

An Enormous Dog

Back in the middle of the last century, the great literary Pooh-Bah of the time, Edmund Wilson, wrote a famous essay entitled "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" It was the latest salvo in his ongoing war against what were known then, as they are now, as detective stories. And he came to this conclusion: that the reading of such fiction is "simply a kind of vice that for silliness and minor harmfulness ranks somewhere between smoking and crossword puzzles." This verdict was issued during the nineteen-forties - a period many believe to have spanned the genre's most verdant flowering. Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh were writing then.

The angry reader reaction that ensued just whetted Wilson's literary broadsword.. In another essay, entitled "Mr. Holmes, They Were The Footprints of a Gigantic Hound" - a reference to the famous Sherlock Holmes story about the Baskerville family's big dog, he confessed that he had of late been reading himself to sleep with the Sherlock stories. And even the dread Holmes wasn't safe.

Wilson went so far as to concede that the Sherlock stories constitute literature on a "humble, but not ignoble level". That said, the critic redonned his brass knuckles.

Author Conan Doyle, he said, regarded "Holmes and Watson as the paper dolls of rather ridiculous and undignified potboilers and he paid so little attention to what he wrote about them that the stories are full of inconsistencies, which Doyle never bothered to clear up. He forgot Watson's Christian name and later on gave him a new one; he began by making an ignorance of literature a Holmes trademark and then had him talk about Petrarch and Meredith. The critic does concede, though,

~~then had him talk about Petrarch and Meredith. The critic does concede, though,~~
that there is something special about the stories:

...."the admirable settings: the somber, overcarpeted interiors or the musty empty houses of London, the remote old or new country places always with shrubbery along the drive. and the characters - the choleric big game hunters and the high-spirited noble ladies - have been imbued with the atmosphere of the settings and charged with an energy sufficient - like the fierce puppets of a Punch-and-Judy show - to make an impression in their simple roles"

I'm going to try to counter the distinguished critic and take the position that detective stories - perhaps better referred to as murder mysteries - can constitute creative writing at a high and rewarding level. Some writing that involves "crime", such as the work of Dostoevsky, Malraux, Conrad and Camus does, indeed, achieve the status of first-rate literature. But that's not the level of so-called "crime fiction" I'm going to deal with. I'm going to cast a benevolent eye on the simple, garden-variety murder story. And I'm going to enlist on my side the eloquent author P. D. James, creator of that melancholy, saturnine Scotland Yard commander, Adam Dalgleish.

To back-track just for a moment, I'd like to mention that I grew up in a family of writers, and my father was a devotee of that once-sneered-at, but now revered, pulp known as "Black Mask", which featured some of the more skillful of the authors of the day - people like the now legendary ex-Pinkerton detective, Dashiell Hammett. Discussion of the "better" stories - meaning in my case, the most lurid - formed a bond between us. An old copy of "Black Mask", by the way, can

now command a pretty penny in the rare book market.

Wilson took his usual condescending attitude toward Hammett's acknowledged masterpiece, "The Maltese Falcon. " I went back and read "The Maltese Falcon,"he said, because "it had been called by Alexander Woolcott the 'best detective story America has yet produced" and since at the time it had caused Hammett to become - in Jimmy Durante's phrase, referring to himself - "duh toast of duh intellectuals."

Wilson concludes that Hammett manages to "infuse the old formula of Sherlock Holmes with a certain cold underworld brutality which gave readers a shudder in the days when it was fashionable to be interested in gangsters." But, the critic adds, "The Maltese Falcon today seems not much above those picture-strips in which you follow from day to day the ups and downs of a strong-jawed hero and a hard-boiled, but beautiful adventuress.

Before I get into my argument for the defense, though, I'd like to mention a few of the fictional detectives I found particularly compelling during my compulsive, adolescent readership of the 1940s. One was the creation of Jacques Futrelle, Professor S. F. X. Van Dusen, Ph.D., LL.D., M.D. - better known as "the thinking machine." He was a small, middle-aged man with a scholar's squint and an unusually large skull. (He wore a size 9 hat).

The "Thinking Machine" usually sat in a corner absorbing details of a crime as they were narrated to him - and then unflinching came up with a startling (and correct) solution without moving a muscle. In his most famous story: "The Problem of Cell 13", Professor Van Dusen volunteered to be incarcerated in what was

touted as an "escape-proof" , blockhouse-like, concrete penitentiary. He got out, of course, within a matter of hours. I won't spoil the story for you, but will mention that shoe polish, a length of yarn from his tattered sweater and observance of the habits of mice in prison's drainpipes were factors in his swift, unobserved exit.

