



A Study in Mystery

1 - Beginnings





with
Johnny Worthen

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CONTINUING EDUCATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

Lifelong Learning Class
(LLWRC 837)

Fall 2024
Tuesdays, October 27 – December 8, 2026
6:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

A Study In Mystery

Today's Goals

- Introductions & Goals
- History of Mystery
- Mystery as Literature
- Sub-genres
- Writing Tools
- Vocabulary
- Premise & Writing Choices

Online Resources - johnnyworthen.com



http://johnnyworthen.com/SharedResources/LLWRC837/MysteryLLWRC837.html





Class Goals

- *This is a seminar on mystery designed for writers and fans of the genre. We'll talk about the tropes, types and methods that make the modern whodunnit. We'll break down the formulae into nice digestible chunks to lay the foundation for a ripping good mystery story. We'll delve into theory while collecting, brainstorming, and workshopping essential elements to create an effective mystery.*
  - *At the end of class you should have an actionable plan to create a compelling mystery.*
    - *Then write it.*

Warning

This class may explore adult themes, language, and content.

–University of Utah

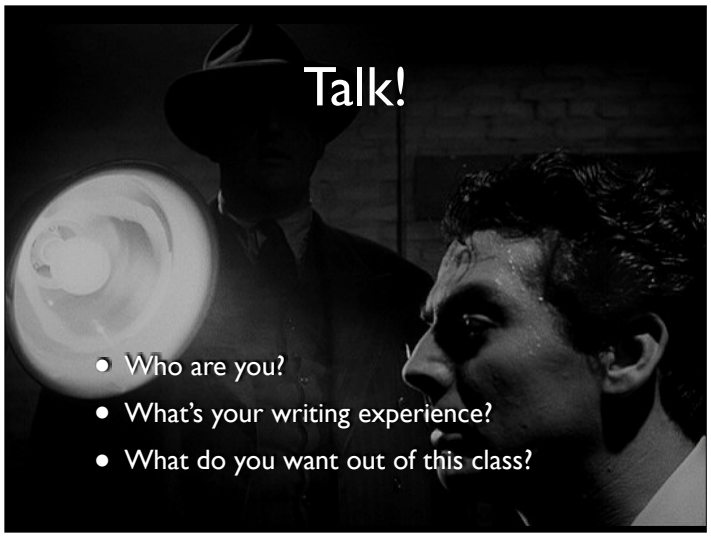
I will probably take my shoes off. It's my thing.

–Johnny Worthen, your instructor

What's all this then?

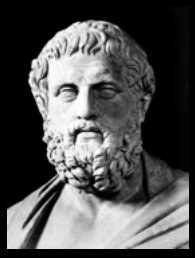
- Class Structure
  - Roll Call (yes, really)
  - Readings
  - Homework
  - Lecture - Break - Workshop
    - Lectures are FULL of examples which may or may not be gone over in class - Read anyway. They are for you.
- Classes are weighted - more workshopping in later classes
  - Not every writing assignment may be critiqued in class - do them anyway. We're learning habits.



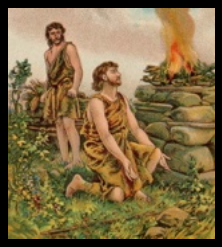


History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction



Sophocles



Cain & Abel

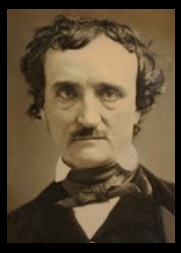


Hamlet

History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins

First Detective Story



Edgar Allan Poe



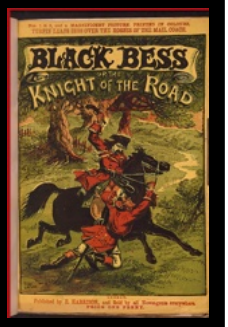
1841: C. Auguste Dupin
Murders in the Rue Morgue

History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins

1850's+
"Penny Dreadfuls"



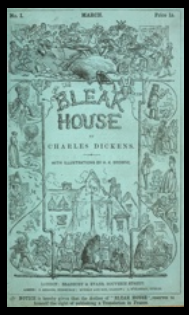


History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins



Charles Dickens



BLEAK HOUSE (1852-53)
Inspector Bucket

History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins



Wilkie Collins

Most of the
Pieces in Place



THE
MOONSTONE
WILKIE
COLLINS

1868: Sergeant Cuff
The Moonstone

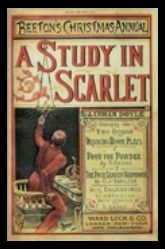
History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins

Blockbuster!



