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Sample

# BOOK

## ARCHITECTURE

HOW TO PLOT AND OUTLINE  
WITHOUT USING A FORMULA

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# Series is the New Plot

**I**n *Book Architecture: How to Plot and Outline Without Using a Formula*, you will learn how to create an effective plot and a clear outline for your work-in-progress, whether your work is an advanced draft or you are just starting out, and whether you are working in fiction, film and television, or creative nonfiction. You will learn a new approach to structure, and you won't have to resort to using a formula, which may seem risky! But it can be done.

I founded the company Book Architecture 15 years ago because I was tired of being called a “book doctor”—as if I had some kind of magic pill or syringe I could inject into a manuscript that would cure all of its ills. It doesn't work that way; at least it doesn't if you're not using a formula. Writers everywhere need help building something beautiful, solid, and original, and that takes a method. This is how we do it. This is how it gets done.

You may never have heard of the Book Architecture Method. Or, you may have bought my first book, *Blueprint Your Bestseller: Organize and Revise Any Manuscript with the Book Architecture Method* (hereafter, *BYB*), but didn't look into it too closely because you didn't have

enough material to “organize and revise.” *BYB* suggests you have at least 60 pages of first-draft material and preferably a hundred before you undertake its 22 action steps. By contrast, you can use the book you are holding now on a manuscript in any stage of completion. Anything you learned from my first book is applicable here, but you don’t have to have any prior exposure to jump right in.

The Book Architecture Method uses three main concepts: scene, series, and theme. Let’s talk about *scene*. The method says that if you find your 99 scenes, and you put them in the right order, then you will be all set. That’s kind of a joke, but I’ve seen it happen. Please note: 99 is a placeholder because we don’t yet know how many scenes your finished manuscript will have: it might have 72, or 138, etc. I am not saying your manuscript must have 99 scenes because to do so would be formulaic. What I am saying is that when we think of our scenes as comprising a certain number, and therefore separate from each other, we can get the flexibility we need to move things around, to discard some and brainstorm others.

I chose the number 99 because it is one short of a hundred. Meaning, we don’t achieve *unity*, the ultimate goal of literary creation, by aiming for comprehensiveness. Instead, we have to seek continuity, consistency, and coherence. Don’t put everything in, in other words.

It’s similar to when you first start learning how to cook and you get “kitchen sink syndrome,” as a chef friend of mine calls it. You’re making spaghetti sauce and you spy a yellow pepper, so you dice that up and add it. *Chinese five-spice powder*? Sure, let’s throw in a dash of that . . . and red wine vinegar . . . and the whole thing ends up tasting kind of like crap. Whereas if you just start with good tomatoes, good olive oil, etc. then you can taste the individual flavors *and* the way they come together. So it is with scene.

Your scenes are where things happen, and because something happened, your scenes are where something changes. Your scenes are where you “show, don’t tell,” where you use description and

dialogue, but they won't be animated at the level of the full-length narrative, unless you use *series*.

What is a series? Let me first tell you what a series is not: it is *not* an interrelated series of books in the same genre that have a lot of the same characters. (It is related to that, but we don't have to worry about that right now.)

*Series* here is defined as:

*The repetition and variation of a narrative element so that the repetition and variation creates meaning.*

You may have heard *repetition and variation* applied to art in general: the use of melody in music, the architectural pattern.

Repetition and variation of *a narrative element*—what is that? A narrative element is anything that can be identified in a reader's mind as something discrete, for example, a person, a place, a thing, a relationship or a phrase. In fact, the repetitions and variations of series are how a person becomes a character, how a place becomes a setting, how a thing or object becomes a symbol, how a relationship becomes a dynamic, and how a repeated phrase becomes a key to the philosophy of the work.

Repetition and variation of a narrative element *creates meaning*. It's a little early for that. I promise we will come back to how series creates meaning, and we will see examples of a wide variety of series. In fact, that's all we're really going to talk about.

