

Spicing Up Your Subplot

Part One

By Ann Charles and Wendy Delaney

As mystery writers who blend romantic elements into our stories, we've noticed that in the past decade, romance subplots have become an increasingly hot commodity in various mass market fiction genres, including mystery. With romance sales accounting for over fifty percent of the paperback market, if you can stir a pinch of romance into your story and lure more readers to your shelf at the bookstore because of it, all the better, right? HOWEVER, creating a viable romance subplot isn't as simple as you might think. You can't just throw in a kiss at the end of a book, and then blithely tie the story thread up in a bow at the chapel.

Romance subplots must serve a much greater purpose than just attracting more readers or adding page count to novels. They must follow a story arc, mix well with the main plot, and enrich the story overall. In addition, any secondary characters featured in the subplot must be the stars of their own stories, including having their own goals and motivations which create "stakes" in the subplot.

No matter the type of subplot in your book, romance or not, there are some base ingredients that you should include to give it purpose and make it more than just a page-filler.

Subplot Ingredient 1—Theme

Along with your main plot, your subplot should reveal the theme of your story. What do we mean by theme? According to the American Heritage Dictionary, theme is "an implicit or recurrent idea."

Many beginning writers (and not-so-beginning writers) struggle to understand the concept of theme. Think of each scene in your story as a pearl. Theme is the string that runs through each pearl and ties them all together to make a beautiful necklace...or novel. Without the string, the pearls would just be a jumble of pretty, round beads in your hand. Whether you choose to make your theme blatant or hidden on the page is your call, but you need to have it there to bind your scenes together. Otherwise, your reader might finish your book (if she or he hasn't already thrown the book across the room out of frustration) and wonder about the purpose of your story.

Note: We have heard theme defined in many ways in various classes and workshops over the years. Some writers think of it as a phrase (for example, *Wizard of Oz* might be, "There's no place like home"); others use a single word along with a phrase that is labeled a *premise* (in this case, the theme for *Wizard of Oz* would be "home" where the premise is, "There's no place like home"). Because themes can be analyzed with many different outcomes based on individual personalities and understandings, for the purpose of this article, we are going to focus on using the latter example for theme. So, from this point onward, we will use a one-word general theme that allows for many different premises.

The movie *The Shawshank Redemption* is an excellent example of the theme of *hope*. The idea of hope is strung throughout the movie as Andy is stuck in prison and slowly digging his way toward freedom. The movie even ends with the following line in narration, "I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. (*beat*) I hope." (On a side note, *integrity* could also be thought of as a possible theme for this movie.)

So, now that you understand the necessity for a theme, you can begin to appreciate how it can impact your story. If your theme is a dark, highly-emotional idea, your story will be dark and highly emotional. If your theme is light and airy, your story will be light and airy. That doesn't mean if you're writing a gritty story featuring a serial killer/murderer, your theme has to be death or murder. Your theme could be hope or family and still have your readers on the edge of their seat from page one. It's all in how you choose to use your theme.

We'll have more on theme and its importance in Part Two of this article. For now, let's take a look at the next base ingredient.

Subplot Ingredient 2—Reveal Character

Your subplot must reveal important information about the characters involved. By this, we don't mean it should list hair color, bust size, or whether they prefer boxers or briefs. The subplot should enhance the reader's understanding of your characters' motivations—the "why" for each character's goal. It should also show the inner needs and relationships of the characters, giving the reader more reason to care about what happens to each character.

Reveal more about your characters...this sounds like great "stuff" to have in our books. But how in the heck are we supposed to do it? Well, that's the difference between thinking it's easy to write a good book and actually producing something that shouldn't be recycled into a cardboard box.

Think about when you first meet someone. When you're shaking their hand and they tell you their name, they don't also list all of their personality traits that explain why they're funny, depressed, or a border-line psycho. While knowing these kinds of details right out of the gate would make life easier, it just doesn't happen. For that very reason, we can't introduce our characters and immediately tell the reader all of the things about our story people that make them honorable or despicable. We must plant seeds, interspersing them close enough to produce cross-pollination, but far enough apart that they will grow along with the page count.

