

Characters' Wants and Needs

I Should Be Writing S17 Ep7

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Speaker

Mur Lafferty

Mur 0:34

This is I Should Be Writing season 17 episode 7. And I'm trying to keep up with that a little bit better. Got a fancy light box to take pictures of. And I've just messed up everything and lost my W. Smooth. That's what they call me. Anyway, this is the podcast for wannabe fiction writers and I'm your host Mur Lafferty. Hey, Tim. Good to see you. I'm streaming this to Twitch and I think YouTube. We'll see how well that goes. And this will go into the feed later on, if you just listen to audio via RSS and the Patreon supporters will get it first. So that is the news there. As for what I've been up to, I drove to Boston. Again. Thanks to the coronavirus, we are not comfortable with our kid flying so we drove her up on Friday and drove ourselves back on Saturday because there's nothing to do, because there's a pandemic. So, none of the typical touristy things, even just like eating at a nice restaurant, no. So that pretty much wore me out for Sunday and yesterday I was still pretty tired. So today I'm trying to get back into it. And I don't know why I'm wearing the headphones. Because all it did was confuse me when I tried to get Pretzel going while the stream was live. If you're a newbie don't do that. No, don't do that.

Mur 2:29

I have a bag of mustaches here. I finally got everything set up for the Evil Mur Mirror Universe thing. So if anybody wants to redeem some channel points -ah there it is- I got my moustache ready, sort of. Hey Sario. Hey KayKimmy. Booksnyarn, good to see you. Ooh these are soft. I didn't know they'd be soft. I got a whole bunch. I got a whole bag of mustaches. The world we live in, that you can get a whole bag of mustaches. Hey Indigoquill. Wow, lots of people. Good to see you all. So, this is I Should Be Writing. I usually talk about the emotional challenges writers have but I often go into craft as well. Which is what I'm going to be doing here. 600 points short of a mustache, you'll get there. This is today's mustache. So, I'm sorry, it's bizarre. What I wanted to talk about today was characters' wants versus characters' needs. This is a very important aspect that not a lot of people talk about. Or at least, the stuff that I read or listened to. And whenever somebody brings it up it's always like a light bulb hitting me. No, lightning hits. A light bulb goes off in your head. Yeah, that's the way it goes. So it's like a light bulb turning on, because I have to remember. I don't know about you guys but I don't think about all the rules of writing when I'm writing a scene. I don't know whether that shows a weakness in my writing or the fact that I know the rules well enough to not have to think, does this character have something she wants in this scene and do I give it to her. Because really, all of your characters should have this happen. Hey Todd. Good to see you. The famous comment is, even if it's a glass of water your character should want something because that want drives the scene forward. If you don't want anything, you can be like

those rats in that experiment where the scientist turned out the dopamine in their head, so they had no desires. So they just died. They had no desire to eat or drink.

Mur 5:27

And I did not mean for this to get depressing. Sorry about that. But a lot of times people make your protagonist want or desire something while everybody else in the supporting groups work to help that happen with no wants or needs of their actual own. And yeah, their wants and needs could be help the protagonist, but there's usually something else going on there. Underpope, Billyboy. Good to see you. So when you're writing your scene, if you feel a scene is a little bit bland one thing -beyond looking at the passive voice versus active voice, all that stuff- but another thing you need to look at is do my characters want anything. And the scene ends when your character either gets what they want, or is denied what they want. Now those are the wants and needs that actually drive the story, drive the scenes along. But there's a larger picture of wants and needs, that affect the story as a whole. And that is your character is introduced as somebody who has a want and whatever it is that they need, they don't know it, or they deny it. Of course it's hard for me to break down other things here on the spot. I should have written down that part. I usually like to go back to Star Wars because it's a pretty solid storytelling structure and a lot of people know it. So Luke Skywalker, all he wants to do is go to the academy, wants to go down to Tashi station and hang out with his friends. That's what he wants. I think what he needs is to be able to harness his abilities to save the galaxy. He needs to make a difference. He needs to find his people that will join him to make a difference.

