**Why People Like Detective Stories** *by* [Joe Bunting](http://thewritepractice.com/author/joe-bunting/) | [46 Comments](http://thewritepractice.com/detective-stories/#disqus_thread)

Have you ever thought about that? Detective stories, murder mysteries, legal thrillers—these are among the most popular genres in literature, but have you ever thought about why people like them so much?

I have two theories:

**1. People love puzzles.**

My mother loves doing crossword puzzles. She gets up at six in the morning so she can sit on the coach in her pastel-pink robe, drink coffee and solve the puzzle in the paper. My grandmother does the same (although her robe is closer to neon-pink). They also both love detective stories. My mother watches CSI, Law & Order, The Mentalist,  Bones, Castle, Masterpiece Mystery, and a few others religiously. It’s insane.

Is it a coincidence that she likes both crossword puzzles and detective stories? Maybe. But I’ve done an informal survey and everyone I know who likes doing crossword puzzles says [mystery](http://thewritepractice.com/second-person-pov-mystery-and-mark/) is their favorite genre.

Murder mysteries are the only genre of literature which consistently offers the chance to figure out the story for yourself. Puzzlers love to catch the killer before he or she’s revealed. Detective stories are really, then, a game, a puzzle to solve, and if you have any interest in writing them, you need to remember to make it a challenging, exciting puzzle to solve.

**2. People are puzzles.**

In no other genre does a team of people expend such energy to understand the identity of one person. We usually focus on the murderer, but it is really the dead who are the stars for one last moment. To solve the murder, the team of detectives must know the victims’ history and their motivations. They have to find out who would want to kill them and why. In looking for the killer, they often have to discover the soul of the one killed first. It isn’t always the murderer who is on trial. It is the murderee.

People are puzzles. It’s often difficult to understand why people do the things they do. Detective stories give us a glimpse into people we would never get in real life. We get to team up with fascinating people like the genius Sherlock Holmes, the likable Hardy Boys, the aristocratic [Hercule Poirot](http://thewritepractice.com/how-you-break-up-long-dialogue-like-agatha-christie/%22%20%5Co%20%22How%20You%20Break%20Up%20Long%20Dialogue%20Like%20Agatha%20Christie), the hardnosed NYPD, and my most recent favorite, the carnie Patrick Jane. These heroes lead us into the psyches of the dead, and in so doing, help us to understand the living.

**This is Valuable Information**

Whether you write mysteries or not, you need to know why people enjoy them. Every story must have a mystery because in every story, at some level, is the question of motivation: why did this person behave in this way. Faulkner and Shakespeare and Milton and Agatha Christie all have the question of*motivation* at their heart.

Motivation. Why do people do what they do?

This question is the currency of fiction. You don’t always have to give the answer, but you always have to raise the question.

**PRACTICE**

A man was discovered murdered in a field on the edge of town. Why was he killed?

Write for fifteen minutes.