

How to Write Compelling and Well Structured Scenes

with Savannah Gilbo

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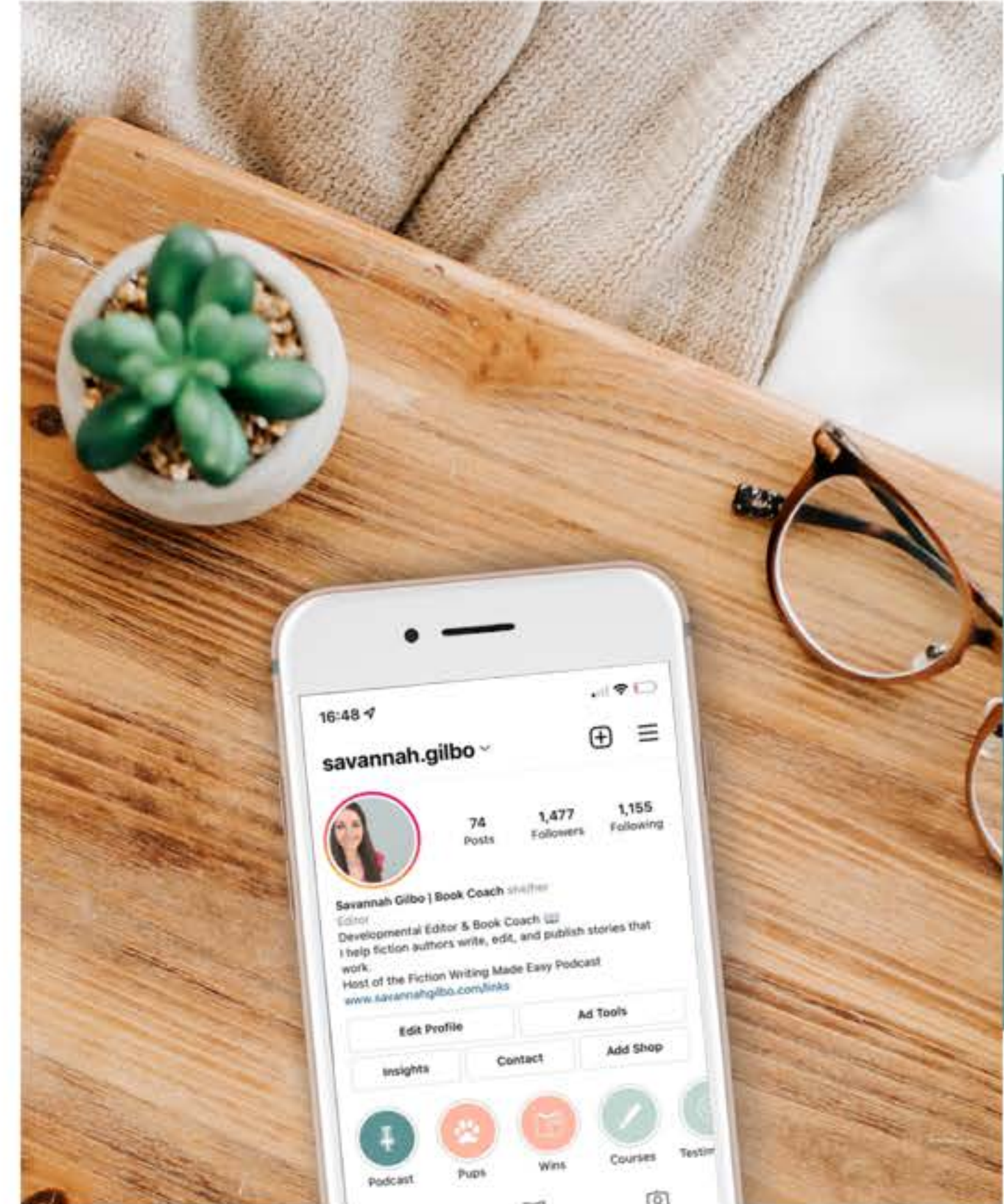



Hi, I'm Savannah 🙌

- Developmental Editor & Book Coach
- Host of the top-ranked Fiction Writing Made Easy Podcast (+1.5m downloads)
- I've helped hundreds of authors write engaging stories using the step-by-step, repeatable process I teach inside my Notes to Novel™ program

Let's Get Social!

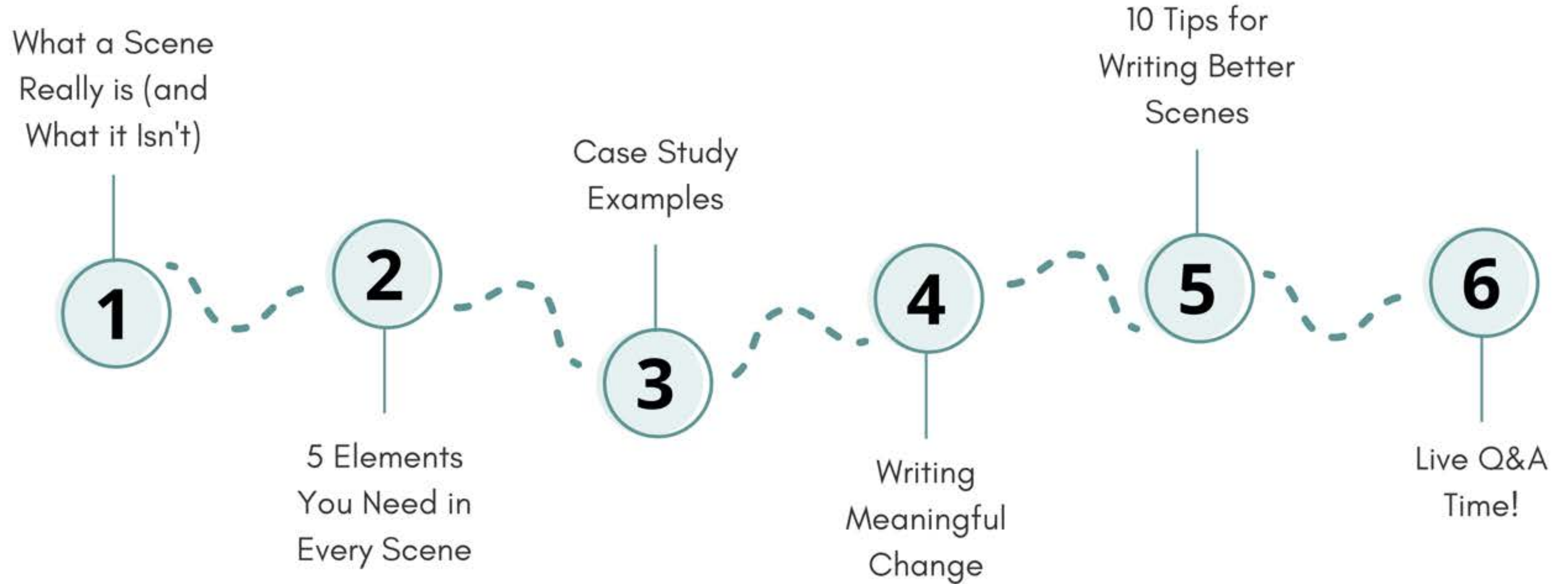
Take photos during the training and share them on your Instagram stories! Make sure to tag me at **@savannah.gilbo** so I can re-share your post!





