

# ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

CREATING  
SATISFYING  
TWISTS  
WITH AN HEA





# WHO I'M TALKING TO

- ANY FICTION WRITER LOOKING TO
  - INCREASE SUSPENSE IN THEIR STORY
  - INCREASE READER ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PACING AND TWISTS
- DISCOVERY + PLOTTERS WELCOME
- FOCUS ON ROMANTIC SUSPENSE (GENRE)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# IN THE NEXT 45 MINUTES, WE'LL COVER:

- WHAT SUSPENSE IS AND WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT
- WHY TWISTS ARE KEY FOR SATISFYING READERS
- HOW TO IDEATE/EXECUTE TWISTS THAT WORK
- TIPS FOR SELF-IDENTIFYING PACING OPPORTUNITIES
- Q&A

*Samantha Skelton*

author | book coach

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

PLUS, WE'LL COVER BEST  
PRACTICES FOR HOW AND  
WHEN TO USE BETA READERS





# WHO I AM

- AUTHOR ACCELERATOR CERTIFIED BOOK COACH. FOCUS: MYSTERY, THRILLER, (ROMANTIC) SUSPENSE, NOVEL PLANNING THROUGH AGENT PITCHING.
- AGENTED AUTHOR (IN DEBUT REVISION)
- CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THRILLERFEST
- CO-FOUNDER OF SHADOWS + SECRETS, THE RETREAT FOR MYSTERY + THRILLER WRITERS



*Samantha Skal*

author | book coach

A top-down view of a wooden desk. On the left, a laptop with a light wood finish and a black keyboard is partially visible. Below it, a spiral-bound notebook, a black pen with gold accents, and a white cup of black coffee on a saucer are arranged. The background is a vertical wood-grain pattern.

# WHAT IS SUSPENSE AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# ROMANCE GENRE EXPECTATIONS

- HAPPY EVER AFTER (HEA) - FOR NOW
- STORY QUESTION: HOW?
- VARYING LEVELS OF SPICE
- SEXUAL TENSION RESOLVED

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# ROMANTIC SUSPENSE = ROMANCE +

- LIFE/DEATH STAKES + A THIRD PARTY THAT PREVENTS HEA
- STORY QUESTION: MYSTERY + HOW
- FEAR THROUGHOUT
- SLEUTHING TO SOLVE (+ ALL EXPLAINED)
- CHAOS TO ORDER (FOR NOW)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# CHARACTERS IN ROM-SUS

- A IS PROTAGONIST, B IS LOVE INTEREST.
- A AND B MUST BOTH OVERCOME SOMETHING TO BE TOGETHER.
- TYPICALLY: EITHER A OR B HAS AN EMOTIONAL BLOCK AGAINST BEING TOGETHER
- C = VILLAIN = OUTSIDE FORCE

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# SUSPENSE = STICKINESS

- WE KNOW HOW IT ENDS, BUT WE DON'T KNOW HOW WE'LL GET THERE
- WE'RE HERE TO GET SUCKED IN TO FIND OUT HOW IT ALL GOES DOWN
- TWISTS AND TURNS
- CAN'T STOP TURNING PAGES

