

SAVE THE CAT! WRITES A NOVEL

The Last Book on Novel Writing
You'll Ever Need



JESSICA BRODY

BASED ON THE BOOKS BY
BLAKE SNYDER

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Based on the best-selling
Save the Cat! by Blake Snyder



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INTRODUCTION

In 2005, a very wise screenwriter named Blake Snyder wrote a very wise book called *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. In this book, Blake set out to teach screenwriters how to structure their screenplays using a template of fifteen “beats” or plot points, claiming that every great movie Hollywood ever made was structured around these same fifteen beats.

The reaction was almost instantaneous. Within a few short years, screenwriters, directors, producers, and studio executives the world over were turning to Blake’s fifteen-beat template or “beat sheet” to develop better, tighter, more engaging stories for the screen. “Save the Cat!” quickly became an industry-recognized method.

Meanwhile, in 2006, I was a former-movie-studio-executive-turned-struggling-*novelist*, trying (and failing) to sell my first book. I had a file drawer literally full of rejection letters, which all said the same thing: “Great writing. No story.” Essentially, I was clueless about plot structure. Until one day, a screenwriter friend of mine handed me a copy of *Save the Cat!* and told me, “It’s a very popular screenwriting book, but I believe it could work for novels too.”

He was right.

After reading *Save the Cat!* cover to cover (multiple times), and comparing Blake’s fifteen-beat template to popular novels that I’d read and loved, I soon discovered that with some tweaking and adaptation, his methodology could be applied perfectly to novels.

And I set out to prove it.

Now, nearly a decade later, I have sold more than fifteen novels to major publishers like Simon & Schuster, Random House, and Macmillan. My books have been published and translated in over twenty-three countries, and two are currently in development as films.

Is this a coincidence? Definitely not. Am I just that good of a writer? Debatable. Did Blake Snyder invent something that no one

ever had before? Not at all. He simply studied the elements of story and character transformation and noticed an underlying pattern. A secret storytelling code.

And now, after plotting countless novels using the Save the Cat! methodology and teaching thousands of other authors how to do the same, I've come up with an easy-to-follow, step-by-step process for teaching novelists how to harness the power of that storytelling code and turn it into compelling, well-structured, unputdownable novels. And I'm sharing it all with you here in this book.

Because essentially the Save the Cat! Beat Sheet that Blake designed is not about movies. It's about *story*. And regardless of whether you're writing screenplays, novels, short stories, memoirs, or stage plays, whether you're writing comedy, drama, sci-fi, fantasy, or horror, whether you fancy yourself a literary writer or a commercial writer, one thing is nonnegotiable: You *need* a good story.

And I'm going to help you get there.

A Screenwriting Guide for Novelists?

But why should novelists follow in the footsteps of screenwriters? After all, we novelists came first!

The truth is, in today's media-centric, fast-paced, technology-enhanced climate, we novelists are actually *competing* with screenwriters. Like it or not, since the moment that first silent film hit the big screen, novels have had to contend with movies as a source of entertainment. Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters didn't have to compete with the latest high-octane superhero flick or the newest Melissa McCarthy comedy, but we modern novelists do. (Although, as a side note, I can attest to having found all fifteen of the beats on the Save the Cat! Beat Sheet in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Great Expectations*, among many other classics.)

The key is all in the pacing. A well-paced novel with visual elements, compelling character growth, and an airtight structure can step into the ring with any blockbuster film—and win.

But how do we write one?

Enter Save the Cat!

The Method to My Madness

For several years before writing this book, I taught an intensive Save the Cat! workshop for novelists. After years of watching writers struggle to figure out what their novel is about, and how to structure it, I have come up with what I believe is the most logical, intuitive, and effective way to guide you through the Save the Cat! methodology. The beauty of the way I've structured this process is that you can do it alone *or* with a critique group or partner. I've even included exercises and checklists at the end of key chapters to help you hold yourself accountable (either on your own or with your critique group). So whether you prefer to fly solo or flock together, this book will help you develop the best possible story you can.

