

## CHAPTER 13:

# BE A DRAMA QUEEN

*“Write what disturbs you, what you fear, what you have not been willing to speak about. Be willing to be split open.”*

—Natalie Goldberg

**O**ver years of editing my own work and others, I’ve often found myself swept along by a compelling flow of intrigue and tension that carries me to a climactic sequence and then...damn. The fear-based or inexperienced writer cuts loose from the drama too early. The reader gets left wondering why his dream date — *the book* — went AWOL without explanation.

In a draft of my recent novel, a beloved creature is dying, having sacrificed her life for the main character, a fugitive twelve-year old. I worked countless hours to concoct that climactic moment. I developed an original world a hundred and three years in the future, a poignant relationship and a fraught-filled escape. Should be gripping and heart-breaking.

It is now but not at first.

Instead of working with the death, I cut out. See ya! Unforgivable.

This isn’t the scene, but it could be:

*His dear friend was dying. When she finally died...they carried on. [Chapter break].*

Oh, I can’t stop weeping. Geezuz.

**Tip:** do *not bail* on emotion. You’re not a repressed English colonel from the First World War urging a stiff upper lip (and if you are that, make it dramatic). You’re a writer. Do not cheat yourself or the reader. Pull heart strings or gut strings or any other emotional strings *hard*. Don’t have an escape *without the escape*. Don’t have a death

*without* a death. Don't have a fight *without* a fight. Don't shoot someone *without* shooting them. Don't backstab someone *without* backstabbing them. Don't have a love scene without the scene.

There are exceptions. In a comedy, one might leave out the sex act, but never the emotional humour that follows that sex act. Cutting to post-sex discomfort or humiliation can be one of the story's great comedic and emotional moments. I can vouch for that in real life, as well. Awkward sex can deliver comedy and occasional heartbreak.

**Tip:** don't undersell the moments you've created and slam a door in the face of the reader's desires.

In the first *Harry Potter* book, the story peaks with the final search for the philosopher's stone and Harry's imminent confrontation with *He Who Shall Not Be Named*, the evil Voldemort, who murdered Harry's parents. On the ominous path in search of the stone, Harry travels with his friends, Ron and Hermione. Fear, anticipation, hope and intrigue surround the journey. The reader is primed.

We're at the moment of truth. Ron and Hermione return to their dorms and Harry faces his destiny. Exciting, right?

Not so fast, my writing friend. *It's drama time.*

First they have to dodge the deadly-fanged, three-headed dog, built up earlier. The dog is only lulled from its killer instinct by music. The kids oblige with atonal flute playing. To go on from the dog, the kids have to leap into a dark pit. The landing turns out to be the vines of a soft plant.

They leap. Next stop, Voldemort and the battle we've been —

*Whoa!* The plant is not so soft; it's a creeper that winds around their bodies — a twist on the snake pit trope. Also known as...drama.

Tension rises. Hermione, *of course*, realizes the plant is a Devil's Snare and recalls from study it thrives in the dark and damp. She frees an arm from the creeper and casts a spell that creates flames. The creepers retreat.

Drama! The three hurry away as the reader squirms with anticipation. Finally Voldemort, right? *Wrong.* Rowling owns the climax and she's going to milk it like an Amish farmer tending his dairy.

The trio push on, working with flying keys and magic brooms until only a giant chessboard with animated rooks, bishops and kings stands in their way. The kids have to *become* human chess pieces and defeat their giant opposition to carry on.

Ron rises to the occasion. We experience his character evolution from scared bystander to hero. Our emotional investment deepens. Ron sacrifices himself to the chess Queen so Harry can continue on. Finally Harry must leave and face his destiny, without Hermione or Ron.

If you're one of just over a billion fans, you've read the rest. Three times. It includes enough excitement and *a-ha* moments to make a ten-year old salivate, run away from home and share the wonder of Harry Potter with every circus person they meet for the next half decade.

J.K. delivered the goods and increased literacy.

The lesson? *Whatever* the emotion—joy, sadness, anger, anticipation, fear, hope, relief, disgust, shock—*your* function as a fiction writer is to create sequences that create emotions. Do *not* under-deliver your hard-earned dramatic moments. If you unfold them perfectly, you can sell anywhere from zero to 450 million books.

Another important **tip** about creating drama and emotions, one I mentioned earlier: create drama and dilemma for your characters and between your characters as soon as possible. Your characters facing horrific obstacles *is* drama, and will produce emotion and push your story forward, regardless of genre—and vital for all storytelling. Remember, character informs *and* drives the plot.

**Prompt:** scan your most recent work(s) and their big moments. Did you give them their emotional due? Their comedic due? Their thriller due? Did you bring us even higher? Go look. Be brave.

Remember, you have earned that moment as a writer, you have wrapped the gift. Give yourself the gift. Open it. Give us the emotion. The laugh. The fear. The thrill.

Emotions of all sorts are the pot of gold at the end of the writing rainbow. Create emotion: comedy, fear, pain. Heighten it. Deliver it. The world will share that greatness.

So be a drama queen and slay us.

We can't wait.