

Writing A Killer Mystery Series: 10 Knock'Em Dead Tips From The Experts

By Stacy Juba

If there's one thing mystery writers hate, it's having old decisions kill new ideas. Leslie Meier, author of the Lucy Stone Mysteries, keeps a box of index cards listing all the inhabitants of the fictional Tinker's Cove, Maine. When she starts a new book, she flips through the cards and determines which characters will fit best into Lucy's latest adventure. Readers anticipate a certain style when they read the Lucy books, and Meier must work hard to be creative within the confines she has set for herself. That means sticking to one point of view, using quirky recurring characters and balancing the mystery with Lucy's domestic life. Lucy and her family can age – but not too much.

Writers can take many steps to improve their chances at series success. Not only does your book need an original concept and characters, it must also reflect qualities expected of all series. It's not easy, but with careful planning, you can give readers what they crave. Here are 10 tips recommended by established mystery series authors. Use their advice as a blueprint for crafting your novel, or as a checklist to evaluate your completed draft.

1. Amateur or Professional?

When Roberta Isleib began her series featuring LPGA golfer Cassie Burdette, she didn't consider how many corpses could plausibly turn up on a golf course, or how Cassie could manage the mental demands of tournaments while playing detective. She advises writers to weigh the pros and cons of an amateur vs. professional sleuth.

“With Cassie, two close friends, her caddie and a sports psychologist, help her puzzle things through,” she said. “They can also go off on sleuthing missions while she's playing in a tournament. Your amateur protagonist's personality will need to support her stake in solving murders. In Cassie's case, a tendency to nosiness, a preference for avoiding her own problems by focusing on others, and a soft heart, keep her involved.”

While Marcia Muller is best known for P.I. Sharon McCone, she has also written about amateur sleuth Elena Oliverez and sheriff's deputy Rhoda Swift. Muller had difficulty believing that her amateur sleuth could continually become involved in crimes, prompting her to end the Oliverez series.

“With Swift, I often became mired down in procedure, and had to justify her acting in an unorthodox manner for the sake of the plot,” she said. “The private investigator format is much more fluid and believable, although Sharon's constant involvement in major cases doesn't exactly mirror the often dull real-life work of investigators.”

2. Identify With Your Protagonist

Laura Lippman, author of the Tess Monaghan books, recommends creating a protagonist whose company you want to keep.

“You may end up spending more time with your character than with most flesh-and-blood people,” she said. “This doesn't mean your character has to be blandly likable. After all, don't you have friends who challenge or frustrate you upon occasion? But if you loathe them, you're in trouble. In my case, I chose a younger person, age 29, who was going to grow and change.”

Dana Cameron, author of the Emma Fielding mysteries, also chose to have her character undergo growth. In the first novel, Emma learns that her archaeology skills are similar to those of a detective and that she feels obligated to help.

“In another book, she's contemplating getting forensic training that will make her an official part of murder investigations,” said Cameron. “Realizing that if she was going to keep getting into trouble, I needed to get her some kind of protection, I decided she would study Krav Maga. (a type of self defense) I keep pushing Emma, to keep us both interested.”

3. Playing Cupid

Although many series authors successfully use love triangles or on-again/off-again romances, Cameron felt that Emma should be happily married.

“This lets me show the reader some of Emma's character traits, like her sense of humor, commitment and loyalty, that might not be revealed in her professional relationships, where she tends to be more distant,” said Cameron. “Even a happy marriage provides plenty of excitement and problems to solve. Emma's not immune to an attractive face, or particularly a quick mind. She's on a strict diet, but that doesn't mean she isn't interested in looking at the menu. There's always room for a little frisson.”

Literary agent Evan Marshall, who writes the Jane Stuart and Winky series, has drawn out his character's romance for maximum reader interest and suspense.

“I gave a lot of thought to Jane's personal life and how it would change as the series progressed,” he said. “She's a widow when the series begins, and I decided to give her a romantic interest, police detective Stanley Greenberg, but not to rush the relationship. In book six, Jane and Stanley are quite serious about each other, but not yet engaged. In book seven, due largely to reader request, I'll be moving the relationship to the next step.”

4. Consider Time Elements

Joanne Fluke, creator of bakery owner Hannah Swensen, recommends that writers consider how to handle the passage of time. Fluke needed to decide early on whether Hannah should age one year for every book. She chose to slow things down instead.

