

Demystifying the writing process

By Kathy Pohl

Just as she has solved the most puzzling murder mysteries, author Elizabeth George has tried to take the mystery out of writing

ELIZABETH GEORGE IS fascinated by the dark side of human nature. In her psychological mysteries, she examines the landscape of the human heart and its many motivations for murder. Her lengthy tomes are full of suspense, peopled with fascinating characters, and are all about not only whodunit but, more importantly, why?

All 14 of the Detective Lynley mysteries in George's bestselling series are set in England, a country she fell in love with when she visited there as a teenager. Indeed, readers are often surprised to learn that George is an American, so richly detailed are her settings in the English countryside, so attuned is her ear to regional accents, and so clear is her understanding of contemporary British society.

George's longtime fans have come to know and love her recurring cast of crime-solving characters. Handsome and aristocratic Scotland Yard Detective Inspector Thomas Lynley and his rough-around-the-edges working-class assistant Barbara Havers first made their appearance in *A Great Deliverance* in 1988. The book begins with the discovery of the body of a decapitated farmer and his daughter sitting nearby with an ax at her side, saying, "I did it. And I'm not sorry," while a horrified clergyman looks on.

It was a far cry from the first mystery George tried to publish. "Too old-fashioned. Detectives no longer take all the suspects into the library and reveal the truth to them," is what she heard from one editor who rejected her work. She took the advice to heart—and took her writing in a new direction, creating intricate plots, complex characters, a gritty reality and landscapes as visual as a Constable painting.

George killed off a much-loved character in a recent novel, *With No One as Witness*. The heinous act raised an angry outcry from readers. "I think readers were unprepared for the depth of their emotion," George

In *What Came Before He Shot Her*, Elizabeth George examines the events leading to a horrific crime described in her previous novel, *With No One as Witness*.

said. "People were devastated by the death of that character, just as the characters in the book were devastated."

In her latest novel, *What Came Before He Shot Her*, she examines the events leading up to the horrific crime in her previous book, although, as is often the case in an Elizabeth George novel, things in the end are not really what they seem.

The themes vary, but the constant in each book is the enormous amount of meticulous research that goes into it. George travels often to England where, with camera and tape recorder in hand, she searches out settings and landscapes for her novels. Back home, she goes through an incredibly detailed process of writing, a process that she shares in amazing detail in her nonfiction book *Write Away*. I talked with George about mysteries and the writing process when she stopped in Milwaukee on a recent book tour.

You approach writing in a very organized, methodical way. Can you talk a little about the process of writing?

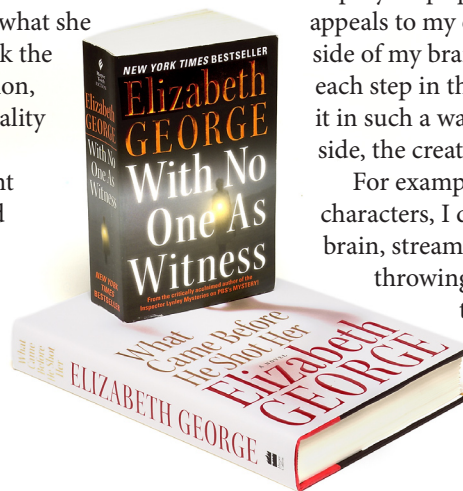
I developed a complicated process to demystify writing. I do think everybody needs to develop a process that works for them that will demystify or "deterify" the process.

If I were to begin a novel thinking that somehow I was going to have to create on a blank computer screen a 600-page rough draft, it would be very frightening, and I'd probably never be able to do it. So I created a structured,

step-by-step approach to writing that appeals to my organizational side, the left side of my brain, and as I apply myself to each step in that structured approach, I do it in such a way that it triggers the right side, the creative side, of my brain.

For example, when I'm creating my characters, I do it in a present tense, right brain, stream-of-consciousness fashion,

throwing onto the page everything that pops into my mind until I feel I am heading in the right direction with that character. It's very much a





Figge Photography

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physical feeling.

When it comes to writing, I never listen to my mind; I always listen to my body. I’ve learned to trust that feeling right in my solar plexus.

You talk a great deal about the craft of writing. What do you mean?

It’s important for beginning writers to learn the *craft*, the basics, of writing. You can’t teach somebody to be a creative artist, to have talent or passion, but you *can* teach somebody craft. Whether they can apply it in an artistic fashion, well, that’s in the hands of the gods. But they can certainly learn what the craft of writing is.

How do you begin to write a mystery? How much do you know from the start?

When I begin a mystery, I know the killer, the victim and the motive. From that, I develop what I call an expanded story idea. It answers all the questions of who, what, when, where and why. Then I develop a generic list of characters of everyone who is in any way involved in the story—for example: the killer; victim; detective; suspect one, the milkman; suspect two, the postman; etc. First, I give them generic titles, then I name the characters, and then I create them.

Only one character is created to do something specific—and that is the killer. I have no idea what the rest of the characters in the book are going to do until I actually start creating them. As I create them, they begin revealing to me who they are, how they fit into the story, and they give me an idea of what the theme is going to be and what the subplots will be, as well.

You are an American writing about England. How can you do it so well and in such detail?

First of all, I never write about a place I haven’t been to. I make sure that if there is any description in my novels, I have actually been there and walked in that place.

Somebody asked me recently how I managed to describe the early morning run that one character, Elena, takes in *For the Sake of Elena* just before she is murdered. She said, “I’ve been in Cambridge, and I just could not believe how you managed to capture the nuance of that run.” And I told her that I got up at that same hour of the morning, and I walked Elena’s run all the way to the point where she is murdered, and I noted all the sensory details along the way. So it’s not like I’m looking at a map at home in the U.S., just trying to imagine what might be on that route. I can’t do it that way. I always go to every single location that’s been described in any of my books.

