

POV tension

Have to share. Since I moved in to my place in Rome, I have seen this woman walking a bunch of dogs — anywhere from four to six at a time. And she does it at least three times a day. Turns out she's a professional dog walker, and the dogs all belong to different people in the neighborhood! No joke! You can always hear her coming because she is talking nonstop to the dogs. I haven't fully figured out what she is saying. I have attempted to engage in her in conversation to no avail. I'm dying to know more about how she juggles the pups and their personalities! Does she do test run walks before she takes them out together? How does she know they're going to get along? Do they all respond to different commands and languages? One of these days my Italian is gonna be good enough to have a coherent conversation with her about it. Until then, like today, I wave hello at her and the dogs. She responds with a head nod and then what I presume is an Italian order to the dogs to ignore me and keep walking.

This is a Facebook post from a friend of mine who lives in Rome.

Turn this into a short story and write the first paragraph.

Use a genre: mystery, memoir, travelogue, essay on learning a language , from a dog's point of view...anything you choose.

WHAT IF...

Tension is the backbone of stories, the emotion and action that helps to move the plot and deepen our characters.

It's what engages our readers and keeps them up at night (we hope) finishing our book.

- There can be internal tension; characters questioning their own capabilities, fears, weaknesses
- external tension; a kidnapper, a thief, a person with a gun pointing at the character's head
- or general tension; a tornado, a flood, a plane crash, a political coup

In each of these areas, the characters react plausibly because we've identified and created their strengths, weaknesses and psyche. Most of the time, we understand their reaction.

How do we create these tensions that add action and spice to our stories? The way I've found both in working with reporters in journalism and as an author myself is ask. What If?

At any spot in your story, your characters will have opportunities to change their realities and shift their responses.

What if behind that closed door:

is a lost child

a killer

a set of steps leading down (or up)

their ex-spouse

a raging storm

a shady porch with a wicker swing and a pitcher of margaritas (or lemonade)

The character can experience emotions ranging from fear to yearning to blazing anger, as can your reader.

What if your protagonist finds a body:

It's a stranger

It's a relative

It's a prior or current lover

It's a beloved dog

Will they:

Call the police

Turn the body over to see who it is

Call their significant other

Drag the body elsewhere and hide it

What if your protag is being blackmailed? Will they

Pay the blackmailer

Call the police

Round up their family members to raise the money

Develop a plan to turn the tables

Just like some rogue lightning, tension can come from a clear sky when your characters are least expecting it.

They see their high school crush at their engagement party

They begin being stalked on social media

They're going to work and get involved in a high-speed chase

Developing tension in almost any situation is possible when you look at the choices your characters have.

The Gweneth Paltrow film *Sliding Doors*, examined the outcomes when the central character either caught or missed a train and whether or not she met the man she'd marry. Sometimes and choices are ours and sometimes it may be accidental fate, but all decision points can create tension.

When you're developing your characters and building tension in your story, remember to ask yourself "what if."



Michele Drier is a fifth generation Californian and has lived all over the state from Humboldt County in the north to Riverside County in the south. She was born in Santa Cruz and raised primarily in the Bay Area. During her career in journalism at daily newspapers in California, she won awards for investigative series. She is the past president of Capitol Crimes, a Sisters in Crime chapter; the Guppies chapter of Sisters in Crime, current president of NorCal Sisters in Crime, and co-chaired Bouchercon 2020.

Her Amy Hobbes Newspaper Mysteries are *Edited for Death*, (called "Riveting and much recommended" by the Midwest Book Review), *Labeled for Death* and *Delta for Death*. A stand-alone, *Ashes of Memories* was published May 2017.

Her paranormal romance series, *SNAP: The Kandesky Vampire Chronicles*, was named the best paranormal vampire series of 2014 by PRG. She is currently writing Book Twelve, *SNAP: Love Betrayed?*

Her new series is the Stained Glass Mysteries, *Stain on the Soul*, *Tapestry of Tears*, and the just-published, *Resurrection of the Roses*.

She lives in Sacramento with her cat with only one cat... now.

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