

Environmental Mysteries
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Type “mystery genres” into your browser and you’ll get the familiar list of cozies, amateur sleuths, historical mysteries, thrillers, and a few others. As an ecologist, I am especially interested in a less well-known category—the environmental mystery. In these stories, the physical environment may be as essential to the crime and its solution as the characters (think Tony Hillerman), or the novel may be based on environmental problem such as damage to the Florida Everglades. Also, with other sub-genres, an environmental focus could be imbedded in a professional sleuth or a thriller. My intention in this piece is to pique readers’ interest in environmental mystery with a few examples.

The significance of location in environmental mysteries brings up an intriguing point. A strong sense of place in all its complexity is key in crime fiction. For instance, Baker Street and Sherlock Holmes’s gritty haunts help us appreciate the Victorian London that the famous detective must navigate. So how is treatment of physical setting in an environmental mystery different? Two writers whose books feature vivid environmental backdrops—Nevada Barr and Tony Hillerman—illustrate the point.

Nevada Barr situates park ranger Anna Pigeon in national parks and other recreation areas from northern California to Florida’s archipelago. A former park service ranger, Barr clearly writes from experience and in each book she reveals

an intimate connection to landscape. For example, in *Winter Study* Anna describes her airplane window view of Lake Superior’s Isle Royale, the setting, in splendid prose. “The day was painfully bright and clear as it can be only in the north, where every particle of moisture is frozen from the air ... Crystalline amber light honed the edges of the world till shadows of pines, long on the shores of snow-covered lakes, were as sharp and black as fangs drawn by children.” The location of a second Nevada Barr novel, *Borderline*, is Texas’s Big Bend National Park. In Barr’s narrative, nature—in this case the Rio Grande—is a cruel and ever-present force. She sets the mystery in motion with the discovery of a very pregnant Mexican who tried to cross the river to illegally enter the U.S. Instead, the woman became trapped in a tangle of branches tellingly called a “strainer”. Next, the physical setting—steep cliffs, huge rocks, lack of water—hamper escape from a sniper firing down on Anna and her companions.

In Tony Hillerman’s stories dessert is omnipresent, and we cannot imagine Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn outside their beloved Four Corners landscape. Here the burnt-orange mesas, treacherous steep canyons, and miles of emptiness are always “there” as cultural and spiritual inspiration for the Navajo Tribal Police—plus they provide hard-to-reach places where the bad guys go. Vast distances are made real by lengthy car rides on dirt roads that crisscross the unforgiving desert. Hillerman died in 2008, but his daughter Anne has written a real treat for her Dad’s fans. In *Tony Hillerman’s Landscape: On the Road with Chee and Leaphorn*, Anne narrates a collection of original photographs by her husband Don Strel. The book is a

loving tribute that illustrates the spectacular landscape that was the inspiration for Tony Hillerman's eighteen Navajo series books.

Physical setting acts as the backdrop for an ecological problem or disaster in a different type of environmental mystery. In this category, I particularly admire Jessica Speart, who effectively walks the fine line between storyteller and preacher in her Rachel Porter, U.S. Fish and Wildlife agent, series. In these stories, Speart tackles abysmal treatment of wildlife by the greedy and dimwitted. Readers willingly learn about these issues from Rachel because they can't help but like a woman who acts first and thinks later, thrives on junk-food, and finds dead alligators in bathtubs of New Orleans apartments. My own favorite, "Restless Waters", is not for the squeamish because it focuses on one of the most vile animal cruelties: shark finning. (People cut off shark's dorsal fins, throw the animals back into the ocean to drown, and sell their prize at astounding prices—for shark fin soup). Like Nevada Barr, Speart's mysteries are based on her own experience as a journalist investigating wildlife issues.

If you ask mystery fans to identify an environmental mystery writer they liked, I'd wager they would name Carl Hiaasen. This is not surprising since Hiaasen's books are hilarious treatments of the most down-in-the-weeds issues such as nutrient contamination of the Everglades by big agriculture ("Skinny Dip"), mango vole conservation ("Native Tongue"), and "Flush" (you can guess). Hiaasen uses wicked humor to bring readers into the world of environmental scientists and managers better than anyone I know. Some of his

most recent books such as "Flush" and "Hoot" are for children, what the Seattle Post-Intelligencer calls his "new generation of greenies". All the more reason to love this writer.

I end with a new category of environmental thriller—"cli-fi" (climate fiction). Most cli-fi is dystopian science fiction (as in *The Day After Tomorrow* film in which extreme weather turns New York City into a subarctic nightmare). In contrast, the novel "Arctic Drift" by Clive and Dirk Cussler is a genuine thriller. The authors imagine a world with energy shortages that bring the U.S. and Canada to the brink of war. The protagonist, scientist Dirk Pitt, is head of the National Underwater and Marine Agency (NUMA). Dirk visits a laboratory said to be poised to end the threat of global warming with an artificial photosynthesis discovery right when the lab is destroyed by a bomb. Cussler's complicated story has many layers, and this twentieth Dirk Pitt novel has received mixed reviews.

For more information about environmental mysteries, I refer readers to these URLs: mysteryreadersinc.blogspot.com/2012/04/earth-day-environmental-mysteries.html and flashlightworthybooks.com/Great-Environmental-Mystery-Books/530

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