

# **Shaping Emotion**

**Some thoughts and an exercise**

**by Ian Bone**

'A plot is ... a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot.'  
EM Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*

Plot is the driving force of narrative fiction. The first thing any author is asked when they are writing a book is: 'What's it about?' And of course, any author finds this question difficult to answer because a novel is *so much more* than what it's about. This is equally so for the plot. It is so much more than story and causality. The longer I delve into this simple foundation of the novel, the more complex and subtle and interrelated it reveals itself to be.

Look at the king and the queen. What were they like as characters? Did I like them? Love them? Admire them? Did I want the king to die? Was I shocked when the queen died? Was there something emotionally satisfying for me that the queen died of grief? Was it noble? Stupid and pointless? There are so many shades and variations to the simple causality above that can be created just through what kind of characters the king and queen are. Add to that how the author might structure the story of the king and queen up to the point of their death (the author might even begin with their death) plus what style the author chooses to write all this in, and you begin to see why plot becomes such a slippery sucker to pin down.

In giving his simple example of causality above, Forster injects the vital element of fiction writing, *emotion*. This is what creates the connection between the reader and the character, between the reader and the fictional world the author creates, and probably

most importantly, between the reader and the *spirit* of the book. So, let's have a look at injecting a bit of emotion into some writing to shape the reader's response to character, to play with the reader's empathy, to tinker and jiggle and smash the causality a bit and to get a sense of how plot can shift around under your feet as a writer if you're not careful!

### **Writing Exercise.**

Think of a simple interaction between two characters, A and B. Perhaps A is passing on information to B. Perhaps A is trying to find out the answer to a simple enquiry from B. Don't make it too complicated. It's just the story.

Write one page of this, either as a script or as fictional prose or as a poem. KEEP IT SIMPLE. Just focus on the story, on A getting information from B, or telling B something, or whatever you choose.

Now let's add the emotion and the causality. Imagine your scene with a definite emotional progression. Not just for one character, A or B, but for the *character of the scene*. It might go from high energy to ennui. It might move from hope to frustration. Or from anger to passion or compassion. Be very clear in your mind what this progression is.

Without making *substantial* changes to the dialogue that you have already written:

- What would you change to portray this emotional progression in the scene?
- Would you alter how the characters speak?
- How they move?
- Where they are?

- What about symbolism? Would they start out active and end up still? Or would they drop and smash that precious thing they've been carrying?

In other words, how can you inject the emotion, the causality, the stuff that creates the empathetic response from the reader without relying on the dialogue?

Have a go at writing this. Have fun.

And, if you want to keep going, look at the individual emotional progression of character A and character B. What if one goes from delighted to suspicious, and the other goes from withdrawn to extroverted? Play around with variations. How does it impact on how you write the scene? How much do you want to play with that dialogue?

Look at something you've written. How clear do you make the emotional progression of the scene, the chapter, the character?

To emotionally involve the reader, you need to be aware that every movement you write, every section, every chapter, scene or part should convey some sort of emotional progression – either for the character or for the overall writing – that is consistent with your intended plot and themes.