

Anatomy of Violence

The purpose of this skills session is not to justify violence. Nor is it meant as an examination of the underlying socio-economic factors that beget violence. I will not expand on the notion that today's terrorists are yesterday's freedom fighters, and that once they were our allies. Given the events of the last bit, I think we are all aware of the systemic issues that act as fault lines beneath the surface of any nation or society. Violence, boiled down to its essence, is only a vessel by which the acquisition of power is achieved or maintained. Everything built by men, is mortared with the blood of other men. Violence is inherent in any human system.

As writers, violence is often used to showcase the very real consequences of the conflict our characters are enmeshed in. It need not be the clashing of armies. It can be a bar fight. Someone striking a child. It can be a car crash. Yet often, it does involve charging horses, shield walls, or tanks rolling across fields of wheat. **The purpose of this skill session is to help ensure that what you write makes sense and is engaging for the reader when you are writing a fight scene.** Too often bad action scenes are included for the sake of it, but like a bad sex scene, they end up being far too distracting and should not have been included in the first place if not done well.

Violence, both the word and the application, carries weight, but ultimately how you choose to interpret the situation will depend entirely on the type of novel you are writing. A YA novel is not meant to have the same impact as a war novel, but the fundamentals of writing engaging action scenes are the same. It is only the details that differ.

This session will be broken down into five sections:

- 1.) Character
- 2.) Realism vs. Fantasy
- 3.) Psychology/Consequences
- 4.) Rhythm
- 5.) The Donut Factor (Tension)

1.) Character

Writers are well aware of the importance of strong, memorable characters in a book. They are the backbone upon which everything is built. The better the characters, the better the story. But for this section, I am not speaking about primary characters. Your writing should have already built a strong foundation for any and all primary POV or even secondary characters.

No, I am referring to tertiary characters (as well as secondary characters, to a smaller extent). The faceless bodies in the shield wall. The fighter pilot only known as a designation and that likely only gets a single sentence. The original Star Trek was famous for its Red Shirts, so much so that they have become a standard trope across a broad range of genres. These are the characters I am talking about. The nobodies. The non-elevated pieces that are moved around the board by the actions, or lack thereof, of the primary characters.

Now, of course, one cannot expand on every character. There is not enough time to consider every soldier on a field of battle, or every fist fighting hillbilly in a Deliverance style bar brawl. That would be entirely too unwieldy.

Yet in order for action scenes to carry the necessary weight to actually matter, the people involved have to matter as well. A faceless Red Shirt is a faceless Red Shirt and becomes only statistics on a board. One, as they say, is a tragedy. A million is a statistic.

Tertiary Character

A character whose purpose and significance is little, even if they appear more than once. These characters can be stock characters or joke characters, if they are granted higher importance than that, they can be bumped to secondary characters.

The above definition is the standard methodology of writing tertiary characters. The notion is that they are disposable, and to an extent, they are. These are not POV characters, nor are they often the secondary characters even. As a general rule, they rarely even have names, though often in books surrounding military personnel they will have a rank and a last name. They might even get a line of dialogue, but often not much else.

Yet just as much as crafting a strong protagonist matters, when it comes to writing action scenes, these characters must matter as well. They often take the brunt of the negative choices made by the character. They are often the first to die and do so in the largest quantities. When violence occurs, in order for it to carry the necessary weight, these characters need to matter more.

Now there is a fine line to walk, of course. Every fight and every faction need not matter all the time. There is a critical diameter whereupon people will just stop caring if something terrible is always happening. (Think of characters in a Song of Ice and Fire). Sometimes action happens, and those caught up in it do not need to be expanded upon as greatly. But the more these characters are built to matter, the more, by extension, the consequences for the primary characters will feel real to the reader.

Let us really focus on that last point for just a moment. The connection your readers feel with the Red Shirts will translate into a further appreciation and care for your primary characters. Everyone is elevated when those at the bottom are.

As an example of this, I present the 1986 James Cameron science fiction action thriller, Aliens. This is the benchmark for action movies, not only for pacing and plot and character, but for what we are talking about right now. Tertiary and secondary characters. After thirty years, I still remember the name of the least important characters. Ferro. Frost. Crowe. Spunkmeyer.

