

# GURPS<sup>®</sup>

Fourth Edition

# MYSTERIES



*An e23 Sourcebook for GURPS<sup>®</sup> from Steve Jackson Games*

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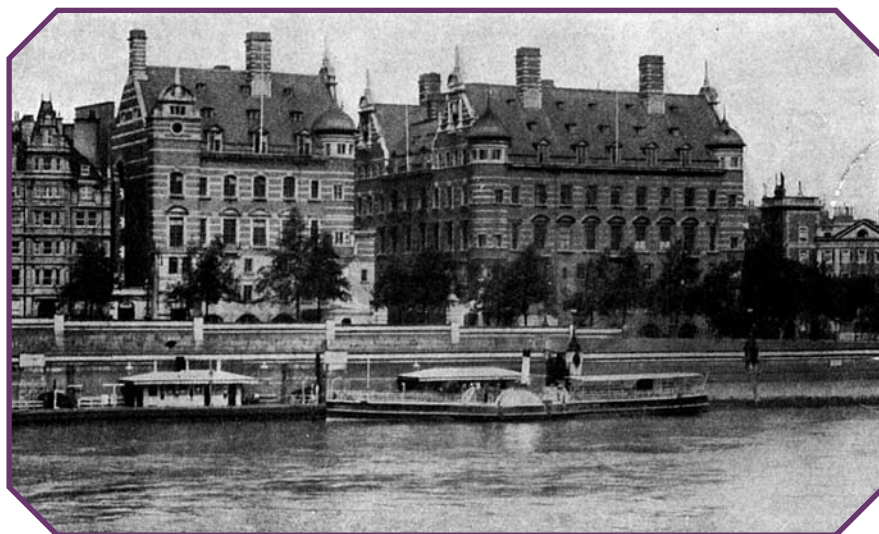


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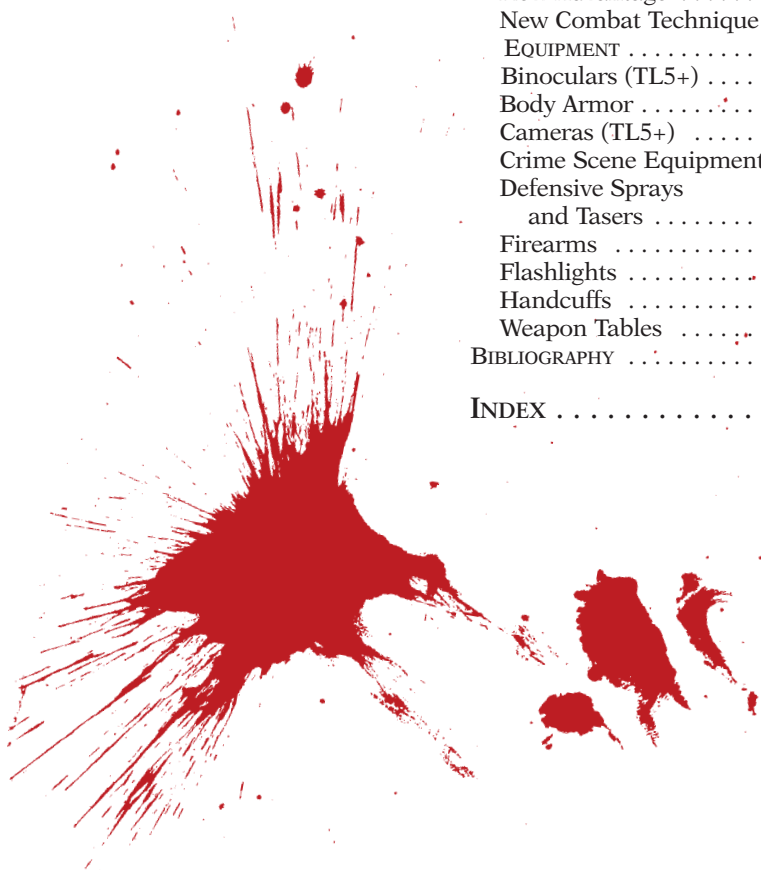
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# INTRODUCTION

*"Yeah, that's me, Tracer Bullet. I've got eight slugs in me. One's lead and the rest are bourbon. The drink packs a wallop, and I pack a revolver. I'm a private eye."*

– Calvin,

*Something Under the Bed is Drooling*

At their root, mysteries are about man's quest for knowledge – something is hidden and must be found out. Order must be restored. Honor and integrity must be maintained in spite of corruption and indifference. Mysteries are about puzzle-solving. Reason, logic, and perseverance let investigators triumph over a criminal's cleverest schemes and darkest deceptions.

This universal drive to find the truth is what makes mysteries so compelling, and also what makes them so compatible with all types of settings. **GURPS Mysteries** delves into the mystery genre, showing how to structure a mystery campaign, or layer a mystery plot over an existing campaign of any type.

A mystery adventure is part stage magic. It works by sleight of hand. The audience, or in this case, the players, expect to be fooled – at least for a while. **GURPS Mysteries** lays bare some of the classic tricks. It explains why some tricks that work for mystery writers won't work for GMs and what tools GMs have that writers don't. It also describes specific challenges inherent in running low-tech, modern, science-fiction, and paranormal mysteries, and specific tools that GMs can use in each of these settings.

For players, **Mysteries** explains how to portray experienced investigators. It describes modern forensics and modern theories on interviews and interrogation, as well as low-tech investigative methods, spells that can help or hinder an investigation, the use of psionics in mysteries, and more. Whether you are playing a forensic expert, genius detective, meddling kid, or jaded gumshoe, there is something here for you.

So put your feet up on the desk, and let's see who comes in the door.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa J. Steele is a criminal defense attorney and author based in Massachusetts. She is a vice-chair of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL) Forensic Evidence Committee. She represents clients accused of crimes ranging from minor traffic offenses to capital murder. Ms. Steele is the author of several legal articles about criminal defense, **GURPS Cops**, and **Fief**, from White Rose Publishing. She is a contributing author to White Wolf's **Dark Ages: Europe** and **Spoils of War**. Her personal interests range from science fiction to economics to medieval history to firearms.

## About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of the **GURPS** system. Our address is SJ Games, Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! Resources include:

**Pyramid** ([www.sjgames.com/pyramid/](http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid/)). Our online magazine includes new **GURPS** rules and articles. It also covers **Dungeons and Dragons**, **Traveller**, **World of Darkness**, **Call of Cthulhu**, and many more top games – and other Steve Jackson Games releases like **In Nomine**, **Illuminati**, **Car Wars**, **Toon**, **Ogre Miniatures**, and more. **Pyramid** subscribers also have access to playtest files online!

**New supplements and adventures.** **GURPS** continues to grow, and we'll be happy to let you know what's new. For a current catalog, send us a legal-sized or 9"×12" SASE – please use two stamps! – or just visit [www.warehouse23.com](http://www.warehouse23.com).

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**GURPSnet.** This e-mail list hosts much of the online discussion of **GURPS**. To join, point your web browser to [www.sjgames.com/mailman/listinfo/gurpsnet-l/](http://www.sjgames.com/mailman/listinfo/gurpsnet-l/).

## Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the **GURPS Basic Set** – e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with CI indicate **GURPS Compendium I**, those beginning with CII indicate **GURPS Compendium II**. Other references are BIO for **GURPS Bio-Tech**, C for **GURPS Cops**, CV for **GURPS Covert Ops**, G for **GURPS Grimoire**, H for **GURPS Horror**, HT for **GURPS High-Tech**, M for **GURPS Magic**, MA for **GURPS Martial Arts**, MF for **GURPS Modern Firepower**, P for **GURPS Psionics**, S for **GURPS Space**, SPI for **GURPS Spirits**, T for **GURPS Technomancer**, UN for **GURPS Undead**, UT for **GURPS Ultra-Tech**, and UTT for **GURPS Ultra-Tech 2**. For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the updated web list at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html).

# CHAPTER ONE

# THE IMPERFECT CRIME

*"A person who is tired of crime is tired of life."*

– Horace Rumpole,  
*Rumpole of the Bailey*

So you want to run a mystery adventure in a roleplaying game? Let's get the bad news out of the way up front; it's going to be a lot of work to prepare and run the session. However, done well, it's worth it. That hard work will pay off with a rewarding and unusual adventure that taxes your players' wits, teases their imaginations, and leaves them hungry for more.

This chapter will help you avoid many of the obvious pitfalls and organ-

ize your ideas into an interesting adventure. Subsequent chapters will provide you and your players with technical information, rules mechanics, setting specific ideas, and character templates and equipment.

This chapter contains essential guidelines for how to structure a mystery adventure. It comes first because it lays out some vital groundwork for GMs. Players may want to skip this chapter and start with Chapter 2. Mystery adventures are more enjoyable when GMing sleights-of-hand and misdirection come as a surprise.

The mystery adventure fits into any setting, and can be used with nearly any group of players and characters. You can use the basic idea in a near-infinite number of ways: there are puzzle mysteries, action mysteries, funny mysteries, dark mysteries, horrifying mysteries, high-tech mysteries, low-tech mysteries, historical mysteries, psychological mysteries, scientific mysteries, computer mysteries . . . as many mysteries as there are settings. What they all share is one of the most powerful central ideas in storytelling: something is hidden, and it must be discovered.

## SOME GROUND RULES

Your preparation begins well before you actually start designing the adventure. You need to start with some basic "gotchas" that aren't necessarily obvious, even to experienced Game Masters.

### MYSTERIES ARE NOT LIKE REAL LIFE

You can use real-life crimes for inspiration. The tabloids, the newspapers, and the True Crime section of your local library or bookstore will provide you with stories of crime and punishment on a daily basis.

But that's about as far as you should go. The mystery genre – for good reason – has evolved a powerful set of conventions, which have nothing to do with realism but everything to do with the demands of drama. If you violate these conventions, you'll have a harder time coming up with a satisfying adventure. Here are some of the most important:

*A mystery has a worthy adversary.* Real criminals usually aren't dramatically interesting. Their crimes, while

shocking and tragic, aren't hard to solve. Real people seldom use elaborate fake timetables, elaborate alibis, or cunning poisons; if they think about covering up at all, they generally just try to guard against witnesses and fingerprints. Even serial killers tend to be lonely, marginal figures with histories of child abuse and mental illness, not charismatic geniuses à la Hannibal Lecter.

In a mystery story or game, that's a recipe for anticlimax. The crime itself may be impulsive or meticulously planned, but solving it should be a real achievement.

*A mystery is rational.* Real crimes are full of uncertainty and loose ends. In reality, if there's a spot of garden soil on the carpet by the body, it may merely have been tracked in by the family dog, and have nothing to do with anything. It'll be put in an evidence bag and subjected to some fairly routine analysis, which probably won't turn up anything anyway.

In a classic mystery, that spot is probably there for a reason. If it weren't, the author wouldn't have mentioned it. (At the very least, if the spot is a red herring, the detective is given a fair chance to deduce that it isn't important.) As GM,

you need to use the same principle. Yes, this is meta-game thinking – and you should use it! Cluttering up the crime scene by describing random and unimportant details is realistic, but it gives you bored and frustrated players when lead after lead comes up dry.

*A mystery has a definite resolution, where the loose ends are tied up.* The real-world justice system is complex and slow. Criminals can make bargains with police and prosecutors for lighter sentences. It can take months, sometimes years, to bring a complex case to trial. Real detectives have to justify their methods and conclusions to jurors while being cross-examined by a skilled attorney. Even after a conviction, a criminal may challenge the detective's work in appellate courts and *habeas corpus* proceedings for years to come. And some questions may never be answered.

At the end of a mystery story, by contrast, the investigator usually has no doubt about the villain's guilt. The criminal's punishment is a high-certainty. In any case, it's beyond the scope of the plot, which is completely and satisfyingly fulfilled by unmasking the bad guy.

## RPG MYSTERIES ARE NOT LIKE BOOKS

You can also use mystery novels, movies, and television shows for ideas. There are thousands of mystery novels at your local library, bookstore, or used bookstore. If you have a large selection of television channels, you can probably find a mystery television show being shown at any hour of the day. These stories are a treasure trove of plot twists, settings, and interesting characters. Mine them shamelessly for your adventures – especially the lesser-known ones. But bear in mind that you don't have authorial control over the PC investigators. This makes an enormous difference in what you can expect to get away with. Here are some things you need to remember:

*The mystery author and the reader are on opposite sides.* Like the audience at a magic show, a mystery reader comes to the book expecting to be fooled, but hoping to figure out the trick. The audience follows alongside the investigator as he unravels the crime, and tries to solve the case at least as quickly as the investigator does. If the reader fingers the criminal within a few pages of the crime, he'll usually feel disappointed. If, on the other hand, he's totally baffled until the last chapter – or, better yet, sure of himself, but turns out to be completely wrong – he's likely to feel happy and satisfied!

In a game, surprising as it may sound, the GM and the players are on the same side. You want your PCs to solve the puzzle you've given them, and catch the bad guy. If they don't, they won't be happy, and neither will you! It's like running a combat adventure in which the PCs – through no fault of their own – are overmatched, fail miserably, and run away or get killed; everyone feels glum and let down.

Nobody likes to fail, even if it's reasonable that they should. Equally, nobody likes to have to sit there while an NPC expounds the solution that the players couldn't grasp. Worse, a mystery has the particular complication that the players have almost no control over the setup; if the setup isn't fair, they will blame you, and probably rightly so.

*Written mysteries are far more complicated than any RPG can ever hope to be.* The mystery writer can count on the

reader's undivided attention through the book. He can provide a map and a detailed cast of characters. If the reader is confused, he can turn back a few pages and re-read key encounters. He can set the book aside to think about it. And he'll enjoy the book even if he's fooled, as long as he's fooled fairly.

Mystery television shows and movies are much simpler; the viewer has a shorter attention span, and isn't expected to re-watch a key scene if he become confused. Still, the mystery television writer can and does ensure that everything that needs to be clarified is clarified, that all of the supporting cast are easy to remember and identify, that plot twists come at the right times and are explained clearly.

All of this is too much for players to remember. A plot that's perfectly clear on the page, or even on the screen, tends to be dizzyingly unclear to PCs caught in the middle of it. People in a face-to-face setting mishear things, misunderstand what they hear, and misremember what they understood. Furthermore, *you* only get one chance to get it right; if you explain something badly (come on, it happens to the best of us), you'll leave everyone in a muddle.

*A mystery author has complete control.* If the story logically hits a dead end, he can go back and rewrite it to avoid the problem. The author can make the detective as insightful, or as dense, as the plot requires. He controls what the investigator sees, whom he talks to, and when he makes key deductions. If the story needs a brilliant piece of reasoning to keep moving along, the detective makes it. If the story requires that the detective *not* put the pieces together until the last minute, he doesn't. If the story requires that the detective suspect the wrong person so that a second murder can occur, that's what happens. The writer determines when the investigator gets information easily from a suspect, when he picks the wrong approach and gets nothing, when he's lied to and notices it, when he's lied to and doesn't notice it.

Needless to say, you can't do that with your players. Mystery RPGs are interactive; the players, not you, are in control of the investigation. You, as GM, have no control over whether they recognize a clue, how they interpret it, whom they interview, or what questions they ask. You need to be flexible and you need to keep things simple. You need to pay

careful attention to what your PCs are doing and why. There should be multiple ways for the PCs to find key clues, rewards for clever deductions, and consequences for not thinking logically.

*Written mysteries are talky.* The centerpiece of any investigation is asking people questions. The question-asking scene can dominate the entire story. One classical mystery format can be summed up, with no exaggeration, like this:

1. The suspects assemble.
2. A crime is committed.
3. The detective interviews each of the suspects in turn.
4. The detective announces the solution.

This makes good reading, if done well, but it makes a slow RPG. After all, nothing happens! As a GM, you need to be aware of the pacing of the adventure. Think about putting action scenes in among the Q&As. Try to instill a sense of urgency. Don't let players babble on and on without getting anywhere. Summarize, rather than roleplay, small encounters whose only purpose is to give the PCs important information.

## RPG MYSTERIES ARE NOT LIKE OTHER RPG ADVENTURES

A classic RPG adventure can often be described as: "The PCs are walking through the woods/dungeon/city when a big monster/robber/gang jumps out and attacks them." (Or, alternatively, "A big monster/robber/gang is sitting there in the woods/dungeon/city when the PCs charge in and attack it.") Much mayhem ensues. The iconic fantasy dungeon or wilderness adventure, therefore, doesn't have or need much of a plot.

Mysteries do. The perpetrator has a plan. In carrying out that plan, he leaves behind clues. The investigators need to find those clues and put them together to figure out who the villain is. That means you need to come up with the clues ahead of time, make sure the PCs find them, not let the clues and subplots get too complex, and yet still fool everyone until the appropriate moment. It's particularly challenging because you have to steer very carefully between two equally dangerous reefs: railroading and thrashing.



*Railroading* takes place when you, the GM, determine that there is one and only one linear path through the adventure that will lead to the end. It's a seductive thing, because it lets you plot out a satisfyingly dramatic conclusion in advance.

But it's a weak adventure design. Usually, the players end up guiding their PCs off the path – not necessarily out of malice, but because they think differently than you do. You will then have to sit there and repeat, *ad nauseum*, some variation on this interchange:

PC: We try X.

GM: It doesn't work.

(Repeat until PCs hit upon the one true path, if they ever do.)

*Thrashing*, by contrast, results from too little GM planning. Clues, gimmicks, and plot twists don't just happen; they have to be meticulously thought out ahead of time. If the PCs are at point A, and you have no clue how to get them to point B, they may just flounder helplessly. Or, if they're really unclear on your intentions, they may go off on some completely unrelated tangent, and never reach point B at all.

You need a very clear idea of who the NPCs are, what their motivations are, how the clues fit together, and what the ultimate goal is in order to run a satisfying mystery adventure. It's not enough to just have a general idea of who's around; a good mystery proceeds through a series of discoveries, each of which builds in a dramatically satisfying way upon the others, until it reaches a logical resolution. In the worst case, not just the players but you yourself will lose the thread of what's going on, and have no idea of how to bring the adventure to a close.

## DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Now you have some idea of what not to do. Once you've said something during the session, you can't go back and change what you've established if the plot isn't working out. You can lead your players to clues, but you can't make them understand them, or make them ignore something until the dramatically right time. Short of blatant railroading, you can't be sure the PCs will discover the clues in a meaningful order, will not bypass (or kill) important information sources, or will not go off on a wild-goose chase. Do not think of this as the PCs doing something wrong. There isn't a right or wrong way to investigate an RPG mystery. There are just more or less effective ways to do it. What seemed obvious and logical to you in your planning may not seem so to them in the midst of the adventure.

You need to be flexible and quick. You need to master your adventure, so that you can improvise answers to unanticipated questions or tactics on the fly.

You need to pay attention to your players, especially when they seem frustrated and foundering. Otherwise, you'll have no idea what they are thinking when they pursue certain leads, and you may not have time in the middle of the adventure to figure it out.

And, most of all, you have to plan. The more you plan, the easier it is to control

your adventure. It's easier to steer your players in the right direction if the steering is designed into the adventure, not improvised at the table.

### KEEP IT SIMPLE!

This can't be stressed enough when you are planning your adventure. A typical Agatha Christie story can have over a dozen suspects, witnesses, and significant characters. That's a lot of NPCs if they are being introduced all at once for this adventure. Try that in a game, and it's most likely that your players won't be able to keep track of them all, will get confused, and will therefore miss vital clues.

A good rule of thumb is the *Rule of Seven*: limit yourself to seven key items of any kind per adventure. Design your plot with no more than seven named NPCs, no more than seven vital clues, and no more than seven important ideas. In fact, if you can, limit yourself to seven total items among all these categories! Established NPCs, clues, and situations don't count against this seven-item limit, but don't go overboard. You need to keep track of all of these items and facts, too.

Your players' short-term memory has limits. People tend to remember names, facts, phone numbers, and other bits of information for only a few seconds. Repeat names, dates, or other facts if you want them to stick in the player's minds. Repetition, notes, handouts, and other aids will help your players keep track of the plot.

A book or movie can have multiple plot twists, surprise endings, and clever revelations. In Christie's *Cards on the*

*Table*, for instance, there are three different and quite plausible murderers uncovered within as many chapters. Resist the temptation to be that clever in a game. One plot twist or brilliant deduction per adventure is usually enough.

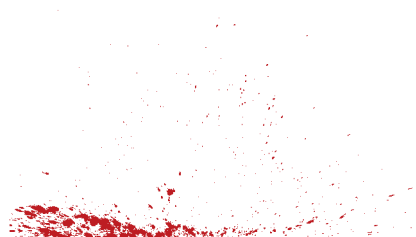
Similarly, a puzzle that's perfectly fair and comprehensible in written form is usually far too complex for a game. An adventure that seems far too simple to you, the GM, is likely to feel just about right to your players.

### INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

The single most important thing you need to think about when you plan an adventure is control of information.

As much as possible, you should plan your mystery so that every scene moves the plot forward. That means that every scene should ideally some piece of information that the investigators need, either immediately (to find the next clue) or in the long term (to unmask the guilty party at the end).

You can start with the one scene that's pretty much guaranteed to happen the way you want it to: the discovery of the crime. Identify the key clues that you want the PCs to garner from the scene – there should be two or three, at most, in accordance with the Keep it Simple! principle. Come up with some prominent ways to give them those clues. Repeat. You can also work back from the end, by identifying what data is required in order to solve the crime. Again, remember to keep it simple – don't have too many intermediate steps between the discovery scene and the climax.



A clear understanding of what information the investigators need at any moment will help you to keep the adventure on track. If they miss a key point, you can arrange to get that same information to them via another path. If they go off on a wild-goose chase, you can arrange for it to providentially give them the clue they really need. You can reveal or conceal information in order to make sure that events happen in a sensible order.

Good information management will help you avoid the twin perils of railroading and thrashing. If there's a key clue that has to be discovered, make sure that there are two or three ways to discover it – and, equally important, telegraph clearly to your players that there's something vital to be found. Identify likely spots for the investigators to get bamboozled, and think about ways to get them back on track.

## THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

One useful technique is the “path of least resistance” method. You can think of the adventure as consisting of a number of scenes: the Finding of the Body, the Interview with the Butler, the Discovery of the Hidden Will, the Search of the Mysterious Catacombs, etc. For each such scene, make sure that there is *at least* one reasonably obvious pointer that the investigators may follow to get to another scene. This can be information (the butler tells them about the old secret panel in the library), or action (they spot a mysterious stranger trying to overhear their conversation, and chase him), or out-and-out coincidence

(they happen to overhear a telephone conversation in the next room). Whatever it is, it ensures that there is something that the PCs can do that will get them further forward, even if they can't think of anything on their own.

Don't let the path of least resistance degenerate into railroading; these are things the PCs *may* do, not things they *must* do. If the investigators don't follow the cue, that's fine! (You may be able to re-use it somewhere else.) If they find a shortcut around a scene – say, by discovering the secret panel in the library on their own – that's fine too!

A good example of this kind of structure can be seen in television's *Columbo*. If you watch a few shows, you'll notice that the screenwriters always give Lieutenant Columbo something to do that gets him a little further forward. He's never sitting around scratching his head; there's always at least one little thing, one loose end, for him to pull upon.

## Information Management: An Example

Let's take a scene from the example in Chapter 4. The private detective is looking over a car belonging to a young female graduate student who allegedly committed suicide.

In this instance, the key bit of information the GM wants the private eye to find is that the gas tank is full and there is a receipt for gas purchased shortly before the suicide.

The car's interior is clean – no textbooks, no papers, no bottles to return. The only items visible are two receipts: one for the local turnpike, one for gas, both dated the day of death. (The trunk and glove box have typical items the GM can make up on the fly.)

A clean car gets rid of extraneous red herrings items, which is good GM planning. The “in-story” reason is that the victim cleaned the car before her death. Tidying things might indicate a suicide, or that she was meeting someone and wanted to make a good impression. That she got receipts and saved them suggests that this was a business trip and she wanted reimbursement later.

The gas receipt itself and the full tank of gas are the important clues. A full tank of gas means that it was filled somewhere near the site where the body was found. The receipt leads the detective to the gas station, which leads him to a security video showing the victim meeting someone at the station.

So how does the GM get the clue to the P.I. (and thus the player)?

1. Hope the investigator thoroughly checks the victim's car. (The clue that got him to this town in the first place was a traffic ticket from a local patrol officer.)

2. If the investigator does not look at the car carefully, his NPC contact (the local police officer) mentions that the car is in the impound yard and offers to let him look.

3. If the investigator still skips the car, the victim's credit card record will show a large purchase of gas on the date of her death. If the PC hasn't asked about credit card records, his NPC secretary may call and tell him this, having been checking information on the missing student in the background of the adventure.

## WRITERS' ADVICE

Aside from the peculiar technical problems of an RPG, there's still the more general problem: what makes a good mystery story?

Raymond Chandler suggested some rules for mystery writers in his essay “Twelve Notes on Murder.” These are good ground rules for GMs as well.

1. It (the crime) must be credibly motivated – plausible actions of plausible people in plausible circumstances.
2. It must be technically sound as to the methods of murder and deduction.
3. It must be honest with the reader (or, in this case, the players).
4. It must be realistic as to character, setting, and atmosphere.
5. It must have sound story value apart from the mystery – the investigation must be an adventure worth reading (or playing).
6. To achieve this, it must have some form of suspense, if only intellectual.
7. It must have color, lift, and a reasonable amount of dash.
8. It must have enough essential simplicity to be explained easily when the time comes.



9. It must baffle a reasonably intelligent reader. (Or challenge a reasonably intelligent player.)

10. The solution must seem inevitable once revealed.

11. It must not try to do everything at once – it must be consistent.

12. It must punish the criminal in one way or another, not necessarily by operation of the law.

You can also consider S.S. Van Dine's *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories*, published in 1928 and available on several Internet sites. Van Dine's advice focuses on the "fair play" aspects of the mystery. For example: all clues must be

plainly stated and described; there must be no love interest to divert the story away from the puzzle; the culprit should not be the detective, one of the official investigators, a servant, a professional criminal, or a member of a secret society. Van Dine's rules have been broken by many writers in later decades, but his reasons for them are worth reading.

# A TAXONOMY OF MURDER

Now that you've got an idea of what to do and what not to do, you can start to think about your adventure. Even with the restrictions described above, though, you have a lot of choices to make. How you make them will determine how your adventure comes together.

## FORMAT

One of the most important choices is the format. A format is simply a set of interrelated conventions about who's likely to be killed, who the suspects are likely to be, how the crime is solved, and what happens thereafter. Picking a format for your mystery helps you and your players have a sense of what to expect and what to do.

Format-wise, mysteries come in four very broad subgenres – the English *cozy*, the *hard-boiled detective* story, the *police procedural*, and the *thriller*. (Fans and experts will argue about these divisions, and their subdivisions, but this is a good place to start for RPGs.) There are also a couple of related subgenres within the category of the *gimmick story*: *puzzles* and *McGuffins*.

These descriptions are frameworks, not straitjackets! Use them to help guide your thinking and to pick out what will work for you. But don't feel that you absolutely must be limited by the accept-

ed conventions. If your particular cozy needs to have a car chase in it, go ahead. If you want to require some clever deductions in the middle of your police procedural, that's equally fine.

## The Cozy

Books by authors such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, and P.D. James best reflect the traditional English mystery, or "cozy." This is the oldest clearly defined mystery genre.

If you choose a cozy format, your victim is a member of a small group of people. They're often well-known to each other – for instance, they may be members of the same extended family. If not, they may well fall into well-known types: the Retired Indian Colonel, the Talkative American Tourist, the Unpleasant Young Man. One of the major foci of the investigation will be on uncovering the complex relationships between the suspects: affairs, secret marriages, children born out of wedlock, embezzlement, a secret will, and other private matters which can provide motives for crime.

Another characteristic of the cozy is that this group of people forms a closed universe: it is highly likely, or even manifestly certain, that the criminal is one of them. To accomplish this, the cozy is often set in an isolated location: a

remote island, a mountaintop castle, a snowbound railroad car, or a family mansion that was locked up for the night. In other cases, it's clear that the only plausible motive for the crime is restricted to members of the group.

The cozy is by far the talkiest format. Many "Golden Age" cozies have no action scenes whatsoever. There will rarely be any chase scenes or violence; even the crime scene will often be described with a genteel detachment. You may want to consider modifying the cozy setup to include some more physical tension.

Your PC investigators will often be gifted amateurs or retired police officers who are accepted, perhaps with some reservations, within the small society of suspects. Commonly, the investigator is neither a cop nor a licensed private investigator; he's someone who is asked to help out in the investigation – perhaps by one of the suspects in order to clear his name, or by a third party who's convinced that the police have the wrong man.

Choose a cozy format if you want to explore the interrelationships between the NPCs in depth. The cozy setting can also be used if you want to explore an organization that your PCs often interact with, like a corporation, guild, or club. If your PCs like to move in moderate-to-high society and be rewarded with a reputation for solving difficult puzzles, this is a good format to choose.

## To Murder, or Not to Murder?

Most great mystery novels are murder stories. Short stories are quite a bit more variable, but even there, murder leads other crimes by a wide margin.

Most of *GURPS Mysteries* will follow this convention by assuming, if need be, that the crime is a murder. However, much of the information here can be adapted to most kinds of crime: robbery, arson, even white-collar crimes.

## The Hard-Boiled Story

The works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Mickey Spillane, and Robert Parker are all typical of the hard-boiled detective mystery, which developed in the 1920s. Hard-boiled stories often adapt easily to RPG adventures because the detective is a cynical but honorable tough-guy, a modern-ish knight-errant similar to many PC adventurers.

If you choose a hard-boiled format, your victim is generally involved somehow in organized crime, prostitution, and other facets of the seamy underside of society. In the course of the adventure, the investigators will be threatened by police officers, politicians, criminals, and possibly even their own client. People will try to intimidate them. People may try to shoot them.

A hard-boiled format means more action. There are likely to be several fist-fights, perhaps a gunfight, maybe a car chase. The crime scene will include more blood and gore, often described with a touch of sensationalism. There's still a lot of talking to people, but the talk scenes are more confrontational.

Your PC investigators will often be former police officers who retired or quit after becoming disillusioned with a corrupt system. Unlike the cozy investigator, who often has some nebulous independent income, the hardboiled detective often struggles to pay the bills and keep his office open. He is tempted by debt to take jobs that border on illegal. Often, the people he encounters dislike detectives in general, and dislike him in particular. Many suspect he too is corrupt, and refuse to believe that he might be trustworthy or honorable.

Choose a hard-boiled format if you want to explore the underside of your setting, expose hypocrisy and corruption, and pit your PCs against an uncaring world. If your PCs like small victories, a job well done, and a client's life or reputation saved, this is a good format.

## *The Procedural Story*

The police procedural story is about how dramatically realistic police officers solve fairly realistic crimes. It is the youngest of the genres; the first example appeared around World War II. The genre ranges from CBS' *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* to Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novels to comparable stories set in nearly every country and time from the late 19th century onward. Often, as in the above examples, the adventure focuses on the squad or the unit, not on individual "star" investigators.

Procedurals try to accurately reflect how real detectives operate. The story may showcase forensic techniques like ballistics, DNA, and fingerprints. If you and your players are versed in the details of actual police work and forensic methods, then a procedural format gives

you a chance to put that knowledge to good use.

If you choose a procedural format, your victim can be anyone. Typically, your victim is an ordinary person going about an ordinary life. The victim might be attacked by a criminal, stalked and killed by an old flame, or otherwise caught up in the sort of crime you could find in your daily newspaper. During the course of the adventure, the investigators will often have to balance several competing cases and obligations. The cases are often thematically interrelated, but not committed by the same villain. The investigators are typically police officers or government officials. A panicky suspect may threaten them, but most criminals will not plot to kill a police officer. Crime scenes tend to be gory, but described with clinical detachment.

Procedural investigations can be almost as talky as cozies, although the potential for violence is always lurking in any police setting. They can also turn dull if you emphasize only the routine, form-filling, evidence-tracing side of police work. Consider borrowing some of the cleverness of the cozy, or the personal edge of the hard-boiled story to liven up the adventure.

The investigators will typically be police detectives or crime scene specialists. Often they have families and family obligations. The detective may have to make a choice between interviewing one more witness and missing his son's recital or his daughter's soccer game. Police detectives may come across evidence of police corruption or misdeeds and be placed in a difficult ethical situation.

Choose a procedural format if you and your players are interested in how police and specialists do their job. A procedural emphasizes relentless procedure, which wears away the villain's elaborate plots and schemes. Generally, your PCs will be rewarded with little more than a pat on the back from their lieutenant, or maybe a commendation from the chief, and the gratitude of the victims' families.

## *The Thriller*

The thriller format is either a kind of mystery, or a closely-related genre, depending on whom you ask. The setup is definitely mystery-like, usually in a hard-boiled or procedural format. However, the thriller format has some

instructive differences from the straight mystery, which in many ways make it an excellent source for RPG ideas. Thriller writers range from Ian Fleming to Tom Clancy, to say nothing of the vast number of thriller movies.

Here's one of the key differences: in a typical mystery, the big crime tends to happen at the start of the adventure, when the investigators come across the corpse or the crime scene. The adventure is about figuring out what happened, restoring order, and punishing the malefactor. A thriller often starts with a crime, but that tends to be a prelude to a much bigger crime that the hero must stop. The adventure is about discovering what's *really* going on that prompted the initial incident.

Thus, if you choose a thriller format, the initial crime is just a prelude to the real problem. For instance, a murder victim might be an accomplice with cold feet, or an undercover officer who stumbled into the crime, or a guard killed while the villain stole an item vital to his scheme. During the course of the adventure, the investigators encounter ever-more-sinister and powerful forces. The villain and his minions escalate the seriousness of their crimes as they build to their big scheme. Often, the plot has a "bait-and-switch" aspect: the investigators think they understand their foe's plot, but then suddenly realize it is much larger and more dangerous than they expected.

Another common element of thrillers is betrayal. This is similar to the traditional setup of the cozy, where the objective is to have the criminal be the one person nobody suspected. In the thriller, that person is frequently someone who was ostensibly on the same side as the investigators – superior, love interest, sidekick, helpful specialist, and so on. You need to be careful about using this trick in an RPG; it gets old fast. However, that's not to say that you can't use it sometimes, especially if you've had the chance to establish the betraying NPC as friendly over several adventures.

Crime scenes tend to be spectacular. Schemes tend to be grand. There's a lot of action, which may or may not make a lot of sense. This is the format to choose if you want an over-the-top Hollywood cinematic adventure. However, players have a lot more time to think about logic and plausibility in a game than do audiences in a theater, and may catch you out if you're careless; you may want

to temper the standard thriller setup with the more reasoned approaches of the other formats.

The PCs will typically be police detectives, federal agents, crime scene specialists, or, more rarely, private investigators or lone geniuses. Often they are the only ones who see and understand the relationship between seemingly disparate cases and must persuade their superiors to give them the resources and personnel to stop the big scheme. They may even be discredited or implicated, and have their superiors and coworkers trying to imprison or kill them.

Choose a thriller format if you want a fast-paced adventure with a race against the clock, a big chase, or a large fight at the end. The higher the stakes, the greater the recognition and reward for the PCs at the end of the day. One very desirable feature about the thriller as an RPG format is that it avoids one of the big problems in a traditional mystery: the climax is not a talking scene, but an action scene.

### *The Gimmick Story: Puzzles and McGuffins*

There are two minor formats within the gimmick subgenre: the puzzle mystery and the McGuffin quest.

Locked-room mysteries are the classic puzzle stories, going back to Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*: a person is murdered, but it seems impossible that the murderer could have gotten into and/or out of the murder site. In these and similar puzzle-story setups, character and plot are secondary to explaining a seemingly physically impossible conundrum. The perpetrator may even be obvious, in which case it's the means that are mysterious. Puzzle stories are like elaborate dungeon traps or riddle games: the point of the story is to have the PCs scratch their heads for a while until they figure out how the trick works.

Dorothy Sayers' short story, "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will," is also a puzzle story. Lord Peter Wimsey helps a disfavored niece find her wealthy uncle's will naming her as his heir. The uncle cleverly hid his final will, leaving behind an earlier one that named a charity as his heir. The young niece will only be rewarded with his estate if she (or Lord Peter) can outwit the dead uncle's last puzzle and find the will. Poe's *Purloined Letter* is another

version of this kind of story, although the gimmick is hard to use because it is so well known.

McGuffin stories are about a mysterious object (or sometimes a person) that the characters pursue. The object exists to drive the plot and give the characters a reason to run around killing people, stealing objects, betraying each other, and generally causing trouble. Character and clues are of secondary importance. *The Maltese Falcon*, for instance, is a classic McGuffin: Hammett has to explain what the Falcon is to satisfy the audience, but the explanation is mere detail, and not vital to the plot.

McGuffin plots are also classic fantasy tropes. In that guise, the PCs are looking for the lost king, the eight parts to the magic wand, or an honest man.

From the *GURPS Mysteries* perspective, there is not much to say about the gimmick story. It can be done in any setting and with any group of characters whose abilities will not let them immediately bypass the gimmick or find the McGuffin. Generally, you set up the problem, and then let the characters try various ideas until they figure it out.

## **MATCHING THE MYSTERY TO THE CHARACTERS**

*"And I had a sudden wrenching urge to shed my own identity and be somebody else. Somehow I had managed to lock myself into this unlikely and unsatisfying self, this Travis McGee, shabby knight errant, fighting for the small, lost, unimportant causes, deluding himself with the belief that he is in some sense freer than your average fellow, and that it is a very good thing to have escaped the customary trap of regular hours, regular pay, home and kiddies, Christmas bonus, backyard bar-B-cue, hospitalization, and family burial plot."*

— Travis McGee,  
*The Empty Copper Sea*

So who are the PCs who will confront this mystery adventure? Police officers? Wisecracking shamuses? Retired geniuses with a penchant for puzzles? Members of a crack forensic science team? Criminal defense lawyers and their investigators? Complete amateurs caught up in mysterious events?

If you're starting up a new campaign from scratch, and you want to run some mysteries in it, you'll want to think a lot about what kind of characters you'll suggest and accept. If you want to concentrate on cozy-style adventures, for instance, you won't want a group full of James Bond-style spies or Spenser-style gumshoes.

If you're thinking about running a mystery in an existing campaign, you'll need to think about matters the other way around: what kind of characters do you have in your group, and what mystery formats are appropriate to them? (Incidentally, a mystery offers good chances to reward a character for a minor skill – make that obscure language or hobby skill important!)

The first thing to think about is whether the characters will be insiders or outsiders – that is, whether they'll be investigating in some official capacity, or as nosy private citizens. There are advantages and disadvantages either way. If the PCs are outsiders, for instance, they're not subject to orders, and can investigate whatever they want. They're not obliged to follow official procedure. And they can move on to other adventures when the mystery is done. On the other hand, they have no official standing: people don't have to answer their questions, and the real authorities may interfere with or even arrest them. For insiders, it's the other way around: they have a lot of authority, but they also have a lot of restrictions.

At a more detailed level, you can think of detectives as divided into four loose types: *eccentric genius*, *private eye*, *cop*, and *specialist*. There's a rough correlation between the four investigator types and the four formats: cozy = eccentric genius, hard-boiled = private eye, police procedural = cop, thriller = specialist. It's not a hard-and-fast rule, though. Of the other possible combinations, some work better than others.

There are also some stories in which the detective is not just an outsider but a complete naïf, who's thrust into the tale by circumstance and has no special skills for it. Most of Dick Francis' racing-oriented mysteries, for example, feature this kind of protagonist. This can be fun on occasion, but in general players will be happier if their characters can feel competent and effective in whatever situations commonly occur.



## The Eccentric Genius

The eccentric genius detective is usually a larger-than-life character, with a wide variety of odd habits, gifts, quirks, and talents. He's often accompanied by a bright sidekick who chronicles his adventures. Famous eccentric geniuses include Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey, Margery Allingham's Albert Campion, Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe, and television's Lieutenant Columbo.

The genius is demonstrably smarter and more observant than anyone else in the adventure. Some geniuses, like Hercule Poirot, are not shy about making sure everyone else realizes how brilliant they are; others, like Miss Marple and Lt. Columbo, prefer to be underestimated by their opponents.

The genius may be an insider or an outsider. He's often a complete amateur, in which case the officials may try to stop him investigating unless he has some excuse to do so – Wimsey, for instance, is both an aristocrat and a close friend of Inspector Parker of Scotland Yard.

On the other hand, a genius may be, at least nominally, a professional. He may make his living as a private investigator, like Sherlock Holmes; but, if so, he is totally unlike the common gumshoe. He may even be a policeman, like Lt. Columbo or Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse; but, if so, he gets his results via brilliant insights, not through plodding police routine.

It's hard to GM for an eccentric genius in an RPG unless the player himself has similar skills. It would be very difficult, for example, to give a player enough information to have him respond with one of Holmes' classic deductions about an NPC's life or recent activities. You could, however, give the player a skill roll and the result of his observation and let him invent (within reason) an explanation for how he came to that conclusion.

It's even harder to have a game with two or more eccentric geniuses in it. If you want to have an eccentric genius PC, consider encouraging the other PCs to be other types of characters. For a written example, look at Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe mysteries: Nero Wolfe is an eccentric genius, but Archie Goodwin, his sidekick and narrator, is an expert private eye.

The genius detective generally works best in the cozy format. He's also found in thrillers, often as a brilliant scholar or scientist caught up in the adventure. He's almost never seen in the police procedural, and is almost equally rare in the hard-boiled subgenre.

## The Private Eye

The private eye is a tough professional investigator. He generally works alone, or with a few trusted allies. The abrasive nature of his personality and his stubborn unwillingness to follow any rules make it difficult for him to work in a team. The private eye is tougher than anyone else in the adventure, and generally will prove it whenever challenged. Famous private eyes include Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer, John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee, Robert Parker's Spenser, and television's Jim Rockford. Recent years have also seen a spate of female private eyes, such as Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone and Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski.

The private eye is, almost quintessentially, an outsider rather than an insider. He may have one or two trusted friends in law enforcement – Marlowe has Bernie Ohls; Spenser has Martin Quirk – but as a rule his relationship with the authorities ranges from cold to actively hostile. In many cases, the official forces of law and order are organizationally indifferent or actively corrupt, leaving the private eye as the only recourse for justice.

The private eye is a natural archetype for a player character. He's tough, he's independent, he's skilled, he's heroic in a kind of down-market way. He doesn't have to make spectacular deductions like the eccentric genius, although he can't afford to be stupid. He doesn't need to have a lot of detailed technical knowledge, either, which reduces the chance that the GM will have to do a great deal of exposition in order to advance the plots.

You can have more than one private eye in an adventuring group, but it's helpful to have some clear relationship among the detectives. They might be partners, co-employees of the same larger organization, or rivals thrown together for the adventure. Give the private eye character opportunities to intimidate witnesses, make wisecracks to authority

figures, and show off his underworld contacts.

The private eye generally works well in a hard-boiled format. He's also a good match for a thriller. He is rarely found in cozies, and he's almost never found in procedurals: if the cops are doing the investigation, the gumshoes are generally impediments, not heroes.

## The Cop

Cops – including local police, federal agents, and the occasional spy – are common protagonists. Some geniuses are (nominally) policemen by profession, but the true police hero doesn't depend on genius; he depends on professionalism, procedure, thoroughness, and the unshakable logic of police technique. Famous police detectives include the cast of Ed McBain's 87th Precinct series, Tony Hillerman's Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn, P. D. James' Adam Dalgliesh, Det. Leonard Briscoe and his partners from NBC's *Law and Order*, and Captain Frank Furillo's squad from NBC's *Hill Street Blues*. Several of these examples are groups; the unit, not just an individual detective, is the focus of the adventure.

Police detectives are as much insiders as private eyes are outsiders. They can be good PCs, but players may chafe at the restrictions implicit in the job. Cops, after all, have to do paperwork, follow orders, and give *Miranda* warnings to suspects. On the other hand, they can go anywhere and question anyone, plus they get completely legal weapons. They also have access to police laboratories and forensic specialists, which are great ways for the GM to give out clues and hints.

Be cautious when you mix law enforcement officers and civilians in the same adventure. PCs tend to bend or break the law. A police character who takes his duties very seriously may oppose the other PCs' efforts to take shortcuts, thus diverting the adventure into an inter-party squabble. Non-cop PCs, on the other hand, are unlikely to have much to do during any scenes that involve "official" police work.

Police detectives are, of course, especially common in procedurals. However, they're not uncommon in cozies (either as investigators, or as assistants to eccentric geniuses), and they're seen in thrillers as well. They don't generally appear in hard-boiled mysteries, unless they're rogue cops striking out on their own against an ineffective or compromised department.

## The Specialist

The specialist is anyone who is not a police officer, but works with the authorities frequently enough to be part of the extended police “family.” Specialists can be lawyers, investigative reporters, prosecutors, forensic experts, medical examiners, social workers, psychologists, and so forth. Prominent fictional specialists include Cyril Hare’s lawyer, Francis Pettigrew; Aaron Elkins’s anthropologist, Gideon Oliver; Patricia Cornwall’s forensic pathologist, Kay Scarpetta; psychologist and psychopath Hannibal Lecter from *The Silence of the Lambs*; and television’s medical examiner, Dr. Quincy.

The specialist is usually an insider, but he can be an outsider who gets swept into the center of the adventure by happenstance or coincidence. This is a good archetype for a PC “expert” who consults for the police and has other adventures. However, it can occasionally be frustrating, because a real specialist has a great deal of professional knowledge that most players lack; you may end up telling the player “Well, your character knows that . . .” a lot, which is not particularly interesting. If you’ve got a specialist in your group, give him something to do beside roll dice and have you tell him what he finds.

Specialists mix well with other types of characters, including other specialists. It would be perfectly possible, though perhaps not plausible, to have a party composed entirely of specialists, such as the forensic team in CBS’ *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*.

Specialists can be used in any format, although they’re least common in hard-boiled stories – it’s hard to be a convincing two-fisted, hard-drinking, .38-toting evidence technician. They’re common in procedurals, in which it’s the specialist’s procedure rather than everyday police work that’s highlighted. They’re almost equally common in cozies, where their specialized knowledge allows them to rival the eccentric genius for brilliant detective work. Perhaps their most typical role is in thrillers, where they’re often crack information specialists unexpectedly thrust into fieldwork.

## PLOT STRUCTURES

A mystery is two stories in one: the story of the crime, and the story of the

## Single Adventures and Campaigns

Occasional mystery adventures spice up a campaign. They’re a change of pace, a chance to use social advantages and skills, a way to meet important NPCs, and a way to interact with parts of the setting the PCs don’t often see.

One caveat is that mystery adventures work best with a small group of players. Detective stories usually have a single private detective and a sidekick assistant, or two police detectives working as partners. Having two characters gives each a chance to discuss ideas with someone they can completely trust – a rare thing in the investigators’ world. Large ensemble groups are rare, and hard to handle. If you have a large group of PCs, you may have trouble keeping them all interested in a mystery adventure. You might want to break your group up into smaller teams.

Sustaining suspension of disbelief in a mystery campaign can be harder. If your PCs have to solve too many challenging crimes in the same place or short period of time, it may strain the setting’s plausibility. Setting up a whole mystery campaign is a great deal of work. You may want to vary adventures. A mystery campaign can easily shade into police work (**GURPS Cops**) or espionage (**GURPS Espionage**). Private investigators may work as bodyguards, bounty hunters, or repo men between more intellectual adventures.

Either way, before you start working on a mystery adventure, find out if your players *like* mystery stories. What sort do they read or watch? How familiar are they with the standard tropes? Will it be hard to create a mystery that will challenge them?

There’s a lot of talk in a mystery. Investigators get most of their information by talking to NPCs, observing their actions and reactions, and listening to their answers. Chases and fights happen, but a mystery is a duel of wits, not fists. If your PCs are combat-optimized, then you may want to use a hard-boiled style rather than a cozy, so that they’re not completely lost.

There are also a lot of details in a mystery. The vital clues are usually obscured by lies and red herrings. Players who are good at remembering details or who take good notes will have an advantage over players who do not pay attention, just as players who have a good sense of a combat system have an advantage over those who don’t. If your players are not good with details, you may want to use a ball-of-twine rather than a jigsaw-puzzle style (below) to give them a clear path through the adventure.

investigation. Your chosen format should give you some ideas how and why the crime occurred, and maybe some ideas for NPCs and events during the investigation. The characters in your campaign should give you some ideas as to what kinds of skills and attitudes the party will have to work with. Now you need to think about the structure of the adventure.

There are two basic plot structures: the *jigsaw puzzle* or “fair-play” mystery, and the *ball-of-twine* mystery. They are both a fair amount of work to prepare and to GM. The big difference is how much information is given to the PCs at once.

### Jigsaw Puzzles

Picture a large puzzle scattered on the table. The pieces are the clues. They’re all right there in front of your nose. You just have to fit them together in the right order to solve the crime. For example, in the third-to-last chapter of Christie’s *Evil Under the Sun*, Hercule Poirot lists the following clues:

- Gabrielle No. 8 (a perfume)
- A pair of scissors
- A bottle thrown from a window
- A green calendar
- A packet of candles
- A mirror and a typewriter
- A skein of magenta wool
- A girl’s wristwatch
- Bath-water running down the waste-pipe.

Poirot opines that “each of these unrelated facts must fit into its appointed place. There must be no loose ends.” And, in the next two chapters, he proceeds to fit each of them together to figure out who killed the victim and why. The reader, on the other hand, is likely to be baffled as to why Poirot finds these clues, and not the dozen other red herrings offered up earlier in the book, so significant – until the explanation.

The puzzle pieces all fit together. In sum, one suspect gave her alibi based on the time told to her by the girl wearing the wristwatch, which had been secretly altered by the suspect herself to be 20 minutes fast. Thus, the suspect’s alibi could be discounted. After using the watch to establish her alibi, the suspect (actually one of the killers) later altered the watch back to the correct time while the girl was swimming. Once Poirot realized the suspect had access to the watch before and after the girl told her what time it was, he knew the alibi was unreliable.

The candles were used by the girl to curse her step-mother (the victim). She believed the curse had caused her step-mother’s death, and so had been acting suspiciously. One of the killers discovered the girl reading a book on witchcraft, saw the candles, and used that to frame the girl as an alternate suspect.

The skein of magenta wool, mirror, and typewriter all show that another witness lied. A witness was fetching the skein of wool and did not see another witness who he should have encountered if the second witness’ story was true. The lying witness said he saw in the mirror another suspect typing, which he could not have seen at that moment and therefore had to move the typewriter later to establish his story.

The bottle contained body makeup used to help one of the actual killers disguise herself as the tanned victim. The green cardboard was used to create a hat similar to the one worn by the victim to hide her face from a witness who discovered her “body,” while in the company of the second killer. (During this time, the real victim was alive and hiding in a nearby cave from the female killer, whom she thought was just an intruder who had come across her during a planned rendezvous with the other killer. The scent of the victim’s distinctive perfume was in the cave when Poirot examined the area.) Thereafter, the witness went to get the police while the two murderers

killed the victim, put her body on the beach where the female killer had lain, and used the scissors to cut up the hat and dispose of it. The female killer then took a bath to rinse off the body makeup and threw the bottle out the window. The pair accidentally left the scissors behind near the body.

together. Or, almost as bad, they may see the very first piece, make an intuitive leap, uncover the villain at once, and end your adventure before it starts.

Another issue with the jigsaw-puzzle structure is that, once the pieces are on the table, you have little room to maneuver. If the investigators put the

## Is Failure an Option?

One of the last (but most vital) style choices you need to consider is how much effect skill rolls and “dice luck” will have on your adventure.

One approach is to strictly let the dice fall as they may. If the PCs do not have the right information gathering and analysis skills, or fail their rolls, then they miss the clues. It’s possible for the PCs to fail based on the die rolls. If they do, oh well . . . the crime is never solved, and the adventure ends on a flat note.

The opposite approach is to focus on the story. Skills and dice results are irrelevant if they prevent the PCs from solving the puzzle. In this case, it doesn’t really matter who the PCs are, or what their skill rolls are, or what they do; you’ll guide them to the solution no matter what.

Most games fall somewhere between these extremes. If you want the players to be able to solve the adventure, you can minimize the effects of bad dice luck by having multiple ways to get the same clue. You can also cheat – discreetly! – to ensure that the PCs get the vital clues. Bad dice luck can make the adventure harder, but shouldn’t by itself make the puzzle unsolvable. Don’t overuse this technique; if the players feel that failure is impossible, the adventure will feel like a pointless exercise.

Many jigsaw puzzle mysteries use the cozy format, and vice-versa. The combination of the two is often called a “classical mystery.” There are a few procedural stories that use this format; Ed McBain, for instance, uses it in several books featuring the master criminal called “the Deaf Man.” It is rarely found in a hardboiled story or a thriller.

In a jigsaw-puzzle structure, it’s easy for the detective to acquire information. Witnesses talk freely, the police surgeon tells him an approximate time of death, and clues are found all over the place. It’s the interpretation of that information that’s hard, often requiring feats of deductive intellect.

Jigsaw-puzzle plots are easy to plan, but hard to run in an RPG. The GM can assemble the crime scene, throw in a bunch of suspicious NPCs, leave some loose ends, and let the investigators find the ends in any order. The players have to discard the red herrings and assemble the puzzle. They may spend a fair amount of time thrashing about without making any progress because they’ve missed a puzzle piece, added in a red herring, or just can’t see how it goes

pieces together, the mystery is solved. If they don’t it isn’t. There’s very little room for degrees of success or failure, and little opportunity to nudge the plot in one direction or another.

## Balls of Twine

The classic fantasy dungeon has a ball-of-twine plot structure. The adventurers enter at one point – metaphorically, one end of a big tangle of string. They proceed room-by-room in a certain order until they get to the big fight. There may be side-paths and detours, but generally the heroes must face specific encounters in an order the GM has set up in advance.

The ball-of-twine mystery plot works the same way. The detectives start with a single fact or thing to investigate. That fact leads them to the next fact, which leads to the next fact, and so on. They never have to sit down, scan over a big batch of clues, and say “Aha!” If they keep following the thread, eventually they get all the information they need to confront their adversary.



## Is There a Shortcut?

The converse of bad dice luck is the player who comes up with a brilliant intuitive leap that solves the mystery straight off. For instance: The villain walks into the room. You describe him. A PC exclaims, "Jim, this man's a Klingon!" And your plot crumbles under your feet.

As discussed above, you can limit the likelihood of a shortcut by limiting the amount of information the investigators have at any one time. If you don't give out the key clues until the PCs have done a fair amount of investigating, then it's less of an anticlimax if they solve the mystery on the first big clue.

Have some ideas about what to do if the PCs figure things out early. The villain can run, grab a hostage, or fight. Capturing him may become an adventure in its own right.

Alternatively, the detectives may still need to prove their case. In television's *Columbo*, the audience knows who the killer is and how the crime was committed from the start. Often Lt. Columbo suspects that person fairly quickly. The adventure becomes not "whodunit," but how will you prove it.

You can create an emergency backup villain, whom you can cast in the adversary role if your primary villain gets caught immediately. This is very, very difficult to pull off, since you'll need to prepare a plausible and dramatically convincing case that fits either your primary villain or the fallback villain. Therefore, as tempting though it may seem, you probably shouldn't switch bad guys in mid-crime unless you've thoroughly prepared for it.

In a thriller, the criminal who's caught may be only a henchman of a more powerful adversary. Or he himself may have a loyal henchman who will carry out his plan in his absence, or an ambitious underling who will use the same setup for something completely different.

Be flexible, and think a bit about the worst cases when you plan the adventure.

In a ball-of-twine plot, it's often hard for the detective to acquire information. He may have to tail suspects, intimidate mobsters, and even dodge the law. But the information itself is usually fairly clear, and doesn't require a brilliant analytical leap before it can be followed up.

Ball-of-twine plots are harder to plan, but easier to run. You have to have a very clear idea of how each scene leads onto the next one. A flowchart can be useful. More importantly, you have to be very careful to think about alternative paths at almost every step, since you want to avoid railroading the players. You may

find yourself bogging down in an endless series of alternatives: "If they do A, then B; if they do C, then D; if they do E, then F, unless they did A . . ."

On the other hand, a ball-of-twine plot lets you present the clues in your preferred order, along with the appropriate distractions and red herrings. Since the PCs are only getting one clue at a time, you have some control over when they have enough information to make a brilliant leap of logic that solves the case.

It's less likely that they will thrash about aimlessly in a ball-of-twine plot, since – ideally – there's always something for them to do. On the other hand, the PCs may feel railroaded if they don't believe that they can step away from the twine to follow some other path that looks interesting. You need to make sure that there is more than one path to success. Don't punish them for doing something inventive that ignores the breadcrumb trail; if it actually makes progress, give them the clue they are looking for.

## Mixed Format

You may find it advantageous to mix elements of the jigsaw puzzle and the ball of twine. Your overall structure probably will be mostly one of the two, but you can work in individual stages that follow the alternative paradigm. For instance, rather than having one big jigsaw puzzle, you can have a number of smaller ones that the investigators have to solve in succession, following a ball-of-twine path from one to the other. Or you can have an overall jigsaw puzzle, but the gathering of the pieces can follow a ball-of-twine route.

# DEEP BACKGROUND: THE CRIME'S STORY

Remember that a mystery is really two intertwined stories: the story of the crime, and the story of the investigation. You control the story of the crime; the players largely control the story of the investigation. You need to set up the crime in such a way that the investigation flows smoothly. The work you do in establishing the back story is like an iceberg: the players will never see most of it, yet it's vital as a foundation for the bits that show.

Plausibility (which is not the same as realism) is your goal. You can get away with about one amazing coincidence; everything else needs to follow logically from the set-up you create. This is particularly important in campaigns that include magic, super-science, or the supernatural. The players, not just their characters, need to understand what is possible and not possible in the setting in order to solve the mystery.

You've heard it before, you'll hear it again: keep it simple. You might think it's easy to simplify an adventure in mid-stream. It is easy to do, but it's hard to do well. By the time you realize that things are too complicated, your players are probably utterly confused, and trying to simplify will lead to a tangle of loose ends and anticlimactic resolutions.

## THE ADVERSARY

The adversary drives the plot. You can start with the crime and design a person who would commit it, or start with a villain and think about what he might do. Either way, the villain needs to be a foe worthy of the PCs' efforts. He's larger than life, especially in a thriller. He's clever, resourceful, and devoted to the success of his crime and his escape. Were it not for the PCs, he'd get away with it.

The term "villain" is used a lot in this book. This is deliberate. The villain is the bad guy, the adversary, the criminal, the murderer. A mystery villain is (usually) clearly a bad person intent on doing bad things. He may present a facade of social respectability, but inside is an amoral,

cunning person who will do anything to achieve his goals. If you think of him as an honorable or sympathetic adversary, you may risk an anticlimactic ending as the PCs debate how to resolve the case. If you think of him as just a murderer, you may subconsciously miss the other possibilities for crime. You should think of him, and portray him, as a villain.

This does not mean your villain must be a scene-chewing caricature. He may be a study in contrasts. He may have a respected, even saintly demeanor, and a dark underside. Or perhaps he's a vicious, unscrupulous man who cares deeply about his family (in his own dark way) or has a rigid code of conduct. He must be sufficiently wicked to be worthy of capture and of punishment. In a hard-boiled or procedural format, you can

introduce some moral ambiguity, even give the villain a convincing rationale for his actions, while keeping him firmly worthy of his fate. A cozy doesn't generally introduce moral ambiguity, although there are some exceptions.

The antagonist must be introduced, at least by reference, early in the adventure. Even in police procedurals, the detectives often have a minor encounter with the villain as an informant, witness, or chance bystander. He might be one of the logical suspects in the crime, or he might be a common person linking several seemingly independent crimes. If the perpetrator is someone whom the PCs never hear of until the final scene, they'll be rightfully dissatisfied.

### Motive

Why did this person commit this crime? Need, greed, power, passion, fear, and a need to dominate and control are typical motives. How did he benefit from his misdeeds? How do the drives that made him a criminal show up otherwise in his life? How has his crime changed his behavior? Who has he told, if anyone?

The villain's mental disadvantages should be part of his reason for breaking the law and provide clues that might lead the investigators to him.

If the crime is one of passion, give your antagonist disadvantages like Bad Temper, Berserk, Bloodlust, Bully, Fanaticism, Impulsiveness, Jealousy, Obsession, or Sadism. This logically leads to spur-of-the-moment crimes often fueled by drugs or alcohol. A classic passionate killer is the abusive spouse who kills his partner when she demands a divorce, then tries to cover up her death as an accident. Such crimes are good fodder for procedurals and hard-boiled stories. They're less good for setting up a cozy or a thriller, which usually require that the criminal have a cunning and well-thought-out plan.

If your crime is about a big score, give the criminal disadvantages like Gluttony, Greed, or Miserliness. The logical result is a financial crime like embezzlement and fraud, or possibly homicide. A classic greedy killer is a man who kills to prevent a wealthy relative from changing his will from favoring the villain to favoring another heir. This is most common in cozy mysteries, but it's useful across the board.

## The Mark of Cain

Real-world killers aren't much like their mystery counterparts. The cool, composed killer who casually commits murder, then attends a tea party without missing a beat, is almost entirely a fictional creature.

When a person kills another human being, he breaks the most fundamental rule of every human society. This can have significant psychological consequences. Even those whose killing is sanctioned by their society, like soldiers, police officers, or duelists, are likely to have some psychological reaction, especially if their family, friends, and society are ambivalent in approving of their acts.

Those who study modern killers say that their sleep is disturbed by nightmares. They often have eating disorders (either no appetite or overeating comfort food). They withdraw from social activities, especially if talking about their acts would make those around them uncomfortable. (Uncaught murderers often withdraw from society to avoid saying or doing something that would give themselves away.) They often have sexual dysfunction (either an inability to have intercourse or a heightened desire for it). They may want to visit their victims' graves and justify themselves to the dead, or to their relatives. (Police often secretly watch murder victims' graves to see if their killer makes just such a visit.)

These sudden changes in a killer's behavior will be obvious to those who know him well, even if they do not understand why the change is important. If the killer is an actual sociopath, the change in behavior may come before the crime, when he is working himself into the mindset to kill, and with a return to calmness afterward.

The "Mark of Cain" doesn't just affect criminals. It has been observed in modern soldiers and police officers who take a life with legal justification. Whether similar symptoms affect dueling Musketeers, medieval knights, Viking raiders, or Japanese samurai is up to the GM. The key seems to be whether the character's peers and society are uncomfortable with his actions and being around someone who has killed, even with legal sanction.

How does this affect your setup for the crime? It depends. In a cozy or a thriller, you can pretty much ignore this information. In a police procedural, you can use it to add verisimilitude to the investigation – perhaps the cops bring in a (PC or NPC) psychological profiler. For a hardboiled story, this can be worked into the confrontation between the detective and the criminal.

Vain criminals want somebody to know how clever they have been. They often have disadvantages like Fanaticism, Jealousy, Overconfidence, or even Trademark, which lead them to taunt police. Taunting is more common in fiction than in reality; it adds tension and a personal stake to a crime. Vain criminals collect clippings about their exploits. They hint or even brag to their friends about their role in “something important.” They hang around crime scenes watching investigators. Some are police “buffs” and may try to worm their way into the investigation. A killer who strikes to get rid of a rival (a promising young rising star) or to silence someone who saw a moment of weakness is a typical vain criminal. This kind of grandiloquence lends itself well to the thriller, and can work in the police procedural as well.

The villain’s disadvantages affect his actions; those in turn affect the set of clues and leads that you provide at the start. The crime scene left by a methodical greedy embezzler trying to shield his theft from discovery should look different from the scene left by an angry fanatic who kills young minority women. Think about how the villain’s disadvantages – impulses powerful enough to drive him to kill – are otherwise reflected in his life. What sort of clues to his nature will the investigators find when talking with him; talking to his family and co-workers; in his house, office, or car?

Also think about what caused him to commit this crime *now*. A growing obsession? A sudden opportunity? An unexpected risk of exposure for some ongoing problem (affair, embezzlement, extortion, etc.)? Job or family problems that created stress he needed to relieve by crime? If the investigators study this person’s past, what will they find out?

## Means

How did this villain commit this crime? Was the criminal *organized*, *disorganized*, or a mix of the two?

Organized criminals are smart and socially adept. They plan their crime and bring with them all the necessary tools and weapons. They have a plan for entry and escape, and leave minimal evidence at the scene. An organized offender likes control of the victim, of the scene, and, indirectly, of the investigation. Organized criminals are ideal for cozies

## The Least Likely Person

Above everything else, you usually want to keep the players guessing about the criminal’s identity up to the very end. The ever-popular way to manage this is the well-known ironclad alibi. However, some players may immediately sense that nobody except the culprit is likely to have such a thing, and home in on the alibied one at once.

Fortunately, there are a number of other ways to divert suspicion away from the true wrongdoer. For instance:

- The villain appears to have no motive, and indeed appears to lose heavily as a result of the crime.
- The crime appears to be the result of long planning, and the villain isn’t the planning type.
- The crime appears to be the result of a sudden impulse, and the villain isn’t the passionate type.
- The villain is someone highly unlikely due to age (a child), relation to the deceased or investigator, social status and reputation, or personality.
- The villain is someone unlikely due to his profession (physician, detective, judge, or clergy). Generally, the villain is likely to be someone “respectable” rather than a servant or employee.
- The villain seems to be another victim of an attempted attack, threats, or harm. The villain may even feign his own death, although that’s hard to do if anyone carefully examines the body.
- The villain seems to be clumsily incriminating himself to protect another. The related trick is an innocent person who tries to incriminate himself in order to protect a person he thinks is guilty (but who is also generally innocent).
- The villain actually comes to the investigators, tells them that he’s been falsely accused of a crime, and begs them to help clear his name. This sets up a strong presumption in their minds that he’s actually innocent, particularly if he seems sympathetic.

and hard-boiled mysteries, and they can be master villains in thrillers.

The disorganized criminal is a less-smart person, often with an unstable life. He strikes spontaneously, or with little planning, with the weapons and tools at hand. Often he uses sudden, excessive force, and leaves a messy crime scene with a great deal of potential evidence. The disorganized criminal has no plan. After the crime he needs to improvise an escape route; disposal of any weapons, bloody clothing, or other evidence; and possibly an alibi. Disorganized criminals are common in procedurals. They’re also found as henchmen in thrillers – their carelessness and violence may lead them to commit an unnecessary crime that brings the investigators onto the scene and starts exposing the grand scheme.

Most criminals are a mix of the two types. The crime starts as organized, but the criminal has forgotten something, or the victim has done something to make his plan go awry. Or the crime starts as disorganized, but the criminal swiftly pulls together a plan to clean up the

crime scene and divert attention from himself.

If your villain is organized, he may have left a trail the investigators can find as he acquired the means for his crime, researched his target, and tested his methods. In one poisoning case, the FBI was able to find the murderer’s fingerprints in books on poisoning he’d checked out from his local library. If your villain is disorganized, he may have chosen to dispose of items in places he was familiar with, and felt comfortable would not be observed or disturbed.

## Opportunity

What must the guilty person have been able to do, or know, to commit this crime? Is there something unusual about the place or time of the crime that fits only one suspect?

