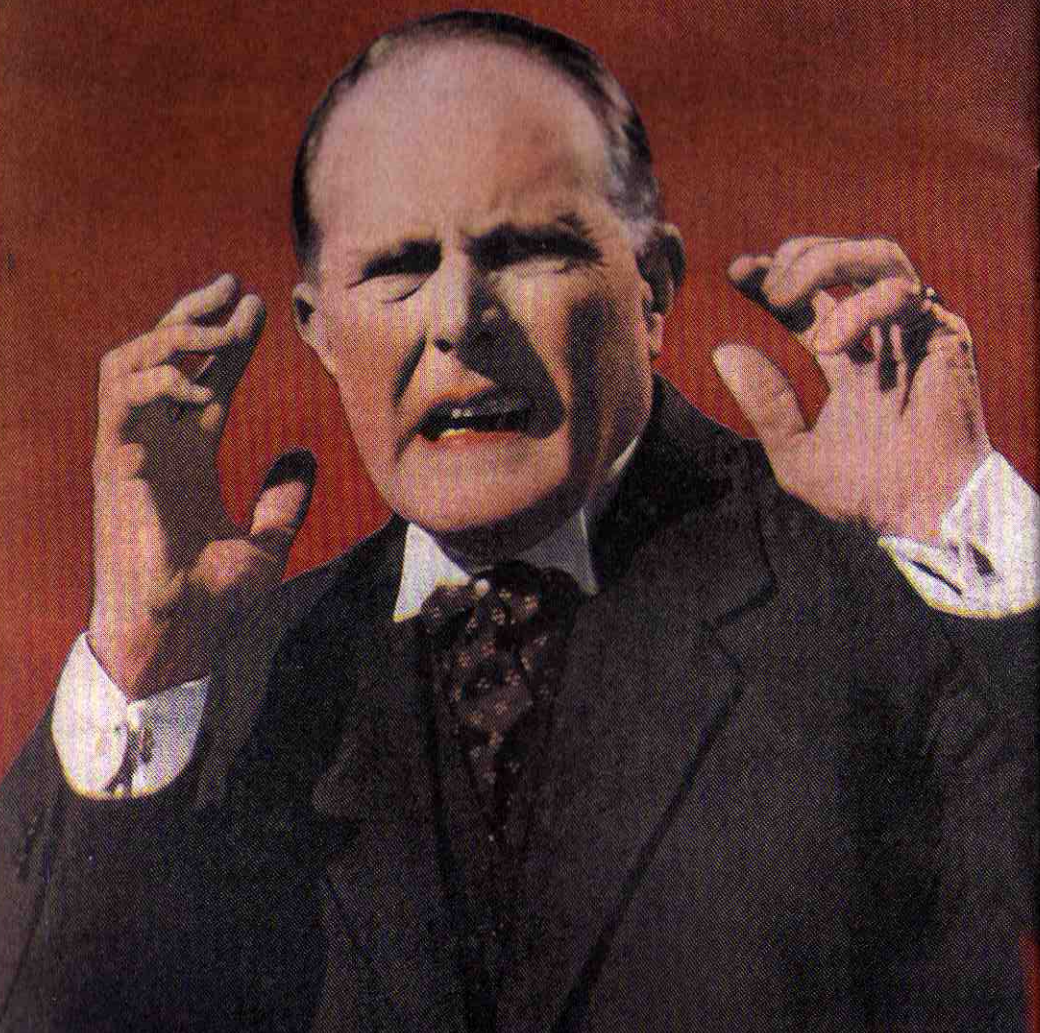


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The Ultimate Locked-Room Library

