

A HISTORY OF THE FICTIONAL DETECTIVE

Steven Cross goes sleuthing

The earliest puzzles

In an English country house a murder takes place. There are a large number of suspects. The bungling local constabulary cannot solve the crime, distracted by various red herrings. The detective arrives, or was perhaps one of the guests. Inquiries and questioning follow. The least likely suspect is revealed as the perpetrator, but there is a final twist in the plot.

These are the classic features of the modern detective story, but early crime fiction was just simple story telling. They were puzzles often laced in emotion, but ultimately they were description and practical explanation of what has happened. So how has the detective developed from the naïve questioner to the forensic investigator?

In ancient Greek myth, Oedipus was abandoned on a mountainside so that the prophesy that he would kill his father and marry his mother would not come true.



He is rescued and brought up by the King and Queen of Corinth. He hears of the prophesy and travels to Thebes. He meets a man coming the other way, they squabble and argue and Oedipus kills him. On reaching Thebes he learns that the King has recently died. He wins the crown of Thebes by solving the riddle of the sphynx, and marries the Queen. Oedipus discovers the truth of his origins after questioning various witnesses, and he is ultimately exiled. This story was turned into the Greek tragedy 'Oedipus Rex' by Sophocles (476-406 BC). The only country to issue a stamp showing Sophocles is Greece in 1998.

The lecherous Elders had been watching Susanna, then blackmailed her by claiming she had been meeting a man. However when questioned they had very different versions about what they saw. This uncomplicated story appears in the Bible, Daniel ch.13, written between 167 and 164 BC. The Rubens painting of Susanna and the Elders has featured on a stamp of Paraguay and maxi card of Tonga (inside front cover).

In order to save her life Scheherazade told 1001 stories, one each evening to the Sultan. Amongst this early Arab fiction is what is argued as the first detective story 'The Three Apples'. A woman's body is found in a chest on the bank of a river and the Caliph orders the Vizier Ja'fa to investigate. This collection of stories goes back as far as the 9th Century and has Indian and Persian origins. Several countries, including Ajaman in 1967 have all celebrated the Aladdin or Sinbad or Ali Baba stories, but none feature this tale.



Early Chinese detective fiction is often referred to as Gong'an and dates from the 16th Century. It often has a supernatural element, huge casts and a detective who is a local Judge. There are philosophical digressions and we often know the criminal from the start. This earliest Chinese fiction takes its name from the 'case records of the public law court'. Whilst significant numbers of Ming dynasty objects and people and lifestyle have been issued, there are no examples of these tales on stamps (this issue comes closest with its folk tales).

It took a long time before western culture and as a result Western writing turned its attention to the concept of crime, but again it followed the idea of simple

description and questioning to reveal the mystery. Voltaire's *Zadig* (1694-1778) features a main character who carries out analysis and deduction, and is considered one of the earliest examples of detective fiction. France has issued a number of different portraits of Voltaire. The Hungarian issue had the French writer as one of ten authors on its 1948 issue.



'The Rector of Veilbye' by Danish author S S Blicher (1782-1848) was written in 1829. A village rector is accused of murdering his servant, and the evidence is against him. He is sentenced to death. Years later the servant reappears; it was a hoax perpetrated because he wasn't allowed to marry the rector's daughter. The judge has a heart attack and the servant is found dead on the grave of the rector.

S. S. Blicher

In 1819 E T A Hoffman, a German Romantic author, published 'Mademoiselle de Scuderi' the investigation into the murder of a jeweller by his apprentice. It too has a claim to be regarded as the first detective story. 150 years after his death West Berlin produced this stamp and commemorative cancel in 1972.



A series of French authors introduced characters like Rocambole, a murderer turned villain fighter, written in the 1860s by Pierre du Terail. *Fantomas* (1911) appeared in 32 novels created by Allain and Souvestre. *Lupin the gentleman thief*, a contemporary of Holmes, was penned by Maurice Leblanc (1905). *Rouletabille* (1907), created by Gaston Leroux is a young journalist who becomes a detective. These four detectives appeared in a set of six issued in 1996 by France (the other two being 20th century detectives).



'Father of Detective Fiction'

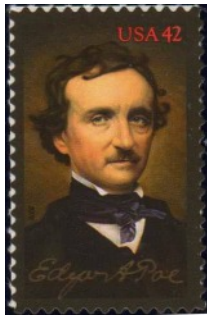
Edgar Poe (born 1809) had a miserable childhood. His father abandoned the family and his mother died when he was just two. He moved in with John and Frances Allan, but was unable to form any positive relationships, and the unhappiness continued until his foster father eventually disowned him. His military career was difficult and he tried to focus on writing, releasing poems and prose with little success. He was court-martialed out of the army and tried his hand at editing several different journals. He married his 13 year old cousin Virginia in 1835.

A number of countries issued stamps to celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth,



including Monaco in 2008. Poe's best known fiction works are Gothic, with recurring themes of death, including its physical signs, the effects of decomposition, concerns of premature burial, the reanimation of the dead, and mourning. He became known for the macabre and for mystery, publishing 'Murder in the Rue Morgue' in 1841, also acclaimed as the first detective story. The brutal murder of two women is heard by numerous witnesses but there is no agreement on the language spoken by the assailant. The detective Dupin finds a non-human hair. After advertising in the papers, a sailor comes forward saying his pet orangutan had escaped, and in the frenzy which followed it had killed both of the women. 'The Mystery of Marie Rog e' and 'The Purloined Letter' followed.

