

When Words Collide/2015 August 16/Calgary  
Anatomy of a Mystery

If you've already published a mystery, you probably already know the basics we're going to talk about today!

- What is a MYSTERY?
- What are the rules our readers expect you to follow?
- Are all mysteries the same? And what types are there?
- Are mysteries different from other fiction?
- How do you develop a great mystery - the components and then how they fit together into a mystery arc.

## Mystery Anatomy

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Mysteries are plot and character driven. Each author finds a balance of how much to emphasize place on each of these two elements.

Plot-driven: emphasis on solving the puzzle and seeking justice.

Character-driven: emphasis is on character reactions, emotions, motivations, and significant life turning points.

- Patricia Sprinkle: *Daughter of Deceit* — Bara Wiedenauer is a wonderfully flawed character. She's not likable, but she is worth rooting for. Great portrayal of the way southern women, of a certain age and social status, interact with one another.

All writers spend enormous time and effort developing characters through emotional responses, idiosyncratic movements, and dialogue. In mysteries, these elements of also provide terrific hiding places for clues, red herrings, and secrets.

The crime appears early. There are many formulas about what *early* means, but in general between before page 30 to as late as 50 (pages 60 to 100 of a typed, double-spaced manuscript). In general, sooner is better.

The classic mystery mistake is to assume readers have to know this and that before they will understand the mystery. In real life, if we arrived at work and found a body in the reception area, we sure as heck understand what's going on; namely, this isn't going to be a good day. Everything else comes later.

- Julia Spencer-Flemming: *I Shall Not Want* — 6th book in the Russ Van Alystne/Claire Fergusson series. Starts with a shoot-out that leaves three people dead, and two wounded; the second chapter drops back six months to introduce all the characters. There was no point in reading the rest of the book. I already knew what happened to these characters.

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TYPES of Mystery

Today, mystery writers go in all directions, pairing their story with other genres or sub-genres. Romance, science fiction, paranormal, and mainstream works routinely tap into mystery or elements. We have the pleasure of reading new and exciting authors who have found ways to stretch and enliven mysteries in ways that the original authors could not imagine.

- Historical + Romance: Deanna Raybourn: Lady Julia Grey and Nicholas Brisbane trilogy — A young Victorian woman is widowed, and teams up with a mysterious stranger to find her husband's killer.
- Paranormal: Mary Stanton; Joyce and James Lavene; and Victoria Laurie — paranormal characters such as ghosts and angels
- Pastiche: Charles Finch - *A Beautiful Blue Death* - Sherlock Holmes meets Nero Wolfe in a Victorian gentlemanly atmosphere.
- Speculative Fiction: Lois McMaster Bujold: Vorkosigan Saga — Miles Vorkosigan has no trouble commanding space marines; it's his family he can't handle.

No matter what the trappings, mystery writers must work within a well-established genre framework. That framework is

interest + anticipation + uncertainty + emotion = suspense

Mystery Rules

Rules are **not** recipes – they define the boundaries of the playing field, but don't require that the game be played in only one way.

The crime must be serious enough for the reader to want it solved.

- My next-door neighbor cheated me out of blue ribbons at the county fair isn't a serious enough motive. I have a terminal illness; this is my last chance for a blue ribbon; and I just discovered my neighbor cheated me out of blue ribbons for thirty years may be.

Every clue known to the protagonist must be available to the reader. This is called fair play. The reader has a right to expect that clues solve the crime.

- Margaret Marion: *Uncommon Clay*; #8 in the Judge Deborah Knott series has a unique murder weapon; the motive was in plain sight all the time, but it was skillfully hidden.

There must be detection; the crime cannot solve itself.

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A coincidence can be used to get the protagonist into the story, but a coincidence that solves the crime is bad form.

- Kathy Reichs: *Bones to Ashes* — #10 in her Temperance Brennan's series — Temperance figures out that her boyfriend had gone back to his former lover because of lyrics a cockatiel sings.

