

Dealing with Reader Knowledge by Wen Spencer

Is it really stupid to go down into the basement with whatever light source you can find?

Think about, you're sitting at home and the lights go off. What's wrong? You could just sit there and hope the lights come on, or you start trying to find the nearest light source. Ah here's a flashlight. Cool. Turn it on. Now what? Well, is it just your house or the whole neighborhood? Hmmm, looks like just your house, so possibly you blew a fuse. Down into the basement you go to see if flipping the circuit breaker will work.

Typical life.

Why, then, do we think characters in a horror movie are so stupid to do the same?

Because WE KNOW what's down in the basement waiting for them. We know that this is a horror movie. We know that there's a killer on the loose. We know BAD things happen in basement. Only an idiot would go down and try to get the lights on.

Consider this situation:

Hannibal the Cannibal walks into a flower shop where the heroine works. He is neatly dressed, clean, and well-spoken. He says, "Can we step into the cold room to look at flowers?" We KNOW who he is, and we're climbing the walls. "No, no," we cry to the heroine, "can't you see how evil he is?" With every clue she misses, the more we think her an idiot. But to be fair to her, she's probably worked in this flower shop for years, taking care of customers and never once had anything go wrong. Why would she mistrust Hannibal?

Indiana Jones bursts into flower shop, dirty from a crawl through a tomb, whip in hand, gun on his hip, and a slight crazed look. "Come with me if you want to live!" he says. We KNOW who he is -- the hero -- and now cry, yes, yes, trust him! If the heroine locked Indy in the freezer, ignoring all his claims that Hannibal was an escape murderer that ate people, we would be angry with her. But why should she trust the armed and obviously dangerous Indy?

Insider knowledge, unfortunately, unfairly colors the reader's reaction to characters. They want the characters to react as if they too know this insider information.

One of the strengths of Law & Order is that we, the viewer, don't know anything more than the cops. All we know is the facts as they are presented and that the police honestly want to find the true criminal. When they think they find their evil doer and zero in on that person, you cheer their attempts because they think have the right person. We applaud their bending the law to the point of breaking. We are angry with judges and

defense lawyers protecting these obviously bad people.

Time and time, again, however, new evidence proves otherwise, and you and the police have to choose a new suspect. If we the viewer knew who the real criminal was, however, we'd be angry for them following red herrings. The case could run exactly the same, but our respect of the detectives wouldn't be the same.

On the other hand, the old classic, Columbo, we were shown the murder at the beginning of the show. We enjoyed what seemed outwardly as bumbling by Columbo because we also could tell he was locking in on the real killer. The fun came from watching the killer squirm as Columbo fumbled around him, closing in. If we didn't know the killer, I think our patience would have been much less with what seemed to be an inept policeman.

At the beginning of DOG WARRIOR, I play a small trick on the reader. I don't give them all the information I could on Atticus Steele. Why? Because I want them to be in the dark as much as Ukiah is. What I wanted was it to be reasonable that Atticus and Ukiah didn't cry "Brother!" and hug. So I hide information out in plain sight, clues that could be read either way, so the reader is unsure -- and is willing for the characters to be equally unsure of one another.