

Creating the “Ah-Ha” Moment

by Linda Rohrbough

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I’ve been studying plot sitting at the feet of current masters, one of whom is *New York Times* best-selling romance author Debbie Macomber. She’s told me if you want to sell as a writer, you need to work on plotting. One of the biggest parts of plotting is creating “ah-ha” moments for your reader. Debbie told me that’s her favorite thing to do.

Rather than telling me, Debbie said it would be better to show me. So we sat down together in her den and watched *The Replacement Killers* starring Chow Yun-Fat. This is a pretty violent movie, and I know Debbie well enough to know that isn’t her style. But I saw the “ah-ha” moment she was referring to and when the movie was over, I asked her a few questions.

Before I tell you what I discovered, let me define what I mean. The “ah-ha” moment is a surprise, a plot twist that’s plausible but one the reader didn’t anticipate. When it comes, the surprise enhances our enjoyment of the story. In a short story, the craftsmanship of the “ah-ha” moment has to be even more painstaking than in a novel because there’s less wiggle room.

One of the important elements of this process is to keep the reader with you and that means each move leading up to the surprise has to be plausible. Debbie told me she figures out an interesting situation and then works backwards to find a plausible but surprising way to create it.

Since I’ve already mentioned the *The Replacement Killers*, I’ll use it to illustrate. John Lee, played by Chow Yun-Fat, is a Chinese mafia hit man. The movie opens with him in unhesitating, ruthless action doing his job. But he doesn't seem like the hit-man type. The next scene seems completely unrelated. As a police detective makes a bust, a young Chinese man tries to get away. Despite the detective’s efforts, the young Chinese is shot and killed. Turns out the young man is the son of John Lee’s boss.

Later, Lee is in a sniper position watching the detective play basketball at home with his wife and young son. Lee has several clear shots, but he hesitates and then puts the rifle down. Now Lee has put himself in jeopardy from his mafia boss and the chase begins. Lee ends up running with a beautiful woman, a passport counterfeiter who inadvertently gets involved when the mafia comes after Lee. During the chase it is revealed Lee's mother and sister are the leverage the Chinese mafia boss uses to make Lee work for him. The "ah-ha" moment comes when Lee confesses he wasn't sent to kill the detective, but the detective's son.

That revelation changes my view of Lee. I remembered Lee had a clear shot of the detective and his son and I assumed the detective was the target. The writer who developed this story knew I'd make that assumption. As the story unfolds, I learn Lee justified his work because the people he was sent after were doing bad things to others. But he couldn't justify harming the boy. That was Lee's line in the sand. Now to save his family, Lee has to take out the mafia boss, which he eventually does. And we want him to get that guy because we see now he's an admirable person caught in rotten circumstances.

I'm sure the writer of this story worked backwards to create the "ah-ha" moment for the reader. And a good "ah-ha" moment not only surprises the reader, it reveals a part of the hero's character. To accomplish the revelation, it doesn't matter if you first create the situation and work backwards like Debbie does, or start with an interesting character and create a situation that challenges the character. Either way, what you want to end up with is a situation where the character's values are challenged.

The other important consideration in creating the "ah-ha" moment is choosing a point of view that gives you the most advantage to create questions and conflict. O'Henry was a master at this. In the Christmas story "The Gift of the Magi," telling the story from the point of view of Della the wife of a poor newly-wed couple, allows us to go with her down the road of several misunderstandings. But not trite misunderstandings. An important one is when Jim comes home and she is already worried he won't like how she looks with short hair. Seeing his reaction makes us wonder if her worst fears have

been realized. And her viewpoint keeps us in suspense until the very end. If the story had been told from Jim's viewpoint, it wouldn't be worth reading.

My final bit of advice is do research into writing mysteries even if you don't plan to write in that genre. I believe every well-crafted story contains elements of mystery. The best book I've seen on the subject is one that's out-of-print but still available used book, *Making Crime Pay: A Practical Guide to Mystery Writing* by Stephanie Kay Bendel. A critical point Bendel makes is resolution of the main conflict must come about by the actions of the protagonist, and not by chance, for the ending to be satisfying to the reader.

And that's the point. Readers love to be fooled if they are fooled in a clever way. Those "ah-ha" moments stay with us and that experience is what readers are looking for in a good story.

Sidebar:

Tips for Creating "Ah-Ha" Moments Readers Love

- 1.) Each move leading up to the "ah-ha" moment has to be plausible.
- 2.) Create a conflicted character or situation and work backwards.
- 3.) Choose point of view carefully.
- 4.) The surprise moment must come about from actions of the hero and not by accident.
- 5.) Study mystery writing techniques as a help to writing good fiction in any genre.

BIO

Linda Rohrbough has been writing since 1989 and has more than 5,000 articles and seven books to her credit along with awards for fiction and non-fiction. Her latest book co-authored with her surgeon, is Weight-Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band from Da Capo Press. Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com