

Almost Except for Everything

By

Reed Farrel Coleman

This past weekend (April 18, 19, 2009), I attended a new small mystery convention in Easton, Connecticut called Murder 203 (203 is the area code for a large part of Connecticut). It was put on by folks from the Westport and Easton libraries with the help of cozy author Rosemary Harris (*Pushing Up Daisies*, *The Big Dirt Nap*). The sites for the event itself were a local middle school and the Easton Library. The guest of honor was Linda Fairstein. Approximately eighty-five fans attended and thirty-three authors participated. Authors did not count against the number of attendees. The significance of these numbers—supplied to me by one of the organizers—will become clear later in the piece. The roster of authors, including SJ Rozan, Alison Gaylin, Karen Olson, Robert Ellis, DH Dublin, Parnell Hall, Jason Starr, James Benn, Sarah Weinman, Jane Cleland, Cathy Pickens, the aforementioned Rosemary Harris and many others, made for an interesting subgenre mix across the mystery spectrum.

The organizers and volunteers were very cheery, friendly, anxious to please. They had a green room for the authors. The book bags were lovely and well-stocked. The auction items were nicely turned out and fun. There was an easy to use, manageably-sized, and finely printed program guide. Everything down to the name badges and author cards were well done. Even the weather cooperated. The morning began with brief speeches by the organizers, a local politician, and Chris Grabenstein, the President of MWA/NY, who also served as the emcee. Chris called the roll of authors who were given a minute or two each to stand, introduce themselves, and briefly describe their work. A very nice touch that allowed for some light-hearted back and forth between the authors.

The panel topics were pretty much the old, familiar standards: How To Keep a Series Interesting, Private Eyes Are Watching, How to Keep a Plot Moving, Forensics, Darkness, Location, Location, Location..., Writing Memorable Villains, et al. Yet none of the panels was overcrowded with authors fighting to get a word in edgewise. The moderators all did fine work and all the panels were well attended given the total number of attendees. The amazing part was that there were three panels at a time. I'll get back to this later. Even the guest of honor interview, done at the end of the lunch break and which can be deathly boring to people who aren't fans of the GOH, was amazingly entertaining. SJ Rozan, filling in for Hank Phillipi Ryan, did a great job of bringing out Linda Fairstein at her charming and humorous best.

Later in the day, after the final Saturday panel, there was a cocktail party thrown at the Easton Library. There was music, the drinks were free and the food served was actually quite palatable. In fact, all the food served that day was better than the usual fare at these things. The authors and fans seemed to be in good spirits and still pretty energized. Inaugural events of any stripe can be nightmares and these folks did well. In all, I'd give very high marks to the organizers of Murder 203 on almost all counts.

Notice I used the word almost. Unfortunately, where the organizers missed mattered most to the authors. And largely, this had to do with book sales. While the organizers did nothing to openly discourage book sales, they didn't do much to encourage them either. The original plan was simply to have books on display, let the attendees purchase them if they wished, and then have them find the author either at an amorphous signing area or during the conference. Having experienced the pitfalls of this method, I stationed myself behind my books and handsold them. Clearly, most of the other authors in attendance had had similar experiences to mine and followed suit.

Understandably, the organizers limited the number of books per author to twenty. However, they didn't consult with the individual authors to determine which titles should be on hand and how to divide those titles into the twenty book limit. The problem was that Murder 203 was the first exposure that many of the attendees had to most of the authors. Because the organizers tended to order the last two titles in an author's series, it became a difficult sale. It's tough to sell people on the last two titles in a series because people want to read sequentially. Only the authors of stand-alones were insulated. Had the authors been consulted, they no doubt would have focused more on earlier titles in their series.

This brings me to another important point. There were way too many authors for only eighty-five attendees. You do the math. Let's say each attendee had a budget for book buying of forty dollars. It's a good bet that many are going to buy at least one of the guest of honor's books. After all, Linda was the star, the drawing card and probably responsible for a large percentage of these people attending. She should rightly be rewarded. However, using my arbitrary figure, this left only twenty dollars per attendee to use to purchase other books. Again, do the math. Twenty bucks doesn't go very far when you divide it by the thirty-two remaining authors. The number of authors also made for three tracks of panels. Again, do the math. With thirty-three authors and eighty-five attendees, it doesn't allow authors to reach a broad enough number of attendees at any one time.

What I found most alarming was the apparent disconnect between panel performance and sales. I've been doing this stuff long enough to know that there used to be a relationship between doing well on a panel and sales. Selling books is, at a basic level, much like selling cars or refrigerators. The salesperson is selling him or herself, not the product. Yet, with books, there is way more of a connection between the salesperson and the product. The appliance store salesperson didn't make the flat screen TV or refrigerator. With books, the seller is also the manufacturer and there is an intimate relationship between product and producer. Yet for all the laughs, applause, interesting answers my fellow panelists and I managed that day, I was surprised to see very slow book sales. Speaking only for myself, I can tell you that my sales would not have paid for my tolls, let alone the gas I used to drive up from Long Island. Okay, that's me. Maybe I wasn't as funny, charming or fascinating as I thought I was, but other authors in attendance with higher profiles than mine managed to sell only half the books I sold.

In all honesty, I am using Murder 203 to exemplify a disturbing trend I've noticed over the last two years. Yes, it is fair to say that some of the dip in sales is due to the nature of the economy. Only a fool would deny that. I am many things. A fool isn't one of them. But it goes beyond that. I find most distressing the disconnect between panel performance and sales. I am glad to be entertaining, to perform, to give straight lines to my fellow panelists, to make people laugh, to give thoughtful answers, but I am an author, not an entertainer. Entertainers are paid for entertaining. Authors are paid with sales. There once seemed to exist a tacit understanding between author and audience that buying books was the way to repay authors for doing a good job at a gig. I think this message has gotten lost in the sauce somewhere. I know several authors who have sworn off or who are seriously considering swearing off attendance at book related event unless their travel and accommodations are subsidized. Ultimately, sales drive participation. If we can't justify our expenses, participation is counterproductive. The best food and most comfortable green room in the world won't matter if we can't afford to attend.

In Murder 203's defense, it was an inaugural event and the chief organizer did call to discuss the weekend with me. She was incredibly receptive to what I had to say and did not act in the least bit offended or defensive. In fact, I predict a bright future for Murder 203. I also found this willingness to learn from their mistakes on the part of the folks at the Tucson Festival of Books. Yet many of these issues could have been avoided before the fact if authors were allowed more input during the planning stages of the events. In the future I would hope that organizers of books events would reach out to MWA and ITW to get author perspectives on events. I would also urge these organizations to establish some guidelines for organizers of events like Murder 203.