

Unremembered Loss

For all the news and information from the world of Rathrae, and for the story Unremembered Loss

Issue 7

March 2010

Welcome to the seventh issue of the Unremembered Loss newsletter. I was trying to come up with an idea for this month's newsletter and decided to share something I've been dealing with in the revision process. I'm about one quarter of the way through now and have had to revise four different fight scenes. Now that I've put these thoughts into words, I'll have to go revise them one more time. Don't forget to forward this newsletter on to your friends and if you're not getting the newsletter automatically sign up at <http://DouglasGClarke.com/lists/>

Douglas G. Clarke

Fight Scenes

As I've been doing revisions on the novel, one of the areas that I've been noticing is the fight scenes. I started to wonder what makes a good fight scene. After some thought I realized that it is the same thing that make every scene good – tension.

Tension is the thing that keeps you on the edge of your seat. It keeps you turning pages. It is the uncertainty in the reader's mind, or in the character's mind, that needs to be answered.

So, what kinds of tension can there be in a fight scene?

The obvious one is will the hero live? But, in truth, this is not really a tension driver because we already know the hero will live. One step back from this is will the hero be hurt? This can be a tension driver since heroes can carry on even if they are hurt.

From a bigger picture point of view, there is the question whether this battle will be a victory, and if so at what cost? In most stories, until the final battle, things keep getting worse for the good guys. When they do win a battle, it is hard fought and the price is high. When they lose, they barely escape with their lives.

So, there is a big picture tension driver, but these are the same drivers that drive every scene. In the end the scene must pose these questions and at least partially answer them to be successful – leaving some questions unanswered can add to the tension.

What specifically adds tension to a fight scene?

Speed. In a fight scene things are moving fast. People are making decisions quickly, with partial information. Speed causes people to make mistakes – which later have to be dealt with. The speed adds a sense of urgency to the story.

Speed can be shown by the use of short sentences, hesitation on one characters part that gives their foes an advantage, short choppy dialog, non-stop action uninterrupted by narration, and quick reactions of the characters fighting with each other.

All these things can speed up the action in a scene, but I think speed is more of a multiplier of the underlying tensions than tension itself.

Uncertainty on the part of the characters can be a source of tension. While we may know the outcome of the scene, seeing the characters uncertainty can make us feel their tension.

Unlike scenes where the characters can plan out how to orchestrate the hostile takeover of a business,

in a fight scene the dynamics keep changing. While the hero might be skilled with a sword, her blood may run cold when she finds that she is facing a thirty foot tall giant. The surprises and adaptations add tension.

Some authors put in extreme detail about how each character is moving and how each blow falls and is countered. This kind of detail in itself does not add tension, and in fact slows down the scene and reduces the tension.

However, if this detail is showing how skilled the characters are, or how close to failing they are, then it can add lots of tension. If the detail is something that the readers can follow, then perhaps they can pick-up the fatal flaw in the enemy's technique before the hero does, then the readers can start yelling at the hero telling her what to do.

Related to uncertainty, is doubt. Is there doubt in the characters' minds that their plan will work? Will everyone in the group do their part? What will happen when someone is behind schedule and hasn't shut down the force field yet?

Characters can have questions about their own abilities. "I know I can take on one zombie, but there are two hundred!"

There can also be doubts of conscience. Should I really kill them or could they be saved? Is it right to sacrifice one to save a hundred?

How about the question that arises when the hero has just disarmed her opponent. Does she run him through, or does she let him pick up his weapon so it will be a 'fair' fight? What if letting him pick up their weapon puts others at risk?

The problem with showing these different kinds of uncertainty is that it takes words, sometimes lots of words, that slow the story down. While speed multiplies tension, long dialogs, detailed descriptions, and internal thoughts reduces it.

The challenge then is to make every extra word count. You don't waste the words, as in "How are you doing?" If the answer is "Great, I've almost got them beat," unless

you're showing that the person answering the question really doesn't understand the situation.

Below are three version of the same fight scene, set in a dark alley. All three are different, but tell the same story. Each has tension in its own way.

Which one do you like best. Send me an e-mail and let me know which one you like best and what makes it click for you.

Four men stepped out from the shadows and blocked the way. Each held a baseball bat - one was aluminum.

Van and Bob stepped away from each other to allow themselves more room to maneuver.

With a nod from one of the men, the four charged, holding their bats over their heads. They all charged towards Van.

Van took a few steps backwards and assumed the position his sensei had drilled into him and waited.

Bob had other training that kicked in. He bent over and placed his right hand on the ground, then started running as fast as he could. He kept his head low and by instinct took the blow with his left shoulder.

There was an audible crack as Bob hit the first man's leg and he started rolling over Bob's back. The second man just stumbled and Bob glanced off of him.

In the momentary distraction, Van jumped forward and then spun his leg around. As he finished his spin, his leg found the ground and the other leg flew into the air and met the face of one of the men - the man spun around, dropping to his knees as his bat rattled down the alley.

The third man's bat came down painfully against Van's side in a glancing blow.

As the four men stepped out from the shadows, Van and Bob glanced at each other. With a nod they separated as they had planned so that the attackers would be split.

One of the men nodded to the others and they all raised their baseball bats over their heads and charged. They all charged towards Van.

"Strength," Van whispered under his breath as he took a few steps backwards. "Like a tiger." Van assumed the position that his years of training had made second nature. *I'll take out two for sure, maybe three before I go down*, he thought as he waited.

Blitz, was the word that popped into Bob's mind. *Got to protect the quarterback*. Bob dropped into set position and then took off in a run. *Hit 'em hard, hit 'em low*. He ran like it was the last play of the game.

He kept his head low and by instinct took the blow with his left shoulder. There was an audible crack as Bob hit the first man's leg. *Too hard!*

He hesitated and just grazed the second man. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid*. He thought as he rolled to the side and tried to regain his footing.

Van let his coiled body react to Bob's distraction and leaped forward, spinning to bring his foot up into the face of one of the men.

The Alley was dark, with the only light being that of the moon which was hiding behind the clouds.

Van and Bob walk cautiously, but quickly, through the maze of garbage that lined the pavement. They both hoped that this short cut would be worth the risk and get them to school on time.

They both froze mid-step when four men stepped out of the shadows. Each man was holding a baseball bat and wore a smile. Bob would have laughed at them for standing in an alleyway in their BVDs, except that he knew it was because they didn't want to get blood on their clothes - his blood.

Bob looked over at Van. "Sorry man. I didn't think it would go this far."

"It's cool. This is bigger than us. I can take care of myself. You get to the game and make this worthwhile." With that Van stepped to the other side of the Alley and got into a martial arts stances.

In a loud voice Van taunted the college men. "Did your mothers dress you all alike this morning."

One of the men nodded at the others and the four of them raised their bats over their heads and charged towards Van.

Bob stood there, unable to run, wondering what to do, when the thought of his team popped into ...