I'm going to show you **how to write compelling, well-structured scenes** so that you don't waste your time (or your words) and so that you can make the biggest impact on readers with your story.

Here's Where We're Going...



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How to Write Compelling Scenes

AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE FOR WRITERS



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The Writer's Guide to Crafting Compelling Scenes PDF

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A scene is a unit of story that takes place in more or less continuous space and time, features a specific cast of characters, is told from one point of view, and contains **a mini-arc of change** from beginning to end.



Scenes vs. Chapters: What's the Difference?

Scenes and chapters *are* different, and they each serve a different purpose in your story.

Scenes are mini-stories that link together to create your overarching story. They need to have their own beginning, middle, and end and a clear arc of change.

Chapters are arbitrary divisions within a story that mainly exist to control the reader's experience. They don't have anything to do with story structure.



Sometimes a single scene can make up one chapter. And other times, a group of related scenes work together to make a similar point, or to set up a pivotal moment within a chapter.

Both scenes and chapters play a role in your story's pacing. But chapters are much more obvious to the reader, and therefore have more control over how the reader experiences a story.

For example, a novel with short chapters is going to have a much different feel, or a quicker pace, to it than a novel with longer chapters.

A scene is NOT:

- A lengthy description of the setting, the characters, or the weather
- Characters sitting around reflecting, or thinking
- Random events that just seem to happen and that don't add to the global story
- Paragraphs of backstory that include explanations of the character's past





How long should a scene be?

The quick answer: **between 1,500 and 2,500 words**

But it does depend on your genre. Something like a thriller might have shorter scenes while something like an action/fantasy might have longer scenes.

A 2,000-word scene *is* long enough to convey what's happening but short enough to hold your reader's attention and make them want to continue reading.

How to Write a Well Structured Scene

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How to Write a Scene

Every scene needs to start with the point-of-view character's goal.

What does this person want to achieve or accomplish or learn in this scene? What are they trying to do?

Ex: fill up a bucket of water so he can make breakfast, or to confront and defeat the evil Dark Lord.

Your character is trying to accomplish something, and **it needs to be clear in the first few paragraphs.**





The 5 Key Scene Elements

Every scene in your novel needs to include these five elements in order to "work":

- An Inciting Incident
- A Turning Point
- A Crisis
- A Climax
- A Resolution

#1. An Inciting Incident

This is the first bit of conflict or **the first unexpected thing that gets in the way** of your character accomplishing his or her goal.

And the inciting incident can cause your character to **come up with a new scene goal** OR it can cause your character to **adjust their original scene goal**.

It depends on what the inciting incident is, and what you need your character to accomplish in the scene.





#2. A Turning Point

This is a moment where **the conflict reaches its peak** and the character can no longer go after their scene goal in the way they had originally planned.

- An **active turning point** - something happens in the physical world that acts as the peak moment of conflict and causes a change in plans.
- A **revelatory turning point** - the character gains new information or realizes something that changes the circumstances or plans.

#3. A Crisis

A crisis is a moment where your character **faces a decision** about how to move forward.

Will they do X or will they do Y? And ideally, you want these options to **carry the same weight**. Your character should face a choice between two equally good things or two equally bad things.

With either choice, **there needs to be something at stake**, too. So, what do they stand to lose or gain either way? This is how you make things interesting.





#4. A Climax

This is a moment where **your character acts on their choice**. So, did they choose X or did they choose Y?

This is one of the main ways you can **show readers who your characters are**—through the actions they take and the decisions they make.

And that's because the dilemma your character faces (in the crisis moment) **will have consequences** no matter what they do. So, their decision will prove something about who they are and what they value.

As the story progresses, and as your character grows and changes, their decisions will begin to shift (because what they value and believe is changing).

By the end of the story, the person they've become will be someone who makes very different choices than the person they started the story as.

You'll want your point-of-view character to be taking the action or making this decision in this moment.

Otherwise, you risk creating a character that has no agency, and when that happens too much, it starts to feel like another character's story.





#5. A Resolution

This is a moment when we get a glimpse into **how your character's decision worked out** for them.

How does your character feel now that they've acted on their choice? Do they feel confident? Do they regret their decision? Were there immediate consequences for whatever they chose to do?

This is also where **you can establish that sense of forward momentum into the next scene.** Now that everything in this scene happened, and now that they've made a specific decision, what's their plan?

At the end of each scene, ask yourself:

“Because of what just happened in this scene, what will my character do next?”

“What is the inevitable result of the choice my character just made?”

Sometimes we get a glimpse of the character's plan in the climax, but other times, characters will formulate a plan here in the resolution.

And this is how you create that sense of narrative drive from one scene into the next scene.





Every scene should link, in some way, to the overarching plot, and to your character's arc—ideally by helping them solve one piece of the plot puzzle and by challenging their inner obstacle (the belief, worldview, or fear they have to overcome).

If a scene doesn't advance your story toward the global climax, then you should find a way to connect it to the spine of your story or consider cutting it altogether.

This is what it means to write a scene with a meaningful arc of change. **Meaningful change is change that impacts the bigger, overarching story.**

**Example:
Cinder (YA) by
Marissa Meyer**



SCENE SUMMARY:

Cinder (a sixteen-year-old cyborg mechanic) is waiting for her android, Iko, to come back with a new foot for her. The one she currently has is all rusted (and super old). While she waits, Cinder disconnects the wires between her mechanical foot and ankle + cleans out her rusted socket.

