

Chapter Two

Stagnation

What happens when nothing happens?

Everything counts, everything matters, everything, everything, everything.

You will read this statement in almost every chapter of this book, because it is the key to creating a seamless, riveting story. Your goal as a writer is to lull the reader into a dream and hold her until you are finished. Nothing should stop the reader. *Nothing*. If something does stop the reader, it doesn't fit, and it doesn't count. Everything, absolutely everything, must count toward spinning that dream.

But what exactly does that mean? What does it mean for something to “count?” And how do you decide what counts? The answer to that question lies in understanding what a reader is doing as she reads your story.

When I read a screenplay, I approach it like a treasure hunt. I assume that every single word—description, image, line of dialogue—is part of the mystery I am trying to unravel. I read screenplays at least two times, so I can understand the whole structure, see where the pieces are trying to fit in.

What keeps a reader turning pages?

There is only one answer, and it's agonizingly simple. The reader turns the page to find out *what will happen next*.

Readers will not turn pages, unless they're being paid to, for any other reason. Not to find out what someone is wearing, or what Mississippi looks like, or how a rocket

launcher works, or what Fred said to Ethel about nuclear physics. We turn the page to find out what will happen next, period.

Think about the last time you sat through a movie and were bored out of your mind. You probably muttered one of two things under your breath: one, nothing is happening; or, two, I don't care what's happening! (What makes viewers care what is happening is the subject of an upcoming chapter, but first let's focus on what it means for something to happen.)

The biggest problem I see in the screenplays I read is that *nothing happens*. Really. Turning the page, even a beautifully composed page, is like turning a sheet of lead.

I know this seems impossible. Surely in all those pages, something must happen, right?

Well, here is a typical scenario. A screenplay begins with some nice sentences, usually the best in the story. Soon, a fairly amicable person shows up and meets some other amicable people. A discussion might ensue, but soon the people exit the scene and drift into another setting. After ten pages or so, I have the vague sense that one of these people, at least, wants something, but I'm not quite sure what it is. Something is lurking beneath the surface, but what is it? I keep trying to figure that out, as the person goes to a lot of different locations and talks to other people. Sometimes the dialogue is clever, though I'm not sure what the point is. I'm still trying to figure out what the story is about. Then a person gets in a car and might drive fast, get on a plane, have sex. Someone might die or get hurt. Still I have some vague sense of a drum beating beneath the pages, but I can't put my finger on it. There's a lot going on, but no real focus. Then, as if by magic, the character announces how he or she has changed, and the story ends.

But nothing has happened. Not really. And I only read the pronouncement at the end because someone paid me to finish the screenplay and give an honest assessment of the work. My job then becomes figuring out why it was so hard to finish it. And that job has led me to this question:

What does it mean for something to happen?

This question goes to the heart of this book, and I will address it from many angles. But the primary point I need to make right now is that *it is all about the protagonist*. To this end, there are two books I initially recommend to screenwriters: Robert McKee's Story and Christopher Vogler's A Writer's Journey. Both of these books, in very specific and diverse ways, offer a vivid lens on structure and an interpretation of the journey of the protagonist. I suggest you read them if you haven't already, and read them again if you have. In the meantime, I'm going to give you a fast and dirty version of why the protagonist is the center of the universe. It's very simple.

What happens in the story is what happens to the protagonist.

You've probably heard about making a protagonist likeable, or, at least, relatable, and I'll address that idea in more depth in the next chapter. For now, I'm interested in the relationship of the protagonist to the story. Wouldn't this assertion mean that all stories are actually "character-driven?" What about other genres? Action movies are not about "character," they're about "action," right? And yet, our favorite action movies are driven by protagonists we care about, fighting against terrible odds, with a lot riding on their successes or failures. Raiders of the Lost Ark. Star Wars. Lord of the Rings. Men In Black. X-Men. Terminator I & II.