The protagonist must pay a price for solving the crime, even if justice isn't done at the end.

Depending on the intended audience, the villain may be brought to justice or not. Justice does not equal legal court proceedings.

- Martin Walker: Bruno, *Chief of Police* — Bruno Courreges, a rural French Police Chief discovers that the murder of an Arab man has deep roots in both France during World War II and the present multi-cultural France. Justice is done, but not the justice of the courts.

**Secret:** uncovering secrets drives the plot. Like the crime, the secrets must be significant, although occasionally funny secrets provide humor. Each revealed secret closes a door. Characters cannot go back to the way their lives were before the secrets were revealed. Some secrets help solving the crime; some confuse the issue and make the crime harder to solve.

- Chris Bohjalian: *Secrets of Eden* – a secret is kept to the last page of the book.

**Whodunnit:** There must be a number of suspects and the murderer must be among them. All suspects must be introduced or mentioned early in the book.

**Whydunnit:** the murderer is may be known — though possibly not immediately named — and the question becomes which motive is the reason the crime was committed.

### What makes a Mystery Great?

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Types of Plots

Using  
Characters

Conflicts  
Clues

Red Herrings

Mystery Types (not a complete list)

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**Reflective Plots:** personal subplots converge in solving the crime. The outcome changes the protagonist's life. The most common type of mystery plots these days.

- Dana Stabenow: Kate Shugak series — The author killed Kate's lover, Jack Morgan. Readers were outraged, but his death pushed Kate into building a different kind of life for herself.
- P. J. Tracy: Monkeewrench series — A group of computer geeks, all severely damaged in some way work to retain their sanity and friendship.
- Canadian Rosemary Aubergt: Ellis Porter series – a disbarred lawyer is living on the streets and fighting to regain control of his life.

**Backgrounder/Oedipal:** the present crime is a consequence of an earlier, forgotten one. Push back into the past to explain the present. These are also very popular today.

- Vicki Lane: Elizabeth Goodweather series — the solution to the current mystery rests with a crime committed in the past.

**Interruption of Everyday Life:** solving a crime transforms an ordinary person into a stronger human being. The base of many traditional (cozy) mysteries, though in recent years, this has taken a darker turn, often with parents having to rescue their children because police can't or won't act.

- Christy Fifiield (pen name for Christy York): *Murder Buys a T-shirt* — Glory Martine inherits a souvenir shop in Florida and a parrot from her uncle. The local high school football hero dies in an accident, but the parrot says it was murder.

**Puzzle:** a crime is committed under impossible circumstances, for example, in a locked room. Puzzles stress plot over character. These have fallen out of fashion to some degree because readers like character involvement.

- Dame Agatha Christie

**Capers** (a crime goes horrible wrong); **Ticking Clocks** (Will they get away with their dastardly plan?) and **Saved by the Bell** (vulnerable person, often a woman or child, is imprisoned by the villain and saved by the protagonist) are more thrillers than mystery plots.

## Mystery Characters

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**Protagonist:** the detective who solves the mystery. The protagonist engages in two steps.

- Solving crime is their regular job, or they are curious; have a desire to see justice done; or find outwitting an evildoer challenging. This motivation often carries through to the second (or more) murder.
- When a second (or more) murder is committed, or they face a personal challenge or risk, the second engagement is internal motivation. They now must solve the crime, no matter what the cost.

The more professional the detective; that is, the more solving crime is their job, the more the writer must have a reasonable understanding of real-life law, procedures, and forensics.

The more amateur the detective, the more the writer is forced to come up with plausible ways for them to get involved and bring the mystery to a satisfactory conclusion.

**Secondary characters:** people whose lives are turned upside down by what happens and who have a connection to the protagonist. They provide motivation for solving the crime; serve as suspects; provide clues, red herrings, and secrets; and add texture and context.

Every suspect must, initially, have viable means, motive, and opportunity. The reader has to believe they *could* have done it.

