

Mystery Novels: Becoming the Sherlock Holmes of Genre Analysis

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Throughout this article, Caitlin Berek uses the techniques of genre analysis to explore elements of the complex process of mystery novel writing. Discussing concepts such as cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), genre characteristics and conventions, and the notion of analyzing other productions of a genre for guidance, she dives in and breaks down the thrilling world of mystery novels.

Mystery is everywhere in the world; from what I can see, it's a secret desire. The tall, dark, and handsome guy standing on the other side of the room; the latest murder in the news; or pop culture's abundance of mystery television shows and books—I love the idea of the unpredictable and trying to solve problems single-handedly, which is why I got caught up in the world of mystery.

I started my journey into this genre when I was in eighth grade reading the *Pretty Little Liars* book series written by Sara Shepard (Figure 1). I was obsessed. I personally felt as if I was piecing together the clues and solving the crimes. I loved how Sara Shepard wrote the series of *Pretty Little Liars*—every page left me wanting more. The novels were already incredibly popular with the audience

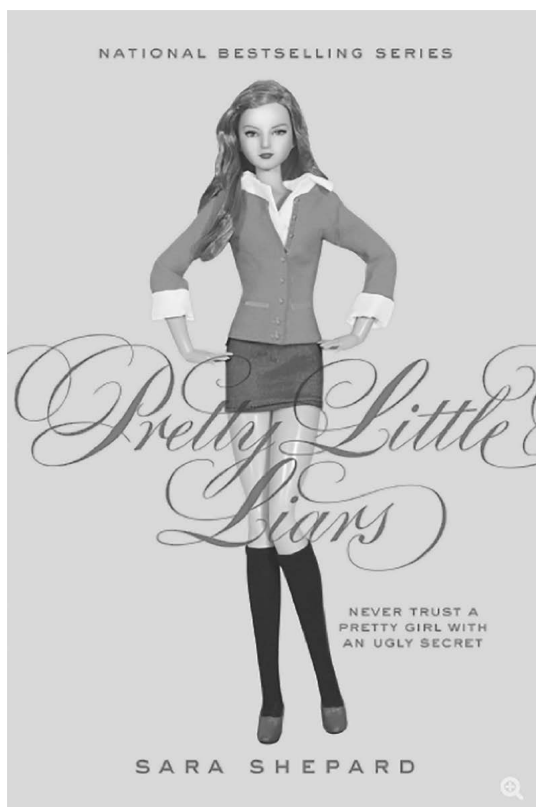


Figure 1: *Pretty Little Liars* cover (Pedarkwa).

I was a part of, until the television show premiered and the series became even more popular than before. Seeing this continual growth in popularity made me intrigued about the genre of mystery novels and what it is about them that makes me love them as much as I do. So with that interest in mind, I chose to break out my genre analysis skills and my knowledge of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and take a crack at the writing process with my own mystery story.

“There is nothing like first-hand evidence” – Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet*

A great approach to studying genre is to do a genre experiment, or actually try out the kind of writing you are learning more about. To begin writing my own mystery short story, I started with what every author should: research. I sat down and brainstormed a giant list of questions that I had about the genre of mystery stories. I began thinking of all the reasons why I love reading novels—particularly the elements of surprise. From my observations and antecedent knowledge, I realized that mystery novels have a set of main conventions and characteristics; however, I needed more than my own brain to figure out what they were. So I researched my first question: “What are the conventions of the characters for mystery novels?” In the course of my research, I found a “The Five Essential Elements of a Mystery” chart (Penguin). According to this list, the most popular mystery novels involve a protagonist who takes it upon him/herself to solve the crime, plus a cast of clients, victims, and suspects.

These characters are vital to the mystery genre, but my research also showed that two other conventions seem to have a greater importance: the crime and the clues to help solve it. According to a “Genre Characteristics Chart” that I found in my Internet searching, the clues throughout the novels are what keep the reader involved (Scholastic). If the audience isn’t engaged in the crime and with the characters, they won’t have any desire to read books in this genre.

The information I found about clues shaped my second research question: “Are there different types of clues in mystery novels?” It turns out there are two kinds that authors use. The first is a foreshadowing clue, meaning something used to warn or signify a future event. The second form of clue is a red-herring clue, on which I had to do follow-up research. I found that red-herring clues are the exact opposite of foreshadowing (Scholastic). These types of clues are used to lead the audience to mistaken

conclusions about what happened or who the perpetrator was. I have been a victim of red herrings so many times and I had no idea that was what happened. This research was helping me to discover how sneaky mystery novelists can be.

