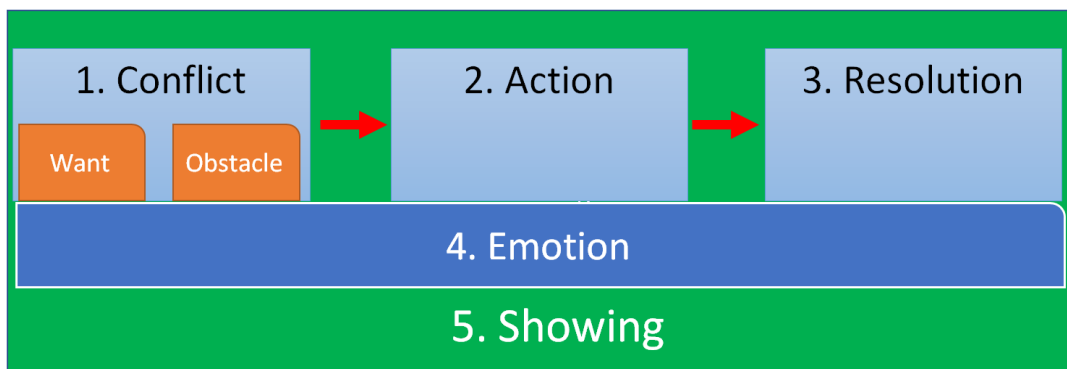# 5 Ways to Show the Backstory
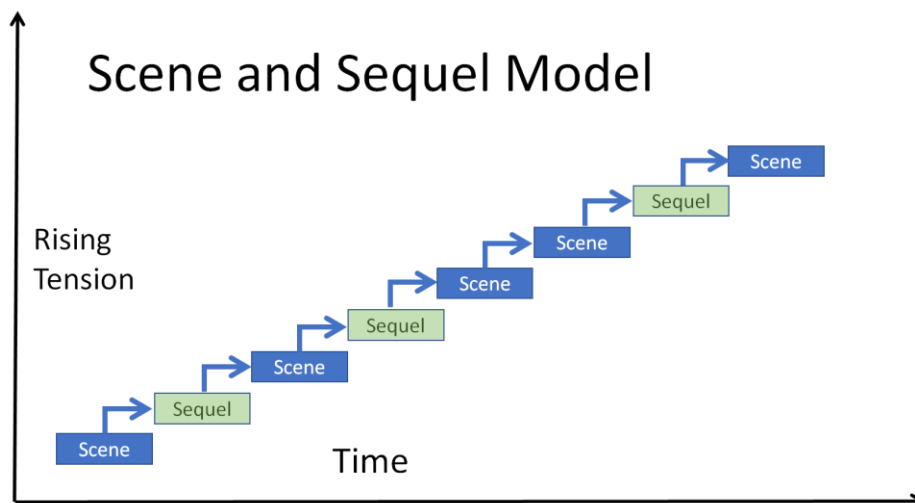*Presented by Jack Massa, June 5, 2018*

Models for Fiction Writing

A model for story-telling is like a *map*. It helps us find our way, but should not be confused with the *actual territory*.

This model is adapted from *Immediate Fiction* by Jerry Cleaver

This one is adapted from various sources:

Premise of Our Talk

Fiction works best when it engages us with immediate presentation of character's conflicts, actions, and emotions. This happens mostly in *dramatic scenes*.

But how do you convey all the **backstory** (that is, all the exposition, description, character psychology, motivation. and past history) without losing the immediacy of engagement and dramatic momentum?

We'll look at **5 Techniques**.

1. Show the Backstory in a Dramatic Narrative that Sets Up a Scene.
This narrative can come at the start of a story and cover a long period of time.

From "Homely Girl," by Elizabeth Brown, quoted in *Immediate Fiction*. This is the opening of a story, leading in to a scene of the girl going home as an adult to visit her mother.

> She's a homely girl. I don't know where she gets it," my six-year-old ears overhear my mother saying to my Aunt Beth. I don't know what "homely" means, but I know it's bad. I run to my room, bury my head in my pillow and cry. Eventually, I learn what homely really means. It means to be taken to the dentist for my buckteeth: "Can you make them straighter?" To the plastic surgeon for my nose: "Can you make it smaller?" It means I am dragged to walking classes, talking classes, and posture classes: "Chin up. Shoulders back. Enunciate. Smile." Homely means that everything I put in my mouth is carefully weighed, measured, and calculated beforehand, so I don't take up more space than I already do. "Will she ever lose weight, Doctor?" my mother asks. "She's just a big girl," says Doctor Chen. Homely means that you see a look of disdain on the face of a mother who wishes her daughter could be a beauty queen. You see that look every day of your life.

2. Show the Backstory in a *Sequel* Connecting Two Scenes
A *sequel* shows characters' responses to a preceding scene and sets up the following scene. Sequels are great places to drop in some backstory.

From *Fool Moon* by Jim Butcher. Harry Dresden is a Raymond Chandler-esque Private Eye who happens to be a wizard. He consults with the Chicago Police on supernatural cases. This passage is part of the sequel to Chapter 1. In a bar, Dresden has met Lieutenant Murphy, and she has asked him to come along to help investigate an unusual murder…

> Murphy declined to ride in the Blue Beetle, my old Volkswagen bug.
>
> The Beetle wasn't really blue, not anymore. One of the doors had been replaced with a green duplicate, the other one with white, when something with claws had shredded the originals. The hood had been slagged by fire, and my mechanic, Mike, had replaced it with the hood from a red vehicle. The important thing is that the Beetle runs, even if it doesn't do it very fast, and I'm comfortable with the car. Mike has declared that the VW bug is the easiest car in the world to repair, and so that's what I drive. He keeps it running eight or nine days in ten. That's phenomenal.
>
> Technology tends to foul up around wizards—flip on a light switch, and it'll be the time the bulb burns out. Drive past a streetlight and it'll pick just then to flicker and die. Whatever can go wrong will, automobiles included.
>
> I didn't think it made much sense for Murphy to risk her vehicle when she could have taken mine, but she said she'd take her chances.