A thorough villain may try to arrange an alibi. A too-solid alibi is as good a reason for suspicion as none at all, but it takes a lot of confidence to rely on a realistically “thin” alibi.



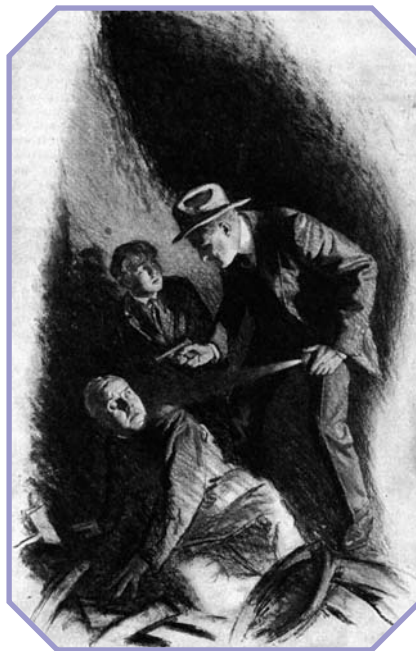
You can give your suspects alibis by hiding the time of death or the identity of the victim. Thus, for instance, the suspect can stay continuously in the company of unimpeachable witnesses from the time the presumed victim was last seen until the body is discovered. So long as no one realizes that a sleight of hand has occurred, the alibi seems rock solid. The story of the investigation will therefore center on feeding the players the clues they need to discover the trick – a good setup for a cozy mystery.

In a less intellectual setting, such as a hard-boiled or procedural story, alibis tend to be simpler. They usually consist of the bad guy getting some buddies to lie for him. If you use this setup, you can use the NPCs involved to build some good interaction scenes in which the investigators try to sweat the truth out of them.

The next chapter discusses some of the technical details involved in determining identity and time of death.

## THE VICTIM

The victim's story is also important to the crime. The investigators will be spending a great deal of time talking to NPCs about the victim. By figuring out what kind of person he was, and why someone would want to harm him, they can get closer to the villain.



The corpse isn't going to tell the detectives about himself. You'll need to show what he was like through his family, friends, and acquaintances, as well as through his clothing, his house, and his office. All of these are fertile grounds for your ongoing information management efforts – the number of ways that you can convey clues is almost infinite.

For instance: What do people think about your victim? What sort of reputation did he have? What sort of gossip

was commonly known? What secrets did he have and who knew about them? What sort of impression did he give the world through his clothing, his workspace, and his home? What were his hobbies?

Your victim should be sympathetic to the investigators. They are going to spend the adventure figuring out what happened to him and why. If they don't care about him, then the adventure will have less impact. That doesn't mean the victim has to be a saint – a homicide victim in a mystery needs to be the sort of person that several people had a reason to kill – but he needs to have some sympathetic aspect. (You can relax the rule in a procedural, though.)

## THE SUPPORTING CAST

Even more than in conventional RPG adventures, a mystery requires that you make your NPCs distinctive, memorable, and useful. Your players are immersed in the toils of a plot which seems complex, even baffling. If they have a raft of poorly delineated NPCs to contend with, their confusion and frustration will redouble. Remember the Rule of Seven!

Every important NPC should have a specific function that's germane to the plot. Most of them, in fact, should exist for the single and sole purpose of transmitting one or more pieces of information to the investigators. This is a vital piece of your information management scheme – knowing which NPCs have what information, and how and when they can be induced to part with it.

Some or all of them may need to be suspects. Spend some time deciding who's going to be a suspect, why, and how you're going to get that information into the investigators' hands. If one NPC is the obvious suspect, your players will immediately deduce (knowing the conventions) that he's not the guilty party; you should have at least *two* other NPCs who are also plausible.

Archetypes and typecasting are useful tools. Many cozy mysteries, as previously mentioned, have characters who fall into easily-identifiable stereotypes: the Dignified Butler, the Spoiled Heiress, the Absent-Minded Vicar, and so on. The authors do this because the archetype saves them time and focuses the reader on the puzzle, not the people.

## Killing Victims

Most RPG rules systems make it relatively difficult to kill a person who is not utterly surprised, asleep, bound, or otherwise helpless in one or two blows. This prevents PCs from dying too frequently, or as victims of unlucky die rolls. It also prevents them from wading through too many adversaries without a challenge. On the other hand, real people can and do die, while awake and fighting back, from a single gunshot, knife wound, or other unfortunate blow.

Most systems make it easy to kill helpless or surprised victims. If a villain is killing a victim who is neither helpless nor surprised, assume that the attacker does well with his die rolls and the victim does poorly, and fails rolls when needed. If the victim or aggressor is a PC, on the other hand, you probably will need to roll through the encounter, and may find that RPG characters are harder to kill than their real-world counterparts.

On a related note, hard-boiled and thriller detectives generally fall down on the first blow when hit with a blackjack, slipped a mickey, or otherwise incapacitated by a villain for purposes of capture. PCs, on the other hand, generally hate to be captured and will work very hard to resist it. You may want to reassure players that a convention of these genres is that their characters will not be killed by their captors while helpless, and will generally have a chance of escape or release before being tortured or seriously harmed if they keep their wits.

Another rule of thumb that's even more useful in mysteries than in standard adventures is to give each NPC one distinctive trait – either a physical trait, or a personality trait, or a mannerism, or a turn of phrase. The butler constantly rubs his nose as he talks; young Lady Pamela says “oh, er” at the start of every speech; Jack Perkins has a big droopy mustache. Once again, your objective is to eliminate confusion and muddle so that your players have a clear idea of what's going on, whom they can talk to, and what they've been told.

Make sure that the NPCs' names are distinctive, too. Don't have two NPCs with even remotely similar names – try not to even use the same initial consonant. If there's an NPC who's an unimportant background figure, signal this fact to the players by giving him an unmemorable name (“John”), or no name at all (“the gardener”). Think hard about the implications of the names you give: naming the victim's son “Harry” will give the players a completely different mental image than naming him “Reginald.” Once again, stereotypes are your friends – use them!

## THE HOOK

*“What really matters is plenty of bodies! If the thing's getting a little dull, some more blood cheers it up. Somebody is going to tell something – and then they're killed first! That always goes down well. It comes in all my books – camouflaged different ways of course. And people like untraceable poisons, and idiotic police inspectors and girls tied up in cellars with sewer gas or water pouring in, such a troublesome way of killing anyone really, and a hero who can dispose of anything from three to seven villains single handedly”*

– Mrs. Ariadne Oliver,  
*Cards on the Table*

The last stage of the story of the crime is the involvement of the PCs. This is where you set the hook, get them excited, and get set up for the investigation that is to follow.

### Professional Involvement

Some characters get paid to be involved. Police, for instance, investigate crimes because it's their job. The captain or bureau chief calls them in, gives them an address, and off they go. Or the characters' superiors might

assign them to monitor an official investigation with politically sensitive aspects, or assign them to investigate where there are no police or other officials.

Private detectives need clients. A private eye, or an eccentric genius who works as an inquiry agent, might be hired by the lead suspect's attorney, by the family, by an insurance company worried about fraud, or by anyone else with an interest in the case. An eccentric genius with good police contacts, such as Sherlock Holmes or Lord Peter Wimsey, might actually have the cops come to him.

### Personal Involvement

Professional hooks are OK, but you may be able to make the case more absorbing by giving the characters a personal stake. The victim might, for example, be someone important to the investigators. This trick is easily overused, but can still have emotional impact if the victim is someone unexpected.

The victim might also be someone unimportant who the detectives have met previously – an informant, a rival, a family member, a business associate, a contact, even a previous client. You can use the PCs' investigation as a way to posthumously provide details and depth to a minor character and suggest that NPCs have lives outside of their interactions with the PCs. You can even use it to show the PCs as reflected in the lives of those around them.

### Coincidental Involvement

It's perfectly reasonable, in some cases, for the PCs to be minding their own business when the crime happens right in front of them. This is a favorite mechanism for eccentric geniuses, many of whom appear to be mobile high-crime areas. Coincidence is less useful with private eyes, who need paying clients for both practical and legal reasons. Police detectives and specialists may stumble across crime, but for them it's not much different than a day at the office.

A variant of coincidental involvement that's good for parties who aren't primarily investigators is the bait-and-switch plot: the PCs stumble across the crime in the course of another adventure. The adventure begins as something else – a missing persons case, a divorce investigation, a simple bodyguard job, a

background check – when suddenly the party stumbles across a dead body. The stakes are raised. What was routine suddenly becomes important.

With a bait-and-switch, you need to carefully balance the original and the revised adventure goals. You can use compelling bait – our heroes are delivering vital medicine to Ceres Base when they receive an automated SOS from a nearby ship – to create narrative tension. Here, our heroes have a reason to try to resolve the problem quickly so they can get on to saving lives at Ceres. But the bait shouldn't be so compelling that it distracts from the investigation plot, otherwise the characters will just do the equivalent of calling 911 and moving along. On the other hand, if the bait is boring – our heroes are inspecting the bilge of their ship for a leak – then bring in the interruption quickly. There's only so much you can do with a routine event before you lose the PCs' interest. Once the players are bored and distracted, it can be hard to get them motivated, even with a good plot.

### Legal Involvement

You can make the investigators the suspects. This works well if the victim is a known rival or adversary of the PCs. Perhaps they've tangled with him in the past, threatened him in public, and will profit handsomely by his demise. They have an obvious incentive to clear their good names, and serious problems getting information and cooperation from witnesses and the authorities.

### Emotional Involvement

You can make the crime horrific – a child is accidentally shot in a dispute between rival gangs; a serial killer slays all but one of a college sorority house; a terrorist assassinates a local judge. This starting point often leads into a thriller plot.

### Intellectual Involvement

You can also make the puzzle itself the problem. Locked room mysteries, missing wills, or seemingly impossible crimes demonstrate that someone clever is at work. The situation may challenge the detectives to match wits with the villain.

## THE CURTAIN-RAISER SCENE

Once you've decided how to set the hook, it's time to build a scene around it. The curtain-raiser scene is vitally important in that it's the only one that you can be reasonably sure will happen as you planned. Use it to establish the key NPCs, plant some clues, and give the detectives at least one obvious thing to follow up. This is also a good scene for prepared materials – crime scene sketches, maps, and other handouts.

### *In at the Deep End*

The simplest curtain-raiser scenes involve plunging the PCs into hot water right away.

Here's one starting scene: the investigators walk into the crime location. You don't care how they got there, what equipment they brought, or what they saw before walking into the room. If those details are important, you can fill them in later. However, some players are more resistant than others to having the GM drop their characters in the midst of a situation without time to prepare equipment, spell components, and so on.

Another approach is to back up a bit and start with the detectives learning about the problem and gathering their gear. Some players may accept a "teaser" where you briefly establish the crime scene, then pause to let them decide what they might have reasonably done on the way to the scene, then proceed with the investigation. Try not to let things get too bogged down in equipment and procedure; a good mystery doesn't hinge on an investigator having the right tool or skill.

Then there's the classic film-noir curtain-raiser, useful for all private eyes and for some eccentric geniuses: "I was sitting in my office when I walked trouble." Trouble is usually a client, and – in an overused cliché – often an attractive woman. Trouble can also be an enemy coming to issue a threat, which is particularly effective if the detective doesn't know why he's being threatened.

### *The Slow Buildup*

The other approach is to bring the PCs gradually into the adventure, so that the curtain-raiser occurs before the crime is actually committed. This offers



you a chance to do some foreshadowing and plant some clues before the PCs are on guard. The problem is, it can wreck your plot before it gets started.

Cozy stories, in particular, often begin well before the crime. The reader or viewer is introduced to the victim and suspects in a social setting; the investigator is not present. This is hard to do in an RPG, since there's no omnipresent narrator to describe key scenes. Not many players will sit still for a long GM monologue full of flavor-text. They may also ask questions, the answers to which would reveal the mystery at once. In one of Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy short stories, "The Ipswich Phial," the narrator describes a woman finding something shocking on the beach. It is very important to the story that the omnipresent narrator does not describe exactly what the woman sees. If your players hear that, you can bet they'll ask you the obvious question. When they don't get an answer, they'll know something's wrong, and there goes your setup.

Another curtain-raiser is to have the detective on the scene, but not currently involved in detecting anything. In Christie's *Evil Under the Sun* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, for instance, Poirot is at the scene of the crime and interacts with victim and suspects before the death. This situation is easier to portray in an RPG; however, players are exquisitely sensitive to narrative convention, and that will cause you trouble. Some players may, consciously or not, realize the nature of the adventure and the probable victim. If they do, they're quite likely to shadow the proto-victim – making it difficult or impossible for the killer to act, and once again derailing your plans.

This is a particular problem if the PCs are present when the victim says, for

example, that he knows something important and will reveal all in the morning. Meta-game thinking will derail your plot: even the most dull-witted PC will want to shadow the soon-to-be-deceased.

Similarly, in *Murder on the Orient Express*, the soon-to-be deceased even asks Poirot for help, is refused, and is subsequently promoted to full deceased. That won't happen in an RPG. Even if your investigators refuse the request as a group, one of them is likely to keep a discreet watch, thus foiling the crime and the adventure.

For all of these reasons, the slow-buildup approach has to be handled differently in a game than in books. You may wish to have the crime take place before the PCs arrive, or have it take place off-stage while they're doing something else (another bait-and-switch setup). If you do want to have the PCs interact with the victim and suspects, have a plan in mind in case the heroes decide to protect the victim. You might even be able to take advantage of meta-game thinking by setting it up so that the person whom they expect to be the victim, isn't!

If you want to give the players a chance to warm up before being dumped into the crime scene, you can have an opening scene in the cozy detective's garden, the hardboiled detective's office, or the police detective's squad room. Give the detectives something to do in the scene – some local gossip (related or unrelated to the story), a bill-collector inquiring about overdue rent, or a bystander to banter with. Once the players have had a few minutes to get into character, you can then plunge them into the mystery with the call for help, the client walking into the office, or the dispatcher's summons.



# GOING FOR THE RIDE: THE INVESTIGATION'S STORY

*"The best way to get to the bottom of a murder is to pick out any pertinent fact which hasn't been explained and find the real explanation of that fact."*

– Perry Mason,  
*The Case of the Sulky Girl*

Now that you have created the story of the crime, you can – at long last – prepare for the story of the investigation. Ideally, you're aiming for a delicate balance of characteristics:

- The investigators are puzzled by events, but still have a clear sense of who's who and what's happening.
- There's a satisfying balance of action scenes, interaction scenes, and investigation scenes.
- The characters always have enough information to move forward, but never enough to see the whole picture until the end of the adventure.

## USING YOUR CHOSEN FORMAT

Each of the four formats – cozy, hard-boiled, procedural, and thriller – has its own typical structure and characters. That's good; it gives you, and your players, some idea about how the plot should flow. You don't need to stick slavishly to the whole set of conventions, but you shouldn't violate it without a clear purpose: the conventions have evolved together because they work well together.

### Plotting the Cozy

You'll be hiding the villain's means, motive, and opportunity under a web of social interactions. Your investigators are introduced to all of the suspects early in the adventure. Often the crime takes place in some isolated location like a resort, train, island, or small village, where it would be difficult for an outsider to have done the foul deed. Several NPCs have access to the victim and the means to commit the crime, although this may not be immediately apparent.

If there's a doctor or coroner available to provide forensic information, he'll be

able to reliably determine the cause and rough time of death. (If he might be wrong, you'll want to clearly signal the possibility during the course of the adventure.) Other evidence at the crime scene may include suggestive physical clues like broken mirrors, stopped watches, signs of things having been burned in the fireplace, dying messages, footprints, spots of dirt, and so on. None of the physical evidence is definitive, however, and forensic evidence such as fingerprints is at best mildly helpful. The cause of death may be ordinary (a gunshot) or devious (a cunningly-administered dose of poison). Figuring out how the crime was committed may itself be one of the puzzles.

Almost invariably, you'll want to use one of these four setups:

- There's no obvious suspect. Maybe nobody seems to have a motive, or everyone seems to have an alibi.
- There are a lot of obvious suspects. Everyone hated the victim, or stood to

gain by his death, and nobody has much of an alibi.

- There's an obvious suspect who apparently can't be guilty. The person who clearly benefits from the crime has an unimpeachable alibi.

- There's an obvious suspect who looks guilty, but the investigator thinks or hopes otherwise, because the suspect is a client/an old friend/not the type to have done it/etc.

All of the suspects, and possibly some of the other witnesses, will have a dizzying array of domestic secrets they want to protect, such as extra-marital affairs, blackmail, a criminal past, drug use, illegitimate children, and financial troubles.

If the villain has an alibi, it will depend on easily verifiable information, like clocks or railroad timetables or being seen in public, not on the dubious testimony of his poker buddies. If he has a strong motive, he may try to conceal it, or make it appear that someone else has an even stronger motive.

## The Great Mysteries

*"Fundamentally, it is the same careful grouping of suspects, the same utterly incomprehensible trick of how somebody stabbed Mrs. Pottington Postlewaith III with the solid platinum poignard just as she flatted on the top note of the Bell Song from Lakmé in the presence of fifteen ill-assorted guests; the same ingenue in fur-trimmed pajamas screaming in the night to make the company pop in and out of doors and ball up the timetable; the same moody silence the next day as they sit around sipping Singapore slings and sneering at each other, while the flat-feet crawl to and fro under the Persian rugs with their derby hats on."*

– Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*

You should definitely read some of the best-known authors – like Chandler, Christie, McBain, Parker, Peters, and Sayers – for ideas about the genre. If nothing else, it'll give you some idea of what your players might be expecting.

But be wary of borrowing ideas from famous authors or books, like Arthur Conan Doyle's or Agatha Christie's most notorious works. You may discover, generally midway through the adventure, that one or more of your players has either read the source, or seen a pastiche of it, and suddenly recognizes the plot twist. Things will go downhill from there.

If you borrow, change the details so that there's at least a sporting chance that nobody will recognize the source. If you borrow literally, borrow from less-well-known authors, or from series television, where the source is less likely to be remembered.

## Cozy Format

Tone: An orderly world has been set askew by a crime. Order must be restored.

- Detectives introduced.
- Crime presented along with suspects and clues.
- Investigation, in which the suspects are interviewed and motives elucidated.
- Detectives announce and explain solution.
- Postscript or dénouement.

The detectives will have an easy time finding evidence, as a rule. If NPCs lie to them, they should have a fair chance – either immediately, or as a result of some subsequent clue – to figure that out. To the unimaginative police, the evidence will either seem to make no sense at all, or to point in what the PCs think of as the wrong direction.

Therefore, your information-management scheme should consist of feeding the investigators clues that help them make sense of the information they find. If they figure it out on their own, great; if not, you'll need to be ready to prompt them.

### *Plotting the Hard-Boiled Story*

In a hard-boiled story, you'll be exploring the gritty underside of society through the gumshoes' investigation. The case will often start with something seemingly simple, such as a missing person. The detectives meet important NPCs one by one as the story progresses. While they will likely encounter the villain early in the story, they may not recognize his importance until much later.

If there is a homicide, the cause of death is obvious and violent. Physical clues, if present, are seldom more complicated than a cigarette end or a dropped business card. Forensic information is hard to come by; the police are reluctant to share anything with nosy gumshoes. Indeed, important forensic data may be missing, contaminated, or falsified by corrupt officers. It's very common for a private eye to find the crime scene before the cops and then be accused of concealing or meddling with the evidence.

The suspects may be connected through family, friends, hobbies, or employment, but their ties aren't as

obvious as in the cozy. The suspects still have their secrets, at least some of which involve social ills like prostitution, loan-shark debts, gambling, and drugs. One or more suspects may have some tie to organized crime, or to corrupt police who will threaten the detectives.

If the gumshoes have a client, the latter often has a strong motive for committing the crime. He's usually, but not always, innocent. On occasion he (or, more often, she) is trying to play the detectives for patsies. During the course of the adventure, the PCs will often have to hide the client from police, or hide evidence that incriminates their client. Meanwhile, the client will usually hide something from the detectives, often his reason for wanting the case solved.

If the investigators encounter fake alibis, they're the result of lies, bribery or intimidation – not clever manipulation of the crime scene. There's almost never any doubt about the motive for the crime, which often concerns sex, drugs, corruption, old family secrets, unscrupulous business dealings, or something similarly shady.

The detectives will have a hard time finding evidence; even the client may not be on the level. They'll be intruders at the

crime scene, and are frequently accused of complicity. The people they interview are often not forthcoming – they're drunks, grifters, gamblers, criminals, quack doctors, broken-down former actresses, haughty millionaires, and tough guys. The PCs will have to use lies, misdirection, intimidation, and seduction to get information, and the information they get may not be reliable.

On the other hand, the information they get seldom requires the kind of genius-level deductive skills that the cozy demands; it's often no more than the name and address of someone else whom the detective can visit. At worst, the detectives might pick up two seemingly unrelated facts from disparate sources, and have to see how they fit together.

Therefore, your information-management scheme should be heavily centered on the NPCs: who they are, what information they have, and how the various approaches that the PCs can try will play out. Your goal should be to keep the investigators in trouble, but always with something further to do.

### *Plotting the Procedural*

Your adventure centers on the routine of police work and of forensic experts. Some NPCs are introduced early; they're the witnesses to the crime and/or part of the victim's immediate circle. Other NPCs come to light in the course of the adventure, via the mechanisms of patient police work: questioning, following down leads, computer or forensic work, knocking on doors, and interviewing informants. The villain is often one of the initial NPCs – cops will always look first at spouses and other close acquaintances – but proving the case may take the investigation far afield.

## Hard-Boiled Format

Tone: The bad guy will win, and justice will be denied – unless a very determined investigator makes it his business to see that justice is done.

- Detectives introduced.
- Crime presented, often as a seemingly simple task that leads into the adventure.
- Investigation, focused on the heroes' struggle to overcome intimidation and obstacles.
- Confrontation: the investigators must make a moral or ethical decision.
- Dénouement, justice achieved at a price.

## Procedural Format

Tone: Hard work and steady investigation will solve the most perplexing problems.

- Detectives introduced, often simultaneously with the discovery of the crime.
- Investigation, focused on dogged police work and interesting forensic science.
- Confrontation, often in the interrogation room.
- Dénouement, arrest, and postscript about trial and conviction.

Often the case will focus on the mechanics of studying the crime scene. There can be plenty of physical evidence, as in the cozy, but it'll mostly be a lot less complicated: jimmy marks on the windows, hidden stashes of cocaine, names scribbled down in address books, receipts from restaurants, and the other minutiae of daily life. Some of the evidence may be hidden in logical but obscure places; you'll want to prompt your players to tell you where their characters are searching. In a procedural, forensic information is copiously available and generally reliable, although it may be slow in coming. The cause of death may be routine, but a routine case may mask a more mysterious method that's revealed by the careful work of experts.

The suspects and supporting cast are only loosely related – or are not related at all, except through the victim. Sometimes the victim has led a double life, like a respectable banker who's involved with diamond smuggling on the side, and there will be two quite distinct groups of NPCs. As with a cozy, many of the NPCs have something to hide, although the secrets in procedurals tend to be petty rather than grand. Typical NPCs range from ordinary citizens, to first-offenders who are otherwise upstanding members of the community, to career criminals deeply involved in street gangs and organized crime.

If the PCs are professional law enforcement officers, a trope of this format is to play off of that status. You may offer them temptations to abuse their power and take shortcuts to solve their case. There's also physical danger: while suspects usually can't threaten a police officer as they can a private investigator, cops still risk being shot by a nervous

suspect. Police may be subject to political pressure, departmental politics, inter-service rivalries, and other concerns that don't affect a gumshoe or ordinary citizen.

Alibis are simple or nonexistent. Motives are usually obvious.

Police procedurals develop evidence gradually. It's not necessarily hard to find, but finding it is time-consuming, and may involve a lot of false leads and boring legwork. (In an RPG, you'll probably want to understate that part of the adventure.) Once found, the evidence usually doesn't require feats of analysis to understand, but it's often ambiguous, incomplete, or unlikely to stand up in court.

Your information-management strategy should be to explore the different ways in which police or their allies can put together a case. You'll be testing your players' thoroughness and organizational ability as much as their cleverness, so be prepared to feed them a large number of small clues and indefinite-but-suggestive leads. Any time the investigation starts bogging down, you can always have a "major break in the case" due to new forensic evidence or a new witness coming forward. Furthermore, it doesn't destroy your plot if the cops make a stunning leap of logic and finger the villain in the first scene – they still have to prove it.

### *Plotting the Thriller*

The thriller is fast-paced. It starts with a small crime that involves the PCs, then runs through an escalating series of crimes and action sequences to reach a big final shootout. The ultimate antagonist might be a serial killer, a serial arsonist, a looming gang war, or a group of professional burglars trying to pull off the big score. If you want to be

cinematic, the adversary can be a scenery-chewing megavillain bent on achieving vast wealth and power.

The detectives will enter the investigation when they're called on to investigate a crime, which is not necessarily a murder. The crime itself may have some strange or unusual characteristics requiring the PCs' expert attention. Alternatively, the crime may appear to be a small, routine matter until the investigators start poking around the crime scene, at which point they will discover clues that lead them to believe that all is not as it seems.



Either way, the crime scene will definitely have a clue or two, and they won't be too subtle. They should immediately hint to the investigators that this is part of something else, something bigger. Forensic evidence in a thriller is often especially useful and revealing; at the initial site, you can use it to highlight an inconsistency in the ostensible crime. ("Hey, Lieutenant? If this guy committed suicide, why doesn't he have powder burns on his skin?") If the PCs aren't themselves experts, assume that they have ready access to whatever forensic expertise is required to move the plot forward.



The thriller, unlike any of the other formats, needn't confine itself to a set group of suspects who are closely linked to the initial crime. Instead, the PCs are likely to deal with a changing set of NPCs as they work their way up to stopping the big crime. The investigation seldom concerns the niggling details of alibis, hidden motives, or detailed examinations of witnesses. The initial clues get the action moving. Thereafter, whenever the plot slows down – or whenever your investigators show signs of getting lost or confused – there's another crime, more spectacular and more consequential than the last one.

It's desirable to introduce the villain early in the adventure, but it may not be desirable to have him actually appear. You can have him referred to by name, or you can have his henchmen appear on the scene and throw their weight around, or you can have a scene set on property that he owns. It's not always necessary that the PCs be kept in the dark as to the villain's identity – knowing who he is and being able to take him down are two different things.

If the PCs are law-enforcement officers, one of the important NPCs may be the superior officer or politician who doesn't believe them, demands that they stop pursuing certain lines of inquiry, or won't give them the resources they need to proceed. This confrontation is important to the mood. Often, it results in the PCs being suspended, which gives them the freedom to take necessary actions to stop the big scheme.

The PCs will have an easy time finding evidence, and that evidence is usually easy to interpret. Your information-management problem is reduced to making sure that you feed the investigators a steady diet of interesting scenes, with enough connecting clues to make a narrative, until they get to the big payoff at the end.

## SCENES

All four major formats follow the same basic structure: crime, investigation, solution. You'll usually start out with a clear idea of the crime, and probably a pretty good idea of the solution. But building the path connecting the two of them can be hard. You want it to be difficult enough to engage your players' wits, and drawn-out enough so that they don't immediately jump to the conclusion, yet simple enough that they're

## Thriller Format

Tone: An ever-escalating battle against sinister forces.

- Detectives introduced, often simultaneously with the discovery of a minor crime.
- Investigation, which leads the PCs to other crimes. Alternatively, the PCs are interrupted by seemingly unrelated crimes that later form a pattern.
- Confrontation: the PCs' theory is rejected by their superiors. If they persist in a disfavored line of investigation, they are suspended or punished.
- The Big Scheme: the detectives confront the villain in his minions and must thwart his evil plans.
- Dénouement, death (typical) or arrest (less common) of villain.

Postscript, if needed, about trial and conviction of villain, minions, and others involved.

never stymied, and fair enough that they won't complain afterward.

The easiest way to think about this middle part is as a series of individual scenes. Each scene should ideally take place in one location, and contain one or two NPCs, although both of those guidelines are flexible. Each scene should have a specific purpose in furthering the plot – this is your information-management strategy – and should be intended to smooth the way for one or more subsequent scenes.

You should think, not only about the scenes, but about how you're going to make the transitions from one to the next. This is a good time to remember the path of least resistance method (p. 8); there may be more than one way to make the change, but you want to make sure that there's at least one. The ways in which you can change scenes are almost infinite, but here are some of the most common:

- The investigators get some information that points them to a particular person, place, or course of action.
- As the scene is finishing up, some kind of action starts nearby.
- An NPC comes in; he wants the investigators to go somewhere or do something.
- An NPC does something that makes the investigators want to talk to him.
- A blatant coincidence happens. (Use this one sparingly.)

Roughly speaking, mysteries contain three kinds of scene: action, talking,

and investigation. Books, and to a lesser extent movies and TV shows, can get away with being almost entirely one kind of scene. Cozies, for instance, are biased heavily toward talking scenes, while thrillers are filled with action scenes. In an RPG, you'll probably need to strive for a more balanced approach, unless you have an unusual group of players.

## Investigation Scenes

*"I admit," I said, "that a second murder in a book often cheers things up. If the murder happens in the first chapter, and you have to follow up everybody's alibi until the last page but one – well, it does get a bit tedious."*

– Captain Hastings,  
*The A.B.C. Murders*

Investigation scenes showcase the detectives searching for clues, analyzing information, exploring a place, or using their forensic skills. The primary investigation scene is the crime site, although you can have others as well.

Investigation scenes should be meticulously planned out – the more detail, the better. Fortunately, planning them is more time-consuming than difficult. They're pretty static, especially the initial one: you can set them up beforehand with reasonable confidence the PCs will encounter them as prepared. Avoid improvising investigation scenes – it's too likely that you'll provide a clue that either gives the game away, or hopelessly confuses people, or contradicts some other information you've given out.

## Improvised Scenes

No matter how well you plan, at some point you're likely to run into a spot where your players are stymied, you're frustrated, and the plot is going nowhere.

Raymond Chandler once said that whenever he felt that the story was slowing down, he wrote a scene in which a man came into the room with a gun. In spite of the known merits of careful planning, you may have to take the same tactic: if your players are floundering, throw some trouble at them. It can be Chandler's gunman, especially in a hard-boiled format. It can be one of the suspects getting arrested, particularly if it's someone whom the PCs think is innocent. It can be a deliberate attempt by an NPC to feed the detectives false information, which tells them that that NPC has something to hide – this happens a lot in cozies.

This can be hard to do in a story structure as tightly plotted as a mystery. Once again, to do it successfully, you need to think in terms of the information you want the PCs to have. If you just have a gunman show up and get punched out, then you're no better off than before. If, on the other hand, dealing with the gunman gives the players the information that they need to move on – or makes them realize that they had that information already – you can get your plot unstuck. Don't worry too much about why the gunman is coming into the room just now, or who sent him, or what he's hoping to do; you can come up with justifications for that stuff afterward, if anyone asks you or questions him.

Handling an investigation scene is usually equally simple. You've decided beforehand what information the investigators can get, and what they have to do, in general terms, to get each datum. They tell you what they do; you tell them what they get. Your chief danger is that they'll stand around arguing about what it all means for so long that the game bogs down. For that reason, you may want to consider using the path of least resistance principle (p. 8): if the PCs don't transition out of the investigation scene on their own, something else happens that changes the scene for them.

One of the classic investigation scenes in all four formats is the second (or third, or fourth) murder. Second murders very often come about because the victim knew something about the first murder. This scene works so well because it does several things: it heightens the tension by upping the stakes, it removes a potential suspect, and it gives the protagonists a whole new crime scene and set of circumstances to explore. It's an excellent idea to have a Second Murder Scene ready to use if the detectives aren't making any progress; you simultaneously give them a hint and provide an unpleasant consequence to their slowness.

## Action Scenes

Action livens up a mystery, but that doesn't mean you should toss them in willy-nilly. The key to making action scenes work well in the adventure is to integrate them into your information management. They're not just there to give the combat-oriented PCs something to do; they happen as a consequence of some piece(s) of information that the detectives uncover, and they give rise to further information that the detectives can act upon. You'll need some preparation, but not as much as in an investigation scene: some basic statistics for the NPCs involved, and some ideas about the consequences if the scene doesn't go as you expect.

Typical mysteries use four basic kinds of action scenes: intimidation, fights, chases, and races.

*The intimidation scene* is most common in hard-boiled stories, where the detective must stand up to the pressure of police and criminals. Police officers also have to intimidate some witnesses into providing infor-

mation. In a cozy, the detective is rarely in personal danger, and rarely tries to intimidate a witness with physical force; specialists almost never are intimidators. You'll probably find yourself improvising intimidation scenes when the PCs try to get information from a recalcitrant witness, or have drawn the ire of an NPC who has connections to thugs or to the police.

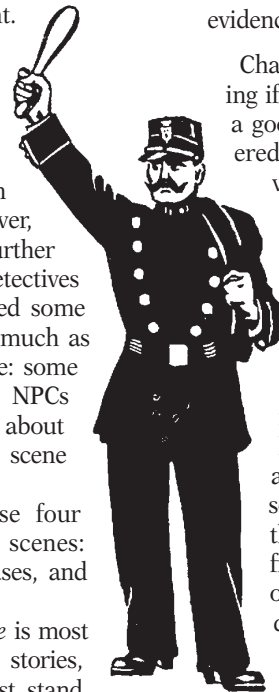
*Fight scenes* often arise out of an intimidation. Alternatively, a villain may send thugs to take something in the investigator's possession, or knock him out and leave him in a compromising location, or beat him up to scare him off. (That trick never works, but villains never stop trying it.) Brawls are better fight scenes than gunfights, because you can plausibly presume that they have no significant consequences. Gunshots attract the police to a private eye, at the risk of his license; police who fire weapons face an investigation. Brawls, on the other hand, attract little attention, so long as neither party is badly hurt.

*A chase scene* involves the PCs trying to catch an NPC, or vice versa. Some well-known chase setups include:

- A witness flees rather than answer questions.
- Heavily-armed thugs come after the protagonist.
- Somebody snatches a key piece of evidence.

Chases are more likely to be satisfying if you plan them in advance. Have a good idea of the ground to be covered, likely obstacles, monkey wrenches you can throw into the works, and the general likely courses the chase may take.

*A race scene* involves both the PCs and the NPC(s) trying to get to the same goal, with the prize going to whoever gets there first. In some cases the race is against an outside force, like a ticking clock, rather than against NPCs directly. Races of all sorts are especially common in thrillers – stopping the villain's fiendish master plan, for instance, often requires that the heroes act quickly and under pressure. You can use them occasionally in hard-boiled mysteries and procedurals, and even in cozies, as a way of building up tension. Like chases, they're best planned rather than improvised.



## Talking Scenes

*"A good questioner will ask a question, get what sounds like a complete answer, and sit there in silence, mildly quizzical, until you qualify or add to the answer. A good questioner will ask very simple questions requiring short and simple answers and slowly increase the pace until when he throws a curve, the silence seems to last too long, and you feel a compulsion to give an answer quickly. Any answer. . . . A good questioner will give you back your answers, twisted very slightly, and wait for the correction. . . . If you can know and anticipate and deal with the skilled questioner, you slowly begin to realize that you are doing so much bobbing and weaving that, in itself, it becomes significant."*

– Travis McGee,

*The Empty Copper Sea*

Mysteries involve lots of talking. The characters will probably end up talking to each individual witness and suspect at least once, maybe more. Badly handled, these interview scenes will become dull and repetitive. Your challenge, then, is to make each individual interaction different, distinctive, and memorable.

From a story perspective, of course, the function of the interview scene is to give the investigator some piece of information that the witness knows. Even more so than the other scene types, an interview that doesn't add to the PCs' knowledge is a waste of time and possible source of confusion. Also, you should avoid talking scenes with more than one or two NPCs; the more NPCs there are, the more likely it is that your players will lose track of who said what.

Interview scenes require less preparation than investigation scenes, and the preparation isn't as clear-cut, since you don't know exactly what the PCs will ask. Be sure you have a good handle on exactly what information the detectives absolutely require from the scene, and what information would be useful but not critical. Have notes about what the NPC knows and doesn't know.

Think about how the NPC will react to the detectives, based on their appearance, race, class, and position. Think, also, about how the NPC will react to the various tactics the detectives employ. What happens if they're friendly? If they try bribery? If they're hostile? If they try to be seductive? If they try subterfuge?

When you do have to improvise, write down what you say, so you can be consistent later. Your players will assume that everything you say in the voice of an NPC is important; they'll assume that any mistakes or omissions are clues.

Give the players a good sense of the NPCs' personality. Detectives, especially in a cozy, depend on finding patterns in suspects' behavior; then trying to match that personality with the crime. Reward players who listen carefully to the NPCs. (See pp. 53-55 for optional rules for interaction scenes.)

Think about the setting. If the detective meets with the witness in an official or semi-official guise (police detective or private investigator) he'll usually go somewhere where the witness will be comfortable – the witness' office or home, for example. (This also gives the investigator a chance to learn something about the witness' character from his housekeeping, furnishings, and his family or co-workers.) If he intends to approach the witness in an unofficial way, then he may meet the NPC on the street, or in a bar, or in any other appropriate location for the approach he has in mind.

Think about ways that your investigators can verify the information they get. Think, too, about how you can signal that an NPC is lying – either during the talking scene, or with another scene that comes later. Information that comes from multiple unrelated sources is more trustworthy than information from a single source, especially if that source has a reason to lie. Information that conflicts with the physical evidence is also suspicious. Any time the PCs can establish that an NPC has lied, that's a great lead for them, and a powerful way to push the story forward.

## STIRRING UP TROUBLE

*"My way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey wrench into the machinery."*

– Sam Spade,  
*The Maltese Falcon*

"Trouble" scenes are created by the players who feel they have reached a dead end and want to stir up the NPCs to generate clues, because stirring trouble can be fun, or because they've seen or

read this sort of scene in mystery fiction. This is a very useful tactic because it forces the GM to improvise the NPCs' responses. The players expect that you (and thus the NPCs) will make a mistake when you have to react swiftly.

When you are planning your adventure, expect the players to try to stir some trouble – particularly if they're stymied. If they do surprise you, you are not obliged to respond at once! This may be a good time to call a meal break while you think about how the NPCs should respond.

The monkey wrench can be a problem for you, but it can also be an opportunity. If the adventure is stalled, you should think about exactly what information the PCs need, and use the monkey wrench to provide it.

Here are a few typical things characters do that cause trouble:

*Threaten 'em:* Cozy detectives may threaten to reveal whatever personal secrets they have discovered. Hard-boiled detectives usually threaten to beat the suspect unless he cooperates. Police detectives can threaten to prosecute the suspect or someone he cares about for unrelated offenses, or threaten to leak word that the suspect is cooperating with them.

*Spook 'em:* Make a target nervous with a "rough shadow" – someone tails the target in an obvious, easy-to-detect fashion. The target sees the shadow, gets nervous, and calls for help. Usually, the rough shadow is supported either by a hidden second shadow or a means to listen in on telephone calls. On occasion, the investigator presents himself as the person whom the target can go to for help.

*Fake 'em:* Investigators can lie to suspects about the evidence. This is a risky move; if the suspect sees through the fib, then the investigator's credibility is shot. On the other hand, suspects are often willing to believe that an accomplice has betrayed them, or that they missed some important bit of physical evidence.

*Draw 'em:* A PC deliberately makes himself a target, and hopes that the NPCs will come after him. This one happens quite a bit in hard-boiled stories – and also in procedurals, since this is a recognized police technique. In a cozy, the equivalent approach is for the detective to pretend to have knowledge that he doesn't really possess.



## HIDING CLUES

Jigsaw-puzzle mysteries, particularly cozies, are at their most devious when they're fulfilling the requirement to play fair with the reader. The writer tries to present crucial clues in such a way that the reader either doesn't notice or misinterprets them. The more clues get slipped past the reader, the more satisfying the mystery.

In an RPG, you don't usually want to do that.

Remember, the writer wants the readers to be fooled; you want your players to be successful. Most of the time, when you give the characters a piece of information, you want them to act on it. Or, at the very least, you want them to remember it, so that it can match up with another piece of information later. Keep it simple!

However, you can get nearly the same "mystery novel" effect by judiciously using the tricks in this section – perhaps once per adventure. You'll often want to slip a crucial piece of information past the detectives very early on. Then, much later, you can give them the additional clue that makes them slap their foreheads and cry out "D'oh! *That's* why the housecat keeps looking in the upstairs cupboard!" Done right, you can give the investigators a completely incorrect view of the situation without ever lying or concealing information. You can conceal the perpetrator, the motive, the means, the time of the crime, the location, the true victim, or even the type of crime that was committed.

Of course, the more you do this, the greater the chance that someone will pick up on the clue, and short-circuit your plot. And if you do it in every adventure, your players will start looking for this trick.

Keep the Rule of Seven in mind, and don't get too caught up in layers of false clues and diversions. Misunderstandings

in an RPG are pernicious, because the players have to rely on their memories – they can't rewind the videotape, or read back a couple of chapters, to see exactly what was said. Remember, one clever trick per adventure is usually enough.

Remember, also, that your objective is *not* to fool the players permanently – only to keep them in the dark until the right time. If you sneak a gimmick past them, you should also plan on giving them the clue that reveals the gimmick to them at the appropriate time.

### Classic Obfuscatory Techniques

- Hide a piece of physical evidence by putting it in a long list of other pieces of physical evidence, most of which are boring and irrelevant. This is perhaps the single most common rhetorical trick of mystery writers.

- Something that should have happened didn't happen.

- Something that should be present is missing.

- Obscure the time of death by tampering with mechanical devices, manipulating the forensic evidence, having an accomplice pretend to make a telephone call or shout to a bystander while masquerading as the deceased, or having someone pretend to be the victim and be seen from a distance.

- Have an authoritative NPC misidentify the cause of death.

- Disguise murder as a suicide or accident.

- Disguise natural death as murder, in order to frame a suspect or for insurance purposes.

- The obvious motive for the crime turns out not to be the real motive.

### The Double Whammy

Here's a trick that's especially appropriate for highly-experienced players,

and/or players who are well-versed in the mystery genre: let them find one trick.

Meta-game thinking – applying out-of-game knowledge and assumptions to in-game play – works as well for the GM as meta-book thinking does for the mystery author. Players, like readers, may have spent hundreds of hours reading or watching mystery stories before they come to your adventure. They'll be looking for the gimmick. They'll be looking for gaps in information, white space in timetables, and information given by only one source, especially an unreliable one.

Having found a gimmick, they may relax, believing they've outsmarted you. What they often don't realize is that they've found a decoy. The real gimmick slipped past while they were congratulating themselves on their cleverness.

### Red Herrings

A red herring is a false clue – a piece of data that points away from the real villain and toward someone (or someplace) else. Red herrings can be accidental, created by the NPCs' own innocent actions, or deliberate plants by the criminal.

Used sparingly, the red herring can be your friend. Having an innocent NPC whom the PCs can suspect is a good way of keeping their attention away from the real criminal, at least for a while. They may follow the suspect, search his room, run background checks on him, even assault him.

But, once again, don't overdo it. One red herring per adventure is usually enough. Make the false lead convincing enough that the PCs have to keep it in mind, but not so overwhelmingly convincing that they get fixated on it to the exclusion of other possibilities. Again, remember that you don't have complete control: if they abandon the main thread to chase down a red herring, you may not be able to get them back!

# THE CONFRONTATION

*"I've never liked this scene," I said. "Detective confronts murderer. Murderer produces gun, points same at detective. Murderer tells detective the whole sad story, with the idea of shooting him at the end of it. Thus wasting a lot of valuable time, even if in the end murderer did shoot*

*detective. Only murderer never does. Something always happens to prevent it. The gods don't like this scene either. They always manage to spoil it."*

– Philip Marlowe,  
*The Lady in the Lake*

The confrontation is the key scene in your adventure. It's the counterpart to the big fight with the "boss" monster in a fantasy dungeon expedition. You have been building up to this one scene; the hardest, most vital scene in your adventure. You need to help the PCs carry it off.

The goal is for the true culprit to be revealed. Order is restored; justice is done. The PCs should understand the who, the why, and the how of the crime. (There may be a few twists during the final scene, but avoid entirely new revelations.) If the investigators have missed some vital clue, you may want to have an NPC supervisor or assistant remind them of it. Armed with that knowledge, they must confront the offender, establish his guilt to the satisfaction of all, and prevent him from escaping.

## DRAWING-ROOM SPEECHES

The traditional cozy confrontation is the drawing-room speech, where the investigator gathers all the suspects together, explains how and why the crime took place, and finally identifies the guilty party. Traditionally, the police are waiting in an adjoining room to arrest the offender before he can menace the detective or escape.

This is a very difficult scene to arrange in an RPG. Part of the problem is that it's a talk scene, not an action scene, but the fundamental weakness goes deeper than that. In a story, the audience – ideally – still doesn't know the truth. Narrative tension comes from the audience's anticipation of the answer, mirrored by the tension in the innocent suspects who are waiting to find out what happened. In a roleplaying game, on the other hand, the PCs and you should both know the answer. Ergo, no tension.

In addition, if you have more than one detective, it's hard for any one of them to reveal the scheme in a monologue. The other detectives want to be part of this scene, too; they'll tend to interrupt or correct the person who is speaking. This can confuse the scene, and lead to an anticlimax.

Suggest that if the PCs want to stage the drawing-room scene, they agree among themselves who will speak and what is being said first. You may want to give them some time alone to plan to provide some tension in the scene.

A variation on this scene is a personal confrontation between the investigator and the perpetrator. The investigator might offer a sympathetic villain a deal. He may give the villain the face-saving option of dying rather than being publicly exposed as a murderer. In *The*

*Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for instance, Poirot gives the guilty man a chance to spare his family the shame of his trial and commit suicide. In *Murder Must Advertise*, Wimsey suggests that the villain allow himself to be killed by his criminal associates rather than expose his family to the shame of exposure or suicide. Alternatively, the investigator may offer to conceal a family secret or another NPC's misdeeds (to a point) if the NPC villain confesses to police.

If the investigators believe that the crime was justified, they may decide not to punish the criminals at all. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, for example, Poirot does not reveal what actually happened because he feels the crime was justified by the deceased's misdeeds.

Legally, many of these resolutions make the investigator an accomplice to the crime. The consequences of this rarely arise in mystery fiction, but being an accomplice to a murder may not sit well with some members of a group of investigators. If the party is inclined toward this resolution, make sure they are all agreed upon it – an argument between the detectives in front of the villain is unlikely to make the scene work.

Another variation is to have someone outside the party stage the drawing-room scene. Of course, the NPC has the wrong solution, but it's plausible enough that an innocent person may be arrested. This variant forces the PCs to out-argue the NPC and convince the police that their solution is the correct one. It can be especially effective if it's the villain who actually stages the scene.

## IN THE LAIR AT GUNPOINT

A hard-boiled detective or thriller hero usually confronts the villain in private, often in the villain's lair along with his thugs. This is the kind of scene the heroes may be more comfortable with. All they need to do is either outfight the villain's thugs, or set things up so that the police can step in and arrest the villain and his thugs. In *Looking for Rachael Wallace*, for example, Spenser breaks into the villain's home to rescue his kidnapped client, and shoots the bad guys in a clear self-defense situation.

Thriller confrontations are usually free of moral ambiguity (and often highly cinematic, too). Hard-boiled confrontations may not be so clear-cut.

Frequently the detective has to make a moral judgment or choice. He may, for instance, have to decide whether to protect his client by leaving some of the truth unrevealed. Or the offender may be someone he liked and respected. Or he may have to make an ugly bargain with a criminal in order to catch a bigger criminal.

In one common variant of this scene, the investigators have proof that the villain has betrayed one or more of his men. During the confrontation, the heroes intend to expose the villain's treachery; the thugs are expected either to step aside and let the villain be arrested, or shoot the villain themselves. In *In the Best Families*, for example, the criminal mastermind is too wealthy, powerful, and well connected for Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin to merely expose him to the police. Instead, they trick his accomplice into shooting him. The accomplice is then shot in turn by a henchman. Justice triumphs and the wicked are punished, but not in a public way.

An equally common variant is the scene in which the villain – usually someone rich and/or powerful – admits all, sneers at the detective, and challenges him to prove it. If you're going to set up this variation, you should try to make sure that there is, in fact, something the investigators can do to turn the tables on the crook.

## IN THE INTERROGATION ROOM

A procedural detective confronts the villain in an interrogation room. The detective, constrained by *Miranda* and other rules, must get the villain to confess by any legal means.

Tactics vary. The good cop/bad cop routine is a cliché because it works surprisingly often. Appeals to morality, family responsibility, and religious values can also work. Pretending to be sympathetic or understanding sometimes works, as can vague promises to “put in a good word” or “do what I can” for the cooperative suspect.

The key to the procedural confrontation is hope – persuading the villain that he can win his freedom and go home if only he cooperates with the detective.

## THE VILLAIN'S RESPONSE

How the PCs confront the villain is primarily up to them, but they are likely to pick one of the traditional options. The villain's response, on the other hand, is your bailiwick.

Once the villain has been confronted with the proof of his guilt, he may try to explain or lie. The investigators should respond with hard fact after hard fact that seals his fate. If they do not have sufficient evidence of guilt, they may try to brazen it out and trick the villain by claiming they have evidence and convincing him to confess as all is lost – if he confesses he can hope for lenience. This response can work well as a tension-builder if there's some third party who has to be convinced – perhaps a judge, perhaps a police officer, perhaps a distraught relative with a gun.

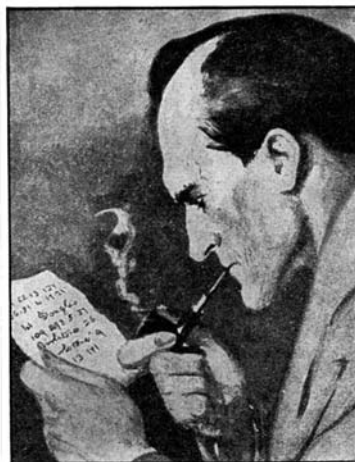
Another classic approach is to set a trap for the villain. Here, the investigators let information slip to several suspects that they have some proof that the villain might be able to destroy if he moves quickly enough. The person who tries to destroy the evidence is the villain.

When confronted with enough proof of guilt, the perpetrator frequently confesses. However, just having him hang his head and mumble “yeah, I killed him,” is not dramatically satisfying. Give your offender something interesting to do in this scene. Your players want to feel confident that they got the right man and that he deserves the punishment he's about to receive.

Have him justify himself. It's human nature to want to justify your deeds. Even the most vicious villain, when confronted, will want to explain how his conduct was virtuous – avenging himself for a wrong, claiming to be the victim of society or “the system,” or just claiming that “everyone else does it.” He may claim that it is the victim's fault; the victim deserved his fate. Have his justification include some minor revelation or twist – nothing that changes what the detectives have figured out, but perhaps something that explains some clue that had puzzled them for a while.

But do have him make an admission, even if he doesn't confess fully. While it's more realistic for the confronted villain to clam up, demand a lawyer, and vow to

fight for his freedom, it's a lot more fun to let the PCs know they were right.



## THE RESOLUTION

*“When you hire a boy in my line of work it isn't like hiring a window-washer and showing him eight windows and saying: ‘Wash those and you're through.’ You don't know what I have to go through or over or under to do your job for you. I do it my way. I do my best to protect you and I may break a few rules, but I break them in your favor. The client comes first, unless he's crooked. Even then all I do is hand the job back to him and keep my mouth shut.”*

– Philip Marlowe,  
*The Big Sleep*

The resolution is the dénouement, the moral, the cherry on top. Mystery adventures shouldn't leave any loose ends. Written mysteries, even series fiction, tie up the loose ends at the end of each book. Television detective series are also episodic: each adventure stands alone. Your players should have that same feeling – they've solved the puzzle, wrapped up the package, and set things to rights.

Take a few minutes to describe what happens to the villain, if it wasn't resolved previously. Explain anything that still needs explaining. If the investigators have questions about a clue or an NPC, resolve them. On the sly, while you're doing so, make notes for yourself about how the adventure worked: what was clear, what they're still confused about, where you needed to prepare more, where you could have prepared less.

Your secondary and tertiary NPCs can reappear, perhaps to be reused in other adventures. Generally,

your villains will not escape and make comebacks. Nor, in most mystery stories, do the vanquished villain's family, friends, or associates threaten the investigators. The exception is the thriller, in which vanquished villains or their followers frequently show up, longing for revenge, in a sequel.

Once your detectives have solved the case, it's not a traditional part of the genre for them to later learn that they mistakenly accused and punished an innocent man. This is one of those places where the genre diverges from reality: knowing the truth solves the problem, period. Introducing evidence that clears the villain in a later adventure may give your PCs an interesting ethical dilemma, but it will also make them more hesitant and indecisive in later adventures. That's bad for a continuing campaign.

The resolution is also the place to handle any serious mistakes the detectives made. This isn't a traditional part of the written or filmed genre, but it's a necessity if you're running an ongoing campaign. If they've acted inappropriately in their zeal to solve the crime or protect their client, they must explain themselves. Official investigators may be chastised by their superiors; private investigators may be threatened with the loss of their licenses; interfering private citizens can be shamed in the newspapers or even sued.

Finally, the resolution is the time to give the PCs their rewards for a job well done. Typical rewards may include reputation, money, favors, patrons, and new contacts, in addition to experience point awards. Contacts may become more available to the investigators, or more reliable. Clients or superiors may help bury the evidence of any minor misdeeds the investigators may have committed.

You can also give them intangible rewards, like flattering stories in the media that provide only temporary fame.





# CHAPTER TWO

## “A LITTLE REDDISH MOULD . . .”

*“For example, observation shows me that you have been to the Wigmore Street Post-Office this morning, but deduction lets me know that when you were there you dispatched a telegram. . . . Observation tells me that you have a little reddish mould adhering to your instep. Just opposite the Wigmore Street Office they have taken up the pavement and thrown up some earth, which lies in such a way that it is difficult to avoid treading in it in entering. The earth is of this peculiar reddish tint which is found, as far as I know, nowhere else in the neighborhood. . . . I knew that you had not written a letter, since I sat opposite to you all morning. I see also in your open desk there that you have a sheet of stamps and a thick bundle of postcards. What could you go to the post-office for, then, but to send a wire? Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth.”*

– Sherlock Holmes,  
*The Sign of Four*

The scene of the crime is a key location in any mystery adventure, containing vital clues about what happened and to whom. This chapter gives GMs and players an introduction to modern forensic science. GMs can use this chapter to generate useful clues. Players can use it for ideas about the kind of things they might discover at a crime scene and what they mean. Although **GURPS**

**Mysteries** focuses on solving crimes, criminal PCs in other genres can also use this chapter for ideas on how they can try to avoid detection by NPC detectives.

Some of this information may be seem familiar to those who read or watch mysteries. It is repeated here to ensure that everyone at the game table is working with consistent facts, drawn from forensic texts, to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. Some of these tools may not be available to the investigators because of the campaign's tech level, or because they use magic in place of science. Even in those situations, the GM will want to make sure that the obvious details are consistent with modern knowledge so the players, and thus their characters, are not misled by what they might know about basic forensic science.

How much forensics affects an adventure depends on what kind of adventure it is and who the investigators are. In a cozy, the gory details of death are often glossed over. The scene focuses on clues left in and around the area. Genius and amateur detectives, the most common investigators in a cozy, frequently rely on NPC experts to provide basic information about time and cause of death. That doesn't mean that detectives in a cozy may not ask detailed questions about the body and its surroundings. However, it is more likely that they will find their answers through questioning suspects

and noticing unusual things than from trace evidence and fingerprints.

In a hardboiled story, the private investigator often does not have access to the primary crime scene. He learns about it if he can gain access to the police reports. During the course of the story, the private investigator may come across other crime scenes, but he often does not have time for a detailed examination. He doesn't want to be found by police at the scene. At minimum, he would be delayed by their questions. At worst, he might be accused of committing the crime. In reading reports or surveying the scene, detectives may ask questions that the GM was not anticipating but which should logically be in the report. Here, as in the cozy, it is more likely that the key clues will come from questioning and intimidating witnesses than from forensic analysis.

The police procedural story often involves detailed descriptions of the crime scene and the body. If the adventure includes a PC scientific specialist, then the adventure will likely include clues that use that character's skills. The GM should be prepared for detailed questions about the crime scene and have consistent, logical answers ready.

This chapter focuses on homicides, but some of the forensics information is more generally applicable. It also deals with factors specific to arson, kidnapping, and a few other crimes.

## HOMICIDE INVESTIGATIONS

### DESCRIBING THE SCENE

*“You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room? . . . Then how many are there? . . . You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now I know that there are*

*seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed.”*

– Sherlock Holmes,  
*A Scandal in Bohemia*

When the GM reads flavor text describing the crime scene, pay attention to the details. What does the scene look like? How is it illuminated? Is the body outdoors or inside? If it is in a room, whose room is it? What sorts of things are in it? What things that should be in it are missing or disturbed? How did the

perpetrator enter and leave? What windows and doors are open or unlocked?

What does the scene sound like? Is it noisy or calm? Are there nearby sounds, like construction or a highway, which might have concealed sounds of a struggle? Are there sounds missing, like Holmes' famous dog that did not bark, or an alarm that sounded when police entered, but not when the struggle occurred?

What does the scene smell like? Are there any unusual odors? Is it unusually warm or cold?

Now think about the victim. Where is he? What position is his body in? Has it been moved? Has it been cleaned? What's the victim wearing? Where are the wounds? Are his personal effects still present?

The GM may provide a crime scene sketch. A typical sketch is a simple line drawing, normally to scale, showing the location of key aspects of the scene. It generally includes the location of entrances, exits, bodies, blood spatters, weapons, ammunition, and other indications about what happened. The detectives who prepare real crime scene sketches are not artists – the sketch is a functional aid in recalling and analyzing the scene.

Props can also be very useful and fun. Many toy stores have toy firearms, toy knives and weapons, and kids' fingerprinting kits. For GMs interested in more graphic props, photographs of wounds and bodies can be found in medical texts and on some medical web sites.

**GURPS Cops** discusses police procedures at a crime scene. For a mystery, PCs only need to know the basics.

When a properly trained officer arrives at a modern-day crime scene, he will not touch anything unless there's an injured person there who needs to be helped, or an imminent danger like a fire or gas leak. The officer will call for backup, then secure the crime scene unless there's a very good reason to abandon it; to immediately pursue a dangerous suspect, for example. He will try to isolate the witnesses from each other so they cannot discuss among themselves what they saw.

A well-trained officer will write down everything about the situation. He will record the time of day, the day of the week, the weather, the temperature, who arrived at the scene and when, what doors and windows were open/closed/locked, and any other detail that seems important to the officer at the time.

When backup arrives, the responding officer turns the scene over to a detective, who is responsible for processing the scene. The detective's job is to figure out how big the crime scene is, to photograph evidence, and to collect it. The detective will take notes and measurements. Before any object is moved or collected, it should be pho-

tographed in place, and its location measured from two fixed points. If there's a corpse, it is removed by the medical examiner after its location and position have been photographed and documented. (The corpse's personal effects may be removed by detectives at the scene or documented later at the morgue.)

Once a piece of evidence is collected, it will be packaged separately and appropriately. Generally, anything that is damp needs to be stored in paper so that the moisture can evaporate. Material with blood or other body fluids on it is marked with biohazard warning labels and stored in a container where it can air-dry naturally. (Sealing it in an airtight container or trying to dry it with heat can cause it to decompose and reduce its value as evidence.) A swab can be used to collect moist fluids; the swab is stored in its own vial of preservatives. Most things that aren't damp can be stored in plastic or glass. If the detective suspects there may be fingerprints on an item, he'll try to suspend it in a large box or can so that the prints are not rubbed off by the container. A paper grocery sack can also work because it is too stiff to rub off prints unless it is badly mishandled.

Detectives or forensic technicians will look for latent evidence like fingerprints or hidden blood stains. Detectives will look for hidden evidence under furniture, in drawers, and so on. If necessary, they'll pull the plumbing traps to see if any evidence was washed or flushed away. Detectives may also use an evidence vacuum, which is cleaned before each use, to collect trace evidence like hair, fibers, soil, and pollen.

If there's a suspect, the detectives may process him for trace evidence. They may seize his clothing and the material under his fingernails, test his hands for gunpowder residue, and take his fingerprints. In some states, they need a warrant to collect a DNA sample, although it can be easy to discreetly collect one from a cigarette he smoked or clean drinking glass he used.

Detectives do not need to restore the property to its original condition, but they generally try not to unnecessarily damage the scene. Major cities have cleaning companies that specialize in crime scene cleanup for the family or property owner.

## Crime Scenes and Criminals

What a murderer does at the scene can tell the investigators a great deal about his personality and motives. The scene itself may help them figure out what kind of criminal they are looking for.

If the corpse was killed with a precise, single wound, then the investigator is likely dealing with an experienced killer and may be able to find earlier crimes by the same person. Generally the body will be left in place, or moved to hide it from a casual observer.

If the corpse was killed by many wounds, especially if the medical examiner finds that some were inflicted after death or many of the wounds were to the face, genitals, or breasts (on women), the investigator is probably dealing with a very angry killer who disfigured the body out of rage against that person or that type of person. It is likely that the criminal knew the victim and the attack was very personal. The body may be left in place, or partly covered by a murderer who felt some remorse after his rage passed.

If the corpse has been casually dumped or left in plain sight, it may show the killer's contempt for him or for that type of person. A corpse that has been displayed in some specific fashion shows a dangerous killer acting out some mental fantasy.

Similarly, a burglar who steals a few valuable items with a minimum of destruction is an experienced professional, likely with a buyer arranged before the crime. A burglar who steals common household items and makes a mess looking for them is likely an amateur out for a quick sale. A burglar who just steals women's underwear or shoes is a fetish burglar and may be working his way up to sexual assault or even serial killing.

In roleplaying games, as in reality, not every crime scene will be ideally processed and appropriately handled. Typically, in a mystery, the scene will be processed well enough to generate key information. Obvious mistakes may themselves be clues that a detective or evidence technician is corrupt, or perhaps even involved in the crime.

## CAUSE, MECHANISM, AND MANNER OF DEATH

*"Crime is about life, death and the liberty of the subject; civil law is entirely concerned with that most tedious of all topics, money. Criminal law requires an expert knowledge of bloodstains, policemen's notebooks and the dark flow of human passion, as well as the argot currently in use round the Elephant and Castle. Civil law calls for a close study of such yawn-producing matters as bills of exchange, negotiable instruments and charter parties."*

— Horace Rumpole,  
*Rumpole and the Age of Miracles*

When the investigators receive an autopsy report from the medical examiner, it will usually list the cause, mechanism, and manner of death.

The *cause of death* is the injury or disease that produced the biological effect that resulted in the victim's death. Gunshot wounds, stab wounds, and coronary arteriosclerosis are all causes of death.

The *mechanism of death* is the biological effect that resulted in death. Hemorrhage, septicemia, and cardiac arrhythmia are all mechanisms of death.

The *manner of death* is the reason for the injury or disease. Natural causes, homicide, suicide, accidental, or undetermined are all manners of death.

## TIME OF DEATH

Time of death is a key clue in most murder mysteries. Fixing the time of death rules out suspects with solid alibis and helps locate witnesses who might have observed something unusual. An NPC expert will normally determine time of death. In general, the longer the time between the death and the attempt

## Homicide or Suicide?

In a mystery adventure, the apparent suicide usually is a homicide, disguised by the villain. However, there are a few stories where a villain disguises a suicide as a homicide to frame a third person. Real-world victims sometimes try to disguise suicides as homicides or accidents so that their families can collect their life insurance. Telling one from the other is difficult for real-world investigators. Here are some things the PCs might look for.

### Motive

Many people commit suicide because of ill health, marital strife, emotional stress (unhappy love affairs, separation, or divorce), financial troubles, humiliation (actual or perceived), loss of a loved one, or revenge on a spurned lover or parents (common in adolescents). Alcohol, narcotics, or serious mental illness may be involved.

### Means

Women are traditionally more likely to use poisons like sleeping pills. Men are traditionally more likely to use firearms; however, since the 1980s, firearms are the preferred method for both male and female suicides. Women are more likely to choose methods that do not disfigure the body; if a firearm is used, the shot is often to the chest.

Among the common means and indicators are:

The victim may have a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the temple or head (more than one wound is possible). The powder marks, gunpowder residue, and blood spatter around the wound should show contact or near-contact (arm's length distance), however, gunpowder residue on hands is not found in 30% of cases. The victim may try to make suicide look like a gun cleaning accident, however an actual death in a cleaning accident is very, very rare.

The victim may have died from hanging even if his feet or even knees are still on the floor.

The victim may have been poisoned. If medicine or illegal narcotics were used, it is hard to tell a suicide from an accidental overdose.

The victim may have drowned.

The victim may have cut himself and bled to death. There may be hesitation marks from earlier attempts and the wound may be shallower at the end.

The victim may asphyxiate himself with carbon monoxide. There's no specific way to tell this from an accident or homicide.

The victim may jump from a high location. There's no specific way to tell this from an accident or homicide.

The victim may have died in a single vehicle "accident." The investigator should look for the impression of pedals on victim's shoes and a lack of skid marks.

A victim may combine multiple methods of suicide, like taking a fatal overdose of drugs, then shooting himself, just to be certain of dying.

In 75% of suicides, the victim does not leave a note. Note writers are more likely to use firearms, hanging, and poison than other methods. Women are more likely to leave notes that detail the funeral arrangements they would prefer. The investigator may want to have a handwriting expert make sure the note is genuine.

to determine the time, the less precise the estimate can be.

Time of death and time of injury are not the same. For example, a person could be fatally injured, but linger unconscious for hours before finally dying. Time estimates can also be rigged.

A villain could try to fool the estimate, by delaying the discovery of the body while altering the temperature with an air conditioner or heater set on a timer.

The major factors in determining time of death are:



*Algor Mortis:* Normal loss of body heat over time. A corpse loses about 1.5°F per hour until it reaches the ambient room temperature in about 16 hours. A body submerged in water loses about 5°F per hour and reaches ambient water temperature within 5 to 6 hours. This formula was adopted in the late 19th century. Modern researchers criticize it as too simple. There are tremendous variations in temperature loss due to build, clothing, environment, blood loss, activity prior to death, and so on. Use this formula with caution from the 1950s onward.

*Livor Mortis:* The reddish-purple discoloration in the dependent (lower) areas of the body. The discoloration is caused by gravity pulling the blood into the smaller vessels in those areas. Livor mortis is visible within 30 minutes to two hours after death. If the body is moved during that time, livor mortis will shift. If it is moved afterward, the livor mortis pattern will reveal the body's original post-death position. (Since livor mortis depends on gravity, the rate may be very different in science fiction settings.) Determining when livor mortis begins depends on the observer's perception, on the hue of the corpse's skin, and on blood loss or anemia. Again, use this estimate with caution from the mid-20th century onward.

*Rigor Mortis:* The stiffening of the body's muscles due to chemical changes after death. Rigor mortis usually appears two to four hours after death and fully develops in six to 12 hours. Rigor mortis usually lasts 36 hours, then slowly disappears. There is a rare, extreme version of rigor mortis called *cadaveric spasm*, in which muscles lock in place at the moment of death. Typically, cadaveric spasm affects the hands; however one medical examiner described a corpse (who had been shot) found kneeling, with his right arm extended upward, with a straight razor clenched in it. Rigor mortis can be affected by stress and activity before death and the victim's fitness which all affect the chemical balance in the muscles.

