

## MORE ABOUT THE PLOT GENIE

Last issue's column was devoted to a discussion of the Plot Genie, an early twentieth-century gizmo with which writers struggling to generate story ideas could produce them by twirling a cardboard wheel and using the numbers that the wheel landed on to assemble plot components from a predesigned list. Its creator, a Hollywood screenwriter of the silent-film days named Wycliffe A. Hill, called it a "plot robot," but what it really is is a sort of primitive computer—no battery required—that uses stochastic methods to assemble information from random bits. By that I mean that the book that Wycliffe Hill published about eighty years ago (which included the vital cardboard wheel as an insert) first establishes what he called a "general formula for all types of stories," which has nine elements, listed by Hill as LOCALE OR ATMOSPHERE, FIRST CHARACTER, THE BELOVED, A PROBLEM, OBSTACLE TO LOVE, COMPLICATION, PREDICAMENT, THE CRISIS, and CLIMAX. The cardboard wheel has a small peephole in it. You turn the wheel and a number will become visible in the peephole. After three turns, you note down the number that appears, which will determine each of your nine necessary elements. These are catalogued numerically in the text of the book, and you have to hunt them down, number by number, to put your story outline together. The book provides long lists for each plot element: under "Backgrounds or locale" we are given "at the morgue," "in the swamp," "in court," "on a yacht," and 176 others. A list of 180 "usual male characters" offers us "spy," "diver," "guide," "judge," and so forth. "Unusual male characters," the next list, "gives us more exotic professions: "anarchist," "archduke," "wizard," "troubadour."

More spinning of the wheel and we fill

in our female character, our main plot problem ("relief from stigma opposed by lack of influence," for example), the obstacles to love, for love is what usually drives the plot ("beloved possessed with fatal ambition for revenge"), complications ("fatal ambition threatens to deprive loved one of health"), and onward through predicament and crisis to climax and resolution. It is a goofy way to construct a story, and some mighty goofy stories must have come from it, but evidently the Plot Genie had its followers, because my copy of the book, which dates from 1932, is the third edition. And in its cockeyed way it does impart to would-be fictioneers some useful knowledge of the basic building blocks of a story, not that I would really recommend your writing one about an archduke trapped in a swamp because his beloved is possessed with a fatal ambition for revenge.

Since writing the Plot Genie column, though, I've discovered that Hill's book was not even the first of its kind. It had a predecessor, *Plotto*, the work of William Wallace Cook (1867-1933), which deserves our attention not only because it, too, can teach one something of the logic of storytelling, but because its creator seems to have been a science fiction writer and may indeed have used his own system to create his books.

That invaluable work of reference, Everett F. Bleiler's *Checklist of Fantastic Literature*, tells us of six SF books by Cook published between 1903 and 1925. *A Round Trip to the Year 2000* (1903) depicts a future dystopia in which a sinister monopoly controls the supply of oxygen and work is done by seven-foot-tall robot slaves. (He calls them "muglugs," since the word "robot" had not yet been coined.) 1904's *The Blue Peter Troglodyte* brings an eight-foot-tall prehistoric man, found

preserved in a mine, back to life. *Marooned in 1492* (1905) is similar in theme to Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*, but apparently is a much less cheerful book. In *The Eighth Wonder* (1907), the earth's rotation is brought to a halt.

From the experience of writing these and other novels, Cook derived a basic structure for all fiction, which he set forth in his book *Plotto: The Master Book of All Plots*, published in 1928. A plot, he says, can be summarized in a sentence made up of just three clauses: "An initial Clause defining the protagonist in general terms, a middle Clause initiating and carrying on the action, and a final Clause . . . terminating the action." Nothing very surprising there; all he is really saying is that a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Cook goes on to declare that all plots are driven by desire for one of the three kinds of happiness: happiness in love and courtship, in married life, or in enterprise. "All that is possible to a mortal craftsman," he observes sagely, "is the combining of old material into something new and different."

Cook next lets us know that these three motivations can be developed into just thirty-six master plots for fiction. (Robert A. Heinlein, many years later, boiled them down to just three, *Boy Meets Girl*, the *Little Tailor*, and the *Man Who Learned Better*, but that's a different story.) So far it all seems very easy to follow. But as Cook sets out to illustrate his three-clause system, his three great motivations, and his thirty-six master plots, he uncorks such a plethora of possible choices for generating stories that the task becomes bewildering.

