

History of the Mystery

by **Carolyn Hart**

First presented as part of a panel on the History of the Mystery at Manhattan (KS.) Mystery Conclave October 1, 2005. Patricia Sprinkle traced the beginnings of mystery literature from the Bible to Poe. Susan Wittig Albert explored history as mystery.

Elements of the mystery are present in much literature, both ancient and modern, but the world waited until Edgar Allan Poe for the first true mystery stories. Scholar Jon Breen believes deductive mystery fiction only became possible after countries with a rule of law organized professional police forces devoted to solving crimes on the basis of fact. A detective wasn't necessary if crimes were solved by guess, happenstance, black magic, or brute force.

Jon believes that Poe was familiar with the rather self serving autobiography of the French detective Francois Vidocq and that Poe's disdain for professional police capabilities prompted him to create the world's first amateur detective, Auguste Dupin. Whatever Poe's motive, we know that the modern mystery traces its beginning to the publication in 1841 of the Murder in the Rue Morgue. All of the elements necessary for a mystery novel were first gathered together in fiction by Poe:

- The amateur detective whose exploits are chronicled by an admiring friend
- The locked room mystery
- An innocent suspect in jeopardy
- Careful detection through following clues fairly offered
- A trap laid for the true villain
- The solution through the efforts of the detective
- The first series character

All of this was achieved by Poe in three stories, The Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Mystery of Marie Roget, and The Purloined Letter.

Early writers who contributed to the genre include Wilkie Collins (The Moonstone 1868), Charles Dickens (Bleak House 1853) and Anna Katharine Green (The Leavenworth Case 1878).

Arthur Conan Doyle carried the idea of the amateur detective to great fame with his Sherlock Holmes stories. The first, A Study in Scarlet, appeared in 1887. G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, the first fictional clergyman sleuth, appeared in 1908.

Mary Roberts Rinehart, at one time the highest paid writer in America, debuted in 1907 with the serialized publication of The Circular Staircase. It appeared as a book in 1908. In that first book, she set her standard of humor and a beleaguered heroine.

1920 was the watershed year in mystery fiction. In 1920, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* by Agatha Christie was published. Agatha Christie was and is the most influential of all mystery writers with sales in the hundreds of millions. What was her magic?

Christie never forgot what she was about. She created clever puzzles and wrote with charm and grace about characters familiar to readers whether they spoke Finnish or Urdu or English. She was unpretentious, honest, and clear-eyed. She never walked a mean street, but she understood human passions. She knew that life in a humdrum English village was as subject to evil as any Bristol slum.

Christie equated the modern mystery with the medieval morality play. In the morality play, trades fair audiences were offered a graphic representation of the seven deadly sins. In a more sophisticated guise, this is what Christie addressed in her books. Do you want to understand the pain and agony inflicted on the human spirit by greed? Read *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Would you like to contemplate self-righteous arrogance lifted to madness? Read *Ten Little Indians*.

Some critics have dismissed Christie's books as puzzles devoid of realistic characters. *Death on the Nile*, *Murder Is Easy*, and *Five Little Pigs* are among many of her books which make that claim absurd.

Christie was the leading light of the Golden Age, that glorious period between the two world wars that saw the publication of Dorothy L. Sayers, Philip MacDonald, H. C. Bailey, Earl Derr Biggers, Ellery Queen, John Dickson Carr, Nicholas Blake, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, Josephine Tey, and Phoebe Atwood Taylor.

These writers excelled with the mystery as conceived by Poe. A different kind of mystery springing from a different heritage made its debut in 1929 with the publication of *The Red Harvest* by Dashiell Hammett.

The private eye novel is rooted in the 19th century action-oriented dime novels with the hero prevailing against the forces of evil. Modern day crime writer Robert B. Parker forever defined the genre when he said that the private eye novel is about the protagonist, not the crime.

