And in the Bad News Department….

Eight Ways Research Can Kill Your Novel

By Lisa Gardner

Research is good. Research adds authenticity to your novels, giving readers that feeling of truly "being there." Research can get those creative thoughts buzzing—no more blank page syndrome. Learn a little and you can write a lot.

But when not handled correctly, research can also bog down a book, overwhelm your characters and stifle your plot. Here are eight things to bear in mind when incorporating research into your magnum opus.

1. Less is more. Hemingway used to say you had to learn the iceberg to write about the tip. That's a good rule of thumb in fiction. The primary goal of a novel is to entertain, not inform. Ask yourself at all times, does this detail add to the story, or does it simply show off how good of a student I've been?

2. Inexpert people should never spout expert knowledge. If the purpose of research is to provide authenticity, then nothing ruins the mood as fast as a layperson suddenly spouting expert jargon. It simply doesn't ring true. If you talked to a psychologist and want to use specific terms, then consider adding a psychologist to your cast. Or stick with Dr. Philisms, which will be more believable under the circumstances.

3. Sometimes, real procedures still need fictional help. Real police work is a slow and excruciating process. For that matter, the justice system can take years just to get to trial. This is all accurate and correct. And using this kind of timeline will absolutely kill any suspense or drama in your novel. Learn what you want to learn, but don't be afraid to fictionalize.

4. The little details are the dangerous ones. Creating a fictional world involves pulling together tons of details. Most of us don't have the time to learn everything, and thus will focus on the big stuff, leaving the little details aside. It's

those little details that will come back to bite you on the butt. If you've done eighty percent of the work on your book, don't shy away from the last twenty percent. The Internet makes double-checking most anything pretty fast and you'll be happy you spent the time.

5. Write first, edit last. Sometimes, you simply have to put all the information down on the page. We're all trained in school to show off what we need, and that instinct can be hard to deny. So if it makes you feel better, data dump into your poor scene and ruin your pacing. Later, however, when you have more distance from the information, go back and edit heavily. The reader will appreciate your discipline.

6. Some details simply don't belong in fiction. Some are too graphic, some are too boring, some are simply too much. For example, no one really wants to read about the intricacies of a gynecological exam, or for that matter, a colonoscopy. Yep, they happen in the real world. Yep, they're important procedures. People still don't want them in their entertainment.

7. Watch the jargon. Too much jargon—whether it's slang, or abbreviations or whatever—can take a scene from streetwise hip to Dr. Seuss silly. Likewise, explaining terms while in dialogue ruins the moment. If two cops are using cop lingo, let them be and trust context to explain it to the reader. Otherwise they sound as if they are giving each other a tutorial, rather than speaking peer to peer.

8. Too many experts spoil the broth. If your book only has expert characters talking to other expert characters, there is no plausible way of explaining the procedures or terms used in the scene. Far better is to have one main character who serves as a proxy for the reader—the young rookie still learning the ropes, the innocent victim trying to understand what is now happening to her life, etc. These characters can ask the logical questions the reader will have about what's happening, allowing you to dole out great information in a reasonable and interesting way.

These tips, of course, are only the start of things to bear in mind when incorporating research into your novel. When properly done, research should meld seamlessly with the tightly woven fabric of your fictional world, giving the reader a satisfying feeling of being simultaneously swept away, while remaining anchored to a world they know and understand.

When all else fails, remember the story comes first and your primary goal should always be to entertain.