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Dare to Know

Detective and Mystery Fiction

Fiction where the nature of a crime, usually a murder, remains unknown until the end of the story. A genre in which the commission or investigation of a crime is central to the narrative and a cast of characters are each suspect. All have a strong motive for committing the crime, and possibly a unique situation or quirky personality that makes the story more interesting. The clever detective, either a professional or an amateur, must interview them to determine which is the guilty party. The perpetrator is eventually discovered to be one of the least likely suspects. Beginning with the set-piece puzzles of the nineteenth century, these plot driven stories are often complex, allowing the audience the opportunity to engage in the same process of deduction as the protagonist throughout the investigation of a crime.

The professional private investigator has been a standard trope of the genre since the beginning. Thematically, traditional private detectives have been portrayed as tarnished knights errant who represent justice when the legal system fails to protect victims. The character owes much to the literary tropes of the Western gunslinger. Fictional gumshoes typically possess a strong moral code, one that is firm and deliberate but not quite articulatable. They work cases outside the bounds of legal authority, even when the money is not forthcoming. Their distance from the bureaucracy of the legal system removes them from some of its restrictions. In more modern stories, the protagonist is normally a wisecracking, former police officer or military veteran, who is tough, armed, and experienced. However, some central characters are unlicensed, often damaged, investigators who work cases for their own reasons. Where once the traditional shamus was a two-fisted, hard-drinking loner, with possibly one friend who happened to be a police officer, current private detectives have richer, fuller inner lives with family, friends, and hobbies. The fictive field of private detection was predominately reserved for tough guys in years past, although female detectives emerged in the Victorian era and the last several decades has seen numerous formidable women operating as private eyes.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1844) and Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891) are among the most influential early examples in this genre. W. S. Hayward's *The Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1864), Catherine Louisa Parks's *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* (1894), H. C. "Sapper" McNelie's *Bull-Dog Drummond* (1920), Leslie Charteris's *Meet the Tiger!* (1928), Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* (1934), Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), John D. MacDonald's *The Deep Blue Good-by* (1964), and Amanda Cross's *In the Final Analysis* (1964) are classic examples. Mysteries can share elements with the **thriller** genre when a fast-paced plot presents a mystery that must be solved before time runs out.

Common Elements

Strong opening
Atmospheric setting

A crime
Detective protagonist

Ineffectual constabulary
Large number of suspects
A culprit
Narrative momentum
Trail of clues
Motive
Foreshadowing
False clues (“red herrings”)
A final twist

Big reveal
Investigators for hire as modern-day paladins
Detective agencies
Clients
Surveillance
Sardonic humor
Mistrust of or conflict with authority

Benefits of Reading

Introduces readers to three-dimensional sleuths whose traits or eccentricities assist in closing the case
Presents readers with complex plots and supporting characters

Permits readers to solve a mystery
Takes readers to unfamiliar settings
Allows readers to explore social issues
Teaches readers about relevant occupations and hobbies

Modern Literary Examples

<i>Adrift</i> (2017) by Micki Browning
<i>All That I Carry with Me</i> (2023) by William Landay
<i>American Gothic</i> (1974) by Robert Bloch
<i>The Boy in the Suitcase</i> (2015) by Lene Kaaberbol and Agnette Friis
<i>The Cabin</i> (2016) by Natasha Preston
<i>Cocaine Blues</i> (1989, 1991) by Kerry Greenwood
<i>Dead Girl Running</i> (2018) by Christina Dodd
<i>The Eighth Day</i> (2002) by John Case
<i>Final Girls</i> (2017) by Riley Sager
<i>The General's Daughter</i> (1992) by Nelson DeMille
<i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i> (2005) by Stieg Larson
<i>Gone Girl</i> (2012) by Gillian Flynn
<i>Ghost Target</i> (2018) by Nicholas Irving, with A. J. Tata
<i>The Hot Country</i> (2012) by Robert Olen Butler
<i>I Know What You Did Last Summer</i> (1973) by Lois Duncan

<i>Iron Lake</i> (1998) by William Kent Krueger
<i>IQ</i> (2016) by Joe Ide
<i>Just Another Day in Paradise</i> (1985) by A. E. Maxwell
<i>The Maid</i> (2022) by Nita Prose
<i>A Merciful Death</i> (2017) by Kendra Elliot
<i>Miami Blues</i> (1984) by Charles Willeford
<i>The Missing American</i> (2020) by Kwei Quartey
<i>New York Dead</i> (1991) by Stuart Woods
<i>Nothing Ventured</i> (2019) by Jeffrey Archer
<i>Plum Island</i> (1997) by Nelson DeMille
<i>One for the Money</i> (1994) by Janet Evanovich
<i>One of Us is Lying</i> (2017) by Karen M. McManus
<i>Open Season</i> (2001) by C. J. Box
<i>The Outsider</i> (2018) by Stephen King
<i>The Whole Truth</i> (2000) by Nancy Pickard
<i>The Silence of the Lambs</i> (1988) by Thomas Harris
<i>Stress Fracture</i> (2010) by D. P. Lyle
<i>The Tenth Virgin</i> (1983) by Gary Stewart
<i>Track of the Cat</i> (1993) by Nevada Barr

<i>The Trapdoor</i> (1988) by Keith Peterson
<i>True Crime</i> (1995) by Andrew Klavan
<i>Vanishing Act</i> (1995) by Thomas Perry
<i>When the Bough Breaks</i> (1985) by Jonathan

Kellerman
<i>The Word is Murder</i> (2017) by Anthony Horowitz