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

**WHAT ARE  
TWISTS AND  
WHY ARE  
THEY  
IMPORTANT?**

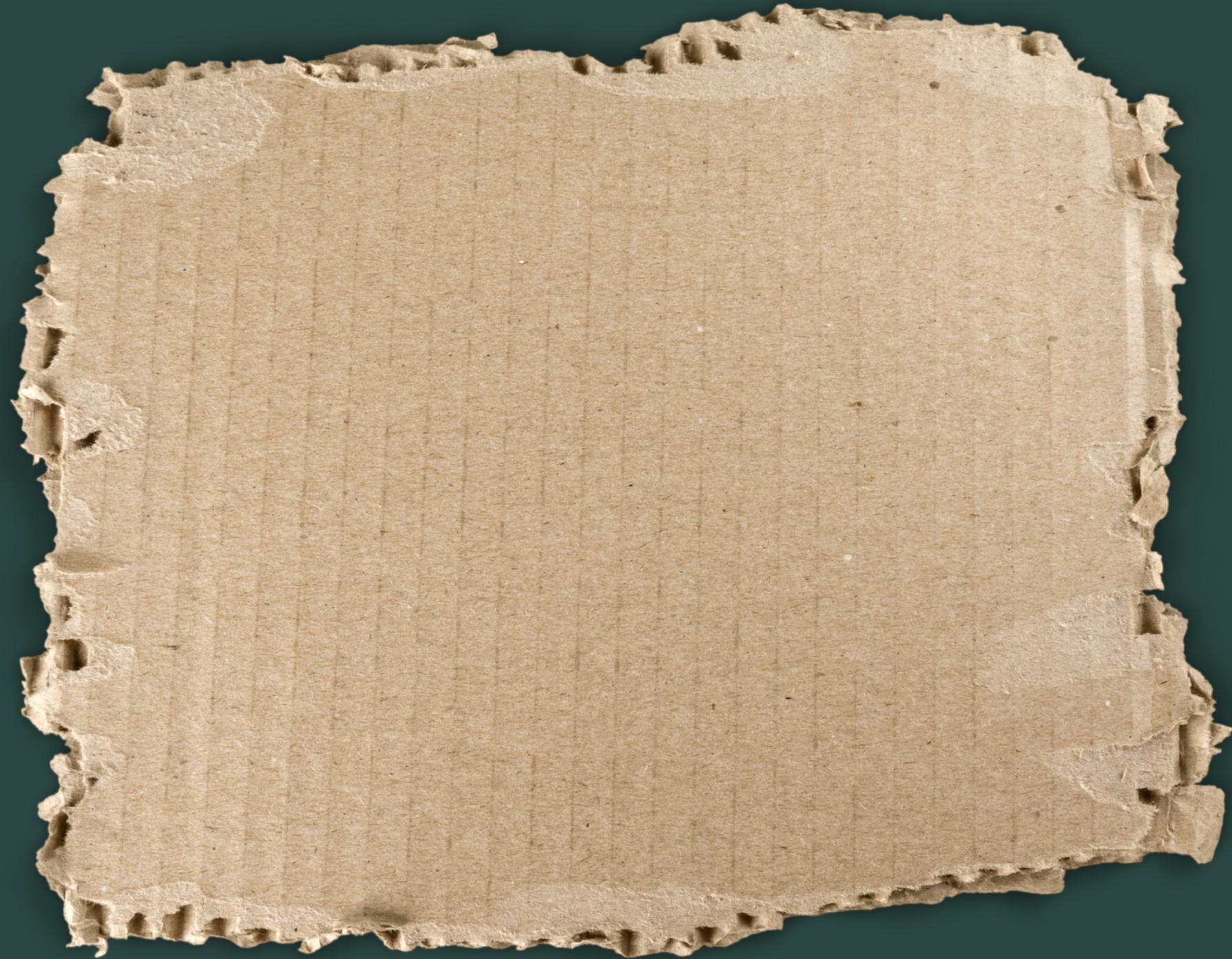
*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

IN  
MYSTERY/THRILLER/SUSPENSE  
THE VILLAIN'S JOURNEY IS  
EXPERIENCED BY THE  
PROTAGONIST.

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN'S JOURNEY

- WHAT THE VILLAIN IS ACTUALLY DOING
- TYPICALLY "OFF SCREEN" IN ROM-SUS
- PROTAGONIST POV TRANSLATES + EXPERIENCES THE STORY FOR THE READER
- FILTER + ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT VILLAIN
- MISDIRECTION :-)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# WHAT IS A TWIST?