The repetitions and variations of each series form individual narrative arcs, and we are going to practice graphing these **series arcs**, the first of Book Architecture's three tools. We gain the skills to have these arcs interact, intersect, and collide—to braid these threads of series into a whole tapestry—through the use of **series grids**, the second tool. And we use the third tool of the **series target** to make sure that all of these series are about the same thing, because your book can only be about one thing.

And we call that one thing our *theme*.

Your book can only be about one thing. I say that often enough that one student said, “Your book can only be about one thing—that’s *your* one thing.” Another student asked, “What about two things? Can my book be about two things?” You know those students. To which I replied, “Yes, provided that those two things are about one thing.”

This is as close as I get to a *should*. You should be able to say what the theme of your work is in one sentence. You don’t have to worry about whether that one sentence is a cliché. Better to spend your time worrying about whether you believe that one sentence.

*“It’s not how you fall in life, it’s whether you pick yourself up.”*

Do you believe that? I do. The originality comes from the clothing that you put on the theme, such as:

*“How a girl goes from being a drunk crying  
lesbian to just being a drunk lesbian.”*

Thank you Jennifer and Brown University for that one. You can feel the change in that, right? She might be all set now. We will see several more examples of theme in the examples that we encounter, such as this one from the novel *Catch-22*:

*“Immoral logic seemed to be confounding him at every turn.”*

When you get your theme, you can place it in the bull’s-eye of a series target (our third tool), arrange your series around it, and then use what repeats and varies to drill down to the level of individual scenes to see what your work is still missing, what has to go, and what kind of opportunity you really have in front of you.

Scene, series, and theme. A relatively simple way to think about writing. There are many good books on the market today on the subject

of *scene*. My use of *theme* is original in its application but not its definition. *Series*, though, fills a void in the writing world, and it has produced attention, a little controversy, and some a-ha! moments for writers.

There are many different types of series, as I mentioned before. There is a character series: when a person repeats and varies, they become a character; an object series: when an object repeats and varies, it becomes a symbol; a phrase series: when a phrase is repeated, it becomes the message or the mantra of the work; a relationship series: when two or more individuals evolve a dynamic; and a location series: when different scenes take place in the same locale, adding extra significance to it—to name a few of the major ones. There is, of course, an event series as well, but here we have to be careful because if we're not, we'll end up privileging these events above all of the other aspects of the work. We'll call the events a *plot* and make everything else take a backseat.

When I work with writers, they all want to talk with me about their plot. "What is this plot you speak of?" I ask, and they say something like, ". . . you know, everything that happens . . . the important parts . . . the stuff that comes together, and you know, means something."

One word can do all that? Plot used in that way is singular. Does that then mean it is either working or not working? I have found that working with individual series gives us a more productive perspective on how things are unfolding in any narrative. If you want to call them subplots, or narrative arcs, that's fine, just as long as you don't go looking for *the* plot or *the* narrative arc, because you won't find one. Every series contributes to the overall movement and impact of a work, and, as you'll see below, it is instructive to group the building blocks of meaning this way.

When we talk about plot as separate from the characters, the symbols, the locales, the dialogue, and the philosophical introspection, what we are doing is privileging events over everything else. But nothing exists in a vacuum; let's make everything a series instead

and immerse ourselves in the continuities, the correspondences, and the cohesion of a narrative that can become our universe.

Writing guides that treat everything separately make returning to unity that much harder. I don't want to sound like one of those people who think they've found the answer while everybody else is wrong. I just feel that current approaches to writing structure will inevitably box you in.

