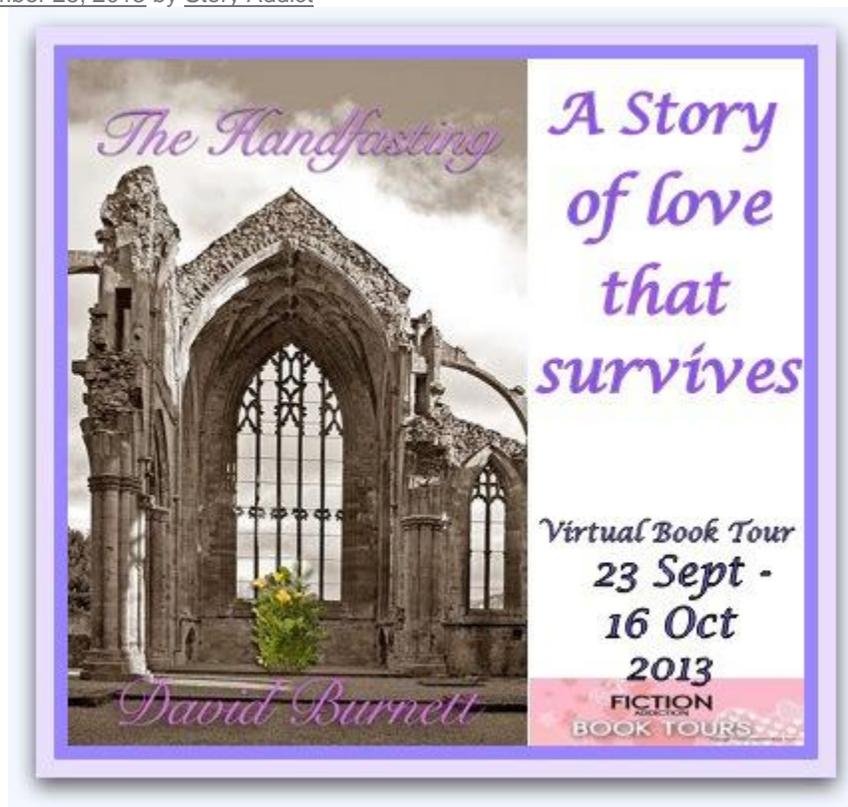


Blog Tour Guest Post: On Happy Endings + Amazon Gift Card Giveaway!

Posted on [September 25, 2013](#) by [Story Addict](#)



Today we have David Burnett for our very pleasant company, author of the romance novel *The Handfasting*. David will talk about the beloved “happy ending” and its necessity (or lack thereof) in fiction. We’d love to hear from you, David!



“...and they lived happily ever after.”

Can a fairy tale end in any other way? Can the beautiful girl ever be eaten by the wolf, remain under the power of the wicked sorcerer, or end her life in abject poverty without the love and support of the handsome prince? If there is such a tale, I've never read it.

Happily ever after is a principle enshrined in literature for generations. It was something on which a reader could count. In the end, the hero would always come out on top. The interest in happy endings carried over into film. No matter how dark the circumstances, the guy in the white hat would triumph, and the villain – dressed in black – would be vanquished.

Of course, not every story or play or book ended in the way we might want. *Romeo and Juliet*, and its modern incarnation, *West Side Story*, come to mind as plays in which the heroes died. But, by and large, the reader or the viewer could plan on a happy ending.

At some point this all changed. Today, one never knows what evil awaits the hero, nor if the hero will be able to overcome it. It has been asserted that if writers want to be taken seriously, today, they must actually avoid *happily ever after* endings to their books.

I wonder if the modern disdain for happy endings comes from the pervasive cynicism that we see among the baby boomer generation. Boomers were born between nineteen forty-five and nineteen sixty-five and, in part because of their numbers, they have had a dramatic impact on American society.

As a baby boomer, myself, I might well ask why we are more cynical than were those who came before us.

Perhaps it is because, during our lifetimes, we have seen political figures shot in the streets (the Kennedys, Wallace, and Reagan). We have watched as our government prosecuted two wars – in Viet Nam and Iraq – which ultimately seemed to make no real sense. A sitting president tried to break into his opponent's headquarters and then

resigned from office. We have seen corrupt politicians, immoral public figures, and rampant corporate greed. We have witnessed mass murders.

All of these have been brought into our homes in full color by the news media who seem to believe that the right to show and tell everything is the same as an obligation to show and tell everything.

Life is not happy, many boomers have concluded. We don't believe in fairy tales anymore and we've lost our confidence in *happily ever after*. Happy endings are so unrealistic as not to be believable.

Still, I like happy endings. When I read a novel, I am entering into another person's world, perhaps at a different time in history, in a place I've never been. The hero may be doing things I've never done. I get to know the characters. I come to care about them. I do not want anything bad to happen to my hero.

If I want to feel depressed, I can tune in to CNN. The news this week focuses on chemical attacks in Syria. Hundreds of noncombatants have been killed. I can feel sad for people who I do not know and have never met.

When I open a novel, though, I am not reading the *Times*. I am reading neither an autobiography, nor an historical account. I do not want the author of my novel to draw me into the story, only to leave me feeling depressed, or sad, or angry. I may be reading the novel, in fact, to escape from the world around me. I want a happy ending.

Perhaps more important than a happy ending, however, is a satisfactory ending.

Alan Watt, in his book, *The 90 Day Novel*, writes that the hero of a story is attempting to get something that he wants – the girl, a new job, a blue ribbon. He also writes that the hero has a need, which is bigger than what he wants, and the hero believes that what he wants will satisfy the need. The boy who chases the girl may really need love, and he believes that she will love him. The one who looks for a new job may really need recognition and thinks that it will come with the position. Winning the blue ribbon may be an attempt to obtain the acceptance that the hero believes will follow an outstanding performance.

It seems to me that the hero must get what he wants if the story is to have a happy ending.

In some stories, the hero does not get what he wants – no happy ending – but he does find a way to satisfy his need. This is a recipe for a satisfactory ending.

In the motion picture, *The Titanic*, Rose is a young lady sailing to America where she will marry. Her family is forcing her into the marriage, and she does not care for her fiancé. Jack is a poor boy sailing to America to make a better life for himself. They fall in love and want to marry.

Had the story ended with their arrival in New York and their marriage, it would have had a happy ending. We would have assumed that they *lived happily ever after*.

However, the Titanic strikes an iceberg and the ship sinks. Jack dies in the icy water of the north Atlantic, while Rose is rescued. She eludes the family members and her fiancé who search for her among the survivors. She gives a false name to immigration officials. She begins a new life. She does the things that she and Jack had talked of doing. She marries, she has children and grandchildren. Although she always cherishes her memory of Jack, she has a good life.

What Rose needed was freedom – freedom from her parents, freedom from her fiancé, freedom to build her life as she wants it to be. During the voyage, marriage to Jack seemed like the path to satisfy her need. While she was not able to follow that particular path, she did find her freedom.

The ending was not happy, but it was satisfactory.

In one sense, a satisfactory ending is better than a happy one, because getting what one wants may provide only short-term happiness – marriage to Jack may not have been as wonderful as Rose imagined it would be. Getting what one needs provides continuing satisfaction – Rose was free for the rest of her life.

A story may have a happy ending. It may have a satisfactory ending. The very best stories have both.