Tough Love

by Joëlle Anthony

It's very easy to fall in love with your characters, but it can be detrimental to your plotting. How many times have you heard a writer affectionately refer to his or her manuscript as "my baby"? I practically never call my young adult novels by their titles, but lovingly refer to them as "Kami's book", "Molly's book" and "Susan's book" and I do that because these three main characters have become best friends to me.

When you've finished the writing, love them all you want, but while you're working on that first draft (or twentieth) it doesn't help you much at all to care about them. It's not hard to remember to keep the character's main desire from them because that's Writing 101. However, in the past I inadvertently became so close to my characters that every time they wanted something small, they got it. Why? Because I couldn't bear to see them go without, be disappointed, or deprive them of anything they desired. The main problem with that was then my manuscripts didn't have any dramatic tension, no action.

It's very easy to fall into the habit of giving your characters what they want because not only is it easier, but your brain is very good at disguising this as moving the plot forward. For example, in my first draft of Kami's book, my character needed a job when she returned to her hometown. They'd loved her at

her old job, so when she walked in the front doors her boss welcomed her back. It made the most sense because she really needed some money to find an apartment and she only had two weeks to sort herself out. There was never any question about her finding a job because if she didn't, she'd have to return to her parents' house, end of story.

My plan was that finding the apartment was going to be the hard part and getting the job quickly moved the story forward effectively. However, when I went back through the manuscript and consciously tried to make things harder on Kami, I realized how much more interesting it would be if she walked into her former place of employment and the boss she'd worked for had been fired for stealing. Now, not only did she not have a job, but she was suspect because she'd worked for the thief. That eliminated all the company's other locations for possible employment and forced her to rethink her plan.

Now, as a writer, you might have read the above example and thought, "Well, duh," and you'd be right. It was kind of an obvious one, after the fact. However, as far as importance of plot points go, on a scale of one to a hundred, it was somewhere in the 30 range, so it was easier to have missed than you might think. That's why once I've got the general story down, I specifically look for places I've been too nice and try to make them more challenging for my character.

Once you've fixed the "big" ones, then it's time to look for the little ones. When I think I've finished a manuscript, I go over it beat by beat, looking for scenes that have fallen through the cracks. They don't really harm the manuscript as a whole, but I can make my writing so much stronger if I change them. While you do want your character to get some things they want (otherwise the reader will feel really badly for them and probably also a little depressed), it's not a bad idea for someone to take the last jelly doughnut, leaving him with glazed, or for her to have to sleep in her car for a night because she forgot her house key.

The reason to do this is because tension begets tension and will lead you new places. For instance, your character gets home late at night and has forgotten her house key. She can wake everyone up, maybe get a dressing down and then the story goes on OR she can sleep in her car, get a crick in her neck which in turn affects everything that happens the next day in a physically painful way. By being a little harder on her, you've created more dramatic tension, but you haven't really even changed the story.

When you read someone else's manuscript, detecting where they've been too easy on a character is much more obvious. That's why, when I hand my draft over to my critique group, I specifically ask them to look for things that seem a little too coincidental, lazy, or have that *deus ex machina* feeling. Don't worry about being mean, concern yourself with not being mean enough. We all want to be a nice person, but when you're writing, being tough is your job and you're only

making the characters and the story stronger. There will be plenty of time for you to love them after you've made their life as hard as possible. Like on that book tour.