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Anatomy of a Fight Scene

Part One – The Craft of Storytelling

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The Big Question

What does this do for my story?

In everything you learn in this industry, always test it before you change your entire manuscript. Even if something works for another writer, it does not mean it will work for you. Remember, creativity is subjective. - DRAKE

“It seems that fighting is a game where everybody is the loser.”

- Zora Neale Hurston 1891 - 1960

Writing life on a knife's edge

Violence can be found in almost all genres of literature. From romance to action adventure. Westerns to Mysteries. Sci-Fi to Fantasy. When it is done well, it will quicken the pulse of the reader. Done poorly, however, and it can ruin even the best of stories.

So, how is it done correctly? Well, before we get into the punching, kicking, stabbing and shooting, let's take a look at why we should even write violence.

Why write violence?

Violence is something that almost every single person can relate to. You will be hard pressed to find someone who has not been in a fight, been present at a fight, or seen fighting (either fictitious or real) on T.V. or in movies. That being said, there are many reasons why writing a violent scene will help up your story.

- Violence speaks to the reader on a primal, visceral level
- Violence raises the stakes, i.e. the tension of a plot
- Physical violence shows how far a character is willing to go
- Physical violence grows the character
- Physical violence is pure emotion
- Violence can evoke sympathy within the reader or,
- Violence can evoke hate or anger within the reader

Two sides of the same coin

For me, a fight scene has two distinct sides. On one side, you have how the violence impacts the characters and the story – what I call the Craft of Storytelling. On the other, you have the technical side – where the writer must decide what words to use to get the reader to see what the author wants them to see. I call that the Craft of Writing and is what we will cover in part two of this series.

For the Craft of Storytelling side, we have a lot to do. It is not as simple as, “Watch as I make these two guys beat the tar out of each other.” Sure, we want our fight scenes to be exciting – be realistic, dramatic, visually stunning. But, we still have to write a scene that maintains a good balance between something exciting for the reader to read, and something that has a purpose within our story. Something that has “literary teeth” – growing the characters, moving the plot. This is “story telling” after all.

To that end, I give you seven thinking points to ponder before you even write the first word of your fight scene.

Thinking Point One: Have a reason for the violence

Violence for the sake of violence is not something most readers are interested in. Sure, it’s done. But where is the bang for the narrative buck?

Do we really need to “show” how much the villain enjoys hurting people if the hero is not around? Maybe. But, as writers, we need to make sure that the scene is important.

So, the first thing I think about before I start writing a scene that will contain violence is: is this scene going to move the plot of my story? I also want to make sure the characters are impacted. That they grow, perhaps gaining something they did not have before, or losing something they cherished. Whatever reason you have, make sure it is pertinent to the story.

Thinking Point Two: Understand how your characters fight

One of the biggest ways to lose your reader is by failing to understand how your combatants think and act during a fight.

If you have a character who is timid, and has admitted to never being in a fight, then somehow beats the crap out of five ninjas in an alley, your readers will not be happy. You need to understand the experience level your characters have. A former special forces Marine will act different in a fight as opposed to a soccer mom who is the chairwoman of her local P.T.A.

Thinking Point Three: Don’t let your non-human characters act like a human

In addition to the experience level, think about special weapons and special tactics your characters may have.

We can all relate to natural human weapons—we have hands, elbows, knees, feet and teeth. But what about a dragon? Or a vampire? How would these characters think and act? Not like someone limited to just hands and feet. Or, in the case of a vampire, not like someone who is of normal strength and speed. No. They would think about their “natural” weapons as... well... natural.

Step outside of your human box and make sure you go through the mental exercise of pretending to “be” your non-human characters. What would you do if you weighed in at a few tons, had a massive tail, giant wings and breathed fire? What would be the easiest way for you, with all these natural weapons, to kill a pesky intruder?

Thinking Point Four: Don't forget about the environment

If you have ever been in a brawl, you know that people tend to look for any and every advantage they can find. Many times in a fight, advantages can be found from the environment. A comfortable chair makes for a great club. Books, vases, small statues, laptop computers, etc. all make for great throwing weapons.

