

[00:00:08] Good evening everyone. Hello. Hello. Lovely to see you all. Wow. There's loads of you tonight. Thank you so much for joining. Um, I'm going to try and say hello to some specific people, but the chat is moving very, very fast. So, hi Mike from Devon. Eric from Cornwall. Oh, it's gone very fast. Amy from Paulette, from Cher, Karen from Rusting.

[00:00:31] Louise from the Highlands. Laura from Canada. Amazing, lovely to see so many people. Michael from New York. Catherine from Canada as well, people from all over the world. Lovely to see you. Thank you so much for joining me tonight. So this is the first session of Build Your Book Month, which honestly is one of my favourite months that we do here at Jericho Writers because I have a very typo personality.

[00:00:55] And this month is all to do with plannings. It's like my favourite topic to talk about. [00:01:00] Um, but if you caught the Tuesday newsletter earlier, um, I did do a blog post specifically to do with planning, and I explained that actually, although build your book month is about novel planning, it works whether you are.

[00:01:15] A plotter or a panther or somewhere in between. It's really a month to just get you thinking about your story and get you thinking about structure and what kind of things could happen in your story, and whether those thoughts end up on a very type a spreadsheet like mine do, or whether they just live in your head and you know, you can sort of discover them as you write them and then tweak them and, and change things as you go whatever way you work.

[00:01:43] Is the correct way. There is no right way to plot or plan a book. So don't worry if you don't fall into that plotter category, this will still be helpful for you. This first session we're gonna be talking about turning the spark of an [00:02:00] idea. So whether it's a picture in your mind or a particular character you want to write about, or whatever it is, that was the idea you had when you said, I wanna write a book about X, Y, Z.

[00:02:11] Taking that idea and turning it into something that is more a premise. And when I say premise, I mean it's something that is going to carry an entire novel because there is a difference between an idea. That would be good for a short story or a novella and an idea that will carry an entire novel. So we're gonna talk about that today.

[00:02:32] This session is available to everyone. The rest of build your book month is for premium members only. So if that is not you, I do encourage you to join. You can do it either by paying for the year, which is the most cost effective way, you can pay upfront for 50 pounds or split it into 15 pound per month installments.

[00:02:51] Or if you just want to join for build your book month, then you don't want to commit to an entire year. You can join on our flex plan, and that is 30 [00:03:00] pounds and it's a rolling sub subscription. So if you join today, just make sure that you cancel at the end of the 30 days or before the end of the 30 days so that you don't roll into another month.

[00:03:09] Hope that will make sense. If Debbie, yes, it is actually live, don't worry, it is actually live. I can see those questions coming in. Yes, if you are interested in joining, then my colleague Johnny is in the chat, he's gonna pop a link to build your book month in the chat and you'll be able to join there.

[00:03:26] So with all of that said, we're gonna get started. I'm gonna start my slides. If you could just pop into the chat and let me know if you can see my slides, that would be wonderful. Um, hopefully you can see a big blue slide saying from Spark to story

[00:03:50] pop a yes into the chat, if you can see. Yes. Wonderful. Lovely. Thank you very much. Okay, we'll get started then. So the goal today is simple. By the end of this [00:04:00] workshop, you will walk away with a clear, testable premise for your story. I think that's supposed to say tested premise for your story. Every story starts with a spark.

[00:04:13] So this could take many different forms. It depends on what kind of person you are and what kind of sparks your ideas. Uh, but it could be a question that intrigues you, it could be a character or a setting. Quite often for me, it's that I, I tend to come up with settings very, very early on in the process and a couple of times that has been my spark and I've, I've pictured a setting and thought that would be a great place that I write psychological, thriller, novel.

[00:04:40] So I'd be like, that is a great place for a psychological thriller novel, and then I'll build it from there. It might be an image that sticks in your mind. Maybe it's a particular scene that stuck in your mind. There was one of my books, I just had this vision of someone walking in on a crime scene and immediately [00:05:00] knowing in their hearts, hearts that it was their son that did it.

[00:05:02] And then that it was kind of a mixture between three and one because it then created that question of, well, what would I do if. I, I suspected that my son had committed a murder. So things like that can really help to spark your ideas. Andy, don't worry, we are going to be sending out copies of the slides and a replay as well.

[00:05:22] It could be a particular plot point that is, stuck in your head and you keep thinking about this particular part of the plot that you think would be really good for a story. Um, it might be a specific chapter. Oftentimes we can think about the opening of a book and we think this would be a brilliant opening.

[00:05:39] I know exactly. I can picture exactly how it's gonna start and I just need to, you know, work out the rest. Sometimes we end up with the climaxes in our head, so like the big exciting chapter towards the end. That could be the thing that we can picture it really clearly and then we need to kind of build up to it.

[00:05:56] Um, and it could be something else. You know, those are just some examples of, [00:06:00] different ways that ideas can come to us. But, so firstly what I want you to do is go into the chat and write what your spark is for this particular book that you're writing or this particular book that you are hoping to write when you come out of the end of Build Your Book month.

[00:06:17] What is the spark of your story? I'd really love to see those in the chat. We'll read through a couple of them in a minute, but why a spark isn't enough. 'cause it's all very well having that spark of an idea. But as we all know, actually turning that into a novel is quite something else. Many, many people have ideas for a book.

[00:06:38] Very few people actually write a book. There is a big difference. And if we dive straight into the writing without testing the idea's strength, we can often hit roadblocks. We can often end up in a situation where we start writing and maybe we get to 10,000 words and we think, you know what? This really isn't an idea that's gonna end up being, 80,000 words long, or [00:07:00] 90,000 words long.

[00:07:01] Um, so that can really be a stumbling block for us. Let's have a look at some of these books that are coming through. A woman on a train. What would it take to overwhelm the afterlife? Really good question there. A young woman with an intellectual disability who a hundred, a hundred percent believes that Disney characters are real.