**Victim(s):** person(s) killed or otherwise suffer harm. They are the most important character even though they may never appear alive in story.

A common mistake is to include the killing in a prolog because of a mistaken impression this will cause the reader to bond with the victim. In fact, because the prolog is at the very beginning of the book, the opposite happens. A reader cannot care about a character who appears and disappears.

**Villain(s):** the one(s) who commits the crime(s).

Must be a worthy opponent, someone whose strength, resources, and power are equal to or greater than those of the protagonist. Should be complex and realistic human being; not purely evil. Psychology of villain is often most interesting part of mystery. Must have adequate motive for crime; be cautious with using mentally incompetent or casual violence as motivation.

## Personal versus Public Stakes

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Personal stakes are played out in contrast to, or in synchronization with, righting wrongs and the triumph of justice. Personal arcs include romance and relationships; danger to person, family, or community; personal fortunes; and living conditions.

- Louise Penny: *The Brutal Telling* — #5 in the Armand Gamache/Three Pines series. She took four books to set up the killer in this one, and by the time she got to the fifth book, readers were hooked.

Paying the price: personal fortunes decline as a result of seeing justice done. The characters sacrifice, either permanently or temporarily, personal happiness for the good of the community.

- A. D. Scott (Pen name of Ann Deborah Nolan): Joanna Ross, a woman in rural 1950s Scotland defies convention by taking a job at the local newspaper. Over the series, her life changes completely.

Reward for a job well done: personal fortunes rise as a result of seeing justice done. The characters' personal lives improve when the community is protected.

- Anne Parker: Inez Stannert's husband abandoned her and her young son in Leadville, Colorado, circa 1870. The only thing she has is part ownership in a saloon, so she becomes a saloonkeeper. Over the series, she makes a new life for herself, and reconciles with her estranged family.

Stasis: in some traditional (cozy) series, not much changes in the protagonist's life. Some readers like this; some do not.

- The late Father Andrew M. Greeley: Bishop Blackie series – Blackie is always his same jovial self.
- M. C. Beaton: Hamish MacBeth series — wants to stay in the same place, do the same things, and not be bothered by the outside world.

## Clues, Red Herrings, and Secrets

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- Weaving clues, red herrings, and secrets through the story is critical.
- These three elements appear at intervals, starting slowly, and arriving more rapidly as the story progresses. The final clue snaps everything into place.
- Clues help the protagonist (and reader) find something or understand something; guides or directs towards the ultimate solution.
- Clues can be physical or intangible. Frequently, different characters have different pieces of a clue, or the same character reveals different pieces at different times.

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- Red herrings also appear at intervals. They are false or a misleading clues. Think of red herrings as bait, leading the protagonist (and reader) away from the truth.
- Red herrings must be as believable as real clues.
- Secrets turn the story. They change what a character thinks of himself/herself or of other characters. Bonus points if they also function as a clue or red herring.
- Secrets must have significant personal and/or social consequences.

Managing clues, red herrings, and secrets

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A suspect's behavior may mislead the detective as to the importance, or lack of importance.

- Tom, the CEO of a large company, retires in three weeks; he's named Michelle as his replacement. When Michelle is found murdered, police don't suspect Tom because he appears to be devastated by her death; and he spent a year grooming Michelle to take over for him. In fact, during that year, Tom was also planning Michelle's murder and knew she'd never become CEO.

The detective can misinterpret meaning, but be careful with this. Readers are smart. Once the reader figures out that the detective needs to interview the baker, the longer before that happens, the more irritated the reader becomes.

- Stephen Booth: *Dying to Sin* — #8 in the Ben Cooper/Diane Fry series. Two bodies are found at a run-down farm. The place is very isolated, is falling apart, and smells bad. The police went around for several chapters, saying, "What is that awful smell," rather than saying, "They were running a meth lab here."

Place a real clue right before a red herring; people tend to remember what they hear last.

Camouflage with action or humor, both of which distracts.

