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STORY TROPES BY GENRE



MEG LEADER

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What Are Genre Tropes?

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So...what is a trope?

Basically, a trope is a concept, character, setting, or plot device that is commonly found in various genres. All the major genres have tropes, and the more popular the genre (i.e., the more books written in that genre), the more tropes you find as stories use and reuse ideas over and over again.

Why do authors reuse a trope? Because they *work*. I mean, if you're writing a horror story and you stick in a haunted house—yeah, your readers will instantly have a clue what to expect will happen in that house.

Readers in genres have specific expectations about stories published in genres. They buy books labeled “romance” on the spine because they want to read about a romantic relationship with a happy-ever-after ending. They buy books labeled “science fiction” because they want to be transported to a different world (or a new version of this world) to see what happens. Readers *expect* stories in a given genre to have tropes they're familiar with. Omit those, and you seriously risk pissing off your audience—and losing those readers *forever*. Not kidding. FOREVER.

But wait? Doesn't that make genre fiction formulaic? Nope, not at all. The trick is to choose a trope or four that fits both the genre you're writing and the story in your head. Then mix-and-match them. Use the trope in a new way. For example, don't make that scary haunted house a place of horror. Make it a place of safety, while the well-lit family home is where the true horror lies.

Turn your tropes around. Mix them up. Play with them so the reader can both recognize the tropes you're using but also be surprised and

delighted that you've discovered a new way to use them. That will win your readers' hearts and minds—and win you a host of new fans.

But whatever you do, don't ignore the tropes in your genre. That's a huge mistake, so don't make it.

The tropes in this list are organized by major genre categories and, with the exception of mystery, are not broken down into subgenres at all. Even the mystery category only breaks down the cozy mystery separately.

The lists of tropes on the pages that follow are from a variety of sources, noted for each genre.

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Fantasy Tropes

TCK Publishing (tckpublishing.com) is a font of information on tropes used in various genres. This list draws from their list of Fantasy Tropes.

- **A Chosen One.** In this trope the whole world can only be saved by one special person, the Chosen One. Talk about pressure! They may be the subject of a prophecy (King Arthur having to pull a sword from a stone), or have some special power, have a relationship with those in power (can we say unwanted stepchild to the king or queen?). How about Luke Skywalker, son of a major Jedi Knight, living in obscurity (Chosen Ones often live in obscurity—it's their thing) until plucked from death-by-boredom by his quest to save the beautiful princess? Perfect Chosen One material, for sure.
- **All Powerful Artifacts.** Very often the subject of a fantasy is the search for some type of artifact that is massively powerful or valuable. Whether the object of the quest is to find the object, retrieve the object, or steal the object, that thing—whatever it is—in the wrong hands can cause Dire Consequences for the whole world. And you have to believe that the Dark Lord either has it in his clutches or is actively trying to get it.
- **An Inheritance or Hidden Truth.** Ah, yes, our hero from obscure circumstances isn't so obscure after all. In fact, as we discover at the end, he's really the son of <fill in the blank of king, powerful wizard, wealthiest merchant>. He's someone—and someone very important at that. And (not to reveal a spoiler here), sometimes he's the son of the Dark Lord himself. (Yeah, take that, Luke Skywalker!)
- **Ancient Settings.** Ever read an epic fantasy set in a modern city with skyscrapers? Yep, there are some out there that use modern settings for their fantasy, but that's generally in urban fantasy, not in epic fantasy. Ever read an epic fantasy in a modern city? No? Well...

hmm...that might be a cool way to distinguish your story from everyone else's out there. Of course, then you'd have to figure out how high-technology and magic balance, but I bet you can do that very thing. Go on, give it a try!

- **Damsels in Distress; Femmes Fatales.** Ah, the ladies in fantasies. Fantasies—especially those penned by writers of the male persuasion—traditionally have tended to present women in their stories as either being weak and helpless damsels who are victims of the Dark Lord and his minions, or the ladies are evil femmes fatales who are out to seduce or kill our intrepid hero. Yeah. Fantasies presented women like that for decades. Happily, however, that is changing over the past couple decades as more women are getting into writing (and reading) fantasy novels. Useful writers to peruse in this regard are Shelley Laurenston, Mel Todd, Gini Koch, Patricia Briggs, Anne Bishop (particularly her Others series), and Jay Boyce.
- **Dark Lord.** And if we have a Chosen One, you have to believe there's an evil Dark Lord waiting somewhere in the wings to stomp on our Chosen One and generally to take over the world, or the galaxy, or the universe. For Luke, his Dark Lord was Darth Vader. And doesn't that name just scream "evil dark lord"? Yeah, it does.
- **Dragons.** Where would a good fantasy be without dragons? Nowhere, that's where. We gotta have our dragons, whether they're on the hero's side or supporting that mean old Dark Lord—or maybe blasting out fire breath on everyone willy-nilly. Doesn't matter. Add a dragon or two and you up your fantasy level by a giant leap.
- **Good vs Evil.** Fantasy novels are nearly always about the fight between Good and Evil in an epic kind of way. One problem with that from a writing point of view is that heroes are white-hat good guys. Villains are black-hat baddies. Characters with more depth and range don't star in fantasies much—they're relegated to the sidekick role. You know, just like Han Solo, who fits that gray area just fine.
- **Magic.** Can you write a fantasy without magic in some form or other? Yeah, but it's pretty rare. Whether it's shapeshifting werewolves, vampires, witches, or simple magic potions littering the landscape, magic nearly always has a substantial role to play. One big caveat,

