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Writing the Thriller

Trish MacDonald Skillman
Writer's Digest Books (April 2000)
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Skillman, author of the thrillers Someone to Watch Over and Buried Secrets, shares her insights into the thriller genre by providing information and advice for prospective writers. The first piece of advice she shares is the definition of suspense, the key element in the thriller genre. “Suspense is emotional. It’s surprise and confusion and fear and anticipation. And suspense is danger. Immediate danger. It’s worrying about what’s going to happen, not about the action taking place at that moment.”

She breaks thrillers down into eight subgenres: action-adventure, legal, medical, political, psychological, romantic relationship suspense, women-in-jeopardy suspense and techno-thrillers. Then she takes the building blocks of any novel-plot, dialogue, setting, characterization-and shows how each building block relates to the unique subgenres.

Most of the first several chapters will be hauntingly familiar to anyone who’s picked up a book on writing before, and to no great surprise, the recommended readings and citations are to other Writer’s Digest books.

The distinctiveness of this book lies in Skillman’s gift of her own knowledge of the genre and the pitfalls laying in wait for writers, and in the interviews with authors who share their expertise. Michael Connelly, Clive Cussler, Joy Fielding, Tess Gerritsen, John Gilstrap, Judith Kelman, Shirley Kennett, John Lutz, Richard North Patterson and Marilyn Wallace delve deeply into the genre that made them bestselling authors and offer fans a glimpse of the writer’s mind at work.

Writing the Thriller is a good supplement to basic writing books.

MELANIE C. DUNCAN (March / April 2000)

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