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The Mysteries of Storytelling Revealed

Delaney Temple

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YOUR heartbeat quickens, your eyes begin to move faster over the words, questions are swirling in your mind, you turn pages quickly in anticipation for what's next. The suspense is killing you! When feeling these effects while reading, it's likely you're reading a theatrical and exciting mystery story. Although the pieces may seem to easily and effortlessly slide together at the end of the story (think of the iconic Sherlock Holmes mysteries), the process of writing a mystery story is not quite so simple. Many factors contribute to the story, such as production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology. These are the categories of a CHAT analysis, which can be applied to any genre.

Thrill and Tension

Activity is the process of actually creating and producing a genre, including all the steps that may contribute to the final product. A mystery writer's activity includes coming up with an original idea and delving into their characters and setting in order to produce a plot that contributes to their final story and then eventually editing and publishing that story. Author Tana French's process is to just start writing and see how the plot and characters develop and then go back and rewrite anything that may not flow toward her newly developed intentions, as she mentions in her NPR interview. On the other hand, Carly Stockwell recommends starting with the ending and forming the rest of the story based on the conclusion in her article, "5 Steps for Writing a Mystery." A writer may decide to try multiple methods for producing a story before they complete a piece of work that they are willing to publish or share with the world. However the author decides to go about writing their own story, the long and arduous process will hopefully not be in vain and instead leave the writer with a sense of satisfaction and completion of a work they can be proud of.

Suspense

Production deals with what tools, formats, and structures the creator of a genre employs in order to produce their genre. A mystery writer has their own specific tools, formats, and structures when writing a mystery story, such as the plot, characters, and setting. As Ruthanne Reid displays in her "20 Mystery Story Ideas," murder is one of the most common conflicts for a mystery story, but mystery stories are not limited to murders. Reid provides many different story ideas that can be used to inspire a writer or spark a new idea. Whether or not the writer decides to expand upon one of Reid's ideas, it gives them a solid jumping off point to dive into their own story. To write a story, one must not only have the format (the setting and plot), but also tools (vocabulary) and structures (characters) which all come together to eventually create a cohesive story with the use of other aspects of CHAT analysis.

Setting

Ecology includes the environmental factors that relate to producing a genre. Ecology can affect the way a story is written in a couple of different ways. An author can weave a particular environment or environmental factor within their story as details within the setting, plot, or even characters. Tony Lee Moral's fourth rule of writing mysteries is to incorporate and intertwine the setting into the story to help develop the plot, as shown in his article, "7 Tips for Mystery Writing." An author can most effectively create a setting based on their own because they can pull details from their personal experience and daily lives. For example, although it would be unfortunate to experience an intimidating thunderstorm, it may provide an author with the perfect weather for their dark and mysterious story. In his NPR interview, Author Louis Bayard says, "I kind [of] go into the 19th century, mostly, and hang out there, but then bring my own 21st-century sensibility into it, and create a kind of hybrid between the two areas." Because he was not actually able to experience the 19th century, he can pull from his knowledge of that time and add it to his own personal experiences to create an entirely new and original setting where he can place his characters and develop his plot. Even an author that places their characters in a futuristic environment must pull from their own experience in order to create a believable setting that is intriguing, yet relatable for their readers.

Intrigue

Similar to production, representation deals with the tools that are used to produce a genre as well as the activity of creating the text itself. Representation of mystery writing is how a writer outlines their story and develops the plot, characters, and setting. When writing, they must also consider how the reader is going to perceive and react to their story. As well as giving ideas for mystery

stories, Reid points out that misdirection is a common convention used in mystery writing. When writing, an author must consider how their audience will react to misdirection and apply it in an attempt to keep the reader on the edge of their seat. In Tony Lee Moral's second rule of, "7 Tips for Writing Great Mystery and Suspense Novels," he states that a contrast of humor can make the story more dramatic while simultaneously giving the reader time to react to the tension. Having that contradiction in tone added to the suspenseful plot can add a layer of depth to the story and the characters, leaving the reader even more enthralled. In her TedEd YouTube video, Victoria Smith explains how dramatic irony can be a good technique to reveal key points of the story to the audience but not the characters. An author pieces together the conventions of their choice to produce a tenacious story, giving every mystery story its own flair and style. Once an author has completed writing and editing their story, their story is ready for publishing.

Publishing

Distribution of a genre considers how and where a text is distributed and how it might be adopted differently than the creator's original intention. Publishing houses, libraries, bookstores, magazines, and eBooks are possible ways a mystery story could be distributed; an author may also go on a book tour to promote their book. On his website BookFox, John Matthew Fox, a successful writer and editor, provides a list of publications and publication houses that may appeal to different authors. He mentions how often and how many stories that some of the companies publish. His website provides an accessible source to publishers for new and old aspiring writers to get their work into the public eye. From there, their story will be distributed to the public and the author can follow the success and possible rising popularity among readers.

Unanswered Questions

Reception includes who will consume a genre and the different ways that genre can be consumed and interpreted. A mystery story could be read and enjoyed by ideally any audience and could be adapted into a movie, television show, or play. The story could be used in book clubs, reading discussions, or as a teaching tool in English or literature classrooms. Even the original story will hopefully garner enough attention for a wide audience to read and enjoy. As Tana French, mystery novel author, mentions in an interview with NPR, "it's one of the basic human instincts to be attracted to mysteries and to look for the solution to them." A well-written mystery can rope the reader in and keep them intrigued until the exciting conclusion. A method that writers can use to produce this tension is explained in Victoria Smith's TedEd YouTube video. The narrator explains how setting up a question(s) that the audience asks themselves while reading will hold the reader's attention. This method keeps them guessing and

holds their interest. The author intentionally subtly implies questions within the story for the reader to ask themselves while they are reading. These questions can be discussed in book clubs or classroom discussions so individuals can see different perspectives and responses to the story.

Secrets and Shocking Revelations

Socialization explains the way people react and respond to a text as it is consumed in their cultural and social environment. Socialization for a mystery story may include discussions between readers about a story or promotions given by bookstores or companies that sell or produce the story, which consciously or unconsciously relates to their culture and society. As I mentioned when discussing reception to mystery stories, individuals can converse with others about the story and how it relates to their own culture and surrounding society. When introducing his list of publications on his website, Fox explains that his goal when writing the list of publications is to provide writers with the publications that will give them the most fruitful audiences. Aspiring writers are also often a part of a community of readers, so Fox's sources provide a way for them to interact with other readers as well as other writers and possibly compare notes so an author can gain an idea of how to write their story in order for it to acquire success and popularity. Although the process of developing and writing a story may not be as exciting as the final product, we would not have our beloved novels if it were not for the hard work and dedication authors pour into their writing. Hopefully, realizing how challenging it can be to write a mystery will give readers greater satisfaction and appreciation for their favorite suspense stories.

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