



RESONANT THEMES SUMMIT PLAYBOOK

Learn to write memorable, life-changing stories with tips curated from award-winning authors!

Introduction to the Engaging Plots Summit Playbook

Dear Summit Attendee,

Digitally hosting you over the past three days has been a privilege. Together we've studied how to craft a theme that deeply move readers—whether that be by choosing the right theme, artistically showing it, or weaving our biblical worldview into it. In so doing, our prayer is that you understand how to better imitate the Great Teller of Parables and the skill he displayed when teaching the crowds through stories.

We know that when you take in a lot of information at once (like you've been doing at this summit), boiling it down to personal resolutions can be difficult. We created the Resonant Themes Summit Playbook to provide you with a roadmap that highlights the key points of our speakers' sessions and shows you how you can use those techniques to better use your imagination to craft themes that move readers.

All this information is, of course, simply synthesized from our speakers. We've condensed our notes on their topics into this simplified guide, but to get the full meat of the talks, you'll want to refer to the recordings.

We hope this final gift helps you press on in your calling as a writer to better glorify God with your storytelling.

-The Story Embers Team

Choosing a Theme that Moves Readers

Main Idea: The most powerful themes often stem from the struggles and challenges you've faced in your own personal life! God is telling a powerful story through your life—and he's given you insights through those struggles. Mine your own life story to discover the resonant themes he's given you.

1. Use Your Life Story to Discover Your Personal Theme

Tips Inspired by “Your Story’s Theme” with Mary Weber

You can't write great stories until you first dive into **your own story** and what God's telling through your life. When you recognize and embrace the themes God's written into your own life, you'll be able to **echo the power of his work** in the stories that you tell.

4 Ways to Discover Your Story's Theme:

- Consider what messages you'd want to share no matter what job you have.
- Examine what has broken *shalom* in your life and what you learned through those painful experiences.
- Look for where God's redemptive work has been most clear in your own life.
- Think about what questions you're personally wrestling through right now ([Melanie Dobson](#)).

2. Explore That Theme in a Way That's Honest

Tips Inspired by “How to Honestly Depict the Brokenness of a Fallen World” with Melanie Dobson

Once you've understood the story God's telling in your life, you want to turn that into a **challenging thematic question**. Questions are often the most powerful way to depict a theme because they allow you to depict multiple sides of an issue. They also give you the chance to discover insights along with readers as you write the story.

5 Reminders for Depicting a Fallen World Honestly

- Don't be afraid to let bad things happen to your characters. Readers will empathize more with them if they see them struggling against the fallenness of the world.
- Honor the pain of your characters by not giving them (or your readers) simplistic answers or solutions to their problems. Allow them to struggle as they search for answers.
- Don't feel the need to provide complete answers; life doesn't always give us those, but we can still find hope to hold onto.
- Draw on the pain you've experienced in life and use those memories to give your story authenticity ([Mary Weber](#)).
- Begin with characters and their problems, not with a moral point. Beginning your message often turns a story into propaganda ([Brian Kohl](#)).

Remember: There's No Right Method for When to Weave Themes in

Tips Inspired by Various Speakers' Sessions

- Josiah DeGraaf normally outlines his themes extensively before writing.
- Connilyn Cossette often discovers her character arc while writing the story.
- Melanie Dobson sometimes changes her theme as she writes the story.
- Lani Forbes often used the revisions process to weave all her themes together.

Every author has their personal preferences for *when* they develop their theme, and that's not a problem! Just find the method that works best for you.

3. Find Resonant Insights to Address the Thematic Question

Tips Inspired by "How Themes (Not Just Characters) Can Capture Readers' Hearts" with Daeus Lamb

Satisfying stories answer the thematic question with **fullness**. Fullness arises from grappling with your question **vigorously** and **holistically**. By digging into your story's question and developing clear, deep insights, you'll beautifully depict the tapestry of God's design.

5 Ways to Present the Truth in a Fresh Way

- Give readers reasons to doubt the truth at first so that when you eventually show its power, the momentary doubt makes their renewed conviction stronger.
- Make wrong beliefs seem sympathetic and attractive before revealing their flaws.
- Force your characters to struggle and fail miserably before they achieve insight.

- Be intentional with the words you use to present insights (when you use words) and remember that less is more.
- Avoid fanfare when presenting your story's message.

