

What Makes a Good Children's Mystery Novel? Questions, Suspense, & Smarts

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In the United States, a mystery almost always means a detective story. The British include fantasy, horror, supernatural, and more within the umbrella of a mystery (Gavin & Routledge, 2001), yet since all books have a bit of unknown to them, these different categories of books rest comfortably in their own genres here. Essentially, just because a story is mysterious, that doesn't make it a mystery.

Along that vein, just because a story is a mystery, that doesn't make it a good one. A good mystery "is constructed from the same ingredients that make any good book: close intellectual attention to the braid of character, plot, and theme" (Werlin, p.303). A children's mystery must weave this braid ever more delicately, as it's readers demand specific themes, tropes, and characterizations.

As little research exists on children's mystery novels (Barr, p. 9), this paper helps analyze the components of a good middle grade mystery novel by looking at scholarly articles on children's mysteries as well as at the books themselves, primarily *The Westing Game* by Ellen Raskin, *Enola Holmes and the Case of the Missing Marquess* by Nancy Springer, and *The Mysterious Benedict Society* by Trenton Lee Stewart (annotated bibliography below). Middle-grade in the United States runs between 8 and 12 years old (Lamba, n.p.), and is just around the age when the words "children" and "novel" start to combine. This is also the age where boys and girls start to show gendered reading preferences, but mystery novels have a distinct advantage here; their puzzling content can often "provide a bridge between 'boy' books and 'girl' books" (Pavonetti, p. 455), making them an even more important object of study.

THE RULES

"Mystery is probably the most rule-bound of all the literary subgenres, with few of the rules accepted by consensus and even fewer adhered to" (Pavonetti, p. 456).

In analyzing *The Westing Game*, *Enola Holmes and the Case of the Missing Marquess*, and *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, the rules of a good children's mystery become rather clear. One, have a strong central mystery. Two, hook the reader right off the bat. Three, acknowledge that kids are smart. Four, give them all the clues needed to solve the mystery themselves. And Five, no magical solutions.

The first rule, have a strong central mystery, seems self-evident but is surprisingly not always present. In the powerhouse *Mystery in Children's Literature*, Gavin notes that "Every mystery, whether formulaic or innovative, requires a secret which lies at its heart" (Gavin, p. 211). Thus, a mystery novel should have a central question which the protagonist attempts to answer. Some popular children's novels often regarded as mysteries, such as *Harriet the Spy*,

do not pass this simple test. The central questions good mystery books aim to uncover are actually the same questions asked in journalism: who, what, where, when, how, and why.

Who - Who did it? Who is this person? Who knows the facts of the case?

What - What does this clue mean? What happened in the ransacked room?

Where - Where is the important clue? Where is the missing person?

When - When did the events occur? When is the deadline to solve the case?

How - How did person x escape? How was the crime pulled off?

Why - Why is the hardest question of all to answer, because why often comes down to motives (Minsker, n.p.), and sometimes to unknowable or unexplainable things. Yet in the process of understanding motives the child characters and child readers grow up, a genre trope which is discussed later in this paper.

In *The Westing Game*, the central question is: who took Sam Westing's life? In *Enola Holmes*, the question is: where is her mother? And in *The Mysterious Benedict Society* the question is: how to stop a mind-manipulation scheme? All of these questions are the primary drivers of the story and plot. *Harriet the Spy*, as mentioned above, is not driven by a central question which needs an answer. Another book often regarded as a mystery, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* does not either: the central plot device is running away from home, which qualifies it more as an adventure story.

Rule two is to get straight into the action. A good children's mystery novel does not just have a central mystery, it states it, and it states it early on in order to hook young readers. This literary trope is called "In Media Res," and while it doesn't work in every genre, it lends itself particularly well to children's mystery novels, because, as mystery book author Joan Lowery Nixon states, "Kids can be impatient readers; they will not read a book they do not like just because it is a bestseller" (Lesesne et al., p. 688). Thus, starting with a good mysterious hook can grab a child's attention, and interest them in reading the rest of the book to find out what happens. As Dixie Lee Spiegel notes, "one shouldn't *amble* toward the solution of a mystery; one should rush enthusiastically" (Spiegel, p. 853). Not following this rule negatively affects the novel *The Name of This Book is a Secret*, by Pseudonymous Bosch, which spends too much time on exposition, breaking the fourth wall, and performing reverse psychology before actually introducing the mystery.

