# STORY GENRES

## GENRES

*Quick Guide*

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# Contents

# Welcome

## Greetings, Writer Buddy!

I had no intention of writing about genre. None. Others have done it extensively and exceptionally well.

But a funny thing happened during the *Memoir Mastery* program: participants struggled to define the roadmap of their story without the guardrails of genre.

So, there you go.

Or rather, here you go.

These are my thoughts on genre, created when I needed a clear and effective way to describe genres to people who cared only because they had a story they wanted to tell. They didn't want a tome. They wanted a tool.

Those participants and their memoirs forced refinement in my thinking. Their stories and struggles with genre went to bed with me and woke me in the morning. It took a few rounds of developing a tool and sharing it with the participants. I knew I finally got it right when lightbulbs went off in their eyes. *They knew the kind of story they were telling!*

I hope this happens for you, too.

Tally ho!

**PS:** This isn't a handbook, it's a Quick Guide, mostly tools, not a lot of words. It will make more sense if you watch the webinar that goes with it.

# What's a Story Genre?

"Genre" is one of those words in the writing world that gets used two different ways.

**Story** genres are not the same as **bookstore** genres. In a bookstore, fiction genres include Crime, Thriller, Romance, Sci-Fi. Nonfiction genres include Business, Travel, Memoir, Self-Help. These bookstore genres tell the potential reader the context of the story and help set reader expectations. However, they do not tell something much more important to the writer: the values at stake in the story. Or in other words, what the story is really about.

For example, a bookstore genre Fantasy novel could be an Action, Love, Crime or other genre. You know the story genres when you know the value scales of your story.

**PS:** Thank goodness neurosurgeons don't use one word to mean two different parts of the brain.

# Why Genre Matters

Knowing your story genre is your north star for writing your book. Genre tells you what's at stake, how the avatar protagonist must change (but might not), and reader expectations, both for expected events in the story and how the reader will feel. For example, a romantic love story must include a scene where the lovers meet, and it must give the reader the feeling of romantic thrill. Here's how my artist and author buddy Katie Robleski put it:

> "Story genres will help you write a much better story. *Why?* Because you will organize your story in a way your readers have come to expect (after centuries of storytelling!). You will set up the right plot, character & setting by aligning them to a Story Genre's corresponding value scale. This is important because it identifies the correct stakes for your avatar and classifies the type of pressure they must experience to change."

**Your story must have at least one external and one internal genre.**

Think about the underlying dimensions of [the Storywheel](#), the external dimension of ORDER—CHAOS, and the internal dimension of STASIS|CHANGE. Your story must drive forward in both dimensions, the external spurring the internal.

The LOVE genre is the only genre that provides both external and internal dimensions, and even then, you might add another genre for conflict and depth. For all other genres, you're going to need a supporting genre from the other dimension. Here are some examples:

*Me Before You, Pride & Prejudice:* VALIDATION primary, LOVE and SOCIETY supporting

*Heavy, To Kill a Mockingbird*: WORLDVIEW primary, CRIME/SOCIETY supporting

*Harry Potter, Star Wars:* ACTION primary, WORLDVIEW supporting

Let's go to the genres graphics!

# Story Genres Chart

## STORY GENRES

| Value at Stake | External Genre, Individual at Risk | THRILLER | External Genre, Community at Risk | Internal Genre |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Life—Death | ACTION | | WAR | VALIDATION |
| Justice—Injustice | CRIME | | SOCIETY | WORLDVIEW |
| Salvation—Damnation | HORROR | | RELIGION | REDEMPTION |
| Love—Hate | LOVE | UNIVERSAL LOVE | | LOVE |

# Story Genres Infographic

## External Genres — Plot-Driven

### ACTION & WAR
Value scale:
- Life
- Compromised Life
- Death
- Death Masked as Life (Fate Worse Than Death)

Avatar challenge: *unleash their intrinsic gift and live?*
Feelings: *excitement, safe thrills, bravery in the face of danger, relief*

### CRIME & SOCIETY
Value scale:
- Justice
- Compromised Justice
- Injustice
- Injustice Masked as Justice

Avatar challenge: *decipher clues or evolve to deliver/create justice?*
Feelings: *intrigue, pride, moral satisfaction, vindication, validation*

