

WRITING HARD THEMES IN THRILLER FICTION

Conference Handout

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ABOUT THIS WORKSHOP

Thrillers often explore difficult realities such as terrorism, war, corruption, persecution, violence, and moral conflict. These subjects can create powerful stories, but they also present unique challenges for Christian writers.

How do we portray evil truthfully without glorifying it?

How do we address suffering without exploiting it?

How do we write realistic villains while maintaining a Christian worldview?

How do we offer hope without sounding preachy?

This handout provides practical tools, questions, and resources to help you navigate those challenges.

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING HARD THEMES

1. DON'T LOOK AWAY FROM DARKNESS

The Bible does not avoid difficult subjects.

Scripture contains stories of war, betrayal, corruption, persecution, murder, and injustice.

Christian writers should not sanitize reality.

Instead, we should interpret reality through a biblical worldview.

Ask:

Am I avoiding this topic because it is inappropriate, or simply because it is uncomfortable?

3. PORTRAY EVIL—DON'T GLORIFY IT

Portraying Evil:

- Shows consequences
- Reveals truth
- Advances the story
- Creates empathy for victims

Glorifying Evil:

- Makes violence entertaining
- Uses suffering for shock value
- Makes evil appear attractive
- Ignores consequences

Before writing a difficult scene, ask:

Why is this scene necessary?

What purpose does it serve?

Would the story lose anything important if it were removed?

4. CREATE BELIEVABLE VILLAINS

The most memorable villains rarely think they are villains.

Instead, they often believe:

- They are serving a cause.
- They are pursuing justice.
- They are protecting themselves.
- They are doing what is necessary.

Understanding a villain's motivation does not excuse evil.

It makes the character believable.

Villain Development Questions:

What does my antagonist want?

Why do they believe they deserve it?

What lie are they telling themselves?

What fear drives their actions?

5. RESEARCH WITH RESPECT

Many thrillers are inspired by real events.

Before writing about terrorism, persecution, war, or political conflict:

- Read books.
- Study news reports.
- Listen to survivor accounts.
- Learn historical context.
- Avoid stereotypes.

Remember:

You are borrowing from someone's pain.

Handle it responsibly.

Ask:

Would someone directly affected by this event feel respected by my portrayal?

6. ALWAYS LEAVE ROOM FOR HOPE

Hope is not the same thing as a happy ending.

Sometimes justice is delayed.

Sometimes wounds remain.

Sometimes loss cannot be reversed.

Christian hope exists because God remains present even when circumstances remain difficult.

Readers should leave the story believing that darkness does not have the final word.

LESSONS FROM READING THRILLER FICTION

One of the writers who most influenced my growth as a thriller author was Joel C. Rosenberg.

His novels helped me understand that thrillers can address terrorism, international conflict, political instability, and religious extremism without glorifying them.

What I learned from studying his work:

- Global conflicts become meaningful when viewed through individual lives.
- Villains should have motivations, not just evil intentions.
- Research creates credibility.
- Suspense is more powerful than graphic violence.
- Faith is often strongest when demonstrated through action rather than sermons.

As writers, we should read thrillers not only for entertainment but also as students of the craft.

LESSONS FROM MY OWN WRITING JOURNEY

Many of my stories are inspired by realities that people in Nigeria and around the world have experienced.

While writing *Jungle Justice* and *The Silent Protest*, I found myself constantly asking:

How do I tell the truth about suffering without making suffering the attraction?

How do I portray violence honestly without celebrating it?

How do I write about darkness while still pointing readers toward hope?

One lesson I learned is this:

The darkness may create the conflict, but the human response to that darkness creates the story.

Readers remember courage.

Readers remember sacrifice.

Readers remember resilience.

Readers remember hope.

Those are the elements that should stay with them long after they finish the final chapter.

RECOMMENDED READING

Political and Military Thrillers

Joel C. Rosenberg

- The Last Jihad
- The Last Days
- The Ezekiel Option
- The Kremlin Conspiracy
- The Persian Gamble

DiAnn Mills

- Airborne
- Deadly Encounter
- Fatal Strike

Lynette Eason

- Life Flight
- Crossfire
- Active Defense

When reading these books, ask:

How does the author portray evil without glorifying it?

How are the consequences of violence shown?

What motivates the antagonist?

Where does hope appear in the story?

How does the author's worldview shape the narrative?

THE THRILLER WRITER'S CHECKLIST

Before writing a difficult theme, ask:

- ☐ Have I researched this topic adequately?
 - ☐ Am I portraying evil or glorifying it?
 - ☐ Have I shown realistic consequences?
 - ☐ Are my villains believable?
 - ☐ Am I treating real-world suffering respectfully?
 - ☐ Does my story contain hope?
 - ☐ Does my worldview emerge naturally through the story?
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FINAL THOUGHT

The goal of Christian thriller fiction is not to protect readers from darkness.

The goal is to help readers see truth, courage, redemption, and hope in the midst of darkness.

We write about difficult realities because they exist.

We write about hope because it exists too.

And sometimes, a well-told story can help readers see both.

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