

# Dress up Your Stories with Touchstones

BY VIRGINIA MCCULLOUGH

## Use touchstones to make your story stand out

Drew Staunton is a 40-year-old widow. Because of the financial shenanigans of her husband's once wealthy family, she's also broke. If not for *Cana Light*, a painting of a lighthouse by a famous artist, she'd have nothing to call her own. Logically, she should sell this valuable piece of art to kick-start a new life, but Drew is determined to hang on to this painting for as long as she can. Preferably forever.

*Cana Light* is one of Drew's **touchstones**. The death of Drew's husband, Larry, is a catalyst for the action and themes, but the painting drives the sequence of the story, Drew's decisions, and some surprises along the way. Or, defining it another way, the painting is a recurring element, a touchstone, that speaks to character, plot, and themes. Without *Cana Light*, I wouldn't have this particular story.

## WHAT EXACTLY IS A TOUCHSTONE?

A touchstone is something used for comparison and identification. Based on its original meaning, calling something a touchstone indicates that it's genuine. As storytellers, we use touchstones as a link to identity and the belief that the "thing," or what it symbolizes, has importance in our stories. For storytelling purposes, touchstones dress up our manuscripts in various ways. Here are some examples of common touchstones:

- jewelry, such as rings, locketts, or earrings
- stones (gemstones or otherwise), seashells, beach glass, leaves, flowers
- magical cups, crests, medallions, pendulums, or swords
- spiritual icons or symbols of any faith system, including fictional ones
- animals, from bears and snakes to birds and fish
- books, letters, diaries, or songs
- photographs, paintings, tarot cards, or other art or charms
- clocks, watches, compasses, or maps
- town squares, diners/cafés, bridges, gardens, or memorials

We include any number of objects and places in our books, but a bracelet, for example, does not a touchstone make. It can be transformed into a touchstone if it belonged to a beloved parent or former love and the protagonist pulls it out in key story moments. When readers begin to expect the bracelet, we're in touchstone territory. If the theme, or one of them, is about self-confidence and the bracelet (or watch or locket or photograph) appears before a performance or a job interview, you can bet it's a strong touchstone. A touchstone is often what a character thinks of as a lucky charm, imbued with certain powers. Or, it can be used for protection, like an amulet or talisman.

Touchstones can be important to only one character or ongoing symbols/stand-ins for what's important in your story world. Pieces of jewelry or watches can remind a character of a loved one, living or dead, which in turn helps keep the character on track during the story. Not that a touchstone must always be a positive element. A photograph of a dead relative can remind a character of what they don't want, and the face in the photo only hardens their determination. It could harden their heart, too. Maybe the point of the story is to challenge that character to soften their heart and accept love.



## **LET THE THEME EMERGE**

A touchstone can be a deeper manifestation of the story's themes. In my work in progress, Drew and Larry viewed the painting of the lighthouse as a guardian of their marriage. It took on that meaning because they rescued an abandoned baby on the grounds of Cana Island Lighthouse (an actual place in Door County, Wisconsin). How miraculous to be in the right place at the right time to save the baby. (The baby girl was immediately reclaimed by family members, so this wasn't an adoption story, but the rescued girl comes into the story later.)

## **TOUCHSTONES IN OUR SERIES**

What's a romance series without a few touchstones? We start with a place or, perhaps, a place plus family. Place often includes the proverbial diner or bar as the gathering place. These are usually colorful and distinctive, like bakeries filled with good smells or a bar that's known for music and dancing. Place also can include particular touchstones whose meanings change. In my second series, *Back to Bluestone River* (for the Harlequin Heartwarming line), my idea developed around a landmark covered bridge. It was the primary touchstone for the couple in the first book, the site of a romantic turning point in the second book, and the couple in the third book helped save it from being torn down. It was one touchstone among others that served all three stories and was a thread that tied the characters together.

Families can be touchstones, usually indirectly. By that I mean a ranch, a restaurant, a corporate dynasty, a waterfall on the land, and so on, can be primary touchstones for the family. A series might revolve around the ranch or the restaurant that's been in the family for generations, and the series' stories are connected through siblings or cousins. We often see a location, such as a waterfall or a creek, that's a touchstone meeting place.

## **CAN YOU NAME THAT TOUCHSTONE?**

In my work in progress, the painting was a deliberately developed touchstone. My idea started with the lighthouse painting and a rescued baby. In other cases, we don't know until the first draft is well underway that we've dropped in small, but memorable, touchstone elements. Maybe we use them to mark a passage of time or link them to turning points along the story path. Either way, readers take note.

- Your protagonist (or antagonist) keeps a folded letter in a book she tucks behind the others on her shelf. When she pulls it out once, readers are curious; the second time, they look for a pattern in her timing. Maybe the character reads it when she needs courage, or it might serve as a reminder of a temptation she must avoid.

- A compass is an old and obvious symbol for direction, but what else is it? Did the character find the compass on a beach or while cleaning out Mom’s basement after she died? Or, did your character expect to be left Mom’s compass and is furious when a sibling got it instead. He’s furious, but is his anger only about a compass? Not likely.
- Birds and butterflies tend to show up as touchstones. I recently read two books in which birds show up at key moments. These stories are based on legends, which is another way to find touchstones. Check out local legends for ideas.
- Touchstones are often “helpers.” My character Drew is an expert in the lore of gemstones, and, in turn, they help her make decisions about her future, either following a “sensible” path or reawakening an old dream.

Consider touchstones, like other elements in a manuscript, as a way to “dress up” a story. Once you identify a key element or item, you can check along the way to make sure you’re using it to your advantage in one way or another. Maybe your touchstones will illuminate a character’s conflicts, fill out a setting, bring a story full circle, or send signals to your characters and, by association, your readers. The more you identify and use touchstones, the more fun you’ll have skillfully putting them to work to “dress up” your manuscript and make it stand out.

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