



Books to Die For: The World's Greatest Mystery Writers on the World's Greatest Mystery Novels

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The world's greatest mystery writers on the world's greatest mystery novels:

Michael Connelly on *The Little Sister* . . .

Kathy Reichs on *The Silence of the Lambs* . . .

Mark Billingham on *The Maltese Falcon* . . .

Ian Rankin on *I Was Dora Suarez* . . .

With so many mystery novels to choose among, and so many new titles appearing each year, where should a reader start? What are the classics of the genre? Which are the hidden gems?

In the most ambitious anthology of its kind yet attempted, the world's leading mystery writers have come together to champion the greatest mystery novels ever written. In a series of personal essays that often reveal as much about the authors and their own work as they do about the books that they love, 119 authors from 20 countries have created a guide that will be indispensable for generations of readers and writers. From Agatha Christie to Lee Child, from Edgar Allan Poe to P. D. James, from Sherlock Holmes to Hannibal Lecter and Philip Marlowe to Lord Peter Wimsey, *Books to Die For* brings together the cream of the mystery world for a feast of reading pleasure, a treasure trove for those new to the genre and for those who believe that there is nothing new left to discover. This is the one essential book for every reader who has ever finished a mystery novel and thought . . .

I want more!

“Why does the mystery novel enjoy such enduring appeal? There is no simple answer. It has a distinctive capacity for subtle social commentary, a concern with the disparity between law and justice, and a passion for order, however

compromised. Even in the vision of the darkest of mystery writers, it provides us with a glimpse of the world as it might be, a world in which good men and women do not stand idly by and allow the worst aspects of human nature to triumph without opposition. It can touch upon all these facets while still entertaining the reader.”

—From the introduction of *Books to Die For*

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Editorial Review

Review

"A delectable treat for mystery lovers." (*Cleveland.com*)

"Indispensable." (*The Telegraph (UK)*)

"Get your hands on this book and devour it." (*Huntington News*)

"A sumptuous exploration of some of the best mystery authors of our time . . . *Books to Die For* is a resource readers will want to keep for decades." (*The News Tribune*)

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"A refreshing . . . provocative, and always entertaining piece of work." (*Mystery Scene magazine*)

About the Author

John Connolly is the author of the Charlie Parker series of mystery novels, the supernatural collection *Nocturnes*, the Samuel Johnson Trilogy for younger readers, and (with Jennifer Ridyard) the Chronicles of the Invaders series. He lives in Dublin, Ireland. For more information, see his website at JohnConnollyBooks.com, or follow him on Twitter @JConnollyBooks.

Declan Burke has published six novels: *Eightball Boogie* (2003), *The Big O* (2007), *Absolute Zero Cool* (2011), *Slaughter's Hound* (2012), *Crime Always Pays* (2014), and *The Lost and the Blind* (2015). *Absolute Zero Cool* received the Goldsboro/Crimefest "Last Laugh" Award for Best Humorous Crime Novel in 2012. He also is the editor of *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (2011). He hosts a website dedicated to Irish crime fiction called Crime Always Pays.

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The Dupin Tales

by Edgar Allan Poe (1841–44)

J. WALLIS MARTIN

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) was an American author, poet, editor, and critic best known for his tales of mystery and imagination, many of them decidedly gothic in tone. For mystery readers, though, his fame rests on the three short stories he wrote about the character of Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, which Poe described as his tales of "ratiocination." Intellectual yet imaginative, brilliant but eccentric, Dupin became the template for fictitious detectives to come, among them Sherlock Holmes, who name-checks Dupin in the very first Sherlock Holmes story, A Study in Scarlet, albeit by describing him as "a very inferior fellow."

Residing in Paris during the spring and part of the summer of 18–, I there became acquainted with a Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin.

So begins the story that many consider to be the earliest in which a private detective assists the police by solving a murder mystery. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is the first of three stories in which Dupin solves a case that has baffled police, and Poe's importance to, and influence on, subsequent generations of writers of crime, mystery, and tales of the supernatural is significant. Consider the following passage, which might have been drawn from a story in which Sherlock Holmes or Poirot took the place of Dupin:

"Tell me, for Heaven's sake," I exclaimed, "the method—if method there is—by which you have been enabled to fathom my soul in this matter."

Dupin obliges, and the benefactor of his powers of analysis can only marvel at him.

"The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" was a sequel to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and opens with the following observation: "There are few persons, even among the calmest thinkers, who have not occasionally been startled into a vague yet thrilling half credence in the supernatural," whereas in "The Purloined Letter," Dupin is exhorted to help the police retrieve a letter stolen from a woman who is being blackmailed.

