

Sample Material from

How to Write Killer Historical Mysteries
The Art and Adventure of Sleuthing through the Past

by
Kathy Lynn Emerson

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PREFACE TO THE E-BOOK EDITION

You are reading the same text as in the print edition, with minor corrections. The only major difference is that it lacks an index and there are no page numbers in the table of contents. Pagination varies according to the format you use to read this e-book. You should be able to use your search function to find specific sections of this document.

This book is my personal take on how to write historical mysteries, based on over thirty years in print as a writer of fiction and nonfiction and the publication of fourteen historical mysteries in two different series, a collection of historical mystery short stories, three novels of historical romantic suspense, and three contemporary mysteries. My experience is the core of the book; the remainder of the text consists of contributions from my fellow historical mystery writers—advice, opinions, anecdotes, and suggestions for research—and input from assorted editors, booksellers, reviewers, and historical mystery fans. I owe a great debt to all of them for their generosity.

I have included a number of Internet addresses (URLs) in the text. These were accurate and the websites were active as of early 2007, but I make no guarantees beyond that. Information about libraries, book sales, and promotion applies to the situation in the U.S. in 2007 and may or may not apply elsewhere or in later years.

You will notice that there is a considerable number of references to historical mysteries I have written. This is not gratuitous self-promotion. In fact, I made an effort to use examples from the books of other historical mystery writers whenever possible. However, it only made sense to illustrate certain points with examples from the books I know best. When it was necessary to give away significant plot details, or even reveal whodunit, to make a point, I chose to spoil the suspense in one of my own novels rather than compromise the reader's enjoyment of someone else's mystery.

Quotations from novels and published interviews are identified and acknowledged in the text, as are comments, anecdotes, and tips from writers solicited specifically for this work. You will find more detailed citations for my published and online sources in the bibliography at the end of this volume. Lists of historical mystery titles written by contributing authors are included in the Sampling of Historical Mysteries that follows Chapter Fourteen.

Whether you are an old hand at writing historical mysteries, or a neophyte who has only dreamed about delving into the past, or a reader and fan of the genre, I hope you will find inspiration and entertainment here.

EXCERPT FROM
CHAPTER TWO
BASIC DECISIONS—WHEN, WHERE, WHO, WHAT,
AND WHAT DO YOU CALL IT?

If you're considering writing historical mysteries you've probably already given some thought to the when, the where, and the who. You may know what crime your sleuth will solve. You may even have a title picked out. If you don't, now is the time to move from vague to specific in all these areas.

WHEN

Since these are historical novels, the "when" comes first for most people. If you want to write a book that historical mystery fans will enjoy, you must know and love the era in which your story is set. It isn't enough to dress the characters in period costumes and toss in a few details of everyday life. Readers want to be transported to the world your characters inhabit. Even if your plot has no connection to the political, military, or religious controversies of your chosen time period, your characters don't live in a vacuum. To give an extreme example—if you are toying with an idea for a murder mystery set during the French Revolution but don't want to deal with mob violence and executions by guillotine, consider a different setting!

Popular Pasts

What are the most popular periods for historical mysteries? A poll taken at CrimeThruTime gave participants nineteen choices, from "Ancient Egypt" to "1960s and more modern." This is a small sampling of readers, only a few hundred, but it will perhaps give some indication of reader preferences. The favorites were "Medieval" with 12% of the votes, "Ancient Roman/Roman Empire" with 9%, "Victorian" with 8%, and "Ancient Egypt" and "Renaissance" tied at 7% each.

