



WRITE

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What I Learned Writing My First Mystery Novel

BY JANICE MACDONALD



The advice to “see one, do one, teach one” for surgical procedures has always felt vaguely alarming to me. But it’s not bad advice for actions that don’t have the potential to leave someone dead on a gurney — actions like writing a mystery novel.

Having written a master’s thesis on the formula and history of the mystery genre and the ways in which crime writers forged their own path and then having reviewed mysteries for several years, I felt somewhat prepared to create my own.

Still, it wasn’t until I was elbow-deep in the manuscript that would become *Sticks and Stones* (Ravenstone/Turnstone, 2001) that I discovered I still had much to learn.

The first thing I’ll share is the last thing I learned as part of the process. My publisher had generously matched me with the great Jennifer Glossop, editor to the stars (Margaret Atwood, David Suzuki, Anne Kingston...). Jennifer noted that several of my sequences were confusing, and suggested I go through the manuscript with a calendar beside me, note exactly on what day each event happened, and ensure there were clear segues for the reader if I decided to skip a week or jump ahead a month. I now run out and buy a mini wall calendar for each book, which doubles as a great place to keep running notes — like where in the chronology you have introduced a new corpse or the name of the second-banana police officer.

Speaking of names, here’s a pragmatic tip: make the initials of each character unique. While of course it is possible to know four Jasons and three Cheryls in real life, the irritation a reader feels when trying to hold onto the difference between a Richard and a Robert in the same book is something you want to avoid. Remember, your reader is trying to solve the puzzle you’ve set as they’re reading. They don’t need to be constantly referring to a cast list in order to keep things straight.

You also need to balance the complexity of your puzzle with

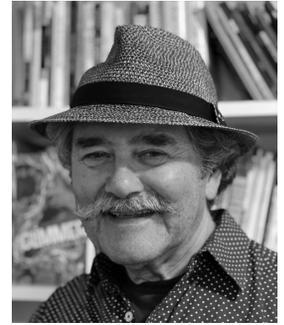
the information dump required for your reader to understand the world they’ll find themselves in. I’m cheating a bit, since I learned this on my second mystery, but it was in relation to my first. The puzzle is the primary component drawing readers to mysteries (character and setting being a close second and third). If the murder happens in a high school, most of your readers will be familiar with the setting, and you can get as intricate as you like with the situation. On the other hand, if your corpse is discovered jamming up the Foucault pendulum at Fermilab, your reader will likely need to expend quite a bit of energy (ha-ha) learning all about the particle physics and dark matter you’ll be delivering to them. In that case, the mystery itself should be slightly less complex, or you’re going to overwhelm your reader.

Finally, the best bit of advice I can give you has to do with writing the query letter and synopsis of the plot publishers will ask for before they invite you to send the completed manuscript. Offer them a tantalizing thumbnail sketch of the plot, the sort you might read on the dust jacket. Never reveal the ending, sketch out the final showdown, or tell whodunit.

I learned this the hard way, when an editor came back with, “No thanks, I guessed who did it right away.” Well, of course, you did, sir — you had read a full synopsis beforehand! Since then, I’ve never let on to anyone what the ending of any manuscript holds in store.

In addition to not revealing the ending, I never tell anyone what my work in progress is about. My sense is that the first iteration contains the most sparks and passion — and that should be going onto the page, rather than into idle conversation. I understand that some people get a lot of value out of sharing in writing groups, but until I have a working full draft, whatever I am working on stays a mystery.

Janice MacDonald has written, among other things, the Randy Craig Mysteries (Ravenstone/Turnstone Press), the first mystery series set in Edmonton, Alberta. She is now thinking about setting a plot at Fermilab.



Canadian Indie Publishing in the COVID Era

BY STEVEN ROSS SMITH

“What doesn’t kill us...”

Canadian independent publishing is a modest affair. We are a country with a relatively small national market spread across enormous distances and with limited budgets. Success requires tenacity and resilience — and the COVID-19 pandemic has made those qualities even more important.

