



Beyond Miss Marple The Best Cozies

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), Agatha Christie immortalized Miss Jane Marple, the shrewd, elderly spinster of the fictional English village of St. Mary Mead. A woman of independent means, she sweetly meddled in her neighbors' business while solving local crimes and never dropping a knitting stitch.

With Miss Marple, who appeared in a dozen novels and more short stories, Christie, who wrote during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, may very well have perfected the traditional "cozy." Though this subgenre of crime fiction takes many forms, it has some defining features. The crime and detection usually occur in a small, intimate, and enclosed community, in which the murderer knows the victim and ultimately turns out to have a personal motive. The protagonist is routinely an amateur sleuth and frequently a woman—nosy, well educated, and intuitive about human nature and the community's social dynamics. Cozies are often character driven, lighthearted, and rich in

humor; murders are frequently bloodless (death by poison!); relationships are regularly chaste; and the amateurs often enlist the help of local police (conveniently sometimes a husband or friend) to solve the crimes. The genre, however, can also take the form of a small-town police procedural. As Marilyn Stasio, the crime columnist for the *New York Times Book Review*, acknowledges, "The abiding appeal of the cozy mystery owes a lot to our collective memory, true or false, of simpler, sweeter times."

In the past couple of decades, the cozy genre has exploded in popularity (and, in some series, has become more graphically violent). Today's cozies center on different themes, from felines to books, holidays, food and coffee, archaeology, antiquing, and even fashion. We've chosen a few series on some loosely structured topics to highlight the variety of the genre.

IF YOU LIKE MISS MARPLE

Miss Silver

By Patricia Wentworth

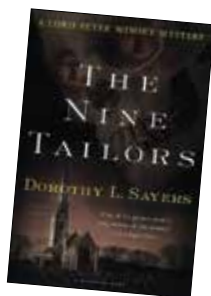
Like Christie, Wentworth was another master of English mystery writing. In the 1920s, she introduced Miss Maud Silver, who, along with Miss Marple, is the quintessential English cozy heroine. The dowdy spinster, a retired governess-turned-private investigator whose fondness for knitting, Tennyson, thefts, and art forgeries masks her profound intelligence, appears in 32 novels published between 1928 and 1961. Much to the chagrin of Scotland Yard, Miss Silver successfully infiltrates the dysfunctional households and crimes of the upper class. Unlike Miss Marple, however, who plays a lone hand, Miss Silver relies on inductive reasoning and shares her thought processes and actions as she solves crimes. One of the standouts is *The Chinese Shawl* (1943), in which Miss Silver must intervene in an age-old family feud that results in murder.



Lord Peter Wimsey

By Dorothy L. Sayers

Sayers, a British author and playwright, is best known for her farcical capers starring amateur sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey—a dapper English dilettante and gentleman amused by his chosen hobby and often assisted by his valet, his Chief Inspector brother-in-law, and his wife. Set between the two World Wars, the 20-plus novels and short story collections, published between 1923 and 1972, address contemporaneous issues—from advertising to women's education and veterans' health. In *The Nine Tailors* (1934), the ninth in the series, Wimsey must solve a two-decades-old case of missing jewels—and the mysterious corpses dotting the countryside. Sayers, who received much less recognition for her whodunits than Christie did, at least in America, is well worth exploring.



Further Reading

MRS. POLLIFAX | DOROTHY GILMAN (14 TITLES, STARTING WITH *THE UNEXPECTED MRS. POLLIFAX* [1966])

PETER SHANDY | CHARLOTTE MACLEOD (10 TITLES, STARTING WITH *REST YOU MERRY* [1979])

HOMER KELLY | JANE LANGTON (18 TITLES, STARTING WITH *THE TRANSCENDENTAL MURDER* [1964])

DAISY DALRYMPLE | CAROLA DUNN (22 TITLES, STARTING WITH *DEATH AT WENTWATER COURT* [1994])

SARAH KEATE | MIGNON G. EBERHART (7 TITLES, STARTING WITH *THE PATIENT IN ROOM 18* [1929])

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE | MARY ROBERTS RINEHART (1908)

THE YELLOW ROOM | MARY ROBERTS RINEHART (1945)

FOR HISTORY BUFFS

Maisie Dobbs

By Jacqueline Winspear

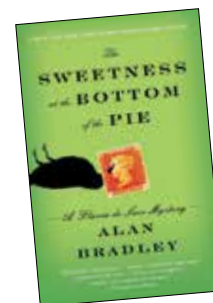
The best-selling Maisie Dobbs series was inspired by Winspear's grandfather's experience in World War I. Maisie, who first appeared in *Maisie Dobbs* (F AGATHA AWARD, 2003), which takes place in England between 1910 and 1929, is a quirky, educated psychologist and private investigator who worked as a nurse during the war and deals in wartime secrets and traumas—her own included. In the 14th and most recent in the series, *To Die But Once* (2018), Maisie investigates the disappearance of a young apprentice craftsman on the home front during World War II. “Most entries in the series begin with a conventional mystery: A suspicious death, a missing person, a family's desire for closure—but once Maisie gets involved, she plugs into a secondary, connected storyline,” wrote NPR. “Sometimes it's her need to reconcile something from her own past, but often it's a parallel mystery with a broader canvas and a modern resonance: Economic disparity, racial tensions, health care. . . .”



