

# IT'S ALL A MYSTERY

by Jim and Esther Hampton

**J.A. Jance** is a mystery writer who combines a nice blend of human interest, geographical detail, and criminal investigation. Her series of books about a woman sheriff, Joanna Brady, chronicles her life as a widow and mother of a young daughter. At the beginning of the series, Joanna's husband, who is the sheriff, is killed in action and Joanna is encouraged to become the sheriff in his place. This series takes place in Arizona.

I particularly enjoy Joanna's interaction with her parents, her in-laws, her daughter, her fellow officers, and her best friend who is a woman minister. Jance has a way of incorporating Joanna's personal conflicts as she balances her duty as the sheriff and as a mother.

In her latest books in the series, Joanna meets a new character who becomes a friend and finally her husband. This adds a new set of conflicts as Joanna balances her duties as sheriff, mother, and wife.

**Iris Johansen** is another mystery writer whose main characters are portrayed as competent and confident men and women. In one series of her books, Eve Duncan is a forensic sculptor who works with law enforcement agencies to identify murder victims. In many cases, she is working to identify victims of kidnappers. Because her own daughter was abducted and never found, she became a forensic sculptor not only to aid in finding her own daughter but to help bring closer to other families whose children have disappeared.

The early books in the Eve Duncan series explain more of the sculpting process while the later books delve more into the apprehension of the criminals. It is best to begin reading the earlier books in the series so that you can follow the emotional development of Eve Duncan and how she deals with the loss of her daughter. An interesting technique that Johansen uses to inform the reader of the character of the missing daughter is to have her appear in dreams to Eve. This solidifies the reader's connection not only to Eve but to her daughter as well.

The latest books in the series are *THE KILLING GAME*, *BLIND ALLEY*, and *STALEMATE* which are best if read in that order.

**Sandra Brown** writes romantic suspense novels! Her main character is usually a woman and, unlike J.A. Jance and Iris Johansen, her books stand alone with new characters. Her plot development holds the reader in suspense and keeps the reader involved in the emotional ups and downs of the main characters until the final page. *THE WITNESS*, one of her earlier books, was a very good read. One of her latest books is *CHILL FACTOR*. Brown maintains a nice balance of the romance and suspense and her books portray characters with real life characteristics.

**Catherine Coulter** writes both Romance Suspense and FBI Thrillers. Her books are usually fast paced with vivid characters and believable storylines. If you are a mystery lover who likes a good scare and lots of plot twists, then you're going to like the FBI series, featuring husband and wife team Savich and Sherlock. You don't have to read them in order, but if you're particular that way, begin with *THE COVE* written in 1996. Her 10th book in the series,

*POINT BLANK*, came out in January 2007.

**James Patterson** is another one of our favorite mystery writers. He has an interesting writing style in that he has very short chapters. His books are particularly good if you have only short periods of time to read. Although he weaves a very good story, his plots are usually not so complicated that you forget what is happening if your reading is interrupted for a period of time.

One of our favorites is *KISS THE GIRLS* which was made into a movie. This is one of a series of his books featuring Alex Cross. This series draws you in as you experience the human side of Alex as he interacts with his children and their grandmother who cares for them. The grandmother is a strong character who not only keeps the children on the straight and narrow but also Alex.

One of his latest series of books is about the Women's Murder Club. These four women go about solving the murder while carrying on their normal daily activities.

Besides his mystery thrillers, Patterson has written a wide variety of other books and often co-authors books with other writers which include Maxine Paetro, Andrew Gross, Peter de Jonge, Howard Roughan, and Michael Ledwidge. These books vary in interest from Christmas to love letters.

In two of his books he has ventured into the world of fantasy and science fiction. They are stories about children who have been raised in a laboratory and have grown wings and can fly. These two titles are *MAXIMUM RIDE* and *MAXIMUM RIDE: SCHOOL'S OUT—FOREVER*. Although he is a prolific writer, he always comes up with new ideas and you never feel like he is just altering a previous plot line. He manages to create a nice balance of suspense, human interest, and believable plot and character development.

**Greg Iles**. Of the authors we have discussed, Iles is the most diversified author. Greg broke the formula adhered to by most commercial novelists when he began to write in a variety of genres. Surprisingly, each book has found a place on the bestseller list.

Natchez, Mississippi, the setting of many of Greg's novels, is a real place in Southwest MS. While the names of places and people have been changed, many of the locations—like the cemetery—are much as he describes them. Although some of his characters reappear in several of his novels, it is not important to read them in any particular order. We have enjoyed reading *TURNING ANGEL*, *THE QUIET GAMES*, *DEAD SLEEP*, *BLOOD MEMORY*, and *FOOTPRINTS OF GOD*.

**Other Mystery Writers** (Recommended by Karen Antikajian):

**J.A. Jance's** series that takes place in Seattle and features homicide detective, J. P. Beaumont.

**Janet Evanovich** - The "By the Numbers" series with main character Stephanie Plum - for a fun read with larger-than-life characters and lots of action! Best if read in order.

**Marcia Muller** - Her main character, Sharon McCone, is a private investigator a little like Kinsey Milhone in the Alphabet series by Sue Grafton except that Sharon gets into deeper, somewhat darker situations. Well-written and enjoyable.