IT’S A MYSTERY!

DEFINITION: There is so much crossover in the Mystery genre that it has become increasingly difficult to define. This is Joyce Saricks’ definition: “Mysteries consist of a puzzle; the author provides clues to the solution but attempts to obscure some information so that the puzzle cannot be solved too easily. We, along with the detective, are drawn into the puzzle in an attempt to solve it” (RA Guide to Genre Fiction, 2001, p.146).

Genre Misconceptions

- All mysteries are alike.
- All mysteries must involve a murder.
- The only reason to read mysteries is to figure out who did what.
- Mysteries are merely escapist reading.
- Most mystery writers pattern their detectives after themselves.

Characteristics of Mystery Fiction

- A crime, usually a murder, has been committed, and there is a body.
- An investigator (or investigative team) attempts to discover “whodunit.”
- There is usually a structure or a formula: a defined beginning, middle and an end.
- Mysteries are often written as a series, following the investigator through several cases.
- Secondary characters, whether suspects or supporting characters in the investigation, play an important role in the appeal of the Mystery. They may also be series characters.
- Working to solve the puzzle, the investigator follows the clues. Readers know “whodunit” and usually why at the end. Order is restored, but justice “by the book” may not happen.
- The story entertains the reader by taking her/him to a different place, or making or renewing a friendship, or covertly teaching her/him something, or including her/him on a compelling journey.
Readers

- May want to solve the puzzle and want the writer to play fair, present the clues, and allow them the chance to solve the Mystery.
- AND/OR
  Wish to participate in the investigation and in the lives of the characters. In fact, often the character of the investigator is the greatest appeal factor.
- Assume that everyone else reads mysteries and have their knowledge of the authors that they read.
- Really like series because they have a relationship with the character(s).
- Often will only read a series in order.
- May tolerate a wide range of quality in writing style.
- May be willing to read across genres for subject matter.
- May consider Suspense & Thrillers in the same category as Mystery.
- May consider Narrative Nonfiction and True Crime.
- May need encouragement to talk about their reading experience of Mysteries.
- Do not assume your appeal factors coincide with their appeal factors.

Appeal Factors of Mystery Fiction

Storyline

- Mysteries usually follow a particular pattern or formula: crime → investigation → solution.
- The appeal elements of Character and Story Line mesh intricately together.
- Many Mysteries are more than straightforward puzzles written to a pattern. Most involve layers of information about plot and characters that must be peeled away.

Characterization

- Often through the series, readers follow characters over years and relish the discoveries of the character’s past and the day-to-day trials of everyday private lives.
- Secondary characters, especially the sidekick(s), are more important than in many other genres. They often play an intricate part in the solution to the crime.
- Much of a series' humor and charm derives from the interaction with secondary characters.
Frame

- The frame in which the Mystery is set—whether physical location, modifying details, or tone—plays a crucial role in the appeal of the Mystery and captures the extent that location in a story is important to the experience of the book, whether it is primary or contributory.

- Frame can flourish whether it is a specific geographical place or a time period in a particular place.

- Details are not always crucial to the Mystery, but detail adds value for some readers.

- Contemporary Mysteries set in specific locales attract readers who enjoy the geographic details and the feel of a place. Place or time may be a character in itself.

- Some authors focus on the occupations or hobbies of the sleuths (usually amateur), and the details add interest and variety to the plots. Often, readers learn as much about the topic as they do about the investigation.

- Tone is important and evokes an emotion from a reader as it paints the atmosphere of a character’s life. Most Mysteries keep the reader on the edge in some way but may differ in degree and intensity: a Cozy village mystery less so than a dark Scandinavian procedural.

- Humor is sometimes important to the tone and is found through secondary characters and dialogue.

Pace

- Some Mysteries are more involved and slower paced, taking into account the nature of the story and the investigation and its concern with details; however, it is the fascination with the character(s) that compels readers towards the conclusion.

  **Example:** Louise Penny’s first in the Three Pines series, *Still Life*, is very different than her later titles in the series. *Bury Your Dead* has an intensity that builds on the character development of the previous five, making it a “page-turner,” unlike the others where the action unfolds at a more leisurely pace.

- Other Mysteries are “page-turners” that read like adventure, suspense, or thrillers.
What KIND of Detective Do You Enjoy?

Amateur Detectives

- These “detectives” are not professionals who have been specially trained in detecting techniques. Most are ordinary people who use their instincts and wits to solve a crime.

- They are more likely “to fall” into a case (often involving someone they know) than to be asked to investigate, and they are usually engaged in only one case at a time.

