

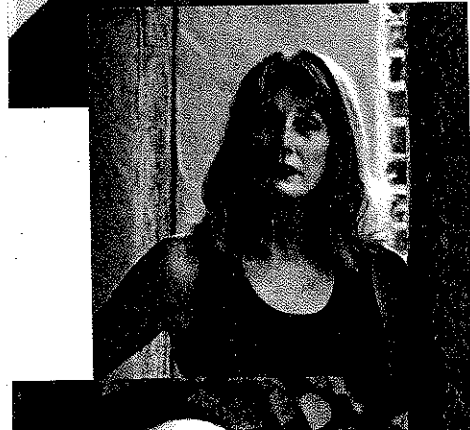
The essential resource for writers



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Dennis Lehane, Gayle Lynds and Stuart Woods tell you how to create a great plot

BY JILLIAN ABBOTT

Three writers on plot

THE WRITER 16 May 2004

A CURSORY GLANCE at the bestseller list will reveal a common thread: Novels that sell well, more often than not, contain, in addition to memorable characters and beautiful language, a gripping plot. To help us get a handle on this important element in fiction, I asked three plot masters—Dennis Lehane, Gayle Lynds and Stuart Woods—to share the secrets of their craft. The following questions and answers were assembled from in-person and e-mail queries.

What is the place of plot in your fiction?

Dennis Lehane: Starting in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, plot became a dirty word in literary circles. Fiction lost its way. A great novel comes when there is beauty of language, illumination of character and a great plot. All three elements are necessary.

Ideally, plot serves character. If you analyze a story, say *The Silence of the Lambs*, you can begin to see plot as a conflict between a character's wants and needs. Clarice Starling *wants* to catch the killer, Buffalo Bill, and to impress her boss. Yet Clarice is unaware of her deeper *needs* to silence the screaming lambs of her childhood, and to come to terms with her relationship with her father.

Gayle Lynds: Plot is about tying a series of story elements to character. After I have the elements, I live with them awhile until characters start to show themselves to me, and I give my hero, heroine and villain something each desperately wants. That, of course, creates the crisis of conscience.

Stuart Woods: Plot isn't everything—there's characterization, exposition, observation and dialogue—but without plot, a book is like a human body without a skeleton. It can't stand up and walk.

How do you approach plotting?

Lehane: I put a character on the page and I have him want something—it could be as simple as a cup of coffee—and he goes out to get that thing. And hopefully, he bumps into another character and then another and conflict will gradually develop. I'm not a good plotter in the early stage of a novel. The trick is to remind yourself that no one's ever going to see those early stages of a book, so let yourself loose and let your characters loose and see what happens. Then go back and rewrite it all to make it look fluid.

Lynds: Plotting is not a conscious activity. It takes second place to story "elements." My way of finding plot is through what I call elements, which means I find two or three things in which I'm truly interested. In *Mesmerized*, it was the heart-transplant thing, the idea that so many ex-KGB [agents] were retired and living in Washington, and the idea that many government agents use

media as a cover. And I wanted to write about an international attorney in D.C.

Woods: Plotting is a process akin to a jazz improvisation: You establish a theme, then improvise on it. I do this on a chapter-by-chapter basis, planning the events that take place, then improvising the writing. I begin this improvisation with a situation (i.e., protagonist discovers skeleton) and build from there.

What is the most common mistake you see beginning writers make in plotting?

Lehane: They either don't have one, in which case their main character sits around thinking and awkwardly telling us, the reader, who he is and what he looks like, or the author starts with a bang, going right into "high-concept" action without us knowing a damn thing about the characters.

Lynds: Timing. When we first begin writing novels, we often either tell too much too soon, or we "save" information for later. From my viewpoint, what's most important is to get the plot and story rolling. After that, the backstory should be earned. In other words, once the book is in full swing, there will be moments when the backstory fits in logically. By the writer's waiting, the reader is already invested and wants to know, which makes the timing appropriate. On the other hand, by withholding clues or other information in an attempt to increase suspense, the author short-changes the book, often making it far too long, too loose and occasionally confusing.

Woods: Too many writers offer too much information and description, obscuring the bones of their plots.

