

## Some Notes on Mysteries

### From Donelson and Nilsen, pp. 185-192

Mysteries are an ever-popular genre, in part because they are unrealistic. Mysteries present to readers games and puzzles that help us to suspend our disbelief and escape our everyday reality.

Hillary Waugh discusses several “rules” for presenting a mystery/puzzle:

1. All clues discovered by the detective must be made available to the reader.
2. The murderer must be introduced early.
3. The crime must be significant.
4. There must be detection.
5. The number of suspects must be known, and the murderer must be among them.
6. The reader, as part of the game of fair play, has the right to expect that nothing will be included in the book that does not relate to or in some way bear on the puzzle.

A great many mysteries include the most significant of crimes—murder. The murder will often take place a little ways into the book, after readers have been introduced to major and minor characters. The detective (official or unofficial) appears, clues are discovered, and investigation ensues. Finally, the detective solves the case, the guilty are punished, and the innocent restored.

Shannon O cork classifies mysteries into these types:

1. The amateur detective—amateur detectives (Sherlock Holmes, Nero Wolfe) are bright and insightful, seeing what others don’t.
2. The cozy mystery—usually set in small towns (Agatha Christie is a well known writer of this type).
3. The puzzle—these stories are exercises in ingenuity. Ellery Queen is a writer of this type.
4. The private detective—Private detectives, unlike the amateurs, solve crimes for money. They are usually cynical and tired. Often they are former police officers. These types of novels usually have an amount of violence.
5. The police procedural—Often very believable books because the central characters are police officers using methods and equipment only available to the police. Ed McBain is a popular writer of this genre.
6. The thriller—Often these are spy thrillers a la James Bond. Sometimes there are other types of mysteries rolled into the thriller storyline but the book usually focuses not so much on who did the crime but on how to stop him/her or how the hero will escape perilous situations.

Mysteries for young adults are usually concerned with more than the crime (i.e., usually involve such “adolescent issues” as identity formation, etc.). They are shorter than mysteries for adults and will often involve amateur detectives who are young people or young people who get “sucked in” to the role of problem-solver. The violence is more likely to be underplayed and the victim is often connected to the hero/protagonist, thus forcing the protagonist to take up detection and solve the mystery.

YA authors, including those in the following list, often write over multiple genres. Some well known mystery writers for young adults include Robert Cormier, Francesca Lia Block, Carol Plum-Ucci, Elaine Alphin, Joyce Carol Oates, Carl Hiaasen, Patricia Windsor, and Joan Lowery Nixon.