

TEN TIPS FOR WRITING MYSTERY SERIES

Camille Minichino

OVERVIEW

Readers of crime fiction love series. They like nothing better than to get to know a protagonist and his world over the course of many books, much as we enjoy the episodes of a television drama series. Each story must stand alone, with its own character and story arcs, but with a larger character arc that encompasses the whole series. It's the writer's job to reveal character over many books, making sure that new readers will understand and old readers will not be bored. Once all of your investigator's personal issues are resolved, the series is over.

TIP ONE: PLAN AHEAD

Think carefully about your protagonist before you begin a mystery series. Your sleuth, if amateur must have an interesting enough job to ride out many books; thus, a loner in an accounting office might not work. If your protagonist is a professional investigator, he should work enough outside the box to be appealing and worthy of return visits.

TIP TWO: RIDE THE BFF WAVE

Give your protagonist/sleuth a complementary friend! Is your sleuth logical and literal to the point of obsession? Give her a friend who will force her to dig into her intuitive side, someone who shows her another way to approach problem solving—and life. This Best Friend Forever can be a partner, a spouse, a grandchild, or the old fashioned Watson-like sidekick. You'll be able to bring the BFF forward in other entries to your series.

TIP THREE: MAKE EACH COHORT COUNT

Other than having a BFF, how "connected" should your protagonist be? Not as much as you the author need to be to sell and promote your book! Giving your sleuth too many friends makes the story hard to handle, but give him too few and you're stuck with not enough of a cast to keep a series going. Avoid the trap of needing to conjure up a long-lost cousin in the fifth book.

TIP FOUR: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Whether your setting is real or fictional, make it sparkle. If it's a real city, be sure to use its special character, whether climate, storied neighborhoods, or physical attraction. If you make up a town, you're free to give it a specialness of your own choosing, like an annual festival or performance, or a unique cuisine. Convince the reader that it's worth revisiting your setting over and over in the series.

TIP FIVE: BECOME A BOOKKEEPER

Keeping track of details is especially essential when writing a series. Create a handy chart where you list each character's physical attributes and backstory, plus her preferences for things like music, books, hobbies, and fashion. Each time you start a new book in the series, check to be sure that if Virgil has a son in book two, he still has a son in book three.

TIP SIX: BECOME A SKETCH ARTIST

Even a crude sketch of your crime scene will come in handy for keeping the details of the crime straight throughout the book. Sketch every room that's important in your story. The sketches also serve as inspiration if you find yourself blocked and needing a new avenue to explore. Go back to the sketches. Where's the bullet casing? What purpose is served by the window overlooking the garden?

TIP SEVEN: START IN THE MIDDLE

Be ready when readers want the first in your series and the bookstore has only your latest in stock. Remind readers through promotion that each book stands on its own with a fully developed and resolved story and that your protagonist can be completely understood as he appears in each book. Just as you can make new friends mid-life, you can meet a character mid-series and have a satisfying relationship.

TIP EIGHT: MAKE YOUR OWN CALENDAR

Books in a series are typically released a year apart. Does your sleuth also age a year? Are you ready for a sleuth that's twelve years older in the twelfth book? It's your choice, but if you make your sleuth ageless, be sure to deal correctly with factors like changes in technology. A fictional investigator operating even five years ago has significantly fewer resources at her disposal. Keep track of your schedule of aging!

TIP NINE: KILL CREATIVELY

Be aware that readers of series like to be surprised, but not too much! Stay true to the personalities and voices of your characters, but be creative with your villains, weapons, and the resources your protagonist uses to solve the crime. Find a new way to build suspense in each book and a new escape route for your sleuth in each threatening situation.

TIP TEN: POSTPONE THE WEDDING

Romantic threads are common in mystery series and there's much debate about whether keeping the romantic tension between unmarried characters is preferable to marrying them off quickly. It does seem that there are more opportunities for adventures and hazardous duty if your sleuth doesn't have to be home for dinner every night! Your choice, and it's your job to be sure no excitement is lost whether your sleuth says "I do" or not.

RESOURCES FOR MYSTERY WRITERS

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.