A second research question of interest to me was: “What are the subgenres of mystery novels?” So I continued my research before I sat down to write my own personal mystery. I found four subgenres of mystery writing; no wonder it has been hard to figure out the difference. According to MysteryNet.com, these subgenres are known as locked room/puzzle, cozy, hard-boiled, and police procedural. MysteryNet.com explained the different subgenres in a clear way. The police procedural subgenre shows up a lot, especially in television series. Since it fits with my love of solving crimes and clues, the experience of watching these types of television series helped me develop an antecedent knowledge about this subgenre. I knew right away that police procedural plots involve the police and the steps they take to solve a crime. I knew less about hard-boiled mysteries, which are formed when one specific character is working to solve the crime separate from the justice system, like a vigilante character (Marling). The other two forms of mystery novels, puzzle/locked room and cozy mysteries, I had to do further research about. Locked room or puzzle mysteries do in fact include a locked room or a puzzle. The authors of these types of novels often have the victim of the crime found in a room with no exit and the other characters solve the escape of the murderer. The cozy subgenre is described as having the characters in the novel reside in a secluded house, and the focus is on how they use clues to solve the murder. Figure 2 illustrates some of the mystery subgenres I learned about, plus a few more.



Figure 2: Part of a larger fictional genre chart, this image shows some of the subgenres of mystery novels and how they relate to thrillers. The entire chart was posted by Jeannette de Beauvoir on the *Beyond the Elements of Styles* blog.

What's really interesting about the conventions of mystery stories is that in some ways they seem self-explanatory, but they also are filled with hidden meanings, making writing in this specific genre that much more desirable to me the further I got into the research. Conventions of this genre are sometimes elements you pick up quickly after reading or watching a few mysteries, such as the basic question and answer method of plots. Questions like, "Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?" create a mystery, a need for an answer and thus an investigation. Mysteries have been around from when we were little, we just didn't realize it then, and all this time, we were developing our knowledge of the genre without even knowing it.

"Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons, with the greatest for the last." – Sherlock Holmes, *His Last Bow*

Before I began writing my own mystery story, I realized that I needed more information than just what type of characters to have and what subgenre to write in. I needed to know more specifics about typical characteristics of the genre. The characteristics of a genre can be as broad as how many pages, what the title is, and how many chapters there are. However, characteristics can also be as specific as what kinds of conflict are typical or how that conflict can be resolved.

From my antecedent knowledge of mystery novels, I know that most titles include something about the crime, a sort of foreshadowing tool. Take the Nancy Drew or Sherlock Holmes novels, for example. In order to further analyze the common characteristics in this genre of mystery novels, I made up a chart with several questions (Figure 3). To gain a broad perspective of the genre I chose the first book in the series of three different types of novels: Nancy Drew, *The Secret of the Old Clock*; *Pretty Little Liars*; and Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet*.

What this question chart is stating is that even these three very different mystery novels still have a number of common characteristics. All three novels are the same subgenre; however, the plot lines are very different from one another. This shows how the mystery genre can be adapted in so many ways. Another similarity between the novels is the type of characters included. In each novel, at least one main character is working to solve the mystery at hand, but there are others that help make the story more interesting for the readers.

| Question | <i>The Secret of the Old Clock</i> | <i>Pretty Little Liars</i> | <i>A Study in Scarlet</i> |
|---|---|--|--|
| What subgenre is the novel? | Hard-boiled—Nancy Drew is trying to solve the case without using the police for help. | Hard-boiled—the four girls try to solve their friend’s murder without the help of the police since they think the police are involved in it. | Hard-boiled—Sherlock Holmes and Watson work together to solve the crime. |
| How many characters are included in the novel? | Nancy Drew is the main detective in this series but the novel is filled with minor characters, too. | There are five main characters that are in this book but there are multiple secondary characters that make the plot more interesting. | There are two main characters that are the sole crime detectives throughout the novel. However, like the other novels there are also secondary characters as well. |
| What types of characters are included in the novel? | The novel has a handful of secondary characters that help Nancy solve these mysteries, such as her friend Helen, who invited her to the camp where the mystery began. | There are a wide variety of characters based on each of Spencer, Emily, Hannah, and Aria’s families, including mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters. There are additional characters, too, such as the infamous “A” who continues to taunt the girls. | The characters are all different to make the storyline interesting. However, the main characters Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are mentioned the most. |
| How does the novel conclude? | Nancy solves the mystery and the characters go back to happily living their lives. | This series is continuous so we do not know the conclusion of the mystery just yet. | The conclusion of this mystery is that Holmes explains how he solved the case to his partner Watson. |

Figure 3: Chart of questions made to analyze the common characteristics in mystery novels.

“Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth.” – Sherlock Holmes, *The Sign of Four*

After I figured out the basic characteristics of the genre, I brainstormed more about what I wanted for my mystery. I wanted it to be in the cozy subgenre with at least five characters, and I wanted to write something that would be “popular,” in other words, something that would have broad appeal. I chose five characters because I wanted to have more personalities to develop with the story lines and more opportunity for conflict. I think the cozy subgenre is very popular today—many mystery and thriller novels and movies are set in that subgenre.