Another was British author G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown. This East Anglian Roman Catholic priest was, as crime-fiction analyst Rosemary Herbert noted in an Oxford University Press article. "short, plump, myopic absent-minded and unworldly . Yet this habitually umbrella-carrying cleric is unshocked by the most grotesque murders and other crimes." In his unthreatening manner, he shares a trait with Agatha Christie's mild-mannered Miss Marple. "Both are at first-sight no apparent threat to wrong-doers and neither has any objection to seeming innocent or naive." Indeed. such an image assists them in their work.

Besides, as Herbert points out: "Clerical sleuths have advantages over other investigators in that they are usually able to go anywhere, talk to everyone - no one so spans the social spectrum as the clergy - and take as much time as they need. Nor, as a rule, are they answerable to any worldly body for their actions.

Another favorite, I must say rather over-the-top, scourge of crime of the time was "The Saint ". Once, when trapped in a shed into which a villain is pumping poison gas, "The Saint" fashions a gas mask from some earth-filled flower pots.

Believable? I don't think so.

And then there was Raymond Chandler, author of the incomparable "The Big Sleep." When criticized, Chandler had a response: "Literature is bunk," , he said,

put out "by fancy boys, clever-clever darlings, stream-of-consciousness ladies and gents and editorial novelists." So much for that bunch.

Now I turn to P. D. James for the defense. Her carefully-constructed, well-written mysteries are generally a delight. They are populated by believable people, residents of a familiar London street or nearby suburb. It is often the prosaicness of the setting she evokes that makes the crime, when it occurs, hit with such shocking force.

She has this to say of the genre: "One of the criticisms of the detective story is that (the) imposed pattern is merely formula writing, that it binds the novelist in a straitjacket which is inimical to the artistic freedom that is essential to creativity, and that subtlety of characterization, a setting which comes alive for the reader and even credibility are sacrificed to the dominance of structure and plot."

"But what I find fascinating," she goes on, "is the extraordinary variety of books and writers which this so-called formula has been able to accommodate and how many authors have found the constraints and conventions of the detective story liberating rather than inhibiting of their creative imagination. To say that one cannot produce a good novel is as foolish as to say that no sonnet can be great poetry since a sonnet is restricted to fourteen lines - an octave and a sestet - and a strict rhyming sequence."

And why murder?

The central mystery of a detective story need not involve a violent death, but, as James points out, "murder remains the unique crime and it carries an atavistic weight of repugnance, fascination and fear." Readers are more likely to be

interested in which of Aunt Ellie's heirs laced her nightly cocoa with arsenic than in who stole her diamond necklace while she was safely holidaying at Bournemouth.

"Some historians of the genre claim that that the detective story proper, which fundamentally is concerned with bringing of order out of disorder and the restoration of peace after the destructive eruption of murder, could not exist until society had an official detective force, which, in England, would have been in 1842, when the detective department of the Metropolitan Police came into being.

Here, I'm going to veer slightly off-tangent and mention an offshoot of the detective story: the non-fiction evocation of an actual crime that in its telling can become just as rivetting as the fictive one. One of interesting examples of this genre was published a few years ago and made into a television episode. It is entitled "The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher." A little boy had been murdered under grisly circumstances at an imposing estate in Wiltshire and police there had all but convicted the family's nursemaid.

Newspapers criticized this outcome. The Morning Post blared: "A crime has been committed which for mystery, complication of probabilities and hideous wickedness, is without parallel in our criminal records...the security of our households demand that this matter should never be allowed to rest till the shadow of its dark mystery shall have been chased away in the light of unquestionable truth."

So authorities called in Inspector Jack Whicher, an unremarkable man with piercing blue eyes. Whicher pinned the crime on the family's daughter, much to the consternation of local residents, who couldn't believe that a member of that

distinguished household would commit such a crime. Years later, though, the daughter did walk into a police station and confessed the crime. With that, the unnotable Jack Whicher slipped into legend and became the prototype of every understated fictional detective from that day to this.

Now for a look at what's out there today. The spectrum is broad and is multi-national in scope. Indeed, there's such variety that I'm sure I will leave out someone's favorite author or category. One interesting phenomenon has been the popularity of what might be called the Nordic, or Scandinavian pulse-pounder .

For example, there are the novels by Henning Mankell set in and around the town of Ystad in Sweden. They feature detective Kurt Wallander, a messy kind of guy; he eats too much junk food, drinks too much and has a hard time controlling the anger frequently boiling up within him. He is a great fan of opera and listens to Maria Callas recordings while driving around in search of suspects.

