The First Secrets of Storytelling

By Terry Dowling

All writers have their own ways of doing things, but when it comes to effective storytelling, there are a few factors which (regardless of genre) are so fundamentally important that they can be put together in a home-grown storytelling formula I always give my writing classes at the Centre.

To be a successful writer, always aim for Invisibility + Voice of Truth. Then, when those two key storytelling elements are in place, add Style. It can work the other way round, of course, Style coming first, but nowhere near as often and not always soon enough for the writer just starting out.

Invisibility first, a placement of words so simple and well chosen that the reader stops noticing the act of reading in the first line, first paragraph, first half page, the sooner the better. Many writers never achieve it. Even some quite successful, widely published writers never achieve it, then wonder why they don't get the major player recognition and respect from critics and peers they so earnestly desire.

But invisibility. As quickly as possible stop the reader noticing the act of reading, just as effective film-makers have to stop viewers from noticing that they are in fact sitting in a theatre and watching a film.

The key aspect for achieving invisibility is, most often, a crucial respect for 'patterning': the simple art of putting words together on the page in the kind of combinations (sentences, clauses, phrases, paragraphs etc) that win the reader. Writing is often such an intuitive, spontaneous, even over-exuberant thing that, while generating words is easy in this age of the word-processor, laptop and I-Pad, generating beguiling, effective text is often much harder to do.

It's as Fantasy and Science Fiction Grand Master Jack Vance insisted over dinner one time: "Words, words, words are the enemy of the writer!" To put it another way, words can actually get in the way of delivering story successfully! By their sheer ungoverned abundance, their actual visual effect and shape on the page, their capacity for stodginess as opposed to visual impact, resonance and force, they can ruin pacing, smother immediacy, damage suspense and destroy character and setting. The writer needs to know what to leave out as much as what to put in, though this tends to be one of the last things most new writers learn. They may focus on plot, characterisation and setting, finding correct motivation etc, all the other good things, but patterning – the sheer effect and quality of the words brought together on the page – gets neglected.

Then, since how a story is written is always more important than what, Voice of Truth is essential, that quality of confidence, sure-handedness, good judgment and sheer elan

that lets readers know in just a few lines that they are, indeed, in good hands. Yes, it's related to patterning, and a single sentence can deliver it (and ideally the first sentence by its elegance, power, its rightness on the page should do so). The reader almost heaves a sigh of relief to discover that they've lucked out, that this time it's the real deal, the genuine article. The work somehow has force and weight, seems true to itself. No self-consciousness. No risk of parody. No thinness. It convinces, carries and beckons, and the reader cannot help but follow.

Once those two things are in place, then an author can try for a signature style that becomes the prevailing flavour, manner, feel this time round (or every time if it's pulling the crowds and gladdening the heart: Vonnegut doing Vonnegut, Le Guin doing Le Guin, Bradbury always doing Bradbury etc). Some writers vary it: go lean and mean one moment, ornate the next, use contrast and variety, feast and famine.

However it falls out, I always keep the above formula in mind when producing a new story, and always make a basic patterning demonstration a key part of any writing workshop I give. It makes a difference.