

The Secret to a Story Idea That Works

By John D. Brown

Going Nowhere?



Do these feel like story?

“The king died and then the queen died is a story. The king died, and then queen died of grief is a plot.”

- *E. M. Forster*

What about this?

The king is murdered, and three days later his scrappy queen and her guards are attacked on a lonely road, and only she and the weird one escape with their lives.

They suspect the attackers were sent by Lord Bannock, a powerful, murderous man, who has convinced most of the court that she's guilty of regicide and should be executed, and they should crown him instead.

What about this?

They then discover he's moving to kill her family to ensure there are none to contend his rule.

She must stop Bannock and identify the real killer, but how can she when she has only the one odd guard, troops are everywhere, and the realm's most bloodthirsty bounty hunter finds her trail...

The 3 Big Reader Responses

1. Hopes and fears
2. Anticipation
3. Puzzlement, mystery

Hopes and Fears



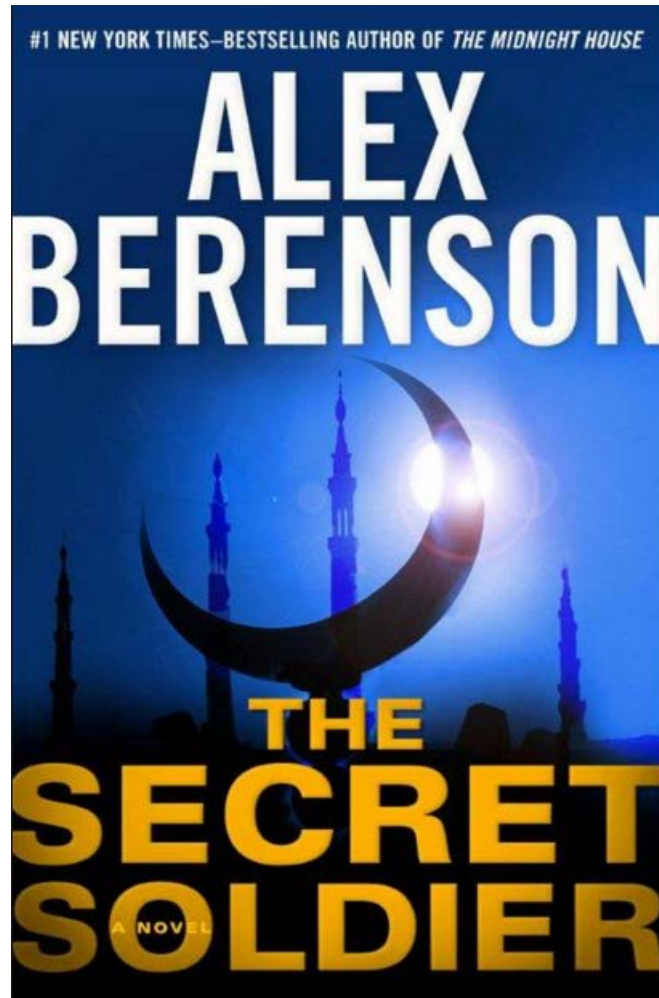
Anticipation



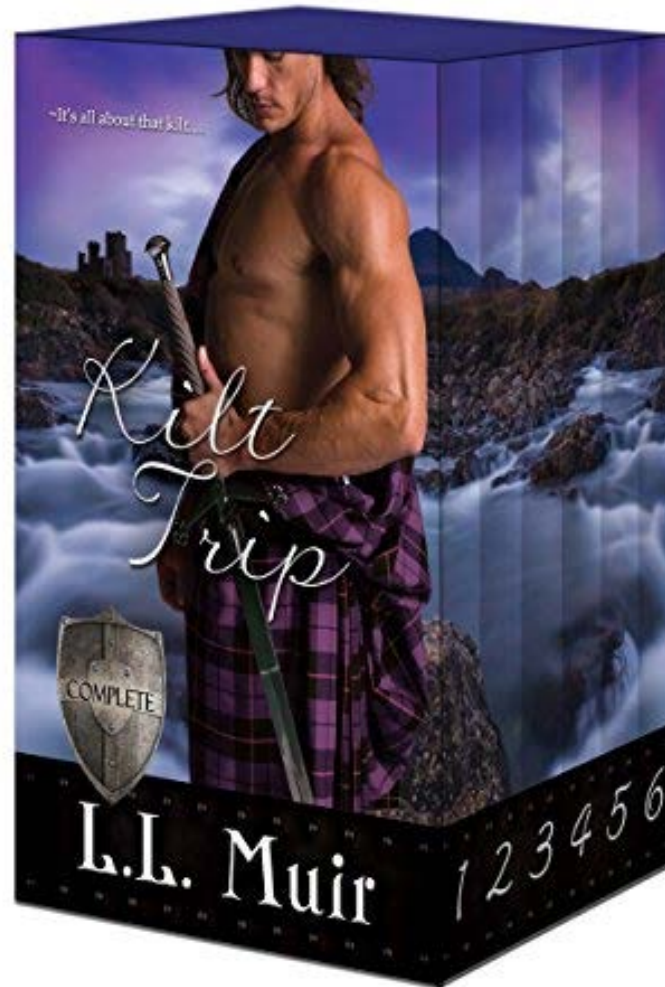
Puzzlement, Mystery



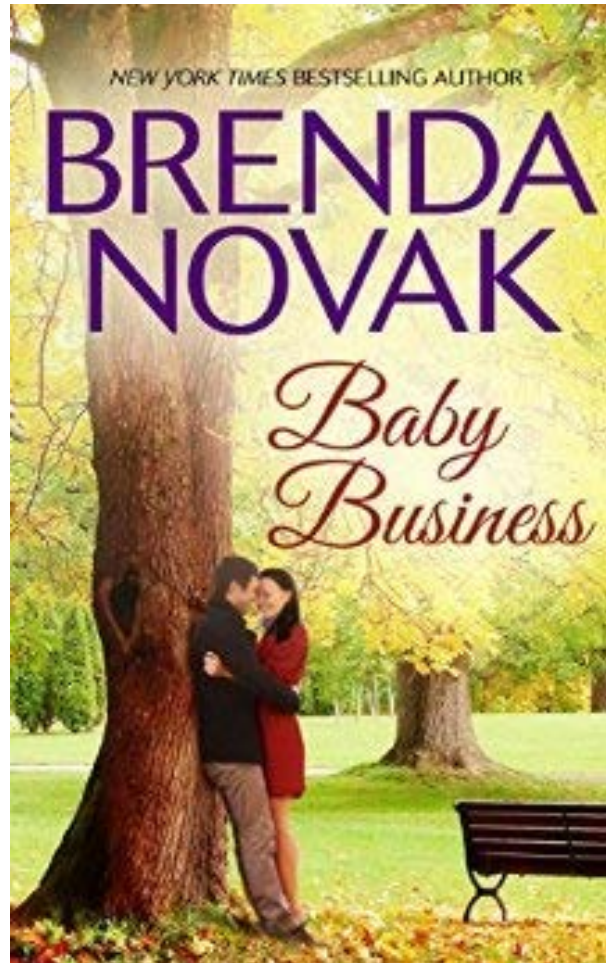
Trigger



Trigger



Trigger



Like a Rollercoaster



To Start the Ride

1. An interesting character
2. Something specific to gain or retain
3. Formidable obstacle

1. An Interesting Character

- **Power**
 - Sheer physical strength
 - Wealth
 - High social status
 - Position of authority
 - Influence on others
 - Ability, expertise
- **Uncommon, New**
 - Larger than life
 - Eccentric
 - Quirky
- **Wish-fulfillment**
 - Doing what we'd want to do
 - Has what we'd want to have
 - Ability we want to have
 - Beautiful, handsome
- **Other**
 - Funny
 - Admirable
 - Has a life, something going on, hope or dream
- **In a Situation (THOMR)**

2. THOMR Triggers

Desire to Gain or Retain

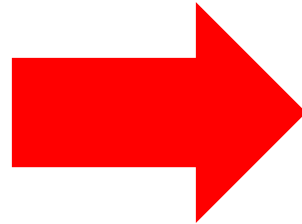
Threat

Hardship

Oppportunity

Mystery

Relationship



Desire to
Gain or Retain
Something
Specific

Threat

An aspect of happiness in danger...

