

chapter 3

ALL LAID OUT... AND NOWHERE TO GO



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"We transform every day, re-awaken to new concepts about the world around us, overcome conflict, and triumph over death... only to start again each morning. It's why stories that follow this pattern resonate. Because each day is a transformation machine, and so are our lives."

Overcoming hurdles.

That's what *Save the Cat!* is about.

Yet when it comes to the topic of "structure," which I think makes *Save the Cat!* a breakthrough for any screenwriter, the trouble I've gotten in for being a structure advocate is puzzling.

We all have deficits in our writing skills. Some of us are missing the "idea gene," some are horrible at titles, but without structure we're sunk. Yet the fights I get on this topic astound me, and lead me to believe I haven't quite made my case. The good news is: Of the skills it takes to be a great storyteller, structure is the easiest to learn — if you're open to it.

And if you are, it is also the most empowering!

I think the biggest misconception about structure, and the biggest block for many writers, is the sense that I'm asking you to do something "formulaic." Can I be honest with you, just you and me? This objection exhausts me. Let's just say for now that those who argue against structure on the basis that it is stopping you from "being free," or feel that if you follow my advice you'll be

doomed to write *Big Momma's House 2* over and over, are wrong. And if you've read my second book, which applies this so-called "formula" to everything from big studio hits like *Spider-Man 2* and *Forrest Gump* to Indies like *Open Water* and *Saw*, and you *still* aren't convinced these a) hit the beats, and b) are extremely different, well... you will have trouble with structure, and that's no fun!

And yet...

I grant you there are times when having diligently followed my suggestions, and worked out your structure as I prescribe, there is unease to having it all so nice and neat. There is something about it that feels mechanical, too "clean," or too simple. And that's no good either. If you've worked out your story but haven't started writing, it may be because you've lost the reason for writing it; the inspiration's gone, you're not *feelin'* it! It might be because you know too much about your tale to be surprised when you actually put cursor to computer screen.

And if you have written a draft, you may have hit all the beats like a master, and the pieces are in place, but the emotion isn't. Your hero seems so much like an order-taking automaton that neither you, nor we, have much interest in seeing where he goes.

If any of the above applies, it feels like trouble indeed.

Whether you bridle at the idea of churning out duraflame® logs that seem so much like firewood, but aren't, or if you just plain don't get it yet, take heart. This is the chapter where we answer your structure dilemmas once and for all, so you will feel confident every time you fully flesh out any story you write.

We must start with the fact your story is not unique.

I know! I know! That sounds bad. I can see you now, in your garret, with your bowl of Top Ramen, cursing me!

But it's true.

You can break up time, as they do in *Memento* and *Pulp Fiction*; you can have anti-heroes as seen in *American Psycho* and *Election*; you can intertwine multiple stories, as in *Babel* and *Crash*; you can pull the rug out from us by saying "And then I woke up, it was all a dream!"

as exploited in *Atonement* and *Stranger Than Fiction*. Yes, you can break all the rules, with varying degrees of success, but you will never evade the principles that come by conquering structure — for until we find a way to live on Earth without lessons on how to do it, we’re going to be stuck with storytelling principles all writers must master.

We’re going to be stuck with structure.

THE TRANSFORMATION MACHINE

As stated in the previous chapters, all we’re looking for — both as writers and as audience members — is a tale that grabs us by the gonads. Our job is simple: to be *astounding*! And doing that is actually easy... so long as we meet only one demand:

Tell us a story about transformation.

I like to say that as we begin any story, you the audience and I the writer are standing on a train platform. You and I are getting on that train... *and we’re not coming back*. The tale we tell is so life-altering, both for the hero and for us, that we can never look at our world the same way again. Others may be lingering on the platform, they may talk about the trip, but in truth it’s only talk; they’ve never actually been anywhere.

It’s because change is not only astounding, it’s painful.

Every story is “The Caterpillar and the Butterfly.”

We start with a caterpillar living among the tall branches, eating green leaves, waving “hi!” to his caterpillar pals, little knowing that his is a life of profound deficiency. And then one day, an odd feeling comes over him that’s so scary, it’s like a freefall. Something strange is happening. And that something... is death. That’s what the cocoon stage is. As caterpillar becomes chrysalis, he dies. He, and everything he knows, is no more. Can you imagine? But when it seems like this purgatory will never end, when things look blackest, there’s another stirring; our hero sees light, and now he breaks through a weak spot in his prison, to sunlight... and freedom. And what emerges is something he never dreamed of when this all began, something... *amazing*!

That's every story.

And if you call that "formula"...

You're still on the train platform talking about it.

Because change hurts.

And only those who've had to change, and felt the pain of it, know that at a certain point it is also inevitable. It's like those *Tom and Jerry* cartoons where Jerry the mouse ties a string to Tom the cat's tail, and runs the end all over the house, then anchors it to an anvil up on the roof. With one push, the look on Tom's face tells us he knows... he's going! And there will come a moment — like it or not — when he's pulled ass-backwards through a keyhole! Overall, we'd prefer Tom to experience this sensation.

