

Writing Mysteries Can Be Murder

**Based on the Novel *Hazardous Duty*
By Christy Barritt**



Contains audience interactive script, director's notes, hints
and a time line

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Writing Mysteries Can Be Murder

Scene 1

After the audience is seated

Characters except for Detective Adams enter and are seated just as any other audience member is. Before the detective begins they must “set their scene”. They may do this by remarks made to audience members or to each other. (See individual character information for possible pre-show remarks and activities)

Host of the event:

I want to thank you all for coming to “Writing Mysteries Can Be Murder” based on the novel Hazardous Duty by Christy Barritt. What you are about to participate in is an audience interactive mystery dinner theater. The action does not take place on a stage but everywhere in this room. The characters appear to be audience members like yourselves.

Now, imagine we are waiting for author Christy Barritt to arrive to autograph books. She is scheduled to arrive at any time. She’ll be glad to answer questions about being an author, a worship leader, even a Christian. She’s driving here from Chesapeake, Virginia just to be with us. I expect her here at any minute.

Detective:

Excuse me. I’m afraid there is a problem.

Detective will get the audience’s attention. He will explain he is Detective Adam’s, on loan from the Norfolk, VA Police Department assigned here for a special investigation. There has been an accident involving the car Christy Barritt is driving, possibly the brakes failing and she will be delayed. (Other characters at their table should loudly mumble things like “Christy deserves to die”, “She’s got it coming after what she did to me” or “Good.” They should not be heard further away than another table at the most and definitely not carry as far as the detective)

Detective:

“Ladies and gentlemen. You are probably unaware of this but this is only the last of several suspicious “accidents” involving Christy Barritt lately. They began with a fire of unknown origin in her kitchen a few days ago. We believe that someone wants her dead and I have reason to believe that that someone may be in this room right now.

I will need your help. I am going to ask that each one of you provide me with assistance as I investigate this matter. Keep your eyes and ears open. You may hear something of bearing upon this case. In the New Testament we are told that the heart can be full of bitterness, greed, selfish ambition, lust and even murder and that out of the heart, the mouth speaks. Listen for clues.

Take a look around. You may notice something suspicious. There are people you know – but how well do you know them? There are probably people you don't know. You should get to know them before the evening is over. Feel free to question anyone here since you are my assistants. Feel free to eaves drop on conversations as needed to solve this case before Christy gets hurt or even murdered.

Motive and opportunity are keys to crime solving. Ask yourself what motive some of the suspects might have for wanting Christy dead. What opportunity would they have had to commit murder? What means would they and could they have used to try to kill her.

Should you notice someone or something suspicious, please come and talk to me about it. I intend to get to the bottom of this before this event is over with. We'll have to start without Christy.

Turn things over to the host to explain how the meal will be served. The host should feel free to urge people to co-operate with the investigation and the detective in anyway possible.

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Scene 2
After dinner

Detective:

Ladies and Gentlemen, if I may have your attention again. I appreciate those of you who reported some interesting things to me. There are quite a few suspicious people here tonight and I intend to arrest someone before the night's activities conclude.

There are too many suspects to take down to the station so I'm going to question some of those suspects now. I want to narrow down who should be arrested. I know this is not regular police protocol to interview suspects in a public forum like this but these are unusual circumstances. I need you to help me decide who to arrest. Listen to what they have to say and help me decide who to arrest and detain. After all the suspects have been questioned I'll ask you to vote for the suspect you think I should arrest.

Detective then describes each of the attempts on Christy's life thus far. You'll need to compile this list based on what characters you have involved and what their corresponding opportunity and means are.

The list may include:

Car brakes tampered with

Cobra in the backyard or rattlesnake

Fire in the kitchen

Peanut brownies on the arriving as a gift

Detective then calls the name of the suspect and asks him or her to stand for the interview. Interview in any order you choose. Be sure to cover character's background, possible opportunity that links to one of the attempts on Christy's life and the suspect's motive. Other characters should interrupt adding incriminating information that the suspect does not volunteer.

Below is a summary of what possible characters might have for motive and opportunity.

