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Elements of Tension

"Tension in novels, stories, and even memoirs is like the connective tissue that allows muscles to attach to bones, and thus flex their might. It's the heart of conflict, the backbone of uncertainty, the hallmark of danger. It keeps readers guessing, and characters on their toes. When it's working, stories leave readers breathless and wanting more. When it's missing, scenes feel inconsequential, the plot drags, characters meander." From my book, *How to Write a Page Turner.*

Tension must exist:

- In the inner life of your character
- Between characters as they interact
- In the way plot events play out
- How your characters react to/are tested by them;
- How you balance scene elements
- In every sentence

Here are four key elements of creating tension:

DANGER: Danger is a primal experience we're all hard wired for. You can elicit it when characters are in some form of peril. Two main kinds:

- Physical danger: Threat of harm or death
- Emotional/psychological danger: Threat of loss of emotional well-being, love or connection, standing or reputation, etc.

CONFLICT: The art of forces opposing your protagonist & allies. Conflict can exist between:

- Protagonist and self
- Protagonist and other characters (antagonists and allies both)
- Protagonist and Society (aka family, religion, time period, social groups, etc)
- Protagonist and Nature
- Protagonist and Technology
- Protagonist and the Supernatural

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UNCERTAINTY. Use this crucial form of tension and suspense as follows:

- Create anxiety when the protagonist doesn't know what will happen next, in the moment, the scene, or the larger plot.
- Use the act of waiting for something (news, reunion, recovery, consummation) to create uncertainty.
- Implausibility: When a character behaves strangely or events seem unlikely, surreal, it creates uncertainty.
- The reader should not be able to predict what will happen next in the plot.
- Antagonists create uncertainty by laying down obstacles and danger for the protagonist.
- Loss, defeat and grief within your protagonist can catalyze plot uncertainty.

WITHHOLDING: Withholding is not giving someone something they want, or not in the time they want it. It creates complex feelings within characters.

You can withhold:

- Approval/respect/esteem
- Material objects
- Romantic union
- Information, etc.

TENSION KILLERS: Tension is often about what you leave out as much as what you leave in.

You can cut:

- "Stage directions"—Actions that are not character or plot significant.
- Mundane dialogue/pleasantries that don't drive plot or character
- Info dump style of plot-revelations (in dialogue or narrative summary), villains monologuing, etc.
- Characters doing quotidian things to create a simulation of reality.
- "House beautiful" descriptions of settings.