Crafting Crime

in association with Fiction Feedback

with Martin Edwards

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Module #5

What's Going On?

Plot

The plot of a crime novel is usually important. A well-structured plot is not only artistically satisfying, it is hugely appealing to readers. Yet in some quarters there is a snobbery about plot, a sense that the craft of plotting has little to do with literary excellence or social relevance. Sometimes it's seen as merely a means of appealing to a mass readership. Writers, especially if they are inexperienced, may feel almost embarrassed to admit that they devote as much time to plotting their stories as they do to refining their elegant prose.

Disdain of well-plotted crime fiction is nothing new. It dates back to the genre's early years. The Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins showed a mastery of plot in two novels, *The Woman in the White* and *The Moonstone*, which have exerted enormous influence on later crime writers ranging from Dorothy L. Sayers to Gillian Flynn. Yet Anthony Trollope famously damned Collins with faint praise, saying that he admired his work but 'could never lose the taste of the construction'.

Writers may feel nervous or inhibited about plotting because it's perceived as difficult to do well. Plotting is a literary skill like any other, and you can learn and develop it.

Does plot matter? One of the masters of the American private eye novel, Raymond Chandler, was far more interested in literary style and characterising people and place. He drew a distinction between 'people who can plot but can't write' and 'people who can write and, all too often, can't plot'. Yet it doesn't have to be as stark as that. There's no reason why an author who writes well should be unable to devise an effective plot.

There is a famous story about a screenwriter who was trying to make sense of the plot of Chandler's superb debut novel, *The Big Sleep*, and could not fathom who was responsible for one of the murders in the story. As a last resort, a telegram was sent to the author, asking for clarification. Chandler's reply: 'Damned if I know.'

You can probably get away with such a cavalier attitude if you write as well as Chandler, but it's better to show your readers more respect. All authors make mistakes, but you'll want to keep them to a minimum. This means, for example, that the loose ends of your plot should be tied up in some appropriate way. Of course, there is scope for subtlety and deliberate ambiguity – and most definitely for certain characters getting away

with murder or defying conventional justice by some other means. That isn't, however, an excuse for lazy or careless storytelling.

As ever, the key is to keep your readers in the forefront of your mind. The snag is, of course, that readers are as diverse as writers, and their preferences vary widely. Some people who read a mystery novel enjoy trying to deduce (or guess) how it will end. Others are content to be taken along on the journey towards the story's conclusion.

Even readers who like to do their own detective work don't necessarily demand a neat, highly logical ending in the Agatha Christie manner. In one way or another, though, people who devote time to reading a novel hope to feel a sense of satisfaction once they have reached the final page. A crime novel that fizzles out into anti-climax will disappoint all but the most forgiving.

Yet crime novels with anti-climactic endings are not as rare as one might expect. The second half of too many books, and not just those written by inexperience or tired writers, represents a dip in quality from the first half. A loss of energy or enthusiasm is often to blame. Endings are too often rushed.

The failings take a variety of forms. A whodunit in which it is patently obvious who actually did it is one example, a psychological thriller which ends in psychological absurdity is another. Sometimes the outcome is inadequately foreshadowed or the way the characters behave in the later pages seems inconsistent or incredible. And sometimes the outcome is simply not just unoriginal but tediously predictable.

Problems arise when authors devote all their effort and imagination to concocting a memorable and mysterious opening. If what happens later in the book doesn't live up to the story's early, dazzling promise, the reader will feel let down. This is so whether the book is a locked room mystery with a crude solution to the criminal puzzle, or a suspense novel in which the tension or a sense of intrigue dissipates far too soon.

How much latitude a reasonable reader will allow you when judging the quality of the book's resolution will depend in part on the type of story you're writing. There's an element of artificiality about the traditional whodunit, and readers will often tolerate an explanation for events that is unlikely in the extreme. Raymond Chandler mocked Christie's solution to *Murder on the Orient Express*, saying: 'Only a half-wit could guess it.' But he was missing the point. In that particular novel, if you buy into Christie's premise for the story, you are likely to enjoy the solution: this is why the book is a perennial bestseller. It's different in the case of some of Christie's less successful novels, where even a Christie fan might find the solution disappointing.