Booksellers see similar trends. Robin Agnew of Aunt Agatha's Mystery Bookshop (Ann Arbor, Michigan) ranks them this way: Victorian, Renaissance/Medieval, Civil War ("oddly, these are mostly male readers"), and World War I ("thanks to Winspear, Todd, Airth"). She adds: "I personally enjoy Revolutionary War series, but these don't seem to go as well as some others." Jim Huang of The Mystery Company (Carmel, Indiana) lists "the obvious: medieval, Victorian, Elizabethan, Regency—basically most all English history—plus Ancient Rome." Deb Andolino, whose brick and mortar store in South Carolina, Aliens and Alibis, has now, sadly, closed (she's still on the Web), listed her customers' favorite time periods as the Victorian era, Ancient Rome, and "the Beau Brummel age," but added that "World War I is getting more popular." Dean James, former manager of Murder by the Book in Houston, listed "medieval, Victorian, Regency, and the ancient world, not necessarily in that order" and adds that "American historical mysteries are harder to sell. There have been several attempts at series set in colonial and post-colonial America, for example, and while some of the books were outstanding (like Margaret Lawrence's wonderful *Hearts and Bones*), readers seem less interested in American history."

Popular pasts are popular for a reason. However, if there are already series and stand-alones set in the period you're most interested in, it is probably a good idea to avoid the same years those authors have chosen to write about. You don't need to read all those novels. In fact, you probably shouldn't. But skim a sampling to get an idea of style, plot, characters, and so forth.

And in particular, look at exactly *when* the books are set. If you are determined to enter an already crowded field, try not to make things any harder on yourself than you have to.

Then again, there's no way to second-guess which period is about to become popular. In 1993, when I started writing the first *Face Down* mystery, there were already several mystery series set in the sixteenth century. One, by Michael Clynes (one of the many P.C. Doherty pseudonyms), was set during the reign of Henry VIII. Three, by Edward Marston, Leonard Tourney, and P. F. Chisholm, were set toward the end of the Elizabethan era. The middle of the century did not appear to be in use, so I set my story in 1559, the first year of Elizabeth Tudor's reign.

Little did I know that in the same month my *Face Down in the Marrow-Bone Pie* came out in the U.S., the first book in Fiona Buckley's Elizabethan mystery series would appear in the U.K., with U.S. publication following a few months later. It is also set in 1559. A couple of years later, Karen Harper's series featuring Queen Elizabeth as the detective debuted, also set at the beginning of her reign. In the years since, possibly because of the popularity of *Shakespeare in Love* and several movie and television biographies of Elizabeth I, even more mystery series set in sixteenth-century England have appeared—Iris Collier's Lord Nicholas Peverell series and C.J. Sansom's Matthew Shardlake series (both set in the reign of Henry VIII), Judith Cook's Simon Forman series, John Pilkington's Thomas Finbow series, Martin Stephen's Henry Gresham series, and Peter Tonkin's Tom Musgrave series (all Elizabethan), and Shakespeare-related series from Leonard Tourney, Philip Gooden, and Simon Hawke. Also, Audrey Peterson's *Murder in Stratford*, features Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, as sleuth.

Steven Saylor had a similar experience, which he recounts in an essay in *Mystery Readers Journal*: "When I started *Roman Blood*, I thought I was working on a fairly lonely patch of literary ground." By the time the book was published, however, six others, two of which would become mystery series, were also out: Colleen McCullough's *First Man in Rome*, Lindsey Davis's *Silver Pigs*, John Maddox Roberts's *SPQR*, Joan O'Hagan's *A Roman Death*, Ray Faraday Nelson's *Dogheaded Death*, and Ron Burns's *Roman Nights*. Saylor goes on to observe that "it's clear that none of the writers involved took inspiration from the others—it was just a curious coincidence that we all experienced a similar brain wave at roughly the same time."

This is not to say, of course, that you should simply select a period based on anyone else's likes and dislikes. You're the one who will be spending thousands of hours in the era you choose. You're the one who has to remain enthusiastic about it.

Why *That* When?

There are as many reasons for choosing a "when" as there are time periods. Lauren Haney had been reading about Ancient Egypt for many years and "didn't have to think twice about where to set the Lieutenant Bak stories. Though the written history of Ancient Egypt spanned nearly 3000 years, narrowing that down to a specific time was equally easy. I'd long ago focused my interest on the early 18th Dynasty, especially the dual reign of Queen Hatshepsut and King Thutmose III and the following decades when he served as sole ruler of Egypt. I considered setting the stories during his reign (after Hatshepsut 'vanished from history,' as Egyptologists say); however, he was a warrior king. I didn't want Lieutenant Bak constantly marching off to war. I wanted my stories to be about the land and people of the Nile valley rather than ancient warfare. Therefore I set the stories midway in Hatshepsut's twenty-one-year dual reign with her nephew."