Even if you bought this book because you're stuck at a very specific part of your plot (like the middle), I still urge you to read the chapters in order. You may *think* you have everything else in the story figured out, but chances are being stuck somewhere (like in the middle) is just the *symptom*, not the real ailment—and your story problem goes much deeper than you realize.

Because despite what you might think, this book is about so much more than just *plot*. The word “plot” on its own is pretty useless. It's just a series of events that happen in a story. But *structure* is the order in which those events happen and, maybe even more importantly, the timing of *when* they happen. Then you add in a character who needs to change and *does* change by the end, and presto! You've got a story worth telling.

Plot, structure, and character transformation.

Or what I like to call the “Holy Trinity of Story.”

All together, these three elements are pure storytelling pixie dust. The three essential building blocks of every great story ever told. But the Holy Trinity of plot, structure, and character transformation is a very delicate, intricately connected entity. And that's why years of research, teaching experience, and careful consideration have gone into the organization of this book.

Plotters Versus Pantsers

It is a truth universally acknowledged (in the writing community) that there are two kinds of novelists: plotters and pantsers. Plotters are those who plot out their novels before they begin; pantsers are those who just “write by the seat of their pants” and figure it out as they go. And I realize any pantsers who has bought this book is probably freaking out right now and breaking into a cold sweat at the sight of words like “structure” and “checklists.” GAH!

But let me be perfectly clear.

This book is *not* an ode to plotters. Nor is it a manifesto to convert all pantsers. Yes, I do consider myself a “plotter,” but I didn’t write this book to prove that any particular way to write a novel is better than the other. I’ve learned, through working with thousands of authors over the years, that the creative process is a very mysterious thing and that everyone is different. (Yes, you are all unique, fragile, storytelling snowflakes.) So, no, I’m not here to change your process. I’m here to *enhance* your process.

If you’re the kind of person who likes to figure out exactly where you’re driving to *before* you turn the key in the ignition, then this book will help you do that faster and more efficiently. On the other hand, if you’re the kind of person who likes to get in the car and just drive, confident you’ll figure out where you’re going along the way, then consider me and this book your personal AAA, ready and eager to give you a jump start whenever you stall out or get stranded in the middle of nowhere with no map, no GPS, and no fuel.

Regardless of which category you fit into, this book will guide you through the inspiring and often daunting process of plotting a novel. Because whether you’ve “pantsed” your way through a first draft, and now you have to figure out what to do with it to make it work, or you’re just starting out with a shiny new idea and you want to plot it in advance, it’s all the same thing in the end. We all have to do the plotting work somewhere, somehow. Honestly, it doesn’t really matter if you’re a plotter or a pantsers; the structure gets added in eventually. Either up front or afterward. It’s all the same to me. And it’s all the same to this book.

Meaning: Don’t worry, I’ll help you get there.

The “F” Word

It's around this time in the process of introducing Save the Cat! that people sometimes start throwing around the "F" word.

Formula.

Many novelists worry that following a methodology like Save the Cat! will cause their novel to end up "formulaic" or "predictable." They worry that following a structure guide or template will detract from their art and limit their creative options.

So I want to nip that fear in the bud right here. Right now.

The pattern that Blake Snyder found in almost all movies and the pattern that I've similarly found in almost all novels is not a formula. Like I said before, it's an underlying storytelling *code*.

It's the secret recipe that makes great stories work.

There's something buried deep within our DNA as humans that makes us respond to certain storytelling elements told in a certain order. We've been responding to them since our primitive ancestors drew on walls and tribes told stories around campfires. The Save the Cat! methodology simply identifies that code and turns it into an easy-to-follow blueprint for crafting a successful story, so that we writers don't have to reinvent a wheel that has been used since, well, the time the wheel was invented.

I've studied popular novels throughout time—books published from as recently as today to as far back as the 1700s. And I've found that nearly *all* of them fit the same pattern. All of them can be structurally analyzed using the Save the Cat! methodology.

If you want to call it a formula, go right ahead. But it's a formula that can be found in the works of countless great authors including Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, John Steinbeck, Stephen King, Nora Roberts, Mark Twain, Alice Walker, Michael Crichton, and Agatha Christie.