Crowe did not speak a single word. Frost, I think, maybe had a line. But I remember moments vividly from that movie because they were all elevated to being more than just mooks. When the sergeant, Apone, came out of the cryo pod and immediately shoved a cigar in his mouth, not a single line of dialogue needed to be spoken. His character (he is a secondary character), was immediately established. Then he barks out the elbows and assholes line, and he is further established as a character. The other characters grow from this moment and are elevated not only by their actions but their interactions with each other. Even Drake, who straddles the line between being a secondary and tertiary character, becomes important for the brief interactions that we see.

Later, when this group of marines ends up surrounded by the aliens, it matters. The primary protagonist, Ellen Ripley, is not even within the vicinity, but the entire action scene still matters because we have come to, if not care for these marines, at least care that they are dying. Because if this unit of highly skilled and trained marines is dying, then what does that say for the fate of our primary character?

Characters, big and small, matter. They expand upon the action scenes in a very real way and provide weight to the violence depicted. For readers that do not care to read action scenes, they might well do so just to see if the characters that they like make it through alive.

Everything is elevated when the characters matter.

2.) Realism vs. Fantasy

This section will likely be the shortest because it's the most self-explanatory. What is the story you are trying to convey? That is usually something that is determined well in advance of your first action scene. A superhero movie has a different look and feel than a WW2 movie, and the same is true of the stories we are writing. Know your audience.

That is not to say that you cannot mix the two. One would be hard pressed to claim that Captain America is a gritty action movie, but there are elements of it sprinkled throughout. There are consequences, both for the primary and secondary characters. There are consequences, and real emotions present as the characters grapple with the events of the story.

Remember, action does not mean only physical violence enacted directly onto, or by, the character. It can be entirely psychological as well. A character can be deeply affected by events swirling around them without ever throwing a punch or firing a bullet. Think of a young soldier in a trench in WW1. The shells come screaming in, crashing down to send great swathes of mud flying about. The air is shivered by concussive blasts. This is an action scene, and the character might do no more than huddle in the bottom of a muddy trench, jacket pulled up and face buried in the mud. All that time he might only be thinking about how he wishes his boots weren't filled with water, or lays wondering what his mother is making for supper.

There are two key points to always remember, no matter what you are writing.

Know your audience.

Be Consistent.

To the first, **Know your Audience.** If you are writing a young adult novel, having a graphic torture scene is likely not the best course of action. Likewise, if your grizzled soldier has a mortar shell explode at his feet and doesn't have his legs blown off, this will cause problems for the reader.

What does the genre you are writing normally do? Look to those books that have been published and use them as a template. It does not mean you cannot do more, of course. Key elemental changes can truly enhance your work. But there is a fine line to walk, and one misstep can send your reader right out of the story.

Brent Weeks wrote the Night Angle Trilogy. In it, there are assassins and the like, and you can almost feel them levelling up like a video game. It is just power levelling heaped on power levelling. It was not for me in any way, shape, or form. I found it childish. It has, of course, sold something like 4 million copies.

He knows his audience. Likely teenage fantasy readers who have grown up on Marvel movies and video games. It works for him.

Tom Clancy spent his career writing pro-military propaganda. Acronyms for military units and government agencies abound in his novels. So, you will likely hear how this or that assault rifle has this sort of clip and that sort of modifications to it, with stocks and barrels and red-dot sights and the like. He writes military porn, and his readership have responded by buying 100 million books.

Be Consistent. No matter where you take your story, into the real world or into one that is very stylized, set the parameters of the world and stay within them. Do not sweep the rug out from beneath your readers by adding some new deus ex machina, no matter how difficult a knot you might have written yourself into. Readers will be very forgiving of whatever real or madcap world you reveal to them, but if they feel like they have the edges of the world figured out and then you angle away in a new direction, you will damage what you are trying to do. If the readers stop trusting you, they will stop reading your work, it is as simple as that.

3.) Psychology/ Consequences

We live in a society where violence is often glorified, and the consequences are brushed under a rug. Often, we need the consequences brushed under the rug because if we acknowledged what we ask others to do in our name, namely, to kill, it speaks more about us than it does them.