One of the things I learned from studying CHAT is that it's important to consider how a genre is talked about and how it's thought of in society. I believe that mysteries are extremely popular in today's society, and there are so many great original mystery novels that are increasing in popularity. I personally love the conventions of the genre, such as the suspense and the opportunity to share the struggles of the plot with the characters, and I think this plays a big part in why the audience loves the genre. This notion goes hand-in-hand with the CHAT term *socialization*, because socialization involves how readers interact with the mystery novels and one another, as well as how the novel influences and is influenced by social and cultural practices at the time. Mystery novels are great reads because the authors draw you as a reader into the story and use the clues to get you thinking and predicting the characters' next moves. Even beyond the text itself, many readers of novels end up interacting with other readers and discussing the books during and after they read them. They might even join Facebook groups or fan fiction websites to keep the interaction going.

Taking these terms into consideration, I discovered that a lot of work goes into writing in this genre. You can't just sit down and write about a murder or kidnapping and think it will make it to the *New York Times* Best Sellers List. I wanted my story to be directed to a target audience of young women, preferably high school to college readers. With this audience, I could draw on what I learned in my research about the genre, but I also had the freedom to make the plotline more relatable to my own life. This seems like something other authors probably think about too, because combining what you know about a genre with your own experience means not having to imagine too much, making the writing process easier and reading more enjoyable.

With a target audience in mind, I realized I then had to think about the *reception* of this genre, which is another term related to CHAT. Reception includes how the audience will think about the piece and how it's taken up by the culture the author has targeted. Using myself as an example with *Pretty Little Liars*, I know that many people in my age group have a positive perception of the novel series. I wanted to integrate that in my own writing, so I decided to include some elements from *Pretty Little Liars* that my peers enjoyed. I surveyed ten women in my age group and asked them what they particularly liked about the *Pretty Little Liars* novel series. My results are as follows (Figure 4).

| Participant | Response |
|-------------|--|
| 1 | The suspense of the plot |
| 2 | The relationships built between characters |
| 3 | The action |
| 4 | The drama |
| 5 | The suspense |
| 6 | The crimes and how they're solved |
| 7 | The characters themselves |
| 8 | The suspense |
| 9 | The connection between the characters and the reader |
| 10 | The suspense |

Figure 4: Survey taken on what readers like best about the *Pretty Little Liars* novel series.

From this survey I learned a lot about the reception of this particular genre. I now know that of the people I surveyed, four out of the ten love the suspense of the novel series, three out of the ten thought that the characters and their relationships were the best, and the other three people polled loved the action, the drama and the how the crimes are being solved. The survey ended up with results that were very interesting and helped me form a better idea of readers' reception of this particular mystery series. Now that I have a sense of key elements of reception at work in a mystery novel, I can include these elements to enhance the story that I am writing.

I have also learned in studying CHAT that what the audience thinks and says about your novel or genre in general determines the *trajectory* of the piece. Trajectory is defined as where the life of this genre leads. It's not just about who reads the novel, but who writes reviews of it, who talks about it to their friends, who posts about it on Facebook, and other activities that get discussion of the novel out into the world. Without a strong trajectory, a novel will not last and will slowly fade away without ever becoming popular. Knowing what I have learned about trajectory and reception, I believe the target audience that I chose for my story is spot on. With an audience of young adults, preferably girls, my story has the potential to have quite a trajectory. Teenage girls are famous for ruling social media sites, so if they enjoy my story enough to post about it, the audience will grow. If readers post great things about my story, then reviewers may take that into consideration and give me better reviews. It's a domino effect of how well the story will do in the public eye.

So with all of my research at hand, I started making decisions about my story. First, I determined that my characters would be a group of teenagers on vacation. I wanted to intertwine a clue aspect into my story as well, so I created one character as a villain while the others had to figure out who that villain is. I believe that this type of storyline has potential because the characters I will develop will be similar to characters from other successful examples of the genre.

“Nothing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person.” – Sherlock Holmes, *Silver Blaze*

So there you have it, the genre of mystery in all of its complicated characteristics and conventions. OK, well, I suppose this is really just the tip of the mystery iceberg. I discovered a few important aspects and tried these out in my genre experiment, but I also realized that if I were going to publish a mystery novel, I’d need to do a lot more research and find out even more about this complex genre. This genre is more than just a story about a man or woman solving a crime, and through my research I found that mysteries are often deep, meaningful explorations of pain, suffering, and the search for justice. Mystery stories are more than just a “beach read” or a novel for a book report; mysteries are written to involve the readers, to change the way they think. There are so many aspects of this genre to analyze by looking at characteristics and thinking about CHAT terms that it makes me appreciate mystery novelists and the great work they have accomplished so much more than I did previously.

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Caitlin Berek would like to dedicate this article to her grandfather, Frank Sidney Moyer, who helped her figure out the mystery of life. Caitlin is currently attending Illinois State University and majoring in Biological Sciences. She hopes to go on to medical school in Chicago to become an optometrist. When she's not spending her time analyzing genres, she's nose deep in science and loves every bit of it.