

THE TEACHER'S EDITION

After-School Sessions with Our Favorite Teachers—by Ann Charles

Hello, everybody. I've set out to interview some of my favorite writing teachers and learn more about them as teachers, not just as authors.

Today, I'm staying after class to talk with: Carolyn Wheat

Carolyn Wheat has won the Anthony, Agatha, Macavity, and Shamus awards for her writing. Her books include The Cass Jameson Series, with titles like *Fresh Kills*, *Mean Streak*, *Troubled Waters*, and *Sworn to Defend*. Plus Ms. Wheat has written books of short fiction and edited anthologies such as *Women Before the Bench*, a book of courtroom stories. She has also written a non-fiction book titled, *How to Write Killer Fiction—The Funhouse of Mystery & the Roller Coaster of Suspense*.

To read another interview with Carolyn Wheat, check out:

<http://www.readersvoice.com/interviews/2004/March/>.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **In your book, *How to Write Killer Fiction*, you talk about mixing the genres of mystery and suspense within a book, referring to this mix as a crossover. What are your thoughts regarding the success or failure of such crossover books in today's publishing market?**

Crossover books (mystery-suspense hybrids) in today's market—when I published my first book, *Dead Man's Thoughts*, we were beginning a Second Golden Age of Mystery Fiction. It was 1983, and Paretzky and Grafton had just come out with the first books in their groundbreaking series. It was an amazing time to be a mystery writer, and it lasted far longer than even the most optimistic fan could have hoped. But then Big Suspense thundered in. Two writers come to mind as I type this: Jeffrey Deaver and Harlan Coben. I remember Jeff Deaver as the creator of a wonderful female amateur sleuth named Rune. You probably don't remember Rune, but you do know Deaver because he went on to write blockbuster suspense, most notably with his quadriplegic detective Lincoln Rhymes. Coben you might recall as the creator of Myron Bolitar, sports agent cum sleuth, but he made and is still making piles of money as a thriller writer.

Moral of the story: suspense is where the money is, with few notable exceptions. So the temptation is to transform your nice little cozy mystery into a bloodcurdling doorstep of a book. Add Dan Brown to the mix, and you have a spate of historical mystery-suspense reads.

The part that isn't so clear is the mystery crossover part. Sure, these blockbuster suspense books involve secrets of some kind, but the aspect of the mystery we call *play-fair* (the reader gets the same clues as the detective) is missing from most of these books. And there's a good reason for this. There are two entirely different parts of the brain involved: the reasoning part that wants to solve a puzzle, and the reptile brain that wants to feel intensely. Mixing them is hard. Mixing them is probably not even a good idea for most writers. Pick which part of the brain you want to appeal to and make that one your main course. Use the other for garnish.

2. **List three of your favorite writing self-help books—can be craft- or promotion-related. (For example, Chris Roerden's book, *Don't Sabotage Your Submission*; or J.A. Konrath's free book, *A Newbie's Guide to Publishing*.)?**

Favorite writing self-help books. Only three favorites? OMG!

- *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, Browne and King. (A must-have.)
- *The Plot Thickens*, Noah Lukeman
- *Story*, Robert McKee

3. **Will you explain what you mean by "meta-novel," and then name some of the "meta-challenges" an author will have to face if he or she decides to write such a tale?**

Meta-novel—the idea here is that the writer thinks in story arcs beyond a single book. There was a TV show called *Wiseguy* that did this with terrific results. They told the stories of an undercover cop, not in single episodes, but in several-episode arcs that allowed for a lot more depth of character development. In fact, I think this whole idea of the meta-novel takes its inspiration from series TV. We want to tune in each week to see what happens to our favorite characters, and we will love the show even more if the episodes reference things we learned about the characters in past episodes. Yes, it's the soap opera, as Lee Childs would say, but you know what: soap opera is the human story and what do we read for if not the human story?

Some meta-challenges:

- Overcomplication. Too many story arcs for too many characters, asking the reader to remember too many things from book to book. Keep it simple and strong and focused on one character at a time.
- Too much time spent on building meta-stories and not enough emphasis on what happens in this volume. Each book has to be able to stand on its own.
- Unevenness of tone in series. We all love the "very special episode," but what happens to your reader when the next book doesn't contain those emotional high points? This is happening right now with one of my favorite TV detective shows, *Law and Order*:

Criminal Intent. The writers took Detective Goren to emotional dark places in the last two seasons, so that now when he solves an ordinary case, something that used to be enough for us, we feel let down. We're thinking, that was nice, but, dude, where's the suffering?

