

## Burying Your Novel's Message

Part III of the 8-Part BRING YOUR NOVEL TO LIFE Series

In the first two articles, we've explored how essential it is to have a theme to give your novel direction, and how to find those themes that will resonate with you.

You'd think that once you have a theme, you could just sit down and write your book about that, and you'd bring powerful emotions and passionate storytelling and compelling, page-turning action to your tale---but it just ain't so.

If you just write your theme, what you'll have is a harangue. A message book. Something that will have the readers who agree with your precise point of view nodding along---whether it be "Global warming is going to destroy the planet" or "Global warming is a pile of cow-flops"---and readers who hold any other point of view bouncing your book of the nearest wall and never buying anything else by you, ever.

Bad.

So now you bury your theme. You write about something utterly unlike the theme you fought so hard to come up with in the first place.

One of you just went, "Waaaaaait a minute! If I write about something besides my theme, how are people going to get my message? How are they going to know that global warming is evil/ irrelevant/ actually the dawning of a new ice age? How will I convince them that I'm right?"

They won't know, and you won't convince them. It's as simple as that.

The theme is there for YOU. Your job as a novelist is to tell a story that entertains your reader, that makes him think, that haunts him long after he finishes the last page---maybe even that STILL haunts him long after he's read the whole thing for the fourth or tenth or twentieth time. I get letters and emails from readers who have done that, and it's great. They frequently tell me what they got out of the book, too, what hidden meanings they found, what they took away from the story.

Funny thing is, they never find what I put in there. That's okay. They found something that mattered to THEM, that changed the world for THEM. So I did my job.

If you want to send a message, buy an ad.

If you want to create resonance, you work your theme in. If you want to have people love your book and treasure it for what it meant to them, you bury that theme so deeply only you will ever know what it was.

Here's how.

1) Figure out the key elements of your theme.

I wrote one book the theme of which was "if the Democrats and Republicans don't recognize each other isn't the enemy and start working together toward a common cause, real enemies are going to destroy the country while those morons are bickering over pork and entitlements."

The key elements of that theme were:

- \* People who had more in common than they knew fighting over trivialities
- \* Enemies disguised as friends bearing gifts

2) Plan your hiding place.

That book was not set in this time, in the US, or even in this world. It was a high fantasy novel set in another world, on an island nation about the size of England and about the location of Australia with the climate of Alaska through the Pacific Northwest of Canada and the US. The cultures were Iron Age plus highly developed magic, with levels of sophistication ranging from 18th-Century France to the nomadic hunter-gatherer-herdsmen of the Mongol Horde.

So figure out YOUR disguise. Your most meaningful themes are always going to be drawn from the here and now, from the events in your life that trouble you and frighten you and elate you--but those themes go into Westerns and SF and fantasy and mysteries and romances and hard-boiled detective tales and mainstream novels set in every possible time and place.

3) Create your metaphors.

In that novel, the Democrats became one nation, the Republicans the other. I made a point of locating the good and the bad in both parties, and giving the two nations those good and bad characteristics. I created the real villains from current events, too, (though not from obvious current events), and worked out a complex metaphor for them, too, creating their culture from elements of a handful of different cultures. My two protagonists were from warring nations, magic was the physics of the world, and the villain was disguised as a good guy for the first half of the novel.

4) Never even hint at what you're talking about underneath it all.

I didn't then write a story about how the politics of the warring nations and the outside world clashed. I didn't give a little nudge, nudge, wink, wink and call my nations Demos and Republis. I spent time developing deep cultures built not around my particular axe to grind, but around the needs of the story. And then I built three characters, one from each of the three cultures.

And the story I wrote was a love story set against the backdrop of war and peace.

I wrote about the characters, I didn't confine them to my metaphors, I didn't try to push any points or convince anyone of anything. I let my folks become who they were, good points and bad, and I told the story of their lives in that world, that place, and that time---and because I knew what underlay it, it meant a lot to me. And because SOMETHING underlay it, it meant a lot to a whole lot of readers.

With the possible exception of its sequel, it was the best book I've ever written.

That story remains a favorite for my readers, too---even though what they take from it is sometimes the exact opposite of what I put into it. They have found their own meaning in it, have felt the resonance of it being about something bigger than the story on the surface, and have taken it to heart.

And if you're a novelist, that is what you want them to do. (If you're still hung up on requiring that they get YOUR meaning from your book, you're in the wrong line of work.)

In BRING YOUR NOVEL TO LIFE, Part IV, Playing Chicken With Your Story, you'll learn how to take the personal risks in writing that will keep your readers glued to their seats turning pages.

## About the Author

Full-time novelist Holly Lisle has published more than thirty novels with major publishers. Her next novel, THE RUBY KEY, (Orchard Books) will be on shelves May 1st. You can receive her free writing newsletter, Holly Lisle's Writing Updates at <http://hollylisle.com/newsletter.html>

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