

To the aspiring fiction writer,

Let's say you want to write character-driven fiction. And you've got this great character—unique, three-dimensional, wonderfully imperfect. You even know what they want!

When I began writing *JUST LISA*, I free-wrote about a character that was loosely based on an old friend of mine, focusing on characteristics that were polar opposites of my own. Lisa is a rebel, but she's also lazy, eats junk-food, and prefers to avoid conflict. She has a good heart, but she can't seem to keep a boyfriend, and she has trouble standing up to her adoptive parents.

Now what?

In my July newsletter, I mentioned how my novel, *JUST LISA*, first clicked when I stumbled upon the elderly healthcare crisis. We all want our writing to be meaningful, don't we? And the increasing shortage of geriatric healthcare workers along with unsustainable financial pressure bearing down on Medicare and Medicaid (leading to a crisis as early as 2030!) gave me a hot topic sure to draw reader interest while creating a through-line for my novel.

Suddenly, Lisa wasn't just hanging around as a lonely young woman who longed for the ideal partner and subconsciously wished for a better relationship with her adoptive parents!

If the Lindstrom for-profit conglomerate takes over the assisted living facility where Lisa works as a certified nursing assistant, the changes the Lindstroms instigate could force Lisa to step up her game to protect her beloved "fossils," as she teasingly calls them. Lisa's growth would then affect her personal life, and the stakes could ratchet up.

As my friends filled me in on their experiences with elderly care facilities, I saw all the problems that would push Lisa's buttons, forcing her to take action. Action that could reveal her true character to her new romantic interest at work, as well as the reader. Obstacles that would trigger a chain of events that raise the stakes on what Lisa has to lose, including the apartment in her parent's garage, and her job.

The series of changes that occur following the new ownership of the Happy Daffodil's Retirement Home (action, reaction, pause, and repeat) create a through-line: a main problem or driving force that encourages the emotional growth of my main character. That is what our readers crave! They want to feel!

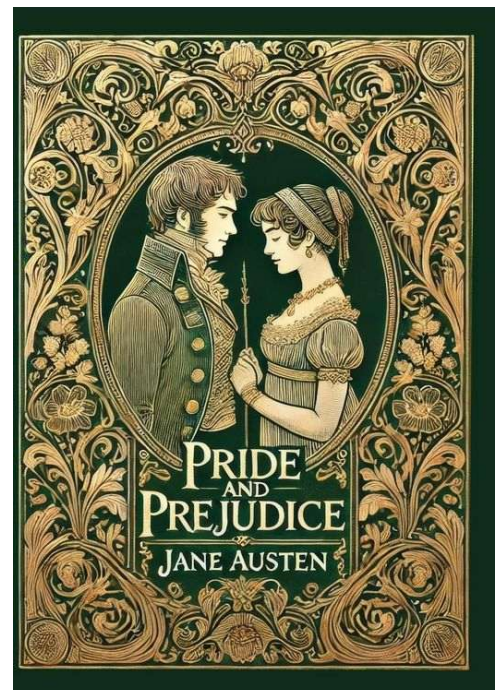
Focus on one main obstacle.

The Lindstrom for-profit conglomerate is reducing the quality of care for people who have become Lisa's surrogate family. (Then you can break it down into a lot of individual examples of how that happens, and rank them in an escalating fashion.)

This obstacle should be represented by one main antagonist.

Miss Courtney Tabatha Lindstrom—Lisa's age, but thin, business-like, bossy—is the new wellness coordinator at Happy Daffodils, and she becomes Lisa's nemesis.

That is the main through-line of the story. Courtney (representing all Lindstroms, and *all* for-profit conglomerates) gradually changes things in the assisted living facility, creating more and more problems, and tension escalates. Lisa first only observes, then is moved into action, and the stakes go up and up until she risks her job as well as her relationship with her parents.

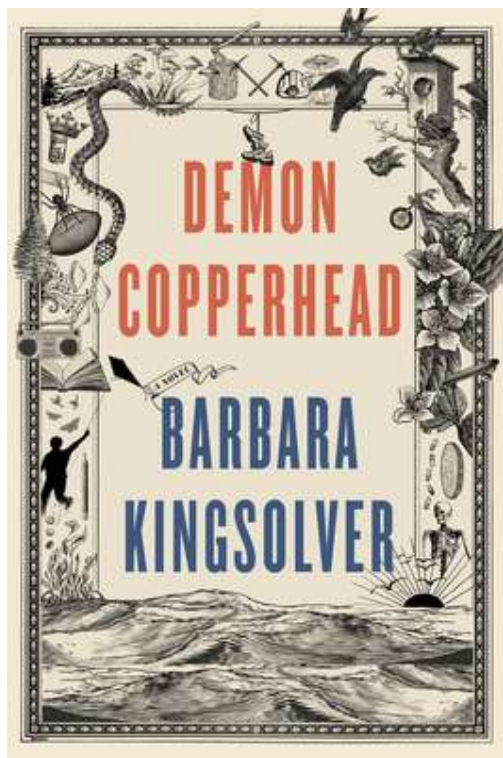


I love my characters.

Sure, they've got their quirks and weirdness, but underneath all that, they are good people. *So why would I want to put them through all this?*

As writers, most of us are not into torture (we're not talking genre fiction here, so forget *Fifty Shades of Gray* for a minute (LOL)...or most Stephen King novels). What I mean is, it's not always easy to keep getting in your character's way, tripping them up just when they think they've got it made.