Flavia de Luce

By Alan Bradley

Considered an old-fashioned cozy, Bradley's Flavia de Luce series is sophisticated and widely appealing. The award-winning *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* (2009) introduces Flavia de Luce, an incorrigible, precocious 11-year-old and aspiring chemist specializing in poison and deduction. Living in an idyllic English countryside in 1950, she stays ahead of the local police as she tries to clear her father of murder. Hailed as “a combination of Eloise and Sherlock Holmes” by the *Boston Globe*, Flavia evolves throughout the eight-book series as she slowly loses her innocence. In *Thrice the Brinded Cat Hath Mew'd* (2016), the most recent entry, Flavia, now 12, leaves a boarding school in Canada, and, upon returning to England, she finds her father gravely ill—and discovers an interesting dead body. Throughout the series, “Bradley never loses touch with the

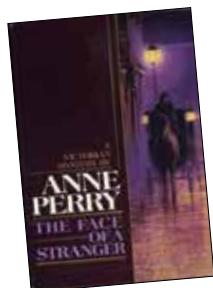


darker realities of this rustic English paradise: a town still haunted by the atrocities of World War II and trying to regain its footing in daily life” (*Entertainment Weekly*).

William Monk

By Anne Perry

Perry brought Victorian England’s social issues to life in *The Face of a Stranger* (1990), in which William Monk—a banker-turned-policeman with scant regard for Victorian social conventions—wakes up after a horrific carriage accident with no memory of his previous life in Northumberland. Slowly rebuilding his identity, he comes to know himself as William Monk, his home as 1856 London, and his primary case the murder of Major Gray, a minor British noble. Hester Latterly, a Crimean war nurse who helps Monk through his amnesia (and assists in his later cases), is a recurring character. By the 23rd novel, *An Echo of Murder* (2017), Monk is dealing with rampant prejudice in the Hungarian immigrant community. Perry’s Thomas Pitt series (starting with 1979’s *The Cater Street Hangman*) also takes place in Victorian London, where Pitt, a police inspector, is aided by his wife’s bored, upper-class family.



Further Reading

THE CADFAEL CHRONICLES | ELLIS PETERS (12TH-CENTURY ENGLAND; 21 TITLES, STARTING WITH *A MORBID TASTE FOR BONES* [1977])

MRS. JEFFRIES | EMILY BRIGHTWELL (VICTORIAN ENGLAND; 36 TITLES, STARTING WITH *THE INSPECTOR AND MRS. JEFFRIES* [1993])

CHARLES LENOX | CHARLES FINCH (VICTORIAN ENGLAND; 10 TITLES, STARTING WITH *A BEAUTIFUL BLUE DEATH* [2007])

GASLIGHT MYSTERY | VICTORIA THOMPSON (EARLY 20TH-CENTURY NEW YORK; 21 TITLES, STARTING WITH *MURDER ON ASTOR PLACE* [1999])

MOLLY MURPHY | RHYS BOWEN (EARLY 20TH-CENTURY NEW YORK; 17 TITLES, STARTING WITH *MURPHY’S LAW* [2001])

AMELIA PEABODY | ELIZABETH PETERS (19TH/20TH CENTURY EGYPT; 20 TITLES, STARTING WITH *CROCODILE ON THE SANDBANK* [1975])

BESS CRAWFORD | CHARLES TODD (POST-WORLD WAR I ENGLAND; 8 TITLES, STARTING WITH *A DUTY TO THE DEAD* [2009])

DARLING DAHLIAS | SUSAN WITTIG ALBERT (1930S ALABAMA; 6 TITLES, STARTING WITH *THE DARLING DAHLIAS AND THE CUCUMBER TREE* [2010])

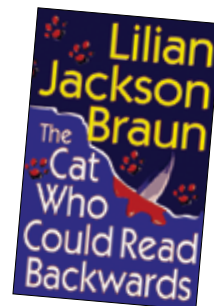
MAGGIE HOPE | SUSAN ELIA MACNEAL (WORLD WAR II-ERA EUROPE; 7 TITLES, STARTING WITH *MR. CHURCHILL’S SECRETARY* [2012])

IF YOU HAVE PETS

The Cat Who ...

