

Serial(ized) Killers: How to Expand Your Story into a Series



Content and Creator Development

Tom McGee

IF YOU ONLY REMEMBER ONE THING:

Modern readers have an enormous number of stories to choose from. They often have high cognitive load going into a story and this load must be managed. If they're reading on a device, they are likely a distracted reader.

IF YOU ONLY REMEMBER ONE THING:

Developing a series helps you leverage the work you've already done AND helps a reader with the problems of choice, cognitive load, and distraction.

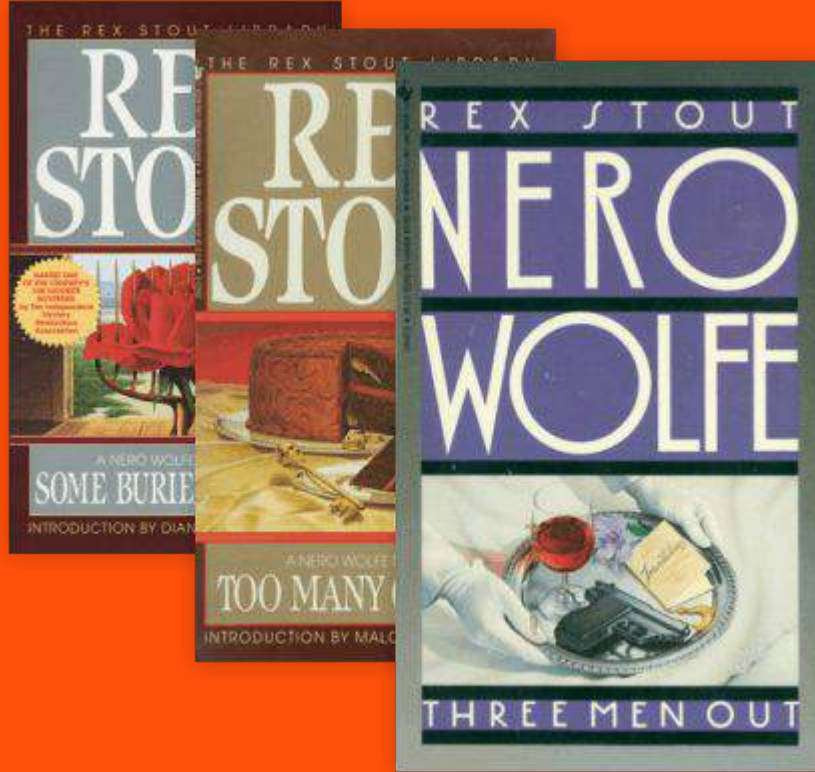
It's a win-win.

IF YOU ONLY REMEMBER ONE THING:

BUT in order for a series to succeed, you need strong characters (with clear Goals, Motivation, Conflict, and Stakes or GMCS) and a plotting model that will help you move the series plot forward and ensure readers come along for the ride.

Introduction

- **Who am I?**
- **What is Wattpad?**
- **What is Webnovel style?**



BLACKTOP WASTELAND

A NOVEL

S.A. COSBY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

"SENSATIONALLY GOOD."

—LEE CHILD

"FAST-PACED, BARE-KNUCKLE."

—STEPHEN KING

"PAGE-TURNING."

—*TIME* magazine

"FULL-ON ACTION."

—*BOSTON GLOBE*

Los Angeles Times Book Prize Winner • *New York Times* Notable Book • *NPR's* Best Books of the Year • *BookPage's* #1 Mystery and Suspense of the Year • *Sun Sentinel's* #1 Best Mystery of the Year

"I loved *Blacktop Wasteland*...[A] fast-paced, bareknuckle thriller." -Stephen King

"A roaring, full-throttle thriller, crackling with tension and charm." -*The New York Times* Book Review

"One of the year's strongest novels." -*Sun Sentinel*

A husband, a father, a son, a business owner...And the best getaway driver east of the Mississippi.

Beauregard "Bug" Montage is an honest mechanic, a loving husband, and a hard-working dad. Bug knows there's no future in the man he used to be: known from the hills of North Carolina to the beaches of Florida as the best wheelman on the East Coast.

