



Some thoughts on writing mysteries

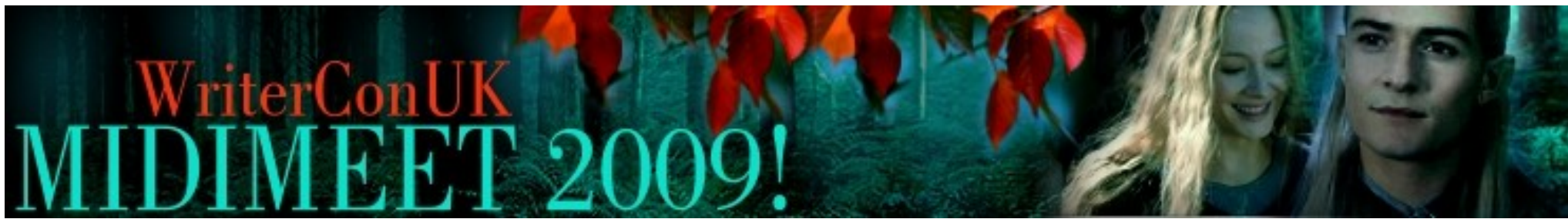
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Two sets of rules

- ▷ **Twenty Rules of Detective Fiction**
by SS van Dine
- ▷ **Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction**
by Monsignor Ronald Knox

Both are given in the handout.



The structure of a mystery story



- ▷ **Normality**, which is interrupted by some unexplained
 - ▷ **Event**, which leads to an
 - ▷ **Investigation** by one or more of the characters (shadowed by the reader); the characters eventually present a
 - ▷ **Solution**, which restores
 - ▷ **Normality**, or something like it.



Emphases that characterise a mystery

▷ **The event itself is 'mysterious'**

It's mysterious both in the context of the story and in the context of the reader's or the viewer's own experience.

▷ **There's an investigation by one or more of the characters**

Every plot invites the **reader** to make deductions but in a mystery the **characters** investigate and the reader shadows them.



Emphases that characterise a mystery

▷ **The clues are handled meticulously**

As van Dine says,

If the reader, after learning the explanation ... should reread the book, he [should] see ... that all the clues ... pointed to the culprit and that, if he had been as clever as the detective, he could have solved the mystery himself.

And he goes on to admit that many readers do, of course, beat the character(s) to the solution.



Normality



▷ **How long should be?**

▷ **How can we use it?**



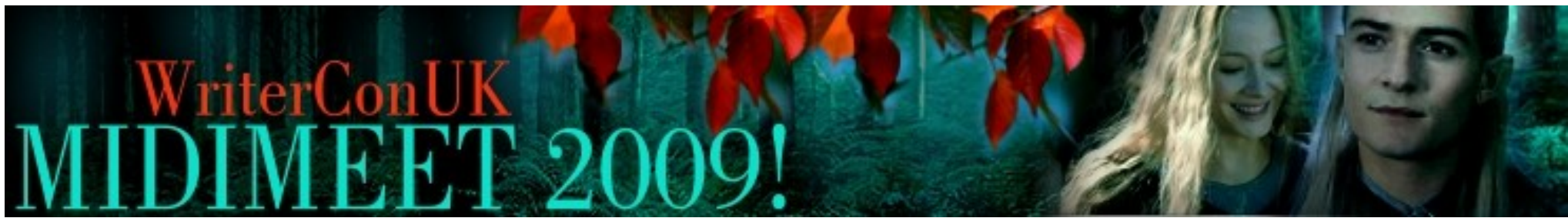
How long should it be?

- ▷ It may last for half of the story.
A Cure for all Diseases by Reginald Hill
- ▷ It may be relatively short.
Taggart ("There's bin a murrduurr!")
- ▷ It may seem to have disappeared altogether.
CSI Miami (Horatio and his shades)



How can we use it: introducing the culprit

- ▷ *The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, **but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.** Ronald Knox*
- ▷ *The culprit must turn out to be a person who has played a more or less prominent part in the story — that is, a person with whom the reader is familiar and in whom he takes an interest. **SS van Dine***
 - ▷ And, once you have a culprit, you also need some non-culprits for him or her to hide amongst.



