

# Writing Dramatic Scenes

By Maralys Wills

Like a vacationer who leaves his suitcase at home, a novel or memoir won't travel far without some great dramatic scenes.

Dramatic scenes are why readers buy books.

Book lovers wallow in them. Readers like me don't just hope for them, we lust after them, yearn for them, read madly until we catch up with them. And then, having found what we're seeking, we read the scenes over and over, soaking up the drama, letting our feelings become involved. We relish them more than dramatic scenes in movies, because on the written page we can slow the scene down and revel in its individual parts; we can re-read the best lines until we've wrung out every scintilla of emotion. These scenes become ours, they're part of what we know and feel about certain characters, but even more, they're part of what we learn about the world.

You may think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not.

Show me a novel or memoir that's rich in great, dramatic scenes and I'll show you a book that becomes a best seller.

SO HOW DO YOU create a dramatic scene?

The first rule is easy. Write and keep writing. You can't do it in a line or two—or even a paragraph or two. A truly dramatic scene takes pages: paragraphs for the build-up, paragraphs for the unveiling, paragraphs for the characters' reactions, paragraphs for the resolution.

If this sounds like quite a few pages, it is—for a major scene, fifteen to twenty manuscript pages, at least.

Recently, one of my long-time students (a very smart man who is also a teacher), submitted a chapter that summed up the end of a several-year period (and many chapters), in which a decent frontier man, let's call him Jake, had been searching for his kidnapped wife. Jake makes a terrible decision when, at a crucial moment, he decides to pursue the "bad guys" instead of chasing those who almost

surely absconded with his wife. Having come agonizingly close to getting her back, this foolish Jake realizes the wife might now be lost to him forever.

The whole class waited for the inner fireworks . . . a desolate husband raving to others about his terrible mistake . . . a long period of loneliness and frustration . . . hours of agonized pacing across his meadow . . . nights spent alone in his cabin, acutely aware that his life could have been rich and full but now, because of his unthinkable misjudgment, isn't.

What we got from the writer was almost nothing—a sentence, I think. And then he wrote, “Fifteen years later . . . “

As I finished carrying on in class, beating up on the poor fellow about the enormous hole in his manuscript, he looked at me and asked with a grin, “You mean the word ‘regret’ wasn’t enough?”

We were all still laughing as class adjourned.

NOT ONLY DOES IT take pages to build a dramatic scene, but only with sufficient pages will the reader think to himself, *This is important*. Subconsciously, the reader equates sheer volume of words with significance, guessing, correctly, that if something is said in a line or two, it can't mean much.

Which is why crafty authors work hard to pull excess lines out of minor moments and add as many lines as possible to the great dramatic turning points.

THE SECOND RULE for a dramatic scene is that you must have dramatic material: heart-stopping events are required, as exemplified in these five scenes from published books: (a) a “devoted” husband tells his wife he’s leaving her for a pregnant girlfriend; (b) the director of the FBI tells a new lawyer his firm is full of crooks and killers; (c) the parents of a hang gliding champion are stonewalled for hours in a hospital, only to learn their son has died; (d) a defeated witness attempts to murder the children of the lawyer who disgraced him; (e) a young girl is lured into a neighbor’s underground hideout and raped and murdered.

It’s a rare author who doesn’t recognize his dramatic moments long before he writes them.

Assuming we have most of the ingredients for drama, how do we make the scene dramatic?

Dramatic scenes are built by slowing the action, by noting and lingering on all the small events and seemingly insignificant background details that comprise the scene.

For instance in example (a), drawn from Maeve Binchy's *Tara Road*, the author employs *fourteen pages* to build the drama of an unsuspecting wife jilted by her beloved husband—a man whom we learn, well into a restaurant scene, has a pregnant mistress.

The tension builds slowly, from the moment the wife suggests that they—the couple—ought to have a third baby, cleverly worded by the author so the wife seems to be saying a new baby would be good for the husband. The reader grasps all is not well when the husband says, “How long have you known?”

Still, the wife doesn't catch on when the husband says moments later, “I can't understand why you're so bloody calm!”

