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Citation:

Taft, A (2023) The Adrenalin Knowledge Gap. Clues: a journal of detection, 41 (2). pp. 89-90. ISSN 0742-4248

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Document Version:

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The Adrenalin Knowledge Gap

Alison Taft

Abstract. The author describes her writing workshop, designed to enable students to work with subtext through the construction of a traditional crime fiction narrative and to encourage participants to recognize and set these skills within a wider employability framework.

Alison Taft is the course director for English and creative writing at Leeds Beckett University in the United Kingdom. She is the author of three novels under the name A.J. Taft, and, more recently, The Disappeared (HarperCollins, 2018) and The Runaway (HarperCollins, 2019) as Ali Harper. She has delivered crime fiction courses in settings including prisons, literature festivals, higher education institutions, and adult education.

At their core, all stories are mysteries and therefore crime fiction can and should play a central role in any creative writing degree program. Crime writing hones many writerly skills. If students learn how to work with techniques such as misdirection, subterfuge, and unreliable narrators, and are able to develop their understanding of the psychology of character, they will graduate with the ability to add depth and texture to their writing, whatever form that writing may take. However, it is perhaps through learning to work with subtext, upon which all good crime fiction depends, that they will understand how to make the reader an active participant in a text, which, of course, is crucial to engaging today's sophisticated audience.

“The secret of boring people,” Anton Chekov said, “lies in telling them everything” (cited in Saunders 377). David Baboulene defines knowledge gaps as the mechanism through which subtext is delivered. He identifies two types: the revelation knowledge gap (where the character knows more than the reader) and the privilege knowledge gap (where the reader knows

more the character). He states, “the vast majority of actions must have implications beyond the presented action, and the vast majority of dialogue in your story must not mean what it says” (93).

There can be no greater challenge, when settling down to write, than to know the words one will sweat to produce will not form the narrative that the reader reads; that the real story is the underlying story that lies beneath the words.

How do we teach the art of working with subtext? One practical workshop that has proved successful in settings such as the Otley (UK) Word Feast, Ilkley (UK) Literature Festival, and Leeds Trinity University—but can be adapted for different audiences—is to introduce an Agatha Christie–worthy crime scene (for example, a 30th birthday weekend in a remote cottage in the Scottish Highlands) accompanied by short character biographies for approximately eight participants (e.g., Birthday Person, Mother, Stepfather, Lover, Best Friend and their Inappropriate Partner, Estranged Sibling, and Victim). Students are tasked to write the first evening’s dinner scene, where the only instruction is that “tensions start to rise.” This activity allows writers 15 minutes to gather the characters around the table and to listen to resulting conversations with a view to uncovering potential sources of conflict and possible knowledge gaps.

Once the scene is established, they are informed that, later that same night, Victim’s body is discovered. At this point, they are given a few minutes to outline the who, how, and why. They are then asked to write the name of the perpetrator on one sticky note and the motive on another, keeping both hidden from their fellow classmates.

Most writers, even non-crime writers, delight at this—choosing a killer, understanding their thinking, working out the logistics. Was it a crime of passion, or meticulously planned?

Understanding the darkest side to human nature is perhaps what underpins our collective fascination with crime fiction.

But, of course, there is a twist. When all writers have settled on a murderer and motive, they are asked to pass one sticky note to the person on their left and the second to their right. This process is usually accompanied by a collective groan as realization dawns that the students are to hand over their carefully conceived plots. But attention soon turns to the sticky notes that they have gained, and there is a surge of energy as each student tries to fit these new pieces to the jigsaw.

This activity reminds writers that there exists a third type of knowledge gap. Perhaps it should be called the Adrenaline Knowledge Gap—where the character knows more than the author. This is key for the crime fiction writer—to surprise the reader, there needs to be a willingness to surprise the self. “For a suspense novelist, this is a great thing,” writes Stephen King. “[I]f I’m not able to guess with any accuracy how the damned thing is going to turn out . . . I can be pretty sure of keeping the reader in a state of page-turning anxiety” (190).

Subtext is not the only skill that students learn from this workshop. Key transferrable skills such as analytical thinking and innovation, active learning (“the capacity to assimilate and challenge new information”), complex problem solving, and creativity and initiative (all featured in the World Economic Forum’s “Top Ten Skills of Tomorrow’s Workplace” [Future of Jobs Report]) are developed, demonstrating that crime fiction can prepare students not only for writing in all its forms but also for the wider world.

Keywords: crime fiction, pedagogy, subtext, transferrable skills, writing workshops

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