- Life
- Security
- Health
- Relationship
- Meaningfulness
- Freedom
- Ownership
- Self-respect
- Control
- Reputation

Hardship & Opportunity

**Already experiencing pain or lack or
see an opportunity for happiness...**

- Life
- Security
- Health
- Relationship
- Meaningfulness
- Freedom
- Ownership
- Self-respect
- Control
- Reputation

Mystery

Seeking insight for...

- Reward
- Justice
- Secrets
- Odd Events
- Understanding what's going on
- A key to gaining or retaining

Relationship

A special type of threat, hardship, or opportunity

- Friends
- Lovers
- Family

2 Keys

Significant enough stakes

Resonates with reader

3. Formidable Obstacle

Synonyms

- Trouble
- Difficulty
- Problem
- Complication
- Opposition
- Dilemma

Why?

Uncertainty

We don't want to know
what will happen.

We want to know what might happen
and worry about the possibilities.

Making the Task Difficult

- **Conflict**

- Antagonist
- Others
- Things
- Self

- **Obstacles**

- Physical environment
- Cultural environment
- Objects
- Lack (knowledge, skills, resource, ability)

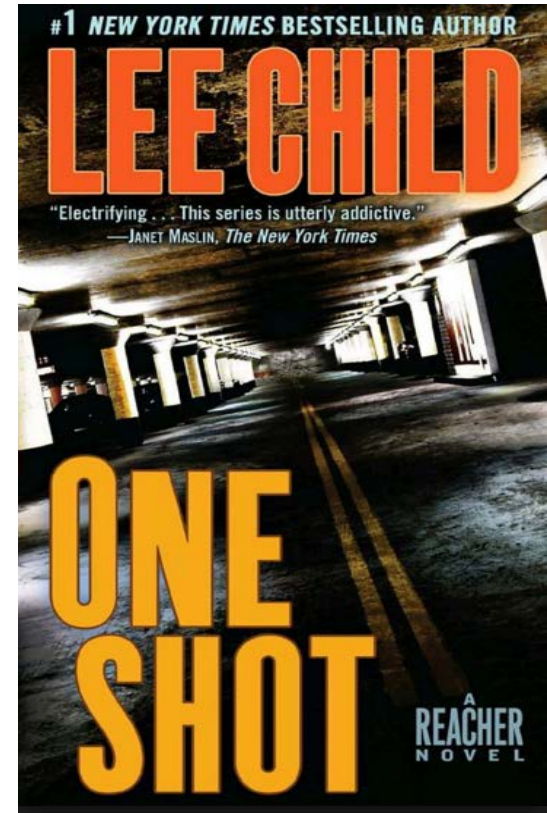
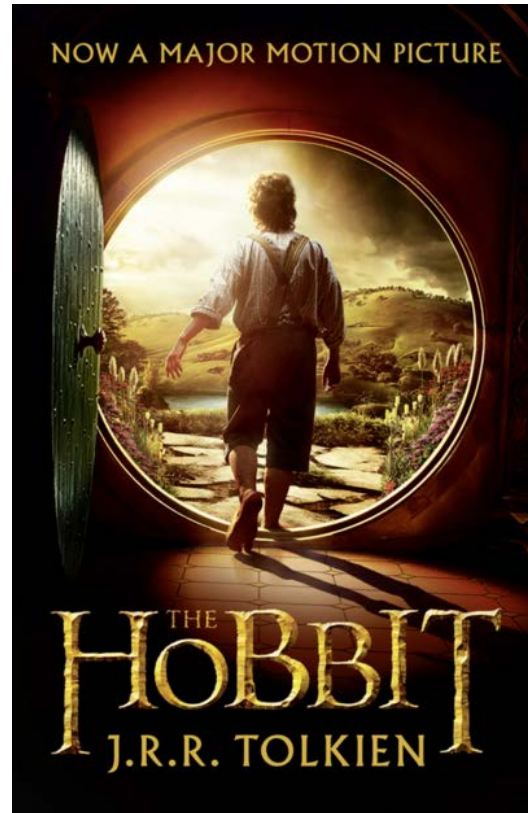
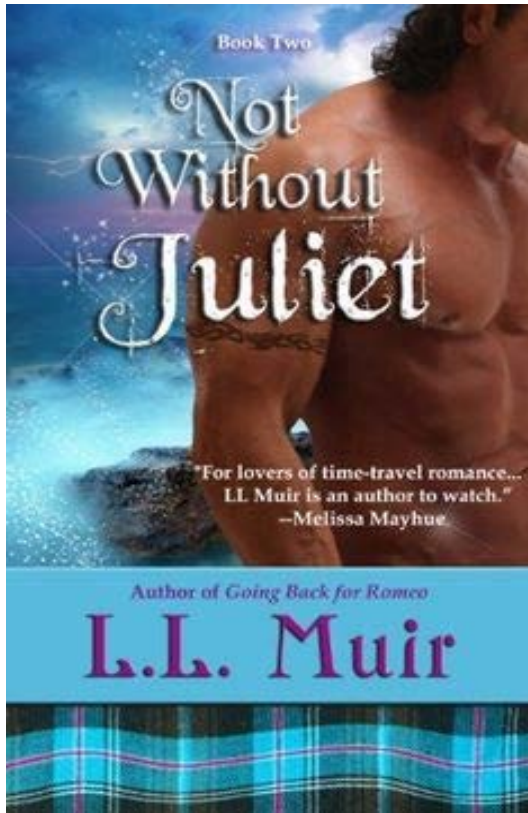
- **Pressure**