[00:07:21] I love that. That reminds me of once Upon A Time, which is like one of my favorite shows, uh, near Future Dystopia based on widow conservation. Uh, old man remembering the time he fell in love. Love that. Rich quick, master Thief dispute over a house. Brilliant. Okay. There's lots of really good sparks being posted into the chat.

[00:07:46] Thank you so much for sharing those. Okay, so I'm gonna give you a real life example. So this is an idea that I had for a book a couple of years ago, and it was a woman waking up in a bunker with a man that she doesn't know, [00:08:00] and he tells her that she can't leave the bunker because of some kind of poison in the air.

[00:08:04] I didn't really plot out the book enough to know what it was stopping them from leaving the bunker, but he says if you leave the bunker, you're gonna die. And she has to figure out if he's telling the truth or not. So that was my idea and there were a couple of things that stopped me from writing this novel.

[00:08:19] On the face of it, it is a good idea for a psychological thriller novel. It's got lots of room for tension, doubting herself, doubting the man, lots of rim for. Very emotional scenes. It really played into the isolation, trope, all of that kind of stuff. But

[00:08:40] there were a few issues that stopped me from writing this book. One of those things is that there would only be one setting because it was the bunker and she wasn't able to leave the bunker, so we would just be stuck in that one setting for the entire novel. The other thing was that there would only be one other character.[00:09:00]

[00:09:00] I mean, I, I was thinking maybe I could add in another character who's been locked down there for years or whatever, but then it just kind of took away the whole thing of, well, this horrible thing has happened outside and I, I rescued you and you can't leave. Because like, if there was someone else who had been there for years, then you would instantly know that actually he's a bad guy and he's, you know, holding people in there.

[00:09:21] So that would've kind of ruined it. So that's not really gonna work. And I probably could have got away with it by having her kind of flashback to her life before the bunker. So I could have added in more settings that way I could have added in more characters that way 'cause she could have been thinking about her husband, for example, and stuff like that.

[00:09:39] But I just suspected that it would end up more literary than commercial. So I write very commercial fiction. And because of the reliance on, you know, the slower pacing, I think it would've ended up feeling more, it would've slowed [00:10:00] down the pacing to the point where it would've felt more literary than commercial.

[00:10:02] My readers really do expect very fast paced books with lots of twists and turns very domestic. And it just didn't feel right. So that's the reason why I ended up not writing this particular. Stuck. But I did like the idea and I think it would work really well as a short story. And I might do it as a short story at some point.

[00:10:22] But it wasn't for me something that I particularly felt strongly about turning into a novel. And that's one of the things we're gonna talk about, which is probably more important than any of the other points that I'm gonna talk about today, which is that if you don't feel particularly passionate about an, an idea, or if you don't feel particularly excited about an idea, there is no point in writing that book.

[00:10:45] Because writing a book is hard and it takes a very long time. And you're gonna have to reread this book many, many, many, many times because you're gonna be editing it many, many times. So unless you feel really passionate about an idea, really excited by an [00:11:00] idea, there's just no point in starting it because you're gonna end up wasting your time 'cause you just won't stick with it.

[00:11:08] So how to test your sparks viability. You've got a few questions you can ask yourself, and we're gonna go through each of these questions one by one. So don't worry about asking them just now, but you can ask yourself, does my spark naturally raise conflict and stakes? Really important. Doesn't matter which genre you're writing in, by the way, every genre is, every genre needs to have conflict and stakes, even if it is internal conflict.

[00:11:36] Does my spark lead to a central question that the reader will want answered? Can it generate enough obstacles, twists, or complications to fill an entire novel? So again, we are talking it, it does depend on genre and also age range. But for an adult commercial fiction book, we are looking at sort of 80 to a hundred thousand words.

[00:11:58] Fantasy and literary tend [00:12:00] to run longer. Sci-fi tends to run a little bit longer. Obviously ya and Children's is gonna run much shorter. Have

a look at what the expectation is for your genre, um, and think about, you know, is this idea going to generate enough plot points to fill that amount of words?

[00:12:19] Is there room for my characters to grow, change or be tested in meaningful ways? And does it excite me enough that I'm, I'll still want to write about it months from now? Really important. So we're going to go through each of these one by one. And we are going to talk about some different ways that you can kind of test your idea for these questions.

[00:12:43] So firstly, we'll talk about does it naturally raise conflict and stakes? So one thing you can try is writing your spark at the top of a page and listing at least five things that could go wrong because of it. So I'm going to use an [00:13:00] example from the chat. Let's have a look. A lonely child and a patisserie shop.

[00:13:05] This is Ruth's Spark. So she's got her lonely child, she's got her patisserie shop. What are five things that could go wrong in that patisserie shop? Have a go at that. Identify what two opposing forces your spark brings into play. Um, some of the examples there are order versus chaos, loyalty versus betrayal.

[00:13:25] Those are very common ones, and if you can name them, then conflict is automatically built into your story. So again, that's, have a look at these barks. Mariah is a spaceship and the crew, what two opposing forces are happening on that spaceship? Have we got the captain and the first mate both trying to control the situation that's conflict?

[00:13:48] Have we got aliens attacking the spaceship? That's conflict. So you should always have two opposing forces. And it might be, as I mentioned, internal conflict. It might be your, you know, two, [00:14:00] two sides of your head are opposing each other, or your heart and your head are opposing each other or, or whatever it is.

[00:14:07] Write your spark as a sentence and then add, but or until to force conflict. So an example here, which you're probably familiar with, a mistreated boy lives under the stairs until a giant tells him he's a wizard and it's gonna turn everything on its head. So let's have a look at this. A photo of an ancestor and the story that went with it. So Caroline a photo of an ancestor and the story that went with it. So she's found the story and she is sorry, she, she's found the photo of her ancestor and she's, I don't know, moving all of the stuff, uh, into a attic until she discovers this interesting story or until she finds out that the house is in dispute in terms of the ownership or something like that.

