

Welcome to The Lippincott Dinner



In the summer of 1889, JM Stoddart organised a dinner party in the Langham Hotel in London. His aim was to wine, dine and generally schmooze members of the London literary scene in the hope of securing submissions from this side of the Atlantic Ocean for his literary periodical, the Philadelphia-based Lippincott Monthly Magazine.

*It was, by all accounts, a successful evening. Although Rudyard Kipling failed to show up, Arthur Conan Doyle described it as a "golden evening", and was said to have been thrilled by fellow invitee Oscar Wilde's effusive praise for one of his earlier works. Stoddart, too, left happy, having secured agreements from both authors to write stories for his magazine. Doyle decided to dust off and revisit a character he'd previously written a story about, and produced his second ever Sherlock Holmes story: *The Sign of the Four*. Wilde, for his contribution, produced his one and only novel: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*...*

Thank you for signing up to take part in The Lippincott Dinner, our new writing event inspired by what may be the most successful dinner party in the history of literature (Rudyard Kipling did, it turns out, also submit a story to the magazine despite not getting to enjoy the Langham's hospitality that evening).

We're going to be accepting JM Stoddart's challenge and coming up with an original mystery story each which we'll be publishing towards the end of the month!

The rules

Participants aren't following a set brief, other than the genre itself. You must submit an original mystery story by the deadline to be included in the final publication.

What do we mean by "mystery" story?

Literally anything inspired by the prompt "mystery" is acceptable, be it funny, fearful, fantastic or felonious; terrifying, treacherous, touching or, erm... t-absurd. In other words, you can explore the full spectrum of the word "mystery", and (like Oscar Wilde) by no means do you need to restrict yourself to detective fiction, or crime. For the purposes of this event, *Scooby Doo* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* are just as much mystery stories as *The Lincoln Lawyer* or *The Maltese Falcon*.

noun

Plural *mysteries*.

- 1 anything that is kept secret or remains unexplained or unknown:
| *the mysteries of nature.*
- 2 any affair, thing, or person that presents features or qualities so obscure as to arouse curiosity or speculation:
| *The masked guest is an absolute mystery to everyone.*
- 3 a novel, short story, play, or film whose plot involves a crime or other event that remains puzzlingly unsettled until the very end:
| *a mystery by Agatha Christie.*
- 4 obscure, puzzling, or mysterious quality or character:
| *the mystery of Mona Lisa's smile.*

Synonyms: [secrecy](#), [mystique](#), [obscurity](#), [ambiguity](#), [riddle](#), [secret](#), [problem](#), [puzzle](#), [enigma](#)

What do we mean by "original"?

We simply mean that it must be entirely your own work. This isn't the place for fan fiction based on someone else's stories or characters. For example, you are welcome to tell a story about a world weary Private Investigator if you wish, but you can't tell a story about Agatha Christie's *Hercule Poirot*.

This also means that you must be the author and hold the copyright in the work — i.e., you can't have sold it or given away the rights already, e.g. because it's already been published elsewhere.

How long does it need to be?

The maximum word count is a pretty generous 3,000 words but — as with all our writing events — we're looking for quality not quantity (we're not NaNoWriMo). We want to see your best work, that you're proud to share. As such, we'd much rather you submit 500 well

edited and expertly crafted words that invoke genuine emotion than a 2,999 word “vomit draft” that readers would skim over. If you can tell a unique and original mystery story in just a haiku — that’s absolutely fine by us!

What's your name again?

And where do I know you from?

Oh, you're a mirror!

In fact — post a haiku in the forum thread and earn a Haiku Sparkle!

Will I still own my story?

Yes! You will retain all the copyright in your submission and are free to use it elsewhere as you see fit. By submitting, you are confirming that you are the author of the work, that you hold the copyright, and that you grant an irrevocable perpetual licence to Literature and Latte and Novel in a Day to include the work in the Lippincott Dinner publications.

When is that deadline again?

All submissions must be received before midnight on the evening of Sunday 23rd March 2025 (UK time) to be included (i.e., if they arrive at 0:01am on Monday 24th March UK time, they are too late!). We’ll then take the next few days to import and compile everything and aim to get the final publication released in time for you to enjoy reading it the next weekend!

How to submit

Please submit your entry via email to: rog@novelinaday.com by midnight on the evening of Sunday 23rd March 2025 (UK time). I.e., you must submit before it becomes Monday 24th March in the UK! Make sure you include:

- your forum name so we can tick you off the list,
- the name you would like to be credited as in the book, and
- the title of your story.

