

Interview: Romantic Times

Interviewer: Diane Snyder

IT'S ALWAYS A THRILL FOR ME!

1. What's the difference between a Mystery versus a Thriller?

To categorize what constitutes the Mystery genre versus the Thriller genre within the larger category of Suspense has always been a sticky wicket. There has long been debate about what constitutes *any* genre within the overall arena of fiction. But we MUST know--or how else could we guess which shelf to find it on in a bookstore? Seriously, there are as many kinds of thrillers as there are mysteries, and many suspense authors deploy a bit of each technique. But the basic distinction between a mystery and a thriller is this:

-With a Mystery a crime takes place, and for the rest of the book everyone is trying to discover Who done it (perpetrator), How they done it (weapon), Where they done it (Scene of crime), When they done it (time and date of crime), and Why they done it (motive of crime). Through clever deduction or creativity, we're reconstructing something that happened in the past.

-With a Thriller, we overhear a phone conversation or some terrorists whispering in a back room, or we see a countdown clicking away that might set off an explosion. With the thriller, the event has not yet happened. It is our job to try to find out what is *going* to happen and prevent it before it does happen. Through clever inquiry, we're seeking to discover something in the future.

You can see that if we isolate these two points of view, these two structural techniques, most Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle stories would be classed as mysteries. While most Alfred Hitchcock and Ian Fleming stories would be thrillers.

The amount of suspense may be identical in a mystery or a thriller. But the technique--the structure if you will--of how that suspense is invoked in the reader's mind is handled differently.

2. Expand on how that relates to your own writing.

When it comes to my work, this categorization issue has always posed a quandary for reviewers and others. My books, it seems, have been nearly impossible even to define, much less to categorize by genre. Over the years I've been called the female Umberto Eco, the female Alexandre Dumas, the female Stephen Spielberg--THE EIGHT was called a "feminist answer to Raiders of the Lost Ark." My books have been reviewed under every category: literature, history, mystery, thriller, romance, science fiction--you name it. They've been taught from middle schools to grad schools, in English departments, history departments--even in one notable business college!

But they're not hard for *me* to categorize--I'm writing Quest Novels, the oldest form of fiction:

In what is likely the world's oldest novel, Gilgamesh, the king of Sumer, was on a quest to find the elixir of immortality; Jason was hunting for the Golden Fleece; Parsifal sought the Holy Grail; Odysseus and Dorothy of Oz both sought that ephemeral place called Home.

So based on the definition of thrillers and mysteries that I've just suggested above, there's no mystery about what a Quest Novel would be categorized as. Since we're not using forensics or deduction or a magnifying glass to resolve the "Five Whoos"--and since we *are* seeking something we haven't found yet (usually to prevent a dire fate from befalling the earth) a Quest Novel by my definition would be a Thriller.

Which leads us to...

3. How do you explain the popularity of thrillers? Does it all hark back to the Da Vinci Code, or are there other factors behind this trend?

A few decades ago, at the height of the Cold War, thrillers were considered the provenance of the writers of espionage fiction--Hitchcock and Fleming, John Le Carré and Helen MacInnes. But with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, people began discounting the thriller as a form that was outmoded. In no time, we began to see contemporary thrillers with lurid dust jackets in garish colors, suggesting there was an axe murderer lurking somewhere between the pages.

Yet interestingly, eight out of ten books on the Times list were still then--and still *are*--thrillers.

Alongside powerful espionage and Cold War (or Hot War) thriller writers like Tom Clancy and Gayle Lynds, there are legal thriller writers like Scott Turow, David Baldacci, John Grisham; financial thrillers, historic thrillers, scientific, sci-fi, and medical thrillers, esoteric and magical thrillers--and a whole new class of high-powered writers who crossed over to thrillers from other genres like romance or mystery and brought their fascinated readership with them, including Sandra Brown, Heather Graham, and so on.

And in this category I would include not only the tremendously successful Da Vinci Code--but predating that and even more so, Harry Potter! I think this reflects a certain hunger that we readers have--not just for suspense or entertainment or even "books that make us think"--but above and beyond that, for books that surprise us with new ideas--things we hadn't thought of, but that maybe we were craving all along.