

Value Change in a Scene

by Linda Rohrbough

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I just spent some time working with scriptwriter Eric Adams while he was promoting his movie “My Suicide.” The topic was creating memorable scenes. I learned from him a concept he calls value change in a scene, which I believe will help me consciously take my scenes to the next level. I want to share this concept with you.

Just so we’re tracking together, let me briefly explain the concept of a character arc. Everyone knows a character (usually the main character) should go through a major change in their thinking during the course of a novel. This is the “character arc.” The short explanation for creating a value change in a scene is each scene contains a mini character arc.

Here's how it works. The goal of a scene, any scene, is to move the story forward. So the trend these days is to have the reader enter the scene at the point the character reacts to something that took place off stage. While this sounds good, it can create a static scene. For example, let's take a scene where we come in right after a little girl finds her dog run over by a car. We see her weeping, and at the end of the scene she vows she'll never get another dog. That's a static scene. It meets all the requirements for a scene, meaning it moves the story forward, but we don't see the change so nothing actually happens. We don't see the dog get run over, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but other than the girl's tears and her vow, there's no movement in the scene.

However, if we can change the scene so we see her go through the emotional process of grieving her dog that leads to her conclusion, then we've got a value change. She might remember how she always wanted a dog, the day her parents gave her the puppy for her birthday, how the dog woke her up for school each morning by jumping on the bed. Now we see

what the dog meant to her. Then she decides losing the dog is too painful and she won't let herself ever want another dog. Now there's movement in the scene. What we've created is a mini character arc and that takes us someplace. The scene becomes dynamic and our story gets bumped up a notch.

Many writers make the mistake that the reader will infer from a set of events what the character is feeling. And that's true, the reader will make assumptions. But the reader will get much more involved if allowed to go through the process with the character of actually making the change. This is what Eric Adams called the value change in a scene. The character who owns the scene goes through a change in their values, and that makes the scene come alive.

It seems like a simple concept, but a value change in each scene requires additional work on the part of the writer. For one thing, the writer has to know, or figure out, a lot more about the character. It becomes necessary to get further into the character's head, understand their background, and reveal specific aspects of their history to make this short emotional journey, or mini character arc -- ring true. It also elevates the character. If you have a throw-away character you're using to move your story forward or reveal information to the reader, it may be necessary to rethink the scene since the character may not be one you necessarily wanted to have that much importance.

As an aside, Eric told me this information about value change appears in Robert McKee's book *Story*. But I read *Story* and I didn't get the concept until Eric explained it to me. However, if you want more information, *Story* is a place you can look.

Can you get away with not adding a value change to each scene? Sure. Lots of published writers do it all the time. But I want my work to move above the ordinary. And this tid-bit about value change is the sort of thing I'm looking for to set my work apart from the rest of the pack.

Let's face it, there's lots of competition out there. So I'm all for anything I can do to give myself an edge. Writing with the goal of creating a value change in each scene helps me. I hope it will help you, too.

Biography:

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda's latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo Lifelong Books, March 2008). Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com