Study the Complete Content: Day One's Sessions

Your Story's Theme | Mary Weber

What's your story's theme? And why does it matter? Those two questions shape your writing and books far beyond craft, publishing, or marketing. They take your frail offerings and turn them into creative art that changes lives. But a deeper question underpins them. "A deeper magic," as C.S. Lewis would say. And within the answer lies the true power of your story. Are you ready? This is your invitation to journey farther up and farther in to discover your story's real theme.

The 4 Steps to Crafting a Deeply Moving Theme | Josiah DeGraaf

Crafting a deep theme may seem complicated, but it doesn't have to be. In this session, Josiah DeGraaf, the summit & marketing director at Story Embers, gives you a roadmap you can use to write a story that moves readers because of how authentically and honestly it portrays reality.

How to Honestly Depict the Brokenness of a Fallen World | Melanie Dobson

All of us live in a fallen world. But if you want to provide answers to the world's brokenness, you can't do so effectively in storytelling until you depict the sin and suffering accurately. In this session, best-selling author Melanie Dobson talks about how to focus your story on real problems that people face and discover thought-provoking answers to those questions.

How Themes (Not Just Characters) Can Capture Readers' Hearts | Daeus Lamb

Every writer wants to move readers. But how do you actually achieve that with your story's themes? In this session, Daeus Lamb, the outreach & community director at Story Embers and author of Songkiller's Symphony, explains how to craft themes that hit home with readers.

Showing (Not Telling) Your Story's Theme

Main Idea: Themes are most powerful when they're shown instead of told. Instead of communicating insights primarily through monologues or sermons, remember the power of example and use natural consequences to point readers toward truth and hope.

4. Explore Your Story's Theme by Showing Readers Examples

Tips Inspired by "The 4 Steps to Crafting a Deeply Moving Theme" with Josiah DeGraaf

Stories most effectively guide readers when you show us a characters' **worldview through their actions** and then show us what sorts of **consequences naturally result** by rewarding virtue and punishing vice. This allows you to subtly reveal the truth without explicitly spelling it out.

4 Ways to Show Your Theme More Effectively

- Seek to feature at least five different worldview responses to your story's thematic question through the examples of your characters.
- Think carefully about where worldviews actually do lead people in real life, and avoid being over-the-top or unrealistic with the consequences for a character's choices.
- Trust that, when you show readers that virtue is rewarded and vice is punished, those natural consequences for characters' beliefs speak more powerfully than sermonizing.
- Use your past experiences in order to portray characters with false beliefs more sympathetically ([Connilyn Cossette](#)).

5. Show Your Theme through your Protagonist's Character Arc

Tips Inspired by "The Essential Components of a Protagonist's Character Arc" with Connilyn Cossette

Your protagonist's character arc is a key opportunity to display the story's theme as she struggles with and explores answers to the thematic question. Successful character arcs are grounded in **the protagonist's background**: the desires, goals, lies, and emotional wounds she carries with her from the past.

How to Sequentially Use Background to Construct a Character Arc

- Hint at a protagonist's wounds in the beginning to make her likeable despite her flaws.
- Help her confront the problems sparked by her background by:
 - Putting her or others in harm's way.
 - Pushing her outside her comfort zone.
 - Allowing her to lose control.
 - Forcing her to face her fears.
- At the midpoint, force the protagonist to make a clear choice that represents a change in her beliefs/actions and a turning away from the flaws sparked by her background.
- Slowly unpeel her background like an onion throughout the story so we gradually understand her better.
- Toward the end of the story, show the protagonist making some kind of sacrifice (which ideally mirrors their dark moment) in order to show and cement her growth.

6. Show Your Theme through Your Side Characters

Tips Inspired by "Weaving Your Side Characters into Your Story's Theme" with Lani Forbes

Side characters serve many different roles—and need to feel like real people with their own story. As it relates to the theme, however, they serve an essential role of **representing other beliefs** that will come into conflict with the protagonist over the course of the story.

