

100 MUST-READ

CRIMENOVELS



but Sherlock Holmes sprang forward and confronted him.
 "You villain," said he, "where's your daughter?"
 The fat man cast his eyes round, and then up at the open skylight.

"It is for me to ask you that," he shrieked, "you thieves! Spies and thieves! I have caught you, have I? You are in my power. I'll serve you!" He turned and clattered down the stairs as hard as he could go.

"He's gone for the dog!" cried Miss Hunter.

"I have my revolver," said I.

"Better close the front door," cried Holmes, and we all rushed down the stairs together. We had hardly reached the hall when we heard the baying of a hound, and then a scream of agony, with a horrible worrying sound which it was dreadful to listen to. An elderly man with a red face and shaking limbs came staggering out at a side-door.

"My God!" he cried. "Someone has loosed the dog. It's not been fed for two days. Quick, quick, or it'll be too late!"

...d I... the angle of the
 use, with... There was the
 age famishe... Rucastle's
 roat, while... in Rucastle's
 unning up... the ground.
 en white... ever with its
 ck. With... cases of his
 n, living bu... we separated, and carried
 n upon the... into the house. We laid
 : sobered T... sofa, and having despatched
 ould to relie... news to his wife, I did what
 er the r... we were all assembled round
 ered the r... and a tall, gaunt woman

"Mrs. T...!" cried Miss Hunter.
 Rucastle let me out when he came
 to you. Ah, miss, it is a pity you
 you were planning, for I would
 sins were wasted."
 Ha... looking keenly at her. "It is

BLOOMSBURYGOODREADINGGUIDES

100 MUST-READ

CRIME FICTION NOVELS

Richard Shephard and Nick Rennison



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is not intended to provide a list of the 100 'best' crime novels. Any such definitive list is an impossibility, given the huge variety of fiction that is classified as 'crime fiction' and the difficulty of directly comparing books which were written with very different intentions and in very different cultural circumstances. How is it possible to take, say, a Lord Peter Wimsey novel by Dorothy L. Sayers and one of James Ellroy's LA Quartet and say which of them is 'the best'? Both may fall within the broad church of crime fiction but comparing them directly is as useful as comparing apples and pears. Some like apples; some like pears. Some like both. We have been guided instead by the title of our book and have chosen 100 books to read in order to gain an overview of the rich and diverse writing to be found in crime fiction. We aimed to produce a book that would prove useful as a starting point for exploring the genre, and the introduction attempts the difficult, if not impossible, task of galloping through the history of crime fiction in a few thousand words.

The individual entries are arranged A to Z by author. They describe the plot of each title while aiming to avoid too many 'spoilers', offer some value judgements and usually include some information about the author's career and their place in the history of crime fiction. We have noted significant film versions of the books (with dates of release), where applicable.

Each entry is followed by a 'Read On' list which includes books by the same author, books by stylistically similar writers or books on a theme relevant to the entry. We have also included 20 'Read on a theme' lists, which are scattered throughout the text after appropriate titles; these are designed to help you to explore a particular subgenre of, or theme in, crime fiction in greater depth. The symbol » before an author name (e.g. » **James Lee Burke**) indicates that one or more of their books is covered in the A to Z author entries.

Most authors receive one entry only. Originally we intended to have 100 authors and 100 books but we decided eventually that three writers (Raymond Chandler, Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) were so central to the genre that they deserved two entries. We have also ignored the constraints of our title by including three short-story collections which we believe are essential to a full understanding of the history of crime fiction. Edgar Allan Poe's stories played a major role in the genesis of the genre and he could not be excluded simply because he did not write a novel-length crime story. Conan Doyle wrote four novels and 56 short stories in which Sherlock Holmes appears and it seemed right to select as our two choices one of the longer stories and one of the collections of short stories. G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown is one of the most loved and admired detectives in English crime fiction and it would have been misguided to leave him out of the guide solely on the grounds that he appears only in short stories.

