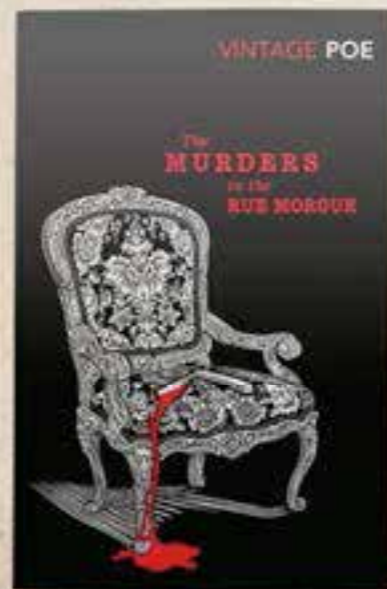


THE *FIRST* DETECTIVE



An influence on *Agatha Christie* and a blueprint for *Sherlock Holmes*, **EDGAR ALLEN POE'S THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE** is the forefather of the modern crime mystery. *Crime Scene* revisits the birth of detective fiction.

BY MATT GLASBY

The Murders

In April 1841, American horror maestro Edgar Allan Poe published a story in *Graham's Magazine* that, one way or another, is the reason you're reading this article. Originally titled 'The Murders In The Rue Trianon', 'Rue Morgue' is what Poe termed a "tale of ratiocination"

(from the French for "reasoning") and introduces Parisian sleuth Auguste Dupin as he solves "a horrible mystery" to which there is not "the slightest clue". Just 19 pages long, and modest in all but Dupin's dazzling deductions, it represents detective fiction's Year Zero, and would inspire writers from Arthur Conan Doyle to Agatha Christie.

Though no stranger to the abyss, Poe wasn't writing in a vacuum. Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747) and ETA Hoffmann's *Mademoiselle de Scudéri* (1819) laid the groundwork for the genre, and many (TS Elliot included) claim that Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) crystallised its themes more completely. Some say Poe was inspired by Eugène François Vidocq, the father of modern criminology, who gets a namecheck in 'Murders', where Dupin calls him "a good guesser". But there's something in the arrogance of Dupin's reasoning that captivates. For 'Murders' and its sequels 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' and 'The Purloined Letter' are not so much narratives as challenges. Solve this, they seem to say, if you can.

'Murders' begins, not with its "horrible mystery", but with a lengthy discourse from an unnamed narrator praising "analytical" minds such as Dupin's. "As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*," writes the anonymous narrator, who we shall christen 'Dr Notson', for reasons that will become clear. Notson then details his acquaintance with Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, a gentleman fallen on hard times, who Notson first encounters in an "obscure library in the Rue Montmartre" while seeking "the same very rare and very remarkable volume". Before you can say "bromance", Dupin and Notson are living together enjoying the "infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford". Indeed, Dupin's leap-frogging intellect is so dexterous he appears to read

Notson's thoughts and, after a particularly showy example (involving geometry and cosmology among other things), we – and they – are presented with the seemingly insoluble Rue Morgue murders.

Madame L'Esplanaye and her daughter are found brutally slaughtered behind closed doors in their lodgings. The pair couldn't have killed each other, there are no witnesses, but those outside hear a voice speaking a strange language that nobody recognises. It is among the first "locked-room mysteries" – where an impossible crime appears to have taken

ingenuity in unraveling a web which you yourself... have woven for the express purpose of unraveling?"

But this new key was, in itself, key. The pleasures of 'Murders' is not about suspense, but intellectual vanity: we're sure we're smart enough to disentangle it, and if we aren't, it causes delight and frustration. Dupin's methods feed into that intellectual vanity, referencing phrenology, zoology – most of the ologies really – and assuming that we are educated enough to follow.

Its other pleasures are more base. From that crucial title change, through to the

“‘Murders’ conjures an atmospheric past of fear and wonder”

place at a hermetically sealed scene – but there is no doubt that Dupin will prevail.

UNRAVELING GENIUS

Crime fiction is often disparaged in literary circles, something Poe was not averse to himself. "These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key," he wrote, later. "I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious – but people think them more ingenious than they are – on account of their method and *air* of method. In the 'Murders In The Rue Morgue', for instance, where is the

gruesome nature of the crime, 'Murders' trades in almost forensic horror. One of the witnesses quoted, a physician called Paul Dumas, describes "eye-balls protruded", a "tibia much splintered" and a tongue "partially bitten through" – details that would be crass in one of Poe's macabre tales, but acquire rubber-necking relevance here as "clews". It's no accident, either, that 'Murders' concerns what Poe called the "most poetical topic in the world", the death of a beautiful woman (two in fact), something that would obsess everyone from Alfred Hitchcock to James Ellroy. To

be fair to Poe, he did lose his mother, stepmother and wife in tragic circumstances, so you can probably see why he didn't end up writing love stories. Or, at least, ones with happy endings.