He thought he'd left all that behind him, but as his carefully built new life begins to crumble, he finds himself drawn inexorably back into a world of blood and bullets. When a smooth-talking former associate comes calling with a can't-miss jewelry store heist, Bug feels he has no choice but to get back in the driver's seat. And Bug is at his best where the scent of gasoline mixes with the smell of fear.

Haunted by the ghost of who he used to be and the father who disappeared when he needed him most, Bug must find a way to navigate this blacktop wasteland...or die trying.

Like *Ocean's Eleven* meets *Drive*, with a Southern noir twist, S. A. Cosby's *Blacktop Wasteland* is a searing, operatic story of a man pushed to his limits by poverty, race, and his own former life of crime.

<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250252678/blacktopwasteland>

Introduction

- **Who am I?**
- **What is Wattpad?**
- **What is Webnovel style?**

Disclaimer

- I'm from Wattpad and going to speak about things we've seen work in my time writing and working there BUT you don't need to post your story to Wattpad - consider if it is the right home for your work (we'll talk more about this at the end)
- **You may already be familiar with some or all of these concepts** - that's okay! We always define things so you understand how we're thinking and speaking about them
- **There's no right or wrong way to do this - we can just speak to what we've seen work**
- **You know what's best for your vision of your story**

Initial Story

Key Definition - Hook

The hook is the first major event in the story that sets the tone, establishes the characters, and gives the reader something to invest in.

The successful hook is emotional, specific, and establishes the stakes and tone of the story. These are high-tension, high-emotion moments that immediately grab the reader's interest and promise them a certain kind of reading experience. Start a story on a note that's high tension, high action, high emotion, or all of the above.

Key Alignment

What is GMCS? (Goals, Motivation, Conflict, Stakes)

Key Alignment - GMCS

Goals, Motivation, Conflict, and Stakes are the building blocks of plot, sometimes called a story engine. While none of these elements *are* themselves plot events, they create the conditions for plot to happen and to matter to the characters and the reader. Strong GMCS gives a story forward momentum and helps guide decision-making as writers decide what to write.

GMCS Explained

Goals: The external thing the character wants to achieve, the thing they are moving towards. Characters are almost always conscious of their goals. The character does not need to achieve their goal in order for the story to be satisfying, but if the protagonist doesn't achieve their goal, they should ideally have some kind of change of heart about it. A character can have multiple goals throughout the course of the story: a big goal that's broken into smaller goals, or goals that change and evolve in response to events.

Motivation: Why the character does what they do. Motivation is usually tied to the protagonist's characterization and/or an event in their backstory. The goal is the *what* of the character's actions, motivation is the *why*.

GMCS Explained

Conflict: At its most basic, conflict is a struggle between opposing forces or characters. In Wattpad stories, this is usually created by the protagonist having a goal that is blocked by some other force. The friction between the protagonist wanting something and trying to get it is the conflict. Conflict can be internal or external. Stories can lean harder on one or the other, or have a mix of both.

External Conflict: External conflict is when the block to the character's goal is a person or force outside of their control. The story is about the protagonist defeating or failing to defeat the external block to achieve their goal(s). If the conflict is external, the story has an antagonist of some kind (either a person or a force).

Conflict, Internal: Internal conflict is when a character struggles with their own beliefs, desires, and actions. The character is their own block to their goal(s), and the story is about them changing to be able to either achieve their goal(s) or let it go.

Stakes: The consequences of the character's actions, their success or failure. Stakes answer the question, "why do these events matter?"

GMCS Summary

The protagonist desires their **GOAL** because of their **MOTIVATION** but the **CONFLICT** prevents them from attaining it easily, which matters because of the **STAKES**.

The Curious Case of the Unsuccessful Genre

Mystery is not a particularly successful genre on Wattpad. We have some incredible mystery and crime stories and writers on the platform, but the stories traditionally perform lower than other genres.

