

W.I.P Plotting a Mystery Series: Celebrant Sleuth

Procrastinating about Murder:

Hazel Edwards

Today, I'm planning a murder.

Fiction, not fact.

Often when I'm stuck on the plotting, I write a WIP (work-in-progress) article to add sub-plots, deepen characters and explore even the weirdest 'What if?' possibilities. Usually it gets me writing original fiction again. And it's also a useful reminder for PR interviews after publication when asked 'What were the challenges of writing this novel?' By then, I've forgotten the specific problems.

Celebrant Choice

The choice of a celebrant as sleuth was deliberate to enable a range of locations and cultures for the weddings, funerals and other ceremonies such as naming days. The time challenge was to have everything happen within the hour's ceremony, or hinted at in preliminary meetings and for the celebrant to be the astute problem-solver.

Dossiers

Character dossiers are where I start. I build up a CV of my major and minor characters. What are they good at? Can I give them a work history that justifies having that skill? A part-time actor seemed a good fit for a celebrant, because of the need to perform in public, be a personable MC but also observe other characters. Once I started interviewing celebrants, many had teaching or training job histories and one was even a stand-up comic. Apart from the possible dilemma of MC ego swamping the shy bride and groom roles, a celebrant needs the skill of a diplomat to handle Bridezillas or control-freaky-in-laws.

I needed a regular cast of about six with skills relevant for events and for mysteries. An extra could be added for each story.

A florist, caterer and retirement-home worker seem logical roles for on-going stories but I wanted them to be idiosyncratic and fun. So Shady Violet the florist with her adult trike bike with baskets appeared and I started chatting to florists and checking displays and floral themes online.

Single colours are IN! Even black blooms (so I found out how they were created). Violet will do that!

Murder She Wrote or Not?

Two things I am NOT good at. Writing gratuitous violence such as murder and detailed sex scenes. And this is further complicated with an asexual sleuth. The gender issues are complex.

Police, legal and coronial procedures I had to check.

Setting

I drew a map so fictional street names are consistent. Proximity of places like the 'Everest' retirement village which my locals call 'The Village' or 'Ever-rest' and Violet's shop 'Infinity Blooms' matter. The local community TV/radio station is where Quinn's techno & genealogy savvy partner Art works, needs a name. Channel Zero?

I make my setting, a fictional regional town about the size of Victoria's Castlemaine. Justifies community roles crossing over and many would know each other for different reasons. Also keen on my quirky florist Violet, being able to deliver bouquets and wreaths on her trike bike, so the local area couldn't be too big. Bea the caterer could cook for other community events, so I needed a name for that business and maybe a café-front too where others could meet casually. 'Comfort Food' or 'Food Angels' wasn't right. Became SAGE café which links with age and wisdom and the herb themed 'signature' food.

Tone

Getting the tone right mattered. Respectful but quirky humour.

At first I was going to have a serious crime such as murder in each episode, but then I lapsed into my real interest which is the motivations of 'everyday' rather than larger than life characters. So I decided to play on the expectation of violent crime which sometimes was accidental. But you can't do that all the time.

Audiences often joke about there being no-one left in villages such as those in 'Midsomer Murders' or Agatha Christie's locations, because they are depopulated by so many murders. Trying to avoid that.

Interviewing Celebrants:

Currently there's an oversupply of celebrants, so word-of-mouth recommendation matters. Some only do weddings. Others prefer funerals for the 'life stories' in the eulogies 95% of which are celebrant-written.

Many have 'specialist' areas such as 'themes', 'sporting celebrities' or Asian weddings where there may be a small wedding in Australia between students but a bigger celebration in their home country later. So photos matter. And hi-tech online videography. And legal skill with paper work such as visas. Which cultural details to include is determined by the bridal clients, especially with mixed marriages, so the celebrant needs to respect but not be familiar with all cultures.

