

Stirring up Trouble: Add in a spoonful of subplot

Amanda Arista
RWA 2022



Goals & Objectives

1. Why include Subplot
2. Where to find the right ingredients
3. What to stir in
4. When to stir
5. How to sprinkle it



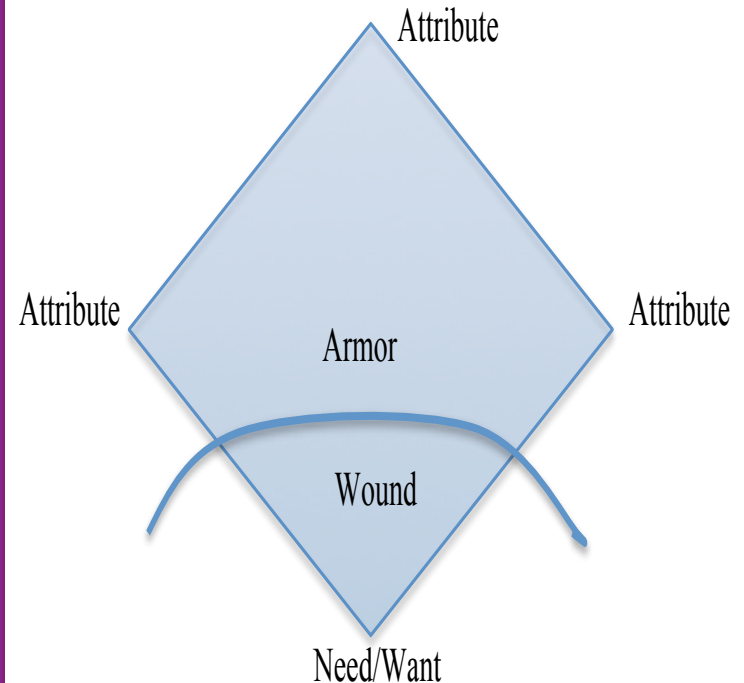
Definitions

- **PLOT:** External actions of the hero to accomplish their external goals
 - Protagonist needs X and will do anything to get X
- **SUBPLOT:** Strands of stories that support or help drive the main plot.
 - Think weaving
- **B-PLOT:** Another story happening at the same time that might not actually related to the main story being told
 - **EXAMPLE:** *Grey's Anatomy*- each character plot should be teased out to their own show

Definitions

CHARACTER ARC

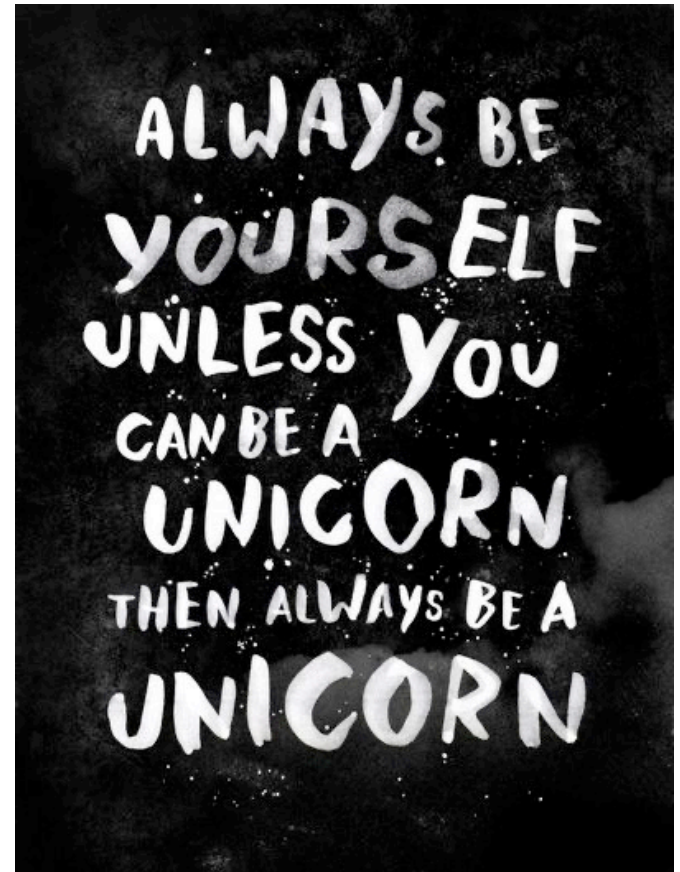
- The internal struggle of the character they will have to get over to succeed in their Plot
- Overcoming a wound that has prevented them from being complete their whole lives. (Michael Hauge)



Definitions

THEME

- Guiding principles of the story
- Views about right and wrong and what they do to a character.
- Think in one word- what is the important part of life this story is:
 - Reacting to?
 - Telling about?
 - Dealing with?