A young man arrives at Cinder's booth, and the retina display in her eye identifies him as the Prince Kai—the crown prince of the Eastern Commonwealth! Cinder feels self-conscious because she's a cyborg (a second-class citizen in New Beijing). Kai is surprised that Cinder is a young woman, but based on her reputation, ends up asking her to fix his android Nainsi (claiming Nainsi has sentimental value). When Cinder hears this, an orange light blinks in her retina—indicating that Kai is lying.



SCENE SUMMARY (conitnued):

Iko returns with a new steel-plated foot for Cinder, but Cinder pushes her to the back of the booth before Prince Kai can see what Iko has. Cinder distracts Kai by telling him that fixing Nainsi will take a week, and he offers to come back the following weekend to pick her up. He leaves.

Iko is absolutely star-struck and fawns over the prince in his absence. Cinder is excited to tell her stepsister Peony about the prince's visit because she loves him, too. She begins attaching her new foot, thinking about how her stepmother, Adri, would kill her if she found out Cinder spent 600 univs on a foot. Suddenly, people start screaming in the street, yelling about the plague: there's an outbreak at Chang Sacha's booth. Cinder immediately closes the door to her booth and she and Iko wait to hear the sirens of an emergency hover take Sacha away.



Cinder's goal: Switch out her old cyborg foot (with the one Iko retrieves for her) without drawing any unnecessary attention to herself

- **Inciting Incident:** A customer arrives; Prince Kai!
- **Turning Point:** Chang Sacha screams; Cinder realizes that Chang Sacha has the plague
- **Crisis:** Should Cinder run to save herself and let Iko be trampled by the crowd? Or should she stay put and protect them both as best as she can?
- **Climax:** Cinder pulls the metal door closed.
- **Resolution:** Cinder and Iko are going to stay put for now. An emergency hover take Chang Sacha away





What is the arc of change?

There are quite a few arcs of change you could call out when analyzing this scene. Here are some possibilities:

- Cinder had **a too-small foot**, now she **has the right one**.
- Cinder normally **lives in hiding**, now she's **exposed**.
- Cinder was **safe** from the virus, now she's **in danger**.
- Cinder was **a stranger** (to Kai), now she's **a helper**.
- Cinder was **following rules**, now **she's broken them**.
- Cinder was **having a normal day**, now it's **abnormal**.



What is the arc of *meaningful change* in this scene?

Based on the big-picture story, and the central conflict with the Lunar Queen, the arc of meaningful change is:

- Before meeting Prince Kai, Cinder was already in danger from the plague* (both in general and because of Chang Sacha). However, once she takes Kai's android, she's (unknowingly) **in possession of knowledge that will bring her into the central conflict** with the Lunar Queen (and put her in actual danger throughout the story)
- This arc of change is in alignment with the global story (science fiction/action) & plays on the global stakes

Commercial vs. Content Genres

There's a difference between commercial genres and content genres:

- ✓ **Commercial genres** are sales or marketing categories that dictate where a book is placed, or how it's sold, in a bookstore or online. Ex: Young Adult Fantasy or Cozy Cat Mysteries
- ✓ **Content genres** describe the type of content within a story. And each content genre can give you a sense of how to construct your story from the ground up. Ex: Action, Mystery, Romance, Worldview, Thriller, Performance

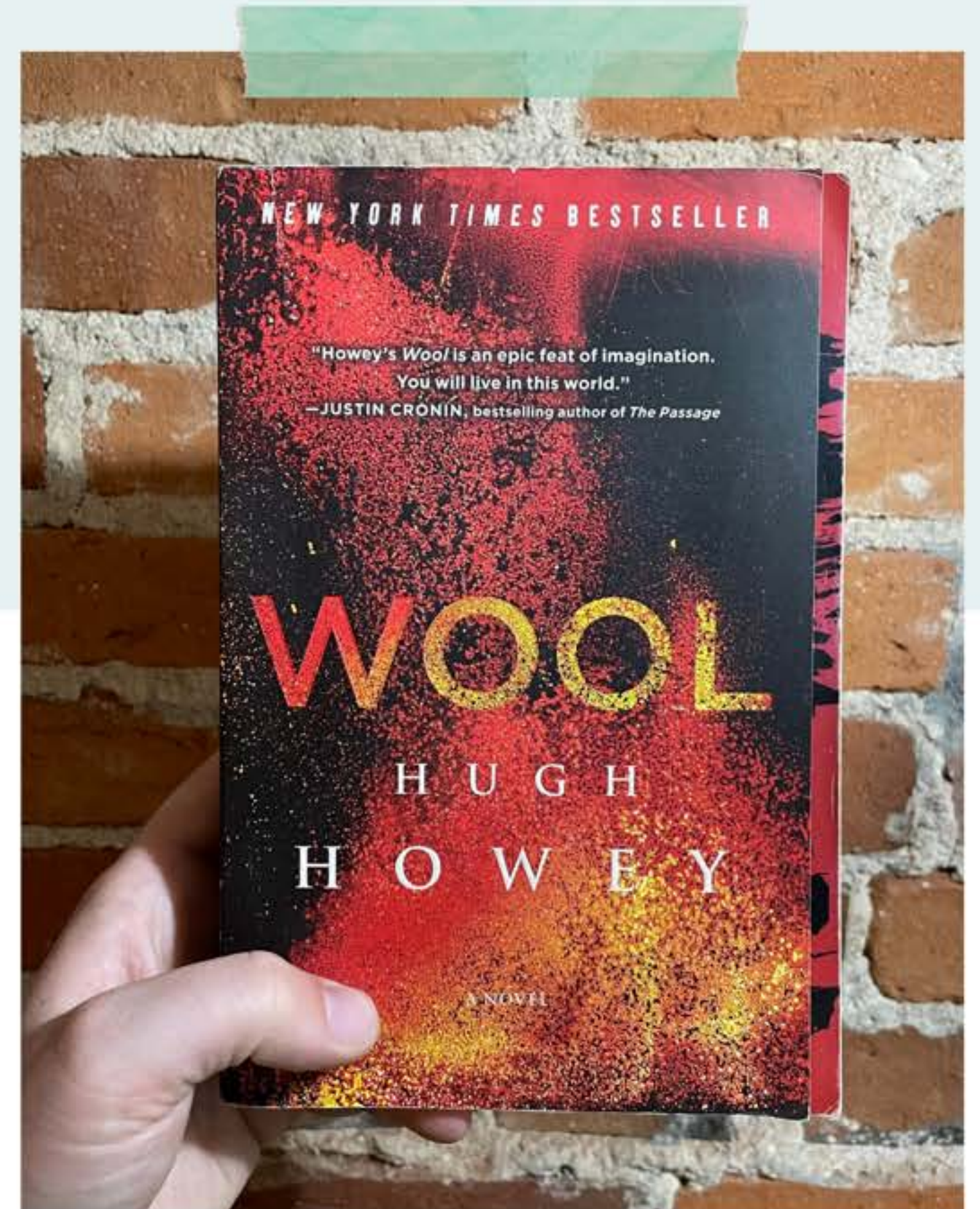


What else is great about this scene?