And that's why we tell stories.

There are all kinds of ways to map out this change, but never forget that's what we're charting here. We will get bored not seeing change occur. Despite all the pyrotechnics you throw our way that dazzle us so, we must experience life. And the trouble we get into as screenwriters comes when we think "The Caterpillar and the Butterfly" is too simple to apply to us.

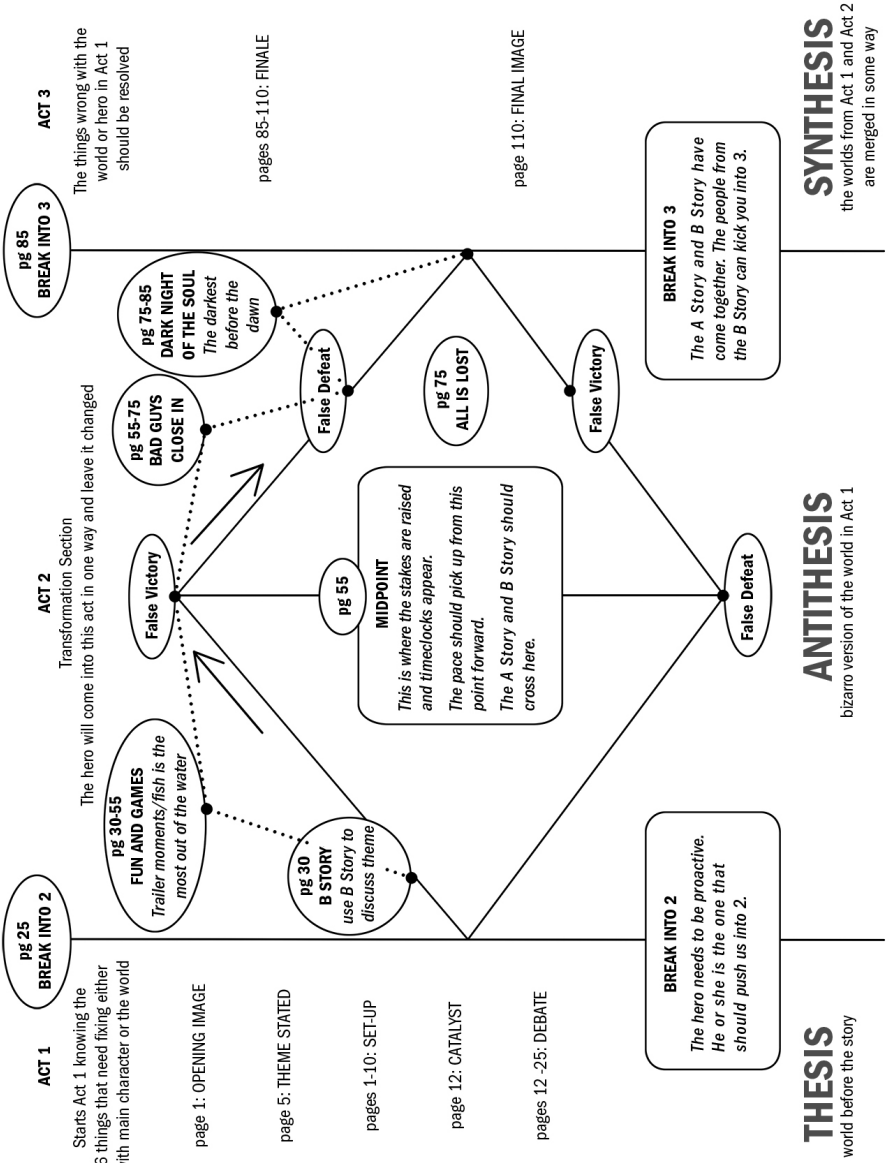
So how do you find the transformation in *your* story?

In *Save the Cat!*, *Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies*, and chapter two of this book, I go into great detail about two different maps to chart change: the 15 beats of the Blake Snyder Beat Sheet and the 40 beats of The Board.

But in the course of teaching structure, I've found another way, a third map, that may be the easiest way to see story yet. This is the "flow chart" that shows **The Transformation Machine** that is change in action. It illustrates how, in the process of change, the hero dies and the person emerging at the other end is wholly new. We can actually track that change using this chart.

Are you ready for a little change yourself?

THE TRANSFORMATION MACHINE



THREE WORLDS

We start with the fact there are three different “worlds” in a well-structured story. We hear these worlds called many things, including Act One, Act Two, and Act Three, but I prefer to think of them as “Thesis,” “Antithesis,” and “Synthesis.”

