**“Thriller: Anatomy of a Genre” by John P. Morse**

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**The Thriller Genre is the BIG TENT.**

There are many sub-genres that can be classified thrillers.

Some familiar writers that represent individual sub-genres:

* National Security - Vince Flynn
* Psychological - Paula Hawkins
* Action - Lee Child
* Crime - Michael Connolly
* Military - Tom Clancy
* Political - Nelson DeMille
* Mystery - Ruth Ware
* Spy - Daniel Silva
* Legal - John Grisham
* Sci-Fi - Michael Crichton

(I couldn’t list all the authors in the genre and arguing about which sub-genre describes their work is fruitless. It’s a very BIG tent.)

**Set the Time and Place for the Inciting Incident.**

Think “ripped from the headlines.”

* Russian Opposition leader sickened with neurotoxin added to his underwear.
* Clive Cussler creating a Tsunami that capsizes a large cruise ship.
* Brad Thor recounting a casual evening in Iraq.
* Lee Child’s Jack Reacher eyeing a pickpocket whose follows a potential target

**Readers expectations: no need for pages of build-up.**

* Contrast the battle of Concord. Do you start in 1620 or on the morning of the “Shot heard round the world?”
* Why agents only ask for the first 10 pages. If the hook is not set, stand by for a rejection
* Thrillers are action-oriented

**What kind of writer are you?**

* Pantser or Plotter?

A **Pantser** just starts writing and telling the story with no particular destination in mind. No GPS.

A **Plotter** outlines the book to some degree, knows where he’s going and follows the roadmap to get there. GPS plus paper road map and AAA trip planner.

* Use the style you are comfortable with

Your protagonist wants something…he or she must crawl through barbed-wire to get it.

Example: Mark Greaney- Court Gentry in the Rain Forest

Example: Dan Steele raiding a compound to capture a terrorist bomber. A girl?

What the reader expects next and what could you offer him

**The Stakes.**

It’s mostly common sense. What or who is at RISK?

If Powerball is only $35M, is it worth buying a ticket?

* What if it’s $800M?
* Possibility of a mugging in DC
* Possibility of storming the Capitol
* Possibility of an intentional launch of nuclear weapons
* Hanging on Impossible odds…calculated by experts?
* Second thoughts of the protagonist

**Building Suspense Over the Pages**.

The tension must increase chapter by chapter. Regarding story structure, try not to peak too early

* Racing against the clock. Remember the Movie: telephone to telephone
* Pedal to the metal: countdown clock
* Maintaining the bus above 50mph
* In the dark…pitch dark, flashlight fails, underwater blinded in a cloud of sediment
* Pinned down with no avenue of escape
* Protagonist versus bad guy. The final Duel
* The 1812 Overture builds to a frenzied pitch with tympany, cannons, bells
* One caution: keep it believable. Example: escape of a bad guy into space. Reviewer found it off the rails

**Characters.**

Who doesn’t love James Bond, Jack Ryan, Jack Reacher, Scott Horvath, James Recce, John Corey, Gabriel Allon, Dirk Pitt, Travis McGee?

* Not a guy riding on a White Horse but someone barely able to reach the stirrups
* Blurring the distinction between the good guys and the bad ones
* Innocent people get caught up and die: Ian Fleming’s Goldfinger
* Collateral damage
* How many have rooted for both the Good Guy and the Bad Guy
* SMERCH or SPECTRE are organizations that can survive the final Mano a Mano
* The villains in both my books team up in the book I’m writing now

**Summary: A Quick Tour of Some of the Key Bones in a Thriller**

* There are 206 bones in the human body so there’s lots of space.
* The Thriller has a naturally big sandbox
* The roller coast that never stops
* Every great novel has some thriller within its pages

**Suggested Resources**

*Techniques of the Selling Writer* by Dwight V. Swain

*On Writing* by Stephen King

*Just Open a Vein* Edited by William Brohaugh

*Plot and Structure* by James Scott Bell