

# SELF DECEPTION = GREAT STORIES

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## THE TRACKS OF OUR TEARS

Sift through the cinders from your past relationships. Each of them. Notice that eerily similar problems haunted them? What about your current coupling?

Most likely, they share one thing in common: your high expectations were bludgeoned, leaving you disappointed, forlorn and upset, wondering what the hell went wrong.

It's especially torturous if the painful parting "comes out of nowhere."

You started with (READ IN DREAMY SLOW MOTION) unabashed anticipation of an exciting, romantic, affectionate, nurturing, fulfilling, wildly sexual union. Remember?

(SNAP! BACK TO ACTUAL READING TIME)

Where is all that *imagined* bliss now?

Pulverized. Blown away with the ashes from the cinders I just mentioned.

What happened to all the electricity, the sensation that you've known each other forever? Disappeared. Those beautiful eyes that lit up when you stepped in the room? That special cut in your strut?

Replaced with hazy memories and a tide of tears in your sea of suffering.

## I SHOULD HAVE DANCED ALL NIGHT

I'm no psychologist, nor do I play one on TV.

But here's how I think doomed relationships work from the outset—as well as how to create great drama and comedy if you understand it.

My simple analysis also explains how to prevent heartbreaks, misery, emptiness, horror and even ruthless vindictiveness by the "wronged" party—if it can be recognized as unsuitable from the first shiver of lust-

Oops! Did I say *lust*? Of course, I mean *love*.

Here's the catch—and you knew there had to be one: happy, healthy relationships are not ordinarily entertaining. Like, at all.

That's why lead characters in romantic comedies heading for a happily-ever-after ending are only seen during the turmoil of deciding whether they want to be together.

The onscreen romance (which we assume is not doomed) and the real life romance (more than 60% of which end in divorce in the U.S.) suffer the same dilemma. Couples invest all their attention, time, effort, comedy and drama in the celebratory get together—or the wedding—rather than the long-term *real* relationship that follows—the marriage.

The only time the functional relationship can work on screen is when both partners have the same goal and a task, then work together to achieve it. Like—solve the crime, get the money back, prove one or both of them are innocent after being accused of doing something terrible.

Wait. That sounds like a buddy movie.

Yep. The question becomes, "Where can we fit the sex part in a film if the 'real' story is not about the wacky romantic relationship?" Because the climax of a romantic story is always sex—onscreen or presumed.

More often than not, even when characters have the same goal and are supposed to work together, in either a buddy or romantic film, many screenplays make the dysfunctional relationship more important than working cooperatively to solve a problem—until the climax, that is. When they suddenly know how to support one another perfectly to solve the crime or problem.

Buddy movies, situations that force a

feuding couple into the hell of being together in order to escape the claws of destitution, death or devastation, or even



two peace-loving, nondescript characters run into typical real life relationship dys-functionalities.

## LET'S GET IT ON!

It all starts with the inability to listen closely and watch the other person attentively.

There are a ton of clues sent you by the other person that scream who they **really** are, but ordinarily they are ignored.

Infatuation is considered by some to be a temporary state of insanity because those who experience it tend to become delu-

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sional—refusing to deal with the truth that flashes brightly in front of them only inches away.

I think it's more a state of piling their personal expectations and assumptions onto the object of their affection, becoming disappointed and angry when the other person turns out to be who she or he actually is.

More complications and misunderstandings occur when we try to impress others by creating an image of ourselves as someone different or "better" than we really are.

In short, unspoken expectations and assumptions do us in, sooner or later.

If we want to screw our characters into the ground to create a great story—give them *plenty of expectations and assumptions!*

### LIVING LA REAL VIDA LOCA

In pseudo-counseling sessions, I interviewed an imaginary couple separately—whose identities I must conceal for reasons of privacy. Mine. They spoke of their assumptions and expectations candidly as they bitterly explained why the *other person* was responsible for the demise of their relationship.

For reasons of national security, I'll call

Anna Davis, "A;" and Benjamin Kiley, "B."

**A:** "Ordinarily I eat big meals—I love a good, thick, rare steak—and three desserts. But when I started dating—what are we calling Benjamin? B?"

**Me:** "B."

**A:** "B. I only nibbled little dinner salads on our first dates. I know men don't like women who eat like loggers, so I wanted to impress him. I didn't want him to think I'm a glutton. So even though I really liked being with, um, 'B,' I'd cut our dates short. I had to rush home. I was famished! Then after I ate a real meal, I went out clubbing the rest of the night. Talk about wild! Wahoo! (Lights up a cigarette)."

**B:** "Ordinarily I like long dates, like overnight. And ordinarily I love women to chow down—to eat like me. But I was so impressed with A. She asked for what she wanted! Salads and to be home early! I mean, other women don't ask for what they want. She was someone special. Independent. A woman with her own mind. I was happy to compromise and take her home. Besides, I could see she was shy about ... about you—know-what. I'm sure she's still a virgin!"

