

Case Closed

Getting Started in Writing
Crime, Thriller and Mystery Fiction



Written by Fiona Cummins

C&W



Contents

Preface	3
Introduction	4
What is Crime Fiction?	6
What is Thriller Fiction?	8
What is Mystery Fiction?	10
Idea Generation	12
Research	14
Five Books About Writing	15
About Case Closed	18

Preface

We launched the Case Closed programme with the C&W literary agency to find and develop new crime, thriller and mystery fiction writers from diverse backgrounds.

To help you get started writing in these genres, we commissioned the crime writer [Fiona Cummins](#) to write about her journey to being an author, definitions of each of the genres with examples, exercises that will help you grow your ideas and further resources to develop your craft.

This guide is paired with the first workshop in the programme, which will be run by Fiona Cummins on Thursday 25 May and is free to join. For more details, please visit the Spread the Word website. There is also more information on the programme at the end of this guide.

We hope you find this information useful and look forward to seeing you at the workshops.

Bobby Nayyar
Programme Manager
Spread the Word

Introduction

Hello, my name is Fiona Cummins and my journey to writing crime began as a book-loving child with a penchant for Agatha Christie novels. As a family, we didn't have much money, but my mum was an avid reader herself, and we made regular trips to the library during weekends and school holidays. That inspired in me a life-long passion for reading, which, it turns out, is a useful habit for a writer!

I never considered a career as an author though. Or if I did, it was in a fleeting kind of way, like a child might daydream of becoming a pop star or professional footballer. I was an average student at school and studied English and History at university, but definitely didn't set the world on fire with my academic prowess.

My first job was as a journalist for my local free newspaper in Essex and it was the perfect place to cut my teeth. After that, I landed a position at the Lancashire Evening Post and lived up north for a few months before moving to London as a reporter for the Daily Mirror. I'd decided to have a crack at applying for their popular graduate trainee scheme – no-one was more surprised than me when I won a place.

Working for a national newspaper was a baptism by fire: on my first day I ended up, by chance, taking a phone call from the Deputy Prime Minister at the time, John Prescott, which led to my first front page story. The job took me all over the world – from Italy and Denmark to Jamaica and the USA – and introduced me to people from all walks of life. I covered rail disasters, terrorist attacks and abductions and interviewed celebrities including Jude Law, George Clooney and Michael Jackson.

But when my toddler son became seriously ill within weeks of his sister being born, and a close family member was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer, I decided that I was ready for a change of career.

At the same time, I heard an interview with S.J. Watson (his debut *Before I Go To Sleep* was made into a film starring Nicole Kidman) on the radio talking about a creative writing course at the Faber Academy and decided to give it a go.

That six-month course gave me permission to take myself seriously as a writer. I don't believe courses are essential to unlock potential but it gave me a time-frame to attempt my first novel which became my debut, *Rattle*.

I'd never written anything longer than 1,500 words before and had no idea if I could do it. I lacked confidence in my writing, but one of the best pieces of advice I've ever been given is to 'finish what you start', so that's what I did.

By the end of the course, I'd written a big chunk and was lucky enough to have interest from a few literary agents, and when it was finished, I sent it to Sophie Lambert at C&W, who agreed to represent me.

We worked on the manuscript for several months, and when it was ready, it was sent to five of the biggest publishing houses: they all turned it down.

I was devastated, but there was still hope, as I'd been invited to make some changes, or in publishing speak, to 'revise and resubmit'. Six months later, it was a different story. Rattle was sold at auction here in the UK and in several international territories, and the TV rights were optioned by a major production company.

Since then, I've written a further five books, appeared at crime festivals all over the country, had two more books optioned for screen, and won praise from household names including Val McDermid, Ian Rankin, David Baldacci, Lee Child and Martina Cole.

The many years I spent on newspapers gave me an excellent insight into getting to the heart of a story, being edited and meeting deadlines. The Faber Academy course offered lots of useful advice. But I want to reiterate that you do not need to pay for creative writing courses, have contacts within the industry or a big social media following to become a crime author. All you need to start writing is a blank page and a good idea.

