A Study in Mystery

1 - Beginnings

with
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CONTINUING EDUCATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

Lifelong Learning Class
(LLWRC 837)

Fall 2022
Tuesdays, October 25 – December 6, 2022
6:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

A Study In Mystery

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Today's Goals

- Introductions & Goals
- History of Mystery
- Mystery as Literature
- Sub-genres
- Writing Tools
- Vocabulary
- Premise & Writing Choices

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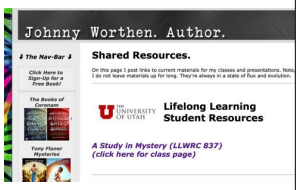
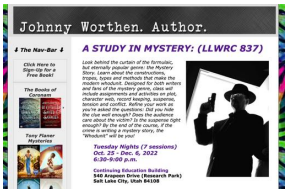
Online Resources - johnnyworthen.com





http://johnnyworthen.com/SharedResources/LLWRC837/MysteryLLWRC837.html

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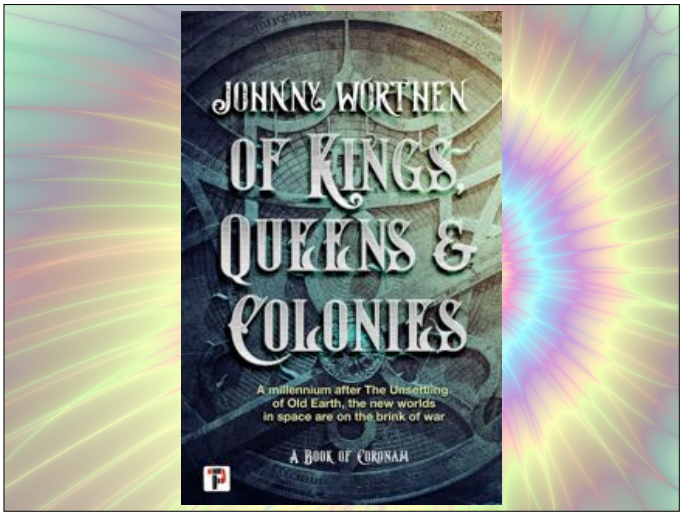

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Class Goals

- *This is a seminar on mystery designed for writers and fans of the genre. We'll talk about the tropes, types and methods that make the modern whodunnit. We'll break down the formulae into nice digestible chunks to lay the foundation for a ripping good mystery story. We'll delve into theory while collecting, brainstorming, and workshopping essential elements to create an effective mystery.*
  - *At the end of class you should have an actionable plan to create a compelling mystery.*
    - *Then write it.*

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What's all this then?

- Class Goals
  - Learn and appreciate theory, formula, tropes and techniques of mystery.
  - Pre-write a mystery story
  - Writing practice
- Class Structure
  - Roll Call (yes, really)
  - Lecture - Break - Workshop
    - Homework
- Classes are weighted - more workshopping in later classes

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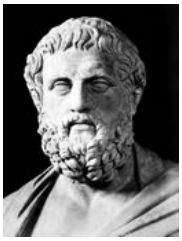
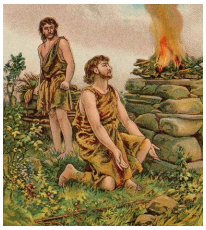
History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction



Sophocles



Cain & Abel

Hamlet

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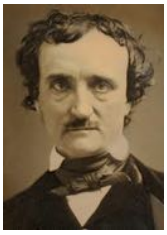
History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins



Edgar Allan Poe

First Detective Story

1841: C. Auguste Dupin
Murders in the Rue Morgue

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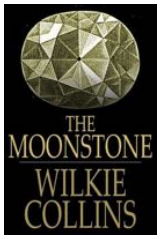
History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins

Wilkie Collins

First Detective Novel



1868: Sergeant Cuff
The Moonstone

History of Mystery

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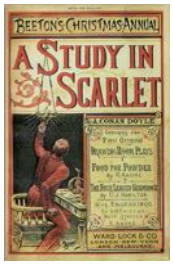
- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins

Sir Arthur
Conan Doyle

Blockbuster!