The detective then starts questioning suspects, audience, etc, (Go in any order. After a prime suspect/character is done talking it is an opportunity to involve the audience by asking the people sitting next to them if they know the character and if they overheard anything they said that might have bearing on this case.

Mildred

1) Questioning Mildred, comes out about her husband doing time for arson

2) *Christy is terrible for giving her such a hard time with the arson, no parents for Keisha*
Denies knowing anything about the grease fire
Suggests it's the detective, probably jealous he's not the Brad Pitt one

Keisha

Keisha asks "Why do bad things happen to good people like my grandpa?"

Sierra

Denies knowing anything about the brownie, uses acorns. Hates being a vegan. Bill could have done it while drunk and not remembered. Maybe the detective is upset he isn't another Brad Pitt. How did he get assigned to a Suffolk beat anyway? Pulling strings?

Bill

Hates his situation, ex, only 2 drinks at the Christmas party (everyone keep in the snide asides that to him everyday is Christmas, and Candace about he could have done it when he was drunk and not remembered)

Detective

Ladies and gentlemen. It is now time for you to do some investigating on your own and for dessert. As my assistants you have permission to question each other. I'm available to assist you as well. (Instruct audience how desert will be served)

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Scene 3
After dessert

Detective gets the group's attention.

Detective:

Ladies and gentlemen, I have received word that although Christy's injuries are not serious she will be unable to attend tonight's event. I, like you, are disappointed. Nevertheless, we have a job to finish.

You have met the suspects. I hope you have carefully considered the evidence presented and done some digging on your own. Decide whom, if any of the suspects, should be formally detained for questioning by the police. I'm going to ask you now to vote for one and only one suspect, the one you think most likely attempted to murder Christy.

Remind the audience they are about to vote for who to detain. He then summarizes about each regular character. Summary includes opportunity and motive for one of the attempts on Christy's life. Audience members are not part of the cast but who have been involved as suspects should be summarized about as well. Tell the suspect you are speaking about to "please stand so the audience, or should I say jury, gets one last look at you. They may need to connect a face with your names."

Have the audience vote for whom to detain. You may do this by a show of hands or having people stand.

Detective:

Let me just double check these figures..... *Acknowledge that your cell phone, which has been turned to vibrate, has just gone off. Ask the audience to hold the noise down since this seems to be an important call. As you "take the call" from Christy's husband Scott, you'll need to say "Hmmm", "Uh huh". "I see" etc with pauses between to make the phone call look realistic.*

Detective announces the call was from Scott Barritt, Christy's husband, who has confessed to being involved in the incidents. Explain Scott confessed that the fire in the kitchen was an accident while Steve was cooking. When he saw Christy's reaction he decided to fabricate other attempts on her life in order to inspire her for her next book.

He did not know he had tampered with the brake line enough to cause an accident. He'd meant to hook the car horn to the brakes so it would blare every time she stepped on the brakes. He was only trying to help her write her next book. He apologizes to everyone here for the inconvenience. Then notice your cell phone is ringing again.

Detective:

Hello, Christy? *(Pause to tell audience it is Christy Barritt on the phone)* I'm sure this is a relief to find out these attempts were indeed just "inspiration" not actual attempts on your life. *(Pause)*

It doesn't make you feel better? You love these characters you created? *(Pause)* Why you're right. I would feel terrible too if the people I created turned on me. *(pause)* I hope you feel better soon. Thanks for calling.

Another character from the show:

You know what? In many ways we are like characters rebelling against our creator. I guess that's how God feels about us sometimes. God made us yet we are often unhappy with how he made us or what role he wants us to play in this life. I'm sure it hurts God a great deal when we do that complain or rebel.

Detective:

I'm sure it does too. He created us and wants us to be right with him. If you are not right with God I hope you will make it a priority to get right.

Optional: Point out ministers, etc who may be present and willing to talk to people interested in becoming right with God. A more extensive optional ending is included in director's notes

Another Character from the show:

We want to acknowledge the people who prepared our meal. Let's give them a round of applause. I'm going to introduce the cast to you. *(This character introduces each cast member (Mildred was played by.....) doing the detective last.*

Detective:

Thanks the audience for attending. Cast takes a company bow.

