Genre Overview: Mysteries

My theory is that people who don't like mystery stories are anarchists. -- REX STOUT

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Why are we here?

The mystery genre as literature

Edmund Wilson: "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" (New Yorker, June 20, 1945)

George J. Demko: "Detective Fiction and Edmund Wilson: A Rejoinder"


Beginnings: 1841 - 1918

Edgar Allan Poe - Father of the Detective Story (Dupin in "Murders in the Rue Morgue", Graham's Magazine, 1841)

- Eccentric detective and sidekick (Dupin and his assistant/narrator)
- The least likely suspect
- Locked room mystery
- Armchair detection
- Fictional investigation of true crime ("The Mystery of Marie Roget")
- 'Ratiocination': intellect rather than brute strength
- Hide in plain sight ("The Purloined Letter")
Arthur Conan Doyle – Creator of The Great Detective (Holmes & Watson in A Study in Scarlet, Beeton’s Christmas Annual, 1887)

- 56 short stories and 4 novels – “The Canon”
- Perennially popular: theater, film, radio, TV versions
- Pastiches and parodies began almost immediately
- The curse of the series detective – can’t kill them off!
- Short stories more popular than novels
- The Watson figure – friend, sidekick, narrator

Continuing fascination with crime and detection:
late 19th and early 20th century

- Emile Gaboriau: First detective novel (L’Affaire Lerouge, 1866)
- Anna Katharine Green: Grandmother of the American Detective Story (Ebenezer Gryce in The Leavenworth Case, 1878)
- Wilkie Collins: The professional police detective (Sgt. Cuff in The Moonstone, 1868)
- Fergus Hume: The detective story as formula & best-seller (The Mystery of a Hansom Cab, 1886)

E. C. Bentley

Reaction against the infallible (& increasingly eccentric) detective (Trent’s Last Case, 1913) and beginnings of the Golden Age of classic British detective fiction

- Detective falls in love with chief suspect
- Follows all his clues to a spectacularly wrong conclusion
- Vows to never go crime solving again
Important Points

Development of the sensational (Gothic) novel

- Increased interest in crime: *The Newgate Calendar* (1760)
- Golden Age of the short story: magazines & other serial publications
- Professional police and detective forces had strong influence

Beginnings of formal detective story:
- The detective as outsider
  - The Watson as stand-in for reader; match wits with the detective
  - Ratiocination and deduction (brains not brawn)
  - Scientific investigation (R. Austin Freeman, others)
  - Two strands: sensation (thriller) and detection (pure puzzle)

Classic Detective Fiction: The Golden Age (1919 - 1939)

Development of formal rules for detective stories

- S.S. Van Dine: Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories (1928)
- Ronald A. Knox: Detective Story Decalogue (1929)
- Detection Club Oath: No Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence or Act of God (c.1928)

Rules broken almost immediately

- Agatha Christie (*Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, 1926)
- Francis Iles (*Malice Aforethought*, 1931 – inverted crime story)

Closed societies

- The village (Colin Watson: 'Mayhem Parva' in *Snobbery with Violence*)
- The university (Oxbridge)
- Murder in the manor (and locked rooms)
- Upper and upper-middle classes (the butler didn’t do it)

Clues, clues, clues – and lots of red herrings

Aristocratic sleuths (and silly asses)

- Campion (with royal connections): Margery Allingham
- Wimsey (younger son of a duke): Dorothy L. Sayers
- Philo Vance (American aristocrat): S. S. Van Dine
- Henry Gamadge (old New York family): Elizabeth Daly
- Inspector Roderick Alleyn (brother of baronet): Ngaio Marsh
A quick detour: misogyny, racism, and just plain thuggery:

- Snobbery with Violence (Colin Watson, 1971)
- 'Sapper': Bulldog Drummond
- E. W. Hornung: Raffles ('gentleman-burglar')
- Edgar Wallace: J. G. Reeder
- Schticks: 'yellow peril'; gentlemen-crooks; violence; all for England

Reaction against the pure puzzle

- The detective story as novel of manners: Dorothy L. Sayers
- Growth in characterization: Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, Josephine Tey, Ellery Queen (especially in later novels)
- 'Inverted' stories: R. Austin Freeman, Francis Iles (and Columbo)
- Psychological complexity: Michael Innes, Michael Gilbert, Nicholas Blake, Helen Eustis (The Horizontal Man, 1946)
- American Masters: Ellery Queen, Rex Stout, Elizabeth Daly, Phoebe Atwood Taylor
- Locked rooms and impossible crimes: John Dickson Carr, Clayton Rawson, Christie, Queen, Anthony Boucher
- HIBK ('Had-i-but-known'): Mary Roberts Rinehart, romantic suspense

Other Golden Age writers (and their heirs):

- Cyril Hare
- Philip MacDonald
- John Rhode
- Josephine Bell
- Edmund Crispin
- P.D. James
- Amanda Cross
- Jane Langton
- Emma Lathen
- Robert Barnard
Important Points

- Murder investigation as intellectual game with reader
- Importance of physical 'clews'
- Relatively bloodless: murder offstage
- Emotional effects of crime rarely seen
- Amateur investigators: the Jessica Fletcher syndrome
- Increasing use of the novel rather than the short story form
- Return to 'moral order' when crime solved - W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage" (Harper's, May, 1948)

The American Revolution: The Hard-boiled School

(Giving murder back to the people who are really good at it)

