

HOW DO YOU WRITE A GRIPPING MURDER MYSTERY?

Joanne West

BA Film & TV – 2006264

Kylie Boon

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

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How Do You Write a Gripping Murder Mystery?

Introduction

You pick up a pen and you write the first line of your very first murder mystery story. You have no idea where it is going to take you and you have fun bringing these characters to life, but you have to stop every five minutes to make up names. You pick the perfect names and start again. You become engrossed in your writing and after an hour you decide to read your masterpiece. You read it and you realise it is the most boring, plotless thing you have ever read. Then you start panicking and thinking you aren't good enough to do this and your book goes down and you leave it for a few days. Days turn into weeks, weeks into months and then your precious book; the one you had high hopes for is nothing more than some scribbles in a book in a drawer, not to be seen again until you have your next big spring clean!

Does this sound familiar? This is certainly my experience of writing. I'd jump straight in with no clear idea of what I wanted to achieve, I just thought I would write a book and that it would come easy to me. I'd use prose to describe a situation within a scene naturally but I never knew where it was leading and it became very frustrating. I will be researching information from a variety of sources and bringing to you the key elements required to write a gripping murder mystery, I will also be reflecting on my past work and how I am going to apply these practices to my future work.

Where do you Start?

Talking about his routines as a writer, Jeffery Deaver says “I spend 8 months on each book before I write a single word! That’s eight months of outlining and research” (Deaver, 2022) You start your book. You then need to give your character's lives, identities, stories, jobs, and hobbies. Once you have done that, you need to think about what you are doing with them. Where is the story heading, what is the turning point, who is the protagonist, and who is the antagonist? Where is the conflict? How would you know where to start it if you don’t know where your story is going or will even end up? Writing a story without a structure is like trying to assemble a car without a blueprint. There is a process, and the process is there for a reason. Denver meticulously puts his plots, character development, chapters, cliff-hangers, and subplots together before he even starts the book.

Looking at and reflecting on my work in the two years I have been at the university I have seen exactly where my downfalls have been. I came up with the story of Dotty Darwin. I brought her to life in my head, knew what she looked like, gave her mannerisms and an accent with a back-story, and then started the book. It started well, despite me not knowing what it was about. I described Dotty, her house and a little about her back story as well as her dog and the little boy she heard crying, I even introduced her best friend and detective Doc and his latest disappearance, last seen in the Marina SA1 and then it went cold. I had no idea where it was going or what I was doing with them. Denver's writing practice of mapping out the whole book/show or whatever story you are writing makes so much sense to me. Right after I have handed in my submissions I am going to look online for an already prepared story-plot chart or make my own and re-use that every time I have a story idea. Characters, plot, episode or chapter concepts, sub-plot, turning points and the main one, the ending, or endings.

Understanding Subtext and Subplot

What is a subtext? I hear you say. Put most simply, a subtext is the execution of the unexplained; a theme.

Subtext can be seen as an example in the film *Citizen Kane* (1941). Welles starts the film with the word “Rosebud”. This sets in motion the subtext of the whole film. Whilst the plot tells the story of a newspaper reporter being assigned to find out Kane’s dying word(s) the subtext is of the word “Rosebud” and no one knows the meaning of that word until the end of the film. Welles plants clues to this word for the viewers throughout the whole film.

The subplot is a secondary plot which also runs parallel to the main plot and is more to do with the character. As a child, Kane lived with his mother in poverty until she gave him up to a stranger so that he could be properly educated. He was sitting on his favourite sledge (Rosebud) on the day he was taken away and he spends the rest of his life living in resentment, that resentment eventually fuels his success.

As you can see the plot, the subplot and the subtext run parallel to each other in the story. I have not applied this to any of my storytelling and until this essay, I didn’t fully understand it. Looking at Dotty Darwin, I had no subtext going on. In the beginning, she hears a little boy crying under the pier late at night but when she goes to investigate, there was no one there. This could be classed as a subtext but reflecting on point 1 of this essay, I hadn’t planned where I was going with it so I can not possibly expect to run a subtext through it if I don’t know where my subtext is going. Going forward and taking Dotty Darwin as an example, I plan to apply my subtext in my structuring phase. I will decide what it will be and then run small subliminal messages throughout the whole story before I start writing it. Looking back as a viewer of movies, I often picked up on these messages and used to wonder how clever you must be to always keep running that theme throughout the story without

forgetting. I wondered how it was portrayed so well and now I know, it is all in the planning from the beginning. I will apply this to all my stories, but I will be paying particular attention to Murder mysteries as the subtext will add clues for a final reveal at the end, one which the viewers had been getting the subliminal messages for and the subplots I will be running to add more depth to my characters and make them come to life more.

Look for Tips

Researching tips from already successful writers is one of the best ways you can enhance your writing skills. Writing is a craft and it can be learned. There are processes and if you follow these processes then it will work. To write a good murder mystery, you must learn the craft and turn to established authors for advice. Turn to writers within your specific genre and also outside of it.