though, is that it's very easy to have too much magic. If magic can solve all problems, and can be done by almost anyone, and doesn't have a major cost to use, well...why wouldn't everyone just be a lotus-eater sitting under a tree? Want a nice steak? Wave your magic wand and there it is. Perfectly cooked. Be careful not to overuse magic in your fantasy novel. Believe it or not, that will be boring.

- **Overqualified Party.** Your basic hero has to have companions that are truly awesome, so they tend to collect allies and companions that each have some kind of power that the hero lacks. That might be political power, but more likely it's some kind of magical capability that will be necessary for their success. How come the party doesn't include someone fairly useless? Hmmm...good question—but such characters fall by the wayside very quickly.
- **Racial Homogenization.** This is where massive stereotyping comes in. Fantasy novels often have a wide variety of types of creatures like elves and humans and vampires and such. The thing is...they all look alike. Elves are short. Humans are tall. Vampires have widow's peaks and pointy teeth. Well, okay. Vampires all probably do have pointy teeth, the better to bite you with, m'dear. But the point is there's very little variation in how each type of creature looks. Even in terms of a city or culture, almost everyone from that city or culture has the same job. Just once it would be cool to have a city where everyone was a teacher. Or a fireman. Or even an artist. Now that would be a cool city!
- **Taverns.** Not trying to imply that our hero has a bit of a drinking problem, but heroes do tend to hang out in taverns. A lot. This is where they network with other travelers, pick up useful stuff (or an ally or two), hear the latest rumors, get warned about the risks ahead, or even just get a bit rest and relaxation before their next trek. The tavern, like the British pub, is the hotbed of information and restorative beverages. And trivia contests. Don't forget the trivia...
- **The Mentor.** If you've ever studied Christopher Vogler's book *The Writer's Journey* based on Joseph Campbell's work on comparative mythology, you'll recognize this guy. In fact, there's a whole step in

Vogler's 12-step journey for Meeting the Mentor. This is (usually) an older character who gives the hero information or materials that will be essential on the hero's quest. This character does not usually participate in the quest itself, at least not in an active way, but convinces the hero to start off. I mean, this dude knows how dangerous the quest will be—you think the Mentor wants to risk it all when they can send the hero out to face the danger? This is why this guy (or lady) is the Wise Old Mentor and not the Brash and Stupid Hero!

- **The Quest.** Christopher Vogler's book *The Writer's Journey* fully describes the Hero's Journey in detail, and that is the model for a huge percentage of fantasy novels. The key to that story structure is that the hero goes on a quest (sometimes eagerly, sometimes dragged kicking and screaming). There might be a prophecy, or some great treasure to gain, or even a beautiful princess to save. (I'm talking to you, Luke Skywalker!) Whatever, the goal of the quest is, our hero is going after it.
- **Training or Magic Schools.** Of course, our hero from obscure circumstances has no idea how to be a hero or use the magic he has. So, how do we fix that? Why by sending him to some kind of training or magic school. Harry Potter ended up in Hogwarts, after all. Sometimes it's an apprenticeship. Sometimes it's a formal training academy. Occasionally it's just on-the-job experience. Whatever it is, it provides a place for the hero to learn to use the skills he was born with.

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Horror Tropes

(Adapted from a list on WritersDigest.com)

- **Alone in a dark house or building** is yeah...constant. It's a given that will happen, though the building might be more of a mine shaft. Or an undersea boat wreck, as in *Jaws* when Hooper dives down and retrieves a great white shark's tooth from the hole in the wreck's hull—only to drop it as the scary corpse drops into that hole. Word of advice: if you're ever in a horror movie, stick with your buds. It's safer.
- **Bad guy won't die** which may be the case with Rasputin, who was reputedly stabbed, poisoned with cyanide, shot multiple times, and finally drowned in the river. He was the model for all the bad guys who Just. Won't. Die.
- **Death to the fornicators** fits right in with the idea that anyone—*anyone*—having sex outside of marriage is targeted as the next victim(s) of the horrible monster who Knows Too Much. You can call that monster the Mediator of Morality if you like. It's kinda what it does.
- **Everywhere monsters**, which basically means that some of the monsters might be just someone who looks like anyone else. Psychopaths and sociopaths can be monsters too. Think Mr. What-A-Nice-Guy Ted Bundy. You know, the serial killer?
- **Feeling of being watched** is a great trope for horror or any scary part of any novel. It's what you almost see on the edge of your peripheral vision—but can't quite catch with a full-on look—that scares the bejeebers out of you.