Reason for *a* subplot

- Impacts the plot- aiding/hindering the main story
 - Romantic interest is FBI agent who has intel
- Reveals character development
 - Shows that MC is changing/growing by through additional obstacles
- Breaks tension of the driving story
 - Creates pockets of breathing room from main story (timing)
- Draws attention to a theme in the story
 - Perhaps the society doesn't think women can kill people
- **USE WITH INTENTION!!!**
 - If readers feel you have just thrown it in, they will wonder what else you have just thrown in.

ROMANCE & SUBPLOTS

- The dramatic question for a romance is “How are these two going to get together?”
- Subplots become reasons they can not be together: Interfering relatives, stressful work conditions, other suitors- **CONFLICTS** that pull them away and make them doubt
- Until the Protag deals with all these internal aspects and subplots, they can not achieve their main goal of getting the guy.

Example: *Pride & Prejudice*

- The main plot is Darcy and Elizabeth's romance.
- Subplot #1- Jane and Bingley's romance- it highlights Elizabeth's viewpoints on romance by juxtaposing them and creates tension in the main plot
- Subplot #2- Lydia and Wickham's debauchery that twists the Lizzie/Darcy Plot



Finding the right ingredients



External World of Hero

- Look to the world of your story for impacting/**distracting**/helping subplots
 - Something is festering or there wouldn't be a mystery!
 - Points of oppression/obstacles currently in world
- How does society view your character? Could that be an obstacle?
- Examples:
 - Cold Weather being an obstacle in *FARGO*
 - Orcs being an obstacle in *The Hobbit*
 - Snotty clackers being an obstacle in *The Devil Wears Prada*

Internal Life of Hero

- What is the major distraction of the hero that has been an obstacle to their journey up to now?
 - FAMILY DRAMA: Crazy mother? Drunk brothers?
 - WORK DRAMA: Up for a big job promotion?
 - WORLD DRAMA: Why is that serial killer killing?
- What ELSE does the Protag want? Need?
 - **EXAMPLE:** Hero is addicted to coffee, but his journey is about the pressure to complete a manuscript but his his coffee shop is threatening to close
 - Subplot to save the coffee shop is distraction from writing the novel.

Thematic Exploration

- Is there another answer to the dramatic question that another character can answer?
 - Wrong answer for the hero but right answer for someone else?
 - Wrong answer that serves as a warning for the hero
- To help- Create a Theme-Line- one sentence that defines the moral of the story, the purpose of the book, the story nugget
 - Will help identify possible subplots to include within your novel that will highlight your purpose
 - Will seem very heavy handed- might look more B-Plot.
- **EXAMPLE: P&P**
 - Elevator Pitch: A young woman learns of her own prejudices as she navigates the waters of marriage and love
 - Theme: Never believe first impressions when love is on the line.
 - Possible Plots: Bad first impressions, Marriage versus love, know yourself, etc.
 - Possible Subplots: Other bad first impressions, other marriage versus love, others who don't know themselves, others who have chosen stable over love

Great Secondary Characters



- Who are the major players in the story who influence the way the hero interacts with the special world?
- Who's peril would affect hero's decisions?
- How do their desires/wants/goals contrast/coincide with the hero's?

