**Lesson #9 - Epilogues**

In BETWEEN THE LINES - MASTER THE *SUBTLE* ELEMENTS OF FICTION WRITING, Jessica Page Morrell devotes a chapter to epilogues. Here are some of the highlights of Morrell’s chapter.

Morrell tells us that fictional endings are written with a lingering potency. They must fulfill the promise of the story and answer the story question. In addition, they must address all the large and small questions created by the plot events and subplots. Ultimately, the success of a story hinges on the ending.

Your ending must be carefully crafted so that a reader never feels cheated. In fact, as you write your novel, you might want to create a checklist of all the questions, subplots, actions, and secrets that must be resolved by the climax. [**Pat says:** This is a very good suggestion, one I recommend you take.] Once you’ve checked off all the tasks the climax and ending must accomplish, you’ll be able to assess if the final moments have packed a proper emotional wallop and then pointed toward the future.

If possible, Morrell suggests, you also should allow readers to inject their own meaning or surmising into the ending. But remember that while endings can sometimes be ambiguous, they are never confusing. In most genres, like horror, thrillers, and suspense, the novel will not hold up if the ending is spelled out clearly. Horror stories often end soon after or at the moment the conflict ends, because carrying on will appear anticlimactic. If your story has featured a monster of some sort, it’s natural for your story to end when the monster is destroyed. In a romance, the ending features the satisfaction of a love affair launched, hinting that the future will bring more bliss than disappointment.

The climax often depicts the gathering and collision of forces, such as the protagonist and antagonist meeting for a showdown. The events that follow the climax are called falling action or denouement and end with the plot’s resolution. These events contrast with the rising action, which leads up to the climax. *Denouement* is a French word meaning “the unknotting” and describes how the ending must untangle all the threads of the plot, subplots, and complications.

As the action winds down, there are often tasks that remain to be accomplished. Sometimes subplots are left dangling, or the aftermath of the climax is so intense that if the story were to stop there, the ending would seem too abrupt. Sometimes the closing pages must carry the reader along for a while, so that the implications of the ending can be sorted out. It is also in the falling action that you, as a writer, have a final opportunity to reveal the emotional depths of your protagonist and reflect the themes of the novel. It’s crucial that the ending wind down on just the right note – without flatness or overkill, yet with perhaps an echo or final whisper of enchantment.

**Understanding the Epilogue**

The word *epilogue* comes from the Greek and means “to say in addition.” Positioned after the story has concluded, an epilogue serves the distinct purpose of suggesting the impact of the story’s climactic events. It’s interesting to note that epilogues were common before the twentieth century but are used less often in contemporary fiction. [**Note from Pat**: epilogues are used quite often in romances, contrary to other genres. The reason is that romance readers always want things tied up with a pretty ribbon. They’re usually not content to simply have the lovers get together. They want to know that down the road those lovers will have the children they desire and that they will still be happy together. In other words, they want a guarantee that “happily ever after” will actually happen.]

**REASONS FOR USING AN EPILOGUE**

You need a clear reason for writing an epilogue, and it cannot be used to simply tie up loose ends, which you should do during your falling action. Without a proper purpose, Morrell says, an epilogue might come across as anti-climatic deadweight, inadvertently signaling to your reader that you’re afraid your ending is so weak that he won’t be able to extrapolate meaning from it without help. To avoid such potential problems, make sure your epilogue is enhancing your story in one or more of the following ways.

