

INSIDE AN AUTHOR'S BRAIN

THE BIRTH OF A BOOK LENGTH MYSTERY NOVELET

by ROBERT J. HOGAN

HOW WELL I REMEMBER that first meeting four years ago with some of the top writers in the air pulp field in New York. How I was awed at shaking hands with men named Arthur J. Burks, Frederick C. Painton, George Bruce, Frank and Ted Tinsley, Seymour Pond, Russ Messervy and others who had been writing for Street and Smith's old *Air Trails*.

The magazine had just been pulled. Kent Sagendorf with Paul Chadwick, the editor, had gathered the bunch of former contribs together in New York to hold a little wake for the deceased. Incidentally, it was at this wake that, through the suggestion of George Bruce, the American Fiction Guild was organized.

I had been writing only a year then and was the baby of the group. During the evening I caught Fred Painton and George Bruce together and asked them, both tops in the novelette field, how a novelette was worked out and written. They more or less agreed that some stories just naturally developed to be novelettes.

I've thought about that a great deal since then and I'm inclined to disagree a little with their answer, which I had a hunch all along was given on the spur of the moment more to satisfy a new writer who was no doubt asking too many questions.

I use just the opposite method. Stories don't happen with me. Friends and acquaintances speak vaguely of a lovely place to work. A place where there is plenty of inspiration. I smile and let it go at that. For my stories, good, bad, or indifferent, are far from inspired. They are ground out along carefully thought out lines.

I've been asked to tell how I get my ideas and how I build my plots. To give my own thoughts during a story development. And to take, as nearly as possible in words, the readers into my work shop and not only let them see me at work, but give them a view into the old bean so that they may see the grey matter splash and swirl, and hear the clickety-clack of the wheels as they turn.

So, without anything in my pockets, up my sleeves, I will proceed to give birth to a book length mystery that will chill the blood and cause sleepless hours all over the nation.

First, however, I must explain that I use mechanical help in developing these plots. This is in the form of a set of books called "The Plot Genie." I never begin plotting a story without first spinning a little dial to get numbers from 1 to 180. I look in my Plot Genie and write down what conforms to these numbers I have obtained.

There are, for instance, several lists. The first contains 180 different suggested victims such as: (1) a politician, (2) a countess, (3) a statesman, (4) a college student, etc.

The second gives the locale of the murder such as: (1) in a bank, (2) in Egypt, (3) at a mine, and so on. The third list gives the method of the murder and the fourth, the outstanding clue.

Let me say at this point that "The Plot Genie"¹ does not purport to figure out a plot for you. It merely furnishes ideas. Every writer must get brain stimulus from some source and I use this one.

Formerly I used newspaper incidents for bases of my plots but I found this was a very poor source. As one editor told me, "If a trick murder takes place on Broadway, I get six novelettes worked around that incident at the end of the week. Although they all may be masterpieces, I can use only one story of that type, and the rest have to go back. Too many writers work their plots around some recent happening."

For a book length mystery novel of the type that I write, I use not only "The Plot Genie" of detective plots, but also the action-adventure formula. As I get my list of numbers and hocus pocus, the story begins to unfold. In this particular instance we find that we have:

1 There are other plot helps on the market but I happen to use the Plot Genie. Some writers use "The 36 Dramatic Situations" and some use "Plotto," while of course many writers use no such aids.

A victim who is a merchant prince. He is killed in a Chinese opium den. It is discovered that his death is due to X-ray. Foot prints are the outstanding clue. A statement or bill is found. The principal suspect is a woman. The method employed to trap the suspect is the burning of incense. Brain tissue is subjected to chemical analysis. A person's authority is questioned and this causes suspicion. Colorful action takes place when there is a siege in a prison. In a daring effort, a guard is intercepted. Great danger is encountered when a suspect is pursued. A secret, mechanical or automatic apparatus is discovered. A dancer is guilty. There is a carousal in a camp, in an underground hangout, aboard ship, or in a dance hall.