If you're trading in gritty realism, on the other hand, a feeble or unrealistic finale will diminish the impact of the book as a whole. Occasionally, a writer can defy the laws of fictional gravity. A brilliant example is Jim Thompson's tough thriller *The Getaway*, which has twice been filmed. This story about criminals on the run is atmospheric and bleakly authentic, but the finale is extraordinary and surreal. It works, because the writing is so compelling, but for the less experienced novelist it's a good idea to make sure that the end of the story is in keeping with the tenor of the novel as a whole.

So how does one achieve that? To what extent do you need to know how the story ends before you begin? There is a never-ending debate about whether it helps to plan the story out in detail before starting to write. As ever, there is no 'right' answer.

Plotter or pantser?

Some crime novelists plan their storylines to a greater or lesser degree; established writers in this category may submit an outline or synopsis to their publisher to seek feedback or approval before writing a word.

The American thriller writer Jeffery Deaver writes extraordinarily extensive outlines for his novels: his outline for *The Never Game*, the first book in a new series featuring the reward-seeker Colter Shaw, ran to 150 pages. This is an extreme example of advance planning, and it's a method that won't work for everyone. Once his outline is complete, though, the process of writing it up in novel form takes much less time. Crucially, Deaver's professionalism and perfectionism means that even after all this work, he does not skimp on revision.

As you gain in confidence, you may find less need to plan in detail before embarking on a novel. This has – broadly speaking – been my own experience, and I wondered if the same was true for other writers with similar instincts. I put the question to one of my favourite European authors, Ragnar Jónasson, who translated Agatha Christie novels prior to writing his own, and who is acutely aware of the importance of effective plotting. Ragnar told me: 'Nothing has changed in relation to the plotting, each story is very well outlined before I start, as I would not want to start a book without knowing in detail how the story is resolved. But giving the question some thought, I realise that I probably used to do more chapter-by-chapter outline on paper when I was starting, but now I rely more on planning the book out in my head. I still however, always make a note of new ideas to save for later, specific or general, but whereas I used to write them down in notebooks, now I tend to email them to me instead, as the phone is always with me and ideas come up at any time of day.'

In contrast, there are many other authors ('pantsers') who fly by the seat of their pants, beginning to write as soon as they have a starting point that seizes their imagination, without having any notion of how the story will develop or conclude. Ian Rankin, for instance, does not embark on a new novel with a clearly defined plan for the story in mind, and writes the first draft of the book at pace in an intense burst of activity, knowing that usually the manuscript will go through two extensive redrafts before he is ready to send it to his agent and publisher. Some authors vary their method from book to book, or as they gain greater experience.

When Trollope criticised Wilkie Collins's emphasis on elaborate plotting, he said: 'When I sit down to write a novel I do not at all know, and I do not very much care, how it is to end.' But Trollope wasn't writing mysteries. Crime writers do not *need* to know in advance how their story will end, but they do need to care about meeting readers' expectations.

When we examine the process of plotting, I'd suggest that the differences between the methods adopted by plotters and pantsers are not as stark as you might presume. And when you come to the end of this course, and you're preparing to submit your material for a critique from Fiction Feedback, it's worth taking advantage of the invitation to submit a short synopsis, even though (naturally) you're not obliged to do so. It may help to sharpen your thinking about the way your novel will develop. And don't worry if you anticipate that you may, as you continue to write the book, depart from the synopsis. As my publishers will tell you, I do that all the time!

The nature of plotting

The name of Fredric Brown isn't well known today, but he was one of America's most gifted post-war crime writers, and noted for the brilliance and originality of his plots. He discussed plotting in an essay for the *Mystery Writer's Handbook*, and claimed that the process is 'ridiculously simple'.

Brown's take on the subject is reassuring if – like many aspiring crime novelists – you feel anxious about or inhibited by the demands of plotting. Brown argues that the process is a matter of gradual addition: starting with a single ingredient, and adding further ingredients to it, one by one. The nature of the starting point doesn't matter. As we discussed when talking about ideas, your story may be launched by a place, or a person,

or a theme, or a newspaper headline or a snippet of overheard conversation. Brown suggests that, to begin with, the early part of the process may be entirely subconscious, so that by the time you start working on your story, part of the plot has already been developed.