When developing a romance subplot, this is especially true. After all, romance is based on emotion, and you can't make your reader instantly like your hero just because you say he's tall, dark, and drool-worthy (this is why instant lust only works in certain genres.) While that may be an accurate description of the character's physical attributes, you need something deeper, something that touches on a likeable personality trait, something that pulls on our emotions and defines him as a hero who is worthy of the heroine, or vice versa. The true route to writing subplots with emotional curb appeal comes with a slower build-up. This doesn't mean it has to take ten chapters just to get to a first kiss, it just means you have to take a little time and effort to allow your reader to find a character interesting, attractive, or drool-worthy.

An excellent example of revealing character in a romance subplot can be found in the movie *Bull Durham* when Annie Savoy asks Crash Davis (an aging baseball player) what he believes in and he states: "Well, I believe in the soul. The cock, the pussy, the small of a woman's back, the hanging curveball, high fiber, good scotch, that the novels of Susan Sontag are self-indulgent, overrated crap. I believe Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. I believe there ought to be a constitutional amendment outlawing AstroTurf and the designated hitter. I believe in the sweet spot, soft core pornography, opening your presents Christmas morning rather than Christmas Eve, and I believe in long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days. Good night."

When Crash finishes, Annie says, "Oh, my." Her line signals a turning point in which this baseball player just became a lot more appealing.

Okay, so you get the gist of what we mean by revealing character. Now let's go over the final base ingredient/function of a subplot.

Subplot Ingredient 3—Advance the Main Plot

Finally, your subplot must advance the main plot of the story, keeping the pace moving while adding depth and meaning. As with any element in your story, if your subplot does not help move the main plot forward, it makes it stall—or worse yet, pulls it backward. A subplot that acts as an anchor needs to be cut loose. If your main plot is your mainsail, your subplot needs to be the jib, helping propel the story forward.

This concept may seem pretty simple, but it's actually fairly complex. You can't spice up your book with a subplot that doesn't tie into the main plot in a way that is more than just the heroine mixing it up with a tall, dark, drool-worthy guy. The subplot has to serve a purpose. It has to interlace with the main plot. Its scenes need to move the main plot forward. Remember, if you can strip the subplot from your story and the main plot can survive on its own, you don't need the subplot.

Now that you know the three base ingredients that form the foundation of your subplot, you can start playing with variations that will not only mix smoothly with your main plot, but also enhance the flavor and texture of your story.

Common Subplot Variations

Your romance subplot can have several different variations. Whichever you choose is based on your purpose for having the subplot.

- **Comic relief**—Your subplot can explore humorous situations and/or feature funny secondary characters.
- **Reflection of the main plot**—Your subplots can explore a conflict or story problem in the main plot. For example, secondary characters overcoming obstacles that the main characters need to learn to overcome (echoing the story's theme).
- **Contrast**—The subplot can provide an opportunity to compare and contrast aspects of a character introduced in the main plot, perhaps revealing the deepest needs of a protagonist who makes every effort to conceal those needs in the main plot.
- **Complications**—Physical and/or emotional intimacy in a subplot raises the stakes and can be a rich source of conflict that spills over into the mystery plot.
- **Clues**—Romance (and non-romance) subplots can be “seeded” with information that will be used later in the mystery plot. This information can also be in the form of false clues to add complexity to your mystery and keep your reader turning those pages.

Regardless of the variation, if you decide to include a romance subplot in your mystery, it can end on a positive/happy or negative/sad note, depending on its purpose. Just remember, whether happy or sad, the ending has to be satisfying!

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Part Two

As we covered in Part One of this two-part article, when developing plot threads for your mystery fiction, there are three important purposes served by a subplot. It should reveal theme, reveal character, and advance the main plot. Subplots can have many variations as is evident in most Hollywood movies and popular genre fiction.