- TWISTS = REVEAL OF THE VILLAIN'S TRUTH
- "TWISTY" BECAUSE THE TRUTH IS UNEXPECTED TO THE PROTAGONIST/READER
- UNEXPECTED BECAUSE PROTAGONIST MADE INCORRECT (BUT LOGICAL) ASSUMPTIONS

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# TWIST STRUCTURE

- MIDPOINT: 50%
  - HARD TURN, CAN'T GO BACK
  - NEW INFORMATION THAT PROVES PREVIOUS ASSUMPTIONS INCORRECT
  - SHIFT TO NEW PRIME SUSPECT?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# TWIST STRUCTURE

- CLIMACTIC: 80%-85%
  - TIED TO EMOTIONAL A-HA MOMENT FOR HEA FROM EITHER A OR B
  - SACRIFICE + ROCK/HARD PLACE
  - MYSTERY SOLVED, MOSTLY

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# TWIST STRUCTURE

- FINAL TWIST: 98%
  - REVEAL OF TRUE VILLAIN
  - HEA WELL ESTABLISHED
  - MYSTERY WRAPPED UP
  - CHAOS --> ORDER

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# WHICH MEANS...

- WE MUST KNOW OUR VILLAIN'S LOGIC, MOTIVATIONS, GOALS, AND JOURNEY IN ORDER TO CREATE TWISTS
- IN ROM-SUS: VILLAINS ARE VERY IMPORTANT

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN IN ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

- VILLAIN = CHARACTER C, PREVENTS A AND B FROM BEING TOGETHER
- TIED TO A OR B PERSONALLY
- PIVOTAL TO A OR B'S EMOTIONAL BLOCK
- A OR B MUST FACE/STOP THEM IN CLIMAX

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# MASTERMIND VS. ASSUMED VILLAIN

- MASTERMIND = TRUE VILLAIN = C
- PERSON DOING THE BAD THING
- WON'T STOP AT ANYTHING TO ACHIEVE GOALS
- HAS LOGICAL REASONS FOR BAD THINGS

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# MASTERMIND VS. ASSUMED VILLAIN

- ASSUMED VILLAIN = FRAMED. HIRED.
- ASSUMED VILLAIN SUBPLOT = PROTAGONIST  
MADE ASSUMPTIONS. RED HERRING.

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN'S IDENTITY

- MASTERMIND IDENTITY NOT REVEALED UNTIL THE CLIMACTIC (OR SOMETIMES) FINAL TWIST
- ASSUMED VILLAIN MAY BE CLIMACTIC VILLAIN
  - REALIZE THREAT STILL EXISTS

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

A photograph of a library with rows of bookshelves filled with books. The lighting is warm and soft, coming from several hanging light bulbs that are out of focus in the background. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# IDEATING + EXECUTING TWISTS THAT WORK

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# WHAT MAKES A TWIST SATISFYING?

- UNEXPECTED, BUT LOGICAL
  - POV WAS DEAD SURE OF ANOTHER LOGICAL ANSWER
- EARNED, AND NOT OUT OF NOWHERE

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# "ON SCREEN CLUES"

- TINY REVEALS OF THE VILLAIN'S TRUTH
- MISINTERPRETED BY POV CHARACTER
  - MISDIRECTS READER
  - THERE FOR READER TO "SEE"
- LOGICAL TWISTS DON'T WORK WITHOUT THEM

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# WHAT MAKES A TWIST UNSATISFYING?

- CONVENIENT -> NOT EARNED VIA "ON SCREEN" CLUES
- READER COULDN'T HAVE GUESSED
- EXPECTED -> TOO MANY CLUES
- PREDICTABLE -> AVOID TROPES, OR FRESHEN WITH NEW MOTIVATIONS/ASSUMPTIONS

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# THE “TRUTH” CHANGES

- RECOMMENDATION: 100% SURE OF X, RIGHT UP UNTIL A “TRUTH”
- APPLIES TO ALL THE MAIN TWISTS
- “TRUTH” MUST BE ACCURATE IN FINAL TWIST

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# IDEATING TWISTS

- DON'T: IDEATE A "TWIST"
- DO: COME UP WITH THE VILLAIN'S TRUTH,  
AND THEN IDEATE MISDIRECTION

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# REMEMBER: PROTAGONIST = GUIDE

