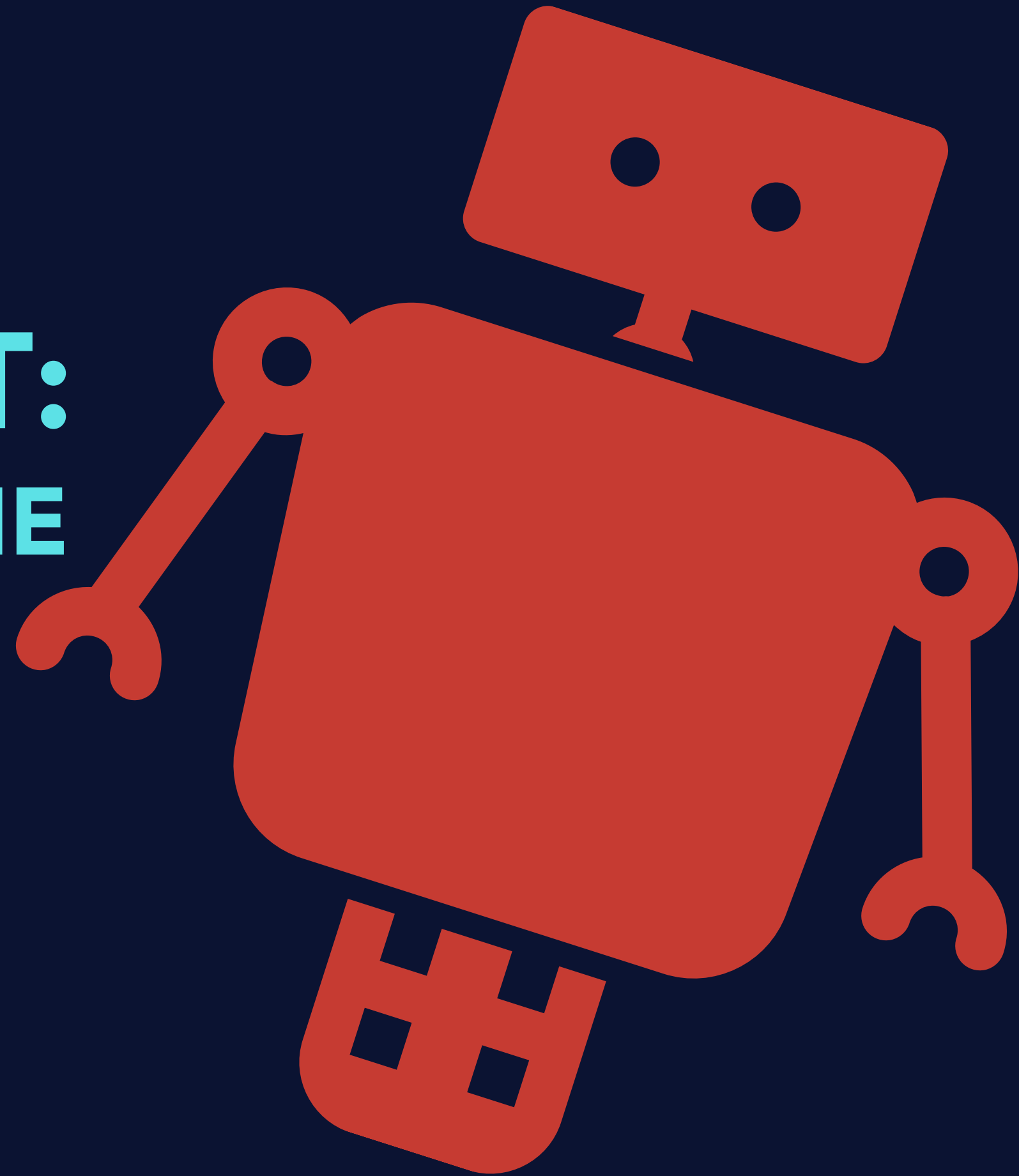


**PROWRITINGAID SCI-FI WEEK 2023**

**VILLAINOUS INTENT:  
THE KEY TO UNLOCKING THE  
MYSTERY IN YOUR SCIENCE  
FICTION NOVEL**



Presenter: Samantha Skal, Book Coach + Author



# WHO I'M TALKING TO

- ANY FICTION WRITER LOOKING TO INCREASE MYSTERY, SUSPENSE, AND TWISTS IN THEIR STORY
- PLOTTERS/DISCOVERY - BOTH WELCOME
- IN PLANNING AND IN REVISION AOK

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# YOU'RE CURIOUS ABOUT:

