

Buried Under Books

Tales of a former indie bookseller

Picking the Right Details to Tell Your Story—and a Giveaway

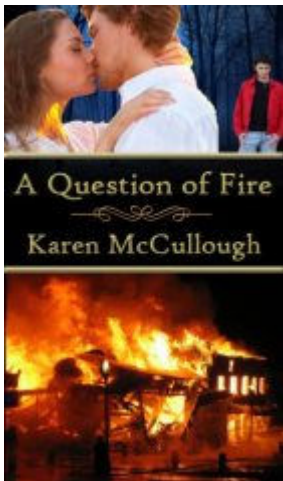
(<http://cncbooksblog.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/karen-mccullough.jpg>) Karen McCullough (<http://www.kmccullough.com/index.php>) is the author of a dozen published novels and novellas in the mystery, romantic suspense, and fantasy genres and has won numerous awards, including an Eppie Award for fantasy. She's also been a four-time Eppie finalist, and a finalist in the Prism, Dream Realm, Rising Star, Lories, Scarlett Letter, and Vixen Awards contests. Her short fiction has appeared in several anthologies and numerous small press publications in the fantasy, science fiction, and romance genres. She has three children, three grandchildren and lives in Greensboro, NC, with her husband of many years.



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(<http://cncbooksblog.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/a-question-of-fire.jpg>) When Catherine Bennett agrees to attend an important party as a favor for her boss, she knows she won't enjoy it, but she doesn't expect to end up holding a dying man in her arms. Nor did she anticipate she'd become the recipient of his last message about the location of evidence that would prove his brother innocent of murder. Now the killers are after her to get that information. She'll need the help of attorney Peter Lowell, as well as the victim's difficult, prickly younger brother and a handsome private detective to help her find the evidence before the killers do.

Buy Links:

Kindle: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B002W5RBZS>

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In a guest blog post I did here in July, I talked about the use of fractal geometry in writing mysteries. (<http://www.cncbooks.com/blog/2011/07/07/fractal-storytelling/> (<http://www.cncbooks.com/blog/2011/07/07/fractal-storytelling/>)). I tried to show how the fractal metaphor could apply to plotting and also somewhat to character development.

This time I want to talk about the use of detail in telling stories, and how the fractal model can teach us something about that as well. Keep in mind that one of the primary principles of fractal geometry is that patterns repeat at ever smaller levels within the whole.

Part of the art of story-telling lies in a sensitivity to the nuances of words and the rhythms of sentences, and maybe most important, choosing the right details to show rather than tell your story. The fractal metaphor can't tell you exactly what words to use or what details can best convey the information you want to communicate, but it can help illuminate how to choose them.

You want to pick objects, actions, and even dialogue that carry meanings and resonances beyond their specific dictionary definitions, because the fractal model tells us that those extended meanings mirror and encapsulate larger patterns.

I want to use a TV ad to illustrate how this works.

The advertisement is for NFL Mobile and Verizon, but it's more interesting to me for the way it tells a story that the NFL hopes will make you want to buy this service.

The subtext of the ad is that watching NFL Mobile on your smartphone powered by Verizon will make you a more confident, interesting and attractive person. What writers can learn from the video is how the details of the character's clothing, accessories, surroundings, and words show the changes in the character, without anyone ever telling us about the development.

You can watch the ad, NFL Mobile "Jane," here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jOjPWTfv1w> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jOjPWTfv1w>)

This is a 30-second ad that consist of five scenes: an opening that establishes an awkward, dorky character; three scenes that show the character making changes in her life, becoming more attractive and confident; then in the last scene we see her at a party, showing off the difference, all thanks to watching NFL Mobile on their Verizon smartphone. In a final humorous twist, we see that she might have actually become a bit over-confident, in fact.

The advertisers never tell us any of this; they show it.

In the first scene we see Jane sitting on her couch in a slouchy sweatshirt and fuzzy slippers, with messy hair, no makeup, wearing big, dorky glasses, surrounded by an empty ice cream carton and a pair of cats. Every detail in the scene conveys the idea of frumpy, lonely spinster – the cats, the ice cream carton, her clothes, her messy hair, the dorky glasses, even the old-fashioned wallpaper on the wall behind her. Then she picks up her smartphone and has a “Eureka” moment as she watches a football team playing on the screen.

