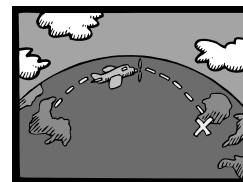


Writing a Series: *It's a journey of details*

By OCC/RWA Member Rebecca Forster



Imagine a dinner party. Your guests are intelligent and attractive, dramatic and maybe a little sinister but all are terribly interesting. You had a great time with your high maintenance guests but now they're gone and you can relax. Suddenly, the doorbell rings and there they are again. This time they want more than dinner – they want to live with you!

Welcome to the world of series writing.

For me, writing *Hostile Witness* was a dinner party, but Josie and Archer, Hannah and Billy Zuni, Burt and Faye captured the editor's imagination and the 'witness series' was born. Yet, along with opportunity came new challenges and responsibilities.

The cast of *Hostile Witness* now needed to be nurtured, guided and molded into maturity if the series was to thrive. The joys of accomplishing this task were evident, the challenges surprisingly complex. As I tackled book two (*Silent Witness*), and proposals for books three and four, I learned the first lesson of series writing: address potential problems and opportunities in the planning stages of book one.

Character Traits and Backstory

In *Hostile Witness* each character had a job, personal style and enough emotional baggage to keep things interesting. It wasn't until I began *Silent Witness* that I realized initial lifestyle choices and psychological motivators were now established and could not be changed without good reason and/or some fancy literary footwork.

For instance, Archer (the heroine's love interest) is a part time PI who has trouble making ends meet. In *Hostile Witness* he drives a Hummer. The choice of car was a minor detail in book one. *Silent Witness*, however, opens with Archer conducting surveillance in a residential neighborhood in broad daylight. Do the math. A Hummer isn't exactly subtle on surveillance or easy to drive on the narrow streets of Hermosa Beach. Yet, having established that Archer loves his car, future books will have to address the problems and opportunities that initial choice created.

Living with a career selection

A character's life work, or pursuit of a dream, is pivotal in a series. Each character's career choice must offer tangential expansion to create ongoing plot opportunities. Beyond that, the author must feel comfortable with the career choice in order to write convincingly.

Hostile Witness's plot demanded that the heroine be a defense attorney. That career choice meant my heroine will look at justice differently than if I had made her a prosecutor. Looking back, I wonder if I would have preferred the

prosecutorial voice for my heroine if I knew this would become a series. For me it is the difference between writing "The Practice" versus "Law & Order." Don't get me wrong, "The Practice" is a wonderful place to be, but it was initially a POV challenge for a "Law & Order" lady.

Slow growth/no growth

After *Hostile Witness* was published, I told a series reader about my plans to 'heal' Hannah – the abused, obsessive/compulsive, self-mutilating teenager who is desperately seeking the stability of a family. The reader was horrified by this plan. Hannah was loved because she struggled; because she was flawed. After that, I realized Hannah must change subtly. She can never get so well that she is self-sufficient, nor can she continue on her self-destructive path so there is no hope for her to form a family – albeit an imperfect one – with the heroine. That reader's input changed my plans for the next four books and made me take critical stock of why readers respond to each character.

Is this the end of my list of challenges for the series writer? Not by a long shot. Are there solutions for these challenges? Certainly.

Work from the outside in

Can you live with the big picture as well as the intimate details of the lives you are creating? Analyze every aspect of every character, setting and plot devices. If something bothers you, change it in the first book or live with it forever.

Know your characters intimately

Develop each character, even the most insignificant ones. Layer the community structure. Each resident of your fictional society is a potential focal point of the next book. When one facet is exploited, draw on another to keep the series fresh.

Finally...

Pen each manuscript as if it were the first of a series. Pay attention to the subtle nuances of your story, overwork your imagination, refine your plots, know your characters because you never know when a dinner guest will become roommate.

OCC/RWA Member Rebecca Forster is the USA Today bestselling author of legal thrillers that have been praised for their "sharp eye for detail." She shares her secrets with students in the Cal State Long Beach creative writing extension program, where she is the anchor instructor. Married to a prominent Los Angeles County Superior Court judge, Rebecca is the mother of two boys.