

A number of weeks ago Linda asked why are formulas popular since she hates them. This was a really interesting question, and I started giving it a lot of thought. I even brought it up as a lunch topic with my buds -- Daniel Abraham, Walter Jon, Ty Frank and Sage Walker. The first thing that emerged is that I have an idiosyncratic use of the word formula. When I was talking about how the Butcher books had a formula -- very short chapters that always ended in a cliff hanger -- Daniel quickly pointed out that that is not formula. That is style. It's how you physically construct your sentences or your chapters, the way you end scenes or start new ones.

Formula is more basic than that. It's about the events that will occur. Let's take romance, it's the easiest and the most familiar.

Boy meets girl.
Boy and girl hate each other.
Boy and girl fall in love and get together.
Boy and girl have a misunderstanding and break apart.
Boy and girl get back together and live happily ever after.

Some people might be dismissive, calling this writing by the numbers, but there's a reason these tropes are there. They're familiar and they are comforting, and that seems to be something that is bred into us.

Sage said she had a feeling that forty thousand years ago while our ancestors gathered around a fire in a cave the stories began with "Once upon a time" and ended with "And they lived happily ever after."

The sense of familiarity offers comfort and a sense of rightness with the world. The romance formula tells us that not only is true love possible, but that love can conquer all. I think it's a

reason people love mysteries. A good mystery promises that there is order in the world, and right and justice will prevail and that we will be safe.

Okay, so if we're all writing to these basic themes how do we keep this fresh and interesting? I think it's all in the execution, and how writers execute a story can differ widely. Which brings us to voice and style. Those are the tools we reach for when we're trying to bring a fresh take on an old tale.

Let me give you an example. Years ago a writer brought a story about cloning to the group. Another writer said, "Oh, wow, I love this idea, but I would do it differently." Writer 1 said, "Go ahead." Another writer chimed in with her take on this story. Again, permission was given to write her version of the story. Eventually all three stories were completed and guess what -- they were all completely different even though they had been generated from the same idea because the voices and styles of the writers were vastly different.

Which also makes the point that people should relax about "having their ideas stolen." Ideas are cheap. Execution is everything. When Wells wrote *The Time Machine* it was a wildly new idea. Since then we just do variations on that theme, and that's okay, because... say it with me now -- it's all in the execution. We're not stealing Wells idea, we're putting our own spin on his way cool idea.

I'm struggling with how to define "voice". It goes deeper than the fact that Roger Zelazny wrote almost exclusively in first person, or that Butcher has a wonderful sense of humor. I think voice is like good music. All I need is a couple of measures and I can identify whether a piece was written by Mozart or Beethoven, Brahms or Schubert. I'm wondering if a writer with a powerful command of his/her craft also generates a distinctive sound or voice. If anyone wants to tackle this one I'd be really interested in your analysis.

I'm going to switch over to film, and look at James Cameron. Nothing he has done is terribly innovative -- *Terminator*, *Aliens*, *Titanic*, *Avatar*. These are familiar stories but he executes them so very, very well. And more importantly his stories touch viewers on very emotional

level. They have heart. There's nothing cynical about them.

Which brings me back to Linda's complaint that she doesn't like formula. I don't either, but I think what bothers me is not so much formula as when the story seems inauthentic. When a writer is just going through the motions and not committing to the heart of the story it doesn't ring true and we reject it.

I'm going to try to stay fresh and innovative, but I'm also going to embrace that bardic tradition and think about the firelight playing on the faces of distant ancestors, and try to take my stories to that happily ever after.