

HOW TO WRITE

KILLER

HISTORICAL MYSTERIES



Kathy Lynn Emerson



ALSO BY KATHY LYNN EMERSON

LADY APPLETON MYSTERIES

Face Down In the Marrow-Bone Pie

Face Down Upon an Herbal

Face Down Among the Winchester Geese

Face Down Beneath the Eleanor Cross

Face Down Under the Wych Elm

Face Down Before Rebel Hooves

Face Down Across the Western Sea

Face Down Below the Banqueting House

Face Down Beside St. Anne's Well

Face Down O'er the Border

Murders and Other Confusions (short stories)

DIANA SPAULDING MYSTERIES

Deadlier Than the Pen

Fatal as a Fallen Woman

No Mortal Reason

NONFICTION

Writer's Guide to Everyday Life in Renaissance England

Wives and Daughters: The Women of Sixteenth-Century England

Kathy Lynn Emerson

How To Write Killer Historical Mysteries

*The Art & Adventure of
Sleuthing Through the Past*

2008 · Perseverance Press / John Daniel & Company
Palo Alto / McKinleyville, California

Copyright © 2008 by Kathy Lynn Emerson
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

A PERSEVERANCE PRESS BOOK
Published by John Daniel & Company
A division of Daniel & Daniel, Publishers, Inc.
Post Office Box 2790
McKinleyville, California 95519
www.danielpublishing.com/perseverance

Distributed by SCB Distributors (800) 729-6423
For information concerning quantity discounts for educational institutions, writing groups, conferences,
etc., call 1-800-662-8351

Book design by Eric Larson, Studio E Books, Santa Barbara, www.studio-e-books.com

Cover painting by Linda Weatherly S.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Emerson, Kathy Lynn. How to write killer historical mysteries : the art and adventure of sleuthing through
the past / by Kathy Lynn Emerson.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-880284-92-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-880284-92-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Detective and mystery stories—Authorship. 2. Historical fiction—Authorship. I. Title.

PN3377.5.D4E44 2008

808.3'81—dc22

2007029250

Contents

Preface	13
---------------	----

1. Historical Mysteries—An Introduction to the Genre

What Are Historical Mysteries?	17
<i>Fiction</i>	
<i>Mystery</i>	
<i>Historical</i>	
<i>How Close to “Now” Can Historicals Be Set?</i>	
Specialized Areas	22
<i>Historical Mysteries for Young Readers</i>	
<i>Historical Mystery Plays and Screenplays</i>	
Variations	23
<i>Historical Romantic Suspense</i>	
<i>Paranormal Historical Mysteries</i>	
<i>Alternate History Mysteries</i>	
Enough with the Definitions, Already!	27

2. When, Where, Who, What, and What Do You Call It?

When	28
<i>Popular Pasts</i>	
<i>Why That When?</i>	
<i>Narrowing Down the “When”</i>	
Where	33
<i>Use a Real Place or Make One Up?</i>	
Who	35
<i>Female Sleuths</i>	
<i>Occupations for Amateur Sleuths</i>	
<i>Amateur–Professional Teams</i>	
<i>Vital Statistics</i>	
<i>Name That Sleuth</i>	
What	39
What Do You Call It?	39
The Basic Decisions	40

3. Researching the Historical Mystery—Primary Sources

What Do You Owe Your Readers?	41
Painless Research	42
Hie Thee to the Library!	42
<i>Photographs and Contemporary Illustrations</i>	
<i>Newspapers and Magazines</i>	
Historical “Truth”	44
A Note on Dates	45
Interviewing People as Research	46
History on the Small Screen— the Ultimate Painless Research	48
<i>Videotapes and DVDs</i>	
<i>Websites</i>	
Hands-on Research	49
On-site Research	51

4. Further Research—Secondary Sources

Books, Books, and More Books!	57
<i>And Still More Books</i>	
<i>An Aside on Poisons</i>	
<i>Evaluating a Secondary Source</i>	
Online Research	63
Sources to Avoid (and a Few Exceptions to the Rule)	64
Consulting an Expert	65
Making History Work for You	66
<i>But It Really Happened That Way!</i>	
The Thin Line between Research and Plagiarism	67
Writing What You Know	70

