

Understanding the Essentials of Writing a Murder Mystery

MAY 5, 2014 by BRONWYN HEMUS



There's nothing quite like a murder mystery, with its blend of high stakes, high tension, and the ability to personally involve the reader as a detective. The best murder mysteries blend the feeling of a great read with the feeling of playing a game. Can the reader figure out the solution before it's revealed?

But with any game, it's essential that both sides know the rules. For all the variety murder mysteries offer, there are a few cast iron conditions that authors need to respect.

Happily I've collected them here, along with some tips and tricks for writing the kind of murder mystery that leaves a reader thrillingly outfoxed. The best of which is...

Of course, the easiest way to ensure your mystery works is to **begin with the solution and work backwards**. It's far easier to work out 'how would the killer hide this weapon?' than 'how do I make it so the weapon can't be found?'

Decide who committed the crime, how they did it, and why. Then you can work out how they'd try to cover it up, who might see them, or who they might tell. Once the killer's path is decided,

you can bring in the detective. Now you know how the clues might link together. These are the important points between which you'll write the detective's path.

To write a great murder mystery, consider plotting backwards.

I always know the end of the mystery before I begin to write. Tension should be held within the novel and there should be no long dialogues of boring interrogation.

– P.D. James

The benefit of this method is that you'll always be writing to justify the conclusion. Plotting forwards means that by the time you reach the mystery's conclusion, you'll have a hundred little details that the solution has to take into account. By deciding on the conclusion first, you flip this, so that the little details are written to fit the most important part of the story.

Nobody reads a mystery to get to the middle. They read it to get to the end. If it's a letdown, they won't buy anymore. The first page sells that book. The last page sells your next book.

– Mickey Spillane

Because you know exactly where you're going before you start writing, it'll be far easier to include subtle clues the master detective can pick up on. Those who plot forwards end up traipsing their criminals around various locations to support the clues they've already written, making the crime more and more unbelievable. Those who plot backwards know where their criminals have been, what they've done, and so can decide on believable clues that make sense once the conclusion is revealed.

A. This is step one. You have to figure out the ending of the mystery. Decide who committed the crime, how they did it, and why. You may not use the name of any famous person in any role in your murder mystery or give him or her traits that would tie him or her to a famous person. You have to describe the killer (age, looks, profession or unemployed, character traits, quirks, sociable or a loner, has family (what kind of relationships?), and living situation, maybe even some childhood experiences).

Realization not revelation

The key to a great murder mystery is the belief that a sufficiently diligent reader could solve the case. That's not to say that the reader actually *can* solve the mystery, just that they believe they could if they spent a bit more time thinking about it.

Every man at the bottom of his heart believes that he is a born detective.
– John Buchan

When the mystery's solution is announced, the reader needs to be able to trace the story back and recognize a path they believe they could have followed. The fact that the detective put the clues together when they couldn't is what makes the character impressive. On the other hand, a detective who has access to information the reader didn't will be considered a cheat, and their writer along with them.

Solutions which feel like new and surprising information are momentarily impressive but then leave the reader feeling cheated, asking 'how was I supposed to solve *that*?' The answer to the mystery needs to feel like realization, not revelation.

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One method which can help you to avoid a revelatory ending is having your detective arrive at the answer through logic accessible to the reader. The Detection Club, a 1930s group made up of prominent British mystery writers such as Agatha Christie and G.K. Chesterton, codified this in their oath:

Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God?

What this means is that the detective should arrive at the mystery's solution through a process that feels accessible to the reader. This doesn't mean that you can't have a clairvoyant detective interrogate ghosts, just that the reader needs to hear everything the spirits have to say.

The detective cannot suddenly know a key detail, they can't 'just have a feeling' that they should check somewhere, because this amounts to hiding details from the reader. Even if the detective

finds new information by logical means (such as running to the library) it'll still feel like cheating if you don't share it with the reader.

In a murder mystery these story details usually take the form of clues. Happily, it's easy to write the sort of clues that lead to a realization while still making your detective look like a genius.

Step two. Describe your detective. Usually crime-solvers have flaws that contrast to their unusual ability to pay attention to details. It makes them human and adds to the intrigue of the story because there may be trouble with someone else involved in the story because of the character flaw. Make him or her a full-bodied, fleshed-out character. That entails a lot of description which includes what he or she would normally do in a tense situation. Personal habits help flesh out your character.

The importance of clues

Making your conclusion a realization depends on making clues feel apparent in retrospect. Of course you don't want clues to stand out as the reader encounters them, that's a procedural story not a mystery, so importance has to be added in retrospect. This can be done through foreshadowing, where the author drops subtle clues about future events in a seemingly innocuous

Any clue essential to solving the mystery has to be described or detailed in some way so that when it's brought back, it feels like a memory rather than a new invention. The more innocuous the reference the better; relevant clues can even be hidden in longer descriptions packed with details, all you need to do is make sure that when the detective establishes a detail was relevant, the reader understands that this is a detail they were aware of, however briefly.

The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described.

— S.S. Van Dine, *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* (Rule #1)

This is also the case for the murderer (or murderers), who should generally be introduced to the reader within the first third of the book. Any later and the reader will be left with the feeling that they weren't given time to solve the mystery and you were hiding key information.

To paraphrase a theatrical observation made by Anton Chekhov, if a gun is shown to the audience in the first act, it better be fired by someone in the third act. Likewise, if a gunshot rings out in the third act, we better have known [the gun] was in the room or on a particular person's body in the first act.

– Christina Hamlett

One of the easiest ways to properly foreshadow is to write the story, identify the key clues, and then add the foreshadowing afterwards. Of course, it's ideal to use the back-writing technique so you already know your key clues before you begin, but often stories shift as you write them and retro-foreshadowing can be a useful tool.

While it's necessary to include readers in the detection process, you may sometimes want it to be genuinely impossible for a crime to be solved before your detective reveals the answer.

Step Three – You know how your killer did the deed. Now you need to assemble some clues that will help your detective solve the mystery. They can't be too obvious, or the story would be over before you get started. It helps if they are somewhat mundane details, but things that an attentive person would notice. Give us four or five clues that will help your detective figure things out.

The illusion of allusion

An oft repeated trick of Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes is to identify where someone has been by the brick dust on their clothing. When this location is used later as part of the explanation of their guilt, it's possible that, if handled lightly enough and supported by a slew of similar evidence, the reader will accept that the only thing standing in their way was a lack of knowledge of masonry.

In this way, your foreshadowing can be very subtle and still achieve the desired effect. 'Introducing' the murderer within the novel's first third might just require another character to

mention they exist. Of course, how satisfactory your clues are depends on the reader and some will recognize and resent not being given a sporting chance.

Step Four. Add at least one character to your story who is suspicious enough to put him or her on the suspects list. Make the description one that naturally invites suspicion. He or she may be someone that the general reader would like to see get punished, just because he or she is unlikable. Or he or she could be someone who is likable but has the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Returning to the scene

Remember that at the end of the day, great murder mysteries come together in the end. Plotting backwards will keep you on track and make the solution more satisfying, but those vital clues need to be scattered with precision and that's only possible when you have the rest of the story in front of you.

Creating a sound, consistent mystery instead of denying your reader vital information shows them a lot of respect, something which won't go unnoticed. Most mystery readers feel a sense of competition with the detective but if the crime feels solvable, and the clues genuine, it's a competition they won't mind losing.

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