

**JOHN CHARLES, CANDACE CLARK,  
JOANNE HAMILTON-SELWAY,  
AND JOANNA MORRISON**

**THE READERS' ADVISORY GUIDE TO  
MYSTERY**

**SECOND EDITION**



# **The Readers' Advisory Guide to Mystery, Second Edition**

**John Charles, Candace Clark,  
Joanne Hamilton-Selway,  
and Joanna Morrison**

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SERIES EDITORS

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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Joyce Saricks and Neal Wyatt, Series Editors

In a library world in which finding answers to readers' advisory questions is often considered among our most daunting service challenges, library staff need guides that are supportive, accessible, and immediately useful. The titles in this series are designed to be just that. They help advisors become familiar with fiction genres and nonfiction subjects, especially those they don't personally read. They provide ready-made lists of "need-to-know" elements such as key authors and read-alikes, as well as tips on how to keep up with trends and important new authors and titles.

Written by librarians with years of RA experience who are also enthusiasts of the genre or subject, the titles in this series of practical guides emphasize an appreciation of the topic, focusing on the elements and features fans enjoy so advisors unfamiliar with the topics can readily appreciate why they are so popular.

Because this series values the fundamental concepts of readers' advisory work and its potential to serve readers, viewers, and listeners in whatever future space libraries inhabit, the focus of each book is on appeal and how appeal crosses genre, subject, and format, especially to include audio and video, as well as graphic novels. Thus, each guide emphasizes the importance of whole-collection readers' advisory and explores ways to make suggestions that include novels, nonfiction, and multimedia, as well as ways to incorporate whole-collection elements into displays and booklists.

Each guide includes sections designed to help librarians in their RA duties, be that daily work or occasional interactions. Topics covered in each volume include the following:

- The appeal of the genre or subject and information on subgenres and types so that librarians might understand the breadth and scope of the topic and how it relates to other genres and subjects. Each volume also includes a brief history to give advisors context and highlight beloved classic titles.
- Descriptions of key authors and titles with explanations of why they're important, why advisors should be familiar with them,

and why they should be kept in our collections. Lists of read-alikes accompany these core author and title lists, which allows advisors to move from identifying a key author to helping patrons find new authors to enjoy.

- Information on how to conduct the RA conversation so that advisors can learn the tools and skills needed to develop deeper connections between their collections and their communities of readers, listeners, and viewers.
- A crash course in the genre or subject designed to get staff up to speed. Turn to this section to get a quick overview of the genre or subject, as well as a list of key authors and read-alikes.
- Resources and techniques for keeping up to date and understanding new developments in the genre or subject are also provided. These will not only aid staff already familiar with the genre or subject but also help those not familiar learn how to become so.
- Tips for marketing collections and lists of resources and awards round out the tools staff need to be successful working with their community.



As readers who just happen to be readers' advisors, we hope that the guides in this series lead to longer to-be-read, watched, and listened-to lists. Our goal is that the series helps those new to RA feel supported and less at sea and introduces new ideas, or new ways of looking at foundational concepts, to advisors who have been at this for a while. Most of all, we hope that this series helps advisors feel excited and eager to help patrons find their next great title. So dig in, explore, and learn and enjoy the almost-alchemical process of connecting title and reader.

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## PREFACE

It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to deduce that mysteries are popular with readers. Whether it is the wealth of mystery authors who regularly appear on best-seller lists, or even just the number of readers in your own library who ask, "Where are the mysteries?" it is clear that this genre is hot.

The purpose of this book is simple: to provide an introduction to the mystery genre and to offer some basic tips on providing effective mystery readers' advisory service. This book is not intended to be a comprehensive bibliography of the mystery genre; there are many excellent titles suited to that task (several of which we include in our resources section). In our book, we offer a selection of key authors and titles in the genre, those constituting a core collection and a baseline for understanding the genre, but this focus is only a sampling, a tantalizing taste, if you will, of the literary banquet that awaits the mystery fan.

Mysteries and the adrenaline-rush genres of suspense and thrillers are closely connected in many ways. Some authors write in multiple genres, and many readers are dedicated fans of each kind of novel. Our book focuses solely on the mystery genre itself. We occasionally discuss the suspense or thriller novel in connection with mystery fiction, but a separate readers' advisory book on adrenaline novels is in the works as part of this series.

