

By the Book: *Drop Dead* by Carol Newhouse

Drop Dead: A Horrible History of Hanging in Canada

Lorna Poplak

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In the current edition of *By the Book*, I dissect *Drop Dead, A Horrible History of Hanging in Canada*. This nonfiction book puts hanging, the Canadian form of execution until capital punishment was abolished in 1976 for all civilian crimes, under the microscope.

When I read *Drop Dead*, I was particularly interested in delving into the differences between fiction and nonfiction writing.

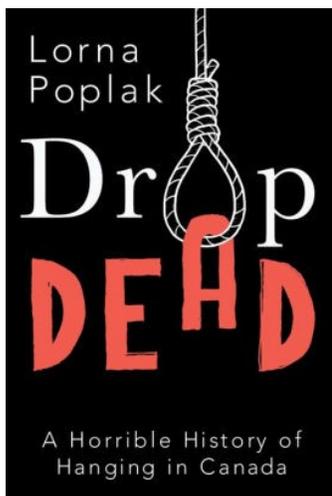
In mystery fiction, an inciting incident usually kicks off the action. Some nonfiction work, including true crime stories, often use the same technique. But *Drop Dead* lacks an inciting incident. Instead, Lorna creates a narrative arc based partially on a frame. Chapter One details the first three hangings in Canada; Chapter Fourteen sets out the last two.

Between these chapters, readers meet some of the “principal players” in the deadly Hangman game, including the body, the aggressor, the sheriff, and the judge, to name a few. Chapter Four, Crowd Control, shines a light onto an important element of a public hanging and Chapter Five, The Hangman’s Job, gives readers a glimpse into the life of a hangman. The science and art of hanging forms the subject of Chapter 8. This braiding of two (or more) story threads is one popular narrative structure of nonfiction, according to Waverly Fitzgerald, writer, teacher, and co-author with Curt Colbert of the talking Chihuahua mystery series (*Dial C for Chihuahua* is the first of five books in the series).

A little knowledge goes a long way. It is fascinating to learn that the nightmare of every hangman is “a heavy man with a weak neck.” This type of information, interspersed with a recounting of hangings, breaks up the read. If *Drop Dead* consisted only of a description of cases, the effect would be as numbing as a few hours of playing slot machines at casinos. Horror or surprise would be replaced with a shrug.

Misdirection plays a critical role in mystery fiction. The red herring is a valued tradition that can be counted on to throw off sleuths and readers alike. Misdirection plays a role in nonfiction as well.

Lorna opens Chapter One of *Drop Dead* with the words, “Modiste Villebrun and Sophie Boisclair were desperately in love.” Ah, romance! But no matter how disarming an opening line, the reader knows things will not bode well for the characters in this book.



She continues, “The burly lumberjack and his paramour yearned to spend the rest of their lives together. There was just one problem. They were both married—to other people.”

The context for their subsequent decision is provided. “What were they to do? They lived in the small, conservative French Catholic community of St. Zéphirin, Quebec. In 1867, divorce would have been inconceivable. The church saw to that. They just had to come up with another strategy.

They chose murder.”

By the end of the first two paragraphs, the reader is wrenched out of the romantic realm and set squarely into a homicidal one.

Using paradox is another technique that adds interest to what could be a very dry narrative. When talking about how the public’s ribald behavior at public hangings led to legislation decreeing executions be conducted in private, Lorna notes, “But an uneasy tension remained: If you prevented the public from attending hangings because they behaved so badly, how could you make sure that executions would remain a powerful deterrent and that their retributive message—if you commit a crime you will be punished—would endure in the public consciousness?”