Thesis is the world “as is”; it’s where we start. You as the writer have to set the world up for us and tell us its rules — even if you think they are obvious. Where we mostly get into trouble as screenwriters is discounting the need to stand in the shoes of the audience who know nothing of what’s in our brilliant imaginations. We have to be considerate — and clear. What is the historic time period? What strata of society are we in? Is it fantasy- or reality-based? Who is our hero? Is he underdog or overlord? What is his burning desire? The world of *Gladiator* is different from *Blade Runner* and different again from *Elf*. When we open our eyes, what do we see, who’s in charge, what are the codes of conduct? And what are this world’s deficiencies?

In each of the movies cited above, there’s also a systemic problem: an empire in transition, killer replicants on the loose, a human — raised by elves — who suddenly learns the truth. What we are setting up is not just a place but a dilemma. And we have to set it all up to understand where we will soon be heading.

Antithesis is the “upside-down version” of the first, and absolutely must be that. I often cite *Training Day* as an example to distinguish these worlds, for when Jake (Ethan Hawke) is given a choice at Minute 17 by Alonzo (Denzel Washington) to “take a hit off that pipe or get out of my car,” and proactively says yes, Ethan leaves behind the world of “ethical” cops that is his Thesis world and enters its “funhouse-mirror reflection.”

Often characters re-appear in a different form in the Antithesis. Think how Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz*, meets funhouse-mirror versions of characters she left back in Kansas. In *Gladiator*, Russell Crowe trades noble Marcus Aurelius (played by Richard Harris) for the moth-eaten version in the gladiator impresario played by Oliver Reed. In *Elf*, Will Ferrell leaves elves in the North Pole, who

told him he was human, for humans pretending to be elves — to get a job as an elf at a NYC department store!

Part of the reason for making the Antithesis world an odd mirror reflection of the Thesis world is a simple truth: We can leave home and go somewhere else, but our problems are always with us. In *Legally Blonde*, let's face it: Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) is a sort of a pill when we meet her. Yes, she's put down for being blonde, but she kinda deserves the label. Going to Harvard forces her to change by setting her in a world where her flaws are obvious. But have no doubt, her problems haven't gone anywhere, and that's why characters from before manifest in different form — just as in life. It's like the person who says: "Everyone in Los Angeles is mean!" and decides to move to a new town, where he discovers that "Everybody is mean here, too!" Sooner or later, it will dawn on this person it's not the town that's the problem; it's something he's doing wrong that's causing "mean people" to always appear.

Again, good storytelling is so, because it reflects truth.

Often distinguishing these two worlds must be forced. I worked with a writer whose logline was: "A struggling artist fakes his death to raise the price of his work and hides out in the world of the homeless, only to discover his agent is actually trying to kill him." (A fear I've had for years!) Problem was: The struggling artist lived in a cold-water flat, and was already broke when we start, so when he fakes his death and hides among the homeless, what's the difference? We changed it to make the Thesis world different, and make the poor artist successful and living in a penthouse! Now the change in worlds is more drastic, richer — and as a result the story is richer, too.

The third world is a combination of the two: Synthesis. What the hero had in Thesis, and added to in Antithesis, becomes "the third way" in the finale. Again citing *Training Day*, Ethan Hawke starts out as an ethical cop in Thesis, then learns a new way in the upside-down world of dirty cops. By the time Denzel Washington tries to kill Ethan by dropping him at a gang house, Ethan, metaphorically,

“dies” at the hands of the gang members. In the very next scene, Ethan has a “Dark Night of the Soul” as he rides a bus around downtown L.A. and we know he can’t go back to the way he was before. The old Ethan would head to the police station and tattle on Denzel: “Teacher, teacher! Denzel did a bad thing!” But Ethan is so changed by what he’s learned in Act Two, he can’t go back. Like our caterpillar, the old Ethan is dead. And to emerge in Act Three victorious, he has to retain his ethics, add that to what he’s learned, and become a “third thing.”

These three worlds force change in a hero. We set him up, throw him in the blender, and he emerges as something brand new.

Much of the troubleshooting I do with your story is an examination of these three worlds. By looking at the process of change this way, it’s easy to step back and take in the big picture of how your hero or heroes move through these phases to their final destination. What I’m always going for is: bigger — or at least clearer — ways to define **the bouncing ball** that is your protagonist and the various ups and downs he must go through. The biggest surprise for most writers is: You are the engineer here! You are “small g” god of this universe and can make it any way you want! Whenever I point out how minor the changes are in your hero, or how the overall arc is insufficient, writers are forever saying: *But that’s not how I saw it*, as if the way it came out of your imagination is the only way it can be. This is why picking your Opening Image and Final Image is so vital, and why you have to keep adjusting the Alpha-Omega and make those two points as wildly opposite, and as demonstrably different, as possible.

And I know you get it because you are awesome! And I’m not just saying it because you’ve come with me all the way to page 50!

THE MAGICAL MIDPOINT

Given these three worlds, we can now put the 15 beats of the BS2 into the Transformation Machine and look how nicely they lay out! From left to right we see Opening Image, Theme Stated, Set-Up, Break into Two, through Midpoint, All Is Lost, Finale, and Final Image.

