

Your Book's Theme As A Tool

by Linda Rohrbough

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The theme of your book can be a useful tool to help you sell your book to an agent or editor. But before I get ahead of myself, let me first define what theme is.

In fiction, the theme is the character arc, the main lesson your protagonist learns, the big take away. Let me give you an example. In my novel, *The Prophetess*, the theme is “men are important in the lives of children.” The book has two sets of bad guys, a doctor deliberately acting in destructive ways and quite clever about it. The other is a lost teenage boy, abandoned by his father, and easily manipulated by another father figure, my bad doc. Hence the theme comes into play, even though it's never outright stated. In fact, I'm stuck on this same theme right now for the next novel I'm working on, with different characters and a different genre..

Having the same theme in different books is not unique to me. John Grisham's books always have the theme of “escape from slavery.” For example, you see this escape from white slavery in *The Firm* and *A Painted House* and the more familiar American theme of escape from the effects of black slavery emerges in *A Time to Kill*.

Theme is not limited to fiction. In my latest non-fiction book the theme “dieting doesn't work” is stated outright and based on statistics from the National Institute of Health. But it's also implied throughout the book in the case studies of patients and in the interviews with medical experts.

Whether you're writing fiction or non-fiction, the earlier you can identify the theme of your book, the better. Some writers don't know right away what their theme is, others haven't thought about it much. But benefits of knowing your theme include aid in writing the book and, as I mentioned earlier, help in selling your work.

As a writing aid, knowing your theme can help you choose setting details that add depth and meaning to your book. For example, an author in my critique group announced her book's theme was “friendships are like marriages, one person tends to love more than the other.” Much later in a portion of the manuscript, after a big emotional scene, the relationship between the two girls in the book becomes strained. A torrential rainstorm comes that my author friend says swept the streets clean and left everything feeling fresh. One member of the group jumped on that setting detail asking, given the theme, should the streets be neat and clean? Others of us suggested the streets be a mess, littered with leaves and small branches and trash washed in from a busy street nearby, which is much more in line with the theme and with the tone of the previous scene.

Literary genre authors make use of theme to supporting setting details and description almost to an extreme. But it's a great technique to set the tone along with adding a richness and depth to the work readers notice whether they're conscious of it or not.

Further, and more importantly, it's been my experience editors and agents love to hear the theme of the book. Most of these folks, especially agents, have been trained at Ivy League schools where they dissected novels over and over again looking for nuances of how the theme was expressed. Knowing your theme when you talk to an editor or agent makes you look like you know what you're doing. While not usually a long discussion, theme piques interest and agents or editors are often curious to see how I work my theme within the plot and characters I've described. The bottom line is knowing my theme works as a great pitching tool.

In my workshops, I often see experienced authors get excited about their work all over again when they start looking at this subject in their own books. So not only does theme help set direction for the work, it can regenerate energy for the project as well, which is something I think we all need at times. That alone makes theme worth looking at.

Biography: *Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989 and has more than 5,000 articles and seven books to her credit. She’s received awards in both fiction and non-fiction, including three national awards. Her latest book, Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band, co-authored with Robert Sewell, M.D., was published by Da Capo Lifelong (March 2008). Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com.*