

How to Make, and Keep, Promises to Your Reader

By Linda Rohrbough

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One of the things I learned in forty-five hours of creative writing classes at the University level was how to make and break promises to my readers. Only we called it being “realistic” or being “literary.” My college professors were nearly phobic about the corny, canned, you-know-what’s-coming kind of fiction. What I’ve learned since studying popular fiction writing from authors who make a seven figure living keeping promises to readers is the hallmark of best-selling fiction. I think it’s necessary to develop the skill to make the reader promises, and keep them, but put a twist on the delivery that is both satisfying and interesting.

Let’s define what I mean by making a promise. Everyone who writes fiction makes a commitment to the reader. You’re not aware of it, but when you put in a hook, you’ve set an expectation on the part of the reader. Usually the delivery at the end of the book of the final promise should be the opposite of how the story starts. But let’s look closely at the promise itself.

It’s easier to see it with the classic comedy technique of working in threes I learned from Bonnie Orr, a Hollywood scriptwriter. For example, let’s pretend we’re watching a video where we see a banana peel on a city sidewalk. Then the view switches to an old lady coming who is walking with a cane. The viewer knows an accident awaits. But this first time, instead of slipping, our old lady turns at some noise and side-steps the peel. Later, we see the banana peel again and our lady walking toward it, but this time a

group of kids run by her, push her rudely to the side and she unknowingly misses it again. The third time she is hobbling along, the peel still in place, the viewer is primed. If she slips, the promise is kept and you'll get a laugh. That's what my college English Literature instructors hated and with good reason. It's corny and boring.

The trick in good fiction is keeping the commitment in a way the reader doesn't expect. If we go back to our example, the third time the old lady might miss the banana peel again because a painter on a ladder loses control of his bucket and dumps Sherwin Williams Cajin Red all over her. This is still "Mad" magazine corny, but it delivers on the promise of an accident in an unexpected way. And you'll still get the laugh.

Let's take another example from a new Jodi Thomas historical romance, *Texas Rain*. The hero, an unmarried Texas Ranger, takes his sister to a dance in town driving a buckboard with a team of specially trained horses. Promise one: we know he's going to meet a woman at the dance. And he does, by backing into her accidentally while both try to keep a low profile in the dance hall. Promise delivered, but in a way we didn't expect.

Next he finds himself thinking about the woman he just met, and decides to watch her. She goes outside into the darkness and starts to untie all the horses outside the dance hall. Her plan is to spook them all at once, "borrow" one and by the time everyone figures out which horse is missing, she'll be long gone. Only our hero sees what she's doing and in behind her in the dark, ties the horses back up. She sees the hero at the last moment when a group of cowhands walk up. Since she thinks the horses are untied, she gets worried he'll get blamed for letting the horses loose. She creates a distraction to get the cowhands attention, but when the horses don't run, she realizes there's no danger to our hero.

She doesn't give up on her plan though. When she figures out the horses were tied back up, she waits a while, then at random takes a single horse from one of the buckboard teams. Guess what team of horses she takes one from? You got it, our hero's team. What we don't expect is our hero telling his family he gave the horse away, which gets him into trouble with them. That's the twist. Promise kept, in a way we didn't expect. At this point, the action and tension escalates and another promise is created: that the hero and our horse-stealing beauty will meet again.

It's important to note a promise **not** kept frustrates the reader. I attended a small workshop a while back taught by Chris Vogler, author of *The Hero's Journey* and known for his work in Hollywood choosing which classic fairy tales could be adapted for Disney. He said Disney was particular about making and keeping promises in their films. Chris then talked about the then newly released movie "The Kingdom of God" a story example that breaks promises over and over. The result: a depressing experience for the viewer.

In any good novel there are a series of promises kept, both big and small. The big one is the story problem. The smaller ones are the obstacles and circumstances along the way. If a novelist does the work correctly, the resolution of one problem will lead to another, and hopefully a bigger, promise. This keeps the action interesting and the story tension escalating.

One mistake beginning fiction writers make is trying to add too many surprises or twists. It's not necessary and it can create a lot of work for the reader who has to constantly figure out what's going on. You can lose your audience that way. It takes skill to figure out how far you can go twisting the reader's expectations in an interesting way

without frustrating or alienating the reader. The goal is to deliver what's expected in an unexpected way. But whatever you do, keep your promises. That's the ticket to best-selling fiction.

Biography: *Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, has more than 5,000 articles, seven books and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Her latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band: Everything You Need to Know Before and After Surgery to Lose Weight Successfully from Da Capo Lifelong, a division of the Perseus Books Group. Visit Linda's updated website for more details: www.LindaRohrbough.com.*