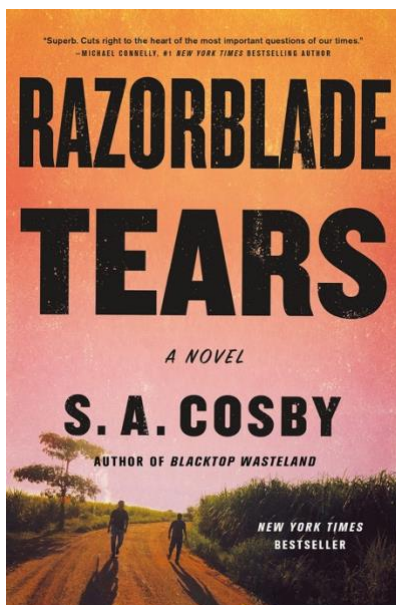
What is Crime Fiction?

Crime fiction is an umbrella term for a genre that covers a broad spectrum, including police procedural or detective, hardboiled, cosy, psychological or domestic suspense, noir, courtroom drama, thriller, historical, literary and mystery. There is often considerable overlap within these sub-genres and the descriptions below are intended as a guide rather than definitive definitions.

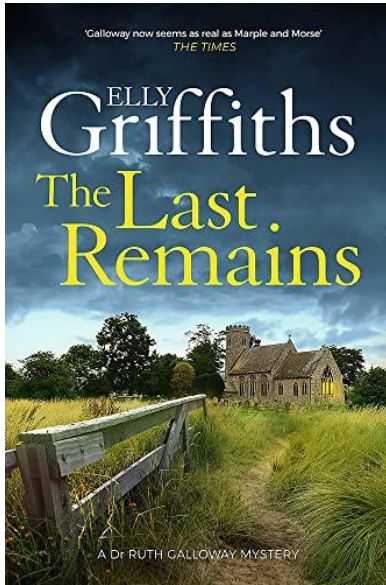
In general terms, crime fiction is about justice – and the restoration of justice. It has a crime at its heart, a protagonist – be it a detective, amateur sleuth, journalist, private investigator, family member, friend or similar – who investigates the crime, and often spotlights the perpetrator and victims.

It encompasses all the elements of general fiction – conflict, tension, plot, story, character, narrative structure – and promises suspense and action. It often reflects the contemporary issues of the time period it is set in, offers up a sense that wrongs will be righted and allows readers to explore their darkest fears in a safe space.

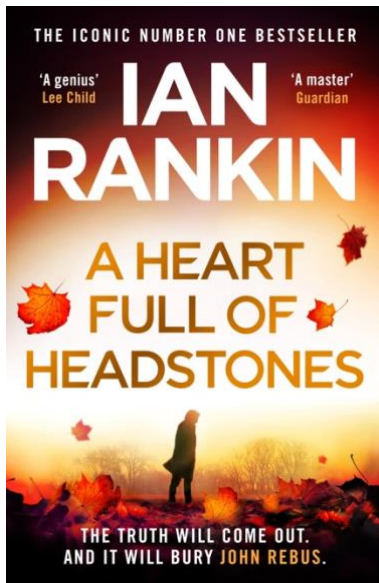
Crime fiction in its purest sense features a mystery about a crime that someone is attempting to solve. The reader will usually find out who committed the crime or why they committed it, or both. These novels are often redemptive, and end on a note of hope.



Razorblade Tears by S.A. Cosby – Two hardened ex-cons – one black, one white – confront their own prejudices when their gay sons are murdered, and they join forces to track down their killers in this blistering story of vengeance, redemption and grief.



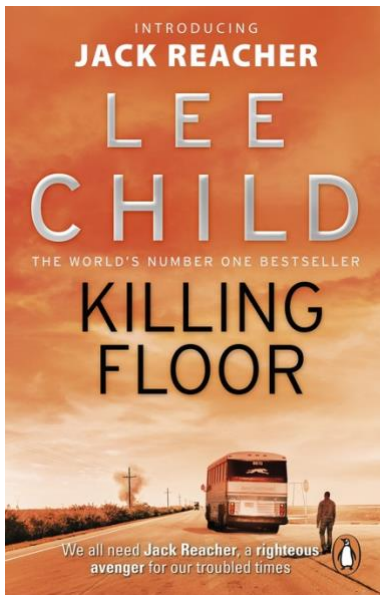
***The Last Remains* by Elly Griffiths** – The final instalment of Griffiths’ 15-book series features much-loved forensic archaeologist Dr Ruth Galloway and Detective Chief Inspector Nelson, who join forces after the skeleton of a student is discovered by builders renovating a cafe, and their friend is implicated in her disappearance.