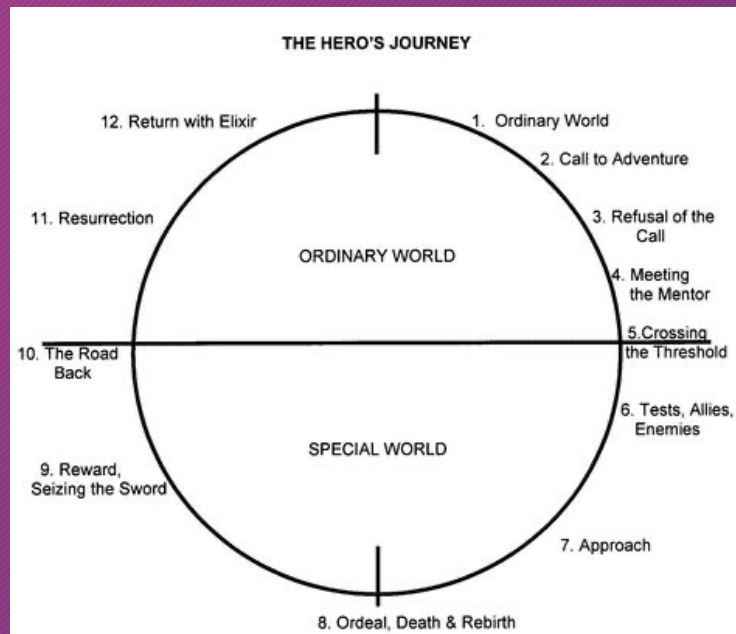
Recipes for Subplots



Plot Points

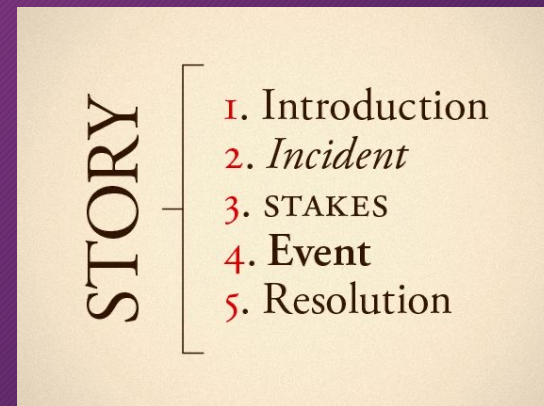
Hero's Journey steps

- Need all 12 to show the change of the hero



Subplots- Number of points vary

- Beginning
- Middle
- End



The 1-2-3



- A story with only three major beats within the story
- Echoes **THEME?**
- First- Sets up a story
- Second- Shows the choice
- Third- Resolution of that choice

The Isolated Chunk

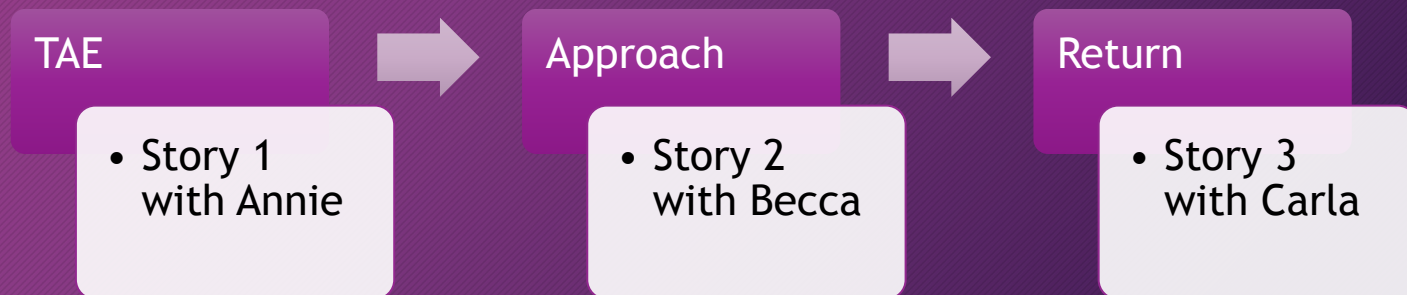
A short journey/story in which a distinct episode has an effect on the hero, usually resulting in the hero's maturation or insight toward hero.

- A **side trip** for your main character-
 - Resolution impacts the Main Plot
- A side trip for a side character on behalf of the hero
- Prologue that SETS UP your story
- Never visited again
- **EXAMPLE:** In Adventure of Huck Finn, two church-going yet blood-feuding families (the Grangerfords, the Shepherdsons) in Huck's life, then out again

The Isolated Chunk

How to Do It: Start a new section or chapter. Tell your story-within-a-story, and then return to your main narrative.