- WHAT PROTAGONIST THINKS, THE READER WILL THINK.
- AMPLE OPPORTUNITY TO MISLEAD THE READER

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



## STEP 0:

- KNOW A. KNOW B.
- KNOW HIGH-LEVEL BEGINNING -> HEA
- EMOTIONAL ARCS, MISBELIEFS, A-HA MOMENTS, BIG SEX SCENES
- ROMANCE STORY BEATS
- HAVE FRAMEWORK, THEN ADD EVIL :-)

*Samantha Skel*



# STEP 1:

- KNOW YOUR MASTERMIND VILLAIN, DEEPLY
- WHY DO THEY WANT WHAT THEY WANT?
- WHY NOT TAKE THE EASY WAY OUT (I.E. STOP?)
- WHAT MOTIVATES THEM?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



## STEP 2:

- WRITE DOWN LOGICAL PROGRESSION OF VILLAIN'S ACTIONS
- AIM FOR 10 SENTENCES/BULLET POINTS
- CONNECT WITH: "BECAUSE OF THAT"
- JENNIE NASH / PIXAR STORY SPINE
- ONCE UPON A TIME, ONE DAY, BECAUSE OF THAT...UNTIL FINALLY

*Samantha Skel*



## STEP 2: ASK YOURSELF

- ONCE CHARACTER A ENTERS THE STORY, HOW IS THE VILLAIN'S PLAN THWARTED?
- WHAT DO THEY DO ABOUT IT?
- PLANT FAKE CLUES? ACTIVELY MISLEAD A AND B?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# STEP 3: CLIMACTIC ACTION

- CLIMAX = A OR A/B FACE C
- WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR THE VILLAIN?
- WHAT CHOICE DOES THE VILLAIN MAKE?
- ROCK/HARD PLACE, NEXT BAD CHOICE, SACRIFICE: APPLIES TO VILLAINS TOO
- HOW FAR WILL THEY GO?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# STEP 3: CLIMACTIC EXPLANATION

- OVERLOOKED CLUES/MISINTERPRETATIONS EXPLAINED
- LOGIC + "ON SCREEN" CLUES REFERENCED
- PROTAGONIST/READER SATISFACTION
- EXPLANATION OF EVIL ACTIONS: NOT JUST WHAT --> ALSO WHY. WHAT IF?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAINS ARE NOT FLAT/DEPTHLESS

- EVEN IF SCARY SERIAL KILLER, TO WHAT END? WHY?
- READERS LOVE TO KNOW WHY, NOT WHAT
- VILLAIN'S ACTIONS MAKE SENSE TO THEM
- VILLAINS BELIEVE THEY WILL SUCCEED

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# STEP 4: PROTAGONIST PERSPECTIVE

- OVERLAY PROTAGONIST'S JOURNEY ON VILLAIN'S JOURNEY
- INTERSECTIONS = "ON SCREEN" VILLAIN TRUTH + MISINTERPRETATIONS
- TINY HOLES VS. RIPPING THROUGH AT CLIMAX

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



## STEP 5: ITERATE :-)

- PLAY WITH IT. ASK WHAT IF?
- OTHER LOGICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR “ON SCREEN” TRUTH? RED HERRINGS?
- A INTERPRETS, THEN ACTS
- ACTION -> SUSPENSE, BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW OUTCOME

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- “ON SCREEN” CLUE TRACKING
- EMOTIONAL BEGINNINGS + A-HA MOMENTS
- “WHAT REALLY HAPPENED” BULLETS TRACK “OFF SCREEN” ACTIONS/MOTIVATIONS OF VILLAINS, ETC.

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

PLAN, BUT BE FLEXIBLE.

