

Scott Editorial

How “Save the Cat” Turns Flawed Characters Into Reader Favourites



If you’ve been in writing communities for a while, you’ve probably come across the phrase “Save the Cat.” It sounds playful (and it is), but this storytelling technique is one of the most effective ways to make even the prickliest characters completely irresistible to readers.

At Scott Editorial, we've seen how a well-placed Save the Cat moment can turn a morally grey protagonist, an antihero, or a tough-to-love romantic lead into someone readers root for wholeheartedly. Without it, even the best plots can leave readers asking, *"Why should I care about this character?"*

What Is the Save the Cat Technique?

The term comes from Blake Snyder's writing guide *Save the Cat!*. Snyder suggests giving your protagonist a small, redeeming act early in the story to create an emotional bond with the audience.

This doesn't have to be dramatic. It might be:

- A sharp-tongued hero helping a lost child find their parents.
- A cynical detective staying late to comfort a grieving family.
- A thief feeding a stray animal while on the run.

These small, often quiet moments show readers that underneath all the flaws and rough edges, your character has a spark of humanity worth following.

Why Readers Fall for Flawed Heroes

When readers first meet a character who is sarcastic, self-absorbed, or morally ambiguous, they can feel distant or unsure about investing in their journey. A Save the Cat moment is like a bridge; it draws readers in and makes them want to stick around to see what's beneath the surface.

This is especially powerful in genres where emotional connection drives the story. Fantasy, women's fiction, crime, and thrillers all thrive on these moments.

How Save the Cat Shows Up Across Genres

Fantasy

Flawed heroes often carry the weight of destiny, power, or painful pasts. A simple act of kindness or vulnerability early on gives readers a reason to care about their journey.

The Priory of the Orange Tree by Samantha Shannon

One character, who seems cool and reserved at first, chooses to protect someone vulnerable even when it puts them at risk. This early choice gives us a glimpse of their inner courage and care.

Ninth House by Leigh Bardugo

The protagonist, struggling with trauma, steps in to help a stranger when walking away would have been easier. This small act hints at empathy and resilience.

The City We Became by N. K. Jemisin

A bold, defensive character surprises us with a flash of tenderness for their city. That moment of quiet love balances their hard edges beautifully.

(These descriptions are intentionally vague to avoid spoilers.)

Women's Fiction

In women's fiction, protagonists often start out in messy emotional places. Readers might not warm to them immediately, but one small gesture can change that.

Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus

A brilliant scientist who comes across as difficult shows a quiet act of generosity that feels deeply personal.

Happy Place by Emily Henry

A sarcastic character who seems distant surprises us by making sure someone else feels included in an awkward situation.

Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine by Gail Honeyman

Eleanor, blunt and socially awkward, unexpectedly helps a stranger. This small act cracks her emotional armor and invites readers in.

Crime and Thriller

Flawed characters are at the heart of many great thrillers. A Save the Cat moment can make readers empathize even when the character's morals aren't clear.

The Dry by Jane Harper

Aaron Falk, a federal agent, quietly helps an old acquaintance during a painful time. That single moment shows his loyalty and compassion.

The Silent Patient by Alex Michaelides

A psychologist's decision to stay late and ensure a vulnerable patient feels safe adds a layer of care to an otherwise tense story.

The Reversal by Michael Connelly

Mickey Haller bends the rules to protect someone in danger. Readers see a flicker of integrity, and it's enough to keep them following him.

(Again, I'm being intentionally vague to avoid spoiling pivotal plot points.)

Why It Works So Well in Enemies-to-Lovers Stories

The enemies-to-lovers trope thrives on Save the Cat moments. A single gesture, like a rival showing unexpected kindness or an antagonist stepping in to protect the protagonist, can turn tension into fascination.

This works across genres:

- Fantasy, where a villain protects the hero from harm and shows a crack in their armour.
- Romance, where a sparring partner quietly supports the protagonist in a moment of weakness.
- Women's fiction, where two hurt people lower their guards long enough for connection to take hold.

These are the breadcrumbs that lead readers from "I can't stand you" to "I see why you're worth loving."

How to Find Your Save the Cat Moment

If you want readers to root for your flawed protagonist:

- Identify their emotional core
- What drives them? What fear or longing shapes how they move through the story?
- Choose a small, authentic moment

It doesn't need to be flashy. A quiet act of empathy is often more powerful than a dramatic rescue.

- Place it early

Ideally within the first 10 to 15 percent of your story so readers connect before making judgments (With a villain, this can be reversed. Place it late to give them a bit of a redemption character arc.)

- Let it feel natural

The moment should fit your character's personality and flow with your story's tone.

Let's Find Your Character's Save the Cat Moment

If you're still not sure where or how to use the Save the Cat principle in your story, get in touch. Together, we can figure out how to weave in those small but meaningful moments that make readers care about your characters from page one.