

Making the Most of Symbols by Lori Weber

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One of my greatest pleasures as a writer is uncovering the symbols that emerge in the writing process. Symbolism is often the least exploited element of fiction and yet it enriches a book, giving it an inner life that enhances the reading experience. While I enjoy books that don't have subtext, I crave books that do.

Symbolism cannot be planned. It's not like plot, or even character, which can be thought up ahead of time. Symbols creep into a story willy-nilly; they are a soft presence at first, nestling in the corner of a page, eventually knocking ever so gently on the door of the story and asking to be let in. If we're lucky, they spin a web under the surface of the story, making it stronger.

In my first book, little creatures kept demanding a presence; this culminated in a key character working in a bird shelter, setting up cages. He did so with zing, making sofas out of straw and hanging up bird pictures. This, I later realized, paralleled the theme of homecoming which was central to the story. In another book, staircases abounded, running up and down various places: churches, box-cars, cellars. The more I wrote, the more stairs appeared. The symbolism of the stairs became inseparable from the plot, where a girl searches for her mother and goes up and down emotionally in the process. In other books there were painted Easter eggs as symbols of beauty; fossils as symbols of a deep connection to place; music as a symbol of inner peace; tattoos as symbols of expression; and keys as a symbol of connection to dead fathers.

As writers, we have to be aware of the symbols that emerge in our stories. We have to recognize the patterns that begin to take shape under the surface of the text as those symbols interconnect. Then we can consciously exploit them and weave them into scenes in meaningful ways. Young readers then have the pleasure of uncovering the symbols and processing their importance in our characters' lives. This, in turn, makes them stronger readers. It also makes them deeper thinkers, better able to decode the subtleties of the world around them. Although we don't write to teach, as a teacher I appreciate a book that gives kids this full aesthetic and intellectual experience.

In my Creative Writing class, I teach students to become aware of symbolism. I tell them to watch for it in the weather, in the setting of characters' rooms, the clothes they wear, or the objects they hold. I do an exercise where students choose 3 objects that their main characters possess; they describe each and write a short passage explaining why the object is meaningful. They then weave one of the objects into the first chapter of their books, making their protagonists interact with it in some way. The hope is that the object will grow in importance as their novels progress.

In another exercise, they revisit their settings and add in detail that could be symbolic of characters' inner lives: eg. dark heavy curtains for someone with a secret unrevealed. Although it might seem formulaic or even simplistic, the exercise helps increase students' awareness that every detail they use has meaning and is, therefore, symbolic. They learn to slow down and give these symbols space to grow. They also learn that symbols can *show* what the narrator then doesn't need to *tell*. The end result is always a richer text.

Lori Weber is the author of seven young adult novels, including *Picture Me* (James Lorimer 2013) and *Yellow Mini* (Fitzhenry and Whiteside 2011). Her first picture book, *My Granny Loves Hockey* (Simply Read Books), came out in spring 2014. She teaches English in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec.