

OLYMPIADS SCHOOL/GRADE 9 ENGLISH/HANDOUT 15

(Web resource: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/hound/tg_mystery.html; adapted for Olympiads School)

Read the following discussion of the detective novel genre. Pay attention to the underlined words. What do they mean? Write down your guesses in the right column.

THE MYSTERY GENRE

A Brief History of the Detective Novel

Crime stories have been with us at least since Cain killed Abel in the Bible, yet Sherlock Holmes is considered the father of what is known as the classic "Golden Age" of English murder mystery. Writers such as Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, and P.D. James went on to emulate this form, and today even a cursory glance at a mystery section in a book or video store will reveal the vigorous lineage of the great detective. Although Edgar Allen Poe, Wilkie Collins, and others had written mysteries before him, somehow, in the persons of Sherlock Holmes and his humble helper, Dr. John Watson, Arthur Conan Doyle captured the public imagination as no detective writer ever has.

The formula Conan Doyle helped establish for the classic English mystery usually involves several predictable elements: a "closed setting" such as an isolated house or a train; a corpse; a small circle of people who are all suspects; and an investigating detective with extraordinary reasoning powers. As each character in the setting begins to suspect the others and the suspense mounts, it comes to light that nearly all had the means, motive, and opportunity to commit the crime. Clues accumulate, and are often revealed to the reader through a narrator like Watson, who is a loyal companion to the brilliant detective. The detective grasps the solution to the crime long before anyone else, and explains it all to the "Watson" at the end.

At about the same time as the English murder mystery was establishing itself, a distinctly different school of detective fiction emerged in America. This "hard-boiled" style of fiction took hold in the 1920s, the era of American prohibition and gangster violence. Popularized through the accessibility of the "pulp" -- cheaply produced, gaudy magazines that featured short, violent crime stories -- the hard-boiled American detective contrasts distinctly with the classic English version. This detective is not a gentleman

hero, but a hard-drinking, tough-talking "private eye," often an outsider to the world of upper- and middle-class values. The classic setting is not a country house but the brutal and corrupt city, and the suspects might be anyone at all in such a vast and anonymous place. The action does not move in a series of orderly steps toward a logical solution, but, instead, **careens** from place to place and scene to scene. As Dashiell Hammett, one of the originators of the genre, explained it, "Your private detective does not want to be an **erudite** solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and **shifty** fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent bystander, or client."

The detective and mystery stories we read and watch on television and in film today can often be traced directly to one of these two original schools, or borrow from both traditions. Contemporary writers continue to reinvent the basic formula so that, over a hundred years since readers first met the great Sherlock Holmes, the detective story is more fresh, interesting, and popular than ever.

Let's explore the detective novel genre. Individually, briefly respond to all the questions in the space provided. Then work on one of the questions in smaller groups by writing a coherent paragraph of around ten sentences.

1. Why do people like to read mystery and detective stories? Why are we so fascinated with crime, especially murder? List as many reasons as you can. How does the fact that detective stories have a predictable structure make them more or less enjoyable to read? Why?

2. Why do many readers consider relaxing with mystery, detective, and crime fiction a "guilty pleasure"? What is the difference between "serious literature" and mystery stories? To think about this, consider the following questions: Why is Shakespeare not considered a crime writer even though he often writes about murder? Is *Crime and Punishment* or *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* a "mystery" novel? Explain your answer.
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3. Mystery and detective fiction is often judged by how well it satisfies the conventions of its genre—that is, how well it follows the unwritten "rules" of how detectives, criminals, suspects, and clues are presented. In the 1920s, writer Ronald Knox made a list of "commandments" that he believed must be followed in all good detective fiction. Since then, nearly all have been broken, but they are still a guide for most writers of the classic English school. Some of these rules are listed below.

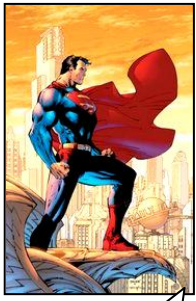
- I. The criminal must be mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
- II. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
- III. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowed.
- IV. The detective himself must not commit the crime.
- V. The detective is bound to declare any clues upon which he may happen to light.
- VI. The friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal from the reader any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.

Other genres also follow rules and conventions. Horror, romance, and science fiction stories all use predictable structures, characters, and plots. Choose any genre of storytelling, literature, or even music. On the next page of the handout, develop a set of "commandments" for that genre. Refer to the appendix to get a basic understanding of a few different genres.