- **Finding old footage that reveals something Not Meant to Be Seen.** Often, it's kids finding a diary or vlog or (shades of the past) a videotape (let's make it a Betamax just to make it harder). They work hard to decipher the writing (it's in code, of course!) or see what that tape contains. Sometimes it becomes a cursed artifact. Sometimes it provides useful information on the monster that's attacking now but was here decades/centuries before. And sometimes it's about someone's first kiss at the county fair. You read the diary or play the tape, and you take your chances...
- **"I'll be right back"** Oh, sure you will. Of course, you will. Nope. You're a deader for sure. Either that, or you won't come back until all the others are dead and/or possibly the monster too. Or maybe *you* are the monster?
- **Inclement nighttime weather** because you just *know* that your characters are going to have to flee into the night—who's gonna want to spend the night where there are monsters or ghosts wandering around killing people? And of course, when they flee there will be lightning, heavy downpours of rain, a blizzard, a tornado, or some such horrible weather phenomenon to add to their woes. And make it easier for them to get separated—see "splitting up" below.
- **Mysterious neighbor** is a great trope. Is the guy next door an alien? A vampire? A secret agent? A...*monster*? Are any of those true? Or does he just go digging in his back garden at 3 A.M. for the fun of it? I dunno—do you?
- **Nightmare that may have been real but you're not sure until the very end.** Think Freddy Krueger, of course, but...but...did you *really* wake in the middle of the night and walk into the middle of a satanic ritual? No? Then *how come your feet are muddy and bloody*?
- **No communication**, so of course your cell phone has a dead battery, there is no land line (or the line is cut), you're in a dark, isolated place miles from everywhere, there's a raging hurricane going on outside. Nope, can't call for help now...*why* exactly did you go to this place?

- **No trespassing** plays into the case of if you tell kids not to do something, that's the very first thing they'll rush out to do. (Hey, parents, ever told your kids *not* to do their homework or chores? Might work, right?)
- **One last scare** pretty much always happens at the very end when you know everything is cool and we're all heaving a sigh of relief... except...nope...that old monster has one last try or twist or son-of-monster to inflict on the world. Make it a good one. And if you do it well...you get a sequel out of it.
- **Open windows and doors** because that's how the horrible beast-monster-ghost-psychopath gets in. Seriously, folks, close and lock all doors and windows. I shouldn't have to tell you this, right?
- **Secret laboratory or base** is so useful that it's also a science fiction trope too. Our bestie, good old Dr. Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* may be the first and best example of this. He had his secret laboratory, and your monster deserves one too. This is Keeping Up with the Joneses, horror-style.
- **Seeing things in mirrors** derives from our fascination with mirror images where everything is just like it looks when we turn around, but it's subtly different too. Folklore says vampires don't reflect in mirrors, so this can also be *not* seeing things in mirrors.
- **Splitting up your team of characters so they go searching in all directions.** Oh, sure, it *sounds* logical and rational and reasonable—even efficient—at the time, but you just *know* it makes it way easier for the monster to pick them off, one by one.
- **Summoning evil** when some innocent “accidentally” finds one of those artifacts and does whatever has to be done to release an ancient evil force. I mean, scary ritual, candles, ancient artifact—what can *possibly* go wrong with this scenario?
- **The abandoned place** is that haunted house, abandoned mine, insane asylum, whatever, that has nothing left inside except fear. And maybe

ghosts. Or a secret laboratory or four (see above and in the Science Fiction tropes).

- **Women and children last** because, hey, the guys are out there running for their lives—and getting picked off by the monster. We have to leave the most vulnerable characters alive to the very end because they're gonna be easy pickings, right? Except sometimes... they aren't.

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LitRPG Tropes

LitRPG is a genre that is part of GameLit. In LitRPG, the story offers the reader the experience of participating in a computer Role Playing Game (RPG). The reader essentially experiences the story as if they were playing an RPG. This means that the story includes three specific story worlds: an initial “ordinary” world that corresponds to reality, the story world that usually is accessed via some type of portal, and a gaming system that, as in an RPG, keeps tabs of a variety of attributes, weaknesses, object inventory, and strengths. Those details are revealed to the protagonist (and thus to the reader) before and/or after significant challenges are encountered and survived. This is a challenging genre to write well because of the additional complexity of the RPG gaming system.

These tropes are adapted from TVtropes.com.

- **Achievement System:** This is how the gaming system keeps tabs on what the player/reader accomplishes (or doesn't accomplish). This includes **Sidequests** (defined below). Some of the achievements are almost inevitable; others are very difficult to achieve. Players don't always know when they've been awarded an achievement until they look at their current status chart.
- **Cyberpunk settings:** A lot of RPG games and thus stories have a distinct cyberpunk vibe to them. This means they're focused on technology, computers, and artificial intelligence. Think *The Matrix*, for example.
- **Gamer stories:** In these stories, one character (our beloved protagonist) abruptly and possibly inexplicably develops RPG characteristics and no one else around them has these skills. Kinda cool when you think about it, and a fairly common LitRPG device.