Regardless of what you call it, it *works*.

The Beginning...

So, let's get this party started. We've got a big journey ahead of us, and I, for one, am antsy to get moving.

First things first. What do you need? At the very least, you need an

idea for a novel. It doesn't have to be a huge idea. It can be a seed of an idea, it can be a twinkle of an idea. It can even be a character that interests you, or a collection of inspiring thoughts that you hope to somehow string together. Perhaps you've got an idea but you don't know if it's worth writing. You don't know if it "has legs" as they say in the film industry. Can it go the distance? Can it really carry you through three hundred-plus pages of prose?

Or you might already have a novel fully or partially written that's not working, that you know you have to revise. Or maybe you've started a book and don't know where it's going and now you're stuck and in need of some inspiration.

Regardless of your specific situation, I'm excited to have you along for the journey. Here's a quick breakdown of what we'll be covering in the following chapters (the *structure* of this book on structure, if you will):

1. **THE HERO:** First, in chapter 1, we'll talk about the main character or "hero" of your story, who they are, and why they are desperately in need of transformation.
2. **THE BEATS:** In chapter 2, we'll explore the fifteen beats of the Save the Cat! Beat Sheet in great detail so you can begin to map out the compelling, transformative journey of your novel.
3. **THE GENRES:** Then, in chapters 3–13, we'll identify the genre of your story using the ten Save the Cat! story genres. These are not your mother's genres (sci-fi, drama, comedy, and so on). Instead, the Save the Cat! story genres are broken down by type of character transformation and/or central theme. This will help you further develop your novel and make sure your story contains the necessary "genre ingredients" to make it successful. Also in these chapters, I'll give you ten beat sheets for popular blockbuster novels (one for each story genre), so you can see how the fifteen beats apply to some of today's most successful books.
4. **THE PITCH:** By chapter 14, you'll have a pretty good idea of what your novel is about, which will help you distill the story down into a one-page description (the synopsis) and furthermore, into a one-sentence description (the logline) that

you can use to pitch agents, editors, publishers, readers, and even movie producers.

5. **THE FAQ:** Despite the awesomeness and thoroughness of the previous chapters, I guarantee you'll have problems along the way. Which is why, in chapter 15, I give you practical solutions to the six most common problems novelists face when implementing the Save the Cat! methodology.

What About the Cat?

But wait! We forgot one important thing. The question that I'm sure has been on your mind from the moment you first heard about this book or picked it up in the bookstore.

Why on earth is it called "Save the Cat!"?

The answer dates back to the original *Save the Cat!* book, in which Blake Snyder included several cleverly titled tips on how to avoid common pitfalls of storytelling. "Save the cat!" is one of these tips. If your main character starts off somewhat unlikable, then, in the early pages of your story, they should save a cat (yes, like from a tree or a burning building or a shelter), or do something comparable that immediately makes the reader root for them, regardless of their original likability.

We'll talk more about cats and how to save them in chapter 15, when we break down some of the most common problems writers face when implementing the Save the Cat! methodology.

Additionally, throughout this book, I've included several new tips and tricks specifically for novelists to help you improve your story.

So, let's get on with it already. Your main character is waiting, and they have a *huge* problem...

Why Do We Care?

Creating the Story-Worthy Hero

WARNING! THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS SPOILERS FOR THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo,
Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, *The Help* by Kathryn
Stockett, *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, *Misery* by Stephen
King, *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline

The relationship between character and plot is an essential one. It's why we start the Save the Cat! methodology here, with the main character, who from here on out I will be referring to as the **hero** of your story. Because doesn't that just *sound* better? A hero is proactive and important and worthy of having an entire novel revolve around them. In the world of Save the Cat!, we write about memorable characters who do memorable stuff. But most of all, we create heroes (male and female!) who are *destined* to be the center of a plot.

So who is destined to be the center of *your* plot? Let's roll up our sleeves and find out!

Regardless of whether you've already thought up your big story idea, or you're still working on that part, I urge you to put everything else aside for now and just focus on the hero of your story. In this section we're going to talk about how to make your hero *story-*

worthy.

