

Diverse mysteries can broaden your world

by *Kate Good*

I fell for Encyclopedia Brown, the boy detective, first.

Then in fourth grade, as a lonely student at a new school, I read all 56 volumes of the Nancy Drew series. I moved on to the Hardy Boys and then hit the complete set of Sherlock Holmes. I was hooked.

I love mysteries, but not because they are an easy read or a guilty pleasure. While the literary world too often honors obscure novels with strange plots and unapproachable characters, I believe that some of the best literature written today is in the mystery section of your local bookstore or library.

And I'm not alone. Washington Post book critic Jonathan Yardley, in an essay summarizing the last 125 years of American literature, wrote, "Some of the most interesting novels being written these days are not self-consciously literary but what are often commonly known (and often dismissed) as genre fiction."

He adds, "[The mystery genre] is fiction devoid of pretension, yet it steps out into the world—not often the prettiest parts of it—and describes that world with intelligence, wit and tough love."

Mysteries are often about death and the circumstances surrounding its cause, a puzzle that in the best crime fiction takes the reader deep into the most primary things that we ask ourselves. What is the value of life? What is right and wrong? These are the questions that literary detectives ask themselves and others as they unspool the circumstances surrounding the murder they are investigating.

Forget what you've seen on CSI or any of those television shows that use technology to solve a crime. The best writers skip the hard science and push their protagonists to hit the street, searching for the answers by asking the hard questions of their suspects and themselves. Rarely are the solutions neat or simple; most are painful and unclear and ultimately unresolved.

Great mysteries also take the reader into worlds that they've

never encountered before. The confines of writing in this genre force the author to bring the neighborhoods where their detectives live and work into sharp focus. These places are not just a part of the landscape but often a very important character in the story, allowing the reader to explore the diversity and uniqueness of any given place from the comfort of an armchair.

Mysteries have taken me around the world and introduced me to a wide assortment of characters while never leaving my living room. One afternoon, I entered the Botswana legal system through *The Number One Ladies Detective Agency* series, a beautifully-told set of mysteries written by the world's foremost authority on Botswanan law. Another day, I experienced the struggles of working as a female Episcopalian priest in a tiny town in the Adirondack Mountains while reading one of my favorite mystery series by the author Julia Spencer-Fleming.

Dennis Lehane brings South Boston to life in his mysteries, particularly *Mystic River*, a book that many consider an American classic. And the underside of New York City is illustrated in Richard Price's masterpieces, while Pulitzer Prize winner, Geraldine Brooks, explores the world of rare manuscripts in her novel, *People of the Book*.

Inspector Rebus tries to maintain law and order in Edinburgh, Scotland in Ian Rankin's novels. The recent history of Washington, DC is exposed in George Pelecanos' stories. And Mennonite farm life is explored in the very well-received books by Judy Clemens.

Sometimes I think that it's the heavy plotting in many mysteries that makes it hard for people to pick them up. I wonder if these readers believe that writing this much fun to read isn't good for them. As if a book that is so captivating that you walk into a light pole while reading it (as the British writer, Nick Hornby once did while reading *Presumed Innocent*) is a bad thing.

I should confess that in order to avoid this kind of accident, I routinely read the last chapter of most books first, particularly mysteries. This is a habit that drives many people in my life crazy. But I find that great plotting will keep me guessing until the very end, even if I know how the story is ultimately resolved. And this trick helps me get some sleep when I'm deep into a mystery I can hardly put down.

So, as you cast about in these post-holiday months for something to occupy your mind, take a trip to your library or bookstore. Pick out a mystery. Read it under the covers if you must hide your splurge from others. But take the plunge into unfamiliar places and people simply by opening a mystery. You won't regret it. 📖