

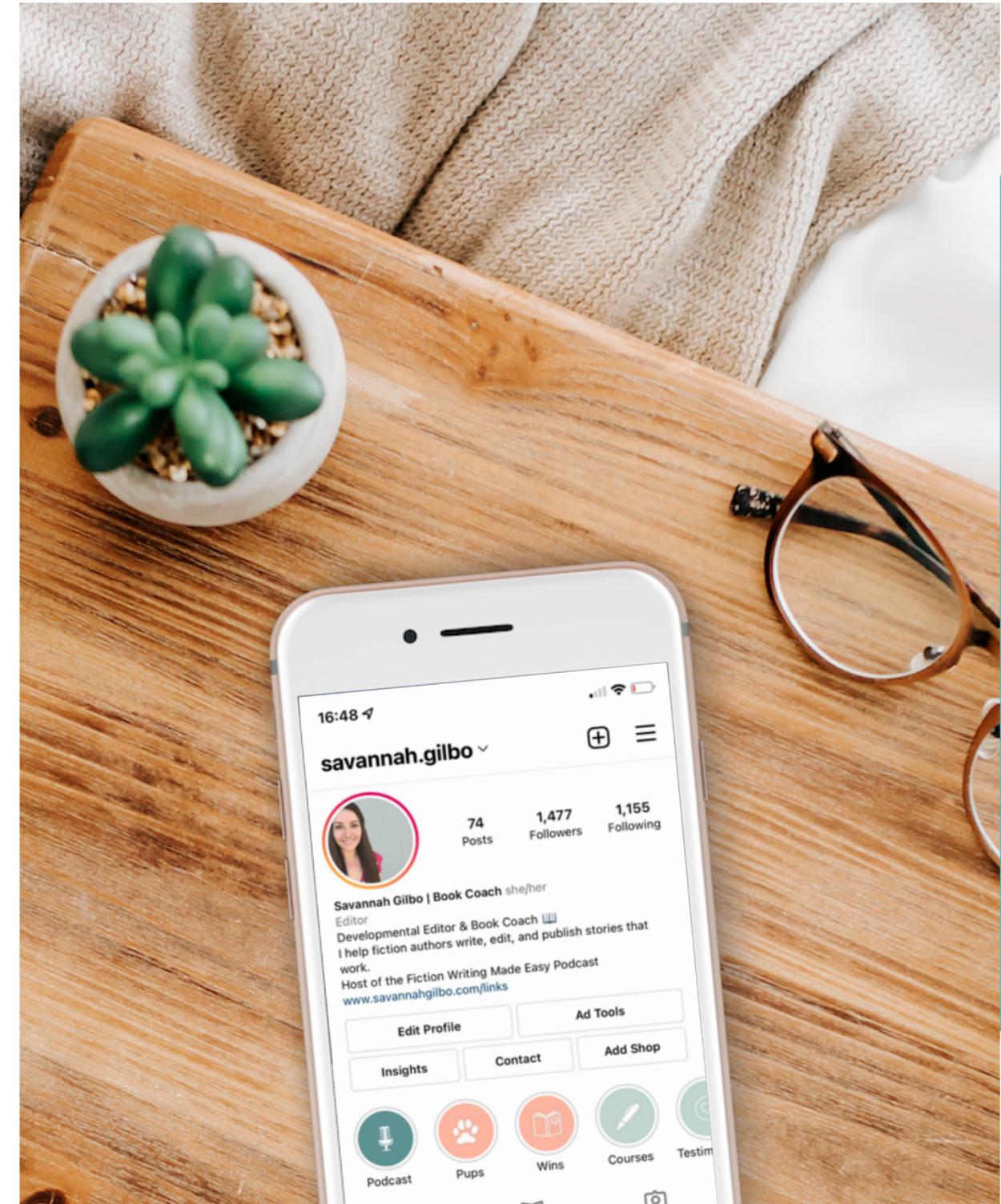
Red Herrings: How to Mislead and Surprise Readers