- Kerry Greenwood: Phryne Fisher series contains explicit sex scenes, like really explicit. Hide a clue in the sexual activity and who would notice?

Have the clue turn out to be what is not there.

- Dorothy L. Sayers: *Five Red Herrings* — Five artists are suspects in the murder of another artist. The clue is what's missing from the murdered artist's paint box.

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Create a time problem, such as a broken clock, especially for alibis.

- Dorothy L. Sayers: *Have His Carcass* — the solution depends on when the victim died, and initially, Lord Peter Whimsy, Harriett Vane, and the police guess completely wrong about when that was.

Hide in plain sight.

- Margaret Maron: *Uncommon Clay* — #8 in the Judge Deborah Knott series — The motive is in plain sight all the time, but is skillfully hidden.

Draw attention elsewhere.

- Marshall Karp: *Flipping Out* — #3 in the Lomax and Briggs series, set in Los Angeles. Initially, the deaths seem linked because the victims are all cops' wives. Only later is it discovered they are all in business together.

Have the clue, red herring, or secret be the sum of its parts, which are scattered or out of order.

- Margaret Maron: *The Right Jack* — #4 in the Sigrid Harald series — Two people are dead, two injured at a cribbage tournament shoot out. Who was the intended victim? Who were the innocent bystanders? Kept the tension going so that each time a victim was considered, the reader could believe that person was the intended victim.

Establish something before the reader can know it might be significant.

- Peter Abresch: *Tip a Canoe* — Two senior citizens go to an Elderhostel on a lake. The author does well at introducing many characters and keeping them straight. Great place to hide a clue.

Emphasize the unimportant while de-emphasizing the important.

- Emphasize a character's gay lifestyle, but devote only one line to him having marksmanship certificates on his office wall.

Use clues, red herrings, and secrets to provide insights into the point of view character that s/he himself is not aware of.

- Craig Johnson — Walt Longmire/Henry Standing Bear series — readers quickly realize that Walt is further along in working through grief about his wife's death than he'll admit to himself.



## Mystery Continuum

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Mysteries focus on individual versus community rights; the battle between good and evil; and whether or not justice triumphs. Murder is the ultimate sin against community. It is treated in a number of ways, from an inconvenience to a dark stain on the human soul.

**Traditional (previously called cozy):** often craft or occupation-related.

Protagonist is an amateur detective who becomes involved for personal reasons, or an easy-going professional. Sometimes includes recipes, craft patterns, or tips.

- Focus: characters equal to or more important than solving the mystery.
- Goal: restore the status quo, as much as possible.
- Diane Mott Davidson: Goldy Bear catering mysteries — one of the first to include recipes
- Juliet Blackwell: Witchcraft series, featuring natural-born witch, Lily Ivory.
- Parnell Hall: The Puzzle Lady series — crossword puzzles.
- Susan Whittig Albert: China Baylis' herbal mysteries.

**Procedural:** protagonist has job-related interest (police officer, criminalist, lawyer, judge, or crime reporter). Characters often have personal as well as professional connection to the crime. Often include inside details, such as how a crime lab works or the legal process for bringing a criminal to trial.

- Focus: how crimes are solved.
- Goal: redemption. The protagonist has an opportunity not only to work for justice, but also to rectify earlier mistakes.
- Alafair Burke's Samantha Kincaid series — Samantha is a deputy District Attorney in Portland, Oregon
- Kathy Reichs: Temperance Brennan's series — Temperance is a forensic anthropologist. The TV series *Bones* came out of these books.
- Robert Crais: *Suspect* — James Scott, a Los Angeles cop with PTSD is partnered with, Maggie, an Army dog hero, who also has PTSD.
- Stephen Booth: Ben Cooper/Diane Fry series, set in the geographical middle of England.

