

## Betraying the Reader: Top 4 Writing Crimes That Make Readers Want to Kill You

*I wanted to throw it against the wall* -- that's what people say sometimes about books they don't like. It's anger. In some cases, it may even be actual Incredible Hulk/run-around-like-you're-on-fire rage.

Why is the reaction so strong? If we purchase other items, such as a new brand of potato chips or what have you, and they're terrible, we say *Yuck*, and then we shrug and move on. We do not have the urge to strangle potato chips.

The difference with a book seems to be that readers feel, not only disappointed (although they are), but also deceived. They had so many other books or stories to choose, but they chose this one. Each time readers makes the decision to read beyond the first pages, it is a leap of faith, a commitment, and they make it based on what the writer has promised at the beginning. It is like falling into someone's arms. The reader says, "Okay, yes. I'm willing to be under your spell. I'm willing to be manipulated in this particular way that you've promised because it might be entertaining or thought-provoking or both."

If the writer doesn't deliver or if the writer delivers something different, readers feel manipulated in a bad way. "I didn't sign up for *this*," they may grumble. In this sense, committing to a book is less like committing to a bag of potato chips and more like committing to a relationship. How many times have we heard someone say, when a relationship crashes and burns, "This person didn't turn out to be at all who I thought they were!"? The reader has, after all, made an emotional investment in this story in much the same way.

As someone who has mentored probably thousands of fledgling writers, in college writing workshops and at writing conferences, I have seen the desperation that beginning writers sometimes have to "hook" their readers. It's a good impulse to create an opening page that's interesting. We only have one chance to make a first impression. But it is not a good idea to promise things one simply can't or won't deliver. This is why I don't like the "hook" metaphor – in fishing, we trick the fish into eating barbed metal, and it kills the fish. This is not our aim in storytelling.

When the TV show, "Lost,"\* first hit the airwaves, it seemed like just the kind of show I would enjoy, with mystery, a variety of characters, and a quirky setting. (\*It should be noted that the mention of "Lost" may cause, for some, the urge to kill people for no reason, as would often happened on the show). However, I'd seen enough stories by struggling writers to recognize that this show didn't seem to know where it was going. Too many plot threads were introduced in the first episodes. I thought, *Hmmm.....* I didn't trust the writers and I wandered away.

Viewers who hung around for five seasons endured the sudden introduction of polar bears and time travel (with unclear rules). They were like, *Wait, What?* This is what happens when writers have not set up strong stories. They later start throwing

everything but the kitchen sink at the problem in hopes of keeping the audience interested. But ultimately they can't bring it all together. Both they and the audience are – wait for it – “Lost” (Ick. Sorry. Clever word play may be the most egregious breach of trust of all.).

The best way to avoid violating one's contract with the reader is to understand that contract in the first place. When readers first encounter a piece of writing, they may evaluate, not just the content, but also the tone, voice, point of view, setting, and style.

Most new writers grasp easily that the plot must develop and that a character has to be the person promised at the beginning. If you are writing a mystery that does not get solved in a convincing way, readers will be disappointed. If you create a protagonist who was a jerk on page one – a quality that made him interesting and complex – you can't suddenly paint him as a saint on page ten, at least not without any explanation. A character can evolve, but that change has to be “earned” by the events in the story.

There are other areas of the contract that new writers find harder to navigate than plot and character development. Below is a list, though certainly not an exhaustive one, of contract violations – otherwise known as “Writing Crimes.”

#### #1 Denial of Something Owed

In fiction, we occupy the mind and body of the main character. It's different from movies, which show us only external action. In a movie theatre, we look at the main character, rather than seeing the world through his or her eyes. When people say, “The book was much better than the movie,” what they often mean was that they enjoyed having access to the internal world of the character more than they enjoyed watching the character from the outside. When readers pick up a piece of fiction, it is because they want to have this experience, and they trust the writer to give it to them.