Soldiers are lionized, as are cops (sixty years of police shows have given us a very disjointed view of what police are actually like, a truth many are just waking up to now with recent events in the US). We create mythologies surrounding these individuals, stories of bravery and courage. And there is that. But there is cruelty, and the basest of human emotions and actions as well. If we do nothing but acknowledge the latter, we do a disservice to the former.

Now, as I mentioned before in the last section, know your audience. Realism vs. fantasy. Where exactly are you taking your story? But I think in order to properly deal with actions scenes, to convey the negatives surrounding violence, we need to look at some of the psychology and some of the consequences of it.

Lt. Dave Grossman wrote a book called; On Killing: The Psychological cost of learning to kill in War and Society.

I will touch only briefly some of the points of his book.

- In both World Wars, 80-85% of soldiers fired their weapons into the air above their enemy's heads, rather than at them.

- Posturing is the same between animals as it is humans. The hope is that the target of the attack will retreat, and death will therefore be avoided.

- Killing is often misrepresented as being easier than it is. The consequences can be lifelong. The trauma of these actions can often be directly correlated to the victim and the type of weapon used. Pilots, dropping bombs from the sky, have significantly less instances of ongoing psychological trauma than those who are fighting and killing in direct contact with the enemy. Distance allows a negative picture of the enemy to be created. Derogatory remarks, based on race or religion, act as a bridge for soldiers to make the mental leap necessary to distance themselves from their actions. (As a side note, it is often why

those set to be executed were forced to wear hoods...to remove the humanity and save the executioner the trauma of watching a person die.)

- 2% of the population fit within the bounds of what one might consider “psychopaths.” Through childhood trauma, or neurological damage or deficiency, these individuals are unphased by the act of killing.

Beyond that book, we know of the consequences that arise from violence. Shellshock is a term first associated with WWI. As early as the first winter of the war there were indications of a high level of mental breakdown amongst hospitalized men and officers. By 1916, over 40% of casualties in fighting zones were victims of shell shock and by the end of the war over 80,000 cases had passed through British Army mental facilities.

This epidemic of traumatized soldiers was completely unexpected, and by 1915 there was a severe shortage of hospital beds for those ‘wounded in mind.’ Many county lunatic asylums, private mental institutions, and disused spas were repurposed as hospitals for mental diseases and war neurosis.

Rates of shellshock were 4X higher among officers than enlisted men. Their positions forced them to set an example, to keep a stiff upper lip, even when the pressures of sending other men to their deaths weighed heavily upon them.

Symptoms were as varied as the treatments. Mutism and speech disorders were the most common. Disciplinary treatment was common at the time, as doctors were pushing to ‘heal’ soldiers and get them back into the thick of it. Shaming, physical re-education and the infliction of pain were mainstays. (A soldier suffering from mutism might have electric shocks applied directly to their pharynx, or to the spine if the soldier had problem walking.) Another treatment consisted of finding out the likes and dislikes of patients and then ordering them to abstain from the former and apply themselves diligently to the latter. Patients with a fear of noise were given rooms looking out onto a main road. Men who were teachers or writers before the war were refused access to the library. Men who feared being alone were put into isolation. (That all feels very Clockwork Orange to me)

The words of a British general at the time, Brigadier-General Frank Maxwell, succinctly show how little thought was put into the mental consequences of war. “There can be no doubt that, other things being equal, the frequency of shellshock in any unit is an index of its lack of discipline and loyalty.”

The reality of violence is long-lasting trauma. It is not only soldiers that suffer from PTSD, but medics and first responders. People in the vicinity. Anyone seeing events on a magnitude that they are not conditioned for. Even for those with the training, there is no telling what will trigger long-lasting psychological problems.

In modern times, treatment options include talk therapy. However, Maj. Gary H. Wynn, a psychiatrist at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, reports that fewer than 50% of soldiers attend this therapy. Most drop-out entirely, resorting to self-medication with drugs or alcohol.

So, how does all this translate into the thesis of this session? Simply put, violence has consequences. Long term, lasting trauma that never goes away. Just as a recovering alcoholic fights their entire life to be sober, so too do those suffering from terrible incidents struggle for the rest of their lives.

I have spoken mainly of wartime acts of violence in this section, but as I mentioned briefly, these mental damages can be applied across a broad spectrum of characters and stories. The abuse or physical harming of one human by another has no borders.