Mur 8:10

A lot of times people want something that's kind of superficial. You see this in good romances. When a character has a want, that's usually falling in love, or never falling in love again and just focusing on work. When it turns out what they need has to do with fulfilling something within their own lives that has nothing to do with their romance partner. But as they discover what they need, they then get what they want. Now not everybody gets what they want, if they go after what they need. It's not like you put the quarter in and out comes the prize, but that is one way to do it. There's a gay take on when Harry Met Sally called When Harry Met Harry, and it's an awesome book. I loved it. It was a lot of fun. But one of the Harrys is, I think he's Chinese and he works at his father's company in San Francisco. He has a dream to invent things. And it was his dream since the very beginning, since moving to the US. And he's kind of held under his father's heel to work at this company. Now of course there's a love story in there and it's not a huge spoiler because it is a romance that they do get together and the plot points are not a spoiler if you've ever seen When Harry Met Sally. It's very clearly, not really a parody but it's taken off the plot points of When Harry Met Sally. It's just two guys. But he has something that Harry did not in the film, which is when the inevitable break apart of the romantic people happens, he kind of throws himself into work, but finds an outlet for his inventing. And after he realizes that he can follow that path in life, is when he also realizes he wants Harry to be with him. And so the point about what he wants, he thinks he wants to make his father happy and be a good corporate boy and maybe someday invent. What he needs is companionship and people to believe in him, and the courage to step out and do his own thing.

Mur 10:55

So I'm gonna catch up with chat. Tim says I just wrote a scene where a bunch of characters with clear goals collided in conversation. It was super fun. I've been missing that kind of thing. I will tell you something in a moment. Ceit says, what should I do if my main character doesn't actually want anything concrete until halfway through the book. Just in a survival, trying to understand how the world works mode. He wants survival. I mean, wanting survival, wanting to maintain the status quo, wanting good weather. That's all wants. Your character doesn't need to want something that's tangible. So think a bit larger. Just staying alive is a very large, large human want and need. So don't worry about that. Sario

says the same thing wants to survive. But Tim, there's a role playing game that I used to play every holiday season. And we don't do it anymore. And the reason why we don't do it is, it's what I'm going to tell you. It's called The Secret Lives of Gingerbread Men. And it's super fun. It's everybody has just been baked as a cookie with various decorations which turn out to be your role playing game equipment. And everything you decorate a gingerbread person with has some sort of ability. The reason why it's called Secret Lives of Gingerbread Men, it's not just the GM has to create an adventure for people to run around the house and be cookies. They all have a secret motivation that they're not allowed to tell anybody. And because they have the secret motivation, they're not having this whole hey, your party stays together and goes to a bar to meet a stranger with a long beard who will tell you what your next quest is. No they pretty much get off the cookie tray and then run to fulfill whatever their goal is. And their goal could be anything from replace the angel at the top of the Christmas tree, or marry the angel at the top of the Christmas tree, or get eaten by the dog, or find a old discarded wise cookie, underneath the fridge. I mean, they came up with the weirdest stuff. And that made it both awesome, but also very difficult to run the game because they wouldn't stay together. So you had like these guys running off to figure out how to get off the table, so they could go find the dog. And then these two are running over the Christmas tree and then I made the mistake of allowing Ursula Vernon to be a cookie necromancer so she went looking for little pieces of cookies to Frankenstein them up into her loyal followers. Ursula Vernon is a delightful friend and so much fun and both a pleasure and a headache to roleplay with. So I made the mistake of allowing her to do it but she started, yeah, that's what she did. Another rule with Ursula is you never give her a pet or familiar. Never. Never, ever, ever. That's what Kevin tells me anyway.