But what about windows and wall? Car doors and stairs? There is so much around us that can not only be used as a weapon, but can also hinder/help someone in a fight.

Thinking Point Five: It's ALWAYS choreographed!

No matter whether you are shooting for realism, or throwing reality out the window, forcing your readers to suspend disbelief over your spectacular combat, you are going to have to think like a choreographer of an action film.

Just as you plan out the plot of your story, you should spend some time planning out how your fight scene will go. If you don't, you may find that the scene takes on a life of its own. Or worse, lose the readers desire to follow the action.

If you are not familiar with the violent side of life, there are ample avenues you can take to become more proficient at thinking about a fight scene. For physical fights, there are plenty of sporting events you can watch, such as boxing or mixed martial arts, which can give you some great insight to how a person acts when going toe to toe with someone who plans on knocking their head off. If you are a bit squeamish about reality, there are plenty ways to watch "fake" fighting. Any good action movie will have plenty of violence. I highly recommend that you take a look at the "behind the scenes" sections of martial arts movies. (*The Protector* has a wonderful special feature on choreographing a fight scene. That movie boasts the longest, uncut fighting scene ever filmed. They have a great piece on how they went about accomplishing this great feat.)

For a gun/laser battle, there is no end to the number of action movies you can watch. And, many have wonderful special features where they go into detail on how they setup the scene.

Another suggestion for those writing a gun battle scene, try drawing out the layout in a top-down perspective. This will give you insight into what each character can see, thereby letting you know who is safe, and who is not. It may also give you some ideas for attacks or escapes you had not even thought of.

Thinking Point Six: Motivation should be the driving force behind every scene

As with every scene you write, you should always keep in mind what the motivation of the character is. This is even more important with a fight scene, because it will dictate how the fight will proceed, provided that character gets their way.

If one of the combatants is just trying to escape, that changes the way they fight. If they are trying not to hurt anyone, or trying to kill the other person, or trying to get themselves killed, etc. all change the mentality of the person fighting.

Understanding what all characters involved in the conflict want to accomplish, what each hopes the outcome will be, and what they hope to gain (or retain) will give you a tremendous understanding in each character. It will let you know how each character is going to approach the conflict, how they will act during it, and most importantly, when they will decide enough is enough and try to retreat.

Thinking Point Seven: Violence inflicts both a physical AND an emotional toll

Keep in mind that the injuries sustained during a fight will linger. And I am not just talking about the physical kind. I am a firm believer that there are no winners in a fight. Even if a person is never touched, and inflicts all the damage, there can be an emotional toll that character will walk away with – unless they are the “evil villain.”

Believe it or not, when a person takes another life for the first time, they normally don't just say, “Wow! That was fun!” I like to take this approach with my characters and try to think about what they ponder after they have done whatever it is they have done. Are they remorseful? Feel guilty? Grateful to be alive? All great things that help develop a character.

Thinking Point Eight: Violence shows growth

As people experience more and more violence, they tend to change - not only growing used to the sight/idea of violence, but becoming numb to its horrors. This can have a profound impact on your characters.

A great example is when you look at how the writers of Buffy Summers, of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, took her character over the years. In the beginning, she was tough, but still connected well with her family and friends. Through the years, however, she began to change. Finding it harder and harder to relate to those she loved.

I try and think of how all the violent situations I put my characters in effects them over time. This allows me to let my characters grow and change, realistically, based on the actual events they have lived through.

Thinking Point Nine: Men see violence differently than women

I think it is important to understand the differences in how men and women think about violence. Men see violence as a tool. It is something that happens. Two guys can go to blows and then go out for a beer afterwards. For women, it is usually different. If things between two women go to blows, their relationship will probably never recover.

It is fun, however, to write a character who favors the other sex's viewpoint.

End

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you found it informative. I have started a blog dedicated to the discussion of the craft of writing. If you have specific questions, please send them to me at author@maxdrake.com and I will include them on blog.maxwellalexanderdrake.com.

I am on Facebook and Twitter as well. Please look me up.

If you want to help further my teaching career, please visit <http://www.meetup.com/Las-Vegas-Creative-Writing-Class/> and review this class. It would be a tremendous help to me.

DRAKE