By Lilian Jackson Braun

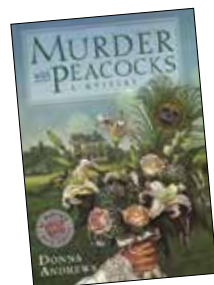
This whimsical series features James Qwilleran, a former crime reporter, and his two Siamese cats, Koko and Yum Yum, who live in the small, isolated town of Pickax (likely in Michigan). In *The Cat Who Could Read Backwards* (1966), Qwill rents a room from the paper’s art critic, starts to care for the literate Koko (Yum Yum, by contrast, is no intellectual giant), and tries to solve an art crime. Then there is the cat who, in future titles, sees red, plays Brahms, knows Shakespeare, talks to ghosts, tails a thief, sings for the birds, and more. In the final and 29th installment, *The Cat Who Had 60 Whiskers* (2007), a gardener’s “accidental” death flummoxes Qwill just as his special lady friend leaves him for Paris. The novels, which sold millions of copies and regularly appeared on the *New York Times* best seller list, are warmhearted if somewhat formulaic—but “for cat lovers, those set pieces offered dependable pleasures” (*New York Times*).



Meg Langslow

By Donna Andrews

Andrews’s first book, *Murder with Peacocks* (1999), which introduced Meg Langslow, a blacksmith by trade in the small town of Yorktown, Virginia, won multiple awards, including the Agatha. Meg earns her living by crafting metal sculptures, but everyone in her family and social circle are oddballs. When the random murder occurs, Meg steps in—and madcap hilarity and adventures ensue. Each of the 22 novels to date marginally feature different birds (who don’t solve mysteries but are usually central to the antics in some way): puffins, flamingos, hawks, ducks, emus, wickets. See also Andrews’s award-winning Turing Hopper series, featuring an Artificial Intelligence protagonist. “Langslow’s tendency to mania into her deadpan prose, whose unflappable cadences ... and cutaways from farcical tableaux suggest half Jane Austen, half battery acid” (*Kirkus*).



Further Reading

MRS. MURPHY | RITA MAE BROWN (26 TITLES, STARTING WITH *WISH YOU WERE HERE* [1990])

PAWS & CLAWS | KRISTA DAVIS (5 TITLES, STARTING WITH *MURDER, SHE BARKED* [2013])

CATTARINA | MONICA SHAUGHNESSY (3 TITLES, STARTING WITH *THE TELL-TAIL*)

HEART (2014))

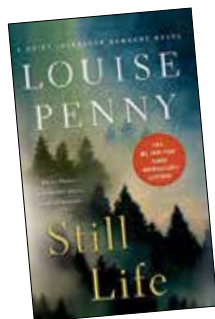
CAT IN THE STACKS | MIRANDA JAMES (9 TITLES, STARTING WITH *MURDER PAST DUE* (2010))

If You Like Police Procedurals

Chief Inspector Gamache

By Louise Penny

Penny earned critical acclaim and multiple awards with *Still Life* (2006); each subsequent novel (13 to date) has won or has been nominated for major awards. Though a police procedural, the series contains scant sex and violence and is generally gentle in nature; the action takes place, mostly, in Three Pines, an enchanting, fictional town in Quebec, where the kindly Chief Inspector Armand Gamache works for the provincial police force. Besides compelling whodunits, Penny excels in delving into the human condition and digging up old Canadian history to set up her lively personalities and their backgrounds. “Penny’s novels are rich and full, intelligent and entertaining, and worthy of all the many awards they’ve garnered,” wrote the *Huffington Post*. “Penny doesn’t write feel-good, frothy novels with everything falling neatly into place by the finish, but instead she creates real scenarios that expose the tolls exacted by real living, where good is not always rewarded and evil not always punished.”



Hamish Macbeth

By M. C. Beaton

In the small, sleepy town of Lochdubh in the Scottish Highlands, Hamish Macbeth makes up the entire police force. Although he appears somewhat lazy, bumbling, and unambitious, Macbeth—the son of crofters who lives in the police station and keeps some farm animals—has a talent for solving the small town’s crimes and murders. In the first novel, *Death of a Gossip* (1985), a tabloid reporter who joins a fishing class is found dead in the water. Thirty-three novels later, in *Death of a Ghost* (2017), a dead body in a castle cellar disappears, and Macbeth must solve the mystery before the “ghost” appears again. “Macbeth is the sort of character who slyly grows on you,” wrote the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Beaton also writes the popular Agatha Raisin series, featuring an English middle-aged, former public relations agent



who solves murders in the Cotswolds and eventually sets up her own detective agency. Start with *Agatha Raisin and the Quiche of Death* (1992).