Let's explore how subplots, and specifically, romance subplots, can be used to enhance a story by analyzing a film noir classic from the mid-1970s and the first book in a popular mystery series.

(Warning! Spoilers to follow!)

Note: Before we begin, we want to reiterate what we stated regarding theme in Part One of this article. We have heard theme defined in many ways in various classes and workshops over the years. Some writers think of it as a phrase (for example, *Wizard of Oz* might be, “There’s no place like home”); others use a single word along with a phrase that is labeled a *premise* (in this case, the theme for *Wizard of Oz* would be “home” where the premise is, “There’s no place like home”). Because themes can be analyzed with many different outcomes based on individual personalities and understandings, for the purpose of this article, we are going to focus on using the latter example for theme. So, from this point onward, we will use a one-word general theme that allows for many different premises.

***Chinatown* (Screenplay by Robert Towne)**

Chinatown is a movie about a cop-turned-private-eye, J.J. “Jake” Gittes. Gittes is a specialist in ‘matrimonial work,’ who is hired by a woman to tail her Water Department engineer husband, Hollis Mulwray. After Gittes photographs Hollis in the company of a young blonde and thinks that he has closed the case, the real Mrs. Evelyn Mulwray (not the imposter who hired him) shows up threatening to sue Gittes. But then her husband turns up dead, and Evelyn hires Gittes to investigate. During his search for the truth, Gittes uncovers a web of sordid personal and political scandals that collide in a tragic conclusion on his old beat—Chinatown.

Reveal Theme:

One of the main themes in *Chinatown* is *corruption* and how everyone is a pawn in a masterful power player’s game. From the external mystery plot involving the murder of Hollis Mulwray to each of the characters on either side of the law, corruption fuels this story which is set in Los Angeles during the early 20th century California water wars.

In the Evelyn Mulwray/Jake Gittes romance subplot, it’s established early on that she is no saint and has had a number of affairs. She is also the daughter of Noah Cross, who is the former partner of Hollis Mulwray (her husband) and the former owner of the city’s water supply. Because of her family ties, Evelyn is further implicated in her husband’s murder, so she hires Gittes to investigate. Throughout the

course of the investigation, she and Gittes become allies, and she comes to his rescue more than once. After one such rescue, back at her home, Evelyn cares for Gittes' injury. This hands-on moment leads to a kiss and then some. During the post-coital scene, Gittes confides that he used to work in Chinatown when he was a cop. He tells Evelyn that there was a woman he cared for, but something tragic occurred in Chinatown, something corrupt, and he quit the force. Gittes then draws comparisons to Evelyn and the secret she is holding back. She refuses to divulge anything to Gittes, telling him to trust her, but he can't. It's not in his nature, nor his business, which specializes in dishonesty and corruption. When she dashes out on a secret task, he follows her and finds out her secret and the corruption she has been hiding—a child born from incest, but not rape. Evelyn then warns Gittes how evil her father is, explaining that she wants to escape with her daughter/sister to Mexico. But when Gittes tries to help her, it leads to her tragic death...in Chinatown.

So, you can see in this example how the theme of *corruption* is laced throughout even the romance subplot in this movie.

Reveal Character:

We learn more about Jake Gittes in this subplot than in any other plot thread in the movie. He is a small-time, private detective who is clearly out of his league with Evelyn Mulwray, yet he is intrigued and perplexed by her. He is determined to not be the one caught with his pants down (unlike his clients' husbands), yet he becomes a more complex, more humane character because of his interactions with Evelyn. In the tradition of film noir, he maintains his jaded, "hard-boiled" demeanor, but Gittes reveals bits of himself to Evelyn (and the viewer) during their more intimate scenes. Even more interesting in this movie is how Gittes' private revelations about his past romance (and loss) foreshadow the tragedy that awaits Evelyn in Chinatown.