The final three rules, that children are intelligent, that readers should be able to solve the mystery, and that there should be no magical solutions, are inextricably linked. That children are smart enough and should be able to solve the mystery are the most steadfast rules of the genre. The child protagonist, or group of protagonists, should be able to tackle "a problem that an adult is not able to solve on his or her own, or that he or she does not believe the child capable of solving" (Barr, p. 10). This may come about in the form of a child squeezing into small spaces that adults literally cannot fit, such as in *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, or in outsmarting the adults around them, as in *Enola Holmes* and *The Westing Game*. Yet children may also solve a mystery by paying attention to things that adults do not initially deem mysterious at all.

Likewise, children readers also need to be capable of solving the mystery. This is where the "No Magical Solutions" rule comes into play. The clues for the mystery must be fully laid out

for the reader to piece together, unlike the first Sherlock Holmes mystery, *A Study in Scarlet*, which hides from the reader distinct footprints that Holmes has noticed until the final moments of the story. Having improbably convenient, and almost miraculous, resolutions at the end of a story is a literary device called Deus Ex Machina (Britannica). While it works to great purpose in other genres, in mysteries the reader often feels cheated, and children will quickly point out anything “not fair.”

Beyond a sense of “not fair,” however, there is a literacy detriment to supplying a magic answer. As Minsker notes for Scholastic, “mysteries are full of little details that could prove to be important clues. Learning to pay close attention to such specifics is a key skill that readers will have to master to deepen their understanding” (Minsker, n.p.). Thus, magical answers deprive children of developing important critical thinking and participatory reading skills (Spiegel). Guessing the answer to a mystery as it’s going along, by looking at the clues, tossing out red herrings, and judging the characters choices, is engaging mental work. It’s also a big part of the fun. Spiegel suggests that “much of the joy of reading mysteries is in the mental activity of forming and testing hypotheses” (Spiegel, p. 852), and Barr notes that “part of the attraction for a reader might be trying to stay one step ahead of the sleuth character and the anticipation of the next step the detective will take” (Barr, p. 9). For any mystery lover, one particularly resonant statement comes from Pavonetti, who says that “When all the clues fall into place, and the solution dawns on the reader, a groan and “Of course! I should have known” are proof of an honest and believable ending” (p. 456). This is why it is especially important for children’s mysteries to lay out all the clues, to avoid magical solutions, and to assume that their readers are smart, because “If the youngster can’t really participate in the solution . . . then there’s no point in thinking about the mystery while reading. And that’s a shame” (Spiegel, p. 853).

THE DETECTIVE(S)

Every great detective needs a couple of key things. Primarily, they need to be curious, questioning, and persistent, and luckily for children’s mystery novels, many children are just that. These traits help the detective sustain interest throughout the book, being “compelled to ponder over possible solutions to the mysteries presented” (Gavin, p. 211). Ramie Muldoon in *The Mysterious Benedict Society* exemplifies this constantly questioning character. Detectives must also be extremely logical, in order to follow the central mystery and find an answer to it. In fact, the best detectives do more than look for clues, they also “cut through confusion and chaos, solve puzzles, and set things right to make the world seem quite a logical place after all” (McCullough in Pavonetti, p. 458). Cutting through the chaos is precisely what Enola Holmes does in both mysteries she is presented with, and at the end of the novel she is determined to pursue this as a career.

Other characteristics of great detectives are that they are believable, and that they are willing to break a couple of (minor) rules. Detectives are often protagonists or central characters in mysteries, and they “come alive by reflecting the flaws and foibles of [those] who read the books” (Pavonetti, p. 457). In children’s mysteries, this means that the characters sometimes get mad at each other (Spiegel), want to sleep in, or take time off to hang out with their friends. They also occasionally lie to adults, skip class, or sneak out of, or into, somewhere they are not supposed to. Turtle, in *The Westing Game*, with her temper, angst, and habit of kicking shins, is

a prime example of a flawed relatable character. Yet even the children in *Mysterious Benedict* get annoyed with each other, and if you look critically at heroine Nancy Drew, you can see that she has some relatable faults too. Good detective work can also involve subterfuge, a good disguise, or infiltration into buildings or groups, which can be moral grey areas. The children in *Mysterious Benedict* must infiltrate a secretive school, and Enola Holmes specializes in brilliant disguises. Yet in children's mysteries this rule breaking is usually done in service of the greater good, and just like with growing up, it is important for child detectives to learn when to lie, hold secrets, or give their exhausted brains a break.