5. Creating a Believable Historical Detective

Selecting Point of View	71
The Sleuth	72
<i>Character Traits</i>	
<i>Mindset</i>	
<i>Backstory</i>	
Should Your Sleuth Have a Sex Life?	75
Using Real People	78
Creating a Sleuth from Another Author’s Character	80
Sleuthing Couples	81

6. Creating Believable Secondary Characters

Sidekicks	83
<i>Comic Sidekicks</i>	
<i>Using a “Watson”</i>	
Other Secondary Characters	85
<i>Motivating Real People</i>	
<i>Suspects</i>	
<i>Victims</i>	
<i>The Villain</i>	
Keeping Track of Characters	90
Characters with Children	91
Animal Characters	93
Supporting Characters Who Want a Bigger Role	94

7. Plots, Subplots, and Building Suspense

To Outline or To Wing It, That Is the Question	95
Crime in Historical Context	96
<i>Serial Killers</i>	
<i>Solving Historical Crimes</i>	
Beginnings	99
<i>The Latter-Day Editor</i>	
<i>Plunging into the Past</i>	
<i>Start with the Day That Is Different</i>	
<i>Involving Your Sleuth</i>	
Subplots	102
<i>Romance</i>	
<i>Political Intrigue and Espionage</i>	
Keeping Track of Plot Points	103
Motivation as Plot Device	104
Building Suspense	104
Endings	106
Rethinking Plots	108

8. It's in the Details: Creating a Sense of Time and Place

Variations on an Opening Theme	109
Getting the Details Right	110
Making Details “Historical”	111
Picking and Choosing Which Ones To Use	112
Elusive Details	114
Figures of Speech	116
Information Dumps and How To Avoid Them	117
Layering in Descriptive Details and Planting Clues	118
Keeping Track	120
How Graphic Is Too Graphic?	121

9. Language—A Sign of the Times

Historical Mysteries as Translations	123
The Flavor of the Language	123
<i>Dialects, Accents, and Speech Patterns</i>	
<i>Slang</i>	
<i>Proverbs, Sayings, Expressions...and Clichés</i>	
<i>The Use of Expletives</i>	
Characters with Distinctive Speech	130
What Were Things Called <i>Then</i> ?	131
What Were People Called <i>Then</i> ?	132
<i>Forms of Address</i>	
Keeping Track of Words	134
What Do Historical Mystery Readers Think about Language?	134

10. Anachronisms and How To Avoid Gadzookery

“Read until First Anachronism. Toss.”	136
Anachronistic Words	137
The Tale of the Clocks	139
Deliberate Use of Anachronistic Language	140
Dealing with Inconvenient Historical Facts	140
The Opportunity To Be Creative	141
“Novels Are Fiction, Not Textbooks”	142
Anachronistic Attitudes	142
Is the Self-Sufficient Female Sleuth an Anachronism?	143
<i>Making Her Stand Out</i>	
What “Everybody Knows”	145
Bloopers and What To Do about Them	146

11. Case Study—Face Down Upon an Herbal	
The Setup	148
The Proposal	148
How “Face Down” Came About	150
Pre-Writing	151
Outline? What Outline?	155
Research	156
Revisions	156
Miscellaneous Statistics	158
 12. Historical Mystery Short Stories	
Inspiration	160
Research	161
Simplify	163
<i>Limiting a “Cast of Thousands”</i>	
Short Story Editors Speak out on Historical Accuracy	165
Markets for Historical Mystery Short Stories	166
<i>Anthologies</i>	
<i>Periodicals</i>	
 13. Selling Your Historical Mystery Novel	
An Overview of the Market	170
The Product—General Advice for	
Submitting any Manuscript	172
Getting an Editor’s Attention	172
<i>Query Letters</i>	
<i>Do You Need an Agent?</i>	
<i>Contests, Conferences, and Conventions</i>	
<i>Other Entrées to the Editor’s Desk</i>	
What Editors Look for	177
Publishing Options	180
<i>Large Publishers</i>	
<i>Independent, Regional, and Small Presses</i>	
<i>Vanity Presses</i>	
<i>Self-publishing</i>	
<i>Ebooks</i>	
Shooting Yourself in the Foot	184

