Untangling Splintegrate: Refining the Story Questions

Tangled yarn, to say the least!

I haven't said much at this blog about my main science fiction WIP[1] [Splintegrate](#) (SPL), mainly because while I'm in the thick of it, I find it difficult to talk about it.

Nevertheless, I hit a particular bright spot today that I wanted to share. I have finally, **at long last**, unraveled a plot conundrum that has had me boxed in in the story-telling in SPL for entirely too long.

I've known there was something "not right" about the plot for quite a while. Sussing it out has been a hair-pulling exercise extraordinaire. I thought I had this resolved in the spring, but it turns out I did not. Lately I went back to some basics, and did some elementary review work of my fundamental construct with a guidebook in hand. That guidebook is Jack M. Bickham's classic work [Scene & Structure](#). It's been through several editions; the one I have has as its subtitle, "How to construct fiction with scene-by-scene flow, logic and readability."

It teaches exactly that.

I recommend this book to anyone who is a) learning the basics of the writing craft and wants to tackle novel-length works, and also to b) anyone who is already writing in this mode, but is not absolutely certain they're following the right blueprint for their story's underpinnings.

Scene & Structure will cure what ails ya, if you actually apply the principles and treat this like a workbook. In particular, he offers specific troubleshooting advice: if it feels like your characters have "taken over the book", go back and analyze the scene disasters to see where you may have overplayed things and set the story up with spin in a direction you didn't really intend. My

wording, his sentiment. But things like that prove very practical for actually analyzing what you've done, and discovering where there may have been a critical misstep.

In my case, my kerfluffle stemmed from this habit I have of creating ensemble-cast stories. (I plead innocence: that's how I perceive them, and so that's how they come through the channel. But man it can be a b*tch to get this all straight when it's on paper!) Plot complications grow exponentially, not geometically, when you add more players to the mix. I had to review who my main point-of-view characters were, identify who was really the foil to all this interaction, and then - only then! - could I absolutely refine what the real "story questions" were that were underlying all the story events.

The story question is that thing you end up asking yourself: will the guy get the girl? Will the kidnappee escape her kidnapper? Will the hero triumph over the bad guy? The question itself is usually pretty simple and straightforward, but it is created by the basic conundrum/life challenge faced by the protagonist or other significant character.

In a story with a lot of moving parts, as mine tend to be, and multiple leading characters, it is easy for this story question to become obscured by other events and closely related questions. And if you have a character (as I often do) with three pressing things going on at once, which of those questions is primary and the sole essential one to the overarching story? With a multi-character cast, it is easy to lose sight of the answers to these questions. But if the central story question is not highlighted and played to correctly later on, the whole tale falls flat, and you'll have the devil's own time figuring out why.

Splintegrate spider diagram synopsis, Aug 15 2011

Thank you Mr. Bickham: you have helped me finally re-define and *clarify* my underlying story questions so that now the ending rings true. (I think, anyway. We'll know after it's in print if you folks think so too.)

Today has been a good day in the salt mines. After quite a while of intensive analysis and always No Insight, I went to bed with my (3' x 2') whiteboard by the bedside and sure enough popped awake out of a dream at 3AM, and started [spider-diagramming](#) *The Answers* that were suddenly so evident to me. Rewrote this then in more of a synopsis form. This morning I was able to look at a now very-cluttered white board and laugh, because there are all the plot points and connections and Correct Endings I've been missing

[I have my Genius to thank for this](#). We had a talk before I went to bed (indeed, we've been having words regularly of late), and man, did she deliver.

Huzzah!

I am way close to DONE, and right on schedule. Or as my heroine [Julia Cameron](#) says,

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"Leap, and the net will appear."

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1. Someone asked me recently what "WIP" stood for. So in case it needs explanation, that's common shorthand for "work in progress."

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