“By book 30, the sleuth who seemed so agile and fit could be using a walker,” she said. “Real time also weds you to a certain time of year. In my case it would be March, my pub. month. My books are set in small-town Minnesota and I didn't want the setting to be exclusively winter. I had so much fun with Hannah's sister's pregnancy, I stretched it out over four books. You couldn't do that in real time, thank goodness.”

5. Choose a Unique Hook

Often, the author's vocation or hobbies trigger a hook for a series. Deborah Donnelly, author of The Wedding Planner mysteries, stumbled onto her hook accidentally.

“When a writing instructor startled me by demanding my sleuth's occupation, I, being recently married, blurted out, "She's a wedding planner!"” said Donnelly. “I expected to change my mind later, but it works quite well. My heroine gets a fresh cast of characters with each new wedding, and nearly everyone has seen or heard of some sort of bridal catastrophe. The real key is finding an angle that excites you, because you'll have to live with it. I'd much rather research cakes and gowns than autopsies and blood spatters.”

Vicki Stiefel found her newspaper reporter protagonist a tough sell as the premise had been done before. She switched gears and now has a contract for her Tally Whyte homicide counselor novels.

"I spent a lot of years writing more generically than I should have," she said. "Get a unique protagonist. This is a business and publishers want something they can sell."

6. Invent a Sidekick

Hallie Ephron, co-author of the Dr. Peter Zak mystery series by G. H. Ephron, recommends that writers create a sidekick – but not just any sidekick. She points out how Robert B. Parker’s poetry-quoting Spenser has tough-talking Hawk. Harlan Coben’s former basketball star-turned-sports agent, Myron Bolitar, has rich preppy friend, Windsor Horne Lockwood, III.

“My protagonist is cerebral neuropsychologist Peter Zak, a self-proclaimed pointy-headed academic who’d probably shoot himself in the foot if someone gave him a gun,” said Ephron. “His sidekick and main squeeze is Annie Squires, a private investigator who teaches self defense, packs a pistol and knows how to use it. Sidekicks are the yin to the protagonists’ yang. The place to start is with the sleuth/protagonist, then, think opposite.”

7. Create Vivid Secondary Characters

Julia Spencer-Fleming, who writes about Anglican priest Clare Fergusson, likes to know more about her minor characters than she shows on the page. In one book, Clare speaks with the historical society's librarian. Unbeknownst to her, he is dying from cancer, which has no effect on the plot.

“But I could picture his lank wasted frame, his curt, don’t-waste-any-time way of speaking, and the way he was sinking into his devotion for his collection, the thing that would outlive him,” said Spencer-Fleming. “He became a fully-realized person to me, despite his entire appearance being limited to a few pages. In my first book, I decided the county Medical Examiner was gay. The only indication comes from a single reference to a photo of him and his partner on his desk. When a real-life gay-bashing incident inspired part of the plot of *A Fountain Filled with Blood*, I had an established character, with a background and connections to my heroes, ready at hand.”

8. Keep Things Fresh Yet Familiar

Bruce Hale, author of the Chet Gecko books for juveniles, notes that readers want the ease of slipping into a familiar world with known characters while also craving novelty.

“I maintain this balancing act by keeping the setting and the main characters consistent,” he said. “However, I'm always bringing in at least 3-4 new characters with

each book, and the series' rules stay flexible. Although Emerson Hicky Elementary is a normal school, it has had ghosts and killer robots. It is familiar to my middle-grade readers, but it's populated with animals that sometimes behave as if they were in an old Humphrey Bogart movie. That makes it novel.”

9. Don't Get Lost in the Details

J.A. Jance, who writes the J.P. Beaumont and Joanna Brady books, maintains files that include characters' names, physical descriptions, habits, weapons and vehicles so details remain consistent from book to book.

“This is important for even minor characters who may show up in another book later on or who, without my expecting it, may turn out to be major characters after all,” she said. “I also set my books in places I know well. That way I can report on the background – the weather, the changing seasons, how long it takes to get from one place to another, traffic congestion – all the while paying attention to what the characters are saying and doing.”

10. Write a Winner

Once you finish the first book, indicate in your cover letter that the idea has series potential. Be prepared that if the publisher likes the concept, you may be asked to develop titles and summaries of future books. But no editor wants to hear how great the next installments will be if the introductory novel has flat dialogue, a lack of character development and plot holes. Finishing your sample novel means rewriting, rewriting and rewriting until it shines.

“Above all else, write the best first book you can, or you may not get the chance to write its sequels,” said Hale.

*Stacy Juba is the author of the mystery novel *Twenty-Five Years Ago Today*. (Mainly Murder Press) More information on her books can be found at <http://www.stacyjuba.com>.*