14. Getting the Word out to Historical Mystery Readers	
Don't Quit Your Day Job	186
Blurbs	187
ARCs	188
Promotional Materials	189
Groups You Can Join To Spread the Word	190
<i>Historical Mystery Readers' Groups</i>	
<i>Sisters in Crime</i>	
<i>Professional Mystery Writers' Organizations</i>	
Getting out and Meeting Your Public	191
<i>Signings and Readings</i>	
<i>Fan Conventions</i>	
Awards	195
Promotion You Can Do from Home	196
<i>Newsletters</i>	
<i>Your Own Domain—the Value of a Website</i>	
<i>Other Internet Promotional Opportunities</i>	
Make Your Own Choices	199
Book Two and Beyond	199
 Appendix—A Sampling of Historical Mysteries	 201
Selected Bibliography	211
Index	215

Preface

THIS book is my personal take on how to write historical mysteries, based on over thirty years in print as a writer of fiction and nonfiction and the publication of fourteen historical mysteries in two different series, a collection of historical mystery short stories, three novels of historical romantic suspense, and three contemporary mysteries. My experience is the core of the book; the remainder of the text consists of contributions from my fellow historical mystery writers—advice, opinions, anecdotes, and suggestions for research—and input from assorted editors, booksellers, reviewers, and historical mystery fans. I owe a great debt to all of them for their generosity.

I have included a number of Internet addresses (URLs) in the text. These were accurate and the websites were active as of early 2007, but I make no guarantees beyond that. Information about libraries, book sales, and promotion applies to the situation in the U.S. in 2007 and may or may not apply elsewhere or in later years.

You will notice that there is a considerable number of references to historical mysteries I have written. This is not gratuitous self-promotion. In fact, I made an effort to use examples from the books of other historical mystery writers whenever possible. However, it only made sense to illustrate certain points with examples from the books I know best. When it was necessary to give away significant plot details, or even reveal whodunit, to make a point, I chose to spoil the suspense in one of my own novels rather than compromise the reader's enjoyment of someone else's mystery.

Quotations from novels and published interviews are identified and acknowledged in the text, as are comments, anecdotes, and tips from writers solicited specifically for this work. You will find more detailed citations for my published and online sources in the bibliography at the end of this volume. Lists of historical mystery titles written by contributing authors are included in the Sampling of Historical Mysteries that follows Chapter Fourteen.

Whether you are an old hand at writing historical mysteries, or a neophyte who has only dreamed about delving into the past, or a reader and fan of the genre, I hope you will find inspiration and entertainment here.

*How To Write Killer
Historical Mysteries*

Historical Mysteries— An Introduction to the Genre

BECAUSE you are reading this book, you have probably already given some thought to the idea of writing historical mysteries. You may have progressed beyond just thinking about it. If not, now is the time to take up pencil and paper or sit down at your computer keyboard and get serious. *How To Write Killer Historical Mysteries* offers practical advice on the entire process, along with tips from some of the hardest-working writers in the genre.

Chapters Two through Twelve deal with the how-to aspects of writing a historical mystery, and Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen tell how to sell and publicize it. Before moving on to the nuts and bolts, however, a few definitions are in order. The historical mystery genre contains immense variety. In addition, several other types of fiction actually make use of elements of the historical mystery.

What Are Historical Mysteries?

Historical mystery fiction is a subgenre of mystery fiction that makes special demands on the writer. It is not just fiction, not just mystery, and not just historical. To be successful, historical mysteries must blend all three elements.

Fiction

Initially, I didn't think I'd need to define fiction. The difference between fiction (stories made up by the author) and nonfiction (true accounts) seems pretty straightforward...on the surface. However, the categories of docudramas, books "based on a true story," and at least some memoirs, make the waters murkier.

