

Secrets of Romantic Suspense: A Series of Eight Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

This continues this series of eight lectures, which started with the first installment, "Introduction."

Lecture VII. Let Them Breathe

Today's lecture is closely related to character development, plotting and sexual tension. It involves modulating the overall tone of your novel by balancing dark characters and gritty plots with elements of hope, humor and romance. On the one hand, you want to build tension, tension, tension. On the other hand, you want to give your readers a chance to breathe, or you risk burning out your audience before they ever finish the story.

Basically, you have a lot of conflict in a romantic suspense novel, internal conflict, external conflict, character angst, villain violence. If you're not careful, the tension level can rise so high, you literally exhaust your reader. The book no longer provides escapism, and is instead giving your audience an anxiety attack. For example, when I wrote my first draft of *The Perfect Husband*, I was so proud of my dark, tormented hero J.T. Until my agent finished reading the manuscript and said, "One problem, Lisa. There's no good reason for this hero to be alive." Basically, I had given my self-destructive hero so many reasons to self-destruct, there was no hope left for him. Not exactly the "compelling" characterization I'd wanted.

My agent gave me a very valuable piece of advice that day: You can't give dark characters only reasons to be angst-ridden, brooding, and borderline psychotic, you also have to give them reasons to live. Yes, these characters may not be the most functional tool in the kit, but they are functioning, so why? In J.T.'s case, I realized his swimming and gardening hobbies were therapeutic to him, whether he consciously understood this or not. I also determined that I needed to better flesh out the true vulnerability in him—sure, he was dark and cynical and warped by his family life. But he also believed in love. He secretly longed to make amends with his sister. In fact, he partly stayed alive just for that reason; in the dim hope that someday she would remember what their father had done, and that she would forgive J.T. for not being able to save her. And while J.T. had

lost his first wife, he had also genuinely loved her, which gave him hope that there were good people out there. So he was cynical, but he also secretly hoped for his dark outlook to be proved wrong.

Strive for Balance

Throughout the course of your novel, you need to balance dark with light, despair with hope, and cynicism with trust. A long series of action sequences needs to be followed by slower, softer moments of introspection and emotion. Lots of scenes at night should be followed by at least one scene set during the day. Particularly brutal murders should be followed by at least one moment celebrating life. In this way, you keep your novel from becoming a caricature, so dark it loses plausibility, or so violent that the reader grows immune to the destruction. Also, softer moments can build suspense as the reader remembers all the good things in life—and worries about losing them.

Seek Empowerment

As your twisted plot unfolds, the reader should experience doubt and fear, but the reader should also see that distant glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Plot twists, escalating tension and harsh setbacks should be followed by fresh ideas and new plans for attack. Your protagonists can feel cornered, afraid and overwhelmed, but they should never, ever be hopeless.

The heroine is being stalked by a madman, but she's not a victim. She's looking for ways to fight back, take control of her life. This is the aspect of the story that resonates with readers. We aren't being stalked by a madman, but maybe our boss, or our husband or our in-laws infuriate us. We want to remember that we, too, can take control and be in charge of our lives. In this day and age, with all of the demands on our time, it's easy to lose sight of that.

Utilize Sex and Humor

Humor, sex or tender asides can also break up the unrelenting pace/conflict/tension of your book. The reader's anxiety goes up, there is a moment of humor that allows the reader to catch her breath, and then the characters are off and running again. Steven Spielberg is the master of resting moments. If you map out the scenes of Jaws or the Indiana Jones movies, you will discover that Spielberg follows almost all intense action sequences with comedic moments or a romantic interlude. These moments don't have to be long or involved, but they should be included.

Conclusion

By consciously including resting moments in your novel, you can craft an entertaining, complex read that in equal parts enchants and terrifies. You can also push the envelope for dark romantic suspense, while ensuring that your reader stays along for the ride.

Now you have engaging protagonists, a twisted plot, doses of romantic tension and moments of hope and humor. All you have to do is wrap this puppy up. Next stop, the big-bang ending!