

JCAD Screenwriting Corner

*Girl on a Train*

A novel by Paula Hawkins

Genres: Drama/Thriller

By Ronnie Tharp-Garber

As I progressed through this "best seller," I kept asking myself who is rating books these days? The high-concept premise is that a young woman who is riding on a train witnesses what would seem to be a scene of violence. This woman, the Main Character, is an alcoholic divorcee. The reader is taken along an evolving crime story through multiple points of view characters. So we have Rachel, Megan and Anna, but they all seem to be one person speaking/whining/suffering from real or imagined demons. Each character is reactive, as opposed to proactive. This singular voice for 3 different human beings is symptomatic of some deep problems with the story structure from the beginning.

Each character is a borderline psychotic with modern day concerns: Can I have a baby? If I cannot have a baby, I think I'll commit suicide. Or now that I have a baby, I'm so depressed that I think I'll take a bath with my baby and what? I will fall asleep in the tub and the baby is drowned? How could that be? Or I'm pregnant with a married man...Oh! Well...At least I have a baby out of the deal. Or I'm bored just sitting home. I think I'll babysit so I can be near a baby because I have been unable to have one. Oops! I'm the one who drowned my baby in another life! The 3 point of view character lines appear to be a very poor imitation of *The Help*, which handled multiple point of view characters beautifully in 3D; each character had a unique and compelling weakness, both psychological and moral; each character had a self-revelation at the end of the story line; each character had a unique voice and a unique arc.

Another problem is the author's not too hidden attempt to have her characters behave like a psychotic's version of *Bridget Jones' Diary*, with the Main Character consuming large amounts of alcohol and worrying about being fat and unloved. She becomes friends with one of the suspects in a murder case and jumps into bed with him. Another character sleeps with her psychiatrist and then goes home to sleep with her husband who just might adore her. But this man has large hands and the woman he married is so petite, so this makes him a probable suspect because of his large hands...

At some point, I feel like I'm an idiot for continuing to read this apparent insanity. I continue on...It's a Who dunnit? after all. Who IS the

murderer? Do I really care? No. I'm wondering why this story was made into a movie. The high-concept premise is the answer. Characters who are not believable, a plot line that is not believable, a story that has structure because the editorial staff was able to construct the cliffhangers for each chapter...But there is no character arc that is believable.

Here's the problem: When the writer writes the story line, the chronological order of things is done first and THEN the characters are created to neatly fit into the plot line. It should be the reverse. A plot evolves (in fiction, at least) because it is an organic whole that emanates from the Main Character's weaknesses/flaws. The Hero should grow in some way in the story line. Either there's an uphill growth or a downhill growth (think *The Godfather*). It's a growth that should be earned and believable.

Writing is a craft. There are principles and moral choices that a character must make. This novel was hyped as a story with a narrator you just couldn't trust. Well, this story line was not trustworthy because the characters and their motivations were fake; just stuck in there to satisfy a plot requirement. But, high-concept sells and this got made into a movie and the novel was hyped by all the proper blurbs and social media gurus. Here's to a better second novel!