

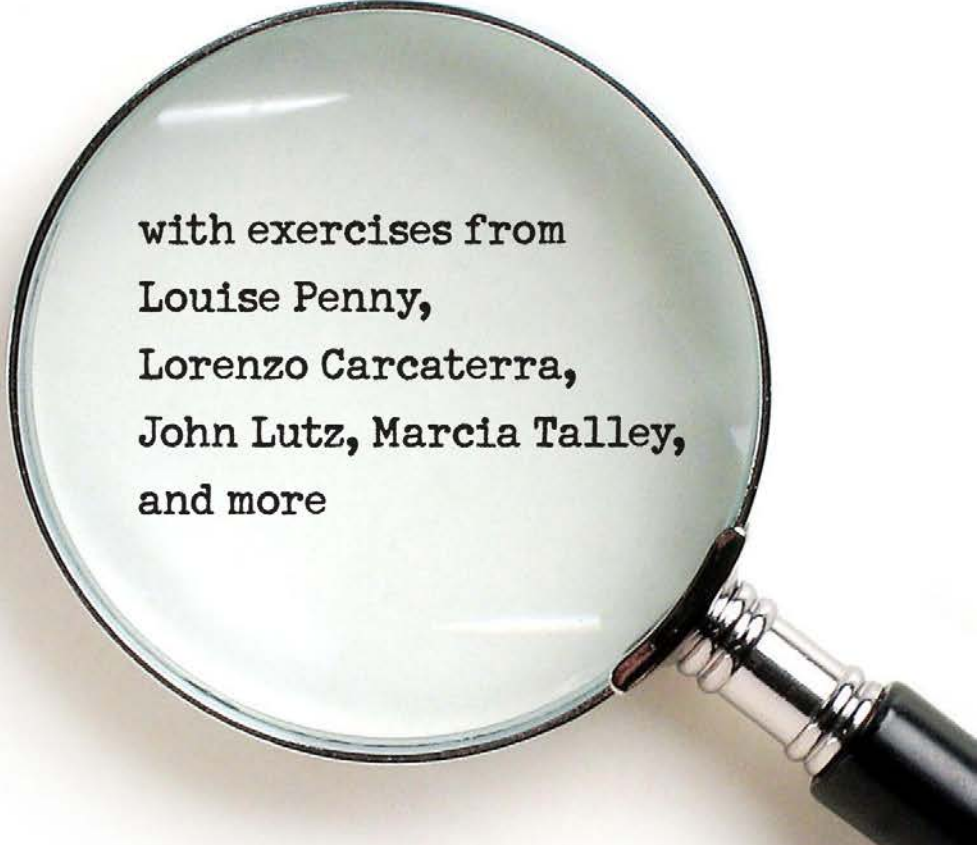


# NOW WRITE!


## Mysteries

Suspense, Crime, Thriller, and  
Other Mystery Fiction Exercises from  
Today's Best Writers and Teachers

Sherry Ellis & Laurie Lamson



with exercises from  
Louise Penny,  
Lorenzo Carcaterra,  
John Lutz, Marcia Talley,  
and more



## **Planting a Seed**

**by Gerard Bianco**

Reading a great mystery novel is a lot like horseback riding. Sometimes, you're cautiously slow-walking on unfamiliar turf. Other times, you're head-bobbling-wobbling trotting. Then there are those times when you're whooshing along on a take-your-breath-away gallop. This variety of pace is one of the key elements contributing to the thrill and excitement of the ride. Another is fear. (What if I fall off the damn horse?)

In keeping with this metaphor, mystery writing then becomes somewhat like laying out a course for the rider. The author must include an assortment of terrains to make the ride interesting and somewhat challenging. There has to be grassy hills to climb and soft, sloping landscapes to descend. There must be twists and turns, tree-laden paths, and long, smooth straight-aways for those blazing gallops.

To accomplish this, writers use an assortment of subtle and not-so-subtle techniques to enhance their storytelling and add the necessary oomph required for a successful mystery/suspense yarn. From the many techniques available, consider the following.

*Planting a Seed.* How do you write a page-turning mystery—one in which people say, “I couldn't put the book down?” How did authors like Raymond Chandler, Erle Stanley Gardner, and Agatha Christie create stories that keep us glued to the page? One technique they used is called Planting a Seed. These authors sprinkled their mystery stories with several small, subtle mysteries that forecast evil—ruthless, merciless, cruel, and unscrupulous events that will take place later on in the novel. These little mysteries, many

times placed at the end of a chapter, add breadth to the story, carrying the interest of the reader from the beginning of the novel to its successful conclusion. Tied together with the larger whodunit, they keep the reader turning pages faster than you can say, “221B Baker Street.”

In my lecture series, *Subtle Writing Techniques Used to Create a Successful Mystery Novel*, I stress the importance of taking the extra steps necessary to bypass the competition you’ll come up against in today’s highly aggressive marketplace. Incorporating the technique of Planting a Seed will place you well ahead of your fellow authors. Both the TV and film industries understand the importance of Planting a Seed to capture the viewer’s attention. Commercials, film clips, and trailers are filled with nerve-tingling uncertainties that leave the viewer panting for more.

Let’s take a look at a few examples of mystery seed-planting from some of the authors I mentioned earlier.

Raymond Chandler in his last sentence of chapter four in *Farewell, My Lovely* wrote: “I went out of the Hotel Sans Souci and crossed the street to my car. It looked too easy. It looked much too easy.” It doesn’t take a brain surgeon to figure out that later on in the story, “it ain’t gonna be so easy.” By planting those two little sentences, Chandler keeps us wondering what will happen next.

In *The Case of the Musical Cow*, Erle Stanley Gardner wrote at the end of chapter thirteen: “The co-ordinates had located the position of car seven within two hundred feet. The trap was ready to be set.” Can’t you just hear the eerie music being played after those lines?

Agatha Christie proved she is the “Queen of Crime” when, in her short story, “The Double Clue,” she introduced the diabolical character, Countess Rossakoff, and Poirot’s suggested love interest, and then prophesized, through Poirot, that the countess and the detective will, one day, reconvene. In his final words of this story, Poirot sighs to Hastings: “A remarkable woman. I have a feeling, my friend—a very decided feeling—I shall meet her again. Where, I wonder?” The seed Christie planted kept her readers on the edge of their seats, waiting for her next story.

Once you begin to recognize how authors use these subtle mysteries to keep the reader racing through the story, you’ll begin to understand their importance and use them in your own mysteries. It’s essential to remember, as with most techniques of writing, not to overplay your hand with too many of these keenly placed accents, otherwise your story will become burdensome and taxing. Keep your dialogue crisp and your descriptions sparse. Say no more than is required to get your point across. Your terseness will create a sense of urgency that will have your reader yearning for more of what you’re dishing out.

Here’s an example of the seed I planted, along with the brevity that I used in my book *The Deal Master*. At the end of chapter eleven, I wrote:

With his shoulders up around his ears, he quickly walked away from the action without once looking back. When he reached the corner, he turned left. Then, when he was certain no one was looking, he sprinted as fast as his legs would take him towards what he thought was freedom, but on the contrary, was nothing of the kind.

## EXERCISE

Reread one of your favorite mysteries, searching for those places where the author interspersed subtle mysteries to keep you wondering what will happen next.

Then practice writing ten different endings of a chapter, making certain to plant seeds that will induce readers to miss a night's sleep because they couldn't put your book down.