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# IT'S OKAY TO PIVOT

- UNEXPECTED VILLAINS HAPPEN
- NEW FAKE VILLAINS. NEW MASTERMIND VILLAINS. NEW SUBPLOTS.
- MOST IMPORTANT: "ON SCREEN" CLUES

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# INNER THOUGHT/REACTION

- BEST WAY TO INCREASE SUSPENSE
- POV/READER SEE + THINK THE SAME THING
- LEAD THE READER VIA THE POV CHARACTER
- ASSUMPTIONS ON THE PAGE
- LOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF "TRUTH" = RED  
HERRING

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# TENSION RAMPING

- START: AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE ACTION
- “PUT YOUR CHARACTERS IN A TREE AND LIGHT IT ON FIRE.” RACHEL AARON
- LEAVE NO LOGICAL OUTS
- AVOID COINCIDENCES - FEEL UNEARNED

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

**SELF-IDENTIFY  
PACING  
ISSUES IN  
YOUR MS**





# LOOK AT PACING

- HIGHLIGHT HIGH/LOW MOMENTS WITH DIFFERENT COLORS
- TOO MUCH LOW IN A ROW? ADD SUSPENSE
- TOO MUCH HIGH? ADD A RECAP SCENE
- DO TRUTH REVEALS HAVE MAXIMUM IMPACT?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# IS IT BORING?

- VILLAIN = WRECKING BALL
- INTERPRET -> DECIDE -> ACTION
- PERFECTION = BORING. HOW DOES MISBELIEF RUIN EVERYTHING?
- TROPES = PREDICTABLE. ASK WHAT IF?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

