Chalktalk: Push-Pull Rhythm

**Chalktalk: The Secret to a powerful story: Push-Pull Rhythm**

Hello, I’m Susan May Warren, the founder of My Book Therapy. Welcome to the monthly advanced writer’s lesson!

Over the last few months, we've been studying storycrafting elements, from building a strong character, to finding the key components of your plot, starting with your character, learning how to build a story from the inside-out. Then we turned to plot and we learned how to make your story matter, and how to build in surprising but plausible twists and turns.

This month, I’m going to share my secret on how to create a plot flow that pulls your reader in and keep them turning pages. It’s called the Push-Pull Rhythm of a story.

Don’t you hate it when you're reading a story and suddenly you think – why did the character do that? That is so stupid. Or worse, his actions just don’t make sense. What the author has done is create an action for the character and wedged it into the plot because he is trying to mold the plot to the character. Instead, the character – and his goals, motivations and values – should mold the plot. When an author forces his character to do something out of persona, they lose the trust of the reader, as well as weaken the epiphany the character may have later. In fact, they’ve stolen a bit of the reading joy from the reader.

Another common scenario is what I call muddling around in the middle. Instead of moving a character forward in the plot, a character continues to deal with the same issues, mulling them over in a circular cauldron of stress rather than moving them from one obstacle or conflict to the next. When this happens, a reader gets bored, and puts down your story because there is nothing new at stake, no new issue or conflict to overcome. The tragedy of this is that your character never fully completes his character journey, or at least completes it with pieces missing.

These two problems can be easily solved by simply understanding and employing the Push-Pull Rhythm to your storycrafting.
What is the Push-Pull Rhythm. It’s the delicate balances of stakes/obstacles versus motivation. I’m going to use one of my favorite movies, Cellular to illustrate. (by the way, I use Cellular as an example as to how to create powerful hero, so check out the previous lesson on heroism and peripheral plotting. But for this lesson, we’re only going to look at the push-pull rhythm of each scene.)

Cellular is one of the best thrillers out there for continually raising stakes and forcing the viewer at the end of her seat: In a nutshell, it’s a movie about a woman who is kidnapped. She uses a demolished phone to call for help and gets a hold of a young man whose girlfriend has broken up with him because of his irresponsibility. A deadline of sorts hangs over their conversation (and all great suspense books should have a deadline), because at any moment, they could get cut off, and she may never be able to dial out again. She must convince this guy to help her and eventually get involved to the point where he begins to break the law and risk his life.

Why does he do all this for someone he doesn’t know? It’s certainly not to prove he’s responsible...he actually doesn’t agree with the accusation by his girlfriend. So what makes this free-living guy care enough about a stranger to help her?

He’s pushed and pulled into it by the enticing rhythm of the story.

See, every scene must have a combination of two elements: A push-pull motivation and a looming obstacle.

The push-pull motivation is the combination of something negative to push your character forward, and something positive to pull at them. They need this to overcome the right-sized obstacle in the scene.
Let’s start with the Obstacles. First, we all know that every story has to have stakes—something at risk in the story...whether public (i.e. the world erupting on global war (Sum of All Fears), an alien nation wiping out the human race (Independence Day),) or private (i.e fighting for true love (While you were sleeping)). Stakes drive the movie, and the obstacles in every scene are what threaten those stakes.

The obstacles, however, must be in proportion to the challenges before the hero. If the obstacles facing the character are too high, the character will quit. If the obstacles are too small, there is no tension, no real battle. The harder a character has to fight to win the day (obstacles), and the more he has to fight for (stakes), the stronger the reader will stay hooked to the story. However, the element that gives your character the courage to fight those obstacles are his motivations.

This is where the Push-Pull comes in.

The Push-Pull combination is the balance of negative and positive motivations. For every scene, we have to incorporate something negative that will push your character forward, and a glimpse of hope or some attainable goal that will pull your character over the obstacle. Or at least give him the courage to attack it.
Now, let’s a look at Cellular to see how it’s done.

In the beginning of Cellular, we meet our hero, Ryan. Ryan is a surfer, a beach bum whose girlfriend correctly labels him as completely irresponsible. To prove she’s wrong, he agrees to pick up some tee-shirts for her. It’s on this journey that he receives a phone call from the heroine, Jessica. She’s been kidnapped and is locked in an attic with just the pieces of a phone. Let’s see what happens.