So, when considering violence, in whatever form it takes, also consider the aftermath. **And if you do not feel capable of handling the broader implications with respect, then do not do it.** A long-standing trope, one that has never had any worth, is using rape as a motivating factor for female characters. Agency, but only at the cost of intense physical trauma. As if women are not motivated by other factors, such as greed, anger, or power. Often time, afterwards, when the author is done with dealing with the trauma, they hand wave it away. In the grossest instances of this, all their trauma is healed by the power of love. Its infinitely more complicated than that, and so is PTSD. (which, obviously, you can get from rape.) Simply put, that grizzled soldier that drinks all the time...if he drinks to medicate, his journey out of that place is going to be a long one. And it might not be a journey that you as an author want to take them on. It is better to not delve too deeply, than to dig in for so short a time as not to do the matter justice. A friend of mine came back from serving in Bosnia, and let me tell you, PTSD is an affliction that just rolls on and on.

4.) Rhythm

When I was first considering doing this skills session, I thought it might be the easiest section. But in thinking on it more fully, I realize it is the hardest to expand upon, even though it is the entire reason why I thought of doing this.

I have read a great deal of bad action scenes. Strip away all the other factors. Realism and psychology and consequence and character, and the simple movement of a fight scene remains. For that, you need rhythm.

Every time you write a fight scene, or incorporate any type of violence, the first thing you have to consider is tempo. Just as in music, fighting has a beat. (At least in novels and movies...in real life, it is far different) Just as the tempo of the entire novel moves towards a climax, so too does your fight scene. There is a beginning, middle, and end. And if you do not nail those beats, it might still work out, but instead of an orchestra, you might end up with a guy busking in a train station. Still lovely, but maybe not what you were going for.

Primarily, this is achieved through the following:

Clarity

Pacing

Distance of View

Clarity

To make it a bit easier, imagine any action scene from a movie. Imagine how the camera moves, and what it reveals within that space. In Jason Bourne, the camera was shaky, hiding key aspects of the fight as it happened. This is not a good way to do it. The viewer becomes lost, images become a muddle, and the weight of the moment, the consequence of everything that happens, is reduced. People need to see in order to know.

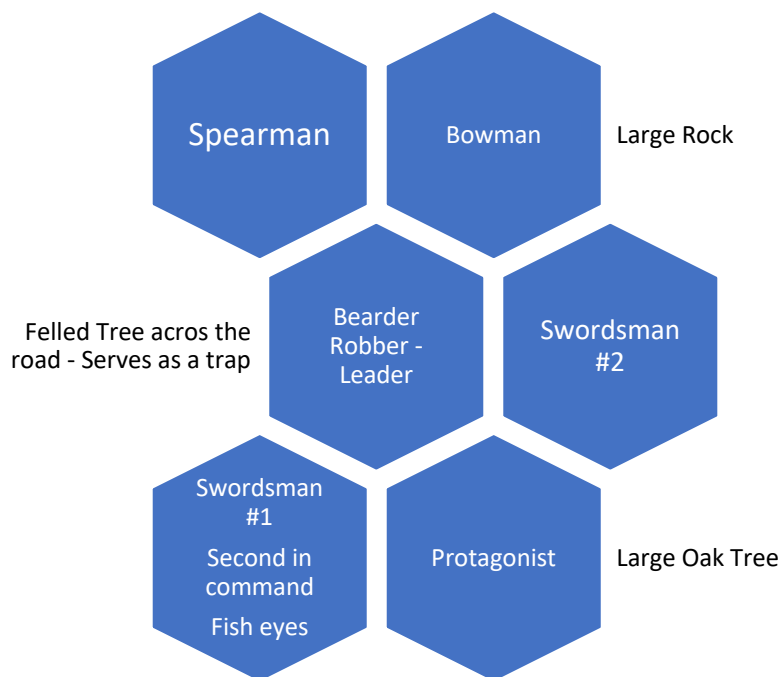
This is no different when writing a fight scene. Just as having tertiary characters that matter add gravity and weight to the events as they unfold, so does understanding what happens helps to ensure that your reader is fully engaged.