Is it necessary, in order for a plot to be satisfactorily resolved, that your protagonist



dennislehane

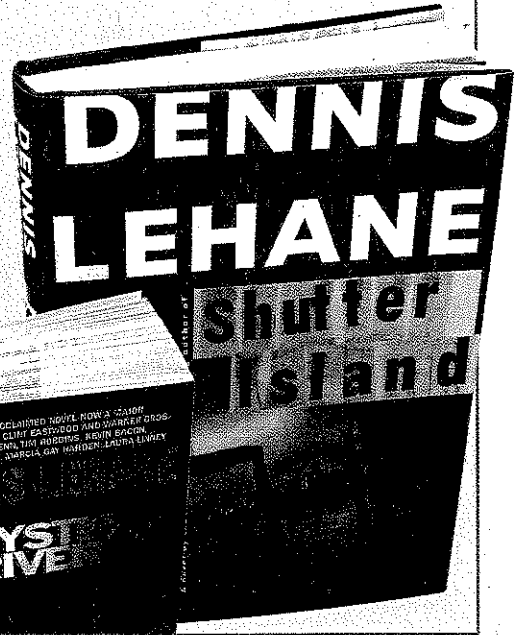
Best known for his award-winning novel *Mystic River*, Dennis Lehane has also penned a successful mystery series which includes *A Drink Before the War*, *Darkness Take My Hand*, *Sacred*, *Gone Baby Gone* and *Prayers for the Rain*.

Bestseller *Mystic River* was a finalist for the PEN/Winship Award, won both the Anthony and the Barry awards for best novel, and is now a Clint Eastwood movie. Like Lehane's earlier detective series, it is set in Boston's working-class Catholic neighborhoods. Lehane's latest book, *Shutter Island*,

Terrill R. Unger

also made *The New York Times* best-seller list. It represents a departure from his home turf of socioeconomic imprisonment to the psychological nightmare of wrongful confinement in a mental hospital on an island off Boston.

Dennis Lehane, who lives in Boston, was born and raised in Dorchester, Mass. He now makes his living exclusively from writing and from teaching writing at the University of Southern Maine. He has worked as a counselor with mentally handicapped and abused children and in a bookstore, and has held down other odd jobs as well, all of which feed his fiction.



get what he or she wants?

Lehane: No. Your [main] characters must get what they need, not what they want.

Lynds: Absolutely not. In fact, if the protagonist always does, suspense goes out the window. Within limits, I agree with Aristotle that the journey is all. But if we know the ending, the journey grows tainted, and our interest declines. I find it far more interesting and useful to have a protagonist who is flawed and fails occasionally throughout the book. By the end, the reader is a bit worried, which again increases suspense. As for endings in which

the protagonist takes all, sometimes they work, sometimes not. The integrity of the book is what counts.

Woods: Yes, pretty much, though it shouldn't be too easy.

How can a conflict between what a character wants and what a character needs propel a plot forward?

Lehane: It goes back to the cup of coffee. David Mamet said something I've never forgotten: As long as a character wants something—anything—the audience will be interested. So, as long as the character has a want, the need



gaylelynds

The *New York Times* bestselling author Gayle Lynds has written three international spy thrillers, three novels co-written with the late Robert Ludlum and five Nick Carter pulp-fiction adventures. She is the first woman to successfully write international spy thrillers.

Her debut solo thriller, *Masquerade*, was rejected initially because "no women could have written this." Doubleday ultimately published the book in 1996. Beth Convey, the protagonist of her most recent novel, *Mesmerized*, is rare and refreshing: a female thriller lead, written by a woman writer.

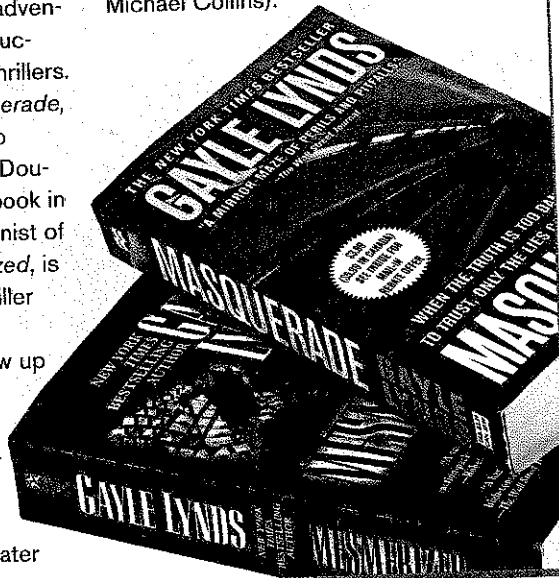
Born in Nebraska, Lynds grew up in small-town Iowa, where she graduated from the University of Iowa with a degree in journalism. She began her writing career as a reporter for the *Arizona Republic* in Phoenix, and later