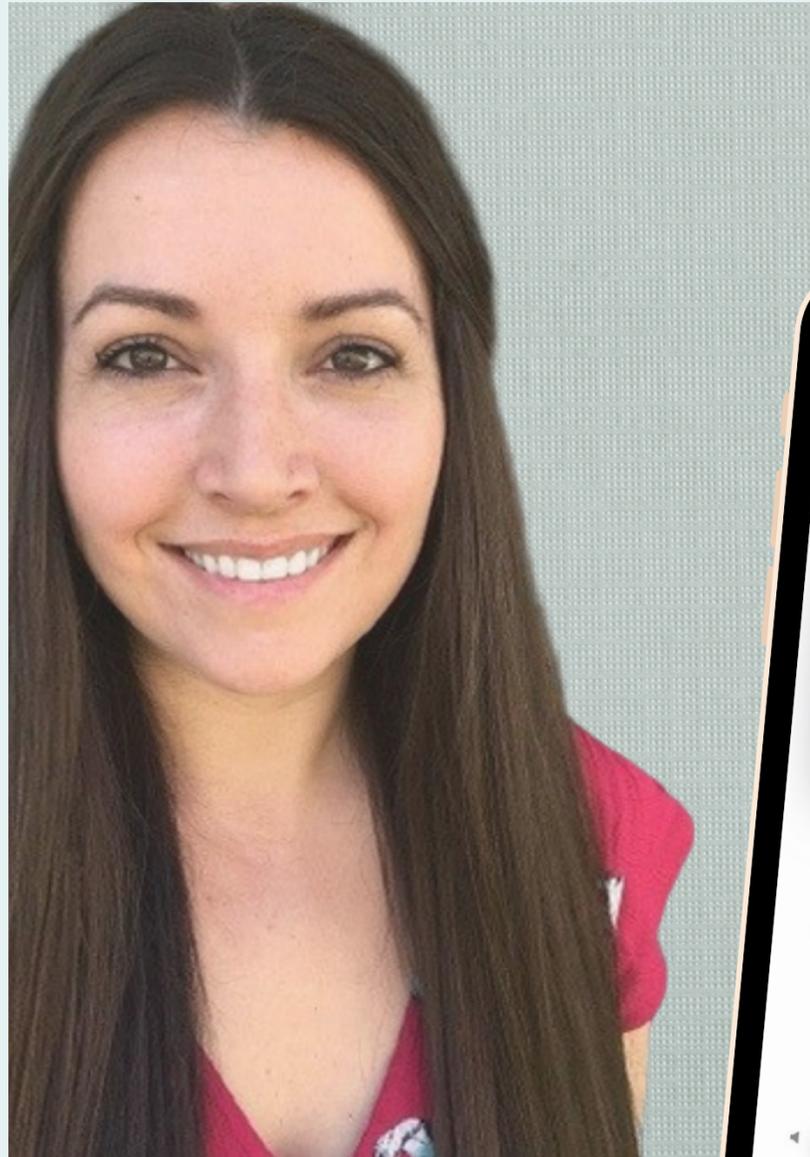
with Savannah Gilbo



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Certified Developmental Editor (Story Grid) & Book Coach (Author Accelerator)

Host of the top-rated Fiction Writing Made Easy Podcast

Creator of the Notes to Novel course that helps writers complete a first draft



I'm going to show you **how to write effective red herrings** (alongside "true" clues) so that you can misdirect and surprise your readers, and pull off awesome plot twists.



You're here because you're writing crime fiction...

Which means that **there will probably be some things you'll want to keep hidden from readers** until the time is right to surprise them.

But sometimes that's easier said than done!

In order to pull off a well-done surprise, you need to "play fair" with readers from the very start.