- ADDING A MYSTERY THAT DOESN'T FALL FLAT
- DESIGNING TWISTS AND REVEALS THAT ARE SATISFYING, BUT NOT PREDICTABLE
- INCREASING SUSPENSE/PACING

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# IN THE NEXT 60 MINUTES, WE'LL COVER:

- HOW MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE ARE TIED, AND WHY THEY'RE SO IMPORTANT FOR READER ENGAGEMENT
- HOW TO INCORPORATE A MYSTERY
- WHY VILLAINOUS INTENT IS THE KEY
- DESIGNING TWISTS THAT WORK
- Q&A

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

PLUS, WE'LL COVER HOW TO  
ADD OR CHANGE A TWIST  
WITHOUT HAVING TO REWRITE  
EVERYTHING





# WHO I AM

- AUTHOR ACCELERATOR CERTIFIED FICTION BOOK COACH
- FOCUS ON MYSTERY, THRILLER, SUSPENSE + TWIST BRAINSTORMING
- AGENTED AUTHOR (IN DEBUT REVISION)
- CO-DIRECTOR, THRILLERFEST (JUNE 2024)
- HAVEN'T ALWAYS BEEN IN THE WRITING WORLD



*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach





**MYSTERY AND  
SUSPENSE,  
AND WHY THEY  
ARE SO  
IMPORTANT**

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# (SUB)-GENRE IS A PROMISE

- CONTRACT WITH THE READER
- TRUST: READER EXPECTATIONS MUST BE MET
- MYSTERY: MYSTERY SOLVED
- SUSPENSE: LOW-KEY FEAR THE WHOLE TIME

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



SUSPENSE IS THE ENGINE  
THAT KEEPS YOUR STORY  
RUNNING.

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# MYSTERY = A QUESTION RESOLVED

- GOOD TRIUMPHS OVER EVIL, FOR NOW
- IMPLIES A VILLAIN DOING BAD THINGS
- SUSPENSEFUL, BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW HOW IT WILL BE SOLVED/RESOLVED

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# SUSPENSE = THE QUESTION ASKED

- WILL THEY / WON'T THEY: GET TOGETHER, BE MURDERED, HAVE THE HEA, WIN, ETC.
- A PROMISE OF ACTION
- OVERCOME AN OBSTACLE = STORY QUESTION

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# STORY QUESTION = ENGAGEMENT

- WHAT MUST THE MC OVERCOME TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOAL?
- WHO IS THE PROTAGONIST?
- WHAT DO THEY WANT + WHY DOES IT MATTER?
- WHAT PREVENTS THEM FROM GETTING IT?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach





# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- "JUST ONE MORE PAGE"
- READER ENGAGEMENT
- READER SATISFACTION
- READER TRUST THAT SUSPENSE WILL RESOLVE

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# DIFFERENT TYPES OF SUSPENSE:

- BIG, SCARY SUSPENSE
- ROMANTIC/SEXUAL TENSION
- EMOTIONAL TENSION
- GOAL TENSION
- USE THEM ALL! :-)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# SEVERAL LAYERS OF SUSPENSE

- STORY, SCENE, MICRO
- OBSTACLES ARE KEY
- "PUT YOUR CHARACTERS IN A TREE AND LIGHT IT ON FIRE" - RACHEL AARON

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# SCENE-LEVEL QUESTION(S)

- WHAT IS SCENE-GOAL? NEXT STEP?
- WHAT DECISION DO THEY MAKE + WHY?
- WHAT ACTION DO WE SEE THEM TAKE?
- OBSTACLE(S)?
- SUSPENSE: WILL THEY ACHIEVE IT?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach





# READER = POV CHARACTER

- WHAT THE POV CHARACTER THINKS/FEELS/SEES IS WHAT THE READER THINKS/FEELS/SEES
- POV CHARACTER = TRANSLATOR FOR READER
- EVERYTHING THEY NOTICE HAS MEANING FOR THE STORY (I.E. INVESTIGATOR)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# TRANSLATION = ENGAGEMENT

- OBSTACLE REFERENCED = SUSPENSE
- HOW THEY DESCRIBE SOMETHING
- HOW THEY REACT TO DIALOGUE
- HOW THEY INTERPRET OTHER'S ACTIONS
- LET US IN THE POV CHARACTER'S HEAD :-)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# USE INNER THOUGHT

- WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN?
- IF THIS HAPPENS, WHAT WILL THEY DO ?
- WHAT'S THE WORST POSSIBLE THING THAT CAN HAPPEN?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# HOW TO ADD A MYSTERY

- ADD A VILLAIN :-)
- INCREASE SUSPENSE AND TENSION WITH A MYSTERY (SUB)PLOT
- HELPS WITH PACING - WHAT'S THE LOGICAL NEXT STEP?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



