

What's Your Genre?

By Fiona Veitch Smith

When writing a novel, one of the first things an author needs to be aware of is what genre they are writing in. A genre is a 'story type' which is accompanied by a number of genre conventions – the type of things a reader might expect to see in that sort of story.

The most difficult stories to classify are literary novels that tend to defy genre. They are characterised by experimentation with genre and form as well as an emphasis on the intellectual or lyrical use of language, including sub-text and metaphor. With a literary novel, how something is *described* is often more important to the reader than what actually *happens*. The book is usually *about* something and the author is often making a comment on an issue or exploring a philosophical idea.

Literary novels, however, can be crossed with conventional genre novels. So one can have a literary horror (*Interview with the Vampire*, Anne Rice), or a literary historical (*The Color Purple*, Alice Walker). In a literary genre novel, the use of language and the way the book is written is foregrounded, with the genre elements (the horror, the history, the romance) secondary.

My novel [*The Peace Garden*](#), is a literary coming-of-age mystery with a touch of political thriller and romance. Those are lots of genre elements, but the primary category is literary because of the way the book is written in terms of structure, language and themes. My novel [*Pilate's Daughter*](#) is a literary historical romance. It is far less 'mixed genre' than *The Peace Garden*, but still literary as it defies a number of typical romance conventions and again has an unusual structure and style.

Even if you are resistant to 'putting yourself in a box' and don't want to too rigidly define your genre, know that both agents and publishers will need to know what it is they are taking on. They need to know how to place it in the market, how to promote it and which shelf to put it on in a bookshop. This is more important than ever in digital bookshops as readers browse by keyword.

My most commercially successful adult books are [*the Poppy Denby Investigates*](#) series, set in the 1920s. They are straight historical mysteries. I like to think that they have a literary touch to them as language, sub-text and metaphor are important to me; as are 'issues'. Nonetheless, the mystery element is so strong that that is what they primarily are – far more than my previous more 'literary' books. In addition, they fall into the sub-category of 'cosy mystery'. This is something that I resisted. For me 'cosy' suggested lightweight, and I resented that. While I write with a playfulness and lightness of touch I very much believe my books have something to say about the world and the 'cosy' veneer covers much deeper and darker elements.

This, however, does not fully appreciate what sets a 'cosy' mystery apart from other types of mysteries or crime novels. The main difference is that the sex and violence is less overt (sometimes humorous) and that the personal life of the main character (usually, but not always, an amateur sleuth) is an important part of the story. Cosies also tend to take place in a small, contained social community with recurring characters. So, whether I like the label or not, I write cosy historical mysteries. Do you know what your genre is?

Fiona Veitch Smith is the author of Golden Age-style murder mysteries set in the 1920s (Lion Fiction). The first book, [The Jazz Files](#), was shortlisted for the CWA Historical Dagger, while subsequent books have been shortlisted for the Foreword Review Mystery Novel of the Year and the People's Book Prize. She also writes children's books for the Christian market (SPCK), including biblical retelling picture books (age 3–6) [The Young David](#) and [Young Joseph](#) series, and [The Time-twisters](#), a series of graphic novels for 7–9s about scientists of faith in history

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