Advance the Main Plot:

The relationship subplot is not romantic in the strictest sense, nor is it passionate, but it does add interesting sexual tension and clearly proves Noah Cross' statement, "You may think you know what you're dealing with, but believe me, you don't." This element is essential to the overall story arc. At every turn, Gittes realizes that nothing about this case is as it appears. This subplot allows the father/daughter relationship to build all the more effectively to its shocking conclusion in Chinatown, leaving both Evelyn and her daughter/sister tragic victims to their amoral father.

One for the Money (by Janet Evanovich)

In this first book in the Stephanie Plum series, we meet Stephanie, a recently-fired lingerie buyer turned bounty hunter. The first bail jumper case she receives is for Joe Morelli (the romance subplot hero), a local vice cop and ex-lover, who has been and continues to be nothing but trouble for Stephanie. In her quest to bring Joe in so she can get paid, she crosses the path of a nasty prize-fighter and not only is her next meal at risk, but so is her life.

Reveal Theme:

While this story is mainly about Stephanie Plum's trials and tribulations in her new vocation, bounty hunter, the theme in the story is *family*. On the first page of the book, right after we learn a little about the setting ("the burg") in Trenton, New Jersey, Stephanie mentions in her narration that Trenton "was an okay place to raise a family." Next, after we learn a little bit about the history between Stephanie and Joe, the story moves to Stephanie driving home to her parents for the standing Sunday pot roast dinner. Again, family is important right at the beginning of this story, and we know from here on out that Stephanie's family will be important secondary characters throughout the book.

Now let's look at how the romance subplot is strung along on this theme. In the very first scene with Stephanie and Joe together, Stephanie tells Joe she is going to take him to the police station because he is in violation of his bond agreement. He laughs in her face. She says to him, "What about your mother...what will she say to everyone, that her son Joe was too cowardly to stand trial?" She tries to use familial guilt to convince him to let her take him in (which doesn't work). Stephanie even goes so far as to visit Joe's mother while trying to find him, and again, she runs into a brick wall. Throughout the other scenes with Stephanie and Joe, family is often mentioned or thought about. So, family plays a role in defining the history between Joe and Stephanie and the present, and the romance supports the family theme running throughout the book.

Reveal Character:

We learn a lot about Stephanie from her past and current relationship with Joe Morelli right from the start. The first line of the book reads, “There are some men who enter a woman’s life and screw it up forever. Joseph Morelli did this to me—not forever, but periodically.” Stephanie’s feelings for Joe, a man with whom she knows she should never get involved but can’t help herself, reveal a lot about Stephanie.

We know from the first line that whenever these two are together, Stephanie is going to have trouble with control. We also know from this that Joe has some killer sex appeal. The author doesn’t have to go into a lot of detail on his character to convince us of his ability to make females swoon. She just tells us a couple of stories about how Joe got Stephanie to let him play choo-choo-train with her as kids and then seduced her out of her virginity at the bakery where she worked in high school, and we know right away that he is extremely charming.

In their first scene together, after informing Stephanie he is not going to let her take him anywhere, Joe looks her up and down and says, “I like the way you’ve let your hair go curly. Suits your personality. Lots of energy, not much control, sexy as hell.” In that line, Joe has just revealed a lot about Stephanie for the reader, something Stephanie could never narrate believably (it would come across as author intrusion).

As the mystery progresses and Stephanie learns more about the situation that landed Joe on the “most wanted” list, she begins to have doubts about Joe being guilty and second thoughts about taking him to the police. The romance is showing that while Stephanie is in dire need of cash and finds Joe extremely frustrating, she is having trouble with her conscience when it comes to having him locked up again. She goes so far as to make a deal with Joe to help him find the “real” killer in the story. Through the romance subplot, we see that Stephanie’s affection for Joe goes deeper than just lust—she cares for him, which makes her a deeper, more likeable character.

