

Plot grows out of character . . . Characters should not, conversely, serve as pawns for some plot. **Anne Lamott**

CHAPTER 4 Plot and Characters

Probably the first thing you notice as you read a story is what happened, to whom. Plot and characters: These are the foundation stones of fiction. As such, they're worth a closer look. We connect with those probably because they're so basic to life: We care about people (family, friends, the famous and influential) and about what goes on in their lives. In literature, we meet not with actual people and events but imaginative constructs; and as readers of literature, beyond our fascination with what happens to whom, we should be interested in the way they are constructed and brought to life. This chapter focuses on the skills and techniques we should be alert to in the development of plots and characters in fiction.

PLOT

The first thing to consider in reading fiction is plot. **Plot**, in a literary sense, is the way events are selected and arranged in narrative work to present them most effectively to the reader. Comparing *plot* with *story* can help clarify that. *Story*, as we used the word in Chapter 3, "Reading Fiction," is a straightforward account of everything that happens, in the order it happens. *Story* provides the materials (the events, the characters, the outcome) from which a plot is constructed. As a story is converted to a plot, some things are left out (ones that aren't essential for the effect and emphasis desired), things are sometimes rearranged (the story may start in the middle or at the end instead of at the beginning), and causal connections between key events are brought out. The interest in plot is not just in what happens but in why it happens and in the implications or results of what happens: What does it all "mean"? What does it "say" to us? Another way to put it is that

plot provides the **structure** of a story, that is, the arrangement of material in it, the ordering of its parts, the design used to draw out and convey its significance.

Pay attention to plot in the following short story about an unexpected encounter between a young man and a young woman on a street in Los Angeles. In addition to what's going on in it, consider what details the author includes, how they are arranged, and how they relate to each other and work together to convey a unified effect.

Dagoberto Gilb b. 1950

Love in L.A.

[1993]

Jake slouched in a clot of near motionless traffic, in the peculiar gray of concrete, smog, and early morning beneath the overpass of the Hollywood Freeway on Alvarado Street. He didn't really mind because he knew how much worse it could be trying to make a left onto the onramp. He certainly didn't do that every day of his life, and he'd assure anyone who'd ask that he never would either. A steady occupation had its advantages and he couldn't deny thinking about that too. He needed an FM radio in something better than this '58 Buick he drove. It would have crushed velvet interior with electric controls for the L.A. summer, a nice warm heater and defroster for the winter drives at the beach, a cruise control for those longer trips, mellow speakers front and rear of course, windows that hum closed, snuffing out that nasty exterior noise of freeways. The fact was that he'd probably have to change his whole style. Exotic colognes, plush, dark nightclubs, maitais and daquiris, necklaced ladies in satin gowns, misty and sexy like in a tequila ad. Jake could imagine lots of possibilities when he let himself, but none that ended up with him pressed onto a stalled freeway.

Jake was thinking about this freedom of his so much that when he glimpsed its green light he just went ahead and stared bye bye to the steadily employed. When he turned his head the same direction his windshield faced, it was maybe one second too late. He pounced the brake pedal and steered the front wheels away from the tiny brakelights but the smack was unavoidable. Just one second sooner and it would only have been close. One second more and he'd be crawling up the Toyota's trunk. As it was, it seemed like only a harmless smack, much less solid than the one against his back bumper.

Jake considered driving past the Toyota but was afraid the traffic ahead would make it too difficult. As he pulled up against the curb a few carlengths ahead, it occurred to him that the traffic might have helped him get away too. He slammed the car door twice to make sure it was closed fully and to give himself another second more, then toured front and rear of his Buick

for damage on or near the bumpers. Not an impressionable scratch even in the chrome. He perked up. Though the car's beauty was secondary to its ability to start and move, the body and paint were clean except for a few minor dings. This stood out as one of his few clearcut accomplishments over the years.

Before he spoke to the driver of the Toyota, whose looks he could see might present him with an added complication, he signaled to the driver of the car that hit him, still in his car and stopped behind the Toyota, and waved his hands and shook his head to let the man know there was no problem as far as he was concerned. The driver waved back and started his engine.

"It didn't even scratch my paint," Jake told her in that way of his. "So how you doin'? Any damage to the car? I'm kinda hoping so, just so it takes a little more time and we can talk some. Or else you can give me your phone number now and I won't have to lay my regular b.s. on you to get it later."

He took her smile as a good sign and relaxed. He inhaled her scent like it was clean air and straightened out his less than new but not unhip clothes.

"You've got Florida plates. You look like you must be Cuban."

"My parents are from Venezuela."

"My name's Jake." He held out his hand.

"Mariana."

They shook hands like she'd never done it before in her life.

"I really am sorry about hitting you like that." He sounded genuine. He fondled the wide dimple near the cracked taillight. "It's amazing how easy it is to put a dent in these new cars. They're so soft they might replace waterbeds soon." Jake was confused about how to proceed with this. So much seemed so unlikely, but there was always possibility. "So maybe we should go out to breakfast somewhere and talk it over."

"I don't eat breakfast."

"Some coffee then."

"Thanks, but I really can't."

"You're not married, are you? Not that that would matter that much to me. I'm an openminded kinda guy."

She was smiling. "I have to get to work."

"That sounds boring."

"I better get your driver's license," she said.

Jake nodded, disappointed. "One little problem," he said. "I didn't bring it. I just forgot it this morning. I'm a musician," he exaggerated greatly, "and, well, I dunno, I left my wallet in the pants I was wearing last night. If you have some paper and a pen I'll give you my address and all that."

He followed her to the glove compartment side of her car.

"What if we don't report it to the insurance companies? I'll just get it fixed for you."

"I don't think my dad would let me do that."

"Your dad? It's not your car?"

"He bought it for me. And I live at home."

"Right." She was slipping away from him. He went back around to the back of her new Toyota and looked over the damage again. There was the trunk lid, the bumper, a rear panel, a taillight.

"You do have insurance?" she asked, suspicious, as she came around the back of the car.

"Oh yeah," he lied.

"I guess you better write the name of that down too."

He made up a last name and address and wrote down the name of an insurance company an old girlfriend once belonged to. He considered giving a real phone number but went against that idea and made one up.

"I act too," he lied to enhance the effect more. "Been in a couple of movies."

She smiled like a fan.

"So how about your phone number?" He was rebounding maturely.

She gave it to him.

"Mariana, you are beautiful," he said in his most sincere voice.

"Call me," she said timidly.

Jake beamed. "We'll see you, Mariana," he said holding out his hand. Her hand felt so warm and soft he felt like he'd been kissed.

Back in his car he took a moment or two to feel both proud and sad about his performance. Then he watched the rear view mirror as Mariana pulled up behind him. She was writing down the license plate numbers on his Buick, ones that he'd taken off a junk because the ones that belonged to his had expired so long ago. He turned the ignition key and revved the big engine and clicked into drive. His sense of freedom swelled as he drove into the now moving street traffic, though he couldn't stop the thought about that FM stereo radio and crushed velvet interior and the new car smell that would even make it better.

APPROACHING THE READING

1. Try sketching out the story, what happens in the order it happens. Then think about what is left out, and what added or emphasized, in plotting the story. Is what Jake was thinking about important to the basic story? If not, why is it included as part of the plot? Are the exact words Jake and Mariana use necessary to the story? Why are they included in the plot?
2. Reflect on the organization of the plot: Why does it start where it does? Why does it linger on certain sections and go into great detail? Why does it stop where it does and not follow through to the outcomes of what happened here?
3. What significance or implications seem to grow out of the decisions about what to include, what not to include, and how to organize? What's the "point" of it all?