[00:14:57] Um, that's a good way to kind of add in that [00:15:00] conflict. Okay. Does your spark lead to a central question? So you can phrase your spark as a question. So you can say, what if or how will, and then does it make you want to know the answer? So an example with this would be so Sarah's persecution of old people.

[00:15:21] What if old people got persecuted? That's a central question that you can have answered, and you need to ask that question and then ask yourself as a reader, not as a writer, as a reader. Would I want that question answered? Because the thing with story ideas is if you as a reader would be interested in this story, then odds are someone else is going to be interested in it as well.

[00:15:46] Try to explain your spark to a friend in one sentence. It's really tricky, but you've shown me that you can do it because you put it into the chat here. Try to explain your spark to a friend in one sentence, and if they immediately ask, [00:16:00] and then what happens? Then you know you've got a strong story question.

[00:16:05] And identify at least one piece of information that the reader won't know until much later in the story. If you can identify one piece of information that you are going to keep hidden until a certain point of the, of the story, then that is immediately a, a central question that is the readers are going to want to have answered, and they're going to have to read the book in order to find out the answer.

[00:16:28] But it's also a plot point right there. A good story will often have a really good twist in it, even if it's not a thriller, even if it's a romance. It might be that ex-boyfriend comes back on the scene or whatever, but there's usually some kind of reveal that happens in the story. Can it generate enough obstacles?

[00:16:50] This is a really, really important one. So this is something I do for every single one of my ideas is I will spend 10 minutes brainstorming every possible [00:17:00] obstacle, big or small, realistic or bizarre. You won't use all of them, so it doesn't matter if it is completely bizarre and ridiculous, but just list it down anyway.

[00:17:09] Because the reason it's really important to list it down, even if it feels like it's a stupid idea that you are never going to use, it might then spark something else. It might unlock something in your brain that you think, actually that's not going to work. But something similar could work and it might, kick off your imagination.

[00:17:27] So literally 10 minutes, just brain dump. Put as many things onto the page as you possibly can, as many different plot points. Big or small, if they are big things, then maybe take that big plot point and then think about other things that branch off of that, like a domino effect. And just get as much down on the paper as you possibly can.

[00:17:46] And then you're not worrying about structure or what order everything's going to be revealed. You're just getting the ideas for the plot points onto the page, and then you can start working them into some kind of structure. And it's really fun. It's like doing a [00:18:00] puzzle. Ask, what's the worst thing that could happen to my character?

[00:18:07] And apply that to your spark. So, uh, we will look at, uh, so image of a boy and an old man traveling together in a cart. David's, uh, spark. What's the worst thing that could happen in that situation? Ask yourself that question and see what the answer is. What would typically happen in my genre? Ask yourself that question and then you can either say, you know, what would typically happen in my genre?

[00:18:33] And lean into those tropes. They're tropes for a reason because they work and people appreciate them. But the other thing that you can do, which is probably better for you to do in terms of being a little bit more unique and a little bit more creative, is how can I bend or subvert that expectation?

[00:18:50] So how can I take what a reader would expect when reading this story and twist it and change it so that it's not quite what they would expect, so that [00:19:00] they're a little bit surprised when the reveal actually happens? Is there room for my characters to grow? So jot down who your character is at the start and who they might be at the end.

[00:19:14] You're looking for a clear contrast. We have got a full session in Build Your Book Month, which is specifically talking about mapping the character's emotional journey. It's so important because it doesn't matter what plot happens and what kind of events are unfolding throughout your story, but unless the reader cares about the character, they're not going to care what happens to that character.

[00:19:37] So you could have the most exciting plot in the world, but if they don't connect with the character and they don't, want to find out more about that character's journey, then they're not going to read it. So it is really, really important to think quite deeply about your characters and what that emotional journey looks like for them.

[00:19:55] Who they are at the beginning, who they're going to be at the end, and what that transformation might look [00:20:00] like. Imagine your setting before the spark and after it, and then what big changes happen. It might not be that the setting changes at all, but it might be that it does really change. It might be that before your idea, it's a nice, calm, beautiful world, and after your idea kicks in, it's suddenly a water torn world.

[00:20:22] You know, there's lots of comparisons there. There can be lots of comparisons there between the beginning of the novel and the end of the novel. Not just with the character, but with the setting as well. And write a quick paragraph about what deeper human truth or theme your spark might explore. Now, I'm someone, as I mentioned, I write commercial fiction.

[00:20:44] I am not the kind of writer who is trying to make a point with my books, who's trying to send some kind of deep message. I think it's great if you are writing a book for that purpose and you want to, you know, share a particular theme and message with the [00:21:00] world. But that not me, I write my books because I want people to be entertained, which is, you know, equally a good reason to write a book.

[00:21:07] I just want people to be entertained for a few hours while they've been to read my book home. I'm not. Too bothered about sending any specific message with my books. But even so, all my books do have theme built into them. They naturally do because it's the human experience. I'm writing about humans.

[00:21:26] And so my books deal with grief. They deal with trauma, they deal with betrayal, they deal with resilience, all these things. So have a think about what deeper human truths or themes you are exploring in this particular idea and think about the transformation that comes with that. 'cause transformation quite often is tied to theme.

[00:21:49] Does it excite me enough? So, as I mentioned, this is a really, really key question to ask yourself. One thing I do suggest if you are not sure if it's [00:22:00] exciting you enough, is to create a quick Pinterest board. Pinterest is really good for, getting all of in inspiration images together.

[00:22:07] You could just do an image collage as well, and if you find yourself getting carried away with it and, you know, constantly coming back to it and pinning more stuff and just getting quite excited about it, and that is a great sign of lasting energy. Just be careful that you don't do this too much to the point where you never start writing the book, because I've done that as well where

I've just planned and planned and pinned and pinned and I've created soundtracks and all sorts and it's, you know, got in the way of actually writing the book.