It must be mentioned that a detective in children's mysteries can be, and often is, part of a team or group. Not only does it teach children about cooperation, team-building, friendship-forming, and trust, working as a team also shows that each person can bring different strengths to help solve the mystery.

SUSPENSE & DANGER

The level of danger present in children's books cover quite a spectrum, from physical or mortal danger to economic danger, from the danger of being discovered to the danger being separated or left alone. In *Mysterious Benedict* Kate is beaten up by three teens. In *The Westing Game* characters are in danger of being hurt by bombs, and Turtle may be emotionally scarred from touching a dead body. Enola Holmes is tied up and kidnapped. And in her first book Nancy Drew is locked in a closet and left to starve. Some may bemoan these dangers being present in children's literature, yet as children really do face many of these dangers, experiencing them in literature may actually be useful. As Nancy Werlin notes, "We all - adult, child, and teen alike - know what it is to fear. And we all want to learn how to handle our fear. Safely. Safely, within the pages of a book" (p. 305). Mystery writer Nixon commented that emotions like fear are actually the key to a great climatic scene in a mystery, that in that moment "there's dialogue, maybe even conflict, and always - underlying the scene - there's emotion" (Pavonetti, p. 456). In many ways, the dangers present in mysteries, and the feelings of fear, dread, and tension that they inspire are a large part of the fun, giving readers a vicarious "thrill of consorting with people who are no better than they should be, people who are doing things that shock us, make us afraid, and, if we are honest, excite us" (Werlin, p. 302).

In building the delicate braid of a good mystery novel, suspense should be woven in thoughtfully. As Nancy Werlin notes in *A Family of Readers*, the tension shouldn't just be constantly raised, "The skilled writer must also know when to lessen the tension, when to give the reader a break before, very soon, tightening the screws yet again. Harder" (p. 304).

One way that mystery novels can build suspense is to layer additional mysteries on top of the central one. In this way, "mystery builds upon mystery" (Gavin, p. 213), and the audience gets absorbed in trying to solve multiple mysteries at once, with the answers usually playing into each other. Another way that good mysteries can build suspense is by focusing on character movements, because "movements that would seem natural in realistic fiction take on added dimensions in mysteries. Opening a shower curtain, seeing a car drive by, or hearing a click are all invitations to terror" (Pavonetti, p. 456). A final way to add suspense to a mystery novel is by "casting suspicion on a trusted person" (Pavonetti, p. 458). This unsettles the reader, and

makes them question things that they previously thought were certain. It also teaches children about trust and wariness with others.

GROWING UP

While tropes of danger and suspense can be applicable to any type of mystery novel, one is specific to children's mystery novels: growing up.

In many ways, being a child is tough, and yet being an adult is a mystery. Yet "in the course of their sleuthing, child detectives move between the adult world and the child world" (Barr, p. 10), thus solving an important mystery is good practice at being an adult and also at navigating the unknown. In fact, for children, "reading a detective book where someone like them solves an adult problem may temporarily make them feel like they are a successful part of it" (Barr, p.10). The oft neglected and overlooked Turtle solves Westing's Game before any of the adults around her, which is the first clue that she might turn out ok as an adult after all.

The child detectives, in navigating the adult world, grow through the experience, and ultimately come out wiser at the end, or, as Pavonetti elegantly puts it, "A more mature protagonist proceeds toward adulthood" (p. 458). This maturation is not just concerned with acting more grown-up, but also with considering adult concerns, as "mystery plots in children's fiction very often overlay a deeper investigation into the adult concerns of class, wealth, and power" (Gavin & Routledge, p. 7). The best children's mysteries also delve into the metaphysical, and examine "deeper mysteries of life and art, involving issues of identity, reality, and fictionality" (Gavin, p. 211). As the protagonists of children's novels are often a few years older than their target readership, the readers are able to "observe the behavior of characters who are more mature and examine their own beliefs and fledgling philosophies" (Pavonetti, p. 460) on these deeper topics and issues.

THE BOOKS

The Westing Game, by Ellen Raskin. 1978.

Referred to nowadays as a children's "Knives Out," the Newbery Award-winning Westing Game has been a favorite for decades. It is an almost perfect children's mystery in that it follows every rule, while still breaking a couple along the way.

