

Getting Up to Speed in Police Procedurals

By Jessica Zellers

What are Police Procedurals?

A subgenre of the mystery novel, police procedurals follow police officers and their associates as they investigate a crime, typically a murder. The police rarely know whodunit until the very end, though readers might learn the perpetrator's identity early on, especially in those books that more closely resemble suspense and thriller novels than traditional mysteries. In either case, the police investigation is crucial to the story, as is the character development of the police officers.

What happens in a Police Procedural novel?

The reader is treated to a detailed examination of a criminal investigation from the perspective of one or more police officers -- but the personal and professional lives of those officers are sometimes even more important than the investigation itself, especially when the characters recur over the course of a series. Pacing, action, and atmosphere can vary widely among police procedurals, though readers may reliably expect some level of suspense, because the police officers inevitably face danger as they try to identify the perpetrator and gather evidence of the crime. Some procedurals feature several different investigations, which may or may not resolve into a single solution.

Why do people like Police Procedurals?

Police procedurals offer insight into the various parts of criminal investigations, from interviewing witnesses to speculating about motives to gathering forensic evidence. The best police procedurals mimic real life: the investigations are constrained by the realities of limited budgets, office politics, and human flaws. Readers enjoy getting to know the police officers over the course of a book or series, and oftentimes the main crime or a subplot will invite the reader to think about large social themes. Setting, too, can be a big draw: in addition to the state or country, there is the setting of the police department itself, which might be big or small, urban or rural, busy or laid-back.

Key titles:

For the classic rogue police hero, there is no finer example than Los Angeles detective Harry Bosch. In *The Black Echo*, Michael Connelly crafts a dark and gritty murder story, infused with themes of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, and riddled with the ugly politics of clashes between Internal Affairs, the FBI, and Harry himself.

Though quickly paced and filled with suspense, *Dance Hall of the Dead* is not so much about the investigation of the crime -- the murder of a Zuni youth -- as about Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and the tensions between the Zuni and the Navajo. The richly-detailed setting and thought-provoking social themes make the story.

Former London policeman Alan Banks moved to the Yorkshire Dales from London to escape the stress of the metropolis, but soon finds that life in the country is not quite as peaceful as he had imagined. In *Gallows View*, Peter Robinson brings together the best conventions of the police procedural: there is the engaging but flawed English hero, the nuanced development of primary and secondary characters at home and in the police department, the central mystery, the romantic tension, and the slow building of suspense.

Mixing high-octane thrills with shrewd political observations, Martin Cruz Smith's darkly atmospheric *Gorky Park* introduces Chief Homicide Investigator Arkady Renko as he investigates the deaths of three unidentified corpses. There is a wealth of crime fiction set in Russia and the former Soviet Union, but Smith's 1981 novel is one of the first and best.

Though his later novels offer deeper social criticism, Joseph Wambaugh's debut, *The New Centurions*, endures as a vivid example of authentic crime writing. With a stark, gritty realism, ex-cop Wambaugh follows three new LAPD recruits as they learn the ropes; the focus is on their growth as police officers rather than on one major crime.

Key authors:

Ed McBain is arguably the most important author in the canon of the police procedural. For half a century, he helped define the genre with his novels of the 87th Precinct. Set in a fictionalized New York City, the series features a recurring cast of police characters whose murder investigations illuminate good, the bad, and the ugly of contemporary American society.

A master of the British mystery, **P.D. James** has been writing her Inspector Adam Dalgliesh mysteries for five decades. Her tight plotting and suspenseful investigations draw readers in, but the biggest appeal is the quiet, intelligent, poetry-writing protagonist Dalgliesh.

J.D. Robb's In Death series features the complex murder mysteries and character-driven stories that are characteristic of police procedurals, but she departs from convention by setting the action in a near-future New York City. Robb's books appeal to fans of police procedurals, light Science Fiction, and Romantic Suspense -- and to anyone who enjoys the stories of Nora Roberts, Robb's real-life alter-ego.

Long before the current craze for Scandinavian crime fiction took flight, **Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö** were exploring the seedy side of Sweden in their Martin Beck mysteries. Written in the 1960s and 70s, the books follow Detective Beck and his colleagues as they investigate homicides. These are strongly character-driven stories that offer social criticism and commentary as well as a rich sense of place.

No one is better at crafting the tortured noir hero than Ian Rankin. His Inspector John Rebus struggles with booze, with lovers, and with family in his personal life. In his professional life, he fights to solve crimes and collar perpetrators in his city of Edinburgh. The mysteries are well-crafted and Rebus's perspective on crime and violence is razor-sharp.

How do I help Police Procedural fans?

Many fans of police procedurals read primarily for the main storyline, the investigation itself, while many others prefer following the character development of the police; if readers do have a preference, guide them accordingly.

Many people enjoy talking about police procedurals television series -- in fact, television is where many fans first encounter the subgenre. A conversation about a favorite television series can easily trigger ideas for book suggestions.

Determine whether sex, violence, or strong language are a concern for readers, as these elements are prevalent in many police procedurals.

A few more tips:

- Because police procedurals can offer a variety of settings, characters, styles, and themes, they can lure in readers of Mysteries, Thrillers, and Suspense novels, as well as less obvious fiction genres such as Romantic Suspense and Literary Fiction.
- Nonfiction readers often enjoy police procedurals for their realism and authenticity. True Crime fans are good candidates, as are nonfiction readers who enjoy thinking about social themes such as violence, criminal justice, and race and class -- and the forensic elements of police procedurals will appeal to fans of science writing.

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