In a thriller, it might seem the antagonist drives the action, that he is the more "active" character. But if we don't care about what happens to the protagonist, if we aren't, in fact, *rooting* for the protagonist in his quest, there are no thrills to the thriller. It's just a bad guy doing bad things to someone we don't care about.

What happens in the story is what happens to the protagonist.

This is a deceptively simple statement. It seems obvious that whatever should happen in a story would, of course, involve the protagonist. But to really understand what I'm talking about, we need to first look at what exactly I mean by "what happens?" Do I mean an event, like an injury or an accident? Or the departure of a lover? Or the death of a beloved mother? Or do I mean an epiphany, a small, subtle shift in perspective?

I mean that it is the perspective of the protagonist that infuses every event—spiritual, emotional or physical—with meaning. More specifically, it is the impact on the desire of the protagonist that provides this meaning.

The desire of your protagonist drives your story.

No event of any size matters if it doesn't affect what the protagonist *wants* in the story, if it doesn't affect the protagonist's journey toward that goal. That goal is at the very root of what it means for something to count. To give you an example of a very clear desire I would suggest Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Frodo is the clear protagonist, and his absolute desire, his goal, the one that gives meaning to every scene in the movie, is to *get the ring to Mordor*.

Desires aren't always so concrete, but they must be discernible once the tale is told. A writer might create the cleverest event ever written, but if it is not connected to the protagonist's desire, it will still feel random. The consequences of the event will lack resonance, and there will be no clear repercussions. The event will be a newsflash, and what it invokes is similar to how we feel when we see an event on the evening news. It may be traumatic, but we'll forget about it by the time we make dinner, do the dishes, and get the kids to bed because it doesn't affect our decisions or choices in life.

An event, in and of itself, has no meaning.

I see this type of event in screenplays all the time. In extreme versions, it comes in the form of a forced trauma. Suddenly, in the middle of the second act, a character's mother might die. Or a child's pet might be killed by a drunk driver. It might be a more benign event, but I'm choosing the traumatic event because in these cases I can see the writer is desperate to tighten the tension around the protagonist, and expects me to be devastated. Yet I often view it like I do the evening news, as something disconnected from me, and I forget about it until ten pages later when someone says, "After my mother's death, I was just devastated..." And I think back and realize the character did not act devastated. In fact, his actions were totally untouched by this event. It came and went. Because it had no effect on what the character was really after in the story.

There must be an intersection of every event in your story with the protagonist's journey—i.e. his desire. It is this intersection which will create resonance and meaning for your event. The reader has to be led to this event so that it feels organic, and the repercussions must reverberate through the entire movie. In a later chapter, I'll talk more about the consequences of actions. But for now let me say that every single action must have consequences that are played out and that directly affect the goal of the protagonist.

It is the goal of the protagonist, the desire, the objective, which establishes the fulcrum around which your story turns. It is what *everything* in your story counts *toward*.

If your protagonist doesn't want anything, you haven't got a story.

Let's consider a few movies and take a very quick look at what might be the desires of their protagonists. In Gangs of New York, Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio) wants revenge for the murder of his father. The story gets complicated because human beings are complicated, but the desire that drives his story is revenge. In I Am Sam, Sam Dawson (Sean Penn) wants to be a good father. In Swingers, Mike Peters (Jon Favreau) wants to be loved. In the Matrix, Neo (Keanu Reeves) wants to uncover the truth.

I've chosen these very diverse movies to make a point. In any movie that works at all, we can see what the protagonist wants. There are goals that articulate the underlying desire of the character, complicate it, challenge it, but they all are defined by what the character wants from the story.