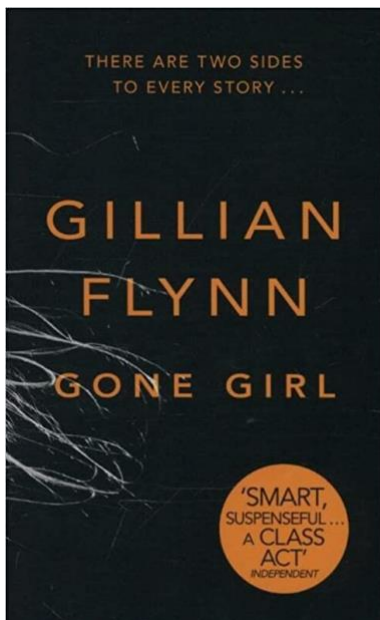
***A Heart Full of Headstones* by Ian Rankin** – Legendary detective John Rebus is on trial, suspected of a crime that could see him in prison for the rest of his life, in this 24th instalment of the much-loved series while Detective Inspector Siobhan Clarke’s loyalties are put to the test.

What is Thriller Fiction?

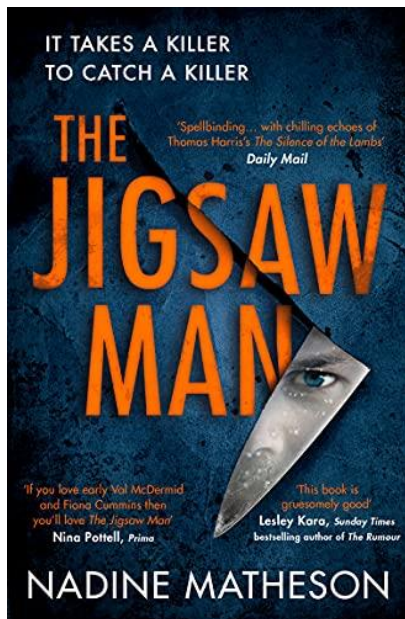
Thriller fiction involves some kind of crime or mystery, is often set in the present and is about the peril confronting the main character. As a general rule, the reader turns the pages to find out what is going to happen, not what has happened. There are many sub-genres within this category including serial killer, legal, medical, action, psychological, domestic, spy, historical or literary thriller.



***Killing Floor* by Lee Child** – In the first of this smash-hit action thriller series, Jack Reacher, a tough former military cop of no fixed abode, is the only stranger in town on the day they have their first murder in thirty years – and he's the prime suspect.



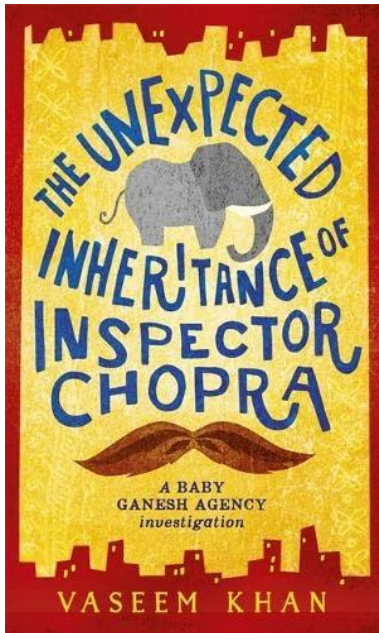
***Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn** – This fiendishly clever standalone psychological thriller tells the story of Amy Dunne, who fakes her own disappearance to frame her husband.



