

WHAT A DESPERATELY CRUEL conjunction. Do I sense mischief here? Very few critics or literary theorists are going to look good when placed alongside E M Forster; but in this extract, John Yorke comes across as a Dennis Hopper style character who's taken one gulp too many of the Cool Aid.

The irony is that I respect his track record as a creative force and I absolutely buy into what I believe he's trying to say – and I think Tom's (I presume it's Tom's) summary in the Session 6 notes is masterful.

The further irony is that I've read and enjoyed just about all the sources he cites, including James Gleick's book on fractals. I've stumbled across Campbell's works many times because he's still revered by many creatives in advertising agencies; as a teenager I read Jung with voracious enthusiasm; and Vogler's book, which is a set text for this Faber course, is thought-provoking and, to my mind, hugely useful. (I've already made a mental note, for instance, to make Harold more clearly a Mentor to Anne in *Flying Over Ruins*.)

And yes, the ideas cited by Yorke probably all fit together. But please. If I ever start citing the laws of physics, Chaos Theory mathematics and Hegelian dialectics (on top of Jungian psychology and a Structuralist critique of how myths work) in the pursuit of an aesthetic proposition, I'd consider it a kindness if you insist I go and lie down in a darkened room for an hour or two.

Love the message. Slight worries for the messenger. I have a feeling that his editors did him a terrible disservice here.

A notion that's only amplified (in my humble opinion) by sipping at the cool clear fountain that is *Aspects of the Novel*.

I have a slightly pathetic reverence for this book, largely, I suppose, because it was a set text for term one of year one at university; and I instantly fell hook-line-and-sinker for Forster's urbane and lucid good sense: this despite the fact that he spends an inordinate amount of time mocking a book I love, *The Antiquary*, and by extension the very notion of the historical novel.

His influence on me is seminal: he is wholly responsible for the fundamentals of my understanding of what plot is. Which is to say, I suppose, that causality is hugely important to the way I think about

fiction – even though I concede, with some great sadness, that it can be the enemy of poetry.

And so to Highsmith. Who instantly makes me eat my words – she lives and breathes easily in Forster’s company. I feel especially at home with her view that there are no rules as such and that you should explore what works for you and the reader both.

But I part company with her on one doctrinal point. Thanks in no small part to my training as a journalist, I am suspicious of coincidence. In fact, I might insist, with the fervent finger-pointing certainty of a cross-examining QC, that *there is no such thing*. So, while I love what Highsmith says about cheap tricks, I suspect that springing a coincidence on the reader is no better than having a summer season Paul Daniels pulling a rabbit from a hat.

I like her point about surprises (as long as they’re not coincidences) too. I am plotting at least one significant surprise (and, like a good joke, the set-up requires a good deal of pains-taking work). It is a surprise that will, I guarantee it, make you cry.



AS FOR MYSELF, I AM A PLOTTER not a pantser. On *Flying Over Ruins*, once I thought I had a decent story arc, I blocked out maybe a dozen crucial scenes, dialogue mainly with hasty stage directions, and had a go at writing an ending (not a beginning, I’m still, as we speak, struggling with that).

Then, in order to understand more fully how these scenes might glue together, I drew up a list of characters and recorded what their desires were (short, medium and long-term), how they might probably go about fulfilling these desires and how each character, in the process, might come into conflict with other characters. I suppose I also started judging them – and deciding the extent they would be granted their every wish. (And though I’m writing about real historical figures, a surprising amount of this is in play.)

I like to think of plot (or at least one part of it at least) as a *negotiated settlement* of a curiously tangled state of affairs.

I often find myself drawing out ad hoc grids and nodal charts to help me understand where the most promising narrative lines are and which relationships I've somehow neglected.

For instance, if you have four main characters who share the same air, there are six relationship permutations to consider – and I wrote write a mini plot summary for the evolution of all six of these relationship across the book. Subsequently, I haven't sought to flesh out every single box on the resultant grid but its existence keeps me focused and anchored – and it has led me to consider new perspectives.

I basically wrote a baggy and rambling first draft of the novel as a whole and I'm using my plot sheets to write it again – and make the storytelling more effective. At all points, where humanly possible, I focus (no surprise given what I've said above) on cause and effect. And I believe in the Robert McKee tenet – there should be something up for grabs, no matter how trivial, on every page of every scene in every chapter.

But I don't want causality to produce dull and functional clockwork, like a Swiss watch. The narrative engine I have in mind is more akin to one of Heath Robinson's fantastic machines, its inevitability should, I hope, *amuse*.

So, having said all that, if my beat sheet is unconvincing, you will laugh up your sleeve. Or mock me outright. And I will deserve it.