ASK YOURSELF: WHAT DO I  
WANT TO EVOKE FOR THE  
READER?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

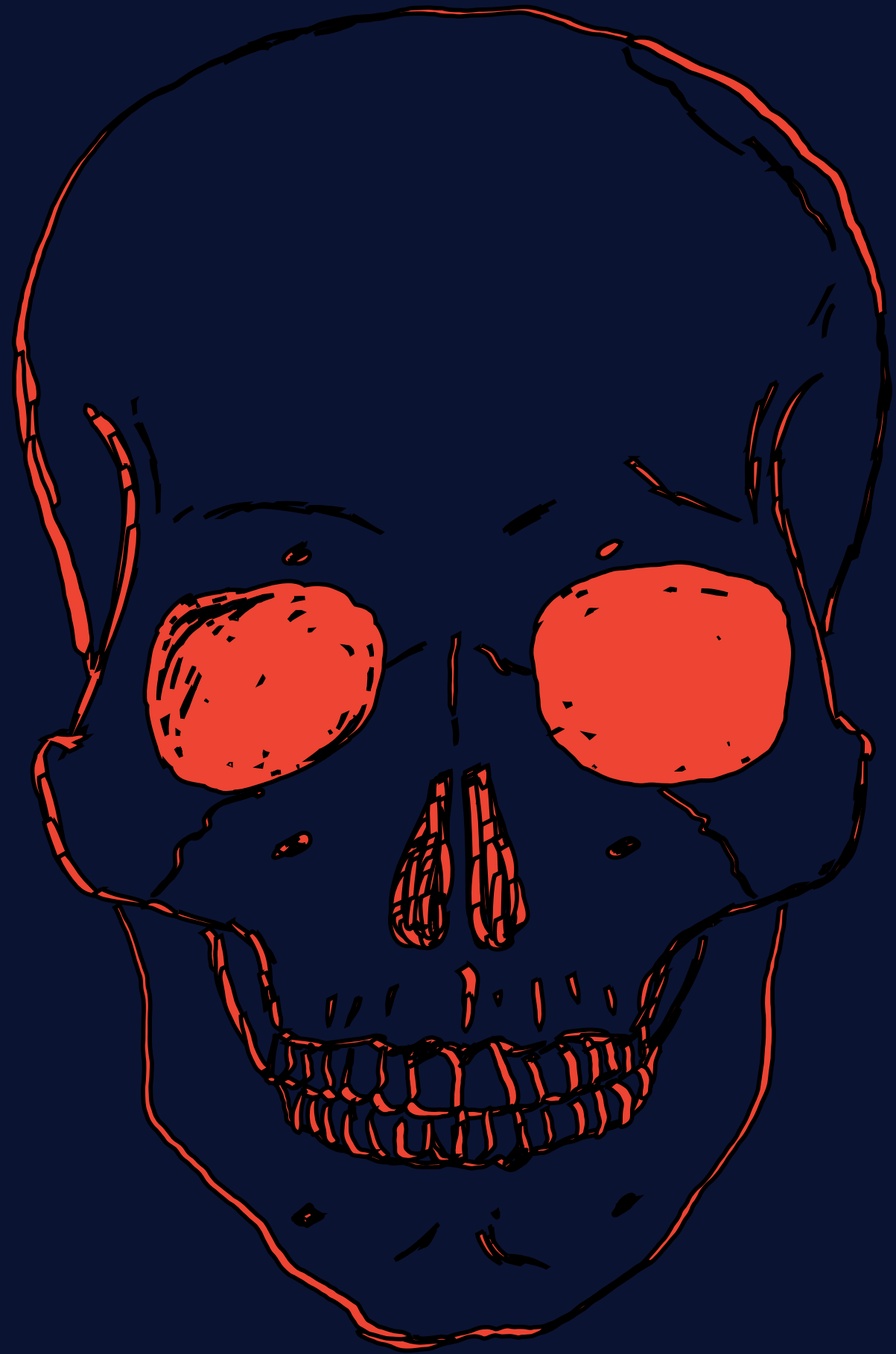


# READER MANIPULATION :-)

- SUSPENSE INCREASES READER HEART RATES, MAKES THEM A LITTLE BREATHLESS
- INTENTIONAL ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN
- INTENTIONAL WITH WHAT IS DISCLOSED WHEN
- CHEKHOV'S GUN

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



**VILLAINS:  
THE KEY TO  
SUSPENSE**



# ANTAGONIST = VILLAIN

- FOIL TO PROTAGONIST
- OPPOSITE GOAL TO PROTAGONIST'S
- WORKS ACTIVELY TO STOP MC
- PROTAGONIST WILL FACE THEM IN CLIMAX