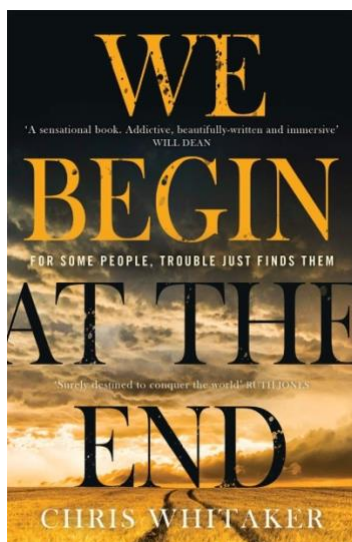
***The Jigsaw Man* by Nadine Matheson** – When bodies start washing up along the banks of the River Thames, DI Henley fears it's the work of the notorious Jigsaw Killer, but it can't be because he's in prison – and she's the one who put him there. In this serial killer thriller of the highest order, the race is on to stop a spate of copycat murders, but is it already too late?

What is Mystery Fiction?

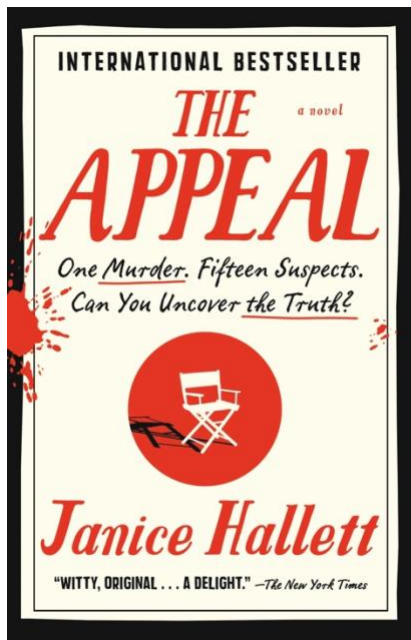
Mystery fiction often poses a question and attempts to solve it throughout the course of the novel, or unravels a secret from the past. It often features a crime but not always. This genre may feature a detective or other investigator. Sub-genres include cosy and locked-room mystery. Sometimes, mystery may be at the more literary end of the scale and be more character-focused. Confusingly, in the US, mystery is often used to refer to police procedural.



***The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra* by Vaseem Khan** – In the first of this charming series of cosy mysteries set in India, Ashwin Chopra, on the day he retires early, inherits a baby elephant called Baby Ganesh. When they form an unexpected alliance, Chopra, concerned about society's ills, discovers this new partner is exactly what he needs.



***We Begin at the End* by Chris Whitaker** – In this heartbreaking portrait of small-town America, Duchess Day Radley, a 13-year-old self-proclaimed outlaw, and police chief Walk, try to make good the sins of the past. Part love story, part murder mystery, this multi-award winning bestseller takes a deep dive into character and what makes us human.



***The Appeal* by Janice Hallett** – A brilliantly twisty whodunnit which centres on an amateur drama group and was inspired by the author’s own love of local theatre. In this debut, comprising of emails and texts, readers are given clues to unlock the mystery, and everyone’s a suspect. A runaway bestseller, bursting with wit and intellect, which shook up the genre.

Idea Generation

'Where do you get your ideas from?' is a question perennially asked of writers, but it's one of the most difficult to answer. For some crime authors, their imaginations overflow with shiny new ideas, all competing for attention, while for others, it's worse than pulling teeth. Ideas can prove tricky to harness and seldom spring from the same place. The author, C.J. Tudor, says the idea behind her bestselling novel, *The Chalk Man*, was inspired by her daughter drawing stick figures on the pavement after she was given a box of chalks for her birthday.

An idea might be sparked by a fragment of overhead conversation or a snippet from a newspaper story or an offhand comment from a friend. Even then, how does a writer decide which idea to choose? What makes not just a good idea, but a *brilliant* one?

In short, it's about coming up with a tantalising premise that makes a reader want to know more.

One of the most important elements in deciding on an idea is to consider whether it has enough scope to carry an 80,000-word novel. Lots of emerging writers discover they can run out of steam at the halfway point, so it's useful to think about the arc or shape of your story. Will it be told over a twelve-hour period or twenty years? Have you thought up a jaw-dropping twist? Is it a quiet, character-based story or an all-out action thriller? Think about the setting of your story. How will your characters develop as the story unfolds?

Most importantly, does it excite you? Remember, it takes a while to write a novel, so make sure you're creating a world you want to spend time in. Think about your characters and their back stories, and what makes them behave in the way they do. Consider potential sub-plots or threads of the story that feed into the main narrative, but are not central to it. Perhaps your detective has a daughter who is struggling with addiction or your private investigator is hiding a dark secret from her past.

