Crime Story Collection

Sarah Paretsky and Others

Story 1: Three is a Lucky Number
by Margery Allingham
Ronald Torbay has met and married Edyth, a 43-year-old woman, alone in the world, with a lot of money. He plans to murder her and make it look like an accident, as he has done with two previous wives. Edyth becomes suspicious and alerts the police. She escapes and the police arrive to arrest Ronald.

Story 2: Full Circle
by Sue Grafton
Kinsey Millhone, a private detective, witnesses an accident on the freeway that turns out to be a murder. She investigates and discovers the identity of the murderer. But in his attempt to escape, the killer crashes his car and dies in exactly the same spot where he committed the murder.

Story 3: How’s Your Mother?
by Simon Brett
Humphrey Partridge pretends that he is living with his elderly mother so that people will leave him alone. The police believe he has murdered his mother for her money, and they arrest him, but when they cannot find a body, he is released. Hearing that he has won a lot of money, his mother appears and he really does kill her. He confesses his crime to the police, but this time they do not believe him.

Story 4: At the Old Swimming Hole
by Sara Paretsky
Victoria (V. I.) Warshawski, a private detective, witnesses a murder during a swimming competition. She realizes that the intended victim was Alicia, an old friend of hers. Victoria investigates and discovers that Alicia’s brother, Tom, was behind the attempt to kill her. She finds Alicia and Tom at the swimming pool in their old high school, but she arrives too late to save Alicia’s life.

Story 5: Slowly, Slowly in the Wind
by Patricia Highsmith
Edward (Skip) Skipperton, a management consultant, has been forced by ill health to retire to the country. He tries, unsuccessfully, to persuade his neighbor, Peter Frosby, to sell him the fishing rights on the land next to his property. When Frosby’s son, also called Peter, elopes with Skip’s daughter, Skip murders Frosby and disguises the body as a scarecrow. Children celebrating Halloween discover the body, and Skip commits suicide.

Story 6: Woodrow Wilson’s Tie
by Patricia Highsmith
Clive Wilkes is obsessed by a waxworks museum, Madame Thibault’s Hall of Waxworks. One night he hides in the museum and steals the necktie from the model of President Woodrow Wilson. The following week he hides there again, and this time he kills three members of the museum staff. He confesses to the police, who do not believe him. So to make people take notice of him, he plans to kill a lot more people.

Story 7: The Absence of Emily
by Jack Ritchie
Wanting to lose weight, Albert’s second wife, Emily, goes secretly to a health farm. Emily’s sister, Millicent, believes that Albert has murdered her and tries to scare him into confessing. But Albert has planned to make himself appear to be guilty, so that Millicent will be obliged to give Albert and Emily the financial help they need.

About the authors
Margery Allingham (1904–66) was one of the leading English crime writers of the period between the two World Wars. In 1927, after various failed attempts at writing for the theatre, she wrote her first detective story as an ‘escape into the Mystery’, and continued writing in the genre for the rest her life. She famously described the mystery novel as a box with four sides – ‘a Killing, a Mystery, an Enquiry and a Conclusion with an element of satisfaction in it.’

Sue Grafton (born 1940) is a popular American writer of crime fiction. Published in 28 countries and 26 languages, she is best known for a series of novels whose titles follow the letters of the alphabet, beginning in 1982 with A is for Alibi, and all featuring Kinsey Millhone. She has said that Kinsey is herself, ‘only younger, smarter, and thinner’! She has also described the mystery novel as offering ‘a world in which justice is served. Maybe not in a court of law, but people do get their just desserts.’
Crime Story Collection

Simon Brett (born 1945) worked as a writer and producer in radio and TV in the UK before becoming a full-time writer of detective fiction in the late 1970s. He is best known for three series: the Charles Paris novels, featuring an actor who gets involved in various crimes; the Mrs Pargeter series, featuring a widow who, with a little help from her dead husband’s friends, is able to solve uncanny mysteries; and the Fethering series, set in a fictional village on the south coast of England.

Sara Paretsky (born 1947) is the American writer who has done most to change the image of women in crime fiction. Her detective, Victoria (V.I.) Warshawski, is a strong, independent character who specialises in financial crime, but usually gets involved in murder plots. Her stories follow a conventional pattern: a murder to conceal a crime, followed by more killings, and a climax where Warshawski narrowly escapes being killed by the murderer. But what makes Paretsky’s books very readable is her characterization and the richness of detail in her portrayal of contemporary Chicago.

Patricia Highsmith (1921–95) was an American writer of crime fiction, who lived in Europe for the last thirty years of her life. Her novels were more concerned with the psychology of the criminal than simply discovering who committed the crime. She is best known for her first book, Strangers on a Train, which was filmed by Alfred Hitchcock, and for a series of novels featuring the amoral but charismatic anti-hero Tom Ripley. Even as a child, Highsmith used to fantasise in her diary about her neighbours having secret psychological problems and murderous personalities.

