

How I Write a Twisty Plot Twist

By Adam Mitzner

What book has your favorite plot twist? *Gone Girl*? *The Girl on the Train*? *The Silent Patient*? Anything by Agatha Christie?

I *like* a plot twist that you never saw coming – but I *love* a plot twist that, when it comes, you can't believe you didn't see it sooner. And I *absolutely adore* a plot twist that makes you consider everything you've read up until that point in a different light.

Granted, that's a pretty tall order. Readers today are very sophisticated, and it's hard enough to surprise them at all. But if you can get them thinking the one thing, while still leaving clues about another that they don't fully grasp until the reveal, then you've got yourself a killer plot twist.

Trying to pull off that bit of magic is much easier said than done, however. How authors do it is their own secret sauce, and I suspect that there is a special *Eureka!* moment that corresponds to every plot twist every written.

Many readers assume that the twist is the first burst of inspiration, and the book is built around it, like how they get that ship in a bottle. I have never been able to do it that way, although I confess I sometimes wish I could.

The inspiration that creates the plot twist is always something of a divine mystery to me. How I go about preparing for that creative burst to strike, however, has never varied.

I start with the characters. Who are these people? What motivates them in their everyday life? No one in real life ever does something that they cannot justify, and even the worst-behaved people see the world in a way that supports their choices and guides their conduct. For that reason, it's important for me to have a clear understanding of how each of my characters sees the world, and his or her place in it, before I write a single word.

Next, I think about what's going to happen to these characters. Will anyone die? Engage in criminal conduct? Abandon his or her own moral code?

Once I know that, I begin to write.

You read that right -- I begin without an outline in any accepted sense of the term. All I know when the first line is written is who the main characters are, and I have some sense of what might be one or two of the key decisions they will face in the next 300 plus pages.

I explain it this way: I have more or less the same understanding of what is about to unfold that anyone else might after reading the plot summary on the back cover of the book or on the Amazon page.

Importantly, I do not know what twists are in store for the characters. I might know that something shocking is coming, but I haven't planned out in my mind exactly how it gets there, or who is involved, or the implications for the other characters. In that regard, I'm just like the reader. That way, when the twist does come, I'm as surprised as I hope the reader will be.

That's a nerve-wracking way to write, to be sure. There inevitably comes a time, after I've spent countless hours working on the book, when I'm wondering, *What if I can't think of a satisfying twist? Will I have to scrap the entire book?*

When I'm stuck in that way, I consider different scenarios. What if the character did X? What if the character did the opposite of X? What if the character is lying about something fundamental? How does the story change if the character is murdered? If the character murders someone? If a new character is introduced into the mix?

To my great relief (and joy), the twist has always somehow arrived. When that lightning strikes, I often think I am the spitting image of Dr. Frankenstein screaming "*It's alive! It's alive!*"

Over the course of my writing career, I've learned a few lessons that make creating that moment of discovery a little easier, and some tricks for how to use those twists for maximum impact in the book.

For starters, if you're doing a murder mystery, you need to have a number of plausible suspects. Readers, in my experience, are quick to make certain assumptions. For example, the obvious suspect – the one who swore he'd kill the victim on page one -- can't be guilty in the end. And from watching *Dateline*, everyone knows that the spouse is usually guilty in real-life murder mysteries. Of course, you can try to subvert those reader expectations, or even have the twist be that there is no twist, but that has to be done very elegantly or readers will feel like you've wasted their time as they waited for a payoff that never arrived.

Second, you need to leave clues. Not just pointing to the twist, but also away from it. And in both instances the clues must be accurate, but not too showy. The last thing you want is for a reader to say, "I figured it out on page 20."

The other approach – hiding the ball – isn't any more gratifying for the reader. It's not much of a twist to find out on the last page that the two main characters are brothers, if there was no way to have figured that out prior to the reveal. But leaving too many references to how they both have the same profile, or that neither knew his biological father, or even that they both share an odd distaste for asparagus, and the reader is already ahead of you.

Third, the reveal shouldn't come at you all at once. Ideally, it should start slowly and then burst onto the page. Full disclosure, that's the hardest part for me, balancing the desire for the twist to be shocking, and yet also having it be a slow burn to the explosion.

Once the twist is written, I go back through what I've written to see if any revisions are required in light of what I now know is coming. I pay particular attention to make sure that every character's reaction is believable, given that some (or at least one) now know about the twist or twists. The murderer cannot express shock at the crime in an internal monologue, but that character can *say* that he or she is shocked, because murderers lie like that all the time to divert suspicion.

Even with all that planning, and the re-writing, some readers are still going to figure it out. (Although I will say there's a difference between *thinking* it's going to turn out some way, and confirming that suspicion, and really *knowing* that there's no surprise at the reveal.)

That's when, to me at least, the most important part of writing a great suspense/thriller book comes into play. Is the book one that captivates you apart from the twist? If so, it's a great book, made all that much greater by shocking twists. But, if the twists don't truly shock every reader, it's still a great book.

When I'm reading, if I find myself only caring about the twist, if I've lost interest in the story, in the characters, in what the author is trying to convey about the human experience, I consider the book to be a failure, even if the twist is a surprise. But if the twist is just the icing on an otherwise already delicious cake, then I'm all-in. Even a spoiler won't deter me because the story is enriching far apart from the author's ability to shock me with the twist. Indeed, the highest praise for a book with a great twist is wanting to re-read the book even after you know the twist.

Which is why when I scroll through the Goodreads reviews (yes, I do look at them from time to time), I am as gratified by readers who say that they thought they saw the twist coming but continued to read on because they wanted to see how everything coalesced, as I am when readers tell me that the twist truly shocked them.

In *The Perfect Marriage*, there are a number of twists. Some are lesser surprises, and some, I'm hoping, jolt the reader. But beyond the twists, I'm hoping that readers enjoy the writing, the relationships between the characters, that they see a bit of themselves along the way, and that they reflect on the themes of *The Perfect Marriage* – love, commitment, jealousy, and the price we pay for our sins.

My most fervent hope is that *The Perfect Marriage* achieves two things: first, that readers really enjoy the book while they're reading it. And two, that they think about it after they've finished.

How'd I do in *The Perfect Marriage*? Did you see the twists coming? Did the rest of the book captivate you aside from the twists? Are you still thinking about the next day?

I'd love to know. Tell me at adam@adammitzner.com.