Mur 15:06

I was recently listening to Save the Cat Writes a Novel. And I discovered that I hadn't really thought of things this way but the way she puts it on, the way she describes it, made it very clear, is that somewhere around the midpoint, or the end of act two, sometime in that part when things start to fall apart for your hero, that's when they realize what they want is not what they need. And if they ignore what they need and keep going after what they want, then that's a tragedy. That is a book that does not fall into the realm of romances. That's Hamlet. Hamlet never went for what he needed. He always went for what he wanted. It's something you need to keep underneath. You're not going to be thinking about wants and needs the whole way through. You're going to be thinking, if a scene stalls, what am I missing? And if the feeling of the story's pacing doesn't quite work in the second act, you got to wonder where they make that change, where they realize what they want and what they need are two different things. And if they change, then they continue. And if they stay the same, then they don't. And I'm sorry I'm going to spoil a movie for you. If you have any interest in seeing Anna and The Apocalypse, which is a Christmas musical with zombies -which I highly recommend- then just don't listen for the next like 30 seconds. We were watching that when we were trying our dreadfully failed watch parties last month and my daughter- you know, not the professional writer in the room- was looking and as you see all the characters sing their songs about what's going on inside them, there's a handful, they're just like, you can't leave me. You can't go away. Please don't go away to college, please stay here with me. Your dad wants you to stay, I want you to stay. And then two others are basically like, I have found my soulmate. Everything is perfect, nothing needs to change ever. Those are the people that died. And my daughter pointed out to me. She's like if they didn't change they died. And I looked back and I went, crap, you're right. So that is an extreme reaction. People don't need to die, to metaphorically die but there's often metaphorical death in novels, especially with people who will not change. So think about that.

Mur 18:22

The wants versus needs is a tool that once you figure it out will really help you move the plot of your novel along, both on a scene by scene level but also as a larger overarching book type blanket. Is blanket the right word there? I'm not sure. So, yes in chat, Ursula sounds like a lot of fun. She is.

Definitely. Ceit says, I get that survival is sensible desire. I guess my fears individual scenes don't hinge on it at the front so I'm afraid that scenes will end up seeming boring or not moving the plot forward enough. At the moment they are geared mostly as character building for the uniqueness of the circumstance as someone who doesn't understand language. Needing to understand is also something I mean, don't worry about it too much because it sounds like you're writing the wants in there. It's just not tangible. But if you're really worried, finish it and give it to a beta reader. Because you know I can only advise so much with regards to what I see in the chat or what you send me in email. It still sounds like your character has things that he wants. Wanting to understand, wanting to learn, wanting to survive. Those are all wants.

Mur 20:01

So that is what I have to say on wants and needs. Got an email today that the Hugo Nominations are open. There's a scene in Schitts Creek, and I can say that because that is the name of a TV show and it's S-C-H-I-T-T. So, there's a character who's an ex soap opera star. And, you know, failed actress who's fallen away from her wealth kind of thing. And she's having a discussion with somebody else. And the question is what's your favorite season and she goes, hm, awards. Which always amuses me because this time of year is very nerve racking, because the nominations for all the awards start getting paid attention to. The Philip K Dick nominations came out a couple of weeks ago. They're given out around Easter. And I'm not sure about Nebulas but they're given out before the Hugos so those should be open, but that's only for members of SFWA. Excuse me. It's something that's so strange because you, and by you I mean me, want it so bad but having seen the underbelly of the Hugo's in the past couple of years, it's a little tarnished. There's been some drama. There's been some, in my opinion, ugliness. But still, nothing was shinier to me as a kid than seeing a rocket on the cover of a book. Seeing that that book was Hugo nominated or had won. So, I would love to win one for fiction. But, yeah I don't know. I thought I didn't see that happening. But my last novel was nominated so that was surprising and strange.

Mur 22:49

Todd says I would like an award season that isn't a dumpster fire myself. Yeah. Yeah, me too. But both of my podcasts, I Should Be Writing and Ditch Diggers are eligible for Best Fancast. I would think it would be Best Related Work but they like to put podcasts all in one little group, including stuff on YouTube like vlogs. And I guess this now. Anyway, but also I do work on Escape Pod with SB Divya so we're eligible for Best Short Fiction Editor and Escape Pod is eligible for Best Semiprozine. And I had a couple of short stories out in anthologies this year. And I wrote Blaseball fanfic around the holidays, that was fun. I suppose that's eligible. Peter Watts won a Hugo with his fanfic about The Thing. Is I Should Be Writing now a vodcast? I don't even know what that means because you get notifications when I'm live, and the videos do go up on YouTube and you can subscribe to them so I suppose they are. But that doesn't mean I'm not doing the audio RSS feed anymore. I'm definitely still taking the audio out of this and producing it for audio podcast and putting it out in the feed that everybody has been subscribing to for years. Appreciate that, by the way. Fanfic now a category or just part of related works? No fanfic is not a category. I was just joking that my Blaseball fanfic could be eligible for Best-how many words is it- it might be Best Novelette. It might be over 7500 words. I need to check. But it's fanfic but Peter Watts broke that ceiling when he won with The Things which is basically the movie The Thing told from the Thing's point of view. So did that answer your question KayKimmy? Definitions are always harder in the real world. Yeah, I think they're doing a test Hugo this year for Best Game. And I was laughing at that because there are asterisks all over the award description. They're just everywhere. And it's defining what a game is and all of that stuff. I would vote for your Blaseball fan. Thank you Numbersninja. That's sweet. I believe you do have nomination abilities by the way, I'm just saying.