[00:22:36] So just be careful with that. You can draft a flash scene from your spark without worrying about where it fits or if you will even use it. So just a really quick scene. It doesn't even have to be in the book. Like, it literally doesn't matter. It's just something that is off the back of your spark, a quick scene, maybe 500 words.

[00:22:59] And then if [00:23:00] you get to the end of that 500 words and you are eager to write more, you are eager to continue the scene, you are eager to see where it goes, then it's a good sign that your excitement is gonna be sustainable. And then this is something that I always do with every single book that I write is when I come to.

[00:23:21] Having an idea, I'll think about it and I will, in my head, I'll start thinking about different things that could happen in the novel, and I might even note it down. I try not to, I try to keep it in my head, and then if I'm still thinking about it in a week's time, two weeks time, then I know that it's a really good idea.

[00:23:44] It's the ones that I end up writing are always the ones that I can't stop thinking about. And if I have, it is a bit of a scary concept, because if I have an idea that I don't write down and then I forget it the following day. To [00:24:00] me, as much as it's a scary thought that I've had an idea and then I've forgotten it because I didn't write it down, it probably wasn't that good an idea if I've forgotten it, because my brain tends to latch on to the really good ideas, and when my brain does latch onto those ideas and I just can't stop thinking about it, that's when I know, okay, I think I've got something here and I really need to sit down and do my mind map, do my brainstorming.

[00:24:24] But as I said, if it's, if it's one that just goes out of my head after a day or two, then I think it probably wasn't that good because I wasn't excited enough about it to constantly think about it. I hope that makes sense. Uh, yeah. Tracy Soundtracks, a lot of people do that actually. They'll put together soundtracks for their novel, like inspiration soundtracks, and sometimes you can listen to it and as you're writing and it'll kind of spark, spark your inspiration.

[00:24:53] Okay. So if after doing this work, the answer is yes. So all of the questions, then [00:25:00] it is time to flesh it out into an actual premise. So if you've gone through, you've taken your spark, you've answered all of these

questions, and you've gone yes. I've, you know, I've got enough ideas that I think I can put together a real thorough plot.

[00:25:15] I've got some great character transformation going on in there. You know, I've thought about how much I'm excited about it, and I, and I really am, I can't stop thinking about it. If you've gone through all of those questions and you are yes to every single one of them, that's the point where you can say, okay, this is a good idea, and I'm going to start fleshing it out into an actual premise.

[00:25:37] So we're going to talk about how to do that. So the first thing you need to do is you need to gather your materials. So get your spark, whatever that initial idea or images that you had the idea about. It might be that you write it down in front of you, the conflict and stakes that you came up with in the question process.

[00:25:58] So when you were doing those questions and you [00:26:00] said, is this idea going to generate conflict and stakes? Write that down, try and summarize it again in one sentence, and have that in front of you as well. Your central question that it's raised. 'cause don't forget you are saying you need to have said yes to all of those questions.

[00:26:14] So you should have conflict, you should have stakes, you should have a central question, get it all written down, and also your brain dump of plot points. Get all of that stuff gathered in front of you. It could be digital, could be on paper. I tend to do mine on paper. As I said, it could be in your head, but I do find it easier to have everything down, written down so that I can see it.

[00:26:35] And then this is the formula for. A premise, really simple formula you can use. Don't worry too much about making it particularly marketable, because this isn't a premise to include on a query letter. It's not a premise to include when you're pitching to agents or anything like that. It's for your own personal use.

[00:26:56] It's a premise that you can kind of think, right, this is what my book is about, and you can [00:27:00] just keep coming back to it. So a protagonist must achieve a goal, but there are obstacles. And if they don't. Overcome the obstacles stakes. So a protagonist must goal, but obstacle, otherwise stakes. So we'll have a look at this in actual context.

[00:27:22] We're going to talk about my book that I've been documenting in my diary of a published author series. So if you are a premium member, you'll know

that I've been doing an event pretty much every single month where I've been documenting the process of writing my fifth sixth book. My sixth book. And I've been sharing, you know, my process throughout that we're going to do this process here for that book.

[00:27:47] So the spark of an idea for that book was creepy man house and crazy mother-in-law. That was the spark of the idea. I was like, I want it set in a creepy man house and I want there to be a crazy mother-in-law. [00:28:00] Didn't know any more than that at that point. Then I went through my process and I asked all of my questions, and then I turned it into this premise.

[00:28:09] A young wife must keep her secret hidden from her new husband, but her mother-in-law knows it. She must stop her from telling otherwise her marriage will end. That's the premise of the book. So young wife protagonist must keep her secret hidden from her new husband. That's her goal, but her mother-in-law knows it.

[00:28:30] That's the obstacle. She must stop her from telling otherwise her marriage will end. That's the stakes. Okay, and then from there you can expand the idea. So into three sentences, introduce the protagonist and the spark. Second sentence, outline The central conflict or obstacle or and obstacle. Really, sentence three, highlights the stakes or the transformation. [00:29:00]

[00:29:00] Again, what this looks like for that particular book sentence. One. Newlywed Mely moved into her mother-in-law, Pauline's crumbling man house to help care for her after she had a stroke, which left her bedbound and unable to speak. Sentence two. When she discovers that Pauline knows her darkest secret, she must do everything in her power to ensure that Pauline never learns to speak again.

[00:29:21] Sentence three. If she does, she'll tell Mely secrets which will end her ma marriage. Can Mely keep both her secret and her morals? So you can see how that tiny little spark of an idea has gone from that spark to a very quick premise to a expanded premise. And actually this premise here, the three sentence version, is probably much closer to the kind of premise that I would include on a query letter if I was querying query.