The vitreous humor test, popular from 1963 to the early-1990s, also tests chemical changes. The test uses the fluid in the eye, but is prone to contamination by retinal cells if not performed properly and can also be affected by the environment and by a pre-mortum infection in the corpse.

*Decomposition:* The progress of decomposition of the body's cells and putrefaction by the body's bacteria. Putrefaction begins at death. Visible signs start appearing within 24 to 36 hours, depending on temperature. If the body is left outdoors exposed to scavengers, it can be reduced to a skeleton in nine to 10 days. When a body is submerged or buried in very wet soil, its fatty tissues decompose into yellowish-white waxy material called *adipocere*. Adipocere starts forming in an adult in about three months and completely transforms the fatty tissues, muscles, and viscera in one to one-and-a-half years. A pathologist might "tongue test" old bones — if his tongue sticks to the bone, calcium is still present and the bones are likely less than 50 years old.

on the specific microclimate around the body from time of death to discovery, locations of major insect activity, the amount of insect activity, presence of absence of insect predators, season, geographic location, and barriers to access by insects to the corpse. Many crime scene technicians do not collect insect evidence unless the corpse has been left undiscovered for a significant period because of the time, effort, and skill involved in doing so accurately and completely.

*Other exotic techniques:* For bodies found long after death, modern researchers also look at pollen on the body, plant growth on and around it, and microbial activity in the dirt under and around a decomposed corpse.

## Dramatic vs. Realistic Forensics

Forensic science has changed a great deal since the golden age of mystery writing. Assumptions that were accepted without significant question by pathologists in the 19th century, such as the simple formula for determining time of death from lost body temperature, would be used with great caution by a modern medical examiner. Nevertheless, there are good dramatic reasons to use the simple formulas, and it is historically accurate to do so and for the investigators to assume that the results are reliable.

If the GM is applying modern forensic theory within a historical setting for realism purposes, and the PCs are applying the historical theory, then the players may be rightfully frustrated when their successful skill rolls lead to inaccurate results. The GM should inform the players whether dramatic or realistic conventions apply, although the characters may have no reason to doubt their methods.

*Stomach Contents:* Since digestion stops at death, if there are any stomach contents, during the autopsy the medical examiner can try to determine the interval between the last meal and death. A small meal like a sandwich is digested in about an hour. A large meal typically takes about three to five hours. Again, this is highly variable; experts in the O.J. Simpson trial admitted that stomach content analysis is one of the most unreliable postmortem time scales.

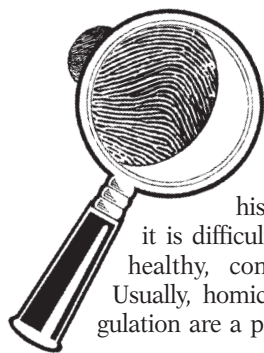
*Insect Activity:* Forensic entomology is a new field based on the life cycle of insects that feed on human remains. Research in this area began in the 1960s, becoming more common in the 1980s. Insects can narrow the time of death to within days, but not hours and depends

## CAUSES OF DEATH

The cause of death will leave specific evidence. An experienced investigator at the scene might spot some of the evidence. Other evidence will not be evident until the autopsy. If the GM describes something atypical for the assumed cause of death, that may be an important clue that all is not what it seems.

### Asphyxiation

Asphyxiation is not a common type of homicide. Normally, asphyxiation means strangulation by hand or by ligature, but it also includes drowning and suffocation.



Strangulation is personal. The killer needs to be in close contact with the victim during his struggles. And it is difficult to strangle a healthy, conscious adult. Usually, homicides by strangulation are a part of a sexual

assault where the attacker is trying to keep the victim quiet during the crime. The victim is often restrained; incapacitated by disease, alcohol, or drugs; a child; or elderly.

Investigators should look for:

*Petechiae* – pinpoint hemorrhages produced by the rupture of small blood vessels in the victim's eyes, face, epicardium, and lungs.

*Ligature marks* from the rope, cord, necktie, cloth, pantyhose, or other object

used to strangle a victim. The mark will be a bruise and a furrow in the victim's neck. The mark may have the pattern of the object used. If it slants upward toward a point, then the victim was likely hanged. If it encircles the neck horizontally, the victim was strangled.

*Bruising and abrasions* on the nose, chin, or lips caused by an object or hand used to smother the victim with a pillow, or by holding the nose and mouth shut.

## Disposing of Bodies

Getting rid of a body without a trace is exceptionally difficult. Identifiable human remains have been recovered from the collapse of the World Trade Center and the destruction of the space shuttle Columbia. Swiss climbers in 1991 found the body of a man who had been frozen in a glacier since 2800 B.C. If the murderer needs to hide an inconvenient body, here are some ideas.

- Burying a body in an isolated location is traditional. The killer needs a location where his digging and the disturbed earth will not be noticeable. Over time, scavengers, insects, and bacteria will reduce the body to a skeleton. Buried bodies decompose slowly, 8 times more slowly than those left in open air. Quick lime (calcium oxide) will speed decomposition by drawing water out of the body. It also prevents scavengers and earthworms from bringing remains to the surface.

The speed of decomposition depends on the soil. Prehistoric bodies have been found preserved in oak water, bog water, and ground with a high arsenic content. Bodies left exposed in dry climates may mummify and remain preserved for dozens, or thousands, of years. Buried bodies can be located by the heat and methane gas they produce while decomposing, by probing for soft earth, and by trained cadaver-sniffing dogs.

- Cremating a body is also traditional. Cremation requires high temperatures (1,238Y to 1,490YF) applied over two to three hours to reduce a body to ashes and pieces of calcinated bone. The bone then needs to be ground up and scattered with the ashes to prevent discovery. A murderer who has legitimate access to a crematorium may escape detection for quite some time. Lacking an actual crematorium, it is possible to burn a body on a large grill using the body's fat to feed the fire. A large pottery kiln can also reach the proper temperatures – and is said to leave an attractive red glaze on any pottery fired along with the body.

- Disposal in the water or at sea is also traditional. The corpse will usually sink, but air trapped in its clothing may keep it on the surface. Once the corpse has sunk to the bottom, it will remain there until the gases caused by putrefaction cause it to rise to the surface and float. Weights or heavy clothing will delay, but usually not prevent, this floating. The

speed of putrefaction depends on the water temperature, salinity, and whether the water is moving. A body sunk in deep cold water like the ocean or the Great Lakes may never surface. In a river in a temperate climate, an unweighted corpse will surface in two to five days in the spring, 10 to 14 days in the early winter, and possibly not at all during the depths of winter. Generally, a body will take twice as long to decompose in water as it would in open air.

- Leaving the body for scavengers in a deserted wilderness area may work. Large carnivores can drag a corpse a moderate distance before covering it with debris or burying it for later meals. Coyotes in the Pacific Northwest will reduce a body to a skeleton in 28 days, and disarticulate and scatter most of the skeleton in 2 months. After a year, the bones will be dispersed over a radius of 1,000 feet. Teeth and bone fragments may be found in the animal scat. Most bodies are found within 50 to 200 feet of a trail or road because of the difficulty of moving a corpse through rough terrain.

- Storing the corpse, tightly wrapped, in a storage locker. A Massachusetts woman murdered her husband and hid his body taped in a freezer in a self-storage facility for 13 years. The body was discovered when she confessed to the murder on her death bed.

- One murderer in 1949 London used sulfuric acid. A large quantity of acid will reduce the body to an unrecognizable goo (which could still possibly be tested for DNA) and some bones. Gallstones, dental fillings, and crowns may also survive. This requires a great deal of acid and produces toxic fumes.

- A Connecticut man used a wood chipper in 1985. He froze his wife's body in a large freezer, dismembered it with a chainsaw, then fed it through a rented wood chipper, aiming the exit chute over a local lake. Police were able to recover some hair and small bone and tooth fragments from the riverbanks and extract enough DNA to match the remains to the man's missing wife. Members of organized crime are rumored to dispose of bodies by rendering them in meat plants.

- Intermingling the body with victims of wars, mass disasters, and disease outbreaks will hide it, as long as no one looks at it carefully enough to realize that its cause of death is different from other victims.

*Bruises and fingernail marks* in a manual strangulation. If the hyoid bone and thyroid cartilage in the neck are fractured, it may mean that the victim was manually strangled; however, similar marks may accidentally be made during an autopsy.

A *fine, white froth or foam* in the airways and around the mouth and nostrils in drowning cases where the victim was alive when he entered the water. Similar foam can be found in cases of heart failure, drug overdose, and head injuries.

It is very hard to tell if a victim found in the water drowned, or died and fell or was thrown into the water. Water will make its way into the lungs in either case. Usually, the medical examiner determines the death was by drowning if the victim was found in the water and all other causes of death have been excluded.

## Burns

For mystery purposes, the key questions with a burned corpse are: the identity of the body; whether the deceased was killed before or after the fire; and whether the fire was the cause of death. Without laboratory testing, it is not possible to distinguish pre-death burns from postmortem burns. (A leading forensic text considers spontaneous human combustion to be “absurd and warrants no further discussion.”)

Bodies found after a fire are not always charred and disfigured. As discussed above, it is hard to cremate a body in a normal fire. The corpse may have no evidence of injury or it may have only some third and second-degree burns. Burned bodies are often found in a *pugilistic* pose caused by heat damage to the muscle fibers – the upper torso looks like a boxer holding his hands in front of him. This pose has nothing to do with whether the person was alive or dead before the fire. Similarly, blisters can form after death.

Investigators should look for blood tests that show fatal levels of carbon monoxide. Bodies who died of smoke inhalation (carbon monoxide poisoning) generally have soot in the nostrils, mouth, throat, and lungs. However, a lack of soot does not mean the person was dead before the fire started. The body's organs will also show a typical cherry-red color, but this can also be caused by cyanide poisoning or a body that has been exposed to the cold for a long time. Inhaling hot air rarely burns the lungs.

If the GM needs to describe burns, there are six different kinds: flame burns (caused by actual contact with fire), contact burns (caused by contact with a hot surface), radiant heat burns (caused by heat waves), scalding burns (caused by hot liquids), chemical burns (caused by strong acids, alkali and other substances that produce blisters), and microwave burns (rare). Scald burns and contact burns from cigarettes and hot irons are often indications of child abuse.

Burns are usually described as first-degree (superficial, like a sunburn), second-degree (minor tissue damage, forms blisters), third-degree (damage to all layers of the skin, skin has dry, leathery appearance without blisters), and fourth-degree burns (damage to the tissues under the skin).

Badly burned bodies are generally identified by DNA, dental records, or comparison of X-rays with the suspected victim's medical records.

## Electrocution

Death by electrocution is infrequent – homicides and suicides using this method are rare. Electrocution can cause burns, bone fractures from muscle contractions, cardiac arrhythmia, and fatal damage to the part of the brain that controls breathing.

If a killer drops a plugged-in electrical device into a bathtub while the victim is taking a bath, the victim will usually die. In many cases, there will not be an electrical burn (the current is spread over a large part of the skin). If the device is removed, the cause of death may be missed. A normal fuse or circuit breaker will typically not react to this electrocution. If the device is plugged into an outlet with a Ground-Fault Current Interrupter (required in modern kitchens, bathrooms, and outside outlets), the current will be shut off before electrocution occurs, much to the killer's chagrin.

An individual who has been fatally electrocuted may yell out before losing consciousness. Immediate first aid may save some victims; in a few cases, the heart may self-correct its rhythm.

## Poisoning

Death by poison is uncommon in reality, but a staple of the cozy setting. Prescribed medicines, over-the-counter drugs, and a large number of household chemicals can cause fatal poisoning. The

most common historical poisons – arsenic, cyanide, and strychnine – and most modern chemicals are easily detected by modern toxicological tests. Many medical examiners' offices routinely perform a complete toxicological screen of any corpse aged 70 or younger that comes into their office.

Starting at TL5, chemical tests become available for traces of poison in a corpse. Roll against Forensics, Diagnosis-3, or Chemistry-5. Modifiers: -5 to -10 without a proper laboratory; -5 or more for a rare or obscure poison; +1 per additional dose of poison after the first. (See p. 79 for a list of specific dates in history when tests for various poisons first became available.)

The victim may detect the poison. (see pp. B437-438, pp. CV73-76.)

When poison is suspected, investigators should ask if the victim complained of headaches, confusion, drowsiness, convulsions, diarrhea, vomiting, cramping muscles, or stomach pain. Cramps and stomach pain are classic symptoms of arsenic poisoning. Cyanide poisoning includes convulsions, nausea, and vomiting, but adds difficulty breathing, irritation of the nose, mouth, and throat, and the smell of bitter almonds on the breath. Strychnine poisoning also includes convulsions, nausea, and vomiting, but adds strong muscle contractions similar to those in tetanus. The muscle contractions can contort the body so that it arches backward with only the heels and the top of the head touching the ground and a fixed grin on the face called the *risus sardonicus*. Check the stomach contents, garbage, dishes and containers, and any uneaten portions of the victim's last meal for uneaten poison.

Look for the amount of poison and possibility of an accidental dose or a suicide. Stereotypically, women are more likely to kill (or commit suicide) with poison since it involves little physical contact with the victim and minimal mess. Poisoning generally requires the poisoner to have access to the victim's food, especially if the poisoner wants to be sure only his victim is harmed. Mass poisonings, like the 1982 Tylenol product tampering incident in Chicago, also require access to the tampered product and the poison (cyanide in that case). Investigators should be aware that, occasionally, a product-tampering incident is a cover for a homicide – the poisoner tries to cover the death by placing tampered products into circulation.



## Common Poisons

The descriptions below include some of the commonly used poisons both in fiction and in actual crimes. Some common poisons, and the rules for poisoning are discussed at p. B437-439. Some exotic poisons can be found in **GURPS Covert Ops** (See pp. CV73-76).

The poisons listed here have modifiers to Holdout (to hide them on the poisoner's person before administration) and Sleight of Hand (to administer them unobserved while others are watching). The difficulty of transporting and administering the poison may give investigators some clue about which suspect might have been capable of the poisoning.

**Antimony** (TL3) has effects quite similar to those of arsenic (p. B439); usually administered as tartar emetic, a medicinal substance sold in the Victorian era and used, among other things, as a sedative. It has a slight bitter taste (-3 to Taste rolls, see p. B437 regarding Taste rolls for poisons). Holdout rolls are at +2; Sleight of Hand rolls are unmodified. \$1. LC3.

**Arsenic trioxide** (TL1), the usual toxic form of arsenic, is a white powder that acts as an ingested poison (or a respiratory agent if breathed). Arsenic poisoning can occur accidentally by improperly handling pressure-treated wood, from damp or moldy wallpaper or wall paint that contains arsenic (normally Scheele's green and Paris green), and from ingesting naturally contaminated well water. Chronic arsenic poisoning creates characteristic white bands (Mee's lines) in the fingernails and toenails. The main symptom is severe abdominal pain if ingested, or a cough, runny nose, and laryngitis if inhaled. As a digestive agent, it has a one-hour delay and a HT-2 roll to resist. Inflicts 1d Toxic damage, repeating hourly for eight cycles. Arsenic trioxide has no taste. Holdout rolls are at +4; Sleight of Hand rolls are at +2. \$1/dose. LC3.

**Atropine** (TL5), the main toxin in belladonna (*Atropa belladonna*) and jimsonweed (*Datura stramonium*), is a digestive or blood poison. The natural plants are also digestive poisons (TL0). Symptoms include dry mouth, blurry vision, racing pulse, delirium, seizures, and coma. As an injected agent, it has 1 minute delay. As an ingested agent it has a 15 minute delay. Damage is 2 HP toxic, repeating at 15 minute intervals, HT-6 to resist, for up to 5 hours. The victim is at -4 DX and -2 IQ after the first failed HT roll. After



effects cease, roll vs. HT to avoid permanent loss of 1 HT; this roll is at +2 if a physician is in attendance. Like most alkaloids, atropine has a distinct bitter taste (+2 to Taste rolls). Holdout rolls are at +2; Sleight of Hand rolls are unmodified. \$20 per dose (note smaller doses are used for medical purposes).

**Physostigmine** (TL7) is a last resort in cases of massive atropine poisoning. Roll vs. HT; on a critical failure it causes a Heart Attack (p. B429), but on any other roll it stops further damage. LC2.

**Barbiturates** are a class of synthetic compounds derived from barbituric acid; the basic compound is TL5, but the useful derivatives are TL6. Treat these as overdoses of a sedative or painkiller (p. B441) No distinctive taste. Holdout rolls are at +4; Sleight of Hand rolls are at +2. \$50. LC2-3.

**Botulin toxins** are produced by *Clostridium botulinum*, a bacterium that can develop in food under anaerobic conditions; oxygen is toxic to it. The need to culture the organism under anaerobic conditions makes production of the toxin difficult, but it is now used as an alternative to cosmetic surgery. The toxins are digestive with a 2d hour delay. Roll vs. HT-2; if the roll succeeds the toxin does 4d toxic damage. Failure results in total paralysis (p. B429) and requires a roll vs. HT to continue breathing. If this second roll fails, the victim is also suffocating, as from choking (pp. B428, 436). Breathing can be maintained by First Aid (p. B425). Roll First Aid-2 for every 1/2 hour of care, or apply mechanical respiration. (Note that CPR is very tiring costing 1FP per minute for full CPR, 1 FP per 3 minutes for just respiration, 1 FP for 5 minutes if the victim has been intubated and a bag or other device is used to help breathing.) If the resuscitation fails, the target begins suffocating again. Assuming that artificial respiration is maintained, roll HT-2, every 12 hours, for up to 1d/2 days, to recover from the paralytic effect. Cannot be detected by taste. Holdout rolls are at +6; Sleight of Hand rolls are unmodified. \$200 and up. LC2.

**Carbon monoxide** is an inhaled poison that acts by bonding to hemoglobin, blocking oxygen transport in the blood. Initial symptoms are headache, drowsiness, and mild confusion. This is a an area-effect respiratory agent. Roll vs. IQ-2 to realize something is wrong. Once carbon monoxide reaches lethal levels, there is a 10-second delay and an HT roll to resist. If the target fails the HT roll, he is Drowsy (p. B428) with a -2 to DX, and IQ and begins to suffocate (p. B436).

If the target succeeds, he is still in life-threatening danger until he finds fresh air. Cannot be detected by smell. Not normally purchased; can be produced by incomplete combustion of charcoal (TL1) or in internal combustion exhaust (TL6). LC4.

**Curare** is the active element in a poisonous Amazonian vine, *Strychnos toxifer*, used by tribal cultures to make poisoned blowgun darts (TL0); the pure substance was extracted in the 19th century (TL5). The injected drug has no delay and weakens and paralyzes the muscles, eventually including the heart and respiratory muscles. Roll vs. HT-6 to resist the effect. Success leaves the victim at -5 DX and -5 ST for 15-HT minutes (minimum 1 minute). Failure results in total paralysis (p. B429) and requires a roll vs. HT to continue breathing. If this second roll fails, the victim is also suffocating, as from choking (pp. B428, 436) (see *Botulin toxins* above). The target rolls HT every 1/2 hour to recover from the poison. Note that curare does not cause unconsciousness. Holdout rolls are at +6; Sleight of Hand rolls are at +4. \$5. LC2.

A combination of atropine and neostigmine is an antidote for curare, but will not take effect until 30 minutes have elapsed.

**Cyanide** (TL4), includes hydrogen cyanide, a respiratory poison that dissolves in water to form hydrocyanic acid (also called prussic acid) and potassium and sodium cyanide, digestive and blood poisons. Hydrocyanic acid is a digestive, blood, and contact poison. Causes 4d toxic damage per dose with no delay by inhalation or injection or after a 15 minutes delay in contact or digestive forms; death is by cardiac arrest. Can be identified by a slight bitter almond flavor (-2 to Taste rolls). (Approximately half of the population can't smell it, however, and get no Taste roll.) Holdout rolls are at +6; Sleight of Hand rolls are at +4. \$2/dose. LC2.

Cyanide decomposes in the blood and may be impossible to detect if the body is not discovered within a few days. Finding cyanide during an autopsy does not necessarily mean the victim was poisoned. Many common synthetic materials, when burned, produce cyanide in amounts insufficient to cause death, but enough to show up in some tests. Cyanide can also be produced during normal decomposition, which can also produce a misleading result on lab tests.

**Ground Glass:** a physical "poison." The sharp edges of the glass inflict numerous cuts on the digestive tracts, leading to internal bleeding and, if that doesn't kill the victim, to a risk of infection.

The immediate effect of ground glass in the digestive system is 1d of impaling damage to the vital organs (see p. B399). Armor does not help. After this, apply the optional bleeding rule (see p. B420), even if it's not used for ordinary injuries. If this doesn't kill the victim, roll against HT-1 to avoid infection in the abdomen (see p. B444). LC4.

**Ricin** is a blood, digestive, or inhaled poison (TL5) extracted from the seeds of castor beans (*Ricinus communis*); the natural seeds are also digestive poisons (TL0). It has an 8 hour delay. Roll vs. HT-2 at this time. If the target succeeds, he takes 3d toxic. Survivors must roll vs. HT or permanently lose 1 HT to organ damage. A successful Physician roll by an attending doctor gives +1 to these HT rolls. No distinctive taste. Holdout rolls are at +6; Sleight of Hand rolls are at +4. \$1. LC1.

**Strychnine** is primarily a digestive poison, but the dust can be a respiratory poison (TL5). It occurs naturally in the dog button plant (*Strychnos nux-vomica*) (TL0). The effect is convulsive contractions of all the muscles at once, producing violent convulsions after a 15 minute delay, the convulsions are a form of seizure (p. B429) lasting 5 minutes. Starting five minutes after the convulsions begin and every 5 minutes thereafter, roll HT-6. If the roll fails, the seizures continues, and the character loses 2 FP. The seizure can last up to one hour. If he succeeds, the seizure stops; target takes 2 FP. If the target's FP reaches 10, his respiratory muscles are paralyzed and he is suffocating, as if from choking. (see p. B428, 436-37). After a total of 2d hours, the paralysis ends. The convulsions produce a distinctive facial expression, the *risus sardonius*; rolls to

## Identifying a Body

One of the classic sleights-of-hand in mystery fiction is misidentifying a badly damaged corpse. In earlier decades, a corpse could be identified by fingerprints, dental work, and calculations on skeletal fragments to estimate age, gender, and sometimes race. There are techniques to try to reconstruct the face from an intact skull. These techniques are still used, but are being replaced with DNA databases.

Look for the fingers, teeth, skull, and long bones.

If someone with forensic training has the pelvis, skull, and arm bones of an adult, he can determine with reasonable accuracy gender, race, and handedness. He can determine height from the long bones of the legs. Weight is hard to determine. It is also hard to determine sex from the bones of a child who has not entered puberty.

For dental records, the investigator needs to determine a possible identity and obtain that person's dental chart from their dentist. Dental records are almost as good as fingerprints; a single tooth, or even the structure of the jaw itself can identify a person. It is rare for dental records to be mistaken; however, there have been cases of dentists recording non-existent work and fraudulently billing insurers and Medicaid, and of not recording work they performed to hide income from the IRS.

Fingerprint records will identify convicted criminals, military personnel, anyone who has ever held a federal security clearance (required for many administrative jobs), holders of firearms permits in many states, and so on. Employers may also have employee fingerprint records in their files.

DNA databases are much smaller. They are generally limited to military personnel and some criminals. If a detective has a possible identity for the victim, he might be able to find DNA on the victim's toothbrush, hairbrush, or comb. DNA tests generally take hours to days to perform, longer than fingerprint tests or dental comparisons, especially if the sample is small, old, or contaminated with other biological material.

identify cause of death are at +4. Strychnine has a strong bitter taste (+3 to Taste rolls). Holdout rolls are at +6; Sleight of Hand rolls are at +4. \$5/dose. LC2.

While not a poison, per se, it is possible but difficult to kill someone by injecting air into his veins, which will cause a Heart Attack (p. B429). A relatively large amount of air (100-250 cm3) is needed, which usually means using an established intravenous line. Contrary to popular fiction, the amount of air means that it is easily detected in an autopsy.

## Wounds

Many victims will have wounds of some kind. Abrasions (scrapes), contusions (bruises), lacerations (cuts), punctures, and gunshot wounds will be most common.

Abrasions and contusions sometimes show the pattern or shape of the object that made them. If enough force is used, fine details like the threading on the end

of a pipe or outline of a striking hand can be clearly seen.

Gunshot wounds are a kind of puncture wound. The medical examiner won't be able to tell much about the weapon from the wound's size. Nor can even a detailed examination distinguish wounds from hollowpoint bullets from round-nose bullet wounds. Rifle wounds are distinct from handgun wounds because rifle bullets are fired at a higher velocity and have more energy when they strike.

It is easy to confuse entry and exit wounds, especially if the muzzle of the weapon was more than three feet from the victim when the shot was fired. Shots fired from three feet or less leave soot, unburned powder, and powder burns, which will help the investigator figure out the distance to within a half-foot or so.

Hacking and chopping wounds from meat cleavers, axes, and machetes leave characteristic damage on the victim's bones. Microscopic analysis of the bones can broadly distinguish between these types of weapons.

Punctures don't hold shape as well. Skin is elastic. A knife wound might be longer, shorter, or the same as the knife's width. The depth may be more, less, or equal to the length of the knife blade. When there are many punctures, a medical examiner might be able to estimate the size of the knife by comparing multiple wounds. The medical examiner won't be able to tell whether the weapon was single- or double-edged or whether the edge was straight or serrated. He won't be able to match the knife to the wound, unless part of the weapon broke off in the body.

Stab wounds that have an "L" or "Y" shape mean that the victim moved while the knife was being withdrawn. They don't necessarily mean that the attacker twisted the knife in the body.

Stab wounds from ice picks are distinct from knife wounds, but can look like wounds from a .22 caliber bullet or shotgun pellet. In fact, a single ice pick wound might not be noticed on a cursory examination, if it did not bleed much.

Wounds from other weapons like barbecue forks, screwdrivers, and scissors all have identifiable patterns.

Investigators should look at the location of the wound, but keep in mind that victims can and will move during a struggle. There's a tiny, but important delay between when a shooter begins to draw and fire a handgun and when he actually does so. The bullet can strike the side or the back, even if the shooter and target were facing each other when the shooter began to fire.

Look at the number of wounds, but keep in mind that people, especially intoxicated people, can be very resistant to pain and may keep moving well after they received a fatal injury.

Look for defensive wounds on the victim's hands and arms suggesting that he tried to block a weapon or blows during the fight. If there are no defensive wounds, the victim may have been asleep, unconscious, or surprised.

## OTHER CRIME SCENE EVIDENCE

*"Cause and effect rule the world; they may be a mirage but they are a consistent mirage; everywhere, except possibly in subatomic physics, there is a cause for each effect, and that cause can be found."*

— Trevis Tarrant,  
*The Curious Mr. Tarrant*

In theory, any contact between two surfaces leaves trace evidence of each on the other. Forensic equipment has become more sensitive in recent years, allowing investigators to match all sorts of trace evidence to suspects. However, useful forensic evidence like fingerprints or DNA associated with a suspect is only found in 5-10% of all crime scenes. This section is a very brief introduction to examining this evidence. Players and GMs involved in forensics-oriented police procedural adventures may want to look at some of the sources in the bibliography.

A police department has to be realistic in how it uses its limited personnel, laboratories, and budgets. Not every case warrants a full-scale investigation. A detective with a hunch may battle superiors for extra resources on a seemingly minor case. Private investigators have whatever resources their client can afford to examine and test whatever information the police might have preserved. If the crime scene has been released and not contaminated too much, private investigators might be able to find key information themselves.

### Blood Spatters

Violent crimes often involve a large amount of blood. First, the investigator needs to locate the blood. Blood that's fresh and not mixed with other materials is easy to identify. Luminol and other reagents will reveal trace amounts of blood left behind when a stain was cleaned up or wiped against another surface. Other chemicals like Hemident can distinguish human and animal blood from other reddish stains like brake fluid. Laboratory tests are needed to be certain blood is human, and to tell the blood type and isolate DNA.

It's hard to tell how old a bloodstain is, but experts can tell a great deal from its size, shape, and location. If the wounded body part was moving as it bled, the shape of the spot will show signs of the speed and direction of movement. Dripping blood produces "low velocity" patterns. The shape and size of these drops tell an investigator how far the blood fell. (Up to about 72 inches. A drop falling from a height greater than 72 inches produces the same pattern as one falling from 72 inches.) Blood cast off a moving body part or expelled when the attacker hits the victim with something like a bat or a fist produces "medium velocity" patterns. Blood moving at high speed, typically after a gunshot wound, produces "high velocity"

patterns. The higher the speed, the smaller the individual drops. The stain's size also reveals how far it traveled from its source (the larger the drop, the larger the distance). Blood from a gunshot wound that strikes a close wall or object will have small drops in a tight pattern; blood that strikes a more distant object will have larger individual drops that are more widely spread out. Blood that lands on an angled surface or a wall will have different patterns than blood that lands on the floor. "Contact smears" indicate that a bloody object brushed against or touched another surface.

Look for the number, shape, size, and location of blood spatters to try to figure out how the blood was spilled. Check to make sure the stain is human blood and collect laboratory samples for blood type and DNA matching.

### Bullets and Casings

Experts can match a fired bullet to other bullets fired from the same weapon, as long as the bullet isn't too badly damaged. Bullets are matched using the rifling patterns impressed on the bullet by the barrel as it is fired. Unrifled weapons like shotguns can't be matched this way. Fired casings can be matched to other casings from the same weapon based on the markings impressed on the casing by the breech, extractor and/or ejector, and firing pin when the bullet is fired. Without a recovered weapon, a ballistics expert can't match a recovered bullet and a recovered casing to each other, but he might be able to say that they were both fired from the same model of firearm.

Changing the barrel, extractor/ejector, and firing pin can alter a firearm's markings. The markings can be damaged beyond matching with files and abrasives, but it will be obvious that the weapon has been altered. Over time, the markings will change by routine wear and cleaning, but unless the weapon is allowed to badly corrode, it can generally be matched even after a few thousand rounds have been fired through it.

Look for recovered bullets and casings. Do not dig bullets out of the wall with a knife. Remove the wall around them and let the lab extract the bullet. Do not stick a pencil or other object into the barrel of a firearm – that may damage the rifling marks. Casings are round and light – they roll and can be easily pushed by wind or kicked. Smaller casings can even get caught in the tread of a boot and carried away by investigators.



If the detective does not have a suspect firearm, he can take digital images of the casing or bullet and match it through the national ballistics database. At present, this database only contains images from crime scenes. Maryland and New York are experimenting with databases that contain images of bullets and casings provided by the manufacturer for every firearm sold in their states. (As of late 2004, neither of these databases had provided a lead to investigators.) There are discussions about expanding this program nationwide and concerns about costs, accuracy and search time. Remember that the computer does not match the image to the evidence. It provides its most likely candidates. An expert then needs to compare the current evidence to the actual evidence from the past crime scene.

Ballistics matching cannot be forged, but bullets and casings can be planted at the crime scene. There are also various ways to make ballistics matching difficult, like using specially-made bullets in which a smaller caliber bullet is set into a slightly larger casing and fired from a weapon designed for the larger casing. When fired, the smaller bullet receives only faint impressions from the barrel, and is "obviously" the wrong caliber for the weapon.

## **DNA**

DNA is the molecule that carries each person's genetic information. It is used to distinguish individuals. Every person, except identical twins, has different DNA. It can be extracted from most body tissues, including hair (if there's a root), blood, saliva, sweat, and various bodily fluids. There are separate tests for nuclear DNA (from cells that have a nucleus) and mitochondrial DNA (which is found in most cells, but is shared by every child of the same mother).

DNA testing is complex and requires a laboratory. The current testing methods take 24 hours to extract DNA from a sample, and two to three hours to type it. DNA testing is in high demand; laboratories are often backlogged for weeks or months with requests. Typing does not match the entire DNA strand, only a portion that is statistically unlikely to match anyone other than the suspect being compared.

Look for DNA in nearly any bodily fluid or tissue. It is possible to tell whether a DNA sample has two or more

contributors to it, which lets a lab determine if a suspect and victim's blood is intermixed. The amount of DNA needed is getting smaller with each year. Some experts are predicting that labs will be able to extract DNA from the organic material in a latent fingerprint by the end of the decade.

Look for a reference sample from the suspects. The investigator may need their permission or a court order to get a reference sample. Or he might be able to get one from a cigarette, or a glass the suspect drank from. If there isn't a suspect, it is possible that entering the DNA information into a database may turn up a match with another unsolved case, or with a prior offender.

At this point, DNA cannot be forged, but blood or other fluids could be planted at a crime scene.

## **Fingerprints**

Fingerprints are produced by the friction ridges on each person's hands and feet. Fingerprints are formed during gestation, are unique to each person, and remain consistent throughout life. Even identical twins have different fingerprints. Fingerprints can be "patent" (easily seen), if made in ink, blood, or a soft surface like putty. They can be "latent," created by tiny amounts of sweat and skin oils. Latent fingerprints can be made visible with a variety of chemicals and powders. The quality of the fingerprint depends on the amount of sweat on the suspect's fingers, the surface the mark is made on, how the surface was handled, and how the print was developed.

Fingerprints can be recovered, with varying degrees of success, from many surfaces, including human skin. They can't be recovered from rough surfaces like brick, rock, stone, unfinished wood, and cloth.

An expert cannot tell an investigator how old a fingerprint is, just that it was made after the surface was last cleaned. A fingerprint will be most useful to an investigation if it is found somewhere that is not accessible to the public in general, and not otherwise to the suspect in specific. Washing, wiping, or just routine contact with other surfaces can destroy fingerprints.

Look for fingerprints, but don't be surprised not to find them. Many criminals know enough to wear gloves at a crime scene or clean up after their deeds.

Look for fingerprints in locations where the suspect might have forgotten to clean, or might have touched before he put on his gloves or after he took them off. Look for prints on the inside of recovered gloves. Do not expect to find fingerprints on firearms; their surfaces are specifically made to avoid the corrosive effects of fingerprint oils on metals. Do not expect to find fingerprints on bullet casings; the surface is small and any marks tend to get rubbed off in the chamber during loading and firing.

Even if a detective does find fingerprints, they may be of insufficient quality to match. Mistaken matches are rare, but possible. Three senior FBI examiners, and an outside examiner appointed by a court, misidentified an Oregon attorney as part of the Madrid bombing in 2004. Spanish authorities identified the actual culprit separately.

Fingerprints can be forged. There are no known cases of fingerprints being forged by criminals, although one enterprising prisoner had a confederate plant an object with his fingerprint on it at a later crime scene in an effort to undermine the validity of fingerprint comparisons. (The ruse failed and his accomplice confessed.) Sadly, some police officers have taken latent fingerprints from objects handled by suspects during an arrest or interrogation, then claimed to have found those prints at crime scenes. Be sure that recovered prints are properly documented to avoid forgeries.

Searching the computerized fingerprint databases can take hours or days unless the investigator can narrow the search with some information about the suspect like gender, race, or age. And remember that the computer does not match a fingerprint. It provides likely candidates for a human expert to match.

## **Gunpowder Residue**

When a firearm is fired, it produces a cloud of residue composed of materials from the primer (mostly lead, antimony, and barium) and sometimes unburned or partially burned powder. The residue will adhere to skin, clothing, and anything else within a foot or so of the firearm's muzzle, but it can be easily removed with soap and water, or just normal contact with other surfaces. There are a variety of tests for gunpowder, which should be used within a few hours after the weapon was fired.

## GM Note: Game Mechanics

Often you will want to give your investigators accurate crime scene information, like time of death, which will lead them to other clues. But forensics is not an exact science. If you want to introduce the possibility of error, you should make a skill roll for the characters involved.

First responders roll at Forensics or Law Enforcement skill (p. C58) of 10 or 11. Apply penalties if the crime scene is particularly grisly. Failure means the officer made a minor mistake like touching something, leaving multiple witnesses together too long, or allowing the wrong person access to the scene. Critical failures mean the mistake tainted or destroyed critical clues.

Detectives and experts make Sense and Forensics rolls to gather physical evidence and Criminology rolls to interpret it. Whether the detectives make the rolls themselves or leave it to experts depends on the department's resources and whether your adventure is dramatically realistic or cinematic. Evidence technicians have Perception rolls of 11, and Criminology and Forensics skills of 13 to 15.

Autopsies use Forensics and Diagnosis. Forensic Entomology, Forensic Anthropology, and Forensic Dentistry are sub-skills of Forensics and default to it at -4.

Adjust for the size of the department and apparent importance of the case. Apply reasonable modifiers depending on the difficulty of finding and interpreting the item. Finding and preserving a latent fingerprint on a glass sliding door, for example, is at a +1 bonus to Criminology and Forensics. Finding the same print on human skin is at a -4 and must be done within 12 hours of the print being made.

Ask investigators for a rough description of where they are searching. Determine from there what they find. (Investigators with Luck or Common Sense may be given information they didn't ask for.)

You will generally make one roll to gather information per PC (or per unit for NPCs) for the crime scene. You can give each PC investigator one roll to interpret the information or take the best roll from the PCs as a group for the result. Give characters additional interpretation rolls when they get significant new evidence.

Reports are written using the officer's or expert's Writing skill (usually 11 or 12) with a +1 to +3 bonus depending on how much time the officer is given to complete it. Failure means something was left out. Critical failure means something vitally important was left out.

Look for gunpowder residue on the suspect's hands and clothing. If none is detected, it doesn't mean the suspect didn't fire a weapon. Tests of known

suicides by handgun failed to detect gunpowder in about 30% of all cases. If residue is present, it could be a false positive from something the suspect

handled that contained lead or antimony. Check to make sure that the officers who arrested and handled the suspect prior to testing had not fired a weapon, or handled a fired handgun, within a few hours before contacting the suspect.

## Handwriting and Documents

There are a variety of techniques for trying to match handwriting with known samples and trying to match typewriter and printer marks. It is harder to match marks from copiers, fax machines, and computer printers, but it may be possible. It is also sometimes possible to match documents by the kind of paper or ink used.

## Toolmarks

Firearms matching is a subspecialty of toolmark analysis. Many tools will leave impressions on softer surfaces when they are used. Those marks often can be microscopically matched to the type of tool, and possibly to the tool itself if it is recovered.

## Other Physical Evidence

Dirt, fibers, glass, paint, and pollen can all be matched to reference samples. There are disputes about how well hair can be matched to a specific person.

Look for any sort of trace evidence, especially if it seems out of place. Be wary of crime scene contamination by the police, bystanders, or forensics experts.

Don't forget to look for the obvious – answering machine messages, caller ID logs, phone bills, appointment books, computer records, PDAs, video from any security cameras that might overlook the crime scene, tire tracks, shoe tracks, and so on.

# NON-HOMICIDE INVESTIGATIONS

A mystery adventure does not need to include any deaths. Arson, burglaries, and kidnappings all can be high-stakes puzzles to interest a group of detectives. Often, non-homicide puzzles follow a thriller structure instead of the mystery structure (see p. 24). Instead of solving just one crime, the investigators often find themselves facing a serial arsonist, a burglary ring, or an elaborate blackmail ring run by organized crime.

The thriller climax usually includes a set-piece confrontation, often in a location of the mastermind's choosing, where the heroes have to disable the nuclear bomb, stop the ritual summoning of Cthulhu, or save the heiress from the deathtrap. If they capture the villain before the set-piece fight, he will often reveal that he has left some bomb or deathtrap that they must find to prevent disaster.

Stopping the big plot usually will involve a series of actions, not one all-or-

nothing skill check. While the investigators will generally have a fair chance to stop the plot and capture the bad guy, the GM should have contingency plans to prevent the adventure from ending in an anticlimax if they uncover the villain's scheme too early – e.g., an undiscovered minion or superior who carries on the evil plan. The heroes in a thriller should be rewarded for cleverness as they figure out the plot, but they should still face a challenge in the final scene.

## ARSON

*"Why is it that the crime of arson has the lowest arrest and conviction rate of all? The reason is simple. The arsonist is weak and insecure, and usually perpetrates his crimes in the dark, generally in seclusion. Sometimes he uses time delays. Additionally, the evidence is almost always destroyed, if not by the fire, then by firefighters during extinguishment."*

— John Orr,  
former arson investigator, convicted  
serial arsonist and murderer

Arson has long been recognized as a serious crime, second only to homicide. Fires spread. A person who deliberately sets a fire, even to an abandoned building, endangers any neighbors and, of course, the firefighters who respond to put out the blaze. Fire is a traditional way to destroy evidence after a murder.

Fires are normally classified as incendiary (deliberately set to burn the property), suspicious (cause undetermined), and accidental (not willfully or maliciously set).

Typically, incendiary fires are deliberately set for profit. The owner has insured the building for more than its value and burns it to collect the insurance settlement. Often, this is a desperate action by a failing business, a way to dispose of unsalable inventory, or a way to destroy a dilapidated or condemned building for urban renewal. Some business owners set fires to destroy competitors, or destroy a customer's stock to provoke a reorder. Fires are also set out of jealousy, for revenge, to destroy evidence of another crime, by firefighters or firebuffs in order to heroically save someone from the fire, and by pyromaniacs.

Accidental fires are caused by many things – children playing with matches, smoking in bed, cooking accidents, defective heaters, dryer and chimney fires, lightning, and so on.

Arson investigations attract many different official investigators. In America, the local or state fire marshal's office generally investigates arson. If an explosive was used, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, a division of the Justice Department, may investigate as well. If someone died, the local police will investigate the homicide aspect of the crime. If the building was insured, the insurance company will assign an investigator to determine whether it must pay the fire insurance

policy. The number of different investigators can lead to bureaucratic battles, especially in a high-profile case.

Fire marshals are often experienced firefighters. They are often notified while the fire is being fought that the on-scene fire personnel suspect arson. Investigators typically arrive while the firefighters are working on the blaze and will ask specific questions about how the firefighters entered the building, whether doors or windows were open or closed, locked or unlocked, and, if there is an alarm, whether the burglar and fire alarms were working.

An insurance investigator generally will not arrive until well after the fire has been put out. First, the fire department has to locate the owner of the property. Then the owner needs to contact the insurance company and submit a claim. At that point, the company will assign its investigator.

Once the fire has been put out, the marshals and insurance investigators will begin looking through the debris.

The fire itself, and the water and chemicals used to fight it, will destroy a great deal of evidence. Firefighters often need to tear down walls and ceilings to make sure they have gotten all of the fire. They may break windows, doors, even roofs and walls to ventilate the smoke. Fragile evidence like hairs, fibers, fingerprints, and blood is likely to be lost. If the fire is hot enough, metal bullets, cartridge casings, and weapons may be warped or just lost beneath the other debris.

Look for where and how the fire started. If there is more than one point of origin for the fire, suspect arson. A fire that starts on the uppermost floor is also suspicious – the water used to fight the fire causes a great deal of damage to the lower floors, which increases the insurance loss.

Look for signs of the fire expanding upward and outward in a distinctive "V" shaped burn. The point of the burn indicates the origin of the fire.

Look for *alligatoring* (charring of wood) to determine the heat intensity of the fire. If the wood

has large, rolling blisters, the fire was rapid and intense. If the wood has flat charring, the fire was low-intensity. The relative depth of the charring tells the investigator which parts of the fire were hottest, and thus where it started or burned longest.

Look for traces of accelerants (flammable liquids), using Perception rolls, instruments, and trained dogs.

Look for remains of timers or other devices used to start the fire. Matches and gasoline are the tools of youths and pyromaniacs. More sophisticated chemicals, timers, and explosives are the tools of seasoned arsonists.

Look for valuables and papers that have been removed from the property before the fire.

Look for obvious profit motives like a failing business, impending mortgage foreclosure, and large debts (especially large debts to organized crime). The more severe the debt, the more likely it is that the person set the fire himself or hired a professional arsonist.

Look for indirect profit motives such as long-term declines in rental income, rent-controlled tenants who cannot be easily evicted, inventory that was selling poorly, or a business that needs to remodel or relocate to survive.

Look for unscrupulous rival business competitors, extortion schemes, labor troubles, jilted lovers, feuding neighbors, and disgruntled employees.

Look for a pattern, both in the means of arson and in the owner's finances. There is an insurance industry registry that keeps track of fire, burglary, and theft claims, looking for fraud. An NPC might be listed in that registry, although his presence there could be a clue or a red herring.





## BURGLARY

RPG mysteries sometimes involve recovering an important stolen object, often with a minimal amount of publicity. A private investigator or insurance investigator may be able to make a deal for the return of the item, without worrying about prosecuting the burglars. In a game scenario, the stolen item may be far more important than it seems. It may have mystic powers, have valuables concealed beneath a mundane-seeming surface, or contain secret information.

If the PCs are police officers or private security forces who receive a signal from an alarm of a burglary in progress, they need to approach quickly, but carefully. Professional burglars may have lookouts or may monitor police and security radio frequencies. Even amateur burglars will bolt if they hear the wail of approaching sirens. Only 13% of burglaries are solved nationwide, so the investigators should try to catch the burglars at the scene. Give them a fair chance to do so. If they do, then the GM can design the plot around finding the mastermind the burglars were working for. If they do not, then the mystery may just be about catching this band of burglars. If the GM doesn't want the burglars to be caught, he should let them bypass the alarm. The police will arrive on the scene long after the criminals have left.

Once the police arrive at the scene, they need to figure out how to watch the exits and search the building. This scene gives ample opportunities for chases and scuffles. Clearing a building is dangerous, difficult work. The searchers should worry about being ambushed by a panicked burglar with a gun trapped somewhere in the building.

If the burglars are gone, the investigators need to figure out what's missing and how the burglars got in. Generally, commercial buildings are entered at night or on weekends from the rear, using service doors and loading docks. Residences are entered during the workday from the front, breaching the front door while disguised as a salesman, delivery person, or utility worker. If the burglars forced their way in, their tools will leave toolmarks that may allow an investigator to match crime scenes to each other, and to the burglar's tool if recovered. About a third of burglaries involve entry without force, using a master key, lockpicks, or an unlocked door. If

the burglars had access to a key, or to a conveniently unlocked door, the investigators should suspect an insider accomplice. Similarly, if the burglars are able to circumvent or disable alarms, avoid cameras, or quickly find hidden safes, the investigators should suspect an insider's aid.

If the authorities suspect an insider, police and/or insurance investigators will go over the employment records of everyone who had access to the area, including significant former employees, looking for criminal records and associates, recent financial troubles, disagreements, or other signs that an employee might have been vulnerable to a burglar's solicitation.

The investigators should also think about what's missing. An amateur burglar will take obvious valuables, often overlooking more expensive items that cannot be easily sold for cash. If, on the other hand, the burglars stole specific items that don't sell fast on the street, then they may be professionals working directly for a client like an unscrupulous art collector or a rival business owner. Since professionals tend to spend weeks or months making painstaking studies of their targets, the police should ask security guards and staff if they recall any frequent or odd visitors. The investigators may also examine security videotapes looking for frequent visitors or people conducting surveillance.

Investigators will often suspect that there's more going on than they are being told. One twist may be insurance fraud. Their client might have stolen his own property to collect the insured value, intending to sell the real item when things get quiet. The client might have overinsured the property and destroyed it, or destroyed a good forgery of it. The investigators should look for financial troubles, just as they would in an arson investigation.

### *Fences*

Professional fences can be useful sources and intermediaries in a burglary adventure. Fences have been around as long as thieves. Without a market for stolen goods, few thieves would bother stealing anything other than cash and food.

A traditional professional or occasional fence for general goods operates his own store selling overstock, seconds, and damaged goods. This gives him a

perfect cover for selling goods stolen from warehouses and from trucks, or by shoplifters. Fences prefer to own shops that deal with large amounts of cash with few receipts so illicit profits can easily be laundered. Fences usually have a specialty, like furs and clothing, or furniture and antiques, but are willing to deal in a wide variety of goods. Some fences only deal in specialized goods, such as art or jewelry.

Fences usually buy stolen goods at 10% to 20% of their value, and then sell them at a third or half of the value. A fence generally has no qualms about cheating a thief who does not know the value of what he is selling. The fence may claim that genuine jewelry is fake, or that an item is an undesirable model, or that it is less valuable without some accessory the thief overlooked.

Typically, about 80% of a professional fence's stock is legitimate – overstock, damaged goods, factory closeouts, and seconds. If a fence has a steady supply of a particular stolen good, he may buy small amounts of the same good legitimately in order to mix his illegal goods with the legitimate goods and have a legitimate-looking paper trail. His profit margin is about the same as a fully legitimate business. His costs are lower, but his prices are lower too. A fence makes his money on the volume of his sales.

Often, the fence is at his store by 6 a.m. to meet with burglars and deliverymen who stole during the night, and with wholesalers. In the afternoon, shoplifters who stole during busy lunch hours appear with their goods. A fence will have one or more "drops" (garages, barns, attics, and other places rented for cash for six months under a false name, then cleaned out and changed). Fences generally carry large sums of cash with them to quickly wrap up a sale. A fence may carry a pistol or have a shotgun in his shop. Some rely on reputation and organized crime connections for protection.

A fence can be a contact or informant for police and private detectives. He may also offer advice to police, stores, and insurance adjusters about how to limit their losses, as well as teaching his sellers how to steal smarter. A large city will have two to four major fences and a number of part-time or specialized fences. Most fences have contacts with organized crime and can find a buyer for nearly any item.

A PC who has a fence contact may be able to recover a stolen item, for an appropriate fee, and a promise that the fence will not be prosecuted. If the fence betrays a thief, the fence will want a promise of confidentiality.

Occasionally, police run undercover sting operations where they set up a front business and spread the word that it is actually a fence's operation. They will purchase stolen goods, videotape the transactions on hidden cameras, and compile information about the local thieves, then arrest their "customers" at the end of the operation. If private investigators mistake a police sting operation for a real fence's store, things may get very interesting.

Blackmail, for obvious reasons, is rarely reported in the press. Thus, the GM will need to look more at fictional models than at reality.

Usually the plan is simple. The villain has something the client wants, like a kidnapped loved one, or an incriminating or embarrassing document. The client has something the villain wants – usually money. Often, the client goes to a private detective seeking someone who can deliver a payment to the villain and has the combat skills to defend himself in case of betrayal. If a company or person has purchased kidnapping, ransom, and extortion insurance, the PCs might be private security experts hired by the insurance company to resolve the crisis.

and authorities do not try to rescue victims for fear of causing their deaths. The official plan is typically to get the victim back, then locate and capture the villains.

Ransom demands can be large. Some companies have received demands for \$10 million to \$25 million or more for kidnapped executives. Negotiators may try to haggle with the villain. Most kidnappers will settle for 10% to 20% of the demand, but a few insist on the whole sum and have no qualms about sending back a victim's body part to make their point.

A blackmail or kidnapping investigation is similar to a burglary case. The investigators will be looking at what skills and information were needed to obtain the missing person or item. Investigators trying to recover incriminating photographs taken of the CEO and his secretary face a different kind of criminal than those trying to recover the CEO himself.

Similarly, the means used to contact the client may tell the investigators something about the villain. A kidnapper who uses cloned cell phones has a different level of technical sophistication than one who uses a series of public telephone booths.

Even the manner of ransom delivery may give the investigators some clues. A kidnapper who wants his payment in uncut diamonds has different resources than one who wants a briefcase full of small, unmarked bills. Modern kidnappings for ransom often involve organized crime or terrorist groups, with payments demanded by wire transfer to offshore banks in the Middle East, Asia, or Russia.

What is taken, and what is demanded, may give the investigators some clue about the criminal's motive. Why was this particular person targeted? Does the perpetrator have some specific grudge against the client? Does he have specific inside information that made this client more attractive than some other target?

The GM can also make the investigators themselves the targets of a kidnapping or blackmail plot. Dependents or Secrets are disadvantages, after all. Be aware that if a PC is the target of this kind of crime, he will take it very personally and is unlikely to just pay his foe and let him escape. Be prepared for the heroes to expend vast amounts of money, resources, favors, and effort in order to recover what they have lost, avenge themselves on the villain, and deter anyone else from trying a similar scheme.



## KIDNAPPING AND BLACKMAIL

Movies and books sometimes involve private investigators, or less commonly police, who need to recover a person or object from a villain. There are relatively few kidnappings for ransom in real life. In some countries, Western business executives, tourists, and government officials are kidnapped by local criminals or terrorist groups for money, but that is a different kind of adventure.

However the investigators become involved, something generally goes wrong with this simple set-up. Typical complications include a client who cannot, or will not, pay the ransom, or a criminal who accidentally killed the hostage or destroyed the blackmail item and is bluffing, hoping to get paid anyway. If the client and the villain are dealing honestly, the police, the press, or a rival may clumsily intervene in the ransom delivery.

Generally, kidnapping victims are not killed unless something goes drastically wrong in the abduction or in a rescue,

# CHAPTER THREE

# THE DEADLIEST OF REVEALERS

## WITNESSES

*"Oh, my dear friend, it is impossible not to give oneself away – unless one never opens one's mouth! Speech is the deadliest of revealers."*

– Hercule Poirot,  
*Cards on the Table*

Investigators need to talk to many people to solve a mystery. This chapter is about witnesses – people who have seen or know something important about the puzzle. It is about what witnesses know (perception), what they recall (memory), and how investigators

can try to get information from them. It expands the existing **GURPS** reaction and influence mechanics to provide rules for handling PC questioning of NPCs.

## Solving Mysteries

For players, sometimes the hardest part of the adventure is figuring out where to start. Your character is presented with a group of NPCs, most of whom are lying to you about something, some forensic evidence, none of which points directly at a suspect, and a crime. Where do you start?

Listen to the GM. Most of what the GM is telling you is being said for a reason. If he keeps repeating the same name, place, or time, then it is probably important. (Yes, this is meta-game thinking, but it is part of how mystery fiction, and mystery RPGs, work.)

Take notes. (A large white board that all the players can see is very handy for this purpose.) Keep track of who gives you information as well as what they said. (Different colored markers can help differentiate notes from various sources.) Keeping notes means you won't forget something important. Also, the act of writing may help you concentrate. Your notes may help you see patterns in the information.

You are looking for means, motive, and opportunity (see p. 16). A chronology is often helpful. Keeping track of what happened when will help you spot oddities in alibis and events.

If you have an obvious clue, by all means follow it. If you have a choice of directions, start with the NPCs who have the least obvious reason to lie to your character. Generally you will be able to trust police experts, but find out how they got their answer. A disfigured corpse identified by a distraught relative and not confirmed by fingerprints or dental records is not a reliable identification in a typical mystery.

Triangulation is useful. In this context it means getting the same information from two independent NPCs.

Witnesses can be mistaken about what they saw or remember (see *Perception*, p. 46). If the witnesses talked about what they saw before you talk to them, they aren't independent (see *Memory*, p. 49). Generally you won't need more than two sources. If a key bit of information is coming from only one source, bear in mind that it could be a lie or a mistake.

Have a plan before you approach an important NPC. You should discuss with the other players what approach you want to use, who'll be doing the talking, and what questions you need to ask. Look over your notes before the interview.

Listen to the NPC. You are not just listening to what he says, but looking for clues about his personality. Is he the kind of person who might commit the crime? What might motivate him to do so? Try to get a sketch from the NPC of where he was and what he saw. (This gives you, the player, something to look at later.)

Look for evidence of unusual skills. If one of your suspects is a dental assistant and the disfigured victim was identified by his dental records, you may have been tricked. If one of your suspects is a computer expert or hobbyist, be wary of any computer records related to the crime.

Ask NPCs what they think of each other. You can get useful gossip about their inter-relationships.

Take a moment before you leave the NPC to think about any other questions you need to ask.

Have a plan for the confrontation scene. A confrontation scene is the counterpart to the big fight scene in action-oriented adventures. Review your facts. Figure out which PCs will be doing the most talking. Have a plan in case the guilty party (or someone else) tries to flee, shoot at you, or shoot the bad guy.



## HANDLING THE TALKING SCENE

Portraying a talking scene can be difficult. The two major pitfalls are *thrashing* and *repetition*.

Each talking scene is in the adventure for a reason: it provides information that advances the adventure (see p. 26). The investigators are thrashing when they either can't figure out how to get information the witness has, or they continue the scene too long looking for information the witness can't provide. Repetition occurs when the investigators go back to the same source over and over because they forgot to ask for certain information. (This can be especially frustrating when the PCs shuttle between two NPCs on opposite sides of town.)

In *Murder on the Orient Express*, Poirot interviews each person in the railway car once. He thinks about what he has learned. Then he interviews each witness again, asking specific questions to confirm his theory about what happened. Police in the real world use a similar method. Responding officers take statements at the scene. Detectives then interview important witnesses and suspects again, asking specific questions. Once they have enough information to make an arrest, they arrest and interrogate that suspect.

Both players and GMs should aim for that level of efficiency. The detectives should be able to extract enough information in their first encounter with an NPC to decide whether they need to interview that NPC again. In a second encounter, the detectives should have a specific idea what questions they need to ask this NPC in order to prove whether he's the perpetrator. In any later encounter, the PCs should know whether the NPC is guilty and be focused on gathering enough information for a confrontation.

Talking scenes are important, but it is sometimes not important what the witness says. As Poirot observes, any speech reveals regardless of content. Tone conveys emotion. Vocabulary conveys education. What is omitted may be as important as what is said. A lie locks the witness into a story with facts that can be checked. How the witness lies can be as useful as the truth itself.

There are two basic approaches to handling talking scenes in an RPG. Pure roleplaying is one method. The GM

portrays the NPC, speaking and acting as that character would. The players portray their characters, speaking and acting as their character would. Skill rolls are used rarely, as general guidelines. The other extreme is purely rolling dice. The **GURPS Basic Set** offers general rules for social interactions using Influence rolls (p. B359), reaction rolls (pp. B494-495), and the *Reaction Table* (pp. B559-562). The player says what skills he wants to use. He, or the GM, rolls the appropriate dice and receives the appropriate information. The exact words of the interaction are entirely abstracted.

Many GMs use a mix of both approaches. The problem with pure roleplaying is that it favors glib players, regardless of their character's abilities. In an extreme case, a player could entirely forgo buying social skills for his character, knowing that his own skills will make up for the lack. Pure roleplaying also makes it difficult for a player who is not skilled at verbal acting to play a suave, persuasive character. If a klutz can play a skilled fencer, then a wallflower should be able to play a lothario.

On the other hand, a pure dice-based approach can be boring. If a player rolls well at Fast-Talk, the GM can ascribe the results to a cutting quip, but often the players want to know "what was that quip?" Dice-based approaches can also be very random, especially if there are only a few opportunities for rolls and not many tactical options. For example, if a character routinely questions a murderer about his alibi and rolls a critical success, will the murderer blurt out a confession right then and there? Probably not. That would make for an anticlimactic adventure.

Try different mixes of the two systems. Use a skill roll to guide the result, with +1 or +2 for good roleplaying, or -1 or -2 for bad roleplaying. Or allow glib players to offer suggestions to less glib ones as table talk, consistent with the speaking character's skill roll, and let the player pick the suggestions he likes.

In any case, in preparing the adventure, think about the best and worst possible outcomes of any encounter. What needs to happen elsewhere in the adventure to improve the best possible outcome? Decide what key clues the detectives must get from the encounter, regardless of their approach. If they need to try a particular approach to get information, what clues will help them

choose the right tactics for the encounter? If the detectives skip an encounter utterly, are there multiple ways to get them key clues?

There are some suggested rules in this chapter for expanding the **GURPS Basic Set** mechanics. These are intended to provide the players with tactical options. When the detectives initially encounter the NPCs, they will probably have little information about them. Through investigation and interaction, they will find out about the NPCs' personalities and thus find ways to use the suggested modifiers to make it much more likely they will get the information they need.

### Sounding Guilty

How can a GM make an NPC sound guilty or innocent?

Use "I" for innocence. Investigators claim that truthful people give statements using "I." Any deviation like "we," skipping a pronoun, or using the passive voice is taken as a sign that the speaker is not telling the whole truth.

On the other hand, "we" is a sign of togetherness. If a suspect describes something he did with his spouse or a close friend and doesn't use "we," then there may be something strained in their relationship. "We" can also imply the suspect's involvement in a crime or his closeness with an accomplice.

Possessive pronouns are also important. As any parent knows, there's a big difference between "'our' son got an A on his midterm" and "'your' son got called into the principal's office." A suspect can try to distance himself from a person, or an item, by not using possessive pronouns when it seems logical to do so.

Changing from using someone's relationship ("my friend," "my wife") to the person's name ("Jack," "Helen") can be a way to distance the speaker from the subject being discussed. A suspect may find it easier to admit he killed "Helen" than that he killed "my wife."

When answering questions, most suspects will use the past tense. If the NPC shifts suddenly to the present tense, it may mean that he's now making up the story. Using the past tense to refer to a missing person, on the other hand, may mean the suspect knows the person is already dead.

Extraneous details can be a sign of guilt. Innocent people, it is claimed, answer questions directly and concisely.

Suspects often want to justify their actions, so they will give information out of chronological order, or skirt around the crime.

Equivocating or modifying phrases like "I think," "I believe," "kind of," "sort of," "possibly," "as far as I know," and so on are a way to distance the speaker from the event. It may be a way for a victim to distance himself from the trauma of the crime, a way to evade personal responsibility for the event, or a way to distance oneself from some deception in the statement. If the incident was confusing, on the other hand, qualifying statements may only indicate that the speaker did not perceive the entire event and is trying not to provide information he is uncertain about.

Investigators are also dubious about claims that "I don't remember" or "I can't recall."

Usually witnesses will talk in equal detail about what happened before, during, and after the incident, including what they thought and how they felt. If the statement focuses too much, or too little, on one aspect, then investigators suspect deception. The part that's too detailed may be an attempt to justify the suspect's actions or to stall. The part that's not detailed enough may be an attempt to hide important information.

Use tone and body language. Studies say that 38% of communication is not in the words, but tone, timbre, tempo, and volume. Writers can only indirectly suggest this with words like "said," "whispered," and "shouted." GMs can act out their NPCs' words. Take advantage of this tool.

Body language is a large part of communication – posture, breathing, skin color, and movement. Many people don't have fine control over their own body language, but GMs can get around this by exaggerating certain aspects of NPCs' body language for emphasis. People who fidget a great deal, cross their arms, or refuse to look the questioner in the eye are often deemed guilty, even when they are merely nervous. (Fidgety GMs may need to exaggerate this a great deal before their players catch on that they're acting out the NPC.)

Use these simple, common-sense guidelines as a way to make NPCs sound guilty or sound innocent. The players are likely to pick up on the clues. If they don't, give them a die roll on their Detect Lies or Body Language skill to point

them in the right direction (both skills default either way at -4).

## WHO IS A WITNESS?

A witness can be anyone, but like a Hollywood director, a GM only has a limited "attention" budget for NPCs. The more named, described people who are introduced, the harder it will be for the investigators to tell them apart.

The villain, the victim, and the logical suspects are going to take up several of those positions. There will also be incidental NPCs like the nosy neighbor, the victim's family, his friends, coworkers, and staff, any of whom the investigators may decide to interview. An NPC assistant, like a secretary or junior investigator, who talks to all the "unnamed" NPCs like the mailman, cable guy, college roommate, and so on, and then gives summary reports to the investigators at useful intervals can free them to focus on the major characters.



### Finding Witnesses by Skip Tracing

Sometimes finding a key witness is an important part of the adventure. "Skip tracing" is the term private investigators use to describe finding missing persons. "Unintentional" skips are the people who just drop out of sight, like an Army buddy or college roommate that a client wants to find. These people are not intentionally hiding and are relatively easy to find with a little bit of research. "Intentional" skips are people who have disappeared on purpose, but who aren't trying to create a new legal identity. Deadbeat debtors and runaway children are typical intentional skips. Like the unintentional skip, they can be found with a bit of research, since they will tend to use their own names and keep in touch with some family members and friends. "Criminal" skips are another problem entirely. These are people on the run from the law or

other criminals, sometimes with the right contacts to get false legal identities. Criminal skips are least likely to leave a clear verbal or paper trail, and most likely to be protected by family and friends from official investigators.

Finding a skip starts with what the investigator can find about the target before beginning the search. A legal name, date of birth, and (in the United States) social security number are the best leads. An investigator can usually get this basic information from the client, or from the place the client last saw the skip. With these, a good investigator can use Research to find financial and employment records that will lead to the target. Skip tracing can mean interviewing the family, friends, coworkers, church members, and so on, to find out where the target might go, what money and property he had with him when he fled, and who he might turn to for help. The skill roll required depends on the interviewee: talking with the target's mother might call for Diplomacy; his belligerent drinking buddies may only respond to Intimidation. (For more details, see *Getting People to Talk*, p. 50.)

Once found, the investigator has to figure out how to make contact in a way that doesn't make a jittery witness flee, or perhaps even attack.

## PERCEPTION: WHAT DOES A WITNESS KNOW?

*"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"*

*"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."*

*"The dog did nothing in the night-time."*

*"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.*

*– Sherlock Holmes and  
Inspector Gregory,  
Silver Blaze*

In most cases, the GM can just decide what a witness saw or heard. Glance briefly at the Sense roll rules (p. B358 and *Sense Roll Modifiers*, p. 47) for some ideas about what is possible. If the witness saw or heard something that turns out to be highly unlikely or impossible under the rules, the puzzle may be sidetracked because a player calculates the modifiers and decides that the witness must be lying.

Perception is affected by distance. The range table (p. B550) provides a good rough guide for vision modifiers. Sound is more complex. Use the range table, but add a further -1 per 100 yards over 300 yards (see *Sense Roll Modifiers*, below). Perception is affected by contrast. In a dimly lit environment, someone wearing light colors will be easier to notice than someone wearing dark clothing. It is easier to hear an odd sound on a quiet night in a rural area than on a busy street corner.

Perception is also affected by alertness and stress. In reality, there's a complex curve involved. People who are bored are less attentive and less likely to notice unusual details. If there's a sudden threat, they are often disoriented and confused for a few moments. People who are in the middle of a dangerous situation, on the other hand, are focused on the danger and are less likely to notice peripheral details. A mugging victim, for example, will pay very close attention to the mugger's knife and

less attention to his face or clothes. Apply a -1 or -2 modifier to the Sense roll as appropriate. People who are easily distracted (Distractible or Short Attention Span) or flustered (Combat Paralysis or Confused) are less likely to perceive details than those who are focused (Single-Minded) or calm (Combat Reflexes or Unfazeable). The GM may assess -1 or +1, as appropriate, per applicable trait.

Also bear in mind that a witness may not be able to describe all of the details that he saw. If the mugging victim above were threatened with a handgun, he might get a +1 or +2 bonus to rolls to notice details about the gun, but he might not have the knowledge or vocabulary to articulate them. Many people can distinguish between a shotgun and a handgun, and maybe between a semi-automatic pistol and a revolver; but the witness may not be able to tell a .40 caliber Glock pistol from a .38 Webley revolver, even if he saw the gun clearly. Similarly, a victim may be able to distinguish between a van, a station wagon, and a sedan, but might not be able to reliably tell a Ford from a Jaguar. (If the detail is critical and the PCs can trust that the NPC knows what he's talking about; the NPC may have a hobby or background skill that helps him reliably describe a detail.)

