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 Mystery series

Magic Lamp

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INTRODUCTION
If you noticed how this book's cover described me, you know that I've written a 'popular' 15-book series mysteries, and the main reason that description is accurate is because of Amazon.com's three divisions, handling print books, ebooks and audiobooks.

Don't be misled: this book is not intended as a commercial for Amazon.com, because there are several other sources for writers to gain popularity that I'll go into later in this book, but at the time I wrote my mysteries, they were the only game in town for getting titles distributed in those three formats without going through an agent or major publishing house.

Of course the landscape continues to change rapidly, and ebooks have finally become mainstream, through the efforts of Amazon's **Kindle**, Barnes & Noble's **Nook**, Sony's **eReader**, Plastic Logic's **Que**, Apple's **iPad**, Borders' **Kobo**, Hearst's **Skiff** [my books are available on all of them], plus all the other devices that are continually coming to market. A generation from now, kids graduating high school may have the same expression on their faces when you mention printed books that kids graduating high school presently have when you mention Johnny Carson. It's called the 'that's before my time' look.

I'm pleasantly surprised by the popularity of my fictional titles, because even while writing them I felt it was taking a big chance… and this thought is being confirmed now, because I've also written 19 non-fiction titles and amazingly, the best-seller of them all is a non-fiction book I completed in 2009 that compromises 24% of my eBook royalties (including all 15 of the **Peter Sharp Legal Mysteries**) – and don't ask why, because I've been trying to figure it out for some time now. The non-fiction title I'm talking about is **Celestial Navigation for the Complete Idiot**, and when writing it I kept thinking to myself "Nobody will want this book, but I don't care if it sells or not, because I'm having a good time explaining it to sailors like me who are interested in the subject…" and that's not a bad attitude to assume when writing a non-fiction title, because your psychological mindset comes through in the writing: the readers can sense that you really care about them learning the subject you're writing about – and they appreciate it.

It might also interest you to know that the book you're now reading is running a close second to the Celestial Navigation title, which means that if you have choice of which to write, I'd suggest non-fiction. However, since the reason you're reading this book is because you've probably already got your heart set on writing a mystery or detective novel, you might as well get it out of your system before switching over to non-fiction.

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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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Chapter Two: Name-Calling

At this point, my team was starting to come into being and it was time to give them names. This can be a problem, because there are a lot of things to avoid when naming a character… and one of them is lawsuits.

I wasn't too worried about the kid. Being Asian, I wanted her to have a name that sounded 100% American, but had a hint of Asian ancestry in it, so I finally settled on *Suzi*. Spelled with the "i" ending, I thought that it would fit in nicely. Having her use only one name also helped out, because there was little chance of a legal conflict with a real person… but I still researched it in advance, as much as I could.

The dog was even easier: being a Saint Bernard, I just called him *Bernie*, not at all being worried about any lawsuits from dogs who might be reading the books. I explained away the simplicity of his name by mentioning that his real name was only used by the kid: some strange-sounding Chinese word that my lead character didn't understand and couldn't pronounce.

It was a little harder getting a name for my lead character, because he's a professional person, sworn in and licensed to practice law in the State of California, where the stories all take place. This means that if you pick a name of a real California attorney, you're looking for trouble.

One of the real greats, Donald Westlake, had a man named **John Archibald Dortmunder** that he used in 14 novels and 11 short stories. In reality, *Dortmunder* is a <u>pale lager</u> that originated in the industrial city of <u>Dortmund</u> in <u>Germany</u>, but when Westlake saw it advertised on a neon sign, he created the name of his main character… and by that name itself, you should be able to have some idea of the great personality of Donald Westlake, who many authors feel should be immortalized with a statue of his likeness placed in front of every library.

After discovering that my first few dozen names were unusable because of similarity to living attorneys in California and several surrounding states, I got lucky. Using the first and last names of two attorney friends of mine I know (Peter Knecht and Tony Sharp), I created the name *Peter Sharp*. The only other person of note that I could find with a similar name was a professional athlete in Australia.

Giving names to walk-on characters (guest stars) who will only appear in one book are another problem, especially if they are being painted in a bad light, like being an insane killer. Proper research on Google and Yahoo will help out. A complicated spelling is also a useful tool that leads to a character being referred to only by his or her nickname.

In one of my books the action takes place in a town about 50 miles outside of Los Angeles and the local police chief there is a main character. I drove out there and inquired as to whether or not the police chief or any member of their small force had a name similar to the one I was planning on using for my character, and only finalized its use after they informed me it was safe to use.

The FBI and CIA are quite different. In some of my books Peter runs up against an FBI Special Agent based in their West Los Angeles office. I tried to find out if the name I was using was close to any actual agent there, but they wouldn't give out any information about their agents, so I used the name I had chosen.

The CIA is a special case, and I would advise against using any name for a CIA employee in any book you write. First of all, there's no way you're ever going to get clearance for use of a fictional CIA agent unless you're Tom Clancy or with a major motion picture studio or television network.

Second of all, if you decide to make up a name for a fictional CIA agent, just your luck, it might be close or actually the real name or cover name of an actual CIA agent, and then you're into a Valerie Plame type of situation. Not good. If you have to have someone in the CIA in your story, try not to give that character a name, and simply mention 'the spook,' or some other reference used for a spy.

On second thought, 'spook' might be a bad word to use. If you think differently, you should read the first few chapters of *The Human Stain*.

Now that the characters exist and have names, the next step is to give them some traits, and one thing governing that in my mind was an experience I had many years ago when creating a video on celestial navigation (I guess that by now you know I'm a boating enthusiast). After shooting a program called *Celestial Navigation: Sextant Use & the Sun Noon Shot*, I wanted to market it on the internet, and the best way to do that is getting on the search engines. Everything was going fine until I started getting rejection messages from several search engines, with a form-letter message stating that they "do not accept adult material."

I checked out those search engines and saw that they had plenty of things for children and adults, so I started communicating with them to find out why they rejected my video program. The answer I received from each one of them was that they were 'Christian' search engines, and their filters picked up "s-e-x" in the title word "Sextant," and automatically rejected my submission and sent a message to me.

Everyone knows that the major search engines are Google, Yahoo, Bing and a couple of others… probably fewer than ten, if you're counting. These are the ones that it's vital to be on, so why should I worry about some rinky-dink Christian search engine in Virginia? Simple: I'm a businessman too, and I don't want to start out my fiction writing career by creating something that might offend an important segment of society: readers.

Here are some interesting statistics to keep in mind: in July of 2005, the new Harry Potter book sold 6.9 million copies in its first 24 hours of release. Scholastic Children's Books, the publishers of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, have increased their print run from 10.8 million to 13.5 million copies. Many of those 13.5 million copies may be going to libraries to be read by many people; many copies will be passed along to friends, and many will be re-sold as used books, which may make the total readership of that one title around 20 million – and no kid can read that book unless he or she knows how to read, so Steve Jobs might have been wrong when he claimed in a pre-iPad/iBook statement that nobody reads anymore.

The point I'm trying to make here is that reading is coming back into fashion, now that new modes of reading (on eReaders, iPhones, on computers) are becoming available, and putting 'adult' material into a book may cut into sales. No parent wants to let a child read a book that has the "F" word in it as many times as Chris Rock or Eddie Murphy uses it in a 60-minute cable television special.

P.S. Many attorney and non-attorney friends told me that they would love having me use their real names my books – even if I made them murderers. Who knew?

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