Once your submission has been received and we've checked we can open it, we'll send you a confirmation email. If you don't receive the confirmation email, it may mean that your submission has gotten stolen by internet goblins, so please get in touch ASAP to let us know. In addition to the rog@novelinaday.com email address, you can also reach us to flag a problem at rog@pigfender.com or via the Literature and Latte forum if there is an issue. On every event we've run over the past 14 years, there has always been at least one entry that has an issue that means we can't open the file so please do check for the confirmation. If we can't open your entry, and we can't get hold of you to chase it up, we can't include it!

Submission format

We're not overly fussy about what format you send your chapter in, as long as we can easily get that text imported into a Scrivener project. An **RTF file** is probably about as easy as it gets, but you can just copy the text into the main body of an email if that's what works for you.

The one to avoid is PDF as copying the text manually from a locked down publishing format like PDF is a slow — and did I say manual, yet? — process!

Once again, please don't submit your entry as a PDF file!

Submitting early

Please, by all means, submit early. If you've finished already, by all means submit now as long as you're comfortable that you've done all the editing that you're going to want to do. If you do submit early and you later decide you want to make a change, let us know as it may still be possible depending on how close we are to deadline, and how much else is going on. It's much (much!) better to make sure you're 100% happy it's as good as you can make it before you submit though!

Style guide

There are relatively few rules here. Don't worry about fonts or anything like that as we'll be taking care of all the formatting and layout in Scrivener when we import the entries and compile. Note, the final book will use indentation to start new paragraphs, rather than blank lines between paragraphs, so it will make things a bit easier if you do the same in your submission. If you want to retain any blank lines in the final work for scene breaks, etc, then please indicate this using three hash marks (###). Any blank lines that you leave in your submission will be collapsed, so if you want a gap, use those hash marks.

Deadline reminder

Once again, the hard deadline for submissions is midnight on the evening of Sunday 23rd March 2025, UK time. So, 23:59 UK time on Sunday evening is on time. 0:01 UK time on Monday morning is too late! Feel free to submit early. That includes weeks early if you're ready!

Oh — and don't forget to confirm the title, what name you'd like to be credited as in the book, and your forum handle as well!

What is a short story?

Stating the obvious, it's a story that's short.

So it's about length, then?

You'll find all sorts of references on the internet to how word-count drives the classification of stories: 50,000+ words is a novel, 20,000 is a novella, below 1,000 is flash fiction; that sort of thing. As part of the Lippincott Dinner event, we're asking for submissions to be under 3,000 words, but that's more to do with keeping the event approachable and the anthology balanced than anything else.

I've also seen a more prosaic definition that makes me feel less like an accountant or statistician: a short story is one that can be read and enjoyed in a single sitting.

So it really is all about length, then?

It's about what that length constraint means in terms of the story, in a way that the constraint itself becomes a sort of freedom. A novel requires a more complex narrative to keep people engaged. Similarly, the luxury of length means you can be slow in your pacing, and introduce larger worlds (or at least show more of those worlds) and have your readers follow along, but short stories give freedoms. Freedom to focus on a core idea or theme. Freedom to explore a single character or concept without it feeling too small. Freedom to play around with unusual story structures, and play with audience attention in a different way.

With short stories you can paint a beautiful picture that allows readers to lose themselves in the detail with an intensity that would be straining in a longer work, or use pacing that would be either tiring or frustrating in a novel. In other words, short stories allow the author to focus on the story.

Tips on idea generation

Unlike our normal Novel-in-a-Day events where participants are given a set brief for their part of an overarching story, The Lippincott Dinner is an open event for whatever stories participants want to tell (as long as they're on our "mystery story" theme).

If you know what you want to write then you can ignore the rest of this pack and get down to writing, but if you're in the market for a little bit of inspiration, we've pulled together a few brief thoughts to (hopefully) ignite some inspiration.

Where to get ideas

Waiting for inspiration to strike is all well and good, but not that helpful when it's not actually striking and you have a looming deadline! Here are ten quick exercises you might like to try if you're still staring at a blank page and your story is a bit more of a mystery than you'd like!

1) Start with the emotion you want the reader to feel.

Mystery is such a broad genre that there are so many options you can choose from here to suit your taste, style and voice. And of course, don't forget the potential to be inspired by deliberately picking something outside your normal range.

Pick what "vibe" you're going for, and then think: what makes me feel like that in real life?

2) Challenge yourself to read or watch something you normally wouldn't

There are a wealth of great mystery stories out there, in both book and movie form...

If you're a major fan of contemporary fiction like Michael Connelly, David Baldacci or John Grisham, perhaps try some earlier works like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett or even Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

If you tend to like your mysteries serious, try something lighter and comedic, like Robert B Parker, Colin Bateman, or Carl Hiassen.

