

Mystery Writing 101 CWA conference Sat. 10:40-11:30

If there were a formula, everyone would write one. Don't trust anyone or anything that says, "this is how you do it."

A mystery is a novel. It's all writing.

Don't be afraid to be bad. WE ARE ALL BAD ON FIRST DRAFT.

Remember: The worst book you've written is better than the best book you never wrote (huh? no, really - Just. Do. It)

"Bash it out now, tart it up later." - Nick Lowe

I write Mon-Fri. and write to a word count. Currently, my life is crazy - am packing up my mother's apt - but I can manage 500 words a day. That's like a page and 2/3. I mean, come on, one can *always* write a little. Just set your count or your time at the computer or pad and do it. Do it. Do it badly, just do it.

Writing is a skill as well as an art, improved through practice. I give myself a daily word min. Hemingway - good to stop when you know what you'll write next, a page a day = a novel a year.

Know your (sub) genre: Cozies, police procedural, noir, hard-boiled, thriller have own rules.

To outline or not:

Two theories, and my own hybrid system

Plotters vs. Pantsers

Plotters outline heavily.

Plusses: They can think through intricate plots

They always know what to write the next day

More likely to be plot-driven

Less revision

Minuses: Less spontaneity, less room for improv can equal dry writing

After all, a book is a creative project, it's not simply a logic puzzle

Pantsers let their characters speak to them, let the story develop through the writing

Plusses: More options for something new and creative

More opportunities for real discovery

More likely to be character-driven

Minuses: Much more chance to get lost or lose the main thread - the endless novel

Much more revision is often necessary.

Tana French: starts with a scene (In the Woods - two boys go in, one comes out. What happens to that boy when he grows up?)

Obviously, I lean toward the pantsers. I think you find out things. For example, I'm 20,000 words into a new project and after a day working on a scene, I realized that my protagonist was unconsciously involved in an old murder. She unwittingly passed info along.

BUT - I start with a rough idea of what happened. I usually know who did the central crime and why, but that can change. I'm interested in some basic scenario - a conflict, a situation. Hadn't thought of that before - it works.

(Side note: But don't you need a synopsis? Not really. Editors want them, but you are rarely held to them. First-time authors have to write the whole book to sell anyway.)

Important - EVERYONE HAS TO REVISE. This is a pain. Dull. Awful. But it's what makes great writers great. Don't decide to plot everything out because then you won't have to revise, because the unrevised book is the book you'll be sorry you sent out to editors! Honestly. You will catch something that you want to change - and you will be grateful that you made yourself revise.

Bonus - if you keep this in mind, it can free you up to write badly, to write SOMETHING - "Bash it out now, tart it up later"-Nick Lowe.

Plotting:

Things to know for both Plotters and Pantsers:

A mystery, a good mystery, is like any other novel. It is not enough that things happen, the main character has to "happen" (grow, change) too.

The "Sopranos" episode where Michael asks, "where's my arc?"

How does your character change or grow? What journey is she or he on?

In every scene, you can ask, "What does my character want? What is keeping her or him from getting it?" "Where is the tension?" This gives you motivation - and action.

Characters: Some people look at photos, others compile playlists and backstories. I'm not a huge fan of a lot of backstory. You might know it, but the reader should just be able to infer it. Show us that she's insecure, let us figure out why.

Shared "Why" chromosome- Commonality of humanity. I don't write serial killer books, so I believe that every character I write - including bad guys - should act and react in a way I can understand, in a way that I might conceivably act or react. Like, maybe if someone insulted me, I wouldn't draw a gun. But I try to imagine what would get me so angry that I'd want to lash out.

What do your characters want? What is holding them back? What do they fear, why?

Pacing: All right, move it along!

Dan Brown cliffhangers. "And then he saw the gun..."

Remember, you're not writing in real time. You're visiting at key points.

May be helpful to write in real time, or to plot every day out. But be prepared to cut.

What I learned writing memoirs: Rather than deluge readers with every iteration of something, find the one example that will make it real. That works better than detail overload.

Research: This follows pacing for a reason - If you know you're going to need to know something, find it out before hand. Get to know it. Find some experts you can ask questions of as you go. AND find out as you go - Yes, you can fill in the blanks later, but you may end up using a plot point that doesn't work.

Mystery fans notoriously picky - particularly about guns.

I enjoy the ignorance of the amateur sleuth. If she wouldn't know, I don't always have to - but I have to know a little more than she does.

Do NOT empty your notebook into your writing, even though it is VERY TEMPTING to use that obscure doohickey that you discovered or incorporate that fun outdated turn of phrase. Only use it if it is necessary. Do not overexplain, either. Assume that readers can figure some things out. Don't state or explain things that your *characters* - the people in the book - would understand, if you can help it. Sometimes you can have a newcomer who needs something explained (in my *Cries and Whiskers*, Violet explains TNR to Theda), but use even this device sparingly.

Not all books are action-paced thrillers, nor should they be. Need for relaxed reads, too. Do NOT let research get in the way of pacing. If your reader stops reading, you're lost.

Tying it all up: Very personal. A mystery is about balance being restored. Do you want to leave some loose ends? Maybe, but be aware of them - this is when revision comes in. Do all the clues lead to the correct solution? If not, will it become clear why the other clues were false, were "red herrings"?

Revising: As stated earlier, got to do it. Different techniques to try:

Making a time line to make sure all your clues/plot elements work out (check your red herrings, for example, to make sure that you don't have a real alternate villain!)

Print out your manuscript in a different typeface than what you are used to. (This from novelist buddy Caroline Leavitt - amazing what you catch!).

Do NOT read on screen: Recent study (Google it) shows that when we read on a computer screen, we are actually skimming - reading fewer of the words on the page - than when we read actual type on actual paper.

Read it aloud to your cats. When they either fall asleep or leave the room, it will help you deal with future bookstore events.

Put it away, if you can, for a few weeks or even a few months. Work on something else. Start the next book. Then read it through again. You'd be amazed to see the difference between what you thought you had written and what is actually on the page. All that detail? The subtle characterization? If it's not on the page, but is instead still in you heard, this is your chance to put it back in.

Change the typeface one more time and print it out and read it through again.

SEND IT OUT! GOOD LUCK! - Clea