- Keeps with the wandering feeling as your main character can experience only one thing at a time.
- First or Third POV



The Parallel line



- A subplot that never touches the main plot
- JULIE AND JULIA- two women trying to deal with holding together a personal life, cooking, and their mutual love of butter.
- Both their stories coincide and contrast.
- Impacts the meaning of the story for the hero OR the reader alone

The Parallel Line



How to Do It: Start your story with your main plot and get going with your chief cast of characters, especially your hero. Then insert the beginning of your second plot.

- Switch back and forth between the stories as you wish (at least THREE)
- Make your parallel plot any size and significance that suits your story
- Easiest : First POV, then drop in Third POV

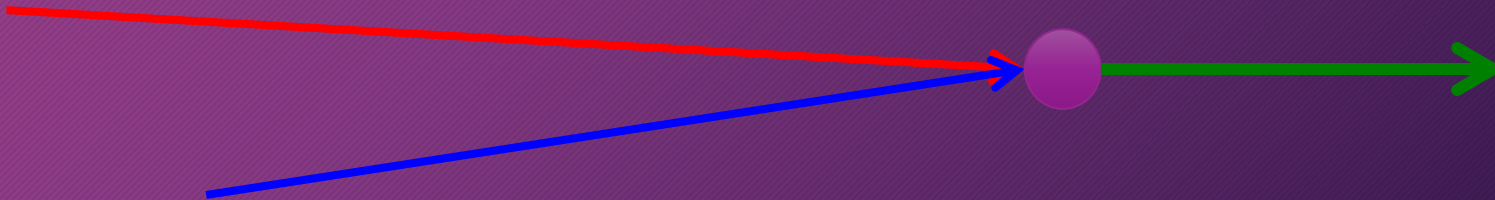
The Swallow Tail

Two parallel plots woven together firmly at a certain point (ORDEAL).

- Start with one MAIN PLOT from MAIN POV
- After it's off and running, launch into a completely different tale (like parallel) with SECONDARY POV
- Reader wonders what Guy A will have to do with Guy B
- For a while, the two lines of action are completely separate, but move closer to each other = increases reader's anticipation.
- When they meet, Readers are satisfied and both plots gain complexity going forward.

The Swallow Tail

- **How to Do It:** Alternating between two or more parallel makes your separate characters and their stories converge on a piece of journey they have in common.
- **EXAMPLE:** *Silence of the Lambs*- We show two separate stories of Clarisse and Buffalo Bill, until they meet at the climax in his house



The Clue

Clues propel the unraveling of a puzzle, and they serve to entertain your audience.

Not just for mystery writers- who the mentor really is, what the hero really is, how the world really fell apart