1. **Wrapping up story events after a traumatic or violent climax.** This is an especially important technique when the ending is abrupt or surprising, as when a major character dies, or when the fate of the characters is not clearly depicted. If your ending raises more questions than it answers, you will need to rewrite it or create an epilogue to resolve this problem.
2. **Highlighting consequences and results of story events.** Perhaps you’ve written a comeuppance story, or the ending features a major revelation. The epilogue will serve to assure the reader that justice has been dispensed.
3. **Providing important information that wasn’t covered in the climax or denouement.** If a character was ailing in the story, you might want to explain his fate. Or, if a character becomes pregnant, the epilogue can explain the birth of the child. This can work especially well if the father dies or the child has special significance to the story.
4. **Suggesting the future for the protagonist and other characters.** This is an important consideration in series fiction or if you’re planning a sequel. An epilogue might also be appropriate if a character undergoes severe physical, emotional, or psychological trauma, to assure the readers of his full or partial recovery. [**Pat says:** I used epilogues frequently in my series Rainbow’s End because the books were written using “real time” and I wanted to always keep my readers up to date on where the story was time-wise, as well as to gently lead them into the next book’s timeline.]
5. **Making the story seem realistic.** For example, if you’ve killed off a character, the epilogue can be written by another character to explain how things went down. Or, if you’re writing a story and the ending was literally explosive, the epilogue assures readers that the protagonist has survived. [**Note from Pat**: I’ve talked about one of my favorite movies of all time, *The Big Easy*, ad nauseam. The action of the movie ends with a huge explosion at the marina where our hero Remy and his love Ann uncovered all the hidden drugs. Remy and Ann are thrown into the air by the explosion, but we know they’re safe. In effect, though, the next scene is the epilogue, because it shows Remy and Ann in wedding clothes. He is carrying her in his arms and dancing around to Zydeco music. This scene, which would have been an epilogue had this been a novel instead of a movie, has taken us into the future and shown us their happily ever after.]
6. **Providing data on your large cast of characters, especially if you’ve written a sweeping historical or epic.** Often, with a large cast, it’s difficult to suggest the fate of every character. In *Vanity Fair*, William Thackeray wrote an epilogue titled “Which Contains Births, Marriages, and Deaths.” While this may seem old-fashioned to some readers, in a highly complex novel you can sometimes justify following the cast into the future.

**GUIDELINES FOR CREATING EPILOGUES**

Writers are sometimes cautioned from using epilogues because they create two endings, just as a prologue creates two beginnings. Here is the bottom line: The information and words spent on an epilogue need to be justified and not covered earlier in the story. All endings need to engage the reader’s imagination, but too much information makes it difficult for the reader to imagine possibilities and futures, and will dilute the drama of the ending. Here are a few more tips to keep in mind when crafting an epilogue:

1. **Write from a fresh location, perspective, and time frame**. An epilogue written moments after the climax will seem silly and unnecessary.
2. **Don’t linger.** No matter how interesting the information, the epilogue is still the aftermath and must be written concisely. Most epilogues are fairly short, a few paragraphs or a few pages. The longer the epilogue lingers, the greater the chance that it will be judged as anticlimactic.
3. **Keep proportions in mind.** Shorter novels often don’t need an epilogue or a long denouement. The longer and more complicated your novel, the more difficult it is to tie up all the loose ends. Thus you’re justified in writing a longer epilogue, but remember that it’s impossible to tie up every factor in the story.
4. **Beware of self-indulgence.** An epilogue is not an excuse to experiment or play cute. While it is usually written from another perspective or vantage, it also must be clearly linked to the story and not create a jarring end note.
5. **Offer fresh insights that xcan only occur after ther esults of the climax are known.** Don’t use the epilogue to rehash events. It is also not advisable to comment on major plot events or issues – allow them their own weight and importance, with the reader sorting out the meaning. Epilogues are not like journalism or other forms of literature – they do not “spin” the plot events like the commentators who appear on *Meet the Press* or other talking-head shows.
6. **Epilogues are not catchalls.** If you discover that you have too many unresolved issues or loose ends in the story, fix them in the ending, not in the epilogue.
7. **If possible, give your reader a take-away moment.** It can be a laugh, a smile, a whimsical glimpse of a character’s or narrator’s thoughts, or a scene or visual moment such as the game of catch and the cars heading toward the baseball field in *Field of Dreams.*
8. **Be flexible in your structural approach.** Since there is no fixed structure for epilogues, find a creative format for these final words. Consider using a device such as Sue Grafton’s case reports or Margaret Atwood’s lectures. [I once used a newspaper account of the wedding of hero and heroine as a counterpoint to the prologue, which was the newspaper account of the engagement of the heroine to someone other than the hero! A diary entry would also be an appropriate device for a romance. So would a wedding invitation or a birth announcement. Use your imagination.]

**One last bit of advice about epilogues:**

Writers hear a lot of rules about constructing fiction, some of them helpful, some of them distracting. When it comes to epilogues, ignore well-meaning advice that they are the sign of an amateur. If you’ve written a captivating story, especially one that a reader can scarcely bear to leave behind, your epilogue will be a welcome addition. If you’ve crafted it as a meaningful and informative final glance at your story and characters, the reader will also thank you for wrapping up the story with a final grace note.