If you tend to read longer works, perhaps you'd like to read one of Stephen King's short story collections. Or maybe switch mediums entirely, and go on an Alfred Hitchcock movie spree!

Or, maybe just go out and read Arthur Conan-Doyle's *The Sign Of Four* and Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, which inspired this whole event!

3) Find a different perspective

In the movie *Dead Poets Society*, Mr Keating got his students to stand on their desks to remind them to “always look at things differently.”

What can you do to approach a familiar concept from a different angle? That perspective could be a different time (in “*The Dark*”, our original *NiaD* back in 2011, we took this approach and set the novel in the immediate aftermath after a character had survived a horror movie), or from a different character’s view (in “*3 Ghosts*”, our 2016 *NiaD*, we took a Christmas Carol environment and put ourselves in Marley’s shoes instead of Scrooge’s).

4) Make it POOEE

For the planners amongst you who want to brute force an answer, a good trick is to simply answer the “*Pigfender POOEE Questions*” with the very first things that come to mind... and then tweak and iterate until the combination excites you.

For those that don’t know, the POOEE questions are what *Pigfender* considers the irreducible elements of any story: Protagonist, Objective, Obstacle, Escalation, and Ending. Hopefully all of which are self-explanatory. Just make all of them as cool as possible!

5) Put the wrong person in the frame

As an expansion of the above... think about who would be the absolutely wrong person to be solving a problem. What makes them the wrong person, and what impact does that have on how they approach it? Or, to go the other way, come up with an interesting protagonist, and ask what is the situation that they’d be the worst person to have to deal with!

6) Invent a backstory to the ordinary

Have you ever played the “*Why Are They Here?*” game? This is where you sit in a public place (like a coffee shop) and look around at the various couples, groups, and individuals around you and invent your own little soap opera about them. Why is that guy sitting on his own? Has he been stood up for a date? That lady in the corner who’s been staring at the same page of a novel for 15 minutes... what is she thinking about instead? Is she rehearsing job interview answers in her head? Do these two people actually know each other? Why are they so studiously avoiding acknowledging the other...?

In short, find an interesting detail from a normal scene (actual or imaginary) and then invent a backstory for how it all ended up here.

7) Extrapolate forward

The flip side of the “invent a backstory” coin is taking a detail and then extrapolating from it by asking what the potential consequences are from that event... and because we’re writers, we’re talking worst case, nasty unintended consequences! In 2019’s NiaD, “Butterfly Dawn”, our protagonist found themselves turned into a vampire while on holiday in Paris... but extrapolating forward, the first thing you’d need to know if you found yourself in that scenario is which of the many myths and legends about what kills vampires are actually true (and which can you safely ignore), and how can you prove that without, well, going out and testing them on your fellow toothy undead?!

8) Consider being bland and ordinary

Okay, I don’t really mean be bland and ordinary! But... sometimes it’s nice to immerse yourself in the established conventions and story-telling norms associated with a particular genre and think about how you’d craft something that would fit very nicely within that existing niche. The slow way to do this is read a lot of books in the genre. A much faster and highly entertaining way is to head over to tvtropes.org — a fantastic (and very tongue-in-cheek) website where (if you’re anything like me) you can lose entire evenings to exploring rabbit holes of the various tropes, clichés and conventions from pretty much every genre and medium of storytelling! Learn the rules that define the genre you’re writing, and see what that inspires!

9) Ignore plot and focus on theme

Sometimes you have to approach a problem backwards. In much the same way that in idea (1), above, we said try starting with an emotion and then work out what makes you feel that way, sometimes the best way to come up with a story that has deep meaning and resonance is to come up with the meaning first, and then think what story you can use as an example to illustrate that meaning.

What theme do you want for your story? Perhaps it’s “You’ll regret sacrificing what you love for what you desire” (2012’s NiaD, “Lunar520”), or “There can no justice without truth” (2020’s NiaD “On Your Honor”), or “Helping others is only hell if you’re an arsehole” (2017’s NiaD, “3 Ghosts”)... and then think about a great way to play that out.

10) Combine two or three fragments of unrelated ideas

The best stories come from more than one spark — so if the above exercises suggested a couple of interesting thoughts, try combining them! For example, 2017’s NiaD “Start Wearing Purple” is what happens when three completely separate sparks are combined into a single story... a) inventing a backstory for the photo on the front cover of the book,

where a truck had in the back a cooler with “Sleepwalker” spray painted on it; b) the different viewpoint of showing the villain’s perspective on a superhero story, and c) inspired by listening to something I wouldn’t normally — in this case the song “Start Wearing Purple” by the band Gogol Bordello.