[00:29:50] So you can see how this process can really help you at that stage of writing a book, as well as right here at the beginning. And I know it might seem a bit crazy [00:30:00] to do this right now, but just having this idea of this is what my book is about, even if you don't know what the ending is even if you

are a discovery writer or a panther and you just know, this is what my story's about, but I've got no idea what's actually going to happen.

[00:30:16] Like I've got no idea how she's going to stop her mother-in-law from, telling her secret. I've got no idea how that's going to happen. I don't know how it's going to end. I'm going to discovery, write it. Just having this premise is enough to really keep you on track and keep you focused on the core idea of your story.

[00:30:33] 'cause quite often what we see when we are reviewing people's work and things is that they will have an idea, but where they are discovering discovery writing and they've not got this core premise very clear in their head, they start going off into all these different directions and it gets quite messy.

[00:30:50] And sometimes we end up where by the time we get through quarters of the way through the novel or towards the end of the novel, we are in a situation where [00:31:00] it's not even the same. Book as the book we started with, it feels like a completely different novel. And that is a symptom of not following through with the premise.

[00:31:09] It's always referred to as the promise of the premise. So whatever you start with in your book, you should be continuing that experience for the reader all the way through to the end. Can you say what the original spark was? So, the original sparks on my book was creepy, man house, crazy mother-in-law.

[00:31:27] That's all I had, that's all I knew. And then I expanded it from there. I did my questions. I asked myself if there were enough plot points, I asked myself what the conflict was and it kind of grew from there. What were the three questions? Let me go back to those quickly. This one. I think this is the one that you mean, Sharon.

[00:31:48] Um, introduce the protagonist and spark, outline the central conflict and obstacle, and highlight the stakes or transformation. As I said, I will send you, um, the slides and the replay once they are ready. [00:32:00] Okay, so once you have written your three sentence premise, I'm actually giving this to you as a bit of homework today.

[00:32:07] I want you to share it into townhouse and see what people think. So I've created a forum on townhouse. If you're not yet a member of Townhouse, you can join for free. So you just need a free account to get in there. It's just our

community for writers, and I've created a forum in there where you can post your premise.

[00:32:26] I want you to post it in there much like we do with feedback Friday. Post it in there. Johnny has just put a link in the chat for you and make sure you go and look at other people's premises as well and give feedback on theirs. And then you are more likely to get feedback from them. It's really good to kind of share that sort of thing with, uh, your fellow writers and when you are sharing it and when you're giving feedback on other people's.

[00:32:49] Just have a think about, are you, is the premise actually. Reflective of those questions that we've [00:33:00] gone through. You know, when you are reading someone's premise, think to yourself, am I getting a question in my head? Am I asking myself what happens next? Is there conflict and stakes here? Is there room for character growth with this premise?

[00:33:14] And if the answer's no when you're reading it, then that's a really important thing to say in a very polite way. Please be nice to each other, but say, this is a really good premise. I think that there could be slightly stronger stakes, um, or something like that. 'cause that's, it's one of those things where you don't always see it on your own premise, but sometimes when other people look at it, they might see something that you don't.

[00:33:38] So it's really good to get feedback from other people. And also it might be that they notice something that you didn't, in terms of the question that's raised, or the stakes. It might be that they. Go. Oh, that's, that's really amazing. It really makes me want to know what's going to happen with that particular character.

[00:33:57] And it may be that you, when you were writing the premise, [00:34:00] you didn't have that particular character in your head as a particularly important character, but that's who the reader has latched onto. So it is a really good, um, activity to do. Okay, so we have some time for questions. So I'm just going to take a drink 'cause I feel like I've been talking very quickly.

[00:34:18] If you need me to go over anything else, then I absolutely can. But we're going to go to questions. So in the q and a tab, there should be a, a tab that says Q and A. If you click over to that, you can pop your questions in there and I will be able to help you. I'm just going to have a quick look through the rest of the chat as well.

[00:34:42] You'd love to see the breakdown of three sentences. Again, I'll quickly go back to that. Um, as I mentioned, I will. Send this out to you. So there we go. I'll leave it on the screen just for a little bit longer. Fabulous. And yeah, we've got the link in there as well. A [00:35:00] book from the point of view of the poor mother-in-law would be fascinating.

[00:35:03] Yeah, that would be a really, a really good book. In fact, I might, I was thinking actually about, um, doing some kind of lead magnet. Like we, we sometimes offer short stories, but in exchange for an email address. So I was thinking of doing a short story from the point of view of the mother-in-law and offering that as like a incentive to join my mailing list.

[00:35:24] 'Cause it would be really interesting to see it from that point of view as well. Yes, the, the slides will be available, don't worry. Cool. Okay. I'm going to go to q and a. I'm going to stop sharing my slides so that. You can see me a bit better. Okay. So with a dual timeline, POV, would you write a premise for each?

[00:35:50] That's a really good question. I write dual timeline and multi POV novels all the time. I love them. It does make it very complicated though, and it gives you a much [00:36:00] harder job to do. So, well done to be brave. We are actually, we've got a whole session in build your book month on multi POV novels and how you can go about planning a multi POV novel.

[00:36:10] So if that's you, definitely join, build your Book month so that you can watch that session. 'cause I'm going to be going into a lot more detail about it. I would try and write a single premise that covers both POVs and both timelines. And it can be really tricky as an example. Let me think about, so my fifth Book Secret and number seven has got a multi timeline. So we've got the now chapters, which form the main part of the story, and then we have before chapters, which are her as a child. And it shows kind of what happened to her in the past to get her to where she's now for that particular novel.

[00:36:53] The now chapters are the main part of the story. The before chapters are incredibly important because if it [00:37:00] wasn't for the before chapters, then now chapters wouldn't happen. But the main narrative of the story is the present day. So for my premise that is what I focused on, doesn't mean that the before chapters are any less important.