And each stop on our trip in some way changes the hero.

Let's start with Midpoint or what I am calling the "Magical Midpoint," for in fact it is a very magical place. When I noted in the first *Cat!* book how vital Midpoint is for "breaking" a story, I had no idea how much more I'd keep learning about it.

I like to say that the Midpoint is the Grand Central Station of plot points, the nerve center. It's because so many demands intersect here. The Midpoint clearly divides every story into two distinct halves and is the "no-turning-back" part of our adventure. We've met our hero and shown his deficiencies, we've sent him to a new place, and in Fun and Games we've given him a glimpse of what he can be — but without the obligation to be that! Now at Midpoint, we must show either a false victory or a false defeat that forces the hero to choose a course of action, and by doing so, make his death and rebirth inevitable.

False victory at Midpoint is just that, the point where the hero "gets everything he thinks he wants" — and it has features that are fascinating. Many times you'll find a "party at Midpoint": the celebration Jim Carrey is feted with in *Bruce Almighty* when he gets his promotion to anchorman, and even a "kiss from the girl"; check out *Ironman* when, fresh from the false victory of his first trial flight as a superhero, Robert Downey Jr. goes to his company party and almost kisses Gwyneth Paltrow; look at the party Dustin Hoffman attends in *Tootsie*, when he tries to fly as the man Jessica Lange might kiss, but gets slapped down by her instead. And even when there's not a party per se, there is often a "public coming out" of the hero as he tries on this new identity, or declares a new way of living. Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio do this at the Midpoint of *Titanic*, when, after making love for the first time, they go up on the deck of the soon-to-be-doomed ship together for all the world to see.

False defeat is the same but opposite. The Midpoint false defeat is where the hero "loses everything he thinks he wants." It also has a public aspect. Check out the costume party in *Legally*

Blonde, when Elle Woods bottoms out in her bunny ears and is told by ex-love Warner he doesn't want her, and that she should leave Harvard. Note the false defeat party of *Spider-Man 2* when Tobey Maguire learns Kirsten Dunst is engaged. It's the point where Richard Gere is broken in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, and — publicly — declares defeat by shouting to drill sergeant Lou Gossett Jr. his melodramatic secret: "I got nowhere else to go!"

Whether a false victory or a false defeat, the purpose of this Midpoint "public display of a hero" is to force that hero to announce himself as such — and up the ante of his growth. We've had some fun, we've seen you either rise to the top or crash spectacularly; you've tried out your new identity — here in the upside-down version of the world — but what are you, the hero, really gonna do about it? Are you real or are you fake?

"Stakes raised," "time clocks" forcing his decision, the hero must decide. What's it gonna be, pal: butterfly or worm?

The Midpoint is where the hero stands up and says: Yes, I'm going through with this. Whether by dumb luck, determination, or pressure from the "Bad Guys," he must keep going forward.

And speaking of Bad Guys, this is where they start to "close in" — and there's a good reason for that, too. Part of the risk of declaring one's self a hero is that it attracts the attention of those who most want to stop us from growing, changing, and winning. The Bad Guy/Good Guy intersection at Midpoint is key to upping the stakes of that conflict. The Midpoint is the place where "the Bad Guy learns who his rival is," as Alan Rickman does when he first meets Bruce Willis and his cowboy persona at the false victory Midpoint of *Die Hard*; it's where the secret power or flaw of a hero, or his role in besting the Bad Guy, is discovered, as in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* when Jim Carrey's rival for Kate Winslet's affections (Elijah Wood), learns he's getting competition from Jim... *still*; it's also where, if the hero is hiding, or his location is unknown, "the Bad Guy learns the hero's whereabouts." We see this when the chasers in *Witness* realize Harrison Ford is hiding in buttermilk country,

and when Peter Coyote and his gang of key-jinglers discover E.T. is secreted somewhere in suburbia.

The Magical Midpoint has all these characteristics, but like a writer brilliantly pointed out in my workshop one weekend, it's not all *on* page 55! These beats are spread out, often over several scenes mid-way. To quote Gene Wilder in the dart-throwing scene of *Young Frankenstein*: "Nice... grouping!"

WHY BAD GUYS REALLY CLOSE IN

Having crossed the "point of no return" at Midpoint, a hero of a story begins the most difficult phase of his transformation.

And this is true for the writer of the tale as well.

Remember change is painful. Midpoint is not only the end of the Fun and Games and the glimpse of what a hero can be, it's the knowledge that he has to change. Whether a false victory or a false defeat, the lesson's not over. That's why the hero starts to fight it from here until All Is Lost. *I don't wanna go!* you can almost hear him cry. But like it or not, he's going!

And you as the writer have to go with him.

Part of the reason this section is so difficult to figure out is it's about stuff happening *to* the hero — that will lead to the ultimate when he "dies" on page 75. As writers we like our heroes to be proactive, leading the charge, always in control.