But what are the nuts and bolts of generating an idea in the first place? Here are some tips and exercises for getting started.

TIP 1: Pose a question readers will want to know the answer to, sometimes known as a What If question.

EXAMPLE: What if a woman woke up one morning to find the man in bed with her is not her husband – and he's dead? (*Lie Beside Me* by Gytha Lodge)

What if you forgot everything when you went to sleep each night? (*Before I Go To Sleep* by S.J. Watson)

EXERCISE: Think of your own What If question. Try to make it as intriguing and interesting as possible.

TIP 2: Scan international, national and local newspapers, and magazines for human interest stories. Keep a close eye for ones that are unique or unusual.

EXAMPLE: Cara Hunter's novel, *Hope To Die*, was inspired by the true story of Keli Lane, jailed in Australia in 2010 for the murder of her newborn baby, a child no-one knew she had even conceived. It took the authorities four years to realise the baby was missing.

EXERCISE: Find a newspaper report of a court case, and write an opening chapter describing the crime from the point of view of the criminal.

TIP 3: Think about your own life experiences and whether you might draw on them to help create an idea.

EXAMPLE: Mark Billingham, the multi-million selling creator of the Tom Thorne series, was inspired to focus on the experience of the victim in his novels after he was attacked, gagged and bound by masked intruders who burst into his hotel room.

EXERCISE: Using the same newspaper report as above, describe the crime from the point of view of the victim.

TIP 4: Study the opening lines of your favourite novels. Powerful opening lines can set the tone for a whole book and can often spark further ideas.

EXAMPLE: 'I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ.' - *Dark Places* by Gillian Flynn
'The girl was saying goodbye to her life. And it was no easy farewell.' - *A Place of Execution* by Val McDermid

EXERCISE: Write an opening line for your novel.

TIP 5: A change of scene, whether it's a city, rural or seaside setting, is a great way to get the synapses firing. Being in a different place can stimulate fresh ideas or help us to see the world through new eyes.

EXAMPLE: The writer Louise Candlish was inspired to write *The Only Suspect*, about the creation of a nature trail on a disused site which hides a dark secret, after a walk in the woods.

EXERCISE: Go for a walk somewhere you haven't been to before and write a paragraph about a fictional crime that has been committed there.

TIP 6: Remake a classic. It's no coincidence that some of the most successful books/films share key components that appeal to readers and viewers. Don't plagiarise or copy, but think about how a contemporary take on a classic story might work for you.

EXAMPLE: Ruth Ware's *The Turn of the Key* is loosely based on ghost story *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, published in 1898, with some notable differences. A.J. Finn's *The Woman at The Window* draws heavily on Alfred Hitchcock's Oscar-nominated 1954 film thriller *Rear Window*.

EXERCISE: Choose a favourite film or book, and think of a way to retell it within a contemporary framework.

Research

Val McDermid believes an idea doesn't have to be wholly accurate as long as it feels authentic while Lisa Jewell suggests that when mistakes creep in, it pays to remember a novel is fiction, not fact. Whatever your views on research, attention to detail can help a novel to feel fully realised and inspire further ideas.

Don't be daunted if you don't know how a murder investigation might unfold or what happens to a body after a week in a shallow grave. Information has never been more accessible, if you know where to look. Here are some tips to help you get started.

TIP 1: Don't be afraid to ask for help. Experts are often willing to share their knowledge. Send a polite email explaining that you're researching a novel and outline the questions you need help with and that you can't find the answers to easily elsewhere, or put out a call on social media. Several former police officers offer bespoke services to assist crime writers in writing accurate procedure.

TIP 2: Immerse yourself in the time period of your novel, especially if it's set in a well-documented era. Read around your subject, watch documentaries and visit museums to help you get a feel for the clothing and customs of the past.

