

Article 14 - The Home Run

It has been a long distance race, this novel of yours. In the early stages you took well defined, planned out steps, steps that would warm up the muscles but that would at the same time conserve energy and prepare you for the long haul.

In the first section of the novel the characters deepened and became autonomous and to some degree less familiar than you had expected. It followed that the plot too would not follow exactly the lines laid out in the synopsis.

And so, taking a deep breath you moved into the middle section of the story, where, though referring to the chapter breakdown, you allow yourself to be drawn along by the characters.

In this section of the book, though never losing control, you must relinquish the notion that you are omniscient, (in the context of this novel) and that not just possible readers, but you too, are on a journey of discovery. Fiction comes to life when the writer succumbs to this fact, and lets his heart speak. This is not to say that the pen (or the word processor) takes over completely; you the writer will use your instincts and your intelligence to guide the novel along, but there must be some degree of surrender to this organic process.

And then two thirds of the way into the novel you pause for reflection. The characters have grown and deepened; the plot has at particular stages meandered, at others charged along exhaustingly. You find yourself with a lot of loose ends to be tied up. If you find yourself at a loss, the original synopsis and chapter breakdown can be an enormous help now. You see, you had already taught yourself how to complete and conclude a novel in this original scheme and even though the plot may have diverged from your basic idea, you still have enough material to adapt or re-write. And even if you need to re-write the chapter breakdown for the last section, you know you can do it, because you did it before!

In my opinion it doesn't matter what type of novel you have written, whether it be a thriller, a romance, a psychological drama. It doesn't matter whether the plot, or the characterisation has ultimately taken the upper hand. In every case, a rounding off of all the elements and a satisfactory last paragraph, or sentence, preceding the words 'The End' will make or break the novel. Think back to novels you have read, even ones captivantly written, ones that have drawn you in and kept you reading till dawn. If that last section, or worse still that last paragraph or sentence has disappointed, then it would have coloured your memory of the entire novel. So, reach a satisfactory conclusion, one that leaves no unwanted loose ends. I say, unwanted, because a deliberate loose end, one that forces you to continue thinking about the story after you have closed the book, is not a 'loose end' in the sense of a badly finished novel.

And how exactly do you reach that satisfactory conclusion? By the same means you used to get this far in the first place. Trusting the process, writing from the heart, and finally, listening to your body, because a truly complete conclusion will allow you to take a deep breath, smile broadly and let your shoulders sag a little for a job well done.

In a fast paced novel, one of high suspense and a lot of tension, it is generally a good idea to slow things down, give the reader an opportunity to digest all he has consumed. Soothe the reader, and gently ease him into saying goodbye to the story. In a slower novel, one with possibly a lot of intricate side steps and character motivations, the pace may pick up, turning the conclusion into a real home run, a last sprint or spurt of energy, where the elements just clash together. This type of conclusion hits you in the face, so to speak. I liken it to an Agatha Christie, (Murder on the Orient Express springs to mind). There are numerous elements to be worked out, described; several characters to be developed in depth. Much of the novel is used to do this. The pace is slow enough to give the reader ample opportunity to guess and to assume and inevitably to be wrong footed time and again. But when Agatha Christie decides it is time to lift the veil and draw the reader into the home stretch, the pieces fall in rapid succession, causing the reader to turn the pages furiously. And when the answer is revealed and the story concluded, there is the total satisfaction of knowing that this was the perfect solution, and that all the pieces fit perfectly together. It is then 'obvious'!

Arundhati Roy, in *The God of Small Things* also uses a large part of her novel to lay the ground for her characters and her plot. If it hadn't been for the sheer wonderment of her writing style and use of vocabulary I might not have stuck with this novel at all. But having waded through this first section, I was delighted to have stuck it out, because the second and third sections of this story are riveting. It is then obvious that every description and every event were necessary to the fulfilling of this novel. Not a word too much. But it is certainly a risk and takes a lot of courage on the part of the writer to pace a novel this way because you are in danger of losing the reader. It takes great skill, and a hypnotic use of language to hold a reader in what might otherwise be just a laborious book.

In contrast, I recently read Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. This initially clever book has us intrigued even before we read the first chapter, as Dave Eggers has slyly used the acknowledgements and foreword to illustrate his ability to break the rules and intrigue us. My respect for his daring lasted until about chapter 5, at which point I had the dreaded suspicion that, despite his clever entree, he really had no idea what he wanted to do with this novel. It was rapidly turning into a badly planned, not very profound, chronicle of his life immediately after the death of his parents, and his parenting of his younger brother. The promise he had shown by breaking a few rules initially, fell into superficiality. Dave Eggers was just not ready to dig deep enough to hold my interest. His characterisation (even though he wrote about real people) was marginal and two dimensional, and by the time he actually visits his parents graves and sheds a tear, I find myself saying 'so what'. I cannot even remember exactly how he concluded this novel, and clearly any conclusion was not enough to save this novel, that was potentially a work of staggering genius, but turned out to be heartbreakingly disappointing.

Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* on the other hand, is not particularly fast-paced, but it is set in a time of great social change in England, and this Chevalier uses to her full advantage. Her characters are well thought out, and fit perfectly into the situation of two royal deaths and the suffragette movement in England. I think the consistency of these different elements woven into a novel are underestimated. In *Falling Angels* we take it for granted because it is so well done. But if it were badly done, we would feel it immediately and come away from the novel feeling vaguely dissatisfied. Chevalier does what everyone wants to do: she makes it all seem easy. Her plot flows; the pace accelerating and decelerating exactly when it must. And the characters evolve and deepen without us even really noticing it. The conclusion is gentle, soothing, satisfying and completely in keeping with the calibre of the novel.

Our aim is to write just such a novel. One where the ending is like a deep, languorous breath.

Now, as a final thought, and one I will ponder for the next article: how do you say goodbye, emotionally put it to bed, and distance yourself enough to critically examine the manuscript?