

Structured Breaks and Easy Transitions

S. M. Freedman on how to keep readers grounded within a complicated narrative.

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Telling a story through flashbacks, as anybody who has watched *Passage to Marseille* can tell you, can be a tricky business. S. M. Freedman's most recent novel, *The Day She Died*, revolves around Eve Gold, a young woman who sustains serious trauma as a result of being struck by a car. The resulting brain injury causes Eve to live in a state of temporal disintegration and to question the memories of her dark past. Freedman discusses the techniques she used to avoid confusing her readers and how to keep them grounded as the story shifts back and forth through time.

The Day She Died tells the story of a young woman who is badly injured and spends a long period in convalescence. Throughout this period, we see many glimpses into her past. Sometimes, flashbacks can be difficult for readers to follow. Did you have any guiding principles or set rules to dictate how you would structure this novel in order to avoid losing the reader?

Great question. I love mixing things up to add tension and mystery, but it's easy to lose a reader if the storyline keeps bouncing between timelines or points of view. With *The Day She Died*, I was also concerned about added confusion because the past chapters were not laid out in chronological order. I wanted to make sure the breaks between present and past were obvious and consistent, and the transitions were clear and easy to follow.

I formatted the chapters in a simple back and forth pattern, with the first chapter being in the present and the second in the past, etcetera. I also grounded the past chapters around Eve and her best friend Sara's birthdays. Their birthdays serve as a portal through which we catch glimpses into Eve's past.

There's an instance of using paintings rather deftly to also convey moments of the past. It was quite a clever way to build on to the characters and their history while avoiding more flashbacks. What prompted your use of this technique?

This was actually inspired by my mom, who is an artist. I love the idea of being able to wipe away something you don't like and start again to create something more pleasing to your eye.

Eve uses this technique not only in her art but also in her life, as a method of survival. She's an expert at glossing over the horrible things she's done and experienced so she doesn't have to face the truth. I thought it would be fun to have her head injury turn this around on her.

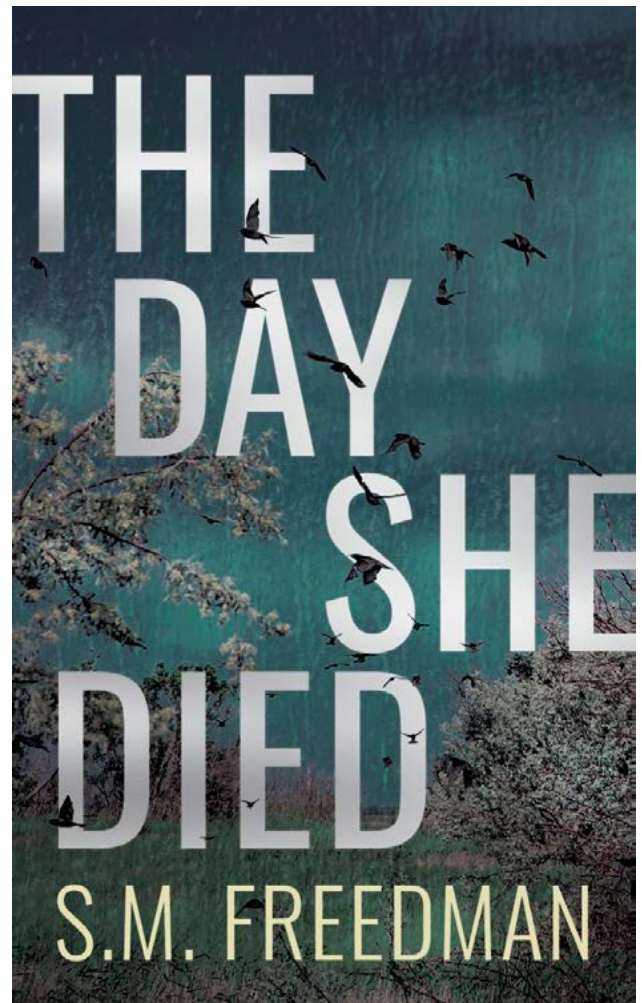
All the horrible things she's been hiding from—the things that happened to her and the things that she's done—start bleeding through in her art. Also, since I'd set up a rule for myself that the past chapters had to be fixed on Eve's or Sara's birthdays, using this technique allowed me another way into her past.

You use objects and in-jokes to ground the characters in time, simultaneously grounding the reader in those moments. A doll, which is something intimately connected with childhood, is referenced again and again, letting the reader feel as if they are watching the characters grow up. It also serves as an anchor that prevents readers from being disoriented in flashbacks. Did you set out to create such a tether with these objects or did it arise during the actual writing phase?

That's funny! It never occurred to me that objects such as the doll or repeated childhood jokes would help prevent a reader from getting disorientated during flashbacks. Having said that, I do use special objects, sayings, and the setting to ground myself in the writing. I hope it serves to ground the reader as well. For example, *The Day She Died* is set in Vancouver along a fictionalized area of the Fraser River. So the fog, the damp bite of the air, the branches heavy and glistening with rain—all these atmospheric goodies become crucial to the story, almost like they're characters in their own right.

Memory can be a tricky thing at the best of times, regardless of trauma. What is it about the brain's fallibility that fascinates you and inspires your storytelling?

If you've ever watched witness testimony, it's incredible to see how different people can have completely different recollections of an event. The filter we put on our recollections and



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experiences fascinates me, and I wanted to get in the sandbox to play around with this concept of fallibility in memory. Eve's is already a mess of fictionalized truths even before her head injury. She lies to everyone, including herself, as a way to survive the horror of her childhood. So I used her head injury like a sledgehammer to break down the barriers she's created for herself, forcing her to come face-to-face with the truth. In doing so, I challenged her to have the bravery to overcome the damage that was inflicted upon her and come clean about her most heinous acts.

What do you find most challenging about crafting a story through an unreliable narrator?

The challenging (and fun!) part about using an unreliable narrator is finding the line between what the character knows and what the reader knows. Sometimes those two things are one and the same, a blind-leading-the-blind type of situation. But I love pushing the limits. What information can I give the reader that the main character doesn't know? It's a fun way to build suspense, but finding the right balance is tricky. I play with this a lot during rewrites. I add in hints and clues, realize I've added too many, go back and revise, and start again. It astonishes me how important a single sentence—or even a single word—can become in steering a story.