A technique I use is to actually choreograph the movement. The protagonist faces off against five robbers trying to steal his hard-earned gold. They come at him on the side of the road. Now, for the sake of clarity, it helps to differentiate the enemy in the reader's head (As well as the writer's head, obviously). What you are writing is meant to be somewhat chaotic, and there will of course be instances where it does not work to make individual enemies. But as with the shaky cam in Jason Bourne, the more we see the more we know and the more we know the more we care.

Weapons and facial characteristics are often the best ways to help ensure the reader better understands the players involved. Two of those robbers, then, will have swords. One will have an axe. Another has a spear, and the last is in the back with a bow. The leader has a beard, but his second in command, a short man that bounces from foot to foot as if filled with too much love for killing, has cold dead eyes like a fish.

From there, establish the environment. The highway robbers have attacked the protagonist on the side of the road. Is it in a forest? Desert? Grassland? The physical environment becomes yet another character in the scene, and you can convey the protagonist's wits or skill by incorporating that environment into the action. This helps not only to give the reader a better idea of what kind of person the character is, but it helps to make the fight scene unique. There are a thousand fight scenes in a thousand books. What differentiates yours? Environment can go a long way towards doing that. Rocks and streams, physical limitations, can also help to ensure your character is believably able to survive being outnumbered...which to be honest, they almost always are.

What I find helps a great deal is drawing a map of the fight scene:



In an instant, you as the writer can size up the situation as the protagonist might, and act accordingly. It also allows you to plot for different things within the scene. If the character has a sword and a shield, then

they can block with the shield against such and such an enemy while engaging with another. Or they can charge madly through the group of robbers, scattering them, in an attempt to make sure they kill the Bowman first before turning to deal with the others.

Whatever you do, pace the scene out in your mind, and physically if you can, so that the movements you are describing make sense to you and to the reader.

Pacing

In the army, when your rifle jams, there is something called IA. Immediate Action. Basically, it is a few simple steps that you learn by heart to clear a jammed weapon and might mean clearing the breach or removing the clip. It is meant to be a response so ingrained that the soldier does not think about it.

For our purposes, Immediate Action works very well. It is a combination of factors that will lead to a better fight scene.

Functionally, this can be as simple as using fewer commas. Or more, depending on the frenetic pace of events as they unfold. Shorter sentences, perhaps. The gravity of a situation can really be emphasized when the overall feeling and tone of the structural element's changes. A paragraph can be lengthened to an uncomfortable or longer than average length, to show the mad and frantic charge of a cavalry unit, even as the length of the sentence is reduced.

Here is an example from a genuinely great writer of action scenes, Bernard Cornwell:

"We held our shields over our heads as we splashed through the ditch. Then we climbed, but the wet bank was so slippery that we constantly fell back, and the Danish spears kept coming, and someone pushed me from behind and I was crawling up the bank on my knees, the shield over my head, and Pyrlig's shield was covering my spine and I heard a thumping above me and thought it was thunder. Except the shield kept banging against my helmet and I knew a Dane was hacking at me, trying to break through the limewood to drive his axe or sword into my spine, and I crawled, lifted the shield's lower edge and I saw boots. I lunged with Serpent-Breath, tried to stand, felt a blow on my leg and fell again. Steapa was roaring beside me. There was mud in my mouth, and the rain hammered at us and I could hear the crash of blades sinking in shields and I knew we had failed, but I tried to stand again and lunged with Serpent-Breath and on my left Leofric gave a shrill cry and I saw blood streaming into the grass. The blood was instantly washed away by the rain, and another peal of thunder crashed overhead as I slithered back to the ditch." – **Bernard Cornwell; the Pale Horseman.**

Pacing is a critical element of any fight scene. Essentially, it is your characters' experiences and skills meshed. A lot of authors have the tendency to show their character reacting and thinking too much. Choreographed movements feel fake because they are fake.

The Immediate Action of most people is a thoughtless process. If they are untrained, then they will act, or more likely, react, in that fashion. For those that are trained, that have drilled and been yelled at and have experienced violence and the speed with which it progresses, it mostly remains a thoughtless process still. Thinking tends to slow your characters' responses, it certainly slows the pacing of the fight scene, and mostly likely it will get them killed. Stay true to the pacing and keep it quick and succinct.

Distance of View

This, simply put, is how immediate the violence is to the character, and by extension, the reader. Here are two examples from Steven Pressfield's, *Gates of Fire*. (This book, incidentally, is a masterclass in storytelling for not only the ideology and politics of the military mind, but the military action itself.)