In those rare cases where a witness has a delusion or hallucinates, those disadvantages can affect his perception in ways that make the "true" situation impossible to reconstruct later. If the witness believes that squirrels talk to him, then their "voices" may obscure other sounds. Drugs or alcohol can also cause hallucinations and delusions. Fatigue or illness may dull perceptions.

As Holmes notes above, sometimes the absence of something is also an important clue. Dogs that do not bark. Victims who let their assailant in, do not struggle, and do not cry for help. Valued possessions, important papers, and family photographs missing from the debris of a fire. An alarm that goes off when police or firefighters enter that was silent during the alleged burglary or attack. All of these things that are not present can be important clues for an investigator. In an adventure, as in a written story, the GM needs to provide a clear clue that the missing item is actually missing, and not something that he did not describe or forgot about.

## Sense Roll Modifiers

### *Darkness Modifiers*

Assign vision penalties based on the light level in the environment.

#### **Modifier      Light Level**

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| +0 to -1 | Overcast day   |
| -1 to -2 | Indoors with warehouse lighting, emergency lights, and other poorly-lit spaces |
| -2 to -3 | Twilight or overhead streetlights  |
| -3 to -4 | Clear night, full moon   |
| -5 to -6 | Overcast night with moonlight  |
| -9       | Clear night, no moon   |

A character can't see anything in complete darkness, such as inside a windowless cellar.

Contrast provides +1 to +3 for moderate to high contrast between objects and background.

### *Duration*

Use duration modifiers when the witness needs to describe what they are seeing. GMs can also use duration modifiers to describe sounds. Gunshots cause fleeting muzzle flashes and sounds. Anyone nearby will see and hear both, but being able to describe them may be harder.

#### **Modifier      Duration**

|    |                               |
|----|-------------------------------|
| -3 | Fleeting (less than 1 second) |
| -1 | Short (less than a minute)    |
| +0 | Average (1 to 2 minutes)      |
| +1 | Long (over 5 minutes)         |

### *Stress*

#### **Modifier      Stress Level**

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| -10 | Immediate life-threatening danger present combined with Combat Paralysis, Edgy, or other appropriate disadvantages.  |
| -5  | Immediate life-threatening danger present  |
| -3  | Sudden surprising event  |
| -2  | Routine event, no reason to distinguish from daily routine   |
| +0  | Dangerous or interesting situation; or immediate life-threatening danger present combined with Combat Reflexes, On the Edge, or other similar advantage or disadvantage. |



In general, witnesses are bad at accurately estimating distance, duration, and speed. Physical evidence like tire skid marks, crash damage, blood spots, and so on may give an investigator a way to cross-check a witness' version of events. GMs may want to have NPCs couch estimates of distance, duration, and speed as "approximately" or "about," to remind players of this problem.

Witnesses are often good at recognizing familiar people, not just by their faces, but by clothing, voice, posture, even smell. Recognizing strangers' faces accurately is hard. It is easy to mix up a stranger's face with a somewhat familiar face. If the waiter who served a witness just before a mugging had his picture in the police mug shot files, the witness might transpose the face that he saw near the time of the mugging into the mugger's face. It is also easy to make mistakes with cross-racial identifications. Just because the witness is certain does not mean he is accurate; the witness' self-confidence has nothing to do with whether he is correct.

Characters do not need to roll to recognize a familiar person at short range (in the same room or hall). To recall a stranger's face, roll IQ + Vision Bonus/Penalty - Range - Stress - Duration modifiers.

Similarly, to recognize a familiar person's voice on the telephone or at short range, a character doesn't need to roll. To correctly identify an unfamiliar or unexpected sound, roll IQ + Hearing Bonus/Penalty + Acoustic Signature - Range - Background Signature. On an especially successful roll, a character with weapons familiarity might be able to correctly identify a firearm by its sound. (For more details on firearms and "silencers" see p. MF16.)



## Assumptions

*"To deceive deliberately – that is one thing. But to be so sure of your facts, of your ideas, and of their essential truth, that the details do not matter – that, my friend, is a special characteristic of particularly honest persons . . . She says she saw her face distinctly because – being so sure of her facts – exact details do not matter! . . . She **knows**. And so she answers questions in the light of her knowledge, not by reason of remembered facts. The positive witness should always be treated with*

## Sense Roll Modifiers

(Continued)

### Acoustic or Background Signature Values

#### Modifier Sound Type

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| -6  | Human hearing limit   |
| -4  | Stalking person, unusually quiet area   |
| +0  | Whisper, rural area at night  |
| +2  | Walking person, suburban area at night  |
| +6  | Weapon action (cocking bolt, hammer falling, etc.), heavy rain, conversation, urban area by day |
| +7  | Gale force winds, car   |
| +10 | Shouting, dog bark, very busy street, white water rapids  |
| +12 | Air rifle   |
| +14 | Rock concert, chain saw   |
| +16 | Very small caliber pistol shot (.22 LR)   |
| +18 | Small caliber pistol shot (.32 ACP, .380 ACP)   |
| +19 | Propeller engine (human pain threshold)   |
| +20 | Large caliber pistol shot (9mm .40 S&W, .45 ACP)  |
| +21 | Machine gun, very large caliber pistol shot (.357 Magnum, .44 Magnum, .50 AE)                   |
| +26 | Rifle shot, heavy machine gun   |
| +34 | Grenade explosion   |

### Other Sound Modifiers

|  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| Both sound source and listener are indoors, in the same building | +2                 |
| Firearm not fired toward listener                                | -3                 |
| Sound originates in light vegetation (grass) or from carpet      | -1                 |
| Sound originates in medium vegetation (woods)                    | -2                 |
| Sound originates in heavy vegetation (jungle)                    | -5                 |
| Weapon suppressor used   | -2 to -6 (typical) |
| Intervening light wall   | -1                 |
| Intervening medium wall  | -4                 |
| Intervening heavy wall   | -9                 |
| Bank vault or bunker wall  | -15                |

*suspicion, my friend. The uncertain witness, who doesn't remember, isn't sure, will think a minute – ah! Yes, that's how it was – is infinitely more to be depended upon!"*

– Hercule Poirot,  
*Thirteen at Dinner*

One other aspect of perception is assumptions. A key trick in mystery fiction is having a witness assume he heard or saw something different from the truth. This is covered under "perception" because the assumption will color how the person remembers the event and how he describes it. If a person believes that he heard a familiar voice, or saw someone he knew, then his mistake will not be detected by skills like Detect Lies,

by "truth" spells, drugs, or polygraphs, or by all but the most skilled telepath. The witness will sincerely recall the assumption as reality.

Some classic misperceptions include hearing someone imitate a voice, mistaking a recording for live speech, seeing someone in disguise, misidentifying a somewhat damaged body (drowned/fire/badly disfigured), and seeing what seems to be a victim's body at a distance. The GM should handle deliberate deceptions as a Quick Contest between the usual Sense roll, including modifiers for distance, stress, and so on, and the deceiver's skill at deception – Disguise, Mimicry, etc. – instead of as a flat Sense roll.

Another classic fictional trick is failure to perceive something in plain sight. Some everyday items and even people are effectively invisible because they are so common. Often people don't recall seeing postmen, waiters, meter readers, and janitors. Common objects like mailboxes, garbage cans, and fireplugs are also effectively invisible unless one is very familiar with the neighborhood.

The third version of assumptions is false associations. In 2002, Washington D.C. area police reported that a series of sniper attacks might be linked to a white van. In many incidents thereafter, witnesses described seeing shots coming from a white van. The snipers, it turned out later, were using a blue car. People heard, and saw, what they expected to see and did not see what they didn't expect.

## MEMORY: WHAT DOES A WITNESS RECALL?

*"For many years I have remembered how I heard of the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which occurred on the day before my thirteenth birthday. I recall sitting in the living room of our house – we only lived in that house for one year, but I remember it well – listening to a baseball game on the radio. The game was interrupted by an announcement of the attack, and I rushed upstairs to tell my mother. This memory has been so clear for so long that I never confronted its inherent absurdity until last year: no one broadcasts baseball games in December!"*

– Professor Ulric Neisser,  
*Memory Observed*

Realistically, memory is not a fixed, unalterable recording like a videotape. Memory fades over time. The brain fills in missing information and gaps with logical inferences and after-acquired information. Suggestion can alter memory in large and small ways. What the witness honestly remembers may be very different from what actually occurred.

Memory errors don't play a large part in fictional mysteries for two reasons. First, it is only with the aid of contemporaneous recordings that people have begun to realize just how inaccurate a normal person who's confident in his memory can be. Most of the psychological studies that demonstrate this have

been done since 1980. Thus, early mystery writers were unlikely to be aware of just how large the problem was. Second, inaccurate memory makes a mystery more complex. If Hercule Poirot or Sherlock Holmes can assume that the witness is either lying or telling the truth, then inconsistencies reveal as much as the truth. If the witness may be innocently wrong, it is harder to figure out the puzzle.

To reduce memory errors in a realistic way, make sure that someone (the investigators or an NPC police detective) takes an initial statement from witnesses shortly after the crime occurs, and keeps witnesses separated from each other until all of them have given statements to avoid the witnesses confusing each others' memories with suggestion and rumor. When the investigators do get statements made long after the event, or after the witness has read newspaper accounts or seen television news, have an NPC mentor remind them not to take the statement at face value. A witness who sees a media account and whose memory was thereby altered slightly may use an unusual turn of phrase or repeat an incorrect fact from the account.

Use memory errors cautiously in an RPG. The players will likely know that memory fades over time. They know that children's memories are different from adults'. They know that alcohol, drugs, aging, and some diseases affect memory. But they may not be familiar with subtle memory errors and may assume that a witness' mistake is a clue.

## How Reliable is the NPC?

Just as certain elements of combat are abstracted in many games, human nature is abstracted in a good mystery. Fictional witnesses are, usually, either reliable or lying. If the butler says that he brought Major Mustard his brandy at 6:15 p.m. and stayed there for 5 minutes, then the investigator can rely on those times. If the facts prove that the butler could not have been there during those times, then he must be lying.

Real people are not like that. They make mistakes. They get confused. They make assumptions (see p. 48). They are unreliable witnesses. For dramatic purposes, however, letting people be realistically unreliable makes it very hard to create a solvable mystery. Here realism will not aid playability in this genre.

If an NPC is unreliable, look for uncertainty. The butler might say, "It was a little after 6 o'clock. Perhaps 6:10 or 6:15." The witness might be obviously forgetful, easily confused, or very suggestible. Look for clear signals that the witness could be honestly mistaken, not a liar.



### "I'll Never Forget That Face!"

There are many people who can recall in great detail where they were when President Kennedy was shot, or the *Challenger* space shuttle exploded, or the World Trade Center collapsed. Few people question the accuracy of such memories, and few have contemporaneous diaries or recordings to confirm that what they vividly recall is what happened. The reason the memory is so vivid is not because something special happened in that moment of grief and shock, but because people repeat that story so often to themselves and to others.

Crime victims may also have vivid memories of the incident that seem, to them, indelible and absolutely accurate. It is an illusion. The same adrenaline surge that produces the fight-or-flight reflex when one is endangered also interferes with the chemicals that store perceptions as memory. If the witness was struck in the head during the crime, he might also have a concussion that can cause minor amnesia for events just before or just after the blow. The witness will fill in these gaps and jumbled perceptions with logical inferences to make a consistent narrative of the attack.

Having a witness describe in vivid detail what happened to them can be a very powerful RPG scene. Unless the players are familiar with memory research, they are likely to believe the witness is right, even in the face of strong conflicting evidence. If the investigator discovers that a suspect the witness is certain committed the crime cannot have done so, based perhaps on DNA or other strong physical evidence, the resulting scene explaining the situation to the witness may be very powerful as well.

## Suggestion

*Poirot leaned forward confidentially, "You see this bunch of wildflowers on the table here?"*

*"Yes," said Miss Pierce – staring.*

*"And you noticed that, when you first came into the room, I sneezed once or twice?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Did you notice if I had been sniffing those flowers?"*

*"Well – really – no – I couldn't say."*

*"But you remember my sneezing?"*

*"Oh, yes, I remember **that!**"*

*... He shut the door and came back into the room with his eyebrows raised. "But I did not sneeze," he murmured, "So much for that. No, I did not sneeze."*

*– Hercule Poirot,*

*Appointment with Death*

Memory is also vulnerable to suggestion. If investigators ask a witness "how fast the car was going when it smashed into the telephone pole" they'll get a higher estimated speed than if they ask "how fast the car was going when the accident happened." If they ask a witness what color hat the bank robber was wearing, the witness may recall and describe a hat that never existed. If investigators show a witness an array of eight mug shots and tell the witness that the bad guy is in the array, he'll pick the person who looks most like his memory of the suspect, and in the future remember the suspect as looking like the photo.

Suggestion is a big problem for real-world investigators, who need to use proper questioning methods to avoid suggesting answers to witnesses. The GM probably shouldn't penalize players, who are not trained investigators, for using bad questioning techniques while speaking in their character's voices and having the errors affect the NPC's memory. However, if their characters are trained

investigators, encouraging players to use appropriate questioning methods can aid roleplaying.

The basics of good questioning are simple. Ask the witness to describe what he saw. Listen. Don't ask questions that give the witness information that he didn't already know. Ask simple questions, not complex, complicated ones. Good questions are open-ended like "What happened then?", "What happened next?", and "What gave you that idea?". The investigator can ask the witness to recall details like the weather or the furniture; or ask the witness to describe events in reverse order; or to describe them as if seen from a different angle.

## GETTING PEOPLE TO TALK

*"The world is full of contention and contentious people. They will not tell you the time of day or day of the month without their little display of hostility. I have argued with Meyer about it. It is more than a reflex, I think. It is an affirmation of importance. Each one is saying, 'I can afford to be nasty to you because I don't need any favors from you, buster.' It is also, perhaps, a warped application of today's necessity to be cool."*

*– Travis McGee,*

*The Empty Copper Sea*

An investigator should be able to find a way to talk to the suspects and witnesses. GMs *want* the investigators to get information from the NPCs, and should work out several ways for interviewers to obtain cooperation from each witness or suspect. Using other approaches may elicit key information, but the investigators will have to work harder to get it. Some approaches may alienate a key witness entirely.

Roleplaying talking scenes can be similar to roleplaying combat. The player tries various conversational attacks, using his character's influence skills modified by his approach. The target defends with his intelligence (IQ) and Will, if he's trying to keep something from the interviewer or just does not feel like disclosing it. (Think of this as picking the best verbal weapon to penetrate the target's armor of willpower, and looking for weak spots for called shots.) No matter what the target says, the interviewer will likely learn something that will help him refine his approach in the next encounter.

Having several investigators gang up on a witness is a bad idea. Police detectives interview witnesses alone or in pairs, not in large groups. Interviews and interrogations deal with very personal matters. A suspect may be more willing to confess to one detective than to a group of people. Two or more detectives may confuse the witness by asking questions simultaneously, or trying to outdo each other, or trying to ask the one lucky question that will make the suspect confess.

A team of investigators should brainstorm a list of questions, then pick someone as a lead questioner. During the talking scene, the others can take notes or make discrete suggestions. In a large group, this may mean that several PCs are watching a talking scene and getting bored – keep those scenes interesting, tense, brief, and relevant to the adventure.

Why would the NPC resist questioning? In reality, people are afraid of legal penalties including fines, imprisonment, and the stigma of a criminal record. They are concerned about their reputation, gossip, and bad publicity. Some are afraid of how friends and family will react to them. Others have suppressed the memory of their acts and are unwilling to confront those memories. Finally, witnesses may be afraid of retaliation from the people who they implicate by telling the truth.

In a mystery, most people have one or more secrets that they are trying to protect. Past or present affairs, children born out of wedlock, or other violations of social norms or personal ethics are good NPC secrets. Loyalty to another person or organization can cause someone to resist cooperating. Sometimes the witness believes that telling what he knows will implicate a loved one. He may be afraid of gaining a reputation as a "snitch," or of reprisals from the perpetrator, or of publicity, or of having to testify at a trial. He may approve of the crime, if the victim is someone he disliked, or may not want to help clear a suspect that he dislikes.

Any response from the witness may reveal why he is uncooperative. If the player can figure out the reasons for the witness' resistance, his character may be able to circumvent them. He can change his approach, promising to keep the interview confidential, offering a bribe, or some other tactic. Or a different investigator could approach the target hoping to gain a better response.



There are three basic approaches to a witness: approaching him openly, using a ruse to trick him, and intimidating him. Each approach has different benefits and risks, described below.

## Openly Approaching a Witness

*"Oh, there's just one more thing . . ."*  
— Lt. Columbo

Here, the PC truthfully identifies himself to the witness as a police officer, private investigator, reporter, or other professional and asks the witness to talk to him. Amateur sleuths can also use this method, but it is harder. A witness might be willing to answer questions for the victim's brother or husband, but might not be willing to help a group of earnest young people traveling around in a psychedelic van.

Typical approaches include appealing to the witness' civic duty; explaining the vital importance of the witness' statement and testimony; suggesting the risk to the community if the villain isn't caught; and emphasizing the need to help or avenge the victim. Bystanders may be reluctant to cooperate with official investigators because they are afraid of reprisals from a criminal or his associates if their cooperation is discovered; are afraid of media attention; do not want to take the time to give a written statement and testify at trial; or just dislike police, reporters, or detectives.

The primary skill for questioning a witness is Diplomacy, modified by Reputation, Status, and possibly Administrative Rank. (Witnesses often expect to be interviewed by patrol officers or detectives, not by senior officers; add a +1 to the witness' reaction per 3 levels of Rank above what he expected.) Interrogation is only used with arrested or convicted prisoners. Charisma and Voice are helpful. If the investigator is not what he claims to be, then a Fast-Talk (for brief interactions) or Acting (for prolonged interactions) roll is needed to convince the witness to accept the investigator's assertion without trying to verify his credentials with the appropriate authorities.

Once the investigator asks about a specific crime, suspect, or victim, decide whether the incident itself provides reaction modifiers. Witnesses are often more willing to help stop "outrageous" crimes like serial murder, rapes, or crimes against children, especially if they believe

## Accomplices

*"You, Mr. Accomplice, should be very fearful, so long as this guy is on the loose. The odds on your life are very, very short. Your only chance is to turn yourself, and him, in. That way, you at least get the legal process as protection, something you're not going to get from him."*

— John Douglas and Mark Olshaker, *The Anatomy of Motive*

A criminal may not be able to complete his crimes alone. He may have friends or confidants who helped him plan or execute the crime in exchange for a portion of the profits. He may have contacts or friends who provided him with information or contraband needed to commit the crime. Generally, the adventure's villain will be the dominant personality in the crime. The accomplices will generally be less assertive, less self-confident persons.

Once police begin to focus attention on the crime, the accomplice has a large incentive to try to sell out his boss to earn immunity from prosecution or at least reduced charges. As the quote above suggests, the police approach to an accomplice is to suggest that the leader let things get out of control and is losing control again because of the investigation. The leader may turn on his partners before they can sell him out. Thus, the accomplice is persuaded to betray the leader first.

Private detectives cannot offer police protection, but they can offer their own protection and to "put in a good word" with police contacts. Amateur detectives likewise have less bargaining power than police, but if they are related to the victim they may be able to appeal to an accomplice's guilt or compassion.

In general, an accomplice will be easier to crack than the leader himself. However, investigators should be wary about accepting any story at face value that is told by a participant in a crime.

their own family or friends might be in danger if the perpetrator isn't stopped. The type of suspect may also provide a transferred modifier; a detective working to clear an accused child-killer will get much less cooperation than one working to clear a popular folk hero. Conversely, the detective working to convict the child-killer will get more cooperation than the one trying to convict the folk hero.

Police officers and private investigators working for an attorney can threaten a witness with a subpoena, forcing him to testify in front of a judge or grand jury, and risking fines or even jail if he does not cooperate. Police can also get search warrants to look for evidence in private homes and businesses. A private investigator working on his own, or an amateur sleuth, can threaten "not to go away" and to keep coming back until the witness cooperates.

When an investigator is openly questioning a witness, he can use all the questioning methods he's been trained in. Even though he has identified himself, he can use some ruses. He can pretend to know less (or more) than he does to get a witness to explain things. He can pretend

to be harmless or feckless to get a witness to underestimate him. He can even use ruses with Interrogation; police are allowed to lie to arrestees and prisoners.

Because the witness knows he's being interviewed, the investigator can ask him to write a statement, or the investigator can write a statement and ask the witness to sign it. He can use a tape recorder or videotape the statement, or the entire interview. In a game, the GM probably won't write or record an entire statement, but he may encourage players to take notes during an open interview. The GM could also assume the investigators are taking notes or making a recording and offer them an IQ or Writing roll later if they need to recall an important clue or find it in their reports. If the mystery occurs over several game sessions, the GM could even write a summary report of the statement taken by an NPC assistant to remind the players of key remarks or encourage the players to prepare their character's report. (If the players prepare the report, it will give the GM useful insight into what they recall and what they thought was important.)

## *Using Trickery and Ruses on a Witness*

Trickery and ruses are good methods for investigators to obtain information from a witness without revealing their identity or true interest in the information. Ruses are usually used with minor witnesses to obtain background information, or for an undercover investigation. Since the witness doesn't know he's being interviewed, he may provide information he'd be reluctant to tell an official investigator or even an interested amateur. On the other hand, since there's no recording, there is no way to prove what the witness said if he later denies it. (The legal rules about recording conversations without both parties' knowledge are complex; it is often illegal for anyone but a police officer to do so, and there are restrictions on an officer's actions.)

Ruses work particularly well with a suspect or victims' family, friends, servants, or staff, who would all be expected to respond loyally, not honestly, to an official investigator. Former servants and staff, disaffected family members, and so forth may be as willing to talk to an official as to answer a seemingly casual query.

The investigator may wish to be disguised or use an associate while conducting a ruse, especially if he has a reputation or has already been introduced to the target. A disguise may also prevent ill feelings if the target is introduced to the detective later and realizes that he's been tricked. (Roll a Quick Contest between against the lower of Disguise (for physical changes), Fast-Talk (for brief interactions), or Acting (for prolonged interactions) and the IQ of the target of the ruse to prevent the target from recognizing someone he's met before.)

Ruses work especially well for investigators who do not fit the stereotypical image of the rumpled white male detective. One of Hercule Poirot's tricks to get answers from witnesses who are only bystanders is to make a statement in front of them, perhaps in a shop or bar, about a rumor he heard (often a preposterous version of the incident). Hastings, his assistant, then enters the conversation, as if he does not know Poirot, and makes a contradictory claim. Generally, the target will then get involved in the argument between the two investigators to show off his superior knowledge. Sherlock Holmes uses a similar trick,

feigning indifference and incredulity, to get a quarrelsome man to give him information while correcting Dr. Watson's "mistake."

The primary skill used in a ruse is Fast-Talk. The primary modifiers are Charisma and Voice. If the investigator is making a prolonged effort to befriend the NPC with small talk, then Acting is the primary skill; use Carousing if the attempt is at a bar or party. Any appropriate knowledge or "hobby" skill may give the investigator some common ground for small talk. (This is a good way to reward PCs who have hobby skills or established backgrounds by giving them a point in common with a witness.) One especially indirect method used in a Sayers novel involved an investigator using Fortune-Telling to pretend to be a medium to trick the target into telling her about the family's history and help her find a missing will.

The indirect approach can be a brief scene, or it may take hours or even days. Generally, roll once for the scene, no matter how long it takes. If the attempt fails, the investigator will need to wait a while (as long as appropriate) before trying again.

## *Intimidating a Witness*

Some investigators are "tough guys" or hard-boiled detectives who prefer to get information by bullying witnesses. Intimidation, like ruses, is mostly used on minor witnesses for background information, or against witnesses who can't, or won't, testify in court, like illegal immigrants, criminals, ex-convicts, and some minority groups. (These targets also are unlikely to complain to the authorities or the PCs' superiors or employers.) There's no recording. The investigator will rarely even admit that the encounter took place.

Investigators can openly threaten or even beat up a reluctant witness. They can use any official status to threaten arrest, searches, and adverse publicity. They can directly, or through hirelings, shadow the witness obviously (a "rough shadow"). All of these are intended to make the witness more afraid of the investigator than of the consequences of revealing information.

Streetwise and Intimidation are the primary skills used to frighten a witness into talking. The primary modifiers are Reputation and the PC's physical or social ability to carry out the implied

threat. Investigators who have scars, are fit, and have higher than normal strength can intimidate targets more easily than those who are overweight and wear eyeglasses. Violent actions, like punching a recalcitrant witness or flashing a weapon, also provide positive modifiers.

The detective's goal should be to intimidate the witness into answering without actually provoking a fight. Threats are just words. Broken bones, bloody noses, and black eyes will substantiate the witness' story if he complains. Choose the location for the confrontation with care. A target who is confronted in a public place, or in front of his girlfriend, peers, or employer, may feel that he can't back down without an actual fight. (The investigator's goal in this scene may not be to intimidate the person he fights, but to intimidate the girlfriend, peer, or employer.)

GMs can use intimidation scenes to add action to an adventure. Intimidating a witness is usually a quick scene and may involve a punch or two, rarely a detailed melee. But the intimidation may have ramifications later in the adventure. Intimidated witnesses may have family, friends, or patrons who will try to retaliate for the aggressor's actions. The intimidated witness may also be hurt, or killed, by the person he was afraid of betraying. The GM should decide ahead of time how much the investigators will be haunted by their rough-and-ready methods.

## *Dealing With Bureaucrats*

There's a great deal of personal information readily available from third parties, like tellers, clerks, and customer service representatives, which can be useful to an investigation. Sometimes, the GM will leave a clue, like a bank statement, which suggests to the alert investigator that trying to get more bank information would be useful. Sometimes PCs decide that they want information the GM was not expecting to generate.

Sweet-talking or tricking information from third parties who shouldn't provide it to the investigator is just another form of ruse. Contacts may be useful, but expensive point-wise. An investigator needs a passing acquaintance with minor bureaucrats in dozens, even hundreds, of organizations to reliably find useful information.

Use a combination of Research (libraries, directories, and paper records) and Administration (knowing who to talk to in large organizations) to figure out who is most likely to have the needed information and is most willing to disclose it. Roll the lower of Administration and Research to find an appropriate functionary. Add the *higher* of Status or suitable Administrative Rank to the roll.

Once the investigator has found an appropriate functionary, roll a reaction roll, adding a +2 modifier for Administration 15 or higher; an additional +1 for any appropriate Professional Skill (especially one related to banking, credit, finance, insurance, or telecommunications) at 12 or higher; and an additional +1 to +3 if the investigator already has some appropriate private information about the target of the query (having a bank account number and looking for the balance, for example). If necessary, roll Fast-Talk if the investigator is pretending to be someone entitled to the information and tries to obtain it after some minor small talk. This kind of casual research only works for relatively routine information like account numbers, bank balances, credit ratings, addresses, and very basic health information. Rolls to obtain sensitive information, or information that requires the target bureaucrat to do some research (and thus have time to think about the request), are at -1 to -5 or more.

In reality, getting key information may take several hours and several different telephone calls to gather seemingly innocuous information from dozens of minor bureaucrats. For game purposes, a roll or two should suffice for most requests.

An investigator can try the open, official approach with a bureaucrat. Generally the initial response will be “no” to any request that seems extraordinary. This is just a reflex, not a final rejection. The investigator needs to get the initial receptionist or clerk to pass him to a supervisor or senior person who may be able to provide the information. Roll the lower of Administration or Diplomacy to find an appropriate functionary. Then make a reaction roll, as above. Rather than providing sensitive information, a functionary may be willing to “accidentally” leave the investigator alone in an office with the appropriate file.

## Hacking

Private eyes and computer specialists may find it easier to hack information from a computer rather than obtain it from a bureaucrat. Police may need to hack into a suspect’s computer, with an appropriate search warrant, to find evidence of a crime. Private eyes in a **GURPS Cyberpunk** game may even specialize in hacking. This is a kind of ruse, where the target is a machine, not a person.

Computer hacking is generally either a slow process of research and experimentation, or a simple matter of using widely available hacking programs to exploit known security holes in common software. (See pp. B184, 472) Cinematic hacking, generally found in thrillers, is usually much faster than hacking in real life (See p. CV37).

Keep in mind these key factors:

**Access:** How does the hacker communicate with the target computer? Is it connected to the Internet? Can he bypass any firewalls?

**Passwords:** What does the hacker need to do to break into the target computer? Can he get the password from an authorized user? Can he guess it?

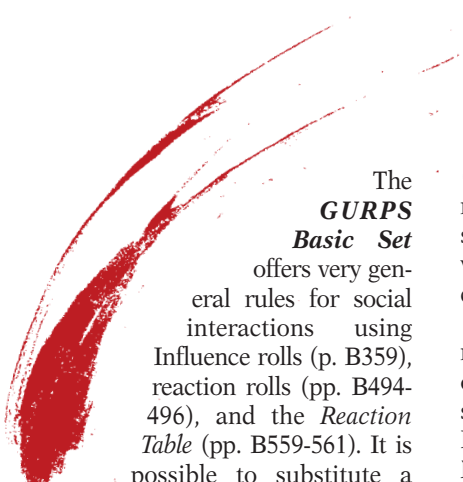
**System Access:** Once the hacker is in the system, what information can he access? What requests will alert administrators or automated security to a problem?

**Locating Data:** Once he has the right access, can the hacker find the data he seeks? Is the system well indexed? Is the information stored in encrypted files? Is it intentionally hidden, and if so, how?

**Defenses:** Police seeking evidence from a suspect’s computer may find that the information is protected by hardware or software so that it will destroy itself if not accessed properly.

Investigators may also find their own systems being targeted by criminals, spies, or other adversaries, especially in thriller-style adventures.

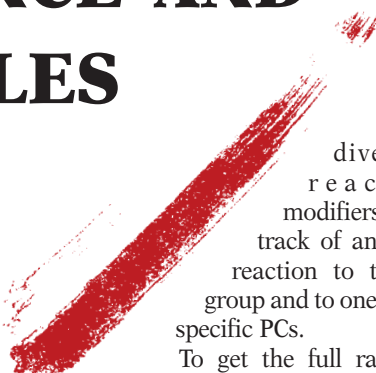
# EXPANDED INFLUENCE AND REACTION RULES



The **GURPS Basic Set** offers very general rules for social interactions using Influence rolls (p. B359), reaction rolls (pp. B494-496), and the *Reaction Table* (pp. B559-561). It is possible to substitute a

Diplomacy, Fast-Talk, Intimidation, Savoir-Faire, Sex Appeal, or Streetwise roll for a reaction roll; however, substitution usually limits the results to “Good” or “Bad,” not the full range offered in the table. (Diplomacy is an exception. Roll the reaction roll first. The result of the substituted Diplomacy roll can never be worse than that result.) Interrogation can also be used with these mechanics.

The GM can pre-designate the NPCs’ reaction to investigators who take an open or neutral approach. Most NPCs should start with a reaction between Poor and Good; usually it will be Neutral. If a group of PCs have widely



divergent reaction modifiers, keep track of an NPC’s reaction to the PC group and to one or two specific PCs.

To get the full range of possible reactions when using Influence skills, roll the usual Quick Contest between the investigator’s Influence skill and the target’s Will, applying any appropriate modifiers from the *Reaction Table*, plus the additional optional modifiers below, then look up the margin by which he won or lost the Contest on the table below.



| <b>Modifier</b>                   | <b>Result</b> |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| +8 or more<br>or Critical Success | Excellent     |
| +6                                | Very Good     |
| +4                                | Good          |
| +0                                | Neutral       |
| -2                                | Poor          |
| -4                                | Bad           |
| -6                                | Very Bad      |
| -8 or more<br>or Critical Failure | Disastrous    |

It is not difficult for a character to amass a large number of positive modifiers from advantages, skills, and situation modifiers. In some cases, the modifiers reach the point where a typical NPC stands no chance of resisting the detective's approach and would, by the rules, spill everything he knows. This can make a mystery adventure unchallenging.

To prevent the adventure from being short-circuited by too many modifiers, GMs could apply The Rule of 16 (p. B349) to influence skills. Another option would be to limit the applicable modifiers, including modifiers from advantages, disadvantages, other skills, and situation modifiers, to no more than +5. Any excess bonus can be used to offset penalties. Similarly, GMs may want to limit penalties to the resistance roll to -5, using any excess to offset any bonuses. Either approach gives a typical NPC with an IQ of 10, no Will modifier, and a few situation modifiers a chance of resisting questioning even from the most skilled interrogator.

The tables below are optional modifiers. The lists are intended to illustrate

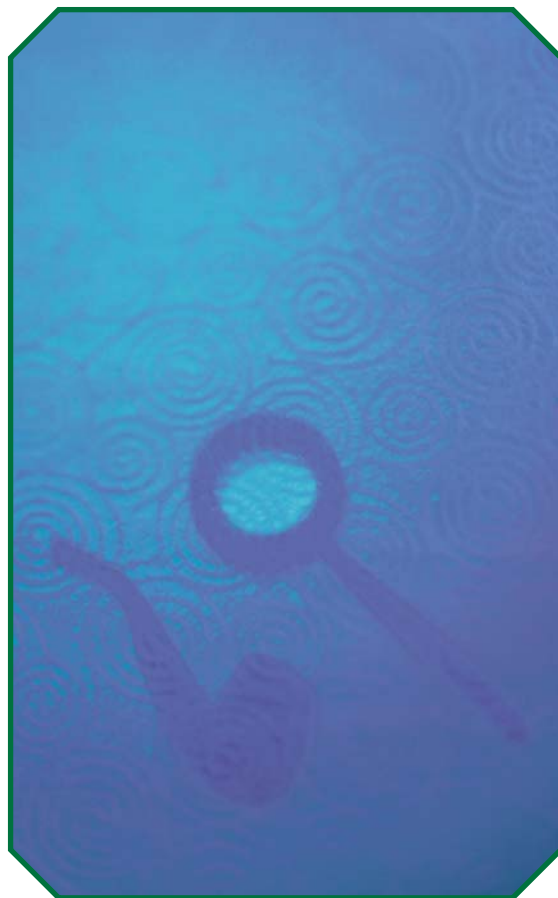
possible modifiers, not provide an exhaustive list. An experienced investigator will adjust his approach to optimize bonuses to his skill and create as many penalties to the target's resistance roll as possible.

## WORKING WITH POLICE

A "civilian" investigator often needs the assistance of police to get access to evidence, reports, and sometimes even suspects. Some detectives have police officer Contacts or Allies, like Poirot's Chief Inspector Japp and Holmes' Inspector Lestrade, who will give them access to official information in return for their help in difficult cases.

If an investigator does not have a contact, he can approach the detective in charge of a case with Diplomacy. Apply as a bonus any Courtesy Rank the investigator might have as a former police officer. (Reduce the bonus if the investigator's home department is a long distance away or has a bad reputation.) If the investigator has a law enforcement contact or ally who can vouch for him with local authorities, he can use the higher of that officer's

rank and department reputation or the investigator's own. The investigator can ask for help from political contacts or allies, but they are not usually as helpful as law enforcement contacts. Apply the investigator's own reputation if any. (If the target officer has Jealousy, the investigator's reputation is a penalty, not a bonus.)



### Optional Modifiers to Investigator's Skill Roll

| <b>Modifier</b>         | <b>Result</b>   |
|-------------------------|---|
| +1 to +3                | Investigator has prepared at least one hour for interview and has significant information about witness and/or crime.   |
| +1 to +3                | Investigator has, or can feign, sympathetic or understanding demeanor ("anybody in your situation would do that") (roll Acting-3).  |
| +1 to +2                | Investigator is using an official or intimidating approach and has control over the location and witness' perceived freedom to eat, drink, sleep, smoke, or leave. (Having this control is a prerequisite for using Interrogation and does not provide any additional bonuses to that skill.) |
| -1 per 5 points         | Investigator has Intolerance or other similar disadvantage that affects his reaction to the target.   |
| -1                      | Investigator has the Bad Temper disadvantage, is busy, or is pressured for a quick solution to the case.  |
| -1 per point of fatigue | Investigator is suffering from missed sleep or meals (maximum -3).  |
| -1 per point of injury  | Investigator is injured (modifier doubled for Low Pain Threshold) (maximum -3).   |
| -1                      | Investigator is suffering withdrawal from a Addiction; -3 for withdrawal from more serious Addictions (see pp. B440-441).   |

The Influence roll is resisted by the target's Will. Anything that would normally affect a Will roll applies to this roll. In addition, consider the following modifiers.

## Optional Modifiers to Target's Resistance

| <b>Modifier</b>        | <b>Result</b>   |
|------------------------|---|
| +1                     | Burdensome or convoluted question or request.   |
| +3 or more             | Persistent, repeated requests for information within a short period of time.  |
| +1                     | Target has Streetwise 14+, Psychology 14+, Interrogation 14+, or any other significant training or experience with formal questioning.  |
| +1                     | Target is Callous and has no personal reason to cooperate.  |
| +3                     | Target believes his life or livelihood would be endangered by cooperating (do not aggregate this with a Code of Honor or Secret modifier; apply the highest value modifier only).<br>No modifier if target has Fearlessness or On the Edge.   |
| +1 per -5 points       | Answering violates target's Code of Honor; Duty, or Sense of Duty.  |
| +1 per -5 points       | Target has Intolerance or other similar disadvantage that affects his reaction to the investigator.   |
| +1 per -5 points       | Target has Shyness and reasonably expects cooperation to lead to testifying in court and/or press attention (double the modifier if the case attracts national press attention), unless the target does not realize that he's being questioned or is reasonably assured of anonymity.   |
| +1 per -5 points       | Answer discloses a Secret or a confidence with similar effects to that disadvantage, unless the investigator convinces the target that no harm will be caused by the disclosure because the secret is protected by a privilege (investigator is a member of the clergy, a lawyer, or other professional legally bound to secrecy) or that the investigator already knows most of the secret ("the cat's out of the bag"). |
| +1 to +3               | Answer concerns a matter that is private or taboo, but not necessary "secret" per the disadvantage.   |
| -1 to -3               | Appropriate bribe (which may include money, favors, or disguised bribes like theater tickets or dinner) offered to target. If the target has the Greed disadvantage, double the modifier or roll a separate Will roll per p. B33.   |
| -1 to -5               | Target confronted with evidence of guilt such as fingerprints, trace evidence, and/or an accomplice confession. (If the investigator is lying about the evidence, roll separately for his Fast Talk skill).   |
| -1                     | Target has the Bad Temper disadvantage, is busy, or otherwise hopes that a quick answer will get rid of the investigator.   |
| -1 to -3               | Target is intoxicated (see pp. B428, 439-440).  |
| -1 per 2 years         | Target's age below 18, max -6.  |
| 1 per point of fatigue | Target is suffering from missed sleep or meals (maximum -3).  |
| -1 per point of injury | Target is injured (modifier doubled for Low Pain Threshold) (maximum -3).   |
| -1                     | Target is suffering withdrawal from a Addiction; -3 for withdrawal from more serious Addictions (see pp. B440-441).   |
| -3 per -5 points       | Target has the Gullibility or Honesty disadvantage and is being approached in an official manner.   |

Add the target officer's own Administrative Rank to his resistance. If the target officer thinks the investigator is hiding information from him, add a +1 to +3 bonus to the resistance roll, depending on how important the target thinks the information is. If the investigation is likely to cause political trouble, add a +1 to +3 bonus to his resistance roll. Add a +2 to +5 bonus to resistance if the investigator's work risks exposing an undercover officer or ongoing investigation. If the police investigation has been tainted by incompetence, corruption, or other misdeeds, add a +1 bonus for every -5 points the target officer has in a police Code of Honor (which generally includes protecting one's department with silence) or a +1 for every -5 points the target officer has in Secret if he is directly involved in the corruption or incompetence.

On a Poor or worse result, the target officer will do whatever he can to impede the investigator's work. On a Neutral result, the target officer will provide information that has already been reported in the media, which at least assures the investigator that the news reports are accurate. On a Good result, the target officer will provide information that is not yet public. On a Very Good or better result, the target officer will share theories, information that is not in written reports, and possibly details the police are intentionally keeping secret to distinguish real suspects from attention seekers and false confessions.

If the investigator is working for an attorney defending a suspect in a criminal case, American police are legally required to provide all reports with any exculpatory information to the defense through the prosecutor when requested. How quickly police provide the reports

and how broadly they interpret the request also depends on reaction modifiers.

## DETECTING LIES

Detect Lies and Body Language can be used in any interview, and in casual and social situations, to tell whether an NPC is lying to the investigator. Detect Lies gauges vocal cues, Body Language reads facial expression and posture. If both of these skills would apply (e.g., the interviewer can see and hear the subject), the user can choose the better roll. Interrogation is used in formal questioning only. Normally the GM rolls the Quick Contest with the IQ or Fast-Talk skill of the target and give the player a "yes" or "no" about whether the interviewer thinks the target is lying. The GM can also make the roll in secret and use the results to exaggerate his tone or

mannerisms to give the player a roleplaying hint that the witness is being evasive or lying. Once the character knows the target is lying, he can choose to confront the target, or can play along to establish a rapport. Sometimes the lie the target tells is as illuminating as the truth.

Remember that Detect Lies and Interrogation only detect deliberate lies. If the target misperceived the information or recalls it incorrectly, he may be telling the truth as he believes it, even though he is wrong. Detect Lies and Interrogation usually do not detect subconscious lies. For example, an alcoholic may state that he does not have a drinking problem and, if sincere, will not appear to be lying.

Detectives, fictional and real, use a target's body language to gauge his veracity. Some authors claim that left-brained individuals (right-handed people) look in specific directions when they are searching their memories – up and to the left (visually dominant); directly left (auditory dominant), and down and to the right (physically dominant) – and look in the opposite directions (up right; side right; down left) when inventing or imagining information. GMs probably won't be able to use this consciously, but they can describe what the PCs notice – “you think Jenkins might be lying to you by the way his eyes shift up and to the right as he describes the murder.”

Since the GM is portraying a wholly imaginary adventure, the players probably won't be able to use most body language methods against him. However, unless he is a trained actor, players who have known him for a long time may have a subconscious sense of his style of plotting and portraying NPCs, and may figure out who the villain is from his body language.

Overuse of Detect Lies and Body Language can dramatically slow down an encounter, especially if they are rolled after every major statement. Use them as a guide, rather than after every sentence.

## SUBSEQUENT INTERACTIONS

The PCs will probably interact with each major suspect at least twice. Typically, investigators meet all of the suspects once at the beginning of the case. They gather the basic facts and get a sense of each suspect and witness. Then they use what they learned in that

first round of interviews for a second round, taking to each person in a predetermined order and checking their stories against each other. The suggested rules in the previous section provide modifiers that investigators can use to their advantage once they understand a suspect better. If, for example, Mr. Brown refuses to answer the interviewers' questions, and they later discover that he suspects his son Mike was involved in the crime, then during the second round of questioning, they can try to gain his cooperation by assuring him that Mike is not one of their major suspects and that his information could help clear his son.

The *GURPS Basic Set* notes that a PC who does not like an NPC's reaction

can try again after a reasonable period of time or try a different approach (p. B495). Significant intervening events (a second murder, for example) are also a good excuse to try again. If the PCs return to the same target too often, apply a cumulative -2 to each reaction roll after the first. Many people resent being questioned multiple times, suspecting (often rightly) that the investigator is unsatisfied with their answers and (often wrongly) that the investigator's prior questioning was incomplete or incompetent. If the target is a client, victim, or family member, the investigator may be able to cover up a return visit in the guise of reporting progress and asking the target if he has any thoughts about the situation.

## Using Social Skills on PCs

Influence rolls are designed to allow PCs to affect NPC reactions (p. B359). The GM should not make Influence rolls on behalf of NPCs and tell the players how to react. However, NPCs can use their skills to affect PC reactions and perceptions.

The GM can portray the NPC's behavior according to the results of the roll, to draw the proper response from the investigators. This requires some acting skill on the GM's part and it can be a problem if two PCs will have vastly different reactions to the same NPC. It is hard to convince players to roleplay a good reaction toward an NPC they do not like or trust because of the GM's portrayal.

Use the roll to establish the result of the situation, but not the character's reaction to the results. If, for example, Strong-Jawed Jim is being interrogated by a pair of the FBI's finest agents, and the agents' Interrogation roll beats Jim's Will by three, the agents will get some useful information from Jim. How Jim reacts to that is up to his player.

A player who has taken a disadvantage for his character like Greed, Lecherousness, or a Phobia, has indicated a willingness to roleplay a certain reaction and adhere to a game mechanic that enforces that reaction. When an NPC makes a successful Influence roll against a PC, the GM should apply the NPC's margin of victory as a bonus or penalty (as appropriate) to the PC's die rolls when dealing with that NPC. For instance, if the beautiful-client-in-distress beats Strong-Jawed Jim's Will by three using Sex Appeal, Jim might suffer -3 on self-controls roll for his Lecherousness and -3 to his Detect Lies skill where the client is concerned.

If the gangster's thugs have made a successful Intimidation roll vs. Jim, his player may be reluctant to have Jim back down. A GM could apply the margin of victory as a penalty to Jim's rolls to Fast Talk the thugs or perhaps to his Brawling rolls should Jim decide to fight back.

Be sensitive to the PC's established nature and conduct. If Strong-Jawed Jim didn't take Lecherousness and has been portrayed by the player as devoted to his wife and family, he should get a situation bonus to resist a Sex Appeal attempt, even if he doesn't have a specific advantage or disadvantage on his character sheet that applies. On the other hand, if an interrogator suggests that Strong-Jawed Jim's family would be embarrassed or that his wife might lose her job if Jim doesn't own up to his misdeeds and mitigate the damage to his reputation, he should get a situation penalty to resisting the interrogation.



# CHAPTER FOUR

# OATHS AND ORDEALS – LOW-TECH MYSTERIES

*“They are bandits who plunder the homes of the people,*

*But a fierce watchdog am I.*

*Money and possessions are all they desire,*

*But never shall they keep this hound from tracking them down.”*

– **Judge Pao**

*(Traditional Chinese courtroom drama)*  
*(c. 1234-1368)*

*“Sir Geoffrey,” his liege began, “A fine homecoming this is. My brother William is dead. A hunting accident, they say. An errant arrow fired by Walter of Poix.*

*“Yet Walter Tirel of Poix swears upon the relics that he did not fire that shot. He*

*swears he was in another part of the New Forest and fled Winchester for his life.*

*“My brother, little Henry, was crowned king at Westminster last month while we traveled back from Outremer. That throne is mine – William made me his heir nine months ago. I will have it, and avenge my brother.*

*“Find me proof enough to convince the Archbishop of Canterbury that a murderer sits upon the English throne, Sir Geoffrey, and I will make you a wealthy man.”*

So where does the hypothetical Sir Geoffrey begin? The underlying mystery is historical, but the conversation is both fictional and anachronistic. In July 1101,

a year after William Rufus died, Duke Robert of Normandy (his brother) invaded England. There is no reason to think he sought or needed any justification for the attack beyond his brother's usurpation of the throne. If Duke Robert had wanted proof, there were no police detectives he could turn to, nor any professional investigators at all. No one had any legal obligation to investigate William Rufus' death.

This chapter, and the following two chapters, discuss mysteries in various specific settings to examine the specific tools they require and challenges they provide.

## LOW-TECH MYSTERIES

The investigators in historical mysteries set before the mid-19th century will be amateur sleuths. They will primarily solve cases by talking to people and working with rumor and gossip, supported by ordeals and torture, without any forensic tools. The lack of forensic science does not make their results unreliable. GMs will have to rely more on the verbal interaction between investigators and witnesses, and the suggestions in Chapter 3 for resolving social skill checks.

The low-tech setting may be a familiar one, like medieval Europe. It may be more exotic, like ancient China, or a culture of the GM's invention. Whatever the setting, the GM needs to make sure that any cultural norms or customs that provide key clues are clearly understood. The example at the start of this chapter sets up the facts right up front – that Duke Robert suspects his brother Henry assassinated their brother William, and

that Henry usurped the throne. The players are likely familiar with the relationships between Norman nobles and the role of an archbishop. If this same adventure were set in Imperial Rome, the GM might have to make sure the titles and powers of the major characters were understood. The details can be filled in as the adventure progresses.

### THE LOW-TECH INVESTIGATOR

Sir Geoffrey is an intelligent, observant knight. His strongest resources are social. He has the wealth and status of a knight, a reputation, contacts, and long experience with human nature. He is not a professional investigator and does not have any formal training in that field. He is a vassal of someone with a personal interest in the outcome of the investigation. His power to compel people to help him and answer his questions comes

from his own status and from that of his “employer.”

A low-tech mystery investigator will typically be someone with a close connection to the case – a trusted vassal, friend, or relative of the victim or of the accused. This makes it easy to work a mystery into any other kind of low-tech campaign. In the absence of professional police, anyone around the PCs might ask them to help solve a problem. That makes it harder to create a *Mysteries* campaign, however. Sir Geoffrey was chosen because he is a trusted ally of his employer. It would be unlikely for him to be asked to do similar work for some other noble. Medieval clergy have more freedom – Peters' Brother Cadfael solves mysteries in and around his English abbey – but few clergy are free to travel widely and only a limited number of mysterious events can plausibly happen to the same group of people, even in a city.

There are some low-tech professional investigators. Chinese and Indian judges from the late 13th century onward were appointed officials who served as both judges and investigators. A few mystery stories survive from that time, pre-dating Poe by five centuries. The Inquisition in Western Europe was also a kind of official investigation, although the priests' goals and methods were very different from those of later police forces. Those investigators relied heavily on their experience with human nature, not on the sorts of detailed indexes, record-keeping, and physical evidence used by modern investigators. Thief-takers (p. 65) appear near the modern era, and could be considered a kind of private investigator.

Players who want to create a "professional" investigator as a character should think about how he fits into the local jurisdiction, customs, and social situation.

## Status

To be effective, an investigator needs social standing – such as Clerical Investment, noble rank, or a royal office – that lets him travel freely and ask intrusive questions in areas where he has no legal or institutional powers. Clients and confidential witnesses are more likely to talk if they think he can keep their confidences because he can't be easily questioned himself and has a duty (religious or personal honor) not to betray them. He'll also need some way to establish his identity and his status, which may involve reputation, contacts, or some obvious token of authority that would be difficult to steal or forge.

He probably won't be paid, at least not in cash, for his work (although he might get favors from pleased "clients"), so he needs sufficient income to allow him to travel and investigate.

He will also need a way to ask questions from servants and peasants and get useful answers. An aristocrat can't ask questions of servants, beggars, prostitutes, and woodsmen in an ale-house – at least not without arousing a lot of comment. A servant or a merchant who asks too many nosy questions about his "betters" may get whipped or killed.

An investigator can use Disguise skill or other social skills to pretend to a position that he doesn't have. Some of the fictional Chinese judges, for example, were masters of disguise and could

## Amateur Sleuths

Amateur sleuths – from Christie's Miss Marple, to Peters' Brother Cadfael, to *Murder, She Wrote's* Jessica Fletcher, to Scooby-Doo and his friends – are typically nosy and inquisitive people, not associated with law enforcement or formally trained as investigators, who get caught up in mysteries. Amateurs are generally regarded as meddling annoyances by the authorities and grossly underestimated by their opponents.

Amateur characters, like many players, do not have any formal training in deduction. Thus, they may not know what is important, nor how to logically investigate a crime, nor how to best question witnesses. The GM may need to provide more structure and more obvious paths and clues in a case involving amateurs than in a case involving experienced players or experienced characters.

The amateur sleuth can have a wide range of abilities. Good perception, good memory, and social skills are important. The amateur generally will not have any formal training in criminology, forensic science, law, or medicine. Many of his deductions involve common sense, human nature, and intuition.

A GM should make sure that clues don't depend on forensic skills the PCs do not have. For example, Brother Cadfael is busy burying bodies in *One Corpse Too Many* when he notices that one of the bodies is not like the others – the ligature mark around the neck is straight, not angled, which he infers to mean that this body was strangled and not executed by hanging. Cadfael does not need to know anything about forensic science in order to realize that something is wrong, and to make logical inferences. Similarly, a GM could use multiple examples of bodies or persons in an adventure to make it easier for the PCs, and their players, to realize that something is odd.

appear as a person of appropriate status to ask questions. However, many have a keen sense of accent, vocabulary, clothing, and manner, honed by the absence of official documentation, which they use to decide if a person is who he claims to be. The penalties for getting caught may range from mere embarrassment to being beaten to being imprisoned until the character's real identity is sorted out.

A group of investigators should have members with different social advantages. A high born character may have a sharp-eared ally of low status, perhaps a reformed criminal, who can talk to the common folk, intimidate servants and discretely shadow suspects.

## Jurisdiction

As a vassal of the Duke of Normandy, Sir Geoffrey does not have any legal authority to investigate William Rufus' death, to compel witnesses to speak to him, or to arrest a suspect anywhere outside the Duke's lands. He needs to persuade appropriate local authorities to help him, or at least not interfere with him.

Sir Geoffrey faces a maze of overlapping jurisdictions and jealously-guarded traditional rights that affect his investigation. The aldermen of a town, for example, may only have jurisdiction over the residents in certain parts of the area within the walls. The local bishop may have the exclusive right to investigate and punish any crime affecting clergy and tenants in buildings owned by the church. University students may be subject to neither the town elders nor the bishop, and may have privileges against anyone but their own rector and the papacy. Port towns highly dependent on trade may have colonies of residents from major trading centers like Genoa or Venice who, within the bounds of their neighborhoods, are legally subject only to the colony's administrator and ultimately to the leaders of the colony's home town. In some places, Jews may be royal subjects who are protected by the crown against anyone other than their own leaders and royal officials. In short, Sir Geoffrey's powers are limited by who he wants to question, where he wants to question them, and the political allegiances of the local authorities.

## Adapting Plots

The English cozy mystery works well in a low-tech environment. The classic amateur investigator uses human nature and social relationships, not forensic science and detailed railroad timetables, to solve the puzzle.

The hardboiled story invokes the myth of the knight errant who lives by his own code and does justice as he sees it. This chivalric myth works well in a low-tech setting where success depends on the investigator's dogged determination, not scientific methods. The hardboiled detective's toughness and intimidation approach work well in the mean streets and dark alleys of a low-tech setting.

The police procedural story is difficult to do in the absence of formal police. A version of it could be done centered around official investigators like papal inquisitors or a Chinese judge.

The thriller can fit into the low-tech setting, as long as the plot raises the stakes high enough; e.g., the investigators must prevent armies from coming together in battle, expose a plot to murder the king and overthrow the government, or halt an invasion.

This maze of custom and authority is a key feature of the setting, although rival jurisdictions and agencies plague modern investigators too. This maze can be used to give the players a tactical puzzle in finding allies or in luring or kidnapping suspects to places where they can ask questions with impunity. The GM may need to give players who are unfamiliar with this aspect of the setting some hints about how their characters can proceed if they seem stalled and unable to think of a way to confront a key witness.

## THE LOW-TECH CRIME SCENE

*"The peasants avoid the area," said the forester. "Malwood," they call it. It has an ill repute. A stag killed William Rufus' elder brother Richard here, a few years back."*

*Sir Geoffrey shook his head impatiently. "Show me where the eight hunters stood, fellow."*

*"Here . . . and here . . . and here . . ." The woodsman pointed. "To await the deer being driven southward by the beaters. Tirel was over yonder by the beech stand."*

*Sir Geoffrey strode to the clump of trees and stared northward. "Five-and-sixty yards to where the king was slain, with a single arrow to the heart. No mean shot, even if it*

*were aimed. As an accident, loosed after a running stag?"*

*The woodsman spat. "Tis possible, my lord, but only just."*

Visiting the crime scene is an investigator's obvious first step. The low-tech investigator, however, should not expect to find too many useful physical clues. To the extent the scene is undisturbed, many clues can't be easily found or interpreted. It is not just that the crime scene tools familiar to modern investigators don't exist; the recorded observations to make sense of them do not exist either. Investigators can learn things that they, themselves, would plausibly be familiar with. Some examples:

- Nobles and soldiers are likely to be familiar with the performance of weapons, the kinds of wounds they inflict, and what dead bodies look like at various stages of decomposition.
- Priests, merchants, and scholars, may be able to make simple deductions

about handwriting, such as the skill of the author, and about the authenticity of written documents.

- Foresters and shepherds may be able to follow tracks or make some deductions about the kind of person or beast who left certain tracks. They may also be able to tell what kind of animal made certain wounds.

In the example, Sir Geoffrey discovers a key clue: there's something suspicious about the theory that Walter Tirel, an expert archer, killed the king by accident. Most nobles know something about hunting and archery, even if they are not specialists. Accidentally hitting the king in the chest at a range of 65 yards with a single fatal wound strains credibility. Sir Geoffrey's player could work this out by looking at the combat statistics for a Bow (p. B275), or the GM could have planted this clue in an earlier adventure where Sir Geoffrey needed to make a similar shot in a competition or combat. Sir Geoffrey will also consider whether Tirel could have deliberately killed the king with that shot. Once again, the combat statistics make it unlikely.

The investigator can also find out mundane details. Here, Sir Geoffrey has learned who the eight nobles involved were, where they were standing, who was with each, and who could see and hear what from each position. Sir Geoffrey can look for one who might have been alone with a bow and with arrows similar to the fatal one. This gives him some inkling of means and opportunity.

Another problem for the would-be crime scene analyst is that a long time may pass before the investigators get to the scene. Crime scenes attract the morbidly curious. Without police to keep unauthorized people away, the scene will be quickly trampled by curious neighbors, the victim's relatives, and local offi-

## Other Times and Places

Medieval settings are popular for mysteries, but there are many other historical settings worth exploring. There are several popular mystery series set in ancient Rome. An *Imperial Rome* campaign could be readily combined with Steven Saylor's *Gordianus the Finder* or Lindsay Davis' *Marcus Didius Falco*. Similarly, there are several series set in Ancient Egypt, in Victorian London, and in many other times and places. The scholarship of these books varies, but the stories may inspire GMs and players with some idea of how to explore the settings during an adventure.



cials. Physical evidence like blood pools and spatters, tracks, and bits of torn fabric will be gone, or mingled with materials left by the onlookers. The body itself will likely be moved as soon as it is discovered, with no attention paid to its original position.

If the investigators are at the scene immediately they may learn more. They may hear the initial outcry and know who made it and what they said. Spontaneous reactions may be very important. The investigators can compare the reaction of suspects as they first learn about the crime.

The body would be fresh. Anyone with battlefield experience will be able to make some rough guesses about time of death. These may be limited to – recent (body's warm, blood's still uncongealed); within a day (body cold, livor mortis complete, rigor mortis complete), and dead for a while (putrefaction in progress). The investigator will normally be limited to an external observation of the body. An autopsy would be unheard of. European medical students rarely were allowed to dissect bodies, and even then were limited to the bodies of the poor and criminals. To dissect a noble's body would be a significant insult. A Chinese judge would be similarly limited – any mutilation of the body which prevents it from being buried whole had serious theological ramifications in medieval Chinese belief. If the investigators are more than a day away, any body is likely to be buried, or at least preserved by having the organs removed and the body packed in salt. This is a normal low-tech practice. Bodies rot quickly without refrigeration.

The investigators may catch sight of a fleeing suspect, although a clever killer may run toward the disturbance as if he was as innocent as a newborn lamb.

## THE LOW-TECH INVESTIGATION

*"Did you know, Sir Geoffrey," said the monk slyly, "that the repute of this King Henry is none of the best? Aye, men say that he killed a man in Rouen, during the troubles these nine years past."*

*Sir Geoffrey suppressed an urge to throttle the man. "Indeed, good Brother Anselm? Please, say on."*

Questioning witnesses about the crime is the primary tool available to low-tech investigators. An investigator will likely

## Why Can't I Invent Fingerprints?

Frustrated with low-tech tools, a player may want his character to invent or apply modern techniques to low-tech investigations. Some modern ideas, like isolating witnesses, using good questioning methods, and reading a statement to a witness for his approval before relying on it are anachronisms, but do not violate the conventions of the low-tech genre and may give the players a more confident feeling about their investigation.

Other concepts, like Holmes' encyclopedic knowledge of molds and dirt, are hard to justify in the absence of widespread education, books collecting observations, and logical, scientific methods. While a low-tech investigator could use some of Holmes' methods, the organization and rigor that Holmes applied would be seen as highly odd.

When a player wants to apply a modern technique, the GM can just say "no" – the idea would not occur to the character or does not fit the genre. This response is rarely satisfying to the player.

The GM can avoid it by not creating clues that the character cannot use. If the crime scene doesn't have a bloody fingerprint on the door, the investigator's player is not going to chafe at not being able to compare the fingerprint to the suspects' hands. Describe the mark as an irregular stain or blotch, and the problem is lessened. Rather than describe a set of muddy boot prints, let the deceased's favorite hound growl when the villain appears.

If the player insists that the modern technique is possible in the setting, take a look at the next chapter's timeline on the introduction of various techniques. There was a great deal of incentive for 19th- and 20th-century scientists to invent methods for detecting crime. But many of the methods could not be invented until underlying tools and techniques were invented. Let the player do the work of figuring out which tools are needed and which of them fit into the campaign.

Authorities tend to be conservative when crime and execution is at stake. A PC is going to have to work hard to show that his insight is better than the existing tried-and-true methods. It will not be easy to convince a skeptical Elizabethan sheriff to arrest a coal magnate based merely on a few marks on a pane of glass. The sheriff is much more likely to round up the usual suspects and threaten and batter them until someone confesses.

start with the people around him, like his patron and his friends and allies who might know something about the crime and the suspects. He will quickly collect rumors about the suspects' reputation, habits, significant skills, and perhaps insights into their vices, and flaws that he can use against them in questioning. By starting with people he knows and trusts, the investigator may have more faith in his information than in information he gets from strangers.

The rumors are likely to be accurate. Communities are small and privacy is rare. Most people stay in the same place for their entire lives. Even in the largest cities, most residents are linked by a web of guilds, parishes, friends, patrons, and neighbors. Secrets are hard to keep. Everyone knows each other's family history, past deeds and misdeeds, current

job and wealth, and many details of each other's lives. Rumors are a good way for the GM to introduce some of the key NPCs before the investigators meet them in person.

In this example, Sir Geoffrey can learn that Walter Tirel was the only "stranger" in the hunting party. Strangers are automatic suspects because they do not have the intimate links of family, patrons, and neighbors to verify their character. Strangers need to prove their identity through acquaintances or relatives who immigrated from their home area, by memory for common events, by letters of recommendation, by dress, manner, and accent. In the example, Walter Tirel was introduced to the court by his brother-in-law, Gilbert Clare, the Earl of Tunbridge. The earl was also present at the hunt, which

## The Veil of Night

Night, in the pre-industrial era, is the time of thieves and assassins. In Europe, an evening church bell marks the end of the working day. (Only a few trades were allowed to work by candlelight.) Workers made their way home, often stopping for a drink at an ale-house or tavern. The gates to the cities were locked. Some cities required local residents to take their turn as watchmen either on the walls and gates, or wandering the streets in groups with lanterns. Some cities set chains across the narrow, crooked streets to block fleeing criminals. Others released packs of trained mastiffs.

Soon after dusk, most people would be in their homes. Travelers would settle into the common rooms of inns if they could not find shelter with friends, family, or colleagues. Those who had no homes would settle into dry corners to sleep for the night.

The city would be dark and quiet. Any traveler who had to be about in the streets on legitimate business would travel, if possible, in a large group with torches. Nighttime travel was dangerous. Louis, the Duke of Orléons was assassinated one night in November, 1407, when he was lured into the dark by a false summons from the king. Louis' escort of two squires and six servants, all with torches, was ambushed by 18 men waiting for him with swords and axes hidden under their cloaks.

The poor, brigands, and those engaged in nocturnal love affairs would not be the only ones moving without light. Gangs of young men or students might travel about, throwing stones at houses, vandalizing property, and causing trouble under cover of night. Some young men broke into houses to steal goods and rape women they found within. Occasionally, a noble or clergyman might lead some household soldiers against a mob of students, but it was difficult to tell friend from foe in the darkness.

Night is an element in a low-tech adventure that makes it distinct from modern settings. Many of the crimes they might investigate will happen at night. The investigators may need to interview suspects at dusk, when they finish work. They may be lured into the night to chase a suspect or to be ambushed by the suspect's allies.

makes it unlikely that Tirel was an impostor. He can also learn that Tirel is known as a skilled archer, but has no known reason to dislike William Rufus.

Henry, on the other hand, has a bad reputation for an ill temper and for betrayals. The monk's story involves Henry capturing a prominent citizen who was a leader of a rebellion in Rouen, courteously treating him as a guest, then pushing him off the city wall to his death, having brought him there ostensibly to admire the view. Sir Geoffrey can also learn from his patron that William Rufus had promised Robert that he would be king if William died childless. However, Henry has broken that agreement and seized the English throne for himself.

### Questioning Witnesses

*Sir Robert fitz-Harmon leaned against the wooden stands and looked over the*

*Winchester tournament field. "I was the first to see the King," he said softly. "I wanted to die. I had nothing left to live for."*

*"He had fallen on the arrow which had pierced his heart and broken it."*

*"Of course, I recognized the arrow. I was there when a fletcher gave some newly made arrows to his Majesty. He*

*gave a few to Walter Tirel and said 'The best arrows for the best shot.' I'd seen him hunt over those few days. Tirel was easily the best archer of us all."*

A knight or noble has many good excuses to visit other nobles. He can gossip with them at the tournament field, or over a meal, listening to their recollections that fateful evening. Some clergy would likewise be free to travel, but might have fewer excuses to casually speak with a noble. Unlike a modern detective, Sir Geoffrey is probably not literate. He won't keep notes about what each witness says. Instead, he'll rely on his memory. If he did have a clerk accompany him, the clerk would paraphrase the statement and likely translate it into Latin. The witness would not ever see the note, or have it read to him, making inaccuracies inevitable.

Sir Geoffrey must rely on his witness' perceptions and memories without much physical evidence to guide him. Here, Robert fitz-Harmon does not specify how many arrows William and Walter were given. They were not made in standard lots like modern mass-manufactured goods. (Other measures like bushels, quarts, yards, and so on will be similarly imprecise. Each market town may have its own standard measure.) It was not important how many arrows Walter received, only that he received the honor and gift from the king. Robert probably could not identify the fletcher either. He would not be likely to pay much attention to someone else's servant.

There are some people an investigator wouldn't think to question and wouldn't rely upon if they volunteered information. Traditionally, the testimony of heretics, excommunicated persons, notorious evildoers and criminals, servants testifying against their masters, and spouses testifying against each other was not deemed reliable. On that ground, Sir Geoffrey might mistrust one of Henry's servants who might offer information implicating the king. An

*Even in the largest cities, most residents are linked by a web of guilds, parishes, friends, patrons, and neighbors. Secrets are hard to keep.*

investigator of high status might not think to interview servants and peasants, whom he might think of as beneath his status and intrinsically untrustworthy. If he did listen to them, he would still look

for other sources, since the word of a servant would be of little weight against the word of a noble.

