

# BUILDING LAYERED STORIES THAT KEEP READERS GLUED TO THE PAGE

**Nev March**

Author of Historical Mysteries

Instructor at Rutgers University (Osher Inst of Lifelong learning)

# Nev March

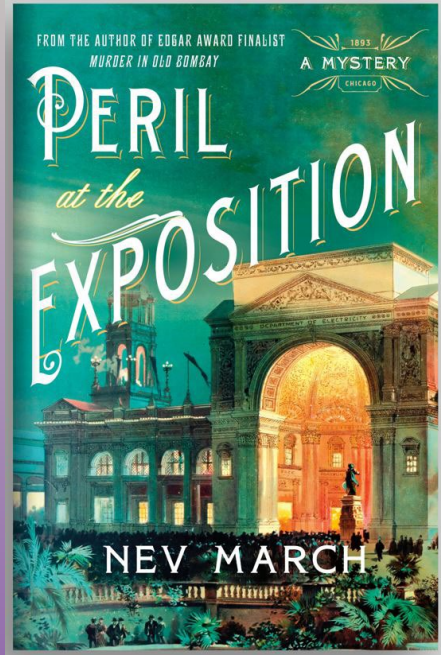
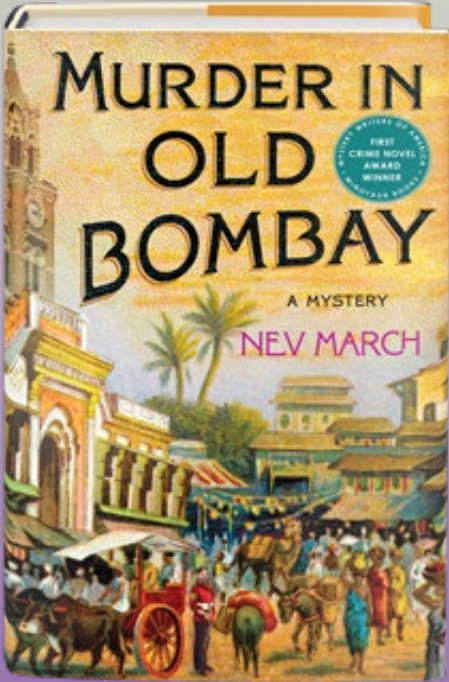
## Author Of Historical Mysteries



After 20 years in business analysis, I returned to my passion for writing fiction

- ▶ First Indian born writer to win Mystery Writers of America's award (Audiofile award 2021)
- ▶ Finalist for 5 national awards including Edgar and Anthony (and Hammett, Barry, McCavity Awards)
- ▶ LOST the audie award 2022 (to Stephen King and President Obama!)

# Historical Mysteries Across The Globe



COMING Sep 2023!  
THE SPANISH DIPLOMAT'S  
SECRET

- ▶ 2020: Murder in Old Bombay
  - ▶ Based on a real unsolved tragedy in 1891—Captain Jim Agnihotri investigates the deaths of two privileged young women who fell to their deaths from a university clock tower. His case takes him all over colonial India and into a whole lot of trouble!
- ▶ 2022: Peril at the Exposition
  - ▶ In 1893, twenty-seven million visitors visited Chicago's World's Fair, while the World Congress of Anarchists is being held. What could possibly go wrong?
- ▶ 2023: The Spanish Diplomat's Secret
  - ▶ Captain Jim and Diana are onboard an ocean liner for Liverpool where a Spanish diplomat is viciously killed. With the threat of war looming, Captain Jim must solve the mystery before they dock. But there are a thousand suspects onboard...some with secrets they will kill to protect.



