

POLICE PROCEDURALS

Let's talk about police procedurals. This sub-genre of mysteries deals with murder most foul, of course, but focuses on the process of solving the crime rather than puzzling over whodunit. Along the way, you get to spend time with a quirky gallery of cops, homicide detectives and suspects whose offbeat lives and loves make for entertaining company.

The undisputed emperor of police procedurals was Ed McBain. Until his death in 2005, he wrote his 87th Precinct novels for nearly 50 years. Like the characters in "Peanuts," his cops never age, but they're as likeable a bunch as you'd ever want to meet. Set in a metropolis very much like New York City, the 25-odd books sport meticulously observed police lingo, procedures and behavior. Always up-to-date, McBain wrote page-turning stuff. Highly recommended: *Heat*, *Nocturne* and *Money, Money, Money*.

Then there are "The Swedes," Per Wahlöö and Maj Sjöwall, who started the nordic proliferation of mystery writers. As king and queen of the genre, they wrote 10 novels in the 1960s and 70s about the Stockholm homicide department and its appealing chief inspector, Martin Beck. Wahlöö was a journalist and provided suspenseful plotting, while Sjöwall, a poet, created the rich tapestry of characters. Their collaborations reflect Swedish society and the human condition brilliantly, and because they're character-driven, they don't feel dated. Witty, penetrating, full of surprises—in a league of their own. Try *Roseanna*, *The Fire Engine That Disappeared*, or *The Laughing Policeman*.

I won't say any more about Tony Hillerman's mysteries, starring Lieutenant Leaphorn and Officer Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal police, than: if you haven't read them, you haven't lived. From early books like *Dance Hall of the Dead*, to later offerings like *Fallen Man* or *Hunting Badger*, Hillerman always delivered.

The Dutch writer, Janwillem van de Wetering, who is something of an acquired taste, almost deserves a column of his own. He spent a year in a Japanese Zen monastery before becoming a cop, briefly, in Amsterdam, and then a wordsmith; and it shows. His principal characters—the retired Commissaris, the 40-something Grijpstra, and the young turk, De Gier—represent the three ages of man. Their conversations segue nonchalantly from the case at hand into philosophical stratospheres without missing a beat. For starters, try *The Streetbird*, *Hard Rain* or *The Maine Massacre*.

There are others, but these four series are a cut above the rest—well-written, meaningful, fun. And after you've read one or two, you won't have to say good-bye to your favorite characters. The work of police detectives is never done, so they're already waiting for you in another installment.