How can we use it: introducing the murder weapon

- ▷ *All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course. **Ronald Knox***
- ▷ *The problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods ... as ... crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo. A reader has a chance when matching his wits with a rationalistic detective, but if he must compete with the world of spirits and go chasing about the fourth dimension of metaphysics, he is defeated ab initio. **SS van Dine***



How can we use it: any identical twins business

- ▷ *Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them. **Ronald Knox***

- ▷ *No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end. **Ronald Knox***

- ▷ **Of course, in our less rule-bound times, you are always free to decide that this sort of information will destroy your mystery—and to withhold it deliberately!**
 - ▷ *Kolchak: the Night Stalker*
 - ▷ *The Aphrodite Inheritance*

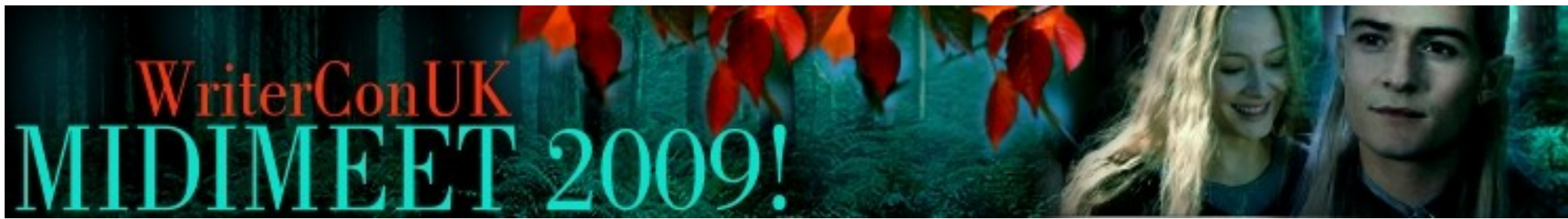


The event



▷ **What is it?**

▷ **How explicitly should it be described?**



What is it: nothing less than a murder...

- ▷ *There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel...
No lesser crime than murder will suffice.*

Three hundred pages is far too much pother for a crime other than murder. After all, the reader's trouble and expenditure of energy must be rewarded. **SS van Dine**

- ▷ *A crime ... must never turn out to be an accident or a suicide. To end an odyssey of sleuthing with such an anti-climax is to hoodwink the trusting and kind-hearted reader.* **SS van Dine**



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What is it: something sudden, unexpected, unexplained and above all abnormal

- ▷ It must be sufficiently serious—or *mysterious*—to warrant investigation.
- ▷ It must be sufficiently serious to drive the investigator to break laws and endanger himself and others in dogged pursuit of the solution.
- ▷ It must be sufficiently serious to convince the reader/viewer that the investigator's behaviour is reasonable.



Supposing it's murder, how explicit should it be?

- ▷ How cruel should it be; how much detail should be depicted?

Some large animal—a dog or a wolf—had dragged it out from amongst the rubble, and had gnawed at its face and neck and torn off one of its legs at the knee. A partially eaten arm lay some yards away.

The body was lying on the beautifully carved porch, surrounded by a splash of dark blood that had dripped from step to step and pooled on the flet beneath.

- ▷ How much does the 'normality' require?

- ▷ **Warnings**



The investigation



- ▷ **One detective or more?**
- ▷ **Detectives in love or in China**
- ▷ **Character flaw of the month**
 - ▷ **What about the clues?**



Who investigates: one detective or many?

▷ *There must be but one detective...
To bring the minds of three or four, or sometimes
a gang of detectives to bear on a problem,
is not only to disperse the interest and break
the direct thread of logic, but to take an unfair advantage
of the reader ... It's like making the reader run a race
with a relay team. **SS van Dine***

▷ *A Cure for all Diseases*

▷ *Henning Mankell's Wallander*



Detectives in love or in China

▷ *There must be no love interest. The business in hand is to bring a criminal to the bar of justice, not to bring a lovelorn couple to the hymeneal altar. **SS van Dine***

But... A mystery can *really* spice-up a love story!

▷ *A detective novel should contain no long descriptive passages, no literary dallying with side-issues, no subtly worked-out character analyses, no 'atmospheric' preoccupations ... They hold up the action and introduce issues irrelevant to the main purpose... **SS van Dine***



Character flaw of the month

An open letter to the writer of *Cracker*:

A well-written ordinary person is interesting enough. Just making the detective a compulsive gambler, liar, womaniser, drinker and, above all, a narcissist, does not make him more interesting. It makes him boring. Thank you.

- ▷ Undermining Jane Tennison

- ▷ How clever is the detective?
Morse vs Frost

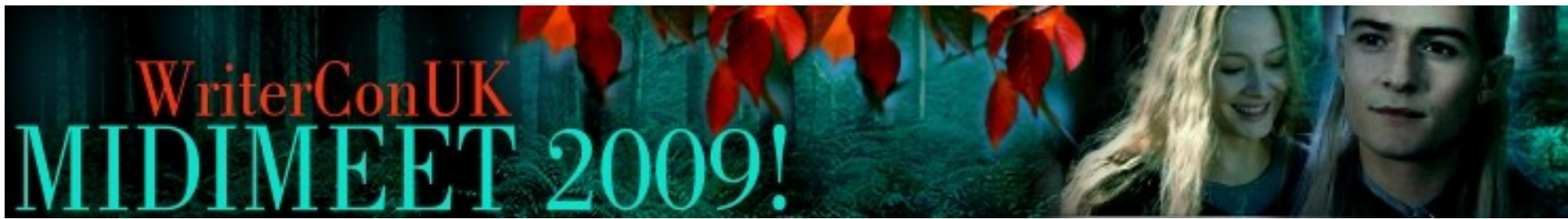


What about the clues?