Sir Geoffrey would be far less suspicious about gossip, rumor, and hearsay than a modern investigator. Since literacy is rare, Sir Geoffrey is used to relying on oral statements and memory for most of his important decisions. He would also be willing to listen to informants who denounce suspects anonymously, or for a share of their property if they are convicted as heretics or traitors. He might ask witnesses to take oaths on religious books and relics. Perjury and divine retribution are taken more seriously in low-tech cultures than in modern ones. Indeed, the villain may himself be deeply troubled by having committed a crime that he dares not confess, and risking eternal damnation if he dies unshriven. If the villain does confess, his admission is protected by the seal of the confessional, but the villain would need to judge his confessor well to avoid gossip reaching the priest's superiors.

## Action Scenes

Sir Geoffrey's investigation might also include action scenes. A forester with a

guilty conscience might try to abandon him in the deep woods. A baron might try to push him off the battlements or have his knights beat him. An important witness might flee, forcing Sir Geoffrey to catch him before he gains sanctuary in a church or escapes to a less friendly jurisdiction. He might have to kidnap a suspect from a place of safety and bring him to Normandy where Sir Geoffrey can hold and question him with relative impunity. Bandits might assail him on the roads. Jealous rivals might denounce him at court or to local authorities.

## THE CONFRONTATION

*Ranulf de Aquis glowered at his captor. "You have taken no small risk in seizing me," he snarled. "Don't you know that I'm the king's chief huntsman?"*

*Sir Geoffrey shrugged. "Sir Robert fitz-Harmon has many questions about King Henry's deeds. As have I. And it is his castle you are in."*

As mentioned above, jurisdiction and status can present all sorts of problems for investigators. Here, the investigator has found an ally who provided men to

help him seize his suspect and a quiet place to question him. Neither man has a legal right to hold the prisoner, but there's no police force to investigate Ranulf's disappearance and try to find him. Sir Geoffrey can use torture to force Ranulf to confess, but he will need Ranulf to repeat the confession afterward to Duke Robert and to any potential ally against King Henry. If he kills Ranulf during the torture without getting the confession, he will have to flee England or face charges of murder.

The investigators could arrange a version of a drawing-room confrontation in a medieval feast hall. Ideally, the confrontation would be in front of a noble with the authority to arrest the villain and try or execute him. If the investigators have sufficient status to request an audience with an appropriate noble, then the scene will be easy to set up. If they are not nobles, however, they may have to bribe a court functionary or per-



suade someone to listen to them before they can even get their audience.

A low-tech arrest does not require a formal standard of proof, but the accused's status, reputation, legal privileges, allies, and enemies matter a great deal. Sir Robert would, for example, be much more willing to help Sir Geoffrey seize a former royal officer who is not a noble than to help Sir Geoffrey confront Walter Tirel's brother-in-law, Gilbert Clare, the Earl of Tunbridge. Had Sir Geoffrey wished to seize even a minor member of the clergy, he and anyone who helped him would risk excommunication for violating clerical privileges, regardless of their reasons.

Once seized, the accused will be presumed guilty. Every effort will be made to convince him to confess. Getting a confession using low-tech methods is relatively easy. Getting a *true* confession is another matter. False confessions are frighteningly easy to produce in modern settings where the ability of police to use physical coercion is limited. The risk is much higher in a time where physical torture, secret accusations, and limited oversight are common. Medieval inquisitors were well aware of the coercive effects of torture. To avoid false confessions, they required the accused to affirm the confession the day after being tortured. Of course, if the accused refused to affirm, then he could be tor-

## Gossip

Men and women in pre-modern societies used gossip differently. This was especially true in societies where women were excluded from formal government and power. For men, gossip was one of many tactics used in political and legal struggles. For women, gossip was a major weapon used by and against them. Women used gossip as a weapon because they had few other means to attack their social, legal, and political foes. Both men and women used gossip against women because their reputations might be the only target available; their husbands and fathers often controlled their property and income. Sexual rumors were often used against women because they were held responsible for their sexual liaisons, whether or not they truly had any say in their choice of partners. Gossip about women might also touch on how they behaved toward their husbands and how well they kept house – be it cottage or castle. Gossip about men included rumors about money, property, trade, or sex (infidelity, impotence, etc.).

Since men and women used gossip for different purposes, the gossip that an investigator gets from a group of men in an alehouse will be different in tone and content from the gossip of a group of women in a birthing room. If an investigator is looking for gossip about a man, he may get a wide range of rumors. If he is looking for gossip about a woman, he is only likely to get gossip about her sexual conduct and home life.

Male investigators may not take women's gossip seriously. Even if a man is interested in hearing it, he may have trouble getting access to the network of birthing rooms, communal chores, and other gatherings where women speak freely among themselves.



tured again. Chinese courts similarly permitted torture with few limits.

There are other ways to get a confession. The Biblical story of King Solomon's threat to cut a child in half to determine the mother was well known. Rival claimants to an item can be asked characteristic details about its manufacture or asked what an animal was last fed before the item is opened up or the animal given a purgative. A clever trick may not only work, but may give the investigator using it a reputation for quick thinking as the story is repeated.

## ***Trial***

A low-tech trial is held before a noble or an appointed officer. In a Chinese trial, the judge conducts all the questioning while the accused kneels on the floor in front of him. The judge collects and calls all the witnesses. Lawyers are forbidden for both plaintiffs and defendants. In Chinese stories, the judge frequently orders witnesses whipped if he suspects they are lying, or not showing proper deference. If, however, the judge orders the accused killed by torture and the accused is later proven innocent, the judge and all of his court personnel are themselves executed. A sentence of execution needs to be ratified by the Imperial Throne unless the judge has a specific, rare grant of imperial authority to execute without any recourse.

A European trial by the Inquisition is private. The accused need not be told the specific charges against him. If the investigators deem the evidence against him to be strong, he could be tortured until he confessed and named his accomplices. The trial itself is held before a group of inquisitors, clergy from outside the Holy Office, and lay consultants from the royal court. The evidence is the written reports of the inquisitors, including transcripts taken by their scribes of the witness' statements and of confessions. The accused is not present during the evidence, deliberations, or verdict.

A European trial before a noble, or his designee, varies dramatically. Generally, a noble will hold court periodically. At the village level, often the entire village attends court. Locals who have disputes among themselves or who have violated local customs give testimony and receive the judgment of the noble or his officer. There is no practical right of appeal. Courts of the higher nobility

## **Undercover Investigations**

Many low-tech societies are very status-sensitive. People tend to be very conscious of status, rank, privilege, and custom. This makes it hard for a single investigator (or group of investigators of similar status) to question some witnesses. Purkiss the charcoal burner is unlikely to be very helpful to Sir Geoffrey, assuming that Geoffrey even understands his Saxon dialect and doesn't just speak Norman French.

In Chinese courtroom stories, the judge is sometimes a master of disguise. This allows him to become someone a witness might confide in, like a doctor or a merchant. Of course, unless the investigator has created and maintained a consistent alternate identity, he will have to contend with the usual suspicion about strangers and may have to prove himself to gain admittance to a town, or even to an inn.

If discovered, the disguised investigator may be in for a great deal of trouble, ranging from social disgrace to arrest. A knight discovered by the city watch masquerading as a merchant could claim to be secretly visiting his mistress. Given the lack of privacy and interconnections of family, guild, and parish, the rumor would quickly spread around town. A merchant disguised as a knight, on the other hand, might face more serious troubles . . . he could be suspected of an affair with a woman above his station, or other nefarious deeds.

If undiscovered, the investigator may find himself contending with his own underlings, who may mistreat him, with bandits who bully him, and with servants who tease and taunt a seeming commoner in a way they would not dare speak to a court official. GMs and players can have fun with these scenes and explore parts of the setting they would never otherwise experience.

and clergy are more formal, but still based upon custom and reputation more than any written code of law or index of prior decisions.

A low-tech court tends to be less formal than a modern courtroom. There are fewer restrictions on who can talk or prohibitions against multiple people talking at once. This allows GMs to avoid one of the problems of a modern courtroom confrontation; that only one PC can be active at a time. Since there is often less emphasis on legal rules, investigators are also more free to state their case using their reputations, gossip, hearsay, and whatever evidence they have to hand.

## ***Ordeals and Oaths***

Ordeals, oaths, and trial by combat make interesting alternative confrontation scenes. Many cultures had traditional ordeals that an accused could use to prove his innocence by divine providence. Typical ordeals included swallowing consecrated bread; touching, holding, or walking across hot stones or irons; and ordeals by water in which the guilty floated and the innocent sank (and were fished out before they drowned). In some

cultures, the accused was made to touch the victim's body so that the body could indicate the killer with a sign like fresh blood flowing from a wound. Some cultures allowed an accused to swear an oath on holy relics, often accompanied by the oaths of friends and neighbors (*compurgators*) who vouched for the accused's innocence and honor. A few cultures permitted trial by combat, either by the accused or a champion. Divine favor was expected to aid the innocent fighter.

Accused characters can use ordeals to prove their innocence of a crime. Ordeals that involve physical tests, like hot irons or stones, are usually based on involuntary body responses, like excessive sweating or salivating, which are associated with guilt. In a physical ordeal, ask for Will or Body Control rolls. If the PC is innocent, he should get a bonus to the roll. If he believes himself guilty, then assign an appropriate penalty.

Defendants who have strong religious faith, Duty, or appropriate Codes of Honor may need to make a Will roll to knowingly make a false oath on relics or other important symbols.

If a defendant is a champion in a battle, the GM may wish to give him a small morale bonus to Will and Health rolls if he

believes he is on the right side and a small penalty if he has doubts about his actions.

## PUNISHMENT

*In a muddy field near the town of Alton in southern England, the invading and defending soldiers waited as their commanders talked.*

*"Well done, Sir Geoffrey!" Duke Robert was practically purring as he entered the tent. "Gramercy for your aid."*

*"How is the parley going, my lord," asked Sir Geoffrey.*

*"Well enough. The Church is standing behind King Henry." The Duke began stripping off his mail. "We have the larger host, and could gain the victory, but I will not be excommunicated for it. But with d'Aquis in hand, I have the leverage I need. He revealed everything – named not only little Henry, but the Earl as well."*

*"What terms has Henry offered?"*

*Duke Robert chuckled. "He offers 2,000 pounds a year, in fee for ceding my claim to the throne. Much owing to your work, Sir Geoffrey. Go back to your home and wife with the thanks of your liege – and this."*

*Sir Geoffrey caught the heavy purse that Robert tossed to him. Weighing it in his hand, he grinned appreciatively. "It is well to know that justice was done!" he said.*

Low tech justice does not necessarily look like "justice" to modern eyes. What happens to the guilty part depends as much on his rank, allies, and the political situation – and on who is doing the punishing – as it does on the misdeeds themselves.

Peasants, merchants, and the lower nobility are likely to be punished swiftly, often by execution, maiming, or branding. Those with significant Status, Wealth, Clerical Investment, and powerful allies may escape any serious punishment for their misdeeds, paying bribes to their foes in money, land, titles, property, and privileges.

Small communities may resist a solution that conflicts with the local consensus. The locals have to live with the villain's family, allies, and friends. Proving the case to the community's satisfaction, and working out a punishment that the community can accept may be difficult.

The investigators can, with hard work, turn political patrons and allies against a guilty suspect, causing them to withdraw their protection. Gilles de Rais,

for example, was a companion of Jeanne d'Arc, Marshall of France, a favorite of the French king, and a powerful baron. When he ran afoul of his family and the Duke of Brittany over gambling debts, his family physically seized some of his castles to prevent creditors from selling them. In those castles, they found the bodies of young children that Gilles had killed over several years. The local peasants had no one to complain to and thus the crimes had remained undiscovered. The Bishop of Nantes became involved in the dispute, which led to Gilles' trial for heresy, his excommunication, and his execution. The nature of the crimes

powers of arrest, imprisonment, interrogation, and, effectively, execution.

An Inquisition investigation began when a group of inquisitors came to an area. They presented their credentials to the local priest and to the highest-ranking local noble. On the next Sunday or feast-day, the Inquisitors would require all residents to attend the service. After the sermon or the creed, an Inquisitor would hold up a crucifix and ask the congregation to raise their right hands and repeat a solemn oath to support the Inquisition and its ministers.

An inquisitor then preached a sermon and recited a list of heresies.

*If, however, the judge orders the accused killed by torture and the accused is later proven innocent, the judge and all of his court personnel are themselves executed.*

made it difficult for any of Gilles' former allies to support him; none came to his defense.

## SAMPLE ORGANIZATION: THE INQUISITION

In a mystery campaign, players may want to make their investigators members of an appropriate detective organization. Or the GM may want a historical model for an organization that can keep the investigators in check if they stray too far outside the law.

The Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834) is the closest European low-tech analog to a professional detective agency. The Holy Office was international in scope. Its members were drawn from the Franciscan and Dominican orders and charged by the papacy, through the Spanish monarchy, with uncovering heretics among the laity, extracting confessions, and giving appropriate penance.

The Inquisition had some aspects of a police force. It worked for the government, not for private citizens, and it had

Anyone who wished to clear their conscience could come forward to the inquisitors and denounce themselves or others, including any accomplices who participated in heresy or incited it. Anyone who did so within 30 or 40 days after the sermon – a period of grace – would be absolved and reconciled to the Church without suffering serious penalties. Those who did not take advantage of the grace period risked serious punishment or death.

Over the next two months, the inquisitors gathered information from those who confessed, from witnesses, and from informants. The Inquisition depended on local residents to denounce their neighbors' heresies. Residents often confessed out of fear of what their neighbors, relatives, and enemies might say about them. Petty denunciations were used to settle old scores. The tribunals occasionally suspended trials when they believed the accusations were false, but they believed false accusations were rare. The consequences for perjury were light, although burning, scourging, and sentence to the galleys could be imposed.

When someone made a denunciation, the inquisitors presented the statements to a group of theologians who

determined whether the accused was a heretic. If the theologians agreed there was proof of heresy, the prosecutor drew up a demand for the accused's arrest.

The accused was taken into custody and his property "sequestered" and used to pay for the accused's imprisonment. The accused's relatives could ask for an allowance to support themselves. Once arrested, the accused was presumed guilty. If he proved his innocence, he was immediately released. Prisoners were held in ecclesiastical jails, often isolated from each other. Those who were released had to swear an oath not to tell what they had experienced in jail.

Inquisitors approached the accused three times over the next two weeks, exhorting him to confess. Only in the last warning was the accused told the actual charges and a summary of the evidence. Then he was required to plead. After he pled, he could request an advocate from a list approved by the inquisition tribunal.

The accused was interrogated in the presence of an inquisitor, a secretary, and a notary. Torture was allowed according to "the conscience and will of the appointed judges, following law, reason, and good conscience. Inquisitors should take great care that the sentence of torture is justified and follows precedent." Torture was used in a minority of cases, to question suspects, not to punish them. In most cases, the threat was sufficient. Confessions made under torture were not deemed valid. The accused had to ratify the confession the day after the ordeal. The rules forbade anyone to be tortured more than once, however, a session could be suspended and resumed. The torturers were not allowed to kill the accused, nor draw blood.

After investigation and interrogation, the case was considered by a tribunal of judges without the accused's presence. The accused could be acquitted; fined; given penance or reconciled; or burned (in person or effigy). The trial could also be suspended, and the accused released, with the warning the trial could be resumed at any time. There was a very limited right to appeal. As a technical matter, those unrepentant or relapsed heretics sentenced to death were "relaxed" to the secular court as the clergy were forbidden to kill.

After trial, the tribunal could order the heretic's property confiscated. Informers could claim a portion of the accused's property as a reward. The bal-

ance was used to fund the inquisition itself.

## **SAMPLE ORGANIZATION: VICTORIAN THIEF- TAKERS**

Prior to the creation of Sir Robert Peel's police, London depended on thief-takers to capture criminals and prevent crime. In a busy city like London, the local merchants no longer had the time to answer a hue-and-cry. (The traditional common law duty of anyone hearing a call for help to come running to catch the thief.) Instead they offered rewards to local thief-takers to recover stolen goods.

Thief-takers captured their quarry, sometimes in an ambush, sometimes by pursuit when a merchant raised a cry. The thief was arraigned before a justice, and then imprisoned for trial. Trial sessions occurred every month, less often in the outlying suburbs where justices traveled on circuit. For his efforts, the thief-taker received a reward from the merchant, a price from the crown, and the thief's goods (if any) were forfeit to him. (The justice, either a court magistrate or an itinerant "trading" justice, also received a fee for each criminal sentenced and a share of any forfeited goods.) A public hanging was the punishment for most crimes.

Of course, a few thief-takers were corrupt and tried to exploit the system by essentially fencing property back to its original owner and splitting the fee with the thief. Jonathan Wild, the self-proclaimed Thief-Taker General of Great Britain and Ireland, was executed for conspiring with highwaymen, burglars, and thieves. Among Wild's schemes was a system of capturing uncooperative, greedy, or low-ranking thieves in order to maintain an appearance of actual deterrence. The victims were hung by the courts.

Another scheme, common after Wild's death, was for thieves to recruit young people into crime so the takers could capture the young criminals and punish them for the misdeeds of older guild members. Thieves also often bribed the thief-takers. After a series of scandals, more efforts were made to reform the thief-taker system.

Henry Felding, a justice of the peace at the Bow Street Court, persuaded a half-dozen thief-takers to work directly under his control. His men spent as much time eavesdropping in the taverns by the docks in various disguises as they did competing for customers among the merchants and wealthy clients. His thief-takers depended heavily on contacts, bribes, and threats to uncover thieves and recover stolen property. Henry's half-brother, Sir John Felding, published a nationwide broadsheet called "Hue and Cry" which listed and described stolen articles, making them harder to fence, and listed names and descriptions of suspects and wanted criminals.

A thief-taker who didn't work for a judge usually had a favorite magistrate whom he preferred to hear his cases. Some magistrates tried their case immediately, holding court in their homes or taverns. A prompt trial and conviction meant no delay in the magistrate and the thief-taker getting their fees, but made it difficult for the accused to defend himself. (There was no privilege against self-incrimination, but a defendant was not allowed to testify at trial because it was assumed he'd be tempted to lie and add perjury to his other sins.)

As a patron, a single thief-taker employs a small team of intimidating thugs, talented investigators, and informants, perfect roles for many period PCs. Most of the team will work as needed, leaving time for other adventures. A patron magistrate often employs several thief-takers and their associated teams. As an officer of the crown, a magistrate can offer better prestige and pay, but will generally supervise his staff closely to protect his own job and reputation.

As foes, most thief-takers have power disproportionate to their social role. They are often owed favors by important people whose goods they have recovered. Through their informants, they are often aware of smuggling, visits to prostitutes, and other fodder for extorting action against a rival or foe. Killing or seriously injuring a thief-taker will generally prompt an investigation and retribution by his peers and allies. A magistrate is a dangerous foe; he has the judicial power to send enemies of lower class than him to prison or to the scaffold. Socially attacking a magistrate is difficult due to the magistrate's own status, wealth, and political position. Physically attacking one is the same as attacking the king's person. Regardless of how



# CHAPTER FIVE

# THE MODERN DETECTIVE

*"It looks to me like a case that will probably never be solved by exhibits or testimony on facts. The cops have had plenty of good men on it, and if they had got anything usable on footprints, or fingerprints, or getting the steak knife from the drawer, or alibis or timetables, or something like shoes that had been worn in the woods, someone would have been arrested long ago."*

– Archie Goodwin,  
*In the Best Families*

*"Look, Jack," the sergeant said, "It's a suicide. Dr. McDonald says so right here."*

*"I know that's what it says, Cecilia, but I talked to her parents and her friends when she vanished – grad student, decent grades, no recent break-ups, no depression. Why would she kill herself, and why in the reservoir in Wroughton? Something just doesn't seem right."*

*"Jack, I was there when the divers dragged her out. She's dead. I don't expect*

*her parents are going to take it well, but shouldn't they decide whether you should keep digging?"*

*"They hired me to find out what happened to her, and that's what I'm going to do."*

Jack Williams is the stereotypical rumped modern private eye. He was hired to find a missing young woman, and now has a possible homicide on his hands. He's a detective in the classic hard-boiled tradition. Once he's found a puzzle, he'll see it through, whether or not he's being paid to do so.

Williams' homicide case was initially investigated by the police, but the police have limited resources. If Williams' clients had gone to the police about their adult daughter's disappearance, the officers would likely not have taken the case very seriously unless there was some evidence of an abduction or other foul play. Once her body was found, police began

an investigation that quickly ended when the medical examiner decided that she committed suicide.

Private detectives are not police. They often become involved when the client wishes to keep the problem a secret, when the problem is not yet a crime, when police are unable or unwilling to get involved, or when someone is not satisfied with the official government answer. Most private investigators are themselves former police officers, trained in police methods, with contacts in various departments and professions.

Williams understands forensic evidence. However, in this case, forensic science mostly tells him what *didn't* happen. If the police had solid evidence suggesting a homicide, then they would still be investigating the case. Since he works alone, not through a bureaucracy, he has more leeway to follow his instinct that something is wrong.

## MODERN MYSTERIES

It is hard to overstate the changes between low-tech and modern investigations. The close of the 19th century brought the first uniformed police departments and the first plain clothes police detectives. The end of the 19th century also brought the first private detective agencies, providing investigation and security services. Finally, the creation of police forces brought about a steady stream of advances in forensic science, and new methods (ranging from mug shots to fingerprints to DNA) to find criminals from the witnesses and trace evidence they leave behind at crime scenes.

The development of full-time professional police and detective agencies, discussed in more detail in *GURPS Cops*, established the idea that justice was a matter for governments, not privately settled by revenge, vendetta, and private lawsuits. Reliable identification methods

made it possible to know who a stranger was and to identify repeat criminals. Physical evidence began to reveal the problems with eyewitness testimony and fallible human memory.

The close of the 19th century also created the first Western detective stories and a new kind of literary and real-world hero. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his imitators created the genre of the "genius detective." Newspapers, "true crime" stories, and magazines thrilled the public with the exploits of Allen Pinkerton's operatives and the detectives of Scotland Yard.

The Golden Age of mystery fiction (1920-1945) was the heyday of Agatha Christie and her "genius detective," Hercule Poirot, and of John Dickson Carr's locked room puzzles. It was also the heyday of more realistic stories that utilized the emerging forensic sciences and used the mystery genre to explore

business, medicine, and religion. And, of course, it was the dawn of the hard-boiled genre exemplified by writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. These classic writers are still widely imitated by modern authors.

The modern mystery is the easiest genre to adapt to RPGs. GMs and players are already familiar with the modern world. They can approach the mystery with all the tools and ideas they have heard about on the nightly news, in newspapers and magazines, and in their favorite books, movies, and television shows. In fact, they may have problems clearing up popular misconceptions about what forensics can reveal.

Keep in mind that mystery adventures are not reality. As discussed in Chapter 1, there are conventions to the mystery genre that make it close to reality, but more dramatic.

The players may be tempted to rely on the police. Their characters pay taxes, after all. The police should be able to handle routine problems. Unless this is a procedural adventure, the adventure should present a problem that the police cannot or will not solve alone. If the answer was easy and obvious, or the police could solve the case using routine police work, then there would be no reason for the characters to be involved.

Modern mysteries may be easier to plan because GMs have access to a great deal of information. They can find city maps, building plans, appropriate photographs, police crime scene procedure, and more. They don't need to create as much from scratch as they might in a low-tech, fantasy, or SF mystery. On the other hand, the sleuths have legitimate access to a great deal of information, too. Managing information, and not letting the need to be realistic overwhelm the adventure or the characters, can be a problem. Remember that the adventure comes first. The players will not be impressed that the GM got the exact plans for the Duke of Buckingham's drawing room if they didn't have anything interesting to do in that location.

## THE MODERN INVESTIGATOR

*"You're a cop, Pat. You're tied down by rules and regulations. There's someone over you. I'm alone. I can slap someone in the puss and they can't do a damn thing. No one can kick me out of my job. Maybe there's nobody to put up a huge fuss if I get gunned down, but then I still have a private cop's license with the privilege to pack a rod, and they're afraid of me."*

— Mike Hammer,  
*I, The Jury*

Jack Williams is a typical modern private investigator. He's a retired police detective from a small city, which means he has several years' experience as a uniformed patrol officer, and a few years' experience as a detective. He's familiar with forensic science and criminal law, as well as with human nature. He has a part-time secretary to keep his files and send out his bills. He is familiar with firearms and may carry one for his own protection.

Although amateur investigators remain a staple of the fictional genre, most modern mystery stories feature

investigators with some professional training. Solving their client's problems, or preventing crimes, is their job. They rarely know anything about the client, the victim, or the suspects before the incident, and may never encounter them again afterward. This model gives the GM a fresh slate for each adventure, but also means that the suspects and witnesses need to be interesting and memorable so the players don't lose track of who's who.

investigator), undergoing a background check, and maintaining some liability insurance. Jurisdiction doesn't prevent investigators from following leads into other states or countries; it primarily limits where the investigator can advertise, have an office, and accept cases. Police, on the other hand, do have jurisdiction limits. Outside of his jurisdiction, an officer is just a private citizen, although he is likely to get some cooperation and help from local law enforcement. Amateur

## Adapting Plots

The English cozy mystery is more common in adventures set before and during World War II. The fragmented, mobile nature of modern society makes it harder to sustain the web of social ties and secrets that characterize a classic English cozy. On the other hand, fragmentation has spawned subcultures that can support their own "cozies," such as the SCA (Mary Pulver's *Murder at the War*) and science-fiction conventions (Sharyn McCrumb's *Bimbos of the Death Sun*).

The hard-boiled story is a quintessential modern tale of anachronistic honor in a modern setting. This genre works well in times of social upheaval, economic uncertainty, widespread corruption, and general cynicism.

The police procedural story is also very common. Some versions focus on the dogged efforts of ordinary police detectives to keep the peace in their small part of the world. Other versions use the latest developments in forensic science to solve crimes.

The thriller story is a perfect fit for modern adventures. This mystery genre is among the most recent, and works best against a setting of shadowy organizations or evildoers pitched against heroes desperately trying to save an unaware populace. Loss of privacy and the anonymity of modern life are two themes that frequently turn up in this genre. Thrillers also tend to have a high level of technology, used both by and against the protagonists.

Investigators have access to a lot of information in the modern era. Williams, who has a friendly relationship with the Wrighton police, can look at autopsy reports, crime scene reports, photographs, and other technical information. Consult Chapter 2 to generate or interpret these sorts of records. Williams can call nearly anyone he wants to consult about the case, and travel as far and as quickly as his budget allows. It is much harder for a suspect or witness to evade him without taking significant steps to disappear for a while.

Jurisdiction remains a concern, less so for private investigators than for police detectives and federal agents. Most American states require private investigators to be licensed, which involves proving some experience as a professional investigator (police officer or working for another licensed

detectives are just normal citizens, jurisdiction is irrelevant to them.

Class, social, and racial distinctions remain important in some places and times in the modern setting. Class distinctions are less important in American stories than in English ones. The hypocrisy of social status is an important theme in some hard-boiled stories, and can appear in stories where middle-class detectives (private or police) investigate high-society crimes. Racial distinctions can be important, especially in American stories. It is less common to see racial issues in a cozy than in a hard-boiled or procedural story, where race may be an important theme.

The mystery example in this chapter illustrates a ball-of-twine plot. Williams was hired on a missing-persons case. His client told him the victim's name, home address, birth date, employer, and so on.

That information gave Williams several places to start, including a credit check for recent charges, a bank check for recent ATM withdrawals, and a driver's license check for recent tickets. The driver's license check had turned up a speeding ticket near Wrighton. While waiting for the results of the other checks, Williams picks up that bit of twine and calls the department looking for the patrol officer who issued the ticket. The officer passes him to Detective McMahon, who investigated the presumed suicide.

Since Williams is a retired police officer himself, he can get more cooperation from the average officer than a detective without that past. Here, however, he is fortunate to have known Cecilia McMahon before the case, and to have a personal friendship that will get him additional information. For game purposes, she could be someone Williams' player mentioned in the character's background, a holdover from a previous adventure, a Contact, or just an NPC the GM created for color.

## THE MODERN CRIME SCENE

*Nancy Oliver's car sat in a corner of the impound lot. Williams walked around it thoughtfully. He looked at the pictures of it at the scene. No one had gone to great effort processing it. There was nothing obvious to find. Television aside, DNA tests, hair and fiber analysis, even luminol, all cost money and time. Not something the Wrighton force could afford to waste. Williams' client could not afford costly tests either.*

*Williams looked under and over the car at the mud and brush, hoping to see something interesting. Nothing unusual. He looked at the department's inventory – standard procedure to search the car when it was impounded. Nothing unusual.*

*The police had found Oliver's keys still in her pocket when they recovered the body. Williams used them to open the trunk. A tire. Some tools. A snow shovel. He looked carefully at the rug for stains. None. He opened the car door and rifled through the glove compartment and over the visors. Students' cars were usually messier – text books, papers, computer disks, CDs. This one was clean except for a few receipts – one for the Turnpike, one for gas. He put the key in the ignition to look at the gas gauge. Why would anyone*

*fill her car's gas tank and then kill herself? Williams copied down the gas station's address.*

The players should have some idea what their investigators should do at a crime scene. Decades of movies, television shows, and novels have made most people aware of how important it is to leave a crime scene undisturbed. That doesn't prevent crowds from morbidly gathering around the yellow tape hoping to see something interesting. Nor does it prevent some bystanders from taking souvenirs from poorly-guarded crime scenes to keep or sell on eBay.

The modern investigator can hope for a crime scene that was mostly undisturbed when the police arrived, and was processed professionally. Police departments have limited personnel and funds, so a crime scene will generally get only the attention it seems to merit. If the cause of death and culprit seem obvious, few departments will take the time to look for minor bits of trace evidence. If a man's body is found with a knife buried in his chest and his wife's fingerprints on the knife, it will be treated as a routine domestic homicide. Obvious crimes don't normally get turned into RPG adventures unless there's something more to the case than meets the eye. This can lead the players into meta-game thinking. They know that the GM probably didn't spend a week preparing for a simple homicide. There's got to be a trick or twist somewhere.

Modern forensic tools provide many places to hide that twist. The characters can look for and find all sorts of interesting evidence. A skilled criminologist with a large budget can virtually reconstruct the crime, step-by-step, using blood spatter analysis, fingerprints, wound patterns, and other evidence. Players can drown in that sea of information if they don't have some idea how to prioritize and categorize it. A mystery adventure should provide enough red herrings to make the puzzle a challenge, but not so many that the players can't remember the important details.

If the PCs are not police officers, a key NPC will be the police detective in charge of any obvious crime scene. The department will have generated a huge quantity of reports, sketches, photographs, physical evidence, and laboratory results. Getting access to that information can be critical to an investigation. The investigators will need to figure

out how to convince someone in the department to officially, or unofficially, give them access to those records.

This can be an important scene in the adventure. Police officers do not appreciate civilians poking around in their cases. The presence of a private investigator can be taken as a rebuke, a sign that the deceased's family doesn't have confidence in the local police. If there really is a problem with the investigation, like corruption, incompetence, or just bad publicity or political results from classifying a death as a homicide, then police may try to discourage the investigator from proceeding. Think about how the local police will react to the interlopers. The investigators need to find an approach to solve this tactical puzzle and get the appropriate information. If they do badly and alienate the local police, they may get key information by other means, but they should expect a more difficult challenge.

Identifying an unknown body is easier for the modern investigator. In this chapter's example, Oliver's body was identified by circumstance. Her car was parked by the reservoir. Her wallet was found in the pants pocket of a drowned body of the correct gender, ethnicity, weight, height, apparent age, and hair color. Her fingerprints were taken, but were not on file. If there was any concern about misidentification, a dental record comparison or a DNA test could be done. Prolonged immersion in water makes it hard to make a reliable visual identification, so Williams should keep in mind that without confirming the identification with dental records or DNA, this might not be Oliver's body. So far, he has no reason to doubt the identification.

Experts will be able to estimate time of death to within an hour or two with reasonable accuracy. The modern setting can support adventures involving detailed alibis with railroad schedules, ATM withdrawals, cell phone calls, and so forth. Checking alibis can get tedious. Players, and the investigators they are portraying, may get bored trying to compare all the various details. A trustworthy assistant can handle this in the background while the main characters are busy with other leads. The GM might also summarize the background investigation with a quick summary like "four hours of telephone calls later, you've confirmed all the details but one."



Experts will also be able to find a great deal of information from third-party records. Some players will want to describe their investigators' search through these kinds of records in great detail. Others will prefer a summary of their results. If they offer some suggestions for research, the GM may reward any clever ideas with useful clues. Many

*The presence of a private investigator can be taken as a rebuke, a sign that the deceased's family doesn't have confidence in the local police.*

people leave a trail of their daily lives as they use credit and debit cards, cell phones, e-mail, and other devices that record the time and content of their transactions. Growing numbers of businesses have security cameras that record every person who enters their stores (and often those who pass their windows). London and some other cities even have cameras in public places to deter street crime. This makes it harder for criminals to create a false alibi, and provides lots of potential sources for information about the crime scene and its surroundings.

The modern setting also yields more sophisticated villains. The same movies, television shows, and books that make most people aware of the need to preserve crime scenes make potential criminals aware of potential forensic evidence. Only people acting in the heat of sudden emotion or intoxication will commit a crime without wearing gloves or wiping down the scene afterward. Criminals are more careful about blood and other bodily fluids. Many know to wash their hands after handling a firearm to clean off gunpowder residue. This awareness can make a crime more challenging for investigators. Experienced investigators may realize that a lack of forensic evidence points to an experienced or thorough perpetrator. The carefully planned crime scene should contrast sharply with more typical scenes.

On the other hand, the mystery genre makes some evidence more reliable in fiction than in the real world. Chapter 3 discussed the real-world unreliability of eyewitnesses and why, for dramatic purposes, most stories disregard witness mistakes or signal them through the

witness' uncertainty or demonstrated unreliability. That same convention applies to the possibility of forensic mistakes. In a mystery, there's no chance of lab error unless there's some reason to expect it, like an obviously careless lab technician or a visibly cluttered and poorly maintained lab space.

On the other hand, the odds that some evidence has been forged or planted are higher in fiction than in reality. Clever incarcerated criminals have tried to plant their own DNA or fingerprints at a crime scene to create the perfect alibi. There are no known cases of criminals leaving false or forged fingerprints; and only a few known cases of planting someone else's DNA at a crime scene, although fictional bad guys do both frequently. Since the false evidence has to be taken or molded from a real person, the investigators may realize something is wrong if they find out the other person would not have committed the crime or they discover a suspect with unusual skills or interest in forensic evidence.

There have been a few cases of overzealous police officers or crime scene technicians taking a suspect's fingerprints from another location and falsely claiming to have found them at the crime scene. Some departments have been accused of planting suspects' blood and DNA at scenes as well. There should be some hints if the investigators should not trust their own experts. The investigators should be wary if they find an undisclosed connection between the expert and a suspect – a family member, friend, secret affair, rivalry, jealousy, etc. – or if the expert is abnormally fixated on the suspect and refuses to consider any alternative theories.

## THE MODERN INVESTIGATION

*The clerk remembered nothing, of course. The station was the typical gas station and mini-mart, with a constant stream of customers from the highway.*

*Over the register, a television screen constantly flicked between images from the security cameras inside and outside. The clerk didn't know how long the videos were kept, but he was willing to call his boss about them.*

*Williams showed the harried man his license. He explained that he was investigating the death of a woman who had bought gas at the station the day she'd died. He had the time from the receipt. Looking at the video wouldn't take more than a few minutes. The manager sighed and got his keys for the storeroom. The gas station video flicked between grainy images: Oliver's car. Oliver filling her tank. A car pulling in behind Oliver. A man talking to her. The camera angle was high and the man wore a hat, concealing his face. Both Oliver and the man looking at a map together. Oliver coming in to pay. The man swiping a credit card at the gas pump.*

*Williams looked at the manager. "Can you tell me who charged the gas on that second car?"*

Williams began his missing persons case by talking to the people who knew Oliver best and who saw her last. He talked to her friends, family, co-workers, and students. He looked around her apartment, her cube, and her lab. When he could, he asked witnesses to show him receipts, phone records, store security videos, and anything else that might help confirm their story and help him figure out what happened. In a game, a great deal of this can be handled through summaries of the investigators' results, only roleplaying a key scene or two.

Williams keeps a notebook with details of his interviews. Some he records on a tape recorder he keeps in his car. This isn't the kind of investigation where he has witnesses give formal statements. That's more often a job for police.

Williams isn't looking for evidence, he's looking for information. That's a big difference. Evidence is dependable information that can be used in an eventual trial. There are legal rules about how it can be gathered and by whom. Information can come from anyone. Often Williams has to promise not to reveal his sources. His reputation depends on his honoring those promises. Once a detective makes a promise to protect a source, there is often a subsequent scene where someone else tries to pressure him to break that promise.

Williams rarely breaks into a location for evidence. If an investigator does break into a location, this can be a good action scene, particularly if a janitor, security guard, or late-working employee nearly catches the investigator in the act. A sleuth who prefers less action can, like Williams, convince a bureaucrat or clerk to tell him what he wants to know.

Once Williams knows who Oliver was talking to, he decides to follow the suspect for a day. He needs more information before a confrontation. He glances at his gas tank – nearly full – and pulls an energy bar out of his glove compartment. He will need to find a good location for a stakeout. During the day, especially in a suburban neighborhood, he risks being spotted by some concerned citizen who would report him to police as a suspected stalker or pedophile.

Williams keeps his car stocked and ready for surveillance. Ideally, Williams would prefer to have a couple of assistants helping him. Following someone, especially someone who knows you, is difficult alone. Using multiple cars, or multiple people if on foot, makes it easier to follow the quarry, and harder to get burned. Williams isn't the kind of

detective who uses high-tech bugs and tracking transmitters. The tracking transmitter is legal. The bug isn't. Williams knows who to hire for that sort of job, but he does his work with binoculars, and a camera with a telephoto lens if he needs proof of what he's seen.

Surveillance scenes are also good places for action; chasing after a person without getting spotted takes skill, luck, and a willingness to take risks. If the suspect spots the tail, the detective is likely burned and will have to stop. Expect obstacles – a slow driver, a nosy neighbor, or a store detective wondering why the investigator is so intent on a fellow shopper. Other obstacles might include a low tank of gas, gnawing hunger or thirst while unprepared on a stakeout, or having to decide whether to stay all night to watch a suspect who's gone home. If there are multiple detectives conducting surveillance, they can talk about the case or bond while bored and alone watching the suspect.

### *Anonymity and Mobility*

A big change from the low-tech setting to the modern one is the size of modern cities. A typical 14th-century

city might have 10,000 residents, all of whom have daily interactions with their neighbors and with merchants, clergy, and local officials. A typical 20th-century city has millions, even tens of millions of residents, few of whom could reliably pick out the inhabitants of their own high-rise residences in a lineup. City size makes people more anonymous. Modern people can more easily keep their lives secret from friends, family, and neighbors. The sheer number of customers in an urban store means that only regular customers are likely to be remembered, and may not be known by name. Strangers come into frequent contact, which allows more crimes where the victim and perpetrator meet by chance and are otherwise unrelated.



Investigators, and others, depend more on identity documents than on people's claims about who and what they are. When not solving mysteries, professional private eyes spend a fair amount of time doing background checks for employers on employees, and looking for debtors and property with liens on it.

Modern society is also very mobile. Relatively few people spend their whole lives in the same state, never mind the same community. Ties of family and friends are much looser than in low-tech societies. Mobility makes people more anonymous. It also allows criminals to strike far from their homes. Thieves and con artists can steal a person's wallet and use his bank account or credit card numbers without ever setting foot in the victim's home state, or even country.

Travel allows opportunities to move the investigators around. If they are getting too comfortable in one setting, the GM can send them on a trip to another city or country for a publicity tour, or even a vacation, and let them solve a mystery during the journey. If the characters are used to friendly relationships with their local police and experts, being in a foreign land, or even another state, means they have to establish their bona fides with locals who may resent fast-talking big-city experts.

## **Can I Invent Fingerprints First?**

Players may want to use techniques that, by the timeline, are cutting edge for their setting. An expert could have heard of experiments with the technique (roll the lower of his Research and his appropriate science skill, at a -1 penalty for every year between the setting and the date the technique was officially introduced). He could also independently evolve the technique (roll appropriate science skill at -2 penalty per year).

In either case, the technique is still experimental. Using it requires a -3 to -5 penalty to the skill check, in addition to any penalties for the situation. If the investigator fails the check by just the penalty for it being experimental, something has gone wrong with the test – he's likely getting either a false positive or false negative result.

Once the technique is published, roll Research (normal check) to be aware of it. If the detective does not get training in the technique from an appropriate teacher, then apply a -3 penalty to the skill use within the first one to two years of the technique's introduction.

After two years, the technique has become sufficiently reliable that anyone who has the appropriate skill can use it without any penalty. Most forensic methods are sufficiently complex that results obtained by those who do not have significant skill and the proper equipment would not be admissible in court, although the test may still provide useful information.

Those wishing more detail in a forensic expert oriented campaign may wish to adopt the New Inventions (pp. 473-74) and/or Gadgeteering rules (p. 475-77) to forensics tests and techniques.

## Forensic Science

Forensic science evolves during the “modern” setting. The timeline at the end of the chapter gives the dates of publication or first successful use in a criminal case of various important forensic tests. As Archie Goodwin observes in the quote at the start of the chapter, forensic science is usually not the key to a fictional mystery. If there were obvious clues that would point the police to a suspect, then there would not be much of a puzzle. The detectives will need to interpret the forensic evidence they find in order to solve the case.

Forensics can point out what didn’t happen, too. In many Christie novels, the experts can tell the detective roughly when the victim died (useful for investigating alibis) and how the victim died (if it isn’t obvious). Experts can bring to light useful, but often misleading clues like fingerprints or boot impressions outside a window. A mystery adventure essentially requires that forensic science alone does not solve the case. The players and their characters need to figure out how to use the available data.

## The Press

*“When dealing with real people rather than institutions or politicians, empathy is more important than intimidation or subterfuge. If a reporter could win a person’s trust, the person would give up almost anything you asked for, often a lot more than you ever expected.”*

– Mitch Gelman,

***Crime Scene: On the Streets with A Rookie Police Reporter***

Reporters, especially investigative and muckraking reporters, are part of the modern setting. Players can use reporters as a background for “amateur” investigators. GMs can use the press as a way to put time pressure on the investigators to handle the case quickly, with a minimum of fuss. As soon as the police know of a crime, reporters will learn about it through their police sources and through radio scanners tuned to police frequencies. Police may use reporters to publicize warnings or descriptions of criminals, to boost their own reputations through media coverage, or to settle scores with rival officers or departments by selectively airing bad news.

Reporters can be rivals and foils for the PCs. Reporters often respond to

crime scenes looking for witnesses to interview for their stories. The more interesting the crime, the more reporters may show up to cover it. A dogged reporter investigating the case for the evening news may give players an incentive to keep a case quiet and to find witnesses first. Press attention is often bad for an ongoing case. Once a case becomes public, witnesses may refuse to talk for fear of press attention. Or they may refuse to talk to police or private investigators before they have made a deal for their story, or their videotape, with the media. Some witnesses may subconsciously conform their stories and perceptions to what they have heard in the news. Other witnesses may give false testimony to be “helpful,” to get media attention, or to collect offered rewards.

GMs can also create newspaper stories to summarize facts, or provide information from minor witnesses or experts the detectives missed in their preliminary investigation. Articles and editorials can summarize past investigations or summarize an adversary’s trial and sentence as a postscript. Newspaper stories can give in-world feedback to players by

describing their characters’ performance and their reputations as seen by the sources quoted in the story.

## CONFRONTATIONS

*The professor stared up at Williams, who loomed over him, his hands tight on the arms of the professor’s chair. It had taken a while to put it together.*

*“I know you went to the reservoir together. I saw you on the gas station security video. What did you tell her? That you needed samples of the bacteria in the reservoir for your book?”*

*Williams didn’t wait for an answer. “She hadn’t figured it out yet. Her thesis would have proven your project was a fraud. You had to stop her. So you killed her.”*

*“No!” The professor yelled. “It wasn’t like that. She . . . she was blackmailing me, detective. Her thesis was crap. But if I didn’t help her, she was going to tell my wife about our affair at that conference in Cancun. I didn’t have any choice. If I’d backed her thesis I’d be ruined. If she told my wife, I’d be divorced. I didn’t have any other choice. You have to understand.”*

## Defense Investigators

In the modern era, the United States and many other countries provide public defenders and defense investigators to those accused of crimes who cannot afford their own lawyers and private investigators. Perry Mason and Horace Rumpole, both trial attorneys, investigate cases themselves, or with hired assistants, to prove their clients’ innocence. A convention of this genre is that the client is almost always innocent, but has secrets to hide that make him look guilty.

Characters may find themselves cast as defense investigators if they, or some NPC they care about, are accused of a crime. The defense investigator’s job is fundamentally different from a police or prosecutor’s investigator. A police detective determines that a crime occurs, investigates the crime to discover evidence leading to a suspect, then identifies and arrests the suspect. The defense investigator, on the other hand, tries to find (not create) evidence supporting reasonable doubt that would require a jury to find the suspect not guilty. Defense investigators confirm alibis, investigate alternative suspects, and examine the credibility of prosecution witnesses and physical evidence.

A defense investigator starts with the police reports, laboratory reports, crime scene information, and witness statements. The police will have done most of the preliminary investigation. The defense investigator is looking for holes and gaps in that work. Then the investigator meets with the suspect (his client) to discuss his history and the prosecutor’s case. Often the investigator goes to the crime scene to take additional measurements and photographs (and to check the accuracy of the police work). He conducts background investigations on all the witnesses, and may check the credentials of experts.



Confrontations, for the modern investigator, can be the traditional drawing-room scene, bracing the suspect alone, or a police interrogation. There are more legal constraints on the modern investigator. Kidnapping and torture that was an accepted part of low-tech justice became unacceptable in modern Western societies. The rubber-hose method of obtaining confessions was outlawed in the United States in 1932. Instead of physical violence, modern investigators often use a variety of psychological methods to get incriminating statements.

Modern investigators rarely shine bright lights on suspects, grill them for 24 hours a day, or beat them with rubber hoses. Courts no longer deem confessions obtained by those methods to be reliable. (Some societies still allow coercive methods to be used in emergencies, such as against terrorist bombers, but limit the use of the information received at trial.) Modern techniques involve feigned sympathy and friendship, appeals to God and religion, using informants, confronting the witness with true or false incriminating evidence, the tried-and-true “good cop/bad cop” routine, and other tricks.

Players may want to roleplay some of these methods. An actual interrogation takes several hours. In a game, it can be compressed into a few key scenes.

An investigator interrogating a suspect may try to scare him by overstating the seriousness of the offense, magnifying the possible punishments, and exaggerating the evidence against the suspect. The suspect feels trapped and frightened. Sometimes this will intimidate a suspect into confessing in hopes of some mercy from police and the courts. Another approach is to “soft sell” the situation and lure the suspect into a false sense of security with offers of sympathy, tolerance, face-saving excuses or justifications, blaming the victim or an accomplice, and minimizing the seriousness of the evidence, charges, and punishment. Often a combination of the two methods is used, first terrifying the suspect, then offering him a face-saving escape. American police are not allowed to bribe a suspect with direct promises and threats, but they can make nebulous offers to “put in a good word” with the prosecutor or the judge.

The same basic techniques can be used to get a confession from a suspect in a confrontation between a private detective and a suspect in the privacy of

the suspect’s home or the detective’s office. Hard-boiled detectives tend to favor the intimidating “maximization” approach. Detectives in cozies tend to prefer the subtler minimization approach, with the implicit promise of leniency if the suspect explains himself.

The GM should consider how the NPC will respond to these methods. The confrontation scene is the climax of the mystery adventure in the same way that the fight scene with the mastermind villain is the climax of an action adventure.

## ***Trials***

*“Nobody won, the truth emerges sometimes, Inspector, even down the Old Bailey.”*

*– Horace Rumpole,  
Rumpole of the Bailey*

Criminal trials are not common in fictional mysteries, unless the investigator is an attorney. For the most part, the trial is an assumed postscript. If the criminal confesses, or at least makes incriminating admissions, then arrest and eventual conviction are virtually assured. Even if the villain maintains his innocence, convincing physical evidence and witnesses can make a conviction virtually certain.

## **Lawyering Up**

*“You have the right to remain silent. If you give up this right, what you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you in a court of law. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights?”*

*– Text of a standard **Miranda** warning*

Since the *Miranda* decision by the United States Supreme Court in 1966, American police officers must tell suspects about their rights before beginning any interrogation. Most suspects waive their rights and try to talk their way out of trouble. Instead, they often talk their way into a jail cell.

*Miranda* only applies to an interrogation, which under American law means an interview under circumstances when a reasonable person in the suspects’ shoes wouldn’t believe that he was free to go. If the police ask the suspect to come down to the station voluntarily, a *Miranda* warning isn’t required at that point.

*Miranda* only applies to police. Private detectives are just ordinary citizens with very little power to make a citizen’s arrest. They can’t legally detain someone, but by a mixture

of bluff, charm, and intimidation, often they can make a suspect stay and talk longer than is in his best interests.

Once a suspect realizes that the investigator is closing in on him, he should realistically hire an attorney and refuse to speak to an investigator without the attorney’s presence. The attorney will generally insist on speaking only with police, on search warrants, and on not cooperating with private investigators. This would bring an adventure to a dead end and move the action mostly into the hands of NPC prosecutors and attorneys.

GMs should limit the times when a witness decides to “lawyer up” and insist on his rights. Let the suspects be arrogant, overconfident, or afraid of looking guilty. Let them graciously let the investigators poke around, certain that they have cleaned up any incriminating evidence.

If the players are roleplaying poorly – relying too much on intimidation, for example – then have a minor witness demand a lawyer in response to their approach. This will remind them of the dangers of their tactics, without creating a fatal dead end to the adventure. If the players persist, then have a key witness or suspect demand a lawyer. The case should still be solvable, despite the presence of the lawyer, but with much more effort.

If the GM wants to include parts of a criminal court proceeding, **GURPS Cops** has some ideas about how to roleplay the dramatic parts of a criminal trial. Perry Mason, the archetypal lawyer/investigator, generally confronted and unmasked one of the prosecution's witnesses as the true villain during cross-examination in his client's trial. This scene is very similar to an interrogation; however, the attorney/investigator has to lead the witness step-by-step into a logical contradiction with a series of questions. Horace Rumpole also wins by clever cross-examination, or by finding new witnesses or evidence that the prosecutor has missed. The minutia of procedural and evidence rules is not important; Mason and Rumpole routinely use tactics that would get a modern American attorney held in contempt or even disbarred.

Setting up a climactic trial scene is very difficult. First, only one PC (the attorney) is generally speaking, which can be very boring for the other players. Also, there's not much suspense if a player is portraying an attorney and the GM is portraying everyone else. If the characters are the defendants, then each of them in turn gets a chance to outwit the prosecutor during cross-examination, but again, having only one player active at a time can be boring for the others.

If players have nothing to do during a trial, try casting them as prosecutors or even the judge. Often Rumpole finds himself defending a case that another member of his chambers is prosecuting. Sometimes, the trial is taking place before a tribunal presided over by yet a third member of his chambers. (This is not allowed in an American trial due to a conflict-of-interests rules.) The only problem with this set-up is that the GM may need to separate the players so that each attorney can investigate his case without necessarily disclosing his leads and results to the opposing players and their attorneys. Because the judge has little to do until the trial scene, consider recruiting an outside player, one who knows nothing about the investigation, to roleplay the jury or judge. Since this person doesn't know the story, there's narrative tension about whether the characters will be able to persuade a neutral outsider to support their side. (For more information on how to set up an adventure in this format, look at the simplified rules for American high

school mock trials, which are available from any state bar association or at [www.nationalmocktrial.org/rules.htm](http://www.nationalmocktrial.org/rules.htm).)

Investigators can be involved in trials behind the scenes too. They can search for witnesses who have refused to appear. They can find information to counter a last-minute surprise from their opponent. They can prevent a villain from corrupting the trial by protecting witnesses from intimidation or harm. They can run background checks on jurors or even the judge.

## PUNISHMENT

Punishment is also an epilogue to a modern mystery. By the end of the confrontation, or in a brief epilogue, the PCs should be certain that they have prevailed and justice has been done. Most modern murderers are imprisoned, not executed, which provides opportunities for investigators in ongoing campaigns to consult with their former foes about new cases, or old cases that they were not able to close. Minor criminals and former minions who have been paroled or received probation may reappear as informants offering information in return for money or other favors. Major criminals may escape or eventually finish their sentences and return to cause more trouble.

## SAMPLE ORGANIZATION: THE PINKERTON AGENCY

*"The individual detective of former days has passed away, or, if he exists, has become corrupt. In order to capture the perpetrators of crime in this immense country, peopled by every nationality on the globe, it has become necessary to establish large agencies, conducted with the most perfect system. In tracing criminals, the manager of an agency, like the general of an army, lays out the plans and selects the men to carry them out; sometimes, in important matters, going to the field of operations to direct, in person, but generally giving his instructions from the main office, where he has hundreds of cases to look after at a time."*

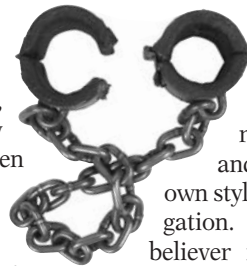
— Allan Pinkerton,  
*Claude Melnotte as a Detective and Other Stories*

The early decades of the Pinkerton Agency, from 1855 to the 1920s, are a good example of a detective organization in an early-modern setting. The present-day Pinkerton corporation, which is part of a multinational corporation, is probably too large to allow the characters a reasonable amount of flexibility. The Pinkertons are an example of a large patron detective agency suitable for any setting where merchants and businesses need private protection in the absence of a professional police force.

The Pinkerton Agency's original headquarters was in Chicago, where Allan Pinkerton (1819-1884) ran it with a careful eye. At first, he recruited each operative and trained them in his own style of disguise and investigation. Pinkerton was a firm believer in scientific detection.

The Chicago office maintained files of mug shots and notes about associates and habits (*modus operandi*) that could be quickly sent to any field agent by telegraph, and later telephone. Pinkerton was also a believer in phrenology, and once rejected a suitor for his daughter because of the size of the man's head. His operatives needed to be men, and women, of somber habits and good character, but he did not require any special training or background. He preferred his operatives to abstain from liquor, except under extreme situations necessary to their work. He prohibited "profane and obscene language" among his operatives. He prohibited gambling, lending money between operatives, and any discussion of politics or religion within the office.

The agency provided railroad police to protect railroads from robbery, theft, and sabotage by outsiders and employees. Pinkerton undercover investigators watched for employee embezzlement, a new crime in the 1850s, and thefts by employees of mail and customer property. The railroads also crossed through many jurisdictions; in the absence of national and statewide police forces, only a private agency could or would pursue a criminal who could easily flee local or county police. Pinkerton's contacts with the Illinois Central Railroad led to the agency's wartime work in military intelligence and as temporary bodyguards for President Lincoln.



In 1858, the Pinkertons created the uniformed Protective Police Patrol, which provided night watchmen for banks and businesses for 50 cents a week. The agency investigated bank robberies, frauds, and embezzlement. After the war, it fought against gangs of bank robbers and raiders, often Civil War veterans, who attacked banks and railroads. It condoned vigilante reprisals against robbers who were otherwise unprosecutable. One such attack led to the death of Jesse James' mother and his eight-year-old half-brother in 1875, which resulted in a flood of bad publicity for the firm.

The agency became allied with business leaders during various labor disputes. Undercover operatives infiltrated both union organizers and often-violent secret societies of laborers, including the Molly Maguires (1875-76). The agency's uniformed watchmen expanded from a Chicago patrol to guarding race tracks, businesses involved in strikes, even Coney Island. Pinkerton watchmen were blamed for the deaths of strikers and bystanders in several strikes. The agency also began recruiting strikebreakers and scab labor for its clients. Following the death of three Pinkerton guards and 10 strikers in the Homestead strike (1892) and subsequent congressional investigations, the agency decided that supplying guards for labor disputes was dangerous and unprofitable. It still supplied

underground operatives to investigate workplaces, but its uniformed men were limited to race tracks and other less dangerous sites.

In the late 1880s, the Pinkertons began protecting groups of jewelers and groups of banks from thefts. The agency began training small businesses in loss prevention and precautions. Signs prominently warned thieves which businesses were under Pinkerton protection. Safecrackers vied with safe makers. When robbers succeeded, the Pinkertons tried to track down the thieves and recover the lost money. The agency also pursued con artists and forgers who defrauded its clients.

By 1907, the agency had 20 offices around the country and was divided into three divisions – New York, Chicago, and Denver. An office was divided into four sections: clerical (accountants, janitors, cashiers, stenographers), criminal (record keeping), operations (two or more detectives, plus undercover operatives), and executive (superintendent and 1-2 assistants).

At the turn of the century, a typical Pinkerton operative charged \$6 to \$8 per day on a strict "per diem" basis and received a salary of \$13 to \$16 per week, a bit less than an urban police detective. (Valuable informants were paid \$12 per week.) He was not allowed to collect rewards or bonuses for his efforts. The firm refused divorce and marital

relations cases. In general, it avoided cases that would bring it into conflict with the federal government or powerful corporations.

PCs who are Pinkerton operatives will have a reputation for professionalism and tenacity. Business leaders will generally react favorably; union organizers with suspicion; and police with mixed respect and rivalry. Male and female operatives will be trained in disguise and long-term undercover work. They will be expected to give frequent written reports to be read by their supervisors and the client.

Operatives will be expected to be on call at all times, and to behave well both on duty and at home. They may chafe at Pinkerton's obsessive oversight and spying on his own employees, but they will gain valuable experience and contacts.

As adversaries, the Pinkertons' bureaucratic, organized methods and relentless pursuit of criminals who attack their protected businesses make them dangerous foes. For crooks used to bribing corrupt police and politicians, and running from jurisdictions that get too "hot," the Pinkertons can come as quite a shock. Their expertise at undercover operations; indexed records on criminals, their methods, and their associates; and wide array of contacts will make it difficult for criminals to escape from scrutiny for any sustained period.

## SCIENCE FICTION MYSTERIES

*"Justice, Elijah, is that which exists when all the laws are enforced."*

*Fastolfe nodded. "A good definition, Mr. Bailey, for a robot. The desire to see all laws enforced has been built into R. Daneel, now. Justice is a very concrete term to him since it is based on law enforcement, which is in turn based upon the existence of specific and definite laws. There is nothing abstract about it. A human being can recognize the fact that, on the basis of an abstract moral code, some laws may be bad ones and their enforcement unjust. What do you say R. Daneel?"*

*"An unjust law," said R. Daneel evenly, "is a contradiction in terms."*

*—Dr. Han Fastolfe and R. Daneel Olivaw,  
The Caves of Steel*

John W. Campbell, the noted science fiction editor, once wrote that it was impossible to write a science fiction mystery. He opined that the author would be too tempted to give the detective extraordinary powers to advance the plot. Certainly that's one problem. In an RPG, if the detective can have cybernetic implants or biotech enhancements, or be something entirely non-human like an alien species, infomorph (see pp. TS119-120), or even a being of pure thought, it's hard to create a challenging puzzle for him. It can also be difficult for a player to know what to do with a character so far from the player's own experience.

Another problem with the science fiction mystery is making sure the science stays consistent and plausible. If John Dickson Carr, noted locked-room

mystery writer, confused carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, his reader might forgive the error as long as the story was still entertaining. If the GM makes a similar mistake while running a science fiction mystery he may see his adventure, and perhaps his campaign setting, collapse.

Isaac Asimov took up Campbell's challenge and wrote several science fiction mysteries and short stories. Asimov's focus was not on the technology of his setting, but on sound reasoning mixed with familiar high-school science principles. Following Asimov's example and making the mystery turn on familiar principles rather than setting-specific technology or background history may help GMs create solvable puzzles for their players.



The science fiction mystery is an extension of the modern mystery. Science, logic, and deduction are still the investigator's basic tools. *GURPS* offers so many possible technologies and societies, ranging from *Bio-Tech* and *Ultra-Tech* to specific settings like *Prime Directive*, *GURPS Traveller*, and *Transhuman Space*, that it is difficult to talk about all the specifics in one book. (The term "super-science" in this chapter refers to any of the advanced technologies in such source books.) This chapter can only give GMs an overview of the generic problems and themes they may encounter in creating a science fiction mystery adventure.

## THE SCIENCE FICTION INVESTIGATOR

A classic theme of science fiction is defining the essence of humanity. That's a key theme of *Transhuman Space* and of many other futuristic settings. Despite the miracles promised by advanced technology, people are still basically the same. They still kill each other for passion or profit. They still steal, cheat, lie, and deceive their spouses. In order to solve essentially human misdeeds, the investigator must have a basic understanding of human nature.

Super-science can give a player's investigator amazing powers and tools. He can be a quintessential outsider like an android, sentient computer, or being of pure thought. He might be enhanced with mechanical or genetic implants to make him smarter or more observant than any normal human. Or he might be a normal human called upon to solve a mystery where the suspects' nature, abilities, and motives are wholly or partly alien.

Super-science changes the skills an investigator needs. Advanced technology might further professionalize detective work, leaving even less room for talented amateurs and cynical shamuses in their rumpled raincoats. On the other hand, easy-to-use "expert" computers may make it possible for anyone to duplicate the results of a modern forensic laboratory, leaving ample room for diligent amateurs who can integrate physical evidence with a broad understanding of human nature and human weakness.

## Adapting Plots

The English cozy mystery translates easily to isolated space stations, under-sea colonies, and space-ship crews on long journeys. It is harder to adapt on a densely populated future-tech world.

The hard-boiled detective story adapts easily to a cyberpunk setting, or other settings with corrupt governments and inept or ineffective law enforcement.

Police procedurals also adapt easily to the super-science setting. New technology will create new crimes and new methods of detection, but the tried and true techniques of law enforcement, like questioning witnesses and interrogating suspects, will always be needed.

Thrillers work well in high-tech settings, crowded populations, and with themes of man against unfeeling forces, whether they be computers, aliens, or giant bureaucracies.

The familiar iconic investigators can all be used in a science fiction setting. The eccentric genius detective, like Sherlock Holmes, may still be able to notice details that even a powerful AI would ignore or misunderstand. A Poirot-like deep understanding of human nature absent any tools may befuddle a villainous hacker who is prepared to counter a more technological approach. Private security and private investigators still have their place, often as beacons of integrity in an otherwise impersonal and bureaucratic future. Police and specialists are natural character choices in many science fiction settings.



## THE SCIENCE FICTION CRIME SCENE

Advanced technology will create new opportunities for criminals and provide investigators with even more powerful tools to find clues. The GM needs to give the investigators a sense of the limits governing technology within the setting. The players, and their characters, need a sense of how difficult it would be to forge key crime scene data, and how hard it would be to detect a forgery. They need a sense of what measures a typical police detective might take, and how reliable the society deems that official investigation. Any

changes to those rules should be foreshadowed – if one of the suspects is a top government scientist working on classified military technology, for example, then the investigators are forewarned that he or his foes may have access to equipment far beyond what they'd expect in everyday investigations.

Super-science may allow an investigator to carry a full forensics lab in a briefcase (see p. UTT26) or less (see *Forensic Nano*, p. UTT83). However, the investigator must make sense of the results provided, including accounting for crime scene contamination by bystanders or investigating officers. Expert systems may be able to make that decision, but the investigator should be cautious about relying on algorithms that may discard important data, assuming it to be contamination, not a vital clue. Infomorphs and AIs have personalities – they may not be objective in their data analysis and may miss or downplay vital clues that don't conform to their theories.

Cheap data storage may allow an investigator to collect information from all sorts of systems. For example, a space ship or an advanced building may keep track of its internal temperature, humidity, and even CO<sub>2</sub> on a room-by-room basis, allowing an investigator to tell which rooms were occupied, even if he does not have a video recording of who was present. An investigator might also be able to use logs for computers and communications terminals to see who was using equipment at the time, even if the contents of those communications are protected by privacy laws.

Advances in cloning and genetic engineering may make it possible to reconstruct the image of a suspect from recovered DNA, or even clone the whole body (although a clone would not have the memories of the original). On the other hand, bodysculpting and other cosmetic surgery (p. BIO61) may give a suspect an appearance that barely resembles his DNA. Bodysculpting may even allow a villain to match a dupe's fingerprints and deposit his DNA, or allow an accomplice to appear as the villain and create a perfect alibi.

Cloning and braintaping (p. BIO116) create numerous possibilities for faking one's own death, and create difficult ethical questions about homicide when the deceased can be resurrected nearly as good as new. It may also create questions about punishment when police arrest the clone or ghostcomp of someone who committed a crime, then died.

The means of committing crimes may get esoteric. Target-seeking pathogens (p. BIO89), for example, allow killers to create a disease that can be carried by anyone, which can only harm one person with a specific DNA pattern. Tracing an otherwise benign virus back to its creator would be a Herculean task for a skilled investigator.

## **“AS YOU KNOW, BOB . . .” – THE PERILS OF EXPOSITION**

“As you know, Bob” is a hoary expository device where one character lectures another on something they both should know, but the audience doesn't. The exposition is usually important to the plot or the puzzle, but there's no in-story reason for the two characters to be discussing it. This is a problem for any setting, but more so for original science fiction settings where the players don't know anything about the world beyond what's in materials given to them. GMs may find themselves preparing “as you know, Bob” dialog because the fact the investigators need to know isn't part of the source or background material, or the GM wants to make sure they remember the fact.

There are other ways to handle vital exposition. A traditional method is the “infodump.” Unlike the fiction writer, a GM can provide this to the players in background material, in the game

materials, or in handouts or e-mail that can be provided outside of the game session. Infodumps are useful, but GMs should not depend on players recalling details at key moments.

knows to explain his actions. In a game, the characters *are* the detectives, and they need to know pertinent information to proceed.

## **Bio-Tech and Other Genre Books**

When the GM is working with a specific genre book, the mystery and the adventure should be targeted at the strengths and weaknesses of that genre. In *Bio-Tech*, for example, the mystery might involve organlegging, stealing genetic material or a stored braintape, homicides using tailored viruses, thrillers about killer diseases, and falsified DNA. The investigators will likely have genetic or surgical modifications that give them superhuman abilities. The GM will need to adjust the power of their opponents accordingly.

Conversely, a GM could set his mystery against type. The killer uses an archaic weapon, perhaps a slingshot, and is careful to remove traces of his DNA from the scene. Because he has not used a method they were expecting, the detectives may have to rely on interviews and basic forensics instead of specialized *Bio-Tech* tools.

One type of infodump is the recap, often preceded by “when last we left our heroes” or “previously,” where the GM summarizes key scenes or information from earlier adventures so that the details are fresh in the players' minds. This is also useful for new players or players who were not at all of the sessions relevant to the adventure at hand.

Try to make infodumps interesting and short. A mock newspaper clipping can provide key information in one “story” and put related information nearby. Newspapers and magazines often provide their readers with useful maps, graphics, diagrams, timelines, and other simple background information. Try creating excerpts from fake textbooks, the Encyclopedia Universal, or library databases. If the investigators use expert systems, a counterpart to the Microsoft paperclip can provide “helpful” exposition – “I see you are trying to analyze Crystal Gibson. Crystal Gibson is highly toxic to humanoids if touched or inhaled. Do you want to continue?”

