

## *What is a MYSTERY NOVEL?*

First of all, there has to be a **detective** who is set apart from everybody else (including the reader) for eccentric habits/appearance (or by contrast total blandness), exceptional intelligence, the practice of making obscure statements instead of just revealing deductions and revelations as they occur. The detective is MEANT to frustrate you!



The **official police** (or if the detective is a policeman, his compatriotes) **must be bumblers** -- even when they discover useful evidence, they should always miss the point. It helps when your detective has a smart rival -- cop, district attorney, etc. -- who is also clever, but not as clever -- to come up with alternate solutions. That increases tension and plot development, also amusement to the degree that that sub-detective usually ends up with the same solution the reader would have come up with.

**Clues must be presented to the reader**, even if they are cleverly disguised or phrased ambiguously. And the villain **MUST** be some character who has appeared or been mentioned fairly plainly in the story under some circumstance before the revelation. (Otherwise, how could that person ever be suspected? That would be cheating under these rules.)

**The author must not tell a lie**, either in the third person or through the mouth of a character who is pronounced unequivocally to be trustworthy or has no ulterior motive to lie. You can say something couldn't have happened, but not that it **DID NOT** then say it did after all. Do not aver it was pitch dark, then reveal later: 'except there was a full moon, forgot to mention that'.<sup>i</sup>

### *What about mystery sub-genres?*

Mystery sub-genres have their own conventions, though writers are taking greater freedom and feeling less restricted these days by "rules" of the genres and sub-genres. Some of the more common mystery sub-genres are

- **cozies** (small town or confined settings, genteel in style);
- **hard-boiled** (tough, sexy, gritty, violent); police procedural (with specific details of police detection the main feature);
- **didactic** ("academic" or "teaching" mysteries that educate the reader, such as archaeological mysteries loaded with facts and findings from that world); private eye (licensed private investigator as the main sleuth);
- **forensic; amateur** (the sleuth is not a professional investigator but is from another field, such as law, journalism, or psychiatry); and
- **historical** (the mystery is set during a specific period in history). Again, these sometimes overlap or become hybridized.<sup>ii</sup>
- **science fiction** (the mystery is set in a future time, on another planet or space and time dimension) Though imaginative solutions are offered, they remain within the possibilities of known facts of science and technology.

<sup>i</sup> From "What Is a Classic Mystery Story?" (4-20-08) <http://www.mysterylist.com/whatis.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> From "Tips on the Craft of Mystery Writing"(4-20-08) <http://www.johnmorganwilson.com/writingcraft.htm>