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End Games

My college playwriting instructor once told us to write a three-act play as follows: 1) Get your hero up a tree. 2) Surround the base of the tree with hungry alligators. 3) Get your hero out of the tree, preferably uneaten if it's a comedy.

When I applied the Hero/Tree/Alligators method to my fiction, though, I discovered one major flaw in my old professor's magic three-step to plot construction:

He never told us what to do with all those alligators.

In fiction as in life, getting into trouble is a breeze. Anyone can tie Little Nell to the tracks and aim the Superchief right at her. Getting her untied and/or stopping the train is something else again and is usually the point at which the writer panics. (I know I often have.) How to get from Point A (the tracks) to Point B (the happy ending)?

Here are some possibilities:

The deus ex machina. Literally, the "god out of the machine," a divine safety-net the ancient Greek dramatists used when they'd gotten their characters into a jam. A platform descended from on high, an actor playing the part of a god stepped out, fixed everything, and took the next platform back to Olympus.

Or, "This looks like a job for Superman!," who stops the train with his bare hands. The author calls up an unbelievably powerful or knowledgeable character to chase off the alligators. The key word here is *unbelievably*. In fantasy fiction, for instance, there's the constant temptation to bring a wizard on stage for this purpose, but you could just as easily summon up a corporate giant, a super-sleuth, or a political string-puller. Wizards and gods wear many hats.

The US 7th Cavalry. Many a western movie of my childhood was ruined by the unheralded arrival of these boys in blue when the settlers were down to their last cartridge and up to their Conestogas in Comanches.

Had anyone in the wagon train talked about the cavalry before this

climactic rescue? Had anyone glimpsed so much as a smudge of blue on the horizon? Had one of the settlers casually remarked to another, "Think we should've asked directions at that US 7th Cavalry fort back aways?"? No.

This isn't the *deus ex machina*. The *deus* is a character whose existence has been mentioned previously and whose abilities are too good to be true. The US 7th is a brand-new character, conjured up by the author at the last moment, whose abilities *and timing* are too good to be true. The woodsman who just happens to be strolling by Grandma's house and hears Red Riding Hood's cries for help is a good example.

The Luck of the Irish. This is also called the Fortuitous Coincidence. It happens when Little Nell exclaims: "Thank goodness the Superchief just happened to derail a scant hundred feet before it reached me. Fortunately, I had already cut my bonds with the Swiss Army knife I found in the pocket of these pants which are my brother's and which I put on instead of my own this morning by mistake. Whew." Too many things "just happen."

What Sigmund Never Told Me. When the villain tying Nell to the tracks tries a sheepshank knot, the word *sheep* triggers memories of a childhood trauma involving his wool blanket being hidden from him by a cruel Nanny. The villain Tells All to Nell, who never had so much as an inkling of this rotter's bruised psyche. Neither has the reader. Nanny's not the only one who's been hiding things.

The villain repents, unties Nell, pays her taxi fare home, then seeks a good therapist.

None of the Above. Good choice. All of the above ways of dealing with the figurative 'gators share one basic flaw: The author produces plot resolution like a magician plucking a rabbit out of a hat. The rabbit-act is dangerous because it is easy to perform, and therefore tempting, but beware: Alligators hate rabbits. So do editors.

This still leaves us with a ring of hungry alligators and an increasingly nervous protagonist. What's the best way to resolve your character's problems and have your story end the way you'd like it *without* the resolution appearing to be contrived?

Grow a plot.

The Three Seeds

Aren't *constructing* plots and *growing* them just about the same thing? No. *Constructing* is a mechanical, artificial process. *Growing* is organic. The ending that grows naturally out of the rest of the story will satisfy

the reader more than contrived endings.

Grow an ending the way you grow a garden (both involve plots): Before you even break ground, decide what you want to harvest. Begin with a clear idea of how and what you want your ending to be. This sounds as if it contradicts both the Rule of Alligators ("First get your hero up a tree!") and *Alice in Wonderland* ("Begin at the beginning!") but it works.

An organic ending—happy or otherwise—can't grow out of nothing. It requires the proper seeds: *characters, predicament* and *place*.

Characters are an author's best friends. Too many writers subordinate characters to action. The result is often two-dimensional, cardboard characters who get blown away on the first stiff breeze when the action gets rough. They really need the help of their local *deus ex machina* to get them out of trouble.

Interesting action will come more readily if you're dealing with interesting people. Give your characters plenty of depth and know *when* to show it. Don't rely on the last-minute revelation or its close kin, the convenient flashback. The time to show the villain's childhood trauma is not when he has Nell on the tracks, but earlier on. He could have a brief aside with one of his cronies, who asks, "Whatever became of your old Nanny?" Better yet, have Nanny herself appear and remind the villain of what she once did to him as a child "for your own good, dear."

Let your characters find the solutions to their problems from within themselves, from their personalities, their wits, their inborn talents, and the abilities they've picked up in the course of the story. In one of my fantasies, *Harlot's Ruse*, the heroine is magicless in a world of all-powerful wizards, dragons, demons, heroes and gods, yet the factors that save her from peril time and again are her own charm, quick thinking and kindly nature.