- The five commandments and the arc of change are clear and meaningful.
- There are on the surface stakes that the readers sees (what will happen now that Cinder's possibly been exposed to the plague?) and also behind the scenes stakes (danger via the information Cinder will find on Prince Kai's android)
- It's a great setup of Cinder's normal world—both the external conflict she's already facing as a cyborg and unwanted child *and* the internal conflict she faces because of the external.



Example:
Wool (Adult)
by Hugh Howey



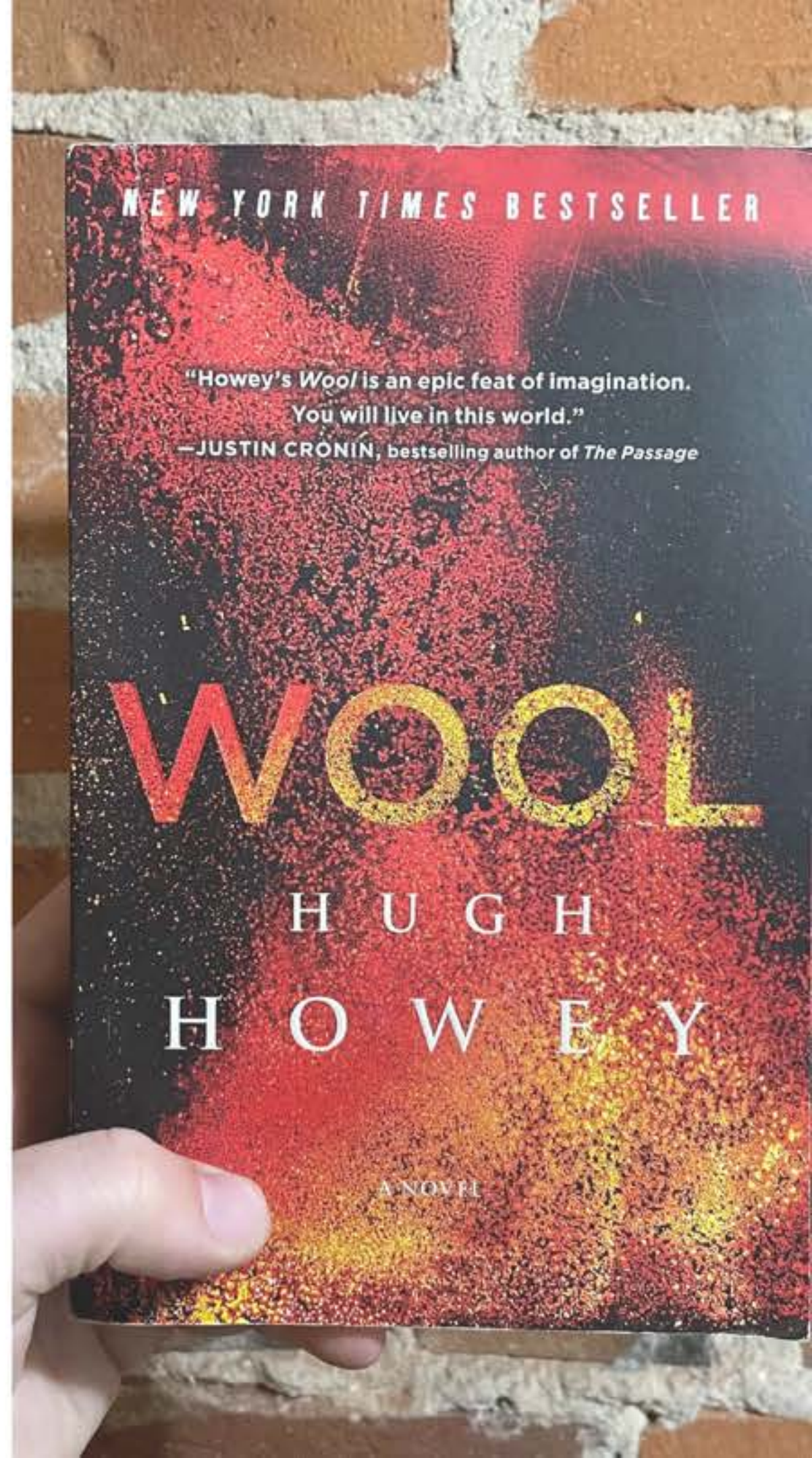
SCENE SUMMARY:

Holston (the sheriff of the silo, a 144-floor underground community of humans), is climbing the spiral staircase to the top floor, reflecting on how the spiral staircase has been worn down by centuries of humans.

He thinks about how the year his wife Allison died, they had won the lottery that would have allowed them to have a child, but they were unable to conceive.

When he makes it to the top floor of the silo, there's a cafeteria with a projection of the outside world on the wall.

The projection scene shows a hill with brown, lifeless vegetation, beyond which is "the top of a familiar and rotting skyline."



