

## **Puzzled by Plots**

### **By Amy Knupp**

I love working jigsaw puzzles. The bigger, the better. I rarely do them anymore because if I start one, I obsess about it until it's done. Very little writing (or anything else) gets touched if a puzzle's in progress.

Lately I've started to see my writing process as similar to working a puzzle. A big, long, hard one. (Minds out of the gutter, please.)

First, I need a general framework. With the puzzle, it's the edge pieces. I always do those first. (Hate it when I can't find one or two of them in the sea of inside pieces!) With the story, it's the synopsis, whether a formal one or more of a rambling description of what happens between the beginning and end, usually seen by no one but me. The framework helps me identify the different elements, the color ranges, the boundaries. And yeah, sometimes I find I'm missing one or two pieces from the synopsis, just like the puzzle.

Next, I jump to a close-up of one or two of the elements. In a puzzle, I might gather all the blue sky pieces, maybe the white clouds too. With my story, it's usually getting to know my two main characters a lot better. (We won't discuss here how one or the other of them usually tries to be Mr. or Ms. Mystery and makes me pull my hair out.) Sometimes I start character charts (but rarely finish them,) sometimes I'll interview with each character. Sometimes I just ponder and take notes. But I need to have a starting point, and for me, it's almost always characters.

Then I start filling in the other areas, doing close-ups of each element as necessary. While at the start of the puzzle the elements appear to be quite separate (the trees, the mountains, the lake, etc.) the more I work, the more I begin to figure out how they all blend together and aren't so separate after all. Same with the writing. I start exploring how the main characters and plot and setting and secondary characters all mesh together to form one coherent story. (If they don't, that's when I get my hammer out and start beating them into shape. God complex, anyone?)

I guess this is where writing gets harder than a jigsaw puzzle. The puzzle has a "last" piece. It has a definite ending, and there's nothing to be done for it. If I think the trees had too much light on them when the photo was taken, too bad. It's out of my hands.

Not so with the story. This is when the work really begins in earnest. If the trees are overexposed, I need to fix them. If the characters have inconsistencies, they must be smoothed out. I tend to go back and fix subplots at this point. Add setting details, cure Talking Head Syndrome. Take out a character here, change a character there. Smooth the pacing. The list goes on.

I'm not sure there's ever an ending with a story--most writers will tell you they could "fix" things forever, even if it's just down to fiddling with the language. There comes a time, though, when I must say goodbye and send that story off to my editor. I'll revisit it

plenty in the upcoming months, revising and polishing with the benefit of the editor's perspective. But reaching that point when it's "as done as it's going to get" is like nothing else. The feeling of satisfaction, the accomplishment (and yes, the fear and doubt too) it's something only writers understand. And I have to say, while finishing a puzzle is satisfying, it's got nothing on writing THE END on a story I've slaved over for months. Here's hoping you all experience that same feeling--soon and often!