

Viewpoint

A Professional Writer's Joy, A New Writer's Bane

Most new writers approach storytelling the way they have experienced story telling. That is, the way they've seen it done on TV or the movies. There, a camera records everything happening. So many new writers write their story as if they were a camera recording the visuals showing the story.

It's painful to read stories written that way.

To examine this problem, we first have to look at what the recorded story has that the written story doesn't. A TV show or Movie has actors and actresses presenting the story. It has music and it has color.

Specifically, actors present the story with their voice. An inflection can change the whole meaning of the spoken word. Body language can do the same. How a line is delivered, it's sound, pacing and timing, can make or break a story. That's why the actors get the big bucks.

Similarly, the actors can do things with their faces. I listened to a two minute, very unlibrarianly, diatribe from Connie Willis insisting that people quit doing that thing we do with our faces. Actors can do it. Writers can't begin to describe it without letting the story come to a dead stop. We can say a character gave someone "that" look. Of course, if a Drill Sergeant gives a trainee "that" look, it's going to send the story in a very different direction from if the young lady gives "that" look to the young man. Or maybe not. Still, if the actor gives "that" look, we can see it in the movie. The poor writer has to find some other way to let the reader interpret "that" look.

I love soundtracks. They can make me laugh and cry. They can relax me or get my heart pounding. The background music grabs the gut of the listener and drives us along with the story. No one has ever figured out how to put a soundtrack to a book. People read at different speeds. Sorry, writer, no music.

Similarly, the use of color in the movies is nothing less than spectacular. Much like music, it grabs at our guts and lures us into the story.

Now then, if you want to get the experience of *writing* with a camera viewpoint, I would suggest you turn off the sound on your TV and bring up the English subtitles. Then turn off the color. That kind of bland, black and white experience is what you have if you use a camera viewpoint in your writing.

You need to tell the story, not just show it. (How many times have you heard that before?)

As a writer you want a warm, personal viewpoint. You want to suck the reader into your story so they *FEEEL* what your character is feeling and experiencing what the character is being dragged, kicking and screaming, through.

Consider this.

I froze. It was as if I'd just taken that first little step ... off a fifty story building. I looked around me. Suddenly every tree, every bush in the darkened forest, was a threat to me. The hackles on the back of my neck stood up as I tried to look every way at once. Somewhere there was a menace. A threat was out there that I couldn't see, but it had my gut tight and my knees weak.

Yet the trees still swayed gently in the night's breeze. The bushes rustled softly. While I stood in terror, the quiet night sounds of the forest continued, crickets chirped, an owl settled on a bare limb, a rabbit slipped out to nibble the grass.

All of nature was at peace - but not me. That rabbit might munch happily, but I stood here in stark terror.

I heard footsteps behind me and whirled.

I was right to fear for my life.

Stomping toward me was my wife. She was giving me *that* look.

Now, compare that with what the camera sees.

I stood in the darkened forest. All was at peace but I was scarred.

I heard a sound behind me and turned to see my wife.

Which would you want to read?

(Note to student. It takes up a lot more words to tell the better story, but it reads better, and goes faster.)