Theme

I do not believe you have no opinions. It is simply not possible that you have never observed a fact of human nature or uncovered a social irony. You no doubt also have some thoughts on the meaning of the universe itself. You are an aware, observant and discerning person. You are a novelist. DMaass

What is theme?

- every novel has a core idea – a theme. It is the deep meaning of your book. It's the central message you're trying to get across to the reader. It may be a moral choice characters grapple with. It may be X vs Y (good vs evil) or it may be an exploration of a subject (addiction, abortion, a family dealing with a missing relative, and so on). It answers the question: what is your story about?

Note: Theme is an open debate in any work. There may be a number of themes and readers, because of their life experiences, may come away with a different theme than you intended.

Examples:
- good ultimately conquers evil
- genius and guile are a match for raw strength
- Neanderthals are real people too
- no man stands above the law
- love conquers all
- there is a way to be good again
- a man's character is more important than his money, looks or good humour
- God is a mathematician
- be careful what you wish for
- espionage is a dirty business
- it's about forbidden love and sex (without the sex)
- it's about forbidden love and sex (with the sex)
- the things we're afraid of
- justice and judgment and who can dole it out

Do you need a (strong) theme? Not necessarily. Know your audience.
- for an easy beach read, no. These people read for pure entertainment.
- people may read into your novel a theme or point you didn't intend to make. Therefore, you may be misunderstood.
- you may be accused of having a shallow, pointless, wandering book.
- breakout novels and the franchises (Harry Potter, 50 Shades, Game of Thrones, etc. all have strong, identifiable themes)
- If you think about it, what many breakout authors are doing is boxing their characters into a situation with inescapable moral choices and dilemmas. Facing a moral choice is perhaps one of the most powerful conflicts any novel can represent. Facing that moral choice = theme.

PROS and CONS to IDENTIFYING THEME PRE-WRITING

PRO for identifying it pre-writing
- provides focus and clarity to the story
- eliminates characters which sound the same
- eliminates characters who aren't contributing to the plot
- it keeps all your stories from sounding the same
- it can help you write a successful conclusion to your book

CON against identifying it pre-writing
- cardboard or one -dimensional characters
- a preachy tone
- lack of subtlety
- story clichés

How to avoid the CON problems (in 1ˢᵗ draft even if you identified it pre-writing)
- characters need conflict. They need to worry, to struggle. Give your characters humanity and passionate commitment to a set of values. Set them in conflict, and as they fight, theme will take care of itself.
- find spots where you can highlight your theme BUT resist the urge to explain
- find the spots where your theme comes out naturally but is a bit fuzzy or distorted and clarify
- where theme seems intrusive, forced or heavy handed, trim it back or take it out. Novels aren't sermons
- if it comes up in character dialogue or interior monologue and it advances the story, then it's legitimate. It's best if hinted at by concrete actions
- find spots where you contradict your theme. If your characters acknowledge the contradiction or wrestle with it, then your readers know you know about it

D Maass approach:
- Examine each scene with the assumption that the convictions of the subject of the scene are weak.
- Why is this character here? What are their inner reasons, motivations? List them.
    1) immediate needs: physical and emotional requirements
    2) secondary needs: information, support, avoidance, comfort, curiosity, etc.
    3) higher values: search for truth, a thirst for justice, a need to hope, a longing for love
- Now, reverse the list, and rewrite with your character motivated by the higher values. Enhancing motivation enhances a character's inner fire and results in a powerful theme.

- Theme can be enhanced by the use of symbols – physical objects, phrases, gestures, animals, whatever. Usually kept to one ie: Frodo had only one ring and not a comb, a sword and a sack of flour.

3 WAYS TO CHOOSE OR FIND A THEME
#1 – FIND IT IN THE 1ST DRAFT

- **Identify what the main conflicts are about**. What are the characters fighting over? You may think the theme in your story is one thing, but the conflicts occurring may be about something else. Your characters know better than you what they're passionate about.

