

Where Stories Come From

The Opus Series

Author Notes/Discussion

INTRODUCTION

For the three main characters in The Opus Series music plays an essential role in their lives. One is a musician/composer, one a singer and the third, as an author, uses music to inspire his writing. When I started writing the first book I had no idea music would be a theme along with other past life experiences. Only setting the story in NYC was a conscious decision. The rest just bubbled up as I wrote. It seemed the material for the series was simply waiting for a spark.

INSPIRATION FOR: **The Girl in the Yellow Scarf – Book One**

While following a disheveled couple shuffling into an up-scale mall, I witnessed a smartly dressed shopkeeper sincerely greet them with a smile. In that moment, having not seen their faces, it struck me I was judging the couple without knowing anything about them. Upon getting home, I told my wife I was moved by the exchange and wanted to write a story about who the couple might be. Giving into that inspiration a story unfolded that led me on a journey of personal discovery over the next six years – turning into The Opus Series through multiple professional critiques, edits, classes, and research.

DREW ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (unintentional)

- 1- Family members: Parents (mother's faith, father passing), Brother (Viet Nam), Wife (singer/actor), Uncle (drowned).
- 2- Places/Events: Time in NYC (14 yearly trips). Story locations, apartment fire (friend), Broadway Theatres, Goodwill stores, Placerville, CA. shelter, soup kitchen, ocean scenes, 1980's: national and NYC events, weather, Gramercy Park Hotel piano bar, NYC Central Park and Madison Square Park, artist friend's flat with grand piano near Washington Square Park, street vendors.
- 3- Music: Play piano and guitar, church choir, and high school band competitions, compose music (band played for department party), listen to music (during writing first draft but not during editing).
- 4- Creative Process: Follow inspiration to see where it leads, enjoy the process. Researched and wrote from personal experience (40+ years in creative careers: designer, sculptor, inventor, patents/awards, creativity educator/author: Funthink and Arthink books).
- 5- Story themes: Recognize and develop your gift to be fulfilled. Also: family, faith, and love.
- 6- Personal experiences: Married, 4 children (2 adopted), 2 granddaughters, 4 older siblings, importance of music, inventor, try many new things (waiter, house and bridge construction, hitch-hike, boxcar and bike cross-country trip, build boats/sail Great Lakes and East Coast, lived in Michigan, Minnesota, California, ties to Kentucky, familiar with alcohol abuse, importance of faith (personally and in family).

ELEMENTS USED IN STORY DEVELOPMENT

- 1- **Story hook**: Appears in the first few pages and introduces the reader to the story with a question that begs an answer. (How did Mike reach success and whom does he need to be with in the opening scene?)
- 2- **Color**: Used to symbolize an emotional state, event or character. What color often comes up and what might it represent? (Yellow: representing hope and optimism)
- 3- **Character arc**: The transformation or inner journey of a character over the course of the story. What are the character arcs of Mike, Sarah and Jesse? (All three find the path to using their gifts)
- 4- **Setting**: Is the location and time in which the story takes place. But can also include historical period, weather, immediate surroundings and social statuses. How are these elements shown and what effect do they have? (NYC energy, positive and negative gritty 1980's, conflicts and situations living in the city that challenge and test each character).

5- **Motif:** A story element (object) that has symbolic significance. What motifs appear and what could they represent? Yellow Scarf (Sarah's optimism), Spoon Cross (trust/faith), Mike's Piano (scarred but still plays beautifully), irises blooming in a weedy garden (struggle/redemption).

6- **Protagonist:** Hero, main character. Mike owes much to other characters in the story who at times are either allies or irritants. What are some ways he was helped by the supporting cast? Al (father figure from soup kitchen), Sarah (helped him realize his dream and face his guilt), Rudy and Rose (held Mike accountable), Jesse (friend through tough times), Grandma Mae (expresses faith through Sarah).

7- **Antagonist:** Often is a person or negative force that opposes the main character. What are some antagonistic forces that affect the characters? Unrealistic expectations (Mike and Jesse involved in family businesses), Sarah (poor health), racial prejudice, crime, alcohol abuse and depression.

8- **Backstory:** Is what happens before the book opens. What are some backstory elements of the three main characters and how does it affect them. Mike (prominent family from Harlem, graduated from Cornell in business), Sarah (close knit family from Kentucky, now homeless), Jesse (from Minnesota, expected to marry college sweetheart).

9- **Theme:** The theme of a story is its underlying message(s) that comes out in the central conflict of the characters. What might be a common theme for each of the main characters? Creativity: Mike's music gift (not honest at first about needing to pursue it), Jesse's writing talent (conflicting goals of fiancée's family), Sarah's voice (unique creative expression). Caring for others.

10- **Dialogue:** Dialogue reveals character. How does the interaction between the main characters show their personalities and beliefs? Mike (outwardly confident/inwardly troubled), Sarah (shy but tenacious, what you see is what you get), Jesse (wishy-washy at times but a loyal friend).

11- **Race:** Is race an integral part of the story? Why or why not? Up to the reader.

12- **Plot:** The sequence of events that draws the reader into the character's lives and helps to understand the choices the characters make. What elements (interests/passions) are woven into the plot and run throughout the story? Love of music: be it composing, practicing, performing or listening.

13- **Subplot:** What are the secondary plots that run parallel and support the main plot? Mike: relationships with women, family, friends and people in the community; Sarah: Her need to be independent and develop her art; Jesse: Standing up for his passion as a writer and interest in Sarah.

14- **Faith:** How does faith affect the worldview of the main characters? Mike: raised Baptist but struggles fitting it into his life style; Sarah: maintains faith while dealing with family tragedy and health issues; Jesse: undetermined.

15- **Conflict and Inner Demons:** What issues do the main characters face that hinders them reaching their goals? Mike: Pride, guilt, estranged from family, hurt by lost love; Sarah: Loss of significant family members, prideful (refuse help: financial/health); Jesse: Struggles to follow his dream as a writer.

16- **Stakes:** What is at stake for the main characters? Mike: His passion as a musician/composer; Sarah: her life; Jesse: Giving up on his dream as a writer.

17- **Redemption:** How do the main characters find redemption? Up to the reader.

18- **Resolution:** Does the story reach a convincing/satisfying conclusion? What might be an alternate conclusion? Up to the reader.

Why?

When first asked why I chose to write the Opus books, the simple answer was: I don't know. I didn't plan on it. It wasn't on my bucket list. It just kind of happened. **But why?** After some "painful" reflection and asking others why they create, here are some possible reasons. It seems we are all endowed with a puzzle-solving gene that draws us to take on challenges/puzzles that can yield a sense of fulfillment/satisfaction. There is a sense of control when we are working on a challenge. Also it serves as a means of escape or a respite from routine, trials, or...fill in the blank. The ways of being creative problem solvers are limitless: Maintaining healthy relationships, parenting, cooking, house painting (my fathers favorite), gardening, sewing, fishing, sailing, writing, and I think even golf: (how am I going to get around that huge oak tree?). At the core it's like an itch we need to scratch. And if we aren't discouraged by fear of failure everyone can benefit from using their innate God given *creative* gift(s). So why write the Opus Series? To me it always felt like a gift. Something to puzzle over, and see where it all leads.

QUESTION & ANSWER TIME