In the early stages of the pandemic, “it often felt as if we were doing three times the work for half the results,” says publisher Marnie Parsons of Running the Goat Press in Tors Cove, Newfoundland and Labrador. The press, which has been publishing for over 20 years, began as a small letterpress operation creating broadsheets and chapbooks and now publishes commercially printed children’s books. “The general uncertainty was overwhelming, but we just tried to stay on track and hope. Now in year three, the mental challenges seem almost greater because things aren’t fully resolving, and exhaustion is setting in.”

Parsons’ experience is consistent with what I heard from

publishers across the country. The word “challenge” came up a lot: issues related to sales, supply, production, costs, promotion, and the workplace.

In British Columbia, Theytus Books — First Nations-owned and on Syilx territory on the Penticton Indian Reserve — is the oldest Indigenous publishing house in Canada, operating since 1981. Production coordinator Ann Doyon says, “COVID halted production for a good six-month time frame.” Instead of leading to long-term disruption though, Doyon says Theytus “came back in full swing and published the *Follow the Water* series about traditional ecological knowledge and the importance of preserving water and environs for future generations.” The press also signed a distribution deal with Orca, which will put its books into the hands of readers across Canada and in the U.S.

In Saskatoon, Thistledown, a literary press founded in 1975, changed owners as the pandemic struck. The press was purchased in 2020 by Calgary writer, bookstore owner, and literary

“It’s been a tough slog, but we’re heartened by the fact that people still love and value books and reading, and we don’t see that changing.”

entrepreneur Joann McCaig. The COVID pause at first enabled the new team time and space to develop a vision and organize. Then the transition was complicated by staff changes. New Managing Editor Rilla Friesen says, “We haven’t experienced publishing without COVID... 2020 did represent a change in Thistledown’s publishing process, but it was more tied to creating a sustainable publishing cycle. She adds, “I have about three Zoom meetings a week with different team members... I think I’m like the hub of a wheel.” Despite the bump in the road, Thistledown launched three books in spring, and another three in September.

While being small presents challenges, it can also benefit publishers who work at a smaller scale and have more personal relationships with suppliers. Take the distinctive Manitoba press Les Éditions du Blé, for instance, founded in 1974 and located in Ste. Boniface — the largest Francophone community in Western Canada. Vanessa Gaillard, the press’s managing director, says “not much changed” during the pandemic in terms of “actual production, as in printing and binding... Our runs are short, and our printer is locally based, and we have a long-standing friendly relationship. Distribution-wise, any local requirements were easily handled.”

On a national scale, things were a bit different. Gaillard says, “Our major distributor, based in Quebec, as well as bookstores in that province (a major source of our sales) did suffer some shutdowns at the start, resulting in less-than-ideal distribution of much of our year’s titles as well as some backlist.”

In Toronto, where the adventurous 57-year-old Coach House Books soldiers on, Editorial Director Alana Wilcox says, “It’s been a tough slog, for sure, and many of the joyful parts of publishing books have been absent. But we’re heartened by the fact that people still love and value books and reading, and we don’t see that changing.”

Paper and other costs rising

The biggest challenge indies are facing, though, may be the cost of paper. “If paper prices keep increasing the way they have been, the whole thing will become unsustainable,” Wilcox says.

Friesen at Thistledown Press echoes this: “Roughly every other month we’ll get an email from one of our regular printers explaining they’re increasing prices because they’re being charged more from their paper suppliers. It’s happening across the board... every printer we’ve worked with has had to raise prices... so it feels like an inescapable issue.”

Printing is not the only cost that’s been rising since the pandemic began. At Drawn & Quarterly, (aka D+Q), Montreal publisher of fiction and nonfiction comics since 1989, Publisher Peggy Burns says, “We have witnessed an increase in the cost of both printing and shipping, so our margins are tighter than ever.”

In this reality, setting retail price points and schedules for books in advance becomes a question of juggling. How much will paper cost when the printing date comes? Can book prices be raised? What price will encourage or discourage a sale? Will launch dates be met? These factors along with wholesale discounts, bookstore returns, printer backlogs, and slowed shipping schedules, challenge administrative efficiency and logistics, and increase stresses and costs.