How do you create a hero who is interesting, memorable, and relatable, a hero whom readers want to read about? A hero worthy of an entire novel written about *them*?

Easy!

You simply give them:

1. A PROBLEM (or flaw that needs fixing)
2. A WANT (or goal that the hero is pursuing)
3. A NEED (or life lesson to be learned)

If you think about these three things up front, your hero will automatically start to take shape before your very eyes. And they'll be much easier to insert into your plot later on.

So let's take a look at each of these three things in more detail.

Here's a little secret. Readers don't like reading about perfect heroes who have all their sh*t together. Perfect heroes without any flaws or problems whatsoever are *bo-o-oring*. Not to mention, completely unrealistic. (I, for one, have yet to meet a human being whose life is entirely flawless.) So if you want to create a hero for your novel who is believable, relatable, and interesting, they can't be perfect. They must have at least one major problem—or better yet, *lots* of them!

You'll find a **flawed hero**—a hero with problems—in every great novel ever told.

Take Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, for example. She's not exactly living in the lap of luxury out in District 12, is she? She's poor, she's hungry, she's fatherless, her mother has completely checked out. And then, boom! Her little sister gets chosen for the reaping. Katniss's circumstances on the outside have also made her hardened, distrustful, and cynical on the inside. This girl's got problems to spare.

Or what about Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck? He's just gotten out of jail (for killing a man!), and he comes home to find his entire family has up and left because of no money, no work, and no food. He's definitely not winning "Farmer of the Year" anytime soon.

And let's not forget about Becky Bloomwood, in *Confessions of a*

Shopaholic by Sophie Kinsella, who, as the title implies, *cannot* stop shopping. Which is why she's crippled by secret credit card debt that's starting to wreak havoc on her entire life.

And that brings us to a great tip for writing flawed heroes: Don't let the problem stay contained to just one area of your hero's life. Let the problem(s) manifest and spread and infect! Your hero's problem(s) should be affecting their entire world: their work, their home life, and their relationships.

When someone starts reading your novel, they should be thinking something along the lines of, *Whoa, what a mess this person's life is!*

That's how you know you've done your job.

I realize this seems like a horrible thing to do to your hero—riddle their life with all sorts of difficulties right from the get-go—but it's also an essential thing to do to your hero. Because if your hero's life isn't flawed, what's the point of the novel? Why do we *care*? We turn to story to watch characters *fix* their problems, better their lives, improve upon their flaws. Great novels take deeply imperfect characters and make them a little less imperfect.

So what kind of problem(s) is *your* character facing? That's the first question you must answer as you begin to create your story-worthy hero.

But it's not enough for your hero just to have flaws; your hero also has to *want* something (badly) and be proactively trying to get it. Your hero knows they've got problems. (Or maybe they don't know, and *that's* one of their problems!) Now, the question is: what does your hero *think* will fix those problems, or what does your hero *think* will better their life? (Take note of the emphasis on the word "think"—we'll be coming back to that later.)

Whatever the answer is—a better job, more money, to be more popular in school, gain their father's approval, solve a big murder case, and so on—*that* is your hero's goal. This is what they will be actively striving to achieve throughout the novel (or at least in the beginning).

Giving your hero a goal and having them proactively pursue that goal is the fastest way to get your reader to root for your hero and latch onto your story. Ooh, *this guy wants to find an Easter egg hidden inside a massive online simulation game?* (*Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline). *Let's stick around and see if he can do it!* Or Ooh,

this gal wants to find a suitable husband for her new best friend? (*Emma* by Jane Austen). *I wonder if she'll succeed!* Readers keep reading because they want to know if your hero is going to get what they want.

So ask yourself, *What does my character want in life?*

And I'm sorry to say, *My hero wants to be happy* is not a good enough answer. I hear this answer a lot in my workshops, and it's just not specific enough. The most effective character *goals* or *wants* are concrete and tangible. The reader should be able to know if and when your hero gets what they want. How can we really know when your hero has achieved this elusive goal of happiness? We can't. That is, unless you give us a concrete thing that the hero *thinks* will make them happy. Like a new house, a new car, a million followers on Twitter, the national championship trophy, passage to a new country, magical powers, to escape from prison. Something tangible that the reader can keep track of and root for.

