

# "Give him a dead wife."

[Scott Myers](#)

Please, don't. Don't slap on a dead wife... dead husband... dead child... just to make the character more sympathetic.



It started with this.

Which led to this:

## Which led to this:

I meant to type "slapped on in an attempt to elicit sympathy."

This was part of a thread of tweets the other day. To frame the discussion, allow me to dip back in time.

One afternoon when I am living in L.A., I am walking my beloved beagle Darwin in the neighborhood when a friend pulls into his driveway. Like me, he is a screenwriter and we live just a couple of blocks away, so we often fraternize about the business. He shoulders out of his car and we have the following conversation:

Me: How's it going?

Him: Ah, just got done with a meeting at New Line.

Me: That action project, yeah?

Him: Yeah.

Me: How'd it go?

Him: Script notes, you know. They're concerned the protagonist is not sympathetic enough.

Me: [smirks] Shocking.

Him: Yeah, right? Anyway, they made a suggestion...

Me: Wait. Don't tell me. "Give him a dead wife."

Him: Exactly.

The reason I could accurately speculate the answer is because I had received the same note on one of my projects. Evidently, this is a go to solution on the studio/network side to generate instant sympathy for a character.

*Give him a dead wife... give her a dead husband... give them a dead child...*

Used in this way, it's a truly awful note.

Why?

It doesn't arise from *inside* the characters, but from *outside*. Slap on a dead somebody. Boom. Sympathy.

But it's cheap emotion. A quick fix in Act One to tug at the audience's heart, then gone once the story really kicks into gear.

Hence, my first tweet.

A lot of folks responded. *What about John Wick? Nomadland? Sleepless in Seattle?* That's a different thing. In those stories, the deceased partner is the **primary emotional storyline**. The Protagonist struggles with their grief. *Gravity. Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri. Manchester by the Sea. What Dreams May Come. Ordinary People. Ghost. The Big Chill. The Revenant.*

Those are just off the top of my head. What about Pixar?

*Finding Nemo. Up. The Good Dinosaur. Coco. Onward.*

There are literally hundreds, if not thousands of movies in which a character or characters deal with the death of a loved one. This can make for great drama, one with universal resonance because each of us has dealt with the

loss of someone we care about.

But that's not the same as tossing out a suggestion, "Give him a dead wife."

Here's the thing. There are **countless ways** to engender sympathy for a character. Don't take the easy way out using the "dead wife/dead husband/dead child/dead pet/dead whatever" ploy.

That's nothing but a tawdry trick.

Instead, go **into** the character and zero in on human experiences and psychological dynamics which elicit emotions in a script reader in an **authentic** way.

It's not that hard. It just takes time. You. The character. Spending time with each other. Discovering what's going on with that makes us care about them.

You can do that or take Brian Duffield's advice:

Other sundry tweets in the thread:

Bottom line, don't cheap out. Do the work. Get to know your characters. Find their humanity. Lean into that when you write them.

Besides, you should be thinking more what makes them **compelling** rather than just trying to make them sympathetic.

***This has been an announcement from The Keep Dead Spouses Alive Society!***