Jay Farbman

became an editor with "top-secret" security clearance at a government think tank.

Her fiction writing began when, after 10 years at home raising her children, divorce triggered the threat of poverty. Two of her short stories were published in literary journals, but the need to support her kids led her to tackle pulp fiction when offered the chance. Now firmly established, Lynds is a master of plot and motivation. *Romantic Times* magazine named *Mosaic* thriller of the year, and in 2002 *Mesmerized* became a finalist for the Daphne du Maurier Award in mainstream suspense. Her latest novel is *The Coil*, a sequel to *Masquerade*.

Lynds lives in California with her husband and fellow writer, Dennis Lynds (known to readers as Michael Collins).



will grow out of that, organically, and the more you'll figure the character out. Tension will develop for the reader the more elusive the pursuit of both goals is.

Lynds: In *Mesmerized*, a high-flying Washington lawyer receives a heart transplant, which seems to come with its donor's personality, tastes and history. She desperately wants to return to who and what she was, although that is unrealistic. Finally, the tension between

wants and needs reaches an explosive point. She has to put to rest all the intrusive thoughts and the strange ideas that began after her surgery. She can't live as if constantly under siege. After that, she goes in search of her donor, speeding the plot forward.

How did you learn to write compelling plots?

Lehane: The best question I ask myself is: What would a play-

wright do? Playwrights can only show; they can't tell. Now, I'm a novelist because I occasionally like telling, but it helps if you keep your eye on ... the constant unfolding of drama.

Lynds: Well, I sure didn't learn about action-adventure in the literary short stories I wrote! Probably my male-pulp-novel era is the closest to training I had. I wrote five Nick Carters, which I figured was a deal, since I was being paid to learn. I was told nothing about plot or much of anything else, except how many words were wanted.

Woods: Lots and lots of reading. As a child, I read horse and dog stories, such as *Lassie Come Home* and *The Black Stallion*. After about the age of six, I was reading Mark Twain and Dickens.

What impact, if any, can setting have on plot, or vice versa?

Lehane: If a novel works, they're all tied together—plot, character, setting, language—and to such a degree, it's hard to pull one from the other. So I wouldn't know how to address that question exactly, except to say if setting works, you don't notice it; if it doesn't work, that's when you notice it.

Lynds: Once again, the Nick Carters demonstrate this connection well. Writing them, I learned very quickly that if I wanted a contract, I needed to come up with a book that took place in an exotic locale that the series had not addressed in a very long time, or at all. So I ended up setting parts of books in Antarctica, the Sudan, Macedonia ... a host of places I perhaps never would have considered.

The experience taught me to pay attention to scene-setting. To move the plot, to give a sense of freshness, to keep the action going—change the scenery. That forces the author to do some work that lingering in the same spot

might not. You must think of a compelling reason for the story to be moved to the new location, and then you must provide a payoff to the readers.

Woods: Place gives your characters mountains to climb and cliffs to fall from.

If plot is the problem, how would you approach a solution?

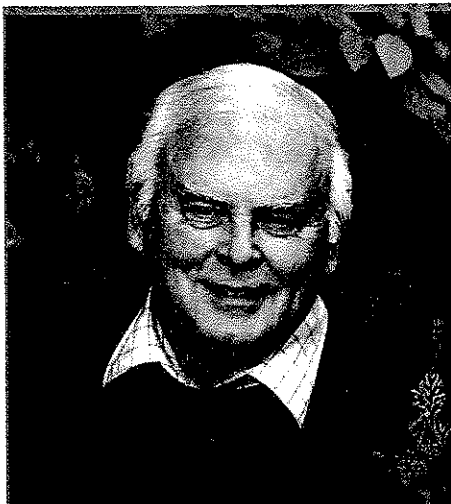
Lehane: If I have a plotting problem, I usually can't move forward. I block. Then I have to take the time to figure out where I screwed up. Once I've identified it, I go back in and try to fix it. If I'm successful, it's pretty apparent because then I can write again. If I'm not, I'm still blocked.