And speaking of your hero getting what they want: Why haven't they?

Why doesn't Wade from *Ready Player One* just wake up one day and effortlessly collect all three keys to the Easter egg hidden in the Oasis? Why doesn't Emma successfully set up Harriet with Mr. Elton in *Emma*? Because if they did, there would be no story. It would be too easy. There would be nothing left for the reader to root for. That's why it shouldn't be *easy* for your hero to get what they want. It should be hard. They should have to work for it.

Almost every want or goal has an equal and opposite force holding the hero back from achieving it. This force is often presented as a "conflict" or "nemesis." What is standing in the hero's way? Why can't Tom Joad and his family find work in California in *The Grapes of Wrath*? Well, because, the landowners lied about how much work there was, so they could attract more workers and drive down labor prices, and now there's a huge surplus of hungry, angry migrant workers. And why can't Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo just start over and live his life in peace like he wants? Because his nemesis, Inspector Javert, won't let him.

Now, it's important to note two things about wants (or goals).

First, they *can* change as the novel goes on. And they often do. Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley goes from

wanting to create life to wanting to destroy the very life he created. Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll goes from wanting to find the White Rabbit to just wanting to go home. Louisa in *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes goes from just wanting a job to help provide for her family to wanting to save Will's life. The *wants*, regardless of whether they change or stay the same, are what drive the story forward. They're what keep the plot moving. Otherwise, you've got a hero who's just putzing around, waiting for something to happen. (Very boring plot.) When a hero wants something, it sets them in motion. It gets them off their butt and into the action, which is *exactly* where we want them to be!

And the second important thing to note is that not all characters actually *get* what they want. Some do. Like Pi Patel in *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. He *does* eventually achieve his goal of getting off the lifeboat. But others, like Opal in the children's book *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo, do *not* get what they want by the end of the story. When the novel begins, Opal just wants to know more about her mother—and maybe even meet her one day. This doesn't end up happening for her. But you know what? That's okay. As we read this novel, we realize that Opal's goal of getting to know her mother is not the true point of the story. It's not where Opal's *real* journey is heading. Because in the end, the want is only half the story. Heroes aren't complete until they also have a *need*.

Heroes are often wrong about what will inevitably lead to their own happiness. Because typically happiness or a better life goes a lot deeper than just a new house, a new car, popularity, or whatever else you've dreamed up for your hero to want.

But it's easier to yearn for a quick fix than to actually do the real life-changing, soul-searching work. C'mon; who among us hasn't thought, for even a moment, that our lives would drastically improve if we only had more money, nicer things, more success at work, the ability to read minds, a date to the dance? When really these wants are just Band-Aids covering a deeper problem. Something that probably relates back to those pesky little flaws and problems we talked about earlier.

True to life, quick fixes in fiction never last long. In the end, your hero must eventually do some hard, soul-searching work. Now I realize I'm coming dangerously close to sounding like a self-help

book here, but the truth is, plotting a compelling and engaging novel and crafting a story-worthy hero is a lot like playing psychologist. It's your job to not only diagnose the real problem in your hero's life, but cure it as well.

We call that real problem the **shard of glass**. It's a psychological wound that has been festering beneath the surface of your hero for a long time. The skin has grown over it, leaving behind an unsightly scar that causes your hero to act the way they act and make the mistakes that they do (flaws!). You, as the author and creator of this world, have to decide how that shard of glass got there. *Why* is your hero so flawed? What happened to them to make them the way they are?

And most important, what will *really* fix your hero's life? What does your hero actually *need*? This is the third and biggest question you'll have to ask yourself as you start to develop your novel. This is the crux of your story. This is the real "stuff" that great stories are made of. And *this* is what readers are really looking for when they pick up a book. Sure, they want action, they want mystery, they want body counts, they want kissing (and sometimes *more* than kissing), but in the end, readers want a novel that's *about* something.

