



ON

THE

By Kerrie Flanagan

UNDERSTANDING

THRILLERS

EDGE

OF

AND THEIR

SUBGENRES.

THEIR

SEATS

Getting chased by deadly assassins...

Discovering your spouse is actually a murderer...

Being hunted by escaped dinosaurs...

A great thriller immediately yanks us into the story, keeping us up late at night reading because the page-turning action, nail-biting tension, and surprising plot twists prevent us from putting the book down. Authors in this genre have perfected the art of keeping readers on the edge of their seats with intricate plots and nonstop action, and audiences are hungry for more: The NPD Group reports that nearly one in eight adult novels sold is a thriller.

But succeeding in this bestselling genre requires understanding specific elements that readers expect. Furthermore, various subgenres take those basic elements and add other unique nuances. Understanding these components will help you write an exciting and wholly satisfying thriller readers can't put down.



Subgenres

As with any big genre, thrillers have a variety of subgenres. Here are some as well as what makes them unique.

LEGAL THRILLER



Melissa F. Miller, a former lawyer, enjoys writing a great legal thriller that has essential elements that make it different than a “regular” thriller or mystery novel. The biggest difference, she says, is that a legal thriller must include a legal case. “It could be civil or criminal; it might be a courtroom drama or not; but at its core, a legal thriller centers around the law.”

Her former career directly influenced her earliest thrillers: “I had practiced civil litigation at a major law firm for many years, so my first protagonist practiced civil litigation at a major law firm. My legal training was extremely helpful. After I had a few books under my belt, I spread my writing wings and tackled criminal cases and areas of the law that I didn’t have personal experience with. I called on friends and colleagues when I had a knowledge gap.”

Because she retired from her legal practice in 2015, her knowledge of law firm culture and technology is dated, so she reads legal publications to stay up to date. She enjoys researching and always looks up cases that apply the legal principles at issue in her novels to make sure she has a solid grasp of the law (even though it doesn’t change much). “I’ve also done hands-on research (like visiting the National Radio-Free Quiet Zone in West Virginia), interviews with experts, and always, always tons of nonfiction reading about the subject matter of the case at issue in my book.”

Gripping opening

Like in all novels, the opening scene in any thriller is crucial. There is no need to ease the reader into the story by introducing the characters and setting up the scene. Start *in medias res*, which is Latin for in the midst of things.

Jordan Rosenfeld, author of *How to Write a Page Turner*, reminds us that thrillers rely on a faster pace of storytelling, so readers don’t need to know the full *who, what, and why* at the beginning. “If you can drop right into the action and leave clunky backstory, explanations, or excessive exposition to the side, you’ll do a better job of keeping readers’ attention,” Rosenfeld says.

The protagonist needs to be introduced quickly, and that can be done by putting them into a situation of action or intrigue. As the story unfolds, you can gradually reveal more information, but don’t bog down the beginning with too much detail.

In Kiersten Modglin’s romantic thriller *Just Married*, the opening prologue is chilling. The first-person protagonist is a woman who witnesses a murder through a window. We learn our protagonist is injured and clearly in danger, but we don’t know why. The prologue ends with her fleeing the scene in a panic: “Could he be coming for me next?” she wonders at the very end of the scene. “I didn’t have time to think. I had to act. And so, I ran.”

There are many lingering unanswered questions in Modglin’s scene, but it does exactly what it is supposed to do: It pulls the reader into the story immediately, compelling them to read on.

Intriguing characters

Great characters are key to any successful novel. But in a thriller, both the protagonist and villain often share the spotlight. Many times, the villain drives the plot, and the protagonist is constantly forced to react to their actions. To add depth to these characters, you need to show what motivates them. In Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park*, wealthy park owner John Hammond is obsessed with dinosaurs and seems sincere in his fascination with them. But it turns out greed is his core motivation in cloning the creatures to create a dinosaur theme park for wealthy visitors. Hammond will stop at nothing to make this park happen, even if people are killed along the way.

