Twitter Thread by Conan the Summer Conqueror

Conan the Summer Conqueror
@conan_esq

When I said I hate Worldbuilding I mostly meant the trap of making up facts and never actually writing a story. How do you beat the trap?

Just learn how to tell a story. Don't fear structure. Commit yourself to it.

Here are some resources I like for studying story structure.



Before I go into specifics, let me also say there are two main ways that study can help. First is deconstructing a work and writing your own to that formula. Second is learning theory so you aren't stuck with formulas. DO BOTH.

Formulae:

Probably the most famous true formula is Lester Dent's for a 6K word pulp story. Dent's is a great starting point bc it's plug n play.

Write 3-5 shorts w this and really examine how it works. The pacing, the actions, the revelations, building and releasing tension.

The Lester Dent Pulp Paper Master Fiction Plot

This is a formula, a master plot, for any 6000 word pulp story. It has worked on adventure, detective, western and war-air. It tells exactly where to put everything. It shows definitely just what must happen in each successive thousand words.

No yarn of mine written to the formula has yet failed to sell.

The business of building stories seems not much different from the business of building anything else.

Here's how it starts:

1. A DIFFERENT MURDER METHOD FOR VILLAIN TO USE
2. A DIFFERENT THING FOR VILLAIN TO BE SEEKING
3. A DIFFERENT LOCALE
4. A MENACE WHICH IS TO HANG LIKE A CLOUD OVER HERO

One of these DIFFERENT things would be nice, two better, three swell. It may help if they are fully in mind before tackling the rest.

A different murder method could be--different. Thinking of shooting, knifing, hydrocyanic, garroting, poison needles, scorpions, a few others, and writing them on paper gets them where they may suggest something. Scorpions and their poison bite? Maybe mosquitos or flies treated with deadly germs?

If the victims are killed by ordinary methods, but found under strange and identical circumstances each time, it might serve, the reader of course not knowing until the end, that the method of murder is ordinary.

Scribes who have their villain's victims found with butterflies, spiders or bats stamped on them could conceivably be flirting with this gag.

Probably it won't do a lot of good to be too odd, fanciful or grotesque with murder methods.

The different thing for the villain to be after might be something other than jewels, the stolen bank loot, the pearls, or some other old ones.

Here, again one might get too bizarre.

Unique locale? Easy. Selecting one that fits in with the murder method and the treasure--thing that villain wants--makes it simpler, and it's also nice to use a familiar one, a place where you've lived or worked. So many pulpateers don't. It sometimes saves embarrassment to know nearly as much about the locale as the editor, or enough to fool him.

Here's a nifty much used in faking local color. For a story laid in Egypt, say, author finds a book titled "Conversational Egyptian Easily Learned," or something like that. He wants a character to ask in Egyptian, "What's the matter?" He looks in the book and finds, "El khabar, eyh?" To keep the reader from getting dizzy, it's perhaps wise to make it clear in some fashion, just what that means. Occasionally the text will tell this, or someone can repeat it in English. But it's a doubtful move to stop and tell the reader in so many words the English translation.

The writer learns they have palm trees in Egypt. He looks in the book, finds the Egyptian for palm trees, and uses that. This kids editors and readers into thinking he knows something about Egypt.

Here's the second installment of the master plot.

Divide the 6000 word yarn into four 1500 word parts. In each 1500 word part, put the following:

* * *

FIRST 1500 WORDS

1--First line, or as near thereto as possible, introduce the hero and swat him with a fistful of trouble. Hint at a mystery, a menace or a problem to be solved--something the hero has to cope with.

2--The hero pitches in to cope with his fistful of trouble. (He tries to fathom the mystery, defeat the menace, or solve the problem.)

3--Introduce ALL the other characters as soon as possible. Bring them on in action.

4--Hero's endevours land him in an actual physical conflict near the end of the first 1500 words.

5--Near the end of first 1500 words, there is a complete surprise twist in the plot development.

SO FAR: Does it have SUSPENSE?
Is there a MENACE to the hero?
Does everything happen logically?

At this point, it might help to recall that action should do something besides advance the hero over the scenery. Suppose the hero has learned the dastards of villains have seized somebody named Eloise, who can explain the secret of what is behind all these sinister events. The hero corners villains, they fight, and villains get away. Not so hot.

Hero should accomplish something with his tearing around, if only to rescue Eloise, and surprise! Eloise is a ring-tailed monkey. The hero counts the rings on Eloise's tail, if nothing better comes to mind.

