

Fiction Submission Guidelines— Stories We See Too Often

Of course it's not impossible to write a good story with one of these plots or themes; it's not that these are inherently bad plots, merely that we see too many stories that use them.

1. Person is (metaphorically) at point A, wants to be at point B. Looks at point B, says "I want to be at point B." Walks to point B, encountering no meaningful obstacles or difficulties. The end. (A.k.a. the linear plot.)
2. Creative person is having trouble creating.
 - a. Writer has writer's block.
 - b. Painter can't seem to paint anything good.
 - c. Sculptor can't seem to sculpt anything good.
 - d. Creative person's work is reviled by critics who don't understand how brilliant it is.
 - e. Creative person meets a muse (either one of the nine classical Muses or a more individual muse) and interacts with them, usually by keeping them captive.
3. Visitor to alien planet ignores information about local rules, inadvertently violates them, is punished.
 - a. New diplomat arrives on alien planet, ignores anthropologist's attempts to explain local rules, is punished.
4. Weird things happen, but it turns out they're not real.
 - a. In the end, it turns out it was all a dream.
 - b. In the end, it turns out it was all in virtual reality.
 - c. In the end, it turns out the protagonist is insane.
 - d. In the end, it turns out the protagonist is writing a novel and the events we've seen are part of the novel.
5. Artificial Intelligence gets loose on the Net despite the computer it was on not being connected to the Net.

- a. Artificial Intelligence gets loose on the Net but the author doesn't have a clear concept of what it means for software to be "loose on the Net."
6. The future is soulless.
 - a. In the future, all learning is electronic, until kid is exposed to ancient wisdom in the form of a book.
 - b. In the future, everything is electronic, until kid is exposed to ancient wisdom in the form of a wise old person who's lived a non-electronic life.
 7. Protagonist is a bad person. (We don't object to this in a story; we merely object to it being the main point of the plot.)
 - a. Bad person is told they'll get the reward that they deserve, which ends up being something bad.
 - b. Terrorists (especially Osama bin Laden) discover that horrible things happen to them in the afterlife (or otherwise get their comeuppance).
 - c. Protagonist is portrayed as really awful, but that portrayal is merely a setup for the ending, in which they see the error of their ways and are redeemed.
 8. A place is described, with no plot or characters.
 9. A surprise twist ending occurs. (Note that we do like endings that were unexpected as long as they derive naturally from character action.)
 - a. The characters are described as if they are humans, but in the end it turns out they're not humans.
 - b. Creatures are described as "vermin" or "pests" or "monsters," but in the end it turns out they're humans.
 - c. The author conceals some essential piece of information from the reader that would be obvious if the reader were present at the scene. (This can be done well, but rarely is.)
 - d. Person is floating in a formless void; in the end, they're born.
 - e. Person uses time travel to achieve some particular result, but in the end something unexpected happens that thwarts their plan.

- f. The main point of the story is for the author to metaphorically tell the reader, "Ha, ha, I tricked you! You thought one thing was going on, but it was really something else! You sure are dumb!"
10. Someone calls technical support; wacky hijinx ensue.
 - a. Someone calls technical support for a magical item.
 - b. Someone calls technical support for a piece of advanced technology.
 - c. The title of the story is 1-800-SOMETHING-CUTE.
 11. Scientist uses himself or herself as test subject.
 12. Evil unethical doctor performs medical experiments on unsuspecting patient.
 13. Office life turns out to be soul-deadening, literally or metaphorically.
 14. In the future, criminals are punished much more harshly than they are today.
 - a. In the future, the punishment always fits the crime.
 - b. In the future, the American constitutional amendment prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment has been repealed, or is interpreted very narrowly.
 15. White protagonist is given wise and mystical advice by Holy Simple Native Folk.
 16. A party of D&D characters (usually including a fighter, a magic-user, and a thief, one of whom is an elf and one a dwarf) enters a dungeon (or the wilderness, or a town, or a tavern) and fights monsters (usually including orcs).
 - a. A group of real-world humans who like role-playing find themselves transported to D&D world.
 17. An alien observes and comments on the peculiar habits of humans, for allegedly comic effect.
 - a. The alien is fluent in English and completely familiar with various English idioms, but is completely unfamiliar with human biology and/or with such concepts as sex or violence.
 - b. The alien takes everything literally.

This is an attempt at classifying the kinds of horror-story plots that we receive too frequently.

Of course it's not impossible to write a good story with one of these plots. But it would have to be really extraordinary.

1. Serial killer or vampire stalks and slays victim(s).
 - a. The tables are turned at the end. (For example, the intended victim turns out to be a vampire or other powerful supernatural creature.)
 - b. The serial killer is insane.
 - c. The serial killer is under supernatural influence.
 - d. The serial killer was abused as a child.
2. Person is insane, and kills a lot of people because of it.
 - a. The insanity is due to supernatural influence.
 - b. The insane person does property damage instead of killing people.
3. Protagonist sits around for a while.
 - a. In the end, it turns out protagonist is dead.
 - b. In the end, it turns out protagonist is a serial killer.
4. Evil creature kills lots of people.
 - a. In the end the creature escapes to kill again.
 - b. The creature is disguised as something cute.
5. Person sees mysterious things that nobody else can see.
 - a. Person has unreasonable dread of a Thing that nobody else can see; in the end the Thing gets the person after all.
 - b. Person has bad dreams; they turn out to be real.
 - c. In the end, it turns out the person is crazy.
 - d. In the end, it turns out someone is drugging the person.

6. Warnings are ignored, with unfortunate consequences.
 - a. Person is warned to Always Do something; fails to do it; thereby sets Nameless Evil free.
 - b. Person is warned to Never Do something; does it anyway; thereby sets Nameless Evil free.
7. A place is haunted or scary. [No, this isn't a plot, but we do receive plotless place descriptions in which this is the only point.]
8. Child is abused.
 - a. The tables are turned at the end.
 - b. The abuser is under supernatural influence.
9. Person is targeted by Evil Thing; in the end, Evil Thing kills person.
10. Horrible things happen to person in the end, either as punishment or irony.
 - a. Person is a bad person; in the end, they get their comeuppance when unspeakably horrible things happen to them. [A.k.a. the *Twilight Zone* plot.]
 - b. Person attempts to kill or dispose of spouse; in the end, the tables are turned.
 - c. Person isn't such a bad person; but in the end, unspeakably horrible things happen to them anyway.
 - d. Person wants or wishes for something, and they get it without any trouble, but it results in horrible things happening to them.
11. Therapist enters into the thoughts of serial killer in prison, via telepathy or VR. [a.k.a. the *Cell* plot.]
12. Initiate into religion discovers that the religion is actually killing/destroying its initiates.
13. Alien creature lays eggs under the skin of a human.

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