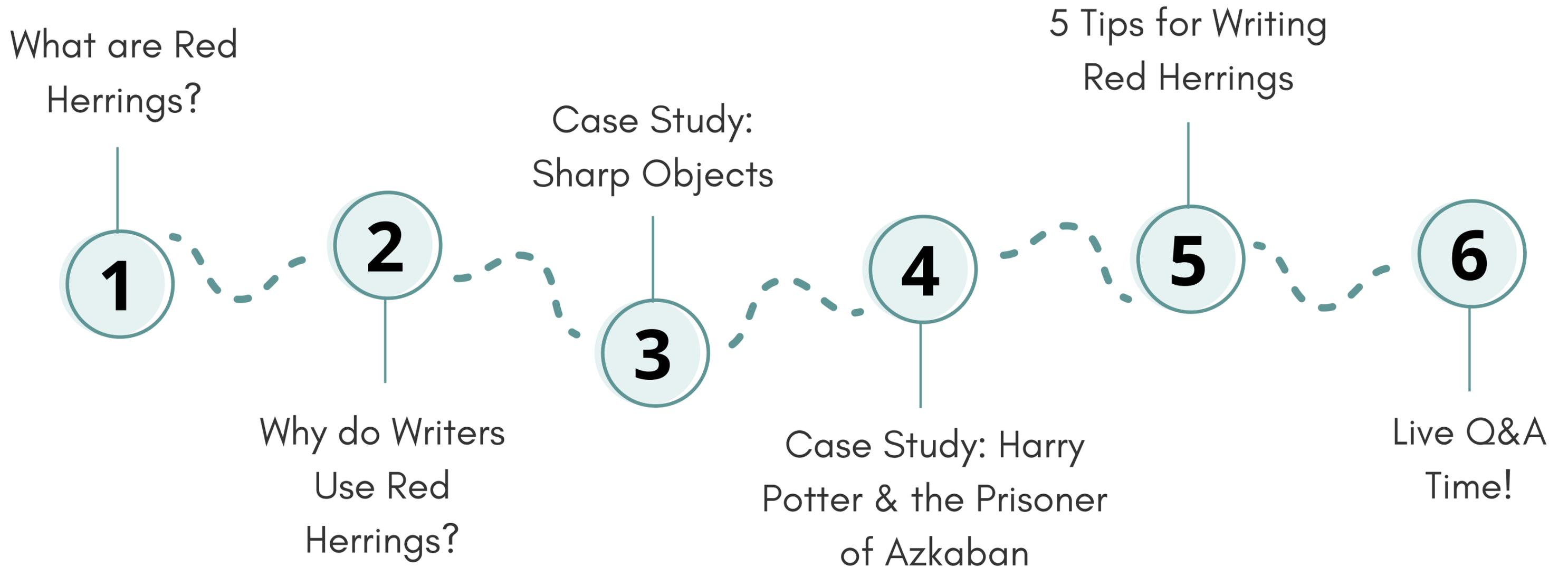
Playing fair means giving readers the truth while misdirecting them from that truth at the same time.

But how do you actually surprise readers if all of these clues are hanging out in plain sight??

You use red herrings to misdirect readers!



Here's Where We're Going...





What are Red Herrings?

A red herring is a literary device that can lead readers (and the characters) down a false path or otherwise distract them from what's really going on in the plot.

They are most often found in mysteries and thrillers, but they can be used in any genres that require misdirection.

Red Herrings are a type of foreshadowing.

Readers pick up on hints and clues to try and figure out what's going to happen next (or at the end of the story).

But not all of these clues will lead to the truth.

Some will be used to deceive the reader about what's coming—and in these cases, the “false clues” are called Red Herrings.





Red Herrings can be anything like:

- A character who seems evil or suspicious
- An object that seems relevant or important
- An event that seems to be significant to the story or protagonist
- A clue placed by the antagonist or a secondary character (unknown to the reader and the protagonist) that sends investigators down the wrong path

Different genres change how the reader views and responds to red herrings:

- In a true mystery story, red herrings are used to make the reader incorrectly guess **what has already happened**
- In a thriller novel, red herrings are used to make the reader incorrectly guess **what is going to happen**





Why Do Writers Use Red Herrings?

- Red Herrings help you give readers the emotional experience they're looking for
- Red Herrings help you create suspense in the story by testing the protagonist's abilities and decision-making skills
- Red Herrings help you express character and create a rooting interest in readers

Let's take a look at a few different case studies to see how the author used red herrings to distract readers from the truth. We'll look at:

- Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn
- Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban by J.K. Rowling



Adult Thriller Example:
Sharp Objects

by Gillian Flynn

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Summary (Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn):

Camille Preaker gets sent back to her hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri to cover the story of two local girls—one who has been murdered and another who has gone missing. Shortly after her arrival, the missing girl's body is discovered in an alleyway in the middle of town. Both girls were abused and murdered in similar ways—they were strangled and had all of their teeth removed, but not sexually assaulted. The police are baffled by the crimes, but think the perpetrator must be a local man, because who else would target these young girls?

While back home digging for information, Camille reconnects with her estranged mother (Adora) and 13-year-old half-sister (Amma). Camille never had a good relationship with her mother because Adora always seemed to prefer Camille's younger sister Marian, who died due to an unspecified illness when they were young.