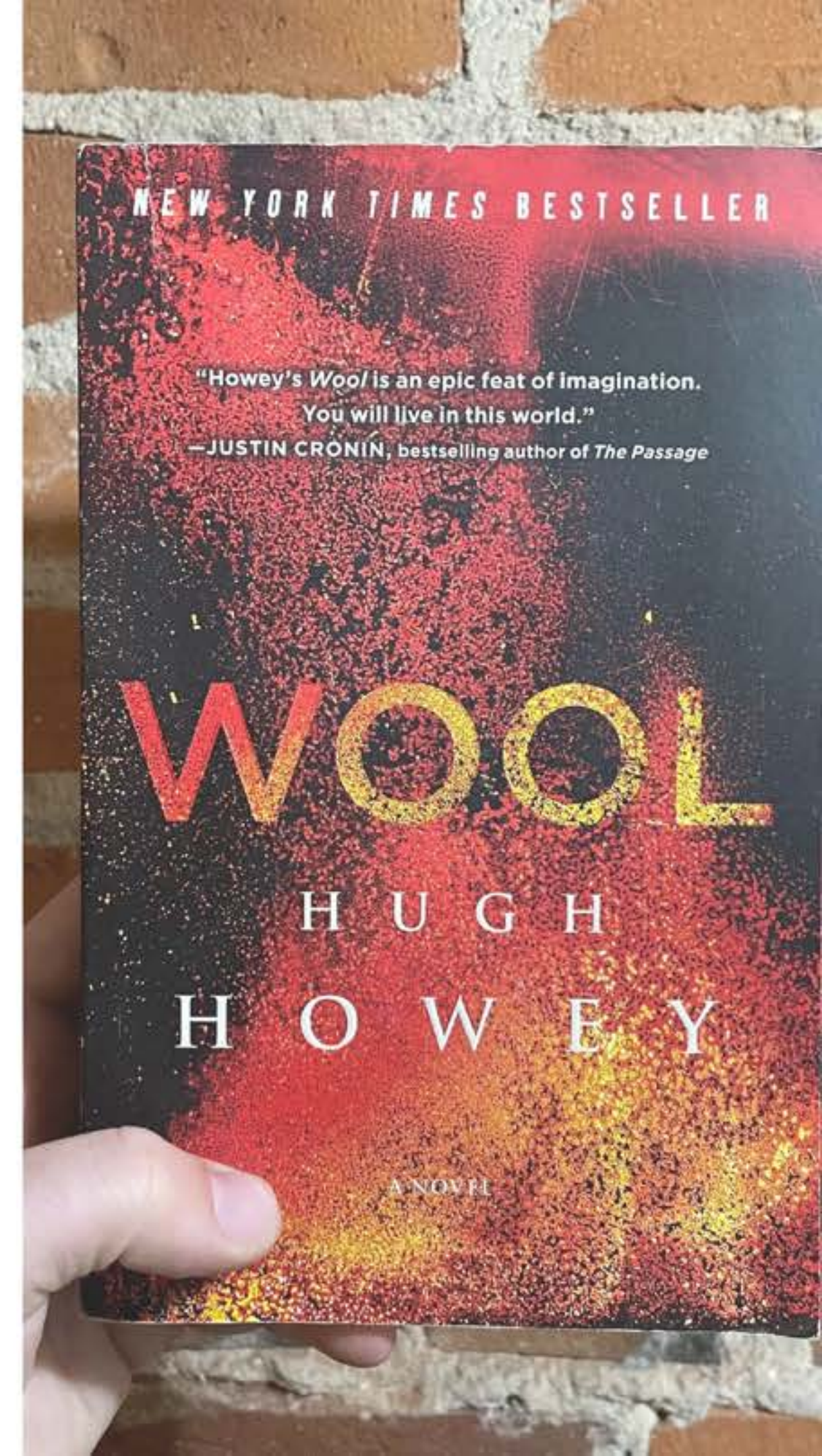
SCENE SUMMARY (continued):

Holston goes into his office, where Deputy Marnes greets him.

To Marnes's confusion, Holston puts himself in the holding cell where prisoners go before they're sent out to "clean."

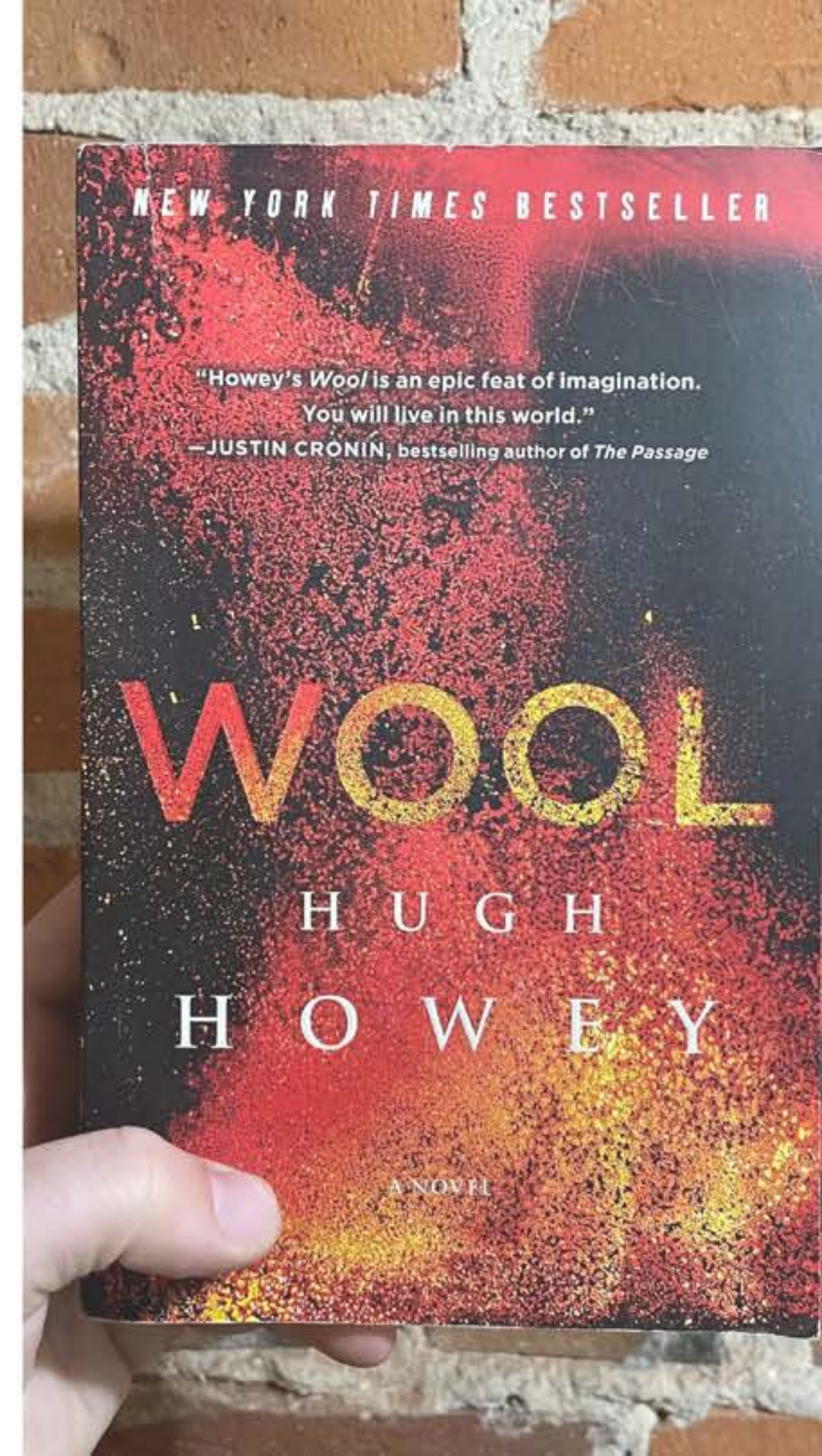
Cleaning is the silo's form of execution—the condemned go out of the silo to clean the cameras that show the view of the outside world before succumbing to the toxic gasses.