3. Create a Scene where a Character Reflects on the Backstory
The whole scene is the character thinking about their situation. This is an efficient method for conveying lots of backstory efficiently.

From John Grisham, *The Client.* This is part of a series of scenes in Chapter 2. We're following a New Orleans criminal named Barry the Blade. Expecting to meet his lawyer (Jerome) for dinner, he's just phoned the lawyer's office and been told the lawyer left the office at 9 AM and has not been seen since.

> The Blade slammed the phone down and stormed through the hallway, then caught himself and began to strut as he neared the tables and the faces. The restaurant was beginning to fill. It was almost five.
>
> He just wanted a few drinks and then a nice dinner with his lawyer so they could talk about his mess. Just drinks and dinner, that's all. The Feds were watching, and listening. Jerome was paranoid, and just last week told Barry he thought they had wired his law office. So they would meet here and have a nice meal without worrying about eavesdroppers and bugging devices.
>
> They needed to talk. Jerome Clifford had been defending prominent New Orleans thugs for fifteen years—gangsters, pushers, politicians—and his record was impressive. He was cunning and corrupt, completely willing to buy people who could be bought. He drank with the judges and slept with their girlfriends. He bribed cops and threatened the jurors. He schmoozed with the politicians and contributed when asked. Jerome knew what made the system tick, and when a sleazy defendant with money needed help in New Orleans, he invariably found his way to the law offices of W. Jerome Clifford…
>
> Barry's case, however, was something different…

4. Create a Scene where the Characters tell each other the Backstory.
Tips: Avoid "stagey" dialogue; present in small chunks; make it emotionally engaging.

In this example from Robert B Parker, *Death in Paradise*, Jesse Stone is chief of police for a small town in Massachusetts. He's investigating the murder of a teenage girl, and it's led him to meet Lily, the principal of the girl's high school. They've covered the case, and the conversation has turned personal.

> Lily crossed her legs the other way. Jesse waited.
>
> "How did you go from shortstop to policeman, Jesse?"
>
> "My father was a cop," Jesse said. "In Tucson. When I couldn't play ball anymore, it seemed like the other thing that I might know how to do."
>
> "And how did you end up in Paradise?"
>
> "I was a cop in L.A. I got fired for being a drunk. And my marriage broke up. And I figured I'd try to start over as far from L.A. as I could."
>
> "Are you still drinking?"
>
> "Mostly not," Jesse said.
>
> "Was that why your marriage broke up?"
>
> "No," Jesse said. "It didn't help the marriage, and the marriage didn't help it. But there were other things."
>
> "There always are. Aren't there?"
>
> "You've been divorced?"
>
> "Twice."

5. Start a Scene then drop in sections of Backstory
Start the scene in the present, then skip back to reveal some backstory.
Tip: Connect the backstory to the characters' emotions.

Science fiction novels usually have lots of backstory to convey. This sample is from *Red Mars*, by Kim Stanley Robinson. One of the first colonization ships has just launched. One hundred carefully-selected colonists are celebrating.

> In Torus D's dining hall, they mingled in a kind of cocktail party, celebrating the departure ... Maya wandered about, sipping freely from a mug of champagne, feeling slightly unreal and extremely happy, a mix that reminded her of her wedding reception many years before. Hopefully, this marriage would go better than that one had, she thought, because this one was going to last forever … Maya turned down an offered refill, feeling giddy enough. Besides, this was work. She was co-mayor of this village, so to speak, responsible for group dynamics, which were bound to get complex. Antarctic habits kicked in even at this moment of triumph, and she listened and watched like an anthropologist, or a spy.
>
> "The shrinks have their reasons. We'll end up fifty happy couples."
>
> "And they already know the match-ups."
>
> She watched them laugh. Smart, healthy, supremely well-educated—was this the rational society at last, the scientifically-designed community that had been the dream of the Enlightenment? But there was Arkady, Nadia, Vlad, Ivana. She knew the Russian contingency too well to have many illusions on that score. They were just as likely to end up resembling an undergraduate dorm at a technical university, occupied by bizarre pranks and lurid affairs. Except, they looked kind of old for that sort of thing …

Optional Practice Exercise

1. Take a story you're currently working on and use any of the five techniques to write some backstory.

OR:

2. Given the following set up, use one of the techniques to tell us some backstory.

Tom, a sixty year old suburbanite, approaches his back fence and yells at his neighbor, Jim: "If this noise doesn't stop, I'm going to have to do something about it. And you won't like it!"

About the Presenter

Jack Massa has published fantasy, science fiction, poetry, and oodles of technical nonfiction. His current projects include: The Abby Renshaw adventures (Young Adult paranormal fantasies set in rural Florida), The Glimnodd Cycle (epic fantasy featuring witches and ice-pirates), and the Conjurer of Rhodes series (historical fantasy set in the ancient world).

Jack Massa
web: www.triskelionbooks.com
FaceBook: www.facebook.com/AuthorJackMassa/
Twitter: @JackMassa2
email: jack@triskelionbooks.com