Writing Suspense:
Things that may derail your quest for the perfect suspense novel.
By Pepper Smith

Not long ago, when I knew I would be contributing to this workshop, I ran several unscientific polls among readers, asking about their likes and dislikes in mystery/suspense fiction, primarily what things turned them off to a story. What follows was gathered from the responses to those polls.

There are always exceptions to every rule, but these are things that were of particular concern to the readers I corresponded with.

Look-alikes vs. Original fiction

Every now and then, a book will appear on the scene that becomes a runaway best seller. Like the weather, there's no real way of predicting where or when it will happen—it just happens. With it, though, comes a somewhat dangerous temptation, especially for newer authors.

"Well, if they liked *The Mysterious Mountain* so much, surely they'll fall all over themselves to buy my novel, *The Secret Precipice*, which is *just like it!*"

Keep in mind that it's probably going to take you a year or better to get your manuscript written and ready to submit, and that in all probability, you're not the only one who's trying to cash in on the popularity of that best-seller. Knowing that, the question becomes: Do you want to present some overworked editor with *Mysterious Mountain* clone #751, or with something original that will catch his or her attention *because it's different from what everyone else is submitting?* And by about the fifth or sixth *Mysterious Mountain* clone to hit the shelves, readers are often already moving on, looking for something new.

Gimmicks

Sometimes writers will fasten onto a 'gimmick,' like basing a mystery/suspense story on or around an actual historical person. There are some really fine examples of using historical persons that work very well, where the characters become so real that you feel like you've actually spent the day with them. It becomes a gimmick, though, when an author takes the names of historical figures and slap them on generic characters, and use them as the selling point of the story—say, for instance, taking the names of a certain famous writer of Victorian era detective fiction and a colleague, and placing them in the roles of Holmes and Watson, without much regard to personality, character traits, and the realities of the time period the story's set in.

Readers of mystery/suspense fiction are not ignorant—in fact, they tend to be highly educated, and will notice if a writer ignores essentials. If they feel a writer has simply labeled cardboard

cutouts with famous names to dress up a story that otherwise isn't particularly well-written and inventive, it's likely they'll pass on buying any more of that author's work.

Research your subjects and the era you're using; make those things as close as you can get to what actually was. Or better yet, research, and change the characters names. Write something that's original. Maybe you'll be starting your own series of Victorian era detective novels.

The Big Bad World

Sometimes it seems as though authors deliberately put both their characters and their readers through Hades, as if to see how much they can all take. Sometimes authors work to make their protagonists and their readers fall in love with someone, only to kill the love interest off in rather senseless ways, as if to say, "This is the real world, and it's a horrid, nasty place."

Well, yes, sometimes the world is a horrid, nasty place. And yes, there are readers who delight in being made to feel miserable. Most readers don't mind if you take them on a trip through the worst parts of town, as long as there's a payoff of some sort. If you take your protagonist to the depths of the pit and leave him/her wallowing there, it's very probable you're going to lose readers. To paraphrase one reader's remarks about that sort of ultra-dark fiction, "If my life was like that, I'd slit my wrists. Why would I want to read something that's going to make me feel like that?"

This *is* fiction, after all. Most people read it to *escape* from the realities of the Big Bad World. Does this mean that everyone wants happy endings all the time? No, of course not. But readers do like to feel that there is something, a sense of justice done, of completion. Even horror stories tend to have happy endings of sorts—the monster dies, and the protagonist has survived, scarred perhaps, but tested to the limits and proven worthy of our admiration.

The Overuse of Violence

A related issue to consider is that of the use of violence in a story. "But wait!" I can hear you say. "You can't have a murder without violence!"

That's true, and the issue is not whether or not to use it, it's how to use it. Once you rely on violence to add shock value to your story, you find yourself in a cycle of having to increase the level of violence to give your readers the same thrill that they got in your last story. This spirals upward until you wonder if you can keep your protagonist alive through all the violence you're throwing at him/her, because you feel the need to outdo yourself with each story, and what you wrote last time is now old hat to your readers. You also risk not only writer fatigue, but reader fatigue, on an emotional level. It can literally reach the point where just making it through the story is so draining that the reader feels relieved to have finished it. It's along the lines of a critic's complaint about a recent James Bond movie—by the fourth time a character yells out "It's a bomb!" and there's an explosion, the critic just plain didn't care anymore.

Keep in mind that the suspense in a story often comes not from something happening, but from the *threat* of something happening. Simplified, it's like worrying about getting a shot at your next doctor visit, as opposed to the reality of getting a shot. Once you've had the shot, the suspense, or the anxiety leading up to it, is gone. Once you've inflicted the violence on your protagonist, the suspense is gone. You either have to up the violence level, or keep the violence as an escalating threat, with the suspense coming from wondering just how far the protagonist can push things before the axe falls.

Playing Fair

Writing a mystery/suspense story can be viewed as a sort of game between the author and future readers. You want to do the best you can to present something that will surprise and delight your readers, while at the same time not giving away the ending somewhere around the middle of the book. Who is causing the bad things to happen? Why? Will the hero or heroine figure it out before the villain closes in for the kill?