**Mean streets:** protagonist must challenge the system alone.

- Focus: working outside of the law; the detective as sacrifice.
- Goal: righting a wrong with no reward other than personal honor.
- Raymond Chandler, describing his detective, Philip Marlow: "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything."
- Margaret Fenton: *Little Lamb Lost* — Claire Conover, a social worker, investigates the death of a two-year-old she helped return to his mother.
- Nalini Singh: psy/changeling standalones that share a common universe

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**Dark mysteries:** crossover to the thriller.

- Focus: stop nasty things from being done.
- Goal: end the fear.
- Dick and Mary Francis: mysteries set in the horse racing world, many of which contain elaborately detailed torture scenes.
- Tess Gerritsen: *The Apprentice* — Detective Jane Rizzoli isn't counting on becoming a target herself.
- Thomas Harris: *Silence of the Lambs* — the iconic Hannibal Lecter

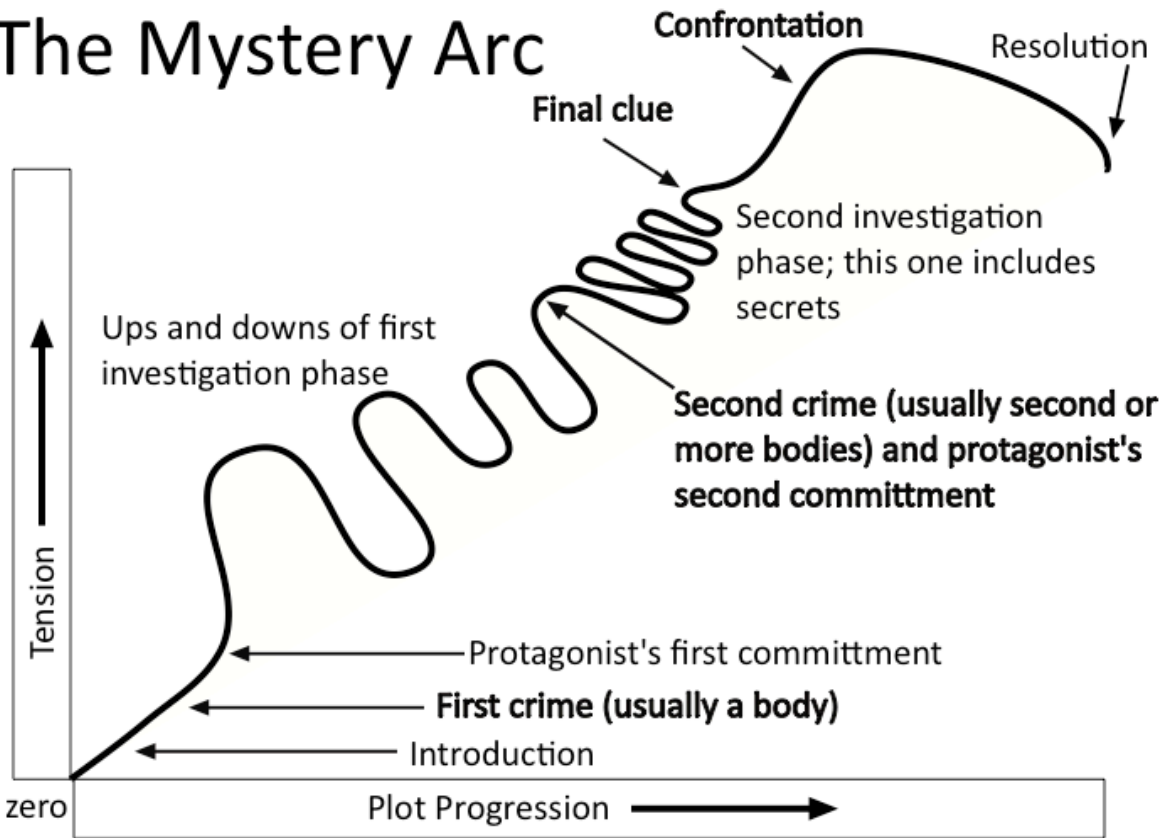
### Mystery Arc

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All stories have arcs: a beginning; complications in the middle; and an end. The mystery arc provides a scaffold on which to build the story and explore the characters. Generally, it includes

