

Crime Fiction Genre Study

Mystery: Amateur, Cozy, and Humorous

Glenview Public Library

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Definition of Mystery Genre

A mystery is a story in which a crime – usually, but not always, a murder – has been committed, and the means, motive, and criminal are in doubt or unknown. This puzzle of “whodunit?” is presented to an investigator, either professional or amateur, who then tracks the investigation, gathers the clues, and solves the case. Readers require that these stories contain all the necessary clues for solving of the puzzle within its pages.

Appeal of Mysteries:

Mysteries are **Puzzles**, where the clues are obscured. However, the clues are provided. This separates them from other Crime Fiction where the goal is not necessary to solve a puzzle.

The **Investigator** is important. This time we are focusing on **Amateur Investigators**. (Cozies and Humorous novels often star amateur investigators.)

- In novels with amateur investigators, the detective’s life is often as important as the crime. Learning about the detective, and other characters, becomes a major appeal factor. This desire to learn about the characters leads to a lot of **series**.
 - Especially in Cozies, it becomes as much about revisiting the town and the people as about solving the crime.
- The reader wants to solve the mystery along with the investigator. This separates Mysteries from other Crime Fiction, especially Suspense.
- The novel becomes a battle of wits on two levels – the investigator versus the villain and the investigator versus the reader.

In a Mystery, **Good Wins** – unlike in Suspense, especially Psychologically Suspense. In other genres of Crime Fiction, evil may triumph over good. But in a mystery, the crime will be solved, and the criminal is generally brought to justice (although maybe not through the legal system). The key is that the reader and investigator end the book knowing who did it.

Pacing usually starts compelling and then speeds up with the action of the book. However, mysteries vary in pacing over the full spectrum.

Resolved Endings are a general rule in mysteries; however, the ending may not be “closed”. This is especially true in series. The crime of the novel is resolved, but the events in the character’s lives may not be resolved. Sometimes, the open issues in the character’s lives form continuity between novels in the series. But, readers may become outraged if the novel does not have a resolved ending – asking where are the missing pages [This has happened to Becky before].

Characteristics of Amateur Detectives:

Amateur Detectives **work without pay** because they are intrigued by the puzzle of the crime. They usually have a **real job, or a hobby**, the details of which get worked into the plot of the story. These details play a major role in cozies.

- Stop, You're Killing Me (<http://www.stopyourekillingme.com/>) has a great **job index** which you can use when someone is interested in mysteries with a particular frame – e.g. gardening mysteries. It's also great for making displays around a particular theme.

Amateur Detectives often have a **contact in the police department**. Sometimes there is tension with this contact, because the amateur is invading the police's territory. It's a contact they can go to, but they are in competition. Other times, the police contact and detective eventually become a team.

- Sometimes, especially in the cozies, a **romance theme** or subplot gets developed over the course of the entire series. This element is not developed in one book, and is subordinate to the mystery. Often, the romance develops between the police contact and the amateur detective.
- For example, Diane Mott Davidson's Goldy Schulz and Joan Hess' Claire Malloy both marry their police contact.

Amateur Detectives often star in **series**, and the **characters provide appeal** as much as the mystery or crime. The series often star eccentric secondary characters who also contribute to the appeal.

Fan and Non-Fan Perspectives

- Fans find the other occupations, or hobbies, interesting as they are woven into the crime, or frame the other details of the story
- Fans love the series nature of these stories. They are drawn to the way the backstories are slowly revealed as the series progresses.
- If you prefer stand-alone stories, you may be a non-fan of these types of Crime Fiction. Suspense and Psychological suspense more naturally lend themselves to stand-alone format.
- People may be a fan of Cozies when they are in a particular mood.
 - o Right after 9/11, these books were in really high demand.
 - o These are great vacation books – for when you don't want to think very hard.
 - o They are good for new mom, or others who may not have a lot of time to invest in a complicated plot.
 - o They may be good when a Teen or Tween is assigned to read a Mystery, because you can be fairly sure they won't have objectionable content.
- Fans love the characters, and building relationships with the characters.
- Fans may find them a guilty pleasure. The mysteries are something they enjoy, when they are in the right mood, even if they can't articulate why they enjoy these type of mysteries.
- Fans love that the good guys win, and all is right with the world. There may be a murder, but the overall tone is not dark.
 - o However, dialog has been getting snarkier. Not everything is as much sweetness and light as they used to be. The cozies are getting a bit of an edge

- o or bite to them.
- o Some of the cozies are getting younger lead characters, which is adding to this snark and edginess.
- Fans like that the person who dies tends to have deserved it. Innocents tend not to have died, as can happen in Suspense and Psychological Suspense
- Overall, especially the cozies, these Mysteries lean towards “Ladies’ Corner”. It may be harder to find Mysteries in this area that appeal to men.

