

“The End—Knowing When to Stop”

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The ending often impacts the overall impression of a book: an unsatisfying ending can leave an unfavorable impression of a book that might otherwise have gotten a rave review. Let’s look at the significance of a novel’s end.

“I *loved* that story. I hoped it would never end.” I’ve felt that way—lingering and digesting the last few sentences, wishing the novel would continue. John Irving claims he writes his last sentence first. That’s hard for me to even imagine!

I begin to think about the ending as soon as the conflict peaks. That’s not to say that I’ve figured out all the plot points completely. The moment my characters’ meanderings cease to fascinate, within a cohesive, forward-moving plot, that’s the moment I no longer have a story that is compelling. The plot and characters have to move together to a crisis or climax. Then it’s time to take a deep breath and end my story. I’ve now taken my readers to the scene that is the most dramatic and intense. Or, why should my readers want to read to the end? My readers need to be so involved and engrossed they cannot go to bed,--not even go to the bathroom—until they know what happens. When the

story's dramatic questions have all been addressed, then it's time to start wrapping up. Prolong the ending for more than a chapter or two and your story becomes flat and boring. Know when to stop!

If a writer has done his or her job well throughout the first three quarters of the novel, then the protagonist has developed in a logical manner and the ending or endings of the plot will be hinted at. No new characters, nor sudden turn of events should appear in the last two chapters to jar the reader and make the ending less plausible.

So, as a writer, I have to ask myself: Will my protagonist achieve what she needs after the crisis or climax occurs? If so, it's a happy ending. If not, it's an unhappy one, or perhaps a partial, more ambiguous achievement, in which case both happy and sad. (In my debut novel, *Things Unsaid*, the main character was successful only in part of her mission, i.e. a mixed or ambiguous ending.)

I love ambiguous endings but the ending is the most difficult part of the writer's journey for me. I have to imagine what will satisfy my readers and satisfy me at the same time. I left the ending of my debut novel *Things Unsaid* on an ambiguous note, since I might wish to write about them some more one day. Will the characters live on after the final page is turned? I like to think so. If I have succeeded in presenting vivid and three-dimensional characters to my readers, I hope they will go on to wonder what would happen in the future to them. My readers should

feel that every question raised was acknowledged, if not completely answered.

When I reach the ending of a novel as a reader or a writer, I like to go back to the very beginning of the story. I always do this. Is that opening sentence an echo of the last? Are the earlier elements a guide to indicate that the ending is plausible? The ending can be unexpected, but it has to make sense in the world the author has created as well as be appropriate for the protagonist.

And one thing about happy endings: you don't have to have one. Sometimes a happy ending just doesn't make sense. But, there should be at least some awareness or realization of what life will be like in the end. (Think Orwell's *1984*: the change is undesirable and dystopian, but the farm residents are at least aware of it. That is the only hint of positivity.)

Experiment with multiple endings.—There may be more than one that suits the story: write and rewrite, remembering the beginning hook and what you thought the initial ending would be. In the case of *Things Unsaid*, every time I wrote a new draft, the ending changed as the personality of the protagonist changed, developing in parallel directions. That affected the beginning of the story which had to be rewritten too. When I had run out of believable options, I knew I had come to the end and needed to stop.