

## Opening on the Past: The Challenge of Writing Historical Series Fiction

by Susan Spann

The start of a novel is always critically important, but the challenges multiply when the book is part of an ongoing series.

I write the Shinobi Mysteries, featuring ninja detective Hiro Hattori and his Portuguese Jesuit sidekick, Father Mateo. Although the books are standalone adventures, in the sense that readers don't have to have read the previous installments in order to enjoy each book, a large percentage of my readers are also returning fans of the series—which creates some additional challenges in writing the opening pages.

In addition to hooking the reader, the opening pages have to accomplish some vital goals, for series fans and returning readers alike. Let's look at the most important ones, in the context of my most recent Shinobi mystery, *Flask of the Drunken Master*:

### **1. Engaging and orienting readers in the setting—in this case, 16<sup>th</sup> century Kyoto, Japan.**

Historical novels present a special challenge, because they require immersing readers in a new, and often unfamiliar, time and place. I want the reader to know that “Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore”—and to know it immediately.

The opening line of *Flask of the Drunken Master* doesn't mess around:

*“Halt!” The armored samurai stepped forward to block the bridge. “No one crosses the Kamo River without identification. State your names and your business in Kyoto.”*

We already know we're in Kyoto at a time where armored samurai patrolled the streets. The exact year isn't important—in fact, it never appears in the novel (“only the jacket copy knows for sure”)—but the reader knows from moment one that we're in medieval Japan, and that's close enough for detective work.

This line also does double duty by creating tension in the scene and opening the way for the second mission-critical task:

### **2. Introducing new readers to my detectives, ninja assassin-turned-bodyguard Hiro Hattori, and Father Mateo, the Jesuit priest Hiro is sworn to protect.**

Series fiction allows the author to “cheat” a little by using secondary clauses when introducing returning characters. I try to avoid too much cheating, though, so in *Flask of the Drunken Master*, I opted to allow my detectives to introduce themselves:

*Hiro Hattori gestured to the Jesuit at his side. “Father Mateo Ávila de Santos, a priest of the foreign god, from Portugal. I am Matsui Hiro, his interpreter and scribe.”*

*After a pause, Hiro added, “Our business in the capital has not changed since yesterday. As you know, we live just up the road.”*

Returning readers will know that Hiro is only masquerading as an interpreter—in truth, he's a ninja assassin (in Japanese, a *shinobi*) hired to protect the priest. However, the samurai's demand for identification offers a perfect opportunity to “introduce” my characters to the reader—literally.

New readers get caught up on Hiro's true identity two sentences later:

*Hiro considered pointing out that only a fool asked for identification from men he recognized. However, he didn't bother. Men who followed orders blindly didn't respond to logic, and Hiro, a shinobi assassin, didn't waste time on fools.*

Although I'm using the "trick" of a subsidiary clause to inform new readers (and remind returning ones) that Hiro is "a shinobi assassin," I've buried that piece of information within a sentence that drives the story by letting Hiro react to the samurai's challenge. Blending "telling" tricks with reactions that "show" the character's personality helps prevent the sentence from feeling like an information dump.

### **3. Filling readers in on what's happened to the characters since the last installment of the series.**

Fans of the Shinobi Mysteries want to know what happened to Hiro and Father Mateo since the last installment. The series is set in the 1560s, during a tumultuous time in Japanese history, and the second book in the series, *Blade of the Samurai*, involved a plot to assassinate the shogun.

Putting my characters face to face with an armored samurai in the street suggests that the situation in Kyoto has become more militarized since the last installment, and Hiro's next comment confirms it:

*"You've stopped us every morning for a week," Hiro said, "and yet, our names and business have not changed."*

The fact that armored samurai are making people identify themselves on a daily basis suggests to the reader that Kyoto is now under martial law—or, at least, under strict controls.

After a brief interlude in which Hiro reflects on Father Mateo's facility with the Japanese language, I drop another clue to the city's current status:

*"I have orders." The samurai glanced over his shoulder as if expecting to see someone behind him.*

*Hiro's attitude softened a fraction. Many men obeyed unreasonable orders out of fear, and Matsunaga Hisahide, the samurai who controlled Kyoto, inspired well-founded fear in all who served him.*

Returning readers will remember Matsunaga Hisahide from the previous novel, while new ones now know that a frightening samurai controls the city. In either case, the reader is now oriented to where we are in the story—and the series—and alerted to the fact that there's more going on in Kyoto than the murder the detectives are about to discover and solve.

Which brings me to the last—but by no means least important—of the challenges a mystery author faces in those first few pages:

### **4. Getting the detectives to the crime scene as fast as possible.**

*"Noodles," Hiro said.*

*The samurai's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Excuse me ... noodles?"*

*"Our business in Kyoto," Hiro said without a smile. "Do we have to show a travel pass to eat a morning snack?"*

After their confrontation with the samurai, Hiro and Father Mateo cross the Kamo River and head into Kyoto for a noodle breakfast from Hiro's favorite roadside vendor. Before they can finish ordering, they see the Kyoto police arresting their friend, Ginjiro the brewer, just down the road. A rival brewer has turned up dead in the alley outside Ginjiro's shop, and Ginjiro has reasons to want his rival dead.

I could have opened the novel in the road outside Ginjiro's shop, but that would have put the reader "too close" to the action without any context. By "backing it up" to the encounter on the bridge, I have the chance to establish setting (via the samurai), introduce the characters (in their own words—always a bonus) and tell the reader what's going on in the detectives' world.

From there, it's only a two-page walk to the crime scene, and a five-page walk to the murder victim's corpse—a journey that would have taken quite a bit longer, at a slower pace, if I hadn't been able to find a way to give that opening page quadruple-duty.

One of my favorite parts of writing a series is finding unique and effective openings that simultaneously hook readers into the action and anchor them into Hiro's world. It takes a little extra effort, but the results are definitely worth the time.



**Susan Spann** writes the Shinobi Mysteries, featuring ninja detective Hiro Hattori and Portuguese Jesuit Father Mateo. Her debut, *CLAWS OF THE CAT* (Minotaur, 2013), was *Library Journal's* Mystery Debut of the Month and a Silver Falchion finalist for Best First Novel. Her third Shinobi novel, *FLASK OF THE DRUNKEN MASTER*, released in July, and the fourth installment will release in 2016 from Seventh Street Books. Susan is the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers' 2015 Writer of the Year, and when not writing or practicing law, she raises seahorses and rare corals in her home aquarium. You can find her online at [www.SusanSpann.com](http://www.SusanSpann.com).