Writing Mysteries Can Be Murder

Director's Notes

Brief overview of “Writing Mysteries Can Be Murder”

What could be more fun than eating and solving a mystery? Eating, solving a mystery and making new friends! Audience interactive mystery dinner theaters do all three making them a fun adventure for all.

The plot of the show: The audience gathers for a book signing by Christian author Christy Barritt. Her arrival is delayed by an attempt on her life. As the mystery unfolds the audience meets various characters from her novels, all with opportunity and motive to see her dead. Who did it?

The audience is enlisted to assist the detective in solving the crime. Some of the audience may even become suspects themselves. After dessert the audience votes for which character(s) to arrest and detain. An optional ending for Christian groups performing this brings the mystery to a close while reminding the audience that being in a right relationship with our creator is essential.

Plot is broken into 3 scenes. One before dinner, one between dinner and dessert and the last after dessert is served. It can be adapted for any occasion as best suits a producer's individual situation.

The Characters

More Structured Characters

These characters have their motive and opportunity defined for you and actors must simply build upon the foundation already set by pulling from what's already written in the novel. The characters appear throughout the novel so the actors should have read the entire novel, done a character study and put together costume, dialogue, mannerisms and props suggested by the text.

Below each character is motive and opportunity they use. In some cases there are multiple motives or opportunities. Use one or both as you decide. Avoid having multiple characters with the same motive or opportunity as this bores the audience.

Candace Mills, Ambitious campaign manager for Michael Cunningham

Motive: She's been painted as a bad person, should have been a candidate herself not just a campaign manager

Pre show ideas: Constantly getting calls on cell phone and talking about the campaign, asks people if they plan to vote for Ed Laskin or Michael Cunningham. Blows them off if they don't know which senate race she is talking about. Comes across as pushy and abrasive.

Opportunity: Candace will refuse to say where she was the night the fire started in the kitchen which will cast suspicion on her. Another character can announce she was probably with Michael Cunningham because they are having an affair.

Michael Cunningham, Senatorial candidate and Gloria's (the corpse) husband

Motive: Painted as a bad person (*Do NOT use the fact he is killed late in the book. That is a surprise killer for the audience*)

Pre show ideas: Ask people what they want in a candidate then convince them you're that candidate

Opportunity: Powerful person, people would do it for him

Sierra, Asian American animal rights activist

Motive: Isn't allowed to eat meat, jealous of Gabby's cool boyfriends

Pre show ideas: Wonders what vegetarian options will be available. Asks people what their favorite vegetarian recipe is. Asks them what "animal companions" (not pets) they have. Talks about how wonderful acorn brownies are. Talks about how we must save the endangered species.

Opportunity Peanut brownies that showed up on Christy's door step

Bill McCormic, Radio talk show host on his way to alcoholism

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Motive: Who wants to have a wife that leaves him and an alcohol problem?
Pre show ideas: Asks if they are selling wine or mixed drinks somewhere or where the bar is. Asks what radio station people listen to and why they like it. Talks about why his station and show are the best and tries to convince people to listen to his program.
Opportunity Broken bottle of wine on Christy's front porch

Mildred, Wife of Harold

Motive: Christy set her husband up for a crime he didn't do and keeps dragging his past arson up; nothing in the books to let Mildred know how many or what the names of her children are – all she knows is she has twin grandchildren with no last names
Pre show ideas: Takes candles or flammable liquid from purse or pocket, Talks to Keisha or Donovan about eating all they can because with their grandfather in jail they don't have much food in the house.
Opportunity Set the fire in the kitchen, has matches or a lighter on her person

Harold, Gabby's grandfatherly assistant, ex con and husband of Mildred.

Motive: Hated being in jail the first time, now is an innocent man in jail
Pre show ideas: Asks people if they know a good bails bondsman or criminal attorney
Opportunity: Was with Gabby earlier that day and has no alibi for where he was at the time of the fire. Set the fire in the kitchen, has matches or a lighter on his person

Do NOT use Riley, Gabby, Veronica and Parker. They have detailed physical descriptions (and trust me, finding a Brad Pitt look alike to play Parker would not be easy). The permission to use this script and concept expressly forbids you to do so.

