

Medical Facts & Fallacies in Popular Fiction Kimberly Frost

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Who Am I?

- Emergency Physician at a teaching hospital/trauma center
- Fan & newly published author of popular fiction

What Inspired the Lecture?

- Getting asked questions at a writers' retreat
- Watching a movie with distracting medical errors and considering which were necessary and which were just lack of effort
 - o (Example - KtG...PDR alone in the middle of the night)

Goals of the Presentation:

- Discuss the types of medical errors in popular fiction
 - o (Including when you might decide to make an error on purpose for the sake of storytelling and which errors could be dangerous for a reader.)
- Provide examples of the effective use of medical details in storytelling
- Discuss common medical errors made in popular fiction

Altering Medical Facts...

1. to support the story's premise
 - a. Example (Memento, First Fifty dates)
2. to support the storytelling
 - a. Example (Kiss the Girls)
3. from lack of research
 - a. the telephone game style fact-checking
 - i. Example - flat line heart rhythm
 - ii. Example - TBT, non-medical (door kicking)
 - b. Lack of available beta-reader who knows what's accurate
 - i. Example - category romance (JS - surgery resident)
 - ii. Strategy...books, online, among your friends/relatives
4. in a way that could be dangerous
 - a. Example - writers' loop - JC/ectopic pregnancy
 - b. Example - arm through glass window

Writing Craft meets Medical Research:

Authors who do things well & examples from their work:

- Tami Hoag ... *Dust to Dust* (Example from Prologue)
- CJ Lyons ... *Lifelines*
 - o (Example of opening hook, creating tension with dialogue, characterization, and medical detail)
 - o When not done well this kind of scene creates: “on the nose” dialogue or confusion with heavy jargon
 - o Turkey Lexicon Research Warning v. watchers of e.r.
 - o Option...place in P.O.V. of non-medical character
- Patricia Cornwell - *Cruel & Unusual*
 - o Scene where Mr. Waddell’s body is brought in post execution
 - o Example of creating suspense through physician’s character’s interpretation of physical evidence that raises interesting questions for the reader
- Laurell K. Hamilton - *Guilty Pleasures* (Main character’s head injury)
 - o Her approach v. the Mike Hammer story (head injury x 3)

Common Medical Errors:

- Snakebites
 - o We don’t use tourniquets, cut open the wound, or suck anything out anymore
 - o You could have your characters do it...unless they’re doctors
- Digging out Bullets
 - o *Desperado* and *Tombstone*
 - o Okay in historical stuff or if your character isn’t a doctor
- Medical Details in Historical Novels
 - o Example, sulfa drugs too soon
 - o Potential Resource: *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* by Roy Porter - bibliography
- Death throes... blood from the mouth
 - o Example, many action-adventure films (*The Alamo*, etc.)
 - o Only certain type of injury causes this

Other things to consider:

- Level of Responsibility
 - o Medical students cutting open people’s throats (e.r.)
 - o Interns running trauma resuscitations (*Kiss the girls*)
 - o The Hierarchy of Medicine in U.S.

- Attending Physician works only in his/her specialty
 - Resident Physician rotates through services that are important to his/her training to become a specialist
 - Intern 1st year resident
 - Medical Student
 - Core rotations
 - Elective rotations
- The reality of medicine
- *City of Angels* - cardiothoracic surgeon character played by Meg Ryan emotional reaction to the loss of a patient
- Disabling Illness
- *Angel*
 - Fred breathes in demonic mummy dust
 - She's chatting normally and they say... "her organs are cooking."
 - *The Lost World*
 - Roxton is comatose and ill
 - Then he appears to have a seizure and Challenger says, "His blood is purging the poison from his system."
 - Never confused, recovers very quickly
 - Seizures, death, pregnancy...characters should be tired
- Disabling Injury
- Legal Thriller - The P.I. who is assisting the lawyer breaks his ankle.
 - Two weeks later he's walking on it
 - Fractures (broken bones) take about 4 - 6 weeks to heal
 - Movies with Jackie Chan, Mel Gibson, etc.
 - People don't work well as projectiles
 - Breakaway walls and glass...don't try this at home
 - Angela Knight quote
 - Examples where it's handled well:
 - *Dead Witch Walking* by Kim Harrison
 - Demon-fighting Passage then, even with the healing amulets, the character takes time to recover
 - *Wonder Boys* - Michael Douglas' character with dog bite
- "Keep him awake" as a medical strategy
- Overdose v. head injury
 - *Almost Famous* Penny Lane overdoses, they "pump" her stomach
- Amnesia/Fugue
- Examples: soap opera, *The Bourne Identity*, *Dead Again*
 - True amnesia is extremely rare; more often event-specific

- Critically ill characters in a coma
 - Soap Operas
 - *Blade*
 - *Miami Vice* (the movie version)
 - Scenes involving an officer in a coma after explosion are very well done
 - Great footage to watch if you need to describe the setting, the way a character looks



Kimberly Frost's first novel, *Would-be Witch*, will be published by Berkley in February 2009. You can visit her at FrostFiction.com