Donald Maass approach:
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Now, reverse the list, and rewrite with your character motivated by the higher values. Enhancing motivation enhances a character's inner fire and results in a powerful theme. (Maslow's Hierarchy)
- Theme can be enhanced by the use of symbols – physical objects, phrases, gestures, animals, whatever. Usually kept to one ie: Frodo had only one ring and not a comb, a sword and a sack of flour.

- One of the most highly moral SF writers working today is Orson Scott Card. While his convictions are clear, they emerge from the action of the story rather than from his characters mouths. Check out Enders Game.

#2 IDEA – CONCEPT – THEME METHOD

IDEA: This is where a lot of stories start. For example: Two powerful wizards who battle it out for control of both the magic and muggle worlds

CONCEPT: The concept is the hook of your story. It can usually be phrased as a "What if?" question, and it often points to a theme and/ or conflict for the story. For example: What if …. an 11-year old child learns that he is a famous and celebrated hero in an underground magical world he never knew existed until now and this world's fate depends on him vanquishing a villain.

A concept isn't specific and usually doesn't "name names" or provide detail on the characters, the setting, or anything else. It highlights the protagonist, an opposing force, and the situation. At a writer's conference, it might be the sentence you say when someone asks you what your book is about.

CONCEPT TO THEME: The easiest way to go from concept to theme is to ask, what does my main character represent?

Concept: see above

Character Sketches: Harry (protagonist); Voldemort (antagonist)

Character Representation: Harry Potter represents good, love, while his nemesis Voldemort represents evil, fear.

Theme: It's a classic tale of good and evil, or love vs. fear.

#3 CHOOSE THE THEME WHEN PLANNING YOUR NOVEL

a) DETERMINE WHAT TOPICS INTEREST YOU, YOU'RE PASSIONATE ABOUT OR WOULD LIKE TO EXPLORE For example: good vs evil; how far would you go for your children if…?; exploring front line moral choices in a war; exploring the social and personal side of addiction in a fantasy; what does it mean to belong?; loyalty vs betrayal

Respect genre conventions. Note, the theme can quietly be echoed n subplots seemingly unrelated to the plot. The best themes are relevant to today's world, even if they're set in fantasy, SF, or historic fiction. The hotter the topic, the more opportunity for conflict.

For example: Tudors – the story isn't about the politics but concerns Henry VIII's marital problems with Catherine of Aragon. Why? We can relate to relationships gone sour, not to the political workings of the marriage.

b) DETERMINE THE POSITIONS ON THE SPECTRUM YOU WANT YOUR CHARACTERS TO REPRESENT

Topic: The Calgary Flames will win the Stanley Cup
1. **Yes they will** – die hard fans; fans swept up in the excitement; coaches; statisticians, parents; gamblers; bar owners; etc.
2. **No they won't** – people who hate the team because (lots of opportunities here!); no for the sake of rivalry; statisticians; gamblers; etc.
3. **Not sure/ maybe** – people who are clueless; people who don't care; not comfortable making a prediction; hate hockey; etc.

Characters should reflect one of these three groups. Note that there are degrees or shades of grey within each group, factors which affect the degree to which characters exemplify these positions. For example, family members can have differing views. Some characters may even switch sides. Differing positions on the theme creates opportunities for tension and conflict, and it keeps characters from sounding the same.

An example: Veronica Mars - Theme: income disparity and the corruption that comes with it. This theme is never resolved. Veronica admits she's addicted to fighting corruption.
- O'Niners – rich class. Veronica was once friends with this group
- The Others lower income class – Veronica and others.
- Middle class – Veronica insists there isn't one – either you're a millionaire or your parents work for one.

Within each group are jerks, terrible, corrupt people, nice people, generally good guys who get into trouble due to circumstances. The PCH Gang represents the criminal element – the darker and more rebellious side of the lower class.

Sources:
James Scott Bell, *Revision and Self-Editing for Publication*
Donald Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*
Randy Ingermanson and Peter Economy, *Writing Fiction for Dummies*
Leonelle, Monica**,** *Nail Your Story: Add Tension, Build Emotion, and Keep Your Readers Addicted*