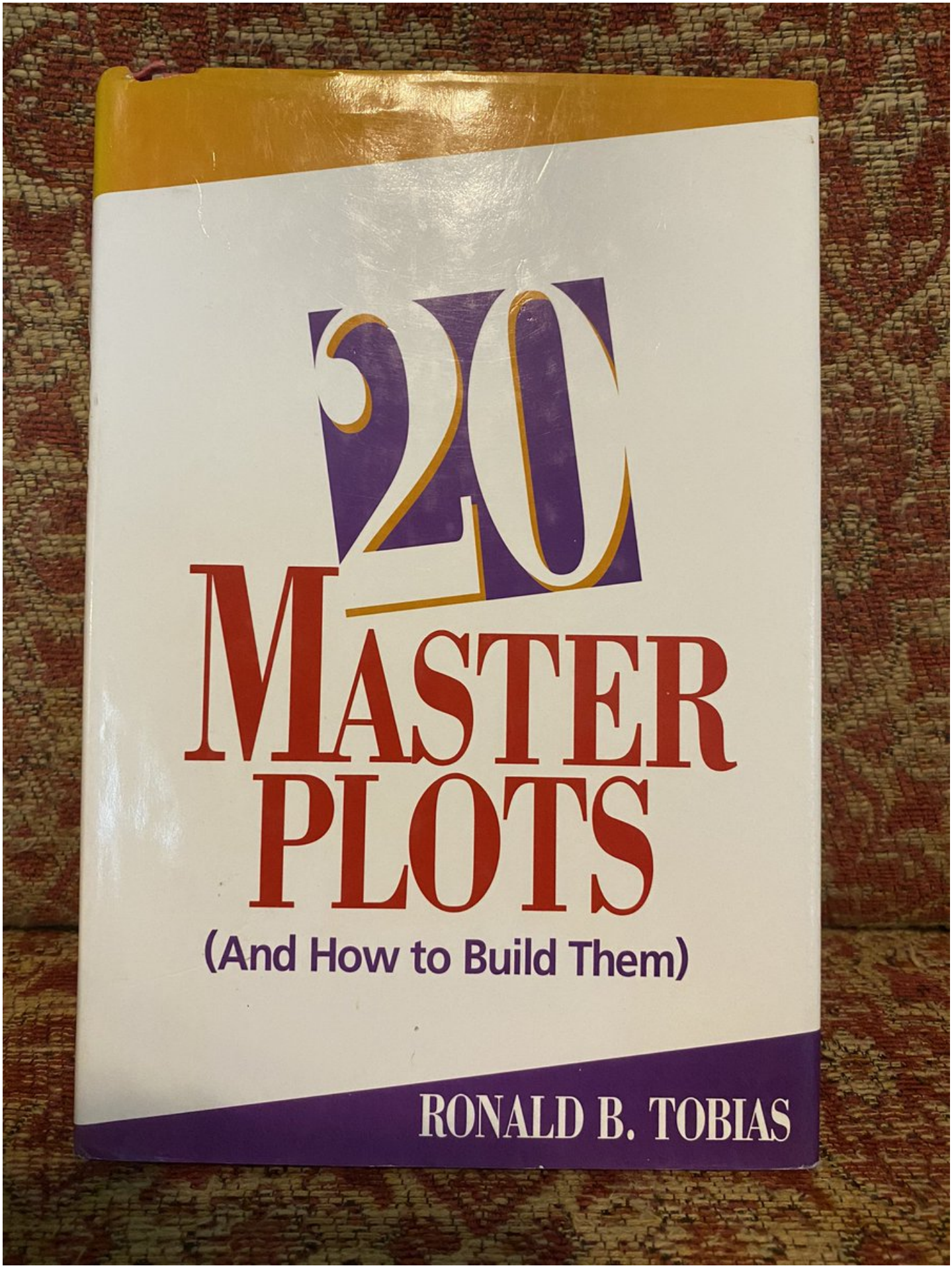
They're not real. The rings are painted there. Why?

Another I love is Polti's 36 Dramatic Situations. Excellent reference and primer on comparative classic literature structure.

Write 1K word short stories for as many of the 36 as you can get thru. Notice where the actions and reveals end up to 'turn' the scene. https://t.co/enOEYjZQMo