Summary (Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn):

As the story progresses, Camille realizes that Adora has an illness of her own—Münchhausen syndrome by proxy—and that she is responsible for Marian's death. Not only that, Camille also discovers that the detective believes Adora to be responsible for the murders of Ann Nash and Natalie Keene, too.

In the end, Adora is charged with the murders of Marian and the two girls, and Amma is sent to Chicago to live with Camille. Amma initially seems to be adjusting nicely to her new circumstances, but soon after she starts going to her new school, a classmate is murdered—and six of her teeth have been pulled out. So, although Adora *did* kill Marian, Amma is the one who murdered the two girls in Wind Gap (Ann and Natalie).

Red Herrings / True Clues Summary:

Both the readers and the characters believe that a local man is responsible for the death of Ann and Natalie because that's what we're told.

Throughout the story, Camille becomes more and more suspicious that Ann and Natalie's murderer is a woman—more specifically, her own mother, Adora. But when Adora gets arrested (and the killing doesn't stop), Camille realizes that Adora isn't responsible for *these* deaths—she's a red herring.

The truth is that Camille's sister, Amma, is the one who killed Ann and Natalie—and the clues are all there, hidden in plain sight.

Here's what readers learn about Adora (Camille's mother):

- Adora is a hypochondriac who seeks out attention and loves to play the victim. She's an expert in illness and injury, and loves to play the victim.
- Adora tutored both Ann and Natalie, and even considers them to be her friends. Ann and Natalie's parents both love Adora for this, but it seems a little suspicious. She also refuses to talk to Camille about them.
- Adora had a terrible relationship with her own mother. We're told that her mother used to come into Adora's room at night and pinch her and that she would peel sunburns off Adora's back in front of her friends.

Here's what readers learn about Adora (Camille's mother):

- Adora has violent tendencies of her own, especially towards children. She remembers seeing Adora bite a baby on its cheek when she was a child. Camille thinks that her mother might hate children (or be jealous of them).
- Adora's friends say that she's been acting strange since this whole thing with Natalie and Ann happened—before that, too. Jackie (Adora's friend) tells Camille to go back to Chicago because Wind Gap is not safe for her.
- Adora has Munchausen by Proxy, and was responsible for Marian's death. She's also been medicating Amma (and Camille).

Turns out, Adora isn't responsible for Ann and Natalie's murder—but she *did* kill Marian.

All of the suspicion that's cast on Adora hides the truth about who the real killer is... it's Amma!

Adora is a Red Herring.



Here's what readers learn about Amma (Camille's sister):

- Amma is *obsessed* with her dollhouse. She's bothered by the fact that she can't get the floor in her mother's dollhouse room to look like her mother's real-life room with ivory floors. (The girls are all missing their teeth, and not only that, but their bodies were made "pretty" post mortem.)
- Amma likes to be the center of attention. Whenever Camille brings up the dead girls, Amma reacts by either dismissing the girls or by drawing attention to herself. (Adora spent a lot of time with Natalie and Ann, Camille spends a lot of time with Lily, making all three girls the perfect target for Amma.)

Here's what readers learn about Amma (Camille's sister):

- Amma is a bully. She's known for her bullying all around town, but we also see her bully Camille even though she's only 13-yrs-old. (She bullied both Ann and Natalie as soon as Adora took an interest in them).
- Amma likes to be in control of things, whether that be a situation or someone's attention/affection. She uses her sexuality and/or her favor to get things from people. (The detective later describes the teeth pulling as being all about power and control.)
- Amma is fascinated by death and violence. She likes hurting people and seeing others in pain (her friends, the pigs on the farm, Camille).

Why is this an effective Red Herring?

This red herring works because Camille's perspective is limited by what the detective and the locals will tell her. She's biased because of her own history with Adora. Plus, *Adora is guilty of her own crime—she killed Marian.*

In the end, Camille's shock and horror at discovering that Amma is the real killer is shared by the reader. It works because the clues were all there!



MG Fantasy Example:

Harry Potter & the Sorcerer's Stone

by J.K. Rowling

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Summary (Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban by J.K. Rowling):

After another miserable summer at the Dursleys (where he accidentally inflates Aunt Marge, runs away, and sees a large black dog watching him from the bushes), Harry reunites with Hermione Granger and the Weasley family at The Leaky Cauldron. Mr Weasley warns Harry about the wizard Sirius Black, a convicted murderer who escaped Azkaban prison and is believed to be hunting down Harry. Once they arrive at Hogwarts, the kids learn that the dementors (the guards of Azkaban prison) are patrolling the school grounds, hunting Black.