Less Structured Roles

As the saying goes – “There are no small parts, only small actors. The following roles have less description in the text and therefore have greater flexibility in casting and more latitude in dialogue developed. In the hands of a creative actor and director these roles can be tailored to fit an actor's personal testimony while still moving the plot along and providing a believable suspect that the audience will enjoy.

These are a challenge as you must provide plausible opportunity and motive that does not contradict anything in the novels nor give away the plot of a novel for anyone who has not read the book yet. We have listed ideas below. When you select characters avoid having more than one with the same combination of motive and opportunity or avoid having more than two total characters with identical motive or identical opportunity

Senator Ed Laskin

Motive: Hates working in politics and wished he could have a low maintenance daughter

Pre show ideas: Ask people who they plan to vote for and show a “photograph” of their beautiful daughter who is a lawyer.

Opportunity: Has the power and money to have hired anyone to kill Christy by any means discussed.

Mrs. Cunningham, Michael Cunningham’s white haired mother (pg 92-94)

Motive: Why did my son have to suffer so much in the book – he’s a widower, in the hospital

Pre show ideas:

Opportunity: Could have dropped off those peanut brownies knowing Christy is allergic to peanuts.

Gabby’s lab partner in physics 101 (Brief reference that she had one, nothing else mentioned)

Motive: Hates having such a small part in the book

Pre show ideas: Asking if any brought gunpowder, sulfuric acid or other chemicals “just in case”, talking about current events in science.

Opportunity: Could have caused a fire, chemical explosion, placed a bomb, anything chemistry related

Car repair shop owner (pg 121)

Motive: Why did I have to be blackmailed into doing such awful things?

Pre show ideas: Ask around for a good criminal lawyer who works cheap. Ask people if they need work done on their cars because you need some quick cash for an upcoming trial.

Opportunity: cut the brake lines

Older woman working in the law offices of Michael Cunningham (pg 189)

Motive: Wanted to grow up to work (fill in the location, preferably something outdoors or in a wild untamed country with a profession that contrast with office work. Forest Ranger, Navy Seal, pilot, hurricane tracker, astronaut all work well) not work in a boring office shuffling papers all day

Pre show ideas: Complain about how Christy made a lot of extra work for you but refuse to say how. It’s confidential.

Opportunity: You could have sent her brownies or

Lawyer in charcoal suit (pg 189)

Motive: Wanted to grow up to be (fill in the profession) not a lawyer

Pre show ideas: Pass out fake business cards, interact with characters looking for a lawyer, discuss what a terrible tragedy happened to Michael Cunningham

Opportunity: Just about anything you choose consistent with a lawyer

Robert Brown, publicist (pg 194)

Motive: Christy gave a soft sticky handshake as his only description

Pre show ideas: Ask people what they think of the upcoming election between Ed Laskin and Michael Cunningham. If they are unaware or confused mention you must not be doing your job getting the word out and blame it on Christy for not making you (smarter, harder working, able to work with your staff)

Opportunity: Could have done just about anything

Lela, middle aged Christian Latino crime lab worker (pg 222)

Motive: Would have rather had another job or be young in the book

Pre show ideas: Talk about recent local crimes in the news and how you helped solve past crimes. Ask people if they know their blood type them mutter "Can't be this suspect"

Opportunity: Possibly set the fire or rigged a chemical explosion at her house

James O'Connor, Barbara's ex, full beard, bald head (pg 231)

Motive: Why did I have to have such a horrible wife?

Pre show ideas: Ask people if they have used any dating services lately or could recommend a good one

Opportunity: Could have left beard hairs at Christy's house or a threatening letter about how terrible women are

Keisha/Donovan, blonde kindergarten age grandchildren of Mildred and Harold

Motive: Who are my parents? Why don't we have last names? Why did Christy let bad things happen to a good person like my grandfather?

Pre show ideas: Sits with Mildred or Harold and asks things like "When will I ever get a last name", "I wish I had parents", "I hate grandpa being arrested."

