

Planting Clues and Red herrings
SiGW March 2023
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CLUE: anything in a fair-play, puzzle-plot mystery that allows the reader to twig whodunnit, howdunnit, whydunnit, whendunnit and more . . .

- A. Where, how and when and how many clues in a mystery?
- B. What makes a good clue (and a bad one)?
- C. How do we make sure it doesn't matter if we get it wrong?
- D. Red herrings, Easter eggs, and loose ends

A Planting Clues

Where should we plant clues?

Where? In detail (Think Wally/Waldo)

Note: The level of detail has to match.

"There were litter trays cheek-by-jowl all the way along the passageway to the stairs and sprays of gravel arcing across the carpet. Black sacks, old enough to be dusty, sat in a pile, their contents stinking and seeping. Up the sides of the stairs were newspapers, junk-mail, boxes of empty Smirnoff vodka bottles and a hundred other kinds of waste, rubbish, detritus and broken junk." Anon

Note: the expectedness has to match.

Tracy Clark *Broken Places* (2018) after a murder inside a city church:

"Techs logged a butt load of crap. But again we can't link any of it to Luna or Father Ray. ... I mean, look at the stuff people left behind—hand fans, a pack of gum, eyeglasses." He thumbed his way down the list. "A paperback novel, handful of beads, a candle in a bag, socks. ... It was all over the place. Under the pews, near the altar, behind it. Even found a couple of plug nickels in the donation box."

Where? In humour:

She strolled over to the rank of dumpsters that cut off the view of the pool from the street - Feng Shui wasn't the Last Ditch way - and tossed two empty Clorox bottles into the blue one. "I tell you," she said. "Every time I think I've seen everything . . ."

I didn't want to know what a motel guest might have done that needed two bottles of bleach and surprised an old-timer like Noleen, but before I could escape she went on.

"I thought it was a menstruation incident," she said. Not that I asked.

"Or it could have been beets," she added, even though I had started backing away.

"Plus a blocked drain," she continued, despite the fact that I have never had a less interested look on my face in my life.

"But I tell you . . . I don't know *what* it was."

Scot Free, Catriona McPherson 2018

Where? In authorial attitude

"She could have been pretty, but her pale face was washed out by her black hair, and her make-up had been applied by the heavy hand of the beginner, uncertain and unsubtle, her thick clumping mascara falling in crumbs onto her white cheeks and her eyebrows drawn on in thick black lines and not nearly straight enough."

Where? In a character's attitude

Eg. In a rant

"I know it was I who spoiled her. But still it's a trial to live with a spoiled brat, never cheerful, never grateful. She spends a fortune on dresses and then doesn't bother wear them, goes slopping about in the same old rags. So wasteful! So profligate! I see her bathroom light shining out all night. I wish I had never had the house wired at all. And she's no kind of company. Reading, reading, reading. She'd read at dinner if we let her. Perhaps I shall let her. It would make no difference, for she has no conversation about her. I'm ashamed of her. Ashamed and disappointed. Thankless, wretched child."

E.g. in POV

Elly Griffiths *THE ZIG ZAG GIRL* (2014)

Inspector Stephens is on the hunt for two men, a short young man seen by an elderly flower-seller, a landlady in her sixties, and an antiques dealer, and a tall old man by the landlady's eleven year-old daughter.

Where? Inside another clue:

Reversal of Fortune (1990)

Sunny Von Bulow is in a coma after an insulin overdose. Her husband Claus is the prime suspect. Earlier, her maid found insulin and other drugs hidden in the house. She remembers being puzzled. She remembers saying "Insulin! What for insulin? My lady is not diabetic."

Where? In a sub-plot

In WWII, X is a suspected spy. The children in the story are trying to build a radio set. The radio set has intermittent faults. The detective is watching X and doesn't have time to help the children.

Where? In a sex scene

[curtains billow]

Summary: where do we hide clues?

- in detail
- in humour
- in editorialising
- in emotion
- in POV
- in another clue
- in a sub-plot
- in a sex scene

How do we plant clues?

How? By presenting material – as above

How? By omitting material:

The Unpleasantness at The Bellona Club, Dorothy L Sayers, (1921)

Shocking murder of Gen. Fentiman during the two minute silence on Armistice Day. Wimsey is quizzing his valet.

“I should like to see all the clothes General Fentiman was wearing that day – the outer garments, I mean – hat, suit, overcoat and so on.”

The garments were produced ...

“Have they been brushed?”

“No, my lord – only shaken out.”

[DISCOVERY OF SMALL TEAR IN TROUSERS]

“Just a moment. Has anything been removed from these clothes? The pockets were emptied, I suppose?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“There was nothing unusual in them?”

“No, my lord. Just his handkerchief, keys, money and cigarettes.”

[DISCUSSION OF MONEY, TAXIS, TRAINS, LUNCH . . .]

“Right you are, Woodward. You’re perfectly certain that you removed nothing from these clothes except what was in the pockets?”

