

Death Becomes Us

By Ann Charles

What is it about a dead body that makes so-called 'normal' people want to plunk down at the computer and write all about it?

I didn't start out in this business with the intention of writing about dead bodies. I had other writing aspirations, most of them involving a heroine, a hero, lots of romance, and maybe a little sex. Unfortunately, corpses kept showing up in my love stories. In scenes where my heroine needed to spend page upon page emoting about the hero and why she shouldn't fall for him, somebody would wind up dead.

Before long, I was reading books like, Death to Dust: What Happens to Dead Bodies during Christmas vacation at my in-laws. My family began to express their concerns about my choice of gruesome reading materials. My husband wrinkled his nose when I explained to him over dinner what I'd learned about shrimp and their love for "floaters."

Then came the agent-snagging attempts. I butted my head against many walls, pitching my romances to agent after agent and getting rejected for "not enough love story." Finally, I talked to an agent and neither of us mentioned the "R" word. A couple of months later, she called wanting to send me a contract and told me she couldn't wait to help me sell my mystery.

Mystery?

Suddenly, it all made sense. I kicked the emoting heroines out of my stories, laid out the welcome mat for the dead bodies, and started weaving together mystery plots.

SKELETONS, CORPSES, AND BLOOD, OH MY!

But what about you? What draws you to those skeletons and corpses?

Is it the puzzle aspect? Are you one of those people who loves to sit down with a hard crossword or cleverly crafted story problem and try to figure out the answers? Instead of word games, do you put yourself in a sleuth's shoes, throw a dead body on the empty manuscript page, and start looking for clues and hints? Do you enjoy the process of solving the crime along with your fictional counterpart? Do you get scared in the suspenseful moments and ride the adrenaline wave when the old cliché cat jumps out of the closet at your own heroic version of Sherlock Holmes?

Or is it the fascination with other people's dirty laundry? Under the cover of night as you're driving home from a long day of work, do you find it fascinating to look in people's front windows to find how they have decorated their living room, to see what they are watching on the television, or to just observe them in the midst of living their everyday lives. Are your observations always followed by the 'what-ifs'? What if you saw someone stab another person? What if you caught a glimpse of a shooting? What if you saw Michael Meyers sneaking up behind Jamie Lee Curtis on the couch? What would you do?

Maybe some of you enjoy the thrill of closely examining death. You've memorized every episode of *CSI* and love analyzing each detail to figure out the answer to how the victim died--and therein lies the answer to who did it. I know I do. While *Monk* is more my cup of tea (I'm a sucker for humor), I enjoy looking for hairs, blood specks, or anything that will tell me more about my killer. And while my books don't tend to deal with the up-close details of death so much, I still enjoy traveling along that road of discovery.

Could it be that rather than examining death, you enjoy playing with corpses on the pages because you are fascinated with that big question to which nobody really has a definite answer? You know the one I'm talking about—what happens after we die? While your stories don't necessarily deal with the afterlife (unless you have a sprinkling or more of paranormal/woo-woo elements in your mystery), do you find that writing about a murder allows you to come up with various answers to the big question? Answers that appease your curiosity...at least until another "what-if" pops into your head.

MACABRE FOR ME, MACABRE FOR YOU?

Perhaps some of you are like me and enjoy that bit of goosebump-inspiring macabre in your daily life. You're a fan of writers like Stephen King and Clive Barker, the masters who dabble in the frightening and disgusting. However, you just don't have the full-on horror writing gene in your DNA. But you do know how to write a good mystery! So, you intersperse bits of maggot-laden flesh and decapitated corpses into your books, giving hints of detail—not enough to throw you out of the mystery genre, but enough to satisfy that nasty little monster you try to keep locked up in the dark recesses of your mind as much as possible.

And I suppose there are some of you with everyday jobs involving subjects that lend themselves naturally to mystery and dead bodies. I'm talking about you ex-cops, doctors, forensic scientists, pathologists, and everyone else who spends their days working with what I think of as the 'exciting stuff' (in other words, not writing technical documentation about banking software). You fortunate few are not only paid to research story-related ideas, but you also don't have to spend days surfing the internet or combing through the library while trying to learn just enough about the subject of death to be able to convince your readers you know what you are talking about. For those of you who work with death, is it just a continuation of what you like to do best? Working around death, yet skirting the subject itself when it comes to your own beating heart?

In the end, no matter what the basis is for your fascination with death and mystery, you're in good company. And lucky for all of us in the mystery genre, the world loves to read about death, dying, and the secrets surrounding it. Take a look at today's headlines. How many have something to do with slayings, shootings, or stabbings?

The world loves a good mystery. It's our job to satisfy them by creating a fictitious world where they can read all about corpses while sitting on their comfortable couch, their shaded beach chair, or wherever they can safely slip away into the exciting world of the unknown. So keep writing about those dead bodies!

Written by Ann Charles, this essay was originally published in First Draft, March 2008.

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