Agatha Christie

- Grand Dame of cozy mysteries
- Benchmark for how cozies are written
- Miss Marple is her amateur detective (while Hercule Poirot is a professional)
- She follows the rules of fair play – all the clues are there, you may just have missed them. The mystery is a puzzle, usually with a twist.

Miss Marple

- **Murder at the Vicarage** is the 1st
- She is nosey, a gossip, and expects the worst of everyone
 - o She does mellow as the series goes on and becomes more likeable
 - o However, she remains very nosey
 - o She knows how she is perceived by the village, and it doesn’t bother her
 - o She has a shrewd intelligence
- In some of the later stories, she doesn’t appear until much of the story has happened, and you start to wonder if she is going to appear. (e.g. **The Moving Finger**)
- She has the solution to the case long before she reveals it, which some found annoying.
- The solution may be revealed suddenly. Miss Marple sits the police down and explains how she knew it all along.

Amateur List

- Nevada Barr’s Anna Pigeon series (starts with **Track of the Cat**)
Each of national park ranger Anna Pigeon books is centered in a different national park. You can recommend any book in the series, out of order, depending on the location. (So if a patron is heading to a national park, recommend that one to them.) While she’s an amateur detective, these are not cozies. The frame is very strong in this series, and you also hear about the politics and seamy side of national parks. This series is popular with men as well as women.
- **Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie**, by C. Alan Bradley (Flavia de Luce series)
Set in 1950s English countryside, 11-year-old amateur sleuth and amateur chemist Flavia de Luce solves village crime amidst her eccentric family and village. Flavia is in some ways a young Miss Marple, although the police aren’t incompetent instead often rescue her from danger. Readers may find Flavia’s precociousness enduring, humorous, or annoying. This series may appeal to men as well as women.
- **Grime and Punishment**, by Jill Churchill (Jane Jeffry series)

This series stars Chicago suburban mom (and widow) Jane Jeffrey. The titles are generally literary allusions, and the details center around her domestic life raising three children. The tone is humorous, even cozy. Her police contact becomes her love interest.

- **Just Desserts**, by Mary Daheim (Bed and Breakfast series)
This series is set in a bed-and-breakfast outside of Seattle, Washington run by Judith McChavez. The tone is light, reflected in the pun-ridden titles, and humor is infused by her quirky cousin. The series may appeal to cozy fans. Her police contact becomes her love interest, and eventually her spouse.
- **Dead Cat Bounce**, by Sarah Graves (Home Repair is Homicide series)
Home renovation and repair details infuse this mystery series starring Jacobia “Jake” Tiptree and set in Eastport, Maine. Local Maine color, home repair tips, and details of being a single mom raising a teenaged son fill the series. This series may appeal to men.
- **Death on Demand**, by Carolyn G. Hart (Death on Demand series)
Set in a mystery bookstore (named Death on Demand) in Broward’s Rock, South Carolina, this series stars Annie Laurance Darling. Because of the bookstore setting, other mystery authors and titles are frequently mentioned in the text. Annie’s husband is a professional crime consultant, and thus her police contact. The series has a Southern flavor, and may appeal to cozy fans.

Also Mentioned:

- Joan Hess’ Claire Malloy series (starts with **Strangled Prose**)
Claire Malloy runs the Book Depot bookstore in Farberville, Arkansas. Claire has a teenaged daughter and eventually marries her police contact. Farberville is full of quirky characters, and the series would appeal to fans of humorous, cozy mysteries.

Cozy List

Cozy mysteries frequently feature a hook – often a hobby – that provides additional points of interest. This leads to the **Three C’s of Cozies**: Cats, Crafts, and Culinary – which are perpetually popular.

- **Aunt Dimity’s Death**, by Nancy Atherton [amateur] (Aunt Dimity series)
With the recent popularity of paranormal, this cozy series is being rebranded as the first paranormal mystery with Aunt Dimity being the first dead investigator. After the death of family friend “Aunt” Dimity, American Lori Shepherd moves to the English village of Finch. Over the course of the series, Lori solves mysteries with help from Aunt Dimity in the form of messages written in a blue notebook. The charming village of Finch provides the backdrop as Lori finds love and raises a family.
- **Death of a Gossip**, by M. C. Beaton [professional – police] (Hamish Macbeth series)
Set in the Scottish Highland village of Lochdubh, this cozy series features police constable Hamish Macbeth. The series is full of local color, quirky characters, and humor. This series may appeal to men.