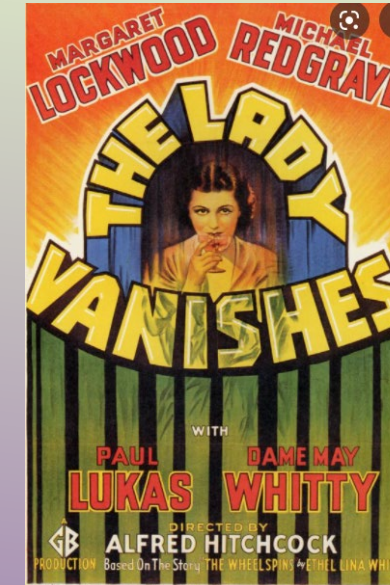
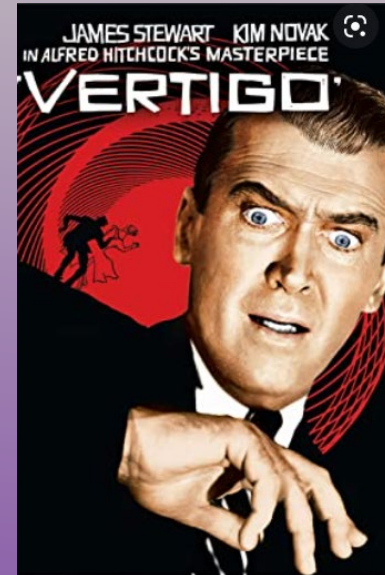
# What Do I Teach? Anything I Want To Learn!

Rutgers University-osher Lifelong Learning Institute

-Great Mysteries -ALL HITCHCOCK (Part 5) Winter 2023

Q:How did Hitchcock build riveting stories with such a small number of characters?


1. Strangers on a Train
2. The Lady Vanishes
3. Vertigo
4. Spellbound
5. Notorious



# Why Do Readers Read Crime Novels?

- ▶ Mystery novels excite our imagination, engage our emotion and draw us into a world of intrigue, where **crime solvers** battle villains as well as confusion, bureaucracy and sometimes each other.
- ▶ Mysteries, thrillers, suspense and other crime novels fascinate and chill us, but also add **insight** into part of the human psyche we may not (thankfully!) often encounter.
- ▶ Anthony Horowitz says crime novels fascinate because it's **where things have gone terribly wrong**. Is it **emotion** that draws us? Some wonder whether we ourselves might be drawn to **break the law** under the right circumstances.
- ▶ **The stories that linger are those that resonate on many levels**

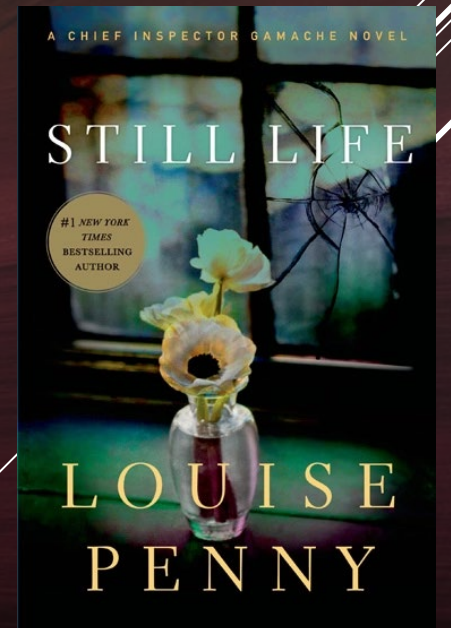
# What We'll Cover Today

1. What makes a layered novel?
  2. What do I mean by a layer?
  3. How does a layer enhance a novel?
  4. Where to start? Working with genre conventions
  5. How to add a layer and where to find ideas
  6. How to Incorporate the layer organically
  7. Story structure to keep readers engaged
  8. Where to introduce and resolve subplots
  9. How much is too much?
  10. Leading into emotion
  11. Leaving readers satisfied
- 
- Three parallel white lines of varying lengths are positioned diagonally in the bottom right corner of the slide, extending from the right edge towards the center.



# What Makes A Layered Novel?

A layered novel makes the reader think, offers up insights,  
**BUT**  
can be enjoyed at many levels



