Rules to Follow When WRITING A SUSPENSEFUL MYSTERY NOVEL

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FOREWORD

One day when I was still in elementary school, I accidentally stumbled into a strange room that I never knew existed... it was called a "Library," and while there I came across a book written by some guy named Poe that included a story I thought was about an insect. It was titled *the Gold Bug*.

I read that story, and some others he wrote, and then at the library lady's suggestion, moved on to stories written by a man named Conan Doyle, and by that time I was almost hooked.

Not only did those guys give me a habit I've never been able to 'kick,' but it got worse: I even started to think I'd like to someday have people read something that I wrote... and for sure, it would have to be a crime mystery.

So sit back, relax, and see what an addiction can do to a person, because pleasure loves company and I'd like to get you wanting some readers too.

This book reveals all the rules and tips that I've created and still follow: they've worked for me, and I bet they'll work for you too.

Gene Grossman

Rule Number 1: Please... No Flashbacks

Then I'm not writing or outlining a book I watch a lot of television, and if there's one thing that makes me change the channel faster than some stupid un-scripted 'reality' show full of desperate non-professionals ad-libbing what they think is dialogue, it's seeing the first few minutes of what looks like an interesting, professionally done mystery, crime or other type of 'procedural' program open with a person peril from apparently in other persons, criminals, or danger, when suddenly the picture freezes, and the words "Two days earlier..." appear on the screen, and they then dissolve to what looks like a completely different story beginning.

At that point I'm not interested in what happened two days earlier; I want to know what's going to happen to the guy that was just on the screen. That move they just pulled on me is like a person starting to tell you what sounds

like a really funny joke or interesting story, and suddenly stopping mid-sentence and saying, "Oh, by the way, I'd like you to know why I'm telling you this." I then wish it was an interactive animated cartoon, so I could make the **RoadRunner** figure out some way to have a large boulder fall on that show's head writer.

At least the above example has a chance to catch someone's interest, but the corniest type of flashback is when the first scene has a very young child asking his grandfather about some character whose name he heard being talked about on a television show... and then the grandfather starts to tell the child a story about that character, as the scene dissolves back to something going on several generations ago, and the history of some fantastic character starts. Oh, please... give me a break.

How would you like it if Ken Burns' great documentary on America's Civil War started out with a kid asking his grandfather "Grandpa, why did people wearing blue or grey uniforms shoot at each other a long time ago? – and then the scene dissolves to episode one of Ken Burns' classic project.

I don't care how you do it... it just doesn't work for me, and if you're curious, I didn't even like it when Michael Caine played it out that way in the fine film, *The Ipcress File*.

Successful editors and authors realize that with today's technology, any person interested in buying a book can go to Amazon, and by using their *Look Inside the Book* feature, read the first couple of paragraphs... they know how important it is to do a good job right at the beginning of a story to give a reader the impression that it's good enough to spend hours on: that's what a lot of us have nicknamed "Setting the Hook..." and once that hook is set, your book is sold.

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Even worse is a device I've seen used quite often in foreign mysteries that I watch on antenna television's channel 58.4, in which a wife will tells her husband for the fourth time to take out the garbage... and that's obviously the last straw, so his expression turns into one of rage, he picks up the nearest club-like item and proceeds to beat his wife senseless... and then the scene cuts back to him looking like he's just come out of a dream sequence, and picks up the garbage.

I'm no fan of wife-beating, but I'm also no fan of being confused by having the progress of a plot being interrupted with a dream sequence that's been sneaked in. If the writers and actors can't figure out some other way for a character to let the reader or audience know that he's almost at the breaking point, or that he fantasizes about killing his wife, then instead of trying to fill the writers' room with young geniuses, maybe the producers should hire people that can actually know what a character like that is going through, like one or two middle-aged married guys whose honeymoons have been over for a decade or two.

Another reason I'm not fond of flashbacks is that they also act as a spoiler, because I know that no matter how death-defying previous experiences of that character may have gone through before the flashback, I already know that not one of them was fatal.

