

## Fun with Conflict

Frank Soos

OK, writers, you may be reading this little note shortly after a long Thanksgiving dinner where you were seated across from a person whose politics you abhorred, and who at the same time called into question your own politics, your career choice, and even your choice of a partner (and maybe that person was your mother or father, too). Some fun, huh? And there are still Christmas and New Year's Eve and Day to go. Rather than dread these next holiday trials after having barely avoided not coming to blows at the first one, consider instead the value of conflict for the fiction writer. While we might not want to experience so much conflict in our lives, conflict is the motor that makes fiction run. And the holidays are excellent times to observe conflict in action (preferably from a safe distance).

Consider conflict in its simplest form: One character has money, another wants his money and has a gun, a stick, or just his fists to use as a means of getting it. That sort of conflict is pretty straightforward. The wants of each character are clear, and the actions are clearly visible—they're external conflicts.

But those kinds of conflicts are both simple and thankfully fairly rare for us. Most of the conflicts we experience are more subtle, less direct, and as often as not internal as well as external.

I tried this experiment on some high school writers a few years back. What, I wondered, does it mean when a guy asks a girl out and she says she needs to stay home and do her geometry homework? "It means 'no' in the kindest possible way," a student told me." Good answer. We have an action that invites conflict and we see how the subsequent action that only partially resolves it.

There are only three ways we have of making conflict happen on the page: through actions, through dialogue, and through thoughts. So in the above action, we see a good bit of the conflict through dialogue alone. That can be a good enough stopping place. But there are those other two options available as well. They might go as follows: Guy, hands in pockets, eyes on his shoelaces, delivers his line. Girl wincing slightly, turns away to stare at the cinderblock wall of their school. Now we've enriched them a bit, and the conflict is deeper since we've taught contemporary readers how to mine nuance from physical actions.

And there can be more: What are they thinking? Maybe the guy, having gotten the message correctly or not (Geometry equals "no"), is allowed feel ashamed and resentful at the same time, and he may think, "She's a snot and not that pretty anyway." And the girl might feel some genuine regret. She might think, "He is a nice enough guy, but I need to do my homework." In this way, the thoughts of each character have the power to deepen the conflict.

Subsequent encounters between these two are informed by actions, and words...things plainly visible to both characters, and thoughts which can only be made available to readers. How many thoughts and whose thoughts we choose to offer readers is the subject for another day. For now what we want to consider is the value of these three elements of conflict and how to use them for best effect.

Sometimes it helps to think of these conflicting moments as pressure points put on characters—note the plural. Single character stories do sometimes succeed. That Jack London chestnut, “To Build a Fire,” is a classic single character story where Great Nature becomes the other side of the conflict and brings out all the necessary elements in the lone traveler, both his inexperience and his arrogance. At each pressure point, a physical mistake amplifies the conflict. In Flannery O’Connor’s story “Greenleaf” the pressure is brought to bear by a bull.

Mostly, though, we find ourselves in conflict with our fellow humans. And mostly in the world we inhabit these conflicts are understated, if not unstated. That means we are obliged to deliver the slight signals we’ve learned in navigating our non-writer lives to our characters on the page.

That boy and girl I mentioned earlier? Let’s follow them around the halls of their high school for a few days. Their continuing conflict may have no words at all. His attitude may be manifest by a glowering swagger he puts on to try to recover his self-esteem. She may try to catch his eye in the cafeteria only to see him abruptly turn away. We can continue watching them acting out this wordless drama for days, but at some point we will have to create another opportunity for a collision.

Here’s why: the choices made in the first encounter, especially the knowledge we have that the girl’s choice is made with regret create the necessity, some would say the obligation, to have a subsequent scene just to see how the conflict might resolve itself. And it could be that in such a scene that the relationship remains unsettled in some way which would require yet another scene or more scenes.

Because our characters are, as I noted last month, shifting sacks of words, they’re changing through each conflicting scenes, and we writers are desperately chasing them to learn how they change while at the same time throwing conflicting opportunities in their paths. That’s right, cause some trouble for them. Sometimes a writer has got to be cruel to characters to make them deliver their secrets up.

Fortunately, at some point, a scene happens that seems to be definitive, a scene that seems to offer a sense of resolution while leaving the reader with enough information to make their own judgments about the characters.

Our characters may find their way to each other, attend their senior prom together and live happily ever after. But that’s unlikely in any story I write.