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Finding Valhalla: An Investigation of Writing in the Mystery Genre

By Patricia Shea

I have always wanted to write fiction but had never had the opportunity or time to devote to what I would ultimately find to be a lengthy, but extremely rewarding, process. Therefore, this semester, I decided to dive headfirst into the process of writing not just fiction, but a mystery novel, through which my own story is a result. Ultimately, my novel, *Finding Valhalla*, is about a disgraced police investigator, Rebecca Olson, who learns that her sister's killer has supposedly resurfaced fifteen years after the murder. After the murder of another young woman, she becomes determined to solve the case that has haunted her. To do this, she must team up with detective Jeremy Thompson in order to stop the murderer who has laid dormant, until now. Ultimately, this is a story about a woman who has too much pride for her own good, and, in the end, Rebecca must learn to move beyond her obsession with the past, and, more importantly, to forgive herself. Before I could even begin writing this story, however, I had to begin by brainstorming ideas, and, in the end, creating the foundation for the success of my project as a whole.

Throughout the beginning of this process, I read John Truby's *The Anatomy of Story*, which covers the basics, and his opinion, on how to best create characters, irony, and intrigue. As whole, while he focuses on films, he also focuses on other works, like *Harry Potter*, *Jaws*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Godfather*, and *A Christmas Carol*. In regard to one of his subjects, he focuses his chapter on moral development on helping his audience come up with a trajectory for how the personality and the morality of their characters begin at the beginning of their story, and how their journey throughout the story leads them to who they become at the end of the novel. I have found this especially helpful, so I began by

trying to do some of the exercises that Truby outlines. As an example, once I began to brainstorm characters, I began breaking them down by their weaknesses and needs, their desires, and even their moral beliefs. This forced me to think about my characters in terms of their core values, and how this drives them, rather than their potential actions alone. In the end, there needed to be a reason that Rebecca Olson, for example, would be so determined and dead set in being involved in the present murder investigation and getting justice for her sister. With that said, it still took a long time to sort out my ideas and settle on a single premise.

I originally brainstormed two ideas, which both revolve around the same general premise for the murder. Ultimately, the victims will be found dead viking style, with worldly possessions with them. As my part of my family is from Minnesota, I felt like this would be an interesting concept. The first idea I came up with did involve a washed up female detective, who has failed to solve a case that reminds her of her sister's murder. Twenty or so years later, she discovers that similar murders, or a murder has occurred. In this case, the murders are spaced out, and there is the improbability of the time difference. At that point, I only really had two characters fleshed out. The main character would be Rebecca Olson, who is not only cynical, but has lost her sense of self. The antithesis of this character is the younger detective archetype, who I called Jeremy Thompson. The main conflict between them is essentially that he does not and cannot understand why she has become the way she is. I also came up with an additional idea. One of my favorite mystery writers is Agatha Christie, particularly in the way she is able to reveal everything at the end. Ultimately, she inspired another context for the Viking murder. In this scenario, I came up with a wealthy American family. The father is not a kind or generous man, although he seems like it on the outside. When he is murdered, through the eyes of an outsider, a lot is revealed about the family, who are trapped on a yacht.

It was ultimately the Minnesota idea that I felt really grabbed my attention. In this way, this is good, considering this is the idea that I initially came up with. Before I could even think of moving on to actually writing, I first have to understand my main characters, and to make them more developed. For this, Professor Nikitas wanted me to write one-page character descriptions for each of my main characters, which he wanted me to do before I chose which premise I am going to go with. As a whole, this proved to be more difficult than I originally thought, but this is the nature of brainstorming and developing my writing, and is what I ultimately wanted to learn throughout the process of working through this project. To work with the character dichotomy, however, I first had to think of some character traits for Rebecca, who I planned to be the main character. To start, she is impulsive. She, of course, cares about those she loves, but has become cynical, and embittered, after the death of her sister, and the failure to catch the killer at the time. She has always been blunt, and as a result is not able to connect to people well. Ideally, however, she does believe strongly in doing the right thing, and, most of all, is good at using deductive reasoning. What I had trouble with was sharpening the traits, and making this character someone who is unique, problematic, but the right person to solve the crime all the same. It is through reading various published works in the mystery genre and working through various brainstorming exercises that I was really able to flesh out the character and plot of the story I am ultimately trying to tell.

To become more familiar with the genre as a whole, I first read *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, by P.D. James. The main character in this particular novel, along with others that James has written, is Cordelia Gray, who is hired by the father of a university student to find out why his son apparently killed himself. Throughout book, I thought I was on the verge of figuring some elements out, but nothing turned out to be the way I expected it to be. At first Cordelia is

figuring out how to deal with her boss's suicide when she finds him in his office when she comes in one morning. Throughout the novel, she not only is able to become more confident in herself in following investigations on her own, but as a person as well. Of course, this is continued in P.D. James's other works as well, which include more stories about Cordelia. As a whole, this book gave me a lot to think about in terms of character development, especially considering that my main protagonist is going to be a woman. Another novel I ended up reading was *Silence of the Lambs*, by, which also had a similar effect, and forced me to think more deeply about my killer and his mindsight, as opposed to just my protagonist's.