In the next scene she’s getting her hair done. She’s still wearing the oversized glasses and no makeup, however. And then in the next, she’s in a check-out line in a hardware store. She still wears the big glasses, but her hair is more attractively styled and her demeanor is more confident. Next we see her on a bus, again still wearing the glasses, but with make-up, nice earrings, and her hair much more attractively styled.

In the final scene, she’s at some sort of party, wearing attractive makeup, a short, flirty dress, and no glasses. She’s surrounded by men and performs a loud, confident tribute to one of her favorite players. You’ve come a long way, Jane, in just 30 seconds.

Listen to the tone of her voice, how mousy it is in the first and second scenes. Notice the dramatic change in the middle of the third scene, and the increasing confidence in the next scenes.

The ad packs a lot of story into thirty seconds, and none of it is told. It’s all shown in small, mini-scenes that condense character change into brief vignettes. This is seriously fractal story-telling. Those tiny scenes use a small set of details and brief snatches of dialogue to show major changes in the characters’ lives.

Consider some of the details that carry all this implication. Jane starts out with awkward-looking glasses but loses them in the course of the story. Why? Especially in these days, when contact lenses are cheap and easy to wear, glasses are associated with geeks and nerds. They carry undertones of bookishness and awkwardness and suggestions that the wearer doesn’t care much about appearances. The cats and the empty ice cream container are classic (yes, you could say clichéd) indicators of a lonely woman, contrasting with the lights and barbecue and surrounding people in the final scene at the party.

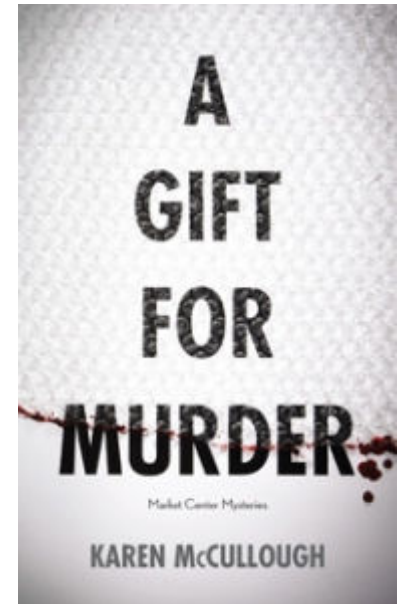
Clothing also conveys information. Jane goes from wearing baggy sweats to a stylishly short and sexy dress in the last scene. The backgrounds of each vignette suggests where the character is on the journey. It’s no accident that the second scene is set at a hair stylist (we know this because she’s sitting in one of a line of chairs with someone else washing her hair). In fact, everything you see in each frame contributes to showing the change in the character.

You see how it works?

Confession time. I admit I don’t understand why the third scene is set in a hardware store. What have I missed there? Best explanation (as judged entirely by me) will win a copy of [A Gift for Murder](#), so leave your email address with your comment. (No bonus points, but do you recognize the *other* well-known football player in the ad?)

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<http://cncbooksblog.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/a-gift-for-murder-2.jpg>) For fifty-one weeks of the year, Heather McNeil loves her job as assistant to the director of the Washington DC Market Show Center. But the Gift and Home trade show, the biggest show of the year at the center, is a week-long nightmare. This year's version is being worse than usual. Misplaced shipments, feuding exhibitors, and malfunctioning popcorn machines are all in a day's work. Finding the body of a murdered executive dumped in a trash bin during the show isn't. The discovery tips Heather's life — personal and professional — into havoc.



**To enter the drawing for a copy of A Question of Fire,**

**leave your guess about the hardware store and your**

**email address below. Karen will select the winner**

**on the evening of Thursday, December 27th. Hint:**

**show your address as Joeblow at fakemail dot com**

**to prevent spamming or phishing.**

[December 23, 2012](#) Posted by [Lelia T](#) | [Contests/Giveaways](#), [Guest Blogs](#) | [Leave a Comment](#)

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