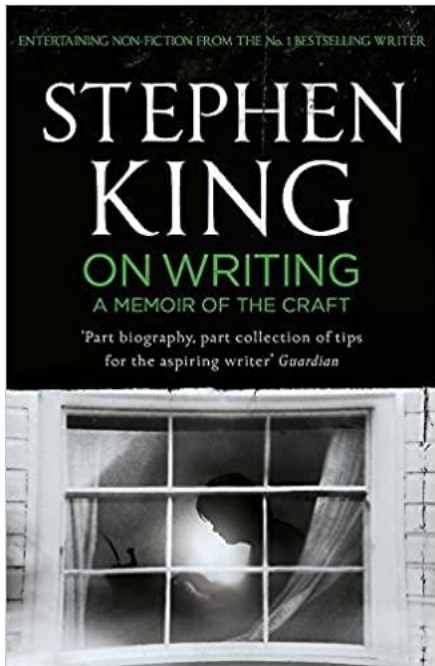
TIP 3: If you're able to, visit the location of your novel. If that's not possible, have a look on Street View. Being able to describe a place or setting accurately helps to bring it alive.

TIP 4: You don't have to write what you know, but it can be helpful – use personal experience to inform your writing. What about personal contacts? Is there a barrister or police officer in your family or friendship group? Ask them for help too.

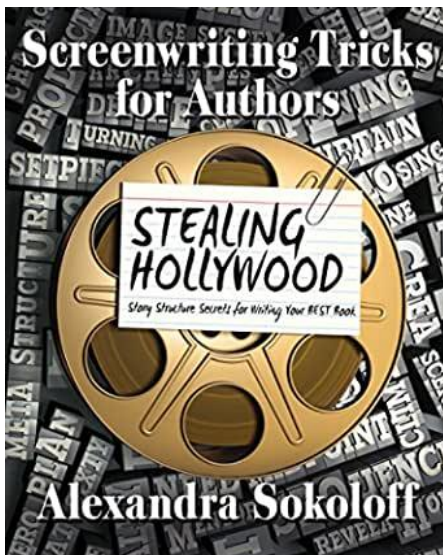
TIP 5: The internet is your friend: use Google and YouTube to search for information. There are a wealth of accessible websites offering insights into our legal system, as well as policing, forensics and the security agencies. On YouTube, you can find videos on anything from post-mortem examinations to crime scene clean-ups to the stages of a decomposition of a body, as well as lectures on subjects as diverse as the science of blood spatter and courtroom sketch artists.

Five Books About Writing

You don't need to read books on writing to become an author, but they can be a useful addition to the writer's toolkit. Here is a list of popular books on the craft of writing used today by many working crime authors.



***On Writing* by Stephen King** – This generous glimpse into the writing life of the world's most famous storyteller is part memoir, part collection of tips on craft. It is full of sensible advice and practical wisdom and can be summed up like this: tell good stories, simply and well.



***Stealing Hollywood* by Alexandra Sokoloff** – This textbook provides a brilliantly accessible view on structure and the mechanics of plotting. Packed full of practical tips, it shows authors how to jump-start plot and bring characters to life by borrowing the storytelling tricks of successful film-makers.

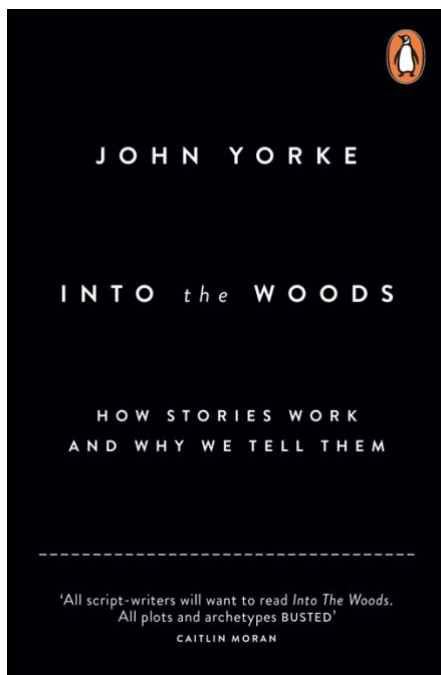
SAVE THE CAT!