There are a few, and probably more, ways of keeping your reader from figuring out the ending that amount to cheating in the game. One is a method that was frequently used by Agatha Christie. There was always some key piece of information, some vital clue, which the detective noted but the reader was never informed of. This makes for the dramatic reveal scene in the drawing room at the end of the story (or the modern equivalent), where the protagonist reinforces his reputation for god-like powers of observation and ratiocination by walking his captive audience and the reader through the events of the book before springing that last vital clue or piece of evidence on them, thus revealing who the villain is. In such a case, there was clearly never any real intention of giving the reader a fair chance of figuring it out on their own, which is half the fun of reading a mystery/suspense novel.

Another favorite among some authors is the *deus ex machina*, the unexpected event that saves a seemingly hopeless situation. This could be the mysterious stranger that steps in and saves the day by revealing that he's actually Inspector Crandall from Scotland Yard, and he's been following this ruffian for years. Now, thanks to the protagonist, he's finally caught up with the villain and can arrest him, thank you very much… Which leaves the question of where Crandall was during the whole rest of the story, why he didn't step in earlier to help, and actually works to negate the struggle that the protagonist has been through to that point, because it's never actually resolved. This scenario might come about because of getting your protagonist into a situation you can't get him or her out of. Think it through a little more, see if there's something your protagonist can do to get out of it, or try something different. A last-minute rescue from someone who wasn't even in the story prior to that point will leave the reader feeling cheated.

One more is the trick of making the murderer/villain someone who never shows up at any point in the story until the last few pages, where he's suddenly revealed as being the heroine's third-grade crush, who has always been obsessed with her and is killing off her boyfriends because they're not good enough for her. Or it's Joe Farnam, the passing stranger who shows up in the final scene holding a dripping knife over the body of his last victim, but has never been introduced to the reader or been given any sort of motive for his killing spree. This is patently

unfair, especially if you've been planting clues all along that point at other people. Red herrings are one thing, but never planting clues at all that lead to the actual perpetrator may cause your readers to pass on your next book.

The Villain

Somewhere along the line, it seems to have become politically incorrect for villains to be anything but poor hapless victims who had horrendous childhoods and became the way they are because they couldn't help it. Or they're suffering from some bizarre mental disorder that takes away their culpability. This has become so common that it's almost trite. Yes, this does exist in the world, but a lot of people had horrendous childhoods and didn't become mass murderers, and probably few people with a mental disorder are likely to turn into knife-wielding maniacs when someone accidentally says something to set them off. People from all walks of life commit crimes for reasons that they can easily justify to themselves, if not to the law. Using the insanity angle, especially when it's without any sort of prior warning that there might be a problem with that character, is along the lines of using Joe Farnam, the passing mass murderer. Yes, you surprised your reader, but you didn't play fair doing it.

Readers also indicated that they didn't want to know too much about a villain's motives and background, or his identity, too soon in the story. Revealing too much can take away from the sense of dread the reader feels. It takes away from the game of figuring out whodunit, and why. Balance is required to reveal just enough to provide clues without giving away too much. Many prefer the bad guy to be a mysterious figure until the climax of the book.

The Protagonist

Whether male or female, your protagonist starts off at a disadvantage. Face it—villains tend to be more colorful characters, because they don't play by the rules. It's up to you to make your protagonist interesting enough for a reader to care about, but there are pitfalls to avoid.

Too perfect or too flawed—As one reader brought out, there are protagonists that speak seventeen languages and can solve complex mathematical equations while working out tomorrow's lunch menu and painting the Sistine Chapel, or other equally improbable things. There are also protagonists who are so flawed that it's nearly impossible to imagine them being capable of dealing with the plots they're presented with.

Too dull or wooden. Not fleshed out. Stereotypes. These are things that will render a protagonist into someone the reader cannot connect with. If they can't connect with your protagonist, there's a good chance they won't read to the end to find out whodunit.

For your protagonist to connect, he or she needs to feel real to the reader. Overly perfect or overly flawed comes across as a caricature—someone who works well will have strengths as well as flaws in a good balance. Character descriptions should include physical details that will help readers picture them in their own minds, and some history to provide readers with a sense of

who the protagonist is. Your protagonist becomes the reader's closest companion for the course of the book. Would you want to go on an adventure with a perfect stranger who remains a stranger from beginning to end?

Think through who your protagonist is, how you want to present him or her. Does he or she have interesting hobbies or character quirks that can be logically worked into the story without detracting from it? Find things about your character that will make a reader want to take that journey with your protagonist as the guide.

Pacing

There are some things that can absolutely kill your pacing, which is important in suspense because the speed of the narrative, or the lack thereof, can make all the difference between a compelling tale and a slow tome that a reader might put down and never think to pick up again.

Extreme detail: Detail is important, there is no denying that. But if it takes a writer three pages to describe the room the protagonist is standing in, could that perhaps be overkill? Sometimes you want the reader to see the revolver on the mantelpiece because you intend to use it later in the story, but describing it in detail if you never intend to use it will only slow the narrative. Is it really necessary to describe every fold in the drapes to let the readers know that there are heavy blue curtains at the windows? Huge blocks of description are like unexpected speed bumps. They slow the pace and draw the reader away from the action.

