

## A Murder Book?

### Uncle Bob Delves Into Mystery and Crime Fiction

#### Part Two

In A Murder Book? Uncle Bob sets down some reflections on his reading through a genre that he hoped would challenge his logical sense and attention to details. He hopes some of this book chat is useful to readers and potential writers. Like many others, he is now hooked, especially on works of several favorite authors. In [Part One](#) he dealt with some of the human factors to be considered in constructing a murder mystery: the gender of the cops and the private detectives, and partnerships and mentors. In Part Two, he takes up other side issues, ones that give added color to the nearly unavoidable blood red in many stories.

**Time Setting: Contemporary or Period Piece?** One of the reasons we read or write any kind of fiction is to be transported to another time or place. If we're into these crime stories for gritty verité then there is no better time than the present. Societies across the globe are in disarray with the breakdowns of families, moral upbringing, substance abuse, poverty, and the indifference to mental health care. There seems no end to the depraved acts which people inflict on others, and today's authors depict these acts in graphic detail.

I avoid stories that are wall-to-wall bad language, violence and worse. Reality is bad enough. The contemporary stories written by Connelly, Rankin, and Elizabeth Gunn (more about her later) are told from the good guy or antihero point of view. Investigators and police must deal professionally with one another and the public. Gutter talk and brutal acts are reserved largely for the bad guys.

Authors from more gentle times describe their murders in more delicate terms, but there were murders nonetheless in the Christie and Marsh era and in times even more distant. The classic writers would euphemize their way through the heinous and dastardly deeds. Readers were called upon to imagine the gore and depravity. No need to make the Poirot fan faint dead away. The focus was on the solution, not the crime.

I've found a nice balance of these issues again in the Maisie Dobbs stories. They take place between the World Wars and show the brutal effects of the First War on European societies and the lead up to the Second. In these stories, history is a major driver of the crimes and the plots, and Winspear makes war the chief criminal. [For more on Winspear, see [Part One](#).]

**Place Setting: Local or Global?** A good story needs to be well researched and the world is a big place to have all of its details understood and encompassed. At the other extreme, there are good stories that take place all in one town and its environs. Jane

Marple covers all of St. Mary Mead on her bike, and Agatha Christie makes a good mystery out of it. Ms Louise Penny's fictional Three Pines, Quebec – the place where people who must murder must go – has supported a good number of her entertaining stories. I've read several, and my wife continues to, so periodically I ask her how Ruth is doing – she's a character who struck a heavy chime with me.

**Home Turfs:** Talk about being transported, I love learning about what's around the corner in London or New York; love being shown the quick routes around traffic jams in LA and San Francisco. I let Nero Wolf's legman Archie Godwin give me a walking tour of Manhattan, back in the day when you walked your deposit to the bank. I rode along with Connelly's Harry Bosch, taking the back roads into the Hollywood hills to make better time going crosstown.

Elizabeth Gunn, one who does a colorfully accurate job with characters of the other gender, has set her Jakes Hines series in Minnesota, mostly north of St. Paul. Here the police and our detective deal with naturally cold cases, you might say. Jake is challenged to solve the crimes in stories titled in numerical order from Triple Play through Five Card Stud, Crazy Eights, Eleven Little Piggies, and Noontime Follies. Jake rushes to solve the crimes before the snow covers all the clues and the case goes literally frozen. He then rushes home to get the fires going before the household does the same. The clime does, however, provide an excuse for him and his roomie to get under the covers quickly.

**More about Characters:** Getting personal. If you are writing a mystery, you know your own biases and you want to bring some out in the cast of characters. Make sure there are people in the story whom you would loathe and give them the attitudes and characteristics that you loathe. These characters can lead the reader astray by playing up to their biases. I suppose I don't need to list them, but why deny myself? Wealth, lechery, snobbery, egotism, greed, abuse of power, drug-dealing, drug abusing, petty thievery – oh such fun. I would make sure that all my characters have at least one of these flaws, even the main crime solver.

On the other hand, you may decide to have one or two characters earn the unquestioned sympathy of the reader – people to root, root, root for. They may be the crime solvers and/or the victims. They would always tell the truth, or at worst, maybe tell an innocent little fib for a good reason. I once began reading a crime series – not to be named – where every single character told lies with abandon. This foible made the bad guys look not so bad. I dropped that author quickly.

One unusual approach is to have the crooks be sympathetic characters, and I have a recommendation here. Writer Donald Westlake, possessed of a very unique wit, wrote a series known as the Dortmunder books. Dortmunder is a professional crook, a denizen of NYC, and his only means of sustenance is from petty or sometimes grand thievery.

He and his comical gang of regulars are into nonviolent larceny. They do not plan nor participate in murder or other heinous crimes, but those come upon them sometimes. They plan and end up in hilarious crimes. Their modus is to carefully scheme, get in, and get out with the loot. Their loftier efforts rarely succeed.

**What's in a name?** Suggestive names can help the reader remember the various characters, their appearance or personality, but my advice is: don't go overboard in that respect. A detective might have a name like Peter Pierce, suggesting keen perception, but don't call Peter's investigative partner Kat Sharp. One or the other will do. Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison's name evokes the feeling of pressure, of tension if you will, and jumping to TV momentarily, Helen Mirren had it written all over her face in the Prime Suspect series.

Names can be mildly strange or goofy, but again, don't get carried away. Allow some giggle room but don't be consistently comical. Given that she doesn't have a daughter Flossie, nor Flossie have a cousin Smedlington, the name Aunt Winnie presents no problem. Of course we will need lots of names for the several suspects and dark horses in your plot. Bad guys often get heavy sounding names – ones that evoke an image of the clunky shoes worn by Frankenstein's monster. A Paul Krukruk might show up in my mystery story.

If you thought you might have your detective remain nameless, you would be moving into the territory, namely San Francisco and its environs, of Bill Pronzini's Nameless Detective. He is an average guy who suffers life's slings and arrows while giving the crooks their just deserts.

Some finer points:

**Sustenance?** The males in these stories seem to get by with alcohol, tobacco, and firearms. Females will actually eat and make largely healthier choices.

**Up-and-Comer?** Maybe there is a Sergeant Gretchen Schulz, an on-the-ball beat cop among all those flat feet – an underpaid, under-appreciated future Detective Constable, and your prima detective is the only one to notice her. Gretchen might be called upon to assist at a critical moment, and might survive into a sequel.

**Mis-direction, sleight-of-hand?** Perhaps an investigator puts all the focus and the efforts of forensic techs on that counterfeit note, but, NO, it was that little mark on the envelope that the note arrived in which led to the arrest.

**Ah! The Arrest:** The well-worn ending, where all involved meet in one room, even if they've tried to scratch one another's eyes out, and sit calmly while the prime sleuth retraces the thread that makes all of the clues, some subtle and some hardly noticeable, make sense. Make sense, that is, only if the murderer were – YOU, Krukruk!

And then KruknuK sees the perfectly planned crime, like the lovely and varied stitches in a fisherman's knit sweater, unravel all the way down to the cuffs – the handcuffs. The movies often resort to a shoot-out at this point, with KruknuK leading a chase up into the high reaches of a high rise. Ever wonder why in order to get away, they go up into the dead end cavities of a building. Well, there's that, or the peaceful surrender, or the cyanide pill. You can take your pick or, ideally, come up with a better idea.

Uncle Bob hopes that he has dropped enough crumbs for you find and enjoy some good stories in this genre, both classic and contemporary. Let him know when you've written a murder book that eclipses them all. He would enjoy reading it. Happy reading, writing, and/or detecting, you Big Sleuth, you!