For writers who have written many books, choosing just one to represent their work has proved difficult. Some writers have produced long series featuring the same character. In most cases, the earlier books in the series are the freshest and most inspired and we have

chosen one of these but that is not always so. To represent Elizabeth Peters, for example, we have selected the first in her Amelia Peabody series, but to represent Ian Rankin, we have gone for *Black and Blue*, a later book in his Rebus series. Some writers have, in the course of long careers, produced books in a number of series and in a number of styles. Here the difficulty has been in choosing which series to highlight. In all cases we have chosen the series for which, in our opinion, the writer is most likely to find his place in the history of crime fiction. Robert B. Parker, for example, has written a very fine series of books featuring an ex-alcoholic cop named Jesse Stone but it is his novels starring the hip, wisecracking private eye Spenser that first made his name and which remain his most famous. However tempting it was to choose a Jesse Stone novel rather than a Spenser novel to represent Parker, it would have seemed deliberately perverse and unnecessarily controversial to do so.

All the first choice books in this guide have a date attached to them. In the case of English and American writers, this date refers to the first publication in the UK or the USA. For translated writers, dates of publication refer to the book's first appearance in English.

INTRODUCTION

What is crime fiction? The simplest definition would be one that states that it is fiction in which a crime plays the central role in the plot. However, closer examination of this definition shows it to be inadequate. In *Oliver Twist*, many of the novel's most compelling scenes take place in London's criminal underworld and Bill Sikes's murder of Nancy is of major importance to the plot. The narrative of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* unfolds from Raskolnikov's murder of an old pawnbroker and her sister. In a more contemporary novel, Martin Amis's *London Fields*, the anticipated murder of one of the characters is the driving force behind the plot. The first two chapters are even entitled 'The Murderer' and 'The Murderee'. Yet no one would think of describing any of these three novels as 'crime fiction'. A better definition can be achieved if we extend the previous one a little and say that crime fiction is fiction in which the unravelling and detection of the truth about a crime, usually but not exclusively murder, plays the central role in the plot.

When and where did crime fiction begin? Some students of the genre, eager to provide it with a respectably lengthy pedigree, have traced its sources back to stories in biblical and Ancient Greek literature but this is special pleading. More convincingly, the critic and crime writer Julian Symons cited William Godwin's 1794 novel *Caleb Williams* as the first true crime novel. Certainly *Caleb Williams* hinges on the investigation of a murder but Godwin is more interested in using his narrative to expose the injustices of contemporary society than he is in unfolding a suspenseful crime novel. It is difficult to read the book today and accept unreservedly that here is a work of crime fiction. A better case can be made that the genre really began in the middle decades of the nineteenth century and that it began in America, England and France.

AN ENGLISH, A FRENCHMAN AND AN AMERICAN...

In America in the 1840s, » Edgar Allan Poe became the founding father of detective fiction with the three short stories in which the brilliantly ratiocinative Auguste Dupin solves apparently insoluble mysteries. 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', first published in a magazine in 1841, is the prototype 'locked room mystery' in which Dupin is faced by a series of murders where the killings take place in apparently inaccessible rooms and has to work out how they were committed. It was followed by 'The Mystery of Marie Roget', in which Poe takes a notorious real-life murder in New York and re-imagines it in Dupin's Paris, and 'The Purloined Letter', the story of a compromising letter being used for blackmail, which Dupin finds after all police attempts to locate it have failed.

In England in the 1860s, a new genre of fiction emerged which became known as ‘sensation fiction’. With its antecedents in the Gothic and ‘Newgate’ novels of earlier decades, ‘sensation fiction’ peered beneath the surface gentility of Victorian domesticity and revealed a world of bigamy, madness, murder and violence supposedly lurking there. It was all too much for some critics. One described the genre as ‘unspeakably disgusting’ and castigated its ‘ravenous appetite for carrion’. The best-known purveyor of ‘sensation fiction’ was » Wilkie Collins. Collins’s most famous books are *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), novels which hinge on the working out of a crime mystery. In *The Moonstone* Wilkie Collins introduces the idiosyncratic and intelligent Sergeant Cuff who, although he mistakenly suspects an innocent person and is eventually dismissed from the case, is the first of innumerable police protagonists in crime fiction over the next 140 years.

Collins may have been influenced by the short-lived French novelist Emile Gaboriau (1833–73) who wrote a number of books which use themes and motifs still recognisable in crime fiction today. A great admirer of Poe, Gaboriau is best remembered for the creation of Monsieur Lecoq, an agent of the French Sûreté and a rational, scientifically minded detective able to astonish his colleagues by his careful analysis of clues at the scene of the crime and his leaps of deduction. Lecoq first appeared as a supporting character in an 1866 novel entitled *The Lerouge Affair* but he took centre stage in *The Mystery of Orcival* (1867) and several subsequent novels.