- **Wish You Were Here**, by Rita Mae Brown [amateur] (Mrs. Brown series)
This cozy series features cats (and dogs) who talk to each other (but not humans) about both the curious ways of humans and the mystery of the novel. Mary “Harry” Harristeen is the postmistress of Crozet, Virginia and an amateur sleuth. Mrs. Murphy, a gray tiger cat, and Tee Tucker, a corgi (as well as all the town’s pets) infuse humor into the series. The series is sweet, charming, and quirky. It is “the coziest of the cozies”.
- **Dying for Chocolate**, by Diane Mott Davidson [amateur] (Goldy Schulz series)
A culinary cozy mystery series featuring Goldy Schulz, owner of Goldilocks Catering in Aspen, Colorado. Goldy is divorced from an abusive spouse and mother to a teenaged son. Her police contact becomes her love interest, and eventually her husband. The series is full of interesting characters, and fabulous descriptions of food. Each book includes recipes at the end, which were described in the text.
- **Crewel World**, by Monica Ferris [amateur] (Needlecraft Mysteries series)
A craft cozy mystery series set in a needlework shop in Excelsior Minnesota. Betsy Devonshire inherits the needlework shop after her sister dies in the first book. Readers learn a variety of crafts as Betsy learns them. (The series gets better after the first book, so continue to read if you don’t like **Crewel World**.) Each volume has a pattern or instructions for a different craft in the back.
- **No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency**, by Alexander McCall Smith [professional – PI] (No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency series)
This series is the least mystery driven of the cozy mysteries. Mma “Precious” Ramotswe sets up a detective agency in Botswana using primarily her instincts. In each book, she will solve five or six mysteries, which are more problems than crimes. Ramotswe is like Miss Marple in that she is a student of the human condition. Ramotswe is genuine and sincere, but not naïve. The books involve a lot of philosophy and contemplation. The series is about the lead character and her relationship with the other characters more than about crime. The setting is also an appeal factor, and the novels have a travelogue feeling. The audiobooks are a sure bet, and the HBO series was fantastic as well. This series appeals to men.

Also Mentioned:

- Lilian Jackson Braun’s The Cat Who series (starts with **The Cat Who Could Read Backwards**)
(Lilian Jackson Braun died in 2011, so this series is now over.) Unlike the Mrs. Murphy series, no animals talk in this series. Crime reporter Jim Qwilleran inherits a large fortune and moves to Moose County Michigan where he becomes an amateur sleuth. His cats Koko and Yum-Yum often perform actions or antics which give him inspiration to solve the mystery. It is never made clear whether the cats are psychic and solving crime, or just inspirational to Qwilleran’s ability.
- **Three Bags Full**, by Leonie Swann
A sheep mystery, which is hilariously funny. The sheep set out to solve the mystery of their shepherd’s murder, led by Miss Maple the smartest of the sheep. The book is

eccentric, quirky, and madcap.

Humorous List

For these books, the appeal is more about the humor than the mystery

- **Murder with Peacocks**, by Donna Andrews (Meg Langslow series)
This series is full of madcap humor starring Meg Langslow's dysfunctional family. Meg Langslow is an ornamental blacksmith who works part-time for her brother's computer-game company. Her father is a busybody doctor and her boyfriend is a handsome college professor. The series is set in a small-town in Virginia. (The 2nd in the series isn't as good as the rest of the books.)
- Any Janet Evanovich featuring Stephanie Plum (starts with **One for the Money**)
In Trenton, New Jersey, Stephanie Plum gets a job as a bounty hunter. Stephanie's humor and backbone are offset by her incompetence, but she generally gets her man. Because her job centers on catching criminals, each novel doesn't necessarily include a crime. Plum's love life is equally filled with mishaps. The series abounds in eccentric, humorous secondary characters (especially Grandma Mazur).
- **This Pen for Hire**, by Laura Levine (Jaine Austen series)
Ghost writer Jaine Austen frequently gets drawn into crime through her writing assignments. The series is fluffy and humorous, including Jaine's wry, self-deprecating style. The style mixes chick-lit and mystery, with Jaine's cat Prozac adding to the appeal. The series also has teen appeal.
- **The Spellman Files**, by Lisa Lutz (Izzy Spellman Mysteries series)
The Spellman family is a family of private investigators, and quite dysfunctional as a family unit. Because the family business is investigation, each novel doesn't necessarily focus on a particular crime. The novels focus on Izzy's life and her love life. Lutz does an excellent job of catching you up on what happened in the previous novels at the beginning of each new edition. The humor is of the darker, edgier Carl Hiaasen vein.

NOTA BENE: Please be careful when you weed these series. Try to keep the beginning of the series so that new fans can start at the beginning.

The next meeting is:

June 5, 2014 2-4 p.m.

Berwyn Public Library

Mystery: Police and Private Investigators

See <https://sites.google.com/a/arrtreads.org/crime-fiction/> for details