

Tip #1. Backstory – bin it!

Head down, feet apart, knees bent. Keep your leading arm straight and remember to follow through. I'm oversimplifying but these are some of the basic tenets of a good golf swing as taught by golf pros on driving ranges across the globe. Why? Because mechanically these principles assist with the direction, power and control of a golf shot. They lay the foundation for the more advanced techniques that follow. Virtually every sport, hobby or pursuit has these intrinsic principles, from fundamentals through to advanced levels, upon which the master craftsmen and craftswomen build.

Writing is no different. Principles exist that are geared towards improving your prose. I don't profess to know them all, nobody does, but in the coming months I'll share with you some of the gems I've learned from far better writers than myself. There is nothing mythical about them, nothing arcane. They are practical, they are reasonable, and they can make your writing sing. By all means, challenge them, test them, play around with them but don't ignore them. They exist for a reason. Learn the reason, understand the reason. More often than not, the reason behind a piece of writerly advice is the most useful part.

This month I want to talk about backstory.

Backstory in fiction is essentially the retelling of past events. Straight off the bat, avoid backstory at all costs! Backstory can be harmful to your writing. Why? The clue is in the word "retelling". By now the writer's mantra of "show, don't tell" the reader what is happening should be seared into your brain for the simple reason that today's readers crave visual scenes. They crave words that they can picture. They crave scenes that are immediate, where the action is happening onstage, right now! They crave immediacy for the simple reason that what's happening now gives them an insight into what they think is going to happen *next!* And *that* is the real drug they're after. Not what happened earlier. Earlier is done and dusted. The past is old news. Your whole story should be geared around making the reader exclaim, "Holy smoke! What now?" Not knowing the answer to that question is what keeps your reader turning the pages.

By contrast the modern reader quickly gets bored with off-stage action. With backstory, you, the author, are telling him what has already happened, and that information is second hand. So, why do authors plant backstory? Usually it's to give the reader crucial information. I believe backstory can, in all but the most exceptional cases, be brought forward into an immediate scene. Dialogue is a good way to achieve this. Rather than simply tell the reader about the car accident six years ago that left with your hero with a gammy leg, have it come up in conversation:

"Hey, John. Long time. What's with the walking stick?"

John smiled as he extended his hand, "Got myself t-boned by a tow truck at Spaghetti Junction about six years ago. Pins, skin grafts, all the usual gore. The bugger had the cheek to offer me a tow as well."

Some writers try to get around the issue of backstory by introducing a flashback. A flashback is when your character remembers something that happened earlier. The author introduces the flashback, containing the backstory, with a sentence such as:

A tear rolled down her cheek as she remembered her father. She remembered how he used to laugh, how he used to walk, how he used to talk to her. She remembered all the little things that made him who he was. All his stories, all his idiosyncrasies. Above all, his obsession with the morning post. He was a grand old man. Older than all of her friend's fathers but wiser too.

Flashbacks, if not handled carefully, jerk the reader out of the present moment and thus out of the story. Again, I believe most flashbacks can be incorporated into immediate scene. But, if you absolutely feel you have to use a flashback, then make sure it's visual. Get it over with quickly and get the reader back into the immediate scene as soon as possible. The example above gives the reader nothing by way of visual cues. The below would work better.

A tear rolled down her cheek as she remembered the way her father woke her each morning with a tickle on her nose and a whispered "Morning pumpkin" in her ear. Once dressed in her grade seven pinafore she would watch from her window as he took his mug of coffee for a slow walk to the post box at the end of the drive. He would feel around inside the tin house, find nothing and then bend at the waist and peer into its depths as if his old withered fingers could not be trusted. She wiped away the tear and stood up.

To sum up, avoid backstory wherever possible. But, if you must have it, keep it brief and visual and your writing will immediately tense up.