SERIALITY.

The term "soap opera" was coined by the American press in the 1930s to denote the extraordinarily popular genre of serialized domestic radio dramas, which, by 1940, represented some 90% of all commercially-sponsored daytime broadcast hours. The "soap" in soap opera alluded to their sponsorship by manufacturers of household cleaning products; while "opera" suggested an ironic incongruity between the domestic narrative concerns of the daytime serial and the most elevated of dramatic forms. In the United States, the term continues to be applied primarily to the approximately fifty hours each week of daytime serial television drama broadcast by ABC, NBC, and CBS, but the meanings of the term, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, exceed this generic designation.

The defining quality of the soap opera form is its seriality. A serial narrative is a story told through a series of individual, narratively linked installments. Unlike episodic television programs, in which there is no narrative linkage between episodes and each episode tells a more or less self-contained story, the viewer's understanding of and pleasure in any given serial installment is predicated, to some degree, upon his or her knowledge of what has happened in previous episodes. Furthermore, each serial episode always leaves narrative loose ends for the next episode to take up. The viewer's relationship with serial characters is also different from those in episodic television. In the latter, characters cannot undergo changes that transcend any given episode, and they seldom reference events from previous episodes. Serial characters do change across episodes (they age and even die), and they possess both histories and memories. Serial television is not merely narratively segmented, its episodes are designed to be parceled out in regular installments, so that both the telling of the serial story and its reception by viewers is institutionally regulated. (This generalization obviously does not anticipate the use of the video tape recorder to "time shift" viewing).

Soap operas are of two basic narrative types: "open" soap operas, in which there is no end point toward which the action of the narrative moves; and "closed" soap operas, in which, no matter how attenuated the process, the narrative does eventually close. Examples of the open soap opera would include all U.S. daytime serials (General Hospital, All My Children, The Guiding Light, etc.), the wave of primetime U.S. soaps in the 1980s (Dallas, Dynasty, Falcon Crest), such British serials as Coronation Street, EastEnders, and Brookside), and most Australian serials (Neighbours, Home and Away, A Country Practice). The closed soap opera is more common in Latin America, where it dominates primetime programming from Mexico to Chile. These telenovelas are broadcast nightly and may stretch over three or four months and hundreds of episodes. They are, however, designed eventually to end, and it is the anticipation of closure in both the design and reception of the closed soap opera that makes it fundamentally different from the open form.

In the United States, at least, the term "soap opera" has never been value-neutral. As noted above, the term itself signals an aesthetic and cultural incongruity: the events of everyday life elevated to the subject matter of an operatic form. To call a film, novel, or play a "soap opera" is to label it as culturally and aesthetic inconsequential and unworthy. When in the early 1990s the fabric of domestic life amongst the British royal family began to unravel, the press around the world began to refer to the situation as a "royal soap opera," which immediately framed it as tawdry, sensational, and undignified.

A successful serial needs four elements, say writers and editors who have mastered the form.

1. THE ENGINE

The unanswered question is the engine that drives the story -- and the reader -- forward, says French. In "The Wizard of Oz," the question is whether Dorothy will get home to Kansas. In "Jurassic Park," it's who will end up in the digestive tract of the dinosaur. In mysteries, it's whodunit.

Although every narrative needs an engine -- a thread that drives the story and pulls the reader along-- the serial narrative imposes extra burdens. If the narrative is a mountain that the reader is climbing, a serial requires what Jan Winburn, who edits narratives at The Baltimore Sun, calls "switchbacks," things you didn't expect, lots of twists and turns, which give you the opportunity for cliffhangers, those moments of suspense that ended early film melodramas.

In the opening section of his award-winning serial, "A Stage in Their Lives," for instance, Ken Fuson of The Baltimore Sun introduces the story's engine -- the suspense surrounding the mounting of a high school play -- and its theme: a rite of passage.

In "The Holly Wreath Man," a central question fuels the plot for every major character. Will Jeff win his family back? Will Pop keep his wreath business alive or will Turner, the Labor Department investigator, shut it down? Will Allie marry the wrong man? Will Jeff be able to keep his fallout shelter a secret? Will they deliver the Radio City wreath in time for Christmas?

2. ACCESS

You need good access for any narrative story, but you can't have any reluctant sources for a serial narrative. When Fuson wrote his serial narrative, he attended scores of rehearsals, interviewed the students, teachers, their parents. French of the St. Petersburg Times dressed up in a toga to follow the high schoolers he profiled in his serial narrative "South of Heaven."

3. A “GOLD MINE” SOURCE

Someone who knows all the answers, has all the details the reporter needs to craft a believable, dramatic story. Usually it's the subject of the narrative, but it can also be a detective or prosecutor privy to the workings of a criminal case or a doctor overseeing the care of a cancer patient. Of course, the reporter should make every effort to verify the source's account with documents and interviews.

4. THE BIG PAYOFF

A resonant ending.

Read any of the final chapters of the serial narratives linked below to see how their success depends on an ending that delivers on the promises made in the opening chapters.