1. Character and setting introduction
2. Discovery of a body or other crime
3. The protagonist's initial status and commitment. Status doesn't mean social position; it is where the protagonist is in his/her life when the story starts.
4. Collection of evidence, clues, and red herrings, complicated by procedural delays, unavailability of interviewees, fuzzy focus, or personal issue escalation.
5. Discovery or second (or more) body or other crime.
6. The protagonist's second commitment. He/she realizes the danger, but now cannot pull away from solving this.
7. Revisiting the evidence, clues, and red herrings. Secrets began to be revealed, complicating the investigation by providing conflicting data and a need to change directions. This part of the arc often includes rising physical or psychological danger to the protagonist or those close to him/her.
8. The final clue drops into place.
9. Confrontation with the villain at the risk of physical or psychological damage. Sometimes, the final clue turns out not to be the final secret.
10. Resolution: justice triumphs, or not; protagonist satisfaction, or not; happily ever after or happy for now.

# The Mystery Arc



In a series, subsequent books do not start at zero.

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Event	Traditional Mystery (cozy)	Middle of the road	Dark
Introduce protagonist	Characters are having an ordinary life	Characters have issues	Characters have serious problems
Body is discovered	Body is off-stage or nasty details downplayed	Body is messier and more graphic	Seriously graphic
Emphasis on police procedure; forensics; and legal aspects	Happens mostly off stage. Summarized as needed to move the plot along. Relationship with police may be played for laughs	Some details are given not only to move the plot along, but to establish atmosphere	Full frontal autopsies and intricate police procedure details
Introduce suspects and red herrings Secondary arcs are developed here	Aim for real people with quirks – the quirkiest the better – who face real personal issues	Tangled web of people's lives	Raining downtown on drug dealers and pimps
First significant threat to protagonist – mystery arc and personal arcs often intersect here	A dark spot in an otherwise upbeat story	Chilling	Physical, emotional, or career damage to the protagonist
Raise the stakes	At least one new complication	One or more complications	Looking like the St. Valentine's Day massacre!
Confrontation that puts	Real fear, another dark	Significant danger, but	More physical damage, torture,

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Event	Traditional Mystery (cozy)	Middle of the road	Dark
protagonist in real danger	spot	protagonist often emerges unharmed	rape
Revelation and resolution—all of the arcs come together	Characters regroup, and may or may not have life changes	Characters have life changes and a commitment to go on with life	Life has changed, usually for the worse. The most the protagonist can hope for is hard won and transient happiness

### 10 Tips for a Successful Mystery

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1. Play fair with the reader
2. Challenge the characters'/readers' ingenuity
3. Raise both private and public stakes
4. Make interrogations more than dialog
5. Control the pace
6. Threaten the characters
7. Impose a deadline
8. Allow characters to make mistakes
9. Limit the detective's options
10. Isolate the detective physically and psychologically

### Mystery Definitions

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**Clue:** a piece of the puzzle; something that directly relates to solving the crime. See also secrets and red herrings.

**Crime:** a wrongdoing, usually against the law, with consequence. Incidentally, including consequence in the definition is largely a North

American/Northern European thing. Many crime stories written in other parts of the world don't bring the story to a tidy conclusion where justice triumphs.

- The crime is significant: murder, kidnapping, fraud, robbery, torture, terrorism, and so on.
- Solving the crime is foremost to the story (the major plot).
- Means (how it was done); motive (why it was done); and opportunity (who could have done it) are integral to the story.

**Detective(s):** protagonist(s) who solve the crime, and pays a price for solving it. Often, the resolution involves the protagonist's personal issues.

**Red Herring:** something that appears to be a clue but isn't. Frequently, red herrings are related to secrets.

- April Henry: *Heart-Shaped Box* — complex plot with at least 3 layers of resolution; more than one person was responsible for what happened.

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