4. **In your book, you tell readers that they need to make narrative mean something. Will you expand on that, maybe give an example?**

I just went to my garage and pulled out two mysteries written in third person. First person narrative usually doesn't present a problem because it will be in the main character's own voice. But third-person narrative—the part where the author is summarizing action instead of presenting it in real time—can be deadly dull.

Here are two examples that are not dull:

The southwest wind picked up turbulence around the San Francisco Peaks, howled across the emptiness of the Moenkopi plateau, and made a thousand strange sounds in windows of the old Hopi villages at Shongopovi and Second Mesa. Two hundred vacant miles to the north and east, it sandblasted the stone sculptures of Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park and whistled eastward across the maze of canyons on the Utah-Arizona border. Over the arid immensity of the Nokaito Bench it filled the blank blue sky with a rushing sound.

Tony Hillerman, *Listening Woman*

So what's he saying? "This book takes place in Arizona. It's big and empty out here. There's a strong wind." If he just said that, would you turn the page? No. He uses the narrative to create a mood. Verbs like "howled, sandblasted, whistled" and nouns like "emptiness, maze of canyons, arid immensity" set the stage for murder in a landscape that challenges humans at every turn. He uses the senses, mainly hearing, as he sets the stage, which is interesting in a book titled *Listening Woman*, isn't it?

Second example:

Marjory Clayton had not been much help. Aged about twenty, she was a plain girl, rather anemic in complexion and wearing a shapeless cardigan which looked as if it had been woven around a sack of potatoes. She seemed genuinely upset at her employer's death, and Pascoe treated her gently. Monday had been her half-day and she had been nowhere near the office after midday. Nothing unusual had occurred during the morning.

Reginald Hill, *Ruling Passion*

The reason for this narrative summary is different. Here we have a brief interview with an unimportant witness. Instead of giving us the

interview in real time, Hill summarizes it because nothing really happens during it (which could, of course, mean that this is an ideal place to hide a clue, but that's another seminar).

Still, there is spin on the ball. I love the cardigan "woven around a sack of potatoes." See, without little touches like that, we get into the "show, don't tell" mantra, because this is telling, plain and simple. My point is that some telling is necessary, sometimes to set the scene and sometimes to summarize events that don't warrant an entire scene. But whenever you do need to summarize, make it fun to read.

5. **Lately, I received a comment about my own work regarding a red herring on which I didn't deliver. What would you say is the definition of red herring? Will you give an example of a book or movie with an excellent example of one or more red herrings?**

Red herrings—we all know or should know the classic meaning. In hunting, hounds follow the scent of the prey. Anti-hunters dragged smoked (red) herrings across the trail to confuse the hounds and save the fox's life. So a red herring is something that diverts our detective from the correct scent and focuses her attention onto the wrong scent. How can it fail to deliver? I don't know what your specific reviewer meant by her comment, but a couple of things come to mind:

- Perhaps she meant the red herring wouldn't have fooled a puppy, so it shouldn't have diverted your sleuth. The red herring must be strong enough to be believable, at least for a few pages.
- Perhaps she meant you started the detective down the wrong path, then diverted her to another wrong path without ever circling back to the original wrong path in order to explain why it wasn't the right path. Part of the detective's job is to debunk all the wrong theories of the case as well as coming up with the right one.

The red herring book to end all red herring books is, of course, *The Five Red Herrings* by Dorothy L. Sayers. It really is a tour-de-force of red herringness, but it's a tough read precisely because it is so technical, so filled with railroad timetables and half-eaten breakfasts. Still, to get a feel for what the term means, do give this book a try. Lord Peter has to track down and debunk five erroneous theories of the case before he unravels the puzzle.

6. **You talk about "straight-line narrative" in your book. What do you mean by this, and how can it benefit an author to use this concept?**

Ah, the straight-line narrative. It's essentially a blueprint of what actually happened. The killer did x, y, and z before the crime; the killer walked up to the victim and shot him. The killer walked away, got into his car, drove to the bridge, and threw the gun in the river. He did these things at precise times and in precise places and ways.

