

The Three-Step Process To Surprising Your Readers

Nearly all storytelling relies, at some point, on hitting the reader with something she hasn't seen coming. Or *thinks* she hasn't seen coming, but actually has, because you, the author, have prepared the way for it, then sprung it only after she's forgotten about the groundwork you've painstakingly laid. Or maybe she never realized it was there in the first place.

Granted, some surprises really do come totally out of the wild blue. Some just need to, and work better that way. Sometimes life is delightfully, cruelly, random.

The others, though, the prepared surprises, nearly always seem more satisfying. Because when one is delivered well, it's like a stealth puzzle piece clicking into place – “*Ahhh, riiight, I forgot about that!*” And most of us are hardwired for puzzles. As readers, as viewers, we love seeing them solved, love solving them ourselves.

But when you're the one in control, you have to plant the right seeds, and – this is important – you have to disguise what you're really up to. Maybe give the reader time to forget all about it, too.

To The Power Of 3

I've often seen such surprises pulled off – and done it myself – in a 3-step process. Which may sound formulaic, but it isn't, because it can manifest in an infinite number of guises.

Step 1: Introduction Of The Key Element

Get it out in the open. Show it, talk about it, but above all, tie it into something immediate that makes it look as if it has relevance right then and there. If you don't, it runs the risk of being too obvious, another of Chekhov's guns hanging on the wall in Act One: Everybody will be expecting it to be fired by Act Three.

Better still if the weaving-in comes with emotional significance to the characters. This sells the sense of immediacy, and often makes the scene more memorable for later.

Step 2: The Reminder

Show it, talk about it, again. Preferably in a different context from the first time, but once more, it has to look free of ulterior motives. That the point is self-contained.

This is the bridge between Steps 1 and 3, a reinforcement of whatever you've put into play. Ideally, though, these first two appearances will be pulling double-duty, doing something in the moment that's almost as important as what you have planned for later on ... say, on the surface revealing something about your characters, while your delayed purpose lingers below, out of sight.

Step 3: The Payoff

Here's where everything finally comes together. Either you've been subtle enough or buried the key element amid enough distractions to make the reader forget about it until its time comes ... or everything you've laid out is now seen from a different perspective, a fresh context, a wider view.

And that's it, the craft of surprise. Using something old in a brand new way.

It's easy to describe, but easier still to point out in practice, so let's take a peek at how this plays out in a couple of examples.

Case Study #1

In the movie version of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Fellowship Of The Ring*, the Power Of 3 is used to amp up and draw out suspense during the chaotic melee with orcs and their cave troll, in the Mines Of Moria. For several moments, we're left thinking there's no way Frodo could've survived being skewered by the cave troll's giant spear.

But he did, of course, thanks to his shirt of mithril chainmail.

Step 1: Introduction

During their reunion at Rivendell, Frodo's Uncle Bilbo gives him the mithril shirt, along with a sword (which slightly dilutes the impact a single gift would've had). "As light as a feather, and as hard as dragon's scales," he describes it. It's an emotional scene, too. Bilbo is dealing with some heavy regrets over what his actions have led to, and in equipping Frodo for the journey, he's not just investing in Frodo's protection ... he seems to be trying to make amends.

Step 2: Reminder

While the Fellowship hoofs it through the Mines Of Moria, we see the chasms glittering with mithril in its unmined state. Gandalf remarks that Bilbo once was given a shirt of mithril ... a kingly gift, Gimli observes.

“I never told him,” Gandalf says, “but its worth was greater than the value of the Shire.”

That’s the really interesting part. We’re left wondering why, exactly, Gandalf withheld this information. For my money, it shows Gandalf’s protective nature, that he doesn’t want to introduce the corrupting influence of wealth into hobbit society ... and maybe that he doesn’t entirely trust Bilbo to resist it. But we can only guess.

Step 3: Payoff

Frodo is skewered, but rumors of his death are greatly exaggerated. Open his shirt and ... SURPRISE! The Reminder and the Payoff come surprisingly close together, but so much happens in those intervening minutes that most viewers completely forget about the shirt by the time it matters.

Case Study #2

In my crime novel *Mad Dogs*, I used the Power Of 3 to disguise the fact that I was bringing in a new character at a point when conventional wisdom says you shouldn’t: fairly close to the end. Her name is Petra Lanier, she’s a Hollywood makeup artist, and she plays a brief but vital role in preparing the main characters, actor Jamey Shepherd and career criminal Duncan MacGregor, for a climactic confrontation with someone who’s been busy stacking the odds against them.

The problem: Bringing in a pivotal new character this late would’ve come off too much like winging it ... kind of like the cheeseball hero who, in a pinch, reveals that he just happens to have studied nuclear fusion during a semester at MIT. But there was absolutely no place to have brought Petra onstage any earlier.

There was still a way around this.

Step 1: Introduction

Petra was first brought up in conversation by Jamey's fiancée, Samantha, in a heart-to-heart with a new friend, Dawn. It comes out that there was a never-acted-upon infatuation between Jamey and Petra in the past. The scene's surface duty is to reveal Samantha's insecurities about herself and her relationship with Jamey, and bond her with Dawn.

Step 2: Reminder

Petra comes up a second time in a conversation Jamey has with Duncan. This time you get the infatuation from Jamey's perspective, and see that Samantha didn't have nearly as much to worry about as she thought she did. It sheds light from another direction on the depth of Jamey's love for and commitment to her.

And up to this point, it all just seems like a bit of she-said-he-said backstory, a potential fray in their emotional ties. Important, and valid, but hardly the only thing I'm up to.

Step 3: Payoff

When Petra finally gets her walk-on, she may not have been seen before, but she's certainly been a presence, the subject of a couple of heartfelt conversations. She has a unique enough name — this was no accident — that it's likely to spark additional recognition. Her arrival isn't a surprise the reader is likely to have seen coming, but under the circumstances it makes perfect, resourceful sense, and doesn't come off like something I've whipped out in desperation to wiggle out of a corner I've painted myself into.

Ultimately, there are almost as many ways to surprise a reader as there are to tell a story. This is just one of them, but if you start looking for it, you probably won't have to look very far.

The tripod, they say, is one of the most stable structures you can build.