

“The Dreaded Middle: Story Block”

Submitted by Diana Y. Paul for *San Diego Book Review* (800 words)

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Writers talk about writers’ block but, for me, story block is a much bigger deal . When I have the theme, the conflict, the character arcs in place and know the ending (or think I do), the middle looms large and I dread it. My story seems stuck and writers even have a term for this: “the saggy middle”.

All writers can think of books they didn’t finish reading. It always comes down to the middle. The hook and inciting incident in the first chapter will hopefully pull the reader in, expecting a story built on the promises imbedded into the character and his or her conflict. All this time the reader expects the middle of the narrative to get more exciting, not less, or listless.

When I finished my fifth (or was it the sixth?) draft of *Things Unsaid*, it was a painful struggle to go through it yet again, word by word, to see what revisions were still needed. My beta readers marked exactly where the story sagged. And there was consensus.

So, I looked at the page number. It was almost exactly in the middle of the novel. This is where I had to escalate the tension, the dilemma for my main character, not later on, which is where I had originally placed the chapter. The character’s mission, the stakes raised to a crisis, had to be here or the story would lag. The dreaded middle. So, I ramped up what happened to the protagonist at this point. A story without this type of conflict is a story that few readers find interesting.

What had made the middle ninety pages so flabby? I had provided a lot of backstory, the psychology behind the protagonist's actions: but the momentum of the plot had been sacrificed as a result, the motion of the book was not moving forward. In the rewrite, I moved the "big doom" moment in the protagonist's life earlier and used backstory very sparingly.

In addition, I created a major subplot to increase complications further: how to choose between aging parents and her daughter. Both needed her financial and emotional support. I had to sharply raise the tension rather than diffuse it. The "resolution" of choosing one would further complicate the relationship with the other. In other words, all hope is lost. There is no way the character can achieve what she wants. The dilemma must loom larger and larger. The relationships in the narrative had become stale, in early versions of *Things Unsaid*: either the story looked like the choice made was a good one (=everyone seemed to be satisfied) or there was conflict and anger, as a result of the choice.

Loss of narrative momentum is structural, similar to the pacing of a movie. Almost mathematical in timing, the beginning of a well-edited movie has to present the problem in the first ten minutes and the climax begins to build at approximately the midpoint or there is a risk of losing the audience.

For writers the same happens. In a poorly edited movie the pace lags and nothing seems to "happen" about half-way through. What does that even mean? The character is conflicted but we know that already. What if the writer adds a character flaw to make the tension even stronger? In *Things Unsaid* the protagonist is torn between helping her dying parents with their assisted living expenses and her daughter with her college tuition. Let's add another problem here: her

husband is growing impatient with her tendency to choose her parents over her own family. Here I made the low point *worse*.

But, perhaps a bit of relief is needed too. What if I add a combination of a few encouraging moments too—that the main character might be able to pull through, just maybe? Maybe this provides a bit of hope to the reader. Then, I can prepare for the dramatic finale.

Almost all of the important events of a novel happen in the middle, so I had to revisit the beginning to make sure that the action was not too long. I mapped out the major plot points (landmarks on my story map) and made sure they were high points of interest.

I read all the aspects of character and points leading up to conflict again, looking for complexity that would sustain interest. I identified where the characters were not changing enough, and realized that I was thinning out the story in order to fill up pages. Writing clean, lean, even mean—I could put more muscle and less fat and flab in the heart of the plot: more character change without too much backstory, more plot and scenes, and more motivation and psychological doubts. Writing a novel is not all about word count.

AUTHOR BIO:

Diana Y. Paul was born in Akron, Ohio and is a graduate of Northwestern University, with a degree in both psychology and philosophy, and of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, with a PhD in Buddhist studies. Her debut novel is [Things Unsaid](#) (She Writes Press, October 2015). A former Stanford University professor, she is also the author of three books on Buddhism, one of which has been translated into Japanese and German (*Women in Buddhism*, University of California Press). Her short stories have appeared in a number of literary journals and she is currently working on a second novel, [A Perfect Match](#). She lives in Carmel, CA with her husband, Doug, and two cats, Neko and Mao. Diana and Doug enjoy visiting their

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