The Last Book On Screenwriting That You'll Ever Need

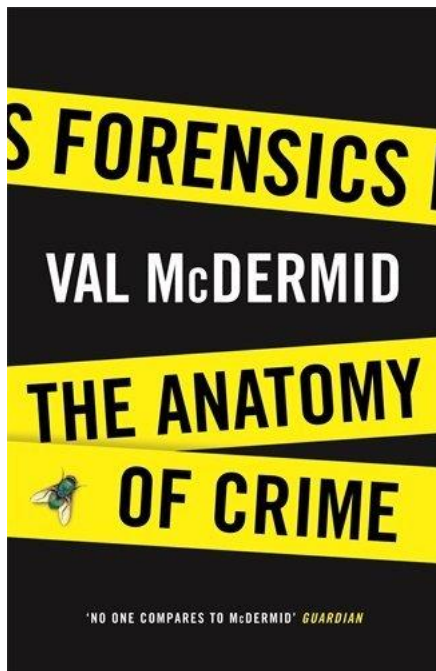


BLAKE SNYDER

Save The Cat by Blake Snyder – Save The Cat is a screenwriting term that refers to a narrative device in which the protagonist performs an admirable act at the start of a story to win over hearts and minds. This bestselling book on craft is bursting with ideas to help writers develop their screenplays and novels.

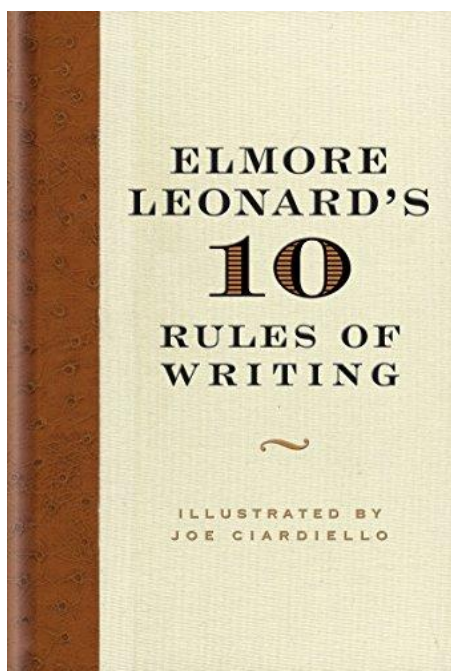


Into The Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them by John Yorke – In this book by the creator of the BBC Writers' Academy, Yorke takes the reader on a journey to the heart of storytelling and considers how the writer can make story work for them.



Forensics: The Anatomy of Crime by Val McDermid – A deep-dive into the world of forensic science by one of Britain’s foremost crime writers, this fascinating study shows us how specialists use ground-breaking techniques to solve the darkest mysteries and convict killers.

And finally...



Elmore Leonard's Ten Rules of Writing – This isn't a book, but an unmissable part of any discussion on craft, and readily available on the internet. You can't go far wrong if you follow this powerful collection of tips that legendary American writer Leonard acquired during his decades of penning books and screenplays.

About Case Closed

Case Closed is a new programme run by Spread the Word in partnership with [C&W literary agency](#) to find and develop new Crime, Thriller and Mystery Fiction writers from diverse backgrounds.

Case Closed aims to demystify the process of writing a crime, thriller and/or mystery novel from a craft and career perspective and encourage and support more writers from backgrounds underrepresented in UK publishing to write a crime, thriller and/or mystery novel. It has an access fund in place for deaf and disabled writers.

Running across 2023, Case Closed will provide free and accessible opportunities for unpublished and unagented writers to gain the skills and insight to develop their crime, thriller and/or mystery novel, including:

A pre-recorded panel event with debut crime author [Tracey Lien](#); literary agent [Emma Finn](#) and publishing director [Leodora Darlington](#).

A guide on 'Getting Started' by Fiona Cummins.

[Three free online workshops](#) led by new and established crime writers represented by C&W and Curtis Brown:

Fiona Cummins on Getting Started
Thursday 25 May, 6.30pm-8.30pm
[Click here to book your place](#)

Olivia Kiernan on Plot and Structure
Thursday 29 June, 6.30pm-8.30pm
[Click here to book your place](#)

Elliot Sweeney on Developing Characters
Wednesday 5 July, 6.30pm-8.30pm
[Click here to book your place](#)

[An online seminar and Q&A on submitting to agents;](#)

A first chapter competition, which will open in July 2023. More details to follow.

Through the programme, a cohort of writers will be selected for ongoing support with the goal of them going on to be represented by C&W and being published.

If you have any questions, please contact Bobby Nayyar at bobby@spreadtheword.org.uk.