From Idea to Screen: The Beginning

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As a debut novelist who is now writing her second novel, I still have the same dread: how to go from idea to glowing screen (or blank paper). I know how ugly and intimidating all that blank white space can be.

So, readers often ask me how did I get the idea for my novel in the first place? It seems like that question should be straightforward enough to answer. When you write a novel, you make up profiles for characters and create some adventures to send them on, outline the plot, concoct some conflicts to resolve and arrive at a suitable ending. Then you're done. Right?

I do start with an idea, of course. For *Things Unsaid*, the inspiration was based upon stories my friends told about their aging parents, the financial pressures they all faced in the Great Recession of 2008, and parents who become estranged from children and vice versa- a family who, on some level, you're sure must love each other, but they can't express it. They also do things that are demeaning, whether they intend to or not. I recorded stories my friends told me and mixed them up with mine and my husband's. Imagining all sorts of variations of families - all the different ways that families behave. Am I my brother's keeper? My sister's? My parents'? What would I say—my last words—to my dying mother, the first and primal relationship in human life? How much

responsibility and to what extent does an adult jeopardize her own family and life for her parents? My friends gave me some possible answers. Movies and television were other inspirations. So were wonderful novels. Even newspapers, podcasts and other websites.

No matter how carefully you craft a synopsis, the story is bound to turn in a different direction. As I've said elsewhere "I had to give myself permission to speak that truth, to let go of the editor, critic, and censor within. " So I just start spilling the first scenes and words that I can think of to fill up all that white space. When it comes to writing, my motto is "get me to the next page." I have a quota for each day I write. No matter how godawful the writing is, I spit out ten pages. Or at least five, if I get blocked. But the first page is often the hardest.

I agonized and procrastinated writing my first novel, and struggled over and over again with page one. I felt like Bill Murray's character in the classic movie, "Groundhog Day", where he wakes up every morning to relive February 2. Well , that's me. I just started writing, first on white sheets of paper, and sometimes on the computer using my beloved Scrivener software, and kept writing the same beginning in different ways. I LOVE beginnings! But that's other books' beginnings. Mine was such a struggle. It's definitely the most important part of any book, as any agent or publisher or author will tell you.

And so difficult to achieve. For those who write, it is known as "the hook", the page-turning device that compels the reader to keep on spending time with your story. It needs to accomplish a lot.

I list everything I know or think I know about the major question or theme. In broad categories-- major plot, scenes, events or characters – I start an outline. Then I add: dialogue, playing with each character— what he or she looks like, if there are siblings, partners, children. I play, expand, scribble, and talk to myself, trying to find voices. Sometimes I take long walks by myself and imagine conversations. I'm on my second novel and it hasn't become any easier.

 While writers are often divided into one of two types: pantsers (who write by the seat of their pants) and outliners (who map out the story in a systematic grid), I am an outlier. I do both.   I usually start off "stream-of-consciousness" style, with a theme but no clear map. I have some sort of conflict or plot but usually am not sure of the ending. Will it be a happy one, ambiguous, or sad? I leave that to the resolution of the conflict, and that often takes on a life of its own

The outline is my first step to getting all the those black-and-white sentences onto the screen, or paper, or file cards, so I can see the overall pattern. It organizes my story—a Simple Map (yes, that's the name of the software). Now I can step back and begin to visualize what works or doesn't with all these beautiful little color "thought bubbles" on my

laptop monitor. Beautiful bubbles filled with keywords from my outline.

I start developing a history for each character.   I am collecting imagined data about my characters evolving over time. Connections emerge—and I can speculate where I hope my readers will connect the dots and imagine their own resolution to the conflict. Sometimes, this is where I can tweak my outline or ignore it completely, knowing there is a map although the destination may have changed. I don't have to follow it.   But my map is full of places and scenes.

The outline is a tool, use it or discard it. It's only one device among many that stirs up the imagination. All that matters for me is that page one is behind me. For now. I will be writing that first page over and over again. Once I know the ending, which will change too. After rewriting the first chapter over and over again, seesawing back and forth. But I am on my way.