▷ *The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.*

Ronald Knox

▷ *The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described. **SS van Dine***



Hiding the clues in plain sight

- ▷ Reveal clues piecemeal, and in an illogical order (but always have a good fictional reason for delaying the revelation).
- ▷ Mention the clue and then change the subject (but not so abruptly that you draw attention to the thing you're trying to hide).
 - ▷ Misdirect the reader.
- ▷ **You don't need to deceive all of the people all of the time.** There's nothing the mystery reader likes better than to find the clues and solve the mystery one step ahead of the characters, provided the clues don't seem too obvious!



Don't plan too far in advance

- ▷ Use the first chapter to set the scene; place the murder at the end of the chapter.
- ▷ For the first half of the story, aim for at least one mysterious development per chapter; don't worry too much about anything beyond that chapter.
- ▷ Half-way through the story, start solving the mystery yourself. If readers leave feedback—and it does occasionally happen—choose an alternative culprit, or otherwise adjust the plot.



The solution



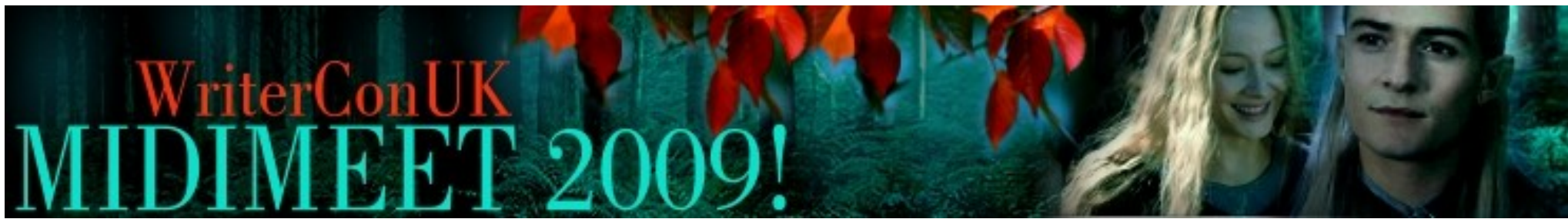
▷ **When is it revealed?**

▷ **Whodunnit?**



The solution: when is it revealed?

- ▷ As near to the end as possible.
- ▷ Slightly before the end, giving you time to tie up any other loose ends.
- ▷ If the story combines multiple plots, do you
 - tie them all together?
 - keep them separate but resolve them at the same time?
 - resolve the minor one(s) first and then concentrate on the major one?



The solution: whodunnit?

- ▷ *There must be but one culprit, no matter how many murders are committed...*
- ▷ *Secret societies ... have no place in a detective story...*
- ▷ *A professional criminal must never be shouldered with the guilt...
A really fascinating crime is one committed by a pillar of a church,
or a spinster noted for her charities.*
- ▷ *The motives for all crimes ... should be personal...
a murder story must ... reflect the reader's everyday experiences,
and give him a certain outlet for his own
repressed desires and emotions. **SS van Dine***



The solution: the big taboo

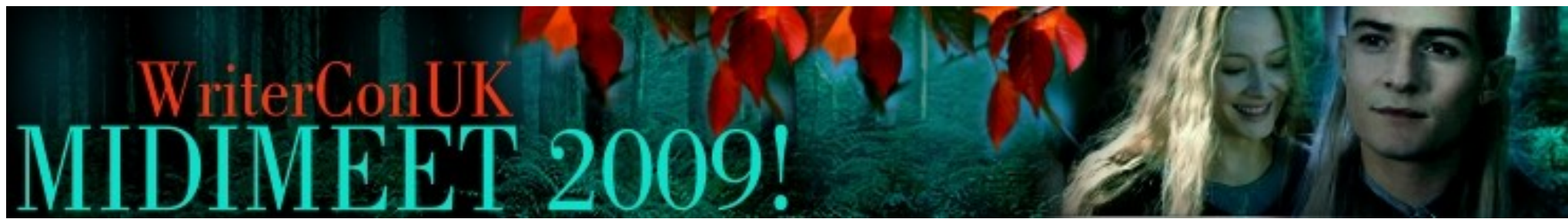
- ▷ *The detective must not himself commit the crime. **Ronald Knox***
- ▷ *The detective himself, or one of the official investigators, should never turn out to be the culprit.
This is bald trickery, on a par with offering someone a bright penny for a five-dollar gold piece.
It's false pretenses. **SS van Dine***
- ▷ *All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?*



Finally, normality once more



▷ **How much angst do we really need?**
The difference between a mystery and real life.



And that's it!
It's finished!