But this is the part where what the hero once believed was real, solid ground, is crumbling away, forcing him to react.

After the false victory beat in *Alien* when the monster attached to John Hurt's face drops off and "dies," Sigourney Weaver and the crew of the *Nostromo* prepare to go back to Earth.

Hey! Let's have a party!

But once that creature splatters John's stomach all over the dinner table and skates off squealing into the darkness, the disintegration of Sigourney's world begins in earnest. Not only do her fellow crew members start getting eaten right and left, it's slowly dawning on Sigourney that her belief in the company is false... and the rules she thought would keep her safe, won't.

And that's unthinkable.

So she resists. And resists. And resists.

Until it becomes painfully obvious at All Is Lost.

That's Bad Guys Close In. Externally, aliens are actually attacking. Internally, we are still clinging to our old beliefs.

And one by one they are being exposed as false.

Resistance is not as easy to write as proactive, leading-the-charge, directioned activity that heroes normally exhibit.

How do you reveal the internal fear of a hero, for whom it's gradually being revealed her old beliefs are wrong? How do you show panic — which most heroes are trying *not* to show?

That's why BGCII is so tough to write!

But if you know that's the purpose of that section, it's at least easier to think about, plan, and aim for in your writing. This is disintegration of the old ways, the slow sloughing off of ideas, beliefs, and friendships that are wrong, useless, harmful. The horrible realization that the keyhole is near and you're going through it and there's no escape. We... are... going!

And that realization begins at the Magical Midpoint.

THE THEME STATED – B STORY CONNECTION

Why are there so many scenes at Midpoint that involve the “hero kissing a girl,” you may well ask? It's because another intersection that happens here at Midpoint is the **A and B Story cross**. And since many writers have asked for more on this, there's no time like the present for further elucidat'n'.

Midpoint is not only where we “raise the stakes” of the hero's A Story, but where we do the same for the B Story. And that's why the boy and girl so often kiss here — or at least come close. I told this “discovery” to an old-time screenwriter once, thinking myself quite brilliant for having figured this out all by myself, only to be told by him: “Oh yeah! ‘Sex at Sixty’!” That was the term he and his screenwriting buddies used for the “kiss at the first hour.” It just goes to show that where the basics of storytelling are concerned, nothing changes.

As suggested, most movies have two intertwining skeins:

The A Story is the hero's tangible goal, what he wants.

The B Story is the hero's spiritual goal, what he needs.

The A Story is what is happening on the surface. It's the plot. The B Story, or what I call the "helper story," helps push the hero to learn the spiritual lesson that every story is really all about. Most often the B Story is "the love interest" aka "the girl." The hero enters the upside-down version of the world of Act Two, looks across a crowded room, and there she is — the person who'll help him on his way to transformation, and hold his hand as he dies and is reborn! And, of course, because she can't be with him when they meet (otherwise where'd we have to go?), the process of boy wins girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back in a poker game, is seen time and again in a thousand forms.

"The girl" can also be "the mentor." Check out the B Story of the hit comedy *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*. Who's the B Story? Who's the "helper" character that will push hero Vince Vaughn to learn his lesson in leadership? Why it's Rip Torn, as down-and-out ex-dodgeball champ, Patches O'Houlihan! Proof comes when seeing how the B Story beats of that movie line up. We first meet Patches on page 30, when Vince and his team see an old dodgeball instructional film starring the younger Patches (Hank Azaria). At Midpoint, the stakes are raised, and A and B cross, when an older Patches arrives in the flesh and — publicly — tells Vince that he is now the team's coach. Since all mentors go to page 75 to die, Patches does too, giving Vince pause before pushing him to action in Act Three, where Patches even reappears — *en spirito* — to give Vince the ghostly final shove he needs to go on to dodgeball greatness. Rudimentary? Yes. Silly? Of course!

And yet this basic construct appears again and again.

Whether the B Story is one person like a love interest, mentor, or sidekick, or a group such as the host of helpers the heroes learn

from in the Act Two worlds of *Legally Blonde*, *Miss Congeniality*, and *Gladiator*, these B Story pulse points denote the function of forcing the hero to learn his real lesson.

And all of it ties back into Theme!

Keep in mind the only reason for storytelling and why A and B must cross throughout: It's to show the true reason for the journey is not getting the tangible goal, but learning the spiritual lesson that can only be found through the B Story!

The Theme Stated moment on page 5 of a well-structured screenplay ties in to the lesson the hero will learn. This is the place, up front, when you as writer get to say what this movie is about — and it might take a few drafts to enunciate precisely. A clue for finding it is seeing how the B Story “helps” the hero learn the lesson. When you do figure it out, state the lesson up front, tie it to the B Story's introduction on page 30, the raising of the stakes at Midpoint, the **moment of clarity** that helps the hero realize his error in *Dark Night of the Soul*, and the final push into Act Three the hero needs to learn his lesson — and triumph.