Clip 1

He doesn’t to help her, but the words of his girlfriend (the push) and the fact that he could easily help this woman (the pull) are enough to overcome the obstacle, the 10 minutes out of his way.

So he drives to the police station. Let’s see what happens next.

Clip 2

So, although our hero doesn’t believe her, he’s taken the cell phone to the police. He encounters another obstacle – the riot that then causes him to have to take the phone up the stairs. Right now, this is starting to be a bigger hassle than it’s worth. The obstacles are too great – the amount of time it’s going to cost him on this wild goose chase. However, at this moment, he hears her assailants on the other line, and he realizes she is telling the truth. When he hears that her son is about to be taken – the negative push, and that he can get to the school to stop it – the positive pull – he believes she is in danger and easily overcomes this first obstacle of inconvenience takes off for the school.

Now what happens?

Clip 3

He must race through traffic, and now we’re starting to see him begin to break a few laws in order to help her, putting himself at risk as he charges into the school. When the school lets out a sea of khaki and blue shirt clad ten year old boys, he starts to give up hope when he sees the boy get kidnapped. The new obstacle is chasing after the bad guys and rescuing the boy. The negative push is the kidnapping of the boy, the positive pull is that he sees it, believes it and has them in his sights.
Clip 4

Now that he is on their tail, all could be well, except for the fact that he loses them in traffic. He’s trying to figure out how to find them when he faces the next obstacle…a dying cell phone battery. The push here is the fact that he’s lost the little boy and might also now lose the mother. The pull is the glimpse of hope in the Cellular store across the construction zone. The obstacle is small – simply drive across the construction zone. It increases when he goes into the store to find it packed. The push-pull continues with every beep of the phone until he takes a giant leap over the obstacle by grabbing the gun in the glove compartment of the security car.

Clip 5

Now, our hero had crossed over to a point of no return, but he’s done it through logical motivational steps. At the beginning of the movie, there is no way that irresponsible Ryan would have put his freedom on the line for a stranger. Now he’s breaking into cell phone stores and wielding a gun. By the end of the movie, he’ll put his life on the line for this voice on the other end of the phone.

And we’ll believe it is possible because for every scene, there’s been powerful push-pull rhythm propelling us through the story.

Here’s the key: if the character had be able to say, grab the license plate number, or if he even believed that she’d be able to call out again, he might not have had sufficient motivation to conquer the obstacles. But because he believes he is the only one who can help, and because more and more lives are threatened, he is pushed and pulled forward over every obstacle.

As an additional note, You’ll notice too, that each time a stake is raised, another element of his primal instincts is brought into play. If you’ve listened to the Twists and Turns lesson, you’ll know what I am referring to.

So, how do you do this?

Start with the obstacle. What do you want to put before the hero or heroine to challenge them? Make it big enough to stretch them, but not so big as to shut them down. Likewise, you may have many smaller obstacles in your scene, but if they aren’t enough to slow your character down, you may need a larger
obstacle. The right sized obstacle is one that causes your character to consider the cost, even briefly.

It’s then that you employ Push-Pull motivation. Give him something negative that pushes him forward. Bad news, or villain’s decision or a new clue, or even a no-win situation. It can be external or internal – but should be powerful enough to make the character want to do something about it.

The pull can be a glimpse of victory or hope. It could be the belief that yes, your character can save the day. It might be the love of a child or spouse or girlfriend, it might be saving the world. The key is, this glimpse can give him some sense of victory over the obstacle.

Here’s a litmus test question: For every challenge or turn in the story – have I raised the stakes sufficiently, and subsequently, are the characters current motivations high enough to face those stakes?

Keeping those stakes believable yet ever rising with powerful obstacles, and matching them with increasing push-pull motivations to overcoming them is the key to creating a powerful push-pull rhythm that will propel your character through a story, over obstacles and challenges and even to the point of them risking it all for a stranger and becoming an ultimate hero.

And this is my secret to powerful storytelling.

Hopefully this has been helpful in your writing journey. Go, write a powerful story!