

GRAVELINE GUIDE:
FLABBY MIDSECTION? FIRM IT UP!

By Eileen Watkins

It's an experience even the seasoned novelist dreads: Your book seems to be chugging down the track you've laid, unstoppable as a locomotive, when suddenly...it derails. Or even more pathetically, it just runs out of steam.

Maybe the characters who came up with such clever banter in the first half no longer have much to say to each other. Or a situation that seemed compelling at the start feels totally unbelievable now that's you've tried to write it. You don't know how to get from where you are to the end...or you don't know how to fill a hundred more pages until you get to the end. You no longer like your main character, or you've lost interest in the whole story!

Don't be too quick to throw in the towel. There are usually reasons why a book-in-progress falls apart in the middle, and ways of salvaging the situation.

The Organic Approach

Donna Fletcher, author of more than a dozen paranormal romances, believes all structural problems have similar causes--either the plot or the characters weren't strong enough to begin with. "There's a weak link somewhere," she says. "Go

back to the beginning and read. Does the book start off strong? Have you defined your characters? Are you setting them up for growth and change? Are their motives and emotions clear? Some time spent on these questions can kick-start a sagging plot."

When you write yourself into a corner, she says, you've either gone against a character's personality or veered away from the plot. "How are the characters acting and reacting to events? Are their actions and reactions advancing the plot? Is one more character needed to help advance the plot? Reread the last few paragraphs or pages, and see if you can take things in another direction."

She advises against getting too attached to any one section of your writing. "Sometimes what a writer feels is her best passage in the book needs to be deleted, so it can mature into her best book!" If that passage throws you off track, put it aside. Maybe you can adapt it to use in another piece of work some day.

Structural Support

A structured approach works best for Jack Passarella, author of the horror novels *WITHER*, *WITHER'S RAIN* and the forthcoming *WITHER'S LEGACY*. "When one of my novels dies, the main problem always seems to be that I haven't thought it through," he says. "The solution, I believe, is to outline, but it doesn't have to be anything onerous. Find your 'act break'

turning points, and build scenes around those to form a skeletal outline."

The result should be something like this:

INCITING INCIDENT/ACT 1 SCENES/TURNING POINT 1

ACT 2 SCENES/TURNING POINT 2

CLIMAX/RESOLUTION

"Those turning points act as tent poles, holding up your plot," Passarella explains. "The problem with Act Two is that it should be about twice as long as Act One, and Act Three should be the shortest with the fastest pace. Some writers add a mid-Act-Two turning point, almost creating a four-act story."

At TURNING POINT 1, things get BAD. At TURNING POINT 2, things go from BAD to WORSE (always darkest before the dawn)! You need to escalate tension and increase the stakes for the characters.

"Act Two is the meat of your story, the main course," Passarella adds. "That's why it can be so hard. You have to really work through your premise in Act Two. Act Three is working out of it."

Knowledge is Power

I often can pull out of a mid-novel slump by doing additional research on the characters, setting or situation. Find out more about the profession, hobby or even ethnic background of your character, and you may find a twist that can

heighten the conflict or help him out of his present dilemma. The same kind of clue might turn up if you research the geographical setting more thoroughly.

Have you created a dramatic situation, such as a kidnapping or a haunting? Research what real people have done in similar situations. Truth, as they say, is often stranger than fiction--look at the way Patty Hearst apparently started to identify and cooperate with her abductors!

For my novel DANCE WITH THE DRAGON, I read up on the real-life practices of the Branch Davidians before I created a vampire cult operating under similar conditions. For a haunted-house novel, I read several books on "real" hauntings, and learned about the latest techniques used by modern-day ghost hunters and New Age channelers. You don't want to imitate real life completely, but histories and contemporary news stories can show you the wide range of possible twists you might incorporate into your plot.

Surprise Yourself!

Don't be afraid to brainstorm on paper. What should your reader be worried about right now? (Make sure there is always something for the reader to worry about, until the very end!) How can you keep it in the forefront of his mind, and if possible, boost the tension further?

How can you surprise the reader? What's the most unexpected

twist the plot could take at this point? Unless it totally contradicts the motives of your character or the purpose of your book, give it a try! Keep your reader on his toes, and he'll keep turning the pages.

As Fletcher says, "A strong plot and good characters keep going and growing. They have a passion of their own, and rush forward eagerly to reach a good, satisfying ending."

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