Opportunity: None

Pre-show and during the show character confrontations:

Ed Laskin and Michael Cunningham argue over who's the best candidate, Candace and other's in Michael's office can jump in on Michael's side

Harold and Mildred can talk back and forth about his unjustified arrest and how without him working they won't make house payments.

Lela, the physics partner, etc can discuss chemical explosions, recent crimes involving fire or chemicals or the best way to make and place a pipe bomb.

All characters can talk to each other about these:

Why do you want her dead?

How would you do it?

What characters do you like, dislike?

Argue over who's been treated the worst

Suggestions for **Writing Mysteries Can Be Murder**

Casting

The detective has the largest and hardest role. It can be simplified by having him carry a notebook and pencil as if he is jotting down or referring to notes. The detective can have some lines, cues, an outline of the plot, etc in the notebook and the audience need never know.

If you use both Mildred and Harold they need to have their stories fit like a glove. If the audience asks too many questions off the topic (like what color car do you have, what year did you get married) in an attempt to “catch” them off guard, I suggest they both redirect the conversation back on track. They can always quip “How can you be concerned about something so trivial at a time like this. Focus on proving our innocence!”

Less structured characters can be minor characters or in the hands of a skilled improvisational performer who is willing to fill in the gaps, a major character.

Rehearsal

How many rehearsals you need depends on how comfortable and adept your group is at improvisational acting (and how much you are charging the audience.). You may want to have the first rehearsal simply be a time to do some role playing, gather suggestions and try a few out. You may want to work through character studies together.

A lot of the fun is coming up with your own bits that are funny. Give characters the chance to try things out in practice to see if they work and if other cast members have suggestions for tweeking them.

Misc.

Do NOT let anyone develop dialogue that gives away the ending or too much of the plot of any Gabby Sinclair novel. The audience should NOT know who is the killer in either novel from what you say and do. The audience should NOT know who either Gabby or Riley is dating at the end of Hazardous Duty or Suspicious Minds.

Christy Barritt

Christy Barritt may be available to attend your event in person. Contact her at christybarritt@cox.net. It can't hurt to ask and she just might be in your area.

Host time line

Hosting a mystery dinner theater is not as hard as you might imagine. Here it is in a nutshell:

Read the book with friends, choose characters, select a date and time, set a menu and ticket price, publicize for 4 weeks, rehearse, sell tickets, have the show

Menu/Food

Buffets are the best since it gets the audience up and mixing. You should have multiple lines. For every 25 people have a line. This can be done by having people go down both sides of tables or having multiple tables in different locations. (Salads, drinks, main course, desserts)

Tables can be preset with settings (paper and plastic aren't as noisy as metal and china). If you do use china and metal tablecloths help dampen the noise. Butter, rolls, salads etc can be placed ahead of time.

If the menu is a selling point, be sure to include it in your publicity.

Music/Sound/lighting

Not necessary but can add to the atmosphere. Please make sure it can be turned off or way down so it doesn't interfere with the audience hearing the show. Special lighting isn't needed. Rule of thumb – it's a mystery, so dim the lights some to set atmosphere. If you want to do something special like candles on the table – go for it.

Optional ending

The following ending provides a more explicit Christian message.

Another character from the show:

You know what? In many ways we are like characters rebelling against our creator. I guess that's how God feels about us sometimes. God made us yet we are often unhappy with how he made us or what role he wants us to play in this life. I'm sure it hurts God a great deal when we do that complain or rebel.

Detective:

The difference is we did murder our creator in the form of his son Jesus Christ. The good news is we can be reconciled to him I'm going to introduce the cast to you. A few of our cast would like to drop character and share a bit with you how they became reconciled with God through Jesus death

Each cast member that wishes gives an example from their own life, how they have rebelled against God at one point or another and how they became right with God. Cast members who are not comfortable with personal narratives can share a scripture or indicate their willingness to talk one to one with any audience members who would like to discuss their relationship with God.

Another Character from the show:

We want to acknowledge the people who prepared our meal. Let's give them a round of applause. Thank you all for coming. Good night

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If you have questions regarding putting together an audience interactive mystery dinner theater contact Kathy Applebee at
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