For some reason, at least to this North American eye, there is an attractive strangeness about Wallander's beat. You get to know his home street - Mariagatan - in the southeastern city of Malmo. The chilly ambiance into which the detective plunges each morning has an inviting, oddly exotic tinge. Mankell's novels have sold extremely well.

Then there are the highly popular stories by the late author and journalist Stieg Larsson featuring the deeply-troubled, but brilliant, Lisbeth Salander. She is the "girl with the dragon tattoo" who is unafraid to kick over a hornet's nest. Victim of abuse in early life, Lisbeth is fearless, and can be sadistic in her own way when it comes to retribution for those who prey on the powerless. She also

happens to be an astute computer hacker and uses this talent to stunning effect.

The crime story in Japan, where the genre is extremely popular, Professor George J. Demko points out, reflects a "society where guns are rare and there is an aversion to violent, swashbuckling detectives." and it is "almost always a police procedural reflecting the nation's concern for an orderly society defended by establishment police." In many parts of Latin America the mystery has been turned upside-down with criminals depicted as the good guys and the police or the state the criminals.

Professor Demko has also noted that many of his friends admit to being "closet readers" of mysteries. It is difficult to understand, he says, why it is necessary to be a "closet reader" of a genre that is worthy of the "most demanding, literate and even arrogant reader."

For my own enjoyment, I turn to P. D. James, not only for critical insight, but as a favorite author. Her novels, featuring the aforementioned Adam Dalgleish are strong on psychological motives and take place often in the ambiance of Great Britain's bureaucracies such as the criminal justice system or the National Health Service where James worked for decades. And setting plays a strong part.

In analyzing herself, P. D. James says: "I can detect the influence of Dorothy L. Sayers (the author of such winners as "Nine Tailors" in which bell-ringing figures prominently, and "Gaudy Night" set in an Oxford University milieu) in my own work, together with that of Jane Austen, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh. To her admirers, James says, Sayers is the novelist who did more to lift the detective story from its status as an inferior puzzle to a respected craft with

claims to be taken seriously as popular literature.

" Her (Sayers's) detractors deplore what they see as the snobbery and elitism (she must be the only writer to include in one of her books a letter in French which she does not deign to translate), focussing their dislike on her aristocratic detective, Lord Peter Wimsey. But " her books continue to entertain, not the least giving us a lively picture of life in the 1920s and 1930s, that period which E. M. Forster described as "the long weekend between wars."

Commenting about her own work, James gives this insight: "In "A Taste for Death," two bodies are discovered in a church vestry by a gentle spinster and a truant she has befriended. The contrast between the sanctity of the setting and the brutality of the murders intensifies the horror and can produce in the reader a disorienting unease, a sense that the ordained order has been overturned and we no longer stand on firm ground.

In "An Unsuitable Job for a Woman," she notes, a particularly appalling and callous murder takes place in high summer in Cambridge where wide lawns, sun-dappled stone and the sparkling river recall to the young woman detective, Cordelia Grey's mind, some words by John Bunyan: "Then I saw there was a way to Hell, even from the gate of Heaven"

Another favorite of mine is Ruth Rendell, Baroness Rendell of Babergh. She is a prolific writer and weighs in heavily, too, on the psychological side - developing themes of human miscommunication and the far-reaching consequences of family secrets.. She has shed light on such issues as domestic violence and the change in the status of women. While they do involve violence, the works of James and

Rendell belong to a degree to the cozy English tradition murder in surroundings that often enchant.

I like the closed house concept. Perhaps it's a cliché, but a family gathering in a well-furnished and creaky English mansion that results in a corpse on the carpet is my idea of crime scribbler's ambrosia.

One critic credits Rendell and P. D. James with "upgrading the entire genre of whodunit, shaping it more into a whydunit. Rendell's protagonists are often socially isolated,, or are otherwise disadvantaged; she explores the adverse impacts of these circumstances on these characters, as well as their victims. "

Before closing, however, I want to go back to my days as intrepid, and I use that adjective with a heavy overtone of irony, boy reporter. For a while, I covered what was known as "the federal beat." As a result, I got over to Alcatraz, on occasion, when it supposedly housed some of the system's hardest cons, but never managed to corner one of the prisoners for an interview.

But, once, at the Federal Courthouse at Seventh and Mission streets, a deputy marshal I knew said he could sneak me into a holding cell where Abe, "The Trigger" Chapman, was waiting to testify. before a grand jury. Since Chapman had been touted as "the brains" of Murder Incorporated, I jumped