

How Do You Write a Novel?
or
Lead with the Log Cabin Center

How do you write a novel? Though I'm asked this question a lot, I'm rarely asked its counterpoint: Why do you write? I believe the answer to both is not so far apart.

I'll explain by first knocking down an assumption some aspiring writers make--that because a book is read from the beginning, that must be the order in which the writer constructs it. Sentence one of paragraph one, page one, each locked in stone before the writer can proceed. I do know of writers who've begun that way, then run out of steam by Chapter 3, likely because they didn't, even at a subconscious level, know the emotional place they were headed.

To me, a story doesn't unfurl from page one. It gets pieced together from an emotional center. I liken my process to that of creating a quilt. I don't actually quilt, but love admiring them at the fair, and the quilt pattern that fascinates me most is the log cabin quilt. The ones with a distinct center piece (often, but not always, red). The rest of the quilt seems to grow from that center piece and flow outward in a gorgeous patterns of lights and darks, echoing colors.

I start, like those log cabin quilts, with what I've come to think of as the red square in the center of my story--the emotional heart. I write the scene that most begs to be written. I write others. Not connected, but another piece cut from strong emotional fabric. Then I write connecting scenes, and I give myself the freedom to move my scenes around as I try out the dramatic impact. Of course, during the weeks and months I'm constructing my novel, I'm not working with velvet, denim, poplin, or yarn and thread. My squares (think, scenes) involve characters, motivation, crisis and conflict, stitched together by dialogue and narration, among other tools

When the pattern (think, plot) is set, then I'll go back and look at the start, at which of my scenes might be the most compelling place to start. If I think there's a hole in the design, I create additional scenes. Then I'll polish the whole thing, tighten and cut loose threads, embroider in a bit more detail, snip out the raw edges until it's tight and works as a whole.

My goal, of course, is not a blue ribbon, but to keep the reader entertained, interested, compelled to keep reading. And yes, keep turning pages because somewhere the reader can sense there's going to be a red cabin or heart to my story. A fair-goer sees a quilt in one glance impact. A reader, when done, should feel that red log cabin in one fell sweep of emotion. I want the reader to think, Oh, I get what the author was trying to get me to feel!

Which also explains, I think, the why of writing a novel. I think every novelist, published and aspiring, carry within them emotions in want of a story. An emotional context begging to be released from the person and displayed in writing as a novel, poem, or short story. In my case, usually, some emotional situation intrigues me so much, stays in my mind so long, that I'm compelled to write about it. That situation is never the start of a story. It's more the emotional center from which the scenes all grow. Which is why I said the how of writing a novel is not so different from the why. I suspect, too, that the difference between published and aspiring can be holding back on page one until you find and write that red log cabin at the heart of your story.