



Getting up to Speed in...Mystery

Here's what Mysteries are:

Mysteries are puzzles. The author provides clues to the solution but attempts to obscure some information so that the puzzle cannot be solved too easily. Along with the detective, readers are drawn into that puzzle in an attempt to solve it.

Here's what happens in a Mystery:

This puzzle involves a crime, usually murder, and the resulting body. An investigator, whether professional or amateur, solves the question "who-dun-it", and the culprit is brought to justice. The Mystery tracks this investigation, with its concomitant exploration of the victim's, murderer's, and detective's lives.

"Detectives" run the gamut from snoops (à la Agatha Christie's Miss Marple) to seasoned police detectives and hard-boiled private investigators with much in between. In addition to distinctions among the types of detectives, there are other differences. Some readers prefer historical settings for their Mysteries; others seek paranormal elements — vampire detectives for example. International settings abound — from Scandinavia to Australia and beyond.

Mysteries tend to be in-depth examinations of human nature, probing the why almost as frequently as the who and how. They are also morality plays, and justice, or the restoration of order, is at the heart of the solution in Mysteries. When "legal justice" is not an option, investigators take the law into their own hands. As they do in most genre fiction, readers expect the good guys to win and the bad guys to be punished.

Some Mysteries focus on the puzzle, others more on characters. Some add strong elements of suspense and intrigue, with characters placed in deadly danger throughout the investigation. Many currently popular Mysteries focus on social issues such as drugs, child abuse, and political corruption. Setting these issues in the context of a Mystery often sheds new light on serious problems.

Here's why 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 readily distinguishable and justice triumphs in the end.

Series dominate the genre, and readers follow the lives of series detectives, as well as of secondary characters, throughout the series. For some readers, the detective is at least as important as the Mystery itself!

Mysteries often have elaborately detailed backgrounds. These may be geographical (Sara Paretsky's descriptive Chicago setting), professional (cooking in Diane Mott Davidson), social/cultural explorations (Tony Hillerman's descriptions of Indian culture and relics), or historical (Elizabeth Peters's series set in 19th and early 20th century Egypt). Readers "learn" something in many Mystery series, rich in these features.



Readers also find a range of tone. Humor dominates many Mysteries from the madcap adventures of bail bondswoman Stephanie Plum in Janet Evanovich's series to the smart-mouthed dialogue in Robert B. Parker's Spenser series. Others feature a dark, moody atmosphere, such as Burke's Dave Robicheaux. C. J. Box's Joe Pickett series celebrates the beauties — and dangers — of the natural wilderness. Others, Sharyn McCrumb and Jaqueline Winspear for example, create an evocative tone that pervades the story. Just as there are a range of background interests to hold readers' attention, there are also a wide range of moods.

Here are key titles to read:

- Agatha Christie, premiere among Britain's Golden Age Mystery writers, offered complex plots, "cozy" settings, and intriguing detectives. *Murder on the Orient Express* remains a popular example of her style.
- Ed McBain's long-running 87th Precinct series set the standard for urban police procedurals, with familiar series characters and an authentic big-city feel. *Money, Money, Money* makes a good introduction to his characters and style.
- Dick Francis, a former jockey, set all his Mysteries in the world of horse-racing, providing behind-the-scenes information as well as fascinating details of related fields. His skilled, pragmatic, and likeable heroes solve racing-related Mysteries around the world. *Under Orders* features occasional series characters, Sid Halley.
- Dashiell Hammett created the quintessential hard-boiled detective Sam Spade in his classic, *The Maltese Falcon*. His gritty, urban, noir Mysteries set the standard for contemporary writers like James Ellroy and George P. Pellacanos.
- In *Postmortem*, Patricia Cornwell introduced medical examiner Kay Scarpetta and changed the genre. Forensic investigations and details continue to dominate the Mystery genre — in books, television, and movies.

Here are key authors to know:

- In the Stephanie Plum Mysteries, **Janet Evanovich** offers humorous dialogue, situations, and characters — from bounty-hunter-in-training Stephanie to her eccentric grandmother, and a range of villains from deadly to inept. *One for the Money* is the first.
- **P. D. James** writes classic, complex, layered puzzles, filled with multi-dimensional characters and social concerns. Her brooding Scotland Yard detective Adam Dalgleish first appears in *Cover Her Face*.
- **Henning Mankell** represents the increasingly popular international face of the genre. His police procedurals star Kurt Wallander, a dark, moody, very human detective. Start with *Faceless Killers*.
- **Robert B. Parker's** Spenser is the hardboiled detective for 90s and beyond. Descriptive scenes of Boston and the northeast, witty dialogue, strong and sympathetic characters, action and building tension, and fast-paced stories that pull readers into his characters' lives figure prominently. Although not the first in the series, *Early Autumn* makes a good starting point.
- **Elizabeth Peters** adds delightful wit to her multiple Mystery series, all of which feature intelligent, educated women with strong crime-solving skills. Her best-known series stars Amelia Peabody Radcliffe, amateur Egyptologist, who, with her husband Emerson and brilliant son Ramses explores Victorian Egypt, uncovering tombs and danger. *Crocodile on the Sandbank* starts the series.



Here's how to talk with Mystery fans:

- Ask readers to describe the detective they like to read about. The story line may control how the characters act, but the personality of character directs the book and its appeal to readers.
- Each reader also has his own 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.
- Tone is also important in reader choices. Readers seeking lighthearted Mysteries may find them across the genre, and they may like smart-mouthed detectives, whether they are police detectives, private investigators, or amateurs.
- Readers looking for gentler Mysteries without a lot of blood and violence should seek out cozies, where bodies are offstage and language and actions are more "old-fashioned" than modern.

A few more tips:

- The Mystery genre crosses over with many others: Many Western Mysteries, both contemporary and historical, combine the Western landscape with investigative details. A number of Fantasy novels feature detectives with a variety of powers. Horror Mysteries feature vampires and other supernatural creatures. Both Romances and Romantic Suspense highlight investigative elements as the love story develops. Many Thrillers and Suspense novels feature policemen or ex-police officers. Science Fiction can combine with Mystery to produce "who-dun-it's" set in the future. Paranormal, historical, and international Mysteries are currently among the most popular types.
- The first title in the series is not always the best place for readers to start, as the character may not be fully developed yet. If you know a better title, start readers there. They can always go back and read older titles.
- Just a few of the many excellent Mystery awards include: the *Agatha Awards*, the *Anthony Awards* and the *Dagger Awards*.

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