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ZJ CZUPOR'S MYSTERY MINUTE: ON TOUR WITH DEAD WRITERS

ANSWER: Anna Katharine Green (1846-1935) has been called the “Mother of the American Detective Novel.” Her tightly plotted “whodunits” influenced writers like Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie.

She was born in Brooklyn, New York and married the actor and furniture designer Charles Rohlfis (1853-1936).

Her debut novel, *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), concerns the murder of Horatio Leavenworth, a retired merchant. The murder is investigated by Ebenezer Gryce, a detective of the New York Metropolitan Police Force, who continues in the lead role in three other Green novels.

Green also is credited with inventing the “girl detective.” Her character Violet Strange is a debutante who secretly acts as a sleuth. When *The Leavenworth Case* was adapted for the theater (1891), Rohlfis toured with the company in a lead role. When his acting career stalled, he became a furniture maker around 1897 and Green collaborated on his designs. Green was also known for designing her own book covers which incorporated some of the same design elements seen in Rohlfis’ furniture. Since all good mysteries include a “twist,” so is there a twist in Green’s long-held reputation. Many literary critics believe the title of “Mother of the American Detective Novel” should belong to Seeley Regester (1931-1885). Regester was the pen name of Metta Victoria Fuller Victor, who published her mystery novel, *The Dead Letter: An American Romance* in 1866, twelve years earlier than Green’s novel. In the mid-1800s, Regester was a successful author. She also edited *Beadle’s Home* and *Beadle’s Monthly* magazines and was an active abolitionist drawing praise from Abraham Lincoln for her abolitionist novels *Maum Guinea* and *Her Plantation Children* (1861). She never received broad recognition for her writing as did Green, but she also wrote more than one hundred dime novels and experimented in various genres of westerns, romances, thrillers, and humorous works under ten pseudonyms.

Green died in 1935 at the age of 88 in Buffalo, New York. If you visit, you can take a walking tour which highlights authors with local connections. She’s included on the tour with Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Herman Melville, Taylor Caldwell, and others. By the way, a copy of Rohlfis’ chair (there were three or four and this one made from mahogany) was found in an attic in Dayton, Ohio in the 1960s. The owners took it to the “Antiques Roadshow” television show (PBS, Philadelphia, Aug. 5, 2006), where the chair was appraised to be worth between \$80,000 and \$120,000 at auction. The chair was later sold at auction in 2020 for \$220,000.



Anna Katharine Green
(photo taken c. 1880. Rohlfis family archive).