

Low Self-Esteem? Avoid Crime Novels With Surprise Endings

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Not everyone enjoys a murder mystery with a surprise ending, new research suggests. People who have lower levels of self-esteem prefer crime and detective stories that confirm their suspicions in the end, while those with higher self-esteem enjoy a story that goes against expectations.

“Personality plays a role in whether a person wants to be confirmed or surprised when they read mysteries,” said Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, co-author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

“People with low self-esteem like to feel they knew all along who committed the crime, probably because it makes them feel smarter.”

But everyone seemed to enjoy mysteries where there were no strong hints of how the story would end, the study found.

Knobloch-Westerwick conducted the study with Caterina Keplinger of the Hanover University of Music and Drama in Germany . Their research was published in a recent issue of the journal *Media Psychology*.

Researchers know very little about what makes various forms of crime fiction popular or appealing to consumers, Knobloch-Westerwick said. This study is an attempt to find out more about how a classic genre of fiction appeals to different kinds of people.

The mystery and crime fiction genre draws large audiences, for example, with the “Law & Order” TV series and best-selling novels by John Grisham or Mary Higgins Clark.

The study involved 84 German college students. The students all took a variety of written personality assessments. They then read a short, one-page mystery story in German titled “Murder Because of Lust or Greed?” The story was about a businessman who was murdered, with two likely suspects: the victim's wife and his lover.

The students read one of three versions of the story. One version presented both suspects as equally likely to have committed the crime. A second version hinted that one of the suspects was more likely the killer than the other, and that suspect was later revealed to have been guilty (the confirmation ending). The third version also hinted that one suspect was more likely to be the murderer, but in the end the killer turned out to be the other woman (the surprise ending).

After reading the story, the participants rated how much they enjoyed the resolution of the story. People with low self-esteem rated the surprising ending as much less enjoyable than the confirmation ending. People with high-self-esteem reacted in the opposite way, disliking being confirmed and enjoying being surprised.

One implication from this is that the most popular mysteries would be those with a high degree of uncertainty from the beginning, which don't lead readers to expect a certain ending.

“Mysteries that thwart or confirm expectations in the end only pleased some of the mystery readers,” she said.

Knobloch-Westerwick said while certain stable personality traits, like self-esteem, influenced enjoyment of mysteries, there may also be

situational factors that have an effect.

“If you have a bad day at work that threatens your self-esteem, you might enjoy a confirming mystery resolution more than you would normally,” she said.

Students in the study who scored high on a measure of susceptibility to boredom were slightly more likely to enjoy the story with high uncertainty.

Participants in the study were also tested for “need for cognition” – the tendency to enjoy thinking deeply about issues and situations in life. Those that scored higher on a scale for need for cognition enjoyed the story less than others, probably because this short story was rather brief and simple, she said. They would probably enjoy a more complex mystery plot.

Overall, Knobloch-Westerwick said mysteries probably appeal more to people who enjoy thinking more than average.

“The mystery genre is one of the more complex genres,” she said.

“Mysteries have multiple suspects, and multiple possible motives, which all add complexity. It is much different than a suspense story which just has a good guy vs. a bad guy.”

Source: Ohio State University

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