

# Crime Fiction Genre Study

## Thrillers: Espionage and Forensic

Glenview Public Library

December 4, 2014

Our second meeting to discuss Thrillers, and we will have one more meeting of Thrillers before we turn our eyes to Suspense.

**Definition of Espionage:** Thriller set amongst the action surrounding spies, terrorists, and covert government operations featuring the details, jargon, and people involved in this profession.

### Espionage thrillers:

- Are *not* about the routine lives of spies or analysts
- About the mythic nature of spies and analysts work
  - It's not realism – readers want the fantasy element
  - Yes, it uses frame and details of spies/analysts jobs, but not the boring details/reality
- About the havoc created by relentless agents and the super-villains who oppose them.
  - Readers want the mythic scale of the *really* bad – even if the bad is from the spy's own side
- Are usually set in periods of international tension, World War II, the Cold War, and the recent period of Islamic extremism
  - These are the times when we rely on the spy agencies the most to keep us safe
  - Times of upheaval is when espionage is the most popular to be read as well
  - Times when the spy agencies are most in the news
- Authors frequently have some real-life experience
- You can't talk about Espionage Thrillers without talking about the Films
  - James Bond movies
  - Jason Bourne movies
  - The novels are very ***cinematic***

### Popularity of Espionage:

- Have always been spy themes in novels of adventure
- Emerged as a specific genre type in early 20<sup>th</sup> century with establishment of modern intelligence agencies.
- Became popular with development of fascism & communism in lead-up to WW2
- Continued to develop during Cold War – height of popularity
- For a while, people thought Espionage was going to die when Cold War ended and Berlin Wall came down.
- Revitalized with emergence of:
  - Rogue states

- o International criminal organizations
- o Muslim fundamentalism
- o Global Terrorist networks
- o Maritime Piracy
- o Technological sabotage

### **Appeal of Espionage:**

- Appeal strongly to men (unlike some types of mysteries) but also to women
- Plot is the focus
  - o Some writers do more with characters, some do less
  - o Race against time – ticking clock
- Heroes and heroines trust themselves
  - o Own moral code
  - o They are the good guy
  - o May do bad things, but doing them for the right reasons
  - o Own agency may have gone bad
  - o Vigilante justice
    - Cross-over appeal with Private Investigator fans – especially Noir
- Treachery, subterfuge, conspiracy are par for the course
- Villains drawn from real-life
  - o See them in the news – government agents, terrorists, drug traffickers, evil scientists, corrupt politicians
  - o Identity of mastermind hidden until end even if we see his henchmen
- Exotic settings
  - o If set in America, it's within a closed community that most people don't know the inner workings of – like the Pentagon, CIA, etc...
- Gadgets are important
  - o High tech may be a draw to some readers
- NOTE: Hero is holding off one attack, but may not beat the ultimate evil
  - o The evil may still exist, there may be more to come
  - o How espionage started having series like other crime genres
  - o Similarity to Horror genre— the immediate menace is defeated but there overarching evil is still lurking.

### **Common Espionage Plots:** (follow hyperlink to article)

- Rescuing someone from a hostile country
- Preventing someone from entering a hostile country
- Preventing a hostile power from obtaining technology or information
- Capturing technology or information from a hostile power
- Preventing a hostile power's invasion or takeover of another country
- Preventing an overthrow of our government

### Ian Fleming – James Bond

- When you read Fleming, James Bond does feel dated. However, the character is still immensely popular. Different authors have rebooted the series.
- James Bond is iconic within Espionage. He woos women, gets duped, and has amazing gadgets. (Especially for 1950s, his gadgets almost approach Science Fiction.) Bond is more flawed in the books than in the movies; he has self-doubts, and seems more human.
- The attitudes in the books are very dated as well. Bond is sexist, and **Live and Let Die** in particular is very racist. However, the attitudes probably weren't out of sync for the time in which the novels were written.
- There is something comforting about knowing James Bond will save the day, and he will do it with flare.
- **Suggest to:** Fans of the movie; Someone looking for a fast, fun, short read; Someone looking for exotic locals; Reluctant teenage male readers – However, in most cases, we felt we would qualify our suggestion by saying the attitudes in the book were dated.