Advance the Main Plot:

If there wasn’t a hint of romance when Joe and Stephanie are together, Stephanie would not find herself questioning Joe’s guilt. She would never agree to help him prove his innocence by finding the real killer—especially since she has to put her life on the line and hang out in very dangerous places to help him. The romance is necessary to help motivate Stephanie to unravel the mystery, and it lends itself nicely to the humor that is laced throughout the book.

As you can see with these two romance subplot examples, these are blended stories. The characters live very human lives and express very human needs. The romance serves as a vehicle for that expression during the telling of each story.

Blending in Your Subplot

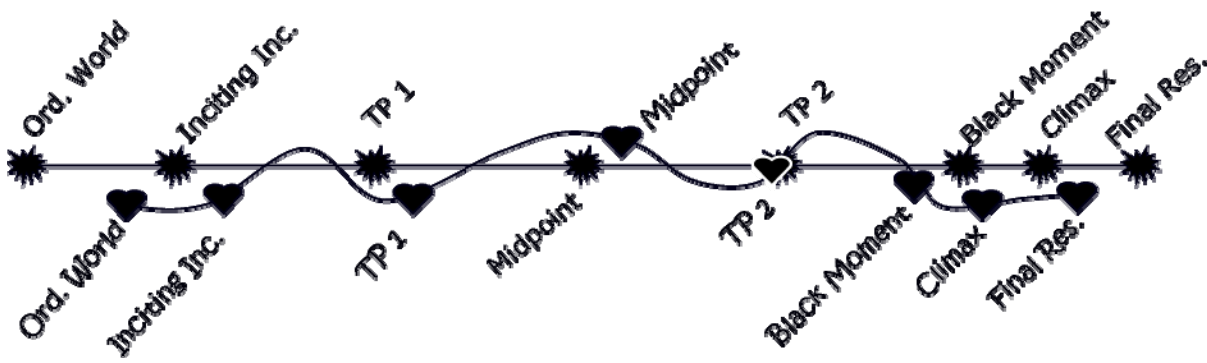
Now that we’ve covered the basic ingredients of a subplot, let’s take a look at how to blend in a romance subplot with the main mystery or suspense plot.

Like the main plot, the subplot has a beginning, middle, and an end—a story arc. Webster’s Dictionary defines a story arc as “the principal plot of an ongoing storyline in the episodes of a narrative; the continuous progression or line of development in a story.”

A story arc consists of the following steps in the order listed:

- Ordinary World
- Inciting Incident
- First Turning Point
- Midpoint
- Second Turning Point
- Black Moment
- Climax
- Final Resolution

Since a subplot is a secondary plot, it must begin after the start of the main plot and finish prior to the ending of the main plot. In addition, the subplot’s story arc needs to interweave with the main plot’s story arc as illustrated in the example below (the romance subplot line is represented by the curvy line dotted with hearts):



This is not an exact formula. Your subplot's beginning and ending, as well as the major story elements' occurrences, can blend into the main plot wherever they work best for the tale you are telling, but the subplot shouldn't run parallel without interweaving once. It's up to you to decide the weave pattern and frequency.

The Subplot Thickens

So, we know our subplot will have its own story arc, and that we are going to reveal theme, character, and advance the main plot in every one of our subplots.

Now, let's stir in some spice.

Just like in the romance genre, romance subplots in the suspense or mystery genres are, at their essence, all about sexual tension—the sexual awareness between two characters that escalates with every scene, creating an intimate, emotional bond. And what fuels that sizzle throughout the arc of your subplot? Internal conflict. There is some internal problem keeping them apart—typically, some lesson a character needs to learn. Without such a problem your reader will be wondering, why don't they get together already?

A subplot simmering with sexual tension doesn't require a consummated love scene. Write what fits your story and the lessons your character(s) need(s) to learn. Just be aware that the sex act (in order for it to be interesting to your reader and you, the writer) should put your character into an emotionally exposed situation.