The tension builds further as the husband shouts, “Oh God, I don't believe it,” and the still-unsuspecting wife tells him to keep his voice down, she doesn't want the whole restaurant to know.

At last, a full page and a half into the scene, the husband admits he's been seeing someone and “we've just discovered she's pregnant.” He adds, “We are very happy about it. I was going to tell you next weekend. I thought suddenly that you must have known.”

In the following paragraph, note the details that are employed to slow the pace and bring the reader into the wife's grief:

“The noise in the restaurant changed. People's cutlery started to clatter more and bang loudly off people's plates. Glasses tinkled and seemed about to smash. Voices came and went in a roar. The sound of laughter from the tables was very raucous. She could hear his voice from far away. ‘Ria. Listen to me, Ree-ah.’ She couldn't have said anything. ‘I wouldn't have had this happen for the world, it wasn't part of any plan. I wanted us to be . . . I didn't go looking for something like this . . .’”

And still the scene isn't over. The husband stumbles through apologies and explanations, and the wife's responses are vague and disjointed, hardly more than a word at a time.

Finally she gets up to leave: "She walked unsteadily toward the door of the restaurant while Danny stood helplessly at the table watching her go. But her legs felt weak, and she began to sway. She wasn't going to make the door after all. (The restaurant owner) put down two plates hastily and moved toward her. He caught her just as she fell, and moving swiftly he pulled her into the kitchen."

Some writers might be dazzled by the wealth of extraneous detail like clattering cutlery, tinkling glasses, and raucous laughter, realizing that the reader has been given "reaction time"—low-key moments to respond to the seriousness of the situation.

***In fact, "reaction time" is a major component of all dramatic scenes.***

Most beginning writers would think this much display of grief would be sufficient. But no. The author shows the wife sitting up all night in her evening clothes, shows her questioned by two puzzled children the next morning, and again responding vaguely as though from a faraway planet. Only after many more pages of scenes with concerned friends, with her mother, is the beleaguered wife able to respond with something approaching normalcy.

Fourteen pages. Yet even as the story moves into other, less dramatic realms, the reader is reminded often, though now in a lower key, about the wife's continuing sense of loss.

In each of the above books, dramatic scenes are slowed (and at the same time heightened) by "telling detail" noted within the scene but not strictly necessary for what's going on. Oddly, the reader pays scant attention to this seemingly extraneous material, recognizing subconsciously which details are important and which aren't . . . while deeply affected, nevertheless, by their presence.

Dramatic scenes always imply that the stakes are high for the characters. The outcome matters a lot—and the more it matters to the characters, the more it matters to the reader. Without great importance to someone in the book, there can be no importance to the reader.

Dramatic scenes always build—from smaller events and smaller reactions to larger ones. In general, the highest, most emotional point in a scene comes toward

the end. And while the writer can include character reactions to this great moment, he cannot add a last, less important event without producing a sense that the scene “drops off.”

An additional, tacked-on event in a dramatic scene, such as characters speaking of something that happened earlier, or a final, trivial happening, pulls the scene down, and is known as “going past the dramatic point.”

The problem with going past the dramatic point is that it makes the reader feel deflated and let down. Just as he’s responding emotionally to the full impact of the electrifying moment, taking it all in viscerally, he’s asked to pay attention to something minor. And he doesn’t want to.

When the highest dramatic point is reached, the curtain must go down.

IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE that George Bernard Shaw, surely one of the world’s most gifted playwrights, was also capable of going past the dramatic point. In the last scene of “*Major Barbara*,” (which I saw twice), the ‘Major Barbara’ character comes to grips with a final, altered viewpoint, but does so in such a blizzard of words and redundancy of ideas that the audience grows ever more restless. One can literally hear them losing interest.

Seeing it for the second time, I was able to discern the repeated thoughts that dragged down an anti-climactic last speech, and I ached to get out my red pen and do some judicious cutting . . . which, of course, would be the ultimate in nerve. Ah well. Wouldn’t any of us love to create something so enduring, if a tiny bit flawed.

SOME DRAMATIC SCENES ARE mainly confrontational, built around one character gaining the upper hand over another . . . the kind of scene that I, for one, relish—perhaps because we’ve all dreamed of speaking so brilliantly that we are able to put down an adversary with just the power of words. Confrontational scenes bring out the Walter Mitty in all of us.