In Gangs of New York, for example, Amsterdam's goals and desires shift as he adapts to his environment. He must survive on the streets and do whatever it takes to blend in. He must earn Bill the Butcher's (Daniel Day-Lewis) trust in order to get close enough to him to act on his revenge. Another more abstract desire is Amsterdam's yearning for a father. So the relationship he forms with Bill the Butcher becomes complicated as Bill takes on some fatherly duties and makes Amsterdam his disciple. In this case, Amsterdam's yearning is so great that one might argue what he really wants is to get his father back, and that might drive the story. But I would put that very strong desire as the driving force of the subplot between Amsterdam and the Butcher, not as the driving force of the movie. At any rate, even the subsidiary desires of Amstersdam, including falling in love with Suzy (Cameron Diaz), either positively or negatively impact his ability to exercise his desire: to get revenge for his father's death by killing Bill the Butcher. And since we are rooting, at least most of the time, for him to achieve that desire, we're invested in every twist and turn.

In I Am Sam, Sam Dawson loses his daughter when the state steps in and judges him incompetent, and he wants to win her back. But at some point he considers letting go of his daughter, because his underlying desire is to be a good father. Although we want him to end up with his daughter, his decision to let her go feels connected, because it connects

to his underlying desire, the desire the story supports. Similarly, the relationship he develops with his attorney (Michelle Pfeiffer), a sort of push-and-pull mentorship on both sides, serves that desire. Ultimately they both learn from each other, but we wouldn't care about the lawyer if she didn't affect, in every single scene, whether or not Sam Dawson would get to keep Lucy in his life.

In Swingers, Mike Peters wants his old girlfriend back, he wants to be cool, he wants to find love, but at his core, what he really wants is to be loved. All of his actions make sense in this context. They advance him closer and further from that goal. That's why it is so painful to watch him make those seven hundred horrible phone calls to his only dating prospect. He is getting further and further from his goal with every beep of the phone machine.

In the Matrix, as the story progresses, Neo desperately wants to prove the prophecy wrong, he wants the girl, he wants to beat Morpheus, but underneath it all, it's the truth he seeks. It's easy to see how every scene, every event, either advances or obstructs his goal. Every single scene hangs on that desire.

Events gain meaning by intersecting with the protagonist's desire.

With all of this in mind, let's look at an event a writer might put in her story. Let's go for the big forced trauma. What could be worse than a child's dog being run over by a drunk driver? How could I be so heartless as to read this scene and not care? But I have read it and not cared, because I have encountered this story without knowing who the protagonist is or what he wanted.

To clarify, I am looking for the underlying desire that drives the entire story. A character needs to want something in every scene, and desires can flex and change in a story. But a protagonist must have one, clear, driving need, however subtle or overt.

In many screenplays that I have read, I would not be able to answer even who the protagonist is for certain, much less what his underlying desire is. What I might find instead are scenarios. There might be an ugly divorce, and there might be a child, and the child might have some altercations at school, and there might be a beloved dog with whom the child romps through the woods. And the dog might get out one night... All of this has the makings for a good story, but it will be nothing but a group of scenes of mild interest unless you can link them together. And how do you link them together? By defining the desire of the protagonist. If the story lacks drive but holds together in a loose way, the writer usually has that desire buried within the pages, but hasn't been able to totally define it. They feel it, but they can't quite get their heads around it. Why? Because it is difficult to do so! The driving force of a beautifully constructed narrative is so clear that we forget to realize that this kind of clarity is rare. Such clarity takes practice, talent, and insight.

If I were reading this story, I would suspect that the desire of the protagonist, the child, might be to find a place where he belongs. It may be that his parents move him to a new school after the divorce. Although he's always been a good student, he becomes scared and sullen, and the new kids are meaner and bigger than the kids in the last school. His home life is hell, his mother wracked with guilt, and school is a nightmare. His father takes him out on fantasy trips to arcades and miniature golf courses and the mother can't compete with those, so she gets him a dog. The dog quickly becomes his best friend and confidante, and together they plot an escape to a place where they truly belong. But, tragically, at the end of the second act, the dog is killed by a drunk driver.

The event has meaning because it affects the protagonist and his desire.

