

# A Murder Book?

## Uncle Bob Delves Into Mystery and Crime Fiction

### Part One

In doing this little book talk I hope to provide fans of mystery stories with info on writers I've enjoyed, and include links to author pages. A second aim is to sketch out some of the aspects of typical tales so that a potential mystery author has things to think about at the start.

My impression is that there are a zillion dedicated readers of detective fiction and crime novels. Contemporary authors like Dan Brown (The Da Vinci Code) continue to turn out best sellers and the public continues to make them so. Uncle Bob is a relative newcomer, having spent most of his life reading and writing in math topics, astronomy, and puzzles. You, dear reader, probably know someone who has read all of the Father Browns, all of the [Michael Connellys](#), or all of the Dame Agathas. If you are of my acquaintance then you know someone who has read all of the Conan Doyle Sherlocks twice, but that was accomplished only when I was allotted sixty years to do it.

Only in retirement did I re-connect with Holmes and Watson to finish the oeuvre that I began as a twelve-year-old, and then after, fell to the temptation to read them all again. I've found other authors who have earned my loyalty as well. I'll cite some of them, make some observations of the common features and differences in mystery stories — and have a bit of fun doing it.

Readers in this genre will know that my title embodies a double entendre. One: we read books in which a murder or two take place. Police will begin an investigation and gather evidence, talk to witnesses, and research background information. All this is compiled in reports and collected in — two: a murder book. The book is a work in progress until the case is closed or has gone cold. Older cops, like [Ian Rankin's](#) Inspector Rebus or Connelly's Harry Bosch tend not to let an unsolved case languish. They doggedly go over a murder book which may be ten or twenty years old, looking for lapses in procedure or new angles to pursue. Yes, DNA is a new angle.

If you are intending ever to write one of these corpse-in-the-closet puzzlers, I may be able to help by raising some questions you might consider. All right, enough breast beating around the bier. My questions follow.

**Lone detective or a team?** Many of our famous fictional detectives work for the police, and they are often underpaid, under-appreciated, and handcuffed, if you will, by their own organizations. They endure much of the following: the backbiting rivals who

compete for the job; the incompetent superiors who were kicked upstairs after flubbing a case; the strictures of the letter of the law; and the dumb numbness of departmental policy. Those conditions do garner considerable sympathy for our lead sleuth, but then consider that those organizations do provide more, and more modern, resources for crime solving. [Rex Stout's](#) Nero Wolfe avoids all that flummery — even avoids going outside his New York brownstone, but I'll leave the question of private dick or employed tec an open one for you.

Whether private or official, what about a team? I really think it's as impractical as having Moe, Larry, and Curly contribute equally to the temperament, the slapstick, and the nyuks in the story. A team can be effective by complementing one another, with one providing the athleticism and muscle and one providing the charm, sensitivity and vulnerability, but we always look to just one that has the mentality under the mop. I vote for a single lead, but you will cast your own ballot.

**Male or female lead detective?** I hope that thus far I've avoided any pronoun gaffes, but I will be checking back. Well, I did use the term dick, but that one is so pervasive in the literature that I can envision a female private dick, can't you? I certainly enjoy mysteries centered on a clever prima detective, feeling her way through the personalities of suspects and parsing her way through the evidence, as does Jane Tennison in the series *Prime Suspect*, but would I dare write of one? I'd like to think that we all have some degree of empathy for the other gender, but I'd be much more comfy going back to my own sex and my own roots and ... Hello, Sherlock! My Sherlock short story is available at [The Bob Store](#).

Time to reveal the prima closest to my heart. She is author [Jacqueline Winspear's](#) Maisie Dobbs, a self-made woman if ever one walked through a book of fiction. In a series of fifteen or so novels, Winspear takes Maisie through a childhood in a London ghetto, through service (i.e., maid), through service (i.e., front-line nurse in the first World War) and into her own detective agency, involved in domestic crime, foreign intrigue, and her own personal tribulations.

The presence of a mentor can be a factor — in building human interest in the story and in advancing a book series through the years. Maisie, albeit tutored in the psychology of crime by a man, becomes decidedly her own woman. Rebus, an aging, independent cuss, notices a spark of his doggedness in Siobhan (said "Shiv-awn"), a next gen female cop. He shepherds her through the toxic political atmosphere of Edinburg and official Scotland as dramatized by the author Rankin.

**Crime Immediate or Crime Deferred?** I prefer deferred. When a body floats up to the surface of page one ([Peter Lovesey's](#) *The Last Detective*), it almost always necessitates a flood of flashbacks. What had happened? If you're writing what is known as a procedural, you can have your primo or prima detective, and your police squad, working in the dark for quite some time, either in coordination or in opposition; but sooner or later, a witness or a principle must tell their version of what happened. I've read recently that a well known mystery writer thinks that using flashbacks is unnecessarily confusing for the reader. I wish I could flashback and remember the author's name. Oh, well.

The murder deferred gives the author a chance to introduce the cast of characters. Their psyches and motivations, their regard for one another, and their personal or business difficulties, any of which may lead to drastic actions, yielding a cornucopia of mysteries: who will be offed, and when, how, and why? The possibility of multiple murders adds even more pressure to the investigators. The writer can wring out the pathos and expose the vulnerabilities of our purported infallible snoop, if say, another death occurs so close to the final solution.

**The Sidekick:** *Stumbling, Bumbling or Got Your Back?* Even as a twelve-year-old, I noticed a difference between the book Watson and the much-loved 30s and 40s movie Watson. Nigel Bruce provided the comic relief and modeled our confusion as Basil Rathbone's razor-sharp insights (and his nose) cut through to the solution of the crime. In contrast the "book Watson" knew when to pack a pistol and when to use it. He could medically treat injuries incurred by Holmes or others, and he showed serious concern over Sherlock's drug habit and catatonic spells.

Thus far my favorite primo sidekick is Detective Sergeant Fox, of Scotland Yard. The writer [Dame Ngaio Marsh](#) had him paired marvelously with Roderick Alleyn (plainly pronounced Allen, we are told). Fox was a magical mix of a Santa Claus in physique, and a steely-eyed, principled seeker of justice. In the midst of the pursuit of a fiend, often late in the evening, Alleyn and Fox would take a time-out and review the facts of the case. Review is a must for mystery writers in light of the plethora of characters, deeds, and the minutia heaped on a thorough investigation. Fox would reveal his biases and often point the finger the wrong way, but you wouldn't ever doubt his single-minded pursuit of the facts and his loyalty to Alleyn. Fox often received key information in a case by turning on the charm amongst the kitchen staff of a large estate, practicing his rudimentary French, and portraying the jolly and hungry Santa. Perfect.

Well, won't you join me in Part Two of The Murder Book for more thoughts on the appeal and machinations of the mystery? Hope so. And remember this — nobody dies in fiction, except perhaps the author. Cheers, UB