Dr. Watson, Col. Hastings, and Archie Goodwin often provide this service for readers by explaining things that genius detectives like Holmes, Poirot, and Wolfe take for granted. While “viewpoint” NPCs are a good fictional device, they may not work as well in a game. Watson, Hastings, and Goodwin are telling the reader things that the detective already

## **THE SCIENCE FICTION INVESTIGATION**

Super-science gives an investigator access to massive amounts of information nearly instantly. Investigators might easily expect to have displays of crime scene sketches, floor plans of buildings, displays from security cameras, login records from identity cards and computer stations, and a full genetic profile of every suspect matched to the bits of DNA evidence found around the crime scene. This level of monitoring and information can make adventure preparation very difficult.

Don't let the science, or the information, drive the adventure. Answer the players' questions and let them make deductions. GMs can give any level of detail that seems appropriate and necessary. If an investigator is using the records kept by a life-support system of room-by-room conditions to try to place his suspects, for example, the GM could tell him that the system showed changes in temperature, humidity, and CO<sub>2</sub> at specific locations and times. This provides useful information, but the detective still needs to figure out whether the presumed people in each location were the rooms' registered users, or other guests.

## 1984 AND THE DEATH OF PRIVACY

Many science fiction settings assume the death of personal privacy. Various computer databases already keep track of one's bank accounts, credit cards, telephone calls, and utility charges for billing purposes. Add to that the databases that use "affinity cards" to keep track of grocery and other cash and credit card purchases for marketing reasons, and a very complete picture is already available.

Many cellular telephone networks can pinpoint a user to within a few feet. Some governments require networks to make that location data available to public safety agencies in case they need to locate the telephone user in an emergency. It would be possible to maintain a database to track telephones whenever they are turned on. Future societies may track similar devices, or implanted health monitoring devices that automatically call for help if the user is injured or incapacitated. Even more advanced societies might equip their citizens with Recorder Implants (p. UT107) to track their perceptions and even thoughts.

Tiny RFID microchips ("smart tags") are being developed to keep track of store inventories and prevent shoplifting. If the tags are not deactivated, they could be used to track an item from manufacture to disposal. A smart-tag equipped meal could tell an oven how to cook it, or tell a refrigerator when it passes its "sell-by" date so it could be discarded. A smart-tag-equipped soda can found at a crime scene could tell an investigator where it was purchased and by whom.

Combining pervasive security cameras in stores, banks, and various public places with facial recognition software could allow a computer to track a person's movements with ease. The movie version of Philip K. Dick's *Minority Report* includes ubiquitous iris scanners that customize advertising as the customer walks past, and can be used by the police to track a suspect's every movement.

The PCs will likely wish to thwart these sorts of Orwellian measures for their own adventures. Criminals will do likewise, altering databases, creating false alibis, and otherwise using the

seamless web of monitoring to commit impossible crimes.

Another option is to choose a setting that limits the characters' super-tech tools. If they are sent to investigate a murder on a frontier colony, the colony may not maintain the sort of super-science records they are used to at home. Thus, the investigators may have some tools, like briefcase labs, that help move the story along more quickly, but not tools that make a satisfying adventure difficult or impossible.

Similarly, while super-science makes it easier to identify a person using DNA analysis, huge databases, or face recognition software, the size of the campaign setting may be so large that old fashioned skip-tracing and background checks are still needed. In a setting as large and varied as, say, *Traveller's* Imperium, it is still possible for a villain or witness to flee as fast as the news of the crime, and disappear into huge populations on frontier or lower-tech worlds.

### Space is Big – Body Disposal and Other Problems

If the high-tech setting includes trips into deep space, disintegration weapons, matter transporters, or other means of destroying or disposing of bodies and other evidence without a trace, a GM may have problems creating a solvable mystery. Set the boundary rules carefully. Often an idea that creates a good adventure early in the campaign – like using a transporter to reverse aging or to accidentally clone a character – can cause problems later if the device doesn't work that way in a mystery or other puzzle.

Keep in mind that ways to control or limit these kinds of devices will evolve as the devices become widespread. Weapons may be registered and equipped with intricate safety and record-keeping systems. There may be sensors that look for the unique energy discharge of weapons and immediately alert security forces upon their detection. Matter transporters may have complex built-in safeguards to prevent accidents or misuse. Although space is big, there may be customs inspections or other searches to keep track of who is in space on what vessel. *Ethan of Athos*, by Lois McMaster Bujold, has good details

about why it might be hard to dispose of a body on a space station.

If technological systems have safeguards, investigators will likely check for tampering using their own skills or a hired expert. If they find tampering, then they will begin looking for suspects with the technical skills to tamper, or the contacts and resources to hire an expert. If an unregistered or novel device was used, detectives will be looking for someone with the resources to build or procure the item.



### Psychoprobes and Truth Devices

Another staple of science fiction that can make a plot more complicated is an inexpensive, reliable, safe truth device or drug. In Bujold's Vorkosigan series, a drug called "fast-penta" is a safe, reliable truth serum that allows the target to babble without restraint. (Credaline (p. UT97) has similar effects.) The author limits her protagonists' ability to "fast-penta" every suspect in sight by social customs and laws. She limits her antagonists' ability to use it on her protagonists and their allies by allowing intelligence services and criminals to create a fatal allergy to the drug, and by giving her protagonist a unique reaction to it that will not kill him, but makes the drug useless against him.

Place similar limits on truth devices and drugs that are established in a campaign. The internal reason is to protect the privacy of individuals. Many people have confidences and secrets they do not want exposed to the public. Thus, the investigator may need to justify using the device or drug to some superior or official by showing some evidence that the suspect is guilty or concealing information critical to protecting the public. If the suspect has social status, important allies, or a powerful patron, using truth devices or drugs on him may have social or political repercussions.



Even if the investigators are allowed to administer a truth drug to a suspect, they still have to ask the right questions. They may have the killer or a key witness and miss that fact through poor questioning. Truth drugs and devices in science fiction rarely make the subject tell the questioner what he wants to know, just the answers to what he asks.

A variation on the truth device is computer-assisted lie detectors. In Vernor Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky*, networks of nano-sensors allow some characters to spy on every word and action in a small colony. The networks even allow skilled users to see tiny changes in a suspect's blood pressure, eye movements, and brain waves. While not a perfectly reliable truth device, such sensors would provide a bonus to the Detect Lies skill similar to that given by the Empathy advantage. (See pp. B65, UTT82-83.)

Generally, someone legally using a truth device or lie detector must only ask questions relevant to the crime, and non-controversial background questions to establish a baseline for the target's responses. Often, fictional interrogators accidentally discover more than they expected in an assisted interrogation. For example, a person may reveal an unsuspected romantic interest, embarrassing family secrets like an affair or out-of-wedlock child, or financial troubles. In one real-world case, a police officer being interviewed for the CIA was asked if he'd ever committed a crime during a routine lie detector background check. The officer proudly admitted that he and some of his co-workers had manufactured false fingerprint evidence against suspects they "knew" were guilty. Needless to say, the officer did not get the job – he and his co-workers were sent to jail, and several of their victims were exonerated in retrials.

## Time Travel

Technology or magic may allow characters to view the past, or travel back in time to examine it. There are very few examples of a time-travel mystery story; such stories are fraught with practical difficulties.

If time-travel, or past-viewing, technology is publicly known, then adversaries will account for it in their crimes. They may wear disguises while committing the crime, or try to disguise the time or location of the crime so that the

authorities focus on the wrong clues or cannot find the crime scene or victim.

If the investigators are using time travel merely to observe the past, with the intention of arresting the criminal in the traveler's present, the technology may tempt the characters to intervene in the past. If, for example, they are tracking a serial killer and are observing an early victim's death, they might try to intervene, thus creating a paradox. GMs considering time travel adventures should read *GURPS Time Travel* for other cautions and plot ideas.

## Infinite Worlds

The Infinite Worlds setting lets the GM change fundamental assumptions about what is possible in each alternate world. Physical laws may not work as the characters expect. Psionics or magic may exist instead of science. Cross-time investigators face a number of practical difficulties.

When the investigators are investigating natives of the setting, they may have an advantage in technology or information, but it can be offset by the villains' local knowledge and the investigators' difficulty figuring out where to start looking for information on how to distinguish this world's normal and abnormal conduct. Natives of the setting who do not know about parachronic travel will not take precautions against such investigators when planning their crimes, but they will take precautions against normal law enforcement methods in their setting, which may coincidentally be effective against the investigators.

Investigating world-traveling criminals poses different problems. The villain must quickly learn how to thwart the world's law enforcement and navigate its society, then take precautions, as resources permit, against both native authorities and parachronic investigators and bounty-hunters. A savvy villain

who can evade both at once is a powerful adversary for cross-time agents.

Here, as in other SF and Fantasy genres, if solving the mystery depends on some feature of the setting that is not familiar to the players and their characters, the GM needs to make sure that clue is fairly presented early in the adventure.

## CONFRONTATIONS

Despite instant and near-instant communications ranging from e-mail to holodecks, an adventure should end with a face-to-face confrontation between the investigators and the criminal, or as close to that as may be possible if their foe is a computer program or otherwise disembodied. Personal interactions add tension to a confrontation scene, which is vital to making the RPG mystery satisfying to the players.

Stunning (see pp. UT55-56, UT67) and entangling (see p. UT51) devices – essentially super-science versions of the blackjack and handcuffs – give detectives more options for capturing foes alive. In a hardboiled setting, they make it easier for criminals to capture or temporarily disable the private eye without permanent injury.

The high-tech trial may involve tribunals of telepaths, artificial intelligences, expert judging systems, or traditional courts, judges, and juries. Punishments may range from imprisonment to execution to brain editing (see p. BIO121), psychosurgery (see pp. BIO71-72), cryogenic suspension (see pp. BIO113-14), psionic personality reconstruction, mandatory organ donation, or exile to prison planets. The trial and sentence serve the same purpose in the high tech setting that they do in other mysteries. Unless the confrontation occurs in the trial itself, it is just a postscript to the adventure. The villain's punishment is likewise a postscript, as long as it is suitable and certain.

## Alien Outlooks

The Influence skill rules (see pp. 53, B359) are based on human psychology. Androids, artificial intelligences, and aliens may have vastly different needs, drives, and instincts. Many science fiction stories treat aliens as humans with makeup. This makes it much easier for the players to figure out the alien's motive and means. On the other hand, trying to decide which of several truly alien suspects committed a crime could be a fascinating puzzle.



Players and their characters may argue about suitable punishments. In Larry Niven's short story *Cruel and Unusual*, a kidnapped alien accidentally suffocates over the course of three days due to an allergic reaction to humans. The guilty kidnappers are in turn slowly suffocated by the alien executioners, who clinically inflict the exact same amount of pain on the kidnappers, in front of reporters who can verify the fairness of the sentence. The aliens, of course, do not understand why the humans are so horrified at the proportionality of the punishment.

Similar disagreements can arise about punishing a clone, mind emulation, or ghost-comp for something that the original did. If, for example, one executes a criminal who has a clone whose braintape was made before the crime was committed, can the criminal's estate activate the clone after his death?

Rather than exploring these options at the end of the adventure, a GM may want to use these ethical dilemmas as a set-up at the start of an adventure. The clone of the executed criminal is suspected of a subsequent murder, but claims to be innocent. He comes to the investigators asking for help – could he be innocent, or did he kill someone acting in conformity with his predecessor's behavior?

## SAMPLE ORGANIZATION: UNIVERSAL COVERAGE INSURERS

Detective agencies in the super-science setting are often extrapolations of modern companies, tweaked to fit the tone of the setting. As the name implies, Universal provides insurance for nearly any property on any planet in the Confederation. When a client needs to file a claim, Universal advertises that its courteous, efficient claims representatives will get him his check as soon as possible.

As the ads suggest, Universal does have a crack team of claims adjusters and appraisers who review and process claims. What it does not mention is its crack team of AI software that reviews each claim looking for fraud. Universal is able to hold its rates down by assigning investigators to any fraudulent claim.

Universal's Special Investigative Unit has agents in every major transport hub. They handle any claims where the AI, or the adjuster, suspect there might be fraud or a crime, like arson, false disability claims, staged accidents and thefts, or unnecessary medical care. SIU investigators work closely with local law enforcement, but their goal is first and foremost to protect the company from an unnecessary payment.

SIU investigators have access to a number of specialized databases containing information about the policyholder, information about the item or person covered, and interagency databases on policyholders who have made

large claims. SIU investigators are trained in forensics and investigation. Most are skilled at accounting, finance, medicine, and fire investigations. Investigators also rely heavily on expert systems and laboratories-in-a-pocket, which allow sophisticated evidence processing on even the most backward asteroid.

SIU investigators have a wide range of surveillance equipment, second in quality only to military and major law enforcement agencies. Investigators often carry out long-term surveillance (in person, by drone, and by analyzing public data) of disability claimants to see if they are actually as injured as they claim. In extreme cases, where local law permits, they may implant a chip to report on the claimants activities.

As a patron, Universal provides its sterling reputation and access to top-notch equipment. In return, it expects results. If the AI suspects fraud, then investigators are expected to find it. Investigators are encouraged to take an aggressive, guilty-until-proven innocent approach to deter the suspicious claimant from needlessly fighting the denial. If the agent does not find fraud, he is expected to provide a full report so that the AI can be adjusted to avoid further embarrassing mistakes.

As an adversary, Universal is formidable. People who take a loan to purchase expensive equipment, like a starship, may have to insure it. If the ship is damaged and a claim is made, a typical adventurer's activities are likely to interest the claims AI, resulting in a visit from a stern SIU investigator. Once the investigator opens the ship's mandatory black box, things may get even more interesting. Of course, Universal will make prompt, on-the-spot payment in matters of a clear, unsuspicious loss.

## TIMELINE

- 1248 Hsi Yüan Lu, a work on forensic medicine, published in China.
- 1285 Spectacles invented in Europe; magnifying lenses of various types had been known of since Greek and Roman days.
- 1600 Microscope invented in Europe around 1590-1610.
- 1608 Telescope invented in Europe.
- 1663 Thomas Bartholin creates test for determining if infant was stillborn, first standardized forensic medical test.
- 1665 Robert Hooke uses microscope and identifies cells.
- 1673 Antony van Leeuwenhoek uses microscope to discover bacteria, sperm cells, and blood cells.
- 1692 English Highwayman Act makes buying and selling stolen goods a crime, and creates rewards for those who capture thieves or give evidence leading to their conviction.
- 1724 Gabriel Fahrenheit invents the first mercury thermometer.
- 1725 Jonathan Wild, "Thief-Taker General of Great Britain and Ireland," hanged for robbery.

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| 1807 | First commercially available compound microscope.   |
| 1814 | Mathieu Joseph Bonaventure Orfila, a Spanish chemist, publishes <i>Traité des poisons</i> , a textbook on poisons.  |
| 1809 | Eugène François Vidocq helps create the French Sûreté.  |
| 1819 | René Laënnec invents stethoscope.   |
| 1822 | Vidocq orders the first forensic autopsy.   |
| 1825 | J. P. Lemiere invents the binocular telescope.  |
| 1827 | Joseph Nicéphore Niépce creates first fixed photographic image.   |
| 1832 | Vidocq retires from the Sûreté and thereafter creates the first private detective agency, which lasts until 1847.   |
| 1835 | Marie Guillaume Alphonse Devergie publishes <i>Médecine légale, théorique and pratique</i> , an early forensic medical text.  |
| 1836 | James Marsh publishes a test for arsenic in fluids and body tissues (the “Marsh test”).   |
| 1839 | Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre sells the rights to his photographic process to French government.   |
| 1840 | Orfila uses the “Marsh test” for arsenic to solve the murder of Charles Lafarge, a French industrialist; Belgian police began using photographs to record criminals’ faces.   |
| 1841 | Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” published (first modern Western detective story).   |
| 1842 | English create undercover detective force based at Scotland Yard.   |
| 1847 | French detectives use hair as evidence in a criminal case.  |
| 1850 | John Webster tried for murder of George Packman, a Boston professor, in the first significant use of forensic science in American case; Allen Pinkerton founds his famous detective agency in Chicago.  |
| 1851 | Albert Florence develops test for presence of semen in stains; Jean Servais Stas develops test for vegetable alkaloid poisons like nicotine and hemlock.  |
| 1854 | Ignatio Porro patents a prism system for binoculars.  |
| 1856 | Pinkerton & Co. hires Kate Warne as its first female private detective.   |
| 1858 | Pinkerton Agency (formerly Pinkerton & Co.) creates its uniformed guard service.  |
| 1859 | Two German scientists discover that a spectrometer, which separates light into component wavelengths, can be used to analyze organic materials and their unique parts.  |
| 1860 | First American divorce case involving testimony by private detective about spouse’s sexual immorality.  |
| 1867 | First practical typewriter invented.  |
| 1872 | Alphonse Bertillon invents a system of anthropomorphic measurements for identifying criminals, later called Bertillonage.   |
| 1873 | Pinkerton operative Jamie McParlan begins undercover operations against the Molly Maguires in the Pennsylvania coal mines. Microscope optics theory developed.  |
| 1874 | Newspapers nationwide criticize Pinkerton Agency for involvement in ill-fated vigilante raid on Jesse James’ gang’s hideout, killing James’ mother and eight-year-old half-brother.   |
| 1875 | Difference in blood types discovered, but no reliable test developed.   |
| 1877 | Ten members of the Molly Maguires executed after convictions based on Pinkerton operative Jamie McParlan’s testimony; New York City creates Bureau of Fire Marshals within its Fire Department (first American fire marshals).  |
| 1878 | Alexandre Lacassagne publishes <i>Précis de médecine (Medical Abstract)</i> discussing, among other topics, using livor mortis and rigor mortis to estimate time of death.  |
| 1880 | Faulds and Herschel both claim to have discovered fingerprint identification methods.   |
| 1881 | London Metropolitan Police issue portrait of wanted man to press; Alexander Graham Bell invents first metal detector.   |
| 1883 | Paris police test and adopt Bertillon anthropometric system.  |
| 1887 | Arthur Conan Doyle publishes <i>A Study in Scarlet</i> , the first Sherlock Holmes story; first flash powder for photography.   |
| 1888 | Hanns Gross publishes <i>Criminal Investigations</i> , the first treatise on scientific criminology.  |
| 1889 | George Eastman invents photographic film.   |
| 1892 | First conviction based on fingerprint evidence made in Argentina; Henry Galton publishes <i>Fingerprints</i> (first treatise on fingerprinting); scuffle between union members and Pinkerton operatives at Carnegie steelworks in Homestead, Pennsylvania, kills 10 men and injures dozens. |
| 1894 | London Metropolitan Police adopt Bertillon anthropometric system; Vuetich fingerprint classification system developed.  |
| 1895 | Lambroso begins measuring pulse rate and blood pressure of crime suspects; X-rays discovered; four states (Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania) pass licensing laws for private detectives.  |
| 1897 | Galton/Henry fingerprint classification system developed.   |
| 1900 | Landsteiner creates test for blood types A, B, & O.   |
| 1901 | Paul Uhlenhuth invents test for determining if dried blood is human; Scotland Yard opens fingerprint branch; Pinkerton Agency recovers Gainsborough’s <i>Duchess of Devonshire</i> , stolen by Adam Worth in 1876.  |
| 1902 | James Mackenzie invents the polygraph.  |
| 1903 | Simultaneous incarceration of two men named William West with identical Bertillonage measurements but different fingerprints is death knell of Bertillonage system.   |
| 1904 | First commercial microscope to see ultraviolet invented.  |
| 1908 | America creates federal Bureau of Investigation (predecessor to the FBI).   |



- 1908 Jeanne Weber declared insane after being acquitted of five murders due to errors by Parisian pathologist, then caught in the midst of committing a sixth murder.
- 1910 Edmond Locard creates first police crime laboratory in Lyons, France.
- 1912 Isabella Goodwin, a NYC police matron, promoted to first-grade detective as reward for undercover work (first female police detective).
- 1915 International Association for Criminal Identification founded as the first professional organization for fingerprint examiners and other criminalists; Dr. Bernard Spilsbury discovers method George Joseph Smith used to drown three of his wives by lifting their feet suddenly in the bath; Smith is convicted of murder and executed.
- c. 1916 William Moulton Marston begins marketing a polygraph in America. (Marston may be better known as the creator of DC Comic's Wonder Woman.)
- 1917 Connecticut establishes first state public defender's office.
- 1918 New York establishes Medical Examiner's Office.
- 1920 Agatha Christie publishes "The Mysterious Affair at Styles," the first Hercule Poirot story.
- 1923 U.S. Supreme Court holds polygraph evidence inadmissible in American trials.
- 1925 Tests developed to determine blood type from other bodily fluids and tissue like tears, saliva, semen, skin, and urine (80% of the population are "secretors" and produce these characteristics in their non-blood tissues); Sydney Smith publishes *Text-Book of Forensic Medicine*, discussing ballistics and gunshot wounds.
- 1927 Calvin Goddard publishes article on using comparison microscope to match bullets to firearms.
- 1929 Goddard uses his firearms matching techniques to investigate the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago.
- 1930 First commercially available flashbulb.
- 1931 Max Knoll and Ernst Ruska invent first electron microscope.
- 1932 U.S. Supreme Court outlaws use of physical force to obtain confessions; Bureau of Investigation founds its crime lab; test developed for blood types in dried blood; light meter and zoom lens invented.



- 1935 London Metropolitan Police create forensic laboratory; Congress passes the Wagner Act protecting workers' rights to unionize and eliminating most corporate spying on union activists; Kodachrome (first color film) first sold.
- 1936 Fiber match at homicide scene used to pressure NYC suspect to confess.
- 1939 Electron microscope first becomes commercially available.
- 1940 Landsteiner discovers the rhesus factor in blood (Rh) dividing it into Rh+ and Rh-.
- c. 1940s Leonarde Keeler pioneers using polygraph on candidates for, and holders of, American security clearances.
- 1955 Udo Undeutsch creates statement analysis theory with the hypothesis: "Statements that are the product of experience will contain characteristics that are generally absent from statements that are the product of imagination."
- 1956 First conviction for intentional poisoning with barbiturates.
- 1957 Dr. Brussell, a psychiatrist, creates a psychiatric profile to catch a NYC bomber; first conviction for murder using fatal injection of insulin.
- 1958 California homicide suspect convicted using neutron activation analysis to compare recovered hair strands clenched in victim's hands with suspect.
- 1960 Dirt/dust analysis used in New York homicide investigation.
- 1969 Pollen evidence used in Danish homicide investigation.
- 1970 California passes first "no-fault" divorce law; previously, married couples had to prove adultery, extreme cruelty, willful desertion, willful neglect, habitual intemperance, conviction of a felony, or incurable insanity to obtain a divorce.
- 1982 Bombing attack seriously wounds Irish forensic scientist, primary suspect is never charged or convicted (one of very few direct, serious, and successful attacks on forensic experts).
- 1983 Kary Mullis invents DNA testing method (PCR) for tiny amounts of bodily material.
- 1985 Alec Jeffreys first uses DNA evidence in an English criminal case; South Dakota is last American state to pass a "no-fault" divorce law.
- 1991 Boston police create "Cold Case Squad" to re-investigate unsolved homicides.
- 1992 IRA bombs Forensic Science Lab in Northern Ireland, temporarily closing it.
- 1993 West Virginia Supreme Court releases report on misconduct in dozens of cases by Fred Zain, former head of serology for the state police crime lab.
- 1994 Ralph Erdmann, forensic pathologist, pleads guilty to seven felonies regarding falsified evidence and erroneous autopsies in three Texas counties.
- 1997 Department of Justice Inspector General issues report criticizing FBI laboratory.
- 2001 War on Terrorism begins after attacks on World Trade Center and Pentagon.
- 2004 FBI falsely identifies Oregon attorney as a suspect in a terrorist bombing in Spain. First major fingerprinting error to come to public attention.

# CHAPTER SIX

# PARANORMAL MYSTERIES

*"There is, in every criminal scheme, one little point that only Fate can decide – either to hitch or to smooth out – to bring success and riches or whistling policemen and Brixton Gaol!"*

– Moris Klaw,  
*The Dream Detective*

Fantasy, horror, and psionics campaigns are all good backgrounds for a paranormal mystery. Each of these has its own rules and themes, some of which conflict with the classic mystery setting.

In fantasy, for example, fate, destiny, divine favor, and the "narrative imperative" (the power of story) are more important than the dogged skills of an investigator. Part of the essence of the fantasy setting is its opposition to the orderly, predictable, rational modern world. However, the basic rules for a fantasy RPG setting are well established. Magic, especially the **GURPS Magic** system, often has a consistent set of possible spells with effects which are as dependable, in their own way, as modern science.

The horror universe is even more explicitly an irrational place. Paranormal creatures need not obey rational laws or

act for explicable reasons. Faith, not logic, may be the only way to defeat them. The mystery universe, on the other hand, assumes that logical deduction will inevitably lead to exposing the guilty party. The mystery setting is inherently orderly – when a crime occurs, it upsets that order, which the investigators must act to restore. The horror setting is often inherently disorderly – only the constant efforts of the investigators hold back nightmarish horrors.

Combining a mystery with horror can weaken both genres. Horror becomes less scary when the players and characters realize that there are logical rules by which the monsters work. Rules imply limits. Limited monsters are not as scary as a monster that can do anything. On the other hand, since the rules are often unknown or uncertain, it is harder for the investigator to solve the case, or even to know what clues are significant. Running a successful mystery in a horror setting, or in any paranormal setting, requires the GM to set some rules governing the paranormal and stick to them. The players and characters do not need to know what those rules are at first –

discovering the monster's weakness is often a vital part of the horror adventure.

If psionic powers are well known to society and the characters, then a psionics mystery is similar to a fantasy mystery. Psionic powers have predictable and repeatable effects, and well-established boundaries. If, on the other hand, the verifiable existence of psionic powers is a secret known only to a few, then a psionics mystery may be more similar to a horror mystery. The investigators will be less certain that they understand all of the underlying powers and limits of psionic villains, and the world at large will be ignorant of psionic effects.

Tone is also important. Combining a mystery with the paranormal depends on the style of the setting. A hardboiled adventure may work very well with a gritty mud 'n' magic fantasy setting, but it may conflict in theme and tone with a Tolkien-esque world or an Arthurian-style knights-and-quests setting. The cozy, with its genius investigator, works well with many fantasy, horror, and psionics settings. A police procedural may be more difficult to create and sustain in any setting where the paranormal is not known to society at large.

## FANTASY MYSTERIES

In a fantasy setting, the GM must establish the rules and boundaries for magic. Is magic common or uncommon? Is it publicly acknowledged or a secret? Are all of the spells from **GURPS Magic** available, or has the GM customized the magic system? What sort of magic is used by whatever law enforcement exists within the setting? What sorts of routine precautions might a criminal take against typical "law enforcement" magic?

This section covers mysteries set in fantasy worlds where magic is as common as modern science, and all of the

spells in **GURPS Magic** are potentially available to anyone with the prerequisites. It also touches on mysteries using **GURPS Spirits**. For GMs using their own magic system, or one of the systems in another **GURPS** book, many of the same suggestions and cautions apply.

### THE FANTASY INVESTIGATOR

*"Tell me what we have, Sergeant," said Lady McKelvery.*

*"Elven female, age 225 more or less, height and weight average, found dead*

*near the Bards' Guild hall by the evening watch. Puncture wound to the chest, no weapon found."*

*"Witnesses?"*

*"None so far."*

*Lady McKelvery sighed wearily and began casting. It was going to be a long night.*

Lady McKelvery is a specialist in criminal investigations. She has a wide array of investigative spells from **Magic**. It is likely that at least one of the investigators in a magical setting will have some spells, but they may not be optimized for forensic and investigative magic. Solving

the crime should not depend on the PCs having, or using, a specific spell. The GM should also set up problems that require the skills and talents of non-spellcasters.

Killing otherwise unreachable foes without getting caught is one of the oldest, and most common, purposes for magic. Theft, fraud, and creating vast wealth from straw or lead run a close second. Thus magic, and the myriad opportunities it provides for the unscrupulous, may result in official police becoming established earlier than in the real world. The force may not resemble a modern police department. Its members may be solely clerics and mages, responsible only for “magical” crimes. It could follow the model of historical “women’s precincts” and have units of elves, dwarves, and other non-human races that solely investigate crimes caused by and against each group. It could include private mages or guild enforcers (see p. 88).

If the magic system has consistent rules and repeatable effects, then it may lead to a version of the scientific method, and thus a form of forensics, at an earlier point than in the real world. A hermetic magic system, like **Magic**, is quasi-scientific; although the tools and assumptions of forensic wizards may be very different from those of modern evidence technicians, both could reach the same results. Randall Garrett’s Lord Darcy series has good examples of forensics based on magical principles.

## Adapting Plots

The English cozy mystery can readily translate to most fantasy settings, so long as transportation magic is not extremely common. Many fantasy settings are set in a pseudo-medieval Europe, where isolated villages and monasteries dot the countryside.

The hard-boiled detective story can be adapted to fantasy, although by invoking the myth of the knight errant, it may find itself in conflict with the archetypal paladins already common in fantasy settings.

As in the low-tech setting, the police procedural story generally requires some type of formal law enforcement. This is easier to justify in fantasy settings, where magic substitutes for technology and allows larger cities and more mobility than the common tech level might suggest.

Thrillers are rare in fantasy, especially if the setting is low-tech. To create the appropriate atmosphere, there must be time pressure, escalating danger, shadowy forces at work, and a climactic showdown between good and evil. Be careful that these elements don’t drift from “thriller” to “epic” – the protagonists should have to overcome the threat alone, not with an army at their backs.

## Technomancer

**Technomancer** complicates investigations significantly by including both a large amount of magic and some forensic science. It is likely that most forensic analysis in a **Technomancer** setting is done by magic instead of mundane science, but GMs will need to think about what sorts of useful forensic spells might have been invented. (See pp. T81-82 for **Technomancer** investigator and police templates.)

Some particular spells to be aware of:

*Manipulate DNA* (p. T28): Might be used to change a target’s DNA so that he leaves misleading trace evidence.

*Spoof Sensor* (p. T27): Can cause a sensor to display what the caster desires.

Improvised magic (see pp. M201, SPI82) is more flexible and more variable. An improvised Spirits ritual is based on what feels right when it is needed, not on long-standing procedures passed down from master to apprentice. Any combination of verb and noun in an improvised spell can yield dozens of results, making it less likely that rune masters would logically develop any quasi-scientific principles.

A large city will likely have a magical crime squad, including specialists in a variety of useful spells, equipped with powerstones and useful magical equipment. A private investigator, on the other hand, will likely be a generalist with a smattering of useful spells and items, depending on the typical investigations he makes.

Lady McKelvery, like most wizards, starts with a high IQ. In addition to her

unenanced alertness, she will cast Keen (Sense) (p. M133) before examining the crime scene and before interviewing a suspect or witness.

## THE FANTASY CRIME SCENE

*“Vic?” Lady McKelvery called out. “How long has she been dead?”*

*“Couple of hours,” her assistant replied. “Body’s slightly warm, only a little stiff.” On top of her bag, an animated quill wrote down their words.*

*“Over an hour, less than half a day. Typical,” Lady McKelvery thought as she took out her baton and began casting.*

*With no reflective surfaces to work with, she had to start with sounds. As the spell unfolded, she heard the sounds of walking feet, snatches of conversation, now four hours past, all from the vantage point of the corpse’s clothing. Meanwhile, she set a second spell in motion and frowned; nothing deliberately hidden nearby. She and Vic began slowly searching the area around the body, looking for any scrap of cloth or hair from the attacker.*

*Half an hour later, she heard her spell replaying an angry shout, the sounds of spell casting, a scream, then running feet. She cast a spell to confirm the elapsed time.*

*“Vic, time of death, 3 hours 20 minutes before I cast. Male wizard casting Ice Dagger.”*

*“Did you get a direction?”*

*Lady McKelvery recast near the mouth of the alley, specifying the exact time, and listened carefully. “UnWiz (Unknown Wizard) stood about 10 feet from the body, ran toward the alley mouth, then toward the docks.”*



## Magical Trace Evidence

Locard's Exchange Principle, "every contact leaves a trace" or "no contact without transfer," published in 1910, is a fundamental principle of modern forensics. In sum, people leave behind traces of themselves wherever they go (hair, fingerprints, DNA, etc.) and pick up bits of their environment in their travels (fur, pollen, soil, fibers, etc.). Objects in contact can leave marks (paint scrapes and scratches) on each other. As discussed in Chapter 2, an investigator can use this trace evidence to figure out who was at a specific crime scene.

Magic breaks that rule. In this chapter's example, the villain strikes from range with an ice dagger, which creates the murder weapon, which then vanishes. There's no toolmarks, no knife to match, no way to tell which of potentially hundreds of wizards cast that specific spell.

Spells like Impression Blocker and Seeker imply that people leave impressions on objects and places. Various information spells are hard to recast, or cannot be recast within certain times, implying that the spell disrupts or destroys the impressions. The duration of magical impressions and whether they accumulate or overwrite each other is left intentionally vague in *Magic*. Because impressions are likely to be important in a mystery, the GM should give the matter some thought.

Getting rid of impressions is also a matter for some thought. *Magic* does not have a canonical way to do so. The GM may wish to modify Remove Aura to permanently break tangential associations for a person – the equivalent of a thorough magical shower – but not longstanding impressions.

The GM could also decide that each caster has a unique signature, like a magical fingerprint, that can be found using Analyze Magic (for ongoing spells) or Reconstruct Spell (for past castings). Alternately, there may be specific flavors to different traditions. Pupils of one grandmaster may all have a different signature from pupils of a different grandmaster.

Lady McKelvery has begun her investigation using a series of spells and items. Many magic systems have spells that will let the caster see into the past, often with limitations on time, power, target object, and recasting. The Images of the Past (p. M107, 89) normally requires a reflective surface, which she did not find in the alley. Echoes of the Past (p. M107), on the other hand, can be cast on any object, including the corpse's clothing. Since both spells are expensive to maintain, and recasting on the same item is more difficult, her investigator's baton allows her to cast both spells, and is partially self-powered. Both spells' costs depend on the elapsed time since the period being targeted.

Lady McKelvery expects to come across crime scenes within 1 to 10 hours of the incident. Therefore, her equipment is designed so that within that period, she can maintain the spell indefinitely and cast from the earliest logical point and listen or watch forward (see p. M107 and below). Once she has an exact time, she can recast if necessary to re-

examine the event. This is an expensive item. Not every city could spend the resources for it, but using it requires nothing more than a qualified and patient user.

Many magical systems also provide handy tools. Lady McKelvery has an animated pen (see Scribe, p. M174) that takes notes of the investigation. Her assistant, Vic Grigner, had already cast Mapmaker (p. M118) to sketch the scene. If the adventure were set in another magical system, she might have a familiar or other companion creature to take notes, make sketches, and do other leg-work for her.

Spells that project the caster's senses into the past or which bring those sense impressions into the present, like Images and Echoes, can be fooled by illusions and mundane disguises. The caster should be aware of the limitations of his vantage point, just as he would consider any witness' ability to perceive an event. In this case, Lady McKelvery doesn't have any reason to suspect such complications, but it is early in the investigation.

While letting Echoes replay the sounds, she also cast See Secrets (p. M107) to look for intentionally hidden evidence like a murder weapon stuffed into a pile of trash, but did not find anything. This is a common type of fantasy spell. Criminals who understand magic may be smart enough to hide or dispose of evidence well away from the crime scene. She might also cast Clean (p. M116) if it can be used in this setting to sweep all the dust, debris, and trace evidence into a neat pile for collection. If, in this setting, it destroys dust and dirt, a smart criminal might cast it before departing.

Until she knows more, Lady McKelvery cannot try Seeker (p. M105). The more information she has, the better. If the spell fails, she cannot cast it again on that target for a week, giving the murderer ample time to escape.

Her logical next step would be to have someone at the morgue cast Summon Spirit (p. M150), since it seems likely the deceased knew her attacker. Sadly, the morgue is backlogged; it will have to wait. Speaking with a dead victim, either to his spirit or to him after being resurrected, adds a whole new source of information to fantasy and paranormal mysteries (see p. 85). GMs who wish to limit use of this spell might create cultural, religious, or social taboos about disturbing the dead.

If Lady McKelvery were using the *Spirits* magic system, she would be skilled in the Path of Knowledge (pp. SPI96-97). She would likely start with History (p. SPI97), if her player's GM permitted it to be cast on the corpse (certainly inanimate once dead). She might also try Read Memories (p. SPI97), if the GM allowed it to be used on a recently deceased body. If neither were permitted, she might just try to Summon (pp. SPI104, 107) the spirit of the dead elf and question it.

## INVESTIGATIONS USING MAGIC

*"Tell it again, Weezold," Vic ordered as Lady McKelvery came into the interrogation cell.*

*"Well, you see, ah," the tiny goblin fidgeted. "I didn't expect a truth spell."*

*"Tell it again."*

*"Yessir. A posh wizard came into Vulk's place. The wiz was scared. I could tell he'd*

## Time Modifiers

| Time                 | Cost | Modifier |
|----------------------|------|----------|
| Within 1 minute      | 4    | 0        |
| 1 to 10 minutes      | 6    | -1       |
| 10 minutes to 1 hour | 8    | -2       |
| 1 to 10 hours        | 10   | -3       |
| 10 hours to 4 days   | 12   | -4       |
| 4 to 40 days         | 14   | -5       |
| 40 days to 1 year    | 16   | -6       |
| 1 to 10 years        | 18   | -7       |
| 10 to 100 years      | 20   | -8       |
| Each further 10+     | +2   | -1       |

*never been in a place like Vulk's before. Paid lots of money to have Vulk's wiz cast a spell on him."* Lady McKelvery sighed. *Vulk the Fang had managed to buy an alderman's seat as head of the Brewer's Guild, but most trouble led to back to him and to his pet wizard, who never asked why someone needed to forget the last day or two, or needed his Aura removed.*

*"Describe this wizard."*

*"Elf man. You know, blond, white skin, pointed ears. They all look alike."*

*"Distinguishing marks."*

*"Ah . . . he had a tattoo. Green linden leaf under his right eye. Big cloak. Shiny brass cloak pins."*

*"And?"*

*"Well . . . you said you'd forget about that smuggling charge?"*

*"If we find this wizard."*

*"I picked this off his belt," Weezold proudly admitted and handed Vic an intricately embroidered lady's favor.*

In the absence of solid leads, Vic and Lady McKelvery are using standard police work – in this case, an informant. The description, combined with an item owned by their likely killer, may be enough for a Seeker spell to find him.

Seeker, and its counterpart locating spells in other systems, can derail many plots if the GM doesn't take it into account when planning the adventure. Most scrying and locating spells impose hefty penalties to casting unless the caster has something associated with the target, or at least a name and a good description. Seeker requires the caster to know the target's name, or know him well. It can also work on objects if one has a scrap of cloth, paint chip, or some other bit of trace evidence, at -5.

Usually, there are limits to how often a location spell can be recast on the

same target if it fails. This should encourage the investigators to try to find as much information as possible before casting, so that they have the best chance of success with the spell. On the other hand, if the spell has a limited

range, and they have reason to believe the target is trying to flee, they may feel pressured to try the spell quickly, before their target can escape.

Magic systems that have scrying and locating spells also have spells that counter them. A wise criminal will cast, or have cast, Scryguard, Scryfool, or Remove Aura as quickly as possible to protect himself from Seeker. When cast on an object, Remove Aura breaks the association so Seeker is cast at -5. Cast on a person, however, the spell only lasts for a day.

**Magic** offers a few spells to replace forensic pathology. There are no standard spells for determining time or cause of death. With all of the other magical tools available, spell-casters may never have found a need for some of the tools used by modern forensic technicians. The GM will have to decide whether Body-Reading (p. M88) can be used on a corpse, or only on the living.

A forensic magician might not use Detect Poison (p. M166) very often.

## Questioning the Dead

Summon Spirit (p. M150) allows the caster to ask the deceased a limited number of questions. The PCs can establish a rough time of death, the deceased's last actions and perceptions, and who the deceased thinks had motive to kill him. The spirit's testimony may be sufficient for prosecution, or it may need to be verified, especially if a summoned spirit can lie.

In a **Spirits** setting, an investigator can get similar information by questioning the victim's ghost, if it remains for any time. In supernatural mysteries and horror stories, murder victims are likely to leave behind restless spirits, at least for a short time.

This is a good chance to roleplay the victim. In most mysteries, the investigator rarely gets to interact with the victim directly, since he's often dead when the investigator first appears in the story. The GM should decide ahead of time whether the spirit can lie to the investigator. If, for example, the victim was killed by a mugger on the way home from visiting his mistress, he might not want to explain why he was in that part of town at that hour. Even if the spirit cannot lie, the GM must also decide what he saw and how he interpreted it. The victim might not have seen his killer, but might have convinced himself that the murderer was a known enemy.

Spirits and ghosts may try to take an active role in solving and avenging their own murders, especially in a **Spirits** setting. In traditional Chinese detective stories, for example, the ghosts of the dead lurk around the crime scene and their graves, and will aid investigators! Restless ghosts may haunt their families demanding that they avenge the murder, or they may haunt their killers.

Things get even more interesting if the magic system permits the dead to be raised easily. In Steven Brust's Dragaera novels, assassins kill people as a warning. (There are weapons that will inflict "true" death, but they are rare.) If death is a temporary inconvenience in an RPG campaign setting, one of the investigators may himself be the victim. Killing someone may be considered only a more serious version of assault.

Poisons, while often very powerful in a fantasy setting, are often easily detected and countered by spells and items that are usually common, at least among the wealthy. (It is up to the GM whether Detect Poison and Test Food work on the individual components of multi-stage poisons or on small doses of cumulative poisons which are, in isolation, not dangerous.) Detect Poison is only useful after the fact if no one cast Neutralize Poison (p. M92) in an attempt to save the dying victim, or after death to destroy evidence.

If all else fails, the investigator can try Divination (pp. M108). Divination spells typically consult omniscient neutral entities who have access to the objective truth. The GM can decide that these entities are not neutral in his world. Spirit advisors may have their own biases, gaps in their understanding, or an inability to convey information in anything other than cryptic riddles and clues. In most mysteries, Divination should provide merely guidance, not a solution to the case.

More powerful investigators may have spirit advisors, or be able to travel to other planes. In some traditional Chinese stories, for example, the investigating judge may travel in dreams to the Netherworld to consult with famous judges who preside in the Chinese Inferno.

Magic also makes interviewing *live* witnesses easier by offering a variety of

spells that detect lies and enhance memory. Lady McKelvery could use Recall (p. M106) and Restore Memory (p. M92) if she thought it would help Weezold recall the elven wizard. Of course, she is not likely to use those spells unless she has some reason to think that Weezold's memory is not accurate or not complete. Time is, of course, of the essence in casting Recall. There is also the possibility that a critical failure would cause a false or distorted memory.

Similarly, almost every magical system has spells for detecting lies and compelling the target to speak truthfully. Here, Lady McKelvery cast Compel Truth (p. M47) to make sure that Weezold did not lie to her when he repeated his story. Since he's a known criminal in an interrogation cell, no one is likely to complain. There may be limitations in her world on using Compel Truth, Mind-Reading (p. M46), Mind-Search (p. M46) and Truthsayer (p. M45) on seemingly upstanding members of the community.

If the caster is interrogating a criminal or well-prepared adversary, the target might have had his memories altered with spells like False Memory (p. M139), Forgetfulness (p. M135) or Permanent Forgetfulness (p. M138). The target of these spells would appear to be telling the truth, since he does not remember anything else. This limits Lady McKelvery's ability to trust truth spells when she finds her suspect. Similarly,

Aura (p. M101) and Sense Emotion (p. M45) may be unreliable.

## MAGICAL CONFRONTATIONS

*Lady McKelvery sighed. Trying to interrogate a killer who honestly didn't remember his misdeeds was nearly pointless. Breaking the Permanent Forgetfulness cast by Mr. "the Fang's" minion would take luck. Vulk had enough money to make sure his wizards were more skilled than any public servant. Although Lady McKelvery would dearly like to expose Vulk as a criminal, he was too wealthy, powerful, and well-connected.*

*But she had established the means, motive, and opportunity for Vulk's client, the elf. Guild records showed he was trained in Ice Dagger – means. The deceased had given him her favor when he courted her a half-century or so ago. They'd fought bitterly over her announcement that she was engaged to another, a human no less – motive. By virtue of the spell, he couldn't account for his whereabouts that night. His friends said both he and she were at the Bards' Guild, separately, for a performance – opportunity.*

*But it was all circumstance. The spirit's testimony corroborated the story, but there had been bad blood between them. Still not good enough for the magistrate . . . unless . . .*

*"Vic, bring him in, and make sure you get those bronze cloak pins. I can get an image from those."*

Against an unprepared villain, or one without means, spells like Compel Truth, Mind-Reading, Mind-Search, and Truthsayer all make an investigator's job easier. Cozy-style mysteries become much simpler when the detective can gather all of the suspects and go over each of their stories with a simple spell. If the GM wants to avoid having these spells destroy his adventure, keep in mind that Compel Truth and Truthsayer are concerned with the target's subjective intent to lie. The target may be honestly wrong, or make an honest assumption, and be telling the truth as far as the spell is concerned. The GM could also allow a critical success on Fast-Talk to slip a partial truth, or a blatant lie, past truth-detecting spells.

Here, as with super-tech truth devices, there may be social rules restricting who can learn these spells,

## Spells and Skills

Many magical spells cannot be countered by skills – even an assassin with Poisons-20 will be thwarted by Detect Poisons or Test Food. A con artist with Fast-Talk-20 will be automatically caught by Sense Emotion, Compel Truth, and Truthsayer. This can make it difficult to create villains who are not themselves magicians, particularly in settings where only a few people know about or have access to magic.

Conversely, an extremely skilled investigator may be thwarted by magic if his skills offer no chance against spells like Poison (which may leave no traces of a toxin), Hide Emotion, or Clean (which could destroy all trace evidence at a crime scene).

A GM could allow a skill check to mislead or defeat a spell. It should be very difficult – the modifier could be a flat -10, based on the energy in the spell (equal to twice the energy put into the spell), or require a critical success. Alternatively, the GM could create hard techniques (see pp. B229-33) designed to counter specific spells.

Which method you use depends on the campaign and how reliable magic is in the setting.



when they can be used, and on whom. Fantasy societies often have a version of the medieval aristocracy, who will object strongly to having their honor impugned by a truth spell, especially if the caster is not a noble. Where obvious spells are prohibited, spells that passively detect the target's mood or nature, like *Aura* and *Sense Emotion*, may give an investigator a discreet edge; however, an investigator himself may be the target of truth spells to affirm that he honestly and completely reported the results of his spells and did not use improper measures when questioning a suspect.

A competent villain will take steps to counter whatever investigative magic he could reasonably anticipate, just as a competent modern criminal will wear gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints. False Memory, Forgetfulness, and Permanent Forgetfulness are excellent countermeasures for villains trying to escape detection, at least in cases where forgetting the crime doesn't deprive the criminal of the benefits of his deeds. Permanent Forgetfulness is the most powerful and useful of these spells, but also the most difficult to learn, making it hard to find an appropriate caster. Thieves' Guilds might train and teach specialists in this spell, and Remove Aura, in order to foil the guard or watch.

Magic also offers spells to influence the target, often without his awareness. Persuasion (p. M45) can convince reluctant witnesses to give a statement. It could be used to persuade a target to confess, but there may be social restrictions on using it in that way.

In settings where torture is acceptable, magic systems offer a variety of spells for inflicting pain and damage, and for healing tortured suspects' wounds, perhaps even fatal ones. Spells such as Itch (p. M35), Pain (p. M36), Hunger (p. M38), Retch (p. M38), and Choke (p. M40) permit an investigator to torture a witness or suspect while leaving few physical traces.

## ***Trial***

The confrontation scene could come in a trial, which can take many forms in a fantasy setting. Priests of the gods of truth and justice might hold trials by ordeal wherein an innocent party cannot possibly be convicted. On the other hand, gods may be susceptible to flattery, offerings, reminders of past serv-

es, and promises of future deeds and might be, in effect, bribed to acquit a guilty criminal.

On the other hand, if there is dissension within the pantheon, suspects may resist placing their fate in the hands of certain clergy, particularly if the suspects worship a god who is a rival or foe of that church. There may be alternative "civil" systems for lesser crimes or for people of certain social status, like worshipers of other faiths, nobles, or magicians.

Trial by magic is unlikely to be the climax of an adventure unless the PCs are, for example, the champions chosen by the God of Truth to battle the champion of the suspect to prove his guilt, or the spellcasters actually judging or trying the case. If the investigators are not participants in the trial, they may still be involved in ensuring that the trial is fair and that no one assassinates, possesses, or otherwise tampers with witnesses or judges before the trial is over.

proceeding. Since people and cameras can be easily fooled by illusion and body-altering spells, eyewitness evidence would be less important and less trustworthy and counter-illusion spells would be essential to law enforcement. Police in that setting would routinely use "non-invasive" mental magic like *Sense Foes* or *Aura* when stopping suspects or before entering a building. Various scrying spells would be used with a warrant, like mundane surveillance equipment. Law-enforcement officers could use invasive mind-reading spells, with court permission, as well.

Private investigators in that setting might be licensed to use some investigation spells. When not involved in solving crimes, they might be valued as counter-surveillance experts – protecting wealthy clients from scrying spells and invasive mind reading.

## **Gods of Thieves and Secrets**

*"Magic is fickle. Any time you cast a spell, you are using powers that you do not fully understand, and exposing yourself to the whim of the fates."*

– **GURPS Magic**

Fantasy worlds are often full of good and evil gods battling each other through their followers. Magic need not be an impartial force. The powers that create it may play favorites. They might accept a bribe to protect a criminal from detection by the authorities. (It might be easier to bribe the authorities, though.)

Thieves and assassins who routinely sacrifice to gods like *Loki*, *Hermes*, or *Kali* might receive partial protection from truth spells and *Seeker*. Such spells might not function if the target is within the sanctuary of a god of thieves or of secrets. Gods may protect their faithful worshipers or blessed fanatical assassins from magical detection by followers of other gods.

There may be religious rituals to dedicate stolen goods or misdeeds to an appropriate god, which will make them undetectable by anyone less than powerful priests of an opposing god, or even minions of that god himself.

Campaigns set in a quasi-medieval Europe will have very different trial system than those based on modern Western courts. A noble's court generally will not get involved in detailed questions of procedure and minute points of law. There will be no jury and likely no lawyers. If the campaign follows a modern template and includes magic, consider the suggestions in *Technomancer* (see p. T100). Compel Truth would become part of any standard court

## **FANTASTIC PUNISHMENTS**

*"And you shall spend eternity in the pit of darkness, cut off from any light or living thing, with your heart burned forever to ash. May the demons take your soul," invoked the magistrate. Two huge fiends appeared in the summoning circle next to the elf, then vanished with him, grinning wickedly.*



Punishment in a fantasy universe can be very creative and need not end with the villain's death. Evildoers may face horrible fates in the afterlife, and their suffering may be well publicized in order to deter other malefactors. In some settings, the gods may even punish criminals by making their ghosts or their animated bodies serve the families of their victims, or serve the investigators.

Gods may not stop with punishing the malefactor. Greek gods often punished the offender's family, associates, and sometimes generations of descendants. Gods are patient. An evildoer may prosper for decades before his downfall. Those punished may try to mitigate their fate through good deeds, sacrifice, and prayers. Or they may take a "damned and I know it" attitude and commit their own crime spree, knowing nothing worse can happen to them.

## **SAMPLE ORGANIZATION: THE GUILD OF SEEKERS**

The fictional example involving Lady McKelvery and Vic Grigner assumes a fantasy society with a somewhat modern police force. Change a few words and

methods, and the same adventure could be used in nearly any police procedural. If a GM wants experienced magical investigators without such a direct homage to the NYPD and Scotland Yard, and the setting has a guild of magicians, then consider using part of the guild as a detective organization.

The Guild of Seekers, commonly called the Mages' Guild, is many things. At its heart it is an extended family; members help each other in illness and death, avenge wrongs by outsiders, and stand together against other authorities. The Guild is part self-help society, part club, part trade union, part prayer group. It has some legal powers to discipline its own members and to enforce its economic monopoly.

Like other craft guilds, the Guild of Seekers' rights come from a royal charter. It controls the import and export of all enchanted goods and items of primarily magical significance within the city. It purchases raw materials for its members in bulk and prevents speculation or cartels. It sets the number of apprentices, journeymen, and masters in the magical arts and regulates their training. It regulates quality, requires trademarks, and forbids mixing used materials with new materials and other false advertising. The guild even has the legal power to seize and destroy any "defective"

goods – a potent power often used against magical goods made in other cities – and to search for, seize, and destroy magical goods made outside the city and sold at retail in violation of the guild's monopoly.

The Guild does not have paid professional staff. It relies on its members to serve as officers for yearly terms. Among its officials are five Wardens, master magicians appointed for one-year terms who are charged with inspecting each member's shop, enforcing the guild's regulations, and searching for and seizing competing smuggled goods. The Wardens are also often sent to other cities to represent Guild members in trouble elsewhere and to enforce the Guild's monopoly. Wardens are not paid, but they can make some money through fees. Most members consider the job a bother. They can make more money working in their shops. Thus, they often try to avoid being elected to the post. (If elected, a master can be fined for refusing to do his duty.)

Any PC who is a master magician and member of the Guild could be elected as a Warden for a year. He would become a sort of private security investigator and could easily become embroiled in all sorts of scams, schemes and rivalries. Solving mysteries such as burglaries, frauds, and any homicide that might occur will be part of his difficult job. Since the Guild has its own court, which meets as needed, he might also find himself acting as a prosecutor or a detective investigating charges brought by members against each other. (Under the Guild's charter, members must seek justice there before proceeding to the town or royal courts.)

Some masters take the time to learn spells useful for investigations and interrogations. Others rely on whatever spells they happen to know, and try to cadge help from other guild magicians when they need a specific spell cast. As adversaries, the Guild Wardens will vary drastically in skill, honesty, and perseverance. PCs who encounter a lax Warden may be in for a rude surprise if they later run afoul of one of the more dedicated officers.

# A COMPENDIUM OF USEFUL GURPS SPELLS

These are some of the more useful spells for investigators found in *Magic*. Many of these spells have counterparts in other fantasy settings.

## FOR INVESTIGATORS

### *Alertness*

*p. M133*

(VH) Useful for noticing evidence, but only lasts 10 minutes.

### *Analyze Magic*

*p. M102*

Useful if there is any active magic on a subject. A GM may wish to rule that certain spells like Conceal Magic, Hide Thoughts, Remove Aura, etc., are not revealed by Analyze Magic, Detect Magic, Identify Spell, and Reconstruct Spell except on a critical success.

### *Aura*

*p. M101*

A simple spell that can give an investigator insight into a suspect or witness.

### *Awaken*

*p. M90*

A useful spell for remaining alert during long investigations or stake-outs.

### *Body-Reading*

*p. M88*

Useful for diagnosis and autopsies (if the GM allows it to be used on the deceased). The caster will need medical skills to interpret the information. The GM may wish to rule that the information is retained as per Know Recipe.

### *Cleansing*

*p. M94*

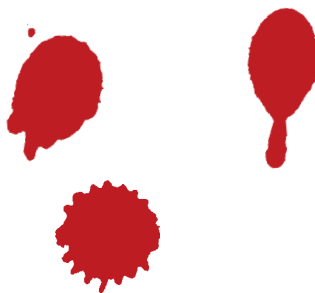
Removes foreign matter from a person and might work on a corpse at

the GM's discretion. If it can be used to gather the foreign matter into a neat pile, it is a useful investigator's tool. If it destroys the foreign matter, it becomes a villain's tool to destroy trace evidence.

### *Compel Truth*

*p. M47*

The subject is permitted to keep silent or tell partial truths, but may not make any statement he believes to be untrue. Can be fooled by illusions, mistakes, assumptions, and altered memories. (See p. 86.)



### *Detect Magic*

*p. M101*

A useful spell for detecting ongoing magic.

### *Detect Poison*

*p. M166*

Detects toxins. Most adversaries will anticipate its use by the victim, if wealthy or a spell caster, and by any investigators.

### *Divination*

*p. M108*

Very useful for "yes-or-no" answers to questions. Accuracy depends on the knowledge and biases of the source of the information.

### *Earth Vision*

*p. M51*

Useful for finding buried bodies and evidence. Water Vision (p. M187) is similarly useful in the appropriate situations.

### *Echoes of the Past*

*p. M107*

Replays sounds from the past.

### *History*

*p. M106*

Can be used to determine recent history of an object.

### *Identify Spell*

*p. M102*

Like Detect Magic, generally useful only for ongoing or very recently cast spells.

### *Images of the Past*

*p. M107*

Plays back whatever images a reflective surface may have seen. At the GM's option, it can be used on any object or surface, but this may make the spell too powerful for *Mysteries*. Remove Reflection may, at the GM's option, make the target invisible to Images of the Past if cast using a reflective surface.

### *Keen (Sense)*

*p. M133*

All useful for noticing evidence. These spells last 30 minutes per casting, and are preferable in most situations to Alertness.

### *Know Recipe*

*p. M78*

Can be used, at the GM's option, for chemical and drug analysis.

### *Mapmaker*

*p. M118*

Useful for creating detailed crime scene sketches, to scale.

### *Measurement*

*p. M100*

Useful for analyzing a crime scene.





### *Memorize*

*p. M105*

Useful for memorizing a crime scene before disturbing it.

### *Mind-Reading*

*p. M46*

Allows the caster to read the surface thoughts of any target, without the target's knowledge, except on a critical failure.

### *Mind-Search*

*p. M46*

(VH) Allows the caster to deeply probe the target's memories, without the target's knowledge, except on a critical failure.

### *Persuasion*

*p. M45*

A useful spell for gaining a suspect's cooperation and trust.

### *Possession*

*p. M49*

(VH) Allows the caster full access to the target's memories, but generally overkill for a criminal investigation.

### *Recall*

*p. M106*

Allows the subject to recall a single forgotten or obscured fact or event.

### *Reconstruct Spell*

*p. M106*

Used to determine what spells were cast on the target in the past.

### *Repair*

*p. M118*

Repairs destroyed or burned documents and other evidence.

### *Restore Memory*

*p. M92*

Can cure minor memory loss.

### *Scents of the Past*

*p. M107*

Replays smells from the past.

### *Scribe*

*p. M174*

A busy investigator's best friend for recording impressions at a crime scene or filling out reports. (Only records the caster, or, for additional cost, other people it has been attuned to.)

### *See Secrets*

*p. M107*

Useful for finding deliberately hidden evidence at a crime scene or other location.

### *Seeker*

*p. M105*

Useful for finding suspects and lost items. (See p. 83.)

### *Sense Emotion*

*p. M45*

A spell with only one prerequisite that can be used to help discern whether a target is, for example, actually mourning or merely feigning grief. Many people will be nervous, hostile, or angry if they are aware they are the subject of this spell, which limits its usefulness.

### *Sense Foes*

*p. M44*

A simple spell with no prerequisites that tells the investigator if a specific person, or someone within an area, is hostile to him. If he is known as an investigator or government official, many people may be hostile to him for reasons wholly unrelated to the crime at hand.

### *Spellguard*

*p. M127*

(VH) This spell may be necessary in some settings to ensure that the investigator's other detection spells work.

### *Summon Spirit*

*p. M150*

Allows the caster to talk to the deceased, with a limited number of questions. The deceased may be mistaken, or wrong about what happened. The GM must decide whether the deceased can lie.

### *Timeport*

*p. M81*

(VH) Allows the caster to move into the past. (Time travel is its own GMing headache apart from its ability to derail a mystery plot.)

### *Trace*

*p. M106*

Generally used in combination with Seeker to keep track of a suspect or item.

### *Trace Teleport*

*p. M84*

Allows an investigator to track someone who is using various transportation spells.

### *Truthsayer*

*p. M45*

A useful spell for determining whether the target has lied, but could be fooled by partial truths or mistaken memories.

## **FOR CRIMINALS**

Almost any spell can be turned to nefarious purposes, but these are especially useful.

### *Alter Body*

*p. M41*

Although it has a number of prerequisites, this spell is very useful for a disguise.

### *Alter Visage*

*p. M41*

Although it has a number of prerequisites, this spell is very useful for a disguise.

### *Apportation*

*p. M142*

A good way to move an object without leaving fingerprints or trace evidence.

### *Beast-Soother*

*p. M29*

Useful for pacifying guard dogs and other watch-beasts.

### *Body of Air*

*p. M24*

Defeats many "locked room" situations.

### *Clean*

*p. M116*

Useful for getting rid of fingerprints, bloodstains, or other bits of trace evidence. If the spell can be used to gather up the "dirt" into a neat pile instead of destroying it, it may be an investigator's tool.

### *Conceal Magic*

*p. M122*

Useful for avoiding various information spells. Presumably, it also interferes with spells that would detect the spell itself.

### *Create Warrior*

*p. M98*

A good way to create a temporary assassin.

### *Daze*

*p. M134*

A very useful spell to cause a potential witness not to notice what's happening around him.

### *Devitalize Air*

*p. M25*

A nearly-untraceable way to kill, leaving no trace of poison behind. In a classic medieval-ish setting, its dampening effect on candles and fires might be a handy clue.

### *False Aura*

*p. M122*

Useful to thwart information spells.

### *False Memory*

*p. M139*

A good spell for diverting or discrediting a witness.

### *False Tracks*

*p. M163*

Useful for diverting suspicion to another.

### *Forgetfulness*

*p. M135*

Causes the target to forget a fact for a moderate time. Useful for thwarting truth spells in an interrogation. Permanent Forgetfulness (p. M138) is much more useful, but could be detected as an ongoing spell.

### *Hide*

*p. M113*

Useful for not being noticed.

### *Hide Emotion*

*p. M45*

Useful for thwarting Aura, Sense Emotion and (at GM's option) Sense Foes. Unfortunately, the appearance of calmness may not be appropriate for the situation and may just indicate that the caster has something to hide.

### *Hide Object*

*p. M86*

Hides non-living objects in an other-dimensional space.

### *Hide Thoughts*

*p. M46*

A useful spell for protecting against mind-reading and thought-control spells. A wealthy person or official in a magical setting may use this spell routinely to protect his own secrets.

### *Hush*

*p. M172*

Useful for thieves and assassins.

### *Illusion Disguise*

*p. M96*

Useful to create an alibi or fool witnesses.

### *Imitate Voice*

*p. M172*

Useful to create an alibi or fool witnesses.

### *Impression Blocker*

*p. M60*

A useful way to transport stolen goods or weapons for an intended murder while making it hard for Seeker and related spells to find the owner. The GM needs to decide how impressions work in his setting.

### *Insignificance*

*p. M48*

Causes people to ignore and/or disregard the target.

### *Invisibility*

*p. M114*

Useful for spying, assassination, and theft.

### *Locksmith*

*p. M143*

Useful for opening locks and for fine manipulation without leaving fingerprints or trace evidence.

### *Manipulate*

*p. M145*

Useful for manipulating larger objects than permitted by Locksmith.

### *Neutralize Poison*

*p. M92*

A very useful spell for covering one's tracks after an attempted or successful poisoning since it "eliminates all traces" of the poison.

### *No-Smell*

*p. M24*

Useful for avoiding tracking animals and Scents of the Past.

**Odor**  
**p. M24**

Might be used to create a false scent of a red herring or dupe at a crime scene.

**Poison Food**  
**p. M78**

A useful assassination tool; however, many wealthy persons or officials in a magical setting will routinely cast Test Food (p. M77) or have an item that does so. Test Food would probably not tell an investigator whether partially digested stomach contents or vomitus contain poison, since the substance is probably no longer good to eat.

**Remove Aura**  
**p. M127**

Useful for erasing existing auras; although the spell is “permanent” it is not magical teflon which will prevent the object from thereafter acquiring new Auras. At the GM’s option, this spell could be used to protect objects against analysis spells like Know Recipe or Schematic.

**Repel (Animal)**  
**p. M31**

Could be used to keep insects away from a body to thwart or confuse an entomology based time-of-death determination.

**Ruin**  
**p. M118**

If it works on a corpse, it would be a good way to dispose of a body.

**Sanctuary**  
**p. M86**

(VH) The ultimate hide-out, at least for a short time.

**Scryfool**  
**p. M123**

Diverts a variety of information spells to a chosen subject. At the GM’s option, this spell could work against Test Food or Detect Poison.

**Scryguard**  
**p. M121**

A common spell to avoid being located by information spells. Wealthy persons or officials may routinely cast this spell or Scrywall (p. M122), or have it cast, to protect their privacy.

Scryguard can be used to protect an object from Know Recipe or Schematic. At the GM’s option, this spell could work against Test Food or Detect Poison.

**Sense Observation**  
**p. M167**

Detects magical and mundane surveillance efforts. Wealthy persons or officials may routinely cast this spell, or have it cast, to protect their privacy.

**Simple Illusion**  
**p. M95**

May be useful in defeating clairvoyance and retrocognition spells and abilities directed at a crime scene. It could be used to create an illusionary tableau in order to establish an alibi for eyewitnesses. Complex and Perfect Illusion can do this with less chance of failure.

**Soilproof**  
**p. M116**

A very useful spell for avoiding stains, spatters, and other evidence from a crime scene.

**Suggestion**  
**p. M140**

Another good spell for diverting or discrediting a witness.

**Voices**  
**p. M172**

Could be used to create an illusionary conversation in order to establish an alibi for eavesdroppers.

**Walk Through Earth**  
**p. M52**

Defeats many “locked room” situations.

## HORROR MYSTERIES

*“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live in a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”*

– H. P. Lovecraft,  
*The Call of Cthulhu*

A horror story uses many of the same elements as a typical mystery. There’s often a series of odd, grisly crimes. Investigators apply traditional (and not so traditional) methods to analyze the crime scene and try to figure out what happened and why. Secrets are often revealed, sometimes even in the drawing room of an isolated English country house. But horror adventures are different from other mysteries in some subtle but important ways.

The key difference between the horror setting and the fantasy setting described above is what the players, and their characters, know about the paranormal. In a typical fantasy setting, both

the players and the investigators know that the fantastic exists. Both have some idea about the capacity of magic and fantastic creatures. And the setting’s society at large has evolved to take these things into account.

Conversely, the investigators (and less commonly the players) may start a horror adventure without even knowing that something paranormal is possible. As observed previously, horror is often more effective and more frightening when the investigators do not know anything about the monster’s capabilities. In the course of the horror mystery, they will have to learn about their adversary.



This implies that logic and deduction will be important to the investigators' success, which is itself a limit on the horror setting. If the creature from beyond can be rationally comprehended and predicted, it becomes less fearsome. Bear this in mind when creating a horror adventure.

## THE HORROR INVESTIGATOR

*"I used to think I helped the police out of a sense of justice, a desire to protect the innocent, maybe even a hero complex, but, lately, I'm beginning to understand that sometimes I want to solve the case for a much more selfish reason. So I don't ever have to walk through another crime scene as bad as the one I just saw."*

— Anita Blake, *Cerulean Sins*

One horror approach is to begin with an investigator who has not encountered anything unmistakably supernatural before the start of the adventure. Adventures involving "just plain folks" caught up in horrific events are slightly different from those involving amateur investigators in typical mysteries. The mundane horror investigator may be a very competent investigator, even though he lacks the specific paranormal or occult tools for this case. Amateur investigators generally lack scientific investi-

gation skills and depend on their reasoning and social skills to solve the case.

