

Mystery Subgenres

(Courtesy <http://www.cuebon.com/ewriters/Msubgenres.html>)

(Definitions and Examples - All) This genre enjoys widespread popularity. Mystery writers, especially the earliest female authors, have often used a pseudonym. Almost all of its characters hail from an urban (and/or upper-class) background, and many of its heroes and villains return to complete an entire series. Mysteries thrive on complexity and misdirection, hence these descriptions are long. Stories in which the crime is not solved, or the criminals never apprehended (or at least identified) by the end of a novel (or series), are rare.

Amateur Investigator tales feature a protagonist who is not a law enforcement officer or licensed private investigator. Harry Kemelman's "Rabbi" series is a great example. Marcia Muller's novel *The Tree of Death* stars a female museum curator in Mexico, and the hero of Edna Buchanan's *Miami, It's Murder* is a male newspaper reporter. One series, Donna Andrews's "Turing Hopper" novels, overlap with 'science fiction' and star an AI-computer detective.

Bumbling Detective tales are sometimes humorous and often endearing. The "Peaches Dann" series, by Elizabeth Daniels Squire, features an absent-minded female investigator; while David M. Pierce's "Victor Daniel" series stars a quirky Los Angeles crew. Blake Edwards' 1963 film *The Pink Panther* introduced the hilarious cultural icon Inspector Clouseau.

Caper (heist) This subgenre places a crook (or band of crooks) in the role of anti-hero. He (or they) plan a major crime, with intricate detail, though it never goes right. (Often the word "Caper" appears in the title itself.) Donald Westlake was the reigning master of this story type, with his "Dortmunder" novels and others. In Elmore Leonard's oddball novel *The Switch*, a wealthy kidnap victim ultimately takes the side of her abductors. Both versions of the movie *Oceans Eleven* fit this category. Heist novels focus on spectacular thefts, often of heavily-guarded precious objects. Eric Ambler's 1962 novel *The Light of Day*, filmed by Jules Dassin as *Topkapi*, helped launch the modern "evade all those high-tech alarms" format.

Child in Peril (woman in peril) This descriptive category incorporates elements central to countless 'mystery' tales, though it may no longer be politically correct to invoke them as such. The real-life Lindbergh Baby kidnapping provided the grist for numerous fictionalized versions, beginning with Agatha Christie's 1934 novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, later filmed by Sidney Lumet. A related subgenre places a beloved woman in the role of victim, and often the husband will go after her, against the wishes of the (so far ineffective) authorities. (Harrison Ford has starred in several movies with this basic theme.)

Cozy mysteries have a specific format. They're usually set in a small town, with an amateur (though highly educated) woman as sleuth. The murder is over quickly, if it's depicted at all, and there is little followup violence. The protagonist's official and gossipy connections allow her to gather evidence. Monica Ferris's novel *Knitting Bones*, and Deb

Baker's "Dolls to Die For" series are great examples, while the "Jessica Fletcher" franchise is perhaps best-known. (Fans of this subgenre have made detailed lists of every subcategory.)

Culinary mysteries feature a professional chef as hero, victim, and/or villain, and are numerous enough to set them apart from other 'amateur investigator' tales. Rex Stout kicked off this subgenre with his 1938 novel *Too Many Cooks*. Nan and Ivan Lyons' novel *Someone Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe* is an obvious example, as is Diane Mott Davidson's *Dying for Chocolate*. Real-life chefs Takis and Judy Iakovou wrote *So Dear to Wicked Men*.

Doctor Detective stories feature physicians who encounter (and then solve) an amazing number of murders. Josephine Bell launched this subgenre with her 1937 novel *Death on the Borough Council*. Tess Gerritsen's novel *Life Support* is a modern example. (Bell and Gerritsen are real-life doctors.) Several TV shows fit this category, such as Dick Van Dyke's *Diagnosis Murder*.