There, then, is the skeleton of the story. A bag of bones out of which you must build a structure that will stand alone. However, you may rest assured that it isn't like any other story, unless you let your memory trick you into putting incidents into the story that have come from other yarns. That, fellow scribblers, is a bad thing from several angles. You might be stuck in jail for stealing someone else's story. But worse than that is the fact that, if you make a practice of letting yourself get in the rut, the editors will find out about you. You're sunk, then, for all time. Personally, I get a great deal of pleasure out of writing and there is no more fun in cheating on the plot of a story than cheating in solitaire.

We come now to the hanging of the bones in the proper place. How would you go about constructing a skeleton from the pile of bones? Would you begin by assembling finger and toe bones, by joining together

the other smaller bones of the body and leaving the main structure until last? I hardly think so.

Let us start building this story by a tentative general assembly of the main members. We may find that a bone that looked as though it would fit the right forearm really should go into the shoulder.

As we go through the outline given, we must bear certain things in mind. We are aiming at a definite type story. It is built along a certain form, not because the editor is hidebound in his views as some writers think, but because the readers have grown to expect that when they buy the so and so magazine it must contain certain things they have grown to expect.

We must have a strong motive for the villain's killing and striking fear to the hearts of the populace in general and the heroes in particular. The villain wants power to further his interests. He is not only unscrupulous enough so that he will ruthlessly kill all in his way, but he is clever enough to devise strange, ghastly methods of inflicting death that will make much mystery in the story and save him from detection. Unlike the heroes, we can make the villain almost superhuman in his powers. The more terrible he is the better.

But the hero characters must be human.

Normal people who are clever, brave and stout hearted. But they must be, most of all, like the men you read about. Great detectives or soldiers of fortune. Men who are clever enough to meet turns of fate with their wits as well as their fists.

I like a background, anchor character who really does all of the cleverer work without letting you know

THE demand from readers for an article, showing how a professional writer's mind works as he writes, has risen in recent months from a mild polite murmur to a steady daily yelp. Inadvertently we mentioned our desire to publish such article, and the hounds were off.

Robert J. Hogan, whose article on the subject is the one finally selected, writes us: "Believe me, this is the toughest job I've handled in a long time. I only hope your readers get as much help out of it as I got out of your magazine in the early stages. To lift the lid of the old bean and let your subscribers peer inside . . . gosh! what an assignment!"

Mr. Hogan flew for the U.S.A. during the War, and acted also as a boxing instructor at camp. After the War he was chief engineer for an aircraft corporation that took a beating in the depression. Bob Hogan started over

again as a pick and shovel worker on a construction job.

Two years later he went into the home construction business for himself, and from there into selling real estate. His old love was aviation and "I was unhappy away from it. I took to writing to occupy my mind, writing flying stories for the pulps, on the back of the stationery of my real estate business. I have been a full-time writer for three years and sold my first story five years ago. I've sold to 35 magazines.

"I sell on contract 160,000 words a month, and lay off after three each day. I write about all the stuff that's in the magazine 'G-8 and His Battle Aces' and I do the main story each month for Wu Fang, published by Popular Publications, 205 East 42nd St., New York City. The story that I talk about in the following article was sold today to Wu Fang and will appear in its January issue."

too much about him. He is even a hero to the lesser character who is the real hero of the story and from whose viewpoint it is told.

We have, then, three main characters: the villain, the criminal investigator, whether he be an ex-detective, government man, or whatever, and the leading interest character from whose viewpoint the story is told.

Now we begin enlarging on the outline, being always on the watch for the strange menace that causes much of the mystery in the story, for meaty situations that will give us good, chilling background, and for chances to build up mystery from any one of a number of angles.

We find, by going back over the outline, that the Genie has given us a merchant prince murdered in a Chinese opium den. I don't always open with the first scene given by the genie, but this seems pretty good as it is. However, there are a lot of things to decide first.

First of all, who is this merchant prince? He might be the wealthy owner of a great store or importing business. Or he might be the son of that man. And the fact that we find him in an opium den, where mystery and crime are prevalent, leads us to believe that he hasn't stayed strictly on the straight and narrow himself.

Think this part over yourself at this point. Stop right here and let your mind wander. Drive it to search frantically for every possible answer to the question. I believe that nine times out of ten you will think of the same thought that I have.