### HORROR & RELIGION
Value scale:
- Salvation
- Compromised Salvation
- Damnation
- Damnation Masked as Salvation

Avatar challenge: *evolve to defeat the monster?*
Feelings: *terror, courage in the face of terror, relief, peace*

## Combo — Plot + Character

### LOVE & UNIVERSAL LOVE
Value scale:
- Love
- Compromised Love
- Hate
- Hate Masked as Love

**Avatar challenge** is expressed differently dependent on type of love—eros, philios, or universal (love for all)

**External**: *will the avatars unite in vulnerability and courage, or will they separate in self-armor and fear? Will there be intimacy or estrangement?*

**Internal**: *sacrifice for their beloved?*

**Feelings**:
eros = *romantic thrill, sexual heat*
philios = *pleasure, joy*
universal = *inspiration, hope*
*|| disappointment or resolve if fail*

## Internal Genres — Character-Driven

### VALIDATION
Value scale:
- Internal Validation
- Compromised Internal Validation
- External Validation
- Ext. Validation Masked as Int. (Selling Out)

Avatar challenge: *nix status-seeking, evolve their definition of success?*
Feelings: *admiration || sorrow or pity if don't evolve*

### WORLDVIEW
Value scale:
- Wisdom
- Knowledge
- Ignorance
- Ignorance Masked as Wisdom

Avatar challenge: *evolve their view of the world and themselves?*
Feelings: *hope and satisfaction || sorrow or pity if don't evolve*

### REDEMPTION
Value scale:
- Altruism
- Compromised Altruism
- Selfishness
- Selfishness Masked as Altruism

Avatar challenge: *transcend selfishness?*
Feelings: *satisfaction || pity or contempt if unredeemed*

# Story Genres Examples

| | External Genres<br>Plot-Driven | Combo<br>Plot + Character | | Internal Genres<br>Character-Driven |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **ACTION & WAR** | *Alien, The Bourne Identity, Casino Royale, Die Hard, Duel, The Hunger Games, Kill Bill, The Lord of the Rings, Mad Max, The Martian, The Matrix, Predator, Speed, Star Wars, Terminator, Wonder Woman*<br><br>*All Quiet on the Western Front, Apocalypse Now, Black Hawk Down, Black Panther, Das Boot, Full Metal Jacket, Gates of Fire, The Great Escape, The Hurt Locker, Patton, Platoon, Saving Private Ryan* | **LOVE & UNIVERSAL LOVE**<br><br>*An American Marriage, Casablanca, Beach Read, Friends, The Gift of the Maji, Guess How Much I Love You, In Five Years, Little Women, Me Before You, The Notebook, Pride & Prejudice, Romantic Comedy, Romeo & Juliet, The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, Tom Lake, Titanic, Love & Basketball*<br><br>*Deacon King Kong, Ghandi, In Love with the World, Love the World* | **VALIDATION** | *Akeelah and the Bee, Bend It Like Beckham, Billy Elliott, Bridget Jones's Diary, The Devil Wears Prada, Gladiator, Hamilton, Hidden Figures, The King's Speech, Legally Blonde, Me Before You, Memoirs of a Geisha, Real Women Have Curves, Rocky, Rudy, Thelma & Louise, Whiplash, Wild, Working Girl* |
| **CRIME & SOCIETY** | *The Hound of the Baskervilles, To Catch a Thief, Devil in a Blue Dress, God Save the Child, The Godfather, Goldfinger, Jigsaw Man, Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase, And Then There Were None*<br><br>*Anna Karenina, The Book Thief, Casablanca, Caste, The Handmaid's Tale, The Hate U Give, To Kill a Mockingbird, Les Miserables, The Other Black Girl, Romeo & Juliet, Shindler's List, The Sympathizer* | | **WORLDVIEW** | *The 40-Year-Old Virgin, Becoming, The Book Thief, The Catcher in the Rye, Charlotte's Web, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Forrest Gump, The Goldfinch, Heavy, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, To Kill a Mockingbird, The Kite Runner, Less, The Men We Reaped, Solito, Where the Crawdads Sing* |
| **HORROR & RELIGION** | *Alien, Brain on Fire, Dracula, Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine, Get Out, The Fly, Interview with the Vampire, Night of the Living Dead, Psycho, Rosemary's Baby, The Shining, The Silence of the Lambs, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*<br><br>*Carrie, The DaVinci Code, The Invisible Hour, The Exorcist, Parable of the Sower, The Scarlet Letter* | | **REDEMPTION** | *Batman, Breaking Bad, Bruce Almighty, Crime and Punishment, A Christmas Carol, Deacon King Kong, Despicable Me, Drugstore Cowboy, Gone Girl, Goodfellas, Groundhog Day, The Hurt Locker, Killers of the Flower Moon, Leaving Las Vegas, A Man Called Ove, The Shawshank Redemption, Wall Street, Yellowface* |

