

# Crime Fiction Genre Study

## Psychological Suspense

Berwyn Public Library

June 4, 2015

### General ARRT Announcements:

- Quarterly Literary Book Discussion and Leadership Training on July 8, 2015  
**The Book of Unknown Americans** by Cristina Henriquez will be discussed at Hinsdale Public Library. The author will also be in attendance at the end of the discussion. The nuts-and-bolts portion will cover issues of including authors in book club events.  
**UPDATE:** ARRT has created a [new site for Quarterly Literary Book Discussion and Leadership Training](#) where the notes from this program are available.
- ARRTExpo will be occurring on July 9, 2015  
If you've never been to PLA or ALA, we highly recommend this program! You will get to meet all the publisher representatives, and they really want to meet us. It's great to establish relationships with the publishers. While this is a totally free program, we do ask that you register.
- ARRT will be giving an ILA award called the [Readers' Advisory Service award](#).
- Becky Spratford and Annabelle Mortensen will also be presenting an ILA program on how to do a genre study. More details coming.

### Mystery versus Thriller versus Suspense

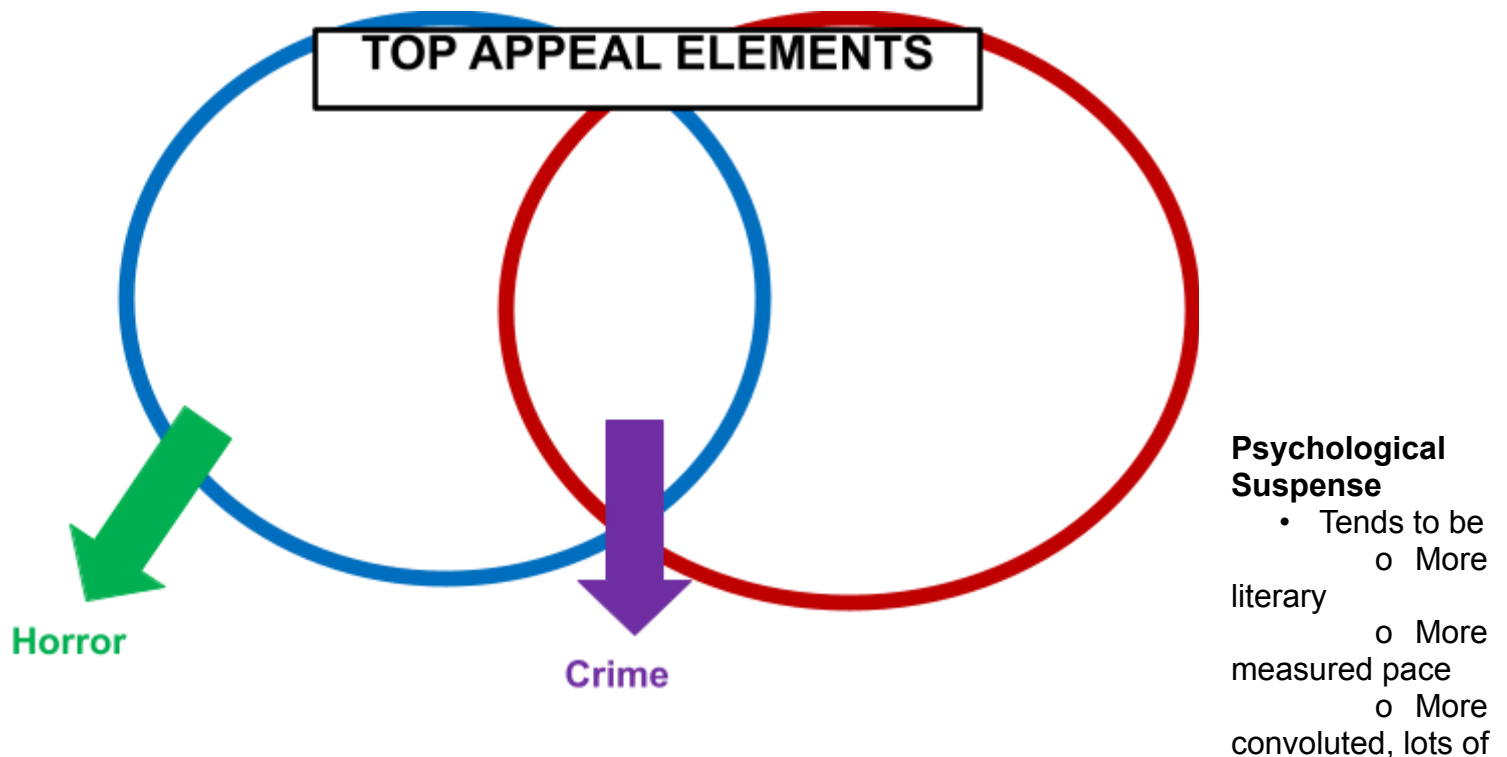
Becky wrote a wonderful article for [Novelist explaining the differences between Mystery, Thrillers, and Suspense](#).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mysteries<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Whodunit</li><li>◦ Why is unknown until the end</li><li>◦ Want to solve the puzzle</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thriller<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Professional details</li><li>◦ Solving the puzzle takes a back seat to the professional</li><li>◦ Cinematic</li><li>◦ HIGH ACTION</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suspense<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ What might happen</li><li>◦ Impending threat</li><li>◦ Compressed time frame</li></ul></li></ul>
---	---	--

