

How To Self-Publish Book Distribution

Exit Your Narrative Structure And Let Your Characters Breathe

By Scott McCormick · January 22, 2021

402 9

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One way to create a memorable story is to take a minute to let your characters breathe. Build a scene where you exit the narrative structure and allow your readers to bond with the characters.

In "Narrative Structure — Why It's Important," I addressed narrative structure and how understanding the classic three-act structure is important for writers.

But structure isn't everything, and placing too much importance on it can lead to a lifeless story. We see this problem all the time in Hollywood movies and mass-market fiction. Narratively, they are textbook examples: the books keep the pages turning, the movies draw you into their worlds and stories. Yet, at the end of the tale, you're left feeling kind of empty. A lot happened, but there was nothing of consequence. These are truly forgettable stories. (My wife has, on more than one occasion, started reading one of these books only to realize, several chapters in, that she has read it before.)

So how do you avoid producing a forgettable story? In a word: *character*. In several words: *ease up on the narrative structure – you've got to let your characters breathe*. And one way to do this is by pausing the narrative and inserting what I call "cockroach races."

What's a cockroach race?

A cockroach race is an inessential moment in a story where the characters get a chance to just be themselves without necessarily moving the plot forward. It's a moment where you pause the narrative and let your readers or audience bond with the characters.

These scenes are totally unnecessary in terms of the plot, but completely essential to bringing your characters to life. You'll find more often than not that the most beloved and iconic moments in books and movies are cockroach races.

Why is it called a cockroach race?

Unsure. My friend calls them that, and he got that term from a friend of his, who probably got it from a friend of hers, etc. I used to call these "egg scenes" (you'll find out why in a second), but I've come to love calling them cockroach races because it doesn't appear to be a reference to a specific book or movie.

Let me give some examples to illustrate why these scenes are important and so beloved.

Egg scenes

The reason I used to call these egg scenes is because of the "50 eggs" scene in *Cool Hand Luke*, which is kind of the quintessential cockroach race. (I've mentioned this scene in an earlier post.)

Structurally, this scene doesn't need to be in the movie. You could easily remove it and it wouldn't affect the outcome of the story at all. No one would miss it, apart from the fact that it's the most iconic scene in the movie. That's not to say the scene is totally pointless — it develops Luke's character and causes the other prisoners to idolize him — but there are other scenes that do that in ways that push the story along. The egg scene does nothing other than just exist and be awesome. And I think the reason it's so beloved is that it's totally ridiculous and random.



World Series

Another great cockroach race is this scene from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in which McMurphy, after unsuccessfully lobbying to have Nurse Ratched turn on the World Series, begins narrating a pretend moment from the game. Like the "50 eggs" scene, it does nothing structurally. I could easily see some network TV exec snipping this scene out of the movie to make the film fit into its allotted time slot. If you hadn't seen the movie already, you'd never know anything was gone. But how great is this scene? (It's worth noting is that McMurphy's narration of the game is not in the book.)



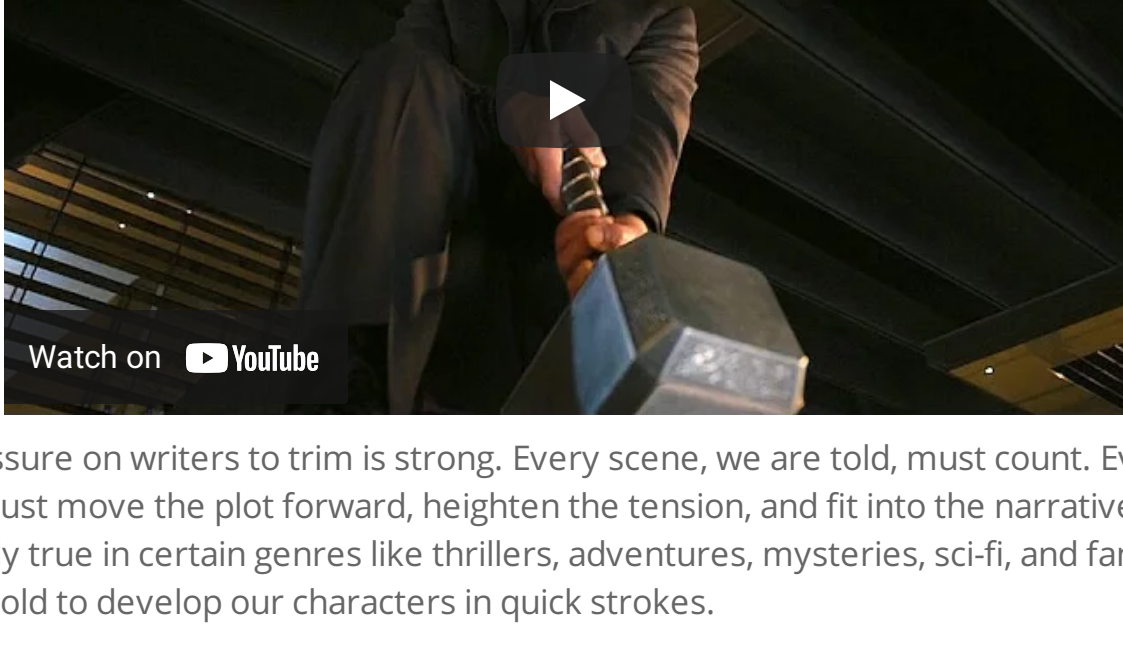
You talkin' to me?

