



MYSTERY GENRE STUDY

The ARRT Genre Study Group studied the Mystery genre from 1996-1997.

Mystery Characteristics

There is a body or some crime has been committed.

There is a puzzle of some sort for the investigator to solve.

There are suspects.

There are clues.

There is an investigator.

There is a solution or resolution to the mystery.

Order has been restored or justice has been served.

Questions to consider when working with readers:

How much violence will the reader tolerate?

Is the reader looking for humor or a light touch?

Does the reader like to follow police procedures with details of forensic evidence?

Does the reader like a specific frame (cooking, academic, Native American, etc.)?

If so which one? Does the reader enjoy learning about a new subject?

Does the reader prefer an amateur or a professional detective?

Does the reader prefer a male or a female protagonist?

Does the reader like historical or contemporary mysteries? If historical, which time period?

Does the reader like leisurely or fast paced books?

Does the reader like books with psychological feel?

Does the reader have a preference for, or a dislike of, books set in certain countries?

Does the reader like/dislike books written in the first person?

Does the reader prefer well-developed characters or a book that is plot driven?

Does the reader enjoy a book with a good sense of place?
Does the reader enjoy books that are a part of a series?
Does the reader enjoy books seen from both the detective's and the murderer's points of view?
Does the reader prefer a book with some resolution at the end or a book that is open-ended?

Mystery Subgenre Characteristics/Appeal Elements

Classic Authors

Dashiell Hammett (*The Maltese Falcon*)

- Layers of deceit; truths and half truths present
- Symbolism important
- Dark division of the world and the people in it
- Characters seemed cliched because they have been limited so much
- Set in time period it was written in
- Can pick up prejudices of the time
- Similar to Jim Thompson

Raymond Chandler (*The Long Goodbye*)

- Writer allows the reader to see more of the main character's thoughts
- First-person more immediate
- Chandler uses similes and metaphors--elegantly written
- Set in the time it was written
- Can pick up the prejudices of the time
- Agatha Christie (*Murder on the Orient Express*)
- Poirot--great detective type
- Stories do not have strong sense of time period in which they were written
- Plots have a timelessness
- Can pick up the prejudices of the time

Dorothy Sayers (*The Nine Tailors*)

- Great detective type
- Took a long time to get into book
- Character does not seem to grow or change as much as they do in modern series
- Subtle British wit present
- Definite code of honor present-villain given a chance to commit suicide before police are called
- Strong sense of morality

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (*Hound of the Baskervilles*)

Great detective type

Story still popular and reads well

Female Private Detectives

Story Line

Protagonists have a strong desire to find the truth

Focus on step-by-step investigation; don't just rely on intuition

Usually only investigate one step at a time

No authority to interview to suspects

Will bend rules; break and enter if necessary to solve crime

Brand of justice meted out, but not necessarily within the law

Less violent than those with male detectives. Threatening situations, but less graphic violence

Better titles have equal parts character development and mystery; readers enjoy following characters' lives

Setting/Background/Tone

Character not domestic; apartment a mess, refrigerator empty

Often a bleak tone; but also contain humor-often wisecracking

Deal with urban crimes, nastier

Real sense of place

Characterization

First person or from detectives point of view

Protagonists are independent, self-reliant, but are still feminine

Code of honor not as evident as with male detectives

Family is important; it may be an extended family created by detective who is a loner otherwise

Lack of significant other. If there is someone to relate to, she doesn't relate as well to reader

Heroine affected when she needs to kill criminal

Takes steps not to be in "macho" situations; always carry a gun

Women PI's live by their wits

Likable characters; series follow secondary characters as well, characters grow and change over the course of the series

Pacing

Fast-paced

Working With Readers

Does the patron only like female protagonists?

These books are often harder edged.

Does the patron like/dislike first person books?

Does the patron enjoy fast-paced books?

Read Alikes

Sue Grafton--Marcia Muller; Karen Kijewski; Linda Barnes; Janet Dawson; Janet Evanovich; (perhaps Robert Parker, James Lee Burke, and Jeremiah Healy)

Sara Paretsky--Liza Cody; Dana Stabenow

Police Procedurals--Women

Story Line

Often investigate multiple cases

Interplay between levels of police; more office dialogue

Have authority to question suspects

Setting/Background/Tone

Involve urban settings

Less humor

See police procedure in solving multiple crimes

See women dealing with being professionals in a man's world; need to show they belong there;

so less humor

Characterization

Written in the third person

Working With Readers

Does the patron enjoy books following multiple cases and seeing the inner workings of a police station?

Does he enjoy Ed McBain, *Hill Street Blues* or *Prime Suspect*?