James Chandler, author of the Sam Johnstone legal thriller series, believes characters, whether they are the protagonist or the villain, need to be authentic. For him, that means he writes what he knows: “Because I have been both a lawyer and a judge, I know my way around a courtroom. I am able to start by basing protagonists and villains loosely on interesting, actual people whom I have known – and I’ve known some real ‘characters!’ – and by placing them in settings with which I am familiar.”



An intriguing crime thriller has specific elements that make it unique from mysteries, which also deal with crime.

Author Patricia Stoltey has written

both mysteries and crime thrillers and explains that one main difference between the two is that mysteries present a defined puzzle to solve. “The crime has already been committed, and now it’s up to the police (and/or amateur sleuth) to follow the clues and bring the culprit to justice. In the traditional mystery, the reader knows everything the cop/sleuth knows, but no more. The pacing in mysteries tends to be a little slower than in thrillers.”

When it comes to a crime thriller, Stoltey says the protagonist is often an ordinary person who stumbles into the plot and is called on to perform extraordinary tasks before their life can return to normal. “I think of a thriller as a high-tension race to stop a potential disaster, whether it be a threat on the main character’s life from a crime ring, a terrorist attack, or a plot to take over the world. The reader may know more than the protagonist does, including who is behind the terrible plot, but reads on to learn how the character prevails.”

Chandler does two things to keep characters as interesting and intriguing as possible. He avoids telling what a character looks like, and he exaggerates whatever traits he is trying to get across. So instead of just describing an attractive but vain and treacherous female villain, he goes about it a different way. “I want the character’s words and actions, as well as those of the people around her, to communicate to the reader the character’s appearance and traits. Showing versus telling mandates reader involvement in imagining the [character]; that alone makes her intriguing, and the external reactions

of others will give her depth.”

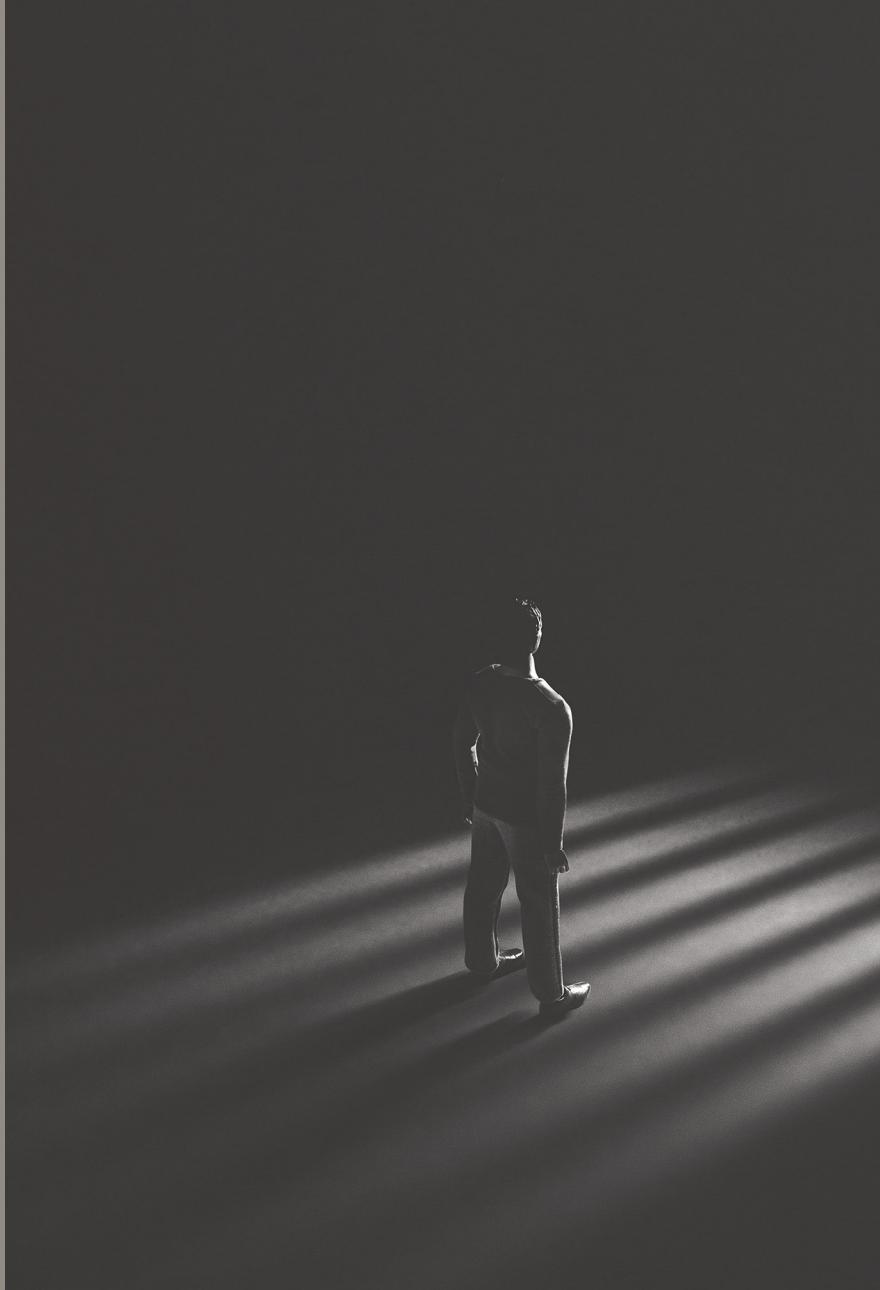
Then he takes the characteristics he is trying to portray and exaggerates them. “Is your villain greedy? Then make her words and actions, as well as the words and actions of others, sufficient to portray her as twice as greedy as you think is necessary to get the point across. Do the same to portray kindness, generosity, courage, conceit, sloth, duplicity, or whatever it is you want to show.”