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Sometimes during an interview, a lead actor will be asked what he thought about the movie he or she just completed shooting, and the answer that always seems to confuse the person asking that question is: "I don't know... I haven't seen the film yet."

The reason for that answer is quite simple: a motion picture is rarely shot "in sequence," with the filming of each scene in the same order as it looks when finally edited for public viewing.

If a character will be visiting a doctor's office four or five times during the film, a production team will have the characters make some wardrobe changes and film all four or five visits to that office the same day, instead of having that doctor whose only scenes in the entire movie take place in that office, come back to that set that had to be kept in place, numerous times during the weeks of filming, and have the lights and cameras brought in and set up over and over again.

Once the film's scenes are all finished shooting, each of those office visits already filmed will be inserted into their proper places during the post-production editing process, and if the actors in those scenes haven't seen the complete, edited film, they have no idea how everything was put together, the pace of the scenes, how it sounded with the music score, sound effects, or special effects that may have been added... and the same

type of confusion that actor who hasn't seen the final product has is the same affect that flashbacks have on me... and that's one of the things that makes the director's job so hard, because he has to prep the actors to know exactly what part of their emotional arcs they may be going through during each 'office visit,' so they know how say their lines.

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I'm a linear type of person and don't like confusion, but I've gotta confess that for a portion of my life, confusion was my stock and trade: it was during the years that I was a practicing trial attorney.

There's an old adage in the legal community about jury trial practice that lawyers are familiar with, but not understood by the general public... it's "Don't as ask a question you don't already know the answer to." Yes, I know that it sound silly, because why would you ever want to waste time asking a question you already know the answer to? Well, here's why.

<u>First</u> of all, a jury trial is no place to learn answers to question that you don't know... it's a place to tell a story to the jury... a story that'll

help them find in your client's favor, but it's better if told to the jury by your opponent's witness and not yours; that makes the story more credible;

Second, before you go to trial you should have already spent a significant amount of time doing your homework in the form of written Interrogatories to the parties that they must answer under oath, plus taking the oral Depositions of parties and witnesses, asking every question you deem relevant for them to also answer under oath;

Thirdly, after going through all of the answers to the written Interrogatories and Oral Depositions, plus going through any documents you may have subpoenaed, you should have found all the information you want to present to the jury... and that's where the strategy of confusion comes into play: asking the witnesses questions in a special order so they can't figure out where you're going with the line of questioning. That throws them off of their game, and disrupts their planned narrative that was designed to benefit your opponent's client. They lose the required order of their planned talking points... and unlike politicians trying to wriggle out of giving yes or no answers, each witness has

to answer each question as it's being asked, without going into some speech about what the answer is about, or anything else.

Once all of the witnesses have testified for both sides, it's then your opportunity to sum up the testimony by putting it back into the proper sequence so that it lays out the story the way you want the jury to hear it... and at that time they will mentally flash back and understand the importance of each question for the first time and realize how you cleverly got your opponent's witnesses to tell the true story that will benefit your client... and that's the only kind of flashback that doesn't make me want to change the channel or put down a book.

And that's exactly also what the best crime-sleuths do: they gather a seemingly endless number of loose ends that *they* mentally tie together. *You* may not realize their importance during the gathering process, but when the hero finally identifies the 'bad guy' and solves the crime, he or she will no doubt sum up those loose ends in their proper sequence, just like a trial lawyer does in his or her summation to the jury... when all the dots finally get connected... and that's how all the old classic mystery stories used to end, in what they called a 'showdown,' in

which all the involved parties were gathered together in one room, and the hero crime-solver would point to each one of them in order and state the evidence proving they were innocent... until there was only one left – the guilty party – and then we finally learn about the clues that all of us had seen, but had no idea of their importance, but led the hero to connect the dots and solve the crime.

I really like a good mystery... even more than seeing Tom Hanks finally wind up with Meg Ryan at the end of a movie, because statistics show that a significant number of love affairs cool down and end, but a murder conviction has a much better chance of lasting 'til death do us part.

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