

Your Writing Saves Lives (if you use this technique)

Hi Bookfoxers,

Agatha Christie's novel "The Pale Horse" described thallium poisoning in fantastic detail.

Christie described a person suffering from lethargy, black-outs, numbness, slurred speech, and weakness of the limbs.

She described it so accurately that fifteen years after she published the novel, a nurse who was treating a sick one-year-old wondered if this little girl might have thallium poisoning. The nurse noticed that all the little girl's symptoms matched up with Christie's description.

The nurse suggested it to the doctors, who had been bewildered, and lo and behold, they found the baby had thallium in her system.

Apparently, the little girl's parents had been using thallium to kill cockroaches in their house, and it had poisoned their daughter.

Now, your attention to detail might not save lives (or it might! Who knows?).

But either way, you should be layering tons of realistic details and observations into your fiction.

I was re-reading Hemingway's "Farewell to Arms" the other week, and I was struck by how masterfully he chooses details.

In one scene, a bomb blows up while a man is eating a piece of cheese. And Hemingway describes how the bomb kicks up dust that covers the cheese:

- "I ran after him, holding the cheese, its smooth surface covered with brick dust ... I took out my knife and pared off the dirty outside surface of the cheese."

I mean, this is such a telling detail only a man who lived through WWI could have known it (and Hemingway did work as an ambulance driver in the war).

Later on, the protagonist in the novel is drinking straight from a bottle of wine and notices the bottom of the bottle has created ring indentations on his stomach.

- "I took little drinks, making rings on my stomach from holding the bottle there between drinks, and watched it get dark outside over the roofs of the town."

Hemingway was an alcoholic (and actually named more than 30 types of liquor in the novel) so this might be another detail drawn straight from personal experience.

Either way, it's those tiny, accurate details that convince the reader they are reading something true, rather than something made up.

So please, put in those telling details inside your book, details that are true to life, and people will resonate with your fiction (and perhaps you'll even save a life).

My fiction saves lives,

John Matthew Fox