Historical mysteries are fiction, written to entertain. Yes, the writer does research in order to get the historical background right. Real historical figures may appear. Real events may play a significant role in the plot. But the writer's goal in a work of fiction is to suspend disbelief. The reader

should believe, while reading, that the events in the work of fiction *might* have happened. If the story is a mystery based on a real murder, the reader should believe events could have fallen out the way the writer says they did. But neither the writer nor the reader should come away from the experience thinking this was a factually accurate account of what really happened.

Mystery

Historical mysteries have to be mysteries, but what are mysteries? The definition I used when I began my writing career came from that classic college text, Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman's *A Handbook to Literature*: "works of prose fiction in which the element of mystery or terror plays a controlling part." Included were detective stories, gothic novels, suspense novels, spy stories, crime stories, and woman-in-jeopardy stories. For many people, however, only novels of detection are true mysteries. Thrillers, novels of suspense, capers, and the like are considered related but separate types of fiction. According to *A Handbook to Literature*, a detective story is "a novel or short story in which a crime, usually a murder—the identity of the perpetrator unknown—is solved by a detective through a logical assembling and interpretation of palpable evidence, known as clues," but the editor adds that "in practice much variation occurs."

More recent definitions are no more satisfactory, although bibliographer Jill H. Vassilakos has come up with one I rather like. She defines a mystery as "a book in which a crime is suspected and the action of the plot is driven by an attempt to identify the perpetrator." She devised this definition in order to exclude quest novels and put the focus on crime.

There is a difference, too, between a novel containing a mystery or mystery elements and a mystery novel. Take Dorothy Dunnett's six-volume masterpiece, known collectively as *The Lymond Chronicles*, for example. These novels have a mystery at their core, solved in the last few pages of the last book, but neither separately nor collectively are they historical mysteries. In a mystery novel the focus must stay on the mystery aspect.

Cozy and Hard-Boiled The terms *cozy* and *hard-boiled* are often used to distinguish between two radically different types of mystery novel. No one really agrees on what either means and they do not work well in defining historical mysteries. That said, you may find it helpful in the planning stages, and again at the marketing stage, to understand what they seem to mean to most people.

The annual meeting of cozy-mystery fans, *Malice Domestic*, calls itself "a convention of fans and authors who gather...to celebrate the traditional

mystery.” By that they mean books and short stories typified by the works of Agatha Christie. This subgenre has “no excessive gore, gratuitous violence, or explicit sex,” and is made up of mysteries that often, but not always, feature an amateur sleuth, a confined setting, and characters who know one another.

If the cozy descends from the work of Agatha Christie, the hard-boiled detective is the child of early twentieth-century private-eye novels, exemplified by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Hard-boiled mystery fiction, sometimes called *noir*, usually features a professional detective, either a private eye or someone employed in law enforcement. In contrast to cozies, these novels don’t hesitate to provide all the gruesome details (aka “gritty reality”) of the crime scene. There may also be scenes of graphic sex and/or violence.

As generalizations, the terms *cozy* and *hard-boiled* are useful—it is good to know where on the spectrum your writing falls—but they can also create perception problems. I consider my novels to be historical cozies, but while the word *cozy* is a recommendation to some readers, others regard it as a pejorative term.

Asked in a 2003 magazine interview if cozies are still as popular as they once were, veteran historical mystery writer Elizabeth Peters replied that “cozies are timeless.” In her opinion, the genre has always been popular and will continue to be, but is “critically overshadowed by so-called realistic books.”

Some reviewers do seem to have a bias against cozies, even when they manage to overcome their feelings long enough to lavish praise on a specific book. Dick Adler’s comments in the Chicago *Tribune* are an example: “Part of the problem is that many cozies tend to veer toward the corner of Coy and Cute—a place I’d normally walk a mile to avoid. Giving the lead character an arcane hobby or occupation doesn’t make up for a distinct shortage of narrative skill or basic literary ability.”