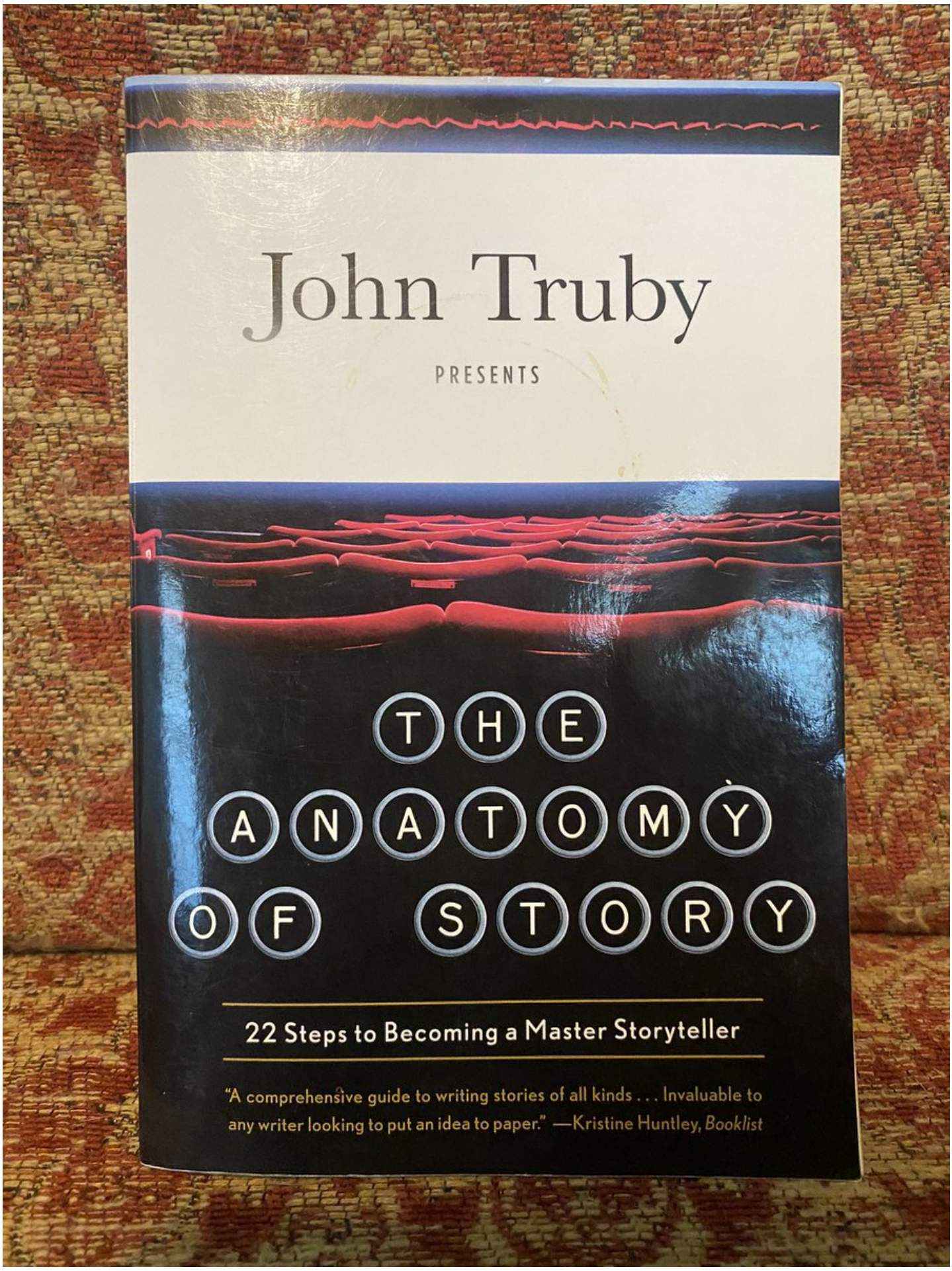
> Georges Polti made this book which is freely available online\u2014i strong recommend as a reference tool. Not just for writers but for anyone using rhetoric. If you can boil your narrative down to a clear narrative statement like this it will be very persuasive. pic.twitter.com/QY1VBEqsle
>
> — Conan the Summer Conqueror (@conan_esq) April 9, 2022

For longer work I have looked at this and found it slightly useful but it’s really for raw beginners who would be better served by the short fiction exercises above.



Truby's book is a little more technical and theoretical while still attempting to provide a sort of formula. Again, when targeting longer work this simply becomes unwieldy. But his theory and process discourse and writing exercises can be interesting

and useful.


John Truby
PRESENTS
THE ANATOMY OF STORY
22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller
"A comprehensive guide to writing stories of all kinds . . . Invaluable to any writer looking to put an idea to paper." —Kristine Huntley, Booklist