But think about all the things Austen did to Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*! How we loved that! Or, more recently, Kingsolver's protagonist in *Demon Copperhead*. (Great social commentary in that one!)



My mother often told me, "Don't be afraid to make a mistake. It's how we grow." And that is what our readers want to see. They want to see characters screw up and end up stronger for it. The reader gets to know our protagonist by watching them bounce against obstacles. They like to watch our characters suffer and learn because it helps them identify with our imaginary beings. It reveals true life.

The secret to writing good fiction lies in mastering one sentence:

What could possibly go wrong?

Learning to create obstacles for our characters to climb over is challenging enough, but the truly hard part is never being repetitive. A challenge that results in a specific reaction from a character cannot be followed by another challenge that only reveals the same thing.

Ever get bored watching an action scene that is just one explosion after another? I love Bond movies and Mission Impossible because they escalate the actions and stakes, but I'm talking about those B-movies that leave you asking "what's the point?" Like banging the character's head against the wall...nothing really changes.

The challenges have to start small and grow in intensity. The protagonist's emotional response must increase every step of the way. The stakes must be higher each time, building towards the inevitable showdown.

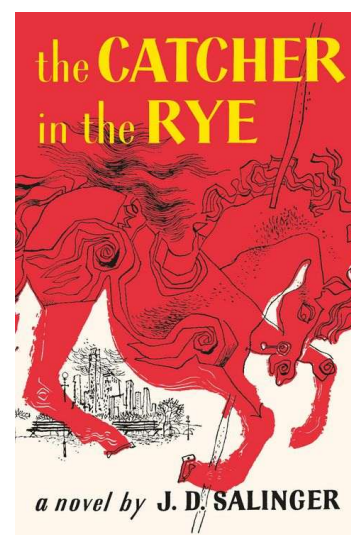
In literary novels, the climax can be subtle, internal, but it is there. In *Catcher in the Rye*, it's when Holden indirectly talks to his younger sister about the inevitability of growing up. In Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, the climax is a deadly shoot-out, but the mental breakdown of the protagonist that follows is the moving result. Fortunately, he is rescued by his wily best friend, but the chaotic escalation of events force Theo to confront the emotional baggage he's been carrying since the museum bombing.

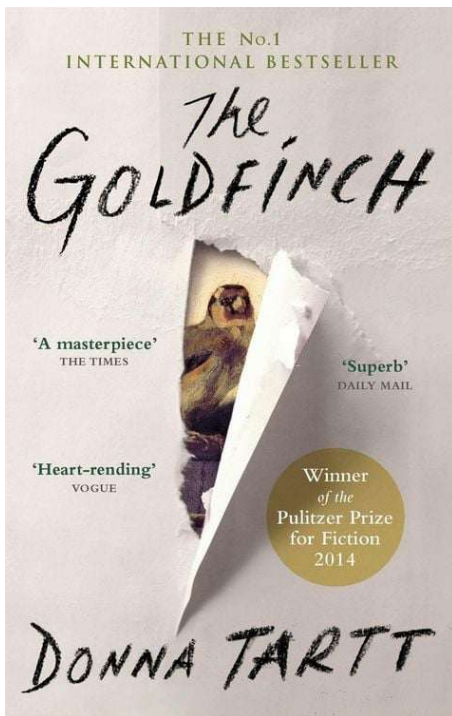
Then there's the pacing.

Like a grandmother on a flight of stairs, the reader needs a break now and then to catch their breath. The repercussions of all that action need to sink in. After a major blow-out with her folks, Lisa spends the weekend hibernating in her garage apartment. Our protagonist pauses on that stair until desire (ignited by fear, worry, anger, jealousy, greed, love) nips at our character's heels forcing them to climb the next step.

Only, it can't be too easy.

In *JUST LISA*, Harold, one of the elderly residents, is infatuated with Lily, who Lisa likes to call "our movie-star fossil." Lily used to be a showgirl in Vegas, and although she's in a wheelchair now, she always has a perfect hairdo





and makeup, dresses in sleek pants and silky blouses that send Peanut Head Harold's heart racing. But Harold's quirk (beside having a bald head that makes him look like a giant peanut), is that he's slightly autistic. He was a Neuropharmacologist at the University of Michigan and sucks at conveying his emotions. He is, however, a great entertainer in spite of himself. Lily loves how he unabashedly plays Dumbo during charades. Harold—no matter how ridiculous he looks playing a flying elephant—is truly authentic. And Lily loves him for it.

Now, if only he could reveal his heart to her!

Lisa sets the two up again and again only to have things go impossibly wrong. Irritating even to gentle-tempered Lily, baffling to poor Harold, somehow Lisa's mistakes bring the two closer, pushing Harold to climb those stairs he never thought he could manage.

All because Lisa cares.

More than that. If Harold can do it, maybe Lisa can, too. Lisa has her own version of Lily...you'll see when the novel finally comes out.

I love happy endings! I want my characters to be happy. The trick is to “give readers what they want, but not how they expect it.” When characters grow through unexpected events, it makes the prize—when they finally attain it—all the more precious.

I'm currently in the middle of my sixth draft of JUST LISA.

Polishing a poem or rewriting a short story for the sixth time may not seem like a lot when you are doing it. But working through a sixth draft of 83,000 words—cleaning out all those nooks and crannies, not forgetting to polish the silver and wash the curtains while you're at it—can feel like an endless endeavor.

But when you are first setting up house, never fear the obstacles. LOVE those obstacles. Search for them, long for them. They are the key to truly good fiction.