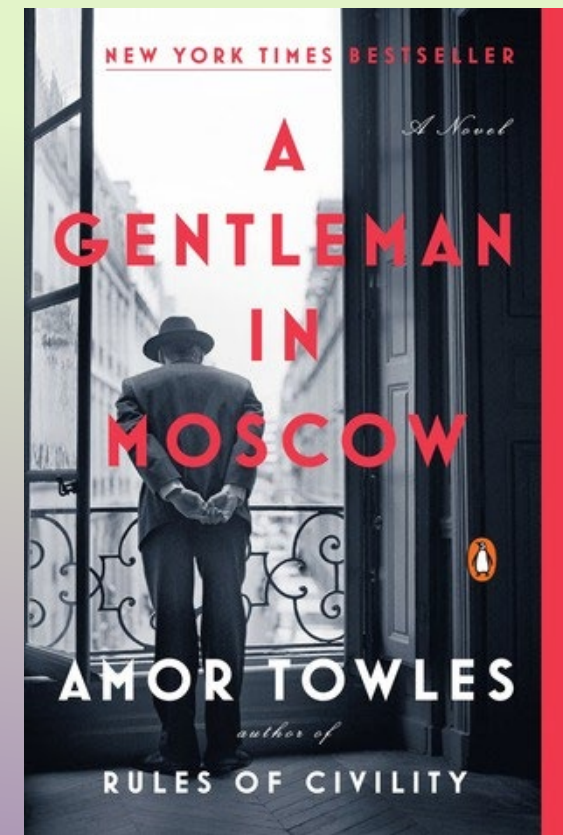
# What's A Layer? An added dimension or aspect that **builds** through the story.

- ▶ **Example:** Count Alexander Rostov, deemed an unrepentant aristocrat by a 1922 Bolshevik tribunal, is sentenced to house arrest in the Metropol, a grand hotel across the street from the Kremlin.
- ▶ Rostov, an indomitable man of erudition and wit, must now live in an attic room while some of the most tumultuous **decades** in Russian history are unfolding outside the hotel's doors
- ▶ **PLOT:** How will he survive? Will he spiral downward? Will he best his nemesis? Will he escape?

**LAYER1:** his reduced circumstances provide him a doorway into a much larger world of emotional discovery. **His relationships**– his KGB minder, his lover, the two children he befriends

**LAYER2:** Offers a deeper understanding of what it means to be a man of **purpose**.

**LAYER3:** Who really wrote the POEM? The meaning of **friendship**





# How does a layer enhance a novel?

The best crime novels are not about how a detective works on a case; they are about how a case works on a detective.

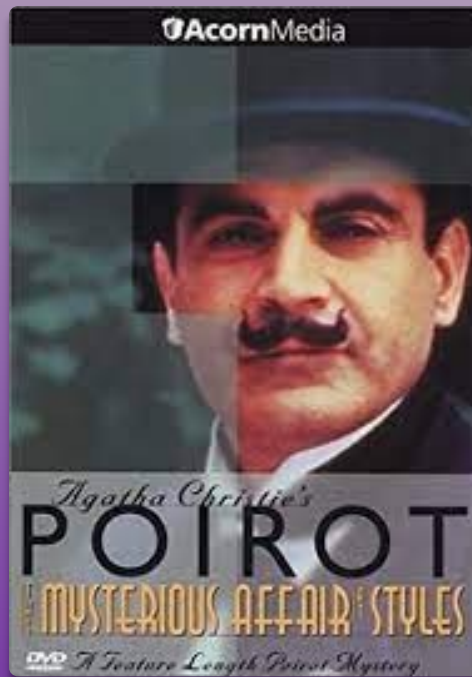
Michael Connelly

# Where to start? Working With Genre Conventions

## CRIME Genres (A Story May Cross Genres)

### Mystery

- Usually, the crime has already occurred



### Thriller

- Protagonists are trying to prevent a disaster or crime



### Noir

- Told from point of view of criminal/ victim/ witness
- Dark world view



# Genre Conventions: Dan Brown's Masterclass defines some mystery genres

1. **Detective novels.** These are crime novels that center around a detective (professional, amateur, or retired) investigating a crime or solving a murder case.

Detective novels generally start with a mysterious incident or death and unfold as the detective follows leads, investigates suspects, and ultimately solves the case.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle introduced the world to the famous Sherlock Holmes in 1887, when he first began writing the series of stories featuring the popular detective. Other well-known detective novelists include Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Sue Grafton.

2. **Cozy mysteries.** These are detective novels that contain no sex, violence, or profanity. In order to solve a case, the detective in a cozy mystery often uses their intellect as opposed to police procedures. The genre has some overlap with detective novels; for example, Agatha Christie is considered both a detective novelist and a cozy mystery novelist. Other well-known cozy mystery writers include Dorothy L. Sayers and Elizabeth Daly.