- **Portal fantasy:** In many if not most LitRPG, the player goes through some type of portal to transition from the real world to the game world. Just like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, traveling through the portal might be a deliberate act on the part of the player, or unintentional or forced.
- **RPGVerse stories:** In these stories everyone kinda knows they're part of the RPG game, even if they don't know why or how they're in that game. Usually, they assume or discover that there is some type of Game God who created this system, and sometimes it turns out that this is a *Virtual Reality* type arrangement. Yeah, it's complicated.
- **Sidequests:** These are optional tasks that are secondary or peripheral to the main objective the player has. They can choose to take on these sidequests or not. You know, like choosing whether to pay your taxes—oops...
- **System Apocalypse stories:** Woo-hoo, most of the world is destroyed, but there are a few who survive—and those few have RPG abilities because they develop the ability to get into the “system” that was controlling the world prior to that apocalypse. Yeah. Destroy the world. Good idea, what?
- **Virtual Reality (VR) stories:** Remember Disney's *Tron*? In a VR story, the player gets trapped in the game and has to find a way out. If they can. Very often, what's happening in the VR of the game is in some way the same or similar to what's happening in the real world. So...which is the real world again?

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Mystery Tropes

NOTE: Not all tropes are relevant to all mystery subgenres. Be sure you read widely in the specific subgenre you choose so you have a solid understanding of reader expectations in that subgenre.

Subgenres of Mystery (with notable author examples)

- **Amateur sleuth** (Charlaine Harris's Aurora Teagarden series)
- **Cozy mystery** (anything by Agatha Christie)
- **Great Detective** (Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot; Sherlock Holmes)
- **Hardboiled detective:** (Sam Spade; Dashiell Hammett mysteries)
- **Paranormal investigation:** (Ilona Andrews, Jim Butcher's Dresden Files, Patricia Brigg's Mercy Thompson series)
- **Police procedural** (J.D. Robb, Gregg Olsen, Lee Child)

Cozy Mystery Tropes (adapted from CaronAllanFiction.com)

- **Bring on the clues and red herrings:** Clues and red herrings must be present.
- **Gather the suspects:** Generally, the main suspects are gathered at the end and the sleuth reveals what happened and makes the formal naming of the criminal(s).
- **Keep the cast small:** Small cast of characters in an idealized setting such as a small village, an enclosed estate, or country house.
- **Leave it to the amateurs:** Usually, uses an amateur sleuth rather than a police officer or detective; often the sleuth is female, but not always.
- **Make it a puzzle solved by logic:** Emphasis on the puzzle of the crime; the reader solves the puzzle along with the sleuth.

- **Nonviolence the norm:** No excessive gore or violence; no realistic trauma, mild swearing, no sex scenes.
- **Solve the crime:** The crime *must* be resolved at the end. No excuses on this one. *Always* solve the crime.

Mysteries in General

(adapted from tckpublishing.com)

- **Alibis:** Well, of course every person is going to have an alibi and the detectives, whether cops, private eyes, or amateurs, spend a big chunk of the story figuring out who is lying to them. Figure everyone lies, of course, until proven truthful.
- **Beyond Suspicion:** A character clearly linked to main suspect is never even considered seriously by police or sleuth. Don't know why they overlook this person, unless it's their baby blue eyes—or maybe their fat bank accounts.
- **Criminal Consultant:** The cops get baffled a lot in mysteries. Why did they go to cop school, do you think? Anyway, when the case is just too complicated or too hard to figure out, what do they do? They go to an expert of course: a criminal genius who can (maybe) steer them in the right (or wrong) direction. Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* is a case in point with rookie FBI agent Clarice sent to interview the dastardly Hannibal Lecter. I call that “rookie FBI agent abuse” myself...
- **Dame with a Case:** This is pure Sam Spade and Humphrey Bogart time. Just watch the opening of *The Maltese Falcon* movie and you'll know all about this trope. A classy dame, one with great gams (that means legs for you children in the audience) comes into the office and looks all pathetic and needy. Our hard-bitten detective sets aside his glass of whiskey long enough to listen to her made-up tale and take her case. (Only if she has a nice stack of handy cash, of course!) And the story is off and running.