In the belief that understanding the roots of a genre can help place authors and titles in historical context, we have included a short history of the mystery. Our history is not a definitive chronology of the genre but rather an introduction that will help the novice mystery readers' advisor understand some of the key authors and literary elements of this genre.

One of the things that quickly became most apparent to us as we wrote this book is that defining the mystery, as well as deciding how to subdivide the genre, is difficult, exhausting work (at the very least our friends and coworkers soon grew exhausted listening to us complain about it). We quickly found that one person's cozy mystery might be another person's traditional detective story. One readers' advisory source might catalog mysteries by theme, whereas another might use type of detective to subdivide the genre. Our definitions of the mystery genre are just that—ours.



If another definition or subdivision works better for you and your readers, we encourage you to use that instead. Readers' advisory work is part art and part science, and you should always be flexible when it comes to adapting readers' advisory tools and materials to your own working environment.

## **A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE FORMAT OF THIS BOOK**

As noted already, this book is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the mystery genre but instead is a guide that will help library staff new to mystery fiction get started working with readers. After chapters devoted to the history of the genre and its appeal, there are chapters dedicated to the four different subgenres (as we classify them) of mysteries: amateur sleuths, private investigators, procedural detectives, and historical sleuths.

One of the most intimidating things about mystery readers' advisory work—especially if you are new to the genre—is the seemingly overwhelming number of authors and titles that readers expect you to know. In each of the subgenre chapters, we include a section called “Key Authors.” The intent of this section is to provide information on some of the most popular mystery authors writing within each subgenre. For each key author we also offer a “Now Read” author with the intention that if readers have read everything by a particular key author, they might enjoy this author as well. The key authors and now-read authors we have chosen to include are just a sampling of the literary diversity and richness of the mystery genre. Our intentions are not to state that these authors are the only ones with whom readers' advisory staff should be familiar, but rather this is our way of introducing some of the more important authors in the mystery genre to you.

In addition to chapters on the mystery readers' advisory interview, collection development, and merchandising of your mystery collection, we have included a chapter dedicated to different resources—both print and web based—that can be useful when working with readers. We have also included a select bibliography at the end, which contains not only the print resources in the “Mystery Resources” chapter but also all of the references we consulted while writing this book. And for anyone faced with a time crunch, we have written a crash course in mystery fiction that provides enough basic information about the genre to get you started working with readers.

Readers' advisory work is filled with potential literary perils as well as plenty of opportunity for professional pratfalls (and we do admit in our many, many years working in libraries, we have hit most of those pratfalls!), but there is no denying the satisfaction that comes from having readers come back and tell us how much they enjoyed a book we suggested. So as we begin our possibly perilous journey into the world of mystery and crime, let us hearken to these inspiring words from that immortal detective Sherlock Holmes: "Come, Watson, come. The game is afoot!"

# 1

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## DETECTING THE ENDURING APPEAL OF THE MYSTERY NOVEL

At its simplest level, a mystery is any book in which some type of crime has been committed and someone attempts to solve the foresaid mystery, that is, discover who, how, and or why the crime was committed. Of course, in the mystery genre, there are endless variations of this basic formula.

Some people believe that all mysteries must include a murder, but this is not always so. Although murder is the most frequently found crime in mystery novels, there are any number of books that craft excellent mysteries around crimes other than homicide. For example, in Josephine Tey's *The Franchise Affair*, it is a reputation that is killed rather than a person. *Aunt Dimity's Death*, by Nancy Atherton, is one of our favorite mysteries of all time, but there is no murder in this modern cozy classic. Donald Westlake has written several excellent caper novels, including *The Hot Rock*, which contain not one dead body. Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Gaudy Night* features her celebrated detecting duo of Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, but the book focuses on vandalism at a women's college in Oxford instead of Sayers's usual plot, which centers on murder most foul. And in Earlene Fowler's *Mariner's Compass* there are mysteries aplenty but no murders.

Although many of your patrons read both mystery and suspense novels (and some authors write both types of fiction), there is a distinct difference between the fiction genres. The easiest way to understand the difference between mysteries and suspense novels is to think about the timeline of the book. In a mystery novel, the focus of the story is on solving the crime. In a suspense novel, the focus is on preventing a crime from happening or escaping from the criminal. In a mystery, the protagonist tries to figure out who the murderer is, whereas in most all suspense novels, the protagonist (or at least the reader) all too often knows who the real

murderer is, and the plot centers on how the protagonist escapes from becoming the killer's next victim.