This view strikes me as highly persuasive. If you read *Agatha Christie's Complete Secret Notebooks* by John Curran, you'll see that Christie's plotting technique took this form. This revealing book shows that her ingenious plots didn't come to her complete, but in bits and pieces over a period of time. One of her most successful books is *The ABC Murders*. This is a serial killer mystery put together with such economy and artistry that you might assume the storyline sprang fully formed into Christie's head. Far from it.

Her notebooks reveal that the evolution of the story involved a good deal of trial and error. At one point she thought that one of the supposed victims would turn out to be the culprit – an idea she later rejected (though it resurfaces elsewhere in her work; sensible crime writers aren't wasteful). She changed her mind about most of the locations of the crimes. Even the idea of murders in alphabetical sequence, integral to the novel in its published form, only occurred to her after she'd been working on her raw material for some time. You'd never guess this when reading the book.

Similarly, Curran's account of the genesis of *A Murder is Announced*, arguably the best novel to feature Jane Marple, shows that Christie considered at least two very different versions of the murder plot. The starting point for the book was the concept of people receiving a formal invitation to a house because 'a death has been arranged'. This is an engaging premise, quite unconnected with the question of who might kill whom and why. One idea that she toyed with was that the person who turns out to be the culprit in the published book might be the victim, killed by another character for a motive unconnected with the final version of the story.

It's worth adding here that authors borrow plot material from each other all the time, a practice quite different from plagiarism. As I've mentioned, Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* is the most famous book featuring an 'exchange of murders', but it is one of many (and wasn't the first) to utilise this idea.

Christie's central idea for *The ABC Murders* was probably inspired by a famous observation in a Father Brown story by G.K. Chesterton: 'Where does a wise man hide a leaf? In a forest?' And the ingenious use she made of that concept has been followed in a good many subsequent books, including a first-rate American police procedural novel and an exciting modern thriller that became a popular film. Those novels are very different from each other: the tone, the characters and the settings are distinctive, but the crucial plot ingredient is essentially the same. The key 'takeaway' here is that the originality you should aim for concerns your *treatment* of a story idea rather than the core idea itself.

Reinventing familiar ideas

Don't make the common mistake of dismissing tropes from detective novels of the past as outmoded and irrelevant. An imaginative writer can always make fresh and creative use of familiar ingredients. Soji Shimada has become a bestseller in Japan and elsewhere by reinventing supposedly old-fashioned story elements such as the locked room puzzle. In the UK and the US, vintage detective fiction has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years, and a growing number of leading contemporary writers have adapted elements from Golden Age fiction with much success, but mystery fiction of this kind – as I've noted, known as *honkaku* – has been enormously popular in the Far East for much longer.

I asked Soji Shimada why, in his opinion, long-established tropes remain so attractive to modern readers and authors of crime fiction. His answer:

> The ability of the human brain to enjoy plotting murder is related to that of memory. The human heart is borne from the experiences gained in the memory hard drive, and while memory is surprisingly incompetent in forecasting the future, it performs well in light of mystery as a form of entertainment. If computers were able to pre-emptively determine whether humans have a tendency to commit crimes, crime would be extremely difficult. In a world filled with cameras and police having access to big data, would a fugitive criminal remain in hiding for ten years? Probably not.
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> Picture this: there is a hotel in the snow, and the main characters are in a locked room. All the guests compare the number of each other's footsteps, and figure out their exact location. The killer can use a 3D printer to recreate a locked room to easily plot his or her scheme. If a 4D printer adds time as a factor, it might further enable the killer to 'print' the key to the locked room at a certain time. Until such days become reality, we can revel in *honkaku* mystery.

Starting at the end

When you set about plotting a traditional whodunit, one possible method is to start at the end. Let's suppose that you have an interesting explanation for a murder mystery, such as an intriguing and unexpected reason why one particular person should want to kill another. If you have a strong ending to your story clear in your mind early on, that can give you valuable confidence. You might then work backwards, devising the various steps which lead to your chosen outcome.

Arthur Conan Doyle adopted this technique. Having come up with a pleasing idea to explain a mystery, his next task was to conceal its existence and suggest alternative explanations, leaving the way clear for Sherlock Holmes to unravel the truth and describe the deductions which led him to the right answer. He 'played fair' with his readers to the extent that Holmes's reasoning was rational and carried conviction.

