

CRIMINAL INTENT

Featuring: Steve Shrott

Interviewed by: Janet Costello



Steve Shrott is the author of 35 short stories, including two published in our anthology, The Whole She-Bang. He recently became our Brother in Toronto, and has been part of the International chapter for four years.

Q: Tell us about being a member of the Sisters in Crime Guppies.

A: Sure. For those who don't know, that's the online SinC Chapter in the US. I've always written short stories but I started working on a book and heard that the Guppies help writers get published. So I joined and have found it to be wonderful! There are many successful novelists on the list as well as writers who are trying to get published. And people are very helpful. You can ask all the questions you want. One of things I especially like is "The Manuscript Swap." That's where you and another "Guppy" swap your novels and give critiques of each other's work. I have done that a few times and always received very useful comments. Recently, I was contacted by someone who "swapped" with me a few years ago. She told me that her friend has recently started a publishing house and she thought that my manuscript might be a good fit for them.

Q: Your stories have great dialogue. Do you have any tips to share on how to make your characters speak?

A: I love dialogue. If I am good at it, one of the reasons is that I've had a lot of practice. For many years I was heavily into screenplay writing which is mostly dialogue. So, of course, that's the first tip, practice. Also reading screenplays written by big names in the industry is very helpful, too. A key factor, however, is to listen to the way people speak. **David Mamet**, the playwright, used to go into bars and gyms and write down bits of dialogue he would hear. I think that's a great idea. It lets you see how the words look on paper.

Q: How do you keep the pace of your stories fast?

A: I think that's due to my comedy background. Humour has to get the point across quickly. If your joke is too long, it won't get the laugh. So you learn how to "write tight." I believe the most important thing in a short story or novel is to keep things moving. I try and see the story as the reader would. When I start to get bored with what's happening, I know it's time to add a new element, either in the situation or with the character.

Q: You clearly enjoy adding twists to your plots. What's a plot twist you've admired by another author?

A: Yes, I confess I love the twists. I think a twist can sometimes make an okay story great! Not all my stories have them, but I do enjoy the reader finishing a story, and being hit with a jolt. One of my favourite twists (although not mystery) was **Ray Bradbury's** "The Sound of Thunder." Just by stepping on a butterfly in the future, Eckels completely changed the political landscape of the present. Even the language was altered. "Shutter Island," the novel by **Dennis Lehane**, had a great twist as well where we learn that the story is completely different than what we thought. It is a mindbender.

Q: You've taught humour writing at the Learning Annex and other places. Talk about finding the right space for humour in a murder mystery.

A: I think in order for humour in a short story or novel to work, you first have to make sure that you have a story to tell. The comedy should be a secondary factor. I also think it's important to make the character as real as possible. The hardest part (at least in my case) is to not to overload the story with humour so it ruins any dramatic tension that you might have. My method is to put a quirky character into a funny situation. In a story I wrote entitled, "Good Times," I had a dentist invited to a Thanksgiving Dinner. Only the person who invited him is Moe, a local mobster. The funny situation is that the mobster's girlfriend likes the dentist and Moe is not too happy about it.

Q: Is the short story market better with the use of the internet and e-publishing or just different?

A: I think it's better in some ways, but worse in others. The rates for published stories are much lower than when there was only print. On the plus side you can now publish short stories yourself at Amazon and Smashwords. Also, e-publishing might make it easier to create a name for yourself. However, my first choice has always been print.

Q: You've had several appearances at The Toronto Public Library. Can any author approach them for support?

A: I think you can certainly go in and ask if you can do a presentation. Some will say yes, some no. When I spoke to various libraries about a talk on *The Whole She-Bang*, I mentioned being part of Sisters in Crime. I think that gave me credibility and helped a lot. I believe one key thing you can do is get to know your local librarian. She will be able to open doors that you may not. My librarian knows me very well and actually approached me about speaking.

Q: With your stories sold to so many different markets, is it possible for you to publish a collection?

A: I don't have a collection out yet, but I'm thinking about it. I have written in many different genres, and for many markets, but I could do a collection. Even within the mystery genre, I have tried to write different types of short stories. In terms of rights, most publishers keep those for a few years, but eventually they revert back to the writer. While most of my stories are in print publications or on pay-only sites, I do have a few "free" ones on the net. One is over at Mysterical.com and two are in the archives at OverMyDeadBody.com.

Q: You're working on two novels. What, if anything, do you prefer about writing a novel?

A: I like the fact that you really get involved in the lives of your characters. I find they kind of take over and I'm just following their lead. With short stories you have to start fresh each time you write a new one. However, with a novel, you get to continue the story you started and that's a lot easier. Once your mind knows what you're expecting it to do, it comes up with a lot of ideas to help you keep your story going. I also feel that when you write in a longer format it improves your ability to write short stories.

Q: How has being a Sister in Crime affected you?

A: It's been very helpful. The Guppies have provided a lot of inspiration and support. As a member of that group, I've seen my writing skill dramatically improve. Joining the Toronto Chapter of SinC, helped me a great deal as well. I've met many fellow mystery writers and got to talk about the craft with them. It's great to be around so many people interested in writing. The other terrific thing is that each month I'm being exposed to experts talking about mystery or other related topics. I take notes but subconsciously I'm absorbing what these experts are saying. I've already found that some of the information has found its way into my stories. So thank you, Sisters in Crime.

For more information about Steve Shrott, visit: <http://steveshrottwriter.weebly.com/>

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