Thrillers are just suspense novels taken to the next level. In a typical suspense novel, the object of the villain's wrath is an individual or a small group of people, whereas in a thriller, the literary stakes are higher, as a whole city, country, or even the world is in danger. As you work with mystery readers, you will frequently find yourself crossing over into suspense and thriller country, but for this book, we limit our discussion to just the mystery genre.

In the past two decades, there has been another literary shift in the mystery genre as more and more mystery authors begin to call their books crime fiction. Although crime fiction has been a part of the mystery genre for more than half a century, there are some differences between these two kinds of books. In a crime novel, the focus shifts from a strict attempt to solve the puzzle to an exploration of the psychology motivating the individuals involved in the story. James M. Cain is famous for his noirish tales of greed and deception, including the classics *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*. Elmore Leonard built his literary reputation creating novels about criminals trying to score, including *Killshot* and *Rum Punch*. With more of an emphasis on characterization and less concern about the restoration of social order found in traditional mysteries, crime fiction can push the mystery genre closer to the world of literary fiction, but readers who expect a traditional mystery might not always be thrilled with this brand of crime novels.

## **WHY READERS ARE DRAWN TO MYSTERIES: AN APPEAL PERSPECTIVE**

Mysteries offer the reader a world in which justice and order prevail. They are, in many ways, a modern version of the medieval morality play, in which good and evil battle for dominance. All too often in the real world, justice is not served and order is not restored. How very satisfying, then, for many readers to see the reverse come true in mystery fiction. This orderly structure of the mystery genre is a powerful element of a book's appeal for many readers.

For some mystery readers, it is all about the puzzle. These readers want a plot that challenges them to solve the crime, using clues the author has woven into the story, before the author's fictional detective finds out who dunit. Puzzle-based mysteries have had a major role in the genre

almost since the beginning, and some of the genre's most influential writers have been expert puzzle crafters, including Agatha Christie and Ellery Queen. This doesn't mean that these authors are less skilled at creating interesting characters and realistically detailed settings—it simply means that a clever plot is the key to the whole book. An excellent example of this is the works of the author G. M. Malliet. Her three mysteries featuring Detective Chief Inspector St. Just have an irresistible mix of acerbic wit and engaging characters, but Malliet also delivers soundly constructed plots with plenty of red herrings that challenge readers to guess who dunit.

The pleasure of solving a puzzle-based mystery is certainly one reason readers are drawn to this genre, but it is not the only one. For other readers, intriguing characters are the most important part of the story. Whether it is Sue Grafton's iconic Kinsey Millhone, or Elizabeth Peters's Amelia Peabody, or Rita Mae Brown's sleuthing cat-and-dog combo of Mrs. Murphy and Tee Tucker, readers just want to spend time with these characters. Just think of how many readers could care less what actual mystery Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum may have gotten herself entangled in but deeply enjoy catching up with the zany antics of the New Jersey bounty hunter and her crazy cohorts.

The intrinsic appeal of the characters goes a long way in explaining the appeal of the mystery series, as it allows readers to get to know a sleuth through several volumes of work and watch the changes in their "life." For some mystery readers, these fictional detectives become as real to them as their neighbors or friends (some even go so far as to write letters to the characters). The attachment of readers to their favorite sleuth is nothing new. Perhaps the most celebrated example of this occurred when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, tired of writing mysteries, tried to kill off his literary creation, Sherlock Holmes, at Reichenbach Falls at the end of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. The public outcry was so great that Doyle was forced to bring Holmes back with the publication of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.

Setting or geographic locale is not always a primary factor when it comes to selecting a mystery, but it can be an important reason some readers choose a book. Certain mystery writers are known for their ability to vividly re-create a locale or setting, and their readers come to expect this vibrant setting as part of the story. The Appalachian Mountains backdrop of Sharyn McCrumb's Ballad series is as important to McCrumb's story as the characters or plot of each book. Margaret Maron has written two different mystery series, but her readers especially value her Deborah Knott books, not only for their wonderful characters but also for the expertly

detailed North Carolina setting that infuses these books with their distinctive flavor. Tony Hillerman is an award-winning mystery novelist whose books combine superiorly crafted plots with a rich cast of characters. But what many readers remember most about his books is the New Mexico setting and its strong ties to the Navajo culture. And reading Cara Black's series featuring Aimée Léduc, each book of which focuses on a different section of Paris, is almost as good as taking a trip to France.

