

# A Brief History of the Detective Story

Crime stories have been with us at least since Cain killed Abel, and a glance at the television schedule on any given night promises there will always be an eager audience for murder and its motives. Whether explored via cozy, old-fashioned whodunits, gritty forensic investigations, or “Law and Order”-style police procedurals, crime and punishment fascinate us, and the fictional formula they generally follow continues to both satisfy and intrigue.

The Inspector Lynley mysteries fall squarely in the tradition of the classic “Golden Era” English murder mystery. Although Edgar Allen Poe, Wilkie Collins, and others were the pioneers of the formula, those we think of today as the first “greats” in this category include writers from the late 19th and early 20th century such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Ellery Queen. In these types of mysteries there are usually several predictable elements: a “closed setting” such as an isolated house or a train; a corpse; a small circle of people who are all suspects; and an investigating detective with superior reasoning powers. As each character in the setting begins to suspect the others and the suspense mounts, we are shown that nearly all of the characters had the means, motive, and opportunity to commit the crime. As clues accumulate they are often revealed through a narrator like Sherlock Holmes’s Watson, who is a loyal companion to the brilliant detective.

At about the same time as the English murder mystery genre was establishing itself, a distinctly different school of detective fiction emerged in America. This “hard-boiled” style took hold in the 1920s, the era of American prohibition and gangster violence. Popularized through the accessibility of the “pulp” — cheaply produced, gaudy magazines that featured short, violent crime stories — the tough, blunt American detective contrasts distinctly with the classic English version. This detective is not a gentleman, nor even a hero at times, but a hard-drinking, unsentimental “private eye,” often an outsider to the world of upper- and middle-class values. The traditional setting in the American version is not a country house or a well-appointed train, but the brutal and corrupt city, and the suspects might be anyone in such a vast, anonymous place. The action does not move in a series of orderly steps toward a logical solution, but, instead, careens from place to place and scene to scene. As Dashiell Hammett, one of the originators of the genre, explained it, “Your private detective does not want to be an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent bystander, or client.”

## The Inspector Lynley Detective Stories

Contemporary writers such as Elizabeth George borrow from one or both of these early schools to reinvent the basic formula so that the detective story today is fresher and more popular than ever. Like Sherlock Holmes, for instance, George's Inspector Lynley is a "gentleman detective," an earl who works as a police inspector simply for the intellectual satisfaction it gives him. And, like Holmes, he has a "Watson" in Sergeant Barbara Havers, a working-class woman who is anything but elegant.

However, George adds some new dimensions to the genre. An American who calls herself "an incurable Anglophile," she chooses to write detective fiction set in England and draws chiefly on that tradition while enriching the stories with an exploration of contemporary British class and race issues. Besides pairing Lynley and Havers and examining their clashing backgrounds, she also features ongoing characters such as Winston Nkata, a detective of Jamaican descent, and Havers's Pakistani friends Azhar and Hadiyyah, all of whom represent the shifting demographics and concerns of 21st century England. As George said in a 2005 online interview, "I try to make the books reflective of England as it is today. Not too much like the England Agatha Christie wrote about, but still an endlessly fascinating place."

Perhaps the greatest difference between the sleuths of the Golden Era and George's characters is that George allows her detectives to change and develop over the course of the series. As George writes on her Web site, the books are less a "mental game with the author" than they are "...about character. They [the stories] may be puzzles as well, but the puzzle is not [my] primary consideration in putting them together."

Audiences around the world have responded, eagerly awaiting each new Lynley book. In fact, in 2005, when George had one of her main characters brutally murdered in the 13th Lynley mystery, *With No One as Witness*, the outcry from her readers was so passionate that she posted a special "Message from the Author" on her Web site to explain her decision. She described how she set out from the beginning to create characters who would "grow, change, develop, and move through time." Had she not followed through with this plan, she says, the reader would have finished the novel and simply "tossed it to one side... [and] the novel would have failed in its purpose. But the reader didn't do that... The reader wept. The reader raged." These reactions, she writes, showed that the novel "succeeded in doing what novels have always been intended to do": make the reader care.

In 2001, the BBC began airing television versions of the Lynley mysteries with Nathaniel Parker as Lynley and Sharon Small as Havers. Though in the beginning all the television shows were based on George's novels, the series proved so popular with British audiences that she gave the BBC permission to use her characters in their own crime stories, as long as she approved the scripts. When asked how she feels about the casting of Lynley and Havers, George has said that, though she thinks Parker and Small are "doing great in capturing the essence" of her characters, her own idea of Lynley and Havers remains "very different from the BBC's." The latest in the series, *Limbo* and *Know Thine Enemy*, are BBC originals.

In 2002, American audiences got their first taste of Inspector Lynley, when the series premiered on the PBS *MASTERPIECE MYSTERY!* series with a chilling two-part adaptation of George's acclaimed first novel, *A Great Deliverance*. George is one of only two American writers whose novels have been adapted for *MYSTERY!* This may be because she captures the attitude and lexicon of the British voice so convincingly. American audiences joined their British counterparts in their enthusiasm for the series, making it one of the most popular in the *MYSTERY!* lineup. Although Elizabeth George may continue writing Lynley mysteries (her latest book, *Careless in Red*, was published in spring 2008), television audiences will bid farewell to Lynley after the final adaptations, *Limbo* and *Know Thine Enemy*, air in summer 2008.

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