[00:37:13] It doesn't mean that it was something that took any less effort to write. It just means that's not where the focus of the story is. And if you think about books that you pick up in the shop and you read the back cover copy,

usually you will see a central storyline, even if the other storyline is kind of mentioned as well.

[00:37:35] And same thing for multi POV, usually they will link together in some way, unless you've got one of those stories where they are completely separate POVs, right? Until the, the very end. But there should be something that links them. And even if it's a case of your premise, it's something like a disaster a disaster occurs and we see the experience of five strangers [00:38:00] and how they react to that disaster.

[00:38:01] I've just plucked that from the top of my head. So it's not very good, but even if it is five completely different people, five completely different stories, there should be something linking those stories together. If there's not something linking those stories together, then it, the two stories probably don't belong in the same novel.

[00:38:18] So whatever it is that's linking the timelines together or linking the characters together, that's your premise. I hope that makes sense. It's a bit difficult to say without reading your specific book but hopefully that helps. How would you do this if you're writing a literary story where you see the mental decline of the protagonist exactly the same way.

[00:38:38] So just because you're writing literary doesn't mean that the questions that I have listed. Don't apply. You still need to have things happening in your book, even if it is the mental decline of the protagonist and you know how they deal with that. Um, they still need [00:39:00] conflict. And it sounds like your, the conflict is born out of their mental health and the decline in mental health.

[00:39:06] How do they deal with that? How do they go up against it? So even in a literary fiction novel, you should still be able to ask those questions. And it might just be that there are less obvious plot points as in, oh, say the example of bombs exploding because that's like a big, you think about a big action story there bombs exploding and timers going off and, dams in distress and all of these different.

[00:39:28] Plot points, but it might be that the plot points within your literary fiction novel are just more internal and they're happening within the protagonist, if that makes sense. And as I mentioned, quite often transformation stems off of theme and with literary fiction theme is incredibly important. Focusing on those areas,

[00:39:53] can you give an example of this point? Spend 10 minutes brainstorming every possible obstacle, big or small, realistic or bizarre? I don't know how [00:40:00] to give an example of that without actually showing you my brain dump, which I don't want to do because it's got spoilers for my books on there.

[00:40:08] Have you ever seen the, the mind maps that they make you do at school where you've got like a word in the middle and it's in a cloud and then you've got loads of lines coming off of it? That's basically what I do. So I'll write my spark in the middle of the cloud and then I'll have all the lines coming off of it and it'll be like so for example, if, if we do want to go down the route of an example, we use the story about the woman in a creepy man house and with a crazy mother-in-law, one of the lines coming off of that could be why is she in the creepy house?

[00:40:43] Okay. One of the questions could be, why is the mother-in-law crazy? What's the mother-in-law trying to do? What's she trying to achieve that the protagonist doesn't want her to achieve? Does she like the protagonist? If she doesn't, why doesn't she? The more you. Go off of that [00:41:00] first initial spark, the more questions you should be asking yourself.

[00:41:04] And every time you an answer a question, it should then present yourself with more questions that you can kind of have branching off. I hope that makes sense. I'll see if I can put together a visual and then I'll post it in townhouse as well. How do you decide who is your protagonist? Really good question.

[00:41:22] If you are a premium member, I really recommend you watch my big picture edit webinar. That one, even though it's talking about editing, I talk a lot about why it's your protagonist story to tell, and that is a really important question to ask yourself, and it's one that people don't think about quite a lot of the time.

[00:41:44] It's, it's a big issue that we see a lot of the time when we're reviewing people's work. And it is basically the concept of if you, I always use the example of being on a train, and like I say, a bomb going off. And if you're on a train and a bomb's going off, that's going to be a horrendous [00:42:00] situation for you.

[00:42:01] But it's also going to be an equally horrendous situation for the person sitting next to you and the person sitting next to them and for the driver and everyone in the area is going to be a horrendous, equally horrendous

situation for them. So why is it your protagonist story to tell instead of the other person who's on the train?

[00:42:22] And the way that you can make it their story to tell is because you can say, well, this particular character is trying to get somewhere, right? They're trying to get to their son who is dying, and they've only got a day to get there. Otherwise they're not going to get there. And so, yes, it's equally horrendous for everyone, but for this particular protagonist, if they don't get there, they're not going to reconcile with their son.

[00:42:53] It's going to be too late. So you can see how by adding in stakes, personal [00:43:00] stakes for a character, it can suddenly be a lot more their story to tell than other people's story to tell. The other example I use is an example of a woman whose job it is to save a rainforest and it's being cut down. But her colleague, it's their job as well to save the rainforest.

[00:43:20] So why is it her story to tell instead of her colleague? Well, she when she was a child, she spent all her time in the forest and it's the only place that she felt safe and secure. And it means so much to her because it's where she used to go with her mum, you know? So she's then got that personal connection to the forest.

[00:43:38] She's got those personal stakes. If this forest gets cut down, I'm going to lose the place. That means so, so much to me. So, yes, my colleague, it's their job too, and it's going to be awful if the forest gets cut down, but it's not going to be as awful for them as it will for me. So that's how I do it. I think about the spark, I think about the setting, whatever it is that [00:44:00] is forming the base of my idea.

[00:44:02] And I think who, whose story is it really to tell? And I ask that question for myself, and that will usually, it will again lead to questions. And the more I answer the questions, the more I kind of come up with that solid idea. I'm just going to let my dog out. Two seconds.

[00:44:21] She was crying at me to go outside. Okay. Uh, Jackie, I've shown it a couple of times, but like I say, I will send out the slides, so don't worry about that. Would you do this process for a short story too, or is it too much? You absolutely can for a short story. Obviously. Because of the nature of a short story, you are not going to need as many plot points.