Mystery readers also like that fact that they often learn something while reading their favorite novels. Many mystery novelists use their own individual expertise in a particular subject area to give their books a unique flavor. Jonathan Gash is known for giving readers a crash course on antiques and collectibles in his books featuring antiques "dealer" Lovejoy. In each of their cleverly crafted books, the writing team of Emma Lathen uses a different area of business, such as the commodities market and agriculture, as the novel's backdrop, proving that economics and business are not just topics for the *Wall Street Journal*. In the past decade, a whole slew of craft mysteries have been published, such as Monica Ferris's Needlecraft Mysteries, which provide the reader with intriguing details about everything from knitting and stained-glass crafting to apple growing and home repair work.

Perhaps, though, more than anything, the reason mysteries are popular is that they are simply good reads. At a time when writing style often trumps characterization and plotting in literary fiction, mystery authors know the power of an entertaining story. And readers know they can count on mystery authors and their books to keep them turning the pages.

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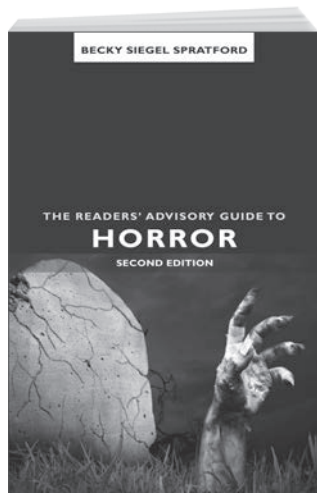
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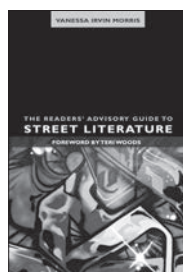


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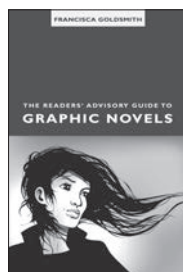
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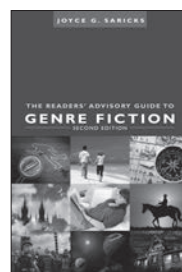
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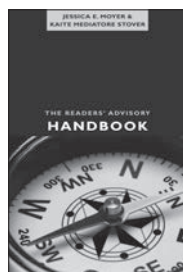
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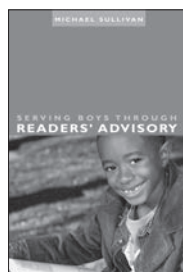
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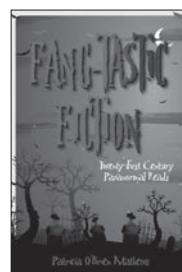
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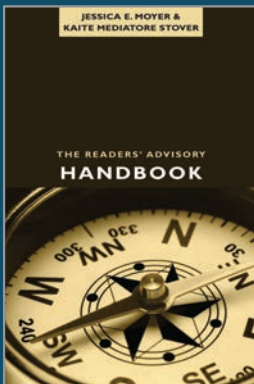
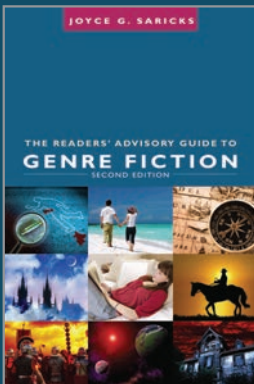
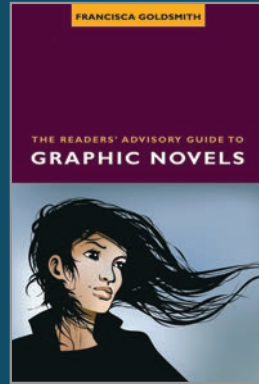
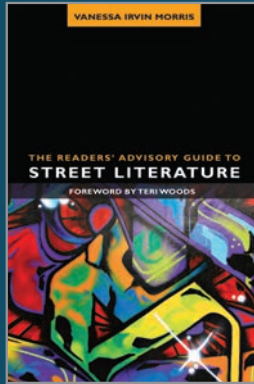
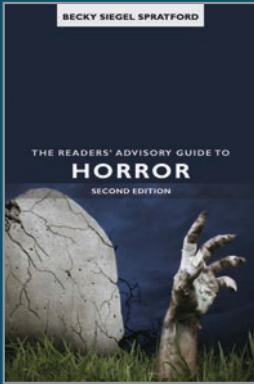
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