

**WHAT'S THE "SO WHAT?"**  
**A FIRST STEP TO WRITING EFFECTIVE FICTION AND THEN SELLING YOUR WORK**  
**BY DAN HEAD**

Did you ever start telling somebody about a kick-ass story idea you had brewing in the back of your head, only to have them roll their eyes and start anxiously looking for the nearest exit? The odds are good that it wasn't your idea that was the problem—or at least that wasn't your whole problem. The truth is that we all have ideas, good, bad, or ugly, but writing effective fiction involves a lot more than just having an idea. Writing effective fiction requires developing that idea into something that your readers will recognize as a story and with which they can identify and sympathize. That ain't easy. And if writing is tough, well, selling your work can be even tougher. The beginning writer has to not only write well but also be able to explain and even sell their writing quickly and effectively to whoever it is that's going to make the decision to pick them over the scores of other guys also trying to break in at any given moment. Like I said, that ain't easy. But there are things that you can do as a writer to make it less difficult. The first, and to my mind foremost, of these is to know exactly what your story is. I call this knowing the "So What?" The "So What?" in your story is the thing that makes it special. Why do you care? Why should we care? So what? That's what I'm talking about. This article is about answering that question: "What's the 'So What?'"

Part of the problem is that all stories today share at least some fundamental elements with stories that have gone before. Thus, it's not enough to say that readers will care about our stories just because they're new and exciting and different. Because the odds are that they won't be. I'm sure you've heard at least some of these things before:

1. "There are only so many plots."
2. "Everything is just a variation of something that came before."
3. "There's nothing new under the sun."

Those things are all true, at least to a certain extent. I mean, sure, it's true that effective fiction has to have a conflict and a resolution. And it's true that effective fiction has to make more sense than does real life. But within that framework of reader expectations there is an entire universe of possibilities. Because it isn't really the story—or the idea—that makes our writing special. It's us. We're the writers. We're the reason that the readers are here. We're the ones telling the stories. Readers want to step outside themselves and their lives and see the world through our eyes. They trust us to take them to places that they've never been. Thus, as writers we have only to realize what it is that makes our storytelling special, and then we can develop what were once simple ideas into creative and effective stories.

I don't mean that to sound easy. In fact, writing—storytelling—is perhaps the most difficult of the professions to master. If you want to be an engineer or a doctor or a lawyer, you can go to a school and then take a test, and if you pass... BAM! Suddenly you're accepted. Suddenly you're qualified to practice your chosen profession. You can get a job and work and even hang a shingle on your office door that says (if you're a dentist named Dan Head), "Dan Head, DDS." And then everyone will know who you are and what you can do, and for the most part, they'll trust your judgment while you're doing your job. Sadly, writing is a more difficult proposition. Yes, there are schools that can teach you the basics of writing. You might even learn some really advanced tricks and become a technically proficient writer through school. But no school can teach you how to feel. And no school can teach you how to relate to people. How to identify with their hopes and fears. The best you can do is to realize your own hopes and fears and then relate them to yourself and to your own life. But that's okay. Because, as we already said, you're the part that's special. The reader wants to see the world through your eyes.

So okay. You can accept that you're a storyteller. Readers want to see not only WHAT you see but also HOW you see it. That's terrific! Now what?

Well, you've already got your idea. Remember? You were telling your friend about it when he started rolling his eyes. The question was, "Why'd he roll his eyes?" But by asking that, you're missing the point. The answer to that question is obvious. He rolled his eyes because your story didn't hold his attention. He didn't care about it. He got bored with it. So then, the real question isn't, "Why did he roll his eyes?" The REAL question is, "How do I keep his attention?"

But the answer to that question is obvious too, even if it's just another question. The answer is, "Why do you think he should pay attention to your story?"

"BECAUSE IT'S MY STORY!"

