

## Michele Drier Makes Us Tense

by Heather Dodge Martin



Your protagonist approaches a closed door.  
What's behind it?

A lost child? A killer? A raging storm? An ex-lover?

Can you feel the tension?

Michele Drier, author of 18 books and speaker at the CWC-Sacramento December Network meeting, described tension as the curiosity readers experience when a character faces a decision point.

She urged writers to use tension judiciously throughout their stories to keep readers invested, moving the plot forward and deepening the characters.

### Types of Tension

While every genre of writing can employ tension, Drier noted that the type of tension may be genre specific. Action and adventure stories tend to contain *external tension*—a kidnapper, a thief, a gun pointed at the character's head—whereas romance leans more on *internal tension*, the stress characters feel inside, perhaps caused by miscommunications and interpersonal power plays. And every genre can contain what Drier called *general tension*: a historical or political event, a natural disaster, or some other precarious situation proceeding in the background. Two memorable examples Drier mentioned were the cliffside location of a house threatening to crumble into the sea, and a glassblowing studio full of molten glass. These inherently tense settings can ratchet up the emotion in a scene as well as affect the plot.

### Time and Tension

Tension in stories can appear either slowly or suddenly. Small sources of tension can be gradually layered into a character's experience, making them relatable for the reader. A medical condition, a bad marriage, or a character's own self-doubt can all create a sense of understandable pressure on the character's decision-making. A "ticking clock", some sort of approaching deadline within a story, can be a great tool for a writer to manipulate time as a tension-builder. Tension can also arise out of the blue, with the sudden appearance of an old high school crush, a social media stalker, or a high-speed chase that envelops a character without warning. Any situation that gives characters the opportunity to change their reality and shift their responses has the potential to add that "what if?" feeling.

## Tension Mistakes to Avoid

Drier cautioned writers not to continually jump from one high-action situation to another, without giving readers the chance to breathe. Too much external tension without space for the character's internal reactions can cause the reader to emotionally disconnect from the character and become bored despite the story's constant movement.

Another common tension mistake Drier sees writers make is over-explanation of potential conflicts. Readers must be inspired to wonder about the possibilities in a story, bringing their own imaginations, experiences, and truths. "Make it participatory," she urged. "Readers are half the equation; don't talk down to them."

## Tension Tips

Some final bits of advice from Drier on how to add tension:

- Use your own experience. Consider your actions and reactions; could your character experience these too?
- Look to your favorite writers. How do they establish and maintain tension?
- The absence of expected things can add as much tension as the presence of unexpected ones. Is the room strangely empty? Is the forest too quiet?
- Try ending each chapter with a *hook*, a single line that inspires curiosity for what comes next.

Learning to create and manage tension, what Drier calls "the backbone of stories", will help you engage readers and keep them up at night finishing your book. Now that's tense!

[Michele Drier](#) is the author of 18 books, including her latest, *Resurrection of the Roses: A Stained Glass Mystery*. Contact her at [micheledrier.me](mailto:micheledrier.me)

Heather Dodge Martin, a brand-new member of CWC Sacramento, writes women's fiction set in the 1970s. You can sign up for her author newsletter at [HeatherDodgeMartin.com](http://HeatherDodgeMartin.com).

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## Copyright for Authors

Saturday, January 25, 2025

Sierra 2 Community Center for the Arts & Community, Room 9.

2791 24th St., Sacramento, CA 95818

The presenter will be Steve Davis.

This will be an overview of copyright law, and the significance of registering your own copyright. Steve will then guide us through the registration process on the copyright website. The event does not entail personal or legal advice. It will serve as a hands-on overview and tutorial.

CWC members [register](#) with the access code "CWC" for the \$10 discount. You must sign up early to reserve your place and avoid disappointment.