Unlike the typical mundane horror PC, however, the mundane investigator is generally not the target of the monster. The investigator usually arrives on the scene after the monster has begun preying on its victims. The investigator may become a target during the adventure, of course. This means that the investigator must have some motive to wrestle with dangerous paranormal forces other than personal survival – i.e. curiosity, revenge, or a duty or sense of duty to the victims.

When a horror mystery involves a PC who does not believe in the paranormal, the GM must present clues to show the character that all is not as it seems. One option is to tell players what kind of adventure they are in before the start of the adventure. Meta-game thinking will generally lead the players to create and portray characters who are open to the possibility of the paranormal. On the other hand, the players often will want a chance for their characters to develop and use paranormal powers themselves.

Another option is to surprise the players and their characters with the paranormal part of the adventure. Here, meta-game thinking may work against the GM. If the players "know" that they are in a very realistic *Cops* campaign, for example, they may strongly resist considering the paranormal clues. In addition,

if the players are not expecting the paranormal, introducing it without warning may damage their belief in, and thus their enjoyment of, the game world.

Horror mysteries may also involve experienced "fearless monster hunters." These investigators have skills and experience with occult threats, appropriate weapons to counter these threats, and often some paranormal abilities. Monster hunters can secretly work within mundane law enforcement agencies and private detective bureaus. Or they can openly advertise themselves as paranormal experts. Like any other investigators, they may be motivated by the intellectual puzzle, a keen sense of justice, or just the money.

The players will, of course, be aware that the paranormal exists when creating fearless monster hunters. Meta-game thinking may lead them to the converse problem – ignoring mundane clues while searching for the paranormal aspects to each adventure.

## THE HORROR CRIME SCENE

Horror crime scenes can be gruesome. The scene may look like the work of a deranged killer, with lots of blood and body parts scattered around. This can be the place to explain, in detail, the wounds the victim suffered, the smell of blood and decay, and the gore clinging to the investigators' shoes. Horror crime scenes can also be subtle, with a series of small unsettling things that just don't make sense to the PCs because the villain's supernatural abilities allow him to do something otherwise impossible. Either tone works well in horror.

Include in the crime scene some clues that will alert the detectives that something is amiss. The clues do not need to be obvious. If, for example, the killer paused to cover or break every mirrored surface in the room, it could mean that he is self-conscious about his appearance, like Harris' killer in *Red Dragon*, or it could be a vampire who cannot bear his lack of reflection.

Keeping the investigators in doubt about whether they are dealing with a human psychopath or a supernatural menace is a powerful technique for keeping them uncertain and uneasy. However, at some point during the investigation, the PCs must find enough clues to decide which is which.

## Adapting Plots

The English cozy mystery converts easily into a horror/mystery setting. Lovecraft's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, for example, takes place in an inbred New England town. The cozy style provides a small cast of characters with the sort of intimate relationships and shared past that could easily hide supernatural as well as mundane secrets.

The hardboiled story style suits the horror protagonist's lonely battle against paranormal evil in the face of an uncaring or ignorant world. The lone "good monster" protecting an unaware humanity from darker evils, like P. N. Elrod's Jack Fleming or *Forever Knight's* Nick Knight, fits easily into the hardboiled trope.

The police procedural story can investigate supernatural events. However, the GM will have to work hard to keep the detectives from getting any scientific proof of their supernatural foes, or find good reasons for them to keep the secret from their superiors. The X-files uses some elements of police procedure to investigate supernatural menaces.

Thrillers work very well in a horror setting; the two genres are closely related. The investigators should feel that they are on their own, even if they are surrounded by people or are part of an organization. They can't ask for help, either because they won't be believed, or because it would endanger others. Keep the tension mounting and orchestrate a climactic confrontation.

# MONSTER HUNTING

*"There's something else we should never forget, Captain; that even when we go chasing our ghosts, we should do it by the rules, without letting guilt affect our judgment."*

– Det. Nick Knight,  
*Forever Knight: Fatal Mistake*

**GURPS Horror** suggests “five Rs” for investigators: *Recon* (crime scene analysis), *Research* (looking for similar happenings), *Routine* (looking for patterns), *Rationale* (motives), and *Records* (keeping notes). (See pp. H28, 100-104.) In effect, these are the traditional questions about means, motive, and opportunity that an investigator would be asking in any setting. When applied to the horror adventure, an investigator unaware of the paranormal may find answers that don't make any sense.

At some point, the GM must lay clues that will lead the investigators to consider paranormal research. If the victim expected an occult threat, he may have had books and materials on the occult in his home. He might have placed protective drawings or items around doors and windows. He might have entrusted a powerful object to a friend or family member to protect it from capture or destruction. The villain may have left behind something odd, like a tarot card or a voodoo doll, which the PCs must take to an occult consultant to analyze.

Any of these routes will lead the investigators to an expert, such as an academic or occult-shop owner, who can try to persuade them that they are not dealing with a hoax or a normal criminal. In general, players, and their characters, are more open to the possibility of the paranormal than a real-world detective might be. If they are resistant to the idea, the GM may have to make the clues very blatant.

An occult expert may seek out the investigators. The victim's ghost may haunt the crime scene or its family. The family may call in a medium, a fortune-teller, or a member of the clergy to quell the disturbance or to contact their lost loved one. If an occult expert arrives at the investigators' door with detailed knowledge of the crime (and a good alibi), the investigators may be willing to listen and consider the paranormal option.

## Monsters as Investigators

*"Sure I was a vampire, but like everyone else on the planet I'm still only human."*

– Jack Fleming,  
*A Chill in the Blood*

The monster protagonist has become a popular mystery hero. Usually, the monster investigator is a hardboiled detective, although a cozy or procedural investigator who is secretly a monster is also possible. Monster characters generally enhance the hardboiled detective's isolation by adding struggles against their own monstrous nature, self-doubt and self-hatred, temptation, and lots of angst. Often the monster investigator views his investigations as a way to keep away from, or atone for, the evil in his own soul.

Monster investigators, especially vampires, may have difficulty questioning witnesses in their homes and offices during daylight hours. Generally, they need to keep their true nature secret from all but their closest allies, leaving them open to blackmail by criminals who learn of their nature, and their weaknesses.

Some examples include: Nick Knight of *Forever Knight*, Hamilton's Anita Blake, Elrod's Jack Fleming, and Angel of Joss Whedon's *Angel*.

Characters who start as fearless monster hunters, on the other hand, are likely to already have experts as contacts or patrons. Rather than leading the investigators to experts, the GM will need to generate experts for them to consult.

Generally, the expert will provide some, but not all, answers. A monster's means are often greater than a mortal's, but it is usually subject to various limitations. If the investigators can find the monster's vulnerabilities, then they may have a chance to actually destroy it. The investigation may become more involved with researching the occult than with the usual witness interviews and forensic testing.

In an ongoing horror campaign, the expert is often a recurring character, providing expository dialog to keep the adventure moving. If the GM does not intend to use the paranormal often in the game, or wants the investigators to discover the “rules” governing paranormal activity slowly, then this character must be an NPC. As the players learn about the setting, their characters will likely develop sufficient knowledge to dispense with the expert and may make contact with more powerful and knowledgeable sources. At that point, the expert may remain a contact, or may be threatened by monsters for all the aid he provided to the PCs in the past.

A character with Occultism (p. B61) will have some knowledge about mysterious and supernatural events. He may also have Research skill, and his own

collection of useful reference materials. A character can only use the Research skill if the answer can be found in the place he is searching. If the only source for information on a particular monster or haunting is in one particular university library, then it is off to that library the investigators must go. Getting access to closed stacks and rare books may involve struggles with library bureaucrats, a counterpart to the investigator's usual efforts to get financial and background data from banks and credit agencies.

The GM can use Language skills to complicate the investigation. Research may help the investigators find the right tome, but they may also need to find the one academic in the city who can read that dialect of ancient Sanskrit. If the villain is also looking for that same academic, then the investigators may have a chance to confront him or his minions. Alternately, tomes in odd languages can be an opportunity for a player to use obscure skills he bought as part of his character's background, job, or hobbies.

Detectives with strong Streetwise and Intimidation skills may be able to uncover useful information by questioning semi-loyal minions, or criminal figures who supply goats, blood, and other odd items to cultists and monsters. A criminal who has seen “things man was not meant to know” may be harder to intimidate than a typical thug, but an investigator will generally find a way to make himself more intimidating than the criminal's dark masters.

## Does Cthulhu Have Fingerprints?

In a modern adventure, player characters may ask all sorts of inconvenient questions about whether an eldritch horror leaves fingerprints, what the werewolf's DNA looks like, and whether a vampire shows up on a video camera. The answers should be consistent, but need not be logical. Paranormal creatures are, by definition, unnatural and not subject to normal scientific rules.

When investigators do find evidence, a laboratory is more likely to believe that the evidence is tainted or spoiled than that the evidence provides proof of the paranormal. Crime scene evidence is often gathered under less-than-ideal conditions. Odd results are more likely the result of improper gathering, or accidental contamination by bystanders.

The GM can resort to having a secret conspiracy of monsters, their minions, or shadowy government figures who steal or suppress the investigators' proof. The investigators may be diverted into trying to protect their evidence, however, instead of following the adventure the GM planned.

GMs may want to give their investigators an incentive to maintain the secret of the paranormal. This is easiest if one of them is himself a monster and wants to keep the world from knowing that such creatures exist. Even those who are not full-fledged paranormal monsters may have paranormal abilities and be concerned about being taken from their jobs for study by "top men" in industry or the government.

The government may even be aware of the paranormal, and prefer that it not be made public for fear of scaring the populace. Investigators who frequently come into contact with the paranormal may get a "friendly" visit from government agents advising them that the government is grateful for their service, and would be even more grateful for their silence.

### Faux Horror

Players are often predisposed to accept paranormal influence in an RPG setting. Their characters may offer only token skeptical resistance to the notion that the crime might have been committed by a vampire or a telekinetic. GMs may want to interweave seemingly-supernatural mysteries which have a mundane motive and cause with paranormal mysteries in order to promote a healthy skepticism in the players and their characters.

A player's willingness to explore supernatural explanations for mysterious events can be a powerful GMing tool. Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was one of the earliest detective stories in which a villain tried to pass off a homicide as a supernatural event. In several of Rohmer's *The Dream Detective* stories, the psychic detective also found that the solution to seemingly-mysterious events was a mundane villain's tricks. *Scooby-Doo*, at least in its original incarnation, was an entire series about investigators who found that

monsters were a cover for a variety of con artists.

A "faux horror" plot has the same structure as a typical mystery. One of the key sleights-of-hand is to prevent the investigators from getting a good look at the "monster" until the critical unveiling scene. Use dim lighting and distance to reduce perception rolls. Witnesses who encounter the monster at closer ranges

generally should have lower IQ, Will, and Sense rolls than a typical investigator.

Investigating a "faux horror" plot will often involve research into who benefits from the "monster's" actions. Investigators may wish to look at inheritance, land ownership, profits, and publicity. They may also want to look at competitors to the person or place being haunted. Insurance fraud investigators often find that people remove their valuables from their houses before setting a fire, replace the new tires on their cars with old ones before torching or wrecking the car, and remove valuable fittings from boats before sinking them. Greed may get the better of those planning a "faux horror" scam, too.

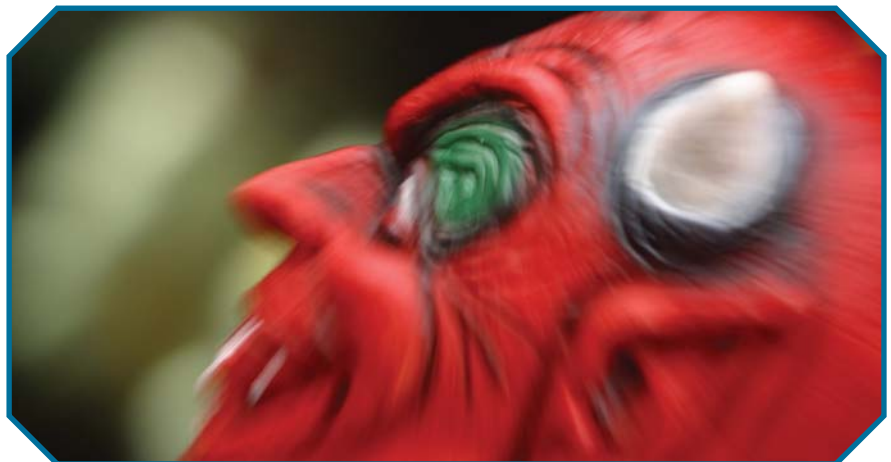
## CONFRONTING MONSTERS

*"We attack the Mayor with hummus."*  
— Oz,

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer:  
Graduation (Part 2)*

A horror confrontation tends to resemble the action climax of a hard-boiled adventure or a thriller (see p. 25). It is possible to set up an English drawing room scene where the investigators reveal which of the assembled villagers is a murderous monster, and capture, dispatch, or dispel him without a fight. Such climaxes are rare, however.

GMs should give horror investigators fair warning that they are dealing with the paranormal before the confrontation scene. If they choose to ignore the fairly-presented clues, then they have no one to blame but themselves when the mild-mannered embezzler suddenly transforms into his 7-foot-tall heavily-muscled "Hyde" persona and grins at them.





Horror investigators are often vigilantes. Horror antagonists are notoriously hard to bring to a public trial. The investigator's proof often depends on matters not normally deemed reliable evidence, like occult knowledge and paranormal powers. The antagonist's nature is often such that normal jail cells could not hold it, even if it were arrested and taken into custody. Wealthy investigators like Bruce Wayne or Lamont Cranston may be patrons of asylums with staff trained in restraining paranormal entities and removing their powers, but most paranormal investigators do not have those resources. They will generally need to kill or banish their monstrous foes and cultist supporters.

This leaves the GM with some difficult decisions. Generally, the investigators will be on solid moral grounds in their actions – stopping horror monsters is usually self-defense. However, the authorities generally will not understand the danger and may see the investigators as dangerously deluded. Not all supernatural menaces will obligingly turn into dust, melt away, or disappear into their home dimension. Body disposal may be a serious problem for the investigator. Ongoing paranormal campaigns may involve a competition between the investigator, who is busy battling supernatural menaces, and local authorities who see the effects of the investigator's vigilante actions and suspect him of being a murderer, arsonist, terrorist, dangerous lunatic, or all of the above. Here, the investigator may need to use all of his experience not only to solve the crime, but to avoid leaving clues to his own actions.

If the investigators are reasonably circumspect in their actions, traditionally they are not caught and punished by investigating authorities. Often, there is a particular nemesis – a police detective or a reporter – who is certain that the investigator is hiding something, but cannot prove it. The existence of the nemesis gives the heroes reason to be careful, and not overzealous in their use of weapons and explosives.

## CLOSURE

*"It would have been mine, if it hadn't been for those meddling kids!"*

*– Professor Wayne,*

*Scooby-Doo: Scooby's Night  
with a Frozen Fright*

The mystery genre generally ends with the villain's death or imprisonment. Once the adventure ends, all the loose ends are wrapped up. Horror adventures rarely end so cleanly. If one unnatural monster can wreak havoc, why not another? Did the investigators really destroy the monster, or will it rise again when it has regained its strength? Did they destroy all of the cultists, or will their dread master just recruit another group?

Leaving these questions open tends to strengthen the uncertainty of the horror genre. If the monsters can be beaten fully and completely, then they are less frightening. On the other hand, if the investigators cannot set things right, at least for a time, then what is the point of solving the mystery?

The GM will have to strike a careful balance in the closing of an adventure, leaving enough unanswered questions to keep the feel of horror, while tying up enough loose ends to satisfy the players that the mystery is well and truly solved.

## SAMPLE ORGANIZATION: DANA DETECTIVE DIVISION

A police procedural is not the typical setting for a horror mystery; however, the Dana Police Department's detective division is one possible patron or employer for experienced investigators encountering the supernatural for the first time.

Dana is a typical mill town in Western Massachusetts, with typical problems of drug abuse, alcoholism, domestic violence, and feuds between local residents and the students of nearby Prescott College. The Dana police department is a typical small-town force of 30 patrol officers, five sergeants, five detectives, three lieutenants, a captain, and a chief serving a population of 30,000.

The Dana detectives have become increasingly aware that they have a problem. It started with a series of unexplained disappearances among Prescott College students. Local lore attributes the vanished students to the ghost of Asa "Popcorn" Snow, a vegetarian known for his love of popcorn who died on November 15, 1872. Most townspeople attributed the disappearances to students who have run away due to college stress.

Without bodies, no one is willing to speculate about a serial killer. A few of the detectives have seen things they cannot rationally explain or prove. Some have allied with a Prescott College professor who has been investigating the Asa Snow ghost legend, but he is generally regarded as an eccentric with tenure.

Dana's detectives are all former patrol officers, either from the town or from the local area. Many are content to remain in the area, although a few aspire to jobs in the big city or even with a federal agency like the FBI. Most detectives work a day shift, but there are detectives on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The department is too small to specialize into different units – the detectives mostly work on narcotics, burglaries, robberies, stolen cars, sexual assaults, and Dana's small street gangs. They handle a few homicides and disappearances, often with the help of the state police. Dana does not have a crime lab. Fingerprints can be developed in-house, but DNA and other complex evidence must go to the state police lab for processing.

If the GM wants to include patrol officer characters, Dana's patrol officers work in three shifts – days, evenings, and night. Most officers work a two-day-on, one-day-off pattern, although extra officers are often on duty on weekend nights, especially when the Prescott College teams are playing at home and doing well.

The Dana department is a good setting for rural horror adventures. While not as isolated as Steven King's Maine, the Swift River valley is a good setting for rural monsters that prey on hunters and hikers. The town is suitable for some urban monsters, and the college adds the possibility of professors experimenting with dangerous technology or the occult. Also, a small town creates potential conflicts between the detectives, who may want to warn the public about dangers, and town leaders, who will generally prefer to keep odd events quiet so as not to scare away business, tourists, and students. This tension is one conflict in Peter Benchley's *Jaws* and in other similar novels.



The detective unit is small enough that the majority, or even all, of the officers could be PCs. Many of the detectives are likely married, with spouses that work in town or at the college. They are likely to know, or know of, the missing students and others who might fall victim to the paranormal. At this point, a few of the officers have begun to consider the possibility of the occult, but none have any significant knowledge or experience. Those who suspect something odd is going on are spending more time

at religious services and carrying appropriate symbols of their faith as reassurance. A detective spends a lot of time in dark alleys, and there are some places in town where radio reception is spotty.

As adversaries, the Dana detectives have enough suspicions about the paranormal to ask difficult questions if outside investigators start using strange abilities in their jurisdiction. Detectives could get enough key information about occult activities from college contacts to interrupt investigators at an inconven-

ient time. A detective might be notified about odd requests for access to valuable books in the closed stacks or to artifacts in the anthropology department collection. The town is large enough so that newcomers are not immediately obvious, but neighbors and beat officers will notice new cars on the street and new people at the local shops, and might begin to ask uncomfortable questions about those funny holes in the car fender and odd stains on the sidewalk.

## PSIONIC MYSTERIES

*"Tenser, said the Tenser.  
Tenser, said the Tenser.  
Tension, apprehension, and dissension  
have begun."*

— Ben Reich,  
*The Demolished Man*

If psionics are an openly-acknowledged part of society, then the psionic mystery will be similar to a fantasy or science fiction mystery. The GM will need to take into account specific psionic powers, but the investigators will be aware of the basic rules governing what is and is not possible. If psionics are a secret, then the structure of the adventure may be similar to a horror mystery, with the need for an expert or research to figure out the abilities of the villain.

Detectives with paranormal powers are not common as fictional investigators. In some cases, the investigator's powers are rare, thus cannot be anticipated by the antagonist. Sax Rohmer's Morris Klaw sleeps overnight at crime scenes and gets clues from psychometry in his dreams. Larry Niven's Gil the Arm has limited telekinesis, and is supported by his police department's resident telepath. James Schmitz' Telzey Amberdon is a telepath who uses her secret abilities to solve crimes. In other stories, psionic powers are openly acknowledged within the society and criminals take the possibility of psionic investigation into account when planning their crimes. Alfred Bester's Lincoln Powell, *Babylon 5's* Bester the Psi-Cop, and Philip K. Dick's John Anderton are all official detectives who openly use psionic abilities, or have employees with psionic abilities, or both.

If the powers and limits of psychic powers are widely known, there will be laws and social customs governing their

use. A psychic detective will be someone of impeccable moral character, guaranteed by background checks, since no non-psychic could verify or contradict his testimony about what he perceived. Criminals will be aware of the possibility of psionic investigation and will take what precautions they can to minimize psionic clues. There may be psionic criminals who can alter the witnesses' memories after the incident or otherwise actively negate the investigators' methods.

If psychic powers are rare and hidden, the investigator may understand his own powers, but may be uncertain about the workings or existence of other powers. Similarly, a psionic villain may be aware of the potential for psionic investigation, but may not expect such an adversary and may take incomplete precautions. Against an ungifted foe, a psychic detective may easily figure out who committed the crime using his talents. Proving guilt, without revealing the source of the character's information, may be another matter entirely.

There are a few people who claim to have psychic powers and offer their help to police in real-world investigations. Psychics say that their offers of help are generally met with skepticism at best, and accusations of being an accessory at worst. Some report being tested by departments who intermingle actual evidence with objects taken from detectives in order to verify the psychic's abilities. If a psychic provides information that is verifiable and could not have been known beforehand, his assistance may be more welcome. Regardless of a psychic's track record, psychic visions are not admissible evidence in court and cannot form the basis for a search or

arrest warrant. Any clues a psychic offers must be verified by other means. Departments are generally loath to admit that they have consulted a psychic; psychics often avoid publicity to avoid threats to themselves and their families.

Psionic characters can make it hard to create a challenging mystery. Where psionics are public knowledge, legal and social restrictions may force the investigator to build most of his case through traditional investigative methods. Telepathy or other powers that invade someone's mental privacy might only be allowed after the investigator convinces a judge or supervisor that he has good and sufficient reason to be certain the suspect is guilty, and cannot prove it by less intrusive means. If psionics are secret, then the investigator's conscience and code of honor are the only thing that may limit his ability to invade others' privacy on a whim.

Psionic abilities may be limited by technology. If psionic abilities are very common, then artificial mind shields may be equally common, used by those who have secrets they want to protect and by those who are concerned for their privacy. The average user will balance the cost of the device and the annoyance of using it against the value of his privacy, just as modern computer and cell-phone users balance their privacy against convenience when deciding how to protect their e-mail and telephone calls.

Finally, most mystery adventures pit investigators against criminals of equal cleverness and capacity. A psionic investigator is more likely to find himself facing psionic criminals who use their talents to commit seemingly impossible crimes.

## Four-Color Mysteries

Like a psionic mystery, a **Supers** mystery that involves relatively low-power, low-profile superheroes like Batman or Daredevil has a different tone and different style than one involving world-famous, blatant superheroes like Superman or the Avengers.

In addition to the obvious problem of providing a mystery that cannot be instantly solved using the PCs' super-powers, GMs may have some trouble motivating their PCs to follow up on clues left after the big battle. Supervillains are active; superheroes are reactive. Some **Supers** PCs seem content to sit in their headquarters waiting for news of trouble on CNN or for a call from the police.

GMs should talk with their players when designing the adventure. If the PCs should actively investigate, not just react, be clear about that.

Require characters to have investigation skills when they are created. Encourage PCs to have secret identities such as police officers, reporters, private investigators, or other people who get involved in mysteries as part of their job.

GMs may need to make clues in the four-color setting very obvious. Supervillains often have themes like riddles, or a particular animal, or a penchant for doubles and the number two. PCs are more likely to follow up on a clearly stated theme, which will lead them to the villain and his dastardly scheme.

## PSIONIC INVESTIGATORS

The Psionics rules (pp. B254-57) offer a number of useful powers and skills for investigators and villains alike. Publicly-known psionic investigators may be certified and classified by a testing agency. Anyone who wants to know about their abilities may be able to find out with some simple background investigation. Investigators who keep their psionic powers a secret may gain a reputation for their "hunches," tipping off a clever criminal. An adversary who is looking for other hidden psionics may be able to find out about the investigator by discreetly reviewing some of his cases in the newspapers and in official files.

Detect (psis) and Detect (psionic activity) (pp. B48, B256) are a critical basic abilities for investigators who are looking for the misuse of psionic powers. The former detects people with psionic advantages, the latter detects powers in use. Detect (psychic residues) could be used to find traces of past psionic powers. The GM may need to decide which psionic powers have detectable signatures (see p. B106), how quickly signatures decay, whether signatures are overwritten by later power uses, whether they can be erased or forged, and so on.

Astral Projection (a form of Insubstantiality (p. B62) and

Clairsentience (p. B42) are nearly-untraceable shadowing and surveillance tools which allow an investigator, or his foe, to follow a target or search a room. Criminals with such powers can use them to spy on the investigators or to case targets for robberies or murders.

Precognition (p. B77) is a very useful power, but limited in **GURPS**. It would be difficult to create precognitives who can dependably predict crimes with sufficient time to prevent them, as in Philip K. Dick's novella *Minority Report* (adapted into a movie). Reliable precognition also creates interesting philosophical problems about free will and about the effect that knowing about the prediction has on its accuracy.

Psychometry (p. B78) is similar to Sax Rohmer's Morris Klaw's ability to learn about a crime by sleeping at the scene, using a special pillow that enhances his abilities. The GM has a great deal of control over what the character sees. Using those limits carefully, he can provide the character with important clues without necessarily providing the answer to the mystery. As written, psychometry only affects places and inanimate objects.

Telesend (p. B91) makes contacting witnesses and missing persons much easier. GMs should think about whether Telesend can be used to reach someone the psi has never met and may only know by name, description, or from some object associated with the person,

and if so, what modifiers apply. Detect (associated person or object) could be used to find someone based on a scrap of clothing, photograph, or other focus.

Empathy (p. B51), Mind Control (p. B68), and Mind Reading (p. B69), are all traditional powers used by detectives like James Schmitz' Telzey Amberdon and Alfred Bester's Lincoln Powell for interviews and interrogations. Ben Reich, the murderer in Bester's *The Demolished Man*, defeats Powell's casual telepathic scans by "accidentally" encountering a catchy musical tune which dominates his surface thoughts and masks his intentions. Mind Probe (p. B69) is less common; and tends to be used only when the psionic investigator has no other way to get important information.

## PSIONIC CRIME SCENES

A psionic crime scene may not appear abnormal at first glance. On the other hand, telekenesis and other similar powers may create locked room mysteries and corpses with no visible cause of death common.

If the villain's powers are still being actively used, then Detect (psionic activity) may reveal his presence and ability. Psychometry or Detect (psychic residue) may find traces of the villain, assuming that the GM decides that mental powers leave such traces. Psychometry can also give the investigator clues about the crime scene itself or about weapons and items used in the crime. Although a corpse may technically be an inanimate object, GMs may want to rule that it cannot be the target of this ability; otherwise it might be too difficult to create a successful adventure. Generally, the investigator only gets a brief impression from this skill, which makes it far less powerful than the counterpart magical spells.

## INVESTIGATING PSIS

Empathy, Mind Control, Mind Probe, and Mind Reading, like their magical counterparts, all make it much easier for a gifted investigator to question witnesses and suspects and determine guilt. In the absence of social and legal restrictions, investigators may be tempted to use these abilities indiscriminately.



## Adapting Plots

The English cozy mystery is difficult to adapt into a psionic setting. Unless the suspects all have psionic powers, their small number makes it relatively easy for an investigator to discover their secrets with his own gifts. On the other hand, a cozy within a psionic training academy or retirement home could provide investigators used to dealing primarily with un-gifted suspects with a difficult challenge.

The hardboiled story style suits a secret psionic powers campaign. The isolated group of gifted investigators with a strong moral code dedicated to protecting an ignorant world from equally gifted villains, fits easily into the hard-boiled trope.

A police procedural story works best when psionics are public knowledge. The investigators may be part of an agency dedicated to investigating psionic crimes, or they may be involved in both normal and paranormal investigations.

A thriller story can work well with either open or hidden psionics. The secrecy and danger of a psionic antagonist loosed among an unaware populace closely replicates the feel of a classic thriller, where the villain usually has overwhelming power because of technology. Alternatively, having the heroes be ostracized and feared because of their own psionic powers can create the friendless desperation required in a thriller.

Keep in mind the problems of perception and memory. A witness may seem perfectly honest, but be utterly mistaken. Witnesses and suspects may have many secrets they are trying to protect other than information about the crime the investigator is trying to solve. In fiction, a character who has a single idea dominating his thoughts, like Ben Reich's rhyme in *The Demolished Man*, cannot be probed more deeply. Witnesses and victims of violent crimes may dwell upon one image or thought about the incident, making it difficult for the investigator to scan past that single idea to find out more about the case.

At its end, all the loose ends need to be wrapped up and the antagonist defeated and punished.

In a campaign where psionics are a secret, as in a horror campaign, the investigators may be vigilantes if the normal justice system cannot imprison and punish a powerful psionic criminal. On the other hand, if psionic powers have a biological source, a skilled surgeon might be able to destroy the criminal's powers, leaving him suitable for mundane imprisonment. Someone who is extremely skilled with Mind Control using Conditioning (pp. B68-69) may be able to erase an adversary's ability to control his own powers, implant compulsions against using those powers, remove mental disadvantages, or even create an entirely new personality and memories, thus "killing" the evildoer without destroying his body.

## SAMPLE ORGANIZATION: TAU STATION PUBLIC PSI-VESTIGATORS

Public investigators are the right-hand of Tau Station's public defenders. Tau Station has 60 full-time public defenders and 30 public investigators.

Trained and employed by the Station management, they work directly with attorneys to help defend accused suspects. A psi-vestigator is, of course, a trained psionic public investigator with talent in ESP and Telepathy. In addition, he is given three weeks of training in legal investigations and a month-long apprenticeship with a senior investigator. He is not allowed to accept outside work. About half of Tau Station's public investigators are psi-vestigators of varying power and skill.

Because public investigators work directly for attorneys, all of the psi-vestigator's work is protected from police discovery by Tau Station's attorney-client privilege. Investigators are sworn to protect their client's secrets and to work zealously in their client's best interests. Attorneys ask them to locate witnesses, investigate leads, take statements from clients, and otherwise assist them in preparing a case for trial.

Absent their psionics, the Tau Station investigators have the same duties as typical American public defense investigators for a large city. If the GM wants the PCs to have steady employment and a constant supply of criminal cases to investigate, then this may be a good job for them. In every case they will have a client to defend. In a cinematic campaign, the defenders, like Perry Mason, may always get clients who are really innocent, or at least guilty of much lesser offenses than they are being charged with. For a more dramatic campaign, the defenders can be dedicated to the ideal of a fair trial for even the most appalling criminal, and to trying to make a difference in the lives of their clients and their client's families, whether the accused are guilty or not. Psi-vestigators, unlike their ungifted counterparts, might at least know for certain whether their client is guilty or innocent.

For campaigns based around courtroom mysteries, public investigators provide a good combination of fieldwork and courtroom work, while having a different point of view from the police and the prosecutor. Public defenders are usually not appointed until after the client has been arrested and brought to court. Thus, public investigators generally face cold leads, crime scenes already processed by police and released to their owners, and witnesses predisposed to believe the client is guilty because his arrest was reported in the news.

## CONFRONTATIONS

A psionic confrontation need not be face-to-face. Mind-to-mind encounters between powerful telepaths or those using astral projection can take place at great distances from their physical bodies. If the confrontation takes place at a distance, it still needs to be conclusive.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# CHARACTERS

*"Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?"*

– Father Brown,  
*The Blue Cross*

As the prior chapters have discussed, mysteries are not about car chases, dead-eye shooting, or exotic martial arts. They are about logical thinking, empathy, perception, and deduction. Your investigators can be anyone who is curious about human nature.

Back story is important to character creation. With a few exceptions, investigators are experienced older people who have worked as police detectives (following several years as a patrol officer), federal agents, or investigative reporters, or

they have apprenticed for several years by working with a more senior licensed private detective. (British private investigators are not licensed – anyone can call himself a P.I.) Teen investigators are the exception to this rule, but many, like the Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew, have parents who are attorneys or police officers and may have taught them some skills.

Characters in a mystery adventure within some other style of campaign must rely on their existing skills. Characters being created for a *Mysteries* campaign, or even one where mysteries will be common, should have relevant prior histories. Characters who are, or were, police detectives, professional criminals, reporters, prosecutors, criminal defense attorneys, forensic experts, and even, as Father Brown notes, priests,

can justify the sorts of skills and contacts useful for a mystery investigator.

Motivation is also important. The best characters for this kind of adventure or campaign are those who are interested in solving puzzles. Think about why a person might be interested in mysteries. Is this just his job? Does he have a personal stake in the case? Does the victim, if a stranger, have something in common with him or with someone he cares about? Does he have a strong sense of justice or a need for vengeance? If he's an amateur, what will keep him from just leaving the problem to whatever professionals might exist in the setting?

Answering these questions may help the GM create better adventures and help the players create better investigators.

## PRIVATE EYES AND POLICE

*"You're trying to make a fink out of me. Maybe I'm obstinate, or even sentimental, but I'm practical too. Suppose you had to hire a private eye – yeah, yeah, I know you would hate the idea – but just suppose you were where it was your only out. Would you want the one that finked on his friends?"*

– Philip Marlowe,  
*The Long Good-Bye*

A private investigator is not a cop. P.I.s are just normal citizens with some experience and training. Private investigators don't have extraordinary powers to question people, search their homes and offices, shadow them, or intimidate them. They do not have the power to arrest people. They do not have a radio and immediate backup when they get into trouble.

Private investigators do not have any legal obligation to help the police, but they can be charged with obstruction of justice for hiding evidence, interfering with an investigation, or lying to police officers. Their homes, offices, and files are not protected from subpoena or search warrant by an investigator-client privilege. (Private investigators working

for attorneys are protected by the attorney's privilege; see p. 72.) The only thing a private investigator's license does is to give the holder a semblance of legitimacy when, for example, a patrol officer wants to know why a middle-aged man has been staking out a neighborhood playground.



As discussed earlier (see p. 12), police and private investigators don't necessarily get along. Some have a relationship of mutual respect, like Sherlock Holmes and Inspector Lestrade or Hercule Poirot and Inspector Japp. Others, like Marlowe, often seem to make an effort to annoy and alienate any police officers with whom they come into contact.

At best, a skilled private investigator with a reputation for solving difficult cases is a rival. Likely both Inspector Lestrade and Inspector Japp would prefer to solve their cases solely using their own experts. Circumstances require them to rely instead on outsiders. When a private investigator is not a genius renowned for his monographs or "little gray cells," police detectives may view him as an intruder in their domain, as someone who might interfere with their investigations, contaminate or tamper with evidence, expose matters the detectives would rather keep secret, or just embarrass the department by solving a crime they did not. Investigators working for a client who is a police suspect are sometimes seen as the enemy, trying to protect someone the police feel is guilty.

# CHARACTER CONCEPTS

Competent characters with a 50- to 75-point base are used for a highly realistic campaign, with ordinary people confronting the sorts of crimes one might see in the daily news. A 75- to 125-point base suits a realistic-yet-dramatic style, with seasoned detectives facing tougher problems. Heroic campaigns, or those focused on the “genius” detective, work best at 150 to 200 points. With the exception of certain “genius” detectives, characters built on more than 200 points are unlikely in most *Mysteries* settings.

The following templates will serve as a guide for making characters for a realistic *Mysteries* setting, and aid in their quick creation. Attributes, advantages, disadvantages, and skills are specified as appropriate for each type. Typical equipment is given in many cases. Customization notes for each template suggest ways to adapt it to various campaign settings.

Skills are divided into three categories: primary skills, which are necessary; secondary skills, which are useful but need not be fully mastered; and background skills, which are related, but optional. Templates are not examples of ordinary people, who typically have lower attributes.

Templates are a convenience, not a requirement. GMs may choose not to use templates in their campaigns; if they use templates, characters created both with and without templates should be allowable. Using a template does not give any discount on point cost or have any in-play effects that might unbalance the game. A template is simply a list of choices that work well together, designed to save work in coming up with well-balanced characters, while leaving room for customization. GMs are free to add new templates to the list as dictated by their specific campaigns.

The templates given are typical archetypes. They will need customization to fit into different settings, especially in their background skills. The Customization Notes identify key aspects of the archetype. Advantages, disadvantages, and skills can be varied to fit the setting. Although Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot would both use the “genius detective” template, they have very different background skills in part because of the three decades that separate their settings.

Adjust the templates as needed to fit a specific campaign.

## DEFENSE ATTORNEY

60 points

You specialize in defending accused suspects in court. You may be a public defender, working in a state agency to defend poor suspects, or a highly-paid

private attorney who represents wealthy, famous defendants. You might have once been a prosecutor or a cop; being a defense lawyer usually pays better, although real estate or corporate law pays better than criminal defense. You may passionately believe in protecting defendants’ rights. You may be fresh from law school, without the grades, experience, or contacts to get a more prestigious job.

### Another Day, Another Dead Body

*“A private eye . . . in my day they used to be nasty men in macs, sniffing round the registers in cheap hotels. They used to spy into bedrooms with field-glasses, in the ever-present hope of seeing male and female clothing scattered around.”*

– Horace Rumpole,  
*Rumpole of the Bailey*

Fictional mysteries primarily involve homicides, but death investigations are, in reality, a rare job for a private investigator. Most private investigators investigate insurance claims, conduct background checks, locate missing persons and property, and serve subpoenas and other court papers. For the most part, this is routine work. A character could be doing such routine work when he stumbles across the adventure, or an unusual case could become the adventure.

Insurance work primarily involves investigating claims for fraud. This may mean interviewing witnesses, photographing accident scenes, examining arson sites in conjunction with fire marshals, conducting background checks, and conducting surveillance on victims who claim to be injured. Fraud investigations can be as compelling as homicides, especially if the fraud has been cleverly done, or involves an organized conspiracy of fraudulent doctors and lawyers inflating claims with the aid of greedy policyholders.

Background checks and skip tracing have been described earlier (see p. 46). These can be good segues into adventures. Background checks can also involve efforts to stop employee theft and sabotage, which may involve stake-outs, undercover work, auditing security systems, and investigating computer hacking.

Serving court papers is generally straightforward. The investigator needs to find the person to be served and present him, typically in hand, with a formal document, like a civil complaint or subpoena. This is often a routine matter. The investigator goes to the target’s home or office and hands him the paper. If the target is determined to avoid service (by not answering the door or varying his routes), the investigator may need to be creative. Sometimes a suspect reacts violently to being served and may yell at the investigator, throw a tantrum, or even attack.

Since the advent of “no fault” divorce in the 1970s, a spouse who desires a divorce need no longer prove infidelity. Affairs and other bad conduct are rarely important to alimony claims, although misdeeds can have an effect on child custody. Investigators are sometimes still hired to investigate affairs and to help locate hidden financial assets. Because of the strong emotions involved, domestic investigations can be dangerous for the investigator.



**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** 10 points chosen from among Appearance [4]; Charisma [5/level]; Contacts (Street, 12-, available on 9 or less, somewhat reliable) [1]; Favors [Varies]; Status +1 [5]; or Wealth [10].

**Disadvantages:** Duty (Legal Ethics, 9 or less) [-1]; and -15 points chosen from among Addiction (chain-smoker) [-5]; Alcoholism [-15]; Bad Sight (corrected) [-10]; Greed [-15]; Odious Personal Habit (Publicity Hound) [-5]; Overconfidence [-5]; Secret (Corrupt) [-5 or -10]; Sense of Duty (Clients) [-5]; or Wealth [-10].

**Primary Skills:** Diplomacy (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [2]-12; Law (Criminal ) (H) IQ+1 [8]-13; Public Speaking (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Research

(A) IQ-1 [1]-11; and Writing (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

**Secondary Skills:** Detect Lies (H) Per-2 [1]-10; and Psychology (H) IQ-2 [1]-10.

**Background Skills:** A total of 6 points in Computer Operation/TL (E); Criminology/TL or Streetwise, both (A); or Forensics/TL (H).

**Equipment:** Briefcase, pager, and cell phone.

**Classic Examples:** Perry Mason, Horace Rumpole.

**Customization Notes:** Attorneys gain reputations as they get more experienced. The attorney who is the "hired gun" for the Mafia or cocaine cartels will be well known in the local police department and among prosecutors and judges, even if completely unknown to the public. Private attorneys who work in large law firms will get the benefit of their firm's reputation even if they are new to practice.

## FIRE MARSHAL

**60 points**

You're a firefighter who's moved from eating smoke to investigating firebugs. You don't get to hang around the station any more, but you do get to help protect your old friends from criminals.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Legal Enforcement Powers [5]; Rank (police/fire) 2 [10]; and 10 points chosen from among Acute Senses (usually vision) [2/level]; Contacts (Street, 12-, available on 9 or less, somewhat reliable) [1]; Patron (Powerful individual, 6 or less) [5]; Perception [5/level]; or Strong Will [4/level].

## Untraditional Detectives

*"The male detective, particularly when dressed as a workman, an errand-boy or a telegraph-messenger, is favourably placed for "shadowing." He can loaf without attracting attention. The female detective must not loaf. On the other hand, she can stare into shop-windows forever."*

— Miss Katharine A. Climpson,  
**Strong Poison**

The vast majority of fictional detectives are white men. A detective's job requires him to probe into the lives of the witnesses and suspects . . . something that was unthinkable for a black detective investigating white suspects and witnesses in the heyday of the classic and hard-boiled story. The first detective novels written by black authors were published in the 1930s. Detective stories by and about Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian detectives have become common in recent decades.

Detective stories written by black authors featuring black detectives are usually similar to hard-boiled stories. The secrets often involve characters who are passing as white, secret affairs, and children whose black heritage has been concealed. Racism is a common theme. Some stories focus on crimes within and against the black community that are otherwise ignored by the police. Others create international detective agencies, color-blind in their hiring, whose operatives win their white client's trust.

Female detectives, like Miss Marple, were common in classic English cozies, but rare in American hard-boiled stories. When women appeared in hard-boiled novels, they

were either virtuous secretaries or seductive temptresses, often deeply involved in crime. Unlike the black detective stories, most novels written by women did not focus on gender issues and sexism until the late 1970s. The female cozy detectives were usually pillars of respectability, often either widowed or spinsters.

Hard-boiled novels with female detectives have become common. Often, the author has to grapple with differences between how a man and a woman establish their toughness and unwillingness to be intimidated. The threats, bullying, and bravado that is expected from Philip Marlowe or Andy Sipowicz would be unacceptable or unbelievable conduct for a female detective. Female characters, on the other hand, can more easily follow suspects without being suspicious, and strike up seemingly casual conversations on a bus or in a waiting room. Many people expect a detective to be male, and so are less guarded with female questioners.

Real-world minority, female, and homosexual private investigators are less common than their straight white male counterparts because the law enforcement experience required by some agencies and some licensing agencies is less common for them. As discussed in **Cops**, police work remains primarily a white, male, heterosexual world (see pp. C27, 29). The court orders and state and local affirmative action programs that require American police departments to hire more female and minority officers do not apply to private businesses. General anti-discrimination laws do apply, but it remains harder for women and minorities to become private investigators.

**Disadvantages:** Duty (Fire marshal, 15-) [-15]; and -15 additional points in Addiction (chain-smoker) [-5]; Bad Temper [-10]; Callous [-5]; [Chronic Pain (mild, 2 hours, 9-) [-5]; Insomniac [-10 to -15]; Intolerance [-1 to -5]; Overconfidence [-5]; Pacifism (cannot harm innocents) [-10]; Secret (Corrupt) [-5 to -10]; Sense of Duty [-5 to -10]; Stubbornness [-5] or Unfit [-5].

**Primary Skills:** Architecture/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Chemistry/TL (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Criminology/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Explosives (Demolition) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Explosives (Fireworks) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Forensics/TL (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Interrogation (A) IQ+1 [2]-12; Law (Police/Fire) (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Professional Skill (Firefighting) (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; and Writing (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

**Secondary Skills:** Area Knowledge (City) (E) IQ [1]-12; Detect Lies (H) Per-2 [1]-10; Fast-Talk (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Hazardous Materials (chemical) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Intimidation (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Psychology (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; and Streetwise (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

**Background Skills:** A total of 3 points in Computer Operation/TL or First Aid (E); Administration or Public Speaking (A); Diplomacy (H); Brawling (E); Wrestling (A); or Running (A).

**Equipment:** Badge, handgun, handcuffs, latex gloves, portable radio, and possibly a cell phone or pager. Fire marshals may have basic crime scene equipment, either carried or in their official cars.

**Classic Examples:** Suzanne Chazin's Georgia Skeeahan (NYFD fire marshal); John Orr's Phil Langtry (fire investigator).

**Customization Notes:** Fire Marshals and firefighters are not the bomb squad. They are often familiar with explosive and arson devices, but generally leave disarming and disposing of them to other professionals. The disadvantages suggested for the template suggest a firefighter who has been injured on duty and thus has moved to the less physically strenuous job of arson investigator. Marshals who belong in an "outsider" class in a department – women, racial minorities, religious minorities, homosexuals – may take a negative Reputation or Social Stigma as appropriate to their society and the stereotypes about their class.

## GENIUS DETECTIVE

215 points

*"The fish that you have tattooed immediately above your right wrist could only have been done in China. I have made a small study of tattoo marks and have even contributed to the literature on the subject. That trick of staining the fish's scales a delicate pink is quite peculiar to China. When, in addition, I see a Chinese coin hanging from your watch-chain, the matter becomes even more simple."*

– Sherlock Holmes,  
*The Red-Headed League*

You are a famous detective – intuitive, creative, and rational – with abilities at deduction and analysis that confound your less-witty peers. You may be a master of disguise, able to blend in to any setting from seamen's tavern to the royal court. You may have charm and wit enough to persuade the most recalcitrant suspect to betray his innermost secrets. Often you are not particularly handsome or athletic. If you need someone to carry a firearm or engage in a brawl, you may well have a stalwart sidekick at your side who also jots down your deeds for posterity.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 17 [140]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 17 [0]; Per 19 [10]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Ally (75% point total, 15 or less) [9]; Contact (Police, 12-, available on 12-, usually reliable) [4]; Independent Income [5]; Reputation +3 (Famed Sleuth, almost everyone, all the time) [15]; Status +1 [5]; Wealthy [20].

**Disadvantages:** Code of Honor (Gentleman P.I.) [-5]; Overconfidence [-5]; any appropriate physical disadvantage such as Addiction, Compulsion, Odious Personal Habit, Overweight, or Unfit [-30].

**Primary Skills:** Criminology/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-16; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [2]-18; Diplomacy (H) IQ+3 [16]-20; Fast-Talk (A) IQ+3 [12]-20; Public Speaking (M/A) IQ-1 [1]-16.

**Secondary Skills:** Acting (A) IQ-1 [1]-16; Disguise (A) IQ-1 [1]-16; Writing (A) IQ-1 [1]-16; and 9 points from languages, medical skills (particularly First Aid and Poisons), scientific

skills (particularly Forensics and Research), hobbies, and various esoteric knowledge skills.

**Background Skills:** A total of 3 points in Administration (A); Brawling (E); Guns (Pistol) (E); or Wrestling (A).

**Equipment:** None needed. A deerstalker hat, pipe, cloak, and magnifying glass are iconic.

**Classic Examples:** Lt. Columbo, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Nero Wolfe.

**Customization Notes:** The key features of the genius detective are high IQ, Perception, and excellent social skills. A bright, but not genius-level ally who is more physically fit and has some combat skills is common. Intimidation and Interrogation skills are rare. This version is cinematic. Eidetic Memory could be added for an even more cinematic character. If you reduce the IQ, you can represent more realistic detectives like Lt. Columbo.

## HARD-BOILED DETECTIVE

85 points

*"Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it."*

– Raymond Chandler,  
*The Simple Art of Murder*

You are a cynical yet honorable man driven by a fierce desire for justice. You are a tough guy (or gal) who will not be intimidated or threatened by anyone. You protect your clients, even if you have to bend or break the law to do it. You are curious and will poke into interesting events that aren't directly related to your case to make sure that justice is done. Police usually don't like you – you are trouble waiting to happen.

**Attributes:** ST 11 [10]; DX 11 [20]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 11 [10].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 11 [0]; Will 13 [5]; Per 12 [0]; FP 11 [0]; Basic Speed 5.5 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Fearlessness +2 [4].

**Disadvantages:** Code of Honor (Private Investigator) [-10]; Overconfidence [-5]; Sense of Duty (Clients) [-10]; Stubbornness [-5]; plus an additional -15 points, often in Addiction (chain-smoker), Compulsive Behavior (Heavy drinker), Debt, or No Sense of Humor.

**Primary Skills:** Brawling (E) DX+2 [4]-13; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [2]-11; Fast-Talk (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Guns/TL (Pistol) (E) DX+1 [2]-12; Intimidation (A) Will+1 [4]-14; Shadowing (A) IQ [2]-12; Stealth (A) DX+1 [4]-12; Streetwise (A) IQ+1 [4]-13.

**Secondary Skills:** Acting (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Criminology/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Diplomacy (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Disguise (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Driving/TL (Automobile) (A) DX [2]-11; First Aid/TL (E) IQ [1]-12; Holdout (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Lockpicking/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Photography (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Writing (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

**Background Skills:** A total of 3 points in Area Knowledge or Computer Operation/TL, both (E); Administration, Bard, or Research, all (A); or Law (H).

**Equipment:** None required. A trench-coat, slouch hat, and bottle of whiskey in a desk drawer are iconic. Frequently carries a pistol. A sap is common for 1920s-30s era characters.

**Classic Examples:** Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, Spenser.



**Customization Notes:** Hard-boiled detectives are tough, stubborn people. They are hard to scare or intimidate. High Pain Threshold and Contacts are often useful. While they can use Diplomacy and Acting, most tend to gather information through Intimidation and Fast-Talk. Many have police contacts; others earn the respect of working officers and detectives (but not their superiors) during their investigations. Private investigators who are women, racial minorities, religious minorities, and/or homosexuals may take a negative Reputation or Social Stigma as appropriate to their society and the stereotypes about their class.

## INVESTIGATING MAGE

**150 points**

You are a wizard who specializes in solving crimes, often those caused by foes with magical powers themselves. You may work for a noble, a city, or a guild, which provides you with a job and some magical items to assist your official investigations in the same way that a modern police department provides equipment to its employees.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 14 [80]; HT 11 [10].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 11 [0]; Will 14 [0]; Per 14 [0]; FP 17 [9]; Basic Speed 5.0 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Legal Enforcement Powers [5]; Legal Immunity (guild justice only) [5]; Magery 2 [25].

**Disadvantages:** Duty (15 or less) [-15]; and an additional -30 points in any appropriate disadvantage like Odious Personal Habits or Sense of Duty.

**Primary Skills:** Acting (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Diplomacy (H) IQ-2 [1]-12; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [2]-14; Interrogation (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Public Speaking (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Streetwise (A) IQ-1 [1]-13.

**Secondary Skills:** Riding (Horse) (A) DX [2]-10; Writing (A) IQ-1 [1]-13.

**Background Skills:** A total of 4 points in Area Knowledge (E); Administration or Research, both (A); or Detect Lies or Law, both (H).

**Spells:** Aura-14 [1]; Detect Magic-14 [1]; Echoes of the Past-20 [12]; History-14 [1]; Identify Spell-14 [1]; Images of the Past-20 [12]; Keen Ears-14 [1]; Keen Eyes-14 [1]; Memorize-14 [1]; Persuasion-14 [1]; See Secrets-15 [2]; Seek Earth-14 [1]; Seek Water-14 [1]; Seeker-15 [2]; Sense Emotion-14 [1]; Sense Foes-14 [1]; Simple Illusion-14 [1]; Sound-14 [1]; Tell Time-14 [1]; Trace-14 [1]; Truthsayer-14 [2]; Voices-14 [1].

**Equipment:** For practical purposes, a device that casts Echoes and Images of the Past, and which is self-powered (p. M17) by at least 2 points. At 2,200 power, this is the equivalent to a fully stocked mobile crime lab and would only be available through an employer or patron, not as normal adventuring gear. Items that cast Scribe (250 power) and Mapmaker (100-300 power) are also quite useful. Unless

the character purchases or makes the item himself, or takes his employer as a patron, these items can only be used for official purposes, not personal adventuring.

**Classic Example:** Randall Garrett's Master Sorcerer Sean O'Lochlainn.

**Customization Notes:** An investigating magician relies more on a specific range of magical spells than on mundane skills. He is likely teamed with a more combat-capable ally or partner who can assist in his investigations and protect him from physical dangers. This example has minor law enforcement powers and, as a magician, is only subject to his or her own guild's justice (much as a monk is generally subject only to his abbot). In other settings, Status may be required in order to gain cooperation from noble suspects and authorities.

## MEDICAL EXAMINER

**80 points**

You are a doctor who specializes in forensic medicine. You perform autopsies on the bodies of crime victims, and anyone else who died unexpectedly. Your job is to figure out the cause of death. In criminal cases, you look for clues on the body that might tell you who killed the victim. Often, you go to court to testify about how the victim died.

Generally, you do not go to crime scenes, but you may sometimes get more involved in your cases than your colleagues would like.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 13 [60]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 13 [0]; Per 13 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.0 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Up to 15 points in Comfortable [10]; Contacts (Police or professional, skill 12-, available on 9-, somewhat reliable) [1/contact for beat cops, 2/contact for detectives and federal agents, 3/contact for lieutenants, managers, other doctors or scientific experts, 4/contact for the chief, senior officers, and well-known experts]; Status [5] or Unfazeable [15].



**Disadvantages:** Code of Honor (Hippocratic Oath) [-5]; and a total of -20 points in any physical disadvantage, Addiction (chain-smoker) [-5], Addiction (Prescription stimulants or painkillers) [-10], Alcoholism [-15], Bad Sight (corrected) [-10], Callous [-5], Loner [-5], Low Empathy [-15], Nightmares [-5], Odious Personal Habit [-5 to -10], Secret (Corrupt) [-5 to -20], or Shyness [-5 to -10].

**Primary Skills:** Diagnosis/TL (H) IQ-1 [2]-12; Electronics Operations/TL (Medical) (A) IQ [2]-13; Forensics/TL (H) IQ [4]-13; Physician/TL (H) IQ [4]-13; Physiology/TL (H) IQ-1 [2]-12; Surgery/TL (VH) IQ-1 [4]-12; and Writing (M/A) IQ [2]-13.

**Secondary Skills:** Chemistry/TL (H) IQ-1 [2]-12; Criminology/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Poisons (H) IQ-1 [2]-12; Research (A) IQ-1 [1]-12.

**Background Skills:** A total of 4 points in Computer Operation/TL and First Aid/TL, both (E); Administration, Public Speaking, and Teaching, all (A); or Biology/TL (VH).

**Equipment:** If a medical examiner examines the body at the crime scene, then he will have basic crime scene equipment. Otherwise, all of his equipment is kept at the morgue, is owned by his employer, and is useable only as part of his job.

**Classic Examples:** Dr. Quincy of *Quincy, M.E.*; Dr. Al Robbins of *C.S.I.*; and Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta.

**Customization Notes:** In Los Angeles, the coroner is a trained physician and uses this template. In most other areas, a "coroner" is not a doctor and uses the Forensic Technician (pp. C47-48) or Specialist template. Mental Disadvantages such as Necrophobia and Squeamishness are precluded.

The contacts listed are the sorts of people who a medical examiner will normally interact with at crime scenes, at the morgue, and as colleagues and consultants.

## POLICE DETECTIVE

**60 points**

You're the relentless investigator of major crimes. You and your partner, or your squad, uncover the big crimes, stake-out the bad guys, and do your real

work in the interrogation room, not the squad car.

If you work in a large city, you could be assigned to a unit like Vice (gambling, prostitution, and drugs), Robbery, or Homicide. If you work in a small rural department, you may be the only detective in your town. If you're an American detective, you have four or more years' experience as a patrol officer. If you're a French detective, you may have been hired right out of college with no prior experience on the streets.



**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [20]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.0 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Legal Enforcement Powers [5]; Rank (police/fire) 2 [10]; and 10 additional points chosen from among Perception [5/level], Contact (Street, skill 12, available on 9 or less, somewhat reliable) [1]; Patron (Individual, 6 or less) [5], or Will [4/level].

**Disadvantages:** Code of Honor (Police) [-5]; Duty (15 or less) [-15]; and a total of -15 additional points from Addiction (chain-smoker) [-5], Bad

Temper [-10], Bully [-10], Insomniac [-10 to -15], Intolerance [-5 to -10], Overconfidence [-5], Secret (Corrupt) [-5 to -20], Sense of Duty [-5 to -10], or Stubbornness [-5].

**Primary Skills:** Area Knowledge (City) (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Area Knowledge (Precinct) (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Criminology/TL (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Detect Lies (H) IQ [4]-12; Fast-Talk (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Forensics/TL (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Guns (Pistol)/TL (E) DX+1 [2]-11; Interrogation (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Law (Police) (H) IQ-2 [1]-11; Law Enforcement (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; and Writing (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

**Secondary Skills:** Acting (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Driving/TL (Automobile) (A) DX-1 [1]-9; Holdout (A) IQ [2]-12; Intimidation (A) IQ [2]-12; Psychology (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Savoir-Faire (E) IQ [1]-12; Shadowing (A) IQ [2]-12; Stealth (A) DX [2]-10; and Streetwise (A) IQ [2]-12.

**Background Skills:** A total of 6 points chosen from among Computer Operation/TL and First Aid/TL, both (E); Administration, Disguise, and Public Speaking all (A); Diplomacy (H); Brawling and Guns/TL (Shotgun), both (E); Shortsword (baton) and Wrestling, both (A); and Running (H).

**Equipment:** Badge, handgun, handcuffs, Type II body armor, latex gloves, portable radio, and possibly a cell phone or pager. Detectives may have basic crime scene equipment, either carried or in their official cars. Cinematic detectives often carry lock-picks and have the skill to use them.

**Classic Examples:** Det. Andy Sipowicz (*NYPD Blue*), Ed McBain's Det. Steve Carella.

**Customization Notes:** Typical homicide detectives have similar skill levels and an IQ of 11. Detectives in other departments like Robbery or Vice may have a slightly different mix of skills, reflecting their expertise. Officers may have skills from their patrol days; the template reflects typical skills and assumes some beat cop skills have functionally atrophied from disuse (see p. C45 for Beat Officer template). Officers who belong in an "outsider" class in a department – women, racial minorities, religious minorities, homosexuals – may take a negative Reputation or Social Stigma as appropriate to their society and the stereotypes about their class.

## PRIVATE PSI

125 points

You are a specialist in using the powers of the mind to solve crimes. If psionics are openly accepted in your society, then you are a respected professional able to publicly use your powers. If psionics are a secret in your society, then you use your powers to help you discover the culprit, but must use mundane methods to prove your case.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 13 [60]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 13 [0]; Per 14 [5]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.0 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Detect (current psionic use and past psionic residue) (ESP) [9]; Mind Probe (telepathic) [18]; Mind Reading (telepathic) [27]; Mind Shield (telepathic) +3 [11]; Psychometry (ESP) [18]; Telepathy Talent+2 [10]

**Disadvantages:** Code of Honor (Private Investigator) [-10]; Sense of Duty (Clients) [-10]; and a total of -25 additional points chosen from among Addiction (chain-smoker) [-5], Bad Temper [-10], Bully [-10], Insomniac [-10 to -15], Intolerance [-5 to -10], Overconfidence [-5], Secret (Corrupt) [-5 to -20], Sense of Duty [-5 to -10], Stubbornness [-5] or any appropriate physical disadvantage.

**Primary Skills:** Criminology/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Detect Lies (H) IQ-2 [1]-12; Diplomacy (H) IQ-1 [2]-12; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [2]-13.

**Secondary Skills:** Brawling (E) DX [1]-10 or other combat/weapons skill(s) as appropriate; Streetwise (A) IQ [2]-13.

**Background Skills:** A total of 3 points in Computer Operation/TL or Area Knowledge, both (E); Administration, Public Speaking, or Research, all (A); or Law (H).

**Equipment:** None required.

**Examples:** Sax Rohmer's Morris Klaw; Alfred Bester's Lincoln Powell.

**Customization Notes:** If psionics are a secret, then the character may have an appropriate Secret and/or Unusual Background. A Reputation for odd behavior might also be appropriate. If psionics are well-known and common, a detective might have a Vow or other

legal restriction on when he can use his powers to invade the privacy of others.

## SPECIALIST

70 points

You are not a sworn police officer, but you work with police officers on a regular basis and are welcome at the station house. You may be a civilian crime scene technician, a criminal psychologist, or a social worker. You find the evidence to put the bad guy away. You are not supposed to be chasing the bad guys down alleys, but sometimes you can't resist the temptation.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 13 [5]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.0 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** 10 points chosen from among Acute Sense [2/level per sense] or additional Perception [5/level], Contacts (Police or professional, skill 12-, available on 9 or less, somewhat reliable) [1/contact for beat cops, 2/contact for detectives and federal agents, 3/contact for lieutenants, managers, other doctors or scientific experts, 4/contact for the chief, senior officers, and well-known experts], and Reputation [Varies].

**Disadvantages:** A total of -20 points chosen from among Addiction (chain-smoker) [-5]; Bad Sight (corrected) [-10]; Odious Personal Habit [-5 to -10]; Overweight [-1]; Secret (Corrupt) [-5 to -10], or Unfit [-5].

**Primary Skills:** Forensics/TL (H) IQ+2 [8]-14; Photography (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Writing (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; and 9 points in any specialty, such as Armory/TL (Melee Weapons) or Armory/TL (Small Arms), both (A); Biochemistry/TL, Chemistry/TL, Diagnosis/TL, Metallurgy/TL, or Poisons, all (H); or Biology (often genetics or entomology) (VH).

**Secondary Skills:** Criminology/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Physiology/TL (VH) IQ-2 [2]-10; and Research (A) IQ [2]-12.

**Background Skills:** A total of 5 points from Computer Operation/TL and First Aid/TL, both (E); Administration and Teaching, both (A); or other scientific or weapon specialties.

**Equipment:** Latex gloves, camera, measuring tape, and any of the crime

scene equipment (p. 114) depending on department needs and budget.

**Classic Examples:** Gil Grissom of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (criminalist); Aaron Elkins' Gideon Oliver (forensic anthropologist).

**Customization Notes:** Coroners who are not doctors are a kind of forensic specialist. In the past, and in some rural areas, funeral home directors or other people experienced in handling dead bodies may be responsible for determining cause of death. Coroners may have the Mortician skill (p. UN109) and Pathology (p. UN109).

The contacts listed are the sorts of people who a specialist will normally interact with at crime scenes, at the morgue, and as colleagues and consultants.

## THAT DARN KID

65 points

You're the meddling teenager with a nose for trouble. You solve high-school mysteries and occasional adult problems. You are quick-witted, observant, and precocious, but may lack insight into complex adult motivations and the consequences of your adventures.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

**Secondary Characteristics:** Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 13 [5]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.0 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

**Advantages:** Patron (Parents, 15 or less) [30]; and 5 points chosen from among Attractive [4]; Fit [5]; Perk (Honest Face) [1]; and Pitiable [5].

**Disadvantages:** Struggling [-15]; Social Stigma (Minor) [-5] and -10 points chosen from among: Bad Sight (corrected) [-10]; Curious [-5]; Fearfulness [-2/level]; Ham-Fisted [-5]; Honesty [-10]; Klutz [-5]; Overconfidence [-5]; or Stubborn [-5].

**Primary Skills:** Climbing or Stealth, both (A) DX+1 [4]-11; Criminology/TL (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Fast-Talk (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Hobby Skill (Trivia) (E) IQ [1]-12; Throwing (A) DX [2]-10.

**Secondary Skills:** Area Knowledge (Neighborhood) (E) IQ [1]-12; Bicycling or Swimming, both (E) DX or HT+1 [2]-11.

**Background Skills:** 3 point in a Hobby skill, musical instrument, singing, dancing, sports, games, or fishing.

**Equipment:** A car (or a bicycle for younger kids). Possibly a camera and binoculars.

**Classic Examples:** Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, Encyclopedia Brown, Alfred Hitchcock's Three Investigators, the gang from *Scooby-Doo: Where Are You?*

**Customization Notes:** A "darn kid" rarely has any formal training in investigation, but may have read intently about subjects like fingerprints and cryptography. Although they cannot have lower than a point in a skill, the GM should keep in mind that a child or teen's understanding of a topic based on books is often very different from an adult with practical experience in the field. Often kids have an immense knowledge of trivia that may prove useful in investigating the case. While "kids" receive a reaction

penalty from their youth, they can also be socially invisible, allowing them to see and do things that would not be possible for an adult. Either level of Luck is appropriate. Wealth levels for minors are difficult to set. Minors do not generally have control of their own wealth: equipment and cost of living is provided by their parents, here marked as patrons. The template's income is assumed to be "average"; school substitutes for "work" in terms of the minor's free time.

# ADVANTAGES, DISADVANTAGES, AND SKILLS

Some of the basic advantages, disadvantages, and skills are especially important – or have a special significance – in a mystery adventure.

## ADVANTAGES

### Acute Senses

see p. B35

The ability to notice clues is critical to an investigator. Acute senses and perception (p. B16) add to the investigator's ability to spot physical evidence. In order to interpret those clues, you may need other skills like Forensics.

### Allies

see pp. B36-38

Many investigators have allies and sidekicks who loyally assist them in their investigations. Allies can include partners, secretaries, subordinate investigators, and other NPCs with a lower point cost than the PCs who assist them above and beyond mere employment. NPC allies are often found in one-player adventures. In multi-player adventures, the PCs typically complement each other's skills.

### Blessed

see pp. B40-41

Those who are Blessed (or who have Power Investiture, if the setting features active divine magic) might enjoy limited Magic Resistance to information spells cast by servants of a deity that opposes

their own as part of, or in addition to, the basic advantage. They might even be immune to such prying, save on a critical success by the caster. This benefit may be contingent upon a Duty to the god that grants it, or require adherence to Code of Honor, Disciplines of Faith, Vows, etc. Failure to observe these requirements is likely to result in loss of the advantage, perhaps permanently! 10 points or more.

loans, and sometimes minor jobs. If the organization dependably provides significant benefits, it is a Patron.

### Contacts

see pp. B44-45

An investigator can and should have a wide range of contacts and informants. Private investigators often have at least one contact in a major police department, who can provide the character with information and a reference when he must work with other police officials.

*"There is something about wills which brings out the worst side of human nature. People who under ordinary circumstances are perfectly upright and amiable, go as curly as corkscrews and foam at the mouth, whenever they hear the words 'I devise and bequeath.'"*

– Lord Peter Wimsey, *Strong Poison*

### Claim to Hospitality

see p. B41

This advantage can reflect membership in a union, guild, or social organization that will aid its members from time to time. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, various organizations like the Elks, Odd Fellows, Masons, and trade unions had nationwide branches that assisted members who were traveling or relocating with temporary housing,

### Favor

see p. B55

Investigators can build up a great many favors by keeping a secret at the right time or saving someone's life or reputation. Favors are a good way for a GM to reward PCs for a job especially well-done.



