



Studying the Bones of Successful Mystery Fiction

The Anatomy of a Mystery

Presented by:

BC Deeks & Sharon Wildwind

Presentation Sponsored by: Calgary Crime Writers Association



The Anatomy of a Mystery

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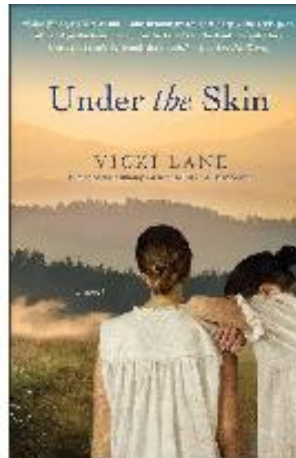
What we'll be talking about

- What is a MYSTERY?
- What are the rules?
- Are all mysteries the same?
- Are mysteries different from other fiction?
- How do you develop a great mystery?

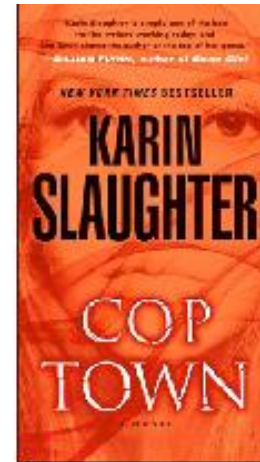
Types of Mysteries



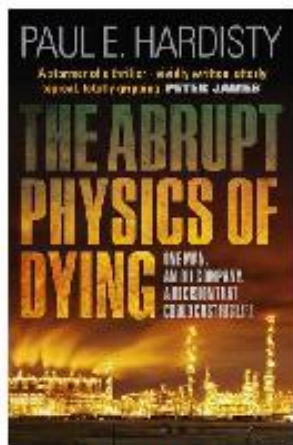
International Authors



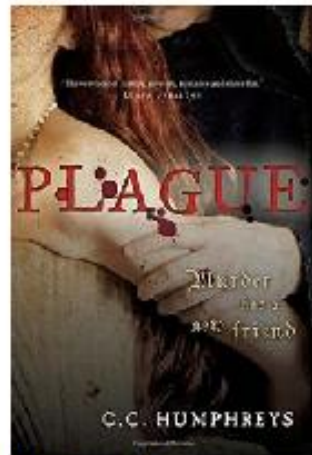
Backgrounder



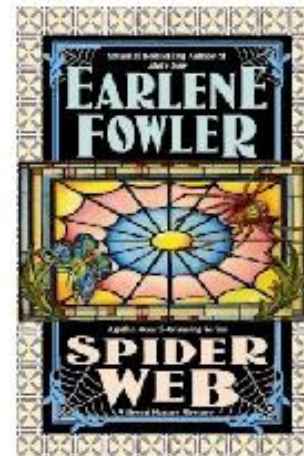
Police Procedurals



Thriller



Historical Crossover



Traditional (cozy)

Rules of the Game

THE BARE BONES

- Fair Play
- Open with serious crime
- Motivated protagonist
- Orderly Resolution
(i.e. investigation)

Justice



- Legal
- Moral
- Ethical

must be served
...usually!

What makes a mystery great?

- Strong Mystery PLOT
- Depth of CHARACTERS
- Multiple sources of CONFLICT
- Strategic Placement of CLUES
- Creative use of RED HERRINGS



**Before mysteries were primarily PLOT DRIVEN;
Now heavily CHARACTER FOCUSED.**



Types of Mystery Plots

- Puzzle
- Caper
- Backgrounder
- Everyday Life Interrupted
- Ticking Clock
- Reflective Plots

“There’s something about a secret that’s addicting.”

