

## AgentInsight: Timing a Murder by Nupur Tustin

**T**iming is crucial when you're plotting to kill. Bodies, conventional wisdom goes, need to start dropping by page 50 of your novel, at the very latest. But must every mystery conform to this rule? Are there any exceptions to it?

That's the question I put to our panel of agents for this issue: Sandra Bond of the Bond Literary Agency; Janet Reid and Peter Rubie of FinePrint Literary Management; Kim Lionetti from BookEnds Literary Agency; Dawn Dowdle of Blue Ridge Literary Agency; Priya Doraswamy of Lotus Lane Literary; and Rachel Brooks, a new agent at the L. Perkins Agency.

"The BODY," Sandra Bond responds, "doesn't necessarily have to appear in the first 50 pages, but something dangerous, exciting, compelling, has to happen in the first five pages. And I really want to say the first two pages, but of course there's always a good exception to be pointed out."

Janet Reid agrees: "I've often described myself as an agent who loves to see someone catch on fire on page one. Drop us right into the action, and don't stop to ask questions." But that strategy, she goes on to say, is only suitable for the kind of "high-octane" thrillers that she loves to sell.

What then of the gentler, more cerebral, cozy or traditional mystery? Do the same rules apply? Most such books "do have a body very early on," Reid says. "But think about our beloved Agatha Christie. In *The Hollow*, the dead body doesn't appear until the very end of Act I. And in *Ordeal by Innocence*, the deaths have occurred before the book even begins."

Reid's colleague Peter Rubie concurs that there are plenty of stories in which small squabbles between the victim and suspects eventually escalate to murder. But "can the writer sustain interest in the characters long enough to have us wait, patiently, for the inevitable crime that will launch us on our journey to discovering who done it? That's the question."

And even though the timing of Christie's murders vary from one book to the next, they do, as a general rule, take place before page 50.

"And, honestly, who am I to argue with that?" Reid asks.



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— Janet Reid, FinePrint

At the end of the day, though, the placement of the murder does depend on the book. And, according to Rachel Brooks, on whether you have a murder in the book, "I don't claim to be an expert on the mystery genre, but I can say," she asserts, "that you don't HAVE to put a murder in your cozy mystery. I recently sold a cozy, and it's murder-free."

Although Brooks' assertion of a "murder-free" cozy contradicts Dawn Dowdle's view—"Would a publisher consider a cozy without a main murder? Possibly. It's just not how most cozies are written"—she does agree with her fellow panelists that when the precipitating incident is a murder, it should appear as early as possible. "This allows your story to progress with your protagonist hunting for clues."

Priya Doraswamy, however, says that while this might be the case in a traditional or cozy mystery, in some psychological thrillers,

"the murder can take place after the first 50 pages to keep the reader guessing." The hook in such novels, she points out, is whether the victim "can escape his or her fate of being murdered."

Although having a corpse by page 50 seems like yet another meaningless formula that writers need to incorporate into their writing in order to get a book deal, there are, as Kim Lionetti explains, several excellent reasons behind it.

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A former journalist, Nupur Tustin now divides her time between composing music and writing mysteries. Prior publications include work for Reuters, CNBC, diverse freelance articles, short stories, and academic research. She is currently looking for a home for *A Minor Study in Murder*, the first in her Joseph Haydn mystery series.

## AgentInsight, continued

The cozy series she represents “are sold on a proposal comprising an outline and three chapters. If I send the proposal to an editor for consideration and there’s no corpse by the end of those chapters, they’ll see that as a big red flag.”

Moreover, she continues, “Since cozies are set in such an inviting, welcoming atmosphere, there’s no sense of menace or mystery until that body shows up.”

Although it’s important, especially for a first-time author, to get to the investigation as soon as possible, Dowdle cautions against starting too soon. Some setup, she explains, is necessary before the investigation can start.

“Your readers need to care about the person who has been murdered, but even more about the protagonist, so they can engage with her as she begins investigating. There also needs to be a strong reason” for the protagonist to investigate the case. If it’s because she herself or someone close to her is a suspect, it’s especially important for the reader to care that she’s in trouble, Dowdle adds.

Too much setup, on the other hand, Rubie warns, can also kill a mystery. “I think the thing to consider here is: who is the main point-of-view character/narrator of the story? If it’s the detective, which it usually is, then the story really starts with the murder, or pretty soon before or after it.”

Anything important before the murder, he suggests, can be shown via an interview with a witness or a flashback—“but be cautious with the use of these”—once the story is underway.

Dowdle, in fact, suggests placing the murder at the end of the first chapter, thus giving the reader enough setup to care for the characters, while starting the mystery fairly early on.

Even so, Rubie warns against treating a general rule of thumb as a precise formula. Writers, he says, are apt to think “If I follow this



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—Kim Lionetti, BookEnds Literary Agency

formula, then I’m more likely to get my book published.’ Alas, it isn’t that simple.”

And Lionetti admits that her “three-chapter rule” may not be “quite as cut-and-dried for other types of mysteries,” and that even some BookEnds cozies may not follow the rule.

Reid concurs. “Mostly, though, when agents rail about starting with a body,” she explains, “what they really mean is start where the plot begins. Start where something changes (dramatically) or where the main character has to make a choice.”

“It’s always imperative,” Lionetti adds, “to have some kind of suspense element

or intrigue introduced by the end of the third chapter. Maybe it’s a missing person, or a brutal attack, or a missing valuable... Something with stakes high enough to invest the reader in the outcome. If there’s enough implied danger involved, then the corpse can come later.”

And finally, Bond advises, “Dissect the books you truly admire. Exactly when does the mystery get set up, exactly where does the tension start? How does the author build mystery or suspense? How is it paced? At what point in the novel does everything come together? And then how does it wind down?”

And as for that body? “Sometimes,” she says, “it’s not found until the end of the book, maybe as part of the resolution to the mystery.” An episode in Season 7 of CBC’s *Murdoch Mysteries*, “The Murdoch Sting,” is the perfect example of just that!

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