

TEN TIPS FOR WRITING

MYSTERIES

Camille Minichino

OVERVIEW

Mystery novels remain one of the most popular categories of fiction. The spectrum of crime fiction published today is broad, spanning titles from the coziest whodunits, where the lady who runs the crafts store solves all the town's murders, to the most graphic thrillers, where the lives of millions are at stake. Each subgenre has different conventions, but there are characteristics that apply to all: a strong and appealing protagonist, a compelling story with red herrings and interesting twists, and a satisfying conclusion. Here are ten tips to help you write a polished, dynamic page-turner, no matter what the subgenre.

TIP ONE: FIND YOUR NICHE

The best reason for choosing to write a mystery is that you love to read them. Take a minute to analyze your mystery reading habits. Do you prefer hard-edged or soft boiled? Gritty or cozy? Graphic or "fade to black?" A professional detective or an amateur who gets caught up in solving a crime? Being able to pinpoint the subgenre is critical in selling your book to an agent or publisher.

TIP TWO: NAIL DOWN THE TROPES

Read extensively in your subgenre. Note what works and what doesn't. Pay attention to details like chapter length and number of characters. How early in the book does the murder take place? When is each new character introduced? Is profanity acceptable? Yes, there's a formula. Like the architect who must start with the basic structure of floors and ceilings, it's up to the writer to add the elements that make his book unique.

TIP THREE: BUILD THE CHARACTER ARC

Whether your sleuth is an amateur or a professional, give him an arc of personal growth that is apart from, but runs parallel to, solving the crime. Maybe he's afraid of heights but in order to find the last clue he has to climb to a rooftop. Maybe she thinks ill of a secondary character, but finds out in the course of the investigation that she's misjudged him and has thus learned something about herself.

TIP FOUR: MOTIVATE YOUR SLEUTH

Especially if your detective is not a professional, there must be a compelling reason for him to want to solve the crime. But even if your sleuth is a homicide detective or a PI, it's a good idea to add a personal motive for her passion to bring the killer to justice. Is the victim related to a friend? Is there backstory that makes this case important? Will this case help resolve a personal issue?

TIP FIVE: BEAT THE READER OVER THE HEAD

Be aware that although you introduced Johnny in Chapter Three, the reader might have gone to Tahiti and back since she picked up your book. Provide a tag line nearly every time you mention Johnny. Remind the reader who he is and what he's like through action or description. Maybe his baldhead picks up light from the lamp; maybe he's wearing the tie with the gravy stain in the middle of the flock of seagulls.

TIP SIX: DELETE SMALL TALK

Make your dialogue count. Never use throwaway words like "Well, ..." or information-free phrases like "How are you?" Instead, use "Do you still suffer from ...?" or "When's your surgery?" Give each character a distinctive phrase or manner of speaking, without going overboard. Use accents sparingly or you'll annoy the reader.

TIP SEVEN: MARK TIME WELL

Pace the story by interweaving all the elements of fiction in every scene: action, dialogue, physical description of the setting, physical description of the characters, internal thoughts and physiological sensations of your point of view

character. Spending too much time on one element, such as lumping several paragraphs in row to describe scenery, will bore the reader and distract from the story.

TIP EIGHT: LAYER THE CRIMES

Each suspect should have some flaw that makes him seem guilty of murder, but in the end is a lesser crime. Your sleuth discovers that the victim's financial manager is an embezzler, but not a murderer; the butler has been skimming from the cookie jar, but he's not a killer. The murderer will be the last to be revealed, but on the way, your sleuth finds that everyone is hiding something.

TIP NINE: MAKE EVERY SCENE COUNT

Each scene needs an arc of its own, with a beginning, middle, and end. Each scene must move your story forward. Avoid throwaway scenes that are simply funny or pertain to a romantic thread. Plant an "aha" moment in the line of that joke, or a clue as the date progresses. Everyone, even Cupid, must serve the mystery! Consider also a cliffhanger ending to each scene, as long as you eventually include a payoff.

TIP TEN: MAKE EVERY WORD COUNT

Use allusions and figures of speech wisely. Choose a theme or metaphor or leit motif and stay with it. If your sleuth is a scientist, show us her world through metaphors that evoke laboratory smells and equipment. Don't throw in a reference to Hamlet unless you've convinced us that she's also a Shakespeare buff. Like a beautiful painting, your novel should have a finely tuned palette.

RESOURCES

The Howdunit Series from Writers Digest Books, written as aides to writers and covering all aspects of crime, crime scenes, and police procedure.

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA, the premier professional organization for crime writers. www.mysterywriters.org

SISTERS IN CRIME, a national service organization that offers support and information to male and female crime writers. www.sistersincrime.org

ABOUT CAMILLE MINICHINO

Camille Minichino is the author of short stories, articles, and three mystery series, currently totaling 14 novels. The Periodic Table Mysteries feature a retired physicist (like herself); the Miniature Mysteries, written as Margaret Grace, feature a miniaturist (like herself); the Professor Sophie Knowles Mysteries, written as Ada Madison, feature a college math teacher (yes, like herself). Dr. Minichino teaches science at Golden Gate University in San Francisco and conducts writing workshops throughout the Bay Area. She is a member and past president of the Northern California chapters of MWA and SinC. Visit her at www.minichino.com or contact her at camille@minichino.com.