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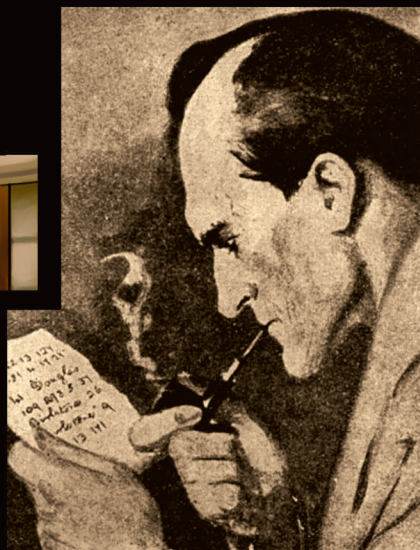
MYSTERIES

BY LISA J. STEELE

A Dame Walks Into Your Office . . .

A dead body, no witnesses, and a room full of suspects with perfect alibis. Can you find the killer and bring him to justice? Learn the secrets of mystery fiction – and what will, and will not, work in RPG mysteries. Learn how to be a better investigator. Discover the problems you are likely to encounter in a low-tech, magic, super-tech, or horror mystery.

GURPS Mysteries covers:

- Creating mysteries as stand-alone adventures, as part of an existing campaign, or as a campaign in their own right, with specific discussions of the low-tech, modern-tech, future, magic, and horror settings.
- Setting the crime scene, including detailed forensic information on causes of death, investigation methods, and a forensic timeline.
- Creating interesting villains, and matching their disadvantages to their motives and means of carrying out a crime.
- A template-based character-generation system for iconic investigators, including the genius detective, the hardboiled shamus, police detectives, investigating magicians, even "that darn kid."
- Sample detective and investigative agencies to hire or bedevil characters.
- Expanded rules for questioning and interacting with NPCs.

GURPS Mysteries, by the author of *GURPS Cops,* is designed both for the GM who wants to create and run mystery adventures and for players who want to play investigators in any setting.

By **Lisa J. Steele**   Edited by **Alain Dawson** and **Scott Haring**
Cover Art and Illustrations by **Bob Stevlic**

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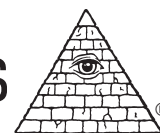
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INTRODUCTION

"Yeah, that's me, Tracer Bullet. I've got eight slugs in me. One's lead and the rest are bourbon. The drink packs a wallop, and I pack a revolver. I'm a private eye."
– Calvin, **Something Under the Bed Is Drooling**

At their root, mysteries are about man's quest for knowledge – something is hidden and must be found out. Order must be restored. Honor and integrity must be maintained in spite of corruption and indifference. Mysteries are about puzzle-solving. Reason, logic, and perseverance let investigators triumph over a criminal's cleverest schemes and darkest deceptions.

This universal drive to find the truth is what makes mysteries so compelling, and also what makes them so compatible with all types of settings. **GURPS Mysteries** delves into the mystery genre, showing how to structure a mystery campaign, or layer a mystery plot over an existing campaign of any type.

A mystery adventure is part stage magic. It works by sleight of hand. The audience, or in this case, the players, expect to be fooled – at least for a while. **GURPS Mysteries** lays bare some of the classic tricks. It explains why some tricks that work for mystery writers won't work for GMs and what tools GMs have that writers don't. It also describes specific challenges inherent in running low-tech, modern, science-fiction, and paranormal mysteries, and specific tools that GMs can use in each of these settings.

For players, **Mysteries** explains how to portray experienced investigators. It describes modern forensics and modern theories on interviews and interrogation, as well as low-tech investigative methods, spells that can help or hinder an investigation, the use of psionics in mysteries, and more. Whether you are playing a forensic expert, genius detective, meddling kid, or jaded gumshoe, there is something here for you.

So put your feet up on the desk, and let's see who comes in the door.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa J. Steele is a criminal defense attorney and author based in Massachusetts. She is a vice-chair of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL) Forensic Evidence Committee. She represents clients accused of crimes ranging from minor traffic offenses to capital murder. Ms. Steele is the author of several legal articles about criminal defense, **GURPS Cops**, and **Fief**, from White Rose Publishing. She is a contributing author to White Wolf's **Dark Ages: Europe** and **Spoils of War**. Her personal interests range from science fiction to economics to medieval history to firearms.

About *GURPS*

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of **GURPS** players. We can be reached by e-mail: **info@sjgames.com**. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Resources include:

New supplements and adventures. **GURPS** continues to grow – see what's new at **gurps.sjgames.com**.

