Subplot Sanity

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SUBPLOT – a supporting narrative to the main plot. It has three purposes:

Complicate the Main Story.

Provide Psychological Insight.

Deepen a Theme or Moral.

CHARACTER ROLES – usually one, up to about 3 characters, fulfill a story role:

Protagonist

Antagonist

Confidante

Romantic Interest

etc.

There is "always" only one protagonist. Many stories especially romances also have a secondary protagonist – a character who works as a team with the main protagonist – but one is always subordinate (story-wise) to the other. The main protagonist is the one who experiences the character arc (hidden need subplot).

Character Roles are sometimes based on MYTHIC ARCHETYPES. For one way to generate your story ideas see Chris Vogler's *The Hero's Journey* and James Frey's *The Key: How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth.*

There are usually about 8 – 10 identifiable character roles in a story. More than that leads to "One Darn Thing After Another" Syndrome.

ONE DARN THING AFTER ANOTHER SYNDROME

This occurs when the story meanders without a point. Events don't change story circumstances and therefore can be eliminated without consequences.

"One Darn Thing After Another" occurs because there is a lack of story tension.

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WHAT IS THE STORY?

Story is King. Other aspects of the novel/screenplay (character development, theme/moral, story world) must take place in the context of story events.

A story is defined by having:

Story Goal (and multiple mini-goals)

Story Stakes (and multiple mini-stakes)

Story Obstacle (antagonist; plus multiple mini-obstacles)

DEVELOPING STORY TENSION

A story can be thought of as a sequence of small goals from beginning to end.

Each of these goals can be unambiguously answered by a "yes" or a "no." For example, Ryan needs to do X before Y happens. Will he?

However in your prose avoid straight "yes" or "no" answers to these small goal questions. These goal questions must be answered by:

Yes, But…

No, and Furthermore…

Answering this way allows another goal question to immediately be asked and thus pushes the story forward.

For example:

YES, Ryan does X, BUT Z problem results from his action, so now he has to…

NO, Ryan is not able to do X, AND FURTHERMORE his efforts cause Z something else bad to happen, so now he has to…

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Note that the problems (and new goals) are a direct result of the solution attempt – problems must be caused, not appear randomly. Everything makes sense in a story, unlike real life ☺.

FIVE STORY STRANDS – five general narratives that go on in a story:

A Strand (Main Story) – outer struggle for protagonist to achieve story goal.

B Strand (Hidden Need) – protagonist's weakness that needs to be cured.

C Strand (Antagonists) – POV of anyone or anything that opposes main story goal.

D Strand (Gift at Climax) – avoids "Deus Ex Machina" phenomenon by explaining how fortuitous events come to be.

E Strand (Protagonist's Mirror) – follows another character who deals with the same essential problem as the protagonist, but solves it in a different (usually worse) way.

A Strand – external story so won't be a subplot.

B Strand – Hidden Need is solved by the HIDDEN NEED TRIPLET in Act 2/2 (after the midpoint, before the slide into act 3) .

C Strand – give point-counterpoint perspective of main story.

D Strand – lays the groundwork for otherwise *random* events; one or a few scenes interspersed that may not otherwise connect to story.

E Strand demonstrates the story's stakes in one or both of two ways:
1. showing what happens if someone flunks correctly solving the story goal (think Gollum versus Frodo).
2. The mirror character is in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the antagonist can demonstrate bad behavior towards him. This shows the reader what can/will happen to the protagonist if he isn't careful.

YOUR STORY

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Your story should have one narrative line for each of these five strands. Occasionally you may wish to add more, but be cautious because overstuffing the plot leads to "One Darn Thing After Another" syndrome.