CHAPTER 6:

STRUCTURE CREATES FREEDOM

"The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks,
and then starting on the first one."

—Mark Twain

T he title STRUCTURE CREATES FREEDOM reads like a slogan from Orwell's *1984*. And why not? Getting through the first draft of a novel (or screenplay or a non-fiction book on, say, writing) can be dystopian. Heck, *starting* a novel can be overwhelming. I have not yet cracked the first line of *My Last Friends on Earth, Book 2*.

That said, I've got a different one going called either *Micro-Dad* or *Micro-Gods*.

Either way, awareness that a marching army of infinite blank pages, failed character twists and appalling exposition lie ahead can bring this writer to his knees. So what to do? Well, I could abandon the enterprise of a book and offer a journaling prompt. Or if I write a quick poem and fail—that is to say, you don't like it—I can write another one.

But no, I want to talk about structure; the outline; the plot.

Meanwhile, Stephen King's whispering in my ear about how his initial idea for *Cujo* —a mom and her son trapped in a car by a rabid dog—and *Salem's Lot*—vampires in a small town—were so visceral he didn't jot down one note of a plot.

Hey Steve? Take your wheelbarrow of bestsellers and exit stage left, okay? I'm teaching here.

Where were we? The unwritten novel inside you is a sewer rat gnawing on a gangrenous shin. That can't be enjoyable.

So how to rise to the challenge? Make the process feel manageable—or at least manageable enough to dive into and give it all you've got.

Tip: breaking the book into compartmentalized sections can be a huge help.

I'll arrange the following **prompt** in steps. Follow these steps and the book's outline will take form and become a container that will seem fillable.

Step 1: do you have a title? Yes? No? Make up something temporary if you're not sure. Say, *The Tanned-Maiden's Hail*. About a tanned milkmaid who possesses the superpower of creating hail to pummel the patriarchy. That won't work. Let's go with… *Destiny Calling*. Get it? *Your* destiny. My point? To write that new novel, an evocative title can help shape the story.

My latest novel, that Middle Grade sci-fi/fantasy I've already mentioned and set 103 years in the future, was first called *The Unforgettables*. Then *Last of the Humans*. Now it's *My Last Friends on Earth*. I wish I had written it under that name. *My Last Friends on Earth* invokes the story better.

Step 2: *name the genre* of your proposed novel. I know yours is that rare tome that cannot be defined or contained by a genre, but humour me. Write it down. Epic.

Step 3: an approximate word count? Let's say, for whatever reason, you love books of a certain length and you could see this one being similar. Say, 80,000 words? Cool. That's manageable, right? Five hundred words a day will result in an 80,000 word draft in less than six months. I wrote that last sentence like I'm the precocious love child of James Patterson and Agatha Christie. But 500 words a day is 80,000 words in a hundred and sixty-days.

Manageable and enticing.

Step 4: take fifteen minutes to write down the theme of the book—the main idea and the meaning you hope to convey. In general. Don't feel tied to it. It's not a contract.

Step 5: jot down the plot in more detail, clarifying the major plot points. Where things change big time. Significant battles, physical or mental, or both. Emotional collapses. Changes of heart. Whatever it is. Use certain plot point formulas for dividing up the story. *The opening. A crucial turning point*. Try a "and then _____ happened…" "And after that _____ happened." Do you have danger? Fear? Terror? Heartache? Big love? What kind of tension? Use the describable tension as a marker. *The halfway point*. We're using screenwriting terms here which as a form is heavy on structure. *A turning point*. The *resolution* even. Divide it into sections, if you can. Do you know how you'd

like it to end, or at least how you'd like it to feel when it ends? *A satisfying ending.* A bit vague, but why not? Who lives, who dies, who wins, who loses (see the chapter KNOW THY ENDING?).

Add extra plot points that occur as you write. Don't edit yourself, keep putting ideas down, and give yourself half an hour to do this. You will feel relieved and inspired.

This can work brilliantly for non-fiction books, too. What's the premise? What do you want to say? What would particular chapters be based on and so forth? It's freeing and generally flowing.

Step 6: jot down names and other details for your PROTAGONIST and MAIN CHARACTERS and give them flesh and bones. What they believe? What do they need and want? What's in their way? As you'll see in the next chapter SHOW SOME CHARACTER, plot ultimately succeeds or fails on the power of characters, specifically the PROTAGONIST(S). Or as writer and brilliant teacher Scott Myers succinctly states in his masterful book *The Protagonist's Journey*, "Character drives plot." Never forget that.

Step 7: if it's going well, add chapter titles, if you can, along the plot line. Now add key plot twists inside the chapters and emotional or physical cliff-hangers at the end of the chapter.

Give yourself a half hour to get those ideas more detailed. It's taxing to make big choices but pleasing. Or maybe it's easy. You're flowing.

Either way, right before your eyes, you're starting to see the shape of your novel.

Title.

Genre.

Length. Estimated word count.

Characters and their needs and obstacles.

Plot points. Sections and even chapter titles.

An ending.

Don't panic. Nothing is in stone. But there it is. *Your* novel. Broken into sections and defined.

It's been a work day but does the novel not feel manageable?

You know what else helped me with my last novel? I made a temporary cover. That was invigorating but not necessary. Before Neil Gaiman started writing *American Gods*, his editor sent a mock-up book cover. It had a road, a lightning strike and the title, *American Gods*. Gaiman found it, "off-putting and exhilarating…I put it on the wall and looked at it, intimidated, all thoughts of finding another title gone forever. This was the book cover. This was the book.

Now I just had to write it."

Gaiman wrote a massively popular, award-winning bestseller. The cover was not the cause but it may have helped increase clarity and focus.

But back to structure. Here's the thing. Structure is used to build the shape of your story. That's why it's called structure. Though it sounds limiting, if it's right, it should create expansion, supporting you to write more freely, plot point to plot point.

William Wordsworth wrote a poem called *Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room*. I don't know what he knows about nuns, but the man loved being hemmed in by the structure of a sonnet (three four-line stanzas and a final rhyming couplet). Here's the end of his sonnet:

Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

Tip: beware the weight of too much liberty.

Tip: beware the weight of too much restriction (see, you have to find your balance, the sweet spot that maximizes your confidence to write).

Here's another great **tip** to see if you really know your outline. Tell the story of your novel orally. Talk it. Can you do that? Can you feel momentum as you talk, as one would with a compelling story? To tell the story orally is challenging and reveals what we know.

Prompt: check in emotionally *and* on the page to see if your attention to structure gave you excitement and a greater sense of flow. Or did it trigger fear? Hope? A burning fire in your belly?

I'm about to do the same work for my next novel. It's a lot of digging but it has to be done because I know, for me, structure creates freedom. Don't forget that. It can save your story and your heart.