How to Write a Thriller that Keeps 'em Turning Pages with LS Hawker

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THE DROWNING GAME
BODY AND BONE
END OF THE ROAD
THE THROWAWAYS

What's the difference between a mystery and a thriller?

Mysteries often follow this pattern:

1. A crime is committed in the first chapter.

2. A sleuth, whether professional or amateur, gathers clues for the majority of the novel.

3. The sleuth puts all the clues together and reveals the solution at the end of the novel.

In a Thriller:

1. Protagonist is often in danger from the beginning of the story.

2. A crime is going to be committed.

3. The protagonist spends much of the novel, often in a race against time, to prevent the commission of the crime.

Thriller Conventions

- Emphasis on plot—action, pacing, movement
- Tension and conflict must start in the very first line
- The villain drives the story
  - Sometimes the POV is shared between hero and villain, alternating between scenes
- Unlike with mysteries, readers are often one step ahead of the MC

- Hero must race to resolve problems (ticking clock), with stakes being raised each time and obstacles always in their way
- Hero must save the day "just in the nick of time"

Expected/Required Thriller Elements

- Suspense, tension, raising of stakes for the protagonist.
  - Pace of this tension is faster in a thriller than in a mystery.
- MC must be proactive rather than reactive. S/he must be resourceful, have skills, and make things happen.
- MC must have a distinct character arc: s/he must change by the end of the book.
  - This growth ultimately leads to the MC's ability to triumph in his/her darkest hour.
- NO COINCIDENCES, DEUS EX MACHINA, OR CONVENIENT ACCIDENTS

- Typical structural plot elements include
  - An inciting incident
  - Conflict
  - Fast pacing
  - Complications
  - Darkest hour
  - Speech in praise of the villain (can even be given by the villain him/herself)
  - Climactic battle
  - Denoument

- Ending should
  - Tie up all loose ends
  - Provide a satisfactory twist
  - False resolution
  - Good wins over evil
  - Hero has changed

Expected Characters (Besides MC)

- Sidekicks with baggage (Vic in Longmire)
- Complementary characters
- Mentors (Obi Wan Kenobi)
- Confidants (M in James Bond stories)
- Small rivals (Dewey Crowe in Justified)
- Possibly another hero in partnership (The Avengers)

The Villain

- Can often operate completely alone (Hannibal Lecter)
- May appear to be a minion, but is actually the villain (Keyser Soze)
- Must be equally matched with the hero (Lisbeth Salander's father)
- Smart, resourceful, determined, multidimensional (Tom Ripley, The Talented Mr. Ripley)
- Must challenge and triumph over the hero every time until the climactic battle (Erik Killmonger, Black Panther)
- Must be worthy of reader's hatred but invite "sympathy for the devil" (Professor Snape)

Avoid creating clichéd, mustache-twirling villains

Examine the reasons why behind their driving force.

Common motivations include:

- Power (Voldemort)
- Money (Count Olaf)
- Control (President Snow)
- Cruel to be kind (Thanos in The Avengers)
- Evil for evil's sake (Anton Shagur)
- Love (Amy Elliot-Dunne, Gone Girl)
- Revenge (Max Cady, Cape Fear)

Humanize Your Villain

- Show his interests
- Give him someone to love
- Allow him to show his woundedness

- Pay close attention to how villains are written in your favorite thrillers. Make note of how the writer does it.
- Google "greatest villains" and see what comes up, then figure out why they're the greatest

What's the difference between tension and suspense?

- Suspense is achieved when information is withheld from the reader.

- Tension is the potential for conflict that requires the reader to know something is about to happen, but not how or when.

How do you create suspense?

- The ticking clock: in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling must find Jame Gumm before he murders the senator's daughter for her skin.
- Immediacy: The Martian by Andy Weir. From that first profane line, "I am completely fucked."
- Quick cuts between scenes happening concurrently
- The objective viewpoint of the villain: in *No Country for Old Men*, Anton Shagur never gives any indication of what he's thinking or feeling as he randomly and nonchalantly kills his victims.

The Ticking Clock

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling must find Jame Gumm before he murders the senator's daughter for her skin.

Since thrillers often don't have happy endings, we don't know if she's going to make it, and that adds to our sense of suspense.

Immediacy

Show from the get-go that the protagonist is in deep trouble.
From *The Martian* by Andy Weir

LOG ENTRY: SOL 6

I'm pretty much f***ed. That's my considered opinion. F***ed. Six days into what should be one of the greatest two months of my life, and it's turned into a nightmare. I don't even know who'll read this. I guess someone will find it eventually. Maybe a hundred years from now. For the record…I didn't die on Sol 6. Certainly the rest of the crew thought I did, and I can't blame them. Maybe there'll be a day of national mourning for me, and my Wikipedia page will say, "Mark Watney is the only human being to have died on Mars."