This last often gets her *into* trouble, too. Interesting weaknesses add humanity and credibility to a character, and often provide the way out of plot problems. In *Androcles and the Lion*, Androcles's wife rails at him for being too much the soft-hearted animal lover, yet this weakness gives the timid soul courage to pull a thorn from a suffering lion's paw. It also saves his life in the end.

When relying on your characters to provide the means to the ending you will be tempted to over-endow them. You have some pretty nifty perils in store, and you don't want them to be unprepared, so you pile on the physical and mental gifts. Instead of having your protagonist saved by the *deus ex machina,* he becomes the *deus*.

Play it safe: *Divide* those strengths of mind and body among several

different characters. They can pool their complementary abilities and help each other out of danger.

Predicament should be interesting enough to place your characters in jeopardy and rich enough to provide them with ways to get out again, without benefit of the cavalry. Too many writers feel they've done their job by satisfying the first condition alone. There's the wagon train in the middle of the desert, no water, ammo running low, Indians from half a dozen tribes all around . . .

Suppose that while setting up the Indian raid you sketched in a scene showing that the warchiefs had a habit of bickering among themselves; that factions within the Council wanted to see one chief fall more than they wanted to kill the palefaces?

Remember Nell and the lucky derailment/knife set-up? You can get away with it if, early on, you mention the bad condition of the tracks, the poor safety record of the Superchief, your heroine's absent-minded habit of grabbing her brother's clothes frequently (her brother the wood-carver, Boy Scout, or Swiss army officer, of course).

Place is generally a part of predicament. The hero's predicament may consist of where he is: the scene of the crime, the edge of a cliff, the middle of the ocean. Here the same rule applies: Make the environment dangerous enough to put the hero at risk, yet complex enough to give him a way out. The waterless desert where we left our wagon train can grow acres of water-storing barrel cacti.

Dire Straits

Seeds alone do not a garden make. Proper cultivation is required, and part of that is knowing when to plant. Authors capable of using rich characters, predicaments and places still can drop the ball when it comes to timing. They wait until the hero is in dire straits before revealing the secret passage out of the dungeon or the curiously short shelf-life of the poison he's just swallowed. This is not much better than calling in the cavalry. "*Suddenly* . . ." is a weed.

Foreshadowing roots out such weeds. Foreshadowing plants the seeds of your ending while the reader watches. No one feels cheated because nothing is hidden. However, nothing is shoved right in the reader's face, either.

Red herrings make wonderful fertilizer for what you're growing here. The mad aunt from Maine who will be instrumental in revealing the murderer's identity at story's end is casually named in the midst of a

slew of other eccentric relative stories. The bookish Eastern boy notices the barrel cacti as the wagon train enters the desert and mentions their water-storing quality while trying to impress his girlfriend with a lot of other chitchat about wilderness flora and fauna.

Another application of this method—popular in mysteries but usable in all fiction—is to scatter the elements of the solution, showing each one plainly to the reader but leaving it to him, and your hero, to piece them into a coherent whole.

However you decide to foreshadow your ending, remember to be forthright and brief. Don't hide things, yet don't harp on them either. Mention the barrel cactus, the villain's cruel Nanny, Nell's brother the knife freak *once or twice*, then let it go. If you don't, you'll have the reader getting to the ending before you do.

If you find foreshadowing difficult, remember that you don't have to do it on the first draft. You might have begun your story with the intention of having Nell saved by some aspect of her predicament, yet in the course of writing you discover yourself more interested in the villain's personality and what turned him villainous in the first place. If you find this alternative means to the ending more interesting, chances are it will show in your writing and the reader will find it more interesting, too. You can go back and insert foreshadowing as needed in the rewrite.

Now, What Do We Do with the Alligators?

All this still leaves us up a tree. How to get down? Put our three seeds to work:

Characters: In his pre-tree travels, the protagonist has befriended a guide who knows this is 'gator country, and therefore always carries a big shotgun; a professional alligator wrestler; and a talent scout for the handbag business. Sufficiently foreshadowed as being in the neighborhood, they now show up on the scene. A good thing our protagonist has shown his wonderful lung power in previous scenes, or they never would have heard his cries for help!

Predicament: Our protagonist wouldn't be in this predicament if he hadn't ventured into 'gator country in the first place. After foreshadowing the fact that our hero's no fool, it stands to reason that he'd pack proper equipment, such as a knife, some sturdy line and fire-starting materials. If he's not the handy sort who can improvise a way out using these, he could just wait until the sun goes down. Alligators are cold-blooded and get sluggish in the cool of the night.

Place: Remember that alligators are not commonly found in one-tree neighborhoods. Early on, our protagonist notices the thickly growing swamp flora, especially the webwork of sturdy vines between trees. *I wonder if they'd bear the weight of a man?* he wonders. Have him find out first-hand.