

Award Winning Author

GINGER HANSON

The Ripple Effect in Storytelling

by
Ginger Hanson

I recently watched a TV show that featured a scene with the main character and a dog. It was a very cute scene, but even though the story remained in that setting, the dog never appeared again. Basically, they brought the dog on stage, had him do his part, and then forgot about him. Well, they had him go into a kennel with no door. As if that was going to keep him there while people traipsed around his home.

Where Did the Dog Go?

As a dog owner, I was quite bothered by the fact the dog basically disappeared. Although people came and went in this house, the dog was never seen or heard again. References were made that the home owner had a dog, had even worked with a companion dog program, but the dog itself made no other appearance.



The script writers forgot about the ripple effect. What's that, you ask? Well, once something is introduced into the story, it has consequences that ripple out. Imagine a pebble tossed into a pond, it hits the water and then ever widening ripples reach out to touch more area than the pebble itself touched.

Consequence

Now let's look at the word consequence. It has two meanings. The first defines consequence as something that can be the result of an action or condition. Think outcome or repercussion or aftermath. The second definition of consequence is

importance or relevance. Used in that sense, words such as significance, substance, or value comes to mind.

They gave that dog consequence—significance—and then they erased him. In reality or fiction, the dog lived in the house. It was one of those cute dogs you assume is accustomed to attention and therefore would not ignore the different humans who come into the room. The whole sequence ended up detracting from the storyline for me since I kept worrying about where the dog went.

As a result of introducing the dog into the story, there should have been more interaction between the other characters and the dog. The act of introducing the dog as a character who lived in that house meant the dog should've had more of a ripple effect. The dog should have been in more scenes, removed for some reason, or not in any scenes at all.

Keeping the Ripple Effect in Mind

When I set up a scene, I try to keep in mind the consequences of what I write. I try to imagine what kind of ripple effect I will cause in the story as well as with the other characters. When I was outlining my post Civil War era novel *Stealing Destiny*, I knew my heroine, Billie had spied for the South. I needed her to remain in her home, which had been taken over by Yankees, but I needed her to go undetected.



Billie had been thrown from a horse and broken her left ankle when she was twelve years old. She fractured the growth plate, preventing further growth of that leg. Without a shoe designed to compensate for the height difference, she limps. Here's the thing, once I crippled Billie, she had to be a cripple for the entire story. If she wasn't wearing her corrective shoe, she limped. But this injury made it possible for her to pose as a crippled stable boy during the war and gather military information.

Let's say your main character wear glasses. Is it a slight correction or is he practically blind without them? If it's a slight correction and he loses his glasses during the story, not a huge deal. If he's borderline blind without his spectacles and they're broken with no replacement available, then he has a major problem. The loss of the glasses will color every action he takes until he's able to replace them.

As you build your story scenes, think about the consequences of what you write and how it impacts the characters—the ripple effect. Don't leave your readers wondering what happened to the dog.

Let's Revisit the Ripple Effect

by
Ginger Hanson

On May 25, 2015, I posted a blog titled “The Ripple Effect in Storytelling.” I wrote about consequences in setting up a scene. I was reminded of this blog when I recently watched Ryan Reynolds’ latest Netflix movie, *The Adam Project*. As a longtime Reynolds fan (*Two Guys and A Girl!*), it was fun to follow his adventures as a pilot from the future who goes back in time and encounters his younger self.

Reynold’s character is wounded while stealing an aircraft to travel back in time. Although the bullet supposedly exited, its path was through his body, not a graze mind you, a bullet hole through flesh and organs and blood vessels—and he bleeds a lot.

While he spends some time early on tending the exterior of the wounds, he ends up in several physical encounters with no visible problem of an untreated bullet wound in his side. In *The Adam Project*, the screen writers forgot about the ripple effect.

What’s the ripple effect, you ask?

Well, once something is introduced into the story, it has consequences that ripple out. Imagine a pebble tossed into a pond, it hits the water and then ever widening ripples reach out to touch more area than the pebble itself touched.

Let’s look at the word consequence. It has two meanings. Consequence is something that can be the result of an action or condition. Think outcome or repercussion or aftermath. The second definition of consequence is importance or relevance. Used in that sense, words such as significance, substance, or value comes to mind.

The consequence or result of being shot is a bullet wound. What is the importance of this wound? Its relevance? We feel it has significance when we watch Reynold’s character pull his blood soaked hand away from the wound.

Thus, the writers dropped in the pebble of a gunshot wound, but they failed to truly widen the repercussions. They erased the effects of the wound.

What happened?