Which historical mysteries are definitely *not* cozies? I asked this question of the CrimeThruTime Internet group at Yahoo.com (henceforth referred to as CTT) and although most were not sure the term *hard-boiled* was any more appropriate than *cozy*, they did come up with a number of examples. Walter Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series, set in the U.S. in the 1940s and ’50s, led the list, followed by David Liss’s *Conspiracy of Paper* and *A Spectacle of Corruption*, which take place in 1720s London. Other suggestions were Arturo Perez-Reverte’s series set in early seventeenth-century Spain, Oakley Hall’s *Ambrose Bierce and the Death of Kings* set in 1890s San Francisco, David Wishart’s Roman series, Bill Pronzini’s Carpenter

and Quincannon series set in the American West in the 1890s, Maureen Jennings's 1890s Toronto-based series featuring police detective William Murdoch, and Kris Nelscott's Smokey Dalton series set in the 1960s.

Keep in mind that the boundaries are flexible. Some historical mystery series move freely back and forth across the hard-boiled line. Anne Perry's William Monk series is not particularly cozy (although *The Face of a Stranger* and *Defend and Betray* were both nominated for Malice Domestic's Agatha Award). Her Thomas and Charlotte Pitt series, decidedly cozy in the early volumes, becomes much darker in later novels. Novels such as those in Steven Saylor's *Roma Sub Rosa* series and P.F. Chisholm's Sir Robert Carey series, set in the 1590s, also straddle the line.

The term *soft-boiled* has been bandied about to describe novels that aren't entirely cozies but aren't quite hard-boiled either. It has the same problems the other terms do—it doesn't quite fit historical mysteries. The best advice I can give is to be aware of these labels but avoid being confined by them as much as possible. Write the sort of mystery you'd like to read.

Stand-Alones and Series One further mystery definition needs to be taken into account early in the writing process. When mysteries are published they tend to be classified as either *stand-alones* or part of a series. Sometimes a stand-alone later becomes a series, but if you are *planning* to write a series, then you need to think in those terms from the beginning. Since you will be proposing your novel to an editor as the first book in a series, you need to know where that series is going.

The stand-alone, once in a great while, turns into a blockbuster. Among historical mysteries, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1327 Italy), Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* (1896 New York City), and Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* (1970s/1930s Europe) are big books in more than one sense. If you look at most of what is published as historical mystery in the U.S., however, it is obvious that big, single-title, bestselling books are not typical of the genre. In fact, most historical mysteries are much shorter. And an overwhelming number of historical mysteries are series books. When a writer creates a successful sleuth, both publishers and readers want to see more of that character. After Caleb Carr's success with *The Alienist*, even he wrote a sequel.

Historical

Historical mysteries are set in the past. That means a book that takes place entirely in the present day, even though it solves a mystery from the past, is not a historical mystery. Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*,

though a classic, is not a historical mystery. Detective Alan Grant, recovering from an accident in a hospital, becomes intrigued by a portrait of Richard III and sets out to prove him innocent of murdering his nephews in the fifteenth century, but there are no scenes taking place in that earlier era. Grant studies old records and portraits, uses a research assistant, and reasons out a solution to the crime.

Mysteries with dual timelines, sometimes called present/past mysteries, come closer to qualifying as historical mysteries. These usually feature characters in the present but take the reader into one or more past times for a significant portion of the novel. Katherine Neville did this in *The Eight*. The story moves back and forth between 1972 (contemporary, since it was first published in 1988) and 1790. In general, present/past novels are not classed as historicals, but the portions set in the past certainly require the same skills and techniques to create as more traditional historical mysteries.

How Close to “Now” Can Historicals Be Set?

How far back in time must a work of fiction take place in order to be considered historical? Whether a given novel or short story is historical or not depends in part on the publication date. Mysteries that were contemporary when they were written but are, for us, set in a bygone era—novels by Agatha Christie and her contemporaries, and the original Sherlock Holmes stories, for example—are not historical mysteries. Christie wrote only one historical mystery novel, *Death Comes as the End*, set in Ancient Egypt.