Why do you need this? Because the detective is a reactor, not an actor. He can only react to what the killer did. So you the writer need to know what the killer did. Your clues will come from the acts the killer performed.

Killer did x, y, and z before the crime. Those were what? He acquired a gun. Where did he get it? What clues did he leave in obtaining it? He met the victim at a location and time. Did he lure the victim there, and if so, what clues did he leave in doing that? He drove a car and parked it somewhere. Who saw the car? The killer drove to the bridge. Who saw the car? (Remember that "who saw him" could include a camera on the street....) Who saw him at the bridge throwing the gun?

Your detective needs clues. If you create the perfect crime, in which the killer makes no mistakes at all, you have boxed yourself into a corner. Unless your sleuth is psychic, he or she can only solve crimes by looking at evidence, and you have to give the detective that evidence by knowing what the killer did.

7. **One of the many topics in your book that made me pause and read again in order to imprint it on my brain was scene vs. chapter. Briefly, will you explain why you say scenes are organic and chapters are artificial?**

Scenes are organic, meaning that they have a reason for their shape. There's a reason for the beginning, middle, and end. Usually, that reason involves place, time, and character.

Take *Law and Order*. Some citizen finds a body. There's a scene between those characters that culminates with the body being found. Body=end of scene. Cut to commercial. The scene and the chapter, so to speak, are one.

After the opening, we see a series of scenes as the cops interview witnesses, talk to the medical examiner, and talk amongst themselves. You know when the scene is over because the producers put that annoying noise in between the scenes, and because the scene changes to a different location with different witnesses. The chapter is over when we cut to the next commercial.

Now take a different show, say *The Mentalist*. We've had the same kind of thing, scenes strung together between commercials. Now we have a moment when Patrick Jane is snooping in someone's house when that someone comes in and pulls a gun on him. Cut to commercial.

But is the scene over? No, because when we come back from commercial, Patrick is standing in exactly the same spot with his hands up and the bad guy is standing in the same spot with the gun pointed at him. We broke the chapter in the middle of the scene. We could do that because chapters are artificial, made to last just as long as the writer

wants them to last. The scene is organic because it will be over only when the characters have completed the full action of the scene.

I'm using television examples for two reasons. One is that more people will have watched the same TV shows as will have read the same books. The other is that I truly think there's a writing class on your television screen every night of the week, if you're willing to watch and learn. A crime writer who isn't watching crime TV is cheating herself out of a free education.

8. **Are you currently teaching any classes at the moment? What is the next class on your slate? When will you be teaching it and where (online or in person)?**

I will be teaching Novel Writing II at UCSD Extension in the winter quarter. I will also be offering an online mystery writing course through Perelandra College, founded by San Diego's own Ken Kuhlken. Check out the website at www.perelandracollege.com. I offer editorial services and coaching, for those that don't live in the San Diego area!

9. **What compels you to take the time and energy to teach other authors how to write mystery and suspense—or fiction, in general? Is it just that you enjoying helping them learn how to improve their writing skills? Or do you find teaching satisfies some other need or part of you?**

I love to teach. Part of that is that I like knowing stuff and sharing what I know with other people. Part of it is that I love the mystery genre and the mystery community and teaching keeps me connected with those things even if I'm not writing my own stuff at the moment. I do have an editorial bent as well; helping someone make her work better is a definite pleasure for me.

10. **What are your plans for the future? More teaching? More How-To books? More mysteries?**

I have become a yoga teacher. I study, practice, and teach gentle yoga, which is more concerned with releasing tension and increasing serenity than it is with physical postures. I do want to keep on teaching writing and offering editorial and consultation services. [People interested in getting my e-newsletter should email me at cgwheat@pacbell.net and I'll put you on the mailing list.] I'd like to start a blog, and I'd like to write a book for writers just starting their novels. I see it as a kind of cookbook, with sections divided by tabs, so that the writer can access exactly what she needs at any given time. I still love reading mysteries, but ideas for a new series have just not come to me with sufficient force for me to put energy into them. As someone I once signed books with said, writing a novel is like getting married. I just haven't found the right second husband—yet.

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Thank you, Carolyn, for sharing your time with all of us Guppies; and thanks to all of you Guppies for reading along! If any of you have a particular "teacher" you would like me to interview, please email me with his or her name and any other helpful information.

Until the next after-school session...

Ann Charles
Mystery, Mayhem, and Fun in the Sun!

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