

THE PLOT GENIE

Along time ago—1973, as a matter of fact—Sherry Gottlieb, who used to run a science fiction bookstore in Los Angeles, gave me a copy of a book called *The Plot Genie*, which was intended, an even longer time ago, to provide writers with handy formulas for constructing stories. Sherry inscribed the book to me with these tender words: “To Bob Silverberg—I hope this helps you get through those trying times and slumps. If you learn to use this, you may be able to sell a story or something.”

I came upon it the other day in a dusty corner of my office. Apparently I haven’t been using it much in the last few decades. Of course, I don’t write as much fiction as I used to, either. But there are plenty of other writers out there trying to make a living by selling stories, and it occurred to me that knowing about this book might be of great value to them.

The copy of *The Plot Genie* that Sherry sent me back in the halcyon days of the Nixon administration is the third edition, dated 1932. The author was one Wycliffe A. Hill, described on the title page as “Author Inventor”—from other sources I learn that he wrote screenplays for silent films—and the publisher was the Ernest E. Gagnon Company of Los Angeles.

Mr. Hill tells us that about 1915 the great movie director Cecil B. de Mille rejected a story idea of his “with the kindly criticism that ‘although an interesting narrative, it contains no dramatic plot.’” This set him searching for an understanding of the difference between narrative and plot. Upon learning that someone had published a book that claimed to list all the basic dramatic situations—thirty-six in number, he tells us—he bought a copy and began “an intensive study and analysis of dramatic plot building,” which led in

1918 to his writing a book called *Ten Million Photoplay Plots*. He followed this in 1921 with *The Art of Dramatic Plot Building*, and then *The Writers’ Guide* (1925), which brought him finally to the creation of his masterpiece, *The Plot Genie*.

When I say that *The Plot Genie* offers a mechanical way to devise plots, I’m not just bandying metaphors. Inserted into the book is an actual machine, which Hill calls his “plot robot.” It’s not really a robot, and not even much of a machine: actually, it’s a cardboard envelope with a peephole in it and a circular wheel mounted inside. When you reach in and turn the wheel, a number appears in the peephole. Proper turning of the wheel will provide you with all the necessary elements of a story plot, according to a method which Hill spends 141 pages explaining.

“It may or may not have been a mistake,” he admits, “to give the name ‘Plot Robot’ to the device when it was first put on the market, inasmuch as it is not really a robot. Although resulting in a tremendous amount of newspaper and magazine publicity, it also aroused considerable resentment and suspicion among the literati, some of whom were averse to the idea of a robot’s doing intellectual work. Because of this feeling in regard to the name, it was decided to change it to ‘Plot Genie.’” So, back in 1932, hard-edged science fiction—the robot—gave way to misty fantasy—the genie!

As for using the book—well, listen up, all ye ambitious storytellers. You must first become aware of the “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**. You turn the wheel three times to

determine each of these elements, then note the number that comes up in the peephole and hunt each one down in the text of the book. "Important!" the author warns us. "Read instructions on the following pages very carefully before attempting to build a plot with the aid of the Genie."

Shall we get started? Shall I devise a story plot before your very eyes, making use of this ingenious device?

I'll give it a try, anyway, although using the thing turns out to be immensely complicated, and I am a weary guy after having written and sold seven or eight hundred stories myself over the past fifty-five years. So it will be a struggle. "Turn the disk three times and then observe what number shows through the slot, and then write this number in the proper space on the recording sheet. After having obtained the nine numbers—and not before—refer to the index book for your corresponding plot elements, and write these on the Recording Sheet opposite the proper number. The first number obtained by turning the disc three times supplies the locale; the second gives the principal male character, the third, the beloved, and so on." It sounds like a tall order.

But here we go. I turn the disc and number 69 comes up. We are provided with a list of 180 story locales, running from "In Asia" to "At a Fraternity House." Number 69 turns out to be "At a saw mill."

Three more turns and I have my main male character—number 80, "Jazz orchestra leader." Three more and I am given my main female character (the "beloved")—number 58, a wizard's daughter or sister. Let her be his daughter, I decide. Now I need to find my story problem. It turns out that there are six lists of problems, and I must turn the disk until a number ending in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 appears, which will tell me which list to use, and then turn it again to pick a number from that list. I dial up list 3, and then 46, which is "Obliged to risk health in an effort to brave an air voyage." I think a Hugo winner is shaping

up already!