Mysteries written today and set in Christie’s heyday or that of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle *are* historicals. If you want a specific date—*x* years ago is historical; more recent than that is not—there are several available. Most definitions of historical mysteries assign an arbitrary cut-off date. *Murder in Retrospect: A Selective Guide to Historical Mystery Fiction* excludes any mystery by a contemporary writer set later than World War II. Guidelines for novels nominated for the Bruce Alexander History Mystery Award state that they must be set more than fifty years before their publication date.

A poll for members of CTT offered nine choices in defining what makes a mystery “historical.” When tallied in early 2007, 35% of the votes went to “when a writer makes a specific effort to recreate a time period” and 17% to “any era prior to the one it is written in.” In third place, with 15% of the votes, was “fifty years or more before its original publishing date.”

A definition most readers can live with classifies a mystery as historical if it takes place in a time that is clearly distinct from our own. Given technological advances during the last few decades, this could include any date before computers and cell phones came into general use. Kim Malo, who maintains the CTT website and moderates the Yahoo.com group, makes a case for calling a novel historical set as late as 1975. “Technological, social, and political changes have made that a past that truly is another country. Just think of how much...didn’t exist then or was extremely rare.” And she goes on to ask, “How many people today have never seen or heard an LP?”

Is the milieu in which the mystery is set significantly different from the time in which it was created? That’s really the key question for the writer. Whether you are setting your mystery in Roman Britain or in Viet Nam in the 1960s, the following chapters will show you how to take the germ of an idea and turn it into a historical mystery. If you already know what you want to write about and are anxious to get started, feel free at this point to skip ahead to Chapter Two. The definitions below are intended to give readers who are less certain a sense of just how far-reaching the boundaries of historical mystery can be.

Specialized Areas

This book is designed to teach the reader how to write historical mystery fiction. For most people that means novels intended for an adult audience. There are also short stories, for which see Chapter Twelve. In addition, there are mysteries written with a younger reader in mind, and plays and screenplays.

Historical Mysteries for Young Readers

The vast majority of historical mysteries are written for an adult audience, although many of them are read by teenagers and reviewed in *School Library Journal* as if they were YA (Young Adult) novels. The genre also includes historical mysteries written specifically for children and for young adults. The Edgar Award (from Mystery Writers of America) for Best Juvenile Mystery went to Cynthia Voight in 1984 for *The Callender Papers*, a novel set in nineteenth-century Massachusetts; to Barbara Brooks Wallace in 1994 for *The Twin in the Tavern*, set in Victorian times; and to Elizabeth McDavid Jones in 2000 for *The Night Flyers*, set in 1918. Jones’s *Ghost Light on Graveyard Shoal* was an Agatha finalist in 2004. MWA also awards an Edgar for Best Young Adult Mystery.

Several other juvenile and YA historical mysteries have also been

nominated for mystery awards. Edgar nominations went to Avi's *The Man Who Was Poe*, Patricia Finney's *Assassin*, Charlie Higson's *Young Bond, Book One: Silverfin*, D. James Smith's *The Boys of San Joaquin*, and Kathleen Ernst's *Trouble at Fort Lapointe*. Ernst's *Betrayal at Cross Creek* and *Whistler in the Dark* were nominated for the Agatha, as were Elise Weston's *The Coast Watcher* and Sarah Masters Buckley's *The Curse of Ravenscroft*. All the Ernst books and several other nominated titles were published under the banner of the American Girl History Mysteries. These are set in a variety of time periods.

A list of historical mysteries for young people can be found online at http://members.tripod.com/BrerFox/Kids_YA/historicalmystery.html

Historical Mystery Plays and Screenplays

Since plays and screenplays do occasionally fit the three-part definition of *fiction*, *mystery*, and *historical*, I include them here as a category but I will not be discussing how to write them. Although those who wish to write for stage or screen may find some of the material in the following chapters useful, scriptwriting is a specialized area beyond the scope of this book.

