



How to Write a Damn Good Mystery: A Practical Step-by-Step Guide from Inspiration to Finished Manuscript

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Edgar award nominee James N. Frey, author of the internationally best-selling books on the craft of writing, *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, *How to Write a Damn Good Novel II: Advanced Techniques*, and *The Key: How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth*, has now written what is certain to become the standard "how to" book for mystery writing, *How to Write a Damn Good Mystery*.

Frey urges writers to aim high-not to try to write a good-enough-to-get-published mystery, but a damn good mystery. A damn good mystery is first a dramatic novel, Frey insists-a dramatic novel with living, breathing characters-and he shows his readers how to create a living, breathing, believable character who will be clever and resourceful, willful and resolute, and will be what Frey calls "the author of the plot behind the plot."

Frey then shows, in his well-known, entertaining, and accessible (and often humorous) style, how the characters-the entire ensemble, including the murderer, the detective, the authorities, the victims, the suspects, the witnesses and the bystanders-create a complete and coherent world.

Exploring both the on-stage action and the behind-the-scenes intrigue, Frey shows prospective writers how to build a fleshed-out, believable, and logical world. He shows them exactly which parts of that world show up in the pages of a damn good mystery-and which parts are held back just long enough to keep the reader guessing.

This is an indispensable step-by-step guide for anyone who's ever dreamed of writing a damn good mystery.

How to Write a Damn Good Mystery: A Practical Step-by-Step Guide from Inspiration to Finished Manuscript Details

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From Reader Review How to Write a Damn Good Mystery: A Practical Step-by-Step Guide from Inspiration to Finished Manuscript for online ebook

Kimberly Lynne says

Frey sets the villain vs detective battle of wits against the mythic hero's journey backdrop, actually constructing a genre mystery tale as he walks you through the process. Like many books on craft, this begins as good advice and ends up reading like a formulaic checklist. Take what you will; leave the rest.

Stephen says

Jim Frey is qualified to tell people how to write a good mystery novel because he has written several which I have never read and has taught in lots of writers' workshops of which I have never heard. His text is adequate but flawed in several respects. He insists on using the modifier "damned good" in front of nouns like sentence, plot, scene, character, complication, resolution and the like ... doubtless in furtherance of what he considers to be a clever book title. He offers ou... (show more)

Kristin says

The book's clear, casual style and many solid examples made its concepts easy to grasp. It helped me brainstorm some breakthroughs on my mystery novel revision, and I will probably revisit this book again to help me on future projects. The only thing holding me back from a whole-hearted recommendation is that some of the word choices and attitudes in the examples are a little ... retro/not PC. If that kind of thing really bothers you, I would steer clear of this one.

Debra Daniels-zeller says

Another good book on novel writing by James Frey. This installment of How to Write a Damn Good Novel, repeats a lot of the information in his other books yet Frey bends mystery into this book for people writing mysteries. In this book I really liked exploring what other characters did off screen and disliked the writing good prose section at the end that could have been in any book on writing. I also liked the indepth step-sheet but if I had to keep only one of Frey's book on the shelf, it would be How To Wite a Damn Good Novel II.

Chris Bauer says

For decades I've read mystery novels, along with other kinds of genre fiction. After I started writing, I had always wanted to try my hand at penning a mystery novel but really had no idea of HOW to do it right. Horror, fantasy and sci-fi? Yeah, no problem.

But the mystery genre was...well, a mystery to me.

Until I read this book by James N. Frey.

Simply put, it was like a grenade went off in my head once the fundamentals sunk in. I don't place a great deal of faith in many of the "learn to write!" kind of books - I've read too many which are just terrible. This book was anything but. While I may not agree 100%, I'm nodding my head at least 90% of the time while flipping pages - and that is more than good enough.

Might as well confess that, as a direct result of reading this one book, I've become addicted to Frey's writing style and have two more of his works waiting for me.

Readily understood, easy to grasp, yet no-frills and fresh - this is the perfect book for me at this time in my own writing.

Ekaterina says

This book had a lot of good writing advice for writing mysteries. The author had a lot of good points, so I'm glad I read this book. I started writing a mystery, but after the first couple of pages, I knew something was wrong because I didn't know how much to write, develop, and plot. After reading this book, I feel confident about writing the mystery.

After reading this book, I learned some things like writing mysteries are tons of fun, but can be extremely complicated. When the author started talking about the plot behind the plot, I knew I came to the right book.

Disclaimer: There was language and content in the book but once I caught wind of something I didn't like, I skipped it.

Micha Goebig says

I found this book really helpful. It made me come up with some important questions about the plot of my story, and even a few answers :)

Jennifer Harper says

Many of the same points made in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* and *How to Write a Damn Good Thriller* are reiterated here, but sometimes it's good to have things hammered into your brain. Best advice I found in this book is about keeping track of what's happening to your characters "off-stage" and keeping track of each character's agenda. I think this book just might help with a couple of stories I'm struggling to finish off. Working with the examples Frey provides really helps to illustrate the points he makes. Good reference book.

K says

I spent a fair amount of time reading other folks reviews here - and it's always interesting to see how different folks feel about the same book. I don't think I've rated another book as generously as I've this one. It taught me several useful things and most importantly did help *me* as a step-by-step guide.

