Focus any Novel or Memoir with Five Questions

FILL IN THE BLANKS TO FOCUS YOUR BOOK:

1. Plot is best framed as a *question* about whether or not a character will achieve **one over-arching** EXTERNAL **concrete goal** set toward the start of a book. (Both novels *and* memoirs need plot.)

*Can you articulate your book's plot as a **question**?*

Will my main character _____?

(Learn how to create a plot question in TWC post "How to Hook Readers:" https://writingcycle.com/craft/how-to-hook-readers/ .)

2. Theme encompasses a main character's inner struggle, and ties this to a larger question about the human experience we all wrestle with. (In memoir, the main character = you.)

To find your theme, first consider*, what is my main character's primary emotional struggle?* (Usually, a character is torn between two opposing tensions.) Then, consider how this struggle influences your character's deepest yearning. (Yearnings, after all, are what later lead characters to set the goals that power plot.)

Can you articulate your main character's deepest yearning?

More than anything, my main character yearns for _____ but s/he is torn

between _____ and _____.

Theme also results from later considering what larger question about the human experience this inner struggle touches upon.

Can you pose a larger question about life your book explores?

Examples: Is love worth it if it doesn't last? Do adversities bring out the best or worst in people? What's more important: who you are or what you do?

_____?

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3. Transformation reveals how a character changes over the course of a book. Memoir always emphasizes personal transformation, where a character shifts from x to y. Novels and screenplays feature opening and closing images that encapsulate/show exactly how the main character has changed.

*What ONE **main** shift does your main character experience over the course of a journey? (i.e. How did s/he change as a result of this experience?)*

Main Character went from _____ to _____ as a result of

_____.

(Learn about transformations here in TWC post "How to Start a Memoir.")

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4. Timeline refers to the duration of time it takes for the **present** action of any book to unfold, not backstory. (Backstory gets woven throughout the book and features formative moments from throughout a main character's life.) A timeline focuses attention around moments that matter. This might comprise a key school year, sporting event, trip, or trial, for example. The shorter your timeline, the greater the tension.

Read how timelines work here and here in TWC posts "Memoir or Autobiography?" and "How to Start a Memoir."

Then answer: *What is the timeline on your book?*

My book spans the course of _____.

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5. Trope refers to what **type of story** you wish to tell in terms of plot. (Each features three different essential elements.) A relationship story? A rite of passage? Individual v. a group?

Use this list of **10 Types of Stories** from *Save the Cat* for examples.

Then identify the **three elements necessary** for your trope.

Don't write your book until you clearly understand the kind of story you're writing!

Which trope *most closely matches your book*?

_____.

What **three** *elements (corresponding to Acts 1, 2, and 3) are necessary for your trope?*

_____.

_____.

_____.

BONUS: Use this worksheet derived from a former Pixar director to simplify your story.

Once upon a time, there was a (describe main character)

_____.

Every day, s/he: (3 examples of their broken world)

_____

_____

_____.

What s/he really/ yearned for was _____.
But s/he was torn between

(want) _____ and (wound)

_____.

Then one day, (Inciting incident!)

_____!

Because of that, s/he (set concrete goal)

_____.

Because of that, (numerous complications)

_____.

Which led to (CRISIS)

_____.

Until at last, s/he realized (epiphany) _____

and (took climactic action) _____

which brought about _____ (resolution.)