“Now, seven hours into the slaughter, all such observance of piety had fled. Men stared with hollow eyes upon the riven plain. Across this farmer's field of death lay sown such a crop of corpses and shields, hacked-up armour and shattered weapons, that the mind could not assimilate its scale nor the senses give it compass. The wounded, in numbers uncountable, groaned and cried out, writhing amid piles of limbs and severed body parts so intertwined one could not distinguish individual men, but the whole seemed a Gorgon-like beast of ten thousand limbs, some ghastly monster spawned by the cloven earth and now draining itself, fluid by fluid, back into the chthonic cleft which had given it birth. Along the face of the mountain the stone glistened scarlet to the height of a man's knee.”

“The enemy stood, invincible in the might of their missile fire, but somehow the Spartans reached them. They fought without shields, with only swords and then bare hands and teeth. Polynikes went after an officer. The runner still had his legs. So swiftly did he cross the space at the base of the hillock that his hands found his foe's throat even as a storm of Persian steel tore his back apart.”

Steven Pressfield, Gates of Fire

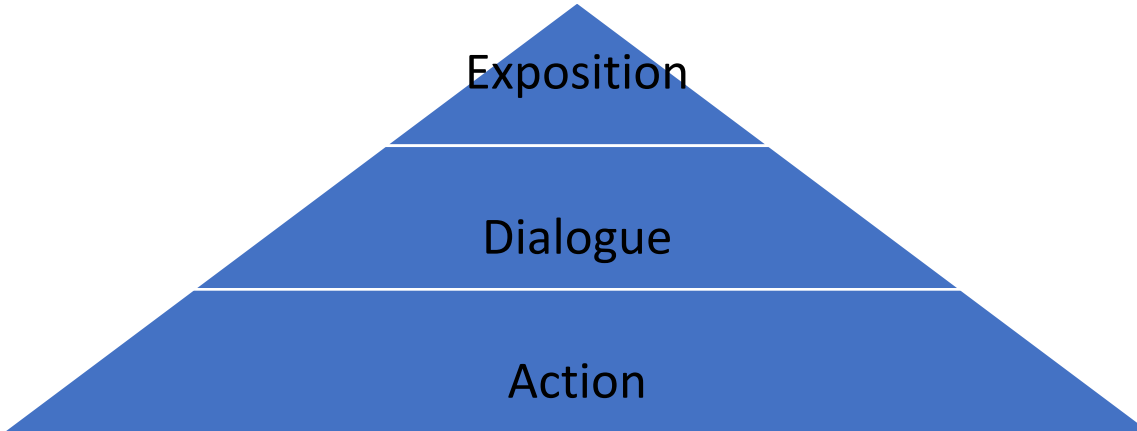
In both examples, you can see an effective way to engage the reader. The first looks at the broader horrors of the ensuing violence. This gives context to the entire situation and coming as it does not near the end of the battle, but somewhere in the middle, lets the reader know that the struggle going forward is going to be even more intense. The stakes for our heroes are going to get even worse. (Spoiler: The Spartans all die.)

The second is a very immediate fight. There is still some distance involved, of course. Unlike the example given of Bernard Cornwell, this section of violence is being watched by a participant. Yet for all of that, you can tell the character is right there. He is feet away from the madness, is covered in wounds and bleeding himself. One of my favorite lines of all time is from that passage: “The runner still had his legs.” That character, Polynikes, was an insufferable prick for a great deal of the book. An arrogant warrior famed for his prowess, and his cruelty. But by the end, I was rooting for him. He was famous for running, even at the end.

That is what helps to make great action. You care.

Rhythm

To help with the **Rhythm** of a fight scene, I like to think of it happening in this order.



As I mentioned previously, just as you have a beginning, middle, and end to your story, these elements are shared in fight scenes. They are the tempo from which everything moves forward.

Exposition

Simply put, this is little more than the scene set up. Usually it is a description of the surrounding environment. Sometimes it can be a set-up for why the character is at that particular place at that particular time. Motivating factors are often included in this. Your character is down at the docks at midnight, why?