My theory on this: mystery, more so than almost any other genre, requires **trust**. Specifically, a reader needs to trust that the mystery will be solved/resolved before they commit to investing in the story. For an ongoing story, this is a big ask of a reader, particularly by a writer they have no history with. With so many published stories (that are guaranteed to resolve - satisfyingly or not), it is harder to convince a reader to take the risk of reading an unfinished/unproven story.

The Curious Case of the Unsuccessful Genre

Good *hook* and strong *GMCS* help override this initial resistance and form trust with the reader.

By giving them a clear understanding of the story they're signing up for, you're making a promise to the reader and they can decide if they are engaged enough by the hook and GMCS to go on the journey with you. It indicates that you've considered your story and can bring it to a successful conclusion.

Initial Story Summary

Ultimately, the question to a reader at the end of your first story will be:

Do I want more of this?

And the question to you, as the person plotting the story should be:

SHOULD there be more of this?

Serial

How to write series GMCS

Key Concept - GMCS for Series

Series Goal

This is the overarching goal for the entire series. A good Series Goal is believably attainable, but convincingly far-off. The more steps your protagonists have to go through to get the Series Goal, the more story you have.

Series Motivation

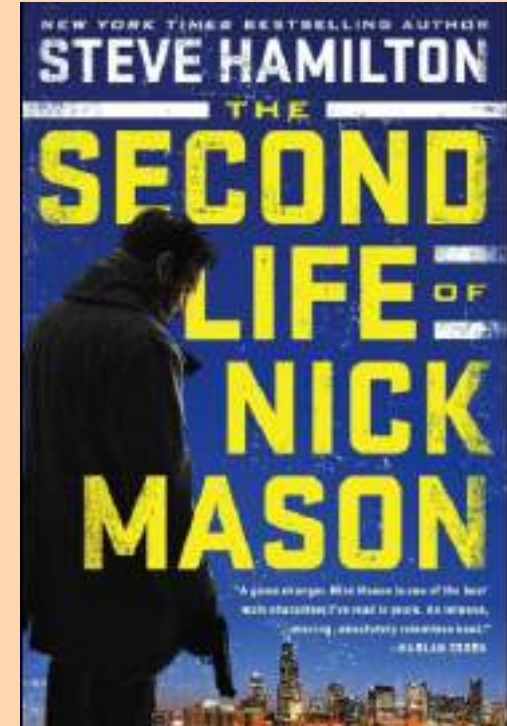
This is the main motivation for the series goal above. This is the *in order to* of the series goal.

Series Conflict

The series conflict is the main thing standing between the protagonist(s) and their goal. In a serial story, this is often (though not always) an actual antagonist who has their own goals and motivations for blocking the protagonist.

Series Stakes

What are the consequences for failing at the Series goal? In other words: Why does any of this matter?



Key Concept - GMCS for Series

Summary

The point of developing Series GMCS is to set the guardrails for the story and create its basic shape. This ideally happens in conjunction with developing characters and a world in order to create the frame for the kind of story a writer wants to tell.

It also gives the reader a reason to come back beyond your initial story: what questions, mysteries, or problems are left that a reader will be eager to see advance in the next story?

How to do this
for Crime Fiction

Things to look for in Crime Fiction

- **What is compelling about your main character?**
 - Good mystery or crime is essential to your first story, but unless that event can carry over (the drugs in Ellroy's *LA Quartet*, the dominos of crime in *Breaking Bad* or the suppliers/city hall in *The Wire*) then it's the *character* we're coming back for
- **What tone/vibe/experience are you giving your readers that they will want to come back for?**
 - *LA Quartet* features very different stories and characters (and perspectives), but centres 'hard boiled noir in 1920s-60s L.A. as a constant (as well as the movement of drugs and money as a corrupting factor moving from one book to the next)
- **How can you derive strong Series GMCS from your lead character or that tone/experience?**
 - Nick Mason's desire for freedom
 - Bosch's unsolved case
 - Follow the money from *LA Quartet*

Things to look for in Crime Fiction

- **Tone continued**
 - Maintaining consistent tone between books in your series is essential
 - Cozy can't suddenly become Gruesome
 - Dexter: the shift from psychological to supernatural (or Scooby Doo)
 - Consistent tone is part of the promise to the reader and a factor that will keep them coming back (particularly in an anthology series like *LA Quartet* or shows like *True Detective* or *Fargo*)
- **Genre analysis and comparative (comp) titles**
 - Take a look at the most popular tropes in your genre space - what will a reader be expecting? (If it's a locked door Christie style mystery, the final 'assembled suspects reveal,' for example)
 - These help build that trust and give you touchstones across books in your series
 - What other stories are doing this well?