Uncertainty

Don't pull your punches. You want to make sure your reader knows that you're not afraid to let horrible things happen to your characters. The master of this is George R.R. Martin. He's perfectly willing to kill off his main characters!

Strong, Relatable Characters

- Clarice Starling: strong but vulnerable, ambitious, but flawed, with weaknesses
- Mark Watney: capable, funny, resourceful, profane, not afraid to feel fear, lonely
- Lisbeth Salander: odd, maybe autistic, very smart, resourceful, remarkable skills, vulnerable to her feelings for Mikael Blomkvist

Setting

- Using weather as a stressor and/or scene setter--thunderstorms, blizzards, hurricanes, mist, fog, tornadoes; extreme heat, drought, insect infestations
- Empty houses, claustrophobic rooms or vehicles, unprotected fields with no cover, etc.
- While you want to keep the emphasis on action, descriptive scene-setting can act as a suspense generator all on its own

Conflict and Tension

- Can be internal or external
- The conflict must bring about change in every scene, no matter how minor
- Your protag must not be passive but must move forward toward his/her goal or desire
- Characters should be at odds, even allies

Show Don't Tell!

- Don't tell us how your MC is feeling. Show it through physical reactions, dialog, etc.
- *The Emotion Thesaurus* is helpful in this area
- Make us feel his/her dread and tension

What is Pacing?

- The tool that controls the speed and rhythm at which a story is told and the readers are pulled through the events.

- Refers to the speed at which events unfold as well as how much time elapses in each scene and event.

- Part structural choices and part word choices.

- Effective thriller pacing requires speed in the opening, middle and climax of your story.

Pacing and Tension

Vary the tension from scene to scene. If every scene is taut with suspense, you'll wear out your reader. Your suspense should build throughout the story, with downtimes in between each intensifying element. Don't spend it all at once.

Your pacing should look like an upward trending graph with plateaus between each upward swing. The plateaus represent the slow-downs during which you pause to express characters' emotions and show significance of story elements.

Action

- Scenes where you "show" what happens in a story.
- Use short and medium length sentences.
- Little description.
- Limited transitions.
- Omitted or limited character thoughts, especially in the midst of danger or crisis—focus on survival.
- Choose a few details that serve as emotionally charged props.

Cliffhangers

- As often as possible, end your chapters on cliffhangers (where the action/conflict/outcome is not resolved), which forces your reader to turn the page (just one more chapter before bed!)
- Ramp up the uncertainty with
  - Unfinished actions
  - Unfilled needs
  - Interruptions
- If characters are talking, end the scene with a revelation, a threat, or a challenge.

Effective Forward-Driving Dialogue

- Rapid-fire exchanges between characters
- Little or no extraneous information
- Pared down, abbreviated version of real-life conversation
- No pondering or long-winded discussion
- Minimal reactions, descriptions, and attributions
- Characters should argue, confront, struggle for power

Prolonged Outcomes

Anticipation speeds up a story the longer you withhold the outcome. This is because readers will turn pages to find out whether he will fall from the fire escape, or whether she can sneak out of the apartment before the murderer finds out she's hiding behind the curtains. Readers are compelled to keep reading until they can overcome their anxiety and uncertainty.

Jump Cuts

- Moves story to a new location with no explanation or transition

- Accelerates the story because readers will keep going to find out why they're now in a different location with possibly different characters

Rapid Incident Series

- Create events that happen immediately one after the other

- Minimal or no transitions

Short Chapters and Scenes

- James Patterson is the king of this—sometimes his chapters are as short as a single page
- Short segments should portray a compete action and end quickly
- Readers can digest them quickly and move on to the next

Word Choice and Sentence Structure: the Subtlest Means of Pacing

- Break up paragraphs

- Use concrete words (like prodigy and iceberg) active voice (potent verbs like zigzag and plunder), and sensory information that's artfully embedded

- Break up long, involved paragraphs

- Use sentence fragments, spare sentences, and short paragraphs

- Use crisp, punchy verbs with onomatopoeia (crash, lunge, sweep, scatter, ram, scavenge)
- Use harsh consonant sounds to push the reader forward
- Words with unpleasant associations also ratchet up the speed: hiss, grunt, slither, smarmy, venomous, slaver, and wince
- Trim every unnecessary word
- Eliminate prepositional phrases: instead of "the walls of the cathedral" write "the cathedral's walls"
- Excise passive linking verbs and replace them with active ones

Summarize

- Reserve full scenes for major events
- Use summary for descriptions and backstory rather than blow-by-blow
- Work well when time passes with little in the way of action to report, action is repeated, or when significant amounts of time have passed.