### Barry Eisler – John Rain

- John Rain is not really a spy, but more a spy for hire or rogue spy. He is often hired by spies or spy agencies. Rain is half American half Japanese and most of the novels are set in (modern) Tokyo, or other Asian settings. He is a hired assassin, but moral. His job is definitely a grey area. He uses high technologies gadgets. Has PI elements, and noir PI feel.
- These are “library bestsellers” that librarians hand-sell. Eisler is a high midlist author. (Unfortunately, the series isn't out in audio.)
- [Criminal Element](#) website ran a special Death Bracket throw down tournament between different suspense and thriller heroes. The final round was between John Rain and Jack Reacher. Reacher won, barely.
- **Suggest to:** Series is great for men, but mostly under 40 people. Good read-alike for fans Lee Child's *Jack Reacher* series.

### John Le Carre

- Le Carre is the living grandmaster of the spy novel. He is much more realistic than the other authors on this list. Le Carre has been called the thinking man's espionage.
- Novels have a strong moral angle. While they are action packed, they are also very introspective. He is stylistically complex. The style is very literary.
- His heroes struggle with the line between good and evil. Moral issues are explored. He describes the spy's lives in details as well as realistically. The novels include procedure and jargon. The true nature of the characters, as well as the situation, are slowly revealed.
- A sense of hopelessness often pervades. His leads are often tortured and dark. The reader rarely gets happy endings. One crisis is resolved, but the war against the bad guys still rages.
- Many are set in eastern Europe. Most are Cold War era.

- They are very cinematic, and some have been turned into movies. However, some of the complexities generally have to be cut from the movies.
- His series hero is George Smiley, who is a very forgettable man – which makes him a great spy.

### **David Silva – Gabriel Allon**

- Silva helped save the spy thriller after the end of the Cold War. He could be considered the modern benchmark.
- Gabriel Allon was a Mossad agent. When the series opens, he has retired after his wife and child were killed by an assassin. He is a very tortured man, but is convinced to be an agent again to get the assassins. He is a ruthless contract assassin. Although he is a killer, he is a good person. Allon doesn't come off as a jerk, but as a real person.
- His cover is as an art restorer, so his jobs take the reader all over the world. The art elements are also intriguing. As a result, this series appeals to non-espionage fans a swell.
- He hunts down terrorists. Silva doesn't shy away from the political issues of terrorism. So the espionage issues are very timely.
- The novels are intricately paced and fun to read. Silva includes a lot of frame which adds to the realism and depth. He creates a world you can believe in. The novels aren't short, but move very quickly. *The writing is clean without being thin.* Silva started as a journalist which may account for this skill.
- He was once a library bestseller, a secret, but has become more well-known. He's a bestseller now.
- **Suggest to:** Series appeals to women as well as men. Short summary – “Mossad agent who retired after his wife and child were murdered but returns for revenge. And he is an art restorer in his spare time.” -- Many women like the art or protective husband/father angle. They are great audiobook recommendations for husband and wives going on road trips together.

### **Tom Rob Smith – Leo Demidov**

- Smith is a modern writer who sets his works in the Cold War. Smith is less literary than Le Carre, but still very literary.
- His novels are set in Stalinist Russia, and his protagonists work for the Russians. The heroes are members of the secret police. They know they aren't the good guys, and they know they are doing bad things. It creates introspection – what would you do if you had to work for Stalin? What is your sense of duty? What does it mean to be free? The setting adds to the sense of turmoil and strain, as well as paranoia. These are good men in bad situations, hence sympathetic.
- The novels contain a lot of action, and conclusions come fast. They also include a great mystery and a lot of very accurate historical detail. Many people don't know the secrets that have recently been revealed about what happened during Stalinist Russia, and these novels explore those details.

- While they are terrifying books, they are somewhat distant from modern fears because of the time and location. So they are good to recommend to people for whom terrorism is too current and too scary. They are great spy novels with today's sensibilities, but set in the past. They appeal to men and women.
- **Suggest to:** Can be a great book club book. Someone who wants espionage and realism, but not something that will strike close to home.

### **Olen Steinhauer – Milo Weaver**

- Milo Weaver is the anti-James Bond. He is the reluctant hero who gets drawn into a conspiracy against his will. He works for the department of tourism and is stuck between right and wrong. The CIA is sometimes after him, sometimes other villains. He is also not as tortured as Gabriel Allon.
- This series is contemporary, real world spy stories. The settings span the globe. The tone is not as dark as many of the others.