# Adding a Layer

Here's what I can tell you about this next part: you're going to like it a lot or not at all. In the webinar alpha test, I included it and several participants recommended it be removed—they thought it wasn't as jelled as the rest of the presentation.

But after I removed it and sent out the updated version, several webinar participants said they were keeping the old version. They wanted it in.

Take it or leave it. As always, your call.

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Many years ago, I read a book (title long forgotten) that described four dimensions of a person. Because I prefer practicality to philosophy, I glommed onto the dimensions. I'd rather use them than debate them. The dimensions came from the book, the definitions are from me.

# 4 Dimensions

**Body:** That which allows me to live and move and breathe and have my being on this planet, in this time-space reality.

**Mind:** That part of me that thinks thoughts about my experience in this time-space reality. Mind is not exclusive to the head, as I have neurons in my head, heart, and guts. Head neurons do the most talking, some of it helpful ("Don't touch that hot stove!"), much of it not ("Don't keep those words. They're awful. Terrible. Burn them. Or at least hit the delete key.") The gut is less verbal but still powerful. ("That person seems creepy. Be careful.") Heart neurons are less about what to avoid and more about what to pursue ("That kitten is so cuuute!!").

**Spirit:** That which makes me conscious of the Being who is greater than me, greater than all. All That Is, Allah, the Force, God, the Universe, whatever you want to call it. My Spirit allows me to experience this Being in a way that elevates, inspires. And, like my mother, you may not believe it exists. We each make our own choices and we honor each other's choices.

**Soul:** That which makes me conscious of Beings who are not greater than me and who are not me. Although separate, Soul allows us to connect emotionally. At the risk of you thinking I'm woo-woo-way-out-there, this includes not just people but animals (Exhibit A: Roxie the Wonder Dog) and maybe even other living things like trees. (Especially the burr oak, a tree that sheds its branches and keeps right on climbing. The ground around old burr oaks is littered with massive limbs.)

The next pages layer the 4 Dimensions onto the story genres chart and infographic.

Take a look. (Yes, really. Go to the next page, then come back)

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What did you think?

As I said, take what works and leave the rest.

If you're wondering how Validation fits with the Body, it's based on the work of Dr. David Rock, neuroscientist and founder of the NeuroLeadership institute. He published this in the NeuroLeadership Journal:

"The perception of a potential or real reduction in status can generate a strong threat response. Eisenberger and colleagues showed that a reduction in status resulting from being left out of an activity lit up the same regions of the brain as physical pain."

Rock's article is dense and those words slid right over me. But when I heard him speak, he said it this way:

"If I hit you with a stick, your brain will process it as pain. If I lower your status, your brain will process it as pain. Lowering someone's status is like hitting them with a stick."

If that's so, if we can equate a loss in status with physical pain, then we can assign VALIDATION to the dimension of the Body.

# Chart + 4 Dimensions

| STORY GENRES+ 4 DIMENSIONS | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Value at Stake** | **External, Individual at Risk** | **External, Community at Risk** | **Dimension of Primary Focus** | **Internal** |
| Life—Death | ACTION | WAR | Body | VALIDATION |
| Justice—Injustice | CRIME | SOCIETY | Mind | WORLDVIEW |
| Salvation—Damnation | HORROR | RELIGION | Spirit | REDEMPTION |
| Love—Hate | LOVE | UNIVERSAL LOVE | Soul | LOVE |

THRILLER (spanning ACTION, CRIME, HORROR rows)

