

Sagging Middles: The Intimidating Space between Beginnings and Endings.

AND...

Plot Outlines: Who Could Ever Remember The Machinations of These Weird Characters?

By Milton Trachtenburg

Starring in no particular order:

Little Red Writing Hood as herself and

The Big Bad Word Wolf as his usual nasty self.

Scene One: Sagging Middles

The office of LRW Hood, Literary Agent extraordinaire. The walls are lined with plaques and pictures of Little Red with only the top writers, editors and publishers.

The view through her skyscraper window is of bustling Sixth Avenue in Manhattan, the Mecca of publishing.

"Sagging Middles, Sagging Middles. That's all I hear about anymore. Look at me; I'm tough, I'm buff. Why do I have to worry about sagging middles?" said Big Bad Word Wolf.

"Biggie, you are forever complaining or explaining. That's why your writing isn't going anywhere," Little Red Writing Hood answered, giving Wolf her Killer Coquette smile. "Every time you start out strong and think you have a winner going, you always forget something and end up with another dead tree to show for all your writing, Hairy One."

Wolf snarled, "My plan is perfect but something always comes along to mess it up. I lose my concentration, and get careless. But I always get back on track and give the readers what they want at the end, painful as that is for me, Petite Rouge."

"Stop with that Petite Rouge stuff, too. I'm not impressed that you know two words of French.

Some of the readers won't know that you just said my name. Your charm escapes me, you lupine word abuser."

"I don't know what you mean by your last remark, but if I did, I think I would be insulted!"

"See?" said Red, "That's exactly what I'm talking about. I did that intentionally to show you how you come off when you get pretentious."

"Maybe I get bored writing all those stories where I end up losing," said Wolf.

"That's still no excuse for sloppy writing. I admit, you have great beginnings and endings that the readers can identify with, but your middles . . . sloppy, careless and bor-ing!"

"Ok, OK," said Wolf, his irritation rising. "I admit that in the "Three Pigs" story, I slipped up because I was so busy thinking about eating all that bacon that I forgot about how to get to the beef and I guess I let down all my carnivorous readers. It sure didn't sell as many copies as 3rd-Pig's version of the same story.

"Maybe if you hadn't been so...redundant. You just had to blow away three houses instead of one! You would have given the readers more of a chill lying in wait for the Piggies. You could have brought incredible tension to the story to have them all show up at one house.

"Instead, you took them and the story all over the neighborhood and ended up ruining the read for those few animals you call your readers. You felt you had to show off your prowess as a big blowhard and take out half the neighborhood. That displays poor ideas combined with bad writing." Red smiled in triumph.

Wolf stared at the floor, dejected. In his devious head, he began creating nefarious plots in which he exacted revenge upon Little Red. When he returned from his reverie, the room was empty.

Where is she? Just like her to run out because I take a few minutes to think about myself.

At that moment, entering through a rear door, Red returned to the room. "See what I mean? she said. "You do that to your readers all the time. Just when you have a good plot going, you take off on some self-serving trip into the ozone and lose them. Who cares what **you** think? You have to write for your reader."

"OK, Little Red Know-It-All, since you're on a roll, why don't you tell me how to fix some of my mistakes? Are you afraid my writing will be better than yours?"

"Wolf, I'd be happy to give you some pointers on how to tighten up your sagging middles. Are you willing to listen?"

"I'm listening, I'm listening."

"For one," said Little Red, "You throw words around like there is an unlimited supply. It gets worse as your story progresses. I told you, you have great beginnings, but once you pull in the reader you tend to huff and puff and use more words than you need. The reader gets bored."

"You repeat yourself. That tells the reader that either you can't remember what you said previously, or you think your words are so important they bear repeating. Wrong and wrong again, Wolf."

"Maybe if you thought about cutting out some of the words, you'd have enough wind left to blow away that brick house."

"Now that was a low blow, Red!"

"If you learn from it, it was worth it. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but you're so defensive about your writing."

"Defensive? It's a tough world out there. Editors are always telling me things like, 'Your writing is turgid.' Of course, I'm defensive."

"Maybe you ought to listen to them," said Red.

"You're a writer, too, and you should be defending me against them," answered Wolf.

"Editors are the defenders of the reader, not the enemy of the writer."

Wolf gave Red a baleful stare as she uttered these words. "There you go, Little Red On-Her-Soapbox again, telling everybody how to write."

"Now you listen Wolf. These ideas aren't original. I had to learn them the same as you do. How do you think I get editors to look so approvingly at my work?"

"I could answer that one, honey, but I'm too much of a gentleman!"

"I'll forget you made that last remark." Red stared razor blades at Wolf. "When I was new to writing, I thought eliminating sagging middles was using a pair of scissors to trim a precious word or two, but I've learned that the instrument of choice often should be a chainsaw. We all write everything that comes to our mind. We have pet words we put in every chance we get. The reader starts making a contest of counting how many times we use the word."

"Then, we want to make sure the reader gets our important point, so we tell her, 'What I'm going to tell you is really important, so listen to me.'"

Red paused and looked across her desk at Wolf to try to get some perspective whether he was getting any of this.

"I've got you there!" Wolf said with glee. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that statement— 'what I'm going to tell you...' "

"Wolf, I'm sorry to disillusion you once again. Not only is there everything wrong with the quote, but your answer had the same flaw in it."

"Oh, come on now. That's being really picky." Wolf's anger was rising. The hackles on his muscular back and shoulders flared.