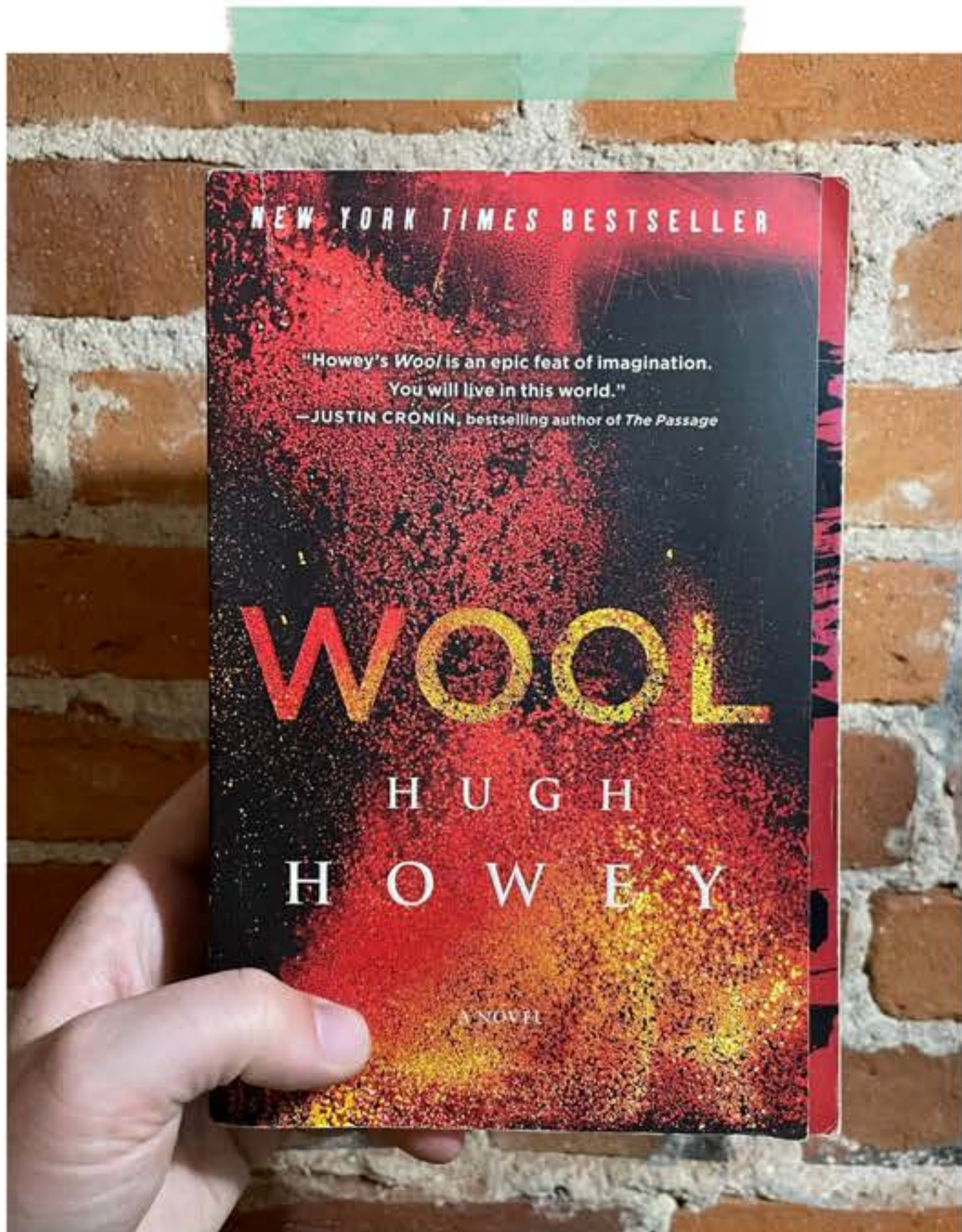
Expressing a desire to go outside is in itself a capital crime punishable by cleaning, and Holston has essentially just sealed his fate.



Holston's goal: Holston wants to get up to the holding cell and inform the mayor that he's ready to clean.

- **Inciting Incident:** The kids remind him of life (external) and are triggering memories of his past and what he lost (internal).
- **Turning Point:** Holstrom passes the spot where his wife asked to go outside and he's in the spot where he could look and see his wife's body on the screen.
- **Crisis:** Should he follow the pull to look at his wife's dead body on the screen or ignore it and keep walking to the cell?
- **Climax:** Holston keeps walking, ignoring the screen.
- **Resolution:** He puts himself in the cell, asks to see the mayor to tell her he's ready to go outside.