Pulp magazines (1920s)
- Carroll John Daly
- Race Williams
- Raoul Whitfield
- Black Mask Magazine - Joseph T. Shaw, editor

Dashiell Hammett: Creator of the P.I. novel
- The Continental Op: Red Harvest; The Dain Curse (both 1929); short stories (1923 on)
- Sam Spade: The Maltese Falcon (1930)

Raymond Chandler: The P.I. as knight-errant

- Philip Marlowe: The Big Sleep (1939); The Long Goodbye (1953)
- "The Simple Art of Murder": manifesto of the American crime story (The Atlantic Monthly, Nov. 1945)
The private eye novel as an American institution

- Ross Macdonald
- Mickey Spillane
- John D. MacDonald
- Robert B. Parker
- Marcia Muller
- Sara Paretsky
- Jeremiah Healy
- Walter Mosley

Roman Noir: an offshoot of the Hammett/Chandler school

- Cornell Woolrich
- James M. Cain
- Jim Thompson
- James Hadley Chase
- Patricia Highsmith

Important points

- Private investigator as lonely fighter for justice
- Violence onstage
- Fear/hatred of women and the ‘other’
- Corruption permeates society at all levels
- The city as character
- No ‘return to moral order’ as in classic (British) detective novels
The mystery today:
two main strands continue –
the thriller and the puzzle

Increasing diversification of the genre:

- **Legal thrillers**: The Bellamy Trial by Frances Noyes Hart (1927), John Grisham, Scott Turow, Linda Fairstein, Robert Tannenbaum
- **Culinary mysteries**: Too Many Cooks by Rex Stout (1938), Virginia Rich, Katherine Hall Page, Nancy Pickard
- **Regional mysteries**: Jane Langton, James Lee Burke, Dana Stabenow, Sharyn McCrumb, Tony Hillerman, Dennis Lehane
- **Unusual sleuths**: Joe Deseske (librarian), Lillian Jackson Braun (cats), Nevada Barr (park ranger), Emma Lathen (investment banker), Aaron Elkins (forensic anthropologist), Iain Pears (art dealer)

The cozy: inheritor of the Golden Age

- Mary Daheim
- Lilian Jackson Braun
- Charlotte MacLeod
- M.C. Beaton
- Elizabeth Peters
- Jeff Abbott
- Elizabeth Daniels Squire
- Carolyn G. Hart

Police procedurals: cops and criminals

- Founders: Lawrence Treat, Hillary Waugh (Lost Seen Wearing, 1952)
- Grand Masters: Ed McBain, Elizabeth Linington, Dell Shannon
- American cops: Joseph Wambaugh, James Lee Burke, Archer Mayor
- British cops: Colin Dexter, Ian Rankin, Reginald Hill, Peter Robinson
The P.I. novel: alive & well (& female, too!)

- Lawrence Block
- Parnell Hall
- Loren D. Estleman
- Stephen Greenleaf
- Joseph Hansen
- Bill Pronzini
- Sue Grafton
- Sandra Scoppettone
- Dennis Lehane

The ethnic detective: amateur & professional

- Earl Derr Biggers: Charlie Chan
- Dana Stabenow: Kate Shugak
- Tony Hillerman: Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee
- Dale Furutani: Ken Tanaka
- Walter Mosley: Easy Rawlins
- Marcia Muller: Elena Oliverez
- Michael Nava: Henry Rios
- Edna Buchanan: Britt Montero
- Harry Kemelman: Rabbi David Small

Out of the Anglo-American ghetto:
the mystery goes worldwide

- Italy: Umberto Eco, Donna Leon, Andrea Camilleri
- Scandinavia (Nordic noir): Peter Häg, Stieg Larsson, Poul Orum
- France: Georges Simenon, Fred Vargas
- Netherlands: Nicholas Freeling, Janwillem van de Wetering
- Switzerland: Friedrich Durrenmatt
- Germany: Hans Hellmut Kirst
- Spain: Arturo Pérez-Reverte
- South Africa: James McClure
- Latin America: Jorge Luis Borges, Paco Ignacio Taibo II
- Japan: Edogawa Rampo, Seicho Matsumoto, Takagi Akimitsu
- Israel: Batya Gur, Robert Rosenberg
- Scotland (Tartan noir): Denise Mina, Ian Rankin, William McIlvanney
The historical mystery: solving old crimes & imagining new ones

• Classic beginnings: Josephine Tei (The Daughter of Time; 1951)
• Robert van Gulik: Judge Dee mysteries (ancient China)
• Leonard Tourney: Elizabethan England
• Ellis Peters: medieval England
• Sharan Newman: medieval France
• Philip Kerr: Nazi Germany
• J. Robert Janes: occupied France
• Steven Saylor: ancient Rome
• Laurie R. King: Mary Russell, Sherlock Holmes’ wife(!)
• Kate Ross: Regency England
• Lynda S. Robinson: ancient Egypt
• Anne Perry: Victorian England

Thrillers, serial killers and modern horrors: noir lives

• Mary Willis Walker
• Patricia Cornwell
• Val McDermid
• James Ellroy
• Elmore Leonard
• Jeffery Deaver
• Thomas Harris
• Minette Walters
• Andrew Vachss

Where do we go from here?

• Mystery and crime stories continue to be enormously popular
• Increasing diversity – race, gender, sexual orientation
• Focus on current issues – abuse, corruption, trafficking
• Cozies still popular – murder offstage, recipes, cats
• Rise in use of ereaders – the ‘long tail’
• Short stories – EQMM, collections
• Sherlock lives!