Writer's Digest, January 1963

So You Want To Write A Mystery

By Michael Avallone

SINCE THE DAYS of Edgar Allan Poe, when the detective story was officially born with the publication of "The Murders In The Rue Morgue," every conceivable crime and contrivance has been whipped up by more than a thousand well-known novelists as well as a million lesser literary lights. So beware, Newcomer! You're stepping up to the plate in a very fast league.

You just have to know the rules. I cannot tell you how to write a salable mystery novel. (Few people can tell anybody how to write anything), but I can tell you how *not* to.

Your Detective Hero must have an Anglo-Saxon name. Editors refuse to antagonize readers about race or nationality. Play it safe and create a John Wheel, Pete Club or Joe Wednesday. After all, what is the nationality of Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, Ellery Queen, Nero Wolfe, Mr. and Mrs. North, Bart Harden, Shell Scott, Johnny Liddell, Pete Chambers, Al Wheeler and Chester Drum? These are but a few of the all-Americans who cavort in modern mystery novels of the day. There are also Max Thursday, Mr. Lucky, Joe Friday, Steve Puma, Johnny April, Scott Jordan, Pete Chambers and Mike Hammer.

For some mysterious reason, though, it is always safe to be Irish. Don't ask me why. Michael Shayne, Burns O'Bannion, Flash Casey and the other Irishmen of the past have always enjoyed some peculiar largesse.

Anyway, play it safe and name your character Al Toy, Dan Dial or Will West; but never Horowitz, Bellini, Steiner or Wiejeck. Do not set the editorial department against you from page one on.

While we're on the subject of name-calling, it is best to check all the names which have been created or used before you came, so you don't unconsciously or foolishly duplicate a Milo March, Johnny April or Colonel Danning. Don't rely on the busy editorial staff of the book company. You have to make sure yourself. Check with Mystery Writers of America or look at the covers of reprinted novels and find out for yourself.

Don't imitate previously published plots. Ignorance is no excuse. If ten people are invited to a strange island to be killed off by a host who fancies himself judge, jury and executioner for their crimes-without-punishment, you're doing Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. If you write a book in which the first-person narrator turns out to be the killer on the last page, you are also stealing Miss Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

You just have to know what has been done before and what hasn't. Every possible variation has been worked on—poisons, suicides, locked room puzzles, twins, impersonations, dual identities as well as daggers, guns, fingerprints and old booby traps. You can't fake it. You have to know. You can only know by going to the library and catching up with the so-called classics of the genre. You will simply have to know all the standard plots so you won't dash off 200 pages of marvelous prose that says nothing new; and, for all the Mickey Spillane fanciers, you just can't have naked, panting females screaming for a bullet before-or-after-Sex and hope to sell a book on that basis. You have to undress your women and your corpses for better reasons than Spillane had.

Nobody sells an imitation.

Don't read English thrillers and wonder why you can't sell the same sort of book in America. It just isn't the same. For one thing, you will probably lack the authentic atmospheric feel that the native-born Englishman has. It can't be faked. Also your American brain will be defeated by the tone and tenor of such books, by the ring of authenticity that makes them unmistakably British. An English mystery reprinted here is sold as such and this makes a difference in reader response which no amount of information I could give you here would explain. Take care. Plan your crimes at home. And if you are doing an American-In-London type of thriller, be sure you know what you're doing when you set down speech patterns, mores and behaviors of your Continental characters.

Don't go off the deep end in plotting. Don't put down the most fantastic things you can think of in the hope of shocking and astounding the audience. It just won't work. No matter how well you can write, how compellingly you can make a scene live,

nothing in a mystery can be arguable. It has to all work out *one* way with only *one* possible killer and *one* possible conclusion after all the facts and figures are brought to light. This is what is meant when the reader puts down the book, ponders a while and then says to himself, "Of course! It had to be that way. Now why didn't I think of that?"

Anything else for a mystery writer is failure—failure as a writer, performer and teller of a mystery story.

If you're male, stick to a male protagonist. If you're female, use a female protagonist. A masculine writer is seldom able to think like a heroine, no matter how well he knows women. Females can hardly ever write from a male viewpoint without sounding prissy. You'll only be uncomfortable with the disguise and it will probably show up. If Maria, instead of Robert Jordan, had been the main protagonist in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, the book would have been a resounding flop.

The only gift you can bring to the field is originality. Think about that. It's all been done and said before, so your characters, settings and plot complications should be fresh, not something people saw in a movie or read in another book someplace. Give more thought to the unusual, the bizarre and the *un*commonplace. Try to come up with a new background, a differently-staged crime, a different kind of a hero or occupational research that explores a little-known subject. Otherwise, you'll hear the same old tired refrain: "Rather routine and old hat. Nothing new."

You can't read every mystery that was ever written, so read the reviews of new books—if only to learn what the competition is doing, has been doing or what they used for a plot or background. You might learn whatnot-to-do from some scholars who have devoted their lives to the mystery review. If you read what they say about you and measure all the arguments accordingly, you might be benefited by that too. But I leave it to your own intelligence. If you've reached the point where you're being reviewed, it won't matter much what they say anyway.

JUST TO GIVE YOU a sampling of how some of the above has applied to myself, here's how the rules affected me.

When I created Ed Noon, my private eye character in 1952, I sold his first case, *The Tall Dolores*, to Henry Holt and Company. His name was then Ed March. Fortunately for me, Holt had printed the Milo March novels, so the name was caught in the bud. Changing it to Noon gave me an individual name.

I've been a mystery fan all my life so I felt on safe ground when I used the Statue of Liberty for a climax and plot solution to *The Tall Dolores*. The same goes for the Polo Grounds in *Dead Game*, the George Washington Bridge in *The Alarming Clock* and a through train to Chicago for *The Case of The Violent Virgin*. All these were fairly new territories for finales and, as such, served to give the reader some fresh, interesting data about these places.

As for subject-backgrounds, I explored mattress testing for *The Case of The Bouncing Betty*, voodoo rites in *The Voodoo Murders*, and Broadway press-agentry in *Meanwhile Back At The Morgue*. To a lesser degree, I've touched on witchcraft, baseball, sculpture, Shakespeare, Poe, show business, judo, Le Savate, stripteasing, dance, Dostoyevsky and aviation—all garnished, of course, with murder, detection and the same old business of trying to find the clues that lead to the killer.

The seven rules I have discussed have saved me a lot of heartache and trouble. They provide negative, but helpful, advice. The rest is up to you.

Writer's Digest, March 1963

Elementary, My Dear Mr. Moto?

Dear Editor:

Says Michael Avallone in the January WRITER'S DIGEST, "Your detective hero must have an Anglo-Saxon name."

Like Charley Chan or Mr. Moto?

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• Well, not all of them.—Ed.