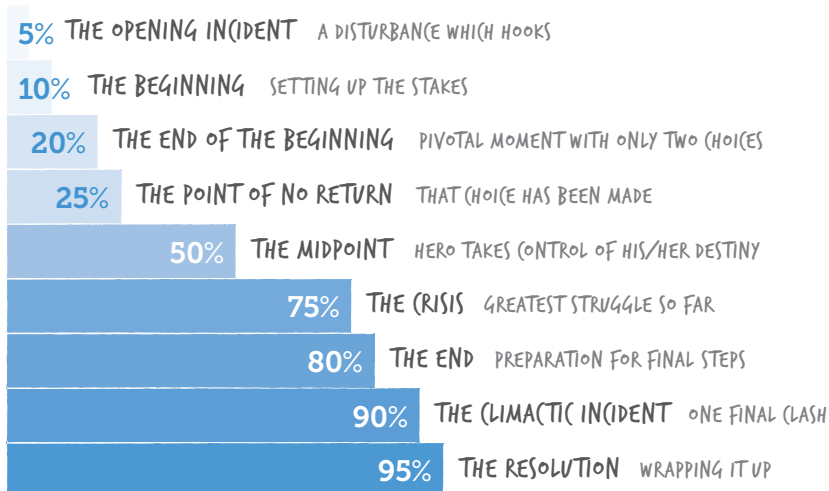
Nowhere is this more true than for the subject of plot. Everybody says pretty much the exact same thing. There is a "universal story" that we all must adhere to: narrative should be divided into a "three-act" structure of conflict, crisis, and resolution. Within these three acts, there are more specific landmarks such as the first "pinch point," where we are reminded of the antagonistic force, or the "midpoint," where we get a twist that sends the main character into a new world.

The whole of it looks more or less like this:

## INTRODUCTION:

### THE FORMULA

At...



...percentage of the story



This is good stuff to think about, just as long as we don't all use it at the same time and create a bunch of narratives that resemble each other because, you know, we all used the same formula. A lot of great books use this formula, but a lot of great books don't. Or, to put it another way: There may be a pre-existing structure in our human psyches that influences how we receive narrative. But we don't start with a formula to get to that structure. We use a method to uncover how you may be working with that structure. (And some people say, "Oh! Wait . . . I was looking for a formula. I'm going to have to call you back!")

Because we have our series, we don't need a formula. By tracking our series, we can straighten out 99 percent of what is wrong with our work. I'm serious; that figure is probably low. You can use the tool of the series arc to ensure consistency with your various throughlines, become aware of any gaping holes, and create moments of emotional impact. You can use the tool of the series grid to time the appearances and interactions of the most important narrative elements to engender dramatic tension and complex emotional and philosophical effects. You can use the tool of the series target to contain the universe of your narrative and give your readers the very comforting feeling that "everything is coming together."

Convinced yet? You don't have to be. All you have to do is give me the benefit of the doubt. Writers just like you swear that the Book Architecture Method has helped them figure out the real story they'd been trying to write. With this method in mind, their experiences of both reading and writing have been totally transformed—the series now jump out like secret codes!

And in case you were out there thinking that famous writers don't have to go through the same processes as the rest of us, because they're geniuses and stuff, let me introduce you to the theme of this book: Intelligent planning is not the enemy of creative genius. John Steinbeck, back me up: "I don't know why writers are never given credit for knowing their craft. Years after I have finished a book,

someone discovers my design and ascribes it either to a theft or an accident.”\*

Well, we won't do that. Yes, we will be “discovering the design” of several works in this book, but we will give those writers all the credit. Just as we will give you all the credit when your work comes before the world.

The works that we will be enjoying while we wrap our minds around how to plot and outline without using a formula are as follows:

“Corduroy” by Don Freeman (children's story)

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (novel)

*Slumdog Millionaire* screenplay by Simon Beaufoy (film)

*The Social Network* screenplay by Aaron Sorkin (film)

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* by J. K.

Rowling (novel)

*Catch-22* by Joseph Heller (novel)

*The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka (novella)

You do not need to be intimately familiar with the example in order to benefit from each chapter. Each narrative referenced will be briefly synopsized, with at least enough content that you can always infer what is going on. Because I know that you are primarily interested in your own work—as you should be—I promise not to waste your valuable writing time.

I'm supposed to warn you that more concentrative study is required than might be expected from a “how to plot and outline” book. But it's not going to be all work. We are also going to dream that we can write better than we thought we could, and then deliver something that is authentic and powerful for our readers. Let's get started.

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\* John Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 134.