- There is a closed circle of suspects, usually people that the sleuth already knows or has familiarity with from a small village, town, or neighborhood of a city.

- Amateur detectives have another job or hobby that occupies their time, the details of which supplement the Mystery. This frame enhances the geographical or temporal setting.

- Mysteries featuring amateur detectives are usually gentler, although there is a range of violence, as well as tone. For the most part, there are fewer graphic, gritty details; and there is rarely violence and/or sex on the page. There is little vulgar language or profanity.

- The tone can be humorous and is usually generated by recurring secondary characters and absurd predicaments that require a leap of faith.

- Advantage: Amateur sleuths are less intimidating and have the ability to blend into a community.

- Advantage: They do not have to play by the same rules as the professionals.

- Disadvantages: They do not have any real power or authority, which is why they often align themselves with a professional counterpart. An occupation like reporter, college professor, or minister helps overcome this problem and gives the sleuth flexible work schedules, an opportunity to pry, and contacts.

- Subgenres: Traditional detectives have their investigations as part of their jobs and usually do so for profit.

- Eccentric detectives may shine at crime solving but have difficulty dealing with normal society.

- True amateur detectives have no credentials but the courage and temerity to right a wrong.
Private Investigators

- Investigations are carried out step-by-step and are usually narrated in the first-person by the protagonist.
- Investigators operate under a personal moral code that may not follow the rule of law.
- The White Knight syndrome: Investigators often feel compelled to help someone, sometimes against her/his will, because they are standing up for an underdog.
- Investigators, often a solitary detective or a loner with a legal or law enforcement background, may have an antagonistic relationship with the police or local justice system.
- Investigators work for a fee, but it is not unusual for an altruistic or idealistic element to motivate her/him either.
- Protagonists may be women or men, and their adventures are usually part of an ongoing series.
- Even loners have frequent sidekicks or assistants that add to the depth of the character and storyline.
- Settings are usually urban. The tone is often darker, and many novels highlight serious social issues.
- The amount and degree of violence varies, but these stories tend to have a harder edge and deal with the more violent situations, sometimes in explicit detail. Language can be vulgar and more streetwise.
- Subgenres: Private detectives do it for the money and have no problem confronting authority or trying to right the wrongs of society.
- Crime specialists are in occupations that aid criminal investigations while maintaining their status as private individuals.
- Ex-cop detectives cannot let it go even though they have no badges, no support organizations, and no funds to investigate; however, it is their professional experience that helps them solve cases.
- Rogue detectives are a twist on the natural order of things. Some detectives cannot help themselves, while some are doing it for profit, and others to defend their own good name.
Police Detectives (Procedurals)

- Either the department as a whole or a particular member (almost always detectives) provides the focus for these Mysteries, which are generally series.

- Details of police departments and police work figure prominently, and the details of the investigative procedures enhance the story.

- The author’s expertise (legal, forensic) adds depth to the story with realistic procedural detail.

- Even secondary characters have distinct personalities that often enhance the storyline or provide humorous breaks in the serious pursuit of criminals.

- Settings may be urban, suburban, or small town. Details of the setting and a strong sense of place are often important.

- Realism colors the story and characters, especially the crime itself. Description of violence is specific, detailed, gritty and often uncomfortable. Dialogue is often shocking and explicit.

- The police team or department is generally engaged in working multiple cases, usually unrelated to each other and these are not necessarily all solved.

- Subgenres: Lone wolf police, because of circumstances beyond their control, are forced to live within the institution but act without and outside the safety net.

- Detectives who support the police are in some way allied with the judicial system and use a specific expertise to aid a police investigation while also functioning as either a professional, private, or amateur.

- Lawyer detectives cannot resist the opportunity to leave the courtroom and get out in the streets to hunt for perpetrators.
Genreblending

**Historical Mystery:**
Combines interest in times past and the intellectual challenge of solving a puzzle—"whodunit."

- Usually in a series providing comfort with the characters, the era, and the physical setting.
- Often contain real people or historical figures who are characters who must use the tools of their time—not modern forensics—to solve the crime, relying on protagonist’s astute observations of people and personalities.
- The era’s political and social realities may offer a different source of motive for a crime.
- Passive learning is painless when it is integrated into a story and explores the differences and strangeness of the past, often reflecting the author’s expertise.
- The main issue is plausibility: Does the reader believe that the character would act or think this way in the historical context?
- Some readers are rigid purists—others will suspend disbelief.