- Underdog
- Stakes
- Time

A Boat Isn't A Boat



A Story Isn't A Story



Think Genre

A story is...

An account of the effort
to gain or retain
something specific
has something new and cool
high enough stakes
resonates with reader
and delivers its type of ride

The Story Setup (The Engine)

1. Genre
2. Interesting Character
3. Something Specific to Gain\Retain
 - THOM R
 - Inciting Incident
4. Formidable Obstacle

Engine 1



Grandma Kick Butt

Genre	Action thriller
Interesting Character	Female, Roxie, sixties, gun-toting, tractor-driving, horse-riding, tough-as-nails widow rancher. Loves spending time with her little cow girl, ten-year-old granddaughter.
THOM R	Threat. Gets a call that neighbor's dog has mauled yet another one of her calves. Goes over to demand dog be put down. Interrupts drug dealer and goons murdering neighbor for punishment. They come after her.
Gain\Retain	Life, security. Escape these murderers.
Formidable Obstacle	Doesn't have phone, out in a rural area. She's in an old pickup. They're in a new SUV. The granddaughter pops up from backseat, having sneaked in to surprise her.

Engine Summary

1. In this [genre]
2. [Character] is an [adjectives] [vocation] working for [hope or dream]
3. When [inciting incident / THOM R occurs].
4. Will she be able to [gain/retain specific thing]
5. When she must [struggle against formidable obstacle]?

Roxie Kick Butt

- 1. In this action thriller**
- 2. Roxie is a mid-sixties, gun-toting, tractor-driving, horse-riding, tough-as-nails widow rancher who loves spending time with her 10-year old granddaughter.**
- 3. When she interrupts a drug cartel killing, the bad guys come after her.**

Roxie Kick Butt

3. Will she be able to put these men down
4. When she is outmanned, outgunned, cut off in the middle of nowhere with her granddaughter, and more of the cartel roadblocks her exit?

Engine 2



Grandma Frame Job

Genre	Mystery
Interesting Character	Female, Roxie, sixties, smart, put together, but starting to forget things, manages ice cream co-op. Earning to help pay for daughter's cancer treatments.
THOM R	Mystery and threat. She loses a deposit for \$30,000. Then an investigation shows something not right with books. Younger gal wants her job, is campaigning to get her out. She's accused of negligence, then criminal fraud.
Gain\Retain	Find the lost money. Prove innocence.
Formidable Obstacle	She's been cut off from files and co-op. Cops and younger gal are building a case. She knows it was stolen, but there are no leads. Only one that believes her is romantic old Ernie, who she grew up with.

