

## ARE MYSTERIES HEADED OUT OF THIS WORLD?

By E. F. Watkins

It used to be that whodunit fans prided themselves on their rationality and frowned on plots that included supernatural twists. It was like the old Reese's commercial where two people bumped into each other and then complained, "You got chocolate in my peanut butter!" and "You got peanut butter on my chocolate!"

If a ghost showed up, it had to be explained away as a clever trick by the villain to cover up a very earthbound crime--for example, the Hound of the Baskervilles, which turned out to be a large but ordinary dog made up to look demonic. Meanwhile, horror fans cared more about atmosphere and scares than complex, tightly woven plots, and as for logic, they practically invented the term "willing suspension of disbelief."

You might ask, what about classic writers such as Edgar Allen Poe? When you think about it, he rarely dealt with supernatural themes. Compared to someone like H.P. Lovecraft or Bram Stoker, Poe wrote fairly straightforward crime stories, albeit with weird overtones.

Over the past couple of decades, though, both mystery and horror writers have grown restless with the restrictions of

their categories. Maybe it began with Ira Levin, who first made his reputation with mysteries such as A KISS BEFORE DYING. In the late 1960s, he dabbled in the supernatural with ROSEMARY'S BABY and in science fiction with THE STEPFORD WIVES and THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL. Yet he still plotted those books as if they were mysteries or mainstream thrillers, and used everyday people as his villains instead of larger-than-life monsters.

Starting in the mid-1980s, Barbara Mertz/Elizabeth Peters mixed paranormal with romantic mystery in a series of books under the pseudonym "Barbara Michaels." These novels deal with real ghosts, characters with psychic talents and "possessed" antique objects that convey messages from the past and often nudge the heroine toward solving the mystery.

As horror fell into a publishing slump in the 1980s-90s, and bookstores no longer gave the genre its own section, many novels that previously might have fallen into that category were marketed as thrillers. THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS received a Bram Stoker Award from the Horror Writers Association in 1988 as Best Horror Novel, even though many people would call it a psychological thriller.

JURASSIC PARK and RELIC both feature big, scary monsters on the rampage attacking people, yet they sold as "techno-thrillers." Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, the

co-authors of RELIC and many other Agent Prendegast books, insert paranormal events and characters into their plots whenever the mood strikes them, freely switching back and forth between the real and the unreal.

In 1994-96, Rosemary Edghill authored BELL, BOOK AND MURDER, a trilogy of mysteries with a young, urban, Wiccan heroine. The climactic events in these stories may or may not have supernatural explanations--it's left up to the reader to make the call.

Perhaps the idea of ESP and communication with the dead has become more palatable to mystery fans as more "psychics" openly work with law enforcement. TV shows such as MEDIUM and GHOST WHISPERER also have helped to make this premise acceptable.

CITY OF MASKS (2003) and other novels by Daniel Hecht feature psychic heroine Cree Black who "sees dead people" and uses that skill to solve crimes. Elena Santangelo has published a new series in which the heroine encounters ghosts who compel her to unravel mysteries from various historical eras.

Some crime writers venture even further into the supernatural. A popular series by Dean James stars gay vampire sleuth Simon Kirby-Jones, and Suzan Sizemore's novella A TOUCH OF HARRY features a werewolf private investigator! To date,

Amazon has tagged 60 products on its site as "paranormal mysteries" and this is probably a gross underestimation.

As someone who loves a bit of the paranormal mixed into my mysteries and thrillers, I'm delighted that publishers and readers are thinking outside "The Oblong Box" and allowing writers to cross genres in new and creative ways. Like those snack-lovers who ended up combining peanut butter and chocolate, readers are discovering that if you mix things up the result can be twice as tasty!

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