

Building a story arc in your novel

What makes a collection of 110,000 words a novel and not a collection of scenes and snippets?

A story arc.

When you're working with a full plotline, it's easier to catch yourself straying off into left field (or falling off of your arc), but when you're writing without a plot or "pantster" as my writer friends call it (aka by the seat of your pants), it's easier to fall off the arc—or as Martin Scorsese said in my favorite American Express commercial of a few years ago, "I've lost the narrative thread." (You can find it on YouTube. Watch it. It's priceless.)

See, I just went off topic. It is *so* easy to do, especially when you're having fun with what you're writing and not realizing that your pet/beloved/precioussss scene doesn't have a dangd thing to do with what you need to accomplish in your book. I have committed this sin on numerous occasions. In fact, the first draft of *Armed & Magical* basically had no story arc at all. Well, it kinda/sorta did, but it was buried so deep even I couldn't find it. In what I can only call a delusional state, I thought the book was brilliant. My agent dumped a metaphorical bucket of ice water over my head and brought me to my senses. As soon as she started pointing out its many problems, I could see every crack, crevasse, and bottomless gorge that the thing had. It was nasty.

I rewrote the book and did it right this time. It was a hit. Disaster averted. I started breathing again.

And I vowed *never* to lose sight of my story arc ever again. Being on deadline, that's time I can't afford to lose.

For me, it takes writing the first draft to get the story down and to "firm up" the story arc. I have a vague notion of it in my head, and I keep it there to refer to. Whenever I sit down to write, I'm constantly asking myself, how does this move the story forward, grow a character, thicken a plot? To build a story arc that will support the weight of a book, I've found I need the following:

Each scene and chapter must build on the one before. Crimes are committed and solved. Secrets are discovered and revealed. Problems are encountered and overcome. Characters learn and grow. And all of this must happen together, interweaving until it becomes seamless, comes to life, and jumps off of the page.

Oh, and it has to be funny, exciting, fast-paced, and keep you all turning the pages. Piece of cake, right? Definitely not. But I'm finding that the more I write, the better I'm getting at keeping that arc in the forefront of my thoughts, and making sure that everything I write builds that arc—and makes a book.