C'mon. Admit it. You know that's what you were thinking. You were thinking about what a great story you have and how you could be a totally excellent comic book or screenplay writer, if only people would just down and listen and give you a chance to break into the business. I know it. I KNOW that's what you were thinking. I know because back when I was the President of Proletariat Comics, we used to take a LOT of submissions. That was tough because we were a small press company without much of a budget, but still... people wanted to get published with us. Or, more likely, they just wanted to get published with anyone! It got to the point where we started a whole online magazine just to have a way to give hopefuls a chance of getting

published. I was the President, and I thought that taking submissions was important. But having that outlet didn't change the reality of our submissions situation, which was that the majority of the hopefuls that we saw had NO IDEA what their stories were really about. And most of them didn't have the first clue why their stories were important—even to them! The most common cover letter we got was little more than a variation on the following theme:

*“Hi. I’m so-and-so, and I’ve had this story in my head ever since I was nine years old. It’s about a war between heaven and hell. Or maybe it’s about a humanoid invasion from space (or another dimension!). Or maybe it’s about the coolest superhero team ever! Whatever. The important thing is that it’s mine, and it’s really important to me.*

*“Now pay for my artist, so I can get someone to option the movie rights!”*

If you've never taken submissions, then maybe you've never seen a letter like that, but trust me, that's what most of them look like. So given that fact, it's no surprise that the letters that stand out—the letters that get noticed—are the letters that know clearly what they're selling.

Consider the following revision on the theme:

*“Hi! My name is Dan, and I’m writing to submit my short story ‘J.E.B. Stuart and the Space Cowboys of Love’ to you for publication consideration. It’s the story of J.E.B. Stuart, a Confederate cavalry commander who is abducted by aliens in the midst of the Civil War, only to discover that the aliens are intergalactic pornographers who want nothing more than to share the love and make him a star. This story is a voyage of discovery and understanding. J.E.B. Stuart was a profoundly religious man who neither drank nor smoked, and he was a confirmed racist. Thus, to survive in his new environment, J.E.B. must overcome his innate intolerances and learn to get along, even with those who are vastly different than he is.”*

So look, that's a pretty racy example, right? Sure it is. “J.E.B. Stuart and the Space Cowboys of Love” will probably never find a publisher. I know that. And I can live with it. But I like it because it's easy to see what it is as a story. We can tell at a glance why readers might care. J.E.B. Stuart was a famous Civil War hero who had some very noticeable personal traits. He was a devout Christian and a teetotaler who neither drank nor smoked. He'd have been horrified by the very idea of pornography. And as a Confederate Civil War general, it's a good bet that he was totally intolerant of others who were different than he was, particularly those who were a different color. Thus, by putting him into the situation I've described, we've put him into the most uncomfortable position imaginable. It's a sure thing that he'd rather have faced death. And that's what sets up our “So What?”:

*“This story is a voyage of discovery and understanding... [T]o survive in his new environment, J.E.B. must overcome his innate intolerances and learn to get along, even with those who are vastly different than he is.”*

Why might we care? Because we’ve all been in situations where we were profoundly uncomfortable. Because in watching J.E.B. Stuart overcome his most uncomfortable situation—and presumably find a way to make himself a better man because of it—we hope that we’ll be able to overcome our most uncomfortable moments, and we hope we’ll find ways to make ourselves better people in the end. All of that is part of the basic promise of fiction. Everything happens for a reason. Good will (hopefully) triumph over evil, and even if it doesn’t, then we’ll at least know why. In fiction, no one dies for nothing. Unfortunately, the same is not true of real life.

With that in mind, how do you find what’s important in your story? Maybe you already know. Or maybe you’re just now starting to figure it out. In the end, the reason that you care as a writer is going to be a big part of why we care as readers. One thing I should say right now though is that your story’s “So What?” does not have to be some high-falutin’ moral lesson that can challenge and change the values and mores of Western Civilization as we know it. Some stories may attempt that. A few even succeed. But if they were all like that, it would totally rule out the idea of the summer popcorn movie, and then where would we be?