Searching for realistic but humorous anecdotes, I interviewed in person on the phone and by email. My Telstra bill went up! Celebrants can talk! But they are also very personable and easy to talk to. I was listening for potential conflicts or dilemmas but also for some humour which could be woven into the script. I asked for specific anecdotes about embarrassing moments or things going wrong. Missing wedding rings in beach sand, or with children putting them in inaccessible places were the most common. Even dogs running off with the rings on their collar. The bride and groom who left on their honeymoon, leaving the metal detector with wedding guests checking the beach sand for the missing gold ring has possibilities.

I asked about the smallest wedding (in the celebrant's kitchen or garden) and unusual ones. Budgets varied enormously. From choppers to hot air balloons and home gardens. 'Elopement packages'. Or even poignant examples of hospital chapels with a terminally ill bride or groom. Then a biological father walking the bride halfway down the aisle and the step father continuing, after an argument.

So I had lots of incidents for background but that's not a plot.

'Older' couples with complex families seemed to have more dramatic possibilities. Inheritances.

I started with motive.

Legal issues were a likely motive and possible twist as marriage invalidates earlier wills, but a wary or wily 'mature' bride or groom could add a protective clause.

Mix-ups. Mistaken identity? Scam?

Then the vocabulary had to be right. 'Service' needed to be replaced with 'ceremony' except where I'd used it for the service lift. Did that.

Titles

‘Celebrant Sleuth’ became my working title despite mix ups between celibate, celebrity and celebrant and one anecdote with the family saying ‘The Psychic has arrived to arrange the ceremony’.

Gender

Needed to decide on appropriate pronouns as my sleuth Quinn was asexual and had a long-term partner Art.

On a literary panel in connection with our transgender ‘f2m; the boy within’ novel, I’d met an asexual reader who requested more asexual characters in mainstream stories. She explained to me the difference between asexual and agender and sexual attraction and romance and how it was possible to prefer ice-cream to sex; but also be a romantic and to have a permanent partner. An intriguing dilemma to juxtapose for my celebrant who was running romantic wedding events. And with same-sex marriage and commitments being very political issues.

Food

Many ‘hard-boiled’ detectives have abysmal fast-food diets and drinking problems. I wanted Quinn to be healthier. Catering is linked with events, so I added sister Bea as the idiosyncratic caterer who could do wonderful food for all cultures, but who occasionally got bored with routine requests.

I’m a woeful gardener but love flowers. So my research into florists for the Violet character was one of the most enjoyable aspects. I discovered early morning flower markets and symbolic floral names.

Serendipitous. I buy flowers at a local florist and she tells me, like Violet she can’t spell. Fiction anticipating fact?

Viewpoint:

One strategic decision was to write first person from the viewpoint of Quinn, to allow a possible voice-over if other media eventuated. This was also a way of setting the tone.

Initially unsure about Quinn’s age, but decided to make 49 as midway and typifies mid-life crisis time of change & wanting to spend time on something meaningful. And the age of possible readership.

Use-Later File

‘Use Later’ is a file for one-liners or short dialogue and ideas too good to lose like real ‘scams’ collected from newspapers

My first draft suffered from ‘researchitis’ because I wanted to include all I’d learnt. It was too ‘dense’ with facts. The second draft was ‘lighter’ and I changed the order of chapters. Up to the tenth draft now.

Expert Readers:

Vital to have expert readers. I discovered that ACE was the term used by some gender diverse groups, so I changed ACE, Quinn’s partner to Art. Sheer co-incidence in choosing his original name. as was seeking a short name. Found out that the coroner’s people not ambulance and para medics must collect a dead body. And the forensic pathologist needed to be there. Also that 18 rather than 21 is the legal age for marriage. And that it is a ceremony not a service when performed by a celebrant. Clergy perform services.

I’m immensely grateful to my ‘expert’ readers who have checked the ms for me. And also to one of my Hazelnuts, Anna who has formatted the ms.

Still working on it.

Hazel Edwards’ (www.hazeledwards.com) other adult mysteries have been published , but she is better known as the author of ‘There’s a Hippopotamus on our Roof Eating Cake’ which is currently touring as a musical. Her memoir ‘Not Just a Piece of Cake; Being an Author’ was released in 2015.