Dialogue

Discussions between the characters can be interspersed readily with expository elements, and often are. Anything that needs to be said prior to the action, that might feel too clunky in a non-dialogue manner, needs to be said at this point.

Action

This is the largest and most important part of a fight scene. It needs to come at the end. There are exemptions to this, of course. A chapter might well start with violence, or a fight. But often as not it grows and grows during the chapter until it explodes, creating both a riveting bit of writing as well as a hook for the next chapter.

The action sequence should come at the end. It is the culmination of events in this particular moment. And it is not a place to describe the clothing of your character, or how they invented an acid gun that runs on the fear of Unicorns. All of that needs to be discussed prior to the action. This is the moment when steel meets steel, when the lines of men clash, or the moment when George McFly punches out Biff Tanner.

These three points, and more broadly all of the points I have spoken of, but specifically **Clarity**, **Pacing**, and **Distance of View** help to keep fight scenes fluid and dynamic for both the reader and the writer. Whatever you do, however, keep your style consistent.

5.) Tension (Or the Donut Factor)

Going all the way back to the discussion of the movie *Aliens*, there is a scene that has always struck me. The camera is panning through the terraforming colony of Hadleys' Hope. There are numerous clues and hints for the viewer to showcase how badly things have gone for the colonists. Weapon scored steel, welded areas to serve as last stands. The fact that everyone is missing.

But for me, it all comes down to a donut. In one scene, the camera pans across a desk for just a moment, and you see a half-eaten donut sitting there. Questions grow and grow from that single donut, and we must consider it further. Think about it this way. This colony is however many light years from earth. As the distance to earth increases, the cost of fuel does as well, likely exponentially. With fuel costs, and restrictions, come weight loads and restrictions. The world of LV-426, upon which the terraforming colony is based, is little more than jagged rocks and terrible weather. Food is limited. Likely everyone is forced to eat meals that have all the fun of wet porridge poured through old gym socks.

Then we see the donut. How much money did it cost to take that donut across intergalactic space? Was it flour, and then baked on site? Or was it frozen? Each carries its own associated costs. The donut probably costs ten million dollars. Each colonist might only get one donut a year.

And someone left it half-eaten. If there was ever a greater indication that shit hit the fan, I cannot bring it to mind as readily as that damned donut. This, however subconscious the little details like this might be, helps to build tension.

Tension is, in its own way, the glue that holds fight scenes together. Will the character win? Will they survive? Will other characters – namely our beloved tertiary and secondary characters – survive as well? Tension is what helps to build the idea of consequence, it roots us into committing ourselves to what we are reading, to invest in what is going on to ensure that these characters, these people, that we like, survive. If there is no tension, if the reader does not actually believe the character is in danger or that the problem will not be solved, you have lost any investment they might have had in your project. From there it all falls apart.

And tension starts well in advance of the action. It is the donut. It is the shadowed doorway. In the movie *John Wick*, the crime boss calls someone asking why they hit his son. That man replied, and I'm paraphrasing here, "Because he killed John Wick's dog and stole his car."

To which the crime boss replied, "Oh."

Tension, and by extension a free hand at world-building, spring up from that single word in that scene. Oh. As if everything is encompassed and understood. That even if the viewer has no idea what is going on, all the threads that bind everything else I have mentioned together, are on full display. They do not know it yet, but trouble is coming. The action to follow is still brutal, but that tension builds from that moment.

A crucial element of any story, for anything within any story honestly, is tension. And it is the same for writing violence. Fight scenes only matter to the reader if they matter to the characters involved.

Conclusion

Too many fight scenes are thrown into book as an after thought. Well, I need to include this, or my readers will not be happy. But you should consider the wider implications, and spend the time required to make it effective. It must have rhythm, and it has to matter.

And it need not always be grandiose. One of the things I did not touch upon is the stakes. Too often people think that the larger the stakes the better the story. But the stakes only need to matter to the characters. The end of the world is sad and all, but John Wick didn't kill 77 people in the first movie over the end of the world. He killed them because of a dead dog, and what it represented.

As writers, we need to consider the wider implications of violence as we write about it, even if we never touch upon it in the story we are working on. Sometimes it is simply not called for. But for every faceless mook or Red Shirt, there is a family waiting for them at home. When this is realized, then at least we can work to properly convey what we are doing in a way that readers will respond to.