The Westing Game has a strong, simple, central mystery: Who took Sam Westing's life? The suspects are one of 16 heirs to his fortune, who all happen to live or work at Sunset Towers, and who must pair up to play his game to find the culprit (and win the inheritance). Similar to Agatha Christie in many ways, with isolated, snow-bound, suspects, Raskin ups the ante by not having a genius, single detective. Instead, The Westing Game "is overtly a puzzle mystery, designed as a game not just for readers but for the characters themselves who are desperately seeking the solutions to the clues they hold" (Gavin, p. 213).

The Westing Game gets straight to the action, daring Turtle to go into a Westing's "haunted house" on Halloween, where she stumbles upon a dead body. Then Raskin adds suspense by building mysteries upon mysteries: Who is Julian Eastman? Who keeps planting

the bombs? Who stole the shorthand will? Who limps? To solve these many, many mysteries, various characters engage in secrecy, lies, and deceit, and the reader must try to keep track of all of them. The danger present is mortal (one person gets severely wounded), emotional, financial, and even interpersonal, with every neighbor suspecting the other of being a murderer. Raskin also ends each chapter on a cliffhanger, which isn't a rule, but does follow mystery writing best practices, and helps keep the reader engaged.

What ultimately sets the Westing Game apart, though, is that it goes beyond a simple whodunnit to look deeper into mysteries of "characters' public facades and the private truths that lie beneath" (Gavin, p. 214), as well as the puzzling complexities of human emotions and relationships. Indeed, the answer to the central mystery turns out to be deeper than one would expect for a children's novel, and by the time the conclusion is reached the characters and readers have all grown and matured. This is a book that lingers with readers, and it has enough clues, characters, and twists, to encourage many re-reads.

Enola Holmes and the Case of the Missing Marquess, by Nancy Springer. 2007.

Enola Holmes has an entirely different feel than that of *The Westing Game*, but is just as successful as a mystery novel all the same. Enola Holmes, the imagined younger sister of Sherlock and Mycroft, is an entirely new creation by Springer, who shines where her brothers slip, and highlights the gender issues of the time.

The case of the Missing Marquess starts with an excellent central mystery: Where is Enola's mother? Initially uncertain if Mrs. Holmes has left, been injured, or been taken, Enola is able to latch onto clues that oblivious Sherlock and stodgy Mycroft overlook, such as her mother's clothing choice, items left purposefully behind, and the importance of the date: Enola's 16th birthday. In trying to determine where her mother has gone, and why, Enola focuses on a case that the adults around her don't, and uses subterfuge and many ingenious disguises to pursue it. The book raises the tension by casting suspicion on trusted adults, heightening movements while she is briefly kidnapped, and in facing the ever present threat of being exposed and sent to a girls' boarding school. The dangers that come to Enola are thus gendered, physical, and economic, at a time when women's rights were barely an idea in her society. It is also a time when she is expected to be grown-up, and soon likely married off, though she still feels childish in many ways.

While pursuing the case of her missing mother, Enola gets curious about, and then mixed-up in, another mystery: what happened to the Marquis Tewkesbury? Who could be out to get him, and why? This added mystery layers suspense, and while Enola solves the marquess mystery, by the end of the book she still has yet to locate her mother (or reunite with her brothers), which sets up a great cliffhanger on which to continue a series of books. By the end, Enola has also come to understand the true horrors of poverty in London, a city that she had previously idealized, and now seeks her mother for companionship instead of dependency, true hallmarks of growing up that young readers can begin to ponder.

The Mysterious Benedict Society, by Trenton Lee Stewart.

The Mysterious Benedict Society opens with one puzzling challenge after the next, but is, at its core, a spy novel. In the book, four children pass a series of unusual tests designed for gifted children. The purpose of the tests is to find clever, trustworthy students who will infiltrate an evil school that performs mind control on the population. The central mystery here is: how to stop the mind-manipulation machine?

The act of infiltration requires bravery, secrecy, lying, detecting clues, and reporting back to their trusted adult, Mr. Benedict. It also involves working together as a group, using the different skills of each child, and sometimes disagreeing and getting frustrated at each other. In a brilliant way, they discover that their loyalties to each other help them resist mind-manipulation, and the sheer stubbornness of one of them was the key to undoing the machine all along.

