

Who Doesn't Love a Mystery?  
November 2021

Regardless of its magnitude or complexity, a mystery is deliciously intriguing. We can't turn away from it. We are determined to solve it, sometimes on our own, sometimes with the help of another who is equally entrenched in the love of mystery.

It could be as simple—read “maddening”—as losing the car keys or putting down the favorite pen without an ounce of knowledge as to where the object is. The agony! Retrace your steps, meditate upon a moment in your life, ask yourself, “Just what was I thinking?” The result: late for work and settling for the scratchy pen that should have gone in the trash long ago.

At the other end of the spectrum are the mysteries to be savored. As a young girl, I and my eighth-grade girlfriends fell in love with Nancy Drew. We purchased and shared the series' books. We could recall nearly every plot, just from the book's title. Using the clues presented throughout, we solved each crime in tandem with Nancy. Although she adored her two best friends, who often spent time tied up with her in an abandoned house or a chilly cave, it was Nancy alone—even without her boyfriend Ned—who solved the mysteries. On the school playground, we created our own mysteries, employing, as young writers, too many characters and too many twists, but the joy was in solving each and every one of them.

As we moved into our high school years, my friends and I, newly introduced to the telephone as an all-afternoon chat line when our mothers were out, never responded politely to “Hello, who is calling, please?” Oh no. To the contrary, the initiator of the phone call crackled some cellophane and turned her usually high and sweet voice into that of an unidentifiable attenuated hag. She crackled and slobbered, “This is the dark shroud that will envelop and smother you tonight in your sleep.” Shrieks of terror from the callee and then “Guess who! Guess who!” from the caller. I hated that game, but I loved it.

Many years have passed, and those of us who grew up on Nancy Drew have not missed a single Louise Penny murder mystery, nearly all set in the delightful Canadian border town of Three Pines, wherein live a cast of delightful and eccentric characters and wherein a murder takes place almost yearly. In our lifetimes, the morally upstanding Nancy Drew has stepped aside for the morally upstanding Inspector Armand Gamache. Both always solve the crime, even if in the last remaining pages. And just as we did many years ago on a junior high playground, we readers zealously attempt to puzzle over every clue, character quirk, and misleading trail in order to solve the crime before our hero does.

Life loves mysteries! They are ours to enjoy. We needn't solve them. We gasp in wonder at the monarch's unfolding of its voluptuous wings in a pencil-width chrysalis. At the ability of the distant moon to make ocean waves ebb and flow. At the migration paths of birds. At the return of a lost dog, over miles and miles, to its home.

Yet don't we love to be fully immersed in a mystery. Afternoon fun in centuries of old involved an intriguing amble through—and an eventual and prideful emergence from—an expansive hedge maze, carefully designed and maintained by the estate's grounds keeper. Some were

simple, allowing one's mind to wander, or perhaps meditate, in the confines of the bushes sculpted into high walls with yielding or trick pathways. Some mazes, though, were so labyrinthine as to be considered daring, if not perilous or, in some extreme cases, deadly. And how much sharper must have been the demand on the wanderer's mind when its owner was seeking escape from an ardent or lascivious suitor or from a demon, daggers drawn!

How silly the hedge maze, we think. And yet, at Halloween, in rural areas, corn mazes appear. Some are innocuous, and we haul our children to them for the dizzying fun. Some are downright creepy: At the turns and twists that threaten "Lost!", the keepers of the mazes have erected bloody knives, severed heads, and gigantic, lifelike spiders.

Actually, one doesn't need Halloween as an excuse to be plunged into mystery. My husband's relatives own a large farm where vast fields of corn are grown. At the edge of a field one day, my brother-in-law—was he joking?—told me that some people, thinking they were clever enough to navigate by rows and contours and even the sun, never came out of corn fields. (sinister laugh heard offstage)

Sherlock Holmes was clever. Wasn't his a mind to study! When she was traveling in England, my mother bought her teenage book worm the complete bound set of Sherlock Holmes mysteries. Halfway through the book, and I am serious here, I felt a ping and a pop as my mind and brain shifted from their born state into a new state of being: that of the detective.

Having recently spent a few summer days on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the intrigue of the Lost Colony remains with me. In July 1587, a group of about 117 English settlers to the New World established their presence on small Roanoke Island. After some days, John White, noted by some historical accounts as the colony's governor (more largely famed as the grandfather of the first English child born on American soil), chose to return to England for more supplies. Upon his return, about three years later, he found the site grown over, with no trace of the settlers. One clue emerged: the word CROATOAN carved on a wooden post. Another partial clue, CRO carved into a tree, might suggest that the attempt to provide a message was abruptly halted. White assumed from these carvings that the settlers had followed their friend Chief Manteo to his homeland, Croatoan. Simply an assumption. The settlers' disappearance has yet to be explained, even by DNA tests. Someone may step forward in the future, don't you think, with the mind and means to unravel the mystery?

Some of us are old enough to remember the games that cried out to us from the backs of cereal boxes: word scrambles and searches, code breaking exercises, circle labyrinths, hidden items in a picture, word plays with hidden meanings. Some of us are crazy enough to have completed, during the pandemic, the 623 clues across / 609 clues down *New York Times* crossword puzzle, just to be privy to the hidden message created by completed sections.

All around are who-dunnits. They lurk in the still and lonely darkness. They step in front of us in well-lighted, busy airports. They intrigue, challenge, or frighten. They are scholarly or fraught with emotion. They are easy or unsolvable, concrete or elusive. Extend your hand and beckon them near. They will never disappoint.