Lynds: Once I know the plot isn't working in one particular spot, I rethink the book, bringing myself up to date. Often, that's enough to remind me of some thread I've forgotten that can now be brought into play. Other times, I discover the characters are a bit off, doing or saying things that really aren't in character. And finally, it may be simply that I need to be more clever, that a solution simply hasn't occurred to me, and I must be patient with myself and take a walk or a nap or wander around, sometimes for days, until at last I have that eureka moment when I understand a new way of seeing the remainder of the book.

What techniques do you use to create and maintain suspense?

Lehane: *Mystic River* is constructed around shifting points of view, third person limited, tight on each point-of-view character. This technique not only maintains and extends suspense, but it also drives the plot forward.

Lynds: I have two favorite words, which I have tacked onto my lampshade at eye level. They are "jeopardy" and "menace"—jeopardy refers to the hero and/or



Matthew Berkoski

stuartwoods

Stuart Woods has written more than 27 novels. His first mystery, *Chiefs*, won a Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award. A later book, *Palindrome*, was also nominated for the Edgar.

A voracious reader as a child, Woods is now a voracious writer, regularly producing two novels per year. He has two successful mystery series going (Stone Barrington and Holly Barker). His most recent Holly Barker book is *Blood Orchid*. His 2003 novel is *Capital Crimes*, featuring Will Lee, Woods' favorite character. Barrington and Barker appear together in *Reckless Abandon*.

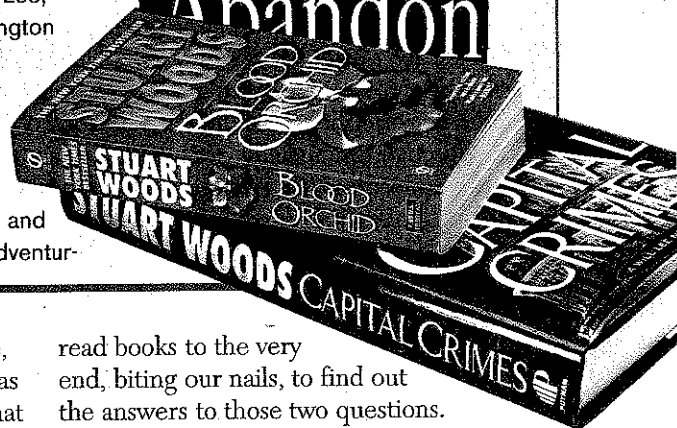
Woods has spent much of his adult life traveling, and currently divides his time between Florida (winter), Maine (summer) and New York (spring and fall). As adventur-

ous as his characters, Woods got his pilot's license in 1986 and flies himself to book-tour locations and between his various houses. His love of the air is matched by his love of the sea. In 1976, he competed in the Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race, completing his crossing in 45 days and finishing in the middle of a highly competitive field.

Woods has written two nonfiction books that grew out of his interest in sailing and traveling: *Blue Water*, *Green Skipper* and *A Romantic's Guide to the Country Inns of Britain and Ireland*.

STUART WOODS

Reckless Abandon



heroine, while menace, of course, refers to the villain. The villain has an overriding goal, and that is what drives the plot. To create suspense, the author must understand and respect that villain, and allow the villain to put the protagonist—and society—in jeopardy. Plus, the villain must be smart enough, good enough, with goals frightening enough that he or she is truly menacing. Will the villain succeed? Will the protagonist succeed? We

read books to the very end, biting our nails, to find out the answers to those two questions. In my opinion, they're the foundation of suspense.

Woods: I look upon writing as a kind of magic, and I'm afraid that if I examine it too closely, it might go away. #

Formerly a columnist for *The Australian*, Jillian Abbott just finished writing a female action/adventure, *The Leopard's Claw*.