

# “Psst! Can You Keep A Secret?”

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Not long ago a student in one of my on-line romance writing classes became highly irate when she found out, halfway through a book she was reading, that the main character was a gossip columnist who, behind her friends' backs, had been Telling All about their most-cherished secrets. The heroine's own secret – her job – seemed to be the only one she hadn't shared with the world, or for that matter with the reader.

“It's not fair,” my student said. “If we're getting any of her thoughts, then we should know what she knows!”

Well... not exactly. We certainly don't want to be told everything the character thinks and knows, or we'd have a stream-of-consciousness novel instead of a romance.

But my student has a point. If the character knows something that he or she is deliberately keeping secret from the reader, that doesn't seem fair. And if the author hides the secret by letting the character lie about it, that just plain isn't fair.

But that doesn't mean characters can't keep secrets – not only from each other, but from the reader. In fact, it can sometimes be crucial to the success of a story for the reader to be surprised down the road by something the POV character has known all along.

So the big question is how we can pull off something the reader may initially see as unfair – surprise her without making her furious with the character or the author. Let's look at a couple of examples.

## **The Murder of Roger Ackroyd**

There was a tremendous screech from the critics and reviewers when Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was first published. If you haven't read the book by now, you're not likely to, so I'm not going to apologize for destroying the surprise by telling you why the critics howled. It was because the first-person narrator was the murderer.

Not such a big deal, you say? Maybe not now, when there are psychological thrillers aplenty, with killers who exult in sharing the details of their crimes. The difference is that Agatha's murderer seemed to be a regular joe – the local doctor, a guy with literary pretensions who was just observing and writing about the excitement in the community – until the moment in the last few pages when he was unmasked.

“She's not playing fair!” the critics whined.

But in fact, she *did* play fair. Agatha's murderer didn't confess, but he didn't lie – he never said he hadn't done it. He just didn't say anything at all about the relevant few minutes, and Agatha handled it so smoothly that most readers didn't notice there was anything left out.

And if it hadn't been for that twist – narrator exposed as murderer – *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* would be just another cozy mystery, with nothing much making it stand out from the hundred others that Agatha wrote. Instead, it's a classic.

## **Family Secrets**

Unlike most romance writers, I don't work from proposals; I write the whole book and stand or fall with it. And I prefer not to talk about work in progress. So when my then-editor first picked up the manuscript of what would eventually be titled *Family Secrets*, she had not read a synopsis or a proposal or even a sample chapter.

And that's why, when she hit the end of chapter seven, she ran down the hall to her boss's office shrieking, "You'll never believe what Leigh did this time!" She was screaming because two-thirds of the way through the book, my heroine – my POV character – admits that the child she's been babysitting for, the son of a famous television actor, is the baby she gave up for adoption four years earlier.

It's intended to be a kick in the stomach for the reader. Until that instant the reader doesn't know our heroine ever had a child, much less what happened to the baby. And it's a completely necessary kick, in order for the story to work. If I'd told the reader up front that our heroine had given up a child, there would have been no surprise, no suspense, and no reason to finish reading the book.

But though that shock is absolutely critical for the success of the story, it's also completely fair. The fact that the child is an adoptee is quite open; the little boy himself tells the heroine that he's a "chosen child." It's also clear from the beginning of the book that the heroine knows a lot about this particular child through his father's fame in the tabloids. And there is no effort to hide the almost-instant connection between the heroine and the child.

## **Playing fair**

Playing fair with the reader means not lying, and it means having a good reason for not telling the truth.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the narrator, Dr. Sheppard, takes pride in noting the details and reporting them accurately – except for one small bit of time-editing. And from where he's standing the doctor has the best of all possible reasons not to tell the truth – because they still hanged murderers in Great Britain in Agatha Christie's day.

In *Family Secrets*, the other characters try to remember exactly when the child's birthday is. Our heroine doesn't say she doesn't know, because that would be lying. She doesn't ask about his birth date, because that would be lying by implication. She doesn't pretend not to know precisely how old the child is, because that would be teasing. She simply never comments.

When the child asks her why she thinks his birth mother would have given him away, she says, "I'm sure she loved you very much." There couldn't be anything more honest than that statement, and no better reason for not telling the entire truth – at least at that moment, when it would traumatize a child.