GENRE: _____

THE COMMANDMENTS

[illegible]



LITERARY GENRES

Fiction

false, fantasy, fable,
fairy tale, fictitious,
fabricated, phony,
fib, figment, fake,
fraud

Format

Novel

long fiction

Short Story

short fiction

Types

fantasy

- **Setting:** In a place that does not exist in the real world.

Elements

- Events occur that could not happen in the real world.
- **Characters:** people animal or objects are able to do things they cannot do in the real world.



fable

- **Setting:** In the distant past or a timeless place.

Elements

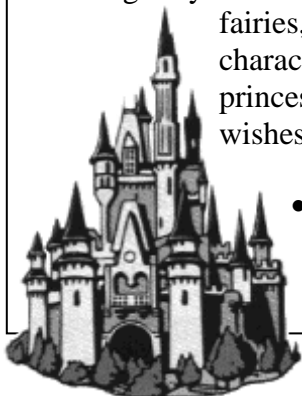
- a very short story that usual has only 2 or 3 characters.
- **Characters:** Often the characters are animals or things that talk and act like humans.

fairy tale

- **Setting:** in the distant past. Often has an open phrase, "Once upon a time..." or "A very long time ago..."

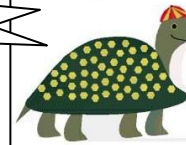
Elements

- A difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible, problem to solve.
- **Characters:** often with magical powers; imaginary characters such as dragons, fairies, giants, elves; royal characters such as queens, princes, etc. The granting of wishes often occurs.
- Has a happy ending in which good wins over evil.



Types

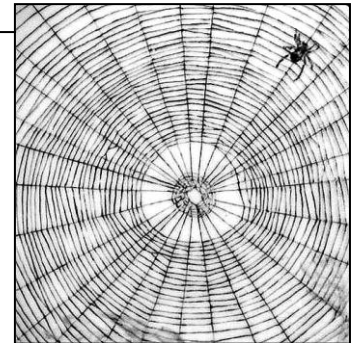
The Tortoise and the Hare



myth

Elements

- May explain how something in nature looks or works (example: why the spider spins a web).
- May explain why people behave in certain ways.
- **Characters:** Often includes gods or goddesses who interact with humans.

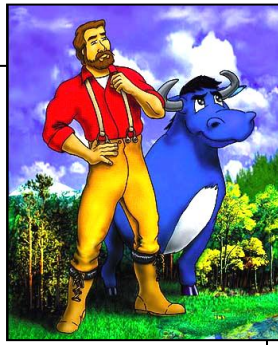


"tall tales"

- **Setting:** in the recent or distant past.

Elements

- humorous exaggeration to tell the adventures of a fictional (or possibly nonfictional) character.
- Build upon improbable incidences and unusual problems that are saved in creative ways.



folk tale

Elements

- Stories passed down from one generation to another. Originally told orally. Reflect the culture in which they originated.
- **Characters:** may include animals or inanimate objects that speak. They often teach a moral or lesson in life.
- Some folk tales called trickster tales are about weak people or tiny animals outwitting their stronger enemies.
- Action builds through repetition. Has an exciting climax at the end. Goodness and intelligence win out over evil and foolishness.
- Told from 3rd person point of view.

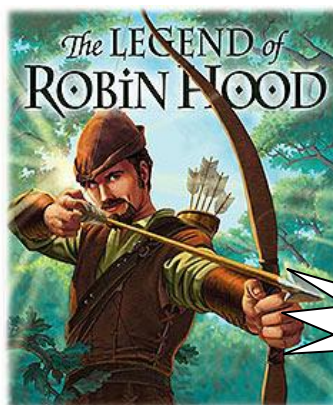


legend

- **Setting:** in the past.

Elements

- Tells the story of a hero.
- May be based on facts and real history, but through numerous retellings the hero and his or her deeds become larger than life, and some facts are distorted.



Fiction

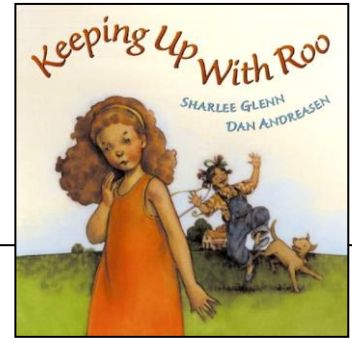
Types

realistic fiction

- **Setting:** a real place or could be a real place.

Elements

- The events in the story could happen in real life.
- **Characters:** behave as people do in real life.