Plotting/Outlining Methods

...aka The Storycoaster

Why “Storycoaster”?

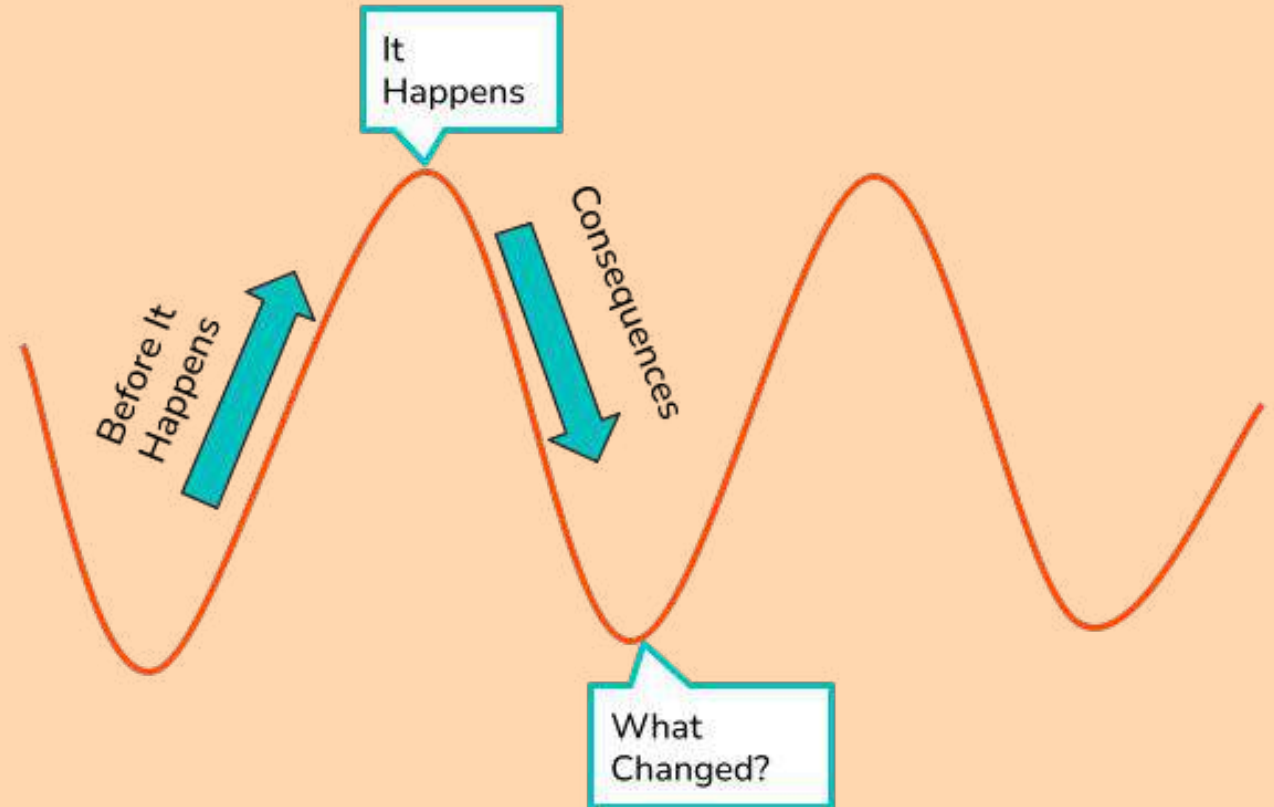
- Traditional dramatic structure and ways of talking about action and conflict suppose two things:
 - 1) The story is complete
 - 2) The story can be revised
- Needed a concept that was flexible enough to accommodate serial fiction and completed fiction, plotters and pantsers, and those who write ahead vs those who don't