“I am quite positive of that, my lord.”

How? By signalling to a nearby clue.

“That’s very odd,” said Wimsey, half to himself. “I’m not sure that it isn’t the oddest thing about the case.”

“Something had been said in my hearing, without my exactly hearing it. Now it was like a hair across my face, insistent but impossible to find.”

Summary: How do we plant clues?

Presenting

Omitting

Signalling

When do we plant clues?

Use the rule of three. Once early, once late, once in between.

Anon:

A note is missing after a suspected suicide/murder?

On p. 324 we are told once that a brand of designer bag has a detachable lining.

On p. 415 the detective finds the note under the detachable lining of that brand of bag.

How early is early?

Compare:

Victim died of inhaling toxic paint fumes.

Suspect appears in overalls with a rag in his pocket.

Unknown stranger walks past in overalls with a rag in his pocket

Victim dies of inhaling toxic paint fumes.

Summary.

When do we plant clues?

Three times – once before we know we care, once near the end and once in the middle – we present, omit, or signal material using detail, humour, POV, attitude (narrator or character), emotion, another clue, a sex scene, a sub-plot ...

And we mix it up

How many clues do we need?

Three!

In what order do we reveal the truth about our three clues?

Crescendo?

Tailing off?

Bell-curve?

Summary: nine times – thrice before we know we care, thrice near the end and thrice in the middle – we present, omit, or signal material using detail, humour, POV, attitude (narrator or character), emotion, another clue, a sex scene, a sub-plot ... and decide what order to handle the reveal.

Are we guaranteed success? No, because they have to be good clues.

B: Evaluating Clues

What makes a good clue?

What should we approach with caution?

What should we never do?

Good clues are Goldilocks clues

Too big

(vodka bottles)

Too small

(bag lining)

Too obscure (and dated)

Dorothy L Sayers "The Article in Question" *Lord Peter Views the Body* (1928)

A young woman says "Me prends-tu pour un imbécile?" (Do you take me for a fool?)

Approach with caution

- Twins = switcheroo (but triplets)
- A death with no body = not dead
- Suicide note with no beginning and no end = not a suicide note
- A silhouette, a shadow, a hoodie, a baseball cap = not who you thought it was
- Race, sexuality, gender and especially trans identity

Really Bad Clues to avoid absolutely.

Never fudge reality when it matters:

Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators: the mystery of the stuttering parrot, Robert Arthur (1978)

"To to to be or not to to to be" = Sherlock Holmes' address. Grrrrrrrr.

Never (ever ever (EVER)) cheat

Living author:

p.34 “I returned from the park, weighed down by the camera in my rucksack”

p.313 “...had stolen the camera I’d left in the park and snapped off all those pictures ”

Could have said

“returned from the park but didn’t unpack my rucksack, leaving all my equipment jumbled inside it. It was weeks later I sorted everything out.”

“I went to the park feeling the weight of my rucksack, thinking I should buy a lighter camera for field trips” *then don’t mention it on the way home*

“returned from the park for once not thinking about how heavy the camera made my rucksack”

C. How to ensure it doesn’t matter if you get it wrong.

Write great characters, write enjoyable prose, conjure a complete world. (sorry)

D Red herrings, Easter Eggs & Loose Ends

Red herrings.

Red herrings behave like bad clues – bigger, clunkier, bolder, more frequent.

Good red herrings would be there in a non-mystery because they:

- Arise naturally out of character

Kathi looks guilty because she has wiped and bleached her car inside and out and washed every stitch of her clothing. She runs from the police too. (She’s a germaphobe)

- Arise naturally out of setting

No one at a Scottish wedding can remember a stranger arriving at midnight. (They’re hammered.)

- Are part of a sub-plot

Della was the only one who didn’t eat at a dinner where everyone was poisoned. (She’s pregnant)

Golden rule for red herrings = they tie in. They are not loose ends.

Kate Atkinson *Started Early, Took My Dog*
Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

Easter Eggs

Easter Eggs are extra little gifts for some of the readership, but they don't exclude anyone who misses them. E.g. the local paper in fictional Cuento CA, is called *The Voyager*. So what, right? The local paper in real Davis, CA is called *The Enterprise*.

Red Herrings obtrude into the reading. Easter eggs don't. Easter eggs shouldn't bug people who're out for a walk on a Sunday in spring. They are only findable by people who're looking. (compare in-jokes.)

Summary.

- Hide clues in detail, humour, POV, emotion, sub-plots, sex scenes, editorial commentary, other clues.
- Present them, omit them, or point to them.
- Do it at least three times (once very early and once very late)
- Have three clues
- Make them not too big and not too small, but juuuust right.
- Don't fudge and don't cheat.
- Make red herrings to the main plot earn their place elsewhere.
- Don't mix up red herrings and Easter eggs.
- Don't leave loose ends

Or break all of these rules in a story so rich and magnificent that no one cares.

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