Furry Sleuth tales feature a cat, and sometimes a dog, as the principle investigator. Shirley Rousseau Murphy's novel *Cat on the Edge* and its sequels put an extraordinary cat in the lead role. In Lillian Jackson Braun's long-running "Cat Who" novels, the human investigator (a newspaperman) is given subtle clues by his psychic house cat. Rita Mae Brown's mysteries depict many animals as intelligent and fully communicative -- but only with each other, not the humans. (Ms. Brown's cat Sneaky Pie is formally credited as co-author!) Most, if not all, of this subgenre's tales overlap with 'cozy' mysteries in their tone and setting. If any feature a bird, reptile, or other nonmammalian animal as the detective, this is rare.

Handicapped subgenre mysteries feature an investigator who must overcome physical challenges to pursue crooks and solve cases. Ernest Bramah's 1914 novel *Max Carrados* and its sequels feature a blind detective of that name. (The novel inspired some obscure film and TV adaptations.) Dick Francis's recurring character Sid Halley is a more recent example. J. Kathleen Cheney's short story "Touching the Dead" (which overlaps with the 'fantasy' genre) stars a 15-year-old blind girl who solves a murder. Raymond Burr broke onscreen barriers with his depiction of wheelchair-bound detective Robert Ironside. (Late in life, during the filming of a "Perry Mason" reunion movie, Burr really was so confined.)

Hard-boiled (noir, tart noir) These stories occupy the heart of the genre, and feature a gritty, cynical, male private investigator, in a violent and corrupt urban setting that suits his demeanor. This subgenre was launched in 1920 by "Black Mask" magazine, which in turn launched the career of Dashiell Hammett. In 1929 Hammett published his iconic *The Maltese Falcon*, later filmed by John Huston. Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane were followed by Robert Parker and a host of others. Swedish author Stieg Larsson's novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and its sequels (also translated into English, and now made into movies) bring a literary element to the field. The noir subgenre focuses on the plight of down-and-out urban denizens. With his novel *The Postman Always Rings*

Twice and others, James M. Cain dominated this category. Dave Zeltserman's novel *Small Crimes* is another example. Tart noir tales always feature a female protagonist who fits the style. *Freeze My Margarita*, by Lauren Henderson, is one example.

Historical (Chinese, Elizabethan, etc.) This subgenre places clever detectives in many historical settings. *Silver Pigs: A Detective Novel in Ancient Rome*, by Lindsey Davis, has a self-explanatory title. *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco, is set in a medieval monastery. Josephine Tey's 1951 novel *The Daughter of Time* has a different twist, in that a modern Scotland Yard detective sets out to (posthumously) prove the innocence of King Richard III. Chinese detective stories are a tiny subgenre, at least as seen in English. The novel *Di Gong An* was translated by Robert van Gulik, who then followed up with a series of "Judge Dee" mysteries set in ancient China. Another flourishing mystery subgenre is set in Elizabethan England. Kathy Lynn Emerson's "Face Down" series is one example. The hero of Edward Marston's "Nicholas Bracewell" series is a theater company manager. A few 'historical whodunits' cast famous individuals as the investigator.

Inverted or Howdunit novels begin with the reader witnessing the murder, thus the plot revolves around how the perpetrator will be caught. R. Austin Freeman's 1912 novella "The Singing Bone" launched this subgenre. Anthony B. Cox (as Francis Iles) wrote *Malice Aforethought*, another early example. Cox/Iles's novel *Before the Fact* was filmed by Alfred Hitchcock as *Suspicion*. Several TV shows, such as *Criminal Minds* and *Law and Order, Criminal Intent* have a similar approach.

Legal (courtroom) Usually the protagonist in these stories is a lawyer or court official who solves a case him-or-herself, while the stubborn (or corrupt) police are on the wrong track. An early example is Ephraim Tutt's "Arthur Train" short stories. Courtroom mysteries are often set in England, and much of the drama takes place within the walls of that ultra-formal environment. P.D. James's "Commander Dalgliesh" tales fit this bill. Erle Stanley Gardner's "Perry Mason" franchise is the dominant American example, and Mary E. Martin's "Osgoode Trilogy" another.