Turning Up the Heat

Just as a subplot has a natural progression via a story arc, a romance subplot has steps of intimacy that follow a natural progression. Desmond Morris detailed these steps in his book, *Intimate Behavior: A Zoologist's Classic Study of Human Intimacy* (originally published in 1971).

1. **Eye to body**—The old once-over, except it happens in a fraction of an instant. Only a few significant details are absorbed. Attraction occurs or it doesn't.
2. **Eye to eye**—Eye contact is sustained only between intimates. If a stranger stares, it's considered rude or an act of aggression.
3. **Voice to voice**—Ranges from small talk to intimate conversation.
4. **Hand to hand**—This requires some trust. Hand to arm applies here, too—for example, a man guiding a woman by the arm.
5. **Arm to shoulder**—May be a hug.
6. **Arm to waist**—Can be sexual, especially if "waist" is considered the small of the back.
7. **Mouth to mouth**—Full frontal contact during a kiss.
8. **Hand to head**—Requires trust.
9. **Hand to body**—Any body part: breast, shoulder, chest...
10. **Mouth to breast**—Obviously sexual.
11. **Hand to genitals**—We're not referring to baseball players adjusting themselves here!
12. **Genitals to genitals**—There is no mistaking what this means. Typically, in the mystery genre, the sex act is not graphic and may not happen on the page.

When developing a romance subplot, consider your story's pacing and spread out these twelve steps so that your characters don't charge their way to step ten by Chapter Two. Your reader wants to

enjoy this developing relationship along with your characters. Escalate the level of intimacy step by step, and reuse a few as best fits your story.

Remember to progress naturally. If your female protagonist has her hand down the love interest's pants in Chapter Six, then they share their first kiss in Chapter Seven, your intent had better be to throw the characters for a loop.

Don't skip anything major. First kiss and first sexual intercourse (if you plan to consummate the relationship) are vital. So is talking and eye contact.

Keep in mind, too, that the characters in this romance subplot **MUST BE AWARE** that they are experiencing each of these steps of intimacy, or it's not really going to do much to increase sexual tension and your subplot may fizzle instead of sizzle.

Romance Subplots in Mystery Series

What if you are planning a mystery series and you want to extend the romance between the protagonist and his/her love interest over multiple books? No problem. You need to develop a relationship arc (and the conflict that will go with it) that expands throughout the whole series rather than just a single story.

Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series is a great example of this. In the first book, the romance begins, but only goes so far as the first turning point in the romance subplot. At the end, Joe and Stephanie have gone from being adversaries to friends with a strong current of sexual tension rippling between them. As the series progresses, so does their romance.

When the Focus Shifts From Whodunit to Who's Doing it?

If your romance subplot will contain a consummated sex scene, it can't just be about sex. The scene must have a purpose. It must provide some kind of conflict that keeps the plot moving forward. If you can delete the scene and the story keeps whistling along without even a hiccup, it's a gratuitous sex scene.

Here are a few other helpful hints:

- Keep in mind that sex between two characters should make their problems worse, not better. What's more, it should add to their list of troubles and dilemmas.
- Make the romance fit your characters. For example, if your heroine is a very serious person and never cracks a smile, she shouldn't be giggling through a sex scene. If your hero is always joking around, he shouldn't be angry or violent while he's in the throes of passion.
- On that same note, make the romance fit your voice. If your stories are full of humor, your sex scenes should probably have humor mixed in them, too. If your story is graphic and violent, your sex scenes shouldn't take place while Disney show tunes play in the background.
- Don't get too caught up in the moment. Your mystery or suspense novel may contain a consummated sex scene, but it needs to be appropriate for your genre/subgenre. You don't want your reader asking, *'Are they done yet?'*

In genre fiction, a well-crafted romance subplot not only enhances the main plot, it can make your entire book sizzle with sexual tension and the kind of excitement that will make your readers clamor for more.

So, sit your butt down in that chair and spice up your subplot!

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