Together, the American Poe, the Englishman Collins and the Frenchman Gaboriau created templates in crime fiction which have lasted to the present day.

THE INCOMPARABLE HOLMES

The next leap forward came, some twenty years after the publication of *The Moonstone* and more than a decade after the death of Gaboriau, with » Arthur Conan Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is not an entire original (Doyle borrowed elements from both Poe's Dupin and Gaboriau's Lecoq) but the supremely rational private investigator, able to make the most startlingly accurate deductions on the basis of the flimsiest of evidence, rapidly became the most famous of all fictional detectives, a position he has held ever since and is unlikely to relinquish as long as crime fiction is read.

Holmes and his stolid comrade Dr Watson have transcended the boundaries of the fiction in which they appeared in a way that few characters in English literature, other than some of Shakespeare's and some of Dickens's, have done. They have entered an almost mythical realm. The two men first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet*, published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* of 1887. Doyle received the princely sum of £25 for the rights to the novella. *The Sign of Four* followed in 1890 but it was only when *The Strand* magazine began publishing Holmes short stories in 1891 that the character's enormous public popularity really began. The magazine's circulation rose dramatically as the stories were published. Eventually Doyle, wearying of his character and keen that his historical fiction should not be overshadowed by the detective, attempted to kill Holmes off, sending him hurtling over the Reichenbach Falls in the arms of his mortal enemy Professor Moriarty. But the public was having none of it. They wanted more of the great detective and Doyle had finally to acquiesce to public demand and resurrect Holmes. He continued to publish Holmes stories in *The Strand* until 1927. By this time, the Golden Age of English crime fiction was set to dawn.

CRIME'S GOLDEN YEARS

The years between the first and last appearances of Sherlock Holmes in *The Strand* were fruitful ones for crime fiction. Holmes had plenty of imitators, from Arthur Morrison's Martin Hewitt (whose adventures also appeared in *The Strand* in the 1890s) to Jacques Futrelle's character, Professor Van Dusen, the 'Thinking Machine' who featured in a series of short stories and two novels published in the first decade of the 20th century. Many other writers enjoyed success with crime fiction. Some, like » G.K. Chesterton, who created the meek but masterly priest Father Brown in 1911, wrote their detective stories in the time they could spare from other writing. Others, like Chesterton's close friend » E.C. Bentley, produced a single, striking example of the genre (Bentley published *Trent's Last Case* in 1913). Yet others built long careers on crime fiction. R. Austin Freeman wrote *The Red Thumb Mark*, his first book about the forensic investigator and lawyer Dr Thorndyke, in 1907 and went on to publish more than 30 other novels involving the same character. Edgar Wallace's prodigious output of crime fiction (he often published half a dozen books a year) began with *The Four Just Men* in 1905 and continued until his death in Hollywood in 1932 (where he was working on the script of *King Kong*).

It was women writers, however, who led the way in creating English crime fiction's Golden Age. » Agatha Christie published her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in 1920 and it introduced the character of Hercule Poirot, who was soon to become the second most famous fictional detective in the world. Other women writers followed in Christie's footsteps. » Dorothy L. Sayers's first Lord Peter Wimsey book appeared in 1923, » Margery Allingham created the character of Albert Campion in her 1929 novel *The Crime at Black Dudley* and » Ngaio

Marsh produced her first novel in 1934. By this time the rules and conventions of the classic whodunit were firmly in place. Indeed, a Detection Club for crime novelists was founded in 1928. Early members included Sayers, Christie, Chesterton and Ronald Knox and they agreed, half in jest and half in earnest, to adhere to a set of rules in their novels that would allow readers a fair chance of working out the guilty party. ‘Do you promise’, said one of the clauses in the club’s membership ceremony, ‘that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them, using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance upon nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery Pokery, Coincidence, or any hitherto unknown Act of God?’

The rules were often breached but there was a genuine sense that the genre had conventions that needed to be observed. Tried and tested settings (the English country house, for example) appeared in dozens and dozens of novels in the 1930s. So too did stock characters – in some books it really was the butler who did it. At its worst, the supposed Golden Age produced a lot of tired, stale and cliché-ridden fiction. At its best – in the works of Christie, Sayers, Allingham, Marsh and others – it created sophisticated and witty narratives that have lost none of their entertainment value as the decades have passed.