Nail-biting tension

Great thrillers keep the tension high throughout the story. Rosenfeld suggests

breaking the tension down into four key elements: *danger*, *conflict*, *withholding information*, and *uncertainty*.

“If you can employ one of these four conditions at any time, you’re in good shape. Additionally, always be looking to drive the momentum of the story forward rather than pulling it backward with pace-slowness techniques such as backstory, explanation, too much contemplation, overly long descriptions, etc.,” Rosenfeld says. “Focus on sensory information (how a character feels/what they perceive through the senses) rather than thinking as much as possible.”





“Peeling apart the multi-layered onion of a story, with revelations in every chapter, is what I find most fascinating as a reader.”

To keep that momentum going and the readers wanting to read just one more chapter, international bestselling thriller author Tess Gerritsen says that every chapter should pose a question that needs to be answered: “Who is this woman who’s following me? Have I met her before? Why does she seem to know me? How does she know so much about me? In the process of answering those questions, your hero is going to keep unearthing new questions, new puzzles, and that journey will also reveal secrets about the hero as well. Peeling apart the multi-layered onion of a story, with revelations in every chapter, is what I find most fascinating as a reader.”

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE



In a romance novel, the narrative focuses on the relationship between the main characters and their journey toward a “happily ever after.” As we have seen, thrillers are high-action and stakes.

So for a romantic suspense novel to work, you need all the elements of a traditional romance and most of the elements from a thriller novel. “You have to root for the characters to fall in love while also rooting for them to stay alive,” Kiersten Modglin says. “A great romantic suspense should have everything readers love from both genres, tied seamlessly together.”

Intricate plot

Thrillers are known for frequent, unpredictable plot twists and turns. These unexpected events keep readers fully engaged and invested in the narrative because they are constantly surprised: What they thought would happen next didn’t. Each twist leaves the reader hooked, eager to see how the protagonist is going to get out of the next situation.