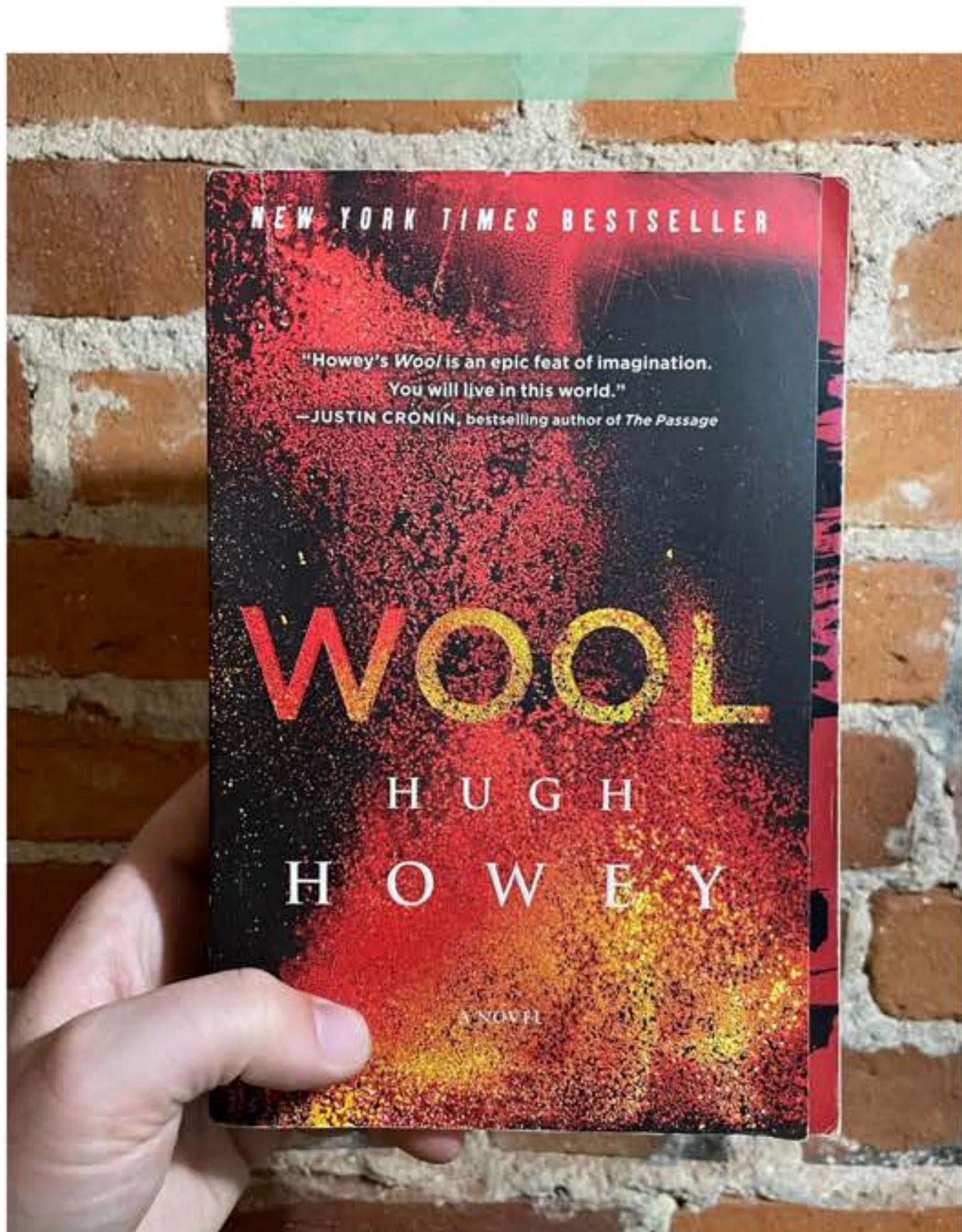




What is the arc of change?

There are quite a few arcs of change you could call out when analyzing this scene. Here are some possibilities:

- Holston was **free**, not he's **inside a jail cell**.
- Holston was safe, now he **faces a death sentence**.
- Holston was **impotent**, now he's **taken back his power**.
- Holston was **considering** cleaning, now he's **decided**
- Holston was **operating in secret**, now he's **exposed**.
- Holston was **in a group of people**, now he's **alone**.



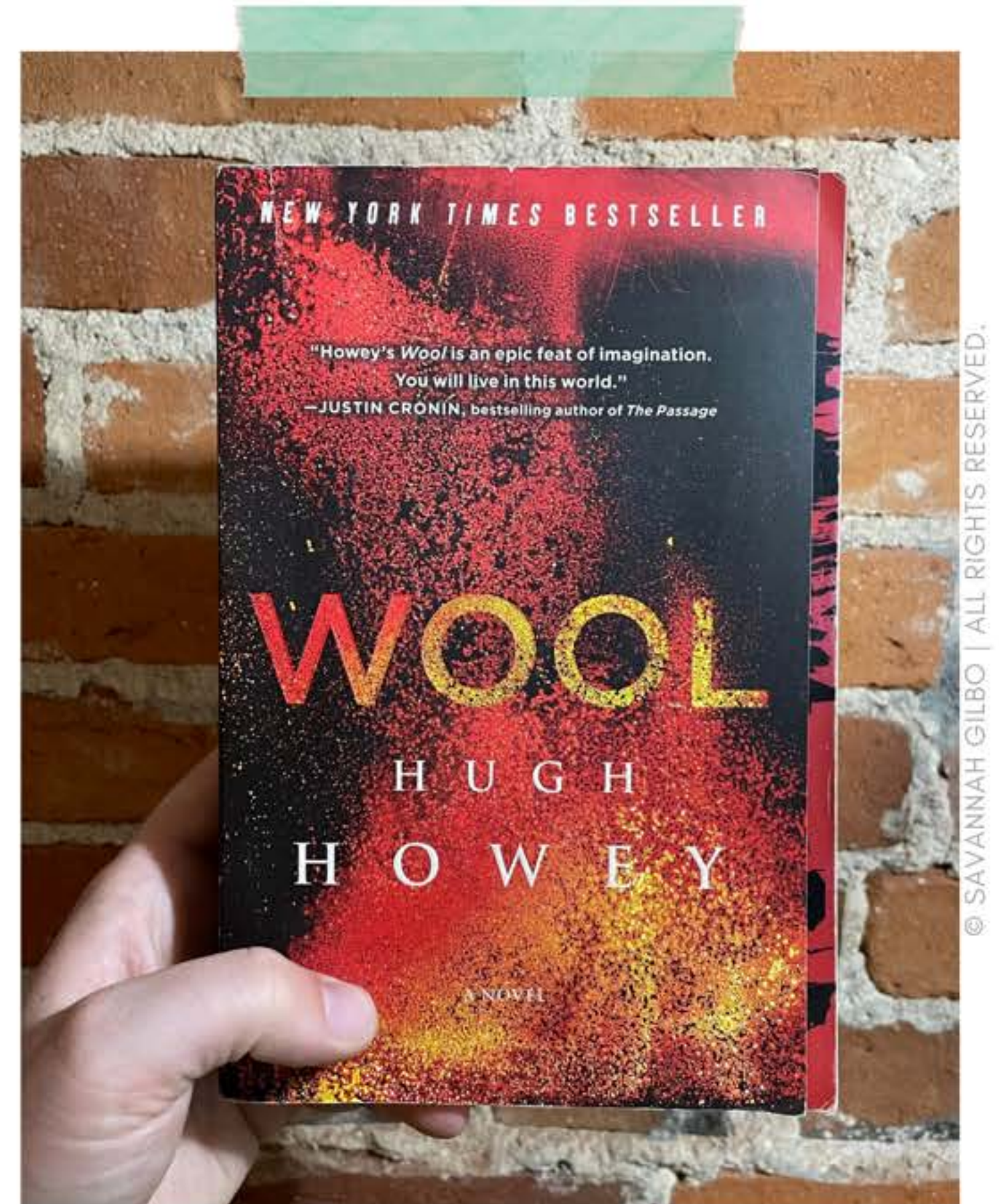
What is the arc of *meaningful change* in this scene?