Best selling Author Dana Stabenow gives some tips, one of them being “Begin with the murder. Get into the victim’s head as they die. Make it as real and as awful as you can”. (Stabenow, 2022) To become a good and convincing writer, you must be able to grip your readers, grab their attention and make them want more. If you are writing a book, you want your readers to buy it after reading the first few lines. If you are writing a screenplay, you want the potential producers to turn the pages and buy the script. Going forward, I will be using this advice to truly imagine what it must be like to be murdered. I can also use it for all different scenarios. Being mugged, being held at gunpoint, getting run over ETC I haven’t applied that so far in my writing, I just created a scene, thought of a murder situation and I was away to go writing about the murder in detail but I was telling and not showing. Can you imagine how detailed the murder would be if you took your mind away **to** the murder instead of just explaining the murder **to** your audience?

Another way to access tips for your craft is to look at professional companies that specialise in screenwriting and writing in general. Studiobinder, Scribe meets world, Masterclass, Reedsy, just to name a few. In this Masterclass article, point 2, they say “Know every detail of the crime” (Masterclass Staff, 2022). How can a writer portray a murder if they haven’t fully thought out every detail of the murder? Whilst getting into the nitty-gritty details of this murder there could be subtexts included, thus giving an even deeper arc to your story.

After reflecting on my writing before this essay, I can see that I was extremely naive to think I could write a gripping murder mystery without applying all of the above techniques. This has been invaluable to me because I plan to spend the next 8 months planning Dotty, adding subtexts and plots whilst referring to authors and web pages designed to assist writers with valuable information for their craft.

Know Your Genre

There are many subgenres in the crime category. You need to know which one you are writing about so it doesn’t end up a mishmash of different genres and you are then left scratching your head trying to explain what your story is about. “The most basic division – the question that comes up all the time is: Just what is the difference between a mystery and a thriller?” (Child and King, 2021) Neil Nyren states in the book ‘How to write a mystery’ that the difference between a mystery and a thriller is that a mystery is a puzzle, a whodunit, it leaves the viewer/reader guessing all the way through and a thriller is about adrenaline, surely more bad things will happen if the protagonist doesn’t do something to stop them. Not only is it the two obvious ones but the genres divide even further EG: Cozy, caper, Noir, suspense ETC. If you are not careful, you could start your story in one subgenre and finish on another and unless that was purposely written in could result in a confusing read. You need to make

sure you read up on your subgenres before your planning stage so that when you start, you know exactly what you want from your story.

Reflecting on this, I haven't done this before but yet again, this essay has been invaluable to me because I now know how I am going to start the planning stage for Dotty Darwin. I knew in my head the kind of feel I wanted which was cosy but I didn't know that was an actual subgenre. Dotty Darwin will be a cosy mystery. Thinking about other stories I have started and not taken any further because of my lack of planning, I have now realised that I didn't know what they were either. Going forward, and depending on whether I have my story and characters in my head or not, I am going to either put that research in before the planning or I will do it halfway through my planning stage when I know what it is I wish to achieve from my story. I will also keep reverting to this genre to ensure my story is in keeping with it and that I am not spiralling unwittingly into another genre.

Get Into Your Characters Heads

"Your characters may live in your head but how do you get into theirs?" (Fox, 2017) Sarah gives us 6 tips on getting into the minds of your characters and below I am going to touch over three of them.

Understanding how your character feels in that moment is a great way to explain the emotion, if you have never experienced what you are writing about ask some friends or research real-life interviews about the thing you are writing about. You could be writing about a mother who has lost her child; one prime example could be to watch some documentaries and pay special attention to the words they use and how they say them. Get to know where your character lives. Take a trip down there, go online and look up the village or if it is made up, base it somewhere you know very well. Your ability to set the scene for your reader or viewer will be consistent if you are already familiar with the place. Shop for them.

One of the greatest pieces of advice I have learned from doing this essay is to go out and shop for your character. Reflecting on these points, I am rather pleased with myself that I already did point two which is setting the scene in a familiar place. In Dotty Darwin I have set the book in Mumbles, I kept it as Mumbles in the book but I didn't need to, I could have used the same town to describe but renamed it. I also think that shopping for your character is a wonderful piece of advice. Once I have started my planning phase I will be going to town and I will shop for my character. I don't necessarily need to buy the clothes but dressing in the clothes I would like my character to wear will give me a deeper understanding of who she is, I can take pictures of me dressed in character and use them on a visual board when character building. Aside from Dotty, I will be applying this to all my stories, if I want to take story writing seriously I quite literally, need to get into character.

Conclusion

So, what have I learned from this essay? Have I learnt how to write a gripping murder mystery? I wouldn't say I have learnt exactly how to write one but the information I have provided is some really strong foundations which I can build on to achieve that goal. I went to the trouble of researching as many elements of writing a gripping murder mystery as I could. I visited hundreds of websites. I visited authors' and screenwriters' blogs, books, and web pages and I picked out a select amount of advice and brought them to you. I argued that you couldn't write a brilliant story without planning first and due to my research and according to most writers this is the case but there were a few exceptions.

The foundations I have put in place in this essay are going to catapult my writing practices that little bit further than I ever thought they could before this essay. To apply story structures and episode or chapter layout in advance of starting the book or movie, getting into character and weaving in the subtexts and subplots in the structure stage are all small little feathers that combine to create the beauty of a peacocks tail.

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