Here is the first answer that pops into my head. This merchant prince has been drawn by clever influence to become an opium addict. The Chinese who now have him hopelessly ensnared in their clutches are trying to force money, information or something out of him on the threat that they will let it be known that he smokes the pipe. That would ruin his business.

But would it ruin his business? I'm trying to write this as fast as the wheels are clicking. If this merchant prince is powerful and owns stores or a great importing concern, his business would not be particularly affected if it became known that he was addicted to the opium habit.

There are, however, other professions and businesses that would be affected to a much greater extent by that information. Take, for instance, a doctor or a banker—anyone in whom the people entrust their lives or their savings. Doesn't it seem, then, that the merchant prince should be a banker instead of an importer or a store

owner? If he were an international banker we could work in intrigue, embezzlement, patriotic conflict, and so on that would please our villain no end.

Then, again, it would really be more logical to make the victim the banker's son, because he would be easier for the villain to handle and hence the story would be more believable.

But hold everything. Doesn't that sound like something you've read before? Banker's son drawn into meshes of crime, ensnared in the spell of the opium habit, forced to do what the Chinese tell him to so they won't let his father know. Why that, if you admit it to yourself, is the old, overworked, melodramatic blackmail gag where the banker's son is forced to rob his own father's bank.

Let me say at this point that there is one iron-bound rule that I've tried my best to live up to. I made it myself and it is this: When, while plotting a story, you think of an incident that sounds like something you've heard or read, FORGET IT.

But perhaps some of this first detail is worth retaining. Let's see what part of it is old. The blackmail trick, perhaps. The son being drawn into trouble through the drug and his being forced to steal money from his father.

Perhaps we can rework that. The opium stuff is out. We have left merely the appearance of the opium den as a swell background for the first scene. It is implied at first that the son is addicted to opium. But imagine the kick when a doctor finds upon examination of his body that he never has used opium in his life!

So much for that. Now why is he there? It came to me a few paragraphs ago that his father might be an international banker. In that case, he might have something to do with the financing of a new and deadly invention from another country. There's something.

What, then, is the banker's son doing in the opium den? He might be there for a number of reasons. The one that seems most logical to me is that the powerful villain, who in all probability is a Chinaman, is after the plans of the invention that the banker has for the foreign person or company. Perhaps he is keeping it as security for a loan that he has made so that the invention can be perfected.

I feel as though we're coming along much better now. My mind suddenly switches to an opium den in Limehouse, London. As I see it now, a British banker (I have discarded the international idea) has loaned a sum of money to the inventor of something very deadly that can be used for Britain in time of war.

The first machine that was made proved to be only a partial success, so more money has been loaned so that a perfect machine may be built. The banker keeps the patent rights, together with the secret description of the first apparatus.

The Chinese villain, thinking that the first apparatus is perfect, carefully figures out a scheme to get those plans. The banker's son is the only one except the banker himself who has access to the plan. This detail can be worked out a little later when I come to it in the story.

However, the main point is that through a clever trick of the Chinaman, the son is led to think that his father, who is out of town, wishes him to bring those secret plans to a certain place in Chinatown. The villain's assistant disguises his voice to sound like the banker's and explains that the son must not fear the tough section of town. He tells him that he has arranged a meeting there so that it will not be public. He has gone there in disguise when he was supposed to be in Paris on business.

The son is tricked by the impersonation, takes the plan to the address given him, and finds himself in the opium den. All this, however, is the part of the story that is learned from different characters through the story. The son is not followed through except as when he enters the place he is recognized by a Scotland Yard man who is standing in the shadows on the other side of the street.

We have a fair idea where we're going now. We're getting the backbone of the skeleton laid and some of the larger bones attached to it.

Moving on down the outline we find that the banker's son has been killed by an X-ray. It develops that this inventor has worked out an attachment that works with the X-ray machine. The attachment is very simply constructed and easily made so that the villain can have his scientist or himself build it quickly. We must kill the son very soon after he enters the opium den for the Scotland Yard man who saw him outside organizes a raid that is to come off in a few hours at least. And the X-ray machine must kill at a little distance, but leaving traces of the cause of death.