# Infographic + 4 Dimensions

## External Genres
### Plot-Driven

**ACTION & WAR**

Value scale:
- Life
- Compromised Life
- Death
- Death Masked as Life (Fate Worse Than Death)

BODY

*Avatar challenge*: unleash their intrinsic gift and live?
*Feelings*: excitement, safe thrills, bravery in the face of danger, relief

**CRIME & SOCIETY**

Value scale:
- Justice
- Compromised Justice
- Injustice
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MIND

*Avatar challenge*: decipher clues or evolve to deliver/create justice?
*Feelings*: intrigue, pride, moral satisfaction, vindication, validation

**HORROR & RELIGION**

Value scale:
- Salvation
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SPIRIT

*Avatar challenge*: evolve to defeat the monster?
*Feelings*: terror, courage in the face of terror, relief, peace

## Combo
### Plot + Character

**LOVE & UNIVERSAL LOVE**

Value scale:
- Love
- Compromised Love
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SOUL

**Avatar challenge** is expressed differently dependent on type of love—eros, philios, or universal (love for all)

**External**: will the avatars unite in vulnerability and courage, or will they separate in self-armor and fear? Will there be intimacy or estrangement?

**Internal**: sacrifice for their beloved?

**Feelings:**
eros = romantic thrill, sexual heat
philios = pleasure, joy
universal = inspiration, hope
|| disappointment or resolve if fail

## Internal Genres
### Character-Driven

**VALIDATION**

Value scale:
- True Success
- Compromised Success
- Failure
- Failure Masked as Success (Selling Out)

BODY

*Avatar challenge*: nix status-seeking, evolve their definition of success?
*Feelings*: admiration || sorrow or pity if don't evolve

**WORLDVIEW**

Value scale:
- Wisdom
- Knowledge
- Ignorance
- Ignorance Masked as Wisdom

MIND

*Avatar challenge*: evolve their view of the world and themselves?
*Feelings*: hope and satisfaction || sorrow or pity if don't evolve

**REDEMPTION**

Value scale:
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SPIRIT

*Avatar challenge*: transcend selfishness?
*Feelings*: satisfaction || pity or contempt if unredeemed

# What's My Genre???

Three question marks may be excessive, but we can tend toward anxiety when our story is at stake.

Take your story through the flowchart below. If you get through it and are still not sure of your genres (remember, you need at least one internal and one external genre), there are tips waiting for you at the end.

## Story Genres Flowchart

Every story needs at least one external genre *(to apply external pressure on the avatar)* and one internal genre *(to prompt internal change).*

**1.** Consider:

- *Who is the Avatar?*

- *What do they Want?*

- *But what do they really Need?*

- *Who or what stands in their way?*

- *When they face their greatest test, what is it, and what quality in them is tested?*

Now, that we've got ourselves grounded, we'll identify the **external genre(s)**.
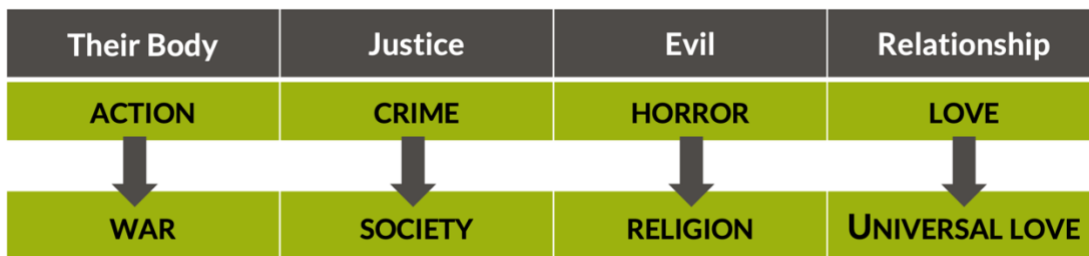
**2.** What type(s) of pressure does your avatar experience in their external world? Pressure from their experience of...

| Their Body | Justice | Evil | Relationship |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| ⬇ | ⬇ | ⬇ | ⬇ |
| ACTION | CRIME | HORROR | LOVE |

**3.** Is the avatar a member of a community that is experiencing this pressure as an identifiable group?

**If No, skip to 4.**

**If Yes:** Your story genre adds a Community genre. The purpose of the Community genre is to show the avatar is experiencing the pressure not because of who they are as an individual, but because they are a member of a community. The Community genres must have an individual genre to show how that pressure on the community affects individuals. Select your Community genre based on your Individual genre.

| Their Body | Justice | Evil | Relationship |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| ACTION | CRIME | HORROR | LOVE |
| ⬇ | ⬇ | ⬇ | ⬇ |
| WAR | SOCIETY | RELIGION | UNIVERSAL LOVE |

*4.* On to the **internal genres(s)**.