Let me get the niggling stuff out of the way first

- yes there's over use of the phrase 'damn good' - after the first few times I probably did not notice it
- yes there's reference (some would say over reference) to his other books - minor irritant and at times while he appeared concerned about repeating what was in those here, I'd rather he did so that each book stood alone

But neither of those things were more than minor matters for me. I found it immensely useful - particularly in the context of writing mysteries. Three techniques I took away, in the order of value

Plot behind the plot - what drives the murderer - I'd always been so focused on the protagonist/hero/detective

Journals for key characters - this was different in that it was done in their voice revealing interesting facets to them

Stepsheets - while I'd tried and read about outlining, the step sheets - were a great way to get a quick handle on where you wanted to take the story and in some instances where the story wanted to take you

I really liked his piece on writing **Writing Damn Good Prose** - almost reminiscent of of Strunk & White - concisely captured a lot of good actionable ideas on writing tight prose

I really liked that he tried to work through all of *Murder in Montana* - unlike other reviewers who found it both "cliche-ridden" and too long - I found it actually useful, as an actual practice of what he preached - regardless of whether it was the final manuscript, seeing where he started and how it evolved, even more than where it ended, taught me a whole lot. I think as another reviewer commented - the main value that Frey brought was he did away with most excuses all of us as writers make and took apart any obstacles that stand in our way - by providing practical methods to work through them. It's now to each of us, reader and writer to make as much good as we want out of this.

I'm going out there to buy this as a keeper.

Jeffrey Hammerhead says

This book gave me som great insights on how to improve my craft of writing. A must for all mystery writers.

Thomas says

Frey includes what sound like some decent tips about developing characters and plotting. He has an especially good idea about the process of devising a mystery plot, and uses *The Maltese Falcon* to illustrate it

(there's few better examples of mystery novels a novice writer could to aspire to than that one). However, Frey then proceeds to spend much of the back-half of his book running through an outline of what sounds like a somewhat inane and pedestrian sounding mystery he's concocted as a working example. Also, he repeats the phrase "damn good mystery" *ad infinitum*, making the book sound sort of like a sales pitch.

K says

Many writers--especially outliners--may find the system in this book helpful, but the woman-negative content of the examples in the book generated too much cognitive dissonance for this reader to pay proper attention to Frey's techniques.

In chapter 4, Frey generates an example murderer complete with backstory to demonstrate his writing process. This murderer's backstory should presumably lay the groundwork for why he is a murderer and Frey's brief explanation of the murderer's family implies that the mother was the problem. His father is described in less than one complete sentence as "drunk" and "weak" whereas 10 lines/2 paragraphs are dedicated to detailing how the mother was a "slut".

In chapter 5, Frey shows us how to create journal entries from the perspective of the murderer. From the murderer's perspective, it appears that the father being an alcoholic had little to do with the murderer's upbringing, but the mother sleeping around had a profound effect on him--which seems incongruous to me. An alcoholic parent often has an affect on children.

I thought Frey might use the protagonist to juxtapose this underlying woman-negative theme he created in the murderer. Not so. In chapter 7 Frey generates the protagonist's backstory and she is described as having been a problem child who "seduced a sixty-one-year-old teacher when she was fifteen." To me, that doesn't sound like edgy, problem child behavior--that sounds like statutory rape.

During the protagonist's introductory journal entry the protagonist "hated [her] mother, but not [her] father". In one sentence the father is described as merely absent and then the next 14 lines describe how the mother was vain and uncaring. Both of these parents are neglectful and would have contributed to the protagonist's backstory problems, but only the mother is held accountable by Frey.

Later in the protagonist's backstory the protagonist is described as having had a spiritual transformation which leaves her celibate. This doesn't do well against the murderer's "slut" mother, the protagonist's own neglectful mother, or the protagonist's history of sexual abuse. It is as though by being celibate the protagonist is excused from the unacceptable sexual behavior exhibited by the problem women in the story, especially her younger self.

It's possible that Frey intended to show the protagonist as having gained control over her own sexuality, which would be fine, but then in chapter 8 Frey introduces a romance-novelish, cowboy love interest. This recalls outdated beliefs that sexually "immoral" women (lesbian, asexual, rape victim) can be "fixed" by sex with a cishet man.

Frey doesn't seem to be aware of this woman-negative tone in his example murder mystery. If it was intentional, that would be one thing, but trying to navigate through a series of problematic depictions of women while also absorbing the lessons about writing-as-a-craft generated a kind of cognitive dissonance for me that was too distracting to push through.

Melissa says

It amuses me how much writers seem to hate "how to write" books, judging by their Goodreads reviews. They're dying to find flaws so they can feel like a better writer than the "how to write" author. That may preserve your ego, folks, but I don't think it helps you improve your books.

Part of writing better is listening to what others advise. That's what I'm trying to do. Criticizing and being defensive is easy. Listening to advice and taking it seriously is more difficult.

I think this book has a lot of helpful advice. I'd add some more helpful advice: read a lot of novels. I think I lot of people who want to write novels fail to read enough. That's why they think they're so great -- because they don't read.

I'm trying to write. I'm not sure which genre. This was an interesting and helpful book. Sometimes it's sexist. But just because someone isn't woke doesn't mean they have nothing to offer and I can write off their advice. There is a lot of good advice in this book despite moments of underlying sexism.

After reading this, do you feel defensive and full of criticism for Frey and the novel he outlined within this book? If yes, chances are, I'm not interested in your writing. Stop defending your bad writing and start improving.

I'm interested in improving. I want to write books that aren't a chore to read. I don't want to have to beg for readers. I want them to beg for more.

This is a helpful book.

Christopher says

A great how-to book I plan to utilize as a first time author. I believe there will be a re-read (or two) in the near future.

It is written in plain, easy to understand language as if Mr. Frey is sitting at the table with you. He makes it clear what he is telling you to do with several examples of different styles or points of view or even with bad vs. good examples of things. Looking forward to reading his other books on novel writing and even some of his fiction works.

Tyra Masters-heinrichs says

A must read for those writing in the mystery genre and wanting to understand how this genre differentiates from other genres. A great intro and confidence builder for writers.