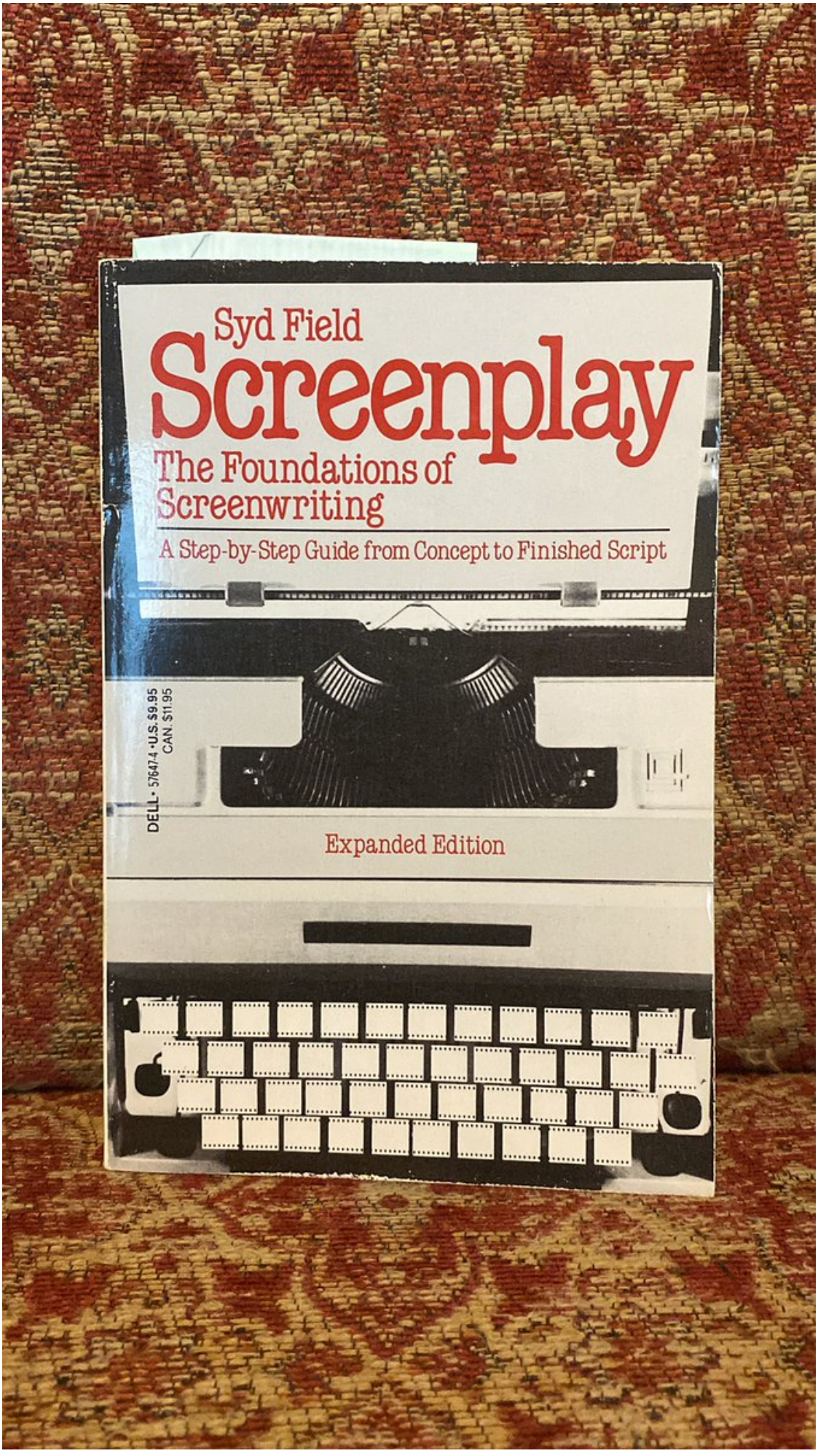
By the way, if I’m not including something here I either haven’t used it or didn’t like it. I read Save The Cat and the Lajos Egri book and found them mostly unhelpful.

