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Writing adventure fiction by Alison Morton

Alison writes [adventure thrillers](#) with a strong Roman theme set in an alternative timeline and featuring heroines leading the action.

Adventure fiction can mean several different things

A gladius point coming towards your neck

A woman defending a castle and her honour while the husband's elsewhere

A Glock in your face

Any of these induce:

- heart pounding,
- sweat running down your face and body
- visceral fear clenching your guts.

Terrifying certainly, but real life extreme circumstances are interspersed with

- long periods of muddle,
- boredom and
- cock-up

in between sharp peaks of action and danger

This gives authors a problem when getting to the heart of the story.

But how to write adventure fiction authentically (including the slow periods) but so it appeals to the reader?

Some things are common to every single story written.

Writing is a series of layers like a well-made gateau:

- Well-structured plot (the classic incident, three crisis points, the black moment, climax, resolution)
- Good grammatical prose
- Imaginative scenes and dialogue
- A plausible and consistent world – world building is one of my favourite things
- Good research – whenever and wherever your story is set, you will need to do your research. (If time, give RN example)
- Cracking pace but with a few slower scenes for the reader to take in the faster ones. This adds realism as well as space for micro summaries of the action so far!
- And in adventure fiction, you need a 'noble ideal' – save the world, rescue somebody or something from the bad guys, pursue a selfless quest.

But the thing that coats them and binds them together into a whole and which should be the first things the reader tastes are the **characters**.

This is often a neglected element in action adventure thrillers, but it's the most important one. However complex the plot, however exotic the setting or the time

period, however ripping the yarn, without good characters, you might as well not bother.

Why? Because characters have the power to bring emotion to the story; the reader must be made to engage on a visceral, primitive level for them, bite through their own lips when the character's heads are nearly blown off, cheer them on when they triumph, sigh they fall into their lovers' arms. Readers want to escape into a different world and experience emotions they wouldn't normally come near.

Even the toughest characters need a visible backstory and a semi-hidden backstory. Lee Child tantalises us with clues and little reveals about Jack Reacher throughout the series. We want to know more about what his background is and what drives him. I do the same with Roma Nova.:-)

Give your characters a **personal emotional life**, whether it's permanent or in passing. And do write any sex scenes with emotions rather than mechanics. We all know what generally happens, but it's feelings and the relationship or lack of it that count.

Walk your characters down a street in your setting. They may be a law enforcement officer from today, a Praetorian guard (ancient or modern), a nineteenth century soldier of fortune, a technospy, but they will all react to their location, they will anticipate going into action with fear, excitement, longing or reluctance.

And the villains? Please make them as complex as the heroines or heroes. Nobody likes cardboard.

A few practical tips

- To create a fast pace, use short paragraphs, short sentences, short words. These convey the breathlessness and speed of the action.
- For a fight, choose a location with only a narrow escape
- Don't give characters super-powers. Make them train hard and long. Allow them to have muscle strain, become breathless, have training accidents as well as injuries in action. Pain is allowed. And wounds don't heal in 24 hours...
- Check the weapons they use are realistic in the context of the setting whether real, historical or imaginary
- Sounds – vastly neglected. Echoes in a narrow passage, birdsong contrasting with resting before a military invasion, pinging of bullets, crash of falling masonry
- Smells: sweat, bad breath, blood, and other bodily fluids and products; hydrocarbons, burning, putrefaction; scents, vegetation, household smells
- Very truncated description and only when relevant to the action. But you still have to get it in.
- Snappy dialogue – it needs to be succinct, but relevant. Police, special forces and private eyes don't generally do Shakespeare. Robert Harris is excellent at this in Fatherland.

And my final surprise ingredient?

Twists and turns.

Do not write a boring, predictable adventure story. You don't need to go all Game of Thrones but you do have to produce some really **good** turns, preferably giving your protagonist a shock that nearly destroys them and where the reviewer says they didn't see *that* coming.

Happy writing!