Jack Ritchie (1922–83) was a prolific American writer, whose work included thrillers, love stories, detective comedies, suspense tales and locked-room mysteries. He sold his first story to The New York Daily News in 1953 and over the next thirty years published over three hundred stories in popular fiction magazines. A number of his stories were adapted for TV series such as Alfred Hitchcock Presents and Tales of the Unexpected.


Slowly, Slowly in the Wind, originally published in 1976, and re-published in 1991, in The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, was the title story in a collection (1979) which also included Woodrow Wilson’s Tie.

Woodrow Wilson’s Necktie was first published in 1997 in The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, and also appeared in Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine (1991), and in A New Omnibus of Crime, 2005.

The Absence of Emily was first published in The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine in 1981, and won an Edgar Award in that year from the Mystery Writers of America. It has been reprinted in five anthologies, including The Best American Mystery Stories of the Century (2000), and filmed twice, for the TV series Tales of the Unexpected, and as a short film in 2005, when it won the Best Foreign Film award at the Dixie Film Festival in Atlanta, Georgia.

Background and themes

Crime and retribution: In ‘How’s Your Mother?’ and ‘Woodrow Wilson’s Tie’, murderers get away with their crimes, and in a third, ‘The Absence of Emily’, the narrator succeeds in his plot to extort money from his sister-in-law. In ‘Full Circle’ and ‘Slowly, Slowly in the Wind’, however, the killers die at the end of the story, and in the remaining two stories the criminals are caught by the police.

Judging by appearances: All of the stories feature misjudgments on the basis of deceptive appearances. The confessions of Humphrey Partridge and Clive Wilkes are both rejected in disbelief by the police; in the stories by Margery Allingham and Sara Paretsky, murders are disguised to look like accidents; Tom Dauphine makes it look as if his sister has sold secret designs to the Chinese; Skip Skipperton tries to conceal his crime; and Jack Ritchie’s narrator, Albert, deceives his sister-in-law into believing that he has committed murder.

The original texts

Three Is a Lucky Number, published in The Allingham Case-Book (1969), has appeared with a number of different titles: ‘Bluebeard’s Bathtub’, ‘Bubble Bath No. 3’ and ‘Murder Under the Surface’.

Full Circle was originally published in 1991, in A Woman’s Eye, an anthology edited by Sara Paretsky.

Pearson English Active Readers Teacher Support Programme

Simon Brett (born 1945) worked as a writer and producer in radio and TV in the UK before becoming a full-time writer of detective fiction in the late 1970s. He is best known for three series: the Charles Paris novels, featuring an actor who gets involved in various crimes; the Mrs Pargeter series, featuring a widow who, with a little help from her dead husband’s friends, is able to solve uncanny mysteries; and the Fethering series, set in a fictional village on the south coast of England.

Sara Paretsky (born 1947) is the American writer who has done most to change the image of women in crime fiction. Her detective, Victoria (V.I.) Warshawski, is a strong, independent character who specialises in financial crime, but usually gets involved in murder plots. Her stories follow a conventional pattern: a murder to conceal a crime, followed by more killings, and a climax where Warshawski narrowly escapes being killed by the murderer. But what makes Paretsky’s books very readable is her characterization and the richness of detail in her portrayal of contemporary Chicago.

Patricia Highsmith (1921–95) was an American writer of crime fiction, who lived in Europe for the last thirty years of her life. Her novels were more concerned with the psychology of the criminal than simply discovering who committed the crime. She is best known for her first book, Strangers on a Train, which was filmed by Alfred Hitchcock, and for a series of novels featuring the amoral but charismatic anti-hero Tom Ripley. Even as a child, Highsmith used to fantasise in her diary about her neighbours having secret psychological problems and murderous personalities.

Jack Ritchie (1922–83) was a prolific American writer, whose work included thrillers, love stories, detective comedies, suspense tales and locked-room mysteries. He sold his first story to The New York Daily News in 1953 and over the next thirty years published over three hundred stories in popular fiction magazines. A number of his stories were adapted for TV series such as Alfred Hitchcock Presents and Tales of the Unexpected.


Slowly, Slowly in the Wind, originally published in 1976, and re-published in 1991, in The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, was the title story in a collection (1979) which also included Woodrow Wilson’s Tie.

Woodrow Wilson’s Necktie was first published in 1997 in The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, and also appeared in Fifty Years of the Best from Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine (1991), and in A New Omnibus of Crime, 2005.