Read Alikes

Prime Suspect; Dorothy Uhnak; and male police procedurals

Male Private Detectives

Story Line

Often more violent than private detectives. Assaulted or beaten up

Crimes they solve are often violent

Usually work only one case at a time

Step-by-step investigations

No authority to interview suspects-may allow suspects to think they are the police

Usually series books

Always a bad guy in the story; PI deals with crooks, underworld, etc.

Setting/Background/Tone

Bleak

Wisecracking humor often directed at themselves

Sense of place

Characterization

Detective is a loner, independent, self-reliant

Has own code of honor

Willing to bend/break the law to solve a case

Will continue to work a case without a paying client-must know the answer

Often a relationship with a woman; men are sensitive, caring about relationships;

Women seemed to stay on the edge of a relationship, men do not seem to have this problem

Often have a friend with the police or reasonably good relations

More likely than females to carry and use a gun

May have a physical problem-alcoholism, nervous stomach

Feel protective of client especially if a woman or a child

Often first person point of view

Character grows and changes through the series; develops relationships; solve personal problems

Likable characters

Male characters are not as well described as female--physical description and clothes

Heavy macho side

Often live on the edge financially

Many male PI's have sidekicks, not usually true with women who have

more of a support system
of secondary characters

Pacing

Fast-paced

Read Alikes

Robert B. Parker; Robert Crais

Lawrence Sanders; Ed McBain (Mathew Hope series); Robert Crais;
Stephen Greenleaf

Walter Mosley; Raymond Chandler

Female private detectives

Police Procedurals

Story Line

Information about policemen and their day to day activities

Show details of working as a cop and police in danger

May focus on social issues

Police work as a team

Police have authority amateur or private detective does not have

Police may use brute force

Usually working on multiple cases, some of them may be minor-cases
may not be solved

British police procedurals are much more like cozies

British police procedurals--the threads seem to come together. There is
a lot of set-up for what is
to follow

Rely on technology (American)

Setting/Background/Tone

Police procedures may be small town (cozy or humorous)

Characterization

Some read police procedural for characters

Policemen stick together and protect on another

Cop can be detached or not

Pacing

Varies

Working with Readers

Some may be humorous--more like a cozy than police procedural--even though they take place in a police department.

Examples include Julie Smith, M.C Beaton (Hamish Macbeth), and Joan Hess (Maggody series)

Police procedurals can have very different feels. Both Julie Smith and James Lee Burke set their books in New Orleans, but they are very different books.

Read Alikes

Police Procedural

Ed McBain; Del Shannon; William Caunitz; Stuart Kaminsky; Eleanor Taylor Bland;

Lillian O'Donnell, R. Hill ; Magdalen Nabb; Tony Hillerman

Ed McBain--Peter Turnbull stories of "P" Division

Humorous/Cozy

Julie Smith; Joan Hess; M.C Beaton; Susannah Stacey

Great Detective

Story Line

Readers see more of the detective's personal life

The great detective gives the solution at the end

Often British

Characterization

One person solves the crime

The sidekick is usually a flunky

Great detective is more literate, more of a gentleman

May be more ethical

Pacing

Leisurely

Working With Readers

Must they meet the detective right away?

Does the patron enjoy bigger, leisurely paced books with a wealth of detail?

One character often works alone with a sidekick

Read Alikes

Frances Fyfield; P.D James; Martha Grimes; Elizabeth George; Colin Dexter;

James Lee Burke; Faye Kellerman; Ruth Rendell (Chief Inspector Wexford)

Serial Killers

Story Line

Don't often see the rest of the police department

Get the point of view of both the police and the killer

Solve the case using forensic evidence that is explained in detail

Usually solve one case at a time

Setting/Background/Tone

Violent

Sense of place

Often psychological

Suspenseful--Cat and mouse situation

Characterization

Also follow the personal life of the detective

Pacing

Fast-paced

Working With Readers

For readers who like fast-paced, suspenseful books and don't mind violence.

Read Alikes

Michael Connelly; Ridley Pearson; John Sandford; Jonathan Kellerman; James Patterson;

Patricia Cornwell; Andrew Klavan; Thomas Harris

Historical Mysteries

Story Line

Set in past (over 50 years ago?)--or what patron thinks is historical

Author is not writing about his times. For example Raymond Chandler is not historical.

Two types

1. Lots of historical detail
2. Mystery set in time but story is more important than historical detail (Carola Dunn; Kate Kingsbury)

Mysteries are solved differently. There is not the scientific detail we find in modern mysteries.

Less actual detecting and more intuitive solving of the problem.

More amateurs and fewer actual detectives since police didn't appear until mid-19th century.

Setting/ Background/Tone

Evoke a good sense of the time and place, lots of historical detail

Author must research time and place

Mystery must be consistent with time; characters must act in character, has to be of the

time in speech and manner as well as moral/social issues

Some historical mysteries. Usually not enough historical detail (Carola Dunn or Kate Kingsbury)

Readers read for time period, characters and their relationships

Social/moral issues appropriate for the time.

