

The Writer Within – What Kind of Writer Are You?

Article Seven: What Is Fiction?

By Janice Alonso

Fiction is not true – it is made-up stories. These stories may have real people or real events, but the point at which an author begins adding made-up information, the piece becomes a work of fiction. For example, you might decide to write a story about Hurricane Katrina. You can set it on the Gulf Coast, use actual tracking data about the storm, and use pivotal personalities who were involved; however, once you add your own characters and introduce a creative plotline, the end result is fiction.

Like nonfiction, fiction breaks down into smaller categories, known as genres. The following is a good representation, but not complete, of types of fiction: romance, sci-fi, mystery, western, adventure, fantasy, comedy, horror, paranormal, and Christian. The definition of each genre is self-explanatory: mysteries have puzzles for someone to solve, romances are love stories, westerns are set in the west . . . and so on. But, and a very important “but” here, these genres become much more complex by having subgenres with specific guidelines.

Let’s look at the mystery genre. It is broken down into numerous subgenres. Amateur sleuth, caper, cozy, hardboiled, courtroom drama, police procedural, private detective, and whodunit are just a few of the many selections you’ll find on mystery bookshelves. To further complicate matters, in a subgenre such as amateur sleuth you’ll find series with main characters who are chefs, people with cats, writers, quilters, and antiques dealers who find themselves looped into one murder investigation after another with their areas of expertise serving as the connective tissue of the stories. As a matter of fact, some of our favorite fictional people fall into this category. Remember Father Dowling, Jessica Fletcher, and Miss Marple?

If you choose to write in a specific genre/subgenre, do your homework . . . familiarize yourself with its guidelines and follow them. Say you choose to write a cozy. This mystery subgenre expects:

- A main character who is a good person

- No graphic violence or explicit sex . . . slashing, gashing, and passionate bed-tumbling happen off-stage
- The setting to be in a small place . . . a country house, a snowed-in ski lodge, or isolated island
- Quirky supporting characters/murder suspects
- The author to lay out clues, including red herrings, so the reader can join in the game
- An ending where the murder is solved fairly and the “bad” people receive their just desserts

While the cozy is only one example, most subgenres come with their own particular guidelines as well. Of course, no one demands you follow these guidelines, but if someone chooses to read your genre fiction and he/she feels misled or tricked . . .

Reread column one: Link your name to a good, dependable reputation. A published writer pleases his/her agents, editors, and readers.

Once a fiction writer settles on a genre, his/her job still isn't finished. Fiction also breaks down by length according to its word count. The following list may vary a little from publisher to publisher, but I think you'll find it typical.

Flash Fiction – up to 1000 words

Short-Shorts – 1000 – 1700 words

Short Stories – up to 7500 words

Novellas – up to 20,000 words

Novels – up to 100, 000 words

Epics – over 100,000 words

So as a fiction writer, besides choosing your subject before you start a story, you'll probably need to have a length in mind, too. The topics for these columns have been straightforward so far, but in the world of fiction, writers find themselves with a multitude of choices. No wonder we become befuddled! While wading through these choices is overwhelming, it is also exciting. When you begin combining genres and subgenres, you are unleashing your creative spirit and fine-tuning a story that ultimately will be uniquely yours.

If you are interested in writing fiction, this column's "step assignment" may be the most important one you do. Soon you'll be asked to choose the story type you want to pursue for your writing piece in the next series of columns. Most likely you'll choose a category you enjoy reading. My short-shorts and short stories have been included in mystery, literary, children's, and Christian periodicals and anthologies. This is no surprise since these are the areas that I've been reading since I was a child.

Step Seven – Read different fiction genres/subgenres of varying lengths you think you'd like to write, write every day, and sign your name to it.