Throughout the year, Harry sees multiple instances of the the black dog (thought to be the Grim, a spectral death omen), and he's having a really hard time dealing with the presence of the dementors on school grounds. Plus, his friends aren't getting along right now—their animal companions (Crookshanks and Scabbers) are at each other's throats constantly.

Summary (Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban by J.K. Rowling):

During a visit to Hogsmeade, Harry overhears in a conversation that Sirius Black is the one who betrayed the Potters to Voldemort and killed their friend Peter Pettigrew. Also, to make matters worse, Sirius Black is Harry's godfather! Harry is distraught by this news, and vows to deal with Sirius Black himself—before Sirius Black can kill Harry. Later, Sirius Black breaks into Hogwarts (twice), but Harry remains unharmed.

In the climactic moment, we learn that the dog that's been following Harry is none other than Sirius Black, an unregistered animagus. He's been tracking down the person who is really responsible for the Potters' death—Peter Pettigrew (aka Scabbers, Ron's rat!). Pettigrew ultimately escapes, but so does Sirius Black. Harry now knows the truth about Sirius and has gained an ally and father-figure in the process.

Red Herrings / True Clues Summary:

Both the readers and the characters believe that Sirius Black is a dangerous criminal and murderer because that's what we're told.

Throughout the story, Harry learns that Sirius is responsible for his parent's death, and is now pursuing Harry to finish the job.

But when Harry finally confronts Black, he learns that Sirius isn't a killer at all—he's a red herring.



Here's what readers learn about Sirius Black:

- 12 yrs ago, a Fidelus Charm was placed on the Potter's house to keep their location a secret, but someone betrayed their location to Voldemort. This led to the murder of Harry's parents. Most people believe Sirius black is the one who betrayed James and Lily to Voldemort.
- Sirius Black was in Godric's Hollow on the night of Harry's parent's murder. He was sentenced to life in Azkaban for the murder of 12 Muggles and a wizard named Peter Pettigrew. The murder was said to be so violent and messy that all authorities could find of Pettigrew was a bloodstained robe and a few fragments of a finger.

Here's what readers learn about Sirius Black:

- Lately, while in Azkaban, Sirius has been heard murmuring, "He's at Hogwarts," in his sleep. It is believed that Sirius wants to kill Harry in order to finish what Voldemort started.
- Sirius Black has never tried to escape from Azkaban prison until now. His escape coincides with the Weasley's return home from Egypt.
- Sirius Black is Harry Potter's godfather.

Turns out, Sirius Black isn't out to get Harry at all.

He's actually trying to protect Harry from the person who's truly responsible for the death of Harry's parents—Peter Pettigrew.

Sirius Black is a Red Herring.



Here's what readers learn about Scabbers (Ron's Rat):

- Scabbers has been in the Weasley family for twelve years. (Harry's parents were killed twelve years ago, the night Peter Pettigrew was "murdered.")
- Scabbers has been acting strange since the Weasleys got home from Egypt. (Upon getting home, Peter Pettigrew learns that Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban and that he's been muttering, "He's at Hogwarts" ("he" being Peter Pettigrew, not Harry).)
- Ron buys a rat tonic to help Scabbers feel better, but it doesn't work. (Scabbers isn't actually a rat. He's a human, living his life in his Animagus form as a rat.)

Here's what readers learn about Scabbers (Ron's Rat):

- Scabbers is missing a toe on his front paw. (The only thing left of Peter Pettigrew was his finger.)
- The Sneakoscope goes off twice when Scabbers is around (first when Ron's packing it up, second when Crookshanks is picking on Scabbers). (The Sneakoscope is a "dark detector" that lights up, spins, and whistles when someone is doing something untrustworthy.)
- Scabbers is constantly hiding, missing, or running away from Ron. (Peter Pettigrew knows Sirius Black is looking for him so he's doing whatever he can to get away from Hogwarts.)

Why is this an effective Red Herring?

This red herring works because Harry's perspective is naturally limited by misinformation and the fact that he's a child—adults don't trust him enough to tell him the truth. Plus, all the evidence *does* point to Sirius Black!

But Harry's relief and amazement at discovering that the supposed killer is actually his godfather is shared by the reader because the truth was there, hiding in plain sight the whole time.