The story also established common elements in mystery fiction: the eccentric but brilliant detective, the inept police, and narration by a close personal friend. Poe also had his detective recap the analysis of his deductions. In this way Poe devised a formula that has been successful ever since and he is often referred to as 'the father of detective fiction'. Poe describes his stories as 'tales of ratiocination': the process of reasoning. Dupin is eccentric and brilliant and laid the groundwork for detectives to follow.



Poe's death in 1845 is a mystery. Delirium or heart disease, syphilis, cholera, rabies or alcoholism have all been suggested. Whichever one believes it is agreed that he became more and more unstable following the death of his wife. The 100th and 150th Anniversary of his death were commemorated in stamps issued by the USA (see inside front cover).

In 1972 Nicaragua featured Dupin and eleven other fictional detectives, one of forty countries recognising the Interpol Fiftieth Anniversary. The others reproduced the Headquarters Building or the Interpol Symbol. Nicaragua was the first country to portray detectives making an influential contribution to the portrayal of law enforcement.



Another early example of a whodunit is a subplot in the novel 'Bleak House' (published in twenty instalments March 1852 – September 1853) by Charles Dickens. The lawyer Tulkinghorn is murdered in his office, which is investigated by Inspector Bucket. He cross examines all the people who were on the staircase that night in order to identify the culprit. A large number of countries have celebrated various Dickens's anniversaries, and in 2012 the UK produced a se-tenant set of four stamps to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of his birth, including an illustration from 'Bleak House'.

Sherlock

The brilliant work of the world's first consulting detective was described by his biographer Watson, and set out in four novels and 56 short stories. The stories have attracted huge amounts of analysis and comment on their literary quality; he has been filmed more than any other character and he is the most widely recognised literary figure in the world. Besides the stories there are two musicals and a ballet. Conan Doyle himself solved a murder, was a failed candidate for the British Parliament, a believer in fairies and the occult and was knighted for

his propaganda work during the Boer War. Sherlock's every utterance has been interpreted and behaviour studied. The philatelic collection of the main characters and the adventures is an extensive catalogue.

Arthur Conan Doyle, one of ten children, was born in 1859. His life has been commemorated by various countries including GB, Monaco, Comoro Islands, and Guinea



The American actor William Gillette (1853-1937) is responsible for the image of Holmes in deerstalker hat, Meerschaum pipe and cape. The Nicaraguan Interpol issue reflects this iconic picture. A huge number of different actors used the image to represent Holmes, most recently GB (2013) when the actor Peter Cushing played the role. The San Marino Fictional Detectives series depicts Holmes as a blood hound. In The Tales of Terror (1997) GB published the Hound of the Baskervilles as one of four literary monsters.



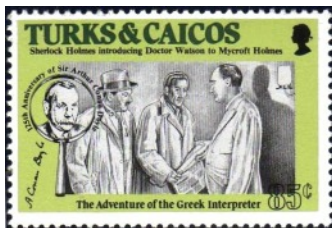
Dr John Watson, originally named Orman Slacker, returned from the Second Afghan War after being wounded at the Battle of Maiwand. He joined Holmes at 221B Baker Street where they lived for six to seven years, and where Watson documented the most interesting cases. He does not appear in his own right on any stamps. In 1984,

with Conan Doyle and Holmes, he is represented on the Turks and Caicos issue in front of a book containing the names of the Holmes' stories. He is also shown with Holmes on Dominica 1991 Souvenir Sheet watching the Brunigline Train, and Switzerland had the Reichenbach waterfall. Both of these appear in 'The Final Problem'.



GB acknowledged the other stories from the canon in its booklet series from 1987. 'A Study in Scarlet' has Holmes examining a wall with the word RACHE in blood written on it. It is the first novel by Conan Doyle and the one in which Holmes and Watson meet. Conan

Doyle's favourite, and voted best Holmes short story, is 'The Speckled Band', shown on another booklet. An unknown man features on the cover of 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' booklet and the classic fight between Holmes and Moriarty is shown on 'The Final Problem'.



The Greek Interpreter introduces the character of Mycroft in 'The Adventure of the Empty House' in which Holmes returns after the great hiatus. 'The Adventure of the Second Stain' is about catching a spy and 'The Adventure of the Final Problem', which has the waterfall as a backdrop, were all issued by Turks and Caicos in 1984.

In 1993 the UK Post Office produced a se-tenant set of five Holmes adventures. Hidden in each stamp was a letter, which formed a word when rearranged. This is the only example of such an idea by the UK.



In 2009 Alderney produced a presentation pack of six stamps. Reading the accompanying story and looking at the stamps for clues, you are asked to solve The Curious Case of the Alderney Bull (see inside front cover).

And so the detective entered the great age of deduction and reasoning, establishing and verifying the facts, which provided the model for the Golden Age of Detective Fiction to come. 