

AgentInsight: Cozy or Traditional — What’s In a Name? by Nupur Tustin

If your protagonist is an amateur sleuth should you pitch your work as a cozy, a traditional, or an amateur sleuth mystery? If this question has you confused, you’re not alone. Even agents like Jessica Faust of BookEnds LLC agree that it’s “not an easy question to answer.”

The reason for the difficulty, both Faust and Paula Munier of Talcott Notch Literary Services say, is that writers produce work that resists being formulaic, and transcends conventional definitions. “The most successful writers in any genre,” Faust says, “tend to push the boundaries a little bit.”

When I put the question to the three other agents on our panel—Jill Marsal of the Marsal Lyon Literary Agency, Paige Wheeler of Creative Media Agency, and Priya Doraswamy of Lotus Lane Literary—their responses ranged from Doraswamy’s belief that “the differences aren’t significant” to Wheeler’s assertion that a cozy is a traditional mystery with a “specific marketing package.”

Doraswamy points to the many overlapping characteristics between the three categories for her perspective: “No gratuitous sex or violence; the murder itself is not described in gory detail; the detective is usually an amateur; and the provenance is such that most characters know each other.”

Munier, however, counters that this “is no longer necessarily true.” She admits that “traditional, cozy, and amateur sleuth mysteries are loose terms whose definitions change depending upon whom you ask.” But like Jill Marsal, she ultimately relies on the editors she sells to for a working definition of the three genres.

“I’ve had more than one editor tell me,” Munier says, “that for a cozy mystery, the heroine (almost always a heroine) needs a fun occupation (baking, crafting, innkeeping), a small-town setting full of colorful friends and frenemies, and pets.” Some of her clients, she adds, have had to add “both pets and recipes to their works before their deals were inked.”

Faust, Wheeler, and Marsal agree with Munier’s definition. The cozy protagonist, Wheeler says, must have a hobby that “is marketable and can reach a specific audience.” Moreover, in a cozy



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“the focus is as much on the relationship between the characters as it is on solving the mystery.”

Marsal, who shares Midnight Ink Editor Terri Bischoff’s views on the subject, says the emphasis is, in fact, “slightly less on the plot and more on the characters’ relationships.”

“The biggest difference between the three categories,” she says, quoting Hannah Braaten at St. Martin’s, “is the voice and feel of the read. Cozies and amateur sleuth mysteries have a lighter touch, and occasionally a slight romantic subplot.”

While the definition of cozies has narrowed over the years, all our panelists agreed that traditional mysteries have the broadest definition. According to Faust, “they can be amateur sleuths or official investigators, they can be a little darker, or light or funny.” Most publishers, she continues, “would identify this type of book as just mystery.”

Marsal agrees. “A traditional mystery can take more shapes and sizes—think Agatha Christie-esque, with an investigator who is, if not a professional, at least particularly skilled in the art of detection.”

Even Doraswamy, who isn’t inclined to see much difference among the three subgenres, feels that traditional mysteries allow authors “to raise issues and dig deeper” into subjects such as the environment, war, and gay rights in a way that is not possible in a cozy.

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A former journalist, Nupur Tustin now divides her time between composing and writing mysteries. Prior publications include work for Reuters, CNBC, diverse freelance articles, short stories, and academic research. She is currently looking for a home for *A Minor Study in Murder*, the first in her Joseph Haydn mystery series.

AgentInsight, continued

Protagonists in a traditional mystery, Munier says, often have “weightier occupations: judge, priest, investigative reporter,” even law enforcement. She points to Louise Penny’s Inspector Gamache novels, Julia Spencer-Fleming’s Clare Fergusson/Russ Van Alstine novels, and Hank Philippi Ryan’s Jane Ryland/Jake Brogan novels, as examples of traditional mysteries.

Faust contrasts the protagonists of Ellery Adams’ *Murder in the Mystery Suite* and Minerva Koenig’s *Nine Days* to illustrate the difference between cozies and traditional mysteries. As the manager of a storybook resort, Adams’ heroine, Jane Steward, personifies the perfect cozy heroine. “Jane is not typically the kind of person to get into trouble, but she does love a good mystery and when one shows up at her door she’s just nosy enough to need to investigate.”

Koenig’s Julia Kalas, on the other hand, is “a rough and tough construction worker/career criminal who is short, fat, pushing forty, and stoically dealing with being forced into the witness protection program after her husband’s murder by gang members.” Unlike the typical cozy heroine, Kalas is bored by her life in a small Texas town, but when “someone she’s come to care about is accused of a murder, Julia decides to find the real killer (the hallmark of any good amateur sleuth).”

Although there’s a broad consensus on what constitutes a cozy or a traditional, agents don’t necessarily agree on how far apart the two categories are. Munier, for instance, considers traditional mysteries to be closer to thrillers. But Faust suggests that while traditional mysteries tend to be faster paced with more twists, turns and blood than a cozy, they are still nothing like suspense.

Wheeler sees the two categories as more alike than any of the other agents. “A traditional mystery doesn’t necessarily have to be a cozy, but a cozy is always traditional.”

“Traditional mysteries,” she goes on to say, “don’t have to have the packaging that makes a cozy—hobby and setting.” She cites Kate Kingsbury’s Pennyfoot Hotel mysteries as an example of a traditional mystery. Kingsbury’s works don’t have the hook that



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Creative Media Agency

cozies tend to have: a spice shop in Leslie Budewitz’s mystery series or pets in Linda O. Johnston’s books.

In Marsal’s view, the hallmarks of a traditional mystery are a small cast of characters that includes the villain and a confined setting such as a small town or a boat. The plot focuses on solving the murder and “fair play” is emphasized: “The reader has all the clues, plus a few red herrings, to solve the case.”

So, while cozies typically have amateur sleuths, a mystery with an amateur sleuth isn’t necessarily a cozy. According to Wheeler, amateur sleuth mysteries don’t always fall into the traditional mystery category either. A book she recently sold, in which the protagonist is drawn into solving the death of her neighbors, was pitched as suspense. “The protagonist may be an amateur sleuth, but if the rest of the labels don’t apply, then it’s clearly out of the cozy, traditional market.”

The differences may be slight, but they are significant. So, what does this mean for you? Marsal recommends knowing the general rules of the genre, but says it’s best not to agonize over the specific category. Munier agrees: “More important than defining your genre or subgenre, is finding best-selling comparable titles published in the past three years that are truly similar to yours. That’s what I need to pitch editors,

because that’s what they need to pitch their publishing board.”

And most important of all, Marsal advises, is to “write the best mystery you can—great characters, strongest plot, good setting, and strong hook.”

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