

The Mo Siewcharran Prize 2026



Love and Secrets

Psychological Thrillers:
A genre guide for writers

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Psychological thrillers are gripping, suspenseful, fast-paced novels portraying what can go wrong in close personal relationships, with plenty of inner thoughts, secrets and lies. Sometimes featuring crimes like kidnapping or murder, they tend to be mostly set in the present day, with characters leading relatively 'normal' lives on the surface.

How do readers expect to feel?

- Gripped – the overarching emotion should be one of intense intrigue rather than terrible fear
- Psychologically and emotionally close to the characters
- Shocked (extremely surprised as opposed to very scared or disgusted!)
- A sense of resolution by the end

Plot and story

- Focus on fast pace and tension, a reader should be desperate to know what's going to happen next!
- Include lots of twists that flip readers' expectations. These shouldn't rely on a previous lie to readers, or come out of nowhere.
- Include red herrings. How can you throw suspicion on innocent characters or mislead readers in an enjoyable way?

Common themes, tropes and elements

- Aspirational domesticity e.g. a conventional yet aspirational lifestyle that still feels relatable. Think marriage, children, and/or a home or holiday setting
- Marriage, romantic relationships, infidelity, in-laws, step-families
- A 'perfect' life being destroyed or under threat. The threat often feels personal and internal to the world of the character, rather than external
- Workplace settings where trust is important e.g. a school, or a medical location
- Holidays and trips
- Events that bring families together, like a wedding, birthday or anniversary.
- Any theme which brings strangers unusually close together e.g. a medical setting in which the main character must place all their trust in a nurse; a nanny living in a family home; a new neighbour arriving on a street or a family moving to a new neighbourhood
- The past coming back to haunt the main character
- Shocking secrets and big lies.

Setting

A recognisable world such as a city or small town, or a specific place such as a coffee shop or workplace.

TOP TIP

A woman dealing with the fall-out of her husband accused of murdering his mistress; or a woman secretly kidnapping her own child, are psychological concepts. But a girl being kidnapped by an anonymous gang for ransom money, or by a serial killer who randomly selected her, might not feel personal and 'close' enough.

Main characters

- Often defined by familial relationships or job identity, with that identity forming a key part of the plot: for example, a husband or wife, a mother or father, a daughter or son, a best friend, a doctor, a teacher
- Often they are resourceful, determined, proactive, curious, wily, clever, or willing to go to extreme lengths to defend their loved ones.
- In lots of bestsellers, readers don't know if they should trust the main character.
- Negative traits or weaknesses should create intrigue and not make your main character seem like they're making bad decisions or undermine their pure intentions.
- Even antiheroes need a good reason for their evil. If readers can't get behind your main character, they'll put the book down!

Examples