Patricia Wynn, who previously wrote about Regency England, chose the preceding early-Georgian era for her Blue Satan mystery series featuring a nobleman turned highwayman. The era has plenty of potential for murder and intrigue, thanks to the Jacobite rebellion and the schemes of the Pretender, but that was not why Wynn selected it. Rather, she was influenced by fond memories of her mother reading Alfred Noyes's poem "The Highwayman" to her when she was a child. She always knew she wanted the hero of her mysteries to be a highwayman but it wasn't until she started doing research on actual highwaymen in England that she discovered the period of their operation was the reign of George I.

Peter Lovesey, in the essay "Have You Tried Murder?" reveals that he "chanced on Victorian London almost accidentally. I was mainly interested in sport. It just happened that the sports event I used as background for *Wobble to Death* occurred in 1879." Lovesey expanded on this in an interview with Mystery Readers International (MRI): "People say you should write about what you know, so I wrote *Wobble to Death*, a whodunit using a Victorian long distance running race as the setting. The history of athletics had long been an interest of mine, and I'd published a nonfiction book on running the previous year." As it turned out, "the Victorian era had all I wanted: the hypocrisy, the die-hard institutions, the over-the-top characters, the brilliant entertainments, and the sense that life inside was comfortable and warm while the streets seethed with criminality and vice."

Carola Dunn jokes that she chose the 1920s for her Daisy Dalrymple mysteries on the same basis she selected the Regency period for her romances—comfortable clothing. But there is a practical reason behind that statement. Think about it—you're going to be telling a story from the point of view of people living in a certain era. In essence, you are going to be wearing what they wear.

Dunn set her series in the 1920s because "it was a period of flowering freedom for women." She continues,

Apart from the social changes—forced by WWI—that allowed women to take a variety of jobs previously considered male territory, two particular aspects attracted me: the changes in transportation that made it possible for women to travel freely, and the clothes that allowed them to move freely in a different sense.

For centuries, with brief relief during the Regency, women, or at least ladies, wore incredibly restrictive clothing. Georgian hoops forced them to turn sideways to go through a door; Victorian crinolines made them—in the words of Wilkie Collins—"take up the room of three men;" Edwardian fashions forced their bodies into the infamous "Grecian Bend;" all with corsets so restrictive it's no wonder girls fainted right, left, and center. The Great War started the change. By the 'Twenties, we can recognize the beginnings of modern fashion. Any woman today could wear a '20s jersey "costume" by Coco Chanel without feeling as if she was wearing fancy dress. The hip-level waist returns periodically, and the current mania for thinness echoes the "no bosom, no bottom" boyish look. Though women still didn't normally wear trousers except for riding (astride, not side-saddle!), sports clothes allowed those so inclined to play tennis and golf without getting entangled in ankle-length skirts. Daisy's figure will never comply with the fashionable ideal, but the clothes she wears in no way impede her movement. It seems to me this is a great advantage for an amateur sleuth!

Narrowing Down the "When"

Once you decide you want to set your novel in a certain era, you need to narrow down the "when" still further. Pick a single year.

Dale Furutani got the idea for his Samurai Mystery Trilogy while visiting a seventeenth-century Japanese farmhouse in Yokohama. "I was sipping a steaming cup of green tea and marveling at floorboards worn glass smooth by centuries of bare feet crossing them," he recalls. "It occurred to me that in fiction about ancient Japan, the people who lived in that farmhouse were often just stage props to some greater pageantry, such as the fight to become the Shogun. Yet they also had stories to tell, and I decided to tell at least some of them through the vehicle of a mystery trilogy.