Roxie Frame Job

1. In this crime mystery
2. Roxie is a mid-sixties, wise-cracking manager of an ice cream co-op who is working to help pay for her granddaughter's cancer treatments
3. She's starting to forget things and when she loses a deposit for \$30,000 an investigation shows something not right with books.

Roxie Frame Job

3. A younger gal at the co-op accuses her of negligence, then fraud.
4. Will she be able to find the lost money and prove her innocence
5. When the cops are building a case, she's been cut off from the books, and the only person to help her is romantic old Ernie?

Engine 3



Roxie Hurlburt
Co-owner, Mercer's Dairy

Grandma SF Smuggler

Genre	Science Fiction Action
Interesting Character	Female, Roxie, sixties, smuggles on planet. Earning to help pay for granddaughter's chance at being a space explorer.
THOM R	Mystery and threat. And then a government AI chases her down, and she's given a choice—take something to the good ranching people she was smuggling to that will kill them or go to prison.
Gain\Retain	Happiness for granddaughter and good people
Formidable Obstacle	An AI robot goes with her to ensure compliance, and the government leader takes her granddaughter.

Roxie the Smuggler

- 1. In this science fiction action**
- 2. Roxie is a mid-sixties, mechanical wizard who is smuggling to help pay for granddaughter's shot at being a space explorer.**
- 3. Then she's tracked and arrested by a shadowy part of the government and forced to smuggle in something that will kill innocent people or go to prison.**

Roxie the Smuggler

3. Will she be able to save the people and her granddaughter
4. When a nasty AI robot is sent with her to ensure compliance and the villain takes her granddaughter?

Engine 4



Grandma Monster Slayer

Genre	Heroic fantasy
Interesting Character	Female, Roxie, sixties, washed-out from mage training, but knows some small magics and just wants to see her granddaughter grow.
THOM R	Threat. Children begin vanishing from the vale. And then they find evidence a korog (ancient monster) is dragging them away.
Gain\Retain	Safety. Save the children, protect her granddaughter
Formidable Obstacle	Korog's are dark, shadowy, and powerful. And when they send their strongest trio of men to go outside for help, it kills them all. They are trapped in the vale.

Roxie the Warrior

1. In this heroic fantasy
2. Roxie is a mid-sixties, bawdy grandmother who wants nothing more than to enjoy her granddaughter.
3. And then children begin vanishing from the vale.

Roxie the Warrior

3. Will she be able to save them and her own granddaughter
4. When the three strongest men have been killed and they discover that they're up against a korog, a dark, shadowy, and powerful killer, and there's no way out of the vale.

Engine 5



Grandma Urban

Genre	Urban fantasy, X-files
Interesting Character	Female, Roxie, sixties, trailer park grandma who used to ride with a motorcycle gang. She's just trying to live in peace and raise her granddaughter to be a good woman who didn't make the mistakes grandma did.
THOM R	Mystery and threat. And then her granddaughter starts seeing dark beings before people are attacked.
Gain\Retain	Safety. Find out what the creatures are and stop them.
Formidable Obstacle	She has no idea what's going on or who might. Doctors diagnose as a mental illness. DFS is giving her crap. And then the dark creatures begin to stalk her granddaughter.

Roxie the Monster Hunter

- 1. In this urban fantasy**
- 2. Roxie is a mid-sixties, ex-biker, trailer park grandma who is trying to raise her granddaughter.**
- 3. When her granddaughter begins seeing dark beings, she's diagnosed with a mental illness, but then Roxie finds evidence the creatures are real and are killing people.**

Roxie the Monster Hunter

- 3. Will she be able to find out what they are and stop them**
- 4. When DFS wants to take the child away and then the creatures begin to hunt her granddaughter.**

The 3 Big Reader Responses

1. Hopes and fears
2. Anticipation
3. Puzzlement, mystery

The Engine

1. Genre
2. Interesting Character
3. Something Specific to Gain\Retain
 - THOM R
 - Inciting Incident
4. Formidable Obstacle
5. *A Twist That's New and Cool

**If you want to
strap your reader in for a ride**



Make sure you've got an engine under the hood