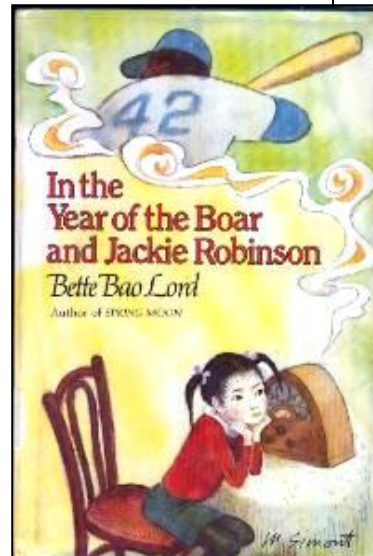
Types

historical fiction

- **Setting:** some specific period of the past.

Elements

- A type of realistic fiction. Often, but not always, the story is based on actual historical events and people of the period.
- The plot reflects events or problems of the period.
- The details about clothing, tools, and food are authentic to the period.



Types

LITERARY GENRES

Nonfiction

Narrative

told as a story

The opposite of fiction.

True.

Real.

Writing Styles

Format

Book

long nonfiction

Essay

short nonfiction

Expository

facts; information

Types

biography

The true story of someone's life written by someone else.

opinions & philosophy

Elements

- Often includes subheads to organize topics.
- Might contain diagrams, photographs and other illustrations.
- Contains information that can be checked by looking at other sources.

Elements

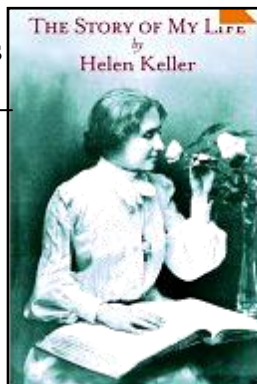
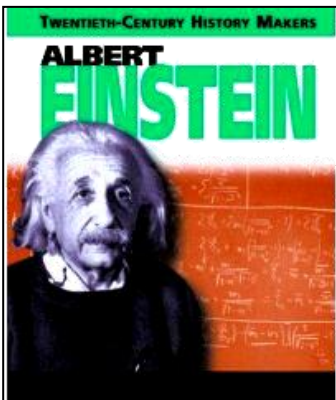
- It may span a person's whole life, or it may tell about an important part of a person's life.
- An account of an person's entire life is almost always told in chronological order (in the time order events occurred).
- Contains a variety of important information about the person's life. Often tells how the person feels and thinks about things.

autobiograph

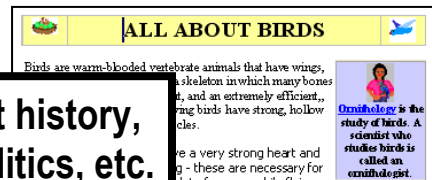
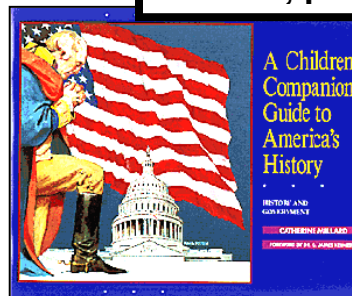
The true story of someone's life written by that person.

Elements

- see "biography"



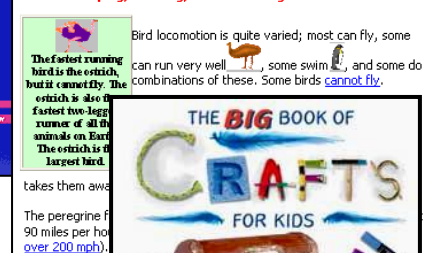
facts about history, science, politics, etc.



Birds are warm-blooded vertebrate animals that have wings, a skeleton in which many bones are hollow, and an extremely efficient, powerful respiratory system. Flying birds have strong, hollow bones.

Not all flying animals are birds; and not all birds can fly. The ability to fly has developed independently many times throughout the history of the Earth. Bats (flying mammals), pterosaurs (flying reptiles from the time of the dinosaurs), and flying insects are not birds.

MOVING: Flying, Running, and Swimming



instruction manuals

Styles for Fiction or Nonfiction

LITERARY GENRES

Poetry

Sentences are sometimes broken into parts. Each part is on its own line.

Often contains words that rhyme. The lines often have a rhythm or meter.

Words are sometimes repeated.

Sometimes describes things by comparing them with something else.

Often uses figurative, descriptive, and sensory language.

Writing Styles

Narrative

told as a story

Drama

A serious story.

Intended for representation by actors impersonating the characters and performing the dialogue and action.

A situation or succession of events having the emotional effect characteristic of a play.

Identifying The Literary Genre

- 1.) Is it fiction or nonfiction
- 2.) What type of writing is it?
- 3.) What is the format (length)?
- 4.) What is the writing style?