

THE CHRISTIE LEGACY

Traditional mysteries—often referred to as Cozies—have been around for more than 170 years and they are still popular with crime fiction fans. They are entertaining, feel-good reads that are loosely defined as:

- Having no explicit sex, no swearing, no excessive gore or violence;
- Feature an amateur sleuth, often a woman;
- Set in a close circle where characters know one another: a village, a large house, even an archeological dig such as in *Murder in Mesopotamia*.

And, of course, these stories have happy endings with order restored to the world that was disrupted by a murder or a serious crime.

It all started back in 1841, with Edgar Allan Poe's short story (the first of four that he wrote), "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." It featured the very first fictional detective, Auguste Dupin, and defined the genre for all time. The story established several conventions that became common elements of the mystery novel:

- The brilliant but eccentric detective (followed by Sherlock Holmes, and Hercule Poirot)
- His less-brilliant associate who acts as the story's narrator and the sleuth's foil (Watson to Sherlock, Captain Hastings to Poirot).
- Bumbling police officers who also act as foils to the detective.
- The Power of Reasoning is relied on to solve the mystery and restore order to the world.
- The detective announces his solution and explains his reasoning for it.

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is also the first locked-room mystery, a device used by Agatha Christie and crime writers today.

Arthur Conan Doyle continued the tradition started by Poe with his Sherlock Holmes stories. As did the writers of the Golden Age of mystery between 1920 and 1940; these included Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh and Josephine Tey. And to my mind, Christie was the leader of the pack. She followed the rules set down by Poe, and elaborated on them in her 66 novels and 14 short story collections.

Christie's greatest strength was her ability as a plotter. The bulk of her time and interest went into devising intricate plots for her novels and stories. Her notebooks show that she made lists of possible victims, murderers and motives for each novel, then she picked the combinations

that pleased her.

She said she found the actual writing of the story something of a chore. “I think the real work is done in thinking out the development of your story and worrying about it until it comes right,” she said. She began with the crime and worked backwards. “Then, when you've got all your material together, all that remains is to find time to write the thing.”

Christie's books follow the traditional novel structure, and examining this structure will give writers a formula to follow in planning their novels.

1. **Setup.** Christie's stories open by establishing the setup: the village, manor house or the archeological dig where the story is set. And some of its key characters.
2. **A murder or a serious crime occurs.** Not too far into the novel, a murder or a serious crime is committed, disrupting the peace and order of the community.
3. **The first victim.** The novel's initial murder is usually that of an unlikeable character, which creates a lot of suspects with strong motives to do away with her or him; OR an outsider character is murdered, someone no one in the community knows or cares about, such as in *A Murder is Announced*. Therefore, this first murder doesn't touch readers' hearts. **A second (or third) murder** later in the book kills off a blameless victim who just happens to be in the wrong place and who comes to know too much. Important to note as well, the murders usually take place off-stage (or in the dark as in *A Murder is Announced*), so readers are shielded from the violence.
4. **The Sleuth becomes aware of the murder.** Give your Sleuth a great deal of thought because she/he will be your most important character. And in cozy mysteries, your Sleuth must be likeable and upstanding—although other crime fiction sub-genres such as Noir will have seriously bent protagonists. Give your cozy Sleuth a flaw or two so she won't appear perfect, but don't make them fatal flaws that will offend the reader; give her endearing flaws such as always being late, or being untidy.
5. **Point of View.** Whose eyes will your readers see your story through? Will your Sleuth be your Narrator, telling the story to the reader in the first person? In eight of Christie's Poirot stories, Captain Hastings is the narrator. Like Sherlock Holmes' Watson, he tells the story and act as a foil to the great detective. Miss Marple doesn't narrate the story in any of her novels (only in one short story). Many of Christie's stories are told by an

omniscient narrator who knows everything that is going on in the story and is able to get into the heads of the major characters.

6. **Your Sleuth's reason for getting involved.** I prefer stories that give the Sleuth a good reason for getting involved in the investigation, such as wanting to protect a friend or a relative who is the prime suspect. She may be reluctant to get involved at first, but the realization that her friend/loved one is in trouble propels her into action.
7. **Sleuth's Goal.** Your sleuth needs a goal that she's intent on achieving. In a murder mystery, that goal is solving the murder and bringing the killer to justice and restoring order to the world.
8. **The Sleuth's plan of action.** Once she has a goal she launches into action. This will become the main part of your novel. She calls on her friends for ideas on how to proceed. She talks to suspects. She attacks any obstacles the murderer may (and should) throw her way.
9. **Secondary Characters.** Your Sleuth will need help on her journey, so you'll need to create a cast of secondary characters. A best friend and confidante. A mentor, maybe a former teacher. Police sources or someone (a newspaper reporter?) who can provide information only the police would have, such as time of death, type of weapon.
10. **Your Villain.** The best mysteries have great Villains, not cardboard Villains. Your Villain has to be smart, BUT not as smart as your Sleuth. Christie's Villains are usually fairly likeable characters. And don't reveal the Villain's identity until the end the novel. Keep your readers turning the pages to find out who he/she is.
11. **Subplot.** Most mysteries have one or two subplots, often romantic story lines, and they should tie into the murder in the main story line. But don't let them compete with the main story. And no sex scenes, please. Sex takes place behind closed doors.
12. **Clues.** Provide clues that allow readers to try to solve the mystery, but don't make it too easy for them. Christie was a mistress of misdirection in her novels. She provided red herrings (misleading clues, her greatest device for confusing the reader) as well as valid clues. The key to solving the murder along with her Sleuth is being able to separate the real clues from the red herrings. The real clues are often so underplayed that it's easy to miss them. Christie sometimes uses the word "interesting" to describe a clue that turns out to be a red herring, but she never uses this word for a vital clue.

