

To Murder or Not to Murder

Does a good mystery require a murder or other equally serious crime? The genre of mystery writing is replete with “conventional wisdom” and the answer to this question is no exception. The general principle is you need a murder to have a mystery. No reader much cares who shoplifted the pack of Wrigley’s Gum, but who murdered the Dean of the medical school last night matters to them. The thinking, it seems, is a serious crime automatically creates tension and drama because the consequences are so dire, for the victim, of course, and for the perpetrator as well.

Serious crime brings readers into the realm of the unknown. The individuals who would pocket a pack of gum are far more numerous than those who would kidnap or murder or steal millions of dollars. And most mystery readers do not fall in the latter group. So the reader is unfamiliar with these bad actors and curious. Why do they do what they do? Why do the rewards outweigh the risks for them, but not us? The reader doesn’t know, but wants to learn. And some readers like to think of themselves in the story. It’s stimulating for them, the titillation of imagining what it would be like to be involved in the action. That wakes them up and keeps their attention.

But what about the alternative? What about the small crime, the petty chicanery of sabotaging a rival’s lunch or taking a neighbor’s car? Small crimes can have big impacts on relationships and relationships are what really interest me. A small crime can engender a grudge, a desire for revenge, a change of personal values, or any number of other consequences.

I have to admit I am on the fence about this question. I know conventional wisdom has a point. Mysteries have evolved as they have for a reason and why tamper with that? But I am intrigued with the little details that comprise a life. In the end, they can be just as important as the big crimes. I’m not taking a position here. Just food for thought.