
The universal plot catalog

Henry Albert Phillips

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INTRODUCTION

A VERY great editor once told me something that has always stuck in my mind. It was just after I had come to New York from a small western town and, although I recognized the truth of what he said, I did not appreciate its depth.

“A writer sells his first story on account of plot—after that technique has to pull him through.”

I knew that he had said something, but it took me a long time fighting away at writing to realize the truth of his remark. Every person who has the cosmic urge in him that makes him put himself on paper in narrative form has a big story in him before he touches his pen. The author seizes his pen and what is in him flows out. He sends it out and it sells.

But when he again feels the inward stirring and, seizing his parturient pen, writes his next story, the magazine can't see it. It comes back and comes back, to be cata-

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combed in a pigeonhole forever. The author can't understand why his first story should sell and his next one scarcely get a personal letter. He moons around awhile and then goes back to the grocery.

The reason is that the plot of his first story was big enough to sell regardless of technique. After that the author must tell a less moving tale and tell it more skilfully. He has to depend on the efficacy of his art. He has not yet mastered his art and as a result his postage is staggering.

For his first story the author does not need anything but paper; after that he needs every help in the world that he can get. He has now entered the finest of the fine arts and must take advantage of every hint that he can get. If he does not some one else will; it is merely buttering his own bread.

As a reader on magazines and as an editor I have found that ninety out of every hundred stories are sold on account of their plot.

Now, after the young author has sold his first story, he is up against that old devil Plot. His first story has poured itself out

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and now he must find something to take the place of that first fine frenzy. He has not been writing long enough to sell by technique alone, so plot must pull him through. But how to get it? That is the question; that is what makes one tumble and toss on the midnight ostermoor.

Anybody who can help you run a plot to earth is a friend from on high. Get him by the coat tail.

But the beauty of it is that you can learn to build plots. It is no simple matter—not by a long shot!—but you can learn. It is all a question of whether you really want to learn or whether you are content to be a dabbler. It is a matter of paying the price. The first thing you have got to do is to get plot by the neck; but when you have got plot eating out of your hand, you have just about got your fingers on the laurel wreath.

I figure that I wasted six years in learning how to sling ink. I began just exactly backward, with no one to tell me how. I first learned the art of the phrase; I could make words climb a pole, but I did not know a

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blessed thing in the world about plot. I could think of fine sounding words, but I could not do anything with them—I could not sell them. The reason was that I did not know how to dig up a plot. And it is only recently that I have learned how. If I had gone to work six years before learning how to build plots instead of stewing around over French phrases and Latin subjunctives, I might now be riding in a twin-six instead of having to flag street cars.

HOMER CROY.

All the Fine Arts serve their tedious apprenticeships—Painting has its drawing and color-mixing; Sculpture its modelling and measuring; Architecture its draughtsmanship and mathematics; Music its exercises and counterpoint. Why except Literature?

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IN no other dignified modern profession do its members just seem to “happen”—excepting Literature. In Painting or in Music; in Law or in the Ministry; in Carpentering or in Steamfitting—one must serve an apprenticeship of painstaking study of theory and daily practical exercises. The apprentice familiarizes himself with the tools and learns how to use them. He solves problems and prepares formulas; he probes fallacies and progresses in wisdom. In other words, before the apprentice is permitted to make a money-yielding servant of his profession, he must become indisputable master of its fundamentals.

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Years of study and apprenticeship usually culminate in one or more tests of the student's proficiency in the essayed profession. Success is then rewarded with some official recognition, certificate or diploma which informs the world that the candidate is duly qualified to practice the said profession without danger to client or public. Furthermore, he is then entitled to the standard rate of compensation—and as much more as the public thinks he is worth.

To practice many professions, without either having passed thru an apprenticeship or possessing the proper credentials, constitutes a breach of common law. The transgressor is liable to heavy fines or imprisonment. This regulation protects both the public from becoming victims and the profession from degeneracy. We can scarcely say that the foregoing is true of the Literary profession.

The reading and theater-going public continue to suffer; the high standards of a selective profession are lowered by mediocrity. Strange as it may seem, this lowering of the standards is not the triumph of a

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foe from without, but the work of an enemy from within.

Who are the enemies that lurk within the craft? Are they the unskilled laborers who have simply "happened" thru the chance sale of a story? Or are they the writers who have attained a "name" which they maintain by grinding out an annual supply of rubbish? Or are they the manuscript readers and editors whose standards are gauged by a limited education, and unbounded opinion, a narrow acquaintance with literature and a broad ignorance of Life, a shallow judgment and a deep-rooted prejudice?

It would be a difficult matter indeed to say who amongst those mentioned, were the most blameworthy. There are, without doubt, many of each class within the conspiracy of ignorance.

Every year thousands of new aspirants rush into the alluring vacuum of beholding their names in print. Many are ignorant in handling the elemental tools of Grammar and Rhetoric. Most of them have little or no acquaintance with those pieces of liter-

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ature and drama that are acclaimed by authorities and educated appreciation as the master works of the species. They merely feel that they can "write." They take their chance, as they would in a lottery. If they succeed in drawing a winning check from an editor they accept it as an act of the Will of God. They forthwith belong to the writing craft by special warrant of the dollar sign.

It seems to have become an axiom of the writing craft that its members are born, not made. In a measure, this is true. An analogy is found in the diamond. Uncut it is without question a rare mineral, but cut it becomes a precious gem.

Now that our writer has actually "happened" into the craft without either laborious apprenticeship or meritorious service, we would naturally expect him to set about to perfect himself in the difficult art into which he has leaped thru sheer mental agility. We would not be surprised to learn that he had journeyed afar to see or hear a famous masterpiece, that he had given up an evening a week to hearken to some