Onward we go. The next stop is the Obstacle. I land on 51: "Lover and beloved are brother and sister." Oh-oh—incest; big plot trouble. Incest has never been a favorite theme of science fiction editors. Perhaps a workaround will reveal itself. We keep going to Complications and I get 10, "Revenge is sought against an immortal for having brought loss of loved one." Ah, a second fantasy element! Good. Now Predicaments: "Madness or mental derangement threatens loss of power." And, for The Crisis, "Learn that a loved one is a slave to passion or habit."

What do we have so far, then? The leader of the jazz orchestra at a sawmill is in love with a wizard's daughter, and is unaware that she is actually his sister. Okay: now to put some flesh on the bones. The saw-mill is on Mars (an additional complication, because water to drive the mill is very scarce on Mars) and they find themselves obliged to make a perilous journey from the Central Drylands to the Western Mountains by helium balloon to thwart a diabolical immortal being who has taken the wizard's daughter's father prisoner. (The wizard was trying to obtain a coveted spell that would provide water to keep the sawmill running.) But the orchestra leader is addicted to kweesh, the sinister Martian narcotic, and has left his kweesh stash behind. He starts to go into withdrawal. As they embark in the balloon he begins acting strangely. His eyes glaze; he nods off at strange moments; he answers her questions with dreamy nonsense. And it all gets worse. By the time they reach the lair of the immortal he is completely wrecked, utterly incapable of functioning as the hero of the story. Thus the beloved one learns for the first time of her inamorato's addiction, and she is deeply distressed. She also realizes that the job of overcoming the immortal is entirely in her hands.

And now comes the climax, the surprise twist that saves everything!

What is required, I see—having had decades and decades of experience at

making cockeyed plot elements fit together—is something that will lead our hero out of the state of mental debility that his kweesh withdrawal has induced, free the wizard from captivity, and bring the evil immortal to his knees, so that our hero, our heroine, and her father can wrest the water-conjuring spell from him and make their escape from his fortress in the Central Mountains. We also need to deal with that brother-sister angle, somehow. Will Plot Genie provide us with some magnificent gimmick that will cope with all these problems?

Well, let's see. We are supplied with the usual list of 180 possibilities, and all we have to do is spin the wheel—

No. That makes it too easy. What I think I'll do instead is look through the list and provide you with seven or eight lively possibilities. You pick the best one, the one that will wrap everything up in one great sweeping burst of narrative ingenuity, okay? Here are some suggestions:

1. Wherein it develops that a person is impersonating himself or herself.

2. In which the enemy places himself in a position to incur the enmity of forces aside from the hero and allies, and is therefore overwhelmed.

3. Wherein a victorious opponent proves to be a friend in disguise.

4. Wherein it develops that the enemy himself is merely a figment of the hero's imagination.

5. Wherein the captor proves to be in the employ of the hero's parent, who is testing his fortitude.

6. Wherein the violence of the avenger or enemy brings about a cataclysm which destroys him.

7. Wherein a vanquished loved one proves to be in reality—

But that's enough. It should be but the work of a moment for you to choose the most appropriate of those plot twists, apply it to the previously determined situation the genie has concocted, and turn the resulting outline into a short story worthy of publication in this magazine. The

one that I like is the first one, in which a character is impersonating himself, which seems like a nice van Vogtian bit of doubletalk. But I would not want to influence your choice. Go to it, friends. Write your stories and send them to: Sheila Williams, Editor, Asimov's Science Fiction, 267 Broadway, Fourth Floor, New York, NY 10007.

Mark them "Plot Genie Contest Entry." Sheila will read each and every one and will respond with a personal letter of criticism, and the three best submissions she receives will be purchased at our standard rate of payment and prominently featured in the magazine. I guarantee it.

Oh, and don't forget to include return postage.* ○

*If there are any literalists among you, let me hasten to add that Mr. Silverberg is surely joking—especially about that three page letter! Most of you will have figured this out because you already know that I now prefer electronic submissions. For more information about submitting online see www.asimovs.com/info/guidelines.shtml.—Ed.

Copyright © 2011 Robert Silverberg