Plotting a Mystery When You're Not a Plotter

Guest Blogger: Karen McCullough

*I an absolutely thrilled to have mystery writer **Karen McCullough** on my blog today as I adore mysteries. I'm anxious to read what she has to say about plotting mysteries, so I won't waste any more time...*

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When it comes to writing a novel, writers tend to divide into two camps, the plotters and the pantsers. The plotters generally outline the story in some detail, from beginning to end, and do character charts or plot diagrams before they start writing. Pantsers get a good idea and sit down to start writing. Hence the term "pantsers." They write by the seat of their pants.

Of course those are two extremes and most writers actually tend toward one side or the other but not necessarily all the way. Not all plotters do extensive character charts and not all pantsers fly into the mist without a clue about the story line.

It seems like a given that mystery novels benefit from the plotter approach. Don't you have to know the answer to the puzzle to plant all the right clues in the right places?

My personal answer is yes—sort of. I generally describe myself as a pantser. I prefer not to know too much about a story when I start writing it. I'll generally have a good idea of how it starts and how it ends, with a few ideas about what comes in between. I usually know enough to be able to write an outline for my editor, but just the bare bones of the structure. I once wrote a long, detailed outline for a story, but by the time I finished it, I'd lost all interest in actually writing the novel.

But mysteries do require careful construction. You do have to place the clues carefully, interspersed with an appropriate bunch of red herrings. The characters have to be right for the story and behave in believable ways. How can you do that when you don't start with knowing all the intricacies?
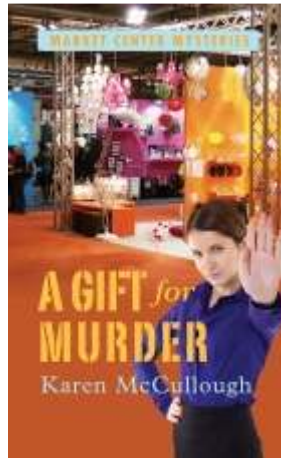
No two writers do things exactly the same way, but I've developed a technique that works for me. I start with a general idea of how the story begins, usually the finding of a body or setting up the conflict that will result in a crime. I usually have a pretty good idea who the guilty party will turn out to be. And I know who my detective will be, and why he or she has an important stake in the solving of the mystery.

But I don't always know how it was done or why or even which clues will turn out to be important for the solution.

I write around that problem by creating what I think of as a rich environment in the story. I create a set of character who might all have a motive to commit the crime. I show a number of events that might have a bearing on the crime. I offer a lot of details that circle around the crime, some of which could provide evidence or suggestions.

My decision to set my new mystery series at a trade show almost automatically provides a gushing

well of possibilities to use in stories. So many things go on at trade shows, so many cross-currents of cooperation, jealousy, spying, bad-mouthing, back-stabbing, love affairs, and friendships develop.

Obviously not all of the things I show will turn out to be relevant. Some characters, events and objects will provide interesting and possibly related subplots, like the question of one character's motivation for the help he provides my detective heroine in **A GIFT FOR MURDER**. And some things are there mostly to test the resolve of the detective and develop her character, like the whole popcorn machine subplot in the same book.

In truth I can't really tell you how or why it actually comes together in the end. There's a bit of trust involved in my investment in writing a mystery novel. But it seems like it always happens that somewhere about one half to two-thirds of the way through the story I have an "Aha" moment where I realize what my subconscious has been telling me throughout the writing. I know who did it and can show the chain of clues that led to that conclusion.

And, yes, it does sometimes mean that I have to go back and rewrite earlier chapters to plant a new clue here or there, put a new slant on an event or make subtle changes to the characters. But it comes together, sometimes in ways that even I find surprising. And that's the real joy of writing for me, and why plotting too deeply ahead of time doesn't work for me.

I want to learn the answer to the puzzle right along with the characters I'm writing about.

Thank you so much, Karen! That was a fascinating look at how a mystery writer tackles the creative process.

I hope folks will leave comments for Karen and visit her at her website at: http://www.kmccullough.com/

Posted by Amy at 8:54 PM
Labels: mysteries, Mystery, Plotting

3 comments:

Sherry Gloag said...

Karen I have wondered whether mystery/detective story writers 'have' to plot their stories ahead of time. It's nice to read you are a panster.
I enjoyed your post. Thanks for sharing.

10:20 AM

Karen McCullough said...
Hi Sherry --

You're welcome! I'm pretty sure the plotters have an advantage when it comes to writing mystery stories, but we "pansers" can still do it.

Karen

9:43 AM

Susanne Alleyn said...
I'm relieved to see that my "semi-panster" process is pretty much like yours. And I thought I was the only one!

My standard writing of the first draft: While knowing roughly who got murdered, how, why, and whodunit, write first third of novel. Get stuck. Go to end of file and write last chapter. Get stuck again. Write a chapter that occurs somewhere in the middle which I know has to appear in the novel. Write the chapter that immediately precedes the last chapter. Continue writing necessary, but unconnected, chapters until they total 80,000 words or more and the plot is there. Look at gaps between chapters/scenes and provide needed transitions. Oh yes, and go back and stick in the clues that you realize you need to plant earlier in the story. Re-read ms from start to finish and realize you used the exact same phrase in both pages 117 and 118 because you wrote the two scenes two months apart and in reverse order.

Somehow a novel comes out of all this. :-D