"Having chosen the actors, my next decision was to select the time of the action. To most Japanese, the year 1603 has a familiarity to it like the year 1776 has to Americans. That is the year Ieyasu Tokugawa declared himself to be Shogun of Japan, and it marked a turning point in Japanese history. For the next 250 years, Japanese culture, politics, and the social order were regulated by the oppressive hand of the Tokugawa Shogunate. This period has been covered by many works of fiction and nonfiction, but I was interested in the hinge of history; that brief period when an entire nation was in the midst of a pervasive and profound change, before the Tokugawa Shogunate had extended its tentacles into every aspect of Japanese life."

Given the pacing a mystery novel demands, it is a good idea to continue to narrow your time frame to a limited period within the year you have chosen. If the investigation of the crime stretches out over too long a period, your story is likely to suffer.

Even if you don't share this information with your readers, it will help you in your plotting to know the actual date on which your story begins. You can find calendars for any year online or in an almanac. The dates of important historical events are easy to come by. As you read about your historical period, keep track of these. One may well trigger some significant action in your novel. In *Deadlier than the Pen*, the first of my Diana Spaulding Mysteries, I make considerable use of the Blizzard of 1888, which blew in on March 13, immobilizing New York City and most of New England for the best part of a week.

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER TEN ANACHRONISMS AND HOW TO AVOID GADZOOKERY

Anachronisms are the bane of the historical mystery writer's existence. It isn't too hard to avoid glaring errors like putting a Regency rake in doublet and hose or having a Roman matron cook on an electric stove, but there are all sorts of things that can sneak into a manuscript when you're not looking. Even if you choose to write paranormals or alternate history mysteries, you need to check facts. Alternate history depends upon

history being the same up to a certain event. Just as in a regular historical mystery, dress, customs, food, and all the rest have to agree with what we know about a certain era.

What, exactly, is an anachronism? Quite simply, anachronisms are things used in the wrong time period. This can be either because they are no longer used or because they are not yet in use. No matter how careful your research, anachronisms in language and anachronistic details—things you never thought to check because you were so certain they were accurate—slip through the cracks.

"READ UNTIL FIRST ANACHRONISM. TOSS."

You may be wondering what happened to poetic license. We're writing fiction and there are bestsellers that are notoriously inaccurate when it comes to historical "facts." True, but as a writer of historical mysteries, you are targeting a specific audience, one that prefers their history accurate down to the smallest detail. Get it wrong and you pull them out of the story. Get it wrong and you'll hear from readers, telling you about what you did. Get it wrong and you justify comments like the one Marilyn Stasio, mystery critic for the *New York Times*, made in a 2006 review: "Here's my standard approach to historical mysteries: Open book. Read until first anachronism. Toss."

Most reviewers seem to agree that anachronisms are flaws that would prevent them from giving an otherwise well-written novel high marks. Jon L. Breen hates "obvious anachronisms of slang or other terminology. I'm most likely to find these in books about relatively recent history, in which they are paradoxically harder to avoid and more likely to be spotted. A too early use of 'shrink' for psychiatrist is one that comes up frequently." Dean James comments that "no one expects the author to write in Middle English or Norman French . . . but the author can still work to avoid obvious anachronisms with words that are too modern. A truly gifted writer can convey the concept without having to resort to the modern term for it."

Reviewer Steven Steinbock suggests that the authors of historical mysteries need "to find the golden mean between accuracy and accessibility. Of course, you want your book to accurately capture the essence of the period in your dialogue and description. You've done the research, and know what foods people eat, how they dress, and how social and political institutions of the period operated. If your villain carries a pump-action shotgun during the American Civil War, a few gun-buffs may catch you. But that's still a few too many. But the flipside is that too much accuracy can bog your story down. Readers want the feel of the period, but they also deserve to get to the story without having to wade through footnotes, glossaries, and endless minutiae."

ANACHRONISTIC WORDS

Kim Malo, moderator of CrimeThruTime (CTT), writes: "Taken to its logical absurdity, any historical mystery set more than a hundred years or so back and written in modern English is an anachronism." As discussed in Chapter Nine, using the exact language of the time usually isn't a good idea. Better, as Kim puts it, to use "comprehensible modern English" and avoid "clear anachronisms, such as having a pair of cavaliers synchronize their watches."

