

On the Traditional Mystery

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I was a little kid living in Oklahoma City, Okla., during WWII. Even for a child, it didn't take long to understand the importance of newspapers. The bigger and blacker the headlines, the more important the story. The war dominated our lives, from ration books to Victory gardens to scrap drives to the desperate need to know what was happening and what the future held.

I grew up believing nothing could be more important than news—honest, unbiased, factual reports. I decided when I was 11 that I would be a newspaper reporter. I majored in journalism at the University of Oklahoma. Always, I held to the faith that news mattered. I believed and still believe St. John's Gospel: "And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

I saw truth as the mainstay of goodness.

And it was in the traditional mystery novel that I also found that same essence of truth. While all fiction deals with human hope, desire, longing, triumphs and failure, the motif of mystery fiction is a commitment to goodness.

A traditional mystery is about the struggles of ordinary, everyday people who sometimes succumb to evil. The traditional mystery reveals the truth of relationships. When the detective sets out to discover who committed a murder, the detective is actually discovering what fractured the relationships among the people involved in the story. The ultimate aim is to uncover truth.

I had only a dim understanding of this when I read my first Nancy Drew, but I knew that these stories satisfied an inner hunger. I didn't want the villain to triumph. I wanted goodness to be rewarded.

One might ask, aren't mysteries all about murder, guns and knives and poison, anger, jealousy and despair? Where is the good?

The good is in the never-quit protagonist who wants to live in a just world. Readers read mysteries and writers write mysteries because we live in an unjust world where evil often triumphs. In the traditional mystery, goodness will be admired and justice will prevail.

It is this underlying theme that I have celebrated in writing more than 40 mysteries. When I began the *Death on Demand* series in 1987, Annie Laurance, later Annie Darling, inherits a mystery bookstore from her uncle. I chose a mystery bookstore

because it provided Annie with a platform to talk about great mysteries of the past and present. The mystery is always celebrated in the Death on Demand books.

Annie and her husband, Max Darling, symbolize society's hunger for justice and serve as society's representative as they seek to solve yet another murder on their South Carolina sea island. In the newest book, Dare to Die, Annie and Max become involved in the murder of a young woman who returned to the island because she feared she may have caused the death of a high school friend 10 years earlier. A desperate killer must be certain she never remembers the truth of that long ago, foggy night. No matter what danger they face, Annie and Max persevere.

Every time I write or read a mystery, I am buoyed by my belief that, indeed, truth will set me free, and that there is a special place readers and I can go, hand in hand, where goodness will be celebrated.