I’ve never been able to describe things by just cooking them up out of my imagination. I have great respect for people who can do that, but it just does not work for me. I have to see the world and notice the telling details of that world, and then carry on from there.

When did you begin writing?

I have always felt compelled to write. When I began reading the Little Golden Books as a 7-year-old, I knew that I wanted to write one, too. I wrote tiny stories like that in the beginning. Now, writing is a really important part of my mental health regimen. It keeps me centered psychologically, and it’s a good way for me to fight depression.

Is writing a real discipline for you, like a job?

Yes, but it is never a chore for me. Writing is something I do because I really love doing it. When I’m working on a novel, I keep a regular schedule, just as if it were a job. I get up early in the morning and do my writing for the day as soon as I’ve worked out. I write five pages a day, five days a week, when I’m working on the rough draft of a novel, regardless of where I am. If I am skiing with my husband for a week, I take my computer with me. I get up early and do my writing and then do my skiing afterwards.

Where do you write?

I write wherever I happen to be. When I'm on a book tour, I've got my computer with me and I write in whatever hotel room I happen to be in ... or I write on the airplane ... or I write in the lounge as I'm waiting for the airplane. When I am at home, I work in my study.

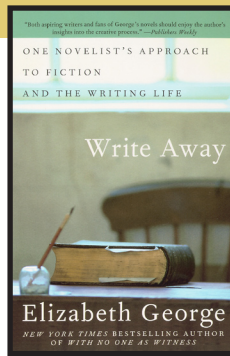
What advice do you have for beginners?

Sometimes it is all about dismissing the committee in your head that might be telling you that you're no good, that you don't have any ideas, that you're not creative. They might be your parents, your high school teachers, the person who wouldn't go to the prom with you. You have to remember that they are part of the past, and that they don't determine your future.

And writing has to be important to you. It comes down to what I call "suit up and show up." ... A lot of writing is simply showing up and doing the work day after day.

You've said that you don't suffer from writer's block. Why do you think that is?

I think it's because I do so much preliminary work. I always have a stack of resource material to look at to get me out of a situation that might be dicey. I have my charac-



In her book about writing, Elizabeth George focuses in detail on writing basics, technique and her creative process.

ter analyses to remind myself who these people are, what is going on with them and the things that trigger them. I have my running plot outline that shows me essentially what the next scene is going to be. I have my step outline that shows me the causal relationships between the scenes.

So when I'm actually sitting in front of the computer, doing the rough draft, I know where the scene is going, I know who is in it, I know what point I'm trying to make, I know where I'm heading ... and that allows me to experience the beauty of manipulating language in writing, which is what I really love to do.

That's not to say that I haven't had difficult days writing, because I have—days where I might spend eight hours and be stumped, but [mystery writer] Sue Grafton once said to me something that was very helpful. I was having trouble doing something, and she said to me, "If you know the question, you know the answer."

And then I once heard Jeff Parker [crime-fiction writer T. Jefferson Parker] speak at a conference, and he said, "If your story stalls out on you, you've played your hand too soon." And those two things have been very liberating for me. So I haven't experienced that really scary blocking of creativity.

THE ELIZABETH GEORGE FILE

- **Born** Susan Elizabeth George in Warren, Ohio, and grew up in Southern California. English degree from the University of California, Riverside; lifetime secondary teaching credential from UC Riverside; master's degree in counseling/psychology from California State University at Fullerton.

- **Worked** as a high school English teacher for about 13 years before turning to writing full time.

- **Has taught** creative writing at a number of schools, including the University of Oklahoma, University of British Columbia and the University of California, Irvine.

- **Recently moved** to a new home on Whidbey Island, Wash., where she lives with her husband,

retired firefighter Tom McCabe, and their two miniature dachshunds. She often travels to London to research her books and keeps a flat there.

- **Her main literary influence** has been John Fowles, author of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *The Magus* and other novels. "None of his books is like any other," she told PBS.org. "He continually challenges himself artistically."

- **Awards:** Include the Anthony Award, Agatha Award and France's Grand Prix de Littérature Policière for *A Great Deliverance*. She's been nominated for the Edgar and Macavity awards.

- **Films:** The BBC has filmed most of her novels for TV, and they have

been broadcast in the United States on PBS' Mystery series.

- **Credits:** Novels: *A Great Deliverance* (1988), *Payment in Blood* (1989), *Well-Schooled in Murder* (1990), *A Suitable Vengeance* (1991), *For the Sake of Elena* (1993), *Missing Joseph* (1994), *Playing for the Ashes* (1995), *In the Presence of the Enemy* (1996), *Deception on His Mind* (1997), *In Pursuit of the Proper Sinner* (1999), *A Traitor to Memory* (2001), *A Place of Hiding* (2003), *With No One as Witness* (2005) and *What Came Before He Shot Her* (2006). Short-story collections: *I, Richard* (2002), *A Moment on the Edge* (2004). Nonfiction: *Write Away* (2004).

Why do you keep a journal while you're writing a book?

It was something that I started doing when I read John Steinbeck's book *Journal of a Novel*. He wrote that journal while he was writing *East of Eden*. ... What I discovered is that it is yet another tool to demystify the whole process—because I write what's going on, not only in my life but also in my writing life—my worries, my fears, my anxieties, my concerns, my triumphs, whatever. I document them on a daily basis.

Then, when I'm doing the next book, I begin by reading a day in the journal of the last book, and then I write in the new journal, and that allows me to see that I've been through it all before, I got through it, it was OK ... and I'll get through this as well, so it's a great tool.

Kathy Pohl

Kathy Pohl has worked in magazine and book publishing for 25 years. She is a Milwaukee-area freelance writer, editor and children's-book author.