### **Brad Thor – Scot Harvath**

- Scot Harvath starts out in the Secret Service, moves through almost every government agency that has any military or espionage connection, and is now a spy for hire. (He was also a Navy Seal). The plots are very over the top, generally with a political thriller aspect. He always saves the day, often the President or the US, and even the world. However, he has still ended up on the United States assassination hit list. Lots of plot twists, action, and intrigue.
- Scot is not tortured; he is an action adventure hero. He is a male fantasy. Readers love to live through him vicariously. It's the thrill and the rush that fans read for.
- If you mix Patterson, Baldacci, and Cussler together, you get Thor.
- **Suggest to:** Fans of high action, who can suspend disbelief regarding plausibility of plot lines. People who read for adventure, not necessarily for espionage, will enjoy as well.

### Other Authors:

- **Stella Rimington – Liz Carlyle**
  - o She was in MI5 herself, and writes very realistic espionage.
  - o Her lead is a female, which is unusual.
  - o Great appeal for women fans, although men enjoy her as well.
- **Keith Thomson – Drummond Clark**
  - o Humorous take on espionage, and an homage at the same time
  - o Drummond Clark was once a legendary spy, but now has Alzheimer's. His son Charlie Clark resented not having his father around when he was a boy. Charlie discovers that Drummond was a spy when Drummond's past comes back to haunt him – with both the Russians and the CIA out to "contain" him.

- **Jeff Abbott – Sam Capra**
  - o Capra is a CIA agent whose life gets turned upside down when his wife seemingly becomes a traitor. Determined to discover the truth, he is racing to find his wife, and new born son, while running from the CIA. Terrorism, double-crosses, and shadow organizations are the order of the day.

**Definition of Forensic Thriller:** Thriller with a forensic frame that focuses on the details, jargon, and people who solve crimes using science. The most popular of these are various crime scene investigators and coroners; however, the genre is expanding to include more obscure scientists such as forensic anthropologists and forensic accountants.

### **Forensic Thrillers:**

- Have had forensics in crime fiction all the way back to **The Murders in the Rue Morgue** by Edgar Allan Poe (fingerprints)
  - o In Mysteries, forensics plays the supporting role – provides clues
- Before Forensic Thrillers could become their own genre, readers had to become comfortable and familiar with science
  - o Medical Thrillers came first
    - **Coma** by Robin Cook (1977) was really the first Medical Thriller
      - Reading it now, it has way too much medical detail to engage readers – almost like reading Tom Clancy
      - Cook now has more action
  - o As forensic science grew – especially DNA – Forensic Thrillers grew
  - o As people heard about forensic science in everyday life, they started looking for it in their crime novels
- In Forensic Thrillers, the specialists becomes the investigator
  - o Specialist often gets more involved in the crime solving/fighting than they should (or would in real life)
- Primary appeal is the detail about detection methods:
  - o Chemical
  - o Biological
  - o Ballistic
  - o Fingerprint analysis
  - o Postmortem reconstruction
  - o Psychological inquiry
  - o Financial scrutiny
- Also very cinematic – *Bones*, *Rizzoli and Isles*, *CSI*, et al.

### **Patricia Cornwell – Kay Scarpetta**

- Created the fan base for Forensic Thrillers

- o Fans interested in medical details and scientific methodology
- o Crime scene investigation becomes the star – the science takes center stage for parts of the novel
- o Darker tone because the autopsies and bodies are described, but not graphic details of the crimes as they are occurring
  - Some people find Forensic Thrillers more gross
  - Other readers find them less disturbing because the science distances the violence – instead of seeing it through the killer’s eyes as it is being committed, for instance
- o Less physical action, so pacing is more like a mystery
  - Complex plots, with lots of twists
  - Most similar to police procedurals or private investigator mysteries
  - Somewhat the feel of the “team” on police procedurals since she works with cops and others
- o “Fair Play Clues” aren’t included as you would expect in a mystery
  - Scarpetta isn’t totally in the loop
  - She’s a funnel through which much police and technician information passes – but not all. So she may not know all elements of the case
- Struck in 1990s right as desire for female leads also on the rise
- Doesn’t dwell on the gory details of the crime scene
  - o Great descriptions of the geography of the crime scenes
  - o Details of the crime and scene, no matter how violent, are offered in a matter-of-fact, scientific tone
- She is often imitated now – so she is the benchmark – but others may have improved upon the formula
  - o First half of the novels often feel heavier on forensic detail
  - o Second half of the novels feel heavier on investigation
  - o Scarpetta herself often becomes the focus of the killer – female heroine in distress element
  - o As the series progresses, her personal life takes more center stage – at points the subplots start feeling soap opera-ish
    - The middle/end of this series is not a good place to start people. Many fans quit liking the series roughly around **Blow Fly** and have only started liking them again since **Red Mist**. Even though **Postmortem** is somewhat dated, that may be the best place to start new readers.