Further Reading

J. P. BEAUMONT | J. A. JANCE (23 TITLES, STARTING WITH *UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY* [1985])

RODERICK ALLEYN | NGAIO MARSH (32 TITLES, STARTING WITH *A MAN LAY DEAD* [1934])

CONSTABLE EVANS | RHYS BOWEN (10 TITLES, STARTING WITH *EVANS ABOVE* [1997])

MR. AND MRS. NORTH | FRANCES AND RICHARD LOCKRIDGE (26 TITLES, STARTING WITH *THE NORTHS MEET MURDER* [1940])

FOR BIBLIOPHILES

Booktown Mysteries

By Lorna Barrett

Barrett writes some of the best cozy mysteries set in contemporary times, many of them *New York Times* best sellers. The 11-novel series to date takes place in Stoneham, New Hampshire, a vacation town lined with bookstores—and rife with crimes. Tricia Mills, a city refugee-turned-mystery bookstore owner dealing in rare books (who becomes, coincidentally, an amateur sleuth), often finds herself mixed up in thorny whodunit murders. Start with *Murder Is Binding* (2008), in which Tricia comes under suspicion for the death of the owner of a rare cookbook. In the most recent entry, *A Just Clause* (2017), Tricia’s absent father comes to town—and becomes the prime suspect for a murder. Of the first book, *Publishers Weekly* wrote: “The mix of books, cooking and an engaging whodunit will leave cozy fans eager for the next installment.”



Further Reading

BOOK COLLECTOR MYSTERIES | VICTORIA ABBOTT (5 TITLES, STARTING WITH *THE CHRISTIE CURSE* [2013])

BOOKS BY THE BAY MYSTERIES | ELLERY ADAMS (8 TITLES, STARTING WITH *A KILLER PLOT* [2010])

NOVEL IDEA MYSTERIES | LUCY ARLINGTON (5 TITLES, STARTING WITH *BURIED IN A BOOK* [2012])

BIBLIOPHILE MYSTERIES | KATE CARLISLE (12 TITLES, STARTING WITH *HOMICIDE IN HARDCOVER* [2009])

IF YOU BELIEVE IN GHOSTS

Aunt Dimity

By Nancy Atherton

When Lori Shepherd learns that her late mother's fabled best friend, Aunt Dimity, was actually a real person who left her an inheritance, Lori, newly divorced, leaves America for the England's idyllic Cotswolds. Besides a quaint cottage, her bequest also includes a mysterious, blank journal possessed by none other than Aunt Dimity's friendly ghost. In the first in the series, *Aunt Dimity's Death* (1992), Lori must find a secret hidden among letters written between her mother and Dimity. In later volumes, none other than Dimity helps Lori solve local crimes. In the 22nd and most recent installment, *Aunt Dimity's Curse* (2017), Lori—now married, with twin boys and a baby daughter—listens as her neighbor cheerfully admits to killing her first husband, and perhaps others. Dimity must, of course, be consulted. The plots in the series rarely involve grave danger; instead, they are romantic, satisfying, warmhearted, and simple: “charmingly low-key puzzles to blood-soaked chills and thrills” (*Kirkus*).



Further Reading

WITCHCRAFT MYSTERIES | JULIET BLACKWELL (6 TITLES, STARTING WITH *SECONDHAND SPIRITS* [2009])

SILVER HOLLOW PARANORMAL COZY MYSTERIES | LEIGHANN DOBBS (4 TITLES, STARTING WITH *A SPELL OF TROUBLE* [2016])

WITCH CAT MYSTERIES | VICKI VASS (1 TITLE TO DATE: *Bloodline* [2017])

SPELLBOUND MYSTERIES | ANNABEL CHASE (8 TITLES, STARTING WITH *CURSE THE DAY* [2017])

LIZZY AND DIESEL | JANET EVANOVICH (3 TITLES, STARTING WITH *WICKED APPETITE* [2010])

A FINAL RECOMMENDATION: ONE OF A KIND

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency

By Alexander McCall Smith

The regally stout, clever, and kind Mma Precious Ramotswe is Botswana's first (and only) female investigator, and her work at the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency both solves mysterious and highlights people's foibles. As Mma Ramotswe's assistant explains, “Most of the time we are just helping people to find out things they already know.” The 17 novels (1998–2016), starting with *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, feature a lush African setting, a folksy style, and ample interpersonal relationships. In the novels, husbands go missing, kidnappers must be identified, a man must atone for past sins, and Mma Ramotswe is romantically pursued. The plots lack suspense, murders, and sometimes even mysteries; the novels are playful and deceptively simple. “The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series is a literary confection of such gossamer deliciousness that one feels it can only be good for one,” wrote the *New York Times*. “Fortunately ... there is no end to the pleasure that may be extracted from these ... books.” McCall Smith is also the author of the 44 Scotland Street series and the Isabel Dalhousie Mysteries.



Further Reading

SOUTHERN SISTERS | ANNE GEORGE (8 TITLES, STARTING WITH *MURDER ON A GIRLS' NIGHT OUT* [1996])