A small note: if the author has a choice between conveying information in narrative or in dialogue, he should choose dialogue, which is invariably more powerful. My students sometimes run through events twice—they tell it first in narrative, then again in somebody’s speech, which leaves the dialogue hanging as limp as a luffing sail.

THE FOLLOWING IS ONE of my favorite dramatic scenes, a confrontation between two characters that beautifully illuminates them both. The book is *One Summer In Between*, the author, Melissa Mather. The storyline concerns a black girl, Harriet, (the “I” character in the book) who spends the summer as a nanny for a white Vermont family, the Daleys. In a twist on conventional stereotypes, Harriet is beset by prejudices, while the host family is not.

Harriet has just gone to her bedroom and discovered that her bus ticket home is missing: “I should never have given her the ticket,’ said Mrs. Daley. ‘It wasn’t fair to put the responsibility on her.’

“I wished they would make up their minds whether they considered me a fool or a thief. I rose to my feet and I said, ‘Mrs. Daley, I honestly thought it would be safe where I hid it. Mr. Daley, I swear to God I did not take that ticket, I am not just pretending it is lost—’

“Mr. Daley thundered, ‘Is that what you think we think?’

“I said, ‘Why not?’

“‘You really think we think you are planning to cash that ticket and then tell us you lost it? You think we think you’re capable of some such lowdown, sneaky, conniving maneuver?’

“‘I—I wouldn’t be surprised if you thought so,’ I said defensively.

“‘Aren’t you accustomed to having people take your word for anything?’

“‘No, sir,’ I said. ‘Not white people.’

“‘Oh, God,’ he groaned, ‘here we go again. Can’t you keep race out of anything? Do you honestly believe, although you’ve been a member of this household if not of this family for nearly two months now, that neither Mrs. Daley nor I have any idea what kind of a person you are? Do you think because you have a black skin and we have a white skin, we immediately lose all judgment of people?’ He stood up. ‘You listen to me, Harriet Brown,’ he said. ‘I don’t have any idea where the hell that ticket is, but I know one thing for sure—neither do you.’”

Coming as it does toward the end of the book, this dramatic scene sums up the relationship between the distrustful young girl and the employer-family . . . those

wise adults who understand human behavior and motivation so much better than she does.

MOST DRAMATIC SCENES are preceded by a lengthy buildup to the big moment: Using (a) *Tara Road*, once more as an example . . . the author devotes several pages to the wife's thoughts about having a third baby, to her vague concerns that there'd recently been less lovemaking at home, to her anticipation of a lovely meal out with her husband. When the husband finally reveals the truth about his mistress, the reader feels as shocked as if a dump truck had just upended its garbage onto the woman's head.

In example (b), *The Firm*, the biggest dramatic scene in the book involves the director of the FBI (presumably J. Edgar Hoover) telling the protagonist, Mitch, the horrible truth about his law firm. But there's been plenty of buildup. A junior FBI agent has long-since approached Mitch with cautions; Mitch is lured to the big confrontation by an agent who spots him at a tax seminar; the critical meeting takes place—dramatically—near the Vietnam Wall; the weather is icy, as befits the mood of the scene; a disguised agent sits nearby in a wheelchair; Mitch is told that twenty agents guard the area.

It's hard to imagine a single dramatic device that wasn't employed in this preface. And the scene itself consumes twelve dense pages. (Closer to twenty manuscript pages.)

The buildup to example (c), *Higher Than Eagles*, when the parents learn their son has died, also involves a number of small and large precursors: another son was killed three years earlier; the first dire phone call comes to the mother when a cleaning lady is in her office, and the mother is aware both of the woman's concern and her earthy smell; the trip to the hospital involves a strange, suddenly-gloomy sky; the nurse at the admitting desk brutally stonewalls the parents; a priest happens by and the mother asks him to pray; an investigating policeman arrives and gives misleading information; the father is strangely passive, yet suddenly erupts and startles everyone by demanding a neurosurgeon; the doctor who finally emerges from the ER to tell them the truth won't speak to them there but insists the parents follow him to a special room.