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Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Errata pages for **GURPS** releases are available at **sjgames.com/errata/gurps**.

Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set,** *Fourth Edition.* Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the **GURPS Basic Set** – e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the **GURPS Basic Set,** *Fourth Edition.* Page references that begin with CI indicate **GURPS Compendium I**, those beginning with CII indicate **GURPS Compendium II**. Other references are BIO for **GURPS Bio-Tech**, C for **GURPS Cops**, CV for **GURPS Covert Ops**, G for **GURPS Grimoire**, H for **GURPS Horror**, HT for **GURPS High-Tech**, M for **GURPS Magic**, MA for **GURPS Martial Arts**, MF for **GURPS Modern Firepower**, P for **GURPS Psionics**, S for **GURPS Space**, SPI for **GURPS Spirits**, T for **GURPS Technomancer**, UN for **GURPS Undead**, UT for **GURPS Ultra-Tech**, and UTT for **GURPS Ultra-Tech 2**. For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the latest web list at **www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html**.

Chapter One
The Imperfect Crime

"A person who is tired of crime is tired of life."

– Horace Rumpole,
Rumpole of the Bailey

So you want to run a mystery adventure in a roleplaying game? Let's get the bad news out of the way up front; it's going to be a lot of work to prepare and run the session. However, done well, it's worth it. That hard work will pay off with a rewarding and unusual adventure that taxes your players' wits, teases their imaginations, and leaves them hungry for more.

This chapter will help you avoid many of the obvious pitfalls and organize your ideas into an interesting adventure. Subsequent chapters will provide you and your players with technical information, rules mechanics, setting specific ideas, and character templates and equipment.

This chapter contains essential guidelines for how to structure a mystery adventure. It comes first because it lays out some vital groundwork for GMs. Players may want to skip this chapter and start with Chapter 2. Mystery adventures are more enjoyable when GMing sleights-of-hand and misdirection come as a surprise.

The mystery adventure fits into any setting, and can be used with nearly any group of players and characters. You can use the basic idea in a near-infinite number of ways: there are puzzle mysteries, action mysteries, funny mysteries, dark mysteries, horrifying mysteries, high-tech mysteries, low-tech mysteries, historical mysteries, psychological mysteries, scientific mysteries, computer mysteries . . . as many mysteries as there are settings. What they all share is one of the most powerful central ideas in storytelling: something is hidden, and it must be discovered.

Some Ground Rules

Your preparation begins well before you actually start designing the adventure. You need to start with some basic "gotchas" that aren't necessarily obvious, even to experienced Game Masters.

Mysteries Are Not Like Real Life

You can use real-life crimes for inspiration. The tabloids, the newspapers, and the True Crime section of your local library or bookstore will provide you with stories of crime and punishment on a daily basis.

But that's about as far as you should go. The mystery genre – for good reason – has evolved a powerful set of conventions, which have nothing to do with realism but everything to do with the demands of drama. If you violate these conventions, you'll have a harder time coming up with a satisfying adventure. Here are some of the most important:

A mystery has a worthy adversary. Real criminals usually aren't dramatically interesting. Their crimes, while shocking and tragic, aren't hard to solve. Real people seldom use elaborate fake timetables, elaborate alibis, or cunning poisons; if they think about covering up at all, they generally just try to guard against witnesses and fingerprints. Even serial killers tend be lonely, marginal figures with histories of child abuse and mental illness, not charismatic geniuses a la Hannibal Lecter.

In a mystery story or game, that's a recipe for anticlimax. The crime itself may be impulsive or meticulously planned, but solving it should be a real achievement.

A mystery is rational. Real crimes are full of uncertainty and loose ends. In reality, if there's a spot of garden soil on the carpet by the body, it may merely have been tracked in by the family dog, and have nothing to do with anything. It'll be put in an evidence bag and subjected to some fairly routine analysis, which probably won't turn up anything anyway.

In a classic mystery, that spot is probably there for a reason. If it weren't, the author wouldn't have mentioned it. (At the very least, if the spot is a red herring, the detective is given a fair chance to *deduce* that it isn't important.) As GM, you need to use the same principle. Yes, this is meta-game thinking – and you should use it! Cluttering up the crime scene by describing random and unimportant details is realistic, but it gives you bored and frustrated players when lead after lead comes up dry.

A mystery has a definite resolution, where the loose ends are tied up. The real-world justice system is complex and slow. Criminals can make bargains with police and prosecutors for lighter sentences. It can take months, sometimes years, to bring a complex case to trial. Real detectives have to justify their methods and conclusions to jurors while being cross-examined by a skilled attorney. Even after a conviction, a criminal may challenge the detective's work in appellate courts and *habeas corpus* proceedings for years to come. And some questions may never be answered.