**SOME EPILOGUES I’VE USED**

 From THE OTHER WOMAN

 Epilogue

Crandall, Ohio, June, 2000

 "Careful, sweetheart!" Natalie called out just before Francesca stumbled over a forgotten toy laying in their backyard.

 Adam jumped up to comfort their nearly two-year-old toddler, whose little round face was already screwed up to cry her outrage, although Adam knew his daughter could not have been hurt. The grass was soft and she had not fallen hard. Still, he picked her up and held her and kissed her silky dark hair until the urge to cry vanished.

 While he stroked her head, Puppee, the newest addition to their family, licked Francesca’s leg. The dog, a three-month-old black lab, had come by his name through the stubbornness of their daughter, who insisted on calling him puppy even as Adam and Natalie tried to get her to agree to a real name.

 "No! Puppy!" she’d say, her lower lip sticking out in a gesture that said she’d never change her mind. So "Puppee" it was, even though the name was bound to raise eyebrows when the dog reached his full growth.

 Francesca, stubbornness (inherited, Natalie insisted, from her bullheaded father) included, was the light of their lives. Had been, from the moment she’d come yelling into the world. Adam knew he would never forget that momentous day. Along with the day he and Natalie had pledged their love and made their union official, it was the happiest day of his life.

 Putting Francesca back on her sturdy feet, he returned to his lawn chair. It was early on a Saturday evening, and he and Natalie had just finished eating hamburgers Adam had grilled and were enjoying their coffee while watching their toddler’s pre-bed playtime with the new puppy.

 Looking at his wife’s lovely profile as she gazed with amusement at their daughter’s antics, Adam thought about the amazing ways his life had changed in the past two plus years. He not only had a wife he adored and a daughter he would give his life for, he had also found meaningful work that gave him great pride and satisfaction.

 Soon after settling in Crandall, he had made the acquaintance of a general practice attorney named Thaddeus Turner who was in his late sixties and really wanting to retire but who hated to abandon his long-time clients. The two men had struck up an instant rapport and within two weeks of meeting him, Thaddeus had offered Adam a partnership. Julia’s threats aside, Adam had been awarded half the worth of his existing partnership in Hammond, Crowley which, after learning about the impending birth of his daughter, he had prudently decided he could not afford to give away in a gesture whose meaning would be lost on Julia, anyway.

 So a deal was made, and two weeks before Francesca made her appearance in the world, the new firm of Turner and Forrester was born.

 Thaddeus, now seventy, spent very little time in the office, but he was always available to counsel and listen.

 Adam discovered he loved practicing law in a small town and taking on all types of cases. The only ones he refused were divorce cases. He wanted no part of marriages gone sour. Thinking about divorce reminded him of how stunned he’d been to learn last month that Julia had married again. He was too happy to hold grudges against her and he sincerely hoped she had finally found happiness with someone who loved her.

 He thought about how Mary Beth, his old secretary from his Hammond/Crowley days had once told him to count his blessings. Now he had so many he counted them daily without having to be reminded.

 He would soon have another. Again his gaze rested on his beautiful wife, traveling from her face to her rounded belly. To their great delight, Natalie was pregnant again, and this time, she was expecting a boy.

 Adam’s cup runneth over.

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I felt this epilogue was entirely necessary. I’d put Adam, Natalie, and by extension – the reader – through the wringer in the book and they all deserved their happy ending. They especially deserved to know that Adam and Natalie had built a good life over the ashes of their old lives. The epilogue made me feel good and I think it made the reader feel good, too.

 From WHICH END IS UP?

I owe my sister more than I can ever repay.

 From an entry in Grace Campisi's journal

 Epilogue

Two years later . . .

 "Grace, will you please sit down?"

 Grace made a face at Craig. "I can't. I'm too nervous. What if--?" She couldn't finish the thought. Couldn't stand to think how she would feel if, for some reason, the judge didn't grant their petition.

 He rose and walked to where she stood. Putting his arms around her, he kissed her softly. "Everything is going to be fine, sweetheart. Trust me on this."

 "Oh, you'd say that even if you thought it wasn't," Grace said. But there was no sting in the comment, for she knew Craig's assurances came from love and not from any lawyerly platitudes. She smiled up at him, thinking how glad she was that he had finally worn down her defenses. Then, as she did dozens of times each day, she glanced down at the beautiful diamond wedding band that adorned her left ring finger. A shaft of sunlight coming through the fourth floor window of the county court house fired the stones with brilliant color.

