

CHAPTER ONE

Every Trip Is a Quest (Except When It's Not)

OKAY, SO HERE'S the deal: let's say you're reading a book about an average sixteen-year-old kid in the summer of 1968. The kid—let's call him Kip Smith, who hopes his acne clears up before he gets drafted—is on his way to the A&P to get a loaf of bread. His bike is a one-speed with a coaster brake and therefore very embarrassing to ride, and riding it to run an errand for his mother makes it worse. Along the way he has a couple of disturbing experiences, including an unpleasant encounter with a German shepherd. And it's all topped off in the supermarket parking lot when he sees the girl of his dreams, Karen, laughing and fooling around in Tony Vauxhall's brand-new car, a Barracuda.

Now, Kip hates Tony already because he's got a name like Vauxhall and not Smith, and because the Barracuda is bright green and goes approximately the speed of light, and also because Tony has never had to work a day in his life. Karen, who is laughing and having a great time, turns and sees Kip, who asked her out not so long ago. And she keeps laughing.

Kip goes on into the store to buy the loaf of Wonder Bread that his mother told him to pick up. As he reaches for the bread, he decides right then and there to lie about his age to the Marine recruiter, even though it means going to Vietnam, because nothing will ever happen to him if he stays in this one-horse town where the only thing that matters is how much money your father has.

What just happened here?

If you were an English teacher, and not even a particularly weird English teacher, you'd know that you'd just watched a knight have an encounter with his enemy.

In other words, a quest just happened.

But it just looked like a trip to the store for some white bread.

True. But think about it. What is a quest made of? A knight, a dangerous road, a Holy Grail, at least one dragon, one evil knight, one princess. Sounds about right? That's a list I can live with. We've got a knight (named Kip), a dangerous road (nasty German shepherd), a Holy Grail (a loaf of Wonder Bread), at least one dragon (trust me, a '68 Barracuda could definitely breathe fire), one evil knight (Tony), one princess (Karen).

Seems like a bit of a stretch.

At first, sure. But let's think about what a quest is made of. It needs five things:

1. a quester;
2. a place to go;
3. a stated reason to go there;
4. challenges and trials along the way;
5. a real reason to go there.

Item 1 is easy; a quester is just a person who goes on a quest, whether or not he knows it's a quest. In fact, he usually doesn't know. Items 2 and 3 go together: someone tells our main character, our *hero*, to go somewhere and do something. Go in search of the Holy Grail. Go to the store for some bread. Go to Mount Doom and throw in a ring. Go there, do that.

Now remember that I said the *stated* reason for the quest. That's because of item 5.

The real reason for the quest is *never* the same as the stated reason. In fact, more often than not, the quester fails at the stated task. (Frodo makes it all the way to Mount Doom, but does he throw the ring in the fire? No, he does not. Really—go read it again if you don't believe me.) So why do heroes go on these quests, and why do we care? They go because of the stated task, believing that it is their real mission. We know, however, that their quest is educational. They don't know enough about the only subject that really matters: themselves. **The real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge.**

Frodo may have saved the world from Sauron, but that really just turned out to be a bit of luck. What his quest actually brings him is a new understanding of the value of mercy and who needs it: Gollum, Frodo himself, and probably everybody in Middle Earth.

Or here's another example. You know the book, I'm sure: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957).

Wait a minute. The Grinch is on a quest?

Sure. Here's the setup:

1. *Our quester*: a grumpy, cave-dwelling creature who's had it up to here with the noise, celebration, and general happiness of Christmas.
2. *A place to go*: from his mountaintop cave to the village of Whoville, far below.
3. *A stated reason to go there*: to steal every Christmas present, tree, and bit of decoration he can lay his hands on.
4. *Challenges and trials*: a risky sleigh trip down the mountain, considerable effort packing up the Christmas

presents and trimmings, an encounter with a two-year-old girl who puts all the Grinch's efforts in peril simply by asking a question, and a painfully difficult trip back up the mountain with an overloaded sleigh.

5. *The real reason to go:* to learn what Christmas actually means, to have his shriveled heart expand back to its proper size (or even bigger), and to find genuine happiness.

Once you get the hang of it, you can see how *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* follows the conventions of a quest tale. So does *The Lord of the Rings*. *Huckleberry Finn*. *Star Wars*. *Holes*. And most other stories of someone going somewhere and doing something, especially if the going and the doing weren't the protagonist's idea in the first place.

A word of warning: if I sometimes speak here and in the chapters to come as if a certain statement is always true, I apologize. "Always" and "never" are not words that have much meaning when it comes to literature. For one thing, as soon as something seems to always be true, some wise guy will come along and write something to prove that it's not.

Let's think about journeys. Sometimes the quest fails or is not taken up by the protagonist. And is every trip really a quest? It depends. Some days I just drive to work—no adventures, no growth. I'm sure that the same is true in writing. Sometimes plot requires that a writer get a character from home to work and back again. But still, when a character hits the road, we should start to pay attention, just to see if, you know, something's going on there.

Once you figure out quests, the rest is easy.