As for good reasons not to tell the truth to the reader – in this case, the heroine has taken very seriously her promise to keep the adoption private. Only after the child's adopted father realizes the situation and confronts her does she admit anything to anybody. Keeping her secret is a pattern – why would she take the reader into her confidence when she hasn't even told her closest friends?

You can play fair and still keep the reader in the dark. But what are the rules for treating your reader equitably when you really need a character to keep a secret?

***Give the character a good reason to keep the secret.*** Only keep important secrets. There's nothing more annoying than a character who has no reason not to talk but keeps quiet anyway. When the hero asks, "Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" and the heroine says no, even though there is absolutely no reason for her not to confess, we lose respect for everybody. But if you make the consequences of talking about that secret severe enough, of course she'll say no, and the reader will sympathize.

***If it's important enough, it should be secret.*** Nearly as annoying as the character who won't talk is the one who has a good reason to keep quiet but who runs off at the mouth, no matter who's listening, simply because the plot demands it. In the movie *The Whole Nine Yards*, the dentist hero comments that his wife would like to have him murdered. Soon afterward, he goes home and recognizes the new neighbor as a famous hit man in hiding. So what does he do? He rushes straight into his house and tells his wife, "You'll never guess who our new neighbor is!" And then he's surprised when she sets him up. Well, duh.

When the time comes to share the truth, ***give the character a good reason to break down and come clean.*** Once a character decides to keep a secret, he or she won't alter that decision lightly. In fact, people tend not to change at all until the pain of staying the same is even worse than the pain of changing. If this bit of their history has been too hurtful to talk about, then it's going to take an enormous amount of a different kind of pain before sharing it will seem like a relief.

For Dr. Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, that point comes when his crime is discovered, he's confronted with the evidence, and he sees there is no way out. Only then, in order to leave a complete record of his cleverness, does he explain what really happened in the missing ten minutes.

Amanda in *Family Secrets* falls in love with her child's adoptive father. When he realizes

who she is and accuses her of seducing him in order to get her baby back, her pain is so great that nothing else matters – and finally she breaks down and tells the entire story.

***Don't tease.*** Your character shouldn't be coy or cute. If the secret is important enough to keep in the first place, then the character is going to stay silent. If the narrator of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* had gone around saying, "I know something you don't know" he'd have soon become irksome.

If Amanda in *Family Secrets* had picked up every baby she came across and shed tears while she cuddled them, and then gone all wide-eyed and innocent if someone asked why, she'd be teasing – and the reader would be justifiably unsympathetic to her supposed desire for privacy.

But it isn't just the secret-keeping character who can tease the reader. I could have set the story up so all of Amanda's friends knew about the baby she'd given up – but if they acted like real friends and were sympathetic and concerned about her, they'd be dropping hints left and right and ruining the suspense. Or, if the friends knew but didn't talk, they'd be a sort of conspiracy of silence – a completely illogical way for them to act. In either case the reader would be the only one left out of the loop, and she'd be quite reasonably provoked.

***Ask the normal questions.*** Almost as irritating as the character who won't talk is the one who has every reason to ask an ordinary question, but doesn't simply because the plot demands that the answer not come out just yet. If a reasonable person would be curious enough to ask the question, then your characters should be, too. If you're visiting a friend and you see a stack of suitcases and an envelope full of airline tickets in the middle of the living room, you'd have to be superhuman not to ask if she's planning to go somewhere.

***Have another character ask the obvious question,*** or volunteer the information, in front of the secret-keeper. In *Family Secrets*, one of Amanda's friends asks the adoptive father how old the child is; it's a fair question since the friend doesn't know. And the child himself volunteers the story of his adoption. Because the reader actually sees the POV character receiving the information, she never stops to ask herself whether Amanda might have already known it.

***Tell the truth whenever possible.*** By keeping secrets from the reader, you're risking her sympathy for the character B so it's important not to toy with that unnecessarily. Tell absolutely as much of the truth as you can.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Dr. Sheppard examines the body and tells the police inspector, "The blow was delivered by a right-handed man standing behind him, and death must have been instantaneous. By the expression on the dead man's face, I should say that the blow was quite unexpected. He probably died without knowing who his assailant was." All perfectly accurate, as he has good reason to know.

In *Family Secrets*, half the people in town know that Amanda has a sort of crush on the television actor, that she's so fascinated by both the actor and his son that she's followed the newspaper stories and even kept scrapbooks about their lives.