At this point, the repercussions of the death will be huge. Having lost his only friend, the loss of the dog will drive the child into despair. Most importantly, it will drive him into

taking action. He might run away from home, he might withdraw, he might rebel in another way. The relationship with his parents will change; it will have to. The event will demand it. This might even be a path for deliverance between the child and the father or the mother. Or it might tip the hand to more tragedy. And there's a nice complication for a subplot. The mother was trying to compete for the child's love by giving him the dog, and her resentment against her ex-husband might escalate, further pressuring the child and his desire for safety.

There are endless ways to spin the story out, endless decisions the characters might make. The point is the event becomes rich and resonant because of its relationship to the protagonist's desire, the protagonist's journey, which is to find a place where he belongs. If the writer is able to impact the lives of the characters then the reader is going to feel it. The journey of the protagonist has been thwarted, jeopardized. And the reader will commiserate with that failure.

In real life, we don't always know our journeys or desires.

In stories, we must know them.

The journey is the driving force against which every action is measured. It isn't the event itself that holds our interest. It's the repercussions of the event. It's the ripple that goes forward and backward through the story from a given event.

The protagonist must have a goal, and the entire story is about his or her struggle closer towards, and further from, that goal. It's about how the protagonist changes—expands, contracts—throughout this journey. Furthermore, the obstacles on the way to the journey have to change and grow, so that the protagonist must stretch to either succeed or fail.

This is what studio executives and producers and everyone mean when they talk about a character arcing. A character must want something, go after it, and be changed by the journey. That is what it means to arc.

What makes a valid desire?

A desire can be external or internal, conscious or unconscious. It can be to recover the Grail, to find courage, to win love, or to destroy yourself. It can be all of these things at once. It can be subtle and quiet, carefully steering the ship as in a small drama like You Can Count On Me or loud and vivacious like Raiders of the Lost Ark. Nonetheless, the viewer will have the sense that something is happening, has happened, will happen, and will want to know what happens next.

So, when I say, “everything counts,” I mean it counts toward whether or not the protagonist will achieve her goal, her heart’s desire. As a reader, I need to be invested in her. I need to relate to her, understand her quest, want to go along for the ride, want to *help* her achieve her goal. There must be consequences if she does not achieve her goal. Will she or won’t she achieve it? What will happen either way? This is what will get me to turn the page.

This means that every event, every line of dialogue, every word of description must serve the protagonist’s journey either to help, hinder, illuminate, obscure that journey.

How and why do we relate to the protagonist?

A protagonist is always on the verge of some sort of breakthrough or failure, or, in some types of stories, his life is about to be changed irrevocably by some external force. That’s

when the story starts, on the verge of change. Because what a story is *about* is how the character *changes* and what makes him change. We all want to change, we want to understand, we want to transcend. Stories give us the tools with which to do this, or the moments of transcendence that infuse our lives.

That preparation might be subtle. In Tender Mercies, for example, Robert Duvall's character has hit the bottom of the barrel, drunk and broke at a roadside dump. In American Beauty, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) has gone completely dead and is on the road to ruin when a vision jolts him from his misery and gives him something to desire. In Unfaithful, Diane Lane's character has fallen prey to complacency. The family is functioning, but without growth. In The Firm, Tom Cruise's character has just graduated from Harvard at the top of his class, a true watershed moment and the beginning of his new life.

A protagonist is ripe for change. For any of the reasons that pre-sage a change in our own lives, there is the sense that the life has reached critical mass, and something has to give. This sets the stage for the inciting incident, the thing that will demand that the protagonist change, that will set her on the course of transcendence, and get the audience behind her.

Because the one thing we *never* want for the protagonist is for her to go back to how she was when the movie began. We want her to keep moving, growing, reaching, changing, failing, succeeding, because that's how we see ourselves.

Is this also true about movies with "passive protagonists" like Leaving Las Vegas? Was he really passive? I don't think so. He was drinking himself to death. And he arced. From life to death, he arced.

Questions for your story:

1. Can you define the underlying desire of your protagonist?
2. Can all of your scenes be connected, in some way, with that desire?
3. Do you have any “forced traumas” in your story?
4. Is your protagonist different—however subtly—at the end of your story?