

Historical Crime Novels

If like me you love crime novels and at the same time can't put down a good historical story, then imagine the delight in reading an historical crime novel. When they are good they have all the elements of a great crime novel – strong plot, character and theme – with the historical overlay of the time in which they are set. Some writers go to great lengths to evoke the period and setting and to bring to life the characters of their time.

Ye Olde World

Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael novels take place during the English war between Stephen and Matilda in the 1100s. They set the standard in 1977 with the first in the series: *A Morbid Taste for Bones*. It stands out in the genre because of the quality of her writing, something that is often lacking in historical crime. She is so revered that the CWA Ellis Peters Historical Award is much coveted.

While fun to read the following writers become repetitive and their characters are one dimensional. But they are still a great read if you don't try and wade your way through all of them. Michael Jecks novels about the Keeper of the King's Peace Sir Baldwin Furnhill, are set in the 1300s. In the same category are Bernard King's novels about Crouner John in 1100s Devon; Karen Maitland's *Company of Liars* which takes place in the 1300s during the plague; Paul Doherty's Hugh Corbett solves crimes in 1200s England and Brother Athelstan in the 1300s; and Candace Robb's Owen Archer (and his apothecary wife) series set in 1300s England.

Peter Tremayne's, Sister Fidelma series is set in 7th century Ireland and England. They have some of the problems of the previous novels, but I found the history more interesting as it deals with Saxon era Christianity. Rory Clements' John Shakespeare (the brother of William) are set in the late 1500s and are a rollicking read; Oliver Potzsch's *The Hangman's Daughter* set in 1600s Bavaria during witchcraft mania and the 30 Years War is a wonderful well written mystery. Ariana Franklin's novels about Adelia Aguilar are set in 1100s England and deal with anti-semitism and the effects of the Crusades. They are two of my favourites. Sylvian Hamilton's novels about Sir Richard Straccan, ex-crusader, are set in 1200s England and like many novels of this era deal with religion.

C.J. Sansom's series, featuring Matthew Shardlake, is set in the 1500s. They are my favourites and easily match Ellis Peters' work. Susanna Gregory's series featuring Matthew

Bartholomew is set in 1300s Oxford. While the novels are mixed – ranging from good to great - they are interesting because they talk about medieval medicine and education.

Ancient World

Lindsey Davis' Falco novels, set in ancient Rome, are wonderful reading as they are written with such humour. Steven Saylor's *Roma Sub Rosa* series is set in BC Rome and features Gordianus the Finder. It's always fun to read about politics and debauchery.

Gary Corby's series set in ancient Greece has Athens' only PI, Nicolaos running fowl of politicians and Persians. Paul Doherty, as well as his mediaeval series, has written a series set in ancient Egypt featuring Amerotke. While there is undoubtedly some poetic licence they are still a good read.

The four novels by Simon Levac set in 1500s Aztec Mexico, have a fictitious slave as the investigator and is a fun read. Yaotl is slave to Tlilpotonqui, the chief minister to the Emperor, Moctezuma II. *Demon of the Air* won the Debut Dagger Award in 2000.

Victorian Era

Not generally recognised as crime novels are Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* and *The Good People* which are set in 1800s Norway and Ireland and deal with female crimes. The first is fabulous. The second is still good, but the characters aren't as well developed.

Michael Cox's *The Meaning of Night* is set in London and a country estate. 'The atmosphere of *Bleak House*, the sensuous thrill of *Perfume*, and the mystery of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*.' (Goodreads) I haven't read *The Glass of Time*, but it is supposed to be just as good.

Judith Cutler's *Shadow of the Past* is the second of three in a series set in rural England. Tobias Campion is the vicar at Moreton Priory and with his friend, Hansard solves murder and a disappearance.

Kylie Fitzpatrick's *The Ninth Stone* is set in London and India and is about jewel thieves and murder with two women as the investigators. There are two more novels in the series. Alex Grecian's novels feature DI Walter Day in London and the black country, and are great; as are James McCrete's Mr Williamson and Noah Dyson books set in London. Caleb Carr's novels in 1896 New York feature Dr Laszlo Kreizler (alienist) and John Schuyler and are a cut above the rest.

Post WWI

Tom Robb Smith's *Child 44* is set in Stalinist Russia and features Officer Demidov as he pursues a serial killer.

Jacqueline Winspear's Maisie Dobbs series is set in London. Maisie works her way from housemaid to Cambridge, and after WWI she sets up on her own as a private investigator. John Lawton's series set in London during WWII is about a police officer solving crimes during the blitz, where contrary to common perception, crime doubled.

Of course I must mention Kerry Greenwood's series featuring Phryne Fisher in 1920s Melbourne. Even if they do become repetitive, she is still a great character and a good read.

I could go on, but I have to stop somewhere, if only to give us all time to read these great books and more.