by Jonathan Scott

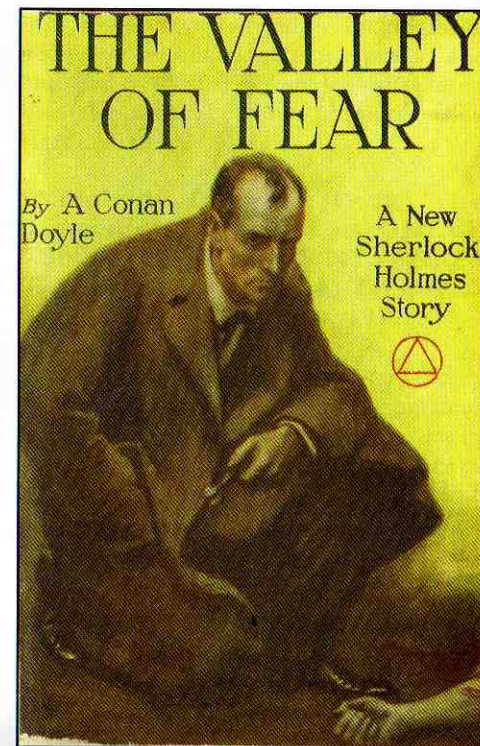


A locked-room problem is at the heart of the first stanza of modern detective fiction – Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ – and there are locked-room devices in the works of Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and others. Holmes was faced with several impossible conundrums in the likes of *The Valley of Fear* and ‘The Adventure of the Speckled Band’, before Israel Zangwill and Gaston Leroux cemented the form.

To qualify as a locked-room mystery, the crime does not have to take place in an hermetically sealed chamber. The deed must simply seem impossible – through a venue that is locked or guarded, a victim killed at close range under observation, a killer who leaves no footprints in the snow, or an impossible suspect, shielded by an unbreakable alibi. The stories often evoke the supernatural, only to be unmasked as an act of trickery, illusion or misdirection.

The books below are some of the best, rarest and most important locked-room mysteries of all. Arranged in chronological author, there is only one entry per author – otherwise the list would be dominated by John Dickson Carr/Carter Dickson. We concentrate on novels and collections published first in English, omitting a number of important French and Japanese authors such as Noel Vindry, Thomas Narcejac, Pierre Boileau and Soji Shimada. Indeed in Roland Lacourbe’s anthology *Mystères à Huis Clos* (Mysteries In Camera) he included a list of recommended reading suggested by a panel of authors and critics. This list has been transcribed (and made available online) by renowned aficionado and locked-room translator John Pugmire, who points out: “The striking feature of this list is that about 40 per cent of the titles have never been published in English.”

Other sources that were invaluable in compiling this feature include *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection* (1989) by David Lehman, Edward D. Hoch’s *All But*



Impossible (1981), Robert Adey’s bibliography *Locked-Room Murders* (1991), ‘The Locked-Room Lecture’ (Chapter 17 of *The Hollow Man*) by John Dickson Carr (of which more below), and the websites www.mysteryfile.com and www.classiccrimefiction.com.

Locked-room mysteries hold a special place in the hearts of crime collectors. The challenge and intrigue of the impossible, the intricacy of the baroque set pieces, set them apart from mere thrillers. The question is not only who, but how?

The prices given in this feature reflect what a specialist dealer would charge, and assume copies in Very Good (or better) condition. The most modern books are assumed to be in Mint condition. Unless otherwise indicated, all pre-1910 values are without jackets, later titles with. All the 19th-century book values assume choice copies, complete and in their original bindings.

T A L E S

BY

EDGAR A. POE.

NEW YORK:
WILEY AND PUTNAM, 161 BROADWAY.

1845.

1. Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' in TALES (Wiley and Putnam: Library of American Books, 1845; first issue with T.B. Smith and H. Ludwig on copyright page; paperback buff wrappers) £40,000+ Ditto (second issue with 'Craighead's Press' on copyright page; paperback) £30,000+ Ditto (first or second issue; rebound) £5,000+ Ditto (London: Wiley & Putnam, 1845; green cloth) £20,000+ Ditto (rebound) £4,000+

A woman and her daughter are murdered in an inaccessible room, locked from the inside. The mother's throat is cut, the daughter strangled and stuffed in a chimney. This is the puzzle of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Murders in

the Rue Morgue', investigated through a series of newspaper reports into the crime, which has baffled the French Sûreté. Although the solution is not as artful as works that followed, it set a template for impossible crimes and the conventions of detective fiction, paving the way for an army of sleuths to follow in the footsteps of C. Auguste Dupin.