OTHER INTERESTING PHENOMENA

The various sections of the Transformation Machine are each different. They serve a different need, have a different tone, and yet all point to the same goal: *change*. They also help troubleshoot our brilliant ideas that don't quite fit, or that we don't quite know what to do with — and even help with the problem of selling our scripts. The Fun and Games is a great example of this.

“Fun and Games” is my term, and indicates, I hope, where the “promise of the premise” of a movie is found. It's the part where the hero first enters and explores the Antithesis world — and it's “fun” to the extent that we are not as concerned with plot as we are with seeing what this new world is about. But this term has also led to confusion. What's “fun” about the series of bodies found in this section of many murder mysteries and slasher flicks? What's “fun” about Russell Crowe in *Gladiator* being given up for dead and

learning the ropes of *Spartacus*-like combat? While not every Fun and Games section is purely fun, it does offer us a cool way to troubleshoot the problem of figuring out what the poster of your movie is, if you don't know. Why?

Because the Fun and Games is your pitch!

I can't tell you the a-ha! moment that occurred for me when this fact hit me. I was trying to help a writer get her adventure going. *It's like Miss Congeniality, I was telling her, by the time you hit page 25, the story is on! Tomboy FBI agent, Sandra Bullock, is undercover...* Then a lightbulb. I saw Sandra in her gown, crown, and sash, a gun in her garter. That's the Fun and Games of *Miss Congeniality*.

It's the poster!

It's the concept!

To me, a guy very concerned with delivering on his premise, I thought that was enough to worry about. But knowing this new twist, I can also reverse engineer both what goes into Fun and Games and how to double-check to make sure it's my movie's crux.

This is an important a-ha! because when you're trying to figure out what your story is, you will pitch all kinds of things: Setting, Theme, Catalyst, even the Finale of your tale.

I've heard them all. And they're all *not* your movie.

No, the movie is not where it's set. It's not its "meaning." It's not how the hero is "called to action." And it's not the big slam-bang Finale — even though all these are vital.

It's the Fun and Games.

That's your movie.

And if your Fun and Games section isn't solid, or isn't delivering on your premise, now's the time to find out.

Looking at the map on page 47, and seeing all the pieces of this flow chart, helps us see other points of interest, too, ones which, while I stood at the whiteboard, led to similar a-ha! moments.

One really interesting point of comparison is the similarity between two sections: "*Catalyst – Debate – Break into Two*" and "*All Is Lost – Dark Night of the Soul – Break into 3.*"

Just look at how these sets of plot points line up:

– *Catalyst* and *All Is Lost* are both points where something is done to the hero. In *Catalyst*, it's innocent, an invitation, a telephone call, the discovery of news that starts the adventure. The *All Is Lost* is also done to the hero, but it's more serious: This is where he's evicted, fired, loses his significant other, or someone dies. It's a different tone, but the same function.

– *Debate* and *Dark Night of the Soul* also are alike. It's... hesitation. Having received an invitation or, later, when the stakes are more serious, and having experienced a death, jail, or exile... now what? Again, the difference is that early on the consequences are few; later, more serious. But the function is the same: Given a life-altering jolt, what will the hero do next?

– *Break into Two* and *Break into Three* is the response. Both are proactive moves on the part of the hero that take him to the next level. Having been hit with something, and thought about it, the hero now acts. Here again, the stakes are more serious later on because we are just about to face "the final test."

And all these sections of your movie are designed to do what the entire Transformation Machine is set up to accomplish: Force change in the hero or heroes — and in us, the audience.

So are we done yet? Not quite.

THE FIVE-POINT FINALE

When it comes to "structure dilemmas," no part of a story can be more frustrating than Act Three — one about which I realize I am guilty of not revealing all. I have been amused by how often I get called out on point #14 in my 15-point Blake Snyder Beat Sheet — the one that is simply labeled "Finale." "Well, thanks a pantload, Blake," is the gist of the objection. And while I say the basis of this section is Synthesis, it doesn't seem quite enough. Where is the little red button that Tommy Lee Jones told Will Smith not to touch in *Men in Black* that *Save the Cat!* is known for? Because when you're

deep in it, and have tried every trick you can to solve the problem, I want you to not only have that button, but to push it!

I am most excited about what I call the “Five-Point Finale” because by using it you can finish *any* story. And though I’ve had a version in my back pocket for a while, it wasn’t until I began helping writers that I realized how useful it is. We’ve seen how the hero is thrown into the Transformation Machine and forced to change, but how do you finish this process? Synthesis gives us one clue. But when it comes to figuring out what to *do*, I hope you will soon be rocketing upside down through the Holland Tunnel smiling — and thinking fondly of me.

In addition to Act Three being about Synthesis, the Third Act Finale is best seen as the “Final Exam” for the hero. Having started off naively, and been schooled in the world of hard knocks, he has died and been given the chance to be born anew. But has he learned his lesson? And can he apply it? There is no better way to show this test than in what I call **Storming the Castle**, the essence of every ending and the key to the Five-Point Finale.