First clause, for example, could give us "a male criminal." Clause Two, perhaps, is "seeking retaliation for a grievous wrong that is either real or fancied." Fine. Now to fill in some of the basic details. What kind of criminal? A bank robber? A kidnapper? A Mafia don? And what kind of grievous wrong has been done him? The perfidy of a trusted colleague? Betrayal by a promising protégé? The treachery of a lovely mistress? And then there is the

problem of choosing a scenario for the middle of the story. "Stricken with fever in a wilderness country," maybe? Does our Mafioso follow his enemy into the heart of darkness, then, tracking him—or her—to some Congo forest? Not bad. But whatever we choose must lead on to a satisfactory Clause Three: "Emerging happily from a serious entanglement," perhaps, or "foiling a guilty plotter and defeating a subtle plot."

Suddenly it all becomes less simple. We need detail, subplot, character shading, and we are offered plenty: "an important secret that called for decisive action," "an erring person committing a grievous mistake and seeking in secret to live down its evil results," "an object possessing mysterious powers," and more. Much more. Too much more. The possibilities become almost infinite. *Plotto* buries us under such a welter of choices that the diligent would-be writer, working through the maze of structural options, soon is wandering down some dead-end path or finds himself doubling back into impossible contradictions. As we pick this item and that to decorate our simple three-clause structure, we find ourselves lost in a thicket of interlocking alphanumeric categories drawn from his lists—B153 (A11 [B14] C22 [B31, A2-6], B66, C9, B41, B51 [C11]), etc., etc.—out of which, if we emerge, we have concocted a bizarre, incoherent surrealist epic made up of incompatible modules that are next to impossible to unite in the glowing fulfillment of "a final Clause . . . terminating the action."

Someone who has some skill at making leaps of inductive reasoning can probably draw the mishmash of plot fragments that *Plotto* provides into an actual story outline, although anyone who can do that could probably make up a story on his own without such arbitrary help—i.e., is actually a real writer. On the other hand, even real writers get stuck for story ideas sometimes, and the mechanical assistance of a gimmick like *Plotto* might just be able to spur the inception of a story by handing the writer a few oddball plot ele-

ments that his own imagination can go to work on. It did work for Cook, after all, and he even got some good SF ideas out of it a hundred years ago.

I used a method somewhat akin to that myself, once, when I needed a story idea and I had, for the moment, run absolutely dry. It was September, 1982, a warm and golden month, and I was exhausted after having spent the previous six months writing an immense historical novel, *Lord of Darkness*. But now *Omni* magazine wanted to do a special Robert Silverberg issue, containing reprints of two of my earlier stories plus a brand-new piece to top everything off. It was too flattering an offer to refuse. But where was I going to get that brand-new story? I was wiped out. I had reached that point, so dreadfully familiar to any author who has just finished a major project, where I felt convinced that I'd never have a story idea again.

One tactic writers sometimes try when stuck for an idea is to grab two unrelated concepts at random, jam them together, and see if they strike any sparks. I tried it. I picked up the day's newspaper and glanced quickly at two different pages.

The most interesting words that rose to my eye were "computers" and "angels." All right. I had my story then and there. Geek uses his computer to talk to angels.

Corny? No. Nothing's corny if handled the right way. Trust me. The story that emerged, "Basileus," has been reprinted

in many anthologies, including the Science Fiction Writers of America's *Fantasy Hall of Fame*.

The drawbacks of *Plotto* led to Wycliffe Hill's improved model, which uses a version of Cook's plot categories but adds the cardboard wheel to the mix so that the job of choosing the categories to use becomes far less confusing, though rather more arbitrary. The numbers turning up on the wheel, rather than the writer's own sense of an appropriate choice of elements, determine the structure of the story. Intuitive selection is replaced by mechanistic determination.

Has either book ever resulted in the construction of a short story that some magazine was willing to publish? I have no idea. But there probably are hundreds or even thousands of would-be science fiction writers among the readers of this column, and I suggest to them that they make the experiment. Just yesterday I saw that copies of *Plotto* and *The Plot Genie* are being sold on the Internet at about \$125 each. Pick one up, follow the instructions, write your story. You might just find that a grand literary career is unfolding for you in a wondrous, magical way. ○

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