

In today's market, the agent simply can't afford to take on any projects that aren't high concept.

Chasing Mr. Big

What's a novel without a hook?

BY BRENDA JANOWITZ

It started when the female fiction-centered site Trashionista posted a video clip of Meg Cabot discussing it. Then Allison Winn Scotch wrote a post about it on her blog. Next thing I knew, everyone was talking about it: the need for a high-concept idea for their book. Nothing scary about that, right? Then why was I so panicked about it? Well, that's because for my latest novel, I, um, you know, sort of... don't have one.

It's hard to describe what exactly makes an idea high concept—it's almost the opposite of what it sounds. But simply put, it's an idea that is easily explainable and can be sold in

one sentence.

Meg Cabot says that she begins by thinking about a big idea, a hook. *The Princess Diaries* is about a plain Jane who discovers she is actually a princess. A real live princess. Complete with devoted subjects and everything. Is it any wonder Disney snapped this one up for a film adaptation?

In Allison Winn Scotch's latest, *Time of My Life*, a woman who is caught up in the what-ifs of her life finds herself seven years in the past, able to fully explore the what-ifs and take the path not taken. It's the sort of book that would be perfect for a book club because it will generate discussions and bring up serious issues. What if I married someone else? What if I never quit that job? And yes, the film rights have already been sold.

Of course, not every bestselling book is high concept, and not every book with a high concept becomes a bestseller. But with the market getting tighter by the day, shouldn't we at least be trying to write books that have universal appeal? Books that have the potential to be best-sellers?

Which brings me to my own work in progress. Do I have a high concept idea? Do I need one? Puzzling over this, I broadened the discussion to my Mediabistro writing class. I encouraged my students to start thinking about high concept ideas and to take their ideas further—no more “it's a book about this girl” ideas.

The class began to panic. Do I need to have a high concept idea? (Preferably, yes.) Then they got angry. Why isn't my idea high concept? they wanted to know. How can I turn this idea (“it's a

book about this girl”) into a high-concept idea?

So I did what any good teacher/writer looking to procrastinate would do: I researched it. Turns out the term “high concept” first came about when Steven Spielberg came on the scene with movies like *Jaws* or George Lucas with *Star Wars*.

Sharks! I thought. I need to add some sharks to my story! Then I thought about *Star Wars*: the battle of good versus evil on an intergalactic playing field. I considered the concept I have for my book: a woman and her grandmother. On an intergalactic playing field? Yes! Sounds better already.

I asked a friend who's an agent about high concept. She explained that in today's market, she simply can't afford to take on any projects that aren't high concept. “But my books aren't high concept,” I said, certain she'd explain there was an exception for authors like me. “Yeah,” she said. “I know.”

I immediately abandoned my manuscript and began e-mailing my own agent pitches, twisting and turning my story into something that could be considered high concept. I refrained from mentioning the sharks. After all, those can always come in later. She read each e-mail slowly but surely, and then wrote back: “Those are all great. Now get back to writing.”

She's right: the best advice for a writer is always “keep writing.” I needed to stop obsessing about whether or not my idea was high concept enough, and just write the book. So I shut down my e-mail and got back to my manuscript. A story about a woman and her grandmother, on an intergalactic playing field, who wake up seven years in the past, only to discover that they are really princesses. Who then get eaten by sharks. ■

Brenda Janowitz is the author of Jack with a Twist and Scot on the Rocks, both published by Red Dress Ink.