What is the “castle”? And what are these five points?

1. *Gathering the Team* — The first step, once the hero has decided to proactively cross into Act Three, is the “Gathering of the Team,” those he’ll need to “storm the castle.” The **castle** can be anything, from an actual fortress (the “Death Star” in *Star Wars*), to getting on stage at a local rock club (*School of Rock*), to helping your girl reach the airport (*Casablanca*), to “rushing to the airport” to stop your girl from leaving without you (*Love Actually*). A big part of being able to do this is the rallying of allies, who may not be on speaking terms with the hero at the moment, and “amending hurts” to be able to work together. It also involves “gathering tools,” and making plans for what we hope will be a successful run at the task at hand. This includes “strapping on the guns” in *The Matrix*, when Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss literally choose the weapons they’ll need to storm the castle and free their captured mentor Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) from the clutches of... those guys.

2. *Executing the Plan* — The second step is the actual “Storming of the Castle” when the execution of the plan feels foolproof. Sure it’s a challenge, and there must be some sense in every Storming of the Castle that “this is crazy.” In fact, that very line is heard in many Finales just to let you in the audience know what an impossible task is at hand. “This can’t be done” is key to setting up the challenge our heroes face. But as the plan begins to unfold, by gum, we just might pull off this crazy plan! We’re succeeding! The team is working together like a well-oiled machine. In many instances this is also where we pay off the arcs and proofs of growth for the minor characters, and show how that defect they had at the beginning of the story is now “fixed” — and even useful — thanks to the journey the hero dragged his pals along on. It’s all looking good here. And yet there is a sense as the goal nears that this is too easy. Sure we’ve lost some nameless soldiers, who demonstrate their loyalty by taking a bullet for the team (Randy Quaid in *Independence Day*, Rhys Ifans in *Notting Hill*, those way-too-happy-to-die pilots in *Star Wars*), but the crew is together and the High Tower in sight.

3. *The High Tower Surprise* — The third step in the Five-Point Finale proves how overly optimistic that assessment was. For this is the part where the hero reaches the High Tower where the princess is being kept and finds something shocking: no princess! (For a twist on the “Princess,” check out the Five-Point Finale of *Enchanted*, which proves Princesses can often save their own damn selves, thank you very much!) But the point is made: The High Tower Surprise shows we were not only overly confident in our plan — overconfidence is one of the problems! Seems not only is the plan dashed, but the Bad Guy, or the forces aligned against our hero, “knew we were coming” all along. This is the part where “traitors are exposed” and our brilliant plan is revealed to be a trap set by the Bad Guys (as Russell Crowe in *Gladiator* discovers when his plot to rally Rome and overthrow Joaquin Phoenix proves to be doomed from the start). The effort now comes to a dead stop. The hero and his allies are

“arrested in their tracks,” and the “clock is ticking” on our doom. It looks like all is lost *again!* However smart our hero thought he was up to this point, however much he’s done to “synthesize” his lesson by reuniting his allies and giving it his all... it’s not enough. The shock of the High Tower Surprise is learning that’s not what this effort has been about. And the real challenge of the Final Exam the hero must pass is about to become clear.

4. “*Dig, Deep Down*” – The whole point of the Finale now is revealed — and it’s not what we expected. This is the part where all human solution is exhausted. This is where we’ve got *bupkis*; there’s not a back-up plan, nor an alternate course in sight. And it’s all come down to the hero — who’s got nothing either. Yet, as it turns out... *this* is the true test! In a sense, every story is about the “stripping away” of the stuff the hero thinks is important at the start of the story, including his own little ideas for winning at the end. This is the part where the hero has to find that last ounce of strength to win but can’t use normal means to do so. And lest you think this is a goofy, “formula” thing, in fact it is the whole point of storytelling. For this is the part we’ve waited for, the “touched-by-the-divine” beat where the hero lets go of his old logic and does something he would never do when this movie began.

Devoid of a human solution, the hero returns to the blackness he succumbed to during the cocoon stage of his transformation to prove he’s mastered that part of himself that is beyond human to find faith, inner strength, a last-ditch idea, love, grace. It’s the Dig-Deep-Down moment all stories teach us: At some point we have to abandon the natural world, and everything we think we know, and have faith in a world unseen. This is the part in *Star Wars* where we hear Obi-Wan say: “Use the Force, Luke!”; the part of *Gladiator* when, seemingly dead, Russell Crowe finds that last bit of energy to stab Joaquin Phoenix right in his Coliseum. It’s the part where Hugh Grant dares speak to Julia Roberts in the press conference finale of *Notting Hill*, and in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* when

Harrison Ford is given a choice to save his father (Sean Connery) by giving up everything else. It's the part in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* where Steve Martin, having figured out John Candy has no wife, recalls the lonely man that has become his friend and goes back to rescue him. This is the moment of faith when, with a breathless gasp, the trapeze artist, high up in the darkness of the big top, lets go of his grip on the world, does his spin, and snaps out into the void hoping another will take his hands. And we watch in anticipation, for in our own way... we've been waiting, too.