Not many historical mysteries *are* written directly for stage or screen. Although Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is sometimes cited as being a mystery as well as a revenge tragedy, I don't believe it can properly be termed historical. For all intents and purposes, Shakespeare's "Denmark" was contemporaneous with late sixteenth-century England. Most other examples that spring readily to mind, such as Ellis Peters's Cadfael mysteries on PBS's *Mystery!*, have been adapted from novels. An outstanding exception is *Gosford Park*, which won its writer, Julian Fellowes, an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.

Variations

Three separate types of cross-genre novel make use of the same skills and techniques one needs in order to write historical mysteries.

Historical Romantic Suspense

By a variety of names—"Woman in Jeopardy" was popular for quite a while—this type of fiction has been around for a long time. It combines mystery, romance, and historical settings.

I wrote a few of these myself back in the 1990s, all set in the sixteenth century. *Winter Tapestry*, *Unquiet Hearts*, and *The Green Rose* are murder mysteries as well as romance novels. In fact, *Winter Tapestry* was the proto-

type for my Face Down series. Initially I attempted to sell it as a mystery and was busily collecting rejection slips when an editor suggested that if I added 30,000 words and beefed up the romance elements, she could buy it as a historical romance. I did, she did, and I continued to write historical romantic suspense until I could no longer resist the urge to try my hand at historical mystery again. “Cordell Allington” from *Winter Tapestry* became an older, less happily married “Susanna Appleton” in *Face Down In the Marrow-Bone Pie*.

Some of the best examples of historical romantic suspense written today are by Amanda Quick, who also writes contemporary romantic suspense under her real name, Jayne Ann Krentz. Three of the Quick novels, set in nineteenth-century England, regularly turn up on historical mystery lists, since they feature a sleuthing couple, Lavinia Lake and Tobias March, and can thus be classed as a series. Others of Quick’s novels contain just as much mystery but are shelved as romance.

Quick considers romantic suspense “a genre unto itself” and feels it should have its own section in bookstores, but she is a realist. “That is not the case,” she says, “and it is highly unlikely that it will ever be the case. Authors, publishers, and bookstore people are, therefore, faced with a dilemma. You either put the books in the romance section or you put them in the mystery section. Now, here are the facts of bookselling life: the romance genre is bigger than the mystery genre. It has more readers and it sells more books. In addition, romance readers are far more likely to read a book with suspense in it than mystery readers are to wander over to the romance section.”

If you are planning to write historical mysteries with a strong romance element, keep this caveat in mind as you read the chapters that follow. At some point you will have to choose whether to emphasize mystery or romance in marketing your manuscript. Romance Writers of America makes a point of keeping track of the percentage of the market romance sales command. Statistics compiled from Ipsos Book Trends, Book Industry Study Group, American Booksellers Association reports, and tallies in Ingram’s catalogue of all book releases indicate that Romance Fiction comprised 39.3% of all popular fiction sales in 2004. Mystery/Detective/Suspense fiction accounted for 29.6%. Science Fiction/Fantasy sales were 6.4%, while General Fiction came in at 12.9% of all popular fiction sold in the United States in that year.

Modern historical romantic suspense descends from the romantic suspense novels, misnamed “gothics,” of the 1960s and 1970s. Many have contemporary settings, but among the bestsellers of that era were a

number of historicals by Victoria Holt and Phyllis A. Whitney. The first Barbara Michaels novel, *The Master of Blacktower* (1853 Scotland), is classic historical romantic suspense. In a *Publishers Weekly* interview with Michaels, who also writes historical mystery as Elizabeth Peters, the interviewer, summarizing both the Michaels and the Peters books, calls them “novels featuring female protagonists who survive danger and solve mysteries with wit, good humor and, usually, good fortune in romance.”

Until the 1990s, historical romantic suspense novels were never sexually explicit. Today they often contain long, detailed love scenes—what many mystery readers would consider graphic sex—although it is still rare for one to include much violence. Some pre-1990 novels also featured paranormal elements. Today’s gothic is not prudish about either sex or violence and the focus in many of them is again on the supernatural.