- **Everybody Did It:** The prospect that *all* the suspects are guilty. Because that just makes everything harder, right? Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* is a good example.
- **Intrepid Reporter:** Popular in the 1930s and 1940s, the intrepid reporter sleuth runs headlong into danger to solve the case before the inept police can do so. Less popular today, possibly due to the dearth of intrepid reporters. But still, occasionally there's a reporter who gets too involved in their story to be able to back away, so don't discount this just yet.
- **Never Suicide:** In this type of story, an amateur sleuth is convinced a death is not a suicide despite police determination and abundant evidence that it is a suicide. Sometimes the amateur sleuth is right; occasionally, he's wrong.
- **Sherlock Scan:** A way of introducing a detective or sleuth that demonstrates his extraordinary ability to notice details and draw amazing, and highly accurate conclusions from those details. Usually presented when the sleuth is introduced. And, of course, it's repeated at intervals in the book when the sleuth has to impress someone new. It always irritates the cops. I mean, who wants to hang with a know-it-all amateur? Especially when they seem to actually...you know...know it all.
- **Summation Gathering:** In cozy mysteries in particular, all the suspects are gathered together when the sleuth (usually an amateur sleuth or a private detective) proceeds to explain how and why the murder(s) was committed and who did it. Happens less often with other subgenres, but it's a useful way to tie up loose ends with a big bow so the writer can prove to the reader that the ending makes sense, and the correct perp is caught.
- **Twist Ending:** Plot leads to an inevitable conclusion but at the last moment, something changes everything. You see this in horror too, but it's super-useful in mysteries to give the reader one last thrill.

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Romance Tropes

Romance is the 900-lb. gorilla in genre fiction, outselling more than any other genre; possibly more than all other genres combined. There are dozens and dozens of tropes used in romance. Your best source is to find authors and subgenres you really like to read and note the types of tropes that appear repeatedly.

The Romance Writers of America (rwa.org) identifies seven major subgenres of romance:

- **Contemporary romance** set since 1950.
- **Erotic romance** where explicit sex is part of the love story and relationship development. Note that the sexual content is essential to that relationship development for this to be a romance and not just erotica.
- **Historical romances** are set any time before 1950. Traditionally, reader favorite periods include Medieval, set in Great Britain after the Norman Conquest, and Regency, set in early 19th century, but any other era up to 1950 is also fine.
- **Paranormal romances** have elements of fantasy, ghosts, spirits, or other paranormal aspects; this may include science fiction as part of the story. (Science fiction romances are really popular, so I'm not sure why they don't have a separate category with RWA.)
- **Faith-based romances** have a strong spiritual beliefs as part of the love story. The particular religion does not matter, though (depending on the audience you're trying to reach) Protestant Christian is far more common than any other. Christianity dominates this subgenre, as you might expect. Romances based on religions outside Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are *extremely* rare. That is a Not Good Thing in my opinion. But then, no one asked me.

- **Romantic suspense** in which there is some strong element of thriller, mystery, or suspense is important, but the romantic relationship still is the most important aspect of the story.
- **Young adult romance** aimed at (shocker!) young adults—those just beginning their lives in an adult world—and which have young adults as key elements of the story.

Tropes in romance fiction appear in a variety of ways, from extended lists of dozens and dozens of story elements to shorter lists of more general plot lines that are commonly used. TCK Publishing (tckpublishing.com) identifies these key romance plot tropes:

- **Belated love** epiphany happens when the realization that one person loves the other only occurs after the other person leaves for a someplace far away, either for a new job or just because they have lost hope that the relationship will ultimately work.
- **Destined to be together**, in which the hero and heroine constantly meet under all kinds of circumstances and find each other every time they turn around. It's as if this love story was simply meant to happen.
- **Enemies to lovers**, in which two people who are absolutely at odds with each other over major issues find their relationship gradually deepening to romantic love. Somehow, though, whatever the issue that made them enemies has to be cleared up at the end for this to work. I predict fireworks for this couple's future.
- **Forbidden love** in which cultural, social, financial, or other circumstances forbid these two to become lovers, yet somehow the couple overcomes that resistance from outside sources to develop a strong and loving relationship. Think Romeo and Juliet. If they had survived, I mean. Of course, they didn't so their story was a tragedy rather than a romance, but I think you get the point.
- **Forced proximity** in which hero and heroine are forced into close confines together (or forced to work closely together) for an

extended period of time. Though they may start out as either strangers or bare acquaintances, the intimacy of their circumstances allows that to turn into love. Put 'em in a locked-up cabin in the woods, or in a capsule in space or undersea, and leave them to stew there till they fall in love. Just the ticket for a happy marriage, yes?

- **Friends to lovers**, where the hero and heroine begin as good friends, but find their relationship gradually deepening into romantic love. Talk about not seeing great opportunity when it's right under their noses!
- **Lost memories** in which one character suffers amnesia and does not remember their romantic relationship with the other person. They have to fall in love all over again for the relationship to survive. Yes, the soap operas on TV did this concept to death, but it can still work. Just forget the soap opera overuse—wait...did I say “forget”?
- **Love triangles** are where there are three people, two of them in love with the third, and the third has trouble choosing between the other two because both are very attractive. This is hard to resolve into a truly happy ending because (unless polygamy or polyandry is permitted) someone will end up with a broken heart.
- **Pretend relationships**, in which the hero and heroine pretend to be lovers or engaged or even married to serve some business or social purpose or even to make a beloved (dying) relative happy. This forced togetherness gradually develops into a romantic love. And besides, it's like that thing where you're told to smile if you're unhappy and the act of smiling will lift your mood. In this case, pretend you're in love if you're not and the act of pretending will make it happen. Could be true, right?
- **Second chances**, where a couple whose relationship broke apart at some earlier time now finds themselves together and revisiting their earlier love. Sometimes this works because both parties have matured since their earlier breakup. Sometimes the couple have each (or one of them) been married between that breakup and the present, and they've learned more about what makes a solid love story.