The Absence of Emily was first published in The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine in 1981, and won an Edgar Award in that year from the Mystery Writers of America. It has been reprinted in five anthologies, including The Best American Mystery Stories of the Century (2000), and filmed twice, for the TV series Tales of the Unexpected, and as a short film in 2005, when it won the Best Foreign Film award at the Dixie Film Festival in Atlanta, Georgia.

Background and themes

Crime and retribution: In ‘How’s Your Mother?’ and ‘Woodrow Wilson’s Tie’, murderers get away with their crimes, and in a third, ‘The Absence of Emily’, the narrator succeeds in his plot to extort money from his sister-in-law. In ‘Full Circle’ and ‘Slowly, Slowly in the Wind’, however, the killers die at the end of the story, and in the remaining two stories the criminals are caught by the police.

Judging by appearances: All of the stories feature misjudgments on the basis of deceptive appearances. The confessions of Humphrey Partridge and Clive Wilkes are both rejected in disbelief by the police; in the stories by Margery Allingham and Sara Paretsky, murders are disguised to look like accidents; Tom Dauphine makes it look as if his sister has sold secret designs to the Chinese; Skip Skipperton tries to conceal his crime; and Jack Ritchie’s narrator, Albert, deceives his sister-in-law into believing that he has committed murder.

The original texts

Three Is a Lucky Number, published in The Allingham Case-Book (1969), has appeared with a number of different titles: ‘Bluebeard’s Bathtub’, ‘Bubble Bath No. 3’ and ‘Murder Under the Surface’.

Full Circle was originally published in 1991, in A Woman’s Eye, an anthology edited by Sara Paretsky.
Discussion activities
The following teacher-led activities aim at discussion and extension.

Story 1
Before reading
1 Discuss: Talk about crime and punishment. Have students talk about crime stories. Do you like murder stories where the killer is caught at the end? Or do you prefer it when the criminal gets away with his or her crime? Talk about a crime story you have read, or a film you have seen, that you particularly enjoyed, and say why you liked it.

2 Guess: Have students read the text in italics below the title and predict what they think might happen. Read these sentences and say what you think will happen in the story. Why must the discovery not happen 'too soon'?

After reading
3 Discuss: Have the students talk about the similarities and differences between Ronald’s three marriages. Look at paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 on page 2. How were Ronald’s three marriages similar? And how were they different?

Story 2
After reading
4 Role play: Have the students look at the picture on page 11.
Student A: You are a police officer at the scene of the ‘accident’. Interview one of the witnesses and find out what they saw.
Student B: You are the driver of one of the cars in the picture. Answer the police officer’s questions and say what happened and exactly what you saw.

5 Discuss: Talk about the title. Ask students if they think the title of the story is a good one, or whether they can supply a better title. Say why you think ‘Full Circle’ is a good title for this story, or agree on a better title.

Story 3
After reading
6 Role play: Have the students look at the picture on page 23.
Student A: You are Mr Denton. Reg Carter has told you about the fire and about Humphrey being in prison. Tell your wife what has happened.
Student B: You are Mrs Denton. Ask your husband for more details and give him your opinion of Humphrey.

Story 4
After reading
7 Write: Have students write Victoria’s statement to the police. Before Victoria is allowed to leave prison, she has to give the police her story. Write down what she says.

8 Role play: Have the students dramatise the police interview with Tom.
Student A: You are a police officer. You interview Tom to find out why his sister was killed.
Student B: You are Tom. You feel terrible about your sister’s death and you tell the police the whole story.

Story 5
While reading
9 Guess: What’s going to happen? Get students to stop reading at the end of page 53 and say what they think will happen. What do you think is going to happen? Will the police discover Frosby’s body? Will Pete and Maggie come back when they hear that his father has disappeared? Will Andy go to the police?

After reading
10 Write: Have the students look at Maggie’s letter to her father on page 51. Write the beginning of Maggie’s letter from Boston.

11 Check: Have students check the predictions they made in the previous activity and explain the reactions of Skip and Andy at the end of the story.
• Why does Skip shoot himself?
• Why does Andy decide not to tell the police what he knows?

Story 6
After reading
12 Discuss: Talk about the Hall of Waxworks. Madame Thibault’s Hall of Waxworks, like Madame Tussaud’s around the world, shows models of famous murders. Ask students what they think about shows like this. What do you think of a waxworks show with models of famous murders? Would you want to see a show like this?

13 Write: Have students write a continuation of the newspaper report on page 63. You are a reporter. Continue the newspaper story on page 63, with short interviews with Fred Keating and the husband and wife who found the bodies.

Story 7
While reading
14 Read carefully: Ask students to stop reading on page 69 when Albert reads the note. What do you think has happened to Emily? Is she staying with friends in San Francisco? Why has she not taken any clothes with her? Why did Albert go out into the woods with a spade?