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



1887: Sherlock Holmes
A Study in Scarlet



The Strand

History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age

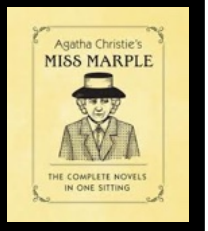
Plot Puzzles
"Fair Play"



Agatha Christie



1920: Hercule Poirot



1927: Miss Marple

Golden Age in America

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age



1926: S.S. Van Dine — *Philo Vance*

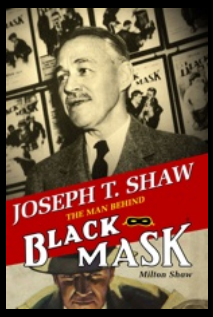


1928: Ellery Queen

History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age
- Hardboiled





Joseph J. Shaw

"Realism"
Crime
"Noir"



History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age
- Hardboiled



Raymond Chandler



1939: Philip Marlowe





Dashiell Hammett



1930: Sam Spade

"Realism"
Crime
"Noir"

History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age
- Hardboiled
- Modern



Major Modern Mystery Sub-Genres

- **The Cozy**—light tone, fun, usually a small community, amateur sleuth, sex and violence off screen.
- **Caper**—elaborate crime planned and carried out. Protagonist is criminal.
- **Police Procedural**—protagonist is an officer of the law. Solution involves protocol.
- **P.I**—Sleuth is Private Investigator.
- **Historical**—Story is set in an historical era.
- **Legal**—Playing field is the legal system.
- **Psychological Suspense**—Protagonist is psychologist or psychiatrist. Explores psychological aspects of crime.
- **Forensic**—Examination of physical evidence is center of the story.
- **Fem-Jep**—Females in jeopardy, needs to be saved. By herself or someone else.

Mystery's Evolution

- Modern genre (relatively speaking)
  - Pulp vs. literature?
  - Formulaic & Popular... maligned
- Literature reflects
  - Social systems/times
    - England: class systems
    - In the US: tough and self reliant
    - What's trending now? What does it say about place and time? (Scandinavia? Korea?)
- Came back around to being about more than just the puzzle



Tools

- Notepads & Pens
- Resources & Books
  - *See Bibliography*
- Computer
  - *Scrivener*
  - *Scapple*
  - *Aeon Timeline*



https://johnnyworthen.com/SharedResources.html

Do it yourself

- "Willful and premeditated"
- Pre-writing
  - *"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail"*
  - Collecting the pieces
  - Planning the journey
- Writing
  - Taking the journey



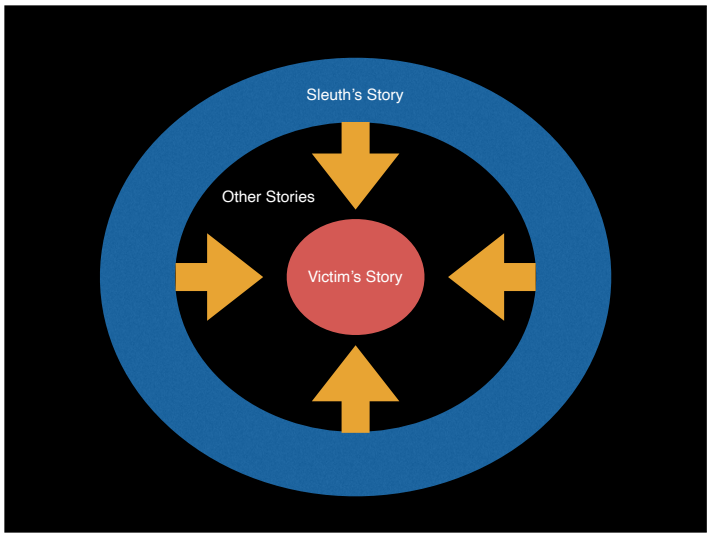
Crime & Mystery

- Crime stories are about crime.
  - Crime stories can be thrillers, crime, capers, etc.
    - Mystery is actually a sub-genre of that
- Mystery is about "solving a crime/puzzle"
  - Double Story
    1. The Crime
    2. The Quest to understand the crime
- Reader is a participant not only in the adventure, but also the puzzle

A Story About a Story Told Through Stories



- **Story One** - the story of the crime
- **Story Two** - the story of discovering **Story One**
- **Other Stories** - connecting **One** and **Two**
- Self-reflective genre



Mystery & Good Fiction

- "Mystery" is the heart of all good fiction
  - Leaving blanks - connecting dots
    - **Reader involvement**
- Planting clues is not so different from planting any other kind of information
- SUSPENSE