1939 saw the publication of Raymond Chandler's first Philip Marlowe novel, *The Big Sleep*. His has been the most profound influence on private eye novels. Chandler wrote with elegance and has never been surpassed as a stylist in this genre. 1939 is also remarked for the publication of Erle Stanley Gardner and Brett Halliday.

The Golden Age between the world wars included great practitioners of both the traditional mystery and the private eye novel.

1947 saw publication of Mickey Spillane's *Mike Hammer* and Ross Macdonald's *Lew Archer*.

There are names to conjure with after WWII, authors of both the traditional mystery and the private eye novel, Rex Stout, Patricia Highsmith, John D. McDonald, Margaret Millar, George Harmon Cox, John Creasey, Dick Francis, Ross Thomas, Tony Hillerman, P.D. James, Emma Lathen, Ed McBain, Charlotte MacLeod, Elizabeth Peters, Ruth Rendell, Georges Simenon, and Donald E. Westlake.

The 60s and the Cold War saw a diminution of interest in both the traditional mystery and the crime novel. This was the heyday of spy fiction which had its early incarnation with John Buchan and the publication of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in 1915. Eric Ambler and Graham Greene were brilliant successors. Building on that tradition in the 1960s and 70s were Len Deighton, John Le Carre, Frederick Forsyth, George V. Higgins, and Ken Follett. The 1960s also saw perhaps the zenith of romantic suspense. I mentioned Mary Roberts Rinehart as a very early and wonderful and enormously successful American mystery author. She was also perhaps the earliest mystery author to combine romance and suspense. Perhaps the finest novels of romantic suspense were penned by Daphne DuMaurier with *Rebecca* in 1938 and *My Cousin Rachel* in 1952. Topping the charts in the 1960s was the brilliant stylist Mary Stewart. Victoria Holt and Phyllis Whitney also captured readers and hearts. Barbara Michaels debuted in 1967 with *The Master of Black Tower*. Her first novel as Elizabeth Peters, *The Jackal's Head*, was published in 1969.

The 1980s was a fateful decade for all mystery writers. It saw the resurgence of the Hammett-Chandler type private eye novel. There was also a major transformation of the private eye novel which opened the window of opportunity for authors of traditional mysteries.

New and good in the 1980s were Robert Crais, Loren Estleman, Joe Gores. But something quite amazing occurred with the advent of women as private eyes. Prior to the novels of Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky, New York publishers had a narrow view of the private eye novel. It was considered to be the American mystery, novels written by men with male protagonists. The traditional mystery was deemed the preserve of dead English ladies, no American women need apply. Sharon McCone, Kinsey Millhone, and V.I. Warshawski, changed American mystery publishing forever. Their huge success convinced NY publishers that American mystery readers were interested in books by and about American women. This opened the window of opportunity for writers such as myself. By the end of the 80s, publishers were scrambling for mysteries set in America with female protagonists. Among the early authors who caught that first wave of change were Nancy Pickard, Margaret Maron, Joan Hess, Barbara D'Amato and I.

The traditional mystery continues to thrive. It has many incarnations including regional mysteries such as Patricia Sprinkle and JoAnna Carl write. Susan Wittig Albert's present day books are a brilliant example of taking an appeal to a niche audience and lifting it to national popularity. Susan's historical mysteries, both her own and those written with her husband Bill, are prime examples of successful historical mysteries. In a moment Susan will share with you the history of the mystery as history.

Other new currents in the mystery are apparent in the chick lit novels of Mary Kay Andrews, aka Kathy Trocheck, Sarah Strohmeyer, and Susan McBride. New and different are the futuristic novels of J. D. Robb. The forensic mystery was first lifted to bestsellerdom by Patricia Cornwell.

The mystery thrives because it is an important part of literature. Mysteries address the bedrock issue of good and evil. The mystery states clearly and absolutely that evil exists, but the efforts of the detective offer a testament that the human spirit seeks goodness and decency and justice.

As long as hearts beat and minds care, there will be mysteries.