

HOW THE STORY WILL END

Steven Pressfield & Shawn Coyne

Steve: This is another question that got asked two or three times. This one is from Petra Miersh and she says “Do you always know exactly how the story will end? What do you do when you don’t know the end?” and this is sort of feeds into the question that we’re talking about, about doing the Foolscap beginning, middle and end. And beginning writers or aspiring writers have this problem where they’ll come up with some great scene that they love or great first act, but then they are stuck and they don’t know “How do I finish this thing? What’s the end?” and the answer I think to that is you have to work hard. You have to take embedded in that great scene that you have is the end, whether you realize it or not. And you have to think about it really hard. This is sort of what you were talking about, Shawn. Like here’s an example; the movie *Gravity*. Let’s say that you’re the writer of the movie, you know the one with Sandra Bullock and George Clooney where they’re up in space. Let’s say that you’re a writer and you come up with this brilliant scene, and the scene is an orbiting space craft, there’s a man and a woman astronaut, they’re doing an EVA, they’re outside the space craft in their ship, fixing something. Suddenly the radio message comes in, the Russians have shot down one of their own satellites and space debris is coming at us at 20,000 mph. all of a sudden, here it comes, it blows the hell out of the space station, kills everybody on it except these two. You go “WOW! What an incredible scene. There they are floating in space” but then you say “But I’m stuck. I don’t know what to do”. So if you just, this is where I say the ending is embedded in this opening scene. You say to yourself “Well, what has to happen if we go forward?” And again, this is global thinking like a Foolscap thing. And you say “Well, they’re going to have to save themselves”. Here they are floating about in space. What the hell is going to happen to them? And you know flash forward to the end, one way or another one or both of these astronauts is going to have to get back to earth. That’s the whole thing. It can’t be another ending unless it’s, nobody’s going to watch a movie if they both die and go drifting out into space. So that’s the ending. So now you’ve got the opening, which is the space debris blowing up the station. The ending is one or both of them survive. Now you turn to the middle and you say “What is the middle? What is act 2?” well it has to be obstacle after obstacle after obstacle for how they’re going to get back to earth. So what will happen is, they’ll come up with plan A and it won’t work. They’ll have to move to plan B, plan C, plan D. So your job as a writer now is just sort of use your imagination and come up with whatever crazy crap you can put in between the middle there. Another analogy, Robert McKee’s thing of act 1, act 2, act 3 works, what was it, Billy Wilder I think said “Act 1, get your hero up a tree. Act 2, throw stones at him. Act 3, get him down from the tree”. So that’s kind of the way at least in an example of *Gravity*, the movie *Gravity*, the ending is embedded and you need in the beginning or in any scene that you have, and you simply need, it’s like detective work for a writer. It’s kind of all there, you just have to follow the leads and track it out. And when you don’t do that, it’s because you’re lazy. You just have to do it. It’s hard work. In many ways, I think of it like anybody that reads this blog knows that I’m a big believer in the muse, and I think that when you get an idea for a specific scene that you fall in love with but you

don't have anything else, it's the muse sort of throwing you a little bone. And she knows the whole story, but she's just giving you one little clue like you're a detective. And it's your job to sort of follow the leads and track it all the way through. The story is embedded in that one scene that you love, I promise you. Shawn, over to you.

Shawn: I think your analogy with *Gravity* was a really great one, Steve because what I really enjoyed about *Gravity* is it's one of those straightforward bullet kind of plots. There is some character development. It's not really that deep, and what really drives that story are the events and the actions of Sandra Bullock, who I thought was great at it.

Steve: Yea, let me add one more thing on the subject of *Gravity*, and this is again this is kind of like how a writer thinks and how you start with say one scene that you fall in love with and how you build a story out of it. So we were saying that the two astronauts were up there floating in space and somehow they have to get back safely to earth. There's going to be obstacle after obstacle after obstacle. But here's the second level of that. It's not just external obstacles that they're going to have to deal with if we're thinking as a writer. And we're thinking that Sandra Bullock is the hero of the piece. So we're going to have to give her internal obstacles as well. She's going to have to have something in her character that she is going to have to overcome in addition of bouncing off space stations in the middle of outer space. So the filmmakers gave her this thing where I've even forgotten what it was. I think it was her daughter died when she was young or something, and she's dealing with some guilt about that. You know they just pulled that off the shelf. It was like they tried a few generic bogus things and they came up with that one. And it was bogus if you ask me. But nonetheless, it kind of worked. And we had how George Clooney's character filtered into that and made it work somehow. But that's how a writer thinks. So if you're thinking "Okay, we've got them in space at the beginning. We've got to get them on earth at the end. We've got external obstacles, now let's come up with internal obstacles". And pretty soon, in like 20 minutes you've got the whole story. You just have to kind of fill in the blanks. So I hate to make this sound formulated, but that's kind of how it works a lot of the time.