Characterization

Protagonist mostly amateur

Some feature real people and these have a different appeal. There's a different feel if the

character is treated humorously. For example, contrast Davis' humorous Roman mysteries

vs. Saylor's more serious series.

Pacing

Slower paced.

Pacing slower because of wealth of detail.

Working With Readers

Mystery is not as important as characters and historical fact; read for the picture of and insight

into the times and a sympathetic series character

Readers choose by historical period

Historical detail is most important aspect
Series character may be as important as time period; a good character who fits in.
Character development is important.
Most popular historical time periods: Medieval, Victorian, 1930's

Read Alikes

Carola Dunn's journalist is similar to K.K. Beck's 1920's flapper Iris Cooper (feminist, slightly quirky character, story has a light romance, cozy feel)

Margaret Frazer is written in the Anne Perry/Ellis Peter's tradition (character one readily relates to, lots of historical detail).

Laurie King readers may like Gillian Linscott

P.C. Doherty's non-series mysteries are for fans that like the detail of Kate Ross and Anne Perry;
his series' are for Ellis Peter's readers (Brother Cadfael).

Fans of Kate Ross would probably like Anne Perry, although the latter are set in Victorian rather than Regency times.

Cozy Mysteries

Story Line

Body is offstage; death and any violence are not graphically described
No graphic violence, sex or language (but not old-fashioned)

Although there may be surprises, they aren't ugly surprises, cozies are not meant to be disturb readers

Protagonists solves mystery through intuition and knowledge of human nature

Gossipy details from neighbors replace forensic evidence as protagonist solve crime

Necessary suspension of disbelief-how many deaths could realistically occur in these small communities?

Setting/Background/Tone

Importance of setting/frame. Protagonist involved in catering academia or something else. Details of

this frame are important to the appeal of the mystery.

Lots of detail-description of lives, careers as well as physical description of people and places.

Sense of community usually small town; cozies unlikely to have an urban setting (if they do it's

some sort of closed community)

Often humorous, or at least light-hearted in tone. Cozies are upbeat.

Great sense of property in British cozies

Characterizations

Characters are not loners--relationships among characters are important

There must be some connection to the police department. Often police person is a friend or lover

of the protagonist

Almost always have series characters. For some readers, the characters and the developments

in their lives are more important than the mystery

Characters may be quirker than in other subgenres.

This may be related to their profession and the setting/frame

Animals often feature prominently

Reader doesn't know and/or like the victim

Eccentric characters, amusing dialogue; reveal human foibles

Pacing

Shorter books that are fast reads

Lots of dialogue

Books have an immediacy

Conversational tone

Working With Readers

Questions to consider:

Do they want humor or not?

Is geographical setting (or English vs. American) important?

Do they prefer a subject frame or profession? If so, which one?

How much tolerance do they have for "cute"?

Do readers know what we mean by cozy?

Listen to clues about what they don't want as well as what they like

Readers who ask for funny mysteries usually want cozies
Possible cozy mysteries for men (with male protagonists): Lilian Jackson Braun,
Lawrence Sanders, Simon Brett, Jeff Abbott, Lawrence Sanders's McNally series, or Charlotte MacLeod's Peter Shandy mysteries
Read for humor not much frame: M.C. Beaton, Dorothy Cannell

Read Alikes

More difficult than in other subgenres. The books tend to have the same feel.

Gillian Roberts--perhaps Sarah Shankman and Nancy Pickard

John Sherwood--perhaps Susan Wittig Albert (herbs) and some of Sharyn McCrumb

Nancy Atherton's Aunt Dimity--perhaps Sheila Allen's *Reluctant Ghost* (mystery and romance)

Harry Kemelman's mysteries are intellectual.

Ralph McInerney deals with issues in the Catholic Church.

Kate Charles (Anglican) and Harry Kemelman are for readers who want to learn about religion.

Mystery Writers (some cozy for young adults)

Lilian Jackson Braun

Robert B. Parker

Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason

Maybe Rex Stout (too reflective?)

Maybe Aaron Elkins, John D. MacDonald, Tony Hillerman

Amateur Detectives

No police or private investigator though usually trained investigator in another field

Have some connection to law enforcement or they are experts brought in because of expertise

Need connection to police; married or dating a police officer

Amateurs don't get paid for their investigation; not their real job
Fall into case as part of their job; come in contact with victim because of job--don't necessarily know the victim as in many cozies
Not licensed detectives or cozy snoops
Many have professions that give them reason to interview people
More violence, harder edged
More often urban setting; not small town
Mostly women protagonists (is this true?)
Amateurs draw reader into their world. Interesting things happen there.

