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Readers like surprises – but not big ones

The most popular books at the library are fiction series. Whether we love parachuting into foreign lands with Jack Ryan or following Hamish Macbeth's brilliant sleuthing but disastrous love affairs in the Scottish Highlands or reading the finely tuned hand of JK Rowling writing as Robert Galbraith in the hard scrabble Cormoran Strike series, we all have our favorites.

What do series do for us that no other kind of reading accomplishes? This is an appropriate question during a pandemic. We have answers.

We (all of us) hate loss of control, unpredictability, and major disruptions in our daily lives. You might think that we enjoy all that with fiction – it's safe enough inside a book. The answer to that thought is yes. And no.

Every author of a successful series, from the relatively low brow to the relatively high brow, has created a winning formula. These books are all "formula literature." To be successful, every formula has to have these characteristics: 1) a plot that in general terms is predictable. 2) Stories anchored in recurring characters. 3) Endings that are similar in nature. 4) Enough variations to make each book interesting.

Take Louise Penny's wildly popular **Three Pines - Inspector Gamache** series. This series has it all. It has a location that readers have grown to love – a tiny village in the Province of Quebec, recurring characters in the form of Inspector Gamache, his family, and a host of characters that live in Three Pines, killer or killers to be caught, and Gamache with a little help from his friends, bringing the killers to justice.

But these elements aren't enough or else we'd just read the same book over and over. Also critical to a great formulaic series is that the formula must be bent in some way each time. Is it one of Three Pines' favorite quirky citizens we have grown to love who is the killer this time? Or the victim? Is it ok – and Louise Penny is going to find out this fall – to set the story in Paris instead of Quebec? Readers need this variety to keep them interested.

However, readers have a breaking point. There is such a thing as not just bending the formula but breaking it. Penny cannot get away with having Gamache shot dead by the bad guys (or worse yet, by his adoring wife). That's a bridge too far for happy repeat readers.

Stephen King knows this all too well. His book **Misery** was all about the fanatical reader who couldn't take it when a beloved character got bumped off in a famous successful writer's

latest book, so she kidnapped him to force him to rewrite this character back to life. (Kathleen Bates plays this crazed fan in the movie version, a good movie to re-watch if you get the chance.)

And all that is what makes our favorite series the ultimate escape. The formulas are self-referential (i.e. they form their own world) making a perfect safe loop for the reader with just enough variation to make the newest book satisfying but not enough variation to pull the reader out of that comfortable loop. Readers rebel when that happens and, these days, take it out in their Amazon reviews.

No one who is coping with a pandemic wants to pick up the latest Penny novel to find out Gamache died. No one wants to pick up a Cormoran Strike book to find out Strike has become a high society social butterfly. And Hamish Macbeth just cannot get the right girl to marry him, please.

(For more on escapism and formula lit, Google **John Cawelti**, a west coast literary theorist, who has written seminal work on this topic focusing on Western novels. I grew up watching my dad read only those plus newspapers.)

Embracing the known is exactly the ticket in a world of unknowable factors. Consider this a two-part column. Next week will be What's New to You in Series for May. Not only is the Library always here for you, but we are also here to assure you that your favorite books are not guilty pleasures. They are great, healthy escape!