While this book doesn't grip the reader with a mystery right off, the layering of various puzzles on top of the mystery, and the different way each child solves them, keeps the reader intrigued enough for the hook to catch on. The tension is raised through small slips that risk jeopardizing their mission, and the terrifying but slight movements of others that could get them caught. This book, unlike the first two, does not cast suspicion on trusted persons, but includes an antagonist determined to see them fail, which substantially raises the threat level. Danger in this book is bodily, with one of the children getting severely beaten up, and brained, as they are all subject to losing their minds to the mind-manipulation device. Yet the danger is primarily emotional and economic: all four children are without parents or friends, and all four have faced various levels of economic uncertainty. Their mission provides fraternal bonds and economic stability, and the danger of losing this weighs on them in various ways.

At the end, the children's resolve is tested, much like Frodo at Mt. Doom, and through this experience grow and mature so much that their understanding of themselves and the world has shifted. This new perception stays with the reader, and this growth is what sets this book above simple mysteries into something more profound.

Nancy Drew and the Secret of the Old Clock, by Carolyn Keene. Originally published in 1930, re-written in 1959.

Nancy Drew is a classic children's mystery book series for a reason: it's phenomenal. The first book, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, follows every rule outlined here. It has a central mystery (Where is the real will?), and an action packed beginning. It assumes that Nancy and the reader are smart enough to solve this mystery, it provides every clue along the way, and doesn't rely on magic to bring about a resolution.

Nancy, for all of her perfect bloneness, also has a few foibles. She makes some terribly reckless decisions, putting herself in harm's way, and even getting locked in a closet at one point. Yet while these decisions often raise the level of danger and suspense in the novel, Drew is also able to her brains and brawn to get herself out of trouble: breaking herself out of said closet, fixing a stalled boat engine, and hiding in a grain bin at one point. She is capable of lying, infiltrating, thinking mean thoughts, and even skipping out on work to play at the lake with friends. All of which makes her a great model for a children's mystery protagonist, particularly at the time she was written (or re-written).

One of Drew's best qualities is that though she is wealthy (her convertible marks her as such), she doesn't look down on those without. As the series began during The Great Depression, some argue that it is crucially critical of "America's capitalist system and the dramatic swings in economic fortune it allowed" (Gavin & Routledge, p. 7). Indeed, the seeming whim of Mr. Crowley to not include promised people in his will speaks to the economic uncertainty that can randomly befall "good" people. Ultimately, Nancy Drew, with her gumption and kind heart becomes a vessel in which young readers can see themselves solving mysteries and questioning inequalities at the same time.

GOOD BOOKS, IMPERFECT MYSTERIES

Not every book billed as a children's mystery follows the rules laid out here. In being different, they not only highlight the genius of the books listed above, but they also shine in their own separate niche.

From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, by E. L. Kinigsburg. 1967.

From the Mixed-Up Files is often listed as a popular children's mystery novel, yet it violates the very first rule: a central mystery is not the main driver of the novel. Rather, this is an adventure novel, about two children who run away from home, and decide to live at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That they come across a mystery while there is an important part of the book, but the mystery is not what prompts the story to start. This book, to me, is a prime example of Billman's assertion that some children's mysteries are really "adventure novels wherein the focus is on the protagonists' activities as the detective work unfolds, rather than on the nuts and bolts of piecing together clues" (Barr, p. 9). That said, this work is quite charming, and the book assumes that children are intelligent enough to solve a mystery, and sneaky enough to live at the Met undetected.

The Name of This Book is Secret, by Pseudonymous Bosch. 2007.

The conceit of this book is very cute, an anonymous writer who often breaks the fourth wall while telling a story, and frequently warns readers to stop reading. However it suffers as a mystery because it doesn't follow either of the first two rules: the central mystery is rather weak, and it takes too long to get into the action. The premise is that two children find a magician's notebook, and use it to infiltrate a secret organization that sacrifices children's brains for immortality. The muddled mystery is made more confusing at times by the narrator's footnotes and asides, however, the jocular writing style and fantastical elements make this book interesting enough to cover its less than perfect elements.

Holes, by Louis Sachar. 1998.

Holes is a terrific fantasy book, and a so-so mystery. It has wonderful character development and maturity, as well as some great character flaws for believability. However, the central mystery, why are they digging holes?, is a bit lackluster, and doesn't drive the story forward

nearly as much as the history of the Yelnats family curse and the romance of the outlaw Kissing Kate. It also relies on magic, through the appearance of Stanley's attorney, to bring a resolution to the story. Though danger, suspense, and teamwork feature heavily in the book, it is primarily a fantasy that has mysterious elements, as it prominently focuses on curses, a magical drought, and an enchanted song.

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