Arizona Mystery Writers

Judging Criteria

A few topics judges may consider while evaluating each story:

Basic Rules

The entry must fall within the broad genre of mystery, thriller, or suspense. However, a story's costumes and settings (e.g., vampires or spaceships) do not automatically disqualify it if the story line clearly contains the elements of a **mystery**, **thriller** or **suspense story**:

- a crime or a crisis of unknown origin or consequence,
- an investigation with real-world, evidence based problem-solving,
- an unexpected or particularly satisfying solution.

Maximum length is **2500 words**, or about **ten double spaced Times Roman pages** with **standard margins**. There must be **no author identification** on the entry. *An entry that does not meet these basic requirements must be disqualified.*

Is it a Story?

This is a story contest. We are not looking for poetry, plays, songs or other formats, although inclusion of such elements within a story is not forbidden. *We do not accept graphics of any kind*.

A seriously flawed story in our genre often has one of several common errors:

- a beginning that fails to make clear the goal or problem to be solved.
- A weak middle with poor evidence and reasoning
- An ending that does not adequately address the initial problem to be solved.

Plot

Readers in this genre appreciate and expect a traditional plot with a clear causal thread running through the story, hopefully with a surprise or two.

Conventional Tropes

A **mystery** involves a crime, presented early, followed by the discovery of who did it, or how it was done, or why it was done. In a **thriller**, the status quo is upset, but the nature of the peril is only gradually discovered before it is finally overcome. In a **suspense story**, the peril is anticipated, though its exact nature is unknown until later, and characters seem helpless to avoid it.

In all these genres, the main character resolves the crime or crisis by the end of the story. A story that does not engage any of these formulas may not fall into the genres this contest requires.

Characters

There should be a main character with a consistent set of traits or values that a reader can identify with. A flawed story may omit a main character, or the main character may have inconsistent or unconvincing motivation.

Point of View

It would be unusual for a story this short to have more than one point of view, or more than one narrative voice (first or third person), although nothing is impossible.

Narrative Tone

A plus is to have a distinctive or compelling narrative voice. This is an extra, as genre stories often have bland or generic narrative voices.

Description

Good description lets characters demonstrate through their speech and actions what they think and feel (**shows**). Flawed description reports that to the reader instead (**tells**). Irrelevant description seems gratuitous rather than organic to the characters. Imprecise description may leave the reader unsure of characters locations in space and time.

Sensory Detail

Good description also employs well-observed sensory details; the more senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch, etc.), the better. Flawed description relies on abstraction.

Dialogue

Good dialogue is understandable, believable, and interesting with vocabulary and diction appropriate to the characters. Good dialogue also reveals characters'

motives, attitudes and feelings.

Language

Genre readers usually expect an ordinary vocabulary because story is paramount. Lyrical language, symbolic imagery, wordplay, allusions, self-reference, and other literary devices are extras that may increase a reader's enjoyment.

Flawed use of language includes incorrect spelling or grammar, awkward or over written sentences or paragraphs, or too many clichés.

Satisfaction

Did you like the story, for whatever reason? Did you feel satisfied at the end? Trust your instincts.