

The Locked Room Mystery mystery


Locked Room Mystery is dead! Can you work out the culprit in this witty short story by Jasper Fforde, author of the popular Thursday Next mystery novels?

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[The Guardian](#)

"So who's the victim?" asked Detective Inspector Jack Spratt, shaking his overcoat of the cold winter rain as he entered Usher Towers. "It's Locked Room Mystery," explained his amiable sidekick, Detective Sergeant Mary Mary. "He was found dead at 7.30pm. But get this: the library had been locked ... *from the inside.*"

"Locked Room killed inside a locked room, eh?" murmured Spratt. "What was that tired old plot device doing out here anyway? I thought he was at the At the End of The Day retirement home for washed-up old cliches."

 "It was the Mystery Contrivances Club annual dinner," explained Mary. "Locked Room was going to be given a long-service award - you know how they like to stick a gong on ideas before they die out completely. Last year it was the Identical Twins plot device."

"I always hated that one," said Jack.

They stepped into the spacious marble-lined entrance vestibule and a worried-looking individual ran up to them, wringing his hands in a desperate manner.

"Inspector Spratt!" he wailed. "This is a terrible business. You must help!"

"Jack," said Mary, "meet Red Herring, president of the club and owner of Usher Towers."

"Perhaps you'd better show me the body," said Jack quietly, "and tell me what happened."

"Of course, of course," replied Red Herring, leading them across the vestibule to a large oak-panelled door. "We were about to present Locked Room with his award but he'd gone missing. We eventually found his body in the library. I swear, the room was locked, the windows barred, and there is no other entrance."

"Hmm," replied Spratt thoughtfully. "You knew him well?"

"Locked Room and I have been friends for a long time," replied Red Herring, "despite the fact that he had an affair with my wife, fleeced me on a property deal in the 60s and has been secretly blackmailing me over my indiscretion with a Brazilian call girl named Conchita."

"Conchita, eh?"

"Damn," said Herring. "You know about her?"

"It's my business to know things," replied Spratt coolly, "I also know, for instance, that this mystery conforms to the Knox Convention."

"You mean - ?"

"Right," said Jack. "There's no chance of someone we've not mentioned turning out to have done it."

"That also rules us out as the detectives," added Mary, "and there must be clues."

"And in a story this short," continued Jack, "some of them might be in italics - so keep a sharp eye out."

Jack turned back to Red Herring. "Who else was in the house at the time?"

Herring thought for a moment and counted the guests off on his fingers: "There was myself, Unshakeable Alibi, Cryptic Final Message, Least Likely Suspect, Overlooked Clue, and the butler, Flashback."

Spratt thought for a moment. "Tell everyone to wait in the drawing room and we'll speak to them one by one without a lawyer present and in clear contravention of any accepted police procedures."

Red Herring departed, and Jack and Mary ducked under the "Police line - do not cross" tape into the library. They cautiously approached the desk *where lay the corpse of the old lady, with her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off.*

"This MO seems somehow familiar," mused Spratt, looking around for a sharp object and finding nothing.

"Definitely locked from the inside," added Mary, having made an impossibly rapid examination of the room. Luckily for them both, the dark-humoured pathologist stereotype was the guest of honour at the Mystery Contrivances Club dinner, and was able to give an improbably precise time of death.

"About 7.02, give or take nine seconds," he said, munching on a sandwich.

The first suspect they spoke to was Unshakeable Alibi, who presented them with a photograph of herself taken earlier that evening - with a clock prominent in the background that read precisely 7.02.

"You knew Locked Room well?" asked Spratt.

"We were both there right at the beginning with Poe's Dupin mysteries," she mused. "Strange as it may seem now, Inspector, Locked Room was once the brightest star of the genre. He said he was going to make a comeback, but it never happened - it was all a bit sad, to be honest."

"And you are?" asked Jack as the next suspect walked in.

"Cryptic Final Message," replied the man, raising his hat. "Locked Room scribbled this note earlier today - I found it in the waste-paper basket."

Jack took the message and handed it to Mary.

"Okay, intimate nectar," she read. "Could be an anagram."

"Impossible," replied Spratt. "The Guild of Detectives have banned all anagram-related clues since 1998 - the same time we finally got rid of the ludicrous notion that albinos must always be homicidal lunatics."

"Well," purred Overlooked Clue, as she entered the room in a silk kimono. "Inspector Spratt - dahling - we meet again."

"Indeed," replied Jack. "You knew Locked Room?"

"Of course," she replied, draping herself with a fashionably decadent air upon the chaise longue. "We were close, but not intimate. He taught me all I know about misdirection. I always keep his first story close to my heart. Dearly missed, Inspector, dearly missed."

She sobbed and clasped a small volume of Poe short stories to her breast.

The next interviewee was Least Likely Suspect, a sweet old lady with white hair and clear blue eyes who spent her time gossiping and handing round photographs of her grandchildren. She asked Jack to hold a skein of wool so that she could wind some into a ball.

"I'm so sorry about Locked Room," she said sadly. "The finish of the Golden Age hit him badly. He always claimed he would make a dramatic comeback in the Christmas supplement of a leading daily newspaper, but I suppose it's too late for that now."

"Perhaps not," murmured Jack, leaning gently against the fourth wall. "I take it that you are still gainfully employed in the mystery thriller industry?"

"Me?" giggled the old lady, "What possible harm could a little old -"

She had stopped talking because a pearl-handled revolver had slipped from her purse and fallen to the floor with a clatter.

"I have a licence for that," she said quickly.

The next to be interviewed was Flashback the butler, who after taking them on an interesting but irrelevant excursion around a trivial incident in his childhood, gave no new information - except to say that Locked Room entered the library alone, and he heard the key being turned behind him.

"Tell me," said Jack slowly. "Was he carrying a small volume of short stories with him?"

"Why yes!" replied Flashback, "it's ... it's all coming back to me now."

"I was initially baffled by the lack of a murder weapon within the locked room," intoned Spratt when all the suspects were conveniently arranged in the drawing room a few minutes later, "but after due consideration, it makes sense. All of you had reason to kill him. Red Herring was blackmailing him, Unshakeable Alibi was nervous that she might be eclipsed by his planned comeback, Overlooked Clue was still in love with him and Least Likely Suspect wanted to stay employed for ever."

They all looked nervously at one another as a log settled in the grate and sent a shower of sparks up the chimney.

"That's right," said Jack, "the killer was . . ."

Â• The answer is below. Jasper Fforde is the author of the five Thursday Next books and also the Jack Spratt Nursery Crime series. His next book, *Shades of Grey*, is published in July 2008 by Hodder and Stoughton. www.jasperforde.com

Answer: It had to be a suicide. Locked Room, unable to come to terms with the loss of his literary stardom, wanted to re-establish the tired contrivance to full prominence in a final, totally unsolvable locked room mystery that would be discussed on a million bulletin boards for all eternity. Sadly, unable to come up with a decent description of his own mutilated body, he borrowed it word for word from Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, his first and keynote appearance.

Keen-eyed as usual, Jack noticed that in his haste, Locked Room had forgotten to change genders on the description and had inadvertently left the quote italicised. It was the book that Flashback saw him with, and also the same one later retrieved by Overlooked Clue as a keepsake. The anagram on the

suicide note handed to Last Cryptic Message read: "I can't take it any more." Red Herring was indeed a red herring, and Flashback's attendance was entirely irrelevant - I just liked the joke.