[00:44:42] So when it comes to things like brain dumping loads and loads of plot points to make sure you fill out the word count, that's not going to be such

an important step. But short stories should absolutely still have conflict and stakes and questions raised for the reader and transformation. So character transformation, you're not going to get so much of a [00:45:00] transformation in a very short amount of time.

[00:45:02] But yeah, you can absolutely go through this process for a short story as well. It just might be that you don't have to do it quite so in depth. Can you talk a bit about what comes with membership? Absolutely, Mary. Um, so I'm head of membership. I don't think I actually said that. I'm head of membership.

[00:45:18] My name's Becca, so you'll see me a lot. Basically we do events like this multiple times a month. We have an ask us anything session. At the beginning of, of every month where you guys can come onto Zoom with us, ask us questions we consider ourselves, your writing agony on, and um, yeah, ask us any questions and we'll try to give you advice on all things writing and publishing.

[00:45:40] We have a critique club session at the end of every month where you can submit your work and we pick five pieces to critique and give feedback on. We do literary agent q and as we do feedback sessions. We do loads of different live online events. And then the other part of membership is the premium member courses.

[00:45:59] So we have [00:46:00] video courses over a thousand pounds worth of video courses included that you can take anytime you want. They're prerecorded video courses so you don't get feedback or anything like that, like you would with a tutored course, but you get the videos themselves. So we've got that. We have agent match with, which is our database of literary agents.

[00:46:20] So that is included in membership discounts to editorial services and things like that. Free entry to competition. So we are running our first 500 competition in November. You'll get free entry into that. What else? Oh, uh, free query letter review every single year. So you can send us your query letter and we will review it.

[00:46:42] Um, there's loads of different benefits. If you have a look at the join us page which Johnny can you grab the link for the join us page as well as the build your book month page please and pop it in the chat. Because that has all of the list of benefits in there for you to have a look at. Um, I hope you join us, Mary as all the three act versus five act [00:47:00] structure to what do you adhere to?

[00:47:02] To be honest, they're both very similar and you'll probably find that your book fits into both of them. I don't really adhere to a specific structure anymore. I used to back in sort of my early days of writing because I felt like I needed that structure in order to know that I was hitting all the right beats and everything.

[00:47:20] The more I've written, the more I feel like I now have just a sixth sense of story structure. And also the more I've read as well, because the more you read, the more you kind of absorb story structure. So having that sixth sense of. What makes a good story and what points, plot points I need to hit, and kind of the general pacing of a story means I don't really have to rely on a structure anymore.

[00:47:49] But generally, as long as you've got a beginning, you've got something kicking off your story, you've got exciting stuff happening. Remember this talk about commercial fiction as well. So it's going to be different [00:48:00] for literary fiction, but you've got exciting stuff happening. You've got a bit of a twist going on in the middle.

[00:48:05] You've got, you know, everything seeming awful towards the end and then a big climax and a big resolution. As long as you're kind of hitting those base points you should be good. But I really recommend read as much as you can in your genre and also outside of your genre, just so that you can really start to absorb story structure and get used to.

[00:48:26] How it works. And actually TV and films as well, especially films, if you, the more you read and write, the more you'll realize that when you are watching a film, they all follow the same structure. They all have something kicking them off at the beginning. They all have exciting stuff happening. They all have a bit of a twist in the middle.

[00:48:44] They all have an exciting climax towards the end and a moment where it seems like the protagonist is going to fail. So they all do follow the same kind of structure, so just absorb as much story as you can and you'll get that sixth sense for it. Can you [00:49:00] use this process if you have three protagonists in a triangle?

[00:49:03] Not, not sure what you mean by triangle, like a love triangle, but yes, you can just use the same, um, what I said about the multi POV you should still have a central plot that kind of ties them all together. What do you think comes first detailed plotting or detailed research? Absolutely. Up to you.

[00:49:22] Whatever. Feels right to you? I don't think you have to do either. I don't think you have to do detailed research. In fact, sometimes I actually recommend against it. 'cause I think writers can really get caught up in the research process and just get lost in that and never actually start writing their book.

[00:49:40] And what I tend to do if I feel like I need to research something while I'm writing is I will just pop a little placeholder in my book and say. Research this and come back to it later so that it doesn't slow me down too much. So yeah, just be careful of doing super, super detailed research and also, again, detailed plotting.

[00:49:59] It's not [00:50:00] necessary. It depends on what kind of writer you are and whether that's helpful to you or not. Personally for me, I tend to do very little research. I will research what I need to just get that main idea down. So for this book that I was talking about, I had to do a little bit of research into strokes and what could potentially stop someone from being able to speak because that was like the main part of the book.

[00:50:26] So I did that research at the beginning. I plotted it all out really, really well. And then other things I had to research, like the husband works in the antiques trade. I know nothing about antiques, so I did have to research that, but I did it later on. I left myself a placeholder while I was drafting and I came back to it.

[00:50:44] Be very specific with what you are having to research. Okay, we've only got about eight minutes left, so I'm going to try and get through as many of these as I can. I find it hard to apply prompts like this. Most of the ones you've given to character driven fiction, any suggestions? So [00:51:00] all of those prompts I gave, all of the, uh, questions I gave are 100% relevant to character driven fiction.

[00:51:06] And actually I've never read a piece of fiction that I've enjoyed, that hasn't been character driven, but I, I think that it's both. I think you need both for a really good, especially commercial fiction novel, you need a really strong character and you need a really strong plot. You need both of them.

[00:51:26] Both of them work towards each other. Like I said, if you've got an amazing plot but not a good character, the reader's not going to care. Any story really any good story is going to be character driven fiction. So most of those questions we're talking about conflict and stakes. If it's a character driven story, there must be stakes that your character is up against.