FROM THE DRAWING ROOM TO THE MEAN STREETS

Across the Atlantic, there were writers who were happy to produce their own American versions of the mannered and often eccentric mysteries that were so popular in Britain. Beginning with *The Benson Murder Case* in 1926, S.S. Van Dine wrote a dozen novels featuring the dandified

aesthete and man-about-Manhattan Philo Vance. Two cousins, Frederick Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, joined forces to create Ellery Queen, both the pseudonym under which they wrote and the detective who starred in their books.

Side by side with these, however, were the growing numbers of American writers who were creating an indigenous form of crime writing that owed nothing to models from across the Atlantic. Most of them appeared first in the pages of the so-called ‘pulp’ magazines, of which the most famous was *Black Mask*, founded in 1920 by H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan but edited during its most influential years, the late 1920s and early 1930s, by Joseph Shaw. Carroll John Daly’s two characters, Terry Mack and Race Williams, who appeared in *Black Mask* in 1923, were arguably the first hard-boiled sleuths of all. The star of the magazine, however, was » Dashiell Hammett. In a 1927 editorial, Joseph Shaw wrote that, ‘Detective fiction as we see it has only commenced to be developed. All other fields have been worked and overworked, but detective fiction has barely been scratched.’ It was Hammett who proved Shaw right. It was Hammett who, in the words of » Raymond Chandler, ‘gave murder back to the people who commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse and with means at hand, not with hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare, and tropical fish.’ Chandler himself, probably the most influential of all American crime writers, published his first story in *Black Mask* in 1933.

In some ways these two main strands of crime fiction – the elaborate puzzles of the classic English detective story and the hard-boiled crime that developed in the pulp magazines – have continued to this day. There have been many crossovers and many novelists who have successfully used elements of both but there is a tradition that links Christie and

Marsh with writers like » P.D. James and » Ruth Rendell just as there is a line that can be drawn from Hammett and Chandler to modern American novelists such as » James Ellroy and » Elmore Leonard.

PICKING UP THE BATON

In England after the Second World War, the conventions of the Golden Age might have been thought to have become passé but they proved surprisingly resilient. Partly, of course, this was because the leading practitioners were still going strong. Sayers had put aside Lord Peter Wimsey in the late 1930s but Agatha Christie continued to publish fiction into the 1970s. Ngaio Marsh's last novel was published in 1982, » Gladys Mitchell's in 1984. Partly, it was because new writers arrived to revitalize the traditional form. » Edmund Crispin's first novels, featuring Gervase Fen, one of the great 'English eccentric' detectives, appeared in the late 1940s. » Michael Innes's earliest Inspector Appleby novels had been published in the late 1930s but he produced many more in later decades. » Michael Gilbert and » Julian Symons both began their careers as crime novelists immediately after the war. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the greatest practitioners of the Golden Age were coming to the ends of their careers, a third generation of writers emerged. P.D. James created the poet and policeman Adam Dalgleish; Ruth Rendell invented the Sussex town of Kingsmarkham in which Inspector Wexford could display his humane skills as a detective. New Queens of Crime had appeared on the scene.

In America after the war, writers emerged to pick up the baton from Hammett and Chandler. Kenneth Millar, using the pseudonym of » Ross Macdonald, created in Lew Archer a detective to rival Chandler's Philip Marlowe. The first Archer novel, *The Moving Target*, was published in

1949. In the 1950s, another important subgenre in American crime fiction came to the fore. Earlier novels like Lawrence Treat's *V for Victim* (1945) and Hillary Waugh's *Last Seen Wearing* (1952) can be claimed as pioneering police procedurals, but the type of crime fiction which attempts to show realistically the unfolding of a police investigation into a crime or crimes really came into its own with the publication of » Ed McBain's 87th Precinct books. Beginning with *Cop Hater* in 1956, McBain wrote dozens of these novels, set in a fictional city based on New York. The disclaimer that he placed at the beginning of each of them succinctly sums up his aim of blending reality and fiction. 'The city in these pages is imaginary. The people, the places are all fictitious. Only the police routine is based on established investigatory technique.'

