

THE ONE-PLOT WONDER

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Back in the mid to late 1980s I was a security guard. The pay was lousy, but it gave me many hours in seclusion to write short stories and novels. However, I usually worked over 80 hours a week. No one can write that much unless his name is Isaac Asimov. Thus I discovered the joys of my local libraries.

Recently, I decided to look up an author who gave me great pleasure in those days. Most of his books are now out of print, I've learned, even the one that became a movie.

I found that two of his books were available, so I ordered them. One I'd enjoyed before. The other was a straight thriller from the days before he created the "Appleton Porter" spy spoofs, re-released in 2001 in POD. I didn't know this before they arrived at my home in China.

Since I'm giving away THE plot spoiler, I won't identify the author or title.

A man who deeply loves his wife buys her a hotel outside London. She is very happy there, at first. This is a fine suspenseful read as she notes oddities and eventually appears to be losing her mind and such. Suicides, an eventual murder. Finally, her husband pays a doctor to kill her.

Her husband arranged all this, we learn at the end, because she was dying of a horrible and incurable illness. Rather than let her suffer the indignity, he tries to give this lover of mystery novels some final days filled with clever puzzles and wonderful memories. He never realizes that he ended her days with a living hell.

The writing was fine, aside from some stupid typos of the sort common in unedited POD titles. He's obviously a sincere, hard-working, talented author. The plot was wholly consistent and everything "worked."

So why is it a weak book? Because the plot I described is all there is. It's a one-plot wonder.

As an author, if you find yourself floundering, if you find your work-in-progress failing to make progress, ask yourself. Is it a one-plot wonder?

Here are some best sellers I've read over the past thirty years.

During the Cold War, a Soviet commander steals a top-secret submarine and tries to defect to the US with it. A good and idealistic young law graduate accepts a job too good to be true, only to eventually learn he's working for the Mafia. An alcoholic author and his family become caretakers at an old Maine hotel, alone during the winter, and he eventually goes nuts. A US President declares war on

drug dealers, a "clear and present danger" to national security. A crippled author is kidnapped by the ultimate fan.

I've chosen these titles because I've read the books and seen the movies. None of my plot summaries are wrong. But with some of those novels, there are many more plots and subplots at work. These are the novels that didn't always translate well to the big screen due to time constraints and/or loss of non-objective voice.

I love a well-conceived "what if" scenario, and none of these books lack that. But more importantly, I love a novel that's rich with the fabric of life. That's where multiple plots come into play. Very rarely will a movie capture this as well as a novel can.

A one-plot wonder is a boring read. It's a boring write. It's not realistic. And, it's a hard sell. All your eggs are in one basket. If the editor isn't enthralled with that sole plot, you aren't published. If the reviewer isn't enthralled with that sole plot, he pans you. If the potential reader isn't enthralled with that sole plot, he doesn't buy your book. Or if he does, maybe you don't get any repeat business from him. You don't get mine.

Plus, we should be setting the bar a bit higher for ourselves anyway. We entertain, but we also enlighten and educate. Or at the very least, provide needed escape. But it's hard to escape to a one-plot wonder. I keep taking coffee breaks between chapters.

I single out no writing medium with this. All are guilty. Come on, TERMINATOR 2 has more subplots than many successful books these days. And it's not just "these days," incidentally. The title I reviewed early in this article is from 1979. Published, successful, well-written, flat.

Craftsmanship is fine. Craftsmanship is wonderful to behold. Craftsmanship is a necessity. But it's not enough.

Do you want to build a horse barn that never leaks or do you want to build a two-story A-frame home that survives five hurricanes undamaged? My carpenter did the latter and I can't do the former. But if I had the ability to build a leak-proof barn, I certainly wouldn't limit myself to barns. I'd try to build houses. Just like the sheriff (Gene Hackman) in UNFORGIVEN.

I'm not talking about weighty tomes. Times change, readers change, and most people don't read those tomes any more. What was once considered gripping is now considered boring.

But one-plot wonders also bore readers. They read it, enjoy it moderately, then go look for something else to do. There's little satisfaction at the end. Rarely the

big "wow" that made you start writing in the first place.

I'm talking about shooting for five stars instead of two or three. I'm talking about richness of story, raising the standard, writing your absolute best instead of settling for adequate.

I risk oversimplification here, but I'm seeing far too many one-plot wonders. People are buying them, too. But it's time for us, the authors, to quit writing them.