3. **Police procedural.** These are mystery novels featuring a protagonist who is a member of the police force. Well-known police procedural novelists include Ed McBain, P. D. James, and Bartholomew Gill.



# What Is the Structure of a Mystery Novel?

Some mystery novels break from the traditional format to heighten suspense or play with readers' expectations. But generally, most mysteries follow roughly the same structure:

1. **The crime.** The audience is introduced to the crime around which the story is based.
2. **Investigation.** The detective works on solving the mystery. They question each suspect, search for clues, and follow new leads in hopes of finding the guilty party.
3. **Twist.** The detective finds a new clue, an unexpected lead, or a crack in a suspect's alibi that shocks them—and the reader—and changes the course of the investigation.
4. **Breakthrough.** The detective uncovers the last remaining piece of the puzzle and solves the mystery.
5. **Conclusion.** The culprit is caught and all outstanding questions are resolved.

# How to add a layer (and where to find ideas)

1. Work out the high points of your plot
2. Consider your theme--is there a way to create a parallel journey?
3. Elaborate on your secondary characters—what aspect is unusual, relevant to today, or echoes your theme?

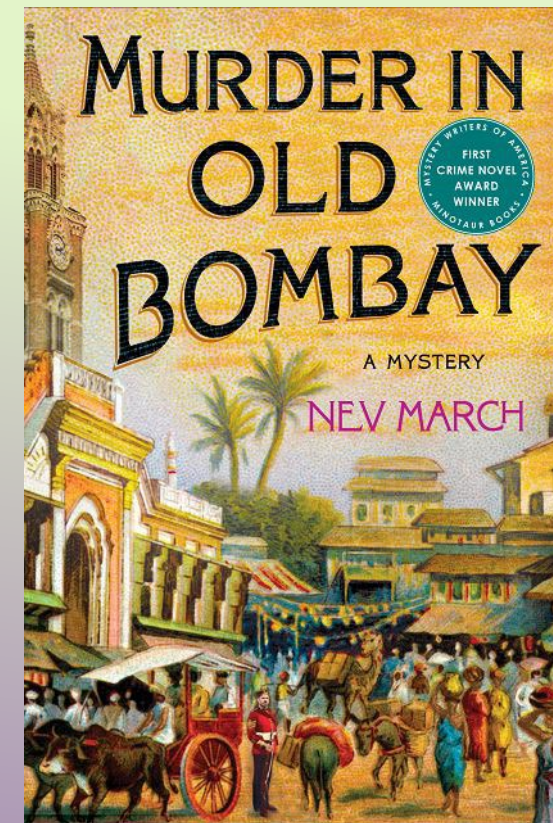
EXAMPLE: *Murder in Old Bombay*

THEME – a search for belonging

PLOT—Captain Jim searches India for clues to the mysterious deaths of two society women

SECONDARY CHARACTERS—the victims, Client's sister Diana, A waif--Chutki, etc

POSSIBLE LAYERS—love interest --unfairness to women--race



Incorporate the layer **organically** as a subplot or theme that repeats in occasional vignettes

Add a subplot that **echoes your theme**

EXAMPLE: Murder in Old Bombay

THEME --A search for **belonging**

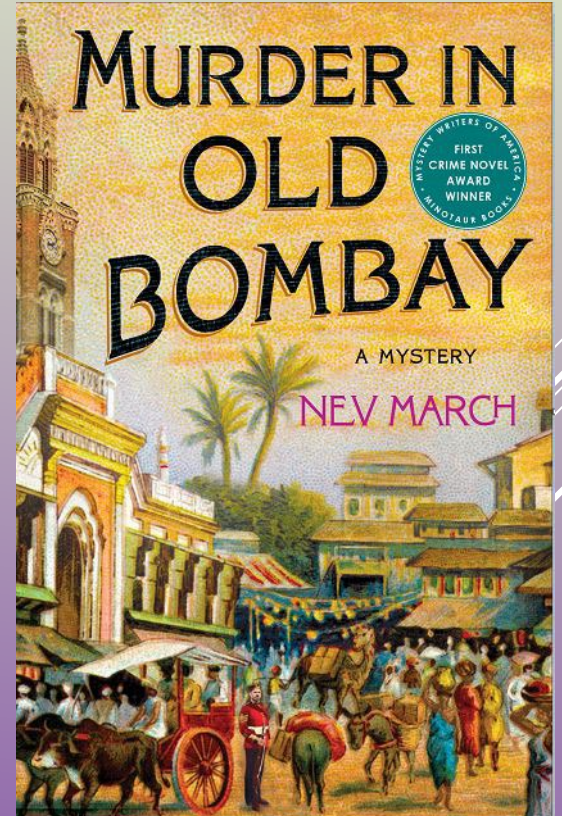
PLOT—Mixed-race soldier Captain Jim delves into the lives of two society women and falls in love with their family!