Another big draw is the way 'Murders' conjures an atmospheric past of fear and wonder. In the mid 19th century, explorers were returning from the New World with exotic discoveries; modern science was in its infancy, yet fortune tellers like Madame L'Esplanaye still plied their trade. The newspapers were full of such crimes, the nascent police forces all but useless. How comforting it must have been to have amateurs like Dupin on the case, even if the case, as here, involves an *extremely* unlikely perpetrator. After much deliberation, we've decided not to spoil the big reveal for Poe newbies, despite 'Murders' having reached its statute of limitation some 150 years ago.

MODEL HOLMES

We'll admit it now – and fondly – but there are elements of Poe's ground-breaking story that show their age. The resolution cannot be guessed from the set-up, not by a long shot; the solving of the crime involves a *lot* of conjecture about trellises; and Dupin is far from a fully formed character.

These mistakes would be rectified in Conan Doyle's conception of Sherlock Holmes – with his deer stalker, pipe and substance abuse issues – although the parallels are, frankly, near-actionable. Like Holmes, Dupin is an amateur, who dirties his hands with crime for kicks and gets one over on the police at every turn. "An

inquiry will afford us much amusement," he tells Notson, a line that Sherlock himself might have uttered. Doctor Watson, meanwhile, was clearly based on Poe's narrator, a bodyguard-come-biographer who sputters in wonder at his friend's mental agility, recounts his adventures with dogmatic fondness and brings the pistols when things get tasty. Like Watson, Notson seems to be all-but-in-love with his friend. "I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervour," he says of the time they spend together in Faubourg St Germain (221B Baker Street, anyone?), "giving myself up to his wild whims with a perfect *abandon*". When the pair leave their dilapidated mansion, they sally forth into the streets "arm in arm".

Doyle would take a shine to the "locked-room mystery", too, using it in *The Sign Of Four* (1890) among other tales. Originating in the Old Testament story of Bel and the dragon, in which priests sneak into a sealed room to steal food supposedly "eaten" by the god Bel, this device recurs everywhere from *Tintin* to *Jonathan Creek*, Cornell Woolrich to *The Crystal Maze*. Even the outlandish twist wasn't safe from pilfering, proving popular in horror, getting its most cherishable outings courtesy of Dario

Argento and George A Romeo, Poe fans who would later collaborate on the portmanteau film *Two Evil Eyes* (1990).

Indeed, from the advent of cinema onwards, big-screen adaptations flooded the market, from a 1914 silent short, to a 1932 Bela Lugosi effort featuring a mad scientist abducting unwilling female test subjects to inject them with his evil serum.

Any similarities to the actual text should be considered

completely circumstantial.

More ground-up versions ensued, such as a 1986 TV movie starring George C. Scott as Dupin, Rebecca De Mornay as his daughter and Val Kilmer as her suitor, although computer game, *Dark Tales: Edgar Allan Poe's Murders In The Rue Morgue* is about as faithful. Heavy metal heavyweights Iron

Maiden weighed in with their own 1981 musical tribute (sample line: "Murders in the Rue Morgue, Someone call the Gendarmes!"), and Canada's *Rue Morgue* horror magazine has been printed since 1997. To this day, The Mystery Writers Of America give the Edgar Award to the genre's most distinguished writers.

Poe's contemporaries agreed. "'Murders'... proves Mr Poe to be a man of genius... with an inventive power and skill, of which we know no parallel," trumpeted the *Pennsylvania Inquirer*. But the story doesn't end there. In a sequence of events worthy of Dupin's adventures, *Graham's Magazine* apprentice JM Johnston discovered the original manuscript in a waste basket. He left it with his father for safe-keeping, who stashed it in a music book, where it survived *three* house fires before being rediscovered and donated to Pennsylvania's Drexel University in 1891. Poe himself died in 1849, but the genre he founded is still alive, and screaming. **G**

The Murders In The Rue Morgue can be read online for free. Head to *Crime Scene's* Facebook (www.facebook.com/crimescenequarterly) page for links.



in the Rue Morgue