

The Magical Writer

The Craft: Promises and Cliffhangers

A promise is an open question that readers will want and expect to have answered. They're called "promises" because the reader trusts they will be answered.

A promise can be anything from "Where is the main character?" to "What's this weird thing they keep talking about?" to "Who killed the murder victim?"

Early promises are often small, and may be answered within a few pages. But some promises will remain open for the entire book.

When we offer the reader a promise, we eventually have to redeem it. If we want to hold our audience, before we answer one promise, we need to have planted another. The best answer raises more questions than it resolves.

Cliffhangers are a subcategory of promises which are placed at the very end of a scene. Their function is to keep us from putting the book down when we finish the chapter. Cliffhangers are often quite simple — a careening motorcycle, the sudden appearance of a character, or even abrupt and unresolved dialog.

The Da Vinci Code is a good example of the use of promises and cliffhangers.

(A) Every scene — every three to five pages — ends with a cliffhanger, making it impossible to put the book down.

(B) A major promise rises early and carries us through half of the book — what's with the Grail and Mary Magdalene? (Note that the author didn't invent this material — he tapped into ideas that many people were pondering.)

(C) The key promise, as with most mysteries, is "whodunit and why?" By the time the promise about the Grail is answered, we are hooked into the question of who is behind the whole scheme.

The Key Promise

The key promise says: "At the climax of this book, you will finally figure this out."

It's often quite simple. In a mystery, it's "whodunit and why?" In a romance, it's "will they live happily ever after?" In a family drama, it's "what's really going on beneath the surface?"

The key promise is not the "point" of the book. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the Grail material may be the theme and purpose of the book, but it is not the key promise — the Grail issues are explained and resolved well before the climax. The key promise is a more traditional "whodunit and why?"

A strong key promise carries the plot forward while you develop your characters and share the "content" of the book.

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The Magical Writer

A Writing Intensive
in the Reclaiming Tradition

With George Franklin and Guest Teachers

Want to write a novel, memoir, or other narrative? Want to jump-start your writing, regardless of the style? Let Reclaiming magic help!

We'll look at the craft of writing and the emotional blocks that keep us from reaching our full artistic potential.

We'll meet in sacred space, share writing and support over the web, and gain understanding and skill from working with others. Writing can be an isolating practice - we'll use magic to weave a web of support and encouragement.

With magical tools such as circle-casting, ancestor invocations, trances, and spellwork, we'll free our expressive gifts and strengthen our belief in ourselves as artists.

We will also work on writing that expresses our unique voice, creating plot-structures, developing characters, and

other aspects of the writers' craft. Each class includes directed writing time.

Class is suitable for those working on writing projects who want a supportive circle and new inspiration, and those looking to begin the process. Although you'll determine your own work-pace, be prepared to dedicate time to your writing, and to write for at least ten minutes each day.

For more information, contact George, <george@directaction.org>

George Franklin is a Reclaiming teacher and co-editor of Reclaiming Quarterly. He has written several novels and published one (visit directaction.org), and helped edit work by writers such as Cynthia Lamb, T. Thorn Coyle, and Starhawk. Magic is a key part of his creative process.

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Hildegard von Bingen, from her "Liber Scivias," c. 1150 AD.

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Promises

Using Promises

Ways to Use Promises

Promises are a plot-structuring device used in many types of writing, from novels to history books to textbooks.

Promises used in narratives are often quite simple and familiar: “Whodunit?” or “Will X fall in love with Y?” It’s how we deploy them that gives our story its unique flavor.

Early on, set as many promises as possible. Introduce characters a bit at a time. Drop hints about the milieu — especially about conflict or problems — and leave the explanation for later.

Mention things the reader will wonder about, and wait a bit before explaining. For instance:

- Keep a main character offstage for a while, but mention their name.
- Show a conflict between characters, without elaborating till later.
- Mention unusual aspects of the milieu or characters — explain later.

Answering Promises

- Before one promise is resolved, plant two more.
- Avoid ending a chapter or scene on a resolved note — use cliffhangers.
- Find ways to weave and overlap, so answering one promise raises new questions.
- By mid-story, smaller promises are answered, and major ones are coalescing around the “key promise.”

Using Promises

What Promises Are Good For

- Keeping readers engaged while the story builds momentum — keep reader from putting the book down.
- Allowing author to feed info under cover of story-drama — give partial info, leaving some open questions that aren’t explained till later.
- Conveying non-plot material — the book’s “content.” Plant some promises, then do exposition. Do the exposition a bit at a time. While you give some info, raise new questions for the reader.

Villain Taunts Protagonist

A classic use of promises is the villain taunting the protagonist at the end of a mystery. The detective is tied to a chair — but before being executed they are forced to listen to the villain gloat about their brilliant crime.

The promise is simple — how will the detective escape? This one promise allows the author to resolve many of the earlier promises, and wrap up many loose ends, while maintaining dramatic tension.

Assuming we care about the characters, or at least want a big chase scene, this simple promise holds our attention while the villain engages in a long-winded exposition, explaining step by step how everything happened, what the various clues really meant, and how the entire story fits together.

Probably they will leave out one or two important details, saving them till the end of the book — so that we don’t put it down till after the escape scene.

Writing Exercises

List o’ Promises

List a bunch of promises that could be part of your story, from small details to overarching ones.

Is one of these the key promise? Remember — the key promise is not usually the theme of the book, but a simpler question such as “whodunit?”

Which promises from your list could be placed in early scenes? What is the first promise you will offer? (It can be simple, so long as you don’t answer it before you plant a couple more promises.)

Find one promise which, when answered, will raise more questions. (For example: Fred feels estranged from his father, then learns that he was a love-child, which raises the new question of who his biological father really was.)

Book Jacket Promise

What mysterious question will you put on the book jacket so that people are compelled to pick your book up?

Sketch some ideas, then hone them to one pithy sentence.

The Villain’s Speech

Try writing the “villain’s final speech” for your book — even if there isn’t a villain. Make up a climactic scene where the protagonist is forced to sit and listen to an explanation of all of the mysteries and loose ends of your book.

What details do you hold back even now, and only answer at the very end?

How does the protagonist finally escape? (Stretch this idea to suit other genres.)