

Writing Away from a Plot Twist and comments on Fight Club

I just found myself writing towards rather than away from a plot twist, so thought I'd bring up the problem.

Since, as writer, you know what's going to happen in the story and are flat out trying to make it happen, it's very easy to write towards, rather than away from a twist in the plot hence to anticipate what's going to happen.

For example, if you were writing *Jack and the Beanstalk* and not concentrating, you would make Jack really interested in the beans that he'd just thrown out of the window, rather than making him (say) absorbed in a money-making scheme he planned for the next day at the market (which wouldn't happen because he'd find the beanstalk outside his window next morning and the story would take a whole new twist.) A variant of this is to have the characters more or less just hanging around waiting for the big twist to happen (which is what I just did).

Writing towards the twist diminishes the impact of the twist or surprise, in fact can actually make it unbelievable. Take that Harrison Ford film (Seven Days?) where the pilot of a light aircraft and a holiday maker are castaway on a Pacific Island and have adventures - until they manage to get their plane going and crash land back at the island resort they left from, right in the middle of their own memorial service.

The crash landing in the memorial service is not as powerful as it might have been because there are no grieving relatives at the service. The people attending are just the staff and guests at the resort. In fact, at no point in the film as far as I recall, do grieving or anxious family members of the two missing-feared-dead people turn up from the mainland or even make anxious phone calls. This is not what would happen in reality (where weeping parents, siblings etc would turn up and be counselled etc). So the memorial crash landing scene looks far-fetched, not funny.

The reason no relatives turn up is because, I suspect, the writer(s) were so taken up with the couple's adventures and the problem of getting them back to the plane that they forgot to get inside the heads of the people in the outside world. The writers knew that the couple were not dead, so they forgot to write as if they were. You can sometimes see the same thing in scripts, where, while the action is supposed to be putting the characters in real danger, you never get the sense that these people will really die.

I once saw something about two people trapped in a fire and they never really behaved like people who were going to die, even though they paid lip service to the notion. If people are at risk of death, really make us believe it, even though you are really interested in, say, the grand reunion scene with the estranged wife that's coming up. Be aware that when you're dying to write a scene, you can easily skimp on what precedes it.

So, bottom line, if a twist is coming up, get inside the heads of all the characters and imagine that the twist is not going to happen - and really set up an alternative. That way, the audience gets maximum impact out of your twist - you really pull the rug from under their feet. And if you have just written a twist, go back and check that your characters are really behaving as if the twist were NOT going to happen - rather than waiting around for it to happen or drawing attention to what is about to happen. It's harder to do than it looks. But if you don't, the twist is significantly weakened.