

## Crime Fiction

By Megan Buxton

**HUNTER  
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Crime fiction is addictive. I can attest to this from my own addiction which began some forty-plus years ago. Crime Writing has traditionally been second in popularity after Romance, but since 9/11 sales of crime novels have outstripped Romance. Why? I'll leave it to two very famous crime writers to explain. Lee Child: *It gratifies (the) desire for safety, security and the rule of law.* P.D James: *...the expression of crime, followed by a solution-but not necessarily a punishment-remains a comforting certitude in an uncertain world.*

I think its popularity can also be explained by its ability to change, to adapt to the changes in society. From its commonly recognised beginning – Edgar Allen Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841)* – Crime Fiction has expanded to encompass a myriad of sub-genres – far too many to detail here.

### Writing Crime Fiction

You've had an idea rattling around in your head for ages. A really clever murder mystery. Before you put pen to paper you should, if you don't already, read LOTS of crime novels. Read the good and the bad and across as many of the sub-genres as possible. Read the old – Agatha Christie's 'cosies' for example – by all means but make sure you read the current trends – the stories the publishers are interested in now!

### How to get started

A good place to begin is with the creation of your detective(s) – your main character(s). You have some choices here, He/she/they can be

- a) Professional: homicide cops, P.Is, criminal lawyers, forensic pathologists and the like, reporters . They investigate because that's their job. They get paid to do so – but they should have other strong motivations as well e.g a desire for justice, love, anger etc.  
PROS: Using a 'professional' gives you a built-in story starter, the 'clients' come to them.  
CONS: Lots of research required – you need to know police procedures, how a pathologist works and so on.
- b) Amateur: An amateur can, theoretically, come from any walk of life but you must provide them with a plausible and compelling reason to investigate. Just being curious or brave isn't enough.  
PROS: Avoids the intense research needed for a professional investigator.  
CONS: There are many places an amateur can't go and they don't have the tools available to the professional.

There are no other formulas to creating your detective. Age, gender, race, sexual orientation, appearance, traits – you decide. BUT, your investigator must be complex, multi-dimensional and **unique**. (Having said that, it doesn't matter how appealing your character is they MUST solve a crime, no matter what problems etc. they may have.)

Before you begin to write about the investigation and solution to the crime it can be helpful to write the 'life story' of the victim and about the murder itself. It is the victim's lifestyle, relationships, their secrets and actions that lead someone to kill them.

Create profiles for all your other characters too – detectives, suspects and the 'villain' of your story. The 'villain' of your story should appear early but be no more or less prominent than

other characters. They should seem ordinary, their complex and compelling (to them) reasons for murder should emerge gradually. If it is easy to guess or work out who the killer is, the reader will lose interest – there must be a challenge to the investigator and the reader.

The more legitimate suspects you have the more complicated and challenging the story will be. However, although their purpose is to misdirect the reader, they must be legitimate suspects – they must have motives and goals that are relevant to the events of the story and that connect them to the victim. To introduce a character simply as a ‘red herring’ is not playing fair with the reader. Even minor characters should have the potential to be suspects.

In most crime fiction the investigator has friends, lovers, adversaries (other than the villain), colleagues and so on – ‘sidekicks’. The investigator can’t be everywhere at once so ‘sidekicks’ can provide some necessary information or action. They are ‘sounding boards’ for the investigator and help to humanise the hero – through sub-plots that deepen and define him/her/them.

Who will tell your story? Many crime novels are told in the first person. The investigator’s perceptions of the world become the reader’s and readers identify with the investigator. First person point of view works well in maintaining suspense but is best when the investigator is active – the narration needs to bring a sense of immediacy. In the first person point of view the narrator must be at least as intelligent and observant as the reader. Third person limited narration works in the same way as first person – but the writer must be careful not to intrude. An omniscient narrator can seem to be manipulative – the reader is aware that the narrator is keeping information from them.

One of the basic rules of crime writing is ‘play fair with the reader’. This means that a crime novel should not be told from the point of view of the story’s villain. A point of view character should not lie to readers, deceive them or withhold crucial information. If the villain does so he or she is cheating the reader. If we know the villain’s thoughts there is no mystery.

### **The ending of the crime novel.**

I have read many crime novels on the edge of my seat only to be disappointed by an ending that does not satisfy for one or more of the following reasons.

1. There have been a number of suspects and the killer seems to have been chosen randomly from among them – in other words, his/her motive does not seem particularly compelling.
2. True justice has not been achieved
3. The ending is ambiguous
4. Loose ends are left floating
5. The killer wasn’t important throughout the story
6. The solution is simplistic even though the story has had many complex strands
7. The killer reveals him/herself so the investigator doesn’t have to do anything
8. The writer resorts to violence to solve the mystery rather than investigation and logical reasoning.

A good ending should make sense. There should be an ‘of course’ reaction to the revelation of the solution.

Suggested websites: [www.austcrimewriters.com](http://www.austcrimewriters.com) ; [www.thrillingdetective.com](http://www.thrillingdetective.com) ; [www.crimetime.co.uk/resources.php](http://www.crimetime.co.uk/resources.php)

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