

Be a published mystery writer!

FabJob Guide to
**Become a
Mystery
Writer**



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1. Introduction

Writing mystery novels is as much **fun** as earning a living can get. In what other job can you hang out with bad company right at your desk, and **get paid for making up fiendishly clever stories of murder and mayhem**? Plus, you get to work at home and make your own hours.

If you entertain a dream about writing and publishing mystery novels, very likely you already love to read them. Well, as a mystery novelist, **you** will get to choose the perp's weapon, decide how the victim dies, plant the evidence, work the case and then execute the justice. Your books can bring enjoyment to your readers, and acclaim to you.



As a mystery writer you will be working in one of the most dynamic areas of publishing. Check out the **bestseller** lists in your local newspaper: at any given time you'll find several mystery novels there. Guaranteed. A recent issue of the *Los Angeles Times* featured no fewer than six mystery titles on its top 15 hardcover best-seller list. Few other categories of literature come close to achieving this kind of success. No matter what other trends have come and gone in the publishing world, mysteries have remained fixed in their appeal for decades.

What has changed is the perception by critics, and even some readers, of mystery writing as less than "real literature." But thanks to the terrific stylists working in the field, many mystery novels are now considered mainstream fiction. Writers such as **P.D. James, Michael Connelly, James Lee Burke** and **Susan Isaacs** are so outstandingly talented by anyone's measure, that they get all the respect they deserve.

In many instances, writers' paychecks reflect that respect. Some of today's most highly paid fiction writers are mystery novelists. **Patricia Cornwell**, the award-winning, best-selling author of the Kay Scarpetta series, broke records when she signed a three-book deal with G.P. Puttnam for **\$24 million**.

Since then, **Mary Higgins Clark**, the master of the suspense mystery, has gotten a five-book deal with Simon & Schuster that reportedly could earn her **\$15 million per book!** That's quite a step up from the \$3,000 advance she got for her first novel in 1975.

The success of a mystery novel can be unlimited. Crime fiction is popular the world over, and many books are translated into foreign languages. A book can lead to a series of books, even to a movie or television deal. **Robert B. Parker's** sleuth, Spenser, has been the subject of two television series. **James Patterson** has had recent hit movies – *Kiss the Girls* and *Along Came A Spider* – made from his Alex Cross novels.



This is not to say that there is only room in the mystery-publishing world for success stories such as these. Far from it. For every superstar like a **Sue Grafton** or a **John Grisham**, there is an entire Milky Way of others out there. These are the people who might never crack the best-seller list or make millions. Nevertheless, they write great mysteries and get published, sometimes by small, specialized publishing houses. After building up a following of dedicated readers they earn increasingly large advances, and become members of a lively and bright community of mystery lovers. Plus, they have a bloody good time doing it!

So what does it take to become a mystery novelist? No particular education or experience is compulsory. Writing ability is a given, and since you have bought this guide you likely know your own talents. Outside of that, the best preparation you can do is **read**.

If you are already a mystery reader, chances are you grew up on **Nancy Drew** and the **Hardy Boys**. As an adult you graduated to books about the grittier side of life: murders, heists, kidnappings, bombings, drug busts. No subtle clues get by you. You can sniff out red herrings at 20 paces. Often, you figure out the toughest cases, but are surprised and thrilled when the writer cleverly misleads you. That's a really good start.

On the other hand, you might be new to mysteries. A grisly headline has sparked an **idea**. Now you are thinking about turning it into a crime story. Perhaps a gruesome plot has bubbled up from the dark side of your brain: you've fantasized, say, about icing your boss. (Much better to do it on paper!) A knack for spotting a potential plot line and a lively imagination are real talents. These, too, are great places to begin on the path to becoming a mystery novelist.

You could work in some branch of the criminal justice system—law enforcement, the courts, the coroner’s office, a crime lab—and have a wealth of stories and professional information that you can parlay into a story. An expert in firearms, or a psychologist who can get into the head of a criminal, is able to make a murder story ring with truth. Readers love this kind of inside scoop. You are a **natural** for writing mysteries.

But there is more to achieving success as a mystery novelist than being a fan and having good ideas or expertise. That’s where this guide comes in. First it will help you decide on **what you are going to write**. Which of the various mystery genres best suits your plot and your style? Do you want to tackle a “stand alone” or begin a series? There are tips for working out your plot, picking a setting and creating characters. When you’re ready to start writing, you’ll find help on organizing your workspace and your time.

The second stage of the process is getting your book **published** and into the hands of readers. Literary agents can help, but how do you get them to represent you? What will compel an editor to pull your manuscript out of the pile in her office? Once your book is published, what can you do to ensure its success?



All you need to get started on this marvelous career is right here: resources, case studies and tips from published professionals. So read on, and **get a clue!**