Locked Room or Puzzle mysteries are a narrow subgenre, in which careful observation and extraordinary logic reveal the means of a seemingly impossible crime (or escape). Edgar Allen Poe launched it with his 1841 short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Another early example is Gaston Leroux's 1907 novel *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, first published in French. (The Greek historian Herodotus is credited with the very oldest known example, however the Catholic Bible's Daniel chapter 14 has another.) Edward D. Hoch's numerous stories in "Ellery Queen" magazine have long dominated this category. Steven Saville's short story "Bury My Heart at the Garrick" depicts Harry Houdini both exposing and performing similar (nonlethal) feats.

Police Procedural (forensic, futuristic, serial killer, stalker, etc.) This is a vast descriptive category. The protagonist is a police detective (or team of officers and technicians) who is tasked with catching fiendishly clever killer(s). Usually the story switches back and forth between the viewpoint of the investigator(s) and the criminal(s)

as the crime spree continues. Lawrence Treat's 1945 novel *V as in Victim*, and Hillary Waugh's 1952 *Last Seen Wearing*, are early examples. Real-life policeman Joseph Wambaugh used his experience to write *The New Centurions* and several other novels. Jack Webb's 1951 series *Dragnet* pioneered the way for genre TV shows such as *Columbo*. Barry Longyear's "Jaggers and Shad" stories feature two British detectives who, in a high-tech future, have their minds transferred into a variety of animal bodies, most notably a gorilla and mallard duck. The TV empires *Law and Order* and *CSI* dominate the forensic investigation subgenre. Thomas Harris's "Hannibal Lecter" franchise rules the serial killer category. Faye Kellerman's novel *Stalker*, and James Swain's *The Night Stalker*, are clear examples of this subgenre.

Private Detectives (female PI) This subgenre features a wide variety of memorable private investigators, working in many different situations, though most are set in the urban United States. Rex Stout's "Nero Wolfe" franchise's detective is so obese he seldom leaves his residence, leaving the footwork to a younger Archie Goodwin. George Chesbro's detective Mongo, in his novel *Shadow of a Broken Man*, is a former circus dwarf with a black belt in karate. Gary Stewart's novel *The Tenth Virgin* is infused with the protagonist's Mormon upbringing. Marcia Muller helped break the gender divide with her 1977 novel *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*, which launched a whole "Sharon McCone" series -- and many other genre heroines.

Romantic is a relatively new 'mystery' subgenre, primarily from romance publisher Harlequin's Intrigue division. (Their offerings are known in the business as a 'continuity series.') Instead of a 'romance' style plot-line, these novels/series follow 'police procedural' and other genre patterns, with long story arcs and numerous crossover characters. What sets them apart is an emphasis on strong and compassionate heroines, who enjoy successful and fulfilling personal relationships with men. Julie Miller's "The Precinct" novels are a good example.

Serials or Series is a descriptive category, in which a strong protagonist drives many novels. Beginning in 1878, Anna Katherine Green developed this subgenre in the USA, with her "Ebenezer Gryce and Amelia Butterworth" novels (and others). Ever since 1887, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes" franchise has towered over 'mystery' fiction. Sue Grafton's "Alphabet" series, starring female detective Kinsey Millhone, began in 1983 with *A is for Alibi* and now up to *V is for Vengeance*, with the express intent of reaching Z. Janet Evanovich's "Stephanie Plum" series has strong 'slapstick humor' elements, and began with numbered titles, which are now up to 22, plus others.

Supernatural mysteries comprise a small yet venerable subgenre, overlapping with 'fantasy.' These stories follow the standard 'mystery' format, with a strange crime or murder, where the villain turns out to be an actual ghost (or other fantastic being). Mother-and-son authors Kate and Hesketh Prichard's 1899 novel *Ghosts* depicts the brilliant scientist Flaxman Low discovering same.

