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

Structure Creates Freedom sounds like a slogan from Orwell's *1984*.

Getting through the first draft of a novel (or screenplay) can be overwhelming. Heck, *starting* a novel can be overwhelming. I have not yet cracked the first line of *My Last Friends on Earth*, *Book 2*.

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 journalling prompt. Or if I write a quick poem and fail—that is to say, you don't like it? I can write another one.

Then there's Stephen King who said 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 billions 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? I have an idea. Make the process feel manageable —or at least manageable enough to dive into and give it all you've got.

Tip: Defining the book on multiple levels 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, a Middle Grade sci-fi/fantasy 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* leads 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 Stephen King 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 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.

Add extra plot points that occur as you write. Don't edit yourself, keep putting ideas down, and give yourself half an hour. Cool.

Step 6: 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.

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.

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 and see if that attention to structure in different gave you a little more freedom and a sense of flow—and enthusiasm. Or more fear? Hope? A burning fire in your belly?

I'm about to do the same for my next YA sci-fi novel. The voices are holding me back but I have to decide if my writing is more important than the cowardly demons.

Yes.

But I will add I could not speak the outline orally. Not yet. I have a lot of digging and structural building to do. I even have to figure out intergalactic travel for teenagers, which is impossible, unless it's a metaphor for hormones.

I'll start by writing down ways intergalactic travel could possibly take place. Or is the mechanism of intergalactic travel a secret? Ooh, I like that. Nobody knows how it happens or who is behind it. But intergalactic travel exists. Intriguing.

Structure creates freedom. Don't forget that. It can save your story and your heart.