### Psychological Suspense versus other Crime Fiction

- Often open ended
- Good guy may not win
- Bad guy may or may not get caught/justice is different than good guy winning
- Less graphic violence (less blood) than in Thriller/Suspense
  
- Because crime novels are becoming darker and darker, more people are crossing over and enjoying psychological suspense.
- Like Horror in that the lead is in a nightmare situation, but they are internal monsters, not supernatural.

- o We did not read **The Silence of the Lambs** by Thomas Harris but this is “old school” psychological suspense



plot twists

- o Until recently, didn't have series ß more like literary fiction
  - Recently, trend toward series as creating characters with back stories and world-building become more popular.
- Unreliable narrators are king
  - o They are very popular these days
  - o Even though the narrator tells you at the beginning you

### Psychological Suspense

### Cross Over

### Suspense

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Character Driven</li> <li>• Mood</li> <li>• Unreliable Narrator</li> <li>• Open Ending</li> <li>• Methodical</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dark</li> <li>• Plot Twists</li> <li>• Villain's POV</li> <li>• Serial Killers</li> <li>• Stalking</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plot Driven</li> <li>• Action</li> <li>• Clear Hero vs. Villain</li> <li>• Closed Ending</li> <li>• Happy Ending</li> <li>• Pulse Pounding Pace</li> </ul> |
|--|--|---|

- can trust them, somehow, you still do – and are then surprised that you shouldn't have Claustrophobic settings
- Character and mood are at the forefront, not plot
- If you asked people 5 years ago, people didn't really know what Psychological Suspense was.
- Now, it's the fastest growing genre

- Patrons may not know what to call it, but they love it
  - o **Gone Girl**, by Gillian Flynn
  - o **The Girl on the Train**, by Paula Hawkins
  
- **Biggest Appeals to Fans**
  - o Unreliable narrators
  - o Unlikable characters
  - o Like figuring out the psychology of the characters
    - Why are they doing these things?
    - It's more fun than just chasing the hero, like you do in most crime fiction
  - o Open ending
    - Allows you to create own ending in your mind
    - Don't know what is going to happen
      - Not guaranteed justice, survival, happiness
      - Good guys may lose
      - Bad guys may win
  - o No two people read the same book
    - True of every book, but especially in Psychological Suspense. Because they can write their own ending, if you talk to readers they really read different books! One reads a hopeful ending, while another reads bittersweet, and another reads tragic. Changes the tone of the entire novel if you change the tone of the ending.
  - o Attraction is in the room for interpretation
    - What is really going on?
    - Number of possible different options
    - There is no formula – so you have to be more on your toes
  
- **Biggest Limiter to Nonfans**
  - o The exact elements that create the appeal can also be limiters
    - Ambiguity & especially of endings
    - Unreliable narrators
    - Unlikable characters
  - o For some people, it's most important that the good guys win.
  - o For some people, it's most important that “the bad guys get it” – even more than the good guys winning.
  - o **People read fiction to escape**
    - So if your life is orderly and going well, reading a book that makes you unbalanced, heavier, harsher is ok.
    - But as life is crazy, melancholy, burdensome, or challenging, then they want more order in their reading. So you may also have to understand where they are in their life.
    - So, over time, even fans of crime fiction may change which type of crime fiction they want to read. While at one point in their life they might want to read Psychological Suspense, it may later be “too much”.
      - Any major life change can change what people want to read – marriage, pregnancy, divorce, sickness, teenagers, et al.
    - This is why we always as patrons, “What are you in the mood to read today?”