Short of checking every single word in your manuscript to be certain it was actually used during the time of your historical mystery, there is no way to avoid ever using an anachronistic word. An alert copy editor may catch some, but more often than

not, they are words you've already checked for yourself and found to be accurate. Check again. No point in letting a foolish error slip through. But there will be other words that will escape notice. They *sound* right for the period and it will never occur to you to make sure they are.

Steven Steinbock calls word choice a "tricky matter. All too often, while reading a historical mystery, I come across a term that seems so jarringly anachronistic that I dash off to the *Oxford English Dictionary* to check. I'm often surprised to find that the author was indeed technically correct. But by that time I've lost the momentum of the story. I've been distracted away from what the author intended. Shakespeare can and did use the word punk. But for the Elizabethan reader, it didn't mean a rude teenage boy on a skateboard. It didn't mean a boy at all. An obnoxious person might have been called a jerk in the 1920s, but encountering it on the printed page might jerk me in the wrong direction. For the author of historical mysteries, it isn't enough to use words that *are* appropriate to the period. The writer must choose words that *sound* accurate for the period.

The words writers need to be especially aware of, since they are sure to be caught by readers if they are used by mistake, are those derived from people's names and names of commodities. Mesmerism, for example, comes from Dr. F.A. Mesmer, born in 1734. Tea leaves and the word *tea* did not appear in England before the mid-seventeenth century. Could a character in the fifteenth century know about a drink called tea (though it would be spelled differently)? Yes . . . but only if he had access to information about China.

In some cases the source word for an English word of a later era was in common usage in another language, such as French or Dutch. If your character has contact with people who speak a language other than English, or has traveled abroad, then he or she may have access to additional vocabulary.

Words we associate with murder investigations also need to be checked. How early could one have an alibi? Or a motive, for that matter? And were those words used in the same sense we mean today?

When I was working on *Face Down Among the Winchester Geese*, I was unable to turn up any information concerning the disposition of unclaimed, murdered bodies in 1560s England. Was there such a thing as a morgue? The *OED* told me that the word was not yet in use and indicated that there was unlikely to have been a specific place where murder victims were customarily taken. It only seems logical that some procedure was followed, but lacking specifics, I decided to have my sleuth claim the body at the murder scene by saying it was that of a relative. I still don't have an answer to my question, but what happens in the novel is believable.

Consulting the *OED* to catch anachronisms is a must for the writer of historicals, but remember that the *OED* cites only the first occurrence of that word *in print* and *in English*. Earlier occurrences may have been lost over time. In addition, when books were rare, many words would have been in use far earlier than their first appearance in print.

In addition to the *OED*, you may find it useful to consult William Brohaugh's *English Through the Ages* (1998). Sections are broken down by date. Some of the words that were not used in 1950 but were in use by 1960, for example, are: dust mop, exotic dancer, eye contact, gunpoint, mother hen, ploughman's lunch, press secretary, second

banana, send-up (parody), spear-carrier, and stretch marks. Also listed is *gadzookery*, a British word that means using archaic words!

THE TALE OF THE CLOCKS

A topic that has been addressed more than once on the CTT listserv concerns how people told time in past ages. The most recent discussion started with a question about the accuracy of referring to the quarter hour in a monastery in the 1530s. This struck a good many people as anachronistic, myself included. How would this person know the time to that degree? Clocks were rare, weren't they? And expensive. Weren't most people still telling time by the sun or by cock crow? Or perhaps, by the ringing of church bells? But how often did those ring, and how accurate were they?

It didn't take long for the inquisitive readers on the list to chime in with their research. It turns out that sixteenth-century people were familiar with the concept of minutes and that most monasteries in the 1530s probably had water clocks. Simple, inexpensive versions of these had been available since ancient times. Is there a great deal of evidence of this in period writings? There is some, but I couldn't recall coming across any reference to water clocks in over thirty years of research into everyday life in the era. Why not? The answer, when I thought about it, was simple. People don't mention the commonplace. You wouldn't necessarily mention how your character knew it was ten past six if you were writing a mystery set in 2008. Your reader would assume your character glanced at a watch or a clock.