What do I mean by that?

I mean, What's the point of the story? What does the hero *really* get out of it? Why *this* hero for this story?

Your hero's want or goal is an integral part of what's called the **A Story**. The A Story is the external story. It's the stuff that happens on the surface. Car chases; wars; fights in the school hallway; new jobs; casting magic spells; taking on an evil, dystopian government; poisoning the king. Essentially, it's the *exciting* stuff. The "cool" stuff. Or what's also referred to as the **premise**.

On the other hand, the **B Story** is the internal story. It's the story that's intricately linked to what your hero needs to learn in order to change their life, complete their transformation, and enter the hall of fame of story-worthiness.

The B Story/internal story/need is what your novel is really *about*.

For example, *Ready Player One* isn't *about* a worldwide Easter egg hunt through a massive online simulation game. That's just the external story (A Story). Underneath, behind the scenes, the internal story (B Story)—the heart of the novel—is about a shy, insecure boy

who hides inside a video game and finally has to learn how to make real-life connections.

Misery by Stephen King isn't *about* a guy stuck in a crazy lady's cabin in the mountains. That's just a really creepy premise. It's the A Story. The book is about a writer who discovers how to write the best novel of his career and how that novel (and writing in general) can save a life (B Story).

And *Frankenstein* isn't *about* a scientist who creates a monster (A Story). It's about a man who has to repent for his sins against the natural world (B Story).

What plays out on the surface—what the hero wants—is only half the story. The true soul of a novel lies in the hero's need, which can also be called the internal goal, the life lesson, or the spiritual lesson. And by “spiritual,” I'm not necessarily talking about religion. Although your spiritual lesson certainly can relate to religion (as evidenced in countless popular novels like *The Shack* by William P. Young or *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini), it certainly doesn't have to.

The life lesson is the inner journey that your hero didn't even know they were on, that will eventually lead them to the answer they never expected.

This life lesson should be something universal. Something inherently human. You should be able to walk up to any Joe Schmoe or Jane Schmane on the street, tell them what your hero needs to learn, and they would instantly get it. Or better yet, *relate* to it.

And here's the good news. There are not that many options to choose from. I've found that almost every novel throughout time has an internal goal or need that is in some way a derivative of one of the following ten universal lessons:

- **FORGIVENESS:** of self or of others
- **LOVE:** includes self-love, family love, romantic love
- **ACCEPTANCE:** of self, of circumstances, of reality
- **FAITH:** in oneself, in others, in the world, in God
- **FEAR:** overcoming it, conquering it, finding courage

- **TRUST:** in oneself, in others, in the unknown
- **SURVIVAL:** including the will to live
- **SELFLESSNESS:** including sacrifice, altruism, heroism, and overcoming greed
- **RESPONSIBILITY:** including duty, standing up for a cause, accepting one's destiny
- **REDEMPTION:** including atonement, accepting blame, remorse, and salvation

Now, I know right now some of you might be thinking, *I don't want to write a "lesson" book or I don't want my novel to have a deep universal message. I just want to write an action story, or a suspense thriller or a romance novel.*

But here's a tip for you: even the best action stories, thrillers, and romance novels have a spiritual lesson hidden somewhere within. They all feature a hero who learns something and changes in *some* way. Don't believe me? Check out the beat sheet for *Heart-Shaped Box* by Joe Hill (horror/action) on [this page](#) of this book, or the beat sheet for *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins (suspense thriller) on [this page](#), or the beat sheet for *Everything, Everything* by Nicola Yoon (romance) on [this page](#).

The spiritual lesson or need is what your reader will grab onto. It's what makes your reader feel like they've been somewhere, done something, experienced something—and that their investment in the pages of your novel was worth their time.

Writing about a hero who transforms—who comes out of the story a different person than who they started as—is the secret sauce of best-selling novels. Novels that people talk about. Novels that hit the best-seller list and stay there. Novels that get turned into movies. Novels that *resonate* with readers. And when you can resonate with a reader, that's when you become a true storyteller.

Who Is Your Hero? (The Answer May Not Be as Simple as You Think)