These three stories comprise *The Dupin Tales*, but as they have been analyzed elsewhere, I will not deconstruct them here. What interests me about them is what we can learn about Poe's character from his portrayal of his alter ego (many academics agree that Dupin is undoubtedly that), for when introducing Dupin for the first time, the narrator of the story describes him thus:

This young gentleman was of an excellent—indeed of an illustrious family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world, or care for the retrieval of his fortunes. By courtesy of his creditors, there still remained in his possession a small remnant of his patrimony; and, upon the income arising from this, he managed, by means of a rigorous economy, to procure the necessaries of life, without troubling himself about its superfluities. Books, indeed, were his sole luxuries, and in Paris these are easily obtained.

The description accords with what we know of Poe's personal circumstances when he wrote the story. The narrator goes on to say:

It was at length arranged that we should live together during my stay in the city; and as my worldly circumstances were somewhat less embarrassed than his own, I was permitted to be at the expense of renting, and furnishing in a style which suited the rather fantastic gloom of our common temper, a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstitions into which we did not inquire.

The "common temper" of which Poe wrote may have been a reference to the moods of elation and despair that plagued him all his life, and support a posthumous diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Were he alive today, Poe might well agree with the diagnosis, for he was, in fact, aware that his moods were cyclic, and that they alternated in nature. In a letter to the poet James Russell Lowell, whose own temperament was deeply moody, he wrote:

I can feel for the "constitutional indolence" of which you complain—for it is one of my own besetting sins. I am excessively slothful, and wonderfully industrious—by fits. There are epochs when any kind of mental exercise is torture, and when nothing yields me pleasure but solitary communion with the "mountains & the woods"—the "altars" of Byron. I have thus rambled and dreamed away whole months, and awake, at last, to a sort of mania for composition. Then I scribble all day, and read all night, so long as the disease endures.

As is so often the case for those who suffer from bipolar disorder, Poe's personal life was a disaster. He was reputed to be irresponsible, unstable, and impossible to deal with. The following is an excerpt from Poe's letter to his guardian, John Allan, after the latter refused to pay gambling debts Poe incurred at university:

Did I, when an infant, solicit your charity and protection, or was it of your own free will, that you volunteered your services in my behalf? It is well known to respectable individuals in Baltimore, and elsewhere, that my Grandfather (my natural protector at the time you interposed) was wealthy, and that I was his favourite grandchild—But the promises of adoption, and liberal education which you held forth to him in a letter which is now in possession of my family, induced him to resign all care of me into your hands. Under such circumstances, can it be said that I have no *right* to expect any thing at your hands?

Poe's accusation was grossly unfair. John Allan had in fact provided for him well, but he eventually lost patience with Poe's appeals for money. As a result, the relationship broke down when Poe was in his early twenties.

Inability to handle money, and a tendency to overspend with scant regard for the consequences, are features of bipolar disorder. (Consider Poe's purchase of three yards of Super Blue Cloth and a set of the best gilt buttons, bought at a time when he was almost two thousand pounds in debt!) So, too, is an ability to focus on a piece of work to the exclusion of all else. However, this was but a small part of what the manic stage of the illness enabled Poe to do. The illness blessed yet cursed him with a clarity of vision, a heightening of the senses which he describes vividly in "The Fall of the House of Usher":

He entered, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy—a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, perhaps, the terms and the general manner of their narration had their weight. He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odours of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

And again, in this extract from “The Tell-Tale Heart”:

TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell.

The period during which those who suffer from bipolar disorder experience a heightening of the senses can last for days or months before the decline into a depression that can be mild to severe. Poe’s depressions were deep, and following one such period, he wrote:

I went to bed and wept through a long, long, hideous night of despair—When the day broke, I arose & endeavoured to quiet my mind by a rapid walk in the cold, keen air—but all *would* not do—the demon tormented me still. Finally I procured two ounces of laudnum [*sic*] . . . I am so *ill*—so terribly, hopelessly ILL in body and mind, that I feel I CANNOT live . . . until I subdue this fearful agitation, which if continued, will either destroy my life or, drive me hopelessly mad . . .

In the above, Poe refers to having procured two ounces of laudanum with which to self-medicate. Another drug of choice was alcohol. Elevated rates of drug and alcohol abuse are often to be found in bipolar individuals, and premature death is a feature of the illness. It is likely that a combination of the two led to Poe’s premature death in 1849. “We know now that what made Poe write was what made him drink,” observed one of his biographers: “alcohol and literature were the two safety valves of a mind that eventually tore itself apart.”

J. Wallis Martin (PhD St. Andrews) is publishing director of the Edgar Allan Press Ltd. Her novels have been published internationally, and adapted for the screen. She lives in Bristol. Visit her online at www.wallis-martin.co.uk.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Angela Gagne:

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Melvin Bragg:

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