J. Edgar Hoover (1895 -1972)

Most common plot devices:

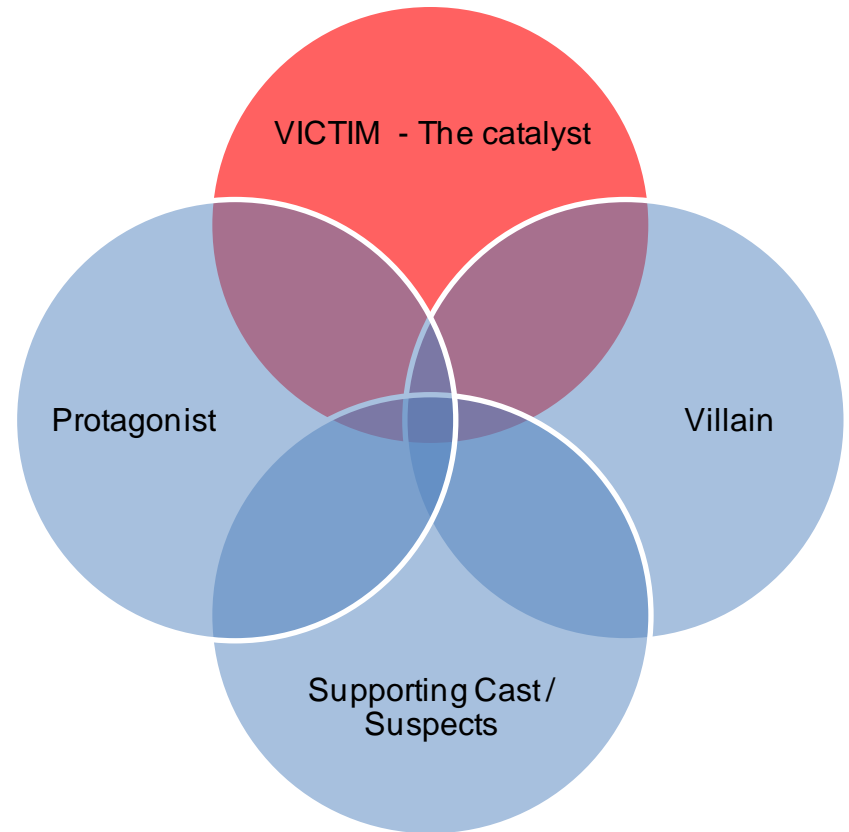
- Long-held secrets revealed
- Missing/murdered children



Key Characters in Mystery



The **PROTAGONIST** may be a Professional or Amateur



Tips for Using Characters

Make it **HARD** to do the right thing!

PRIVATE
Stake

PUBLIC
Stake

Personal
Fortunes

Danger to
Family/Self

Personal
Relationships

Living conditions

Risk to
Community



Tips for Using Conflict

Build TENSION up to final decision point:

