



*'Imagination is a good servant, and a bad master.
The simplest explanation is always the most likely'*

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Beyond the thrill

Why is it that some of our worst nightmares form the backbone of popular entertainment?

People love thrillers. As I write, half of the books in Amazon's top 10 fiction chart are in the crime, thriller and mystery category. And the same goes for six of Netflix's 10 most-watched shows. This is nothing new. Agatha Christie's 66 detective novels make her the world's bestselling novelist in history (only the Bible and Shakespeare have sold more copies). Stories premised on heinous crimes and populated by unspeakable characters – the type that provoke anxiety, dismay and fear when reported in real life – enthrall in fictional drama, with many regularly spending a night curled up on the sofa with a cup of hot chocolate and a gory selection of violently premature deaths and moral destitution.

But what's behind this seemingly insatiable appetite for the macabre? A look at what's going on in the brain provides the clues to some of the answers. The thrill derived from watching the latest tightly honed drama is often attributed to the fact that while the fear experienced triggers the fight-or-flight response, it does so in a space where the viewer feels totally safe. The relief felt when the perceived threat is neutralised prompts the brain's threat-detection system to give you a pat on the back in the form of a dopamine hit. And because danger has been successfully avoided, the brain is encouraged to do it all over again. Yet there's something else going on that extends this initial pleasure period and makes thrillers all the more inviting.

Neuroscientist and author of *The Idiot Brain* and *The Happy Brain* Dean Burnett explains it via a theory called excitation transfer: 'The fight-or-flight response causes a surge of stress hormones, like adrenaline, to hit our bloodstream,' he says. 'It also alters brain activity, making us more alert, focused and sensitive to stimulation.' And this state isn't as sudden or transient as might be imagined. 'It lingers for a good while,' adds Dean, 'sometimes for hours, as the chemicals are removed from the bloodstream slowly and the brain "cools down". In this state, you feel "alive".' With excitation transfer, the stimulation from the original source trickles into other, totally different experiences. Suddenly the idea of tuning into a serial-killer drama on TV after a run-of-the-mill day at home or work is beginning to make sense – ironically, it makes you feel more

alive. Sadly, however, the transfer only happens when the fight-or-flight response is kickstarted, so watching a romcom won't mean that you view the world via rose-tinted glasses for the next five or six hours.

But the brain does have limits and everyone is different. The most successful thrillers are those that get the balance just right for the largest number of people. Dean says that hitting the brain's 'rewarding sweet spot' requires a winning combination of novelty and familiarity, both of which are satisfying to our grey cells: 'The former presents opportunity for new things and experiences, which can enhance knowledge and resources, and studies have shown that a novel stimulus – in other words, a surprise – enhances the reward response.' He suggests this is why finding a forgotten £20 in a pocket is more rewarding than expected funds, such as a salary, arriving in your bank account. It's less money, but it's unexpected, so the brain enjoys it more.

Then there's familiarity. 'This means pleasure for little to no effort,' explains Dean. 'You can enjoy a familiar thing with minimal effort because you already know it's safe and don't have to work to understand it.' It's stress-free but without novelty, things get boring. Equally, too much novelty can be offputting. The balance between risk and reward is lost and we're more likely to reach for the remote or put the book back on the shelf to gather dust.

Co-founder of crime-and-thriller festival Capital Crime and novelist, screenwriter and producer in the genre Adam Hamdy knows how to please the brain. His novels *Black 13* and the *Pendulum* trilogy have garnered plaudits from fellow authors James Patterson and Anthony Horowitz. As you'd imagine, Adam's works include crime and killing, but with respite also written into a scene: 'We need that moment of light relief, that pause from the tension, a chance to catch our breath. Readers will put down a book or skip ahead if things get too intense.'

This is where the thriller genre diverges from horror, and in doing so casts its net wider, catching more consumers. The aim of a thriller goes beyond fear. 'When a reader has finished the last sentence of one of my books, I want them to feel entertained,' says Adam. 'I'd like them to be exhilarated and

satisfied with the sense of completeness that comes from a good story.' And that relies on a bulletproof plot.

The denouement of any thriller is where the writer wields their surprise or novelty trump card. Its success rests on this moment. It's why at the end of Christie's murder mystery *The Mousetrap*, the longest-running show on London's West End pre-pandemic, the audience is asked not to reveal whodunnit to anyone else. The author's grandson, Mathew Prichard, joined criticism of web encyclopedia Wikipedia when it first identified the murderer online in 2010: 'My grandmother always got upset if the plots of her books or plays were revealed in reviews – and I don't think this is any different.'

Spoilers can definitely suck the fun and satisfaction out of a thriller. 'The human brain likes resolving incongruity,' says Dean. We bask in the elation of resolution 'when loose ends are tied up and uncertainty and threat dealt with. It's all stuff our brains like'. In *The Mousetrap*, along with most thrillers, tension reaches fever pitch as the story nears its nail-biting end. The brain by now is practically salivating at the thought of cracking what's invariably a murder case – or, at least, involves untimely and unnatural death.

Although Adam won't 'portray gruesome, gratuitous violence', stating that 'people are more fearful of what they can't see than what they can', he says most thrillers include death for two reasons. 'The first is that there are no higher stakes than the loss of a life. The second is that studies on infants have shown that most of us are born with an innate sense of right and wrong. The desire to see justice done is very profound. Murder is the greatest wrong, and the righting of that wrong speaks to something deep within us.'

Following this logic, those who love thrillers might be the optimistic ones, seeking justice in a fictional environment

when it can't be found in the real world. In this realm, the genre provides a glimmer of hope. This is what Adam strives to achieve: 'For all their thrills and spills, these books are ultimately about the triumph of good over evil and there's something reassuring and rewarding from consuming such tales.'

Of course, frightening places are visited along the way. But Dean says this might have a positive effect on wellbeing. In our everyday lives, he says, there's an understandable inclination to avoid sadness and fear, but doing so too successfully can be detrimental in the long term. 'The parts of the brain responsible for negative emotions are many and varied, and by ignoring them they can become rusty,' he claims. Thrillers present an opportunity for the brain to have an emotional workout in a safe space. It's a simulation, but it can bring strength, says Dean: 'Enhancing the negative emotion system can mean the brain is better able to cope with unpleasant emotional experiences in the future and able to process old upsetting memories. It's almost like a therapy session, helping you come to terms with stuff you perhaps didn't even know you were holding onto.'

Whether it's novelty, problem-solving, justice or catharsis being sought, thrillers can meet some of the brain's most fundamental needs, and we can all have a go at writing as well as reading them (see page 96). But 100 years after the publication of Christie's first book, the recipe for a popular thriller seems to involve similar ingredients: a sophisticated plot, an emotional challenge, a desire for justice and, most importantly of all, a satisfying ending.

Words: Jenny Rowe

Black 13, the first novel in Adam Hamdy's new Scott Pearce series, is available now.