- **Secret baby** where the woman gets pregnant after a fling and for whatever reason, does not tell the man. This could be because he has moved away (or is called away) and isn't reachable. When he ultimately is able to return, the baby adds tension to their reunion along with the question of if/when/what to tell him about the child's father. Probably not best done at their first reunion with a "Hi, Daddy!" tag on baby's bib.
- **Secretly rich** is used when one person in the couple has a *lot* of money but doesn't want to be treated as "special." They meet someone who treats them as an ordinary person and that starts to spark a love affair. Me, frankly, if I'm super rich, I'm all for special. But I guess not everyone's like that.
- **Suddenly a parent**, when a woman's brief fling results in a pregnancy, or a tragic accident leaves someone an unexpected parent to a relative or close friend's baby or child. The relationship develops as the couple realize that nothing is ever going to be the same. If you've had kids or ever been around them much, you know exactly what this means.
- **Workplace romance**, while frowned on by most employers, happens when coworkers fall in love, and have to keep it secret to keep their jobs secure. Lots of meetings in the supplies closet are in this couple's future.
- **You've changed** is a story line where the couple is already in love but separated by work or other circumstances. When that happens one (at least one, maybe both) notes that the other person has "changed" and the relationship founders. Absence in this case makes the heart grow wander.

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Science Fiction Tropes

(adapted from writersdigest.com)

- **Aliens are humans** where the invading bad “aliens” are actually humans from, oh, say, the future, trying to save us from destroying the world, or possibly from a space colony who wants freedom, or maybe from an alternate universe. See how tropes can combine?
- **Aliens are pure energy life forms** who live in the Sun or maybe coast through outer space just waiting to find a nice, tasty planet to colonize/take over/destroy. Seeing a theme here...
- **Alternate Universes** refer to the prospect of parallel worlds that are similar to our own but not *too* similar. So, in the time travel grandpa paradox (explained under Time Travel below), you kill dear old grandpa (you really are a sociopath, aren't you?) and it flips you into an alternate universe where now you're born from slightly different set of parents/grandparents. Or maybe you don't exist at all. Or maybe you exist as a space alien. Who can tell?
- **Bad aliens** are, of course, the stuff for legions of stories. Bad aliens want to take over our world. Mate with our women (really??). Eat our children. Destroy all our world's resources (as if we haven't already done that ourselves). Whatever their motive, they are Bad People and need to be slapped on the wrist—or genocidally eliminated—and told, “don't do that!”
- **Bad artificial intelligence (AI)** is coming far too true in today's world. In this case you have an AI that is definitely truly totally out to do its own little AI thing, and whatever that does to those pesky human gnats is...well...who likes gnats?
- **Bad robots** have been around since the word was invented in the stage play *RUR* by Karel Capek. Sometimes bad robots are really good

robots gone wrong because they interpret their “good” instructions to “protect” humans as meaning “enslave them and keep them in luxurious bondage.” Yeah. Hard to give a robot perfect instruction, isn’t it?

- **Chekhov’s Egg.** If you introduce an alien egg to the story it must hatch and eat someone by the end of the story.
- **Cloning** is another too-close-to-today technology except that in this case, the cloning not only works, but makes people indistinguishable from the original. So, in a variation of the shell game, who’s the original and who’s the clone? Problems, nothing but problems. And the IRS will want both copies to file their tax returns on time. You can bet on that, if nothing else.
- **Creating monsters** is our Dr. Frankenstein’s favorite hobby but it’s also the case that monsters can pop up accidentally. Sci-Fi movies from the 1950s are full of those, generally caused by the nuclear bombs and tests exploded willy-nilly before the test ban treaty was signed in 1963. Great examples are the giant ants in *Them!* and, of course, everyone’s favorite monster, Godzilla. King Kong doesn’t *quite* fit this (unless you stretch the category) because there’s no mythology about how he was created rather than, oh, just evolving like any normal 100-meter-high monster would.
- **Dystopian futures** looks like it’s coming all too true. If you’re watching the climate change issue, we may well be pushing Earth past the point of livability for anything much. Except cockroaches. Cockroaches can survive nuclear bombs exploded practically on top of them. And tardigrades, the cute little buggly things that appear to be surviving on the Moon just fine despite no air, extreme cold and extreme heat, thank you verrra much.
- **Everything is a simulation** ala *The Matrix*. This trope was around long before the movie, but the movie is a great explanation of what that means. We live in a computer simulation and if we can somehow break out of it into the “real” world, we’ll see what truly exists. Interestingly, there actually is a smattering of scientific evidence that

this might be true. Just a smattering, though, so don't be looking for a "get out of simulation free" card in the near future.