At the end of a mystery story, by contrast, the investigator usually has no doubt about the villain's guilt. The criminal's punishment is a nigh-certainty. In any case, it's beyond the scope of the plot, which is completely and satisfyingly fulfilled by unmasking the bad guy.

THE DEADLIEST OF REVEALERS

WITNESSES

*"Oh, my dear friend, it is impossible **not** to give oneself away – unless one never opens one's mouth! Speech is the deadliest of revealers."*

– Hercule Poirot,
Cards on the Table

Investigators need to talk to many people to solve a mystery. This chapter is about witnesses – people who have seen or know something important about the puzzle. It is about what witnesses know (perception), what they recall (memory), and how investigators can try to get information from them. It expands the existing **GURPS** reaction and influence mechanics to provide rules for handling PC questioning of NPCs.

Solving Mysteries

For players, sometimes the hardest part of the adventure is figuring out where to start. Your character is presented with a group of NPCs, most of whom are lying to you about something, some forensic evidence, none of which points directly at a suspect, and a crime. Where do you start?

Listen to the GM. Most of what the GM is telling you is being said for a reason. If he keeps repeating the same name, place, or time, then it is probably important. (Yes, this is meta-game thinking, but it is part of how mystery fiction, and mystery RPGs, work.)

Take notes. (A large white board that all the players can see is very handy for this purpose.) Keep track of who gives you information as well as what they said. (Different colored markers can help differentiate notes from various sources.) Keeping notes means you won't forget something important. Also, the act of writing may help you concentrate. Your notes may help you see patterns in the information.

You are looking for means, motive, and opportunity (see p. 16). A chronology is often helpful. Keeping track of what happened when will help you spot oddities in alibis and events.

If you have an obvious clue, by all means follow it. If you have a choice of directions, start with the NPCs who have the least obvious reason to lie to your character. Generally you will be able to trust police experts, but find out how they got their answer. A disfigured corpse identified by a distraught relative and not confirmed by fingerprints or dental records is not a reliable identification in a typical mystery.

Triangulation is useful. In this context it means getting the same information from two independent NPCs.

Witnesses can be mistaken about what they saw or remember (see *Perception*, p. 46). If the witnesses talked about what they saw before you talk to them, they aren't independent (see *Memory*, p. 49). Generally you won't need more than two sources. If a key bit of information is coming from only one source, bear in mind that it could be a lie or a mistake.

Have a plan before you approach an important NPC. You should discuss with the other players what approach you want to use, who'll be doing the talking, and what questions you need to ask. Look over your notes before the interview.

Listen to the NPC. You are not just listening to what he says, but looking for clues about his personality. Is he the kind of person who might commit the crime? What might motivate him to do so? Try to get a sketch from the NPC of where he was and what he saw. (This gives you, the player, something to look at later.)

Look for evidence of unusual skills. If one of your suspects is a dental assistant and the disfigured victim was identified by his dental records, you may have been tricked. If one of your suspects is a computer expert or hobbyist, be wary of any computer records related to the crime.

Ask NPCs what they think of each other. You can get useful gossip about their inter-relationships.

Take a moment before you leave the NPC to think about any other questions you need to ask.

Have a plan for the confrontation scene. A confrontation scene is the counterpart to the big fight scene in action-oriented adventures. Review your facts. Figure out which PCs will be doing the most talking. Have a plan in case the guilty party (or someone else) tries to flee, shoot at you, or shoot the bad guy.

EQUIPMENT

An investigator needs very little equipment. An ordinary pencil and pad of paper, tape recorder, flashlight, and moderately-priced camera will suffice for most private investigations. Cell phones and pagers can be useful to keep in touch with clients and sources.

Police detectives and others who process crime scenes may carry a great deal of their department's specialized evidence collecting equipment. Such equipment is described in more detail in **GURPS Cops**, p. C71. A few useful, common items are also included here.

BINOCULARS (TL5+)

In widespread use since the late-19th century, hunting or military binoculars typically have a magnification of 7× (although others are available). They give +3 to Vision rolls. $100, 4 lbs. for a TL6 model.

TL7 military-grade 7× binoculars (such as the German Steiner model used as the M22 by the U.S. military) give +3 to Vision rolls. Since they magnify light, most add a further +1 to Vision rolls to negate darkness penalties. Rubber-armored and sealed against dirt, they get +2 on rolls to avoid damage from rough use. They feature either lenses coated to prevent glint that could reveal the user's location, or gold-coated lenses to protect the eyes against laser light (as the M22 pattern does). Those fitted with antilaser coating can be equipped with detachable hoods to reduce glint. Most have a rangefinding reticle. $800, 2.3 lbs. The more recent M24 has the same features, but is compact enough to fit in a uniform pocket (Holdout -1). It doesn't provide a bonus in darkness. $400, 0.8 lb.