5 Different Side Characters that Can Deepen a Story's Theme

- Characters who present different perspectives to the theme than the protagonist are essential. Intentionally choose characters who will naturally do this.
- Foil characters are opposites of the protagonist who show us how different decisions might play out. Use them to help readers see that choices, not experiences, define us.
- Characters with wrong beliefs allow us to see the negative consequences of these worldviews. Make sure you understand why real people believe these, though, so your characters feel realistic.
- Romantic interests allow you to reveal the protagonist's core wound and provide your protagonist with a sense of comfort. Use them intentionally to explore your theme.
- Mentors allow you to point toward key insights—but use them carefully! Good mentors, like good parents, should drop hints—but let characters learn lessons for themselves.

7. Show Your Theme through Your Villains

Tips Inspired by “Crafting Villains who Exploit Your Protagonist’s Flaw” with Kara Swanson

A compelling villain will often be a **dark mirror** of the protagonist and her flaws. Such villains force the protagonist to **deal with the dark parts of herself** that she may not have the willpower to face otherwise. Use the similarities between the villain and the protagonist to progress the character arc.

7 Key Ingredients for a Powerful Thematic Villain

- The ability to powerfully threaten whatever the protagonist values the most.
- High personal stakes that give him a powerful motivation for opposing the protagonist.
- Enough nuances and understandable beliefs to make him realistic.
- Enough negative emotions and immoral choices to keep him from just being a hurt person.
- Copious opportunities to force the protagonist to make sacrifices if she wants to beat him.
- A mirror moment between the villain and protagonist that showcases his vulnerability.
- Cognitive dissonance that he’ll use to justify and excuse his behavior ([LG McCary](#)).

What If You’re Depicting a Sci-Fi/Fantasy Setting?

Tips Inspired by “How to Build a World That Highlights Your Story’s Theme” with Kerry Nietz

Speculative fiction allows you to view familiar themes through new lenses. Once you have solidified your thematic question and protagonist’s arc, consider how you can use your fantastical setting to magnify the theme, take it to its logical limit, and abstract it in ways that bypass readers’ normal objections to the truth. Your world can be a magnifying glass for your theme. Just make sure you create a background that justifies your fantastic elements and use your characters to make the world feel real.

Study the Complete Content: Day Two’s Sessions

The Essential Components of a Protagonist’s Character Arc | Connilyn Cossette

Showing your story’s theme begins with your protagonist. But how can you make sure your protagonist’s journey to growth feels authentic and not like a clumsy morality tale? In this session,

best-selling biblical fiction author Connilyn Cossette explains how to ground your protagonist's character arc in her personality and backstory.

Weaving Side Characters into Your Story's Theme | Lani Forbes

Your theme is explored through more than your protagonist. But how do you use the different side characters in your story to deepen your theme in meaningful ways? In this session, award-winning author Lani Forbes explains how to use each character of your story to display your story's theme.

Crafting Villains Who Exploit Your Protagonist's Flaw | Kara Swanson

Everyone loves a memorable villain. But epic villains don't just intimidate the protagonist—they also are uniquely suited to exploit his weaknesses and force him to change. In this session, Kara Swanson, an award-winning author and co-founder of the Author Conservatory, explains how to craft a villain who presents a potent challenge to the protagonist's beliefs.

How to Build a World That Artfully Highlights Your Theme | Kerry Nietz

Theme can be developed in more areas than just characters. Setting also plays a role—especially in the unique worldbuilding of a fantasy or sci-fi novel. In this session, award-winning sci-fi author Kerry Nietz explains how to use worldbuilding to explore big ideas in ways you can't easily do in other genres.



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Crafting Faith-Filled Themes

Main Idea: Our faith is a core part of who we are—and it should deeply shape the stories we tell (whether they're written for the Christian or the secular market). The more you rely on the Spirit and Word's guidance, the better you'll be able to craft themes that deeply resonate with your readers.

5 Essential Habits for Becoming a Thoughtful Storyteller

Tips Inspired by "5 Essential Habits for Becoming a Thoughtful Storyteller" with Brian Kohl

- Read with discernment so you can distinguish between good and bad techniques. Understanding simple aesthetic theory & literary criticism goes a long way.
- Read outside of your genre to make sure you have a healthy literary palate. Remember: food connoisseurs don't only eat one kind of food, and neither should you with your reading!
- Devote time to your writing. You're the only one who can make you quit.
- Work on seeing your life and experiences like God does. He doesn't view your life as mundane, and neither should you.
- Richly engage in the physical community you're a part of so you can depict people honestly and remind readers of what we're ultimately called to be a part of.