- **Mad scientist** again goes back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, 'cuz if ever there was a paradigm of a mad scientist it was our bestie, Dr. Frankenstein. If you've ever seen the original Universal movie with Boris Karloff as The Monster (who actually had no name, by the way), the image that stands out is our dear Dr. F, eyes bugged out, hair waving wildly, and screaming, "It's alive! *It's alive!*" Yup. Mad scientist to his core.
- **Morals and ethics** are most commonly presented in the form of a human vs. alien societal clash. My personal favorite example (that no one else reads, I suspect) is the classic *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell. A Jesuit priest/linguist is a member of a first contact party to an alien society. All sides agree that the intentions of the contact team are 100% positive, to open dialogue and communications with a society that seems peaceful and quite human-like. The priest returns as the only surviving member of the party—and he's a broken man in all senses of the word. What happened? The whole book is brilliant, and a presentation of what happens when morals and ethics and linguistics all clash. Go read it if you haven't already. Seriously. Do. There's even a sequel, *Children of God*. Read that one too.
- **Nanotechnology**, the technology of the uber-small machines so tiny you can't see them, is a good thing in the minds of those creating such machines to travel through your body to repair veins, etc. But kinda creepy too...how do you control things too small to be seen? And when they're self-replicating (as some already are) how do you stop them from replicating us off the face of the Earth? Yeah, lots of considerations here.
- **Philosophical discussions**, yeah, they're odd, but they do happen really often in science fiction. This is because science fiction is *not* about the future—it really isn't. Science fiction is *really* about holding a mirror up to the modern world and spotlighting what's wrong *now*. But that mirror is like a fun house mirror, it distorts things just enough that you think you're exploring an alien planet or have lost 30 lb. in a flash, but actually, nope. You're still you where you are right

now. And you still have those 30 lb. So sad...but go read Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and consider recent political conditions and then tell me I'm wrong.

- **Secret laboratory or base** derives from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where the good Dr. F. had his secret laboratory and churned out our favorite walking kinda-zombie. It's been used over and over again. The secret laboratory is often a military or uber-secret corporate creation, but sometimes it's manned (aliened?) by aliens who use it for their own nefarious purposes.
- **Space travel issues** refer to the general issues of the technology used to travel through space: modern-day rockets, ion rockets, fusion/nuclear rockets, some type of wormhole effect, a "hyperdrive" or "warp drive" (thank you, *Star Trek*). Figure out what travel technology is available and be consistent about its speed, limitations, fuel requirements, and risks (can we say nuclear radiation, kids?)
- **Technobabble** is speaking in high-tech tongues, and it solves any problem the crew is currently having. 'Reverse the polarity, the Glib-Glops are weak to theta radiation!' Be careful about using this too much because it's really meaningless to the reader and too much jargon-babble diarrhea can cause massive reader nausea, heartburn, indigestion and upset stomach. I recommend massive doses of Pepto-Erase-It-All to replace those issues.
- **Technologically advanced** societies can be cool. Arthur C. Clarke, the Grand Master Science Fiction writer is well known for saying that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." So that's cool, huh? But tech doesn't have to be advanced to that level to cause problems. All you have to do is consider self-driving cars that aren't good drivers, or what social media has done to personal relationships. The examples are never-ending. Tech makes lives great, but also endangers us at every turn.
- **Technologically stunted** provides the flip side of this. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (do they still have kids read that in

school? Or is it banned?) offers a great example of how a high-tech and low-tech societies might interact. But you can create your own version.

- **Time travel issues** Time travel to the future is absolutely possible (though it takes, huh, time, or you have to go really fast at near-light speeds for a while and then come back to where you started). Travel to the past also appears (maybe) as *theoretically* possible (or at least there's no physical law against it—quite), but it leads to the grandfather paradox: you go back to the past, kill your grandfather/grandmother before your parent was born—then how do you exist to go back to the past to kill them? Think about that, and if it doesn't give you a headache pondering, yay for you. There are other paradoxical issues, and they usually can be solved by the alternate universe trope discussed above.
- **Utopian futures** sound great, but you don't have a story if everything's perfect. There has to be some degree of conflict, and often this takes the form of an underworld in this Utopian future that maybe isn't so Utopian after all. See “dystopian future” for reference.

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Western Tropes

Western novels are generally set in the western U.S. in the 19th and very early 20th centuries. They're very specific in terms of genre, more so than most other genres. Generally speaking the "Old West" appears in these novels as a pretty darned hostile place to be, with harsh climate, rugged landscape, hostile natives, and not much in the way of law and order. The western novel and early films, very popular in the 1930s thru the 1950s, is where the tradition started that the good guys wear white hats, while the bad guys wear black hats.

