

Too Many Plots Spoil the Broth

Sometimes there can be too much of a good thing.

Consider a proposed mystery, *Devil at the Dinner Table*. The theme is how a couple, in their fifties, cope with major changes.

Minette and Dougie Shaw live in Drumheller, Alberta. Dougie owns a feed-and-hardware store. Minette is active in her church group and does volunteer work.

Major plots:

1. The RCMP arrest Dougie for a banker's murder. To clear her husband, Minette solves the murder.
2. She discovers that her husband's business is almost bankrupt, and starts her own business to support her family.
3. Stress jeopardize Minette and Dougie's marriage.

Subplots:

1. Dougie covers up that he has diabetes. His poor health contributed to his business failure.
2. Minette's cousin-from-hell, Eustacia, arrives for the Christmas holidays. Desperate for money to start her business, Minette begs Eustacia to be her partner.
3. When their daughter, Jade, comes home from university on Christmas break, Minette tells her there's no more money for tuition.
4. It's a Christmas story, with a family reunion.

Consider this:

Gone with the Wind had one major plot and one subplot. Main plot: Scarlet O'Hara survives the American Civil War and Reconstruction. Subplot: She learns that men are real people, not toys. Everything in the 1,024 pages relates to those two themes.

Our book under discussion, with three major plots, and four subplots is an ambitious—and probably unachievable—goal. The most important plot in a mystery is a given: solving the murder. Since relationships also figure prominently in this book, the second main plot focuses on the relationship between Minette and Dougie. Two strong major plots—double the number in *Gone with the Wind*—may be all one book can handle.

In plot and subplot descriptions, words such as “and,” “but,” and multiple sentence construction, usually indicate multiple, separate subplots. Breaking down the Devil's list, uncovers double the number of original subplots:

1. Minette discovers that Dougie's business is almost bankrupt.
2. She starts her own business to try to save it.
3. Minette learns that Dougie has been covering up that he's been diagnosed with diabetes.
4. Part of the reason the business is failing is his poor health.
5. Minette's cousin-from-hell, Eustacia, arrives unexpectedly to spend Christmas with them.
6. In order to have enough money to start her own business, Minette has to ask Eustacia to be her partner.
7. When Jade comes home from university on Christmas break, Minette has to tell her there isn't enough money for her to finish her engineering degree.
8. It's a Christmas story, with a family reunion.

Trust me, eight subplots are too many. Ways to winnow down subplots include determining the difference between an incident and a subplot; refusing to two-step in plot development, and focusing only on the

subplots that relate directly to the main plots.

An incident is one emotionally-charged event, which may be crucial to the story, but the reader doesn't follow it as a thread throughout the book. Bonnie Blue Butler's death was in an incident, not a subplot. Incidents both turn the current plot, and sow seeds for future books.

Jade learning there is no money her tuition is an incident, rather than a subplot. Jade can either be emotionally supportive to her parents, or flounce out in heated anger. In either case, in a series, no resolution is needed in this book. Let the unanswered question of what will Jade do now hang there, and pick it up in the next book.

On the other hand, a subplot runs through a book, like a ripple of pink fabric running through an otherwise blue-and-green quilt. Eustacia coming for Christmas makes a nice accent subplot, used for comic relief.

Two-stepping belongs on the dance floor, not in subplots. Minette learns that Dougie's business is failing, and convinces Eustacia to be her partner, and founds her own business is not only two-stepping, it's three-stepping. Each element could be the focus of one book. It's important to bring series characters along, using baby steps. Finding out the business is in trouble is enough for one book. Stay there. Dive deep into all the implications of a fifty-something wife, with no job skills, learning her financial security just disappeared. Look at it from different angles. Wring it out for all it is worth. Let it fill the entire book.

Finally, focus only on subplots, which relate directly to the main plots. How much does Dougie's diabetes contribute to the story? More important, how much of the book's word budget will the author spend on visits to the doctor, Minette learning to cook diabetic meals, conflicts between Minette and Dougie about is he or isn't he doing what the doctor said, and the inevitable diabetic reaction at the climax of the book. Could it be a subplot best put away until a later book?

Books set in December can't help but be Christmas stories, but adding a family reunion on top of everything else is over the top. However, Eustacia's visit can tie that subplot firmly back into existing material.

So a revised, and manageable, plot list for *Devil at the Dinner Table* might look like this.

Main plot:

1. When her husband is accused of murder, Minette Shaw finds the real murderer.

Subplots:

1. Minette discovers that the family business is almost bankrupt, and her future financial security has disappeared.
2. Minette's cousin-from-hell, Eustacia, arrives unexpectedly to spend the Christmas season.