"You did it again," said Red.

Wolf almost shot out of his chair, ready to explode from the anger and frustration he felt. He took two deep breaths and clutched the chair arms in a death grip. Red reared back in her chair when she heard the fabric ripping.

"I'm still listening, though I don't know why." Wolf fought his primitive instincts and somehow composed himself.

Red, seeing him relax, regained her own composure, and with a higher degree of caution, said, "The problems are easy to fix if you know what to look for. You never have to say to the reader, 'What I'm going to tell you ...' The reader knows that you are telling her. Just cut it out. Give the reader a little credit for having brains. After all, she was smart enough to buy your book!

"Writing is not like talking. If we wrote the way we talk, we'd be boring. Conversation in the real world is accompanied by gestures and change of voice. We don't rely just on words to do the job of communicating.

"On top of that," continued Red, "you were redundant. You didn't need to say, 'really important.' Let me try rewriting your sentence to see if I can make the same point with less words. 'Listen, this is important!' Or, maybe shorten it further to, 'This is important.' The reader gets the same message without all the extra calories."

"I'm getting it now," said Wolf, releasing his death grip on the chair arms. "So, my answer should have been, 'There's nothing wrong with that statement.' Right? And my next answer could have been, 'That's picky.' "

"Now you've got it." Red smiled with approval as her former adversary came toward her. As she reached out to give him a warm hug, he roared and attacked her with a cold precision.

"Maybe *this* story will be published with my happy ending," said Wolf, calculating the effect of each word as he patted his lips delicately with a crisp, linen napkin.

Some things never change. You can improve a Wolf's table manners, but it's unrealistic to expect him to change his diet.

Part Two: The Plot Outline

Starring the same cast, with poor Red a little the worse for wear

And now, through the magic of writing and the power of your imagination, you may listen in as Red and Wolf discuss plot outlines . . .

"The next hug you get from me will be me hugging my wolf skin coat," said Little Red Writing Hood, her eyes flashing anger.

"Have a sense of humor, Red," said Big Bad Writing Wolf. I did what you told me. I trimmed the fat and the dead spots and the book sold. I've never seen an editor laugh so hard at an ending and now, I'm on the NY Times best seller list for the past 41 weeks."

"Yes you are, and I have to give credit where it is due, however ..."

"Here it comes again. You can't just be positive, can you? Everything has to have conditions or you're not happy."

"I'm trying to help you become a better writer." Red brushed a wild auburn curl away from her face.

"OK, what is it this time?"

"Your story was out of control. It was a good story--if your reader happens to be a raging carnivore, but it didn't keep track of all the characters."

"Didn't keep track of all the characters? It sure made a clean meal out of you, girl!"

"Yes, I'll admit it did. But what happened to grandmother? You never resolved that in the ending."

"I can't be responsible for every niggling detail," answered Wolf, his anger creeping to the surface.

"I saw the reviews and that complaint appeared in almost every one. Not that I am in the same league with the book reviewer at the Times, but inconclusive plot lines was my first impression too."

"And I suppose you are going to tell me that there is a cure for that, too?"

"Yes, I am. It is called a plot outline. If you make an outline of all the threads of the story, you can go back and check to see whether the issues you raised were resolved before you ended the story."

"That's too much work for me." Wolf raised the corners of his mouth to show Red his impressive fangs, more so now that his royalties permitted him to pay for the most advanced bonding process that gave them a killer sparkle.

"Your book was published despite the mistakes because there are enough sadists out there who were looking for a book about the triumph of incompetence over good writing that you were forgiven your incompetence." Red returned Wolf's snarl with a smile, one enhanced by the money earned from her own royalties and commissions from the sales of her clients' books—including Wolfie's.

"So, I made one little mistake," said Wolf, his frustration almost getting the best of him. "Does that mean I'm a lousy writer?"

"Of course not, but you can always learn techniques for improving your writing. You are a great storyteller, but you are undisciplined in your writing and in your life. You are lazy, careless and you lack discipline."

"My mother used to talk to me like that. I didn't like it then, and I don't like it any better now."

"Are you threatening me?" said Red, no trace of fear in her voice.

"No, this is just the way I am. Get used to it."

"See? That is exactly the attitude that kept you a wannabe for 20 years. If I hadn't been stupid and let my guard down, you would still be a wannabe."

"What are you suggesting?"

"The answer is simple. Go to a writing group. They will give you real food for thought. Perhaps they will discuss plot outlines. You could use some real help there. If you had had the sense to create one, grandmother wouldn't still be in the closet."

"Maybe I'll just give that a try. If they get preachy with me like you do, they are going to be on the menu after the meeting."

"I still belong to a group. They don't try to come off as experts. Instead, they try to give their members ideas and we all share our knowledge and experience with each other. We are our own teachers there."

"You mean I could be a teacher? That is impressive. Think of it . . . me, a lowly canine, a teacher. ...

An aside from the author: I offer my profound thanks to one of the major influences in my writing

life, the Hanna-Barbera cartoon factory where unforgettable characters including Rocky, Bullwinkle and Augie Doggy and the characters in *Fractured Fairy Tales* spoke in a similar manner to the style I chose for the material I shared here. It is with humble thanks and the knowledge that they had a profound effect on so many children that I imitated their style to accomplish my own ends. I require the residue of an inquisitive inner child to sustain my writing. Or as the inimical Red might say, "Always give credit where it is due."

Exit, stage left, laughing.

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