Agatha Christie and other Golden Age authors took the idea of fair play further. Their mysteries were often convoluted, but they prided themselves on including clues in the story which gave readers a chance to play detective themselves. Their success depended on their skill in directing the reader's attention away from the key clue.

Christopher Fowler is a versatile author who has achieved great success with his highly distinctive Bryant and May detective novels. The books pay pleasing homage to Golden Age traditions but have are unmistakeably contemporary in their concerns. When I asked him to sum up his method, he said: 'I start with a classic murder plot – an outrageous death, an elusive killer, red herrings and corpses – but I add a contemporary twist. In *London Bridge Is Falling Down*, a driver falsely claims diplomatic immunity after knocking someone down. The plot also involves the tragedy of an elderly lady who dies of neglect in the centre of town. Both of these stories were taken from press reports, the former high profile, the latter local.'

Planning

Kate Ellis, a contemporary author who works broadly in the Christie tradition, describes her methods in *Howdunit*. Her main series of books, set in a fictionalised version of Dartmouth, concerns contemporary police investigations, but there is always a parallel historical case running through each novel, which is either connected to the principal mystery or reflects a key theme of the narrative. The resulting puzzles are convoluted, but their success lies in the clear thinking devoted to their creation.

Kate Ellis builds up her plot, in essence by the 'addition' method advocated by Fredric Brown, before drawing a flowchart on a large piece of paper, with the main crime at the centre and the clues and incidents branching from it. Down one side of the paper, she does the same thing with the historical mystery. This

means she can see the skeleton of her mystery at a glance. This approach can work well for someone with an orderly and visual mind. It's also less restrictive than it may seem. Even a well-organised crime novelist benefits from adopting a flexible mindset and ensuring that they are always receptive to fresh ideas. The sheer length of a novel means that finishing it will take time. It's likely that, as you work on your book, fresh ideas will occur to you about the people you're writing about and the events you're describing. This means that even if you work out a plan in some detail, with or without a flowchart, before starting to write, you needn't worry if you leave some gaps to be filled in later. You may even decide, in due course, to make fundamental revisions to your original concept, perhaps even changing the identity of the culprit or the murder motive.

One of Britain's most successful contemporary crime novelists, Sophie Hannah, has included an essay on her website (www.sophiehannah.com) which gives fascinating insight into her methods and is well worth studying. A staunch advocate of planning, she refutes the notion that it stifles creativity or makes it more difficult to achieve in-depth characterisation or psychological insight. She too is prepared to make fundamental changes to her plans as she keeps working on the manuscript.

Making it up as you go along

The espionage and thriller writer Eric Ambler, who did not plan his books in advance, described his method of writing as a 'voyage of discovery'. He accepted that it was, at times, a wasteful method, since sometimes he found it necessary to rewrite or even abandon a book driven by a central idea that didn't work as well as he'd hoped.

Andrew Taylor doesn't plan his novels in advance, but his thoughtful account of his methods in *Howdunit* illustrates that the differences between plotters and pantsers aren't always as significant as they may seem. He doesn't know how his novels will end, but although his starting point is usually a single idea, he's usually added several more elements by the time he starts writing. How long this takes is unpredictable.

For a number of years, he had in mind the image of a man lying dead on a carpet, surrounded by Remembrance Day poppies. A friend then suggested that he write a new series based in his home territory in the Forest of Dean. At once he was instantly attracted to the idea of setting the books in the 1950s. He'd also been reading Housman's poetry, which gave him a title. The eventual result was *An Air that Kills*, which proved to be the first in a series of mysteries set around the fictional town of Lydmouth.

Even if a good idea doesn't develop quickly into a viable plot, therefore, it makes sense not to abandon them too soon or to forget them. One day something may occur to you that unlocks their potential. But for a variety of reasons, some plotlines are never used. *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks* contains several concepts – including an idea about a murder committed during a meeting of the Detection Club, of which she was President – which she never turned into published stories.