In the beginning, Adam the pilot is profusely bleeding as he escapes capture. He needs to find medical supplies to treat the wound. He even tells his younger counterpart that the bullet exited so he doesn't need to worry about fishing it out. Then the remainder of the movie, it's as if he has no bullet wound. There are no consequences. No infection, no fever, no bodily weakness from blood loss.



According to *Medline Plus Medical Encyclopedia*:

“Gunshot wounds that pass through the body without hitting major organs, blood vessels, or bone tend to cause less damage.”

I guess this is what the writers intended, no major organs hurt, no ricocheting off a bone. But bullets still destroy tissue and blood vessels. Gun shot wounds hurt! They cause damage to the body which needs time to heal. Without the proper care, they become infected.

Wouldn't that hurt?

At the very least, the wound would be a source of pain when someone whacked you in the side.

Yet, Reynold's character fought valiantly against a slew of opponents, including the villain's henchman who engaged him several times in one-on-one physical battle. Ryan's character never flinched or displayed any disability while being pummeled, or leaping around, or bopping the bad guy.

While this lack of the ripple effect may be all well and good for an established actor, the average writer might want to think about the ripple effect's consequences and how they impact characters when building story scenes.

The screen writers failed to give the wound a true ripple effect. It was the result of an action, but it failed the second definition when its important role in the beginning of the story fizzled out. The ripple effect of this injury never reached its true dimensions.

Don't leave your readers wondering why a character fails to react when someone lands a punch in a body part that was penetrated by a bullet only hours earlier. Think of the ripple effect as you write your story.

Storytelling: Do You Remember The Ripple Effect?

by
Ginger Hanson

Several years ago I wrote a blog titled “The Ripple Effect in Storytelling.” Recently, I was reading a novel by a seasoned author who failed to remember the ripple effect. It was so disconcerting, I not only stopped reading the novel, I also decided it was time I revisited the topic.

What’s the ripple effect, you ask.

It’s the consequences that ripple out from story action. Imagine a pebble tossed into a pond, it hits the water and then ever widening ripples reach out to touch more area than the pebble itself touched.

Now, instead of a pebble, think of a story element. For example, your main character is hiking through the woods and trips over a log and injures a shoulder. From that point forward, the injured shoulder must be included with that character until such time as the shoulder has healed.

The hurt shoulder is the pebble. Rippling out from that injury are consequences: the pain, inability to use the shoulder as one should, wearing a brace, or other characters remarking on the injury. These ripples, or consequences need to be part of the story.

Looking Deeper into the Ripple Effect

Now let’s look at the word consequence. It has two meanings: something that can be the result of an action or condition. Think outcome or repercussion or aftermath. Consequence also means importance or relevance. Something that can be the result of an injured shoulder might be the main character’s inability to climb a fence and escape the bad guys. Then, the outcome or repercussion could be that the bad guys catch the main character.

What triggered my need to revisit the ripple effect? In the story, a residence incurs an explosion and subsequent fire. Although the house wasn’t completely demolished, there was of course the usual debris from an explosion and the resulting fire. And the water damage caused by the fire department dousing the fire. Think soot, ash, water damage, and the smells associated with burning a house and its content.

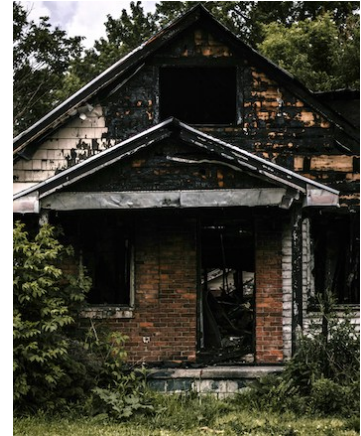
Scene is Set, Now What?

The next morning, two story characters enter the house via a rear entrance and go into the kitchen. The description of the scene includes “a layer of soot had settled on every surface.” On top of the smells of an extinguished fire, we now have soot covering every surface. This does not stop one character from pulling out a kitchen chair and sitting at a table or 2) putting a file on the table top.

Where’s the soot? Where’s the ashes?

I went back to make sure I had read the scene description correctly. Why didn’t either character comment on the soot that “layered every surface”? Not once did the character who sat on the chair mention soot.

Not only did the characters fail to comment on the soot, what are they doing in the house at all? There’s was no mention of any fire official authorizing entry to the house. Nor did the characters seem concerned with the health risk of inhaling soot or ash residue.



Where Were the Ripple Effects?

There were no ripple effects from the explosion and fire. It happened, the characters went into the house, had a nice sit down in a soot covered chair, sat at a soot covered table and proceeded to study the contents of a formerly clean file folder.

As you build your story scenes, think about the consequences of what you write and how it impacts the characters. Don’t leave your readers wondering why a character had no reaction to a soot covered chair.