

Crash & Burn: From the Physics of Auto Accident Reconstruction to the Fun of My Next Suspense Novel

The number one question asked of authors: where do you get your ideas. Trust me, there are days I wish I knew! Creativity can be a fickle beast, so the savvy writer learns to have a few tricks up her sleeve. Speaking for myself, research has become one of my favorite forms of inspiration. Looking for something fresh, challenging, and mind-boggling? Check out real life, where as the saying goes, truth is stranger than fiction.

Enter the Writers Police Academy. Hosted in North Carolina each September, this conference invites writers from all over the country to spend two days learning hands-on techniques from people with the coolest jobs ever: Homicide detectives, SWAT team snipers, search dog handlers, bomb squad technicians, emergency responders, and forensic gurus. Want to learn how to conduct a presumptive test for human blood? Check. Triage an accident scene? Deliver a high risk warrant? Confront a gunman in a crowded mall? Check, check and triple check. The Writers Police Academy is where authors go to play...and in my case, where my latest novel was born.

Crash & Burn started out the first morning of the Academy, watching firefighters literally tear apart a vehicle using the latest extraction tools. Peeling back roof like a sardine can, ripping off doors, popping the dash. In person, you get the full sensory experience. The sound of the groaning metal, the dull roar of multiple pneumatic tools. Tersely shouted orders as a team of emergency responders move quickly and efficiently to strip down a complex piece of machinery to its barest bones and reveal the crushed humans (crash test dummies) inside. Next up, of course, the rush of footsteps as the EMTs swoop in, strap down, and quickly cart each victim away.



Working a crash scene is a controlled adrenaline rush. Uniformed officers, firefighters and EMT all shoulder to shoulder, fighting against twisted metal and mortality's ticking clock. Then, car stripped, victims whisked away, there's almost a surreal hush. The skeleton of the vehicle sits abandoned. And the real work begins.

Enter the auto accident reconstructionist. Much as a homicide detective uses blood spatter and bullet holes to recreate the last moments of a person's life, a reconstruction

expert uses shattered glass and burnt rubber to recreate the moment of impact. Was the driver going too fast? Failing to brake? Or checking his or her cell phone as that sharp turn suddenly loomed ahead? Are we talking human error, mechanical error, or the ill-fated dash of a random deer?

I love a good puzzle, which is why I've always enjoyed writing suspense. So do reconstruction experts. Each crash scene provides its own riddle to be solved. And much as it is with other types of crime, eye witness testimony isn't nearly as reliable as sound science. Sure, Casual Observer A can say that Driver B braked at the last minute, but what does the tread marks on the road indicate, or the impact of the

fender against the guard rail? And of course, does that gibe with the information recorded on the car's own computer, the contemporary auto's equivalent of an airplane's black box?

Science and technology have come a long way. Using the basic laws of physics, combined with specialized tools such as the Total Station, an accident reconstructionist can model most crashes down to an impressive level of detail. Did the driver plunge over the cliff intentionally, versus falling asleep at the wheel? Was it Driver A's fault he slammed into Car B, or Driver B's fault she slammed into Car A? Nine times out of ten, an accident reconstructionist can tell you exactly what happened.



Which of course, got my creative wheels spinning. What if you had an accident which may or may not be an accident? Is such a thing even possible given today's forensic tools? Exactly what might that look like? A puzzle. I had an idea for a puzzle, and with the help of Eric Holloman, auto accident reconstructionist at the Writers Police Academy, I quickly went to work on the pieces. We picked a real car. We drew up a real stretch of road. And Eric discussed a lot of real physics, though I'll confess that wasn't quite as much fun for me.

We designed an accident which may or may not be an accident. For a woman who may or may not be crazy. And who is looking for a child who may or may not exist.

Which is how I like to start writing my suspense novels. With a lot of real life inspiration, married to real world investigative techniques, in order to create a puzzle where I don't even know what's going to happen next. I have a crime, I have many characters, and nine months of furious typing later, I hopefully have a novel, *Crash & Burn*, which will also keep you guessing till the bitter end.



At which point, it's time to start the next novel. But that's okay. The Writers Police Academy has been good to me. Especially that last class on how to get out of various physical restraints (see left)... I hope you enjoy *Crash & Burn*, available February 2015. And as for 2016, given how much fun I'm having doing the research, let's just say good things come to those who wait. Happy reading!

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