Omitting similar information in a historical mystery, however, can result in a true fact being questioned by readers. It must have bothered some of them quite a bit or they wouldn't have posted on CTT. So, if you have a situation akin to this one in your novel, what do you do? Do you make some reference to the water clock—or a sundial, or whatever means of telling time is appropriate—to prevent readers from wondering how the character knew? Or do you follow Joan Blos's test, cited in Chapter Eight, and leave it out because "the equivalent detail" would not be mentioned in a contemporary novel? The only answer I can offer is that you must decide on a case by case basis.

DELIBERATE USE OF ANACHRONISTIC LANGUAGE

Is there ever a time when you can get away with the deliberate use of an anachronistic word? In the use of words from an earlier period, certainly. I call a lady's private chamber a solar in my sixteenth-century series, even though most sources, including the *OED*, say that the word was no longer in use by that time. My argument is to cite a parallel case—we no longer put parlors in today's houses, but some people still use the term, especially in rural locations.

Using words or expressions not yet invented is a trickier proposition and goes back to the "translation" discussion in Chapter Nine. It can work if you do it well and are consistent. Lindsey Davis's character Falco speaks in colloquial English. At times Falco, the Roman "private informer," sounds very much like a twentieth-century hard-boiled detective. Some readers consider that anachronistic. Others delight in the humor that results from deliberate use of anachronisms. At her website, Lindsey Davis answers some of the most persistent critics with the same wit and humor that grace her novels by remarking that "nobody has ever written to tell me I have made an error in human relationships, which ought to matter far more."

Anachronisms are also used for comic effect in Marcia Talley's short story, the humorous howdunit "Too Many Cooks." Set in Scotland in the time of Macbeth, it won the Agatha, the Anthony, and the Macavity awards for best mystery short story in 2002. Talley's deliberate use of anachronistic language, as when one of the three witches yells, "It's show time!" before they go off to confront Macbeth, works well in that context.

DEALING WITH INCONVENIENT HISTORICAL FACTS

Not surprisingly, historical mystery writers have strong opinions on this subject. Jane Finniss, whose books are set in Roman Britain, believes that "the most important rule for writing historical mysteries is: don't tamper with known historical facts to make them fit your story. Some writers think this doesn't matter, as long as they avoid the crasser anachronisms, like having Julius Caesar discussing politics with Plato. They're wrong. Unless you're writing what is clearly fantasy or science fiction, readers have every right to expect the history that comes with their mysteries to be as correct as it can be."

Steven Saylor, in the interview from *Murder: Past Tense* cited earlier, says that "the truth is always more interesting than anything invented. I fill in the gaps, I do my best to be creative in the unknown area, but I never change the facts." When he invents things, such as the "Pharaoh's down the Nile" game in *Rubicon*, he does so with a clear conscience because "the Romans did have board games. I could imagine a little board with crocodiles"

There are usually creative ways around inconvenient historical facts. There are also ways, if you do decide to alter some historical detail, to head off reader outrage. Victoria Thompson's *Murder on St. Mark's Place* is set in New York City in 1896. An Author's Note at the end explains that the Elephant Hotel on Coney Island had actually been abandoned for several years by that date, but that it "was such a delightfully absurd part of Coney Island, I just had to use it in the book." Thompson then asks her readers to "forgive my lapse in accuracy for the sake of whimsy."

Sometimes, however, research reveals inconvenient facts that are much bigger than whether or not a hotel was still in business. Say you've envisioned your plot going in a certain direction and there's a battle or a natural disaster or a train wreck right in the way of the story. Ignore it? Change history? If you do, be sure to add an author's note explaining what you've done and why. But before you do, consider that this setback may present a challenge instead. See if you can figure out a way to work around the problem, or work it into your story, *without* changing history.