

Getting Up to Speed in Mystery

By Joyce Saricks; revised by Jessica Zellers

What is Mystery Fiction?

Mysteries are puzzles. The author provides clues to the solution but obscures some information so the puzzle cannot be solved too easily. Along with the detective, readers are drawn into the puzzle while attempting to solve it.

What happens in a Mystery?

Mysteries tend to examine human nature in depth, probing the why almost as frequently as the who and the how. They are also morality plays, and justice, or the restoration of order, is at the heart of the solution in a mystery. Readers expect the good guys to win and the bad guys to be punished, even when by-the-books legal justice is not an option.

Most mysteries involve a crime, usually murder. An investigator discovers whodunnit and brings the culprit to justice. Each mystery story describes the investigation, while simultaneously exploring the lives of the victim, the murderer, and the detective.

Some mysteries focus on the central puzzle, while others place more emphasis on character development. Detectives run the gamut from amateur detectives and snoops (à la Agatha Christie's Miss Marple) to seasoned police detectives and hard-boiled private investigators. And it's not only characters that show a wide range. The stories themselves run the gamut from cozy, with the body off stage, to hardboiled, with a distinctive noir edge and tone. Some mysteries have strong elements of suspense and intrigue, creating fast-paced stories wherein characters face deadly danger throughout the investigation.

Why do people like Mysteries?

Some fans read mysteries because they like to solve the case before the detective; others enjoy participating in the investigation. All appreciate the ordered universes these writers create, where good and bad are generally readily identifiable and justice triumphs in the end.

Most readers love series, which dominate the genre. Readers enjoy following the lives of both the detectives and the well-developed secondary characters from book to book. For some readers, the detective is at least as important as the puzzle, and fans expect to find all titles in the series they love so they can read them in order.

Many currently popular mysteries focus on social issues such as political and corporate corruption, child abuse, and drugs. Still others combine the mystery with characteristics from other genres.

Some readers prefer historical settings; others seek paranormal elements -- vampire detectives, for example. International settings abound, from Scandinavia to Australia and beyond.

Many readers enjoy mysteries for their elaborately detailed backgrounds. These may be geographical (Donna Leon's Guido Brunetti mysteries, set in an evocative Venice, or Dennis Lehane's Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro novels, located in gritty Boston), professional (herbs and gardening in Susan Wittig Albert's China Bayles mysteries), social/cultural (Dana Stabenow's descriptions of Alaskan Indian life and culture in the Kate Shugak mysteries), or historical (Steven Saylor's Roma Sub Rosa series set in ancient Rome). Readers learn something from mysteries that are rich in these features.

Readers also appreciate the range of tone this genre offers. Humor dominates many mysteries (Donna Andrews's Meg Langslow mysteries or Lisa Lutz's the Spellman Files) while others feature a dark, moody atmosphere. Sharyn McCrumb and Jacqueline Winspear, for example, create an evocative tone that pervades the story.

Key titles:

Alan C. Bradley's *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* introduces eleven-year-old Flavia, a mad scientist and tireless investigator who employs science, literature, and intuition to solve crimes in her 1950s English village. Flavia's efforts to prove her father innocent of murder are both earnest and sweet. (Flavia de Luce mysteries)

Craig Johnson's *The Cold Dish* places Wyoming sheriff Walt Longmire in the middle of a murder investigation that threatens to disrupt his otherwise peaceful community. A thoughtful protagonist assisted by quirky secondary characters, compelling puzzles, and touches of humor characterize Johnson's titles. (Walt Longmire mysteries)

Tana French's *In the Woods* sets the stage for elegantly written, psychological, disturbing mysteries that place members of the police department in dangerous and often violent cases. Detective Rob Ryan investigates a case that is chillingly reminiscent of one in which he was involved as a child. (Dublin Murder Squad novels)

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Walter Mosley continues the tradition of the hard-boiled detective with Easy Rawlins, a black man operating in a white world. Rawlins becomes a reluctant sleuth in 1948 Los Angeles and takes on the task of finding a mysterious woman. These gritty, urban, noir mysteries effectively integrate race and economic conditions into historically accurate, well-crafted dramas. (Easy Rawlins mysteries)

