

P.146

## THREE WRITERS ON PLOT

Advice from Dennis Lehane,  
Gayle Lynds, and Stuart Woods

by Jillian Abbott

A cursory glance at the bestseller list will reveal a common thread: novels that sell well, more often than not, contain, in addition to memorable characters and beautiful language, a gripping plot. To help us get a handle on this important element in fiction, I asked three plot masters—Dennis Lehane, Gayle Lynds, and Stuart Woods—to share the secrets of their craft. The following questions and answers were assembled from in-person and e-mail queries.

### What is the place of plot in your fiction?

*Dennis Lehane:* Starting in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, plot became a dirty word in literary circles. Fiction lost its way. A great novel comes when there is beauty of language, illumination of character, and a great plot. All three elements are necessary.

Ideally, plot serves character. If you analyze a story, say *The Silence of the Lambs*, you can begin to see plot as a conflict between a character's wants and needs. Clarice Starling *wants* to catch the killer, Buffalo Bill, and to impress her boss. Yet Clarice is unaware of her deeper *needs* to silence the screaming lambs of her childhood, and to come to terms with her relationship with her father.

*Gayle Lynds:* Plot is about lying a series of story elements to character. After I have the elements, I live with them awhile until characters start to show themselves to me, and I give my hero, heroine, and villain something each desperately wants. That, of course, creates the crisis of conscience.

*Stuart Woods:* Plot isn't everything—there's characterization, exposition, observation, and dialogue—but without plot, a book is like a human body without a skeleton. It can't stand up and walk.

**How do you approach plotting?**

*Lehane:* I put a character on the page and I have him want something—it could be as simple as a cup of coffee—and he goes out to get that thing. And hopefully, he bumps into another character and then another, and conflict will gradually develop. I'm not a good plotter in the early stage of a novel. The trick is to remind yourself that no one's ever going to see those early stages of a book, so let yourself loose and let your characters loose and see what happens. Then go back and rewrite it all to make it look fluid.

*Lyns:* Plotting is not a conscious activity. It takes second place to story "elements." My way of finding plot is through what I call elements, which means I find two or three things in which I'm truly interested. In *Mesmerized*, it was the heart-transplant thing, the idea that so many ex-KGB [agents] were retired and living in Washington, and the idea that many government agents use media as a cover. And I wanted to write about an international attorney in D.C.

*Woods:* Plotting is a process akin to a jazz improvisation: you establish a theme, then improvise on it. I do this on a chapter-by-chapter basis, planning the events that take place, then improvising the writing. I begin this improvisation with a situation (i.e., protagonist discovers skeleton) and build from there.

**What is the most common mistake you see beginning writers make in plotting?**

*Lehane:* They either don't have one, in which case their main character sits around thinking and awkwardly telling us, the readers, who he is and what he looks like, or the author starts with a bang, going right into "high-concept" action without us knowing a damn thing about the characters.

*Lyns:* Timing. When we first begin writing novels, we often either tell too much too soon, or we "save" information for later. From my viewpoint, what's most important is to get the plot and story rolling. After that, the backstory should be earned. In other words, once the book is in full swing, there will be moments when the backstory fits in logically. By the writer's waiting, the reader is already invested and wants to know, which makes the timing appropriate. On the other hand, by withholding clues or other information in an attempt to increase suspense, the author short-changes the book, often making it far too long, too loose, and occasionally confusing.

*Woods:* Too many writers offer too much information and description, obscuring the bones of their plots.

**Is it necessary, in order for a plot to be satisfactorily resolved, that your protagonist get what he or she wants?**

*Lehane:* No. Your [main] characters must get what they need, not what they want.

*Lynds:* Absolutely not. In fact, if the protagonist always does, suspense goes out the window. Within limits, I agree with Aristotle that the journey is all. But if we know the ending, the journey grows tainted, and our interest declines. I find it far more interesting and useful to have a protagonist who is flawed and fails occasionally throughout the book. By the end, the reader is a bit worried, which again increases suspense. As for endings in which the protagonist takes all, sometimes they work, sometimes not. The integrity of the book is what counts.

*Woods:* Yes, pretty much, though it shouldn't be too easy.

**How can a conflict between what a character wants and what a character needs propel a plot forward?**

*Lehane:* It goes back to the cup of coffee. David Mamet said something I've never forgotten: as long as a character wants something—anything—the audience will be interested. So, as long as the character has a want, the need will grow out of that, organically, and the more you'll figure the character out. Tension will develop for the reader the more elusive the pursuit of both goals is.

*Lynds:* In *Mesmerized*, a high-flying Washington lawyer receives a heart transplant, which seems to come with its donor's personality; tastes, and history. She desperately wants to return to who and what she was, although that is unrealistic. Finally, the tension between wants and needs reaches an explosive point. She has to put to rest all the intrusive thoughts and the strange ideas that began after her surgery. She can't live as if constantly under siege. After that, she goes in search of her donor, speeding the plot forward.