We also find in the next analysis of the outline that there is one outstanding clue—a foot print. There's something to play with. This print could be in an underground passage that has an earthen floor. It could be in the dust on the floor of a room that hasn't been used for years. It could be the print of a bare foot, or a foot wearing a peculiarly-shaped shoe.

Try to think what would be the most mystifying in connection with a ghastly or strange murder.

How about the print of a baby's foot, the only mark near the corpse? And again, how about the print of an animal that doesn't match up with any animal foot print?

I have these thoughts down on paper now and we move to the next.

A statement or bill is found in the pocket of the victim. Again, this may be something just a little different. A note in code or perhaps it is a bill for a certain rare chemical bought in another country for the inventor of the ray. This ties up with the story and perhaps helps to solve some of the mystery.

We have a woman as the principal suspect. There's a lot to play with. She might be a Chinese girl who does some very strange things. Again, she might be a beautiful white girl who appears and then vanishes mysteriously, leaving a clue of some kind.

I have a good lead now for the opening chapters of the story. At this moment I can't quite hook up the other three incidents given about the burning of incense, the chemical analysis of the brain tissue, and authority being questioned. Perhaps the chemical analysis comes when the first victim is given a thorough examination in that manner.

After two or three chapters we run into a blind alley, let us say, where everything is baffling. Then we get another lead when there is a siege at a prison and it is found that the new and strange ray is used. Perhaps this could be an inside job done by one of the trustees in the hospital ward. It develops that the X-ray machine of the prison hospital has been used to kill prisoners and guards wholesale. This, of course, turns out to be a test of the power and deadliness of the ray. Later, they find that the ray is not as deadly as it is supposed to be.

Suddenly, we hear from another source that something horrible has happened in another part of the country. People have suddenly been stricken dead from some unexplainable cause. And the next thing we learn is that when we have already blamed this new calamity on the villain, it is not his fault at all, but the innocent inventor, who in testing his new development of the machine, let it get away from him.

BUT wait a minute. I'm beginning to get skeptical about this ray menace, for the same reason that I mentioned before. When you come to an incident that sounds old and used, FORGET IT. That death ray idea

has been staring me in the face from every angle for years.

I'm not satisfied with it. Got to change it and that knocks out a lot of the skeleton's structure. There are two things I can do. I can make the ray very mysterious and not bring it out until almost the very end of the story, or—and this sounds like the better idea—I can work at the ray from a little different angle from the usual course. This particular ray does something mysterious to the victim, such as shrinking them, or leaving a certain strange mark upon them.

However, by now I've worked out enough of the plot so I can begin the first chapter and as I work other ideas and solutions are bound to crop up.

Now about how I execute (maybe some of you call it murder) the novel itself. Let us say I am starting this story tomorrow. I have decided that instead of a Scotland Yard man seeing the banker's son enter the opium den, it will be my two heroes, the former detective or government man and my real hero, a friend of his, who happens along on the expectation that something interesting is going to show up.

They suspect that the villain they have trailed to London is somewhere in that block so they are standing across the street, watching for some sign. They are talking about this strange invention and the rumor that the banker has something to do with it. The detective hero has even warned him, but the banker has argued that he knows nothing about it.

A fog sweeps over the city. They can see the other side of the street only very dimly. Good atmosphere here. Then a cab drives up before a place on the other side of the street and stops. Hurriedly, a young man gets out and pays the driver. In a flash of light from the cab they get a glimpse of his face.

Taken by surprise, they hesitate. One or the other thinks he recognizes the young man as the son of the banker. They cry out, dash across the street. But the young man has plunged into some doorway in front of them and vanished in a sweeping rift of fog.

They decide to raid the place but they must first get help from the police. The two heroes try to get in but they find all doors locked and barred. Of course, the young man really ran when he heard their voices. He was already scared of the tough section of town and afraid that his father's supposed secret presence would be learned.

Then police break in and find the opium den whose occupants have just cleared out, leaving the young man's body lying in a strange position. There must be

enough argument between the heroes and the police to give the villain time to work.

Tomorrow morning, then, I will begin dictating this first chapter. And if this evening ideas come to me for the development of the story, I'll work those in too.

