

THE FIFTH ELEMENT: The “Other Stuff” of Fiction

By Mike Klaassen

Not so long ago, the most enlightened of mankind considered the basic elements of the universe to be earth, water, wind, and fire. Over the last several hundred years, no doubt through lively debate, the scientists of the world have pretty much agreed on a standard periodic table of the elements.

Fiction-writing certainly isn't an exact science, so maybe it isn't too surprising that the most respected writing instructors of our day don't agree as to the basic elements of fiction.

When I flip through the how-to books on my shelf, I see that almost all of the authors include **character**, **plot**, and **setting** as basic elements. And most authors who address **theme**, also include it as one of the basics. Quite a few of the books stop there, but then they proceed to describe a mixed bag of “other stuff” such as craft, dialogue, voice, point of view, or whatever else they personally consider the keys to successful fiction.

In the Bruce Willis movie *The Fifth Element*, earth, water, air, and fire must be joined by an elusive fifth element to save the world from destruction. I believe there should be a fifth element of fiction to include all the “other stuff.” What should it be called? Raymond Obstfeld has the right idea in *Fiction First Aid*. His first five chapters are titled Plot, Characterization, Setting, Theme, and *Style*.

Style includes the multitude of choices fiction writers make, consciously or not. They encompass the big-picture, strategic issues such as point of view and narrator, but they also include the nitty-gritty, tactical choices of grammar, punctuation, word usage, sentence and paragraph length and structure, tone, the use of imagery, chapter selection, titles, and on and on. In the process of creating a story, these choices meld to become the writer's voice, his or her own unique style.

In the Five Elements of Fiction:

- Character is the *Who*,
- Plot is the *What*,
- Setting is the *Where* and *When*,
- Theme is the *Why*, and
- Style is the *How*.

My favorite writing quote is by Ernest Hemingway: “We are all apprentices in a craft where no one becomes a master.” Fiction-writing has come a long way since the days of Hemingway, and the craft of story-writing continues to evolve. To keep building on the progress made by our predecessors, we need to recognize the basic elements of a

story for what they are. Once we understand the basics, we can delve meaningfully into the more subtle aspects of the craft.

Five fundamental elements comprise all written fiction: plot, character, setting, theme, and style.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

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