Where McBain went in the 1950s, dozens of others have followed in the decades since. Indeed, the police procedural has become one of the most popular forms of crime fiction in all media. Not only novels but films and TV series show McBain's influence. It is hard to imagine a pioneering series like *Hill Street Blues*, for example, and all its imitators without the 87th Precinct.

EXPLORING THE WHYS AND HOWS

There are other strands in crime fiction beyond those of classic English mystery and hard-boiled American realism. There is what is usually termed the psychological thriller which began in the 1930s and can be traced back to the novels Anthony Berkeley Cox wrote under the pseudonym of » Francis Iles. Here the emphasis is not on the solution of a puzzle (in Iles's *Malice Aforethought* there is no doubt who committed the murder) nor on the gritty realism of city life. The interest of the

books lies in the slow unravelling of the psyche of the protagonist(s). Many of the finest writers in the genre, from » Patricia Highsmith and » Margaret Millar to » Barbara Vine and » Minette Walters, have chosen to work with the psychological thriller.

In another vein, there is the courtroom drama, which contemporary writers such as Scott Turow have made their own. Researchers into the history of the English version of this subgenre could locate prototypes in novels by Dickens and Trollope (or even, if over-diligent, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*) but the beginnings of the American courtroom drama are best sought in the work of » Erle Stanley Gardner. Gardner was one of the writers for *Black Mask* in the 1920s but his real success came with the creation of the brilliant lawyer Perry Mason. Judged solely by total worldwide sales of books over the years, Mason is the second most popular character in crime fiction (only Sherlock Holmes outranks him) and his influence has been enormous. Beneath all the contemporary glitz and the plots expanded to fill narratives of blockbusting size, the characters in modern courtroom dramas by the likes of Turow and others are basically Perry Mason with attitude.

The forensic thriller has become increasingly popular in the last decade. Variants on the police procedural, where the emphasis is not on the cop on the beat but on the scientist in the laboratory, forensic thrillers found their doyenne in » Patricia Cornwell, whose success paved the way for many other fine writers, from Kathy Reichs to Karin Slaughter. With the remarkable popularity of TV series like the CSI franchise, this subgenre has spread from the printed page to other media until it has become one of the most visible of all forms of crime fiction.

Other subgenres can be readily identified (the black farce and comic capers of American writers from » Donald E. Westlake to » Carl Hiaasen;

the historical detective fiction that has proved so popular in both America and the UK) but the significance lies not in the number that can be formally anatomized but in what their variety says about the state of crime fiction today. Since the 1970s, the two major branches of the genre (broadly speaking, English cosy and American hard-boiled) have divided and proliferated to such an extent that the sheer range and quality of writing that gets shelved in bookshops and libraries under the heading of 'crime fiction' is remarkable. What other area of fiction in the last thirty years can offer such diverseness? From the tartan noir of » Ian Rankin to the Roman scandals of » Steven Saylor, from » Donna Leon's shadow-filled Venice to the mean streets of » Walter Mosley's LA, crime novels range through time and across the world to give readers a variety of experiences that no other style of fiction can match. Today, writers like » Daniel Woodrell and » Sue Grafton, » Michael Dibdin and » Tony Hillerman, » K.C. Constantine and Minette Walters have very little in common with one another except for the fact that they are all, in very different ways, fine novelists and they are all classified as crime writers.

So, this is the territory that this guide takes. There are adjoining lands (that of the spy thriller, for instance, or the blockbusting narratives of writers like John Grisham and Tom Clancy) that we could have visited but we have chosen to remain within the traditional boundaries of the crime genre. (Perhaps another book beckons in which the pure thriller, in all its many incarnations, can be explored.) We have tried to make our choice of 100 books as interesting and wide-ranging as possible. We have included classics from the genre's past like » John Dickson Carr's *The Hollow Man* and » Nicholas Blake's *The Beast Must Die*; we have drawn attention to rewardingly offbeat novels such as » Cameron McCabe's *The Face on the Cutting Room Floor* and » John Franklin

Bardin's *The Deadly Percheron*; and we have had to choose one particular title to represent such popular and prolific crime writers as » Lawrence Block, » Dick Francis, Erle Stanley Gardner, Patricia Highsmith, » John D. MacDonald and Ruth Rendell. In such a rich field of writing, the list of 100 we have compiled cannot hope or pretend to be a definitive one but it is one that has been great fun to select. We hope that readers will find books in it, both old favourites and new suggestions, that are just as much to fun to read.

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