**How did you learn to write compelling plots?**

*Lehane:* The best question I ask myself is: what would a playwright do? Playwrights can only show; they can't tell. Now, I'm a novelist because I occasionally like telling; but it helps if you keep your eye on . . . the constant unfolding of drama.

*Lynds:* Well, I sure didn't learn about action-adventure in the literary short stories I wrote! Probably my male-pulp-novel era is the closest to training I had. I wrote five Nick Carters, which I figured was a deal, since I was being paid to learn. I was told nothing about plot or much of anything else, except how many words were wanted.

*Woods:* Lots and lots of reading. As a child, I read horse and dog stories, such as *Lassie Come Home* and *The Black Stallion*. After about the age of six, I was

**What impact, if any, can setting have on plot, or vice versa?**

*Lehane:* If a novel works, they're all tied together—plot, character, setting, language—and to such a degree, it's hard to pull one from the other. So I wouldn't know how to address that question exactly, except to say if setting works, you don't notice it; if it doesn't work, that's when you notice it.

*Lynds:* Once again, the Nick Carters demonstrate this connection well. Writing them, I learned very quickly that if I wanted a contract, I needed to come up with a book that took place in an exotic locale that the series had not addressed in a very long time, or at all. So I ended up setting parts of books in Antarctica, the Sudan, Macedonia . . . a host of places I perhaps never would have considered.

The experience taught me to pay attention to scene-setting. To move the plot, to give a sense of freshness, to keep the action going—change the scenery. That forces the author to do some work that lingering in the same spot might not. You must think of a compelling reason for the story to be moved to the new location, and then you must provide a payoff to the readers.

*Woods:* Place gives your characters mountains to climb and cliffs to fall from.

**If plot is the problem, how would you approach a solution?**

*Lehane:* If I have a plotting problem, I usually can't move forward. I block. Then I have to take the time to figure out where I screwed up. Once I've identified it, I go back in and try to fix it. If I'm successful, it's pretty apparent because then I can write again. If I'm not, I'm still blocked.

*Lynds:* Once I know the plot isn't working in one particular spot, I rethink the book, bringing myself up to date. Often, that's enough to remind me of some thread I've forgotten that can now be brought into play. Other times, I discover the characters are a bit off, doing or saying things that really aren't in character. And finally, it may be simply that I need to be more clever, that a solution simply hasn't occurred to me, and I must be patient with myself and take a walk or a nap or wander around, sometimes for days, until at last I have that eureka moment when I understand a new way of seeing the remainder of the book.

**What techniques do you use to create and maintain suspense?**

*Lehane:* *Mystic River* is constructed around shifting points of view, third person limited, tight on each point-of-view character. This technique not only maintains and extends suspense, but it also drives the plot forward.

*Lynds:* I have two favorite words, which I have tacked onto my lampshade at eye level. They are "jeopardy" and "menace"—jeopardy refers to the hero and/or heroine, while menace, of course, refers to the villain. The villain has an overriding goal, and that is what drives the plot. To create suspense, the author must understand and respect that villain, and allow the villain to put the protagonist—and society—in jeopardy. Plus, the villain must be smart enough, and powerful enough with male frothingness enough that he or she is truly menacing.

Will the villain succeed? Will the protagonist succeed? We read books to the very end, biting our nails, to find out the answers to those two questions. In my opinion, they're the foundation of suspense.

*Woods:* I look upon writing as a kind of magic, and I'm afraid that if I examine it too closely, it might go away.

**Jillian Abbott**, formerly a columnist for *The Australian*, just finished writing a female action/adventure, *The Leopard's Claw*. This article appeared in *The Writer*, May 2004.

**Dennis Lehane** is best known for his bestselling novel *Mystic River*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Winslow Award, won both the Anthony and the Barry awards for best novel, and is now a Clint Eastwood movie. He has also penned a successful mystery series which includes *A Drink Before the War*, *Darkness Take My Hand*, *Sacred*, *Gone Baby Gone*, and *Prayers for the Rain*. Lehane lives in Boston, where he writes and teaches.

**Gayle Lynds** has written three international spy thrillers, three novels co-written with the late Robert Ludlum, and five Nick Carter pulp-fiction adventures. She is the first woman to write *New York Times*-bestselling international spy thrillers. Her debut solo thriller, *Masquerade*, was rejected initially because "no woman could have written this." Doubleday ultimately published the book in 1996. Her latest novel is *The Coil*, a sequel to *Masquerade*. Lynds lives in California.

**Stuart Woods** has written more than 27 novels. His first mystery, *Chiefs*, won a Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award. A later book, *Palindrome*, was also nominated for the Edgar. A voracious reader as a child, Woods is now a voracious writer, regularly producing two novels per year. He has two mystery series going (Stone Barrington and Holly Barker). His most recent Holly Barker book is *Blood Orchid*. His 2003 novel is *Capital Crimes*. Woods currently divides his time between Florida (winter), Maine (summer), and New York (spring and fall).