There are some things that can be considered common experience. For instance, most people know what a palm tree looks like. It's not necessary to describe what each individual frond looks like and how it's positioned for a reader to understand that there's a palm tree there. Most people know what a horse, a cow, or a dog looks like in general. There may be a need to throw in a qualifier, that the horse was a Clydesdale, or the cow was an Angus, or the dog was a Labrador. That, and a brief description of the animal's color, are generally more than enough for most readers.

In other words, use a big brush when painting in the common experience details, and a fine brush to bring attention to those things that are vital to your plot or characterizations. Unnecessary detail slows you down.

Plot exposition, or the info-dump: It can be very tempting to give essential details in one big paragraph, to get it out of the way. This is another speed bump. Can you work the details in a bit at a time in other ways? A bit here or there in dialogue, or in a character's thoughts as they're involved in an otherwise uninteresting activity such as driving or waiting for the bus? A truckload of gravel can either make a pile five feet high, or a nice driveway surface if it's spread out. You want the one that keeps things smooth and makes it easy to get down your driveway.

Beware—the info dump can also take place as a solid lump of dialogue, as one character shares information with another and thus with the reader. This takes on a rather ludicrous aspect in its "As you know, Bob," form, when one character is telling another something that the second

character clearly already knows, as a ploy to make sure the reader knows it as well. It's better to find another way of sharing that with the reader.

Unnecessary repetition: This can happen more easily than you'd think, because as writers, it can take us quite a while to get a story down on paper. Details that we wrote early in the story are no longer fresh in our minds, and it's tempting to think that we need to explain something again that we first wrote about two months ago. Remember, though, that what takes us months or even years to write will be devoured by the reader in a matter of hours, perhaps days at the most for slower readers. The same details given over and over and over will interrupt the flow, and cause your reader to question whether they've fallen into a time warp because they've read that bit before.

Inconsistencies in pacing: Have you ever read something where someone turns the heat on under a kettle, turns to have a conversation with their companion, and before they've gotten five words out, the kettle is whistling? This example is literally only a slight exaggeration—I have seen this type of thing in stories before. How long does it really take for a kettle to boil? How long does it take for a woman with long hair to braid it or pin it up on her head? How long does it actually take to drive across town, pick someone up, and come back? If you have one character head off to pick up the kids while two others have a conversation, and you have only five minutes of dialogue before the kids arrive, either the kids were right across the street, or you didn't think about the time actually involved in the scene. Believe me, your readers won't miss the mistake, and they're going to take time out from reading your story to wonder what you were thinking when you wrote that.

Also, in describing action, it's good to keep in mind that if it takes much longer to *read* your description of the action than it would have taken for the action to actually *happen*, it can slow your pacing tremendously.

Some things would seem to be intuitive, but sometimes aren't:

Research

Writing about something you've never had hands-on experience with means you'll be doing research if you want to write about it knowledgeably. This is not a place where you can wing it. You will have readers who will know you got it wrong, in all likelihood ones that you wanted to attract by writing about the subject in the first place. Not only will they probably not finish your story, they'll tell their friends about you story, so you'll lose not just those readers who bought the book, you'll lose others who will never bother to buy it.

Do readers notice what might appear to be inconsequential details? Yes. And they will let you know about it if you get it wrong, usually in terms that will make you feel stupid. This is easy enough to avoid by making sure you know what you're writing about before you start.

Trust Your Audience's Intelligence

Most readers of mystery/suspense stories are intelligent, educated people who resent being talked down to. They keep track of clues and details as they try to beat your protagonist to the solution of the mystery or the identity of the villain. If you've done your job properly, sharing clues and information throughout the narrative, you will not need to provide your readers with a detailed summary and explanation of what happened and how your protagonist reached the conclusions he or she did. As one reader pointed out, such a summary and explanation is insulting to your readers' intelligence. If you're concerned that you might not have explained things well enough through the narrative, have someone read it and tell you if they found it confusing. Leave the summarizing and explaining to the writers who never intended to let you beat them to the solution, so they can show off their protagonists' detective skills in the grand drawing-room finale.

"Man Behind the Curtain" Syndrome

A writer's job is to engage a reader's emotions and senses in the story. One has to be careful, though, to avoid becoming the 'man behind the curtain,' writing things that are so obviously meant to make the reader feel joy or fear or anger that you can almost see the man standing there with cue cards and a cattle prod. The TV Movie of the Week needs to use these sort of tricks because they've only got an hour and a half to tell you the story, and usually have to engage your emotions within the first few minutes if they want you to feel for a character who dies early in the movie. Writers of novels, however, have time to be subtle about it. The best way to learn this is to read the works of other writers with an eye toward what they are doing and how they're doing it. Practice it. It's a skill that will make your narrative much smoother, and you won't be insulting your readers by telling them how they should be feeling at any given point in your novel.

Many thanks to the readers who responded to the polls, and my thanks to you for joining us for this workshop!

Muse Online Writers Conference
October 9-13, 2006