

Short Story Writing - Ten Endings to Avoid

by William Meikle

A logical, satisfying ending is always required in a short story, but how do you ensure that yours is fresh and new? One of the ways is to avoid the obvious. Here are some common endings seen by editors: use them at your peril.

And then I woke up.

The 'Dallas' gambit. This approach is nothing more than a cop-out for people with no imagination. Stories should reach a logical conclusion that satisfies the reader and resolves any conflicts. This method does neither.

And then I died.

The 'Weird Tales' gambit. This one turned up regularly in horror tales during the early part of last century, until it was overplayed by HP Lovecraft, among others. A diary which ends in a string of nonsense words as a crawling terror from beyond comes for the author was fine the first time out, but most editors have seen it too many times.

And I found out I'd been dead all along.

The 'Sixth Sense' gambit. This is an old one, which is why people who were well read in the genre spotted the twist very early in M Night Shyamalan's film. An overused variation is to have someone breaking out of a coffin after a supposedly premature burial. Don't do it; the editor will see it coming from a mile away.

And they called them Adam and Eve.

The 'Bible' gambit or, as Michael Moorcock puts it, Shaggy God stories. If you start with a nuclear holocaust or human colonists on a new planet, make sure you don't use this ending or the story will be bounced back to you straight away. The other trap to avoid is having a computer become a god. That avenue was new in the '40s, but these days an editor will laugh himself out of his chair.

And then I saw the fangs, just before he bit me.

The 'singles bar pick-up' gambit. With this worn-out ending, a person visits a bar and is seduced by a pale, interesting stranger who turns out to be a vampire, a ghost, a werewolf or an alien. There are several variations seen nowadays, such as same-gender meetings and graphic sex scenes before the revelation, but the stories are all the same and editors know it.

And then I caught up with the '@!* who'd done me wrong and shot the @!*' out of them.

The 'Death Wish' gambit is the beloved technique of Michael Winner fanatics and gun-nuts. It makes for a very dull story unless you can bring style, energy and a unique vision to it, in which case you'd probably be better off trying to sell it as a film treatment. There's a long tradition of revenge movies, but in the written word they all come across as being very similar. A variant on this handling is the Charles Atlas gambit, where the weedy nerd

becomes a kung-fu expert to wreak revenge on his tormentors. Don't be tempted to use this angle. Editors will know what's coming.

And the next day I read in the paper that he'd died.

The 'I talked to a ghost' gambit. This practice turned up frequently in Victorian literature. It's usually no more than an anecdote turned into a story. Variations include talking to someone who is later discovered to be the victim of a plane crash, an automobile wreck or a major catastrophe. Editors see a slew of these after a natural disaster, but whatever caused the person's death, the stories are all the same.

And it was a man in a mask all along.

The 'Scooby-Doo' gambit. Pretend spooks are a cliché. The whole story builds up a sense of supernatural menace, only to reveal a human agency behind it all. It won't usually get past an editor but if it does, readers will feel disappointed and let down.

And it was my evil twin; we were separated at birth.

The 'doppelganger' gambit. Stephen King got away with this in *The Dark Half* and Dean Koontz pulled off a variation by making both twins evil in *Shivers*, but unless you have their style and wit, you shouldn't attempt it. Another variation, beloved of the romantics among us, is to have the protagonist find out they're really the son, daughter or sibling of a rich family. This mode is really just wishful thinking on behalf of the writer. You shouldn't be sharing your daydreams with editors.

I'm really a dog/cat/demon/alien.

The 'non-human storyteller' gambit is tried and tested. That's the problem. If you don't leave any clues to the fact, the reader will feel the ending is a cop-out. If you do leave clues, the reader and your editor will spot the ending coming unless you're very good at disguising the fact.

Remember, people have been writing stories for a very long time. If you've read a similar ending in a story or seen it in a film, you can bet the editor will be aware of it, too. There are only so many original endings to go around; make sure yours is one of them.

About the Author

William Meikle is a Scottish writer, with seven novels published in the States and three more coming in 2007/8, all in the independent fantasy and horror press. His short work and articles have appeared in the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Greece, Romania, Saudi Arabia and India. He is available for any freelance writing work.

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