A handful of story prompts

Below is a set of mystery story idea prompts to start you thinking. You are welcome to use any and all of these in any way that you like (whether inside this writing event or more widely — they're all things we'd love to read!). Equally, these are just a handful of random prompts, and you can ignore all of these completely!

1) *Agatha's Least Likely Outcome*

I once read — I think it was in an introduction to *Murder On The Orient Express* — that Agatha's approach to writing her unlikely twists was to write two thirds of the book with no idea who was the culprit, then stop and read it. Whoever she felt was the least likely person to have "done the deed" would become the criminal, and she'd go back and sprinkle whatever clues were needed to make it look like that was the plan all along. I have absolutely no idea if that was a thing she tried once, used regularly, or just made up to give an answer to a reporter once. Part of me really wants it to be the latter, but nonetheless, it's a good idea!

2) *Natural phenomenon*

Not all mysteries have to be crimes. There are countless natural phenomena whose causes remain a mystery to us humans, such as "Globsters" or "SDSS J1240+6710" and probably a whole bunch more — Pretty much anything can be a gripping mystery if someone really needs to know the answer in a hurry!

3) *But crime is cool too.*

There are some of the great unsolved mysteries out there in the world. The identity of Jack the Ripper has captured imaginations for literally hundreds of years, and I've always been fascinated by the tale of DB Cooper's disappearance (and possible escape) from an inflight plane...

4) *...but what if it only looks like a crime?*

Speaking of unsolved real life mysteries that have long held my fascination... what if it only looks li... *okay, I'm just repeating the title now.* But really, something like the Dyatlov Pass Incident probably has an amazing story behind it that I would love to read.

5) *...and a few more unsolved real life mysteries...!*

...like, why exactly do people keep giving JJ Abrams and Rian Johnson work in Hollywood? Have they not seen how dreadful the new Star Wars movies were?!

Only kidding. But a modern investigation into an old mystery (like, “what is Stonehenge really?”) that can give a fresh and interesting take on a very familiar unknown would be cool.



Okay, now moving away from real life...

6) What TV Show would you like to see?

Lots of great (and not so great) TV shows have been made about people who solve some sort of mystery every week. Police (E.g., Touch of Frost) and lawyers (LA Law or Boston Legal) are obvious examples, but really any profession that solves things can make a good show (and by correlation the basis of a good short story!), whether it's a doctor solving a medical mystery (House, MD), a deception consultant (Lie To Me) or even paranormal scientists (The Real Ghostbusters). Your imagination is the limit here, but one I'd like to see is a procedural based on journalism... and not a superhero tie in, like Superman working at the Daily Planet, nor a mere office-based drama set in a newsroom like The Newsroom, but an honest to goodness weekly procedural that gets to the bottom of a new mystery every week. You might even get a TV deal out of it.

7) The unlikely detective

Colin Bateman's Mystery Man series set the tone for this one (although Agatha and Miss Marple might have issue with me saying that), with a bookseller who finds himself in the middle of, well... a mystery that needs solving.

Another great book with an unlikely detective is Seamus Cooper's The Mall of Cthulhu, where a coffeeshop barista has to solve the mystery and save the day (and avoid being sucked into a Lovecraftian nightmare at the same time). Who are some unlikely detectives you could pick, and what story does that imply? A blogger? A florist? An Air Stewardess (while still on the plane?!)?

8) The Howdunnit

Here you might have an obvious crime (a theft, a murder...) and even perhaps a known / likely perpetrator, but if no-one can figure out how the crime could even have taken place do they get away with it?

Think of a crime that couldn't possibly have happened, but apparently did... and then figure out how to solve it. The classic here is the “locked room” mystery, with a dead person in a locked room with no way in, but there are plenty of other impossible options, such as, “how could someone (seem to) be in two places at once?” or “how could the DNA results not be a match?”.

9) *The Whydunnit*

Just as interesting as figuring out the “who” and the “how” can be the “why”. Finding out why someone committed a crime (or did whatever they did) can be just as big a twist as unmasking a previously unknown culprit... especially if revealing the real reason why events unfolded as they did changes their liability (i.e., would convince a jury not to convict) — or at least changes how the reader feels about them.

10) *Or just go online*

If you're still looking for inspiration, googling “mystery plot ideas” produces page after page with lists of idea prompts in this genre. Most of them are rubbish, but they might just take your mind in a new direction and light a spark in your imagination!



But seriously... I'm going to need an answer on the JJ Abrams / Rian Johnson one.

Over to you...

That's enough... over to you! Have fun writing!!