

Writing the High-Concept Novel

By Sophie Littlefield

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I've always resisted the idea of the high concept pitch, believing that a truly memorable story shouldn't be able to be summarized in a single sentence.

This changed when I decided to write a book someone might actually want to buy.

I had an embarrassing number of manuscripts on the shelf that defied concise pitching. If pressed I'd say something like "Well, it's kind of about x, but there's this secondary plot that hinges on y, and thematically it leans more toward z..."

The feedback I got from agents was that I wrote somewhere in the gray area between literary and genre. (I mistook this for a compliment.)

The rejection that finally set me straight came from an agent who had this to say: "Your writing is strong and engaging, but it lacks focus and the compelling hook editors are looking for these days."

I will confess that I had assumed that "engaging writing" – voice, in other words – was ninety percent of the battle, and I thought I'd nailed mine. What I didn't realize was that the most beautiful voice in the world can't sell a weak story in today's market.

I spent a month thinking about those two words – "strong hook" – and paying attention to what was succeeding in the movie theaters, on television, and on literary best-seller lists.

Then I sat down and wrote a story with a simple but unique premise, featuring several entertainment trends (kick-ass woman, vigilante justice). I focused on keeping the energy high and the story tight and using voice *judiciously* to enhance the premise – not as the premise itself.

This one landed me a flurry of interest, and in short order, an agent.

WHAT HIGH CONCEPT ISN'T...

The term "high concept" is roundly misunderstood, and often applied incorrectly.

For instance, the common practice of combining two well-known films or books (e.g. "Harry Potter meets The Story of O") is not a high-concept pitch, but rather a

framing technique that prepares a listener for the pitch that follows, according to Steve Kaire, Hollywood screenwriter and producer.

Just because a premise is unique, it is not necessarily high concept, no matter how fast the pace or high the body count. Kaire cautions that the story must not be “so odd or strange that the appeal exists only in the mind of the writer who created it.” Disney’s 1998 film “Meet the Deedles,” for instance, features dimwitted surfer brothers sent to a rich kids’ boot camp where they are mistaken for park rangers and hired to combat a prairie dog infestation. Intrigued? No? No one else was, either.

And sometimes the term high concept is used as a catch-all euphemism for “I wish I’d thought of that,” says mystery writer Tim Maleeny, “a means of describing a great book or idea that someone else came up with.”

...AND WHAT IT IS

I like this simple definition by television writer James Bonnet: “A high concept is an intriguing idea that can be stated in a few words and is easily understood by all.”

Often high-concept books revolve around well-worn plots – but with a hook that make the story fresh, timely and compelling. Familiar subjects succeed because they resonate with readers, but *your* version of a story about star-crossed lovers or step-parenting or a heist or murder must have something extra, a twist that nobody else thought of.

Consider a child-in-danger crime thriller. The potential for tension and emotional investment are obvious, but how can you make your version unique? A few movie examples:

- Have the father put a price on the kidnapper’s head (“Ransom,” 1996)
- Spoiled prep-school hostages kick ass (“Toy Soldiers,” 1991)
- Kidnapper becomes father figure to child (“A Perfect World,” 1993)
- Set it on a plane (“Flight Plan,” 2005)
- Lock them in a closet (“Panic Room,” 2002)

I would go so far as to say that without that killer hook, even a very well-told story will have a hard time finding a home. Agent Janet Reid, discussing sample queries

on her blog, writes “The problem here is I’m usually not too interested these days in ‘ruthless fanatics’ and ‘rogue agents’ and ‘decades old government conspiracy’ just because they are clichés. I’m much more interested in things that sound up to the minute and current-‘fresh and new’ is what you see a lot in what agents are looking for.”

Assuming you’ve got your basic story and hook figured out, how do you know if you’re headed in the right direction? Author Diana Peterfreund, blogging for The Knight Agency, suggests asking yourself these questions when considering your story:

1. Is it very accessible – i.e., the consumer knows instantly whether or not this is something they want to see?
2. Is it extremely commercial – i.e., a lot of people are interested in this topic? (Think about trends (kick-ass women, paranormal), or perennial favorites (lifestyles of the rich and famous.))

Often a high-concept story will be “big,” in the sense that the scale is enormous, even global. In such a story, “there aren’t just lives at stake, there are countries, planets or lifelong beliefs at stake,” says Maleeny. “The protagonist isn’t just fighting for a victim, or loved ones, or a client, he or she is fighting against impossible odds for all of us.”

But high-concept stories can be “small,” too, concerning a limited story world and set of characters. In “The Pursuit of Happyness” (2006), a struggling single parent and his young son are confronted with eviction, and the father pursues a long-shot internship that could change their lives forever. In “The Wedding Crashers” (2005), a pair of womanizing friends discovers that weddings are perfect hookup hunting grounds; all goes well until one of them falls in love. Neither concept is world-altering; both are compelling.

Steven Spielberg once said, "I like ideas, especially movie ideas, that you can hold in your hand. If a person can tell me the idea in twenty-five words or less, it's going to make a pretty good movie." This measure works just as well on stories featuring small ensembles as it does on epics with casts of thousands.

WHEN TO DEVELOP THE CONCEPT

The time to consider high concept is not, as most articles on the subject tend to imply, when the book is complete and you have an agent or editor appointment at a conference in an hour. Ideally you should think about it as you are plotting, before you write the first chapter. Preferably before you write the first page.

For fantasy and erotica writer Alice Gaines, high concept “comes first, even before the main characters.” In Alice’s work, in fact, characters develop *in response to* her initial concept. She gives this example:

“Driving home one day, I started running through concepts for a Jane Eyre story. Jane Eyre Meets King Kong (dumb). Jane Eyre Meets Bill Clinton (shades of Ken Starr, grody). Jane Eyre Meets The Wizard of Oz. Hmmmm. Not the wizard, but how about another character? Say...the Tin Man. Jane Eyre Meet the Tin Man. A man who thinks he has no heart...At that point, the character development came next. What kind of man would think he had no heart? What life experiences would convince him he was heartless? How was my heroine going to work that heart's last nerve?”

When it’s time to pitch your book, revisit your original concept and revise your logline, if necessary, to reflect the evolution of your story. Often, themes will have been developed and refined during the exposition of the original idea; these may or may not suggest changes to the logline.

Once you’ve reduced your story down to a sentence, if what you’re left with is an idea that’s been done a thousand times before, your story is execution-driven, meaning you’ll need additional explanation (and, more importantly, sample pages) to demonstrate why it works.

Which leads me to the all-important synopsis section of your query letter.

I am convinced that nearly all agents who rejected my last several books (and that number is well over one hundred) did not look past my query letter to a synopsis or sample pages. As I mentioned at the outset, I’m a devoted fan of the complex, character-driven novel. But it’s a tough sell. You can increase the odds of attracting interest in your story by highlighting those elements – and *only* those elements - of your novel that do fall within high-concept structure.

Conventional wisdom has it that up to two paragraphs of your query letter should be devoted to a synopsis of your story. Having read many, many query letters, I’ve

noticed a tendency for authors to jam as much information as possible into those paragraphs, using terse grammar to fit in expanded plot information and secondary storylines and characters.

This is a mistake. Agents, like most readers, find dense narrative off-putting and white space appealing. Two long paragraphs scream “Take a deep breath – this is going to be complicated.” A brief, punchy sentence or two is far more compelling, delivering the opposite message: “Just try and resist this knockout hook.”

In the end, of course, you shouldn’t undertake a book if your heart’s not in it. Unless you’re Junot Díaz, however, marshalling your efforts toward the high end of the concept spectrum is a move that publication-minded authors should consider.