Story Line

Some humorous but there is a range
Solve crime through investigation, more puzzle-solving than in cozies (which feature solving through knowledge of human nature and sometimes blundering)

Setting/Background/Tone

More descriptive details; feel of place and profession
Often a crossover to other subgenres with tone (may like some police)
Procedurals that focus on characters and police investigation like P.D. James or Elizabeth George)
Amount of violence is key to moving from one subgenre to another

Characterization

Patrons read for characters and their changing lives
Readers don't mind a greater amount of violence than present in cozies
Characterizations more sophisticated than in cozies, where they are more prescribed and predictable
Characters have individual, interesting professions that attract readers; a life outside of crime
Contain accurate details of professions and professional life
May be more realistic; we see them more as real people
More to relate to in these-real job, true lives, less police involvement; intelligent
Investigation we can relate to
Not as many eccentric characters as in cozies
Not as many secondary characters, less likely to have sidekicks. Work independently

Americans are more free-wheeling, British more restrained or reserved
Relationships among characters are not so important-not much focus of book

Pacing

Fast-paced

Working With Readers

Is the reader interested in a particular profession?
How much violence will they tolerate; bodies not offstage
Protagonist may be in serious danger or badly hurt
May also enjoy P.D James, Elizabeth George or P.I. novels (amount of violence is the key)

Read Alikes

Amanda Cross/Veronica Stallwood/Jill Paton-Walsh--same flavor,
academic (on campus) feel of
place, tough, intellectual characters, sense of profession

Nevada Barr/Barbara D'Amato/Sue Grafton/maybe Janet Evanovich
tough single women;
sarcastic; harder-edged; adventuresome, same feel and
characterizations

William X. Kienzle/Harry Kemelman/Kate Charles
Information on religion; subject appeal

Aaron Elkins/Elizabeth Peters Same tone; archaeology as theme

John Grisham
Jonathan Kellerman (similar pacing but his characters are richer
because series characters);
maybe P.I.; Steve Martini, Michael Crichton; Nancy Taylor Rosenberg

Gail Bowen-Saskatchewan, academic; balance personal and professional
lives with murder;
Intimate more like P.D. James

Aubert, Rosemary (*Free Reign*)--Ellis Portals, Toronto disbarred,
homeless judge; lives in

homeless subculture; lots of subplots; strong sense of place, details;
appeal for men and women

Sarah Shankman/Sharyn McCrumb's Elizabeth MacPherson
series/Gillian Roberts--move to cozies

Non-Series Mysteries

Story Line

Bigger books that share more characteristics with novels
May be psychological but don't have to be
Murderer could be anyone in book-no recurring characters
Maybe open-ended

Working With Readers

Dick Francis and Robert Barnard fit our criteria for a mystery
Ruth Rendell, Margaret Yorke, and Minette Walters do not fit our mystery
criteria--more
psychological
Series books are popular because if readers enjoy one in a series, they
will probably enjoy others.
Readers also enjoy seeing series characters grow and change

Read Alikes

Ruth Rendell, Minette Walters, Margaret Yorke, and Minette Walters do
not fit our mystery
criteria--more psychological

Series books are popular because if readers enjoy one in series, they
will probably enjoy others.
Readers also enjoy seeing characters grow and change

Read Alikes

Ruth Rendell, Minette Walters, Margaret Yorke

Crime Novels

Story Line

Storyteller type with multiple characters and multiple plot lines
Reader observes a cast of characters
Books are violent, but violence is not looked upon as horrible
There is not really a mystery to be solved
Don't have all our mystery characters-usually a body, but no sense of

justice, (crime does not pay).
No puzzle, no detective

Setting/Tone/Background

Set in a different world (underside of life)
Appeal of books is to see a different way of life

Characterizations

Lots of characters in these books have a criminal background; often not likable

Pacing

Fast-paced

Read Alikes

Ross Thomas, Elmore Leonard, Timothy Watts, and Jim Hall are similar though Thomas may fit better in Comic/Caper category

Stuart Woods books are fast-paced and read like a screenplay

Jim Thompson's books have humor but are bleaker and darker

Comic/Caper

Story Line

Unusual, outrageous books
Violence offstage--reader knows what happened, but doesn't see it happening
Caper--an adventure, a crime to be accomplished, not solved
Suspense--will they get away with the crime?
Humor
Warped justice
See execution of the plan

Setting/Tone/Background

Suspense
Revenge

Characterizations

Bungling or slick criminals

Eccentric characters
Bad guys deal with other bad guys

Pacing

Fast-paced

Working With Readers

As long as patrons don't read Comic/Caper only for the humor, crime books might appeal

Read Alikes

Joe Gores, Donald E. Westlake, Carl Hiaasen, and Lawrence Sanders--
dark comedy