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach





# BUT WHAT ABOUT...

- THE MARTIAN
- ANTAGONIST =
  - MARS
  - THE URGE TO GIVE UP
  - CLIMAX: DECISION TO LIVE OR DIE TRYING

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# MYSTERIES NEED A VILLAIN

- SOMEONE WORKING ACTIVELY TO ACHIEVE SOMETHING
- OPPOSITE GOAL OF PROTAGONIST
- SENTIENT (MAYBE NOT HUMAN)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN = STORY LEVEL OBSTACLE

- WILL THEY / WON'T THEY ACHIEVE THEIR GOAL? --> SUSPENSE
- ANTAGONIST VIEW OF STORY = PROTAGONIST IS VILLAIN
- STORY = CHANGE
- EQUALLY AS IMPORTANT AS MC

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# REMEMBER: CLARITY IS KEY

- OBSTACLES FORCE DECISIONS
- DECISIONS MOVE THE STORY FORWARD
- CLARITY OF MOTIVE --> IF WE KNOW WHY, WE CARE MORE
- CLARITY OF FEAR = SUSPENSE

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN DESIGN

- STARS OF THEIR OWN STORIES
- OWN WANTS/NEEDS/DESIRES
- OWN WORST FEAR
- OWN MISBELIEFS
- PROTAGONIST HAS GENERALLY MADE THINGS BAD FOR THEM

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN LOGIC

- WHAT PUSHES THEM TO KEEP DOING BAD THINGS? WHY NOT GIVE UP?
- WHAT'S THEIR NORTH STAR?
- WHY DO THEY THINK THEY'RE RIGHT?
- LOGIC IS KEY

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN MOTIVATION

- THE KEY THAT UNLOCKS TWISTS
- LOGIC IS KEY - IT HAS TO MAKE SENSE
- WHY IS STORY STARTING NOW? WHAT HAPPENED?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN/PROTAGONIST STORIES

- VILLAIN/PROTAGONIST LIVES INTERSECT AT INCITING INCIDENT
- (AND MAYBE BEFORE)
- INCITING INCIDENT AN INVITATION?  
WITNESSING SOMETHING AND MUST TAKE ACTION?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach





# USING BACKSTORY

- COULD THERE BE AN UNKNOWN CONNECTION?
- ASK "WHAT IF?"
- HOW DID PROTAGONIST RUIN VILLAIN'S PLANS?
- WHAT DOES PROTAGONIST DO ABOUT IT? HOW DOES THAT AFFECT THE VILLAIN?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# SOME IDEAS

- SECRETLY RELATED --> INHERITENCE
- ACCIDENT COVERED UP --> REVENGE
- SOMEONE "STOLE" SOMETHING
- LIES WITH RAMIFICATIONS
- LONG GAME REVENGE / JUSTICE

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# SOME IDEAS

- SECRETS: CAN'T BE/MUST BE REVEALED
- WITNESSED SOMETHING, MISINTERPRETED
- STUMBLING INTO TRUTH
- BELIEF BECAUSE X

*Samantha Skol*

author | book coach



# WHAT IF X WERE CONNECTED?

- PEOPLE DON'T JUST DO BAD THINGS -- THEY ALWAYS HAVE A LOGICAL REASON
- CONNECT THAT REASON TO OPENING SCENE
- START AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE ACTION, THEN MAKE IT WORSE :-)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



**DESIGNING  
TWISTS  
THAT  
WORK**



# TWISTS VS. REVEALS

- BOTH AMP SUSPENSE
- CHANGE COURSE OF STORY
- INTENTIONALITY IS KEY
- TWISTS = UNKNOWN READER QUESTION
- REVEAL = KNOWN READER QUESTION

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# DEFINITION OF REVEAL

- THE ANSWER TO A QUESTION THE READER  
**KNOWS TO ASK**
- WHO DID THE BAD THINGS?
- WHO TOOK THE GOLD?
- ANSWER CAN BE UNEXPECTED --> TWIST

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# DEFINITION OF TWIST

- THE ANSWER TO A QUESTION THE READER  
DOES NOT KNOW TO ASK
- "BUT I THOUGHT THIS, NOT THAT"

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach





# 3-TWIST STRUCTURE

- TWIST 1 - 50% - REVERSAL OF UNDERSTANDING
- TWIST 2 - 85% CLIMAX - WHAT/WHY VILLAIN
- TWIST 3 - 98% - UNEXPECTED BACKSTORY  
CONNECTION, MOTIVATION TWIST

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# TWISTS/REVEALS = VILLAIN TRUTH

- TWISTS/REVEALS ARE THE VILLAIN'S TRUTH, MISINTERPRETED BY THE POV CHARACTER
- RED HERRINGS = DELIBERATE MISDIRECTION
- POV'S INTERIORITY IS READER GUIDE
- AUTHOR = CAT. READER = MOUSE.