But Screenwriting books have pretty good crossover for fiction, so…

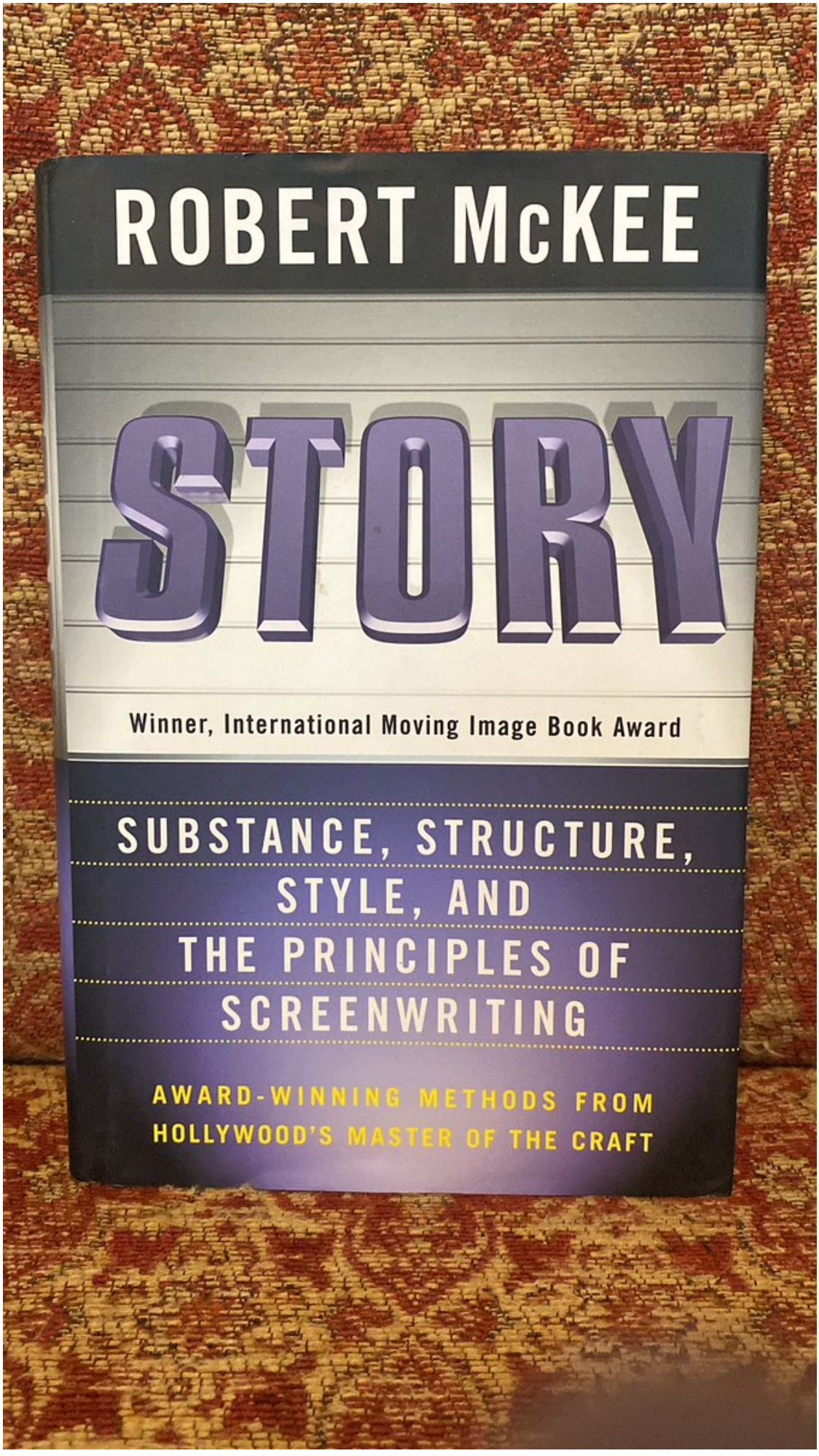


More into the theoretical direction:

I liked Screenplay. I group it as theoretical because it’s better as a discourse on why things work rather than a ‘tutorial’ to follow. I find the diagrams helpful aids to thought.


Syd Field
Screenplay
The Foundations of Screenwriting
A Step-by-Step Guide from Concept to Finished Script
DELL • 57647-4 • U.S. $9.95 CAN. $11.95
Expanded Edition

Story is another screenwriting book with carryover. More clearly theoretical but McKee is good at pushing you to bulletproof your stop as your own first-line editor.

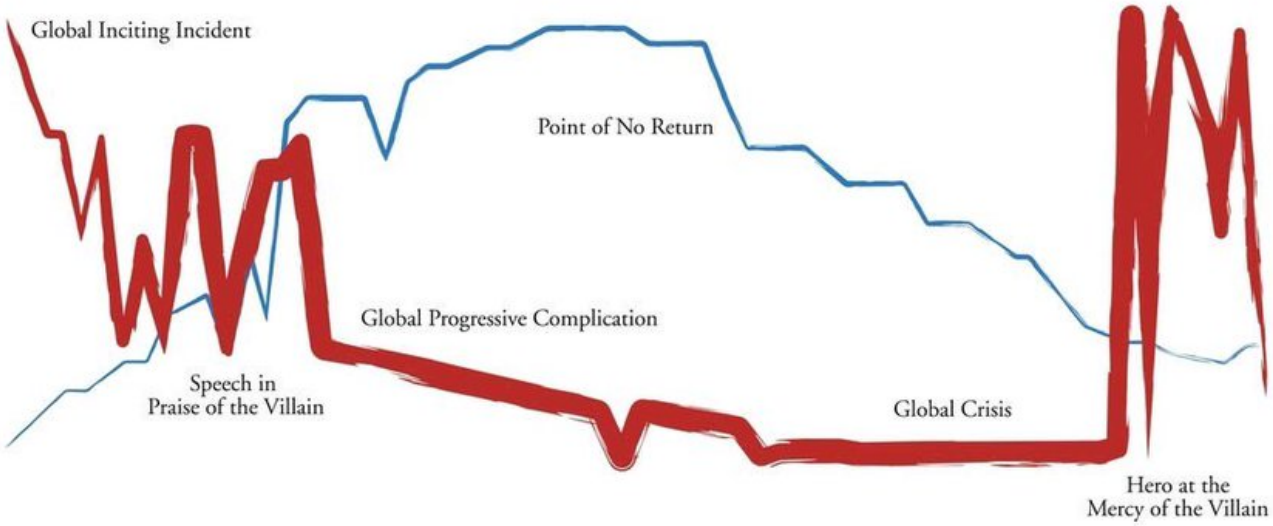

ROBERT McKEE
STORY
Winner, International Moving Image Book Award
SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING
AWARD-WINNING METHODS FROM HOLLYWOOD'S MASTER OF THE CRAFT