How to Do it: Work backwards, then plant clues early and often

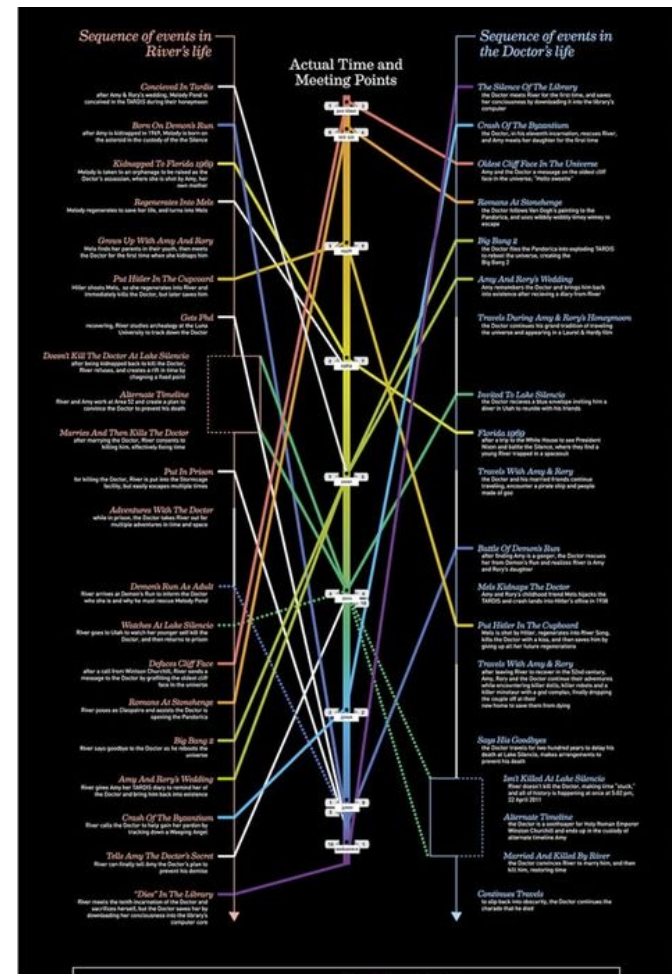
Clue for your readers

Clues for your hero



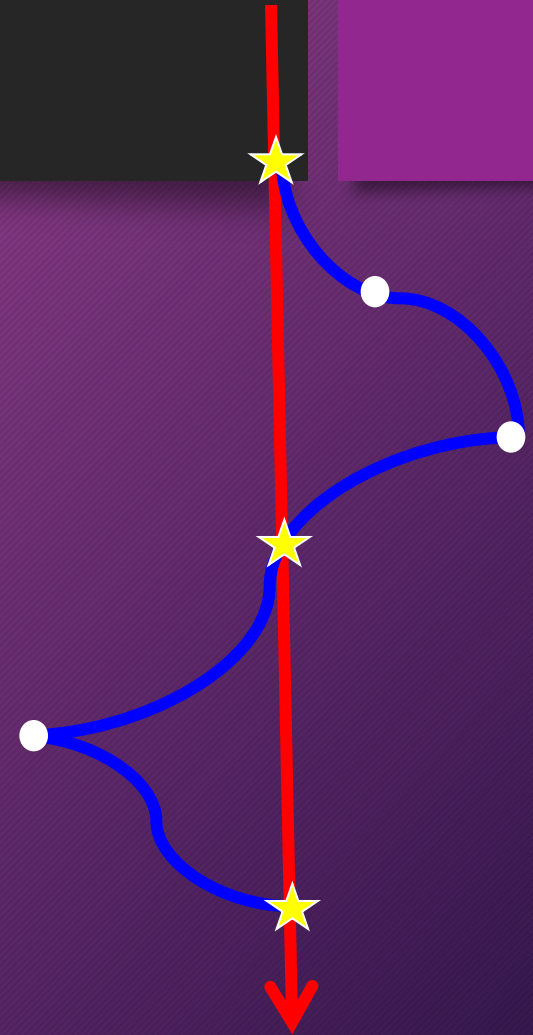
The River (Song)

- A Character weaves in and out of the Hero's stories as they both grow
- The impact the other character when they need impacting, they save the other character when they need saving
- And they are together at the end
- ROMANCE??



The River

- **How to do it:** Start with your main hero, introduce their world, introduce the secondary character and relationship to main.
- Begin the secondary characters story as branch from the main characters story line
- Have them interact as key moments throughout the story and come together as changed characters in the end.
- Why is Secondary Character not a main character?
 - Arc might not be big enough
 - His arc doesn't impact the world, just the main character



How to sprinkle in a subplot

Time to get your hands
dirty!



Story Structure

1. MAIN plot- external struggle between protagonist and antagonistic force

2. MAIN Character Arc- Internal struggles of your hero- could manifest at different times for your story

3. Subplot about external world/plot (external world of hero)

4. Subplot that identifies theme/value and conflict surrounding that value/theme

Know Your Story *Turning* Points

- MAIN EXTERNAL- Create the first ‘story’ all the way through in plot points



- MAIN INTERNAL-Create your internal subplot all the way through in plot points.