2. Israel Zangwill, THE BIG BOW MYSTERY (Henry, 1892; paperback) £400-£600

Israel Zangwill's novella is considered the earliest proper locked-room mystery, and has been almost continuously in print since first publication. The story begins on a foggy day in the Bow district of London, where the wonderfully Dickensian widow Mrs Drabdump is convinced her lodger has come to harm. When Inspector Grodman forces the door, they discover the unfortunate man in bed, his throat cut. First issued in light buff pictorial covers, priced one shilling, this was the English humorist and Zionist campaigner's only work of mystery. He was perhaps most noted for the novel *Children of the Ghetto* and for a play that made him the toast of America – *The Melting Pot*, with its famous line: "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming... Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American."



3. Gaston Leroux, LE MYSTÈRE DE LA CHAMBRE JAUNE (Editions Pierre Lafitte, 1908; paperback) £100-£150 THE MYSTERY OF THE YELLOW ROOM (London Daily Mail, 1908; paperback) £60-£80 (Edgard



Arnold, 1909; paperback) £40-£60

In 1981 Edward D. Hoch invited seventeen authors and reviewers to choose their favourite impossible crime stories. The results appear in his anthology *All But Impossible*. Carr's *The Three Coffins* (see below) was number one, while Carr himself chose *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*. The 'Extraordinary Adventures of Joseph Rouletabille, Reporter' was first serialised in *L'Illustration* in late 1907, before it was published in book form in 1908. There is no murder in the story. Miss Stangerson is merely injured by an attacker, who disappears from a locked-room. Rouletabille investigates the case, and Leroux furnishes readers with clues, diagrams and floorplans, to help crack the problem.



4. Jacques Futrelle, THE THINKING MACHINE (Dodd Mead, US, 1907) £200-£300 (Chapman and Hall, 1907) £150-£200

When Max Allan Collins wrote *The Titanic Murders* (1999), the idea of

setting a murder mystery on the doomed liner was not new. His innovation was casting American detective novelist Jacques Futrelle as the protagonist of the piece, a real victim of the tragedy. Futrelle wrote 43 turn-of-the-century tales about 'the Thinking Machine' – Professor Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen. Like Dupin, Van Dusen solved impossible crimes brought to him by a third party – reporter Hutchinson Hatch. *The Thinking Machine* was chosen by H.R.F. Keating for his chart of the 100 best crime

and mystery books, and it includes the frequently anthologised masterpiece, 'The Problem of Cell 13', where Van Dusen wagers he can escape from a prison cell using ingenuity alone.

5. Melville Davisson Post, 'The Doomsdorf Mystery' in UNCLE ABNER, MASTER OF MYSTERIES (D. Appleton, US, 1918) £100-£125 (£400-£600) (Tom Stacy, 1972) £4-£6 (£15-£20)

American author Melville Davisson Post's recurring character, Bible-bashing amateur sleuth Uncle Abner, solved mysteries set in a reclusive Virginia community during the early years of the nineteenth century. The highpoint of this collection was 'The Doomsdorf Mystery', when he and his brother Randolph travel to confront Doomsdorf, a notorious moonshiner, only to find him murdered.

"The answer is evident," said Randolph: "The one who killed Doomsdorf hid in the room until he was asleep; then he shot him and went out."

"The explanation is excellent but for one thing," replied Abner: "How did the assassin bolt the door behind him on the inside of this room after he had gone out?" Randolph flung out his arms with a hopeless gesture. "Who knows?" he cried. "Maybe Doomsdorf killed himself."

Abner laughed. "And after firing a handful of shot into his heart he got up and put the gun back carefully into the forks against the wall!"

6. Eden Philpotts, THE GREY ROOM (Hurst & Blackett [1921]) £20-£30 (£200-£300)

The highly prolific Devonian writer wrote many dozens of mysteries in a 70-year career, beginning with *My Adventure in the Flying Scotsman* (1888). The Grey Room was his most successful detective novel and the best of his locked room mysteries. Visitors to a country house suffer a bizarre series of deaths in the titular macabre room. The

