



Being Genre-fluid

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THAT OUR PUBLISHER NO LONGER wanted to publish the fourth book in our historical detective series came as no great surprise. Our previous editor had left the firm and the new person looking after our series had stopped answering emails. The third book had received only the bare minimum of marketing support.

That was fine. My co-author and I were looking forward to being bought out of the contract and moving on to pastures new. Then came a call from our agent.

Agent: they would like a fourth book from you, but they don't want another mystery. How would you feel about writing in a different genre?

Self: Anything but saga fiction, really.

Agent: I'm afraid they want saga fiction, in a historical setting.

Self: Happy to work in any setting, except Victorian England.

Agent: They're really keen on a saga set in Victorian England.

Self (getting desperate now): well, I guess we could do something... Just so long as it's not set in the East End of London.

Agent: they really want the East of London. Do you think you could work Jack the Ripper into the story?



I managed to kick Jack the Ripper into the long grass, and switch the setting from the East End to Rotherhithe, but then had to come to grips with this completely new genre. I had never read a saga before; I had no idea how they were constructed or what kinds of characters populated them. The new editor assigned to this book gave us a long list of do's and don'ts. No swearing, it upsets the audience. No graphic violence, ditto. No semi-colons. That last came as a particular shock; the semi-colon has always been my go-to punctuation mark. I still don't know why semi-colons offend the sensitivities of saga readers, but apparently they do.

The biggest adjustment was in terms of how the story unfolds. As a crime writer, you rarely give the game away; part of the aim is to keep the reader guessing about how the plot will unfold, so they keep turning the page until the end. In saga fiction, the element of suspense must be eliminated. The story must unfold in linear fashion with plot elements clearly explained as it goes along. Techniques such as foreshadowing or flashback, grist to the crime writer's mill, are strictly forbidden.

The reason is that the two genres have fundamentally different aims. Most crime fiction presents readers with a puzzle and invites them to work out the answer as they go along. Author and reader are in effect playing a game, in which each tries to prove that they are cleverer than the other. The saga, on the other hand, is an appeal to the heart, not the head. Saga fiction is loaded with emotion, inviting the reader to empathise with the struggles of the lead character, suffer what she suffers and enjoy the same sense of redemption when it all comes out right at the end.

Learning that difference and making that adjustment required me to break out of my writing habits and develop some new literary tropes. The experience, I suspect, was good for me; becoming genre-fluid has probably made me a better writer. Would I write another saga? Ask me in a year's time, when we see how this one sells...