High-end military binoculars function as above, but incorporate a digital compass (+1 Orienteering) and IR laser rangefinder, which is accurate to within 1 yard. Light-gathering optics cancel up to -2 in darkness penalties. Two AA batteries power it for 2 hours. $4,000, 3.5 lbs. In the near future, the built-in computer will use scene-change detection software (p. CV44), giving +2 on Vision rolls to spot movement.

Low-end commercial binoculars have 8× magnification, but only give +2 to Vision rolls due to the limited field of vision, and no bonus in darkness. However, they are cheap and light: $40, 0.4 lb.

The most powerful commercial binoculars are 20×, giving +4 to Vision rolls, and are mechanically stabilized (reducing movement penalties by 3); useful on boats or helicopters. Two AA batteries power it for 3 hours. $5,000, 4 lbs.

BODY ARMOR

Modern body armor was first marketed in 1971. The 1974 version was an olive-green military vest with inch-thick ceramic plates; it was heavy, cumbersome, and uncomfortable. By the late 1980s, armor had become lightweight, flexible, and comfortable. Many departments require patrol officers to wear armor on duty. Police detectives and federal agents are issued body armor, but often do not wear it routinely. Private detectives can purchase body armor, but it is very uncommon.

Ballistic and Tactical Vests covers the front and back Torso. Vests can be bought with groin panels as well. Properly-fitted body armor may have a 1/4 to 1" gap on the sides between the front and back panels. It is possible, but very unlikely, for a shot to go through that gap. (Note: if the owner gains or loses more than 5% of his weight at fitting, his body armor may no longer fit properly, making it uncomfortable or causing dangerously wide gaps.) (See pp. B282-286 for further discussions of body armor.)

Type IIA Armor: The most commonly issued body armor for police and law enforcement and the armor most likely to be worn by a detective under street clothing. Weight 1.5 to 2.25 lbs.; cost $240 to $975 (depending on manufacturer and style). The most expensive versions of this armor are designed to be concealed under a shirt and jacket (Holdout -1). Weight 5 lbs.; cost $1,100 to $1,300. For other levels of body armor, see p. C61.

CAMERAS (TL5+)

Cameras come in a staggering number of styles, and can be equipped with an endless array of accessories. The models below are representative of those used by modern investigators.
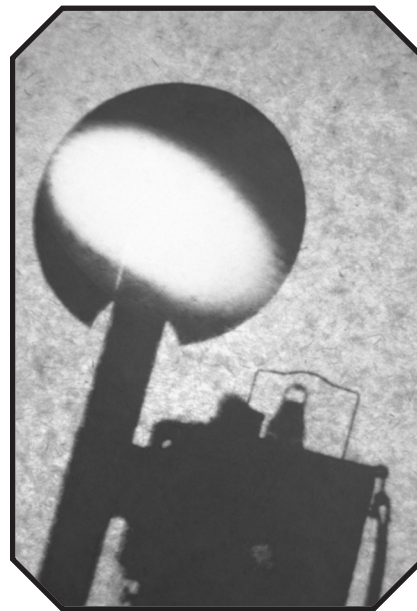
35mm SLR (TL6): Still the world's most popular camera, even though its technology hasn't really changed for decades. A model suitable for surveillance, with date imprinting, winder, zoom lens, and flash, is $750, 1 lb. More expensive systems give a bonus to Photography skill: +1 for $2,000, +2 for $5,000, +3 for $10,000, +4 for $20,000+. These are heavy (2-3 lbs.) and bewilderingly complex: treat all bonuses as penalties unless Photography skill is 12+. A cheap camera can be had for under $100. These are fine for vacation photos, but give -2 to skill for surveillance purposes.

Camcorder (TL7+): compact (Holdout +1) Mini DV video camera with optical and digital zoom (10× optical zoom, +3 Vision rolls), digital image stabilization (reduces movement penalties by 1), and a 7-hour rechargeable battery. Many can be used in low-light conditions, and some even feature a simple infrared imaging mode. They have a handy LCD screen for previewing images and can function as a digital camera (see below), storing images on an included memory card. All will have connections for transferring the video to a computer in digital format. A Mini DV tape can store between 80 and 120 minutes of video. $1,000. 1 lb.

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