

Capturing a Sense of Adventure

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Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. Helen Keller.

When thinking of the action/adventure genre, most people think of a tale filled with excitement and danger, a tale that will keep them on the edge of their seat, turning pages until the very end. The adventure novel is essentially a quest story, where the primary complication is often physical danger to the protagonist. R.L. Stevenson said that if you're confronted with great fear and danger all you need are imagination and courage.

In writing for children and young adults we've all been told that we need to use all five senses to bring fiction to life - sight, sound, smell, taste and touch - but for me, there's two other senses that also need to be used: the sense of adventure and the sense of mischief.

Do you dream of being stranded on a desert island? Would you like to live in a tree, or experience adventures on the high seas? Battle mysterious creatures or stop a crime ring? Then adventure writing is for you.

Elements of the action/adventure genre.

* **A likeable protagonist.** Takes on some sort of heroic quest, where they must prove their own worthiness. If that protagonist should fail their task, there's often dire consequences to them or to others.

The quest may be literal (survive hardship and terror to deliver this ring to an ancient wizard), or more abstract (finding a way to improve a relationship). The quest is a long and difficult search for something. The traditional quest involves: treasure, a mission, an exploration, or, at its simplest, survival. As a reader, the quest is something we can all identify with. Like the main character we've quested with, we all hope to find that certain something - or someone - that will change our lives. And

this is the key to the power of the quest in story: it represents our innermost desires.

* **An unlikable antagonist.** Tries to do everything in their power to thwart the efforts of the protagonist.

* **Obstacles.** These can be 1) human (the enemy; savages; criminals; corrupt police); 2) elements (the ocean, the jungle, the ice, the desert); 3) institutional (the army, the CIA, the KGB, the political system) or: 4) obstacles the hero discovers within themselves (pride, physical weakness, desire for luxury or comfort, greed, or fear).

* **Physical action.** Characters are often placed in extreme situations.

* **Fast paced.**

* **Violence.** Violence is not justified simply for personal gain. It's justified in defense of others, in defense of oneself, or in defense of a wider moral order.

* **Setting.** It underlines the danger and obstacles to be overcome. It is often exotic, or at least, in out-of-the-way corners or underworlds of areas closer to home.

* **Danger.** Anything can happen. It will be as extraordinary as possible.

* **Not necessarily lawful.** However, the goal of the action must meet society's standards of acceptability.

Writing Adventure

Adventure stories are a thrill ride through landscapes of the mind. They're not to be explained, they're to be experienced. Adventure leads the reader to astonishing places they have never imagined, to places they would never normally go of their own accord. Genre doesn't matter. It could be fantasy, mystery, horror, or anything. What matters is that the reader wants to take the trip along with you. So how do we do that? Factors to consider include:

1) Characters

Good character dynamics and relationships can propel a story as much as plot does. In *Freewheelers* I used a small group of friends: 1) some with a shared history; 2) minor characters who have no relation to the main characters and; 3) a mysterious 'other' character.

The readers must care about the characters, be willing to follow them to the ends of the earth, live through the adventure with them. Heroes and heroines are only as impressive as the forces arrayed against them. They are at their best when pitted against strong, resourceful and dedicated forces of darkness. A fully rounded baddie seduces us by their flagrant disregard for the rules, and their defeat satisfies a deep-rooted human need to see order reign within the universe. Coax your inner baddie onto the page!

2) Events

Your adventure story has to be propelled into action by some event or sequence of events. Throw in some jaw-dropping surprising events to keep characters (and readers) at the end of their seats. In the action scene, the mechanics of movement must be described believably and with precision. Dialogue is important but it can't get in the way of narrative tension.

3) Setting

Put your characters in situations they aren't familiar with.

4) Plot

Each story will start with a quest. The hero, flawed in some way, will encounter obstacles. And more obstacles. They encounter risk. Don't avoid the risks.

Always keep in mind: What happened before? What's happening now? What will happen next? It is said that adventure writing embodies the

literary equivalent of the Newtonian laws of motion - every action brings about a subsequent, though not necessarily equal or opposite, reaction. The writer must follow through from event to event in a believable and consistently defined manner. The action scene is like a string of dominoes in three dimensions - or multiple strings that interact in time, space and depth.

Seduce the reader while assaulting the reader - Build your adventure story so that each sentence introduces a new twist or turn, assaults the reader from a new direction, moves the narrative focal point around in unpredictable, though interconnected, ways. Keep the sentences terse and lean, the style stripped, and try opening your sentences with action verbs to put the reader directly into the frame of reference. And, last but not least, never pull your punches. When you get to the hard parts, when you're tempted to take the easy way out and find the simple resolution, push through and go for the solution that feels like it's tearing your soul out.