

WHAT'S IN A TITLE?

Early one morning while making breakfast for my children and listening to the radio with only part of my attention, I overheard a reference to a now-defunct corporation called Genetics Savings and Clone. The subject of cloning could, of course, provide material for future editorials, but what struck me about the sound bite was how unappealing I found the name of the company. It reminded me of some of the titles I've seen attached to story submissions that haven't worked for me and that got me thinking about the value of the title of a story.

The title is usually our first introduction to a story. It is highly unlikely that a title will be a deal breaker—I don't think I've ever rejected a story because of its title—but there are titles that have intrigued me and enticed me into a tale. Lawrence Watt-Evan's classic "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers" is one of my favorite examples of this sort. Often the most memorable titles don't achieve their full resonance until after I've read the stories they come attached to: Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon," Connie Willis's "A Letter from the Clearys," James Patrick Kelly's "Plus or Minus," Alice Sola Kim's "The Other Graces."

Authors use many different criteria for settling on a tale's title. A few sources of inspiration include a character from the story, Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild"; an action that occurs in the tale, Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall"; a place, Arthur Clarke's "The Star"; or a snippet of poetry, Robert Silverberg's "Sailing to Byzantium." Many titles combine two or more of these elements. Jim Kelly offers the following advice about titles to writers: "Often as not, the title you want is somewhere in your piece, whether it's fiction or non-fiction. It doesn't necessarily have to be your cleverest turn of phrase, but it

should point toward the heart of what you have to say."

While pointing to the heart of the story it is equally important that the title not give away too much about the tale. This is not a problem that I tend to run into in stories by professional writers, but it can crop up in tales by beginners. It's generally not a good idea to telegraph too strongly that the main character is going to meet a bad end or that the story was inspired by a science fiction cliché. Of course, the most adroit hands can make mincemeat of this advice. A couple of years ago, the title of a lovely story by Mike Resnick had completely slipped out of my brain the minute I'd started on the first paragraph. About two thirds of the way into the story, I suddenly realized that there could only be one possible title for the tale. A quick check back to the first page informed me that yes, it was indeed called "The Bride of Frankenstein"—a bit of a sleight of hand and an ever so witty name for a story that ended up on the Hugo ballot.

I find the moment when a great title suddenly makes sense to be an intellectually pleasing one. It's a little bit like figuring out the theme in a crossword puzzle. One of my all-time favorite titles is Daryl Gregory's "Second Person, Present Tense." I'd always wondered about which point in the creative process of constructing the tale did that title occur. I recently put the question to Daryl and I wasn't surprised by the answer:

Most titles I have to struggle to find, but this one—appropriately enough—was a gift from the unconscious. I was looking for a story idea, reading articles and books about theories of consciousness, when I realized I could write about the second

personality to inhabit a body. The title immediately popped into my brain. (From where? Some other part of Daryl. Or an alternate Daryl. My Darallel.) So, the title was there before I wrote a sentence, and survived intact until I sent it off. The section of the story actually written in second person present tense was included because the title demanded it.

Sometimes an author really has to struggle to come up with a title. Rather than thinking of it before they ever sit down at the computer to write the story or happening upon it somewhere in the middle, they have to sit back when the story is done and figure out what turn of phrase will best represent exactly what they wanted to say. On rare occasions, an author will request permission to change the title even after they've sold the story to the magazine. I've asked a few authors to change titles that didn't work for me, but I'm not like some of the old-time editors who seemed to enjoy slapping their own titles onto the works that they published. It's not always easy to come up with titles for my own editorials and I find it even harder to come up with a new title for someone else's work.

I don't always unlock all the secrets of the best titles until long after I've read the stories. Sometimes I'll come upon a line in a poem or a play and discover that the title of a story I read years earlier has a meaning on another meta level. It's the realization that our shared culture holds clues to the direction the story will take. We don't really want to have that direction spelled out before we read the tale. Indeed, much of the joy of reading is figuring out those connections ourselves. Just like a good mystery novelist, an SF writer may misdirect us, but we get a triumphant feeling the moment when we suddenly realize that the key to the heart of the story—whether it came from literature, wordplay (as long as it's not an awful pun), or Strunk & White—was right there on the first page.

Month 2011

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52