The Mystery Genre

Surprisingly, the genre of the mystery novel is quite a new phenomenon; generally acknowledged as beginning in the mid 19th century. The reasons for this late appearance in the body of literature – yes, literature - have been attributed to the development of police forces and the investigative process during this period. While plausible, I prefer to think that the reasons remain a mystery.

Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle are widely recognized as early practitioners of the genre; and, apart from the differences between the language of the period and modern day usage, they contain plots, characters and storylines that could be found in modern novels of the genre.

Nowadays, mystery fiction is a thriving field with many sub-genres, and international appeal, as indicated, most recently, by a large influx of translations from foreign, especially Scandinavian, authors.

So what is a mystery novel? A mystery novel requires the solution of a crime; the crime is almost always murder; and, more often than not, quite grisly murder. Let’s face it; a mystery novel about serial shoplifting would hardly have the same cachet.

Apart from the crime, and, of course, a criminal, the novel requires a protagonist, the hero – or anti-hero, the solver of the crime. The protagonist has to discover clues, confront setbacks and discard false leads and, with a good smattering of foreshadowing, allow the reader to accompany them on their winding course to an eventual, successful conclusion.

As the definition of a mystery novel dictates so little, it comes as no surprise that there is a wide spectrum of styles of mystery novel falling into a group of sub-genres; from the relatively mild amateur sleuths of Agatha Christie to the blood-spattered tales of Jeff Lindsay’s Dexter.

Each style, each sub-genre, can be quite distinct though many overlap considerable; however, could you imagine Miss Marple cornering Hannibal Lecter in the drawing room?

I must admit a personal preference for mystery novels by modern British authors. Not that I read them exclusively but I find that while they cover the full range of styles they add an ingredient that seems missing in most North American mysteries that I read. They have humour. From the wry, dry cynicism, of Rankin’s Inspector Rebus to the quirky yet entirely real characters of Stuart MacBride’s Logan McRae, to the absurd Mystery Man series of Colin Bateman.

Murder most foul, with a punch line.