Based on the big-picture story, and the central conflict with those who run the Silo, the meaningful change is:

- At the start of the scene, Holston is **safe, but lacks personal power** (even though he's the Sheriff). By the end of the scene, he's **taken back his personal power** (by finally acting on intel from his late wife), **but given himself a death sentence*** in the process.
- This arc of change is in alignment with the global story (science fiction, society) & plays on the global stakes

What else is great about this scene?

- The five commandments and the arc of change are clear and meaningful.
- The backstory shown in this scene is relevant to what Holston's doing. His wife relayed information re: the outside world, and he's acting on faith (in her) rather than stay here (without her)
- There are on the surface stakes that the readers sees (why is Holston giving himself over to clean?) and also behind the scenes stakes (impotence + ignorance vs. knowledge + power)
- An interesting example of opening w/ a character who isn't the central protagonist



A quick note on word count...

- The example from Wool is about 1,500 words
- The example from Cinder is about 3,200 words

If you're writing science fiction or fantasy, **you may have scenes that are longer than the recommended word count** I gave you earlier from time to time.

When in doubt, aim for the guidelines of 1,500-2,500 words and if you come up with scenes that are longer, be mindful of the amount of exposition you're including.

If your entire draft is full of scenes that are 5,000-words long... **that's likely indicative of a bigger problem.**



10 Tips for Writing Better Scenes



Tip #1: Stick to one POV character per scene

(Note: I'm not saying don't use multiple POVs, I'm just saying stick to one character's perspective per scene.)

Here's why I recommend this:

- It creates a more immersive reading experience because you're grounding readers into that character's perspective
- It helps you avoid head-hopping which can be jarring
- It's easier to write a well-structured scene because you can track that POV character's goal + conflict, etc.





Tip #2: Establish where and when the scene is happening

In other words, ground the reader in time and place at the very beginning of each scene—especially in relation to the scene that came before it.

Where is the scene taking place?

How much time has passed since the last scene?

If the time or place is unclear to readers, they're going to be pulled out of the story to try and figure out what they missed. You want them to be fully immersed.

Tip #3: Give your character a specific goal in each scene.

What does your character want to achieve or learn or accomplish in this particular scene? What are they specifically trying to do?

Without a clear and specific goal, your character won't feel realistic or engaging.

If your character has no goal, then nothing can get in their way. And if there's no conflict, there's no story.





Tip #4: Make sure each scene includes a mini-arc of change

Once you know what your POV character wants in a scene, you can use the '5 Commandments' to help you create a mini-arc of change **through the conflict that your character faces.**

All of these mini-arcs of change are what add up to create your global arc of change across your story.

(Note: This is a great lens to look at your scenes through when it comes time to edit. If a scene doesn't have a meaningful arc of change, it needs work)

Tip #5: Make sure your point-of-view character has agency

Your POV character needs to be able to make decisions and take actions that move the story forward.

No matter what situation your character is in, **they need to take the initiative to do something about their circumstances**, even if that something has negative or unforeseen consequences.

More often than not, it's the negative or unforeseen consequences that make a story interesting, and that forces your character to ultimately grow and change!





Tip #6: Show what your character is thinking & feeling.

In addition to what's happening in each scene, make sure you **let readers inside your character's head**.

What are they thinking? What are they feeling? How are they processing the events of the scene?

To do this properly, you'll need to understand who your character is, what their worldview is, and what they value. This will help you frame how they understand, or misunderstand, what's happening around them.

Tip #7: Try to advance at least one subplot in each scene

In great stories, subplots develop right alongside the main plot. This adds layers of complexity and depth.

It also lets you "setup" things (in your subplots) that will come into play (or "payoff") later, without having to build an entire scene around something.

So, in each one of your scenes, consider how you can move at least one of your subplots forward. How can a subplot cause conflict or bring clarity or...?





Tip #8: Use the ‘story present’ to trigger backstory & exposition

Descriptions of people, places, memories, history, etc. should be directly related to what’s happening in the moment in the scene.

When backstory or worldbuilding information or exposition is relevant to what’s happening in the scene, it’s context, not an info dump.

The key is to only include information that readers need to know in order to understand what’s going on in the scene, otherwise, you risk losing their attention.

Tip #9: Only include dialogue that is relevant to the scene

Dialogue should only be used to establish context or character goals, cause or worsen conflict, reveal character decisions or changes, and things like that.

If your dialogue doesn't do one of these things, you probably don't need it. It's really that simple!

(Note: This is NOT a first draft problem, but keep it in mind as you're drafting as a way to filter your dialogue)






Tip #10: Make sure the scene contributes to the global story

First, think in terms of your **external plot**.

Every scene should push the story forward to the main climactic moment where your protagonist either succeeds or fails in accomplishing their main story goal.

Second, think in terms of your character's **internal arc**.

Every scene should force your character to face conflict, and make decisions that will help him or her grow and change. This is how you express theme.



Now you know **how to write compelling, well-structured scenes** so that you don't waste your time (or your words) and so that you can make the biggest impact on readers with your story!

It's Q&A Time!



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