5. *The Execution of the New Plan* — The answer comes from a place we've all hoped is real, but only the hero has faith enough to trust, and when he does, he wins... and so do we. Awakened to the true lesson of this story, the hero puts this last-ditch plan into action and it works! This is where "on the fly" the hero tries it a new way — and succeeds. Thinking fast, Humphrey Bogart's plan prevails in *Casablanca*; risking all, Dustin Hoffman grabs Katharine Ross and runs in *The Graduate*; going with his gut, Dev Patel answers the final question that will make him a *Slumdog Millionaire*. It was only by stepping into the unknown — and trusting — that the hero could find the way to triumph. *This is the test. Can you give up belief in your old ways and have faith in the dark, quiet place inside?* Rewards go to those who seek this moment in fiction and in life. It's the reason we tell stories and honor those who understand. This is why, when we go to the Final Image of a movie — such as the ceremony at the end of *Star Wars* — we feel like we won as well.

Because we did!

Believe it or not, this Five-Point Storming the Castle occurs in some form or fashion in *every* story! This is the "face-your-fear" part, the final test that proves the hero was paying attention — or not! And yet the risk of putting this out there is to once again hear cries of "formula!" To which I say, *phooey!*

The Five-Point Finale is your secret weapon for finding the true meaning of your tale. And that Dig-Deep-Down point, that

“Use the Force, Luke!” beat, is what we’re all looking for whether we are the writers of the story or the audience for it. Yes, this way of looking at the ending of any story also works when the hero or heroes are “Defending the Castle” as seen in the finales of *Saving Private Ryan*, *Shaun of the Dead*, and *Blazing Saddles* — or in “Escaping the Castle” as seen in *Alien*, *Free Willy*, and *Defiance*. Whether your team is on the offense or the defense, the lessons of friendship, teamwork, selflessness, and nobility are the same, and the Dig-Deep-Down moment is key. No matter what the permutation of your tale, it’s the dynamic we seek, for the need of any story boils down to being touched by powers unseen.

Special effects are fine, great set pieces are wonderful, funny jokes and unique characters are vital. But if you take me to the divine in your story, I will tell all my friends about it.

That’s what storytelling is really about.

And that kind of magic is as far from formula as it gets.

LET’S REVIEW

My goal is much simpler, however: to help you avoid feeling stuck. Between the ease of the BS2, the visual clarity of The Board, and this latest structure map, you should feel fully empowered. You now have the Wurlitzer keyboard at your command. You can set the tempo, rhythm, and structure for every story! Using these tools, you can finesse your way through any structure snag. And though we’ll get into all new monkey wrenches in the next chapters as we deal with actual notes from executives and others, for now you can feel good. You have all kinds of new ways to throw your curveballs, spitballs, sliders, and fastballs.

But perhaps you’re still feeling penned in?

If you can’t shake the feeling that structure isn’t helping you feel “free,” I understand. It’s a common hesitation. Using the BS2 and working out the 15 beats, then going to The Board, you may still think it’s all too easy, too mechanical, too formulaic. You are “All Beat Out... with Nowhere to Go” — dressed to the nines, picture

perfect, but unmotivated to continue on to the show. Well, if that's the case, you have to shake it up. You have to get out of the structure and tell the story in a new way. I have used these tactics to do so:

▶ *My movie: the one page* – This is the trick famed screenwriter William Goldman uses. He will not start writing his screenplay until he can tell his story in one page; he gives himself 300 words and no more to tell the tale. This forces him to get to the crux of his story.

▶ *My movie: the tone poem* – I'm not kidding. I have often retold my story as a poem. In rhyming couplets, with all brand new challenges to get across what my story is, sometimes I have had all new breakthroughs, and sometimes all new story ideas!

▶ *My movie: the comedy* – Perhaps you're too wrapped up in tone? Is your story overly dramatic, overly comic? Try pitching the opposite. If a drama, try the comedic take to shake it up.

▶ *My movie: the Rubik's Cube* – One of the nice aspects of the *STC!* software is the ability to move scenes around at will. Try it. Take them off the board, shuffle, and randomly put them back up out of order. You never know what insights will be realized.

Anything you can do to free your story, frees you too. It lets you deal with the continuing elasticity of your tale. All the way through, from the first *Save the Cat!* to this chapter, I hope I've stressed the nimbleness required, the talent to — at any minute — throw away everything you hold near and dear, and try something brand new. And nowhere is this particular challenge greater than when we have actually executed a script and are now staring at the result. Panic. Self-Recrimination. Grief. These are just some of the emotional candy we snack on when we know something's wrong — and we don't know how to solve it.

But fear not.

The Script Doctor is in!