

WRITING & SELLING THE MYSTERY SERIES

There are a lot of things that go into writing and selling a mystery series. Choosing the type of mystery you want to write, researching the market, coming up with a great setting, creating a unique cast of characters, and dropping clues in just the right places. Doing your homework before you start will make the whole process easier.

Know the kind of mystery you want to write before you start writing it. Do you want to write a hard boiled mystery or would you rather write a cozy mystery. There's a difference. A hard boiled mystery usually takes place in a big city with a seasoned cop and lots of action. The story is fast paced, has more violence, swearing, and even sex. Whereas a cozy mystery is more often set in a small town with a great cast of secondary characters. The story is a bit slower paced and often involves an amateur sleuth. These stories tend to have less violence, minimal swearing, and while a romance can occur, the door is most always closed on sex scenes.

Once you've determined what type of mystery you want to write, do your homework. Research the market by going to the bookstore and seeing what's on the shelves. Is there a particular publisher who publishes the type of mysteries that really appeal to you? If so, then research that publisher. A great way to do that is to use the internet. They all have websites listing books they already have out, and even better, books they have coming out soon. Make a list of all the themes you see. What ones sell well? What ones don't? Stay away from themes that don't sell well, and concentrate on ones that do. Under ones that do sell well, try to think of something that hasn't been done. Or at the very least, add a unique hook to ones that have been done so that your book will stand out.

Now that you've determined what type of mystery you are going to write, what theme you are going to use, and what hook makes your premise unique ... you must decide what location you're going to set your story in. You can either use a small town or big city that already exists, or you can make one up. Whatever route you take, just remember your setting is like another character. You must describe it in detail and make it unique. Make your readers see your setting so well that they want to visit it after reading your story. The right setting can open the door to all kinds of items and places to drop and hide clues.

Now you need a great cast of secondary characters. No matter what kind of mystery you're writing, it's the characters that make the story come alive. Make them a part of your setting, the members of the town, etc. And make them unique. We don't all dress, talk, or act alike, we all have our own little quirks that make us unique individuals. You want to develop your characters in the same way.

For example, you might have two cops in your story. Don't make them talk, look and act like stereotypical cops. Make them stand out. What your characters wear tells us a lot about their personalities as well. How do they dress: jacket and jeans, dress pants and dress shirt, graphic t-shirt and khakis? The way a character works a case can also reveal character. What do they do

when they're stuck: go for a run, play racquetball, listen to old eighties music, toss a hacky sac? And finally how do they talk: swear a lot or not at all, use slang, have a favorite saying or an accent? Do they have tics, scars, bad habits? All of those things reveal characters and make them memorable.

Once you have your quirky three dimensional characters, you have a wealth of material for clues. Based on their backgrounds and what they do for a living and relationships they have with other people in town, coming up with clues shouldn't be that difficult. First, come up with a list of clues that will lead to your murderer. Then come up with a list of clues that could "possibly" lead to your murderer, but in fact, don't. Those clues are called red herrings. You want to spread your "real" clues throughout your story, and then drop in red herrings along the way to throw the reader off.

Whatever you do, make sure the murder can actually be figured out based on the clues you've dropped. Readers will get very angry if you drop a bunch of possible random clues but never set up the real thing and just reveal the murderer in the end. You have to show the real murderer throughout the story without making it obvious he or she is "the one." You can bury the real clues well, they just have to be in there somewhere. Also, don't make the other suspects so obviously guilty, because your readers aren't fools. They are going to know right away the person is innocent because it's just too obvious that they could possibly be guilty.

In the end, make sure you wrap up all those loose ends. You can't throw in red herrings just for the sake of throwing the reader off. They have to actually be true and the detective or sleuth should solve all those mini mysteries along the way and rule out suspect after suspect as he or she is solving the big mystery and finding the real bad guy. Don't make your mystery too easy or impossibly hard, make it interesting and fun and your readers will be hooked for life.

A big tip to remember is that predictability is not your friend. Throw in twists your readers won't see coming. When logic tells you to naturally turn right, you want to throw everyone for a loop by turning left. Do the opposite of what your readers expect. However, that doesn't mean you can simply go off in any direction. You have to have motivation. As long as you have proper motivation for whatever you do, then you can explain why something happened. Just remember to keep your characters in character. Whatever you throw at them, they have to react in a believable way by staying in character. Or give them a great motivation for why they acted out of character at that time, and then get them right back on track.

Writing a mystery isn't that hard so long as you do a little homework and a little planning. And as long as your idea is unique, there will be a market for it. If you've done your job well, a series can go on for a very long time. So get writing and good luck. See you on the shelves someday soon ☺