1887: Sherlock Holmes
A Study in Scarlet

History of Mystery

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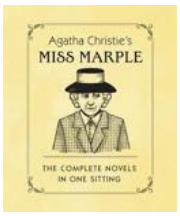
- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age

Agatha Christie

Plot Puzzles
"Fair Play"

1920: Hercule Poirot



1927: Miss Marple

History of Mystery

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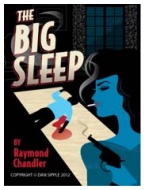
- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age
  - FAIR PLAY
    - Ellery Queen's "Challenge to the Reader"
      - 3/4 way: announce all clues are there
- Plot and Puzzle so closely aligned that characters tended to be automatons of function. *Chess pieces*

Plot Puzzles
"Fair Play"

History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age
- Hardboiled

Raymond Chandler



1939: Philip Marlowe

"Realism"
Crime
"Noir"

Dashiell Hammett

1930: Sam Spade

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History of Mystery

- Mystery/Crime Fiction
- Origins
- Golden Age
- Hardboiled
- Modern

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Mystery's Evolution

- Modern genre (relatively speaking)
  - Pulp vs. literature?
  - Formulaic & Popular... maligned
- Literature reflects
  - Social systems/times
    - England: class systems
    - In the US: tough and self reliant
    - What's trending now? What does it say about place and time? (Scandinavia? Korea?)
- Came back around to being about more than just the puzzle

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Tools

- Notepads & Pens
- Resources & Books
  - See *Bibliography*
- Computer
  - *Scrivener*
  - *Scapple*
  - *Aeon Timeline*

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Do it yourself

- "Willful and premeditated"
- Pre-writing
  - *"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail"*
  - Collecting the pieces
  - Planning the journey
- Writing
  - Taking the journey

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Crime & Mystery

- Crime stories are about crime.
  - Crime stories can be thrillers, crime, capers, etc.
    - Mystery is actually a sub-genre of that
- Mystery is about "solving a crime/puzzle"
  - Double Story
    1. The Crime
    2. The Quest to understand the crime
- Reader is a participant not only in the adventure, but also the puzzle

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A Story About a Story Told Through Stories

TRUTH

- **Story One** - the story of the crime
- **Story Two** - the story of discovering **Story One**
- **Other Stories** - connecting **One** and **Two**
- Self-reflective genre

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Mystery & Good Fiction

- "Mystery" is the heart of all good fiction
  - Leaving blanks - connecting dots
    - Reader involvement
- Planting clues is not so different from planting any other kind of information
- SUSPENSE

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Vocabulary: part 1

- **ALIBI**—an excuse or piece of information given by an accused person to prove that he/she was somewhere else when a crime was committed.
- **BREAKTHROUGH**—a necessary piece of information or insight that helps solve a mystery.
- **CLUE**—an object, observation, or piece of information that helps to solve a mystery or puzzle crime—an act that violates the law.
- **CRIME**—an action that breaks the law.
- **DEDUCE/DEDUCTION**—to use logical reasoning and thinking to infer information.
- **DETECTIVE**—a person who gathers information and investigates crimes (sleuth).
- **EVIDENCE**—a statement, fact, or object used to prove the solution of a mystery.
- **HUNCH**—a feeling or a guess about something.
- **INTERROGATE**—to ask questions or seek information from people.
- **MEANS** — the ability to do the crime. One of the necessary requirements of guilt.
- **MOTIVE**—the reason a person does something or acts in a certain way.

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Vocabulary: part 2

- **MYSTERY**—something that is secret or unknown; a problem needing to be solved.
- **OBSERVANT**—careful to look at things and note details.
- **OPPORTUNITY**—the occasion to potentially have done the crime. One of the necessary requirements of guilt.
- **PERPETRATOR**—someone who is guilty of committing a crime.
- **PUZZLE**—a game that tests someone's reasoning ability.
- **RED HERRING** — a false clue that throws the investigator off track.
- **SEALED ROOM**— a mystery trope where the victim is discovered in an locked or inaccessible setting.
- **SETTING**—the time, place, surroundings, and circumstances in which a story takes place.
- **SLEUTH**—another name for a detective.
- **SUPPORT** — a character who aids the sleuth.
- **SUSPECT**—a person who might have committed the crime.
- **VICTIM**—a person who is harmed by a crime.
- **WITNESS**—someone who saw something related to the crime.

