

Conflict and Stakes! (More on Plot)

The Stakes

Another way to think about plot is the occasion of the narrative—the reason the story is being told, and worthy of the reader’s time and attention. And almost always, the occasion has something to do with disequilibrium. By this we mean that something in your character’s life is thrown off balance. They were cruising along, and something happened to change the course of their life—typically some sort of trouble or conflict or danger.

Steve Almond describes plot as “the mechanism by which your protagonist is forced up against her deepest fears and/or desires.” So, not only is something changing, but it’s changing in a way that makes your character confront some deep and scary chasm in the outer world and/or inside themselves, like Junior transferring to an all-white school in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, or the war-torn world surrounding Liesel in *The Book Thief*.

What gives this chasm power is the reader’s understanding of the stakes. What does the character have to lose, and why should the reader care? If Junior assimilates (fits in) to the environment at his new school, will his reservation friends reject him? What will happen if Liesel gets caught teaching Max to read? This tension, and the reader caring about the outcome, is what we mean by stakes. To better understand the stakes for yourself, it can be helpful to ask yourself questions about your characters, like: What does my character want most in the world? What is she most afraid of?

Conflict

As you consider the stakes of your novel, and what it is that your main character wants more than anything else in the world, it’s useful to think about what’s standing in the way—a.k.a. conflict! Here are four different ways to think about conflict:

- **Physical Antagonist:** A character that stands in the way of your character achieving what he or she wants. Sometimes this is intentional (a bully intentionally making Junior’s life miserable at his new school), but often times the antagonist isn’t trying to be evil, it’s just that his or her own goals conflict with those of your main character.
- **Abstract Antagonist:** Something non-human that stands in the way of your character achieving what he or she wants—the war ripping apart Liesel’s family, for example. Illness and racism are other examples.
- **External Conflict:** The conflict that emerges between your main character and the antagonist. How does Liesel go about stealing books in a war-torn world? How does she keep from getting caught?
- **Internal Conflict:** The fears, jealousies, anxieties (etc.) that your character has to confront within him/herself.