Mur 26:24

But where was I going? Actually, we should dominate blaseball too for best game. I was gonna nominate Hades, because it's got some phenomenal writing, which is why I picked it up, actually. I usually don't like roguelikes. I feel like I've talked about Hades a lot in recent streams but it's a very good game, with excellent writing. So you people are mentioning my Blaseball fanfic. If you want to read my Blaseball fanfic it is at murverse.com and I just wrote it because I had a character of my head in my head, named Lancelot Dineanddash. And I figured, every weird thing that blaseball tells us, like how the players are hatched from the field of eggs whenever someone's incinerated or a new team comes along. You know, my first thought is, who's taking care of that field of eggs. Someone's got to. So yeah, I wrote a Blaseball fiction is a holiday story. But I don't know if Blaseball, if I could say that it would be Best Game because the majority of the work done to make it as richly lore-tastic as it is, is done by the fans. That's all fan created. But I don't know. Maybe I should read all those asterisks about what a game is. But I think I'm gonna do something. Ancilla is the lone YouTube watcher. I appreciate you Ancilla. I'm the lone Twitch watcher of a friend of mine's stream. I show up there and I tell him I am representing all of Twitch. Maybe Blaseball could be Best Fanwork. I don't think so. But Best Fancast or Best Fanzine? I mean, Fanwork is not a category. Yeah, I found that chat moves a lot faster than the video does when I'm watching streams. When I'm watching Twitch streams, sorry. Brain died. I have no idea how Hugo categories work. It's very, very, very, very fussy with the descriptions of what makes Escape Pod a semiprozine. Or what makes a fan artists a fan artists and what makes a pro artist a pro artist. What makes a related work. Yeah, because there's so much, especially with the internet. These awards have been around a lot longer than the internet. But with the internet, there's so many ways to make different kinds of content. And as I've been to the Worldcon business meetings. They are run by Robert's Rules of Order, which I never knew was a thing until I went to those meetings. And everyone just assumed you know. If you buy the Worldcon membership, you have a right to go to the meetings and have your voice heard. But if you don't know what Robert's Rules of Order are, then you're very likely to sit there and I have no idea what's going on. And it's stodgy and it's frustrating. And I guess it's like that because this kind of bureaucracy needs very rigid control, or else loopholes and all this stuff is gonna fly everywhere.

Mur 30:54

But the definition of what makes a short story and what makes a novel and whether a story is considered if it's released in audio In November, and in print in March, which year is it eligible for the Hugo? All these things that come up. It's very fussy. Hey Tish. Good to see you. I need to get my shout out skill on. I think all the wiggly bits are why I haven't gotten into nominating or voting in the Hugo's. Well nominating and voting is pretty easy. It's the creation of the categories or the altering of the categories that get really all over the place, very messy. Tish also has writing streams, both her vlog over at YouTube and -I'm pointing at it like YouTube's over there- and her live writing sessions which I joined one morning when I had horrible insomnia and that was very helpful. So, thank you for listening. If you want to see me live it's twitch.tv/mightymur. If you want to support via patreon it's patreon.com/mightymur. Probably see where this is going. My website is murverse.com and my Twitter handle is @mightymur. I write books. I do podcasts. I edit a magazine. Co-edit a magazine. And you can find all of that at my blog. Shout out to our Patreon folks today. Margaret Dunlap and Topographic Topiary. I'm trying to remember. Y'all get shout outs if you support the Patreon. Thank you Margaret and thank you, Topographic Topiary. Couldn't do it without you. And I'll be back on Thursday 12:30pm Eastern Standard Time, with a live interview with Alasdair Stewart which I'm really looking forward to. Also, Hugo nominated for fancast or, sorry, for fan writer. So, thank you for listening. Keep up the good work, and you should be writing.