I've been asked by a number of writing friends of mine how I dictate. Well, here it is.

My secretary comes to the house at nine and goes to my work shop. She gets out her book. Of course we do some talking, too much usually. How's Aunt Maggie's cold and it looks like rain. I hope so because I can get more work done when it rains and that sort of thing.

Then I try to straighten up and I say, "The name of this yarn will be the 'Mystery of the Baby's Foot Print.'"

"That doesn't sound very scary," she says. "Can't you think of anything else?"

And I do. I say, "How about 'The Floating Coffin Mystery'?"

"Sounds swell," she agrees, but she's been reading the outline that I made out for the story and she says, "But I didn't see any mention of floating coffins in the outline. Is that in the story?"

"No," I have to tell her, "but the idea just popped into my head and I thought it would be pretty good. We can stick some floating coffins in. How about (looking at the word Chinese on the outline and thinking of some jade I own) 'The Green Ray Deaths'?"

"Not bad," she admits, "but I don't like it as well as the floating coffins. You mean the ray turns the victim green?"

"I hadn't thought of it," I answer, "but it's a swell idea. Now let's see. For a start, we've got to have a name for the first chapter. How about 'Death in Limehouse' for a first guess and we'll work from there. Maybe we can tighten that up later."

"O.K.," she says and her pencil moves as she takes it down in shorthand.

I think a few minutes and then I begin:

"As though someone had drawn a curtain quickly away and let it fall back again, a rift appeared in the sodden fog that shrouded London's Chinatown. During that break, a passer-by might have caught a fleeting glimpse of two men standing well back in the shadow of a narrow doorway."

From there we go on and on and on. Sometimes the ideas that I have planned run out by noon, but more often we work until one or two without much of a break. Then my secretary goes home and I take a little time off or write an extra chapter myself in the afternoon if time presses.

Yes, it's just like that. I talk as though I were reading from a printed page. Sometimes fairly fast, sometimes horribly slow.

Sometimes my dictation gets stale and then the girl gets a little vacation and I sit down before my typewriter and slam it out myself. Then again, I get smoked up with doing it myself and we dictate again.

But always there is the dead line when the story has to be in. And ever present is the necessity to tighten up everything possible in the story. Never let go of a secret or mystery that you have built up in the story until the very last minute that seems reasonable. End your chapters where your heroes or heroines are in a very tight jam. Make the reader wonder, not "Are they going to be killed?" for he knows they won't be, but "How can they possibly get out of that situation?"

Never be satisfied to leave a situation bad. Make it worse if possible, either by suspense or added complication. Here is what I mean.

Suppose our hero is trapped by the villain. He is actually in his power and helpless. The villain raises a knife or club to finish him off. Or better still, perhaps he is about to stick him with a nice little poison needle.

You might think that it would be well to end the chapter with the villain saying as he lowers the needle, "If you think quickly, Mr. Fiedlebottom, you will have time for a very short prayer."

But that wouldn't be so bad. But wouldn't it tighten

things up a little more and add to the hero's already sorry plight if the villain said, "As this needle descends towards you, Mr. Fiedlebottom, life is ebbing from your two friends, Mr. Whosis and Mr. Zilch."

You see, the reader rather expects that the chapter is going to end with the villain about to kill Mr. Fiedlebottom but he gets an unexpected kick out of the sudden, awful news that not only Fiedlebottom but Zilch and Whoosis are being finished as well. All is lost now. And as the reader hastily turns the page to race on he is not only interested in how Mr. Fiedlebottom escapes, but how his two pals fare as well. He knows that the writer won't kill all three heroes; in fact, he's pretty sure he won't kill any of them. But what he's curious to know is how they get out of a situation that seems impossible to escape from.

So, I say, bear down on the suspense. But by that, I don't mean keep the action so continuously hectic that the reader doesn't get a breathing space. Let the actual lighting lapse occasionally but always leave mystery, mental torture and suspense in the place of that physical conflict.

And remember that readers of mystery-action fiction buy the stuff because they want to see how the hero solves the mystery and gets out of trouble. And the more baffling the trouble and mystery that you pack into the story, so long as it is made believable, the more satisfied readers you will have.