[00:51:48] There must be something that they're fighting for. There must be something that they want, and there must be something that they are risking. If they don't get what they want, it must be something that they're facing the potential of losing. And maybe it's, [00:52:00] I'm facing, losing myself. You know, if we're talking about literary fiction, maybe it's I'm risking the decline of my mental health, but there must be something that they're up against.

[00:52:08] Transformation, again with a character driven novel. Really important. So, really have a think about it. If you're struggling with it, really, really have a think about it. And do you post in townhouse? If you are, if you are struggling, post your spark into townhouse and say, I'm really struggling with this particular question.

[00:52:25] Have you got any ideas? And see what people say. How do you create stakes where a detective is solving a crime are the stakes? They might not solve it and the perpetrator escapes. So yes, those are stakes, but I would say that they're not personal enough stakes because again, if they don't solve the crime and the perpetrator escapes, that's bad.

[00:52:49] But if their colleague doesn't solve a crime and the perpetrator escapes, that's equally bad for their colleague. So how can you make it so that [00:53:00] it's worse for your protagonist, for your detective to not solve this crime than their colleague? So it could be that if they, if the perpetrator escapes there.

[00:53:12] Wife is going to be targeted, or it could be that the crime was related to someone that they knew. And so they've got that personal tie and they, they want to solve it for that purpose. And that in itself brings up all sorts of conflict because they're not supposed to investigate a crime that they're related to.

[00:53:29] You know, all of these different things can kind of spark ideas. But like I say, if it's not, if it's not personal stakes, if it's just the stakes of, if I don't do this, I'm not doing my job and the perpetrator's going to escape, it's not enough. You need to try and bring it in inward and make it more personal to them.

[00:53:51] Is there a normal limit to how many character POVs you can get away with? As few as possible, especially if it's your first book. A because [00:54:00] the more POVs you add, the harder your job is going to be. But also. Readers can get very, very easily confused. And it's really difficult to write a book with lots of points of view.

[00:54:12] The most points of view I've written was my third book, and that was five points of view, no, four points of view, four points of view with one other point of view right towards the end, which was just one chapter. But that was hard. Really, really hard. So I would recommend cutting it down to as few points of view as possible.

[00:54:34] I love writing multi POVI really, really do. And I can't imagine ever writing a book just from one point of view. Like even the, um, the book that I've just written is technically one point of view, but the fact that I had her as a younger child kind of felt like I had a second point of view 'cause it was her child point of view.

[00:54:52] But yeah, I would really caution against going anywhere over four points of view. Try and bring it down as much as [00:55:00] possible. What if you're writing a multi-gen work, can obstacles come from multiple tropes or is it too confusing? I'm writing a historical magical realism story and a horror ghost story romance.

[00:55:11] So is it one story which is historical, magical horror, ghost story and romance one book with all of those sub genres? If it's then, I wouldn't say it's too confusing. Again, it's really hard without seeing your book written out in like a synopsis. But yes, the obstacles can come from multiple different trs Have a think about, that's the good thing about genre mixing is you are then opening yourself up to a lot more tropes that you can kind of play with.

[00:55:41] So yeah, I wouldn't say it's, it's too confusing. I think you just need to. Really have in mind who your audience is and who your reader is, and try and make sure that you are bearing that mind as you are writing. Because what you don't want to have happen is someone goes into it thinking that they are reading a straight romance and then suddenly [00:56:00] halfway through there's dragons or something like that.

[00:56:02] So you just need to bear in mind who your reader is and are you writing a story for this reader, or are you trying to reach too many people? Um, I find it really hard to create a plan without holes in it. There are things I'm fully aware I still need to work out, which on one hand, leaves room for inspiration, but also invariably leads me to a point where I'm coaching for what happens next.

[00:56:25] Yeah, I, I totally get that and I, I do that as well. I think one of the things that can really help is doing that mind map where you're just dumping as many ideas as you possibly can on, 'cause then when you do have those holes,

you can kind of look at that mind map and think, is there anything here that would fit in there?

[00:56:42] But this is where I really do recommend getting feedback, even if it's just posting in townhouse and saying that this is my plot. I'm really struggling with what to put here. Has anyone got any thoughts? And just see if anyone's got any kind of ideas. What I do. [00:57:00] I jump on a call with my editor, which I appreciate.

[00:57:02] If you are not a published author, you are not going to have that. But if you can jump on a call with someone who you trust, then that can be really, really helpful. Just to bounce ideas around. The amount of times that I've kind of been stuck and I've got on a call with my editor and she hasn't even said anything, but I've just talked at her.

[00:57:20] And then as I've been talking, an idea has sparked and I've figured out a, a plot point. So really talking it through is just such a useful thing to do. Also, things that I always say, the weirdest thing is when I get in the shower, I always have ideas and I will like, play out the scene in my head or, you know, as much of the outline as I can in my head, kind of like a movie.

[00:57:44] And then something about the shower just unlocks ideas for me. Walking as well, going on a walk without headphones, without any noise going on. Just you outside. No noise can really help to unlock stuff as well. So have a go at doing these activities [00:58:00] and going through the questions and doing the mind map.

[00:58:02] See if anything unlocks for you. And yeah, if you can get it into some kind of written down plan, then it'll be a lot easier to fill in those gaps. And don't forget, you will get to the end of the draft and you will still find a huddle. It's inevitable, it always happens. So don't worry too much about it.

[00:58:19] Um, I'm really sorry, but that has brought us to the end of our hour. I realized I didn't get to all of the questions, but the good news is if you join as a premium member today, then you'll be able to join us for our ask us any session, which is tomorrow at 4:00 PM uk time. And I'm gonna be on that session so you can ask me more questions then, um, and I'll be very happy to answer them.

[00:58:42] So I really hope this was helpful for you. We would love to see you in membership for the rest of Build Your Book month. Don't forget your homework and pop it into the townhouse thread that I created. Yeah. And I hope to see you soon. Thank you so much. Bye.

[00:58:59]