And then there is the even greater than normal uncertainty in predicting sales. With about 50 titles a year, Nimbus Press in Halifax is the largest English-language publisher east of Toronto. General Manager and Co-Owner Terrilee Bulger says, “At the beginning of the [pandemic] year, sales were down by 70 percent, then bounced back, then went down by maybe 50 percent. The ebbs and flows weren’t what we were used to. And when cash was coming in, all the [unexpected bookstore] returns eroded it.”

Emergency funding to the rescue

Still, Canadian independent presses seem to be holding their own, buoyed in part by the fast-tracking of emergency funding through Heritage Canada, the Canada Council, and various support agencies. Dollars have come through grants, loans, staffing retention funds, and new promotional incentives. Some publishers benefit from private donations, and/or municipal, institutional, and foundation contributions. But distribution of funds varies

One publisher estimates virtual launch sales at only 10 percent of those at live presentations.

across the country, and some of the money needs to be paid back. Rebuilding cash flow to achieve stability and make repayments adds stress, especially for the publishers with limited personnel.

Bulger says, “The Canada Council and Heritage Canada were terrific... but we only got half as much as we would normally from the provincial grants. I guess they figured that we were receiving federal money so cut us back.” She says she is “so thankful” for emergency federal funding, and that without it, “we wouldn’t be here today.”

Occasionally, the pandemic provided opportunities for efficiencies. Gaillard says that while book sales dropped, “revenue increased on other fronts, in the form of emergency funding through government agencies... and savings were made on travel and hotel costs due to the lack of in-person events.” Les Éditions du Blé also saved money by taking some design and layout work in house.

Embracing the virtual... sort of

Pandemic closures of venues and gatherings halted live events, initiating the shift to, or further embrace of, virtual events and communications. Now ubiquitous are video book trailers, Tik-Toks, tweets, Zoom book launches, talks, and interviews. They have not been a boon to everyone though.

Doyon of Theytus says, “It has been a sad time for us, as our in-person events brought an energy to the releases you just cannot get from YouTube or Facebook. She adds that sales at virtual events have been “dismal at best.”

One publisher estimates sales through virtual launches at only 10 percent of those at live presentations.

At Coach House, Wilcox says, “We focussed on making sure our online presence was optimized: that our metadata is ship-shape, our social media really active, our web store easy to use... Ultimately, our books are the kind you find by browsing in an indie bookstore.” The company has had “a lot of backlist sales, trying to encourage people to browse our website as though it were a store. But it’s not the same.”

Many publishers are excited by, and getting inventive with, new ways of reaching readers. But some feel that the virtual realm is flooded and that the value — labour versus outcomes — is debatable. And of course, there is a learning curve for many.

Drawn & Quarterly has been among the most successful in the virtual space. The press had an active and astute social media before the pandemic and has kept expanding it. Burns says, “We developed several popular new social media series aimed primarily at our 97,000 Instagram followers, often shared across our Twitter (44K followers) and Facebook (36K followers) platforms. On the publication date... our authors participate in our popular ‘At Home with D+Q’ online series, which we started in 2020 to make up for the lack of in-person events.”

Now, as in-person readings and festivals return, it seems clear the hybrid promotional model is with us to stay. And there should be no shortage of material to publish, given the wave of submissions several publishers report.

“We got so many more submissions coming in through the pandemic,” Bulger says. “They probably doubled, and we were already behind on our schedule with some delayed titles.”

Looking ahead

Like many of the publishers I interviewed, Bulger says Nimbus is looking forward to the future. “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger... I think we can pull off some great things in the next few years.”

Parsons says *Running the Goat* is “still not at pre-pandemic levels” and might not be for a few years, “but things are improving. It’s pretty much full steam ahead, with a large measure of foolish (and possibly unfounded) optimism.”

Despite the challenges, publishers, like writers, persevere. Doyon puts it nicely:

“We do this job so that future generations have the opportunity to learn from elders, knowledge keepers, and storytellers. That is why we keep making books through such despair and uncertainties. As long as the stories live on, we are happy.”