Where would *Taxi Driver* be without this iconic moment? It's totally unnecessary. Cut it out and you have still have a taut psychological masterpiece. (Tauter, even.) But this is the scene everyone quotes. (It's worth noting, DeNiro ad libbed this dialog.)

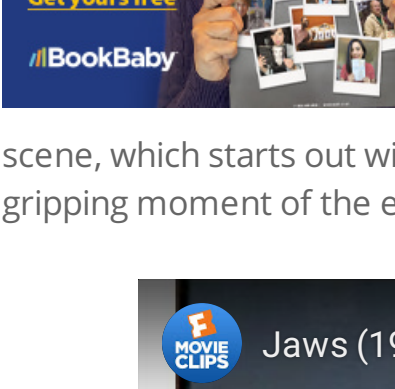


Thor's hammer

To use a more recent example, here is a scene from *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*. While I wouldn't go so far as to call this an iconic scene, I would argue that Marvel's willingness to spend two minutes with what is, narratively speaking, a throwaway scene, is what sets their movies apart from other modern action flicks. It's funny, it's cool, and what's more, by witnessing what feels like a behind-the-scenes-moment, we bond with these characters. (Plus, there's a nice payoff towards the end of the movie when Vision hands Thor his own hammer.) In these kinds of movie and novels, there is usually so much bombastic action going on, authors and directors seldom take the time to zoom in on the little details. But how great is Thor's face when Captain America makes the hammer move just the slightest bit? Personally, I want more Marvel cockroach races.



The pressure on writers to trim is strong. Every scene, we are told, must count. Every scene must move the plot forward, heighten the tension, and fit into the narrative. This is especially true in certain genres like thrillers, adventures, mysteries, sci-fi, and fantasy. We are told to develop our characters in quick strokes.



All of this is good advice. But when you do so exclusively, you won't make a lasting impression on your readers. People want more than "character development." They want moments. They want cockroach races.

The thing is, readers and audiences don't know they want cockroach races. They think they want big concepts. People didn't line up to see *Jaws* in order to see three drunks sitting in a boat talking to each other. But I would argue that this scene, which starts out with a classic cockroach race (comparing scars), becomes the most gripping moment of the entire film. And there's not a single shark to be seen.



People love sit-coms because they are, almost by their essence, cockroach races. There's a reason *Friends* was so popular. People loved the characters. Viewers tuned in for 30 minutes each week to see their TV friends hang out. The plots in sit-coms are secondary; they are just excuses for the characters to do silly things. Sit-coms are at their best, as Seinfeld put it, when nothing happens.

The good news is cockroach races are fun to write. When beginning a novel, once I've sorted out who my characters are and what my story is going to be about, I like to take my characters and throw them into random situations, just to get a feeling of who they are. I send them bowling, have them wait at the dentist's office, or have them play 20 questions. (I love games as a dramatic setup. It's a great way to see your characters' personalities.) Sometimes these are just exercises that help me understand my characters and I never show them to anyone. But sometimes they can provide great fodder for the actual novel. And, typically, I find the further removed from the plot my cockroach race is, the better.

Generally speaking, you don't want too many cockroach races in your book, otherwise it starts to feel aimless. Then again, picaresques, which are basically novels that consist of nothing but cockroach races, are some of the world's most beloved books (e.g. *Candide*, *Tom Jones*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Confederacy of Dunces*).

