

Why are authors afraid to kill off their characters?

By J. A. Awadalla

One of an author's most potent tools is killing off a character, especially if that character has won the reader's heart over the course of the story. The act is an author's way of demonstrating the gravity of a situation, stirring the reader's emotions, and demonstrating the callousness of a villain in the case of a murder. Death is a powerful tool when used correctly, as it symbolizes permanence and ultimate consequence. One trend I've begun to notice, however, is that writers are resurrecting characters that should be dead. What I don't understand is, why?

It may just be me, but it feels like a betrayal when a character everyone thought was dead suddenly makes a grand reappearance. Each reader's reaction to an event is different, of course, but I can't think of anyone heartless enough not to be affected by a major character's death. Some people even refuse to go on reading a story because they can't imagine the story proceeding without that major character. To me, it then feels really cheap when this character reappears in the wilderness somewhere with no memory of who they are, or if they just show up one day and detail some crazy adventure they went on without the rest of the cast. Why did I waste all that time and energy mourning you, then? (And don't get me started on magical resurrections. Those are just flat-out corny.)

I feel that a non-permanent death turns a work more into some cheesy soap opera. No matter how the character "came back," it always really cheapened the experience for me. To me, death should be permanent. Death is final. Move on and let another character have a chance to shine. Clinging to old characters all the time makes them stale in the end and when you lose any sympathy for the main character, the star of the show, you begin to lose interest in the work as a whole. If you aren't going to kill a character "for real," why do you kill them to begin with? Cheap dramatic effect? The purpose of writing—excuse me, the purpose of good writing—is to demonstrate what humanity is. Whether we like it or not, humanity is not immortal. When you remove one of the biggest aspects of being alive, the inevitability that death will someday come for you, it makes the character significantly more difficult to relate to. At least, for me.

As with many things, there are exceptions—I find near-death experiences and faked deaths to be a little easier to handle, for instance. If the character's fate is made ambiguous, I find that acceptable as well. It heightens the elation when that character is found alive or rejoins the rest of the cast. What I don't like is when the character's death is very strongly insinuated—or worse, directly witnessed—by others in the cast, only for them to reappear out of a plot hole alive and well. Rather than feeling happy that they are back, I just find myself thinking, "You should have stayed dead for the plot's sake." But that's just my two cents.

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