13. **The novel's Midpoint.** The Midpoint in all novels, mysteries and mainstream novels alike, is a scene or a series of related scenes that comes half-way through the book and changes the direction of the plot. It could be new information or a new understanding by the Sleuth. It could be the result of the murder of a second victim who the Sleuth had pegged as the killer, but now this character is dead, the Sleuth realizes she'd been going in the wrong direction and has to come up with a new plan.
14. **Cause and Effect.** All this action has to build through cause and effect, with one event directly resulting in another. Not randomly.
15. **The Climax.** The Climax in all novels (and plays) is the big scene that pits the Protagonist (your Sleuth) against the Antagonist (your Villain). In Cozies, this confrontation is often one of words rather than a violent action scene. And it frequently takes place in a Gathering-of-the-Suspects scene, where the Sleuth gathers all the major characters in the library and explains what she/he has learned.
16. **Comeuppance.** There's usually comeuppance in this gathering scene, with the Sleuth publicly embarrassing characters who have secrets, although they are not the murderer.
17. **The Big Reveal.** The murderer is usually unmasked in the gathering scene. Often with a twist (the famous twist ending). Often, the murderer turns out to be the least likely suspect.
18. **Disguises.** Christie uses a lot of disguises in her stories. Her characters sometimes physically disguise themselves as someone else (*After the Funeral*), or take on false identities. There are a lot of twins in Christie novels for this purpose. You can use this device to misdirect readers as well.
19. **Servants.** The input of servants is often vital in Christie novels because they blend into the background, and see and hear things they probably shouldn't. However, Christie's servants are rarely murderers. But you may have other plans for servants in your novels.
20. **Power of Reasoning.** The power of reasoning – inductive reasoning – was favored as the way to solve crimes in the Golden Age of mysteries. The Detection Club was founded in 1930 by a group of prominent British crime novelists, and Christie herself served as its president for a term. Members took an oath promising not to make use of divine revelation, feminine intuition, coincidence, mumbo-jumbo or Acts of God in solving crimes in their fiction. Christie's Miss Marple does, however, display a good deal of

feminine intuition and she understands the psychology of people. But some of today's cozy writers have moved far away from the power of reasoning. They have ghosts (in the paranormal cozy sub-genre), psychic abilities and even cats helping their sleuths.

21. **Social issues.** Understanding Christie's historical period is essential to understanding her writing. Her characters talk a lot about the changing class system between the two world wars and the social changes in the 1950s. Christie pokes fun at the landed gentry whose privileged world is upset by the corpse found in the library or on the lawn. Some of her critics have called her racist and anti-semitic because her characters sometimes make derogatory remarks about Blacks, Jewish people and members of other minority groups. The narrator in *Murder in Mesopotamia* says about Poirot: "I knew he was a foreigner, but I hadn't expected him to be quite as foreign as he was." I believe Christie is parodying the English and their intolerance of outsiders.

22. **Humor.** Cozies have a sense of humor, and Christie's stories are shot through with dry wit. Poirot's discomfort in some situations is hilarious, such as at the archeological dig in *Murder in Mesopotamia* where he can't bring himself to sleep in a tent and has to find a hotel in Baghdad.

In 4:50 from *Paddington*, a decomposing corpse is found in the barn of a great estate. The family's grandson and his friend come tearing up to the barn on their bikes in hopes of seeing the corpse.

"Oh please, sir, do be a sport. Here's a murder, right in our own barn. It's the sort of chance that might never happen again. Do be a sport, sir."

"Take 'em in, Sanders," Inspector Bacon said to the constable. "One's only young once!"

The comedy is there to tame the evil in a cozy.

For writers, here are 8 clues to planning your mystery novel:

- 1. What kind of Sleuth do you want to work with?** Amateur? Professional? His/her reason for getting involved in the investigation?
- 2. Sleuth's special abilities?**
- 3. Sleuth's GOAL?**
- 4. What crimes interest you?** Murder, theft, white collar (financial) crime, insurance fraud, dark psychological, kidnapping, domestic abuse?
- 5. Who is your Villain?** What does he/she want?
- 6. Who are your Secondary Characters?** Your Sleuth will need help on her journey. What are your Secondary Characters' motivations for getting involved?

7. **Police sources.**
8. **Where and When do you want to SET your mystery? Big city or rural setting? Time period: contemporary, Victorian, 1920s, 1950s? Season? climate?**

The answers to the questions above should tell you if you are planning to write a Cozy mystery or something more hard-boiled.

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