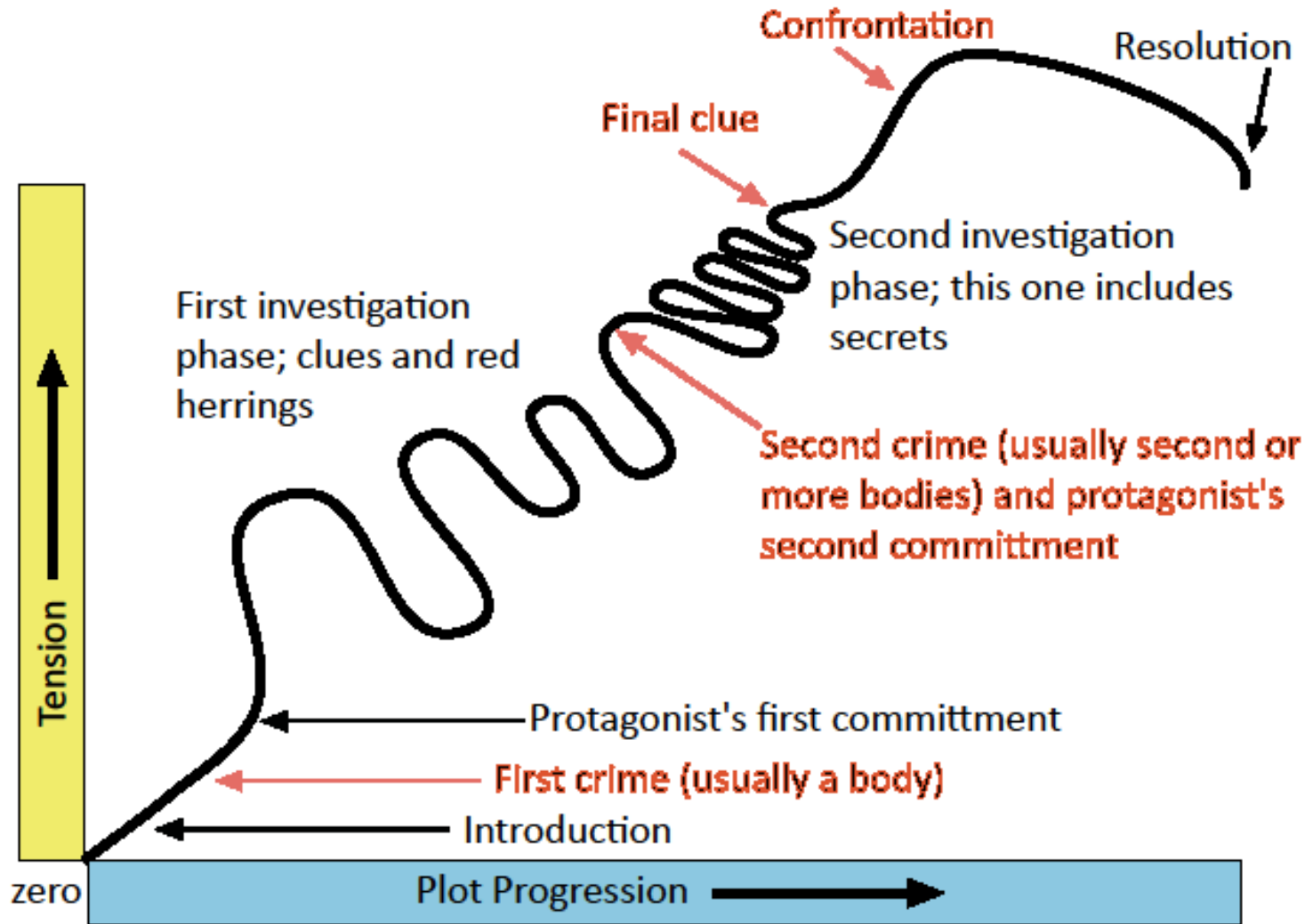
- Individual Rights vs Community
- Good vs Evil
- Will justice prevail?

READERS identify with more multi-dimensional characters.

Make readers CARE what will happen to characters making a bad decision!



The Mystery Arc



In a series, subsequent books do not start at zero.

Secrets, Clues & Red Herrings



- Placement of clue
- Misinterpretation of clue
- Camouflage a clue with action
- Character behavior/body language
- Have the clue turn out to be what is *not* there
- Create a time problem, like broken clock
- Hide the clue in plain sight
- Draw attention elsewhere
- Have the clue be the sum of its parts
- Establish the clue before it matters

Techniques for Successful Mystery

- Play fair with the reader
- Foreshadowing & Flashbacks
- Raise the stakes
- Threaten the characters
- Tighten the pace with imposed deadline
- Make the interrogation physical as well as verbal
- Challenge the characters' ingenuity
- Allow characters to make mistakes
- Limit detective's options
- Isolate detective physically & psychologically



Anatomy of a Mystery

Here's how to find us:

BC Deeks

Email: brenda@bcdeeks.com

Website: www.bcdeeks.com

Amazon Author Page:

- amazon.com/author/bcdeeks

Facebook:

- www.facebook.com/BCDeeksAuthor
- www.facebook.com/FrostFamilyChristmas

You can also find me on *Goodreads, Pinterest, Twitter, various guest blogs.*

Books are available in at all online bookstores.

Sharon Wildwind

Email: cml@wildwindauthor.com

Website: <http://www.wildwindauthor.com/>

You can also find me on **Goodreads, Twitter, Google+ and LinkedIn .**

Books are available through my website.