### Jefferson Bass – Body Farm

- Writing team of Dr. Bill Bass (who works at the real Body Farm) and Jon Jefferson
- The plots are often based on cases Bass sees/saw at the Body Farm.
- The crimes themselves aren’t violent, but the details may be gory
  - o Details are presented scientifically
  - o If patrons find science/forensics gross, this may not be the series for them
- **Suggest to:** Good read-alike for Cornwell. Fans may also like **Stiff** by Mary Roach

### Simon Beckett – David Hunter

- The setting is sunny, pastoral country side while the tone is menacing and horrify. The contrast is part of the appeal.
  - British small town – almost a cozy setting
  - Hunter retired to live a nice quite life, but evil follows him
- The crimes are generally horrific. These are thrillers first and foremost, with a forensic angle.
- Hunter's tragic backstory also draws in many readers
  - Hunter is a forensic anthropologist
  - Three years before the series begins, he lost his wife and daughter to a drunk driver

### Tess Gerritsen – Rizzoli and Isles

- Gerritsen is a doctor, who started writing romance novels then switched to medical thrillers. Her novels always contain a sub-thread of romance.
- **Bone Garden** is a great book, but not part of this series. It's a stand-alone.
- The first couple of books "in this series" were not intended to be part of a series. They may only have one of the leads, or feature other characters. They are in the same universe, and the later books do refer back to them. However, some people can start **The Mephisto Club**.
- Isles is a medical examiner; Rizzoli is a cop
  - Great blend of police procedural and forensic thriller
    - Gets police stuff and the medical stuff right
    - Gruesome forensic mixed with graphic violence
    - Terrifying villains
  - Both leads are flawed and feisty
    - Very strong female characters, who get themselves out of danger
    - Mix intuition and intelligence to solve crimes
    - One or both often end up in mortal danger.
  - Tone is often nightmarish

### Iris Johansen – Eve Duncan

- LIMITER: Do not give these books to people without telling them
  - *Eve Duncan reconstructs the skulls of dead children to tell people what they would look like if they had not died. (Like Angela on Bones.)*
  - If they are okay then say:
    - *She dedicated her life to this because she lost her own child*
  - For many people, one of those plot points may be too much for them to even want to start this series.
- The violence is often against children, but is generally over before the book opens, and happens off screen. However, children are generally the victim.
- She is seeking justice for the victims – because she was a victim.
- Over the course of the series, a love interest does develop.
- Some people found the series became too soap opera-ish after too many books

- o The plots got too bizarre and “what twist can we come up with next”
- o Instead of focusing on crimes, the twists become more about her personal life
- Less science than some of the others, but lots of action, and a lot of emotion.

### **Katy Reichs – Temperance Brennan**

- These books are only loosely related to the TV series Bones. Some people like one media or the other better.
  - o Very different appeal factors
- This series is the most similar to mysteries.
- Reichs is forensic anthropologist
  - o The plots in the series don't repeat
  - o She gets the science very accurate
    - She describes things so that you can understand without feeling stupid – unlike Tom Clancy with whom if you aren't “in the know”, you don't need to understand
    - She doesn't talk down to people
- Appeal points:
  - o Strong secondary characters
  - o Witty dialog
  - o Brennan is often put into danger
  - o Strong team feel
    - Mix of police procedural and forensics
  - o Forensic and Thriller aspects are evenly spread throughout the book
  - o The characters do evolve over time
  - o Strong woman who is really, really smart
- Appeal to men and women

The next genre study will be

**February 2<sup>nd</sup>**

at

**Berwyn Public Library**

where we will discuss

**Thriller: Adventure, Caper, and Supernatural**

For more information, see

<https://sites.google.com/a/arrtreads.org/crime-fiction/2014-15-schedule/2-5-15-thriller-adventure-crime-caper-and-supernatural>