Also liked Story Grid. Coyne offers an interesting and rigorous process without really approaching formula. I credit him for showing me the power and importance of structure especially in the planning phase.

Use his method to outline 10 stories with as much detail as possible.

The STORY GRID

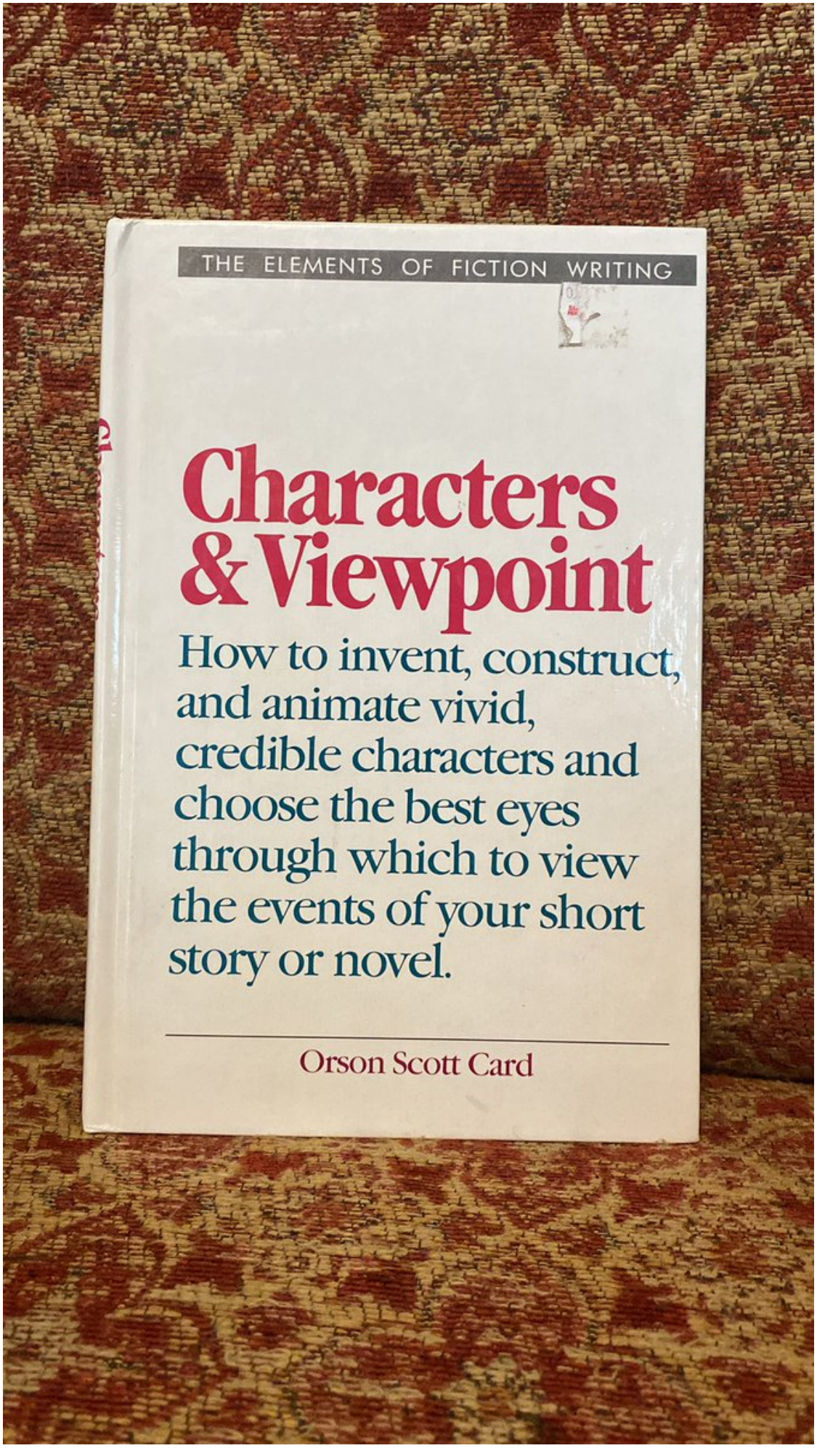