As an example, a friend of mine recently posed the following to me:

*“My next story is about a burnt out adventurer who discovers that it’s okay to live again. A bunch of things are getting in the way of his moving forward with his life, so that he basically has to save the world and then be home in time for his date with the girl across the hall.*

*What makes it special?*

*I think what makes it special is idea of leaving the pain of the past behind and forging hope in a new future. So, hope and happiness. I think the pitch would be, ‘This is the story of a burnt out man destined to live his life in emotional exile only to find out that it’s okay to be happy.’ But I gotta think some more on the “So What?” Could the so-what be about what the other parts of the story are?”*

In this case my friend was **Alan Evans**, the owner of the small press comic company **Workshed Studios**, and this “pitch” was for a short story that’s to be part of his ongoing series **Sawdust: The Workshed Anthologies**. I told Alan that I thought he was over thinking it here. To my mind, his story is a simple but fun adventure story and that the “So What?” therefore IS the adventure. Bottom line: I thought the “So What?” was this:

*“He basically has to save the world and then be home in time for his date with the girl across the hall.”*

I mean, sure, that other stuff was good too, but I know Alan, and I know that deep down, he doesn't really want to write and draw a story about some gut-wrenching emotional realization. He wants to write a kick-ass adventure comic about a guy who has to save the world so he can go on a date with a hot chick. There's nothing wrong with that. But by looking at it in terms of the “So what?” now he can at least focus on the parts of the story that deserve his focus. Now he knows what he's got. He knows what the story is. Thus, for this story to work, he needs to get two parts right:

1. We need to see how badly the protagonist wants to go out with the girl across the hall.
2. We need to see our character go through Hell as he tries to save the world in time for his date.

Part two in particular lends itself to specific creative and literary devices, most notably to the “ticking clock,” which is one of the most well known and effective ways to build tension in any story. It works by establishing a time limit. Our hero must save the world before time runs out! In this case, poignancy is added because our hero really wants to go out with the girl across the hall!

Now I know what you're thinking again. You're thinking that you've got this story, and you THINK you know what the “So What?” is, but you're not sure, and you really don't want to get it wrong. That might ruin your story.

Relax. Your story isn't ruined. You might eventually decide that it needs a re-write, but I guarantee that it's not beyond repair. I know this because I used to have this problem a lot. Back when I was pitching a lot of stories to one well-known publishing studio, I used to hear back a lot of feedback from my editor telling me that he thought I'd focused on the wrong or the least interesting part of the idea, which was functionally the same thing. For example, I once pitched a story called “Red California” that was about a Special Forces A-Team commander who got too personally attached to the indigenous troops he was tasked to train. Sounds interesting, right? Maybe. I mean, yeah, it's a classic leadership story in the style of any number of other successful military fiction writers, and since I have a military background, it's reasonable to think that I maybe could have made it work. The problem was the setting. You see, I set the story in a dystopian, post-Big Quake Los Angeles, and the “indigenous troops” that our hero was sent to train were in fact inner-city gang kids that he was training to overthrow the secessionist government of the State of California. Do you see the problem?

The problem was the story's focus. There's nothing in that story that couldn't work, but taken together, there's way too much going on. In fact, we really don't even need what I had decided ahead of time was going to be the main point of the plot! The base conflict actually gets in the way of what might otherwise be a pretty cool little adventure tale.

The easiest way that I know to make sure you've got the right focus for your story is to make sure that you've got the right protagonist. You can do this by asking yourself, "Who has the most to lose?" or, "Who has the most to gain?" In the "Red California" example, there are several possible answers. The most obvious is the inner city gang kids. Win or lose, they're the ones whose lives are on the line, and they're the ones who have to live in California after the revolution is over. If we shift the focus to the gang kids, then suddenly we have a simpler, and hopefully much more workable story. Suddenly it's the story of a bunch of kids who want to make a better life for themselves, only they've got to go through Hell to do it. And that's something that everyone can understand. And knowing that then gives us the chance to wonder WHY they need to make a better life for themselves, and from there we can get into the most obvious story question of all, which is, "What the Hell happened to make things so bad in California that the federal government has to send in troops to foment a revolution against the governor?" With the story's original focus, that one obvious story question was almost beside the point. That was a big problem.

So now you've got a feel for how to identify what it is in your story that makes it special. It's really not too difficult, but it's way too important to leave it to chance. You've got an idea. Now you need to figure out who is your best logical protagonist and then ask yourself what he or she has at stake in the plot. From there, you can decipher WHY folks will care about your hero's struggles, and then you're halfway home. Now all you've got to do is write your story!

And then re-write it, of course.

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