Steven Ross Smith has published 14 books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. He is also an arts journalist specializing in literary and visual arts. Smith was Banff Poet Laureate, 2019-2021. The final book in his poetic fluttertongue series — coda: fluttertongue 7 — was published with Jackpine Press in 2021. His new book — Glimmer: Short Fictions — is published by Radiant Press. He lives and writes in Victoria, BC.

Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT /

Is an MFA Worth It? Depends on What You Want to Get Out of It

BY AMANDA JESS



When I received my acceptance email to the University of King's College Master of Fine Arts in Creative Nonfiction, I had a panic attack.

I was in my corner cubicle at my daily newspaper job and texted my co-worker to come see me.

As I cried and struggled to take deep breaths, she asked what was wrong. After reading the email, she said, "I thought someone died."

Being accepted to the program had been a dream of mine since I first heard about it. But now I would actually have to follow through, wondering how long it would take before someone figured out I was not good enough to be there.

While my impostor syndrome hasn't disappeared, I can say the MFA gave me more confidence as a writer — and offered me insight into how many established writers deal with similar feelings.

Is that worth many thousands of dollars? It depends on who you ask, and what their reasons are for doing an MFA.

The King's limited residency in creative nonfiction, (with a fiction program coming in 2023) is aimed at helping students complete a manuscript and giving them tools to get it published, with many graduates landing a contract. The residencies used to be in person, but have been online since the pandemic began.

There is a range of other programs across the country, each with their own flavour. The University of British Columbia has both online and in-person creative writing MFAs, including specializations in theatre and film production, while the University of Victoria's MFA program focuses on both writing and teaching writing. The University of Guelph and University of Saskatchewan offer in-person multi-disciplinary MFA writing programs, covering genres including poetry, drama, and fiction.

Karen Stiller, a 2018 King's graduate, says her MFA was worth it. After all, she found an agent and got her book published (*The Minister's Wife*, Tyndale, 2020). But she went into the program looking more for a change in career than a book contract, and that wouldn't have changed whether or not her book was published.

"Even if I hadn't [been published], I know that it would've still dramatically changed my writing life, because I had never had the discipline or the desire to sit down [and write]," she said.

While she made her living as a writer, she wasn't the type to wake up early to fill a blank page. With her mentor expecting her chapters, she had to make a shift.

And Deborah A.M. Phillips, a 2021 King's graduate who comes from a background in fiction, said the experience gave her a better understanding of the world of publishing as well as a deeper desire to be a good writer.

"You get not just a birds-eye view, but a whole scope of what it is to go in front of an agent, and what it is to dig deeper into what you're writing, and [to ask yourself] do you really know what you're writing."

There is also the benefit of having been somehow vetted. One agent has told students who approach her to immediately identify themselves as having come from the program.

Each program has its own approach, and it's not always easy to know at the start how good a fit it will be. Take "Samantha's" experience. (*Write* has agreed to not use her real name.) Samantha chose a UBC MFA to pursue an idea for a novel, opting for the distance option so she could continue working.

But even online, she found work and school difficult to juggle, especially with video meetings in the middle of the work day.

"I knew other people were also struggling with their own circumstances, needing accommodation and not necessarily receiving it. So that was disappointing, because you sort of think the point of an online program is that they're going to be able to give access to people who can't be in a classroom or on campus."

While she finished her novel (because she had to), she wasn't happy with what she created and didn't feel she received the support she needed. She added she hasn't looked at it since she graduated.

While there were some positives — in particular, taking classes outside her chosen genre, which "puts you in this really creative, beautiful space where you can just play" — she does not recommend MFA programs to others (at least without a scholarship or other funding.) Instead, she suggested there are other, less expensive ways of getting that experience, such as finding writing communities online, and paying a mentor or editor to help with a manuscript.

Personally, I'm glad I did an MFA. I'll let you know if I still feel that way when I stop deferring my student loan payments.

Amanda Jess is a Nova Scotia-based freelance writer. Their work has been published in Flare, untethered magazine, the anthology A Teenager's Guide to Feminism (Pear Shaped Press, 2020), and multiple newspapers throughout Nova Scotia. She has a Bachelor of Arts with a major in journalism from St. Thomas University and a Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction from the University of King's College.