Gillian Flynn helped make Psychological Suspense a household name/genre

- At first she was celebrated for the idea that she made women as complex psychologically and as twisted and evil as anyone.
- Then there was a backlash against the idea that women were able to be evil.
- Now she is considered to be the gold standard for psychological fiction
- Recommended [Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives: Stories from the trailblazers of domestic suspense](#), by Sarah Weinman
- Becky did a four part interview with Gillian Flynn at Berwyn Public Library on 07.11.12, before the **Gone Girl** fame
- [Part 1](#)
- [Part 2](#)
- [Part 3](#)
- [Part 4](#)
- She recently won 2015 Edgar Award for Best Short Story [What Do You Do?](#)

## Shirley Jackson

- **We Have Always Lived in the Castle**
  - Sympathetic villain
  - Unreliable narrator
  - Entire family dies in one night because of strychnine in the sugar bowl, but that's not what actually happened
  - You are seeing the aftermath of the crime, but getting no real answers
  - Left with questions
    - Was the uncle imagined, a ghost?
    - Did the villagers really come to get them?
    - What really happened?
    - How old is the heroine?
    - Reader can never know what is real or what was imagined
  - For some readers, these questions make the story
    - For other people, they are just left feeling I WANT THE ANSWERS, to the point they even quit reading
    - The ambiguity is the appeal, or the limiter
  - The language is wonderful and it is very literary
- **The Haunting of Hill House**
  - Stephen King called it the Best Psychological Suspense
  - First paragraph is wonderful
  - Sometimes it is hard to get readers past the title, to realize it's not a horror novel or ghost story, but a psychological suspense novel
  - To crime readers, the question is
    - Is she nuts or not? Is it real or not?
  - To psychological suspense
    - The appeal is watching heroine unravel
    - Reader is off balance the entire book
    - Enjoy the feeling of watching her become unstable and feeling unstable yourself
    - Did she start off crazy or did the house do it to her?
  - **The Turn of the Screw** by Henry James is a great read-alike

- [Shirley Jackson Award](#)
  - Created to honor writers who write in Jackson's style – in psychological suspense, horror, and dark fantasy.
    - The monster is actually living next door.
    - Eerie tone created with beautiful language in a bucolic setting.
    - *The New Yorker* never got more angry letters than when they published **The Lottery**.
- [Let Me Tell You](#) is about to be published. An anthology of lost stories by Shirley Jackson.

### Patricia Highsmith – Ripley series

- Highsmith herself was not a lady you would probably have wanted as a best friend
- Unreliable narrator
- Charming villain
- Interesting to following a psychopath
  - Amoral, sexually ambiguous, conman, and occasionally a murderer
- There are no lines between good and evil
  - The “good guys” are bad at times
  - The “bad guys” are good at times
- Lots of plot twists
  - But you know it's a series, so you know he's not going to get caught
  - Takes away suspense
- Not about the mendacity of life, but about the extravagance of the wealthy jet set
- Ripley has influenced a lot of things
  - Precursor to **American Psycho** by Bret Easton Ellis
  - Somewhat dated, and the language feels awkward
  - Style reminds you of **The Great Gatsby** by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- Other people didn't find Ripley all that interesting
  - He is sort of a bumbling, ex-frat boy without a real purpose or goal
  - Without an agenda or intent, he doesn't seem very self-aware
  - Leaves you feeling anti-climatic – expected more
  - Not likable
- Some dark humor, especially as he is trying to preserve his façade
  - No patience with people who get in his way
    - “It was a curious kind of murder.”
    - “Was there never a moment's peace.”
  - Saw his motivation as playing a trick on everyone
    - I can make a life out of this and pull it over on everyone
- Things don't work simply for him
  - Long sweaty gross to dispose of a body – accurate
- Loved the movie version with Matt Damon
- Highsmith's masterpiece is probably **Strangers on a Train**, but Ripley has had more influence and impact on the genre
  - The movie is fantastic as well

### Peter Abrahams (AKA Spenser Quinn)

- Writes a wide variety of books – Adult, Teen, and Children's
- Harlan Coben of Psychological Suspense

- Clever how Abrahams plays with your emotions
  - Intrinsically interweaves complex characters and sophisticated plots
  - Plausible
  - Menace, irony, violence
- Most fast paced of those listed
- **End of Story** is Becky's favorite
  - Ivy Seidel wants to be a writer. Until that happens, she gets a job at Dannemora Prison, a supermax prison, as a writing teacher. While teaching, Ivy falls under the spell of Vance Harrow, a violent criminal with incredible writing ability. Abrahams sets up the plot, and the reader watches spellbound as it unfolds.
- **A Perfect Crime**
  - Revenge themed story where a betrayed husband plots to restore his career and get even with his adulterous wife. Lots of unknowns during the plot, and at the end.