**Suspense:** Suspense is the focus of the book. Everything else (Mystery, Romance, Espionage, etc.) is secondary to this building of tension and uneasiness.

**Thriller:** Thrillers focus on a particular profession (espionage, medical, legal) and tells an action-packed story that reveals the intricacies of that profession and the potential dangers faced by those involved in it.

**Fantasy:** Paranormal elements may include detectives as vampires, demon hunters, shamans, psychics, ghosts, witches, and werewolves. In some stories, animals speak—from cats to dogs to dinosaurs—and investigate crimes using their very unique insights.

**Urban Fantasy** contains many elements from Mystery, including one specific crime to solve. The Urban Fantasy world’s version of law enforcement may be either a protagonist or a sidekick, and the story may follow the formula for Procedural, PI, or Amateur.

**Horror:** Contains many of the above characters and elements but is usually more serious, and its purpose is to evoke strong emotion, specifically horror, so tone is especially important.
RA Strategies for Mystery RA Interview

1. Have you read them all? Some readers are unaware that they have read part of a series, or that the author may also use a pseudonym or write stand-alone novels.
2. Do you have a preference for a certain kind of detective? Amateur? PI? Procedural?
3. What appeals to you most? Solving the puzzle? Finding a character you can relate to? The theme of the Mystery?
5. Do you have a preference for a certain gender as the main character?
6. How much violence, graphic language, and sex are you comfortable with?
7. Do you want a series?
8. What are you in the mood to read? The usual suspects or something different?

REMEMBER TO LISTEN!

Mystery Appeal Summation

Author
Type of Character
Characterization
Secondary Characters
Pacing
Time Period
Geographic Setting
Dialogue
Romance
Level of Realism
Subject & Theme
Amount & Type of Content (Detail & Tone)
Language
Violence & Sexual Content
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Also suggested resources:


JOURNALS


WEBSITES

Stop, You’re Killing Me
http://www.stopyourekillingme.com/
Stop, You're Killing Me! is a resource for lovers of mystery, crime, thriller, spy, and suspense books. You will find over 4,100 authors, with chronological lists of their books (over 47,000 titles), both series and non-series. Special indexes include: Award winners, Historical periods, Character by Jobs & Diversity, Location, Holiday, and Readalikes. Subscribe to the email newsletter for monthly publishing summaries in the genre.

Murder, Mystery & Mayhem
Discussion Guides for Mystery, Crime, Thriller, and Suspense Book Clubs. This blog has other great resources like booklists and recommendations.

Criminal Element: Murder Mystery Mayhem
http://www.criminalelement.com/
Criminal Element is a community website featuring daily content for fans of the crime and mystery genres in all of their forms. The site features original short stories and excerpts from upcoming crime and mystery novels along with daily blog articles.

Mystery Writers of America
http://mysterywriters.org/
MWA is the premier organization for mystery and crime writers, professionals allied to the crime writing field, aspiring crime writers, and folks who just love to read crime fiction.

The MysteryReader: The Very Latest News and Views of Mystery Novels.
http://www.themysteryreader.com/
Thousands of book reviews for your mystery reading pleasure. This site also features author interviews and more.

Crime Fiction Awards (formerly Mystery Book Awards)
http://awards.omnimystery.com/mystery-awards.html
There are many organizations that annually recognize outstanding writing in the field of mystery, suspense, thriller and crime fiction. On this site, select the award from the list for more information on the authors and titles that have won. The date next to the award is the first year in which the prize was given out; an alphabetical list is in the left sidebar menu. Comprehensive and usually up-to-date, this site has international scope.

Supper Sleuths Mystery Book Discussion Mystery Lists
Lucius Beebe Memorial Library in Wakefield, MA’s long-running book discussion group’s compilation of lists. Created by Leane Ellis, Beth Radcliffe, and Nanci Milone Hill.

The Big Thrill: The Online Publication of the International Thriller Writers
http://www.thebigthrill.org/thriller-roundtable/
The International Thriller Writers (http://thrillerwriters.org/) is an honorary society of authors, both fiction and nonfiction, who write books broadly classified as “thrillers.” This would include (but isn’t limited to) such subjects as murder mystery, detective, suspense, horror, supernatural, action, espionage, true crime, war, adventure, and myriad similar subject areas. One of the main purposes of the organization is to provide a way for successful, bestselling authors to help debut and midlist authors advance their careers.

Mysteries for Kids
Charlotte Mecklenburg Library’s Bookhive: Your Guide to Literature for Children
http://www.cmlibrary.org/bookhive/books