Vocabulary: part 1

- **ALIBI**—an excuse or piece of information given by an accused person to prove that he/she was somewhere else when a crime was committed.
- **BREAKTHROUGH**—a necessary piece of information or insight that helps solve a mystery.
- **CLUE**—an object, observation, or piece of information that helps to solve a mystery or puzzle crime—an act that violates the law.
- **CRIME**—an action that breaks the law.
- **DEDUCE/DEDUCTION**—to use logical reasoning and thinking to infer information.
- **DETECTIVE**—a person who gathers information and investigates crimes (sleuth).
- **EVIDENCE**—a statement, fact, or object used to prove the solution of a mystery.
- **HUNCH**—a feeling or a guess about something.
- **INTERROGATE**—to ask questions or seek information from people.
- **MEANS** — the ability to do the crime. One of the necessary requirements of guilt.
- **MOTIVE**—the reason a person does something or acts in a certain way.

Vocabulary: part 2

- **MYSTERY**—something that is secret or unknown; a problem needing to be solved.
- **OBSERVANT**—careful to look at things and note details.
- **OPPORTUNITY**—the occasion to potentially have done the crime. One of the necessary requirements of guilt.
- **PERPETRATOR**—someone who is guilty of committing a crime.
- **PUZZLE**—a game that tests someone's reasoning ability.
- **RED HERRING** — a false clue that throws the investigator off track.
- **SEALED ROOM**— a mystery trope where the victim is discovered in an locked or inaccessible setting.
- **SETTING**—the time, place, surroundings, and circumstances in which a story takes place.
- **SLEUTH**—another name for a detective.
- **SUPPORT** — a character who aids the sleuth.
- **SUSPECT**—a person who might have committed the crime.
- **VICTIM**—a person who is harmed by a crime.
- **WITNESS**—someone who saw something related to the crime.

Dunnits
The questions we ask

- The suspense that drives a mystery
  - *Who dunnit?*
  - *Why dunnit?*
  - *How dunnit?*
  - *When dunnit?*
  - *Will the dunniter be stopped?*
  - *How will the dunniter be caught?*



The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if a child disappears from a mall the day before his thirteenth birthday?*
- *And then suppose it's discovered that the same thing happened exactly six years before, and six years before that.*

The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if a couple overhears their upstairs neighbors fighting all the time?*
- *And then suppose they suddenly stopped fighting and one of them goes missing?*

The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if a group of political activists blackmail people they don't like?*
- *Then suppose one of their targets is murdered and the investigation threatens to expose the group?*



The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if a train is filled with very diverse people?*
  - *Then suppose somebody is murdered?*
    - *Then suppose all the suspects have a motive?*

The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if girl who lies all the time is the only witness to a crime?*
  - *Then suppose she can't even prove there was a crime at all?*
    - *Then suppose she begins to doubt herself?*

THE Mystery Questions

- **The Mystery:**
  - What is presented?
    - *Mr Roy found dead in a locked room filled with gas*
- **The Fiction:**
  - What appears to have happened?
    - *Suicide of Mr. Roy*
- **The Truth:**
  - What really happened?
    - *Mr. Roy was murdered by his wife*
- **The Gap:**
  - What information feeds either one?
    - *Suicide Note, locked room, gas in the room, wife away*
- **The Breakthrough**
  - What information clears it up?
    - *Mrs. Roy having an affair / her alibi crumbles / Note was from old journal / second gas switch in hallway*

Writer Choices

- **Setting**
  - A Very Good place to start
  - Another Character
    - Can it bring more than background to the story?
  - *Where* is the story set?
  - *When* is the story set?
  - Considerations
    - Write what you know?
    - Research?





Writer Choices

- **Narrator**
  - Who's going to tell your story?
    - The sleuth or another?
- **Point of View**
  - First Person
  - Third Person Limited
  - Third Person Omniscient



Writer Choices

- **Tense**
  - Present Tense
  - Past Tense



Your mission, should you choose to accept it...

- *Read "A Jury of Her Peers"*
- *Read "Guidelines of Critique Sessions"*
- *Study Standard Manuscript Format*
- *For class review (SEND TO ME - in Standard Manuscript Format):*
  - *Four ideas – "What if's, and then suppose's, and then suppose again."*
  - *Three "THE Mystery Questions"*

To Share –
Email to me by Sunday afternoon:
johnny@johnnyworthen.com
in .pdf or Word (.doc, .docx) Format

OR
bring enough copies
for everyone