What Good Editors Know



Shawn Coyne

Introduction by Steven Pressfield, bestselling author of *The War of Art*

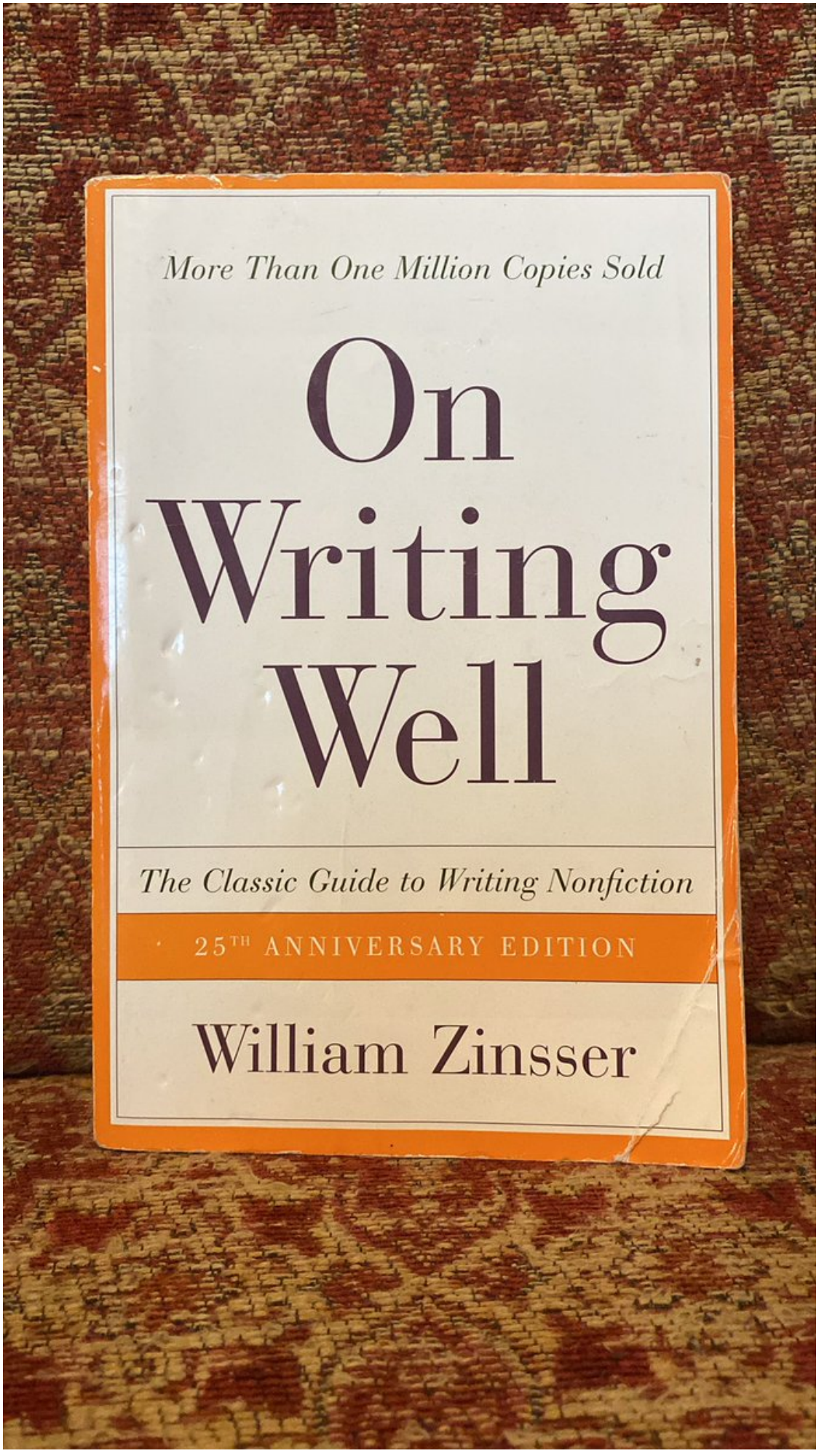
For a very technical analysis of Character I like O S Card’s book, but this is a level of depth not really necessary to a good performance.