## S. J. Bolton

- Best cross-over suggestion for fans of straight Suspense
- Just starting to find a bigger audience
- Mixes chilling Psychological Thrillers with Police Procedurals
- Atmospheric locals and picturesque settings – generally rural
- Tone is very dark, bleak, creepy
- Secondary characters are excellent
  - Both the good guys and the bad guys are multi-dimensional
- Pacing not as fast as Abrahams
- Does tend to put children in danger – although generally “off camera”
- British author
- **Little Black Lies**
  - Set in the Falklands
    - Isolated, insular locale
  - Has three points of view
    - Mother who lost two children
    - Best friend who was watching them when they disappeared
    - Father/Husband who has PTSD after Falkland War
  - Now more children are disappearing
  - Unreliable Narrator(s)
    - Lead starts off saying “I’m going to kill someone”, but you still trust her
  - Atmospheric, dark, moody
- **Blood Harvest**
  - In small, rural English village, toddlers are disappearing and dying
- *Lacey Flint* series
  - **Now You See Me** (#1)
    - Felt like a serial killer mystery for the first  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the book – Jack Ripper pattern
    - Then, like she threw in the kitchen sink and everything got messy. Lost focus.
      - This may have been because you thought you were reading a mystery, expecting predictability, and then got psychological suspense. She didn't follow the formula your brain was expecting.
    - Feels almost like a soap opera. Lost focus.
      - Series later gets better.
  - **Dark and Twisted Tide** (#4)

- Cop Lacey Flint lives in riverboat on the Thames – small, isolated community
  - Finds a body, and determines they have a serial killer.
  - Disregard for procedure upsets superiors, but gets the job done.
  - Lots of plot twists.
- o As part Police Procedural, good cross-over for Mystery fans
  - However, darker, more atmospheric, more unpredictable

### Chelsea Cain

- Most violent of lot
- Twisted and sexually explicit
- Has stand-alone and series
- *Gretchen Lowell* series – Beauty Queen Killer
  - o Very suspenseful and intricately plotted star Gretchen Lowell as the villain and detective Archie Sheridan
  - o Before the series begins, Gretchen had kidnapped and killed 200+ people. She also kidnapped and tortured Archie. Gretchen is in jail when the series starts.
    - Their twisted story starts out with Archie as a clean cut detective and Gretchen as a psychologist who is going to help him. They have an affair, until she kidnaps and tortures him.
    - Although Gretchen is in jail, she escapes. The series continues.
  - o They are addicted to each other, but the relationship is so psychologically tortured and twisted that it is gripping and haunting.
  - o This series is SO TWISTED and SO INTENSE, it makes Gillian Flynn look tame.
    - There is some very dark, very dry humor.
- **One Kick** – starts new series
  - o Still disturbing, but not as violent as Gretchen Lowell series
  - o Off camera child, sexual abuse
  - o Still cringe worthy
  - o Kick Lannigan is a very damaged main character, but she is trying to pick herself up and make her life better
  - o Kick sets out to rescue abducted and abused children
    - Character feels much like Lisbeth Salander

### Nicci French

- Good for Romantic Suspense cross-over
  - o Generally have closed endings
  - o Do tend to be more dark and dangerous
- Actually husband-wife team Nicci Gerard/Sean French – British
- Complex female leads
  - o Strong women at vulnerable moments
- Villains seem normal to everyone else, but turn out to be stalkers or psychopaths
- **Land of the Living**
  - o Abbie Devereaux was held captive, but escapes. No one believes that she was held captive, and she has no memories of the week before she was abducted. Abbie must solve the crime herself.
- **Until It's Over**

- o Seven roommates are living together in London house. When a neighbor is found dead on their lawn, it becomes apparent one housemate is trying to frame another for murder. The isolated setting of the run-down house adds tension as infighting sets in amidst the romances within the group. With the extreme claustrophobia, you start to wonder if you can ever really know who are your friends?

