

## Mystery Novels

Mystery novels are one of the most popular genres, with books for every sensibility available. The sheer variety of books that call themselves mysteries begs the question, "How did this all happen?" Actually, it's a pretty interesting story. The first real mystery wasn't written until 1841 when Edgar Allan Poe wrote the short story, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* featuring his detective C. Auguste Dupin. To this day, the Mystery Writers of America's award for best mystery of the year is called the Edgar. 2008's winner is John Hart's *Down River*.

The genre really didn't get going until around the turn of the century, when Arthur Conan Doyle published many of his Sherlock Holmes stories. In the 1920s and 1930s several British authors, notably Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, refined the detective novel to the book that we recognize today. There are several mystery elements that began with that group that remain consistent today. Most importantly, mysteries in this vein are whodunits. The action primarily focuses on the actual detecting, and finding out who committed the crime in question, and how it was committed. It seems obvious that a mystery novel should revolve around actually solving a mystery. But that isn't always the case.

When people think of a private eye, they typically conjure an image a Humphrey Bogart type of guy in a trench coat, a tough loner who lives by his wits. This image belongs to a distinctly American literary tradition. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane are the fathers of modern mystery. They, and those that followed in their footsteps, revolutionized the genre, featuring the dirty underside of society or *noir*; the liars, the cheats, and the backroom brawls that Miss Marple seems to avoid. These books are more or less the story of a good person (the detective) fighting a corrupt society. And the stories focus on that fight, and the characters in it, sometimes more than the actual mystery.

The inevitable backlash to all of this corruption and bleakness is what is called a 'cozy mystery'. There are now mysteries that feature caterers (Diane Mott Davidson), quilters (Earlene Fowler), crossword lovers (Parnell Hall), cats (Lillian Jackson Braun), herbalists (Susan Wittig Albert), and just about everything else that solve crimes. Some of these far fetched ideas are very well written, and since it's all about losing yourself in a good book, they are very popular as well. Some of them echo the earlier, plot driven novels of Agatha Christie, and others focus more on the hobbies of the characters than anything else. But the character driven, hardboiled private eye novel is still popular as well, and some of the current popular authors in this category include Robert Crais, Sue Grafton, Robert B. Parker, Sara Paretsky, and John Sanford.

There are mysteries for just about every taste and disposition out there. Stop into the library, and I'm sure that we can find something to fit you, too.

*/Dave Miller is Manager of Hope Branch Library, Bartholomew County Public Library*