What is the question the avatar asks of themself, prompted by the external pressure they experience?
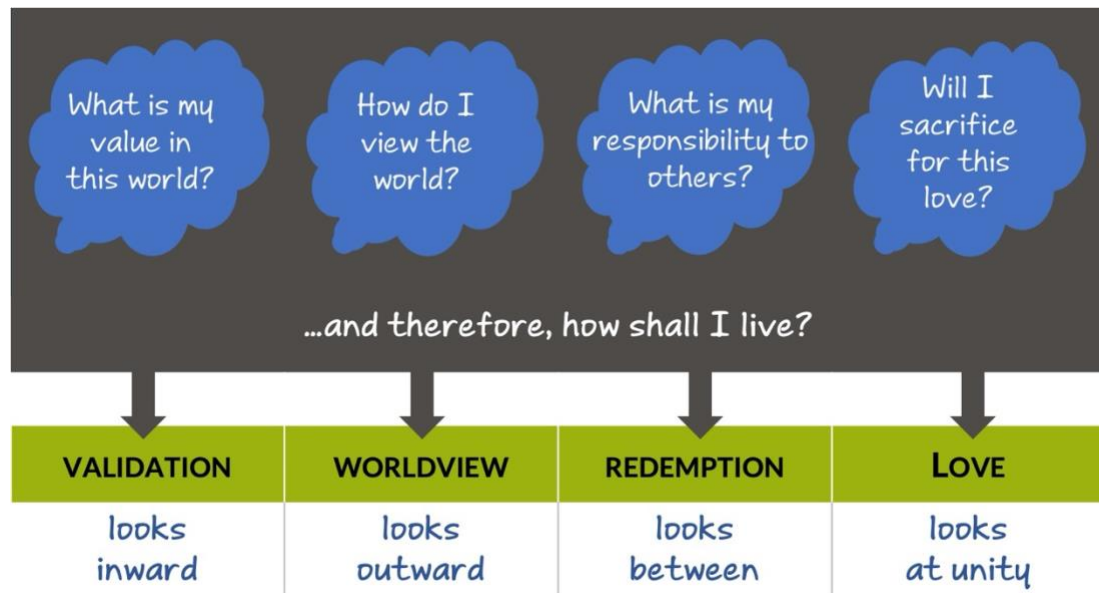


*5.* That's it. Whatcha got?

## 5 tips if you're not sure…

1. Go back to the theme of your story. For which genres do you see a more direct connection to your theme/point/controlling idea (whatever you want to call it)?

2. In the Dig Down Deeper, the avatar is tested. How they are tested externally and what is required of them internally to emerge victorious should tell you your genres. The tests must match the genres!

3. You might have a genre mashup. For example, *Whiplash* and *Billy Elliot* are VALIDATION + ACTION + SOCIETY mashups. SOCIETY automatically includes CRIME, so we can see how the injustice affects individuals. The societal crime against Billy is narrow restrictions around gender. Here, "Boys play football, they don't dance. If a boy dances, we beat him up."

4. If you're struggling with selecting the internal genre, ask if there is a genre question the avatar must get right before they can get the others right. For example, (and I may use this example because I have my own issues), perhaps the avatar needs to see their own worth before they can clearly see the world, or love and be loved by another. We think of *Me Before You* as a LOVE story, but its primary genre is VALIDATION.

5. Back to those internal genres. If you still can't decide, pick the one that's the biggest challenge for you personally, in your life. It's going to come out in your writing anyway, so you might as well make the most of it!

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If we stay in touch, you can be up on my latest thinking and know when I've got a webinar or something coming up where you can ask questions. It would be nice to meet you!

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unravel complexity, find clarity

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