SECONDARY CHARACTERS—the victims; **Client's sister Diana**; A waif--Chutki, etc

LAYERS—subplot: **love interest (belonging)**

--vignettes: unfairness to women

--vignettes: race





# LAYERS – MURDER IN OLD BOMBAY



1892 Colonial India is fraught with divided loyalties – **Some who call themselves nationalists only want to exploit others**

Courage takes many forms: women are equally brave against terrible odds

**Needing to redeem himself, Jim investigates the unexplained deaths of two privileged young women**

Jim longs for a family, but as a mixed-race man, he is a social pariah

► Theme: “It’s not our blood, but our deeds that define us”

# Story Structure To Keep Readers Engaged

EACH SCENE must move your story forward—

But

Keep the surprises coming...plans go awry, but then some work out!

Unexpected help—and betrayal!

Link to Kurt Vonnegut [short video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP3c1h8v2ZQ) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP3c1h8v2ZQ>)

FORGET the three-act structure! Why not four? Five? Six?

WORLD CULTURES have vastly different story structures

Blog: Kim Yoon Mi

<https://www.kimyoonmiauthor.com/post/641948278831874048/worldwide-story-structures>

# Where to introduce and resolve the subplot

Start with your outline. Mine has these columns:

CH	Pace	pgs	Chapter Title	Action/plot	Surprise	TR D	Goal (wants) motivation (why) conflict (but)	internal landscape/story	Who's the SUSPECT, what are they doing?	When? Day #	Time of day
----	------	-----	---------------	-------------	----------	---------	--	--------------------------	--	-------------	-------------

**Chapter #;** pace; # pages; chapter title;

**Action/plot event; surprise**

TRD (Twist/ Reversal/ Danger)—See Jane Cleland's books  
GMC (Goal-motivation-conflict) what protagonist wants, why, what's  
in the way

**Internal landscape**

Current suspect/what are they doing?

Day/date Time of day



# Where to introduce layers (subplots and vignettes)

Each book is different! Color code the main plot in your outline. Add a new color for each new subplot /vignettes

**Example:** The Spanish Diplomat's Secret (coming Summer 2023)

Pink: main plot points

Four sub-plots (plus vignettes about superstitions of the sea)

			LAYERS	Main plot (murder of the Spanish Don and why)	Subplot #1 Jim and Diana's relationship troubles		subplot #2 - shipboard romance	Subplot #3 - international implications	Subplot #4 Or is it all about money?	vignette: Superstition
CH	Pace	pgs	Chapter Title	Action/plot	Surprise	TR D	Goal (wants) motivation (why) conflict (but)	internal landscape/story	Who's the SUSPECT, what are they doing?	When? Day
1	7	6	Toffs and Oddballs	CAPTAIN JIM and his new bride DIANA travel to Liverpool on a TransAtlantic liner. Jim is seasick and meets Don Nepo.	Diana relates an odd incident at boarding	T	Jim has a hidden reason for this trip.	Diana has 'moments of melancholy'	A gets a shock when she recognizes Don Nepo	1
2	5	9	Strange Bedfellows	they meet DORA, the young nurse MRS BARLOW and ALICE; They overhear Alice and Bigby. At LUNCHEON meet the Evansworths, Farley brothers, Felicity and Eleanor Rood;	Diana freezes, but later seems ok.		J wants to fit into Ds world, feels hopeful	Diana had shadows around eyes, crying in the night		2
3	8	6	Murder	They quarrel;	Jim gets a note from Don Nepomuceno. He's found garrotted to death in the First-class lounge.	T	J wants peace with D but is sucked into a case	Diana seems angry over something. Jim wants a child	A's achieved her main goal.	2
4	7	7	An impossible Task	Hawley asks Captain Jim to investigate.	Why not the First officer?	T	J want stability BUT the man who helped him is cruelly killed	J fears he's being set up to fail, but why?		2
5	6	9	A missing witness	RMS ertruria Ship's Captain is ALGERNON HAWLEY. First Officer edwin BIGBY saw Don N leaning on a nurse who led him from the deck.			Too many suspects; wants to impress D	D is worried but helps. Wants to be useful	UNKNOWN NURSE	2
6	7	8	An Accusation	Dona Josefina accuses the captain! Oddities: the missing bowling ball;	Jim needs to question the Nurse and doctor	R	J wants answers, gets more questions	J finds it difficult to assess the spanish woman--too alien		3

