How to write a successful series of mystery novels.

How to Write a Mystery Novel

By Gene Grossman

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How to Write a Mystery Novel

Behind the Scenes: Creation of a Crime Series

By Gene Grossman,
Author of the popular 15-book
Peter Sharp Legal Mysteries

Magic Lamp
Press ™

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Chapter One: GETTING STARTED

If you plan on being a one-trick pony, then any type of character you want to create will probably be just fine, as long as you do a good job at it. But, if you plan on writing a series of books featuring the same protagonist (leading character), then you'd better spend some time crafting him (or her), because the character traits your main protagonist starts out with will have to carry all the future books too, without much of a character arc.

Arthur Conan Doyle wrote 60 stories featuring *Sherlock Holmes* (4 novels + 56 short stories – I know, because I read all of them every five years or so); Agatha Christie had her *Miss Marple* and *Hercule Poirot*; Rex Stout wrote 72 books featuring his armchair detective *Nero Wolfe*, and other authors have created main characters that were successfully brought back time and again.

Ever since reading Edgar Allen Poe's **The Gold Bug** and **Murders in the Rue Morgue** (while in elementary school) and then graduating to Doyle, Stout and Christie, I was hooked on mysteries, so there was never any doubt in my mind that someday I'd write a series of

books that featured a main protagonist who could be brought back again for subsequent adventures. The main problem is creating a lead character that deserves to be brought back... and repetition can be a good thing.

You can tell what's working and what's not, the same way you can tell if a movie or television show is working: if you look at your watch more than once during the presentation, it's not working, but if at the end, you're sorry it's over and are looking forward to the next episode or sequel, it's definitely working.

When starting to write the Peter Sharp Legal Mystery series, I wanted to make sure that my protagonist wasn't too perfect. I wanted someone slightly flawed so that the readers could identify with him.

It was bad enough that he's a lawyer, because in a lot of people's minds members of the legal profession rank down at the bottom of the popularity list, about even in the 'trustworthy' category as used car dealers or fast-talking politicians.

The problem is, once you've got a flawed character, you have to figure out some way to overcome the flaws. A blind person can have a seeing-eye-dog. A person in a wheelchair (remember Raymond Burr's ***Ironside***?) has helpers. Someone who doesn't want to leave his house (Nero Wolfe, the original 'armchair detective) can have a 'leg-man' who runs around and does all the footwork for him.

In my case, I decided to make my lead character not exactly the smartest bulb in the lamp. This would

require the introduction of another co-star to carry the intellectual burden and accomplish two things:

First, it would create a second banana to the lead character, with admirable traits that exceed those of the main protagonist; and,

Second, it would offer up another character with a distinct personality, who could be a good subject for 'cutting away' from the main plot occasionally, offering a way to manipulate the timeline of the main story.

Once the decision is made to add a co-protagonist, you must be careful to make that person quite different from your lead character, with talents that fill in for the lead character's flaws. My thinking on this matter brought to mind the old thought that 'everyone likes cute kids and dogs,' so what the heck – I threw in one of each.

The dog was easy, because I've always gotten a kick out of that campy painting of Dogs Playing Poker, and I always dreamed of having a Saint Bernard – so, because an author doesn't have to worry about feeding and cleaning up after a fictional pet, a Saint Bernard got the job.

Just having a dog isn't enough: you have to also find what professional actors describe as the secret to getting 'into a character:' you have to find 'a way in.'

In my books, the dog's 'way in' was as the pet of my lead character's co-star – the other half of the proposition – a cute kid… but not just any 'cute kid.' This particular one is a precocious little 12-year old Asian girl who just

happens to be a computer genius... and the dog is her pet.

Getting back to my statement above about 'repetition being a good thing,' one advantage is that you don't have to construct all your characters from scratch every time you put them into another book. People probably aren't reading your books in a marathon session or in the order you wrote them, so you'll have to do some character establishing, but it's your book, so do the repeating character introductions with any method you feel comfortable with, but please don't fall into the trap of 'B' movies, where one character will say to another, "that's easy for you to say, because you were a special forces marine with explosives training, and all I ever did was translate seven foreign languages for the intelligence department." That's the easy way out, and you'll be much better off defining your characters by their actions than by what other people say about them.

After the first four or five books featuring the same characters, I devised a way to eliminate being forced into thinking up ways to re-introduce the same characters: I started adding an **Introduction** to the book, that started out with "If this is the first Peter Sharp Legal Adventure you're reading, then you might like to know a little about the cast of characters that Peter usually relies upon." I then go on to introduce each character - and the exact same **Introduction** got cut and pasted into every book that followed.

This makes telling your story a lot easier, because you don't have to introduce each character at the first appearance: they're already constructed for you.

Think about a television show like **Law & Order, SVU**. There's a whole group of characters in the squad room at any given time, and during the course of an episode, each one contributes some dialogue. In network television drama, an hour show is only about 44 minutes of actual program, so if you're going to have to spend time establishing the entire cast of characters every week, the shows better be based on *short* stories, because you're never going to fit in all the character establishing and still have enough time for a decent plot with some dialogue in that short period of time.

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