That said, the key to crafting these twists lies in them being surprising



yet *plausible*. Never add a clue or character at the last minute to help resolve your plot; it will feel too convenient. Chandler strives to write endings that are both surprising and fair. To achieve this, he's careful to drop hints throughout the story, so when the reader reflects back, they can see how that event happened – it all makes sense in hindsight.

Chandler creates detailed outlines of his novels before he begins writing. This allows him to see the big picture and story arc. “I can quickly find appropriate scenes and insert changes/delete passages as necessary to ensure the backstory is present for the twists and turns that I seek,” he explains.

Plot twists propel the story forward, so keep these questions in mind when creating them:

- Is this twist forcing my protagonist to take action?
- Is it as exciting as it can be, or can it be bigger? (Go big whenever possible.)
- Is this the worst thing that can happen to my protagonist in this scene? (If not, up the stakes).

MEDICAL THRILLER



International bestselling author Tess Gerritsen is a former physician and, like Miller, Gerritsen uses her background in her writing. She says that for a novel to be considered a “medical thriller,” it has to include some aspect of medical science or medical ethics, or it should take place in a medical/scientific setting. “Characters, too, often come from that world – a doctor, nurse, or scientist – but I don’t think this is essential. Your main character can be a patient or a member of the patient’s family, but their journey should take place in that world of medicine.”

For example, Gerritsen’s book *Harvest* centers around organ transplants and what happens when the system becomes corrupt, described by the publisher as portraying “a young woman doctor challenging a world where medical miracles and greed fuel a lethal conspiracy – and the bright lights of the O.R. conceal the ultimate corruption of genius.” A perfect mix of medical and thriller.

Life or death stakes

Throughout a thriller novel, the stakes must stay sky-high for the protagonist. There must be something the character will lose if they don't succeed. Readers need to know these stakes and see them clearly on the page.

Romantic suspense author Modglin says it's critical to consider what a character has to lose. Is it her family? Her career? Her reputation? Her life? Maybe all of the above? "To get a reader invested in the story and make sure they care what happens to our protagonist, it has to be crystal clear what they want more than anything else and what is currently being threatened," she says. "In my novels, we're in my characters' heads the entire time. We know what is at stake for them, we know why we should care. Whether I'm writing a good guy or a villain, I work hard to ensure my readers understand the stakes and motivation behind each character and action."

These stakes should remain high. Rosenfeld says, "That means your character should *always* have something to lose in every scene and should be meeting with multiple obstacles to their goals. You should never conclude or tie up or solve a goal easily or neatly in a thriller. Keep the uncertainty and danger elements high."

Putting obstacles in your main character's way will increase the tension. Place them in unexpected and dangerous situations, have their allies turn on them, make the circumstances so grim your reader wonders if this character they've grown to care about is going to make it.

Heart-pounding action

Thrillers are full of action. To maintain the intense pacing readers expect, never add any unnecessary descriptions, backstory, or plot elements that slow the story down. Anything you include on the page needs to be relevant to the plot.

Rosenfeld says to make sure your character always has a goal. "In thrillers, a lot of those goals are external – meaning the antagonist(s) has laid them down, and the protagonist has no choice but to follow."

To ensure the pacing of your story doesn't get bogged down, here are tips to keep in mind during intense action scenes:

- Avoid a lot of character inner thought and reflection.
- Use short, succinct sentences.
- Avoid long monologues from characters.

"Whether I'm writing a good guy or a villain, I work hard to ensure my readers understand the stakes and motivation behind each character and action."

Yet while maintaining that action throughout the story is important, it's important to also balance the high action with moments of reprieve to let the reader (and protagonist) catch their breath.

Thriller author Melissa F. Miller likes to write fast-paced thrillers, so they often include a "ticking clock" or looming event. Her books are usually in third person, with multiple points of view that allow her to create breaks in the action. "I find that cutting away from one character's perspective to another's can provide that needed moment of reprieve."