The characters that appear commonly in westerns are (of course) cowboys, Native Americans, bandits, outlaws, lone marshals or sheriffs, townsfolk who need protection, and U.S. Cavalry troops and officers. Women figured in relative minor roles in traditional westerns in most cases, limited usually to either the saloon girls and prostitutes, or the "nice" women who were wives and daughters of ranchers or townsfolk. Religious leaders were also rare and really only present in the towns.

The Western most commonly exalts the "pacification" (i.e., elimination) of Native American tribes and cultures, and the growth of settlements, mining, and other exploitation of the western landscape. Common story types in westerns include these:

- **Cavalry and Indian stories:** These stories have U.S. Cavalry troops in direct conflict and local war against the Native American tribes. Traditionally in westerns, the Cavalry constitutes the "good guys" and the Indians are the "bad guys." In more recent western novels, however, this is reversed. The point of this conflict is that the Cavalry is trying to "tame" the wilderness so settlers can move in and live more or less peacefully.
- **Code of the West:** The Code of the West was a construct of pulp fiction in the 19th century as a cowboy philosophy. It never explicitly

existed in reality. In essence, the Code of the West was an interesting amalgam of ancient Greek guesting laws, Medieval code of chivalry, and modified by the strong individualism rampant in those who deliberately chose to live in a lawless, hostile, sparsely settled area. Elements of the Code of the West included hospitality to strangers, a sense of fair play to others, staying loyal, and having respect for the land and for “nice” women. Since no actual written law or law enforcement authority existed in reality, each person was free to create their own moral and ethical codes as guides to survival.

- **Empire stories:** In these stories, a rancher or an oil man is trying to construct some type of empire that extends beyond typical ranches or other land holdings. This often puts the empire-builder in conflict with everyone else in the area, from Native Americans to other ranchers because the empire builder is scarfing up all the resources. Given the climate of the American Southwest, this often involves hoarding water sources. When the empire builder is the good guy this often becomes a rags-to-riches type of story. When the empire builder is the bad guy, this becomes an evil empire type of story.
- **Marshal stories:** Ah, yes, the local marshal faces down the outlaws and usually this ends with a showdown duel on the main street of town at (when else?) high noon. (Hey, great title for a movie, yes?) Or else it ends with a chase through rugged wilderness, with or without a posse in attendance, and a shootout among the rocks and mesas of the area.
- **Neo-Western stories:** These stories primarily deal with moving the character tropes from the traditional Old West into the late 20th or early 21st century. The mentality of the Code of the West, with its strong individualism over formal legalities of the modern world. These stories are still usually set in the American West and usually focus on a desire to find justice as defined by the protagonist’s sense of right and wrong, irrespective of legal decisions. Sometimes the story is about a character trying to atone for their own past actions too. According to Vince Gilligan, the creator of the *Breaking Bad* television series, that acclaimed television program was in fact a Neo-Western story, complete with head-to-head challenges and duels.

- **Ranch stories:** These stories are all about defending the family ranch from horrible people trying to take over the little guy's home. This is a classic David and Goliath story in which the little guy is the rancher and the giant is the horrible <choose one: empire builder, railroad, rustlers, outlaws>. Yeah. David vs. Goliath for sure, and of course David wins.
- **Revenge stories:** These are about (gosh, could you guess?) a character trying to get revenge for something awful done to that character or the character's family. This often includes a cool chase between the person going after vengeance and the bad guys. It won't end well for the bad guys. Just saying...
- **Union Pacific stories:** Building the railroad that crossed the continent from the Mississippi River to the Pacific coast was a big deal in the mid-19th century. And it caused an enormous amount of conflict between the builders and the ranchers, Native Americans, and everyone else trying to get in on a piece of the action. In addition to the building of the railroad, this also includes building telegraph lines, or any other type of attempt to bring European technology to the American West.
- **Wagon Train stories:** Wagons, ho! Yup, these are stories about the collections of Conestoga wagons that brought families and settlers from the (relatively) civilized East to the profoundly uncivilized West. Lots of places for conflict in this type of story, ranging from the challenges of the geography, lack of water, bandits, and hostile Native Americans (can't imagine why they didn't want folks squatting on their traditional hunting grounds, right?)

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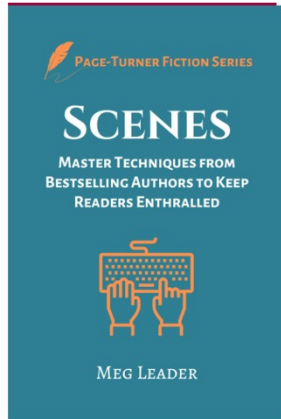
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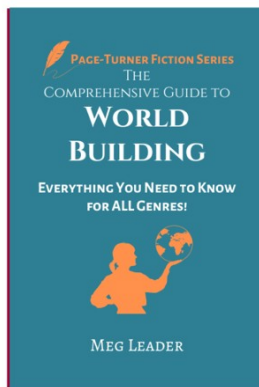
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