This underlines the truth that a single idea is not the same as a plot. Please don't be daunted or deterred by the challenge of constructing the plot of your novel. Remember Fredric Brown's method. You simply need to build it up, bit by bit, perhaps with trial and error over time.

Plot twists

We'll talk more about clueing later, but a word now about the Holy Grail for mystery writer: the dazzling plot twist. Sometimes that twist comes to mind as the author works on the story. But sometimes it can be present from the beginning.

Is it true that the more plot twists you have in a crime novel, the better? I don't think so. A single, truly startling yet plausible twist can often be more effective than a whole host of contrived surprises that test the reader's suspension of disbelief to breaking point.

Of course, when a sequence of plot twists is well done, the result can be highly entertaining. An example is Simon Kernick's action thriller *Severed*. The opening scene is memorable. Tyler wakes up in a strange bed, covered in blood. Lying next to him is the naked body of a young woman – his girlfriend, Leah. Her head is missing. And soon Tyler finds himself playing a DVD which appears to show him killing Leah. After that shocking start, the pace never lets up. Twist follows twist, with plenty more violence to accompany the excitement. The action is compressed into a short timescale and the agony is piled on Tyler, page after page.

A common (and enduringly popular) example of a plot twist that may form the kernel of a story is where the murderer turns out to be someone the reader may never have suspected. The reason *why* they are not suspected may be the jumping-off point for a whole novel. For instance, in a private eye novel, the guilty party may be the client who hires the detective in the first place.

Alternatively, the murderer may be someone who appears to be the intended victim of the crime. These ideas have been used and reworked countless times, but it is still possible for an imaginative writer to make them seem fresh and unexpected. Here cunning misdirection, on which so many traditional puzzle mysteries depend, is inherent in the basic idea for the story.

Dazzling plot twists are a key feature of modern psychological suspense novels such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*, both of which books make clever use of unreliable narrators.

Renee Knight's *Disclaimer* begins superbly. Catherine Ravenscroft, a middle-aged woman who has pursued a highly successful career in TV, finds a novel called *The Perfect Stranger* on her bedside table. She doesn't know where it has come from but starts reading, and finds to her horror that it tells a story about the most appalling experience of her own life, an experience she had believed was safely buried in the past. This isn't a wholly original concept – earlier versions of it can be found in Roger East's Golden Age detective novel *Murder Rehearsal* and John Franklin Bardin's post-war Freudian thriller *The Last of Philip Banter* – but that doesn't matter in the least, because the treatment is fresh and compelling. Even though the initial puzzle is explained quite early in the novel, Knight maintains tension throughout and offers a late plot twist that, because it concerns *character*, is compelling rather than contrived.

The danger for a writer is that a plot twist which is inadequately foreshadowed risks failing to have the desired impact. If it's unconvincing or doesn't make sense in the context of everything that's gone before in the story, it's better to think again and try to come up with a revelation that offers the reader genuine satisfaction as well as the thrill of surprise.

Coincidence

The more elaborate your plot, the more likely it is that coincidence will play a part in your story. In real life, coincidences happen every day, but in a crime novel too much reliance upon coincidence can make it difficult for your readers to suspend their disbelief. When revising your book, it makes sense to consider the extent to which – if at all – the storyline depends on coincidence, and seeing what you can do to reduce that dependence.

It's true that even the genre's finest novelists – Ruth Rendell, for instance - make use of coincidence in their fiction. Belinda Bauer's *Rubbernecker* won the Theakston's prize for best crime novel of the year, but was criticised in some quarters as coincidence-heavy. There is so much to admire about the quality of the writing

and the characterisation that any doubts about the plausibility of the events of the story don't count for too much. But if your writing isn't quite as sophisticated as Rendell's or Bauer's, it's better not to rely too obviously on coincidence.

Exercise

Select a crime novel that you're very familiar with and consider how you would have plotted it. Would you start at the end and work back? Write down the central premise then expand it, little by little? Create a flowchart, plan or plot spider? Or do these ideas leave you cold, and would you have written the opening and ploughed on from there?

Now take another, quite different crime novel you like and consider whether you'd use the same method. If yes, then this might be your natural way of plotting. If no, then it could be the same with your own work: different ideas for content will call for different methods of plotting.

Don't be afraid to experiment: there is no right answer, only what works best for you and your writing.