Foreshadowing, Flash-forward, and Red Herrings

By Nike Chillemi

As I run through foreshadowing, flash-forward, and red herrings in this short lesson, I'm going to attempt to hit the nitty-gritty of these literary devices and make them more user-friendly. Literary devices in general can be off-putting, but they're extremely valuable tools writers can utilize, and techniques of language convey layers of meaning. Skilled use of these three devices can bring richness and clarity to a manuscript.

Foreshadowing is a device in which the author vaguely suggests what might occur in terms of plot development later in the work of fiction. It most often is subtle and works on a symbolic level in the story. One of the most common types of foreshadowing is the self-fulfilling prophecy. This is when a character with a certain type of knowledge or wisdom comments about an outcome in the story. For example, a teacher or the local beat cop might comment that if a certain young man doesn't change his reckless ways he will certainly come to a bad end . . . and then of course things do end badly for him. Then again, the author might bring in a character who has a supernatural feel.

A well-known example of this is in Shakespeare's play "MacBeth," where the witches and their prophecies portend events to come. Slightly different from prophecy, self-fulfilling or otherwise, is when a character might complain that she's constantly running to the bathroom and later learns she's pregnant. In another type of foreshadowing, the author might utilize a folksy legend, superstition, or a dream to herald a later event. Even setting can be utilized as foreshadowing. Storm clouds on the horizon can forecast conflict in the next chapter. The greatest danger with foreshadowing is that it must be done carefully; else the author's fingerprints will be all over it. This you don't want. A little foreshadowing goes a long way. Too much diminishes any suspense the author might be trying to build.

Some consider the flash-forward to be the opposite of a prologue, and I suppose in many ways it can be. It is certainly the opposite of a flash-back. The flash-forward is an actual scene that will happen in the future to characters in the story. It is when the author jumps forward to advance the plotline. A dream sequence can be utilized to achieve this, or prophecy. One of the most well know examples of the flash-forward is in Charles Dickens A CHRISTMAS CAROL when protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge is taken by the angel of death to his own funeral. The flash-forward fits beautifully into many types of speculative fiction, especially fantasy.

Red Herrings are smoked fish that turn red in color. Lore has it that in the 1800s they were sometimes used by methodical and crafty criminals to lay a false trail when they knew they'd be chased by hounds. They were also a tool used by dog trainers. And this is how the term came into being. In crime fiction, red herrings are false clues carefully laid out in the body of the story to misdirect the reader, or to direct the reader away from the identity of the killer so that when the author reveals it at the end, it's a surprise. For a red herring to be most effective it has to be inserted almost invisibly into the narrative of the story. It could be a minor detail that has a large emotional charge attached to it, or the emotional charge could come later. In this way the reader doesn't see the misdirection.

For example, a disagreeable and quite self-centered character who is not the killer might *give* the heroine's son a dirt bike and later the boy crashes and breaks his leg. This along with perhaps the further misdirection in another scene of placing this self-absorbed character in the wrong place at the wrong time might cause the reader to think this garrulous character should be on the suspect list. Of course, it will later turn out that although this character has few redeeming qualities, quite another character is the killer. A phony supernatural force or superstition, later to be debunked, could be used as a red herring. In the Sherlock Holmes story THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES, the notion of the ghostly super-canine is a red herring which diverts the authorities in the story and the reader from the true reason behind the quite deliberate murders. In this case, even the title is a red herring.

Though I hold on to my CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE with every fiber of my being, I still have to admit that the use of literary devices in general can be tricky business. One trap to avoid in using these devices is excessive wordiness. Authors may overstate and oversell these devices in an attempt to sound literary. It's best not to try to come across as literary, unless of course the story is in the literary genre. If there is an attempt to come across as literary, the reader will be able to see the author's hand, which is never a good idea. In my opinion, every successful piece of writing is the successful limitation of the author's hand, but not necessarily of the author's voice. The reader should not come away thinking the author probably got "As" in English class. Rather the reader should think what a great story. That it flowed almost effortlessly, not how well crafted it was. The critics and some reviewers will make note of whether it was well crafted or not, but the reader should simply get lost in the story.

(Nike Chillemi is a well-known crime fictionista. A lesson from Jeanne Leach's Novel Track Editing Mini lessons.)

Note: I believe, as in The Blue Sword *by Robin McKinley and CJ Cherryth's* Foreigner, *that well crafted language adds to story flow. If it takes away, it is not well crafted. But there are differing opinions on that, as on many other things about writing. Follow writers that you like and enjoy. Copy their craft, study their techniques, incorporate their methods into your mind, and let the mix stew. Then dream. When your mind, soul, and heart feel all is ready to burst forth, let your words out, and your story will flow in your unique voice. Listen to your "gut."*

In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.