Paranormal Historical Mysteries

Paranormal historical mysteries come in endless variety. What some readers call “woo-woo” elements include the use of vampires, ghosts, werewolves, witches, wizards, immortals, and time travelers as characters. Many of these books, the ones with minimal sex and violence, regularly turn up on YA reading lists, even though they were written with an adult audience in mind. This isn’t too surprising. Even before the advent of Harry Potter, children liked to read about magic and things that go bump in the night.

Vampires aren’t hard to find in mystery fiction, although they are somewhat more scarce in the historical variety. Jack Fleming, P.N. Elrod’s vampire sleuth, operates a nightclub in 1930s Chicago. The first of Barbara Hambly’s two books featuring Oxford professor James Asher, *Those Who Hunt the Night*, is set in 1907 in England. Asher is called upon to find out who is killing London’s vampires, assisted by a vampire who has been “living” there since the days of Elizabeth I. *An Ancient Evil* by P.C. Doherty deals with a demon who drinks blood and is loose in medieval Oxford.

More recent is *The Historian*, in which the underlying motivation for the characters is to find out the truth about Dracula. Elizabeth Kostova’s novel, although perhaps more quest than mystery, uses the present/past structure, telling part of the story through events that occur in 1972 and part in letters from earlier dates. In most books, simply including the contents of old letters would not be enough to take the reader into a past time, but here the letters are long narratives that create a novel within the novel.

Under the name Ann Dukthas, P.C. Doherty wrote four mysteries

featuring Nicholas Segalla, starting with *A Time for the Death of a King* (1994), which investigates a crime from 1567. Segalla has lived in many time periods, and the other books in the series take him ahead to 1815 and 1899 and back to 1558.

Alanna Knight has written several mysteries featuring Tam Eildor, a time traveler from the twenty-third century, who solves mysteries in various eras. In the first, *The Dagger in the Crown* set in 1566, Tam has amnesia and doesn't know why he is able to predict the future. Other books in this series are set in 1660 and 1811.

I have mentioned present/past mysteries. Many of them also fall into the paranormal category by virtue of employing supernatural means to transport readers to the past. Time travel can work in this way; so can ghosts and reincarnation.

A variant on the ghost element creates an interesting and unique sleuthing team in Charles Todd's Inspector Ian Rutledge (a victim of shell shock during World War I) and Corporal Hamish MacLeod. Rutledge returns to Scotland Yard in 1919 with a voice in his head, that of Hamish, a dead soldier.

There are far too many examples of paranormal elements in historical mysteries to mention all of them here, but one more does deserve to be singled out. Sharan Newman ordinarily bases her Catherine LeVendeur mysteries, set in twelfth-century France, firmly in the real world. In *The Witch in the Well* she departed from this practice by introducing several supernatural scenes, all of them essential to the solution of the mystery. The book won the Bruce Alexander History Mystery Award in 2005.

Alternate History Mysteries

Distinct from paranormal historical mysteries are alternate history mysteries. It has been suggested that all paranormal mysteries could be considered alternate history. And that historical mysteries in which the sleuth is a real person also belong in this subgenre. The true definition is somewhat different: alternate history mysteries are those historical mysteries in which the detecting is done in a world different from our own *because some historical event has been altered*.

Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy mysteries, set in an England made great by Richard the Lionheart's long, prosperous reign, are alternate history and mysteries and they certainly have a historical *feel* to them, but they are *not* historical mysteries. The novels and short stories take place in an alternate *present* where the Plantagenets still rule and magic really works. Those that are dated are set in the same year Garrett wrote them.

The best examples I've found of true alternate history *historical* mysteries are the books by Robert Barnard writing as Bernard Bastable. In these, Mozart does not die young. Instead he lives to a ripe old age, thus enabling him to solve mysteries in England during the early nineteenth century.

Enough with the Definitions, Already!

I could go on giving definitions and examples, but if you bought this book because you want to write your own historical mystery, you don't need any more. You've been reading historical mysteries, probably for years now. You know what you like and what drives you crazy in other people's books. You're looking for practical advice on how to craft your own entry into the genre.

Chapter Two awaits.