Red herrings aren't easy to craft—they have to tread a fine line between visible and invisible.

They have to be obvious enough that most readers will pick up on them, but subtle enough that the reader believes it and follows the false trail.

So, how do you write effective Red Herrings in your story? Let's look at my top five tips!



Tip #1: Incorporate it into the fabric of the story.

Red Herrings have to serve a purpose and feel like they're an organic part of the story.

They can't be inserted into a story just because the plot lacks tension, excitement, or conflict.

Instead, they need to have an impact on the central conflict and the global story.



- In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Sirius Black plays a huge role in the story. The central conflict revolves around Harry staying out of Sirius Black's way because Black supposedly wants to kill Harry. If you took Sirius Black out of the plot, the whole story would collapse!
- In *Sharp Objects*, Adora provides so much conflict for Camille to deal with (both leftover conflict from her childhood wounds, and sometimes a literal barrier to getting answers about the case). Without Adora, it would have been difficult to hide Amma's crime. Plus, Adora was also guilty!



Tip #2: Give your innocent characters motivation, means, and opportunity.

If you're planning to use a character as a Red Herring, you'll need to convince readers that this person could legitimately be guilty.

To convince readers that an innocent character could be guilty, set things up so that character either benefits from the crime, had the means or opportunity to commit the crime, has a strong motive, or all of the above.



- In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Sirius Black is believed to have been the Potter's "secret keeper." That gives him both the means and the opportunity to betray their location to Voldemort.
- In *Sharp Objects*, Adora was Ann and Natalie's tutor. She even went so far as to call the girls her friends. But Camille tells us that her mother might actually hate children—and that Ann and Natalie were "bad girls," so how far would Adora go to "correct" their behavior?



Tip #3: Give readers no (obvious) reason to suspect your guilty character of the crime.

To do this, you could have a guilty character who is acting strangely but the protagonist can't put his or her finger on why (at least not yet).

You could also discredit the guilty character by giving him or her a personality or skill set that doesn't feel typical of someone "bad" or capable of committing the crime.



- In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, nobody would have believed that Pettigrew was capable of not only betraying and murdering his friends but of siding with Lord Voldemort too.
- In *Sharp Objects*, even though Amma has a violent streak, nobody would have believed that she could commit such a horrendous crime (more than once). She's 13-years-old, and she seems like a victim herself.

Tip #4: Focus the reader's attention elsewhere when you plant clues.

Misdirection is not about withholding information, it's about giving the reader extra information and focusing their attention on that instead of the truth.

- In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, almost every clue that points to Scabbers being more than just a pet rat is easily skipped over because of the way J.K. Rowling plants clues in the story.





Here are a few different ways Rowling plants clues:

- She diverts the reader's attention away from the truth by hiding clues within a list of things (for example, the creators of the *Maurader's Map*—Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs)
- She distracts readers with action or high emotion (for example, when Crookshanks chases Scabbers around the room and Hermione and Ron get into a fight).



- In *Sharp Objects*, almost every time we see the "real (violent) Amma," she reverts back into her childlike self, or she will show kindness to Camille. The more we find out about Adora, the more we believe Amma is a victim herself.
- For most of the story, police (and Camille) are looking for a local man because that's the profile that fits this particular crime. We're misdirected because the characters don't know any better themselves.



Tip #5: Always play fair with the reader.

When someone reads your story, they give you their trust. They expect that what you tell them is the truth. They build on each bit of information, trying to understand the big picture and figure out what's going to happen next.

Tricking the reader by misleading them is fun (both for them and for you). But if you fool them by leaving out information they would legitimately have expected to be given, then you are just messing with them.



- In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, J.K. Rowling gave readers all the clues they needed to figure out Scabbers' true identity.
- In *Sharp Objects*, Gillian Flynn gave readers all the clues they needed to figure out that Amma was the murderer.

In both stories, when the truth was revealed, readers were able to connect all the dots because all the clues were there from the start.

Key Point: Don't hold important information back from the reader. Always play fair.

Figure out a way to not only discretely plant the truth in your story, but to distract the reader from that truth with something interesting too.

When you can pull this off, you'll create a story that surprises and delights readers and that sticks with them until the end of time!





Now you know **how to write effective red herrings** (alongside "true" clues) to misdirect readers, and pull off awesome plot twists that surprise even the most clever of readers!

It's Q&A Time!



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