The next time you are writing your book, why not take a break from your structure? Don't worry about your characters' inciting incidents. Take them to the grocery store. See what happens. Maybe you'll create an iconic moment having your swashbuckling space adventurer and her comrades take a time out from saving the galaxy to buy some denture cream.

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9 COMMENTS

Sally M. Chetwynd · February 2, 2021 at 8:32 pm

This reminds me of Kevin Costner's version of Robin Hood, a movie which is badly panned – and perhaps it deserves it – in which Alan Rickman, playing the evil Sheriff of Nottingham, rolls his eyes at some unexpected antic of Robin of Locksley and his band of merry men. The film is full of action and drama, but this one bit resonated with me, adding subtle humor to keep the film from veering into the melodramatic.

As bad as it might be – I'm not arguing its quality or lack thereof – it is full of big names, like Morgan Freeman as the Muslim Moor, desperate to determine which way is east in cloudy England, Sean Connery as King Richard, and a host of others whom I have seen in countless other films but whose names I don't know. A movie with a cast like that can't be all bad.

Reply

Wendy · February 2, 2021 at 9:46 pm

Serendipitous that this article should show up right now. This piece of fan-fiction seems to have hijacked my writing lately (specifically, I threw a couple of characters from the "futuristic" Gatchaman into a modern car), and now I've got close to 5,000 words of something that, while there's SOME movement of the plot, is more cockroach race than anything. I can't decide if I want to fold it into my main story (there's one, possibly two reasons for the car to be in the story), or if I should "file the serial numbers off" and put it into a completely different story (there's a bit of a possible scene that would be great for a thriller, but I've never really thought about writing a thriller novel.)

Reply

Bill Evans · February 2, 2021 at 10:43 pm

Oh, for heavens sake, she can't be saving the world if she's buying dental creme. Where's the logic, man? And who would ever play the role?

Nice article and nice picks.

Reply

CJ Riley · February 3, 2021 at 1:42 am

I would add Ratso Rizzo's pounding on the cab hood in *Midnight Cowboy*. "I'm walkin' heah!"

Reply

Doc Prugne · February 3, 2021 at 2:11 am

Don't read this article. It's not very thoughtful. These scenes are not structural? Baloney. He relates that each scene accomplishes some piece of business, demonstrates character, etc., but doesn't forward the plot. Plot develops out of character. Every stage of the plot should arise out of characters. I also think he's being obtuse when he recommends building a scene where you exit the structure. You never exit the narrative structure. Never. What he is actually describing is character-building scenes that do also forward the plot. I know from "Cool Hand Luke" that the egg eating scene sets up the final moment when the Warden shoots Luke. The egg scene is when George Kennedy's character comes to love Luke—that's a major advancement in the plot—so yes, this writer is recommending you do character development BEFORE WRITING as part of your first draft. Don't. Do it as a pre-writing exercise so you know your characters BEFORE YOU START THE FIRST DRAFT. After all, how can you write about people you don't know? You can't, not with authority, so do your character development BEFORE you start your first draft. It'll be much simpler to write. You won't be wandering all over the place finding out who your character is.

Reply

Batt Johnson · February 3, 2021 at 2:44 am

Wow! That was a fantastic read for me, someone who has only written my own non-fiction books. I do not call myself a "writer," I call myself an "author" because I never studied writing. I came from the world of audio and the visual as a professional radio broadcaster and actor. I often feel self-conscious about this fact. I am currently working on my memoir. I wonder if I have any "egg scenes" or cockroach races in it. I HOPE so. Again, thank you for the illuminating article.

Reply

Anna Willett · February 3, 2021 at 12:21 pm

Love this article. Fantastic advice!!

Reply

D A Barr · February 3, 2021 at 5:03 pm

Love it! For the last couple of days, I've been agonizing over leaving just such a scene in a short story that I'm working on. I like it but was concerned with pulling readers' attention from the narrative.

Now, I feel good about leaving it in the story.

Thanks for this very timely tidbit.

Reply

Sherie Scott · February 16, 2021 at 1:35 am

This is an excellent article. As writers, I think we get so caught up in moving the action forward that we forget to show these wonderful moments, like the egg scene. Thanks for reiterating this essential part for making a memorable story.

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