# Where to resolve the subplots

Most subplots are resolved **before** the main plot climax or simultaneously  
BUT NOT ALWAYS!

**Example:** *Murder in Old Bombay*



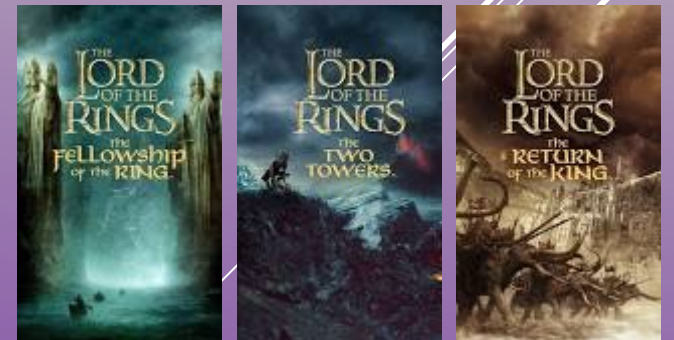
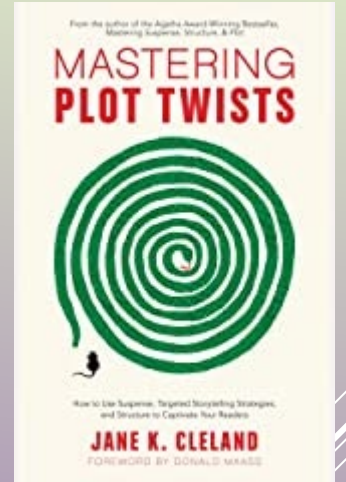
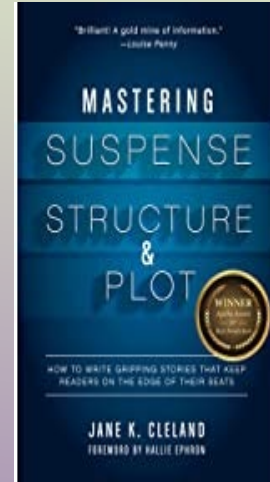
# How much is too much?

Jane Cleland recommends that a book have no more than **two** sub plots;

BUT

It depends on the genre! (How 'bout LOTR?)

How well do the subplots interrelate?





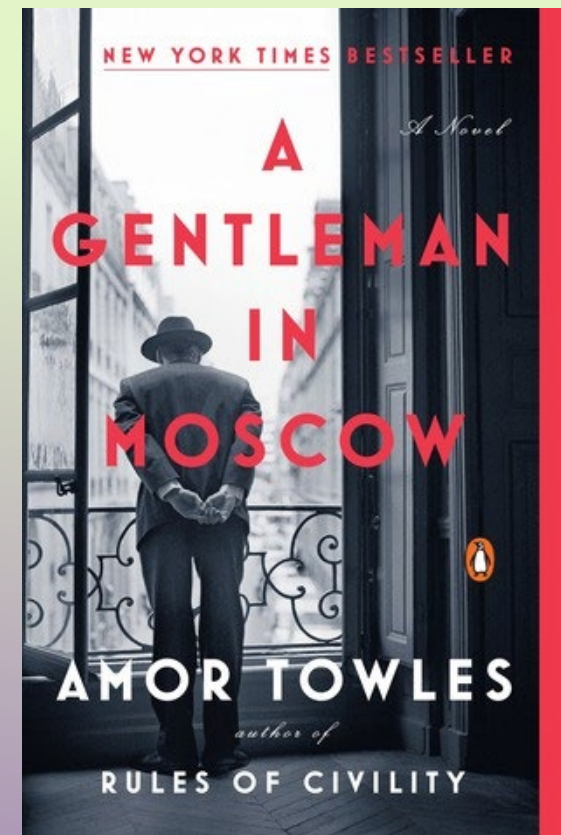
# Leading into emotion

“A book is only remembered for the emotion it brings; All else is forgotten.”

