

Adding Suspense

By Pepper Smith

Suspense is defined as: A state of excited or anxious uncertainty about what may happen.
~~Oxford Dictionary of Current English

With that in mind, what can we as writers do to aid our readers in experiencing that state of excited or anxious uncertainty about what may happen next in our stories?

One thing to keep in mind about suspense is that it really only happens if the reader is given a character he or she has feelings about. This doesn't mean that the character is someone they like—in fact, one can feel serious dislike or loathing for a character, and the suspense can come from wondering how that person is going to get caught, be murdered, or whatever the author chooses to impose on them.

Unlike thrillers, where the point is the action that propels the story breathlessly forward, suspense tends to be more character-driven, and relies heavily on the personal impact, or personal stakes, of the characters involved. What are some ways you can up those personal stakes?

Threats of Violence or Exposure

When your character has something to lose, it provides an opportunity to develop suspense.

Your protagonist's physical well-being. Personal violence is stock-in-trade for the criminal element. Is your protagonist following a course that your villain doesn't like? Threats of bodily injury or death make powerful deterrents. If your protagonist's goal is strong enough to propel him or her onward in their quest, you can build suspense around their efforts to avoid attracting the villain's attention and bringing the promised retribution down on them.

Family or Friends. As much as your protagonist may love his or her own skin, finding that a family member, such as a spouse or child, is in danger brings your protagonist's heart into the equation and can increase the pressure exponentially. Will your hero or heroine back off? Or will they risk everything to save that family member *and* bring down the villain? Again, doing what they can to achieve that goal while remaining undiscovered can make a very fine line for them to walk, where the slightest misstep could bring grievous injury or death to someone they love.

A friend your protagonist is close to can also serve in this role, but it depends on how close the friend is on how much suspense the situation will bring.

Property. The threatened loss of property is another point of leverage that your villain might use, putting your protagonist in the position of having to do things to prevent that loss. Suppose what the villain asks is unacceptable to your hero or heroine? Can he or she try to rectify the situation without the villain finding out? Suppose the property isn't land or a house, but an object, money,

ampoules of a deadly toxin, a prized horse, something moveable that your protagonist must keep track of or find while staying under the villain's radar?

In all of the above, what if the villain does find out and attempts to carry out his threats? That creates even more scope for suspense, as the protagonist tries to stay a step ahead and save himself, his family, or his property from death or disaster.

Exposure. We all have things in our past that we hope no one ever finds out about. For your characters, it could be things that might break up their marriage, lose them their job, result in a loss of position in society, maybe even send them to jail. The threat of the revelation of those secrets if your protagonist doesn't stop their sleuthing or whatever else might be annoying the villain can up the pressure on your protagonist and increase the suspense level.

What if the one with the secrets is the villain? His knowledge that the hero or heroine is trying to expose those secrets will likely bring about a rapid and adverse response. Then it becomes a matter of the protagonist finding some way to complete their task of exposing those secrets while avoiding the consequences.

Then again, what if the supposed secret is a falsehood but achieves the goal of destroying the hero/heroine's family/position/job/etc.? Can you imagine ways of developing suspense as your protagonist deals with the fallout while trying to clear his or her name and restore what was lost? What if the villain is actively trying to prevent that restoration?

Limited Time to Accomplish a Goal

Sometimes it all comes down to a matter of time. What if your protagonist is working against a deadline? There doesn't actually need to be a human villain involved—what if the weather is threatening, and a trapped victim has to be rescued before floodwaters arrive? There are many possible aspects of nature-related limits on time to draw on for suspense.

This also works well with the threat of exposure or harm, upping the ante. If the protagonist doesn't complete a specified demand by a particular time, the protagonist's family member/property/self will be harmed, or the secret will be exposed. As the clock ticks down, the suspense can become unbearable.

Circumstances

Sometimes things happen that stand in the way of the protagonist achieving the goal, things that can be manmade, and others that aren't. This can be along the lines of traffic mishaps, the relative who calls with a request for help that has to be dealt with right then, an illness in the family or of the hero/heroine, or perhaps the protagonist being physically restrained/stopped from carrying out the necessary actions. Some things can add temporary suspense by being overcome, while others might be permanent blocks that force your protagonist to find other ways of doing what needs doing.

Failure

Being imperfect, one can expect that sometimes the protagonist is going to fail in meeting the deadline or carrying out the demands, or in reaching their own imposed goal, and consequences are going to happen. The villain might inflict bodily harm on the protagonist as a warning. Will your hero/heroine risk further harm or even death to do what they know is right? Riding that thin edge between safety and further violence can up your suspense level.

Atmosphere

Sometimes the suspense comes not from anything tangible, but from the characters' perceptions of things. A character can perceive a situation to be dangerous that perhaps isn't, but until he or she is certain of that, it's cause for suspense. This psychological atmosphere can cause threats to seem very real, even if they are all a figment of the character's imagination.

Physical details add to that atmosphere as well. A walk along a tree-lined path on a bright, sunny day will have a different feel than walking along it with a threatening storm approaching, or in the gloom just before nightfall. Remember details of experiences that made you uneasy or uncomfortable, and if they apply to the situation of your protagonist, see if it enhances the scene to work those things in.

Again, all these things work best if they make a personal impact on your protagonist. If the villain threatens to break your protagonist's arm and your protagonist has a genetic disorder that prevents him from feeling pain, there is no suspense because your protagonist probably won't view a broken arm as more than a minor inconvenience. Try to keep it reasonable and real. The threat has to mean something to the protagonist.

I hope that you find these suggestions useful, and that you enjoy the workshop and the rest of this year's conference!

Pepper Smith
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