 She and Craig had just returned from a glorious three-week honeymoon in Italy. And now they were waiting to hear Judge Richards' verdict on their petition to adopt the two young children Grace had been fostering for the past year.

 Thinking about Ethan and Brook, Grace's heart seized up with a mixture of fear, love and hope. They were such wonderful kids, and they'd had such a rough time. Five-year-old Ethan and four-year-old Brook had captured her heart almost from the first moment she'd laid eyes on them--two scared little kids whose mother had collapsed on the street, then died ten days later.

 Just then, the door to the judge's chambers opened, and the bailiff said, "Judge Richards will see you now."

 Grace slipped her hand into Craig's and he squeezed it.

 Judge Richards looked up from her desk as they walked into her chambers. She invited them to sit down. Grace looked around, but the children were not there.

 "I asked Abbie to take the children into the other room so we could talk privately," the Judge said.

 Grace's eyes met Craig's. Was that a good sign?

 He smiled at her.

 Grace took a deep breath.

 "Let me reassure you immediately," Judge Richards said. "I'm going to grant your petition."

 Grace couldn't prevent the "Oh," that escaped her in a relieved gasp.

 Judge Richards smiled. "Both of the children love you very much," she said. "That was obvious from our talk. And," she added, turning her gaze to Craig, "they seem to love you, too, Mr. Mancuso. I feel confident that they'll have a good home with the two of you."

 The judge talked to them for another fifteen minutes, told them when the official papers would be ready for their signatures, then called for the bailiff to bring the children back to her chambers.

 When the two tow-headed youngsters entered the room, Brook immediately broke away from her brother and raced toward Grace. Grace, smiling through her tears, picked up the sturdy little girl and put her on her lap. Ethan, shyer and quieter than bubbly Brook, walked over to Craig, who put his arm around the boy. His eyes met Grace's. In them, she saw the same mixture of emotions she felt.

 They smiled at each other.

 "Good luck," Judge Richards said. She smiled, too.

 "Thank you," Grace whispered. She hugged Brook tighter. I am so blessed, she thought.

 As the new family walked out of the courthouse, Grace said, "Guess what? Aunt Perry is bringing Emily to visit us in two weeks."

 "She is?" piped Brook. Delight shone in her eyes.

 "Is Emily our cousin now?" Ethan asked.

 Grace grinned. "She is. And Grandma Stella is your grandmother now and Aunt Mutt is your aunt, too."

 "Our great aunt," Ethan said.

 Craig chuckled. "Mr. Literal has spoken."

 "Yes," Grace agreed. "Your great-aunt."

 "And now you're our Mom," Brook said. She turned her enchanting smile to Craig. "And you're our Dad."

 "Exactly right, kiddo," Craig said, dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

 Exactly right, thought Grace, whose heart was so full, she was afraid it might burst.

 "Let's go home," Craig said, his eyes once more meeting Grace's. I love you, he mouthed.

 "Ditto," Grace said.

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This epilogue wasn’t one I had intended to write. In fact, when I turned the book in, there wasn’t an epilogue, and the ending was one where the reader would have to supply her own ending. I loved my original, ambiguous ending, but my editor called and begged me to write an epilogue. “Grace deserves a happy ending,” she said, “and so does the reader.” So I wrote the epilogue. Was the decision to use an epilogue a good one? I really don’t know. Some reviewers didn’t think so. One said I gave an otherwise excellent, thought-provoking story too pat an ending. But most readers liked it, although recently the book has been read by more women’s fiction readers than romance readers, and some of them didn’t like it at all, saying it was too “romancy” and “unrealistic”. As you can see, in writing (as in life) there are never easy answers.

**HOMEWORK:** Think about how you’d like your book to end and what you’d like your readers to take away from that ending. Then write a short epilogue portraying that ending. Whether you use it or not, it’ll be a good exercise for you.

**COMING NEXT:** Lesson #10 – Subtlety, Part I

**SOURCE MATERIAL**: BETWEEN THE LINES - MASTER THE *SUBTLE* ELEMENTS OF FICTION WRITING, by Jessica Page Morrell, Writers Digest Books, ISBN 13: 978-1-58297-393-7

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