— Key Concept - Storycoaster

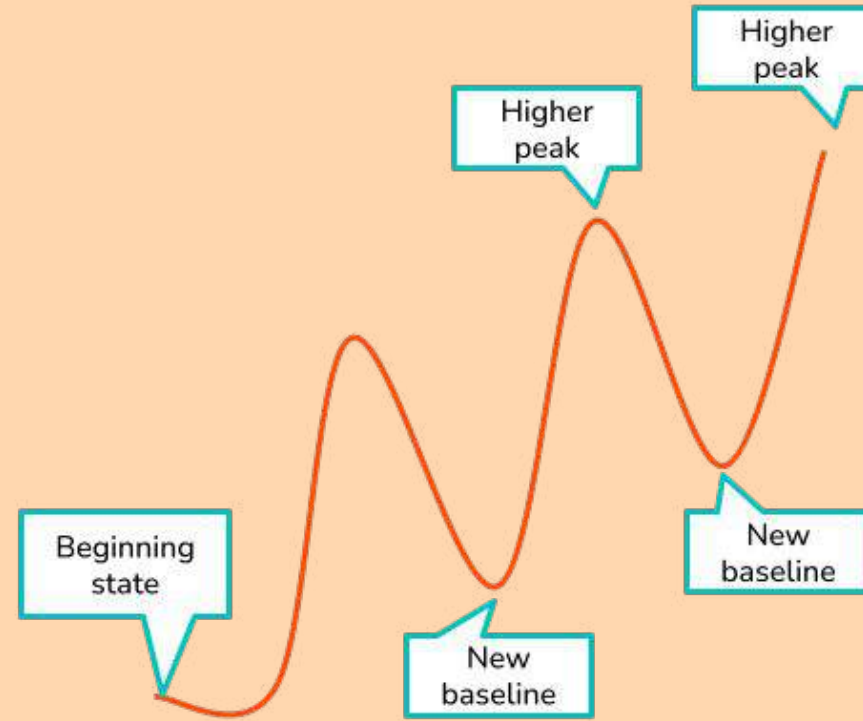
The easiest way to think about action, conflict, and tension in your story is to think about a rollercoaster. **A rollercoaster builds up slowly to a peak, and then sends you rushing down from that peak (which is the fun part!).** A rollercoaster doesn't need to be hundreds of feet tall to be fun; it just needs to offer the rider ups and downs. The same is true of stories. Your story doesn't need to be the most dramatic, it just needs to offer the reader rhythmic build up and release of tension and conflict.

Key Concept - Storycoaster

- **Climb:** Before it Happens - build up of the scene, tension rises
- **Peak:** It Happens - thing the character wants or fears, that we've been building toward happens
- **Plunge:** Consequences - change that happens in the Peak initiates consequences. All the promises made in the Climb come true
- **Valley:** What Changed? - How did the consequences of the Peak change things for the character. What new desires or problems arise as the result of the Peak and the Plunge.



Escalating the Storycoaster



How to Escalate the Storycoaster

To create multi-chapter narrative arcs, consider escalating the Storycoaster. Instead of the Valleys resetting at the same level as the previous Valley, the new Valley should be at a higher level than the previous one, as a result of the intensity of the Peak.

In Summary

Summary

- Strong GMCS hooks readers into your character and first story
- Strong Series GMCS builds off/integrates character GMCS to give readers a reason to care beyond the first mystery/crime/story
- Series serves reader needs and reduces writer work, but only if you give us a reason to care beyond your first mystery/crime
- Consider your character, the world and tone, and the reader promise, as well as the experience you're trying to create for them.

Key Resource - Webnovel Style Guide + Portal

All of our Key Resources have been collated and ordered into a single **guide**. The Webnovel Style Guide is built to guide a writer through everything they need to know in a manual format. **If you ever can't find something, the guidance is somewhere in this guide or on the Wattpad Creators Portal**

[Webnovel Style Guide](#)

[Wattpad Creators Portal](#)

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Thank you.



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