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Writing Queer Mysteries Changed My Life

I never set out to write mysteries, gay or otherwise. When I launched my career as an author, it was with short stories which were ultimately collected in a book that won a [Lambda Literary Award](#) for Gay Men's Debut.

I was ambivalent about going to the banquet in New York. I pictured myself smiling gamely while someone else won—you know, like those stars at the Oscars or other awards show and the picture gave me chills. But my loving husband said, "You'll never be nominated for a debut award again, and if you win and you're *not* there, you'll regret it." So of course we went, and wore matching white dinner jackets, which was a first for us.

Lesbian comic Kate Clinton was the hilarious MC and we had met her several times at P-Town during summer vacations so the evening felt like a reunion. Editors and writers at our table knew me by name which was very gratifying—and one of them actually sent me a dozen white roses to our room later that evening after I won.

Growing up, I was a very catholic reader: history, biography, science fiction, travel, humor, folklore and mysteries. But I had a special fondness for short stories of all kinds and my favorite writers in that genre were Somerset Maugham, Chekhov, Edith Wharton, D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, and Hemingway. I hoped someday to

publish short fiction in *The New Yorker* and be reviewed in *The New York Times*. The latter dream came true, but only because of my queer mysteries, as you'll see.

One of the stories in my Lambda-winning book, "Remind Me to Smile," featured a couple of academics in the English department of a university in Michigan who are faced with a bizarre situation: Stefan has gotten an ex-lover of his a job in the English department. His partner Nick is outraged by the news and by having to share an office with this "interloper." Worse still, Stefan invites the ex- to dinner and snarky Nick contemplates the menu: should he present something show-stopping, or sullen franks'n'beans?

The good ended happily and the bad unhappily, to quote Oscar Wilde. That was what this particular fiction meant, anyway.

My first editor at [St. Martin's Press](#), the legendary Michael Denny who championed many gay writers, was very fond of the story, but said over dinner one night that the guest should have been poisoned. He wasn't the only person who felt it needed a murder: I heard that from many fans as I toured around the U.S. with my book.

The suggestion intrigued me, but I wasn't sure what to do with it. And then a few years later, when I was wondering where I should take my career after St. Martin's had published the collection of short stories, a novel, and a study of Edith Wharton, Denny said, "Nick and Stefan could be fabulous amateur detectives." He also argued that I needed to employ my sense of humor in my work, since it was so serious. That's when [the Nick Hoffman series](#) was born. I had my main characters and I had an ideal setting perfect for satire. I had experienced firsthand how vicious academia could be, and was taken by the idea of skewering it in a series because academics take

themselves and their petty squabbles so seriously. Bald men arguing over a comb, as Borges has said.

I grew up at a time when it was still widely believed that gay men were promiscuous, immature, and couldn't sustain adult relationships, so that fueled my portrait of Nick and his partner. They were happy together, loving and supportive, and able to work in the same field (and same university) without professional jealousy. I plunged into reading crime novels as a student now, not just a fan, and studied Michael Nava, Marisa Piesman, Elizabeth George, Robert Barnard, Sue Grafton and Agatha Christie, who meant much more to me as an adult than as a teenager.

Timing was right. I was reviewing books for *The Detroit Free Press* and the book editor proposed I do a monthly column on crime fiction, which she knew was one of my favorite genres. I was inundated with the books, a big box to sort through coming to my house every single month and I was exposed to crime writers I might not have found on my own. I studied even the ones I didn't end up reviewing for various reasons, learning as much for failures in the genre as successes. One thing I promised myself and my future readers: I would avoid sleuths who don't get changed by what happens to them. In far too many mysteries and thrillers, the protagonist discovers a body and then goes off for breakfast at a diner as if nothing's happened.

And I got some good advice along those lines when I first met Walter Mosley in Houston because our book tours overlapped. We talked about ways to keep a series from becoming routine. He said his strategy was to take the series through historical changes, and see how they affected Easy Rawlins.

In the Nick Hoffman series, Nick ages and is definitely changed by the deaths he encounters. His relationship with Stefan develops, too. Depicting a loving gay couple

over time, and under stress, has been one of the joys of this series. The world has changed a lot, too, since the series began in the 90s, so it's been fun to chart those social changes in the mystery format. As the former owner of Aunt Agatha's mystery bookstore in Ann Arbor, Michigan has said, mysteries aren't just good vehicles for social commentary, they're time capsules.

Mystery writing has brought me a new fan base and made me a better teacher, too, and I've been fortunate to teach mystery fiction in classes, workshops, and online. The series has had more impact than I would have guessed, putting me on the map in ways I never expected. The *New York Times Book Review* took notice, especially relishing the academic milieu. That's how a writing career goes: the unexpected is always your companion. Of course, that's what drives mysteries too.