Choose layers (subplots and vignettes) that **amplify** the emotion

► Dwell on the consequences, show the impact

SHOW the key scenes; narrate or TELL the intermediate ones

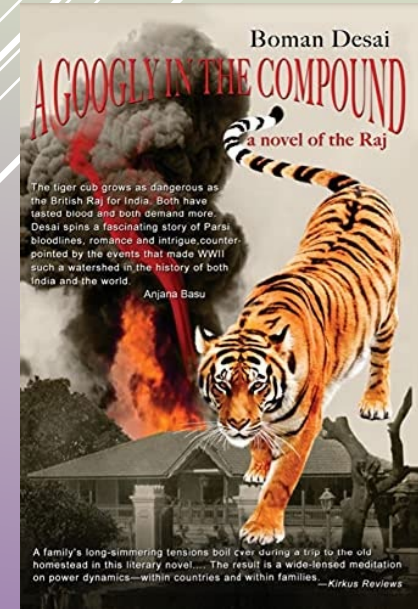


# Leave readers satisfied with a meaningful ending

“It’s easy to show things going wrong, difficult to show the way back home, but such are the novels I admire most and attempt to emulate.

I’m not fond of 1984, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, not even *Madame Bovary* for the same reason. They show the world crumbled or crumbling, but not how it might be uncrumbled again. They work as cautionary tales, but **I want credible, well-earned, hopeful endings.**”

**Boman Desai (*Portrait of a Woman Madly in Love*, *A Googly in the Compound*, *The Elephant Graveyard*, *TRIO* and more)**



# Thank you for joining this session

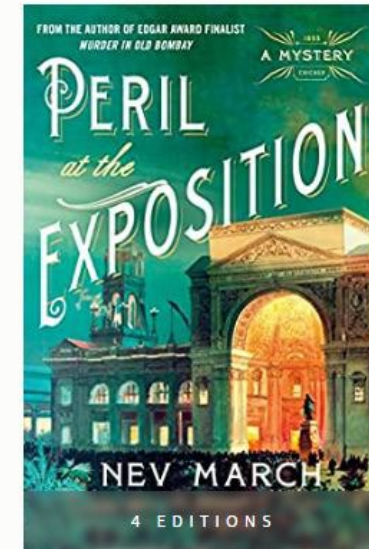
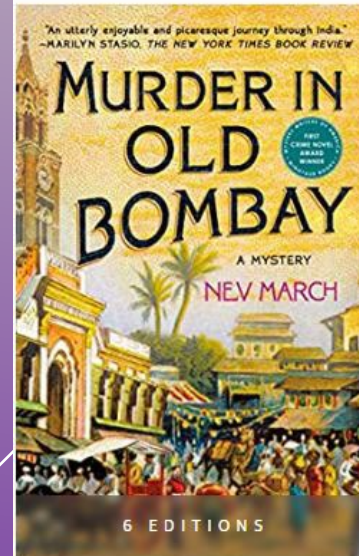
Contact me:

[NevMarchAuthor@gmail.com](mailto:NevMarchAuthor@gmail.com)

[www.nevmarch.com](http://www.nevmarch.com)

Insta/twitter @nevmarch

[www.facebook.com/NevMarch](https://www.facebook.com/NevMarch)





## FROM *GREAT STORIES OF SUSPENSE*, EDITED BY ROSS MCDONALD

- ▶ They are a medium of communication between the popular and the serious, making the former more **meaningful** and the latter more **lively**.
- ▶ Suspense fiction presents a view of modern life as dangerous and flawed but not beyond redemption, a vision in which almost any crime or disaster can be contained or understood. It is an art form which is also a game of skill.