

TIME

Why Mystery Books Are So Satisfying

by Tana French

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I was 6 when I fell in love with mysteries. Some schoolbook had a (not very accurate) comprehension page about the *Mary Celeste*, a ship that was found drifting in the Atlantic in 1872, intact—a meal still cooking in the galley—with the crew, passengers, and lifeboat missing, never to be seen again. I was totally enthralled. I can still remember lying on the living-room rug with the book, promising myself that when I died, I would ask God for the answer. I could probably trace a direct line from that moment, through all the fictional and real mysteries I’ve devoured since then, to where I am today.

Mystery books, for me, divide themselves into two kinds. One kind—Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes—is all about restoring order. The central questions concern concrete facts: Who did it? How did they do it? Truth in these stories is an objective thing, and answers are solid and definitive. By the end of the book, every baffling clue connects up to the others, and the killer’s motive is clear; good is separated from evil, the guilty are locked up, dead, or at least identified, and the innocent are free to move on with their lives.

These books sometimes get dismissed as formulaic or simplistic, but they’re a lot more than that. In a world that can often be chaotic and reasonless, we need these stories. During the first COVID shutdown, I was popping Agatha Christies like Smarties, and I talked to a bookseller who said they couldn’t keep her novels in stock. We need to believe that sometimes things can fit together and make sense, even when that seems impossible; that someday our crisis will end and we’ll be able to leave it behind. The clean resolution offered in the structure of these books—A kills B, C finds out whodunit—makes mystery the perfect genre to speak for the hard-won triumph of order and meaning.

But there are also the wild mysteries. In these books, questions are left unanswered. Maybe the killer stays uncaught, or the process of solving the

mystery leads to more upheaval instead of less, or the solution works against justice rather than bringing it to fruition.

In wild mysteries, order isn't restored, because order isn't the point. Truth isn't objective and solid; it's dark, slippery, double-edged. Good can't be neatly separated from evil. The crucial questions aren't questions of fact—they're more nebulous and tangled than that: What are we capable of? How much of who we are is determined by choice, by circumstance, or by nature? How do we respond to things that seem impossible to cope with? The questions stay unanswered because they're unanswerable.

Mystery is also the perfect genre for exploring these tensions. It deals with the highest stakes—truth and justice, life and death—and with the most complicated twists of the human mind, the processes by which a person takes the transformative and irrevocable step to murder.

When we fall in love with mysteries, it's both those things we're falling in love with: the hard-won sense of order, and the unanswerable questions. This list does a magnificent job of covering those bases from every possible angle. Books like Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies* give us the pure satisfaction of watching the pieces fall perfectly into place, while Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* and Dennis Lehane's *Mystic River* cry out against the utter ineffectuality of solutions and so-called justice in the face of a crime's shattering impact. In Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the protagonist is the mystery, one that can be explored but never solved. *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson create worlds where no answers can ever stack up against the overwhelming sense of the unknown. And Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* exuberantly does all of it at once, neatly tying up every question of fact while also firing out bigger questions in every direction.

I've found (luckily, without having to die first) a tentative answer to the *Mary Celeste* mystery. The ship was carrying a cargo of barrels of alcohol; if some of those were leaking, the fumes could have made the crew think the ship was in danger of exploding. So everyone headed for the lifeboat, tying it to the ship so they could get back on board if and when it was safe—except the rope came untied, and they drifted off.

It's a plausible solution; it fits all the facts neatly and satisfyingly. But I have to admit: I liked the story better before, when the possibilities ran wild.

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