Twitter Thread by Chris Baty

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I can feel it in my bones: NaNoWriMo starts soon. If you meant to do some novel planning this month but never quite got around to the planning part, here are a few questions to help you think through your story arc.

These questions are based on Hollywood screenplays, the hero's journey, and the work of writers who are much smarter than I am—looking at you @RachaelHerron and @LaniDianeRich and @darynda. I didn't invent any of this.

And, it's totally okay to do no outlining and just wing the whole dang thing! Or do your planning in a wildly different way. But I've found these questions useful. So.

To start, you'll need a main character. Let's assume your main character is an orphaned boy whose horrible extended family has forced him to live in a cupboard beneath the stairs. Question #1: What's missing from your main character's life?

All of us are missing something. Maybe it's a feeling of danger or true love or a sense of higher purpose. Maybe it's a large animatronic penguin that can dispense boba tea through its nostrils. For our orphaned boy, it's a sense of belonging.

Great! We have our first answer! Let's stash it away for later.

Question #2: What opportunity or problem can present itself? The best opportunities or problems usually turn the character's life upside down in some ginormous way.

In our example story that I am completely making up all on my own, the opportunity could be that the boy is summoned to a school for young wizards! Or something else. Doesn't matter. It just needs to yank your character out of their metaphorical cupboard and give them a goal.

And now we come to Question #3: What are the stakes of your main character succeeding or failing in this new mission? What do they stand to gain and what will they risk if they lose? The higher the stakes, the more page-turnery the story usually becomes.

The stakes often rise as the story unfolds. The boy gets to wizarding school and learns that his house is in competition with other houses for a championship cup! He also learns that his parents were murdered and the murderer is now coming after

him. Yikes!

Anyhoo, by about the 25% point in most books, you've met the main character, seen them get pulled out of their ordinary world by a big problem or exciting opportunity, and understand what's at stake if they succeed or fail on their quest.

The interesting thing is that your book's ending is often contained in its beginning. And this brings me to the last question. Question #4: How might your character fail to get what they want, but still get what they need?

Hint: the thing they want is often just an extension of the problem or opportunity from Question #2. And the thing they need? That's all Question #1.

For our wizard friend, the killer ultimately comes for him. The boy has his chance to avenge his parents and save the world from darkness. Instead, the killer escapes. The problem is unresolved. The menace continues.

But the ending still feels satisfying because he gets something more important than revenge. He gets a family. Finally, someone has his back.

https://t.co/ugUQEm20dx



Wow, this was long! Anyway, those are 4 questions I like to ask myself as I try to feel my way through story-planning. There are 1,000 other equally good ones! What questions do you find most helpful?

Also, if you'd like more advice for your noveling journey, my book No Plot? No Problem! has entire chapters dedicated to animatronic penguins, and feels like an endless Hagrid hug. https://t.co/Cz7HerZYK7. [fin]