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# BEHIND THE SCENES

- CLUES MUST BE ON THE PAGE FOR SATISFYING TWISTS
  - BALANCE OF ENOUGH AND TOO MUCH
  - MUST KNOW WHAT THE VILLAIN IS DOING
- BEHIND THE SCENES SO CLUES CAN APPEAR "ON SCREEN"

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# "ON SCREEN"

- WHAT THE POV CHARACTER NOTICES **ON THE PAGE**
- LOTS OF OFF SCREEN TOO
- AVOID READER FEELING CHEATED
- MISINTERPRETATION :-)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# WHEN ALL IS REVEALED...

- IT HAS TO MAKE SENSE TO THE READER
- THINK ABOUT:
  - WHERE/WHEN
  - TRAVEL TIME
  - WHY IS VILLAIN DOING THAT? TO WHAT  
END?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# TWIST 1 - 50%

- REVERSAL OF UNDERSTANDING OF ENTIRE SITUATION
- NEW INFORMATION COMES TO LIGHT
- SOMEONE DIES, NEGATING SUSPECT
- DIDN'T REALIZE CLUE WAS IMPORTANT

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



## TWIST 2 - CLIMAX (85%-90%)

- REVERSAL OF UNDERSTANDING OF MIDPOINT
- REVEAL/CONFRONTATION OF VILLAIN
- EXPLANATION OF MOST
- NEW UNDERSTANDING OF MOTIVATION
- VILLAIN EMPATHY

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



## TWIST 3 - FINAL (98%)

- REVERSAL OF UNDERSTANDING OF CLIMAX - THINGS ARE NOT OKAY LIKE WE THOUGHT
- NEW MASTERMIND VILLAIN?
- NEW MOTIVATION REVEAL - PROTAGONIST?
- NEW UNDERSTANDING - THIS IS WORSE
- FINAL CONQUERING

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach





# TWIST DESIGN

- DELIBERATE MISDIRECTION OF THE READER
- MAKE THEM THINK THEY SHOULD BE ASKING A DIFFERENT QUESTION (RED HERRING)
- INTERIORITY!
- LOGIC AT THE TIME AND LOOKING BACKWARDS IS ABSOLUTELY KEY

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



**ADDING  
TWISTS  
WITHOUT  
REWRITING  
EVERYTHING**



# COMMON PITFALLS

- ILLOGICAL ACTIONS FOR CONVENIENCE
- LEAPS IN LOGIC
- CONVENIENT WINS OR LOSSES ON EITHER SIDE
- COINCIDENCES

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

BEFORE REWRITING,  
BRAINSTORM HOW TO  
CONNECT WHAT YOU HAVE

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# VILLAIN MACHINATIONS

- WE KNOW WHY AND WHAT
- CONSIDER
  - WHAT APPEARS ON SCREEN
  - WHAT'S HAPPENING OFF SCREEN
- ADDING A NEW TWIST? COULD IT BE SOMEONE ALREADY ON THE PAGE?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# NOTICE CLUE, THEN INTERPRET

- "ON-SCREEN" VILLAIN CLUES
- UNRELATED OTHER "CLUES" (RED HERRINGS)
- MISINTERPRETATION --> TWISTS
- YOU'RE IN CHARGE :-)

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach

ASK YOURSELF: HOW CAN  
EVERY VILLAIN CLUE BE  
MISINTERPRETED?

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



# REMINDER: SAFE BRAINSTORMING SPACE

- BE KIND TO YOURSELF. WHAT IF?
- READER CLARITY IS KEY
- BETA/CRIT PARTNER NOT GETTING IT? A CHANCE FOR READER CLARITY

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach





# RESOURCES

[WWW.SAMANTHASKAL.COM/SCIFI2023-PROWRITINGAID](http://WWW.SAMANTHASKAL.COM/SCIFI2023-PROWRITINGAID)

- Links to further reading I recommend, including a list of the links in this presentation
- Webinar handout: Suspense Checklist
- Free download: 17 Thriller Twist Ideas to Jumpstart Your Brainstorming
- Sign up for a free check-out call with me

*Samantha Skel*

author | book coach



**THANK YOU!**

[SAMANTHASKAL.COM/SCIFI2023-PROWRITINGAID](https://samanthaskal.com/scifi2023-prowritingaid)

*Samantha Skal*

author | book coach