After figuring out the details of my main character, my faculty sponsor, Derek Nikitas, had me work on a five-page summary of the entire story. The way he explained it to me, the story, particularly those in the mystery genre, is broken into fourths. For instance, if the book, as a whole, is 300 pages, then the first 75 pages or so will be the establishing of the norms. The next 150 pages will be the gathering of the clues, resulting in the main character reaching their lowest point. After this point, they will realize some, and resume the case, refreshed, and with a new purpose. The rest of the novel is essentially the resolution of everything, in which the killer is caught, and the main character comes to their own self-realizations. This ultimately results in there being a new equilibrium for the protagonist. For Rebecca's story, at least, it took some time to formulate this. As I learned, in the mystery genre, planning is essential. It is important to know, as an author, when you are going to release clues, and what causes the setbacks and triumphs for your protagonist throughout the novel. Do you start by making it easy for them, and making it more difficult as they go along, or do you put everyone and everything against them from the start, to make it as difficult as possible to reach their goal? The latter, I found, ultimately makes for a more interesting and fulfilling story. To help with organizing my story,

however, it wasn't until I broke down another book by chapter that I began to get a better idea of how to properly structure a mystery novel in particular.

To help with this, I chose to work on my own chapter analysis. For this, I chose Meg Gardiner's novel, *Unsub*, which tells the story of Caitlin Hendrix, who has only been a Narcotics detective for six months when she discovers the killer who has haunted her since childhood reemerges. An UNSUB is what the FBI calls an unknown subject, and The Prophet terrorized the Bay Area, nearly destroying her father, the lead investigator on the case, in the process. In the logline alone, I could already tell that this story had developed both character and situational irony. This isn't even including the fact that Caitlin has become friends with her boyfriend's ex-wife. Going through the process of breaking down the novel was interesting to say the least. I first chose to read the novel through once to get the general sense of the plot and the characters. I then went back into the novel and focused more on specific plot points. This proved to be harder than I originally thought, especially when it came to classify these plot points. Was the fact that she knows who the killer is through the killer's daughter a revelation or a reversal? Eventually, however, I was able to break everything down to what I believe to be in the simplest terms, which helped me in revising my own summary. This included the numerous revelations, conflicts, and even the situational reversals, that take place throughout the length of the novel.

After I had done all the pre-planning and brainstorming, including polishing and revising my summary, I began the writing process, starting with giving my prospective novel a title. The title, *Finding Valhalla*, I felt encompassed both Rebecca Olson's quest for peace, and Hersir's obsession with Norse mythology. Throughout this process, I also found it important to keep a consistent page goal. In my case, I tried to write 2-3 pages every day. As I got deeper into the

actual writing, I realized that, even through all the planning and preparation, there are always going to be changes that are going to be made. There are things that you plan out beforehand, that seem like they might make sense in the summary but end up not making sense when actually writing the narrative. For me, this includes some aspects of what leads up to the climax.

According to John Truby, in his book, *The Anatomy of Story*, he states that, “Once you set up a hero and an opponent competing for the same goal, you must build up that conflict steadily until the final battle. Your purpose is to put constant pressure on your hero, because this is what will force him to change,” (Truby 94). In my novel, Rebecca Olson’s main opponent is Hersir, who, in his original identity, is meant to view himself as someone who is carrying out punishments. This of course, is what Rebecca is trying to figure out, until she discovers that the person she is currently hunting is a copycat, obsessed with making himself known, because his best friend was the original. My main concern was making sure that the events leading up to the reveal made sense and are substantial enough.

Once I had reached my rough goal for my project, I was able to send my first draft to Professor Nikitas for review. Once he gave me feedback, it was then up to me to choose how I was going to continue my writing and revise. He first discussed atmosphere. As a whole, this has to do with a sense of place. Since my story takes place in Minneapolis, Minnesota, it is up to me to bring this setting to life. It is up to me to make it matter that the story takes place here by flooding the story with details of the area. Another aspect that I needed to work on was voice. In this first draft, he explained that the tone was flat and factual, and that the prose has virtually no voice. It was almost robotic, so I now needed to bring the narrative voice to life, and make it speak with Rebecca’s voice. With this aside, one of the bigger issues, particularly for the mystery genre, was balancing the release of the backstory into the narrative. one of the most major

concerns regarding the backstory was to not give the reader any backstory until you've made them want it. With that said, Professor Nikitas also explained that, at some points, too much backstory had even been withheld too long. One of the narrative problems I ended up creating for myself is that Rebecca did not seem to know nearly as much detail about the previous case as she will find out about the present case. It is these issues with my first draft that I aimed to rectify through my revisions.

In the end, this is the beginning of a long journey, and this only the beginning of what I hope to be a successful project. Throughout this process I definitely learned more than I thought possible and getting the feedback along the way absolutely helped me gain a better understanding of myself as a writer, and the process of mystery writing in particular. My grandfather is an avid mystery lover, who has passed on to me his love of books and writing. I write this novel as a testament to him, who taught me the importance of family, and I have attempted to instill these values into this novel. As an undergraduate student at the University of Rhode Island, I first began writing this novel as a part of my senior honors project and having been involved in the creation of several short films, I wanted to translate my visual storytelling ability to the page. By the end, this project has not only made me reconnect with my love of writing, but has become a labor of love, not only for my grandfather, but for myself. Now, once I complete my revisions, and continue to write, it is then up to my audience to read my final project and see how it all plays out. The story itself is not submitted here, because I hope to be publish it sometime the near future, so for now, my new goal is to continue writing and revising, and taking what I learned throughout this semester to grow even more as a writer.

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