Satisfying ending

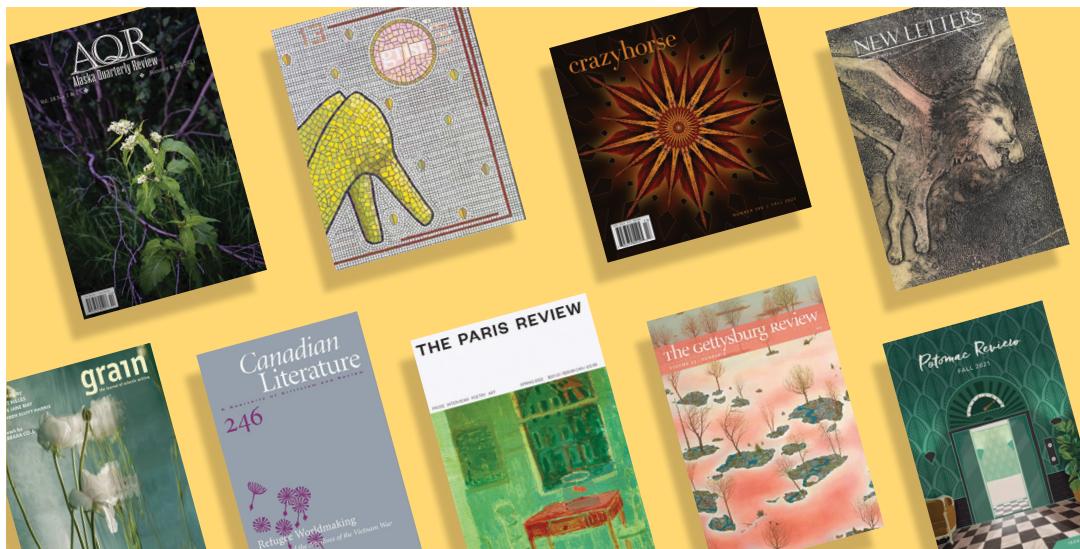
By the end of a great thriller novel, readers have been taken on a roller-coaster ride of emotions and page-turning action – and they know the protagonist is now safe. At this point, readers expect to be rewarded with a satisfying ending. This doesn't mean it has to be a "happily ever after" conclusion, but it *does* mean you need to ensure the tension is released...at least for now. Even if you've decided to end the narrative with some sort of cliffhanger to be resolved in a future book in a series, the current action from this story must be wrapped up by the final page. 📖

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*Kerrie Flanagan is an author, writing consultant, and freelance writer from Colorado with over 20 years' experience in the industry. She is the author of WD Guide to Magazine Article Writing. She moonlights in the sci-fi/fantasy realm with a co-author under the pen name C.G. Harris (cgharris.net). Sign up for her writing newsletter at bit.ly/KerrieFlanaganNews. KerrieFlanagan.com*

# Postscript

LITERARY JOURNALS

Even though many don't offer payment and some are more popular than others, literary journals are a great way to get your writing's foot in an editor's door. Some writers may overlook smaller publications in order to concentrate on bigger projects, but doing so could be a mistake. Whether you're looking to apply to an MFA program or want to build your publishing portfolio, having your work appear in a literary magazine or journal can be a big first step toward your dream career. The magazines listed here are a sampling of what the industry has to offer. Find more at [writermag.com](http://writermag.com). →



## THE MONTH AHEAD

### June 1

Kick off Pride Month by subscribing to an LGBTQ journal, such as *Gertrude*, *Plenitude Magazine*, *just femme & dandy*, or *peculiar*.



### June 10-19

It's time for Lit Fest, an annual weeklong celebration of words in Denver. This is the first in-person iteration of Lit Fest in two years, though organizers promise "plenty of virtual offerings too."

### June 15

The winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction is announced.

Women's  
Prize for  
Fiction  
2022