

Engaging Old and New Readers

Gigi Pandian

Writing a series is tough. I'm not talking about a lack new ideas to keep the books fresh. I mean the challenge of how to hook two different types of readers right away: existing readers, and those who've never before encountered my characters.

As an author who writes two not-quite-cozy mystery series, I want any reader who picks up one of my books to have a satisfying experience. How can I strike the balance for what will appeal to both old and new readers?

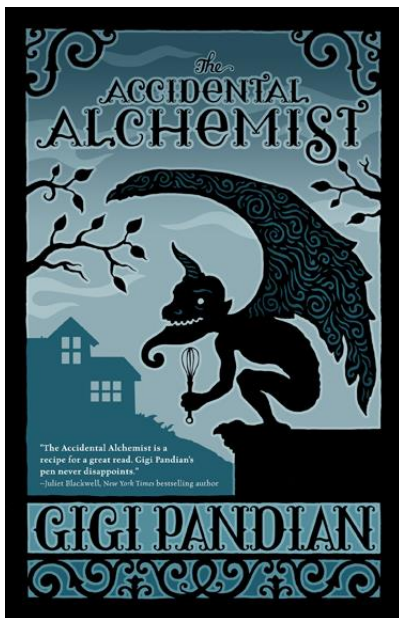
My secret is balancing these two elements:

- 1) **Set the scene vividly.** Entice new readers while making existing readers smile.
- 2) **Lead with an unanswered question.** Keep readers turning pages to get their answer.

Below, you'll find the first pages of the two books in my Accidental Alchemist mystery series, with my notes in **ORANGE**. I'm including both books here so you can see how I balanced these elements in both the first book in the series and in the follow-up that came out last week.

The Accidental Alchemist

First page of Accidental Alchemist Book 1 (Midnight Ink, 2015)



The once-beautiful Craftsman house was falling apart. Sloppily applied sections of wood covered several windows. A chunk of the roof was missing, a plastic tarp in its place to keep out the frequent Pacific Northwest rains. More exposed wall than lavender paint showed on the outer walls. And on the inside? Well, let's just say that the plumbing had seen better days—and I'm pretty sure those better days weren't any time during the previous century.

SETTING THE SCENE

In other words: *perfect*.

THIS UNEXPECTED REACTION ASKS A QUESTION:

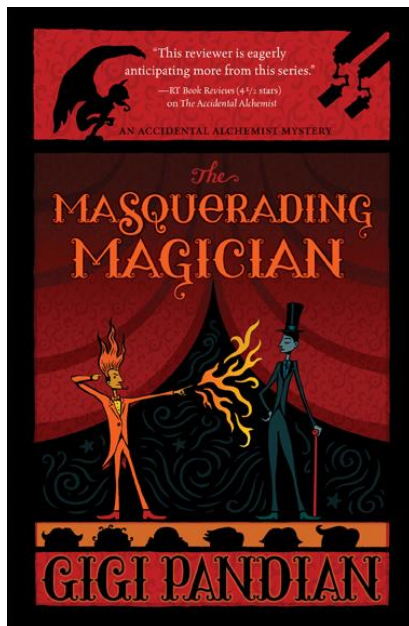
WHY ON EARTH WOULD A DILAPIDATED HOUSE BE PERFECT?

At least, it was perfect for what I had in mind. I smiled as I looked at the rundown structure through the window of my trailer. Finding this house in the artsy Hawthorne neighborhood of Portland, Oregon hadn't been easy. Real estate agents had a difficult time grasping the fact that I wanted a house in complete disrepair. ADDRESSING THE QUESTION THROUGH MORE SETTING, YET LEAVING THE QUESTION UNANSWERED

It was probably my own fault, because I didn't lie to them. I told them I wasn't a professional home renovator. Nor was I a house flipper. No, I wasn't a masochist either. But I left it at that, letting them think I was a single young woman with trendy dyed-white hair and a limited budget who loved a challenge. I didn't tell them I was someone who needed a residence where doing substantial construction wouldn't raise eyebrows—that I was someone who wanted to hide in plain sight. THE QUESTION IS NOW PARTLY ANSWERED, AND THE READER IS ASKED AN EVEN BIGGER QUESTION: WHY DOES THE CHARACTER WANT TO HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT?

The Masquerading Magician

First page of Accidental Alchemist Book 2 (Midnight Ink, January 2016)



Persephone & Prometheus's Phantasmagoria: A Classic Magic Show in the Modern World.

SETTING THE SCENE

The giant poster was illustrated in the style of Victorian Era stage magic posters. Two figures faced each other from opposite sides of a stage, the larger one in a tuxedo and top hat, the smaller impish figure in a devilish red suit. The taller tuxedoed figure held a wand, pointed upward toward an ethereal floating figure. The devilish man held a ball of fire in his hand. SETTING THE SCENE

CONTINUES, WITH A PLAYFUL ELEMENT OF MYSTERY THAT'S A CUE ABOUT THE TYPE OF MYSTERY THIS IS

I smiled to myself as Max and I made our way through the lobby, my fingers looped through his. Some things had changed since the Victorian era. The tuxedo-clad magician in the poster was a woman. Prometheus and Persephone were a

husband and wife magic act with equal billing. **QUESTIONS FOR OLD AND NEW READERS ALIKE. FOR OLD READERS: ARE ZOE AND MAX DATING? FOR NEW READERS: WHO'S MAX? I LET THE ACTION KEEP MOVING, NOT STOPPING TO EXPLAIN THEIR BACKSTORY, BUT LETTING IT UNFOLD NATURALLY.**

Their style reminded me very much of posters of King-of-Cards Thurston and Carter the Great, both of whom used ghost and devil imagery in their posters and shows to illustrate the motif that they were magicians able to control the spirit world. The ambiance felt more like Paris in 1845, on the day Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin took to the stage at the newly-built Palais Royal theater with his ingenious mechanical inventions and masterful sleight-of-hand. But this was a small theater near Portland, Oregon's Mt. Tabor, over 150 years later. Seeing that poster made me feel like I'd been transported back in time. **SETTING THE SCENE. EXISTING READERS CAN SEE THIS IS THE SAME TONE THEY ENJOYED IN BOOK 1. THE BIG UNANSWERED QUESTION FOR EXISTING READERS COMES TWO PAGES LATER – JUMPED TO BELOW.**

I should know. I attended Robert-Houdin's show over a century ago. **BIG UNANSWERED QUESTION FOR NEW READERS: HOW IS SHE STILL ALIVE?**

...

I tilted my head upward, toward the lights above the stage.

And froze.

It had definitely been a mistake coming here tonight. **BIG UNANSWERED QUESTION FOR ALL READERS**

With that, the scene is set and you know what you're getting—but you don't know the answers to the unanswered questions that I hope will keep you turning pages.



USA Today bestselling author **Gigi Pandian** is the child of cultural anthropologists from New Mexico and the southern tip of India. She spent her childhood being dragged around the world, and now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She writes the Jaya Jones Treasure Hunt mystery series (*Artifact*, *Pirate Vishnu*, and *Quicksand*) and the Accidental Alchemist mysteries (*The Accidental Alchemist* and *The Masquerading Magician*). Gigi's debut mystery novel was awarded a Malice Domestic Grant, the follow-up won the Left Coast Crime Rose Award, and her locked-room mystery short fiction has been nominated for Agatha and Macavity awards. Connect with Gigi on her [website](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and via her [email newsletter](#).