### **Carol Goodman**

- Neo-Gothic tone
- Settings are isolated places that create their own issues
  - o Old hotels
  - o Schools for girls
- Uses classics and literary allusions
- Old secrets generally come back to haunt people in the present
- *Blythewood* series (Teen)
  - o Orphan Ava Hall (17-years-old) spends a summer in a mental institution. Next, her grandmother sends her to a finishing school, in this historical fantasy filled with dark magic. As Ava learns about her heritage, she also finds romance.
- **Drowning Tree**
  - o Stained-glass artist Juno McKay is thrilled when her best friend Christine returns to town. When Juno later finds Christine dead, the clues point to her ex-husband who was recently released from a mental institution – after trying to kill himself, Juno, and their baby 15 years prior.
  - o The pacing is very slow.
  - o The art history and stained glass information is wonderful.
- **Sonnet Lover**
  - o Poet and literature professor Rose Asher is devastated when her star student dies. Did he fall from the balcony, was he pushed, or was it suicide? And was his award winning film plagiarized? She returns to Italy which brings up secrets from her past from 20-years-ago.
  - o The academic setting creates a closed environment. The information about Shakespeare's sonnets provides a great point of appeal. The style is very literary.
- **Lake of Dead Languages**
  - o Again, the setting is academic and further isolated by being in rural, upstate New York. The style is very literary, and the pacing very slow. A lot of information on Latin, ice (the formation of ice), and snow is included. The keys to the modern crime are found in a crime from the past.

### **Mo Hayder – Detective Inspector Jack Caffery series**

- Read like a detective novel & provides cross-over point
  - o Ok for Crime fans, if they can handle the violence
- Excellent at balancing plot and characters
- Both good guys and bad guys are unstable
  - o Psychopathic killers more damaged than protagonist
  - o But protagonists also troubled and disturbed
  - o People are violent and crazy
- Death is always imminent, brutal, violent, and quick
- Forensic details are compelling

- o As well as disturbing, brutal, and violent
- Feels like Ruth Rendell mixed with Horror
- English
- Very realistic – like details of disposing of the bodies
- DARK
- **Birdman**
  - o There is a lot going on!
  - o The second sadistic serial killer makes the first necrophilic serial killer seem sane.

### Jeff Lindsay – *Dexter Morgan* series

- Dexter is a blood spatter analyst, and a serial killer of serial killers
- His father was a cop, and his sister is a cop
- He is a psychopath
  - o When his (adopted) father realized this, he realized that Dexter would be likely to become a serial killer. His father created a set of rules by which Dexter lives.
    - So Dexter is a killer with a code.
  - o He is charming, but a killer.
- Dexter talks to you in first person
  - o This is what I do. Get over it. Now, let's talk.
- You are intrigued by Hannibal, but you actually come to love Dexter.
- *Hannibal* the TV show (where the murders are works of art) meets *CSI* meets Carl Hiaasen
  - o The humor is better in audio
    - The Jeff Lindsay narration is not the best version
  - o These are hilarious if you love dry, wry humor

### Ruth Rendell

- Elegant, complex prose
- A lot of misfits
- Close to traditional police procedurals like her Wexford mysteries
  - o Obsessed, paranoid protagonists
  - o Good guys but bad things happen to them
  - o Bad guys don't necessarily have bad things happen to them
- Particularly in her stand-alones & more Psychological Suspense
- More you read, the darker the characters they get
- **13 Steps Down**
  - o The perfect setup
  - o The lead is stalked in a claustrophobic environment. It's scary. You know what is happening, but you don't want it to stop. Even if you know that something bad is going to happen.

### Michael Robotham – *O'Loughlin and Ruiz* series

- Joe O'Loughlin (psychologist) teams with Vincent Ruiz (police officer)
  - o First couple of books alternate which one is the focus
  - o Also alternates which one is in danger
- Robotham is Australian, but his series is set in London

- Creepy, disturbing, fast-paced
  - Feel like someone is watching you
  - Often stalking
  - Someone has snuck into your house
- Closed ending
  - May appeal to crime readers
- You don't need to read this series in order
- **Suspect (#1)**
  - Becky's favorite
  - It appears someone is framing Joe O'Loughlin for murder. Psychologist O'Loughlin has an alibi, and key information, but won't share it with the cops or his wife.
  - Mixes Psychological Suspense and a conspiracy thriller.

Next time we are tackling True Crime.

- We are also going to discuss the new phenomenon of releasing YA and Adult versions of the same title.
- And as you are reading, be thinking, [at what point is a book a crime/mystery novel \(based upon true events\) versus a true crime nonfiction "novel"](#).

The next genre study will be  
**August 6<sup>th</sup>**  
at  
**Glenview Public Library**  
where we will discuss  
**True Crime**

For more information, see

<https://sites.google.com/a/arrtreads.org/crime-fiction/2014-15-schedule/8-6-15-true-crime>