Although there is a lot of exposition in nonfiction, and *Drop Dead* is no exception, both fiction and nonfiction rely on scenes to pack a punch and engross the reader. Lorna Poplak understands this principle. She conveys most information through the scene. Some span a few paragraphs, others comprise a chapter. One of the most compelling leads off Chapter 13:

“On the morning of Friday, September 9, 1949, Canadian Pacific (CP) Airlines Flight 108, en route from Montreal to Baie-Comeau on Quebec’s north coast, made a brief stopover in Quebec City to take on passengers and additional cargo. The baggage was loaded into the flight compartment at the forward left side of the Douglas DC-3. One of the items was a cardboard box labelled FRAGILE, addressed to Alfred Plouffe of Baie-Comeau, which had been delivered as expedited mail just prior to takeoff. The plane was scheduled to resume its flight at 10:20 a.m., but it left five minutes late.”

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Carol Newhouse is a member of several writing organizations, including Sisters in Crime Toronto and the Toronto Romance Writers. She is hard at work on her first book in the Zookeeper Mystery series. When not working as a legal assistant or dreaming of dead bodies, she is walking her dogs, chilling in yoga classes, or hanging out at the Toronto Zoo.

By the Book, continued

The depth of detail creates an ominous tone. And Lorna's word choice steers away from abstract words and uses more concrete nouns. Simple yet stirring language.

And humor. "Science plus art. What could possibly go wrong? As it turns out, quite a lot." Wry wit—such as, "...traditionally, the most common form of capital punishment since Saxon times was hanging. The thinking was that, even without optional extras like beheading, hanging was a pretty nasty sentence..."—made me grin.

To say *Drop Dead* is laced with humor might be an exaggeration, but Lorna doesn't miss an opportunity to present the funnier side of a dark subject, such as when she writes, "According to the *Edmonton Journal*, crisis followed crisis on the day of the execution: the sheriff was delayed by brutally cold weather, ...and unaccustomed as they were to public hangings, the crowd of on-lookers burned the wooden trap from the gallows to provide some heat. As officials scurried around to get the scaffold ready again, the prisoner cheerfully offered to kill himself with a tomahawk and save the hangman further trouble."

Fiction writers are encouraged to use dialogue and thereby create more "white space" on their pages. It is believed this makes a book more "reader friendly." Nonfiction writers are well advised to use dialogue too. Snippets of conversation dot the pages of *Drop Dead*. For example, the last words of Thomas McGee uttered immediately before he was assassinated are recorded.

There were 704 people hanged in Canada over the course of 109 years, yet *Drop Dead* only covers a handful of them. Lorna selects cases based on features that set them apart. The first and the last. Two defendants—one who is hanged and one who is spared. Two infamous characters in Canadian history. One case

where despite reasonable doubt, a man was hanged. Another where, at the time, there was little reasonable doubt, but the death penalty was commuted, and the prisoner was later found to have been wrongfully convicted. The only woman in Alberta to be hanged. The last woman to be hanged in Canada.

Writing nonfiction means facing a mountain of research and making decisions about what to include and what to leave aside.

I was particularly interested in how the writing of *Drop Dead* evolved and thought a Guppy audience would appreciate it if she shared that information. When I asked her, she wrote: "I met Carrie Gleason, who was then Dundurn's editorial director, at a conference in November 2015. At that time, I was very much involved in children's literature, and I envisioned the book for an audience of young readers! Carrie was interested in the book, as was her publishing board, but as a work of adult nonfiction. In fact, Dundurn doesn't publish nonfiction for kids at all. This worked out very well, as it forced me to expand my horizons and explore the topic in much greater depth."

How long did it take? Lorna's interest was sparked in 2008, when she began researching around Canada's faint hope clause. The faint hope clause is the statutory provision where people sentenced to a life term without parole for at least 15 years can apply for parole after serving 15 years.

She wrote a few chapters in late 2014, "but the bulk of the book was written between the time [she] received Dundurn's contract in April 2016 and the submission date in February 2017."

Lorna Poplak's *Drop Dead* is not only a fascinating read but is, in my opinion, a great template if anyone is thinking of trying their hand at nonfiction.