

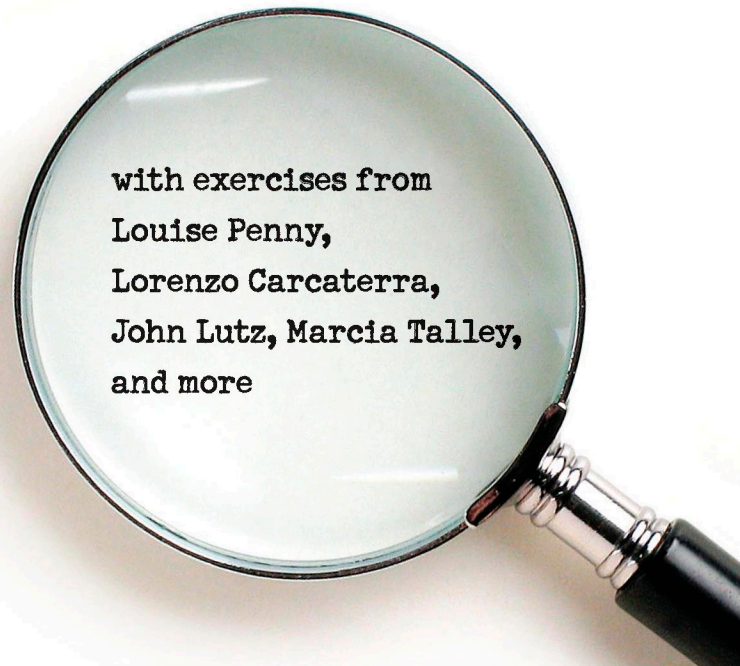


# NOW WRITE!


## Mysteries

Suspense, Crime, Thriller, and  
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## MEG GARDINER

### Ratcheting Up the Suspense: How to Keep Readers Guessing, Worrying, and Turning the Pages by Structuring Scenes to Have at Least Half a Dozen Mini-Turning Points

MEG GARDINER writes two series of internationally bestselling thrillers. *China Lake* won the 2009 Edgar Award for Best Paperback Original. *The Dirty Secrets Club* was one of Amazon's Top Ten Mysteries and Thrillers of 2008 and received the *RT Book Reviews* Reviewers' Choice Award. *The Liar's Lullaby* was chosen by Stephen King as one of his hits of 2010. Originally from Oklahoma, Gardiner practiced law in Los Angeles and taught writing at University of California, Santa Barbara. She now lives near London.

A scene isn't a scene unless it has a turning point. Without some shift in the fortunes of at least one character—for good or ill—a batch of prose is just exposition, or conversation, or description. It becomes a scene only when something changes. Boom.

The turning point should occur near the end of the scene, and that change, that shift in circumstances, drives the book forward. When drafting a scene, you might initially design the turning point to come as a surprise. The scene toddles along, and then the hero announces he's secretly married. Or the couple riding the scooter go around a corner and pitch headfirst off a cliff.

That moment of surprise, of being taken unaware, will stop readers in their tracks and then, you hope, get them rushing to turn the page to the next scene, or chapter, all the way to the end of the book.

Surprises can delight readers. But if everything that comes before the surprise is mundane, then, as an author, you've blown it. To really

grip readers, you need to have mini-turning points during any big scene, points where the trail switches back and forth unexpectedly, moving the characters' expectations and emotions up and down. This turns fluff into grit. This draws out the suspense, and increases tension.

It tightens the screws. It's how you ratchet up the suspense.

Life doesn't run smoothly. Life on the page, especially in crime novels and thrillers, runs ragged. But that's what readers love. That's the thrill and appeal of crime fiction: sharing vicariously in the characters' struggles—physical, emotional, and moral—at the moments of greatest pressure and crisis in their lives. So create sympathetic characters and put them in jeopardy. Readers will go along for the ride.

I learned about tightening the screws in a scene through trial and error. When I wrote the first draft of my novel *China Lake*, one scene was informational (okay, expository) though in a Grand Guignol way. The heroine, Evan Delaney, attends a church service run by an extremist pastor. Evan's sister-in-law has joined his flock, and during the fiery sermon, Evan realizes that the sect is pinning for the Apocalypse.

Then a man bursts in screaming. He raves incoherently at the pastor and runs out. The service ends in a shambles.

Dramatic ending. And, so what? Evan was a bystander. She wasn't involved in the action. There was no action, no back-and-forth, no nothing.

In the second draft, I tossed obstacles in Evan's path. She's not merely watching the service; she's hiding at the back of the storefront church because she knows she's unwelcome. Then she's exposed as an outsider by one of the fanatical worshippers. The crowd turns ugly. Evan calls to her sister-in-law for help. But the pastor puts the sis-in-law on the spot: Reject Satan . . . and Evan. Evan begs her: Please back me up. Show me you're still my friend; that we're still family. Instead, the sister-in-law sics the crowd on Evan. Security goons grab her and haul her down the aisle—she hopes to the street, but perhaps to a beating. The crowd closes on her.

Then the raving man bursts in.

His intrusion stops the scene dead. But it doesn't rescue Evan. The intruder is disheveled, threatening, possibly drunk, and definitely ill. Perhaps with an infectious disease. A scary guy. Woo.

That was draft two. I knew the scene still needed more. Draft three: As he raves, the intruder is grabbed by the security guards. He breaks away. And runs out.

Bzz. Not enough.

Rewrite. He continues raving. The guards collar him and try to drag him off. He grabs Evan to anchor himself.

Caught in his grip, Evan sees that he's fevered, coughing, and likely deranged. And they stumble toward the storefront's plate-glass window, then straight on through.

That made me happy. And kept readers turning the pages.

And did you notice? By building in mini-turning points, the characters came to life, their relationships took on edge, and I came up with a better ending to the scene. That's why I value this exercise.

## EXERCISE

Start with an idea for a scene. Think of a basic idea, with a turning point: a scene that goes from A to B. Broad strokes.

Now go back and build in obstacles and the unexpected. Put twists in the road. Block the protagonist's path. Throw down impediments that are by turns physical and psychological, accidental and deliberate. Breakdowns. A monkey wrench. A landslide—verbal, literal, or emotional.

Here's an example. A to B: The heroine learns a killer has broken into her best friend's house. She races there and prevents her friend's murder.

In the first draft, the heroine may rush straight to her friend's home, burst in, and save the would-be victim.

Now fill that in. By applying pressure throughout, thwarting the heroine's desires, you can increase the suspense and tension.

The heroine finds out the murderer is at her friend's house. She tries to call and warn the victim, but the phone is dead. She must go herself. But her motorcycle won't start. She hot-wires it and races down the road.

She sees the house ahead—but a truck is jackknifed across the

road, blocking her. She abandons the motorcycle and runs, cutting through traffic. She phones the police—they will send help. But they're also blocked by the wreck.

Now it's up to her. She gets there and the door is wide open. Is she too late? She runs inside. The murderer has beaten her there. She must find a weapon. She grabs an electric drill—but the power is out. She finds a baseball bat and runs up the stairs. The door is closed. And then . . .

The rest is up to you.