## Heir

see p. B33

An heir is a prime suspect when the head of the family dies.

## Indomitable

see p. B60

Hard boiled detectives often possess indomitable will, but this advantage should be used with caution in a *Mysteries* setting because it effectively makes the character immune to most social influences.

## Legal Enforcement Powers

see p. B65

Most investigators who are not police officers do not have any law enforcement powers. An investigator who is a police officer has law enforcement powers within a defined jurisdiction. American state and local police officers, for example, do not enforce federal laws, and may only make arrests within their own state (state police) or municipality (local police). Police in many countries have nationwide jurisdiction, but are expected to only enforce the law in their home area.

## Police Rank

see pp. B29-30

A typical police detective or federal agent will have Rank 2. Officers who have retired and become private investigators may have a courtesy rank at a cost of 1 point per level. This courtesy rank is for use in social situations, but may entitle the holder to minor favors from active duty officers.

## Reputation

see p. B26-28

Experienced investigators gain reputations, positive or negative, within their localities. A private investigator's reputation may be critically important in gaining cooperation from law enforcement officers, bureaucrats, and the general public. Reputation is also important in finding private clients. If an investigator works for an agency, that group may have a reputation of its own separate from the individual reputations of its members.

## Reputation (Pinkerton Agent)

see p. B26-28

From the late-19th to the mid-20th century, being a member of the Pinkerton Agency signified a highly skilled detective with powerful connections and a ruthless dedication to his client. The Pinkerton Agency, now merged with an international security company, still maintains a reputation above and beyond other American firms.

In the late-19th and early-20th centuries, a known Pinkerton operative will receive a +1 to +3 modifier from large business owners and managers, most law enforcement agencies, and many politicians. He will receive a -1 to -3 modifier from members of the Socialist Party and union members. In the midst of labor troubles, a 19th or early-20th-century Pinkerton operative risked death from union members.

In the modern era, being a Pinkerton operative is worth a +1 reaction modifier from law enforcement. 2 points.

## Status

see p. B28-29

Investigators with high status may have difficulty questioning low-status witnesses and suspects and vice-versa. Crime and criminal investigation may be deemed beneath the character's station and dignity. If so, the GM may recommend an appropriate disadvantage, like Sense of Duty or an Enemy (in the form of a disapproving family matriarch or patriarch), which compels the character to perform some of his investigations in disguise. The character may also develop a reputation for strange behavior among his peers.

## Talent

see p. B89-91

Skilled investigators may have a talent for appropriate scientific or influence skills. Some examples are below.

*Talker:* Detect Lies, Diplomacy, Fast-Talk, Psychology, Savoir-Faire. Reaction Bonus: clients and other investigators. 5 points/level.

*Tough Guy:* Fast-Talk, Forced Entry, Intimidation, Shadowing, Streetwise. Reaction bonus: most police officers & detectives, bouncers, gangsters, and street-thugs. 5 points/level.

*Whiz Kid:* Chemistry, Criminology, Diagnosis, Forensics, Psychology, Research. Reaction bonus: crime lab employers and detectives. 5 points/level.

## Wealth

see p. B25-26

Many investigators have some form of independent income, which allows them a comfortable existence with enough leisure time to pursue investigations as they see fit. Hardboiled detectives, on the other hand, often struggle for their wages and frequently seem on the verge of bankruptcy when an interesting client comes in the door. Police detectives and federal agents are rarely more than Comfortable.

## DISADVANTAGES

Modern police officers and investigators with major private agencies go through a series of background checks, physical examinations, and psychological testing. Police agencies and major private detective companies frequently conduct drug tests before hiring an investigator and randomly test their employees throughout their careers. Private investigators working on their own, or for small companies, are not thoroughly screened; indeed, the United Kingdom has no licensing rules for private investigators.

If an investigator has a disadvantage that could be used to blackmail, bribe, or intimidate him, he is taking a risk that may blow up on him if he faces a clever, resourceful villain.

## Alcoholism

see p. B122-23

Investigative work is stressful. Like police officers, private detectives may drink heavily to forget gruesome crime scenes, loneliness, and cases that went badly. Investigators may also spend too much time in the bar with their contacts and friends. This disadvantage is hazardous to the investigator's career. Compulsive Behavior (Heavy Drinker) is appropriate for those who drink more than is healthy, but have not yet become alcoholics, and is almost mandatory for a classic hard-boiled detective.

## *Code of Honor (Gentleman P.I.)*

**see p. B127**

Pursue truth and justice. Respect the law and work with it whenever possible. Treat honorable people with respect. Keep your word. Help those in need without charge whenever possible. If a basically decent adversary wishes to protect his family's reputation by committing suicide or will die very soon anyway of natural causes, let him do so without public embarrassment. (This is generally a -5 point disadvantage as it will, at times, involve somewhat illegal conduct.)

## *Code of Honor (Private Investigator)*

**see p. B127**

Don't back down, don't give in, don't be intimidated. Find the truth, no matter who wants to stop you or why. Do what's right, not what's legal. Treat honorable people with respect. Avenge any attack on you or on those whom you're protecting. Keep your word. Keep only retainers you have earned. See to it that the morally guilty (who are not necessarily the legally guilty) are punished. (This is generally a -10 point disadvantage as it will, at times, involve illegal conduct and occasional fights to prove one isn't intimidated.)

A hallmark of the hardboiled detective is a personal code of honor that sets him apart. Most hardboiled investigators also have a Sense of Duty (Client). The Code of Honor and Sense of Duty can conflict if the client lies to the investigator.

## *Code of Honor (Police)*

**see pp. B127, C55-56**

Serve your country and your community. Wear the uniform with pride. Defend the honor of your department and your country. Protect and assist your fellow officers. Don't embarrass your department or your buddies.

Code of Honor (Police) means you can be forced into unfair or even dangerous situations by those who know you will selflessly protect the department or your fellow officers, and that you will restrict your actions in public to avoid tarnishing the badge. This is worth

-5 points. (Also see *Intolerance*, below, and *Reputation*, p. 110.)

A department is a team; anything that threatens the team threatens each individual officer. An officer who violates the code is ostracized and driven out. Other officers respond slowly to his calls for backup, or don't respond at all. Sometimes they may even sabotage or vandalize his locker, car, or equipment.

## *Debt*

**see p. B26**

Many suspects and criminals in a *Mysteries* setting are seemingly-prosperous people who are driven to commit crimes by blackmail, debts, family obligations, gambling problems, an illegal narcotics addiction, unwise investments, or other woes. Discovering a suspect's debt woes may require research into bank and credit records, and/or accounting skills.

## *Duty (Legal Ethics)*

**see p. B133-34**

Attorneys are required to abide by a legal code of ethics. The details of the code vary by country, and in the United States, state by state. If an attorney violates the code, he may be fined, suspended, and even disbarred (forbidden to practice law, even as a paralegal under the supervision of another attorney) by a disciplinary board.

The ethical duties of prosecutors and criminal defense attorneys differ. A prosecutor is required to "do justice." A defense attorney, like all attorneys, must zealously represent his client within the bounds of the law. Once he appears in court with a client, he cannot leave the case without the judge's permission. Attorneys are officers of the court. No attorney is allowed to knowingly present false evidence, fail to call the court's attention to adverse laws and court decisions, or allow a client to lie under oath. (If the client does lie to the court, and the attorney knows it, ethics require him to move to withdraw as soon as possible, but do not require him to say more than "a serious conflict of interests" has arisen and the attorney cannot continue representation.) Attorneys can be disbarred if they are convicted of a serious crime themselves or misuse a client's money.

When the duty comes up, the attorney has to immediately act on behalf of a client. (Attorneys represent multiple clients at the same time, which can cause conflicting obligations.) Examples of this duty include arrested clients who call in the middle of the night, sudden legal maneuvers by opposing counsel that require an immediate response, or additional work or social complications caused by sensitive investigations or high-profile cases. The higher the duty level, the more interruptions occur. A lawyer's duty is rarely life-threatening, but frequent overtime and sudden emergencies take a toll on family and friends.

An attorney's duties may conflict with the typical requirement in the *Mysteries* genre that the killer be punished for his acts. In several short stories, Rumpole succeeds in acquitting his client, and later finds out either that the client was guilty or knew who committed the crime. His Code of Honor and his personal views on prosecutions do not permit him to publicly expose the guilty party.

As written, this is a -1 point quirk. It will generally not interfere with the character's actions or force him into unfair or dangerous situations. GMs can set it at a higher level if warranted by the campaign setting. This duty may reflect a conflict between the attorney's ethical duty and personal morality. It can be supplemented by a Code of Honor or Vow holding the attorney to higher personal standards than those imposed by law.

## *Enemies*

**see pp. B135**

Investigators may acquire a variety of enemies in their work. Enemies may include not just criminals sent to jail by the investigator, but rival investigators or police officers whom they have embarrassed or outshone.

## *Intolerance (Non-cops)*

**p. B140**

Police who regard everyone who isn't an officer as inferior to fellow officers, and will do whatever it takes to shield fellow officers from meddling citizens and officials, have the disadvantage *Intolerance (Non-cops)*. This is worth -5 points.

## *Reputation*

**see p. B26-28**

Being a private investigator can itself be a negative reputation. Witnesses often react poorly to a “shamus” poking around their affairs. Some will feel the matter should be best left to the police. Others may be afraid that the detective will discover one of their own secrets.

Cops who lack both the Code of Honor (Police) and Intolerance (Non-cop) disadvantages may take Reputation -2 (“Not a team player”; Only to police), worth -5 points. Other cops will assume that since the loner’s loyalties are neither to the citizens he’s sworn to protect nor to his fellow cops, they must lie elsewhere – probably with criminals, himself, or Internal Affairs.

## *Secret*

**see pp. B152-53**

Investigators sometimes have secrets of their own – being corrupt, having close relatives who are members of organized crime, suffering drug addictions, gambling problems, alcoholism – are all secrets which will make an investigator vulnerable to threats and blackmail if discovered. Investigators may also acquire a number of secrets during their careers involving clients they have broken the law to protect.

If an investigator is a police officer or licensed detective, then he has undergone a background check that would discover a criminal record and some background secrets. Until the mid-20th century, however, some detective agencies hired reformed criminals as consultants and occasionally as operatives, on the theory that only a criminal could catch another criminal.

## *Sense of Duty (Client)*

**see p. B153**

Hard-boiled detectives go to great lengths to protect their clients, often breaking or bending the law in the process. Detectives may neglect to report crimes if a client might be involved. They may hide evidence, witnesses, or clients from police or other authorities. A detective may risk police suspicion, even jail, to protect a client’s secrets and interests. An investigator may lie to police, or tell them a limited portion of the truth, in order to protect his client from charges or from adverse publicity.

This is illegal, thus the disadvantage is worth -5 points or more.

An investigator’s interest in a client’s welfare goes beyond the task at hand. An investigator may persist in following a case after being fired, especially if he thinks the client has been blackmailed or intimidated into such actions. An investigator may pursue a client’s welfare even against the client’s expressed wishes.

Most hard-boiled investigators also have a Code of Honor (Private Investigator). The Code of Honor and Sense of Duty can conflict if the investigator discovers the client has lied to him about something significant or is using the investigator for unjust purposes. Many investigators will try to find a creative solution that satisfies both, even if it involves blackmailing the client for his own good.

## *Social Stigma*

**see p. B155-56**

Police work and private investigation is dominated by heterosexual males of the dominant ethnic group. Investigators who are female, of racial or religious minorities, or openly homosexual, face routine discrimination. This can be reflected by a negative Reputation based on stereotypes or by a -5 to -10-point Social Stigma.

In earlier decades, discrimination is far more obvious and worth -10 to -15 points, depending on how seriously it affects the investigator’s ability to get cooperation from witnesses and authorities.

## **SKILLS**

### *Area Knowledge*

**see p. B176-177**

Although not always included in the templates, a private eye who works in specific areas should develop a good sense of them. Area knowledge is useful for knowing the local power-brokers and troublemakers, finding shortcuts and not getting lost during surveillance and chases, and knowing where to find a dry cleaner, or a bathroom, at 2 a.m. Area Knowledge also includes knowing the boundaries of the “high crime” areas of town, and may include some very basic ideas of how to avoid random violence in those areas. (For more detailed knowledge, buy Streetwise).

## *Brawling*

**see p. B182**

Many investigators get involved in fights with suspects, witnesses, and thugs. For those wanting more detailed rules, *GURPS Martial Arts* offers Police Hand-to-Hand (p. MA97) and Streetfighting (p. MA102) styles.

Brawling also includes the ability to use a sap or blackjack, a traditional tool of hardboiled detectives. Saps are extremely useful for investigators who need to disable an opponent, or even a client, without permanent injury. Saps are also commonly used by thugs against investigators to capture or disable them without causing permanent harm. (Possession of a sap or blackjack is a felony in many American states; generally no permit is available.)

## *Computer Hacking/TL*

**see p. B184**

Some investigators will go beyond tricking information out of clerks; they will hack directly into a suspect’s computer or a government database. Most fictional detectives do not hack; that kind of research happens in the background. Some real detectives do hack, often to get information out of a suspect’s computer pursuant to a warrant.

For fictional hacking, there are detailed quick-and-dirty rules in *Covert Ops* (see p. CV37). Hacking can be used to read a suspect’s personal computer, laptop, or PDA if the investigator can get access to it.

## *Computer Operation/TL*

**see p. B184**

Most fictional detectives do not have computer skills. Even among real-world law enforcement officers and private detectives, computer skills vary widely. Specialists in Internet crimes, child pornography, etc., may have a great deal of skill using computers.

## *Criminology/TL*

**see p. B186**

Criminology is the skill of interpreting crime scenes and forensic evidence to predict how the criminals involved will behave. Many investigators learn their criminology skill in the field, from years of observation and practice. Some augment their skill with academic study.



## *Detect Lies*

**see p. B187**

The skill of telling whether people are lying in a casual or social situation through their vocal cues. Detect Lies is affected by noise, hearing loss, and bad phone lines. If you are talking face-to-face with the target, there is no modifier. If you are speaking by telephone, the voice of the person on the other end is flattened; roll at -3.

Physical cues are covered by the Body Language skill (p. B181). Written communications are covered by Intelligence Analysis (p. B201-02).

## *Electronics Operation/TL*

**see p. B189**

Electronics Operation specialized to Communications (for wiretaps), Medical (for polygraph tests), Security Systems, and Sensors (for bugging devices) are all common skills for real-world detectives who provide security services for companies. Fictional detectives in the mystery genre rarely need, or have, such skills. (For more information about using surveillance devices see **GURPS Espionage** and **GURPS Covert Ops**.)

Electronics Operation (Media) is used, along with computer equipment (late TL7+) to clarify low-quality data, halving the penalties for poor recording quality on a Criminology or Intelligence Analysis roll. Generally, video camera images are poor quality (-2 penalty), and often a copy of the original (-1 per each step the images being used are from the original). (See pp. CV44, 49-50.) This specialization is also used to detect falsified or manipulated images.

## *Forensics/TL*

**see p. B196**

Forensics is the laboratory counterpart of the field science of criminology. It is the skill of finding, preserving and comparing fingerprints; of analyzing blood spatters, bullet paths, and chemicals; and of matching firearms to fired bullets and casings. Many investigators have a practical understanding of basic forensics sufficient to preserve a crime scene and understand a specialist's report. Some investigators are also specialists in forensics or one of its many specialties.

## *Guns/TL*

**see p. B198-99**

Most investigators have a basic familiarity with common firearms, but are not proficient with them. Many fictional private investigators do not carry a firearm.

Guns (Taser) is used for taser weapons, which allow an investigator to subdue a suspect without killing him. (Tasers are illegal in some American states.)

## *Interrogation*

**see p. B202**

Interrogation is used to coerce information from a reluctant suspect or witness. Investigators who are not police officers will have trouble legally using this skill, since they cannot compel a suspect to remain present without risking kidnapping charges.

## *Law*

**see p. B204**

Most investigators have a basic understanding of criminal and civil law as it applies to their job. Police officers will be familiar with criminal law, criminal procedure, and traffic law from their academy. Private investigators are often familiar with the basic elements of personal injury law, divorce and child custody laws, repossession and debt

collection, and other specialties as they apply to their work.

## *Liquid Projector*

**see p. B205**

This skill is used for defensive spray weapons like pepper spray and tear gas. (For further discussion and examples of common police sprays see p. 114 and p. C69. If no statistics are given for a particular aerosol, assume SS 5, Acc 1, 1/2D -. Max. 1.)

Defensive sprays are uncommon for private detectives, but may be used in the same manner as blackjacks and tasers, as a way to incapacitate suspects without killing them.

## *Mind Block*

**see p. B210**

A skill likely taught to police detectives, federal agents, and operatives for large private investigation/security agencies in any setting where psi powers or magic are a known abilities. A mind block that simulates the normal surface thoughts of an innocent person is a -4 to skill, but if successful the mind block does not look like one. If more detail is needed, see p. CV25 for the Camouflaged Mind Block maneuver.

At the GM's option, this skill could be used against technological mind probes.





## Professional Skill (Firefighting)

see p. B215-16

The professional skill of fighting fires. It is primarily possessed by current and former firefighters. A firefighter uses it to know how to hook up and use firefighting equipment; when and how to enter a burning building; how to properly use radio protocol and codes; how to judge the point of origin of a fire and whether it was suspiciously set; and so on. The skill should be used in situations that are obviously part of a firefighter's job that are not covered by other more specialized skills like Architecture, Chemistry, Climbing, and so on. It also covers routine use of common skills, such as Electronics Operations (Communications) to use a radio properly.

This skill requires specialization by department or agency. It defaults to other agencies at -1 to -5 or more depending on the differences between agencies.

## Professional Skill (Law Enforcement)

see p. B215-16

This skill includes police procedures and training. It is possessed by current and former police officers. An officer uses it to decide when to issue a traffic citation; to properly use radio protocol and codes; to know how to serve a warrant, how to make an arrest, and how to protect a crime scene; for crowd control; for directing traffic; for remembering and following departmental regulations and procedures; for understanding when to use force and how much; and so on. The skill should be used in situations that are obviously part of a police officer's job that are not covered by other more specialized skills like Criminology, Interrogation, and so on. It also covers routine use of common skills, such as Electronics Operations (Communications) to use a radio properly.

This skill requires specialization by department or agency. It defaults to other agencies at -1 to -5 or more depending on the differences between agencies.

## Psychology

see p. B216

Psychology is the formal study of behavior. Many investigators have a practical knowledge of psychology, even if they do not have formal training. Often, this is represented by Criminology, which includes some practical understanding of the kinds of abnormal psychology that result in criminal behavior. Criminology also subsumes some understanding of perception and memory as it relates to witnesses. In certain situations, the GM may allow a Criminology roll instead of a Psychology roll, and vice-versa, to predict criminal behavior, describe how a crime scene might reflect a suspect's personality, or decide on the best approach to question a suspect or witness.

Psychology is needed to diagnose or treat a suspect or witness, to determine whether a suspect is faking mental illness, to make any significant determinations about non-criminal behavior, to prescribe and diagnose the effects of psychotropic drugs, and to testify in court as an expert about criminal psychology. Psychology is also important to determining whether a witness' memory has been tainted by suggestion or after-acquired information, and to determining whether a confession has been coerced or is genuine.

## Public Speaking

see p. B216

The ability to speak well extemporaneously is very important to investigators. It can be used to calm victims and bystanders, make friends with potential sources, and testify persuasively in court.

## Shadowing

see p. B219

Shadowing works best using a team of operatives instead of one investigator. The GM may wish to make only one shadowing roll against the team member with the lowest skill or worst modifiers. Once a target is aware of one shadow, then he can make a roll to spot any other operatives in sight.

## NEW ADVANTAGE

### Spirit Advisor

10 points

Primarily available in paranormal and fantasy settings. You have a "spirit friend" who shares his wisdom with you. This may be a ghost, a manifestation of a previous incarnation, a guardian angel, or any other form of minor spirit. The Spirit Advisor is an NPC (see *GURPS Spirits* for guidelines). A Spirit Advisor does not fight on your behalf; it simply provides information and advice.

This advantage costs 10 points, modified by the *Frequency of Appearance* modifiers on p. B23.

## NEW COMBAT TECHNIQUE

See pp. B229-32 for a description of how to purchase and use techniques.

### Handcuffing

Average

Defaults: DX-2, Judo-1, or Wrestling-2.

An investigator with the handcuffing maneuver knows how to quickly place handcuffs on a struggling suspect. This maneuver is a limited version of Binding (see p. MA57).

The Handcuffing maneuver can only be attempted in Close Combat. After a successful Parry or Grapple, the attacker must win a Quick Contest (Handcuffing vs. DX) to handcuff the targeted limb. The process is repeated for each arm or leg, or one side of the handcuff can be attached to a solid object like a pole or bar. The attacker automatically handcuffs a pinned (see p. B112) target in 2d seconds, or 2 seconds with a successful Handcuffing roll (1 second on a critical success). Handcuffs must be readied unless the investigator also has the skill Fast-Draw (Handcuffs). A limb placed in a lock is automatically cuffed, but use Handcuffing to cuff the other limbs. See p. C68 for breaking or escaping from handcuffs.

Police detectives and federal agents carry handcuffs. Some private investigators carry handcuffs or disposable plastic flex-ties (see p. C67) for use as temporary restraints.



# EQUIPMENT

An investigator needs very little equipment. An ordinary pencil and pad of paper, tape recorder, flashlight, and moderately-priced camera will suffice for most private investigations. Cell phones and pagers can be useful to keep in touch with clients and sources.

Police detectives and others who process crime scenes may carry a great deal of their department's specialized evidence collecting equipment. Such equipment is described in more detail in *GURPS Cops*, p. C71. A few useful, common items are also included here.

## BINOCULARS (TL5+)

In widespread use since the late-19th century, hunting or military binoculars typically have a magnification of 7× (although others are available). They give +3 to Vision rolls. \$100, 4 lbs. for a TL6 model.

TL7 military-grade 7× binoculars (such as the German Steiner model used as the M22 by the U.S. military) give +3 to Vision rolls. Since they magnify light, most add a further +1 to Vision rolls to negate darkness penalties. Rubber-armored and sealed against dirt, they get +2 on rolls to avoid damage from rough use. They feature either lenses coated to prevent glint that could reveal the user's location, or gold-coated lenses to protect the eyes against laser light (as the M22 pattern does). Those fitted with antilaser coating can be equipped with detachable hoods to reduce glint. Most have a rangefinding reticle. \$800, 2.3 lbs. The more recent M24 has the same features, but is compact enough to fit in a uniform pocket (Holdout -1). It doesn't provide a bonus in darkness. \$400, 0.8 lb.

High-end military binoculars function as above, but incorporate a digital compass (+1 Orienteering) and IR laser rangefinder, which is accurate to within 1 yard. Light-gathering optics cancel up to -2 in darkness penalties. Two AA batteries power it for 2 hours. \$4,000, 3.5 lbs. In the near future, the built-in computer will use scene-change detection software (p. CV44), giving +2 on Vision rolls to spot movement.

Low-end commercial binoculars have 8× magnification, but only give +2

to Vision rolls due to the limited field of vision, and no bonus in darkness. However, they are cheap and light: \$40, 0.4 lb.

The most powerful commercial binoculars are 20×, giving +4 to Vision rolls, and are mechanically stabilized (reducing movement penalties by 3); useful on boats or helicopters. Two AA batteries power it for 3 hours. \$5,000, 4 lbs.

## BODY ARMOR

Modern body armor was first marketed in 1971. The 1974 version was an olive-green military vest with inch-thick ceramic plates; it was heavy, cumbersome, and uncomfortable. By the late 1980s, armor had become lightweight, flexible, and comfortable. Many departments require patrol officers to wear armor on duty. Police detectives and federal agents are issued body armor, but often do not wear it routinely. Private detectives can purchase body armor, but it is very uncommon.

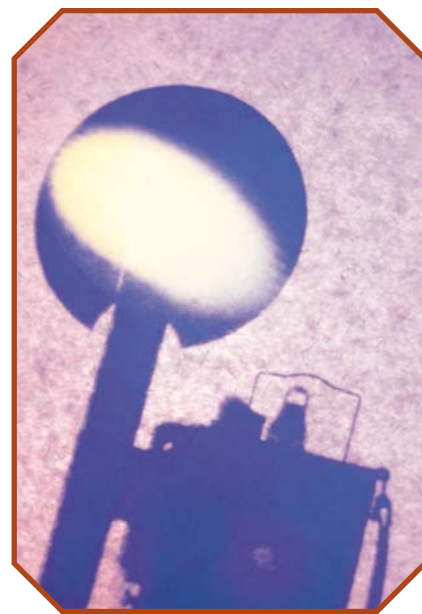
Ballistic and Tactical Vests covers the front and back Torso. Vests can be bought with groin panels as well. Properly-fitted body armor may have a 1/4 to 1" gap on the sides between the front and back panels. It is possible, but very unlikely, for a shot to go through that gap. (Note: if the owner gains or loses more than 5% of his weight at fitting, his body armor may no longer fit properly, making it uncomfortable or causing dangerously wide gaps.) (See pp. B282-286 for further discussions of body armor.)

*Type IIA Armor:* The most commonly issued body armor for police and law enforcement and the armor most likely to be worn by a detective under street clothing. Weight 1.5 to 2.25 lbs.; cost \$240 to \$975 (depending on manufacturer and style). The most expensive versions of this armor are designed to be concealed under a shirt and jacket (Holdout -1). Weight 5 lbs.; cost \$1,100 to \$1,300. For other levels of body armor, see p. C61.

## CAMERAS (TL5+)

Cameras come in a staggering number of styles, and can be equipped

with an endless array of accessories. The models below are representative of those used by modern investigators.



*35mm SLR (TL6):* Still the world's most popular camera, even though its technology hasn't really changed for decades. A model suitable for surveillance, with date imprinting, winder, zoom lens, and flash, is \$750, 1 lb. More expensive systems give a bonus to Photography skill: +1 for \$2,000, +2 for \$5,000, +3 for \$10,000, +4 for \$20,000+. These are heavy (2-3 lbs.) and bewilderingly complex: treat all bonuses as penalties unless Photography skill is 12+. A cheap camera can be had for under \$100. These are fine for vacation photos, but give -2 to skill for surveillance purposes.

*Camcorder (TL7+):* compact (Holdout +1) Mini DV video camera with optical and digital zoom (10× optical zoom, +3 Vision rolls), digital image stabilization (reduces movement penalties by 1), and a 7-hour rechargeable battery. Many can be used in low-light conditions, and some even feature a simple infrared imaging mode. They have a handy LCD screen for previewing images and can function as a digital camera (see below), storing images on an included memory card. All will have connections for transferring the video to a computer in digital format. A Mini DV tape can store between 80 and 120 minutes of video. \$1,000. 1 lb.



A high-quality Mini DV camera has all of the above features, but enhanced: 16× optical zoom (+4 to Vision rolls), better image stabilization (reduces movement penalties by 2 if the shoulder brace is used), and detachable microphone. It can use standard 35mm camera lenses (including wide-angle and telephoto lenses, as well as night vision attachments, pp. CV45-46). +1 to Photography rolls. A good battery will last 2 hours. \$3,000, 6 lbs.

*Digital Camera* (Late TL7): Stores color images on removable memory cards instead of film (the exact number depends on the image quality and the size of the card). These are easier to handle (no risk of accidental exposure or X-ray damage) and can transfer images directly to a computer without any quality loss from scanning. \$200, 0.5 lb. Digital cameras are very compact (Holdout +2) but tend to have limited telescopic capabilities (most use digital zoom), and this can result in a -1 to Photography rolls for surveillance purposes. High-quality models (no penalty, or even a bonus) cost five times as much.

*"Spy" Camera* (TL7): Any one of a variety of cameras that can take pictures while hidden within a suit jacket, wrist-watch, briefcase, or other unobtrusive item (Holdout +5). Since the wearer cannot see what he is photographing, roll Photography at -2 or more. Takes photos on a miniature film cartridge, which necessitates specialized developing equipment (included). \$1,450, negligible weight.

*Video Camera* (TL7+): A version of the camcorder that can be concealed nearly anywhere (Holdout +5). A CCD Camera is a chip camera with a pinhole lens, mounted on a 1"-square circuit board. A basic component; with an appropriate Electronics Operation roll, it can be used to build any number of surveillance devices. It must be connected to a transmitter or recorder to be useful. \$90 for black-and-white, \$225 for color; negligible weight. A concealable portable minicam can be hidden in a common item (necktie, pager, wrist watch) and plugged into a transmitter or recorder hidden in a pocket, belt pouch, etc. The basic cost is \$200 for black and white, \$330 for color, plus the cost of the object in which it is concealed. Smaller models fit in a pen or sunglasses and cost \$700. All have negligible weight. A camera concealed in an indoor fixture (clock, electrical outlet, exit sign, smoke detector, speaker, etc.)

costs \$200 for black-and-white, \$330 for color (any model). It does not significantly alter the weight of the concealing fixture.

## CRIME SCENE EQUIPMENT

Crime scene equipment can include anything from a camera, a basic fingerprint kit, and some evidence bags to a small truck full of specialized tools. Most private investigators and police detectives will carry, at best, a few useful items like a set of latex gloves, a measuring tape, and perhaps some evidence collection bags. Investigators may also have a pair of binoculars, camcorder, moderately priced camera with a zoom lens, and tape recorder in their cars.

*Barrier Tape*: Brightly colored tape used to mark crime scenes, police lines, or restricted areas. Usually yellow with the words "Crime Scene Do Not Enter" or other warnings printed on it. Comes in 3" wide rolls, 1,000' for \$10. A plastic reusable dispenser costs \$15. Weight 2 lbs. (including dispenser).

*Crime Scene Placards*:

Yellow aluminum triangles marked with letters or numbers, used to mark the location of small pieces of evidence for crime scene photos. Set of 26 letters \$100, 15 numbers \$50, weight 2 lbs.

*Evidence Collection Kit*: Case containing barrier tape, tape measure, magnifying glass, evidence tape, bags, tubes, cans, markers, 2 pair of gloves, syringe tube, scissors, tweezers and penlight. Weight 11 lbs.; cost \$155.

*Evidence Bags*: Sealable plastic bag (12" × 10") with pre-printed grid to list chain of custody: \$20 for 100. Sealable brown paper bags (18" × 12") with pre-printed grid to list chain of custody: \$25 for 100, 8 oz. per package.

*Evidence Tubes*: Clear plastic tubes (12" × 3" or 8" × 1.25") for evidence. \$15 for 12 small or 8 large. 1 oz per tube.

*Latent Fingerprint Kit*, pocket sized (6" × 4" × 1.5"): Contains 4 drams of black latent powder, 4 drams of white latent powder, 4 drams of "safecracker" latent powder, 2 2"x4" transparent fingerprint lifters, 2 white fingerprint lifters, 2 black fingerprint lifters, 2 pow-

der brushes, and a 3× magnifying glass. \$27, 10 oz.

*Latent Fingerprint Kit*, large, large pocket sized (9" × 4" × 2"): Contains 1 oz. of black powder, 1 oz. of silver/gray powder, two fingerprint brushes, 4 each transparent, black, and white fingerprint lifters, 4 each black-backed and white-backed record cards (3.5" × 5"), a form pad for elimination prints, a pad of ink, and a case with zipper. \$50, 1.25 lbs.

*Lockpicks*: The lockpicks needed to open modern locks are expensive: an ordinary set is \$140, a fine-quality set (+1 skill) is \$270. Weight negligible. The GM is free to assess from -1 to -4 skill to those using the \$30 "bargain-basement" version on p. B213. Lockpicks are considered "burglar's tools" and are often illegal for anyone but a police officer or locksmith to possess. Philip Marlowe instead carries a thicker than normal piece of clear, flexible plastic in his wallet, over his license, which he can use to pry many 1920-30s vintage latches.

*Metal Detector*: Standard 16" wand: \$150, 1.5 lbs. Small 8" wand: \$200, 8 oz.



## DEFENSIVE SPRAYS AND TASERS

Incapacitating sprays are legal in most states for civilian self-defense and might be carried by an investigator. Incapacitating weapons usually have three basic effects: fright, blinding, and stunning. Most incapacitating weapons do little actual damage.

A defensive spray is a small can of irritant liquid – Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) or Mace – intended to be sprayed in the face (-5 to hit) of a target. Many versions fire a cone of liquid (+1 to hit).

A target hit *in the face* with a defensive spray takes 1 point of damage from skin irritation and burning, and begins Coughing and Sneezing (p. B428). (A target hit elsewhere with a defensive spray is only affected if he is foolish enough to touch the affected area before washing it, and then rubs his eyes.) The target then makes two rolls. The first is a Fright Check at +2, unless the target is familiar with the spray from police, corrections, or military training, or from multiple previous exposures. The second is a HT roll to avoid the incapacitation effects. Defensive sprays usually need a three-second burst to be effective. In **GURPS** terms, if the target is hit in the face once for only one second, the HT roll is at +2. If the target is hit again for one second before the spray can be cleaned off, that HT roll is at +0. If the target is hit a third time for one second before the spray can be cleaned off, the HT roll for the third and subsequent hits is at -2. Strong Will and Weak Will have their normal effects. High Pain Threshold gives a +3 bonus to the roll; Low Pain Threshold gives a -3. Targets who are extremely intoxicated receive a +3.

Any target who fails the HT roll is immediately rendered temporarily Blind (see p. B124) (-10 to all combat skills) for (20-HT) turns (minimum 1). Once the blindness wears off, the target is at -4 to vision and DX rolls and can make a HT roll every 5 minutes to shake off the effects. On the first successful roll, penalties to attributes and skills are halved. The second such roll negates all effects. A successful Physician or First-Aid roll and a gallon of water to flush the eyes will allow immediate recovery. Each attempt takes 1 minute.

Defensive sprays can be Blocked or Dodged, but not Parried; DB from armor does not apply, but DB from shields does. A gas mask, sealed armor, or sealed eye protection protects completely against the effects of OC spray or Mace. Eyeglasses do not provide protection. Mace, which is a version of Tear Gas (see pp. B439), can affect a non-target person, even the firer, if the spray is used in an enclosed area like a car. A person within the same hex makes HT rolls at +4 to avoid being affected.

\$13 to \$16; 2.5 oz. (three 1-second doses) or 4 oz. (twelve 1-second doses). A typical spray has SS 10, ACC 3, Max 5.

Tasers (electronic defense modules) were fairly common from the late 1980s to early 1990s. They fell out of favor after

the Rodney King case in California. Members of the public can buy tasers in many, but not all, American states.

A standard taser is a hand-fired electric stunner with a range of five to seven yards. Compressed gas is used to fire darts connected to a battery by wires. The darts can penetrate up to 2" of normal clothing, but not armor. A taser has SS 14, Acc 2. Reloading takes about 10 seconds unless the model has multiple shots.

If the target is hit, see p. B432 for the weapon's affects. The darts do no significant damage otherwise. They are generally legal for civilian use.

Base cost \$160 for a single-shot model; 22 oz. Laser sights, double shots, and longer range are possible at increased cost.



## FIREARMS

Police departments and federal agencies prefer to issue or allow purchase of firearms from major manufacturers, in .38 Special, .357 Magnum, 9×19mm Parabellum, .40 S&W, or .45 ACP caliber. Private investigators who are retired or former police officers will likely carry

the same kind of firearm they were issued.

Until the mid-1980s, most police departments issued 6-shot .38 Special caliber revolvers with standard round-nosed ammunition. In the 1980s, more powerful semiautomatic handguns with hollow-point ammunition became more common. There are still departments that issue or allow .38 Special revolvers. Police officers are exempted from many federal firearms laws that prohibit civilians from buying new high-capacity (over 10 round) pistol magazines.

This list includes the most common modern handguns used by American police officers and federal agents today. These are also likely to be the most common pistols used by detectives.

### Revolvers

#### S&W Model 10 Military & Police, .38 Special (USA, 1902-)

Smith & Wesson's revolver with a swing-out cylinder is still made in a variety of models with minor changes. It used to be one of the most common police firearms in North America. It cost \$460 in 2005.

#### S&W Model 36 Chief's Special, .38 Special (USA, 1950-1999)

This snubnose revolver is used as an easily concealable weapon by detectives, and as a backup gun by others.

### Semiautomatic Pistols

#### SIG-Sauer P226, 9×19mm Parabellum (Germany/Switzerland, 1983-)

The issue sidearm of the FBI from 1992-1998, and still used by SWAT teams of the RCMP and the Washington D.C. police departments. It cost \$650 in 2005.

The Texas Rangers, among others, use it chambered for the .357 SIG (1995-); Dmg 3d-1 pi, Shots 13+1. The Arizona State Troopers and San Francisco police use it in .40 S&W (1998-); Dmg 2d+2 pi+, Shots 13+1.

The P228 (1988-1997) was essentially a smaller variant of the P226 Dmg 2d+1 pi, Wt. 2.1/0.5, Shots 13+1. It was widely adopted by agencies in the 1990s, including by the FBI and Secret Service. In 2005, it remains the sidearm of the ATF, Internal Revenue Service, and U.S. military police and intelligence services (there known as *M11*).



**Beretta Mod 92F, 9×19mm  
Parabellum (Italy, 1984-)**

Standard sidearm of the LAPD, as well as many other U.S. and foreign agencies. It cost \$485 in 2005.

The *Model 96D Brigadier* (1992-), chambered for the .40 S&W cartridge, is issued by the U.S. Border Patrol; Dmg 2d+2 pi+, Shots 11+1.

**Glock 22, .40 S&W (Austria, 1991-)**

This weapon is currently the most popular handguns in service with U.S. agencies and police forces. Standard sidearm of FBI and DEA from 1998. It cost \$400 in 2005.

**AMT Back Up II, .380 ACP  
(USA, 1992-)**

A popular secondary “hideaway” gun for police officers and drug dealers. It cost \$320 in 2005.

**Springfield M1911-A1 Bureau  
Model, .45 ACP (USA, 1998-)**

This weapon was adopted as standard issue for all SWAT-qualified FBI agents in 1998. It is a customized variant of the famous Colt Government. Usually used with high-powered ammunition (Dmg 2d+2 pi+). Similar guns are employed by the FBI’s HRT and the LAPD’s SWAT operators. The original Colt Government was Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer’s favorite firearm. It cost \$1,350 in 2005.

## Shotguns

Shotguns rarely appear in mystery fiction. Detectives usually don’t need that kind of firepower. However, a detective may own a shotgun for hunting purposes, and throw it in his car trunk for an extremely dangerous situation. “Less than lethal” beanbag, pepper, and plastic shotgun rounds are available to the public, but they are significantly more expensive than standard ammunition. It would be highly unlikely for any detective, other than perhaps a bounty hunter, to own or use such ammunition. For details see *GURPS Cops*, pp. 64-67.

**Remington Model 870P, 12G  
2.75” (USA, 1965-)**

One of the most popular police pump-action shotguns; the police model has an extended magazine. American police prefer pump-action shotguns because they are more reliable than

semiautomatic shotguns. This weapon is standard issue for DEA, FBI, LAPD and the London Met. It cost \$400 in 2005.

**Benelli M1 Super 90, 12G 2.75”  
(Italy, 1984-)**

Probably the most popular modern semiautomatic shotgun. It is in service with the SWAT teams of Los Angeles, L.A. County, and Detroit, among others. It cost \$960 in 2005.

**Mossberg Model 590, 12G 2.75”  
(USA, 1987-)**

This pump-action weapon has seen widespread service not only with the U.S. military, but also with many police departments. It cost \$340 in 2005.

## FLASHLIGHTS

Many private investigators keep a large baton-style flashlight made from aircraft aluminum in their cars. (If used as a weapon, treat as a baton.) The light provides up to 1.5 hours of continuous burn time and recharges in 10 hours. 13” long. \$100 + \$30 for recharger. 2 lbs. Holdout -2. A polymer version of the same light is \$80 +\$30 for the recharger. 1 lb.

Some detectives also carry a small 4.75” flashlight. It is made from aircraft aluminum and provides two continuous hours of light. \$20, 4 oz. Holdout +2. Can be used as a “pommel” in melee for +1 punching damage. Some shotguns and pistols have equipment rails that allow flashlights of this size or smaller to be mounted below the barrel, allowing the user to have both hands on the weapon.

## HANDCUFFS

Private investigators rarely carry handcuffs; police detectives will carry at least one pair. All handcuffs use the same key. For a longer discussion of handcuffs, see *GURPS Cops*, pp. 67-68. Hard-boiled detectives are sometimes restrained with handcuffs by the heavy or his henchmen.

*Handcuff Key*: \$3, weight negligible. Holdout +6, +1 if X-ray or metal detector is used. Handcuff keys can be purchased in any police supply store or by catalog. If a police officer finds a “civilian” in possession of a handcuff key, he will suspect that the owner is up to no good.

*Smith & Wesson Model 10 Nickel Plated Handcuffs*: Standard police model handcuffs. PD 3, DR 5, HP 14. \$40.

Holdout +2. Can only be cut with a hacksaw or bolt cutters. -5 to Escape skill.

Someone with his hands cuffed behind his back is at -1 to DX and cannot use any skills that require free use of his arms. He is at -4 to DX for tasks that require the use of his hands and he must work blind when trying to manipulate an object behind his back. Most tasks that require use of arms are impossible while cuffed.

Anyone who can make a successful Acrobatics or Escape skill roll can bring his legs up and slip his arms around to the front. Someone who has his hands cuffed in front of his body suffers no penalty to DX and is only at -1 to skills that require manual dexterity. Skills and maneuvers that require free use of the arms (such as most hand strikes) are still impossible, but two-handed weapon skills like Guns (Pistol) and Two-Handed Sword function normally while a person is cuffed. Assign a penalty of -1 to -4 to other weapon skills. (This is why police officers are trained not to handcuff a person in front.)

A prisoner might be able to break free from handcuffs. First, he must make a Will roll, at +4 if he has High Pain Threshold or is on drugs that deaden pain (such as heroin, morphine, or PCPs) or -4 if he has Low Pain Threshold, and at -1 for each point of damage he is willing to accept during the breakout attempt to a maximum of his current hit points. On a failed roll, the prisoner aborts his escape attempt due to the pain on his wrists. If he makes his roll, roll a Contest of ST minus the HP of the restraint to break free. Add +1 to effective ST per point of HP damage he was willing to take during the Will roll. Roll at -4 to Will and ST if one arm is already crippled.

On a critical success the prisoner breaks free and takes no damage (the cuffs had a weak point). On a normal success, he breaks free but takes 1 point of damage to each arm, plus any damage he was willing to take divided evenly between his arms. On a failure, the victim takes 1d-2 damage (plus any extra damage), minimum 1 point per arm, and he doesn’t break free. On a critical failure, the victim takes maximum damage per arm – both his arms are crippled until the damage is healed. Repeated attempts are allowed until both arms are crippled.



# WEAPON TABLES

## Revolvers

Guns/TL (Pistols) (DX-4 or most other Guns at -2)

| TL | Weapon                           | Damage  | Acc | Range     | Weight   | RoF | Shots | ST | Bulk | Rcl | Cost  | LC | Notes |
|----|----------------------------------|---------|-----|-----------|----------|-----|-------|----|------|-----|-------|----|-------|
| 6  | S&W Model 10 M&P .38 Special     | 2d pi   | 2   | 140/1,500 | 2/0.2    | 3   | 6(3i) | 8  | -2   | 2   | \$200 | 3  |       |
| 7  | S&W Model 36 Chiefs, .38 Special | 2d-1 pi | 1   | 120/1,300 | 1.4/0.17 | 3   | 5(3i) | 8  | -1   | 2   | \$160 | 3  |       |

## Semiautomatic Pistols

Guns/TL (Pistols) (DX-4 or most other Guns at -2)

| TL | Weapon                               | Damage   | Acc | Range     | Weight  | RoF | Shots   | ST | Bulk | Rcl | Cost  | LC | Notes |
|----|--------------------------------------|----------|-----|-----------|---------|-----|---------|----|------|-----|-------|----|-------|
| 8  | SIG-Sauer P226, 9×19mm               | 2d+2 pi  | 2   | 150/1,700 | 2.4/0.6 | 3   | 15+1(3) | 9  | -2   | 2   | \$620 | 3  | [1]   |
| 8  | Beretta Mod 92F, 9×19mm              | 2d+2 pi  | 2   | 160/1,800 | 2.8/0.5 | 3   | 15+1(3) | 9  | -2   | 2   | \$380 | 3  |       |
| 8  | Glock 22, .40 S&W                    | 2d+2 pi+ | 2   | 150/1,700 | 2.1/0.7 | 3   | 15+1(3) | 8  | -2   | 2   | \$310 | 3  |       |
| 8  | AMT Back Up, .380 ACP                | 2d-1 pi  | 1   | 110/1,100 | 1.4/0.3 | 3   | 5+1(3)  | 8  | -1   | 2   | \$210 | 3  |       |
| 8  | Springfield M1911-A1 Bureau, .45 ACP | 2d pi+   | 2   | 120/1,300 | 3/0.5   | 3   | 8+1(3)  | 10 | -2   | 3   | \$760 | 3  | [1]   |

[1] Very reliable. Will not malfunction unless lack of maintenance lowers Malf. (see p. B407).

## Shotguns

Guns/TL (Shotgun) (DX-4 or most other Guns at -2)

| TL | Weapon                          | Damage  | Acc | Range  | Weight  | RoF | Shots   | ST  | Bulk | Rcl | Cost  | LC | Notes |
|----|---------------------------------|---------|-----|--------|---------|-----|---------|-----|------|-----|-------|----|-------|
| 7  | Remington Model 870P, 12G 2.75" | 1d+1 pi | 3   | 50/450 | 7.9/1.1 | 2×9 | 7+1(3i) | 12† | -5   | 1   | \$280 | 3  |       |
| 8  | Benelli M1 Super 90, 12G 2.75"  | 1d+1 pi | 3   | 50/450 | 8.5/1.1 | 3×9 | 7+1(3i) | 12† | -5   | 1   | \$720 | 3  |       |
| 8  | Mossberg Model 590, 12G 2.75"   | 1d+1 pi | 3   | 50/450 | 8.5/1.3 | 2×9 | 9+1(3i) | 12† | -5   | 1   | \$310 | 3  |       |

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Freeling, Nicolas. *A Dwarf Kingdom* (Mysterious Press, 1996). A retired French police inspector tries to rescue his kidnapped grandchild.

Freeling, Nicholas. *Love in Amsterdam* (Carroll & Graf, 1962). Dutch homicide investigation through the eyes of the suspect.

Garcia, Eric. *Anonymous Rex* (Berkley Prime Press, 2000). Hardboiled detective story with a raptor dinosaur protagonist.

Gardner, Earl Stanley. *The Case of the Crooked Candle* (John Curley & Assoc., 1944). Perry Mason investigates murder on a yacht.

Gardner, Earl Stanley. *The Case of the Sulky Girl* (Aeonian Press, 1933). Perry Mason defends an heiress accused of murder.

Grafton, Sue. *"D" is for Deadbeat* (Bantam, 1987). A detective investigates a client's death shortly after hiring her to deliver a large check to a young boy.

Garrett, Randall. *Too Many Magicians* (Doubleday, 1966). A detective and his forensic sorcerer investigate murder at a magicians' convention.

Hare, Cyril. *Tragedy at Law* (Harper & Row, 1942). Threats and murder on a WWII English judicial circuit.

Hammett, Dashiell. *The Dain Curse* (Wing Books, 1980) (first published 1929). Convoluted tale of family secrets and curses.

Hammett, Dashiell. *The Maltese Falcon* (Wing Books, 1980) (first published 1930). Classic search for a mysterious figurine.

Hammett, Dashiell. *Red Harvest* (Wing Books, 1980) (first published 1928). Detective cleans up a crooked town, solving murders and pitting gangsters against each other.

Hayden, George A. *Crime and Punishment in Medieval Chinese Drama: Three Judge Pao Plays* (Harvard University Press, 1978). A collection of historical mysteries.

Hillerman, Tony. *A Thief of Time* (Harper & Row, 1988). Navaho police officers track a missing anthropologist.

Iles, Francis. *Malice Aforethought* (Harper & Row, 1931). An English country doctor resolves to murder his wife.

James, P.D. *The Black Tower* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975). Murder at a seaside convalescent home.

James, P.D. *A Taste for Death* (Warner Books, 1986). An English politician's murder reveals domestic woes among his family and the investigators.

King, C. Daly. *The Curious Mr. Tarrant* (Dover, 1977) (first published 1935). Short locked room stories with supernatural touches.

Linington, Elizabeth. *Felony Report* (Doubleday, 1984). Police procedural dealing with robberies, homicides, and a serial poisoner.

MacDonald, John. *The Empty Copper Sea* (Fawcett Gold Medal Books, 1978). Travis McGee and Meyer investigate a businessman's disappearance.

Macdonald, Ross. *The Chill* (Warner, 1963). A missing persons case leads Lew Archer into three murders.

Macdonald, Ross. *The Galton Case* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1959). Searching for a long-lost heir leads to fraud and murder.

McBain, Ed. *The Last Dance* (Pocket Books, 1999). A group of seemingly unrelated deaths investigated by a squad of detectives in a New York City analog.

McBain, Ed. *Lightning* (Avon, 1984). A classic police procedural novel involving a squad of detectives in a New York City analog.

McCrum, Sharyn. *Bimbos of the Death Sun* (Ballantine, 1997). Murder at a science-fiction convention.

Mortimer, John. *Rumpole of the Bailey* (Penguin, 1978). Short stories about a crusty English barrister trying criminal cases in the 1950-70s.

Mortimer, John. *Rumpole for the Defence* (Penguin, 1981). More Rumpole short stories.

Niven, Larry. *The Long ARM of Gil Hamilton* (Baen, 1976). A collection of stories about a near-future United Nations cop with limited telekinesis.

Parker, Robert B. *Early Autumn* (Delacorte, 1981). Spenser becomes a foster father to a teenage boy caught in a messy divorce.

Parker, Robert B. *Looking for Rachel Wallace* (Delacorte, 1980). Spenser guards a controversial writer who is kidnapped after firing him.

Parker, Robert B. *Promised Land* (Dell, 1976). Spenser helps a land developer and his wife reconcile their marriage and escape from various criminal entanglements.

Peters, Ellis. *One Corpse Too Many* (Fawcett Crest, 1979). Brother Cadfael unravels a murder, a hidden heir, and a missing treasure.

Poe, Edgar Allen. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales* (World Literature, 1960). This collection includes *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Purloined Letter*, two early "Western" detectives stories.

Pratchett, Terry. *Men at Arms* (HarperTorch, 1993). This book, and others featuring the Ankh-Morpork City Watch, provide a good example of a low-tech setting where the police force gradually evolves a modern approach to solving crimes.

Pulver, Mary. *Murder at the War* (FTL Publications, 2001). Murder at the SCA's Pennsic event.

Rohmer, Sax. *The Dream Detective* (McKinlay, Stone & MacKenzie, 1925). Collected short stories about a detective who sleeps on a special pillow at the crime scene to receive psychic impressions from the past.

Rowland, Laura Joh. *Bundori* (Villard, 1996). Mystery novel set in late 17th-century Japan.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. *Extremes* (Roc, 2003). Near future mystery-thriller involving murder at a marathon held on the moon's surface.

Sayers, Dorothy L. *Lord Peter* (Avon, 1972). Collection of all the Lord Peter Wimsey short stories (1928-1938).

Sayers, Dorothy L. *Murder Must Advertise* (Avon, 1933). Lord Peter Wimsey takes a job in an advertising agency to solve a murder tied to a smuggling ring.

Sayers, Dorothy L. *The Nine Tailors* (Harvest/HBJ Books, 1934). Lord Peter Wimsey's good deed unleashes a flood of buried secrets; contains a nifty cipher.

Sayers, Dorothy L. *Strong Poison* (Avon, 1930). Lord Peter Wimsey defends a woman on trial for poisoning her lover.

Saylor, Steven. *Arms of Nemesis* (Ivy Books, 1992). A private detective investigates murder, fraud, and arms-smuggling in ancient Rome (72 B.C.).

Shannon, Dell. *The Ringer* (William Morrow & Co., 1971). LAPD homicide unit solves a series of murders while a detective is under Internal Affairs scrutiny.

Simenon, Georges. *Maigret in Montmartre* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959). A Parisian police inspector investigates two deaths.

Spillane, Mickey. *I, The Jury* (Curley Publishing, 1947). Mike Hammer's investigation of a friend's death leads to multiple murders and various rackets.

Stout, Rex. *In the Best Families* (G.K. Hall & Co., 1991) (first published 1950). A wife's concerns about her husband lead to murder; Nero Wolfe's disappearance, and a showdown with a cunning adversary.

Tey, Josephine. *The Daughter of Time* (Pocket Books, 1951). Hospitalized police inspector considers the career of Richard III of England.

Van Dine, S. S. *Philo Vance Investigates Omnibus* (C. Scribner's, 1936). Contains Dine's essay *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* (1928).

Van Gulik, Robert. *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* (Dover, 1976). Translation of an 18th-century Chinese detective novel.

Van Gulik, Robert. *The Chinese Maze Murders* (Dover, 1956). First in a set of mysteries in Tang Dynasty China.

Woods, Paula, Ed. *Spooks, Spies, and Private Eyes* (Doubleday, 1995). A collection of short stories and excerpts of novels written by black authors.

## Nonfiction

Auger, Michel. *The Biker who Shot Me* (McClelland & Stewart, 2001). Montreal newspaper crime reporter's autobiography focusing on local crime and an attempt to assassinate him in 2000.

Bailey, Frank. *Out of the Woodpile: Black Characters in Crime and Detective Fiction* (Greenwood Press, 1991). Contains an index and descriptions of major and minor black characters in many detective stories.

Ball, Larry. *Desert Lawmen: The High Sheriffs of New Mexico and Arizona 1846-1912* (University of New Mexico Press, 1992). Historian's look at Old West law enforcement.

Ball, Larry. *United States Marshals of New Mexico and Arizona Territories, 1846-1912* (University of New Mexico Press, 1978). A historian's look at Old West law enforcement.

Baker, Mark. *D.A.: Prosecutors in their own Words* (Simon & Schuster, 1999). A collection of anecdotes by and about prosecutors.

Bataille, Georges. *The Trial of Gilles de Rais* (Amok, 1991). A medieval serial killer's trial that includes English translations of key court documents.

Bayard, Pierre. *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?; The Mystery Behind the Agatha*

*Christie Mystery* (The New Press, 2000; first published 1998). An analysis of the famous Christie story, discussing Christie's tricks for disguising events and suggesting that Poirot was mistaken.

Beavan, Colin. *Fingerprints* (Hyperion, 2001). A discussion of the evolution of fingerprinting in 19th-century England.

Bellamy, John G. *The Criminal Trial in Later Medieval England* (University of Toronto Press, 1998). Criminal jury trials in 1300-1500 with some notes on earlier and later history.

Benjaminson, Peter. *Secret Police: Inside the New York City Department of Investigation* (Barricade Books 1997). Civilian inspectors searching for fraud and white-collar crime in city government.

Bintliff, Russell. *Police Procedural: A Writer's Guide to the Police and How They Work* (Writers Digest Books, 1993). One of many fine books written for mystery writers about aspects of crime and investigation.

Blunt, Roscoe, Jr. *Carnage, Cops, and Deadlines* (Ambassador Books 2004) Police and fire beat reporter's career in the 1960s to mid-1980s.

Bok, Sissela. *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (Pantheon, 1982). Secrets and secrecy.

Brandon, David. *Stand and Deliver! A History of Highway Robbery* (Sutton, 2001). History and mythology of English Highwaymen.

Browne, Douglas and Tullett, E.V. *The Scalpel of Scotland Yard: The Life of Sir Bernard Spilsbury* (E.P. Dutton, 1952). Biography of the famous English forensic pathologist with descriptions of famous cases.

Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Romance, and Mystery: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 1976). Academic analysis of origins, structures, and archetypes.

Clark, Doug. *Dark Paths, Cold Trails* (Harper Collins, 2002). Profiling serial offenders in Canada.

Davis, Natalie Zemon. *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harvard University Press, 1983). Medieval missing-person mystery.

DiMaio, Vincent, and DiMaio, Dominick. *Forensic Pathology, Second Edition* (CRC Press, 2001). The "bible" on this topic; lots of technical details, but not for the faint-hearted.



Douglas, John, and Olshaker, Mark. *The Anatomy of Motive* (Scribner, 1999). FBI profiler's discussion of the factors that might cause a person to commit violent crimes.

Douglas, John and Olshaker, Mark. *Journey into Darkness* (Scribner, 1997). FBI investigative profiler discusses serial killers and serial rapists.

Douglas, John and Olshaker, Mark. *Mindhunter* (Scribner, 1995). FBI investigative profiler discusses serial killers and some of the more famous cases of the FBI Investigative Support Unit (formerly the Behavioral Sciences Unit).

Edwards, Samuel. *The Vidocq Dossier: The Story of the World's First Detective* (Houghton Mifflin, 1977). Biography of the 18th-century French detective.

Etienne, Philip, and Maynard, Martin. *The Infiltrators* (Penguin Books, 2000). Scotland Yard's undercover investigations; contains useful details on crime and criminals in modern London, especially the drug trade.

Gelman, Mitch. *Crime Scene: On the Streets with a Rookie Police Reporter* (Times Books 1992). Adventures of a New York City crime reporter in the late 1980s.

Grafton, Susan, ed. *Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America* (Writer's Digest Books, 1992). An advice book for aspiring mystery writers.

Grinnell-Milne, Duncan. *The Killing of William Rufus* (David & Charles, 1968). A conspiracy theory about the death of the English king.

Gudjonsson, Gisli. *The Psychology of Interrogations and Confessions* (John Wiley & Sons, 2003). British interrogation practices and criticism of the American theory.

Halttunen, Karen. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1998). A history of detective writing.

Hames, Michael. *The Dirty Squad: The Inside Story of the Obscene Publications Branch* (Warner, 2000). Operations in Scotland Yard's anti-pornography and child sexual abuse unit.

Horan, James D. *The Pinkertons: The Detective Dynasty that Made History* (Crown Publishers, 1967). Uncritical history of the famous detective agency.

Kirkland, Michael. *How to Solve a Murder* (Hungry Minds, 1995). Plain

language discussion of forensics, including history of various techniques.

Hibbard, Whitney, Worring, Raymond, and Brennan, Rich. *Psychic Criminology: An Operations Manual for Using Psychics in Criminal Investigations* (2nd Ed.) (Charles Thomas Publishers, Ltd. 2002) A guide for police in using psychics in investigations including several examples.

Inbau, Fred E., et al. *Criminal Interrogation and Confessions, Fourth Edition* (Aspen Publications, 2001). The bible on interrogation used by American police and private investigators.

Kamen, Henry. *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (Yale University Press, 1997). Discussion of the structure of the Inquisition.

Kelly, John and Wearne, Phillip. *Tainting Evidence: Inside the Scandals at the FBI Crime Lab* (Free Press, 1998). Journalists' discussion of problems revealed at the FBI's laboratory in the wake of a 1994 Department of Justice Inspector General's report.

Lee, Henry C. *Cracking Cases, The Science of Solving Crimes* (Prometheus, 2002). Forensic science viewed through notable cases.

Lewis, Arthur H. *Lament for the Molly Maguires* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964). Pinkerton operative's infiltration of the Irish miners' secret society.

Lukas, J. Anthony. *Big Trouble* (Simon & Schuster, 1997). The 1905 assassination of an Idaho ex-governor is used to discuss early 20th-century America; the investigation was led by Jamie McParland, the Pinkerton operative who had once infiltrated the Molly Maguires.

Lyons, Arthur, and Truzzi, Marcello. *The Blue Sense : Psychic Detectives and Crime* (Mysterious Press Books 1991) A guide to police use of psychics with a discussion of how cold-reading and suggestion can mislead detectives into trusting the wrong experts.

MacIntyre, Ben. *The Napoleon of Crime* (Delta, 1997). Biography of Adam Worth, famous 19th-century thief, model for Professor Moriarty.

McArdle, Phil. *Fatal Fascination* (Houghton Mifflin, 1988). Contrasts real and fictional police work.

McDermid, Val. *A Suitable Job for a Woman: Inside the World of Women Private Eyes* (Poisoned Pen Press, 1995). Interviews with American and English female detectives.

Mathers, Chris. *Crime School: Money Laundering* (Key Porter Books 2004) A Canadian detective's stories about crime and money, entertainingly written with several good ideas for following illicit money flows.

Micheels, Peter. *Heat: Fire C.S.I. and the War on Arson and Murder* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003). Mini-autobiographies of several NYC fire marshals.

Mitnick, Kevin and Simon, William. *The Art of Deception* (Wiley Publishing, Inc. 2002). An essential guide for players and GMs about how to trick people into providing information and access to computer systems.

Morn, Frank. *"The Eye that Never Sleeps"; A History of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency* (Indiana University Press, 1982). A history of the agency and the social circumstances that allowed it to prosper.

Morton, James. *East End Gangland* (Warner, 2000). History of crime in London, useful for procedural or hard-boiled adventures.

Norton, Mary Beth. *Founding Mothers and Fathers* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). Tediously academic discussion of colonial American gossip and power networks, useful for creating pre-modern investigations.

O'Connor, Niamh. *Cracking Crime* (O'Brien, 2001).

Biography of the Director of Ireland's Forensic Sciences Laboratory with discussion of forensic science and famous cases.

O'Sullivan, F. Dalton. *The Detective Adviser* (Detective Sciences, 1917). An advice manual for police detectives, insurance investigators, Secret Service agents, and private detectives. Includes a list of contemporary con games and swindles, as well as types of thieves.

Parkhurst, William. *True Detectives: The Real World of Today's P.I.* (Crown Publishers, 1989). Discussion of New York private detectives and some of their cases.

Randisi, Robert. *Writing the Private Eye Novel* (Writer's Digest Books, 1997). Advice book for aspiring mystery writers.

Remsburg, Charles. *Tactics for Criminal Patrol: Vehicle Stops, Drug Discovery, and Officer Survival* (Calibre Press 1995). (Patrol officer's guide to drug smuggling by vehicle with numerous examples of clever schemes and methods.

Rossmo, D. Kim. *Geographic Profiling* (CRC Press, 2000). Criminals' "hunting" behavior and movements.

Sachs, Jessica Snyder. *Corpse: Nature, Forensics, and the Struggle to Pinpoint Time of Death* (Basic Books 2001). History of forensics from simple observations to forensic entomology, botany, and microbiology.

Söderman, Harry. *Modern Criminal Investigation* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1936). A handbook of criminal investigation.

Soitos, Stephen. *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996). Academic discussion of detective fiction.

Tappl, William. *The Elements of Mystery Fiction* (The Writer, 1995). Advice book for aspiring mystery writers.

Thorwald, Jurgen. *The Century of the Detective* (Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1964). History of forensics.

Uviller, H. Richard. *Tempered Zeal* (Contemporary Books, 1988). Law professor spends summer studying NYPD robbery unit.

Vidocq, Francois Eugene. *Memoirs of Vidocq: Master of Crime* (AK Press, 2003). Abridged war stories by the early 19th-century French detective.

Vorpapel, Russell. *Profiles in Murder* (Perseus, 1998). Narrative of an FBI behavioral profiler's training course on serial murderers.

Wambaugh, Joseph. *Fire Lover* (Avon, 2002). True crime story of a California arson investigator convicted of serial arson and murder.

Webster, Jack. *Copper Jack: My Life on the Force* (Dundurn Press, 1991). Toronto homicide investigator's autobiography.

Wingate, Anne. *Scene of the Crime: A Writer's Guide to Crime-Scene Investigations* (Writers Digest Books, 1992). A handbook of crime-scene procedure.

Yeterian, Dixie. *Casebook of a Psychic Detective* (Stein & Day, 1982). Autobiography of a psychic involved in police investigations.

## Films

There are many excellent detective movies, although the genre tends more toward thrillers and caper movies than traditional mysteries. This is a short list of few well-known examples, and is primarily focused on private detectives.

*The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946). An adaptation of the Raymond Chandler novel into a confusing noir classic.

*Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974). A classic noir story about power, corruption, bribery, and betrayal.

*The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941). An adaptation of the Dashiell Hammett novel that became a classic noir detective movie.

*Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002). Adaptation of the Philip K. Dick novella about a police force that uses precognition to prevent murders before they occur.

*The Pink Panther* (Blake Edwards, 1964). Screwball comedy about a bumbling French inspector's pursuit of a jewel thief.

*Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). One of several classic Hitchcock mysteries, this one featuring an acrophobic police detective.

*Zero Effect* (Jake Kasdan, 1998). Quirky film about a genius detective who is afraid of interacting with people.

## Television

In addition to the series below, a number of well-known mystery novels have been adapted into TV movies and mini-series. A number of British authors' works were adapted and shown in the United States through PBS' *Mystery* series. GMs might find a comparison of a novel with the television adaptation useful if they are trying to figure out how to convert a written mystery plot into an RPG.

*Alien Nation* (1989-1997). A Los Angeles detective is paired with an alien refugee in a series using aliens as metaphors for social issues.

*Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981). Three beautiful former policewomen are hired as private eyes by a mysterious boss and his intermediary. More flash than substance, but very popular.

*Columbo* (1971-1978). Long running series about a rumpled, quirky Los

Angeles detective frequently underestimated by his adversaries.

*CSI: Crime Scene Investigations* (2000-ongoing). Drama about Las Vegas criminologists using state-of-the-art (and beyond) technology and techniques.

*Forever Knight* (1994-96). 13th-century vampire becomes modern homicide detective on the night shift, struggling to solve crimes and keep his partner from learning his true nature.

*Homicide* (1993-98, 2000). Drama based on homicide detectives in Baltimore.

*Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974-75). Newspaper reporter investigates grisly homicides with a supernatural link, but can never find sufficient proof for his skeptical editor.

*McCloud* (1970-77). Fish-out-of-water crime series about a New Mexico deputy marshal sent to New York City to learn modern crime-fighting methods.

*Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996). One of the longest-running crime series, featuring a mystery writer caught up in an endless sequence of murders.

*Perry Mason* (1957-1966, 1985-1993). Adaptation of the Earl Stanley Gardner novels about a defense attorney who represents only innocent clients and generally reveals the true criminal on the witness stand.

*The Rockford Files* (1974-1980). Adventures of an ex-con turned private eye, with a large array of interesting supporting characters involved in complex plots and frequent car chases.

*Quincy, M.E.* (1976-1983). Los Angeles medical examiner solves murders and examines social issues. A predecessor of *CSI*, with much less emphasis on cool forensic gadgets.

*Remington Steele* (1982-1987). When a female detective creates a mythical male boss, a charming con man steps into the boss' empty shoes.

*The Sentinel* (1996-1997). Police detective uses enhanced senses to solve crimes.

*Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?* (1969-1972). Classic Hanna-Barbera cartoon series about a team of young investigators and their talking dog who generally find that supernatural happenings stem from a clever guy with a nifty costume. The less said about the post-1972 versions, the better.

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