This internal story-telling means that the main character doesn't typically have secrets from the reader, in the same way as characters on the big screen might. We know what he or she knows because we're in the character's head. If the main character has just murdered someone right before the story starts, for example, it's likely that this act permeates all of her thoughts. It probably isn't possible that she's not thinking about that decision pretty much every moment. So we can't really keep that information from the reader without violating the point of view (the contract). Now, certainly, it's possible that a character could *try* not to think about something or not to picture something. But we'd bear witness to these efforts. We'd see the character start to imagine or think something. Then we'd see him or her try to stop imagining or thinking that thing. When writers withhold something that the main character knows, the reader feels cheated, manipulated in the bad way. If we find out in Chapter Twenty, that our main character, whose thoughts we've seen for 200 pages already, is the murderer, it is you we will want to kill.

## #2 The Bait and Switch

The story started out in one character's point of view, but later it shifted into the secondary character's perspective. For readers, this can be jarring unless handled quite skillfully. We get attached to our main character, and it's difficult for us to transition into another mind and body without breaking the story's spell. In addition, if the story shifts into a secondary point of view, it means readers may never get to finish the story arc for the first character. The story feels incomplete.

I often see beginning writers shift points of view by mistake – they don't know they've done it. If they do it on purpose, it is usually out of desperation. They are really stuck with the plot for Georgie, the Russian acrobat who drinks too much, and so they hop into the mind and body of his partner Nadia, the poodle trainer, in hopes of keeping something going. This is not unlike what happened with sad, old "Lost." Readers signed onto this story because they wanted to know what would happen for Georgie. Would he fall off the tightrope in front of that group of children? Would he reunite with his abusive mother and risk making his problems worse? You are under some obligation to deliver Georgie's story because it's what you promised.

## #3 Pulling the Rug Out

Dream stories are certainly fun for the writer – they rely heavily on surreal images, which are enjoyable to craft. These stories usually end with something like: *And then she woke up*, which is writer-ese for *Gotcha!*

As readers, we want to believe that the characters are real, and we enter into a contract with the writer to, as the saying goes, suspend our disbelief. We become so invested in the characters that they seem more familiar to us than people we actually know. These *Gotcha!* stories can feel like an abuse of that contract.

What's more, the revelation reduces the significance of the story. After all, when we wake up from dreams, we go, *Wow, that was weird*. But then we either forget about them or they just become funny little things we tell people. Dreams don't typically matter that much. However, if a dream did cause a character to make a new decision in his or her "real" life, it could be a catalyst for something that actually does matter. If you want to use a dream as a catalyst, keep the dream part small, so that the bulk of the story can be devoted to stuff that the character *does*, stuff will have real consequences. When a dream comprises the entire story, not only is there little at stake, but also readers can feel tricked.

## #4 Changing (Or Keeping Mum About) Your Own Rules

You can't easily introduce a new "rule" in the middle of the story. For example, if we only find out on page 65 that there is no gravity or that the characters have had eight arms the whole time, we are likely to be confused and, thus, perhaps to lose faith in the writer.

When we encounter a place that is unlike the world we know, we aren't sure what to imagine is the same as our world. Is this place like Earth? Is there air? Are there trees? Find sneaky ways to provide information about what we see and hear around us. If the opening scene involves the main character storming out of his boss's office in a futuristic city, this is an opportunity to world-build. Maybe the character needs some fresh air to calm down. What is the atmosphere like outside that office? Are there space ships going back and forth overhead? Is this normal to the character? Can he hail one like a cab? Does he tell the space cabbie his troubles?

If the space cabbie says, "Sorry, mate. For a minute there, I thought you were an android. And they're really cracking down. Androids aren't allowed in cabs anymore. I could get the guillotine."

Boom. You've set up a rule.

If, a hundred pages later, an android gets in a cab and there's no consequence, nor any explanation of the lack of consequence, your reader's book-throwing arm may get twitchy.

Ultimately, the transaction that a book or story provides to a reader is predicated on trust. As writers, if we make good on our promises, we may eradicate horrible, violent book-tossing episodes in America. And hey, if we're lucky, maybe we even earn the opposite – that moment when the reader finishes the book, closes the cover, and holds the object close to the chest, hugging the story like an old friend.