8. When Depicting Christianity, Don't Fear Going All In

Tips Inspired by "How to Write Explicitly Christian Themes" with LG McCary

Sometimes, we fear portraying Christianity or Christian characters because we think it will feel contrived. The solution, however, is to go all-in. When depicting Christianity, don't shy away from the real challenges we face, the real Christians we meet, and the real practices that might appear strange to unbelievers.

6 Ways to Depict Christianity Honestly

- Make sure you begin with a love for the body of Christ.
- Write about the sorts of people you actually sit next to in church. This should also affect the way you approach prayers and conversion arcs.
- Don't dismiss doubts; depict them with seriousness as a real challenge many Christians face.

- Embrace the unusual sides of Christianity. The “weird stuff” often intrigues readers and is an important part of our faith!
- Don’t be afraid of tackling hard questions and telling the whole truth, warts and all.
- Remember that we are “saints, not angels; sinners, not demons.”

6 Truths to Remember When Portraying Tricky or Sensitive Subjects

Tips Inspired by Panel Discussion with Parker J. Cole, Brad Pauquette, and Sarah Sundin

- Tricky and sensitive topics are real problems that people face—and Christians should be at the forefront of helping people find answers to these questions.
- Know your audience: not all readers want edgy stories, and you need to know who you’re writing to.
- Prioritize the story. Don’t include tricky subjects if it distracts from the main story.
- People are more than their problems. Don’t depict characters with hard challenges in a one-note fashion.
- Make sure you explore the “other side” with sensitivity and sympathy.
- Make sure you point readers to the light! You don’t want to only focus on the darkness; show readers the hope that exists even in dark circumstances.

9. Embrace Your Opportunity as a Christian Storyteller

Tips Inspired by “The Advantage that Christian Storytellers Have” with Paul McCusker

We aren’t “better” than other writers just because we’re Christians... but the gifts God offers us should make us better writers. We have a unique advantage because **we know the truth**, even when the world around us doesn’t. When we cling to the truths God has given us, we can clearly see the opportunities we have as we press forward in our writing journeys.

5 Opportunities to Embrace as We Continue Our Journey:

- Christians historically have been the guardians and protectors of civilization. Embrace your opportunity to safeguard the truth.
- The Spirit lives in us to receive the truth and understand it experientially. Embrace your opportunity to craft that truth into a meaningful form so others can receive it.
- We live in a culture that has forsaken the truth. Embrace your opportunity to be the voice of truth in a world that’s forgotten it.

- Through the lens of faith, we see that God can redeem suffering. Embrace your opportunity to show that the hard things we experience have greater meaning than simple pain.
- You don't need to achieve fame or worldly success to faithfully honor God through your gifts. Embrace your opportunity to play your role as best you can in the time you have.

Study the Complete Content: Day Three's Sessions

5 Essential Habits for Becoming a Thoughtful Storyteller | Brian Kohl

At Story Embers, we often discuss the foundational techniques for crafting themes that resonate. But you can't craft thoughtful themes unless you're a thoughtful person yourself. How do you live a life that will fuel meaningful storytelling? In this session, Brian Kohl, the editorial director of Canon Press, explains how to live a life that's sustenance for thoughtful themes.

Panel Discussion on Tricky & Sensitive Topics

Sometimes telling stories honestly means wading into difficult topics that require wisdom to tackle as a Christian storyteller. In this panel discussion, author and podcast host Parker Cole, writing school director Brad Pauquette, and award-winning author Sarah Sundin will answer your questions about addressing sensitive topics with honesty and tact.

Writing Stories with Explicitly Christian Themes | L.G. McCary

Not every writer will cover explicitly Christian themes in their stories. But those who do won't want to miss this session. Supernatural thriller author L.G. McCary talks about how to depict Christians who are "saints, not angels; sinners, not demons" and explains that embracing the unusual sides of Christianity may be the secret to depicting your faith authentically.

The Advantage That Christian Storytellers Have | Paul McCusker

As a Christian, you have a powerful advantage when it comes to crafting themes that resonate. But do you realize the full extent of the opportunities you have? This closing keynote will remind you of the tremendous gift you've been given and how you truly can change readers' lives when you write with faith and confidence.

"We resolve to look for ways to explore meaningful themes while delighting our readers, avoiding futile attempts to depict truth devoid of beauty."

– Christian Storytellers Manifesto