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Major Modern Mystery Sub-Genres

- **The Cozy**—light tone, fun, usually a small community, amateur sleuth, sex and violence off screen.
- **Caper**—elaborate crime planned and carried out. Protagonist is criminal.
- **Police Procedural**—protagonist is an officer of the law. Solution involves protocol.
- **P.I**—Sleuth is Private Investigator.
- **Historical**—Story is set in an historical era.
- **Legal**—Playing field is the legal system.
- **Psychological Suspense**—Protagonist is psychologist or psychiatrist. Explores psychological aspects of crime.
- **Forensic**—Examination of physical evidence is center of the story.
- **Fem-Jep**—Females in jeopardy, needs to be saved. By herself or someone else.

Dunnits
The questions we ask

- The suspense that drives a mystery
  - *Who dunnit?*
  - *Why dunnit?*
  - *How dunnit?*
  - *When dunnit?*
  - *Will the dunniter be stopped?*
  - *How will the dunniter be caught?*

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The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if a child disappears from a mall the day before his thirteenth birthday?*
- *And then suppose it's discovered that the same thing happened exactly six years before, and six years before that.*

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The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if a couple overhears their upstairs neighbors fighting all the time?*
- *And then suppose they suddenly stopped fighting and one of them goes missing?*

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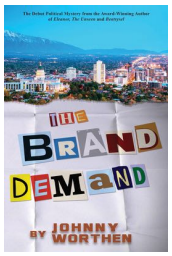
The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if a group of political activists blackmail people they don't like?*
- *Then suppose one of their targets is murdered and the investigation threatens to expose the group?*



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The Premise:
What's the Big Idea?

- What if...
- And then suppose...
- *What if girl who lies all the time is the only witness to a crime?*
- *Then suppose she can't even prove there was a crime at all?*
  - *Then suppose she begins to doubt herself?*

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Log Line

- "High Concept"
- Bare Bones
- Marketing Description
- A good concept sells better than anything else
- A test before writing

Protagonist + Struggle with Antagonist + Death Stakes

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Example Log Lines:

- *In 1936, archaeologist and adventurer Indiana Jones [protagonist] is hired by the US government to locate the ancient Ark of the Covenant before the Nazis [struggle with antagonist] and stop them from becoming the most powerful army the world has ever known. [death stakes]* ***(Raiders of the Lost Ark.)***
- *Two detectives—a rookie and a veteran [protagonists]—attempt to catch a serial killer who uses the seven deadly sins as his modus operandi [struggle with antagonist] before he kills again. [death stakes]* ***(Se7en.)***
- *A young couple [protagonists] becomes increasingly disturbed by a seemingly demonic presence in their new suburban home [struggle with antagonist] and must figure out how to stop it before it's too late. [death stakes]* ***(Paranormal Activity.)***

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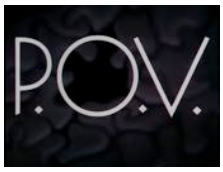
Writer Choices

- **Narrator**
  - Who's going to tell your story?
    - The sleuth or another?
- **Point of View**
  - First Person
  - Third Person Limited
  - Third Person Omniscient



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Writer Choices

- **Tense**
  - Present Tense
  - Past Tense

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Writer Choices

- **Setting**
  - Another Character
    - Can it bring more than background to the story?
  - *Where* is the story set?
  - *When* is the story set?
  - Considerations
    - Write what you know?
    - Research?

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Your mission, should you choose to accept it...

- *Premise*
  - *Make a list of FOUR OR MORE ideas for a mystery story*
    - *"What if's, and then suppose's, and then suppose again."*
  - *Write a log line of a story idea*
- *Consider on Setting*
- *Consider Narrator & POV*
- *Consider on Tense*
- *Consider sub-genres*
- *Don't Despair*