THE ELEMENTS OF FICTION WRITING
Characters & Viewpoint
How to invent, construct, and animate vivid, credible characters and choose the best eyes through which to view the events of your short story or novel.
Orson Scott Card

Also shout out to the inimitable @DavidVStewart who has a wealth of content in this vein on his YT channel:

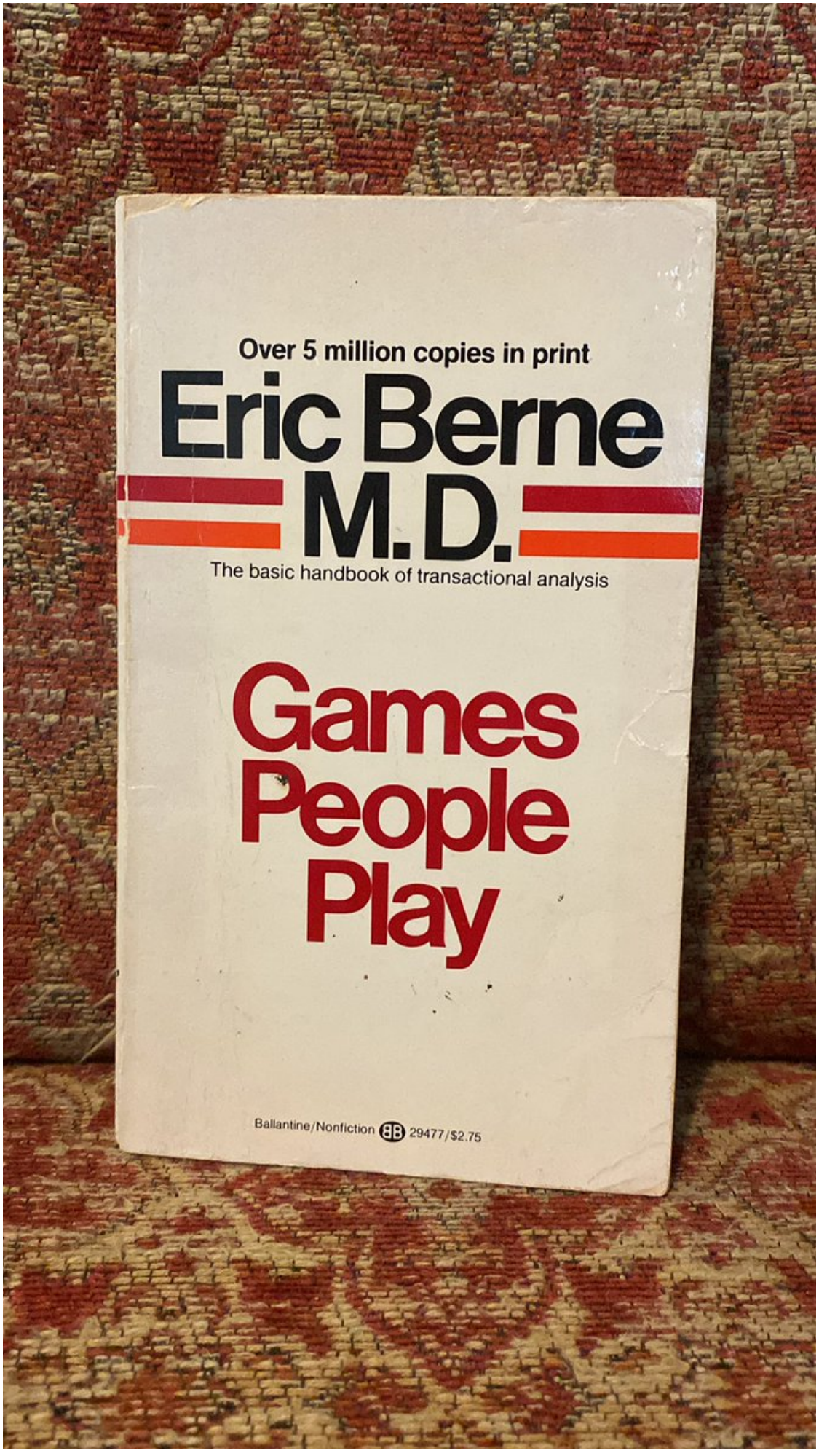
https://t.co/48ppQJkvrE

Oh and prose skill is important to all this. You don’t need elaborate stylized prose fireworks, but you do need to be coherent and confident and smooth. I have enjoyed these:


More Than One Million Copies Sold
On Writing Well
The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction
25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
William Zinsser

You’ll notice the above are not really about fiction writing. This is important. If you can’t write clean orderly prose, don’t bother with anything but learning that first honestly.

I also advocate reading broadly. Here are a couple things that excited me *as a writer*


Over 5 million copies in print
Eric Berne
M.D.
The basic handbook of transactional analysis
Games People Play
Ballantine/Nonfiction BB 29477/$2.75

YOU CANT JUST READ THE BOOKS.

You have to practice. I gave you short exercises to do that will jump your skill efficiently, much faster than muddling through 100k word of a novel that doesn't work.



And don't get overly attached to any one guru either. All these books are attempting to explain a mysterious transcendent object, the story itself. They're all just fragmentary perspectives. It's just a way to increase YOUR direct understanding and make PRACTICE more useful.



Anyway if there are any other real bangers I forgot or should know about let me know.