The scene and its aftermath take ten printed pages.

In the dramatic scene from the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, example (c), Atticus Finch's children are attacked by a deranged maniac. The buildup includes

not only the psychological defeat of the would-be killer, Bob Ewell, by Atticus in an earlier trial, the scene itself is preceded by numerous small, dramatic events: the young girl, Scout, is encased in a “ham”—a confining pageant costume; the night is so dark that Scout trips on her way to the pageant; the children speak chillingly of Haints and incantations; starting home after the event, Scout can hardly see, and Jem worries that she might lose her balance; Jem detects a strange noise; Scout and Jem stop repeatedly because they hear someone walking, the soft rustling of trousers.

Harper Lee used ten pages to cover this event.

The final example (e) from *The Lovely Bones*, is about a young girl who is murdered by a neighbor. The author builds the scene with seemingly innocent devices: the girl’s parents and the neighbor once discussed the neighbor’s flowers; as a mirror to the fatal event, the night is dark and snowy; the neighbor frightens the girl by saying, “Don’t let me startle you”; the killer offers to show the girl his underground hideaway; since he uses her first name, the girl assumes the neighbor has heard an embarrassing story about her; the killer promises the wary girl that this event will only take a minute; the girl is aware that the man is looking at her strangely; she notices that his glasses are small and round; the girl’s ears are freezing and she thinks about the hat tucked in her pocket; as she enters the underground chamber she senses that escape will be difficult.

This scene consumes ten pages.

IN ALL DRAMATIC SCENES, there are consequences to the high drama. People’s lives are changed irrevocably.

Ria, in *Tara Road*, must recast her life and go on without her beloved husband.

Mitch, in *The Firm*, must now choose between his crooked law firm and eventual prison . . . or the FBI and a fatal “accident” at the hands of his colleagues.

The parents, in *Higher Than Eagles* must decide how to deal with the sport that’s now claimed two of their sons.

Atticus Finch, in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is forced to consider surrendering his son to be tried for murder.

The mother of the murdered girl in *The Lovely Bones* suffers so acutely that she abandons her family.

IT IS CLEAR, THEN, that a dramatic scene must include a sizable buildup—a number of large and small events and fine points that are precursors to the big moment. The dramatic event itself should be so full of important, and even unimportant, detail—some of it minutiae—that it takes a significant number of pages. The aftermath must bring momentous change to all the important characters involved.

FOR YEARS I'VE BEEN prodding my students to write longer, more detail-filled, more affecting dramatic scenes.

For an equal number of years they've responded with one or two page scenes . . . as though they'd reached the absolute limit of what one writer could conjure up for one dramatic event. As though no more was possible.

A few weeks ago, after an impassioned lecture which was almost a dramatic scene in itself, I said to them, "We're going to have a contest here. Anybody who brings me a five-page dramatic scene will get a prize." Five pages weren't nearly enough, of course, but we had to start somewhere.

To my astonishment, half a dozen students took me up on this and brought in five and six-page dramatic scenes, some so detailed and filled with such telling material they were positively astounding. I saw old scenes re-written and raised to new heights of suspense, and new scenes fleshed out with dramatic details that must have taken a great deal of thought.

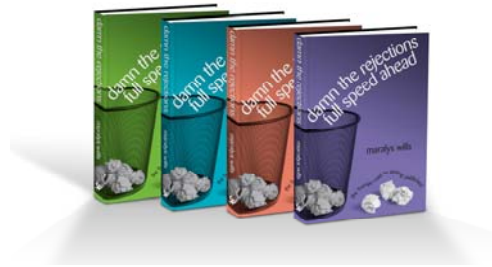
The rest of the class was as surprised as I was. Though I kept my promise and brought in prizes, the winning students seemed almost indifferent to them, as though tangible rewards of any kind were secondary to their own sense of accomplishment.

This event made me wonder—should I now start adding bribes to my weekly teaching efforts?

In any case, I hope I've finally gotten through to my students that every work of fiction, every memoir, needs at least one major scene, a huge, roaring big scene, and four or five lesser scenes, all designed to make the reader care.

Whatever else you do in your book, if you can lure the reader into emotional involvement, you've made him yours.

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