**A:** "God! I really wanted to f\*\*k his brains out anywhere we could get away with it—like my other boyfriends."

**Me:** "Boyfriends?"

**A:** "Only a dozen or so. But I'm only 22. Anyway, my purse is always full of condoms, K-Y and, you know, toys. B is gorgeous! But screwing all night like Olympic athletes takes a lot of energy and mine was tapped from starving myself! I just wish *he'd let me eat!*"

"He never made a pass. I figure he's gay. I thought I was so in love, I even considered moving in together because I could tell he hates kids and animals as much as I do.

"But every time we went out he only ordered that damned tiny salad! I didn't say anything because I know independent women freak men out. But I wanted to break out and order a steak, fries, milkshake, fresh peas, pie, donuts and ice cream.

"Finally—*finally*, my temper blew. Jesus! Couldn't he hear my stomach growling? I get really obstreperous when I'm hungry!"

**B:** "I cherished the way she nibbled at her little garden salad. She's going to stay the same svelte, petite, beautiful woman she is now—forever.

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"I don't know what went wrong. I adore her endearing, shy ways. I remained the perfect gentleman, despite my urge to pleasure her in more ways than the Kama Sutra. (He wipes a tear and blows his nose.) I knew I had to take it slow with my little rosebud and let her blossom in her own time. Which was never because she always had to be home so damned early.

"It's good that a woman wants to be

# Dramatic misunderstandings can be grisly and dark.

home early. I can't stand the club scene. Too smoky, too many drunks. Give me a night watching TV. I could tell she loves family life as much as I do. I was thinking five kids, a dog, couple cats and a gerbil for the younger kids...

"I wanted to marry her. I could see us growing old together. When she dumped me, I was devastated..."

"Um, what does obstreperous mean?"

## KEEP IT SIMPLE, SWEETIE

See the assumptions and expectations that could have been easily resolved with a couple simple questions?

Each imposed his or her assumptions and expectations onto the other person, without any real evidence or verification of either. Nor did they share their expectations—of the other person or the relationship itself.

Imagine how disappointed and angry he'll be when she slaps on a few stone (pounds)?

He assumed she's, um, "shy." It cost him some hot, wild, swinging from the rafters ... action.

Because of his Herculean restraint, based on his assumption, she assumed B is gay.

Once an assumption or expectation is "verified" *in our own minds*, regardless of the truth, we tend to file them into our belief system, which is wired like our hard drive. It's hard to unring that bell.

The result of dashed assumptions and

expectations we place upon others—**without their advice, consent or knowledge**—is ugly. We feel betrayed, lied to, crushed, victimized, hurt, angry and disillusioned. More, we blame *them* for something we created.

We don't stop to think that we experience their behavior in a certain way or are convinced we heard them say something they may have never said—or intended.

To make a relationship functional and healthy, we have to ask questions to clarify who the other person really is, declare our expectations and observe the other person's behavior to see the truth about them.

But for our purposes, if A and B had been emotionally healthy, this scene would have been incredibly *boring!*

## CREATING GREAT DYSFUNCTIONAL CHARACTERS

Give your characters enough assumptions and expectations (shared in some way with the audience—usually through a close friend) to screw up not just the main relationship, but every personal connection both characters make with others around them.

This must be done sensitively. As you can see from my *faux* counseling session, it takes only a tiny pebble dropped in a still lake to make (relationship) ripples continue as far as the eye can see.

I have seen storytellers falter (including myself) when they make the object too large. Dropping a brick or boulder makes only a shocking splash—leaving almost **no** lingering ripples (complexities, anticipations, misunderstandings, incorrect assumptions and expectations).

A and B's wrecked relationship shows clearly how withholding the slightest bit of *minor* information builds mountainous repercussions. The more minute and personal the assumption and expectation, the more we can relate to the characters who

unintentionally do exactly what you and I do (wrong) in relationships! We can also understand the dilemma of those on the receiving end of wrong assumptions and expectations.

## COMEDY OR DRAMA?

Comedies of error ordinarily occur when the price for false assumptions and expectations is not, well, death.

Dramatic misunderstandings can be grisly and dark.

Men and women create most domestic violence when self-defined expectations and assumptions of their partners are unrealistic. If the abused partner doesn't do exactly what the abuser orders, the abuser strikes out to force his or her sick expectations on his or her victim in an attempt to make them a reality. To make the victim behave as the abuser assumes he or she **should**.

Abusers don't take responsibility for their behavior; they are terrified to face themselves, their feelings and the probability that they are a failure and they are wrong. Dead wrong.

100% of the time.

The only way they have the potential of being rehabilitated is by being forced to face public furor and legal action.

It's a pathetic character, but one that must be shown to audiences if required by a sound story.

## THE KEY TO GREAT CHARACTERS: PERSONAL DECEPTION!

Now that you know key elements in screwed up relationships, feel free to share them liberally with your characters—comedic or dramatic. And the smaller the pebble you drop in that still lake, the more anticipation and suspense you will build for your audience.

You may want to offset them with a couple of healthy characters by contrast—but only if it helps your main characters show their story.

Just remember not to infuse your characters with too many personal deceptions—make them real, and not to present all their erroneous assumptions too soon. The more you can parcel out their false assumptions, expectations and hopes—the more your audience is drawn in, anticipating the uproarious climax of your comedy, or the nail-biting, consternation of your drama's resolution! ■