A Test of Wills by Charles Todd stars a Scotland Yard detective returning after World War I but still haunted -- literally -- by his memories. This first case involving a decorated war hero, a clever cover-up, and too few clues may end his career. Historical details frame the mystery, and clever puzzles challenge the detective and reader alike. (Ian Rutledge mysteries)

Key authors:

The author of several series and standalone titles, **Michael Connelly** is best known for his long-running series starring Harry (really Hieronymus) Bosch, a Los Angeles Police Detective who works best on his own. Read Connelly for the intriguing characters, complex puzzles, stylish prose, detailed investigations, and gritty details. Readers can start anywhere, but *The Closers*, with Bosch joining the Open Unsolved Unit, makes a good entry point.

Janet Evanovich offers humorous dialogue, situations, and characters in several mystery series. *One for the Money* starts her best known series starring sassy bounty-hunter-in-training Stephanie Plum, a wealth of eccentric secondary characters, and a range of villains from deadly to inept. Slapstick humor, romance, and sometimes a touch of the paranormal fill all her titles.

Even before **Robert Galbraith** was outed as the pseudonym of J.K. Rowling, he garnered critical acclaim for his deftly-plotted mysteries. Awash with red herrings and plot twists, his books offer atmospheric world-building and absorbing storylines. *The Cuckoo's Calling* introduces Cormoran Strike, a private investigator down on his luck, and a plucky assistant from the temp agency, Robin, who only intends to stick around for a week.

Jo Nesbø represents the international face of the genre by taking readers to Norway in bleak, edgy mysteries filled with descriptive violence. His Harry Hole series star a moody, not totally sympathetic but surprisingly intuitive police detective. Fully realized characters, complex plots, measured pacing, and a strong sense of place distinguish these dark cases. Watch Harry's downward spiral begin in *The Bat*, when he becomes obsessed with stopping an Australian serial killer.

Louise Penny sets her mystery series in Quebec. Tonally these feel like cozy mysteries, though in fact they are police procedurals starring Montreal's Inspector Armand Gamache and his department cohorts. Engaging series characters reappear, and lush descriptions resonate in these layered and twisted puzzles, enriched by thoughtful, multi-dimensional characters. Start with the first, *Still Life*.

How do I help Mystery fans?

Ask readers to describe the detective they like to read about. This is often easier than describing a plot, and the character of the detective offers clues to the kind of mystery we might suggest.

Some readers may find it easier to talk about a favorite mystery television show or movie than a book. Offer titles in the series, if it's book-based, or find similar titles that resonate. This is also a great way to market classics like Agatha Christie and P. D. James, as they are often the basis of these adaptations.

No two people have the same definition of the genre. Be prepared to find favorite "mystery" writers in the regular fiction collection or even among other genres such as Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Romance. Readers looking for gentle mysteries with minimal violence should seek out cozies, where bodies are offstage and language and actions are more old-fashioned than modern.

The first title in the series is not always the best place for readers to start, as the characters may not be fully developed yet. Offer a subsequent title if you are aware of one that might be better than the series opener, and encourage readers to try both.

A few more tips:

- The mystery genre crosses over with many others. Watch for blends with contemporary and historical westerns, fantasy, horror, romance and romantic suspense, thrillers and suspense, science fiction, and even literary fiction. Fans of historical fiction should also be familiarized with the wealth of historical mystery titles.
- Current trends:
 - Paranormal continues to infuse the mystery genre -- as it does every other.
 - Historical mysteries remain popular. Eras dominated by war -- especially the American Civil War and World Wars I and II -- account for a large proportion of historical titles, but mystery writers are also taking readers to other times and places.
 - Internationally-set mysteries are currently among the most popular types and make perfect companions for both vacationers and armchair travelers.
- Just a few of the many excellent mystery awards include: the Edgar Awards, Agatha Awards, the Anthony Awards, and Britain's Dagger Awards. ALA's Reading List also chooses a top mystery and runners-up every year.

Joyce Saricks is a well-known Readers' Advisory consultant, presenting seminars around the country as well as online. In addition, Joyce has written several Readers' Advisory books, such as Read On ... Audiobooks (Libraries Unlimited, 2011).

Jessica Zellers is a Collection Development Librarian with Mid-Continent Public Library. She has a weakness for fat Russian novels, which never conclude with an HEA.