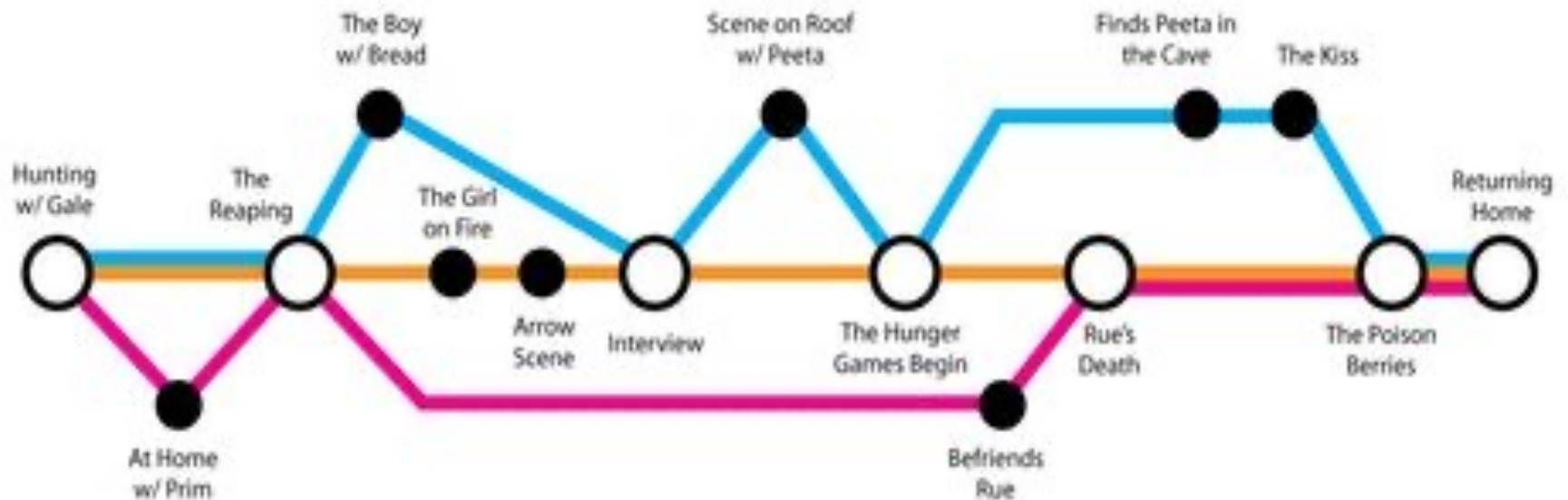
- SUB #1- Constant Obstacle



- SUB #2- Red Herring/Funny/Secondary Character



Some all points might intersect



MDQ: Will Katniss survive the Hunger Games?



LDQ: Will Katniss be able to protect her family?



Begin to weave

1

Start writing your main plot before you begin subplots

- Let the readers know what the REAL story is before you mention another story to pay attention to
- Ask the Dramatic Question

2

Then drop in your first thread of the new story

- Thread, hint, first glance, first snide comment, first clue

Before you *weave*

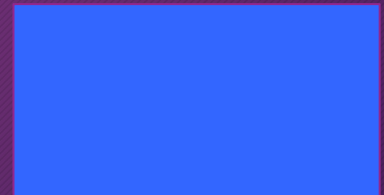
Outline all your plots

- Create the first ‘story’ all the way through in plot points
- Create your Hero’s journey all the way through in plot points.
- Create your external subplot all the way through in plot points.
- Create your internal subplot all the way through in plot points.

Begin to *weave*

Now that you have
INDIVIDUAL small stories...

- Begin placing the first scene of your novel
- Start weaving that story
- Then drop in your first thread of the new story (insert a card here) according to the pattern that you liked (parallel, clues)



How to *weave*

DO NOT ORDER SCENES BY CHROLOGY- Order it by structure

- Choose the next scene by how it develops the hero—what will highlight the emotional place of the hero, what gives the hero long enough to process major information

VARY THE PACING OF SCENE

- Pay special attention to the juxtaposition of scenes- If there was just a quiet scene, do we need a loud one. If we just had a run of actions, do we need an emotional one. (Scene and Sequel structure).
 - Look at the contrast of content.
 - Look at the contrast of pacing

How to *weave*

- Vary the pacing of the scenes for maximum
 - If you have a spiky work subplot impacting your romantic main plot, then weave in the next obstacle right after a dramatic turning point in the main plot
 - Think about when the kissing happens in movies (quiet scene) after the big explosions (loud scene)
- Look for pressure moments where your MC is vulnerable
 - Have the RL poke or push (first half)
 - Have the RL sooth, confide, mirror (second half)

Marissa Meyers



References

- Story Genius - Lisa Cron
- Michael Hauge
- The Writer's Journey- Christopher Vogler
- STORY - Robert McKee
- You've Got a Book in You- Elizabeth Sims
- The Anatomy of Story- John Truby
- Scene and Structure- Jack Bickham
- Pinterest- lots of Pinterest

Thank you!

AmandaArista.com

@pantherista