***Don't lie, no matter what.*** Once an obvious question is asked, it must be answered. But there's no obligation to share the whole truth. The trick is in answering in a way which doesn't

lie to the reader. Misleading her is one thing. Telling a flat-out untruth is another.

In *Family Secrets*, the heroine doesn't admit that she had a child, but she doesn't deny it either. When the hero sees a baby crib in her apartment and asks if she has children, she turns the question aside, saying only, "I kept a friend's toddler over the weekend." When he asks why she doesn't have a child of her own since she loves children so much, she says, "My life just hasn't worked out that way."

Because someone asks you a question doesn't mean you have to give them the full, absolute, hundred-percent-honest reply. If someone asks where you got your dress, you're not obligated to tell them it was at a garage sale and you talked the price down from five bucks to a dollar.

(Of course what you'll say depends on who's asking. Is it your best friend, the one who'll cheer you on for your feat? Or is it someone who'll go around telling the whole town that you're too cheap even to shop at a bargain basement? That's true of characters, too – there's more than one sensible answer, depending on where the question's coming from.)

***Emulate Miss Manners.*** When someone asks Miss Manners a rude question, she draws herself up tall and says coolly, "Why on earth would you ask me a question like that?" The drawback of the Miss Manners Answer is that it calls attention to itself. If your character is insulted enough by the question to do a Miss Manners act, then the subject must be really important, and the reader will be instantly suspicious. There are times, however, when the Miss Manners Answer is a good choice – for instance, when your heroine is being grilled by a truly overbearing character.

***Divert the reader's attention to something else.*** Don't avoid the subject, but distract the reader into thinking it means something altogether different. Ask the question, but instead of answering, shift the focus of the conversation elsewhere. However, this is not a good place to have the doorbell chime or the phone ring. That kind of interruption is so convenient that it actually calls attention to the very thing you're trying to distract from.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the narrator draws the reader's attention away from the moment of the murder by focusing on the contents of a letter that has been delivered to Roger Ackroyd just before the crime is committed. By emphasizing the man's stubborn refusal to read the letter until he's alone, Dr. Sheppard deflects the reader from thinking about what's really happening.

*... Ackroyd is essentially pig-headed. The more you urge him to do a thing, the more determined he is not to do it. All my arguments were in vain.*

*The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread...*

Of course, Dr. Sheppard doesn't really want Ackroyd to read the letter, because he knows it will expose him as a blackmailer. But he realizes that begging Ackroyd to read it will cause exactly the opposite effect, so Dr. Sheppard will be able to strike unsuspected. Secondly, he's shifted the reader's focus to the letter rather than the missing ten minutes. Plus, the fact that the

letter isn't opened leads the reader to believe that the doctor has no idea what it contains. And lastly, by putting his references to the murder victim in present tense, he's implied that the guy's still alive and arguing when the doctor leaves the room. Quadruple play.

***Foreshadow, foreshadow, foreshadow.*** If you're going to stun your reader, then you must prepare her to believe the shocking news when it finally comes out. Yet, too much hinting and you'll give yourself away.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, right after the missing ten minutes, Dr. Sheppard pauses at the doorway of the murder room.

*I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing.*

The implication, of course, is that he's wondering if there was something else he could do to convince Ackroyd. Still, the facts are right there, bare and unadorned – though misleading. When the truth finally comes out, the reader has to concede that he was warned.

Dr. Sheppard also admits to editing the truth under other circumstances. "I had to make up a slightly fictitious account of the evening in order to satisfy her," he says, "and I had an uneasy feeling that she saw through the transparent device." That bit of fiddling with the facts prepares us to believe it when we find out how he fudged about the murder.

In *Family Secrets*, Amanda hears the story of Nicky's adoption from Nicky and his father – right down to the hand-knitted yellow sweater the baby was wearing when he was handed over. So the reader, having heard that side of the story, is prepared to accept it when Amanda opens the compartment where she's hidden the evidence of her secret and takes out, among other things, the ball of yellow yarn that was left over from making the sweater.

In fact, if the reader goes back through *Family Secrets* a second time, she'll see that all the pieces are there. Amanda's immediate attachment to this particular child, her knowledge of the child's life and history, her fondness for children as a group, her single lifestyle, her troubled relationship with her late parents, the hint of a past relationship which went wrong – they're all present. But only when the one missing key is shared do they add up to a full story.

Can you keep a secret? Sure you can – And if you do it right, you can make your reader love you for it.