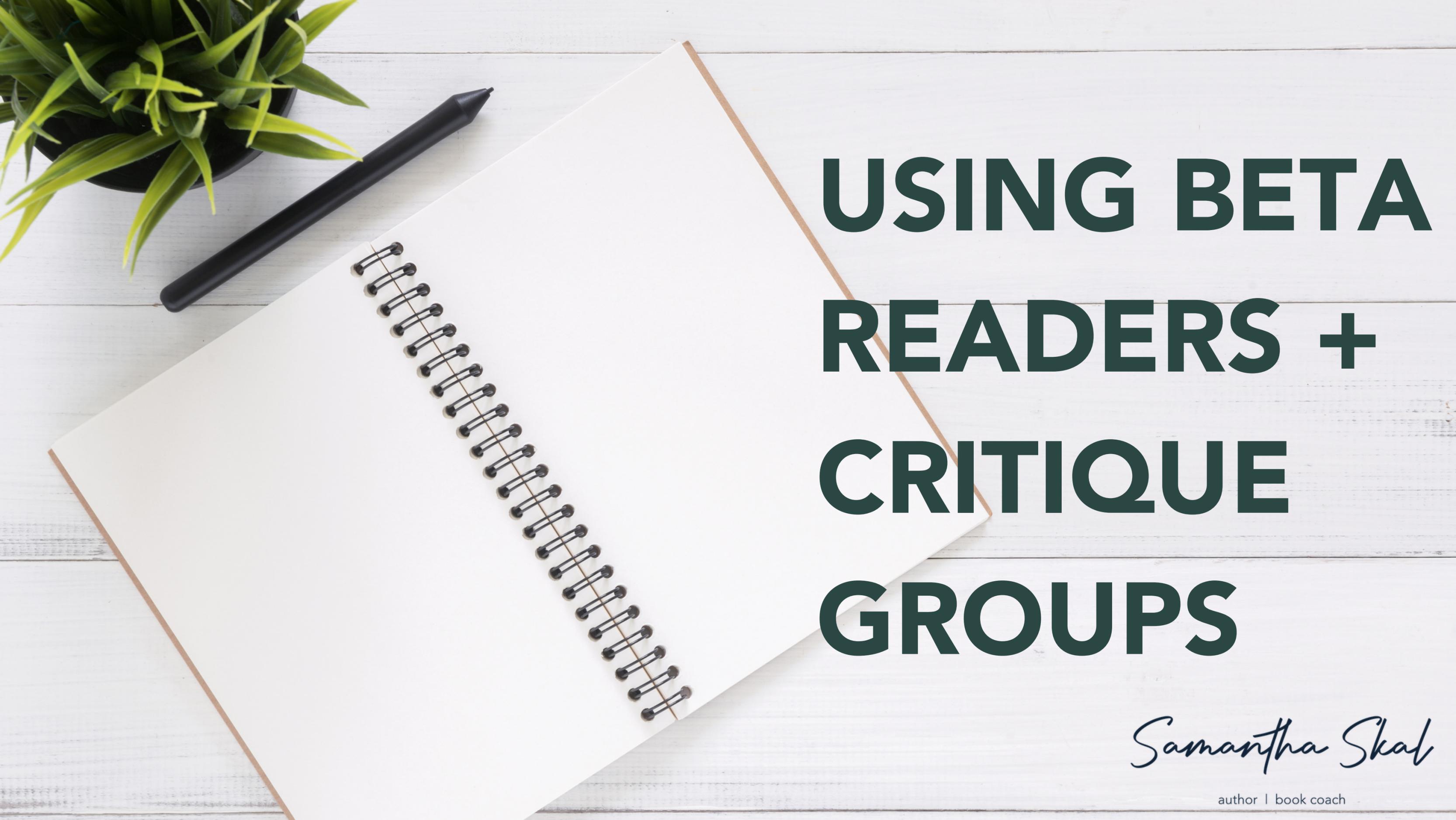


# STILL STUCK?

- CONSIDER HIRING HELP
- FIND SOMEONE YOU VIBE WITH, WHO "GETS"  
WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO DO

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

A top-down view of a desk with a spiral notebook, a pen, and a small potted plant. The notebook is open, showing a blank page. The pen is black and lies diagonally across the notebook. The plant is green and sits in a black pot. The background is a light-colored wooden surface.

# USING BETA READERS + CRITIQUE GROUPS

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# BETAS/CRIT PARTNERS: PROS + CONS

- PRECIOUS RESOURCE
- ANOTHER PAIR OF EYEBALLS
- SUSPENSE/MYSTERY ONLY ON FIRST READ
- SOMETIMES DIFFERING LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE
- CONFLICTING FEEDBACK

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO LISTEN TO?

- ONLY USE WHAT RESONATES WITH YOUR VISION FOR YOUR STORY
- NOT "GETTING" IT? OPPORTUNITY FOR READER CLARITY
- GRAIN OF SALT (EVERYONE HAS FILTERS)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# USING BETA READERS

- SEND TO GENRE-LOVERS
- 2-3 MAX AT A TIME
- BE INTENTIONAL WITH GOALS
- POLISH EDIT

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# ASK SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

- WHEN DID YOU STOP READING? (PACING, SUSPENSE)
- WHEN WERE YOU CONFUSED? (ENGAGEMENT/CLARITY)
- AT WHAT POINT WERE YOU "HOOKED" (STICKINESS, IDEALLY PAGE 1)
- WHEN DID YOU FIGURE OUT WHO DID IT? (TWISTINESS)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

REMEMBER:  
BOOKS IN THE BOOKSTORE  
DID NOT SPRING FORTH IN  
THEIR FINAL STATE.

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# SHADOWS <sup>Body</sup> & SECRETS

THE RETREAT FOR MYSTERY & THRILLER WRITERS

[shadowsandsecretsretreats.com](https://shadowsandsecretsretreats.com)

September 25-29, 2024 | Salem, MA



# RESOURCES

[WWW.SAMANTHASKAL.COM/ROMANCE-PROWRITINGAID](http://WWW.SAMANTHASKAL.COM/ROMANCE-PROWRITINGAID)

- Webinar handout: Questions to Ask of Your Villain
- Email sign up for Shadows + Secrets Retreat - applications open April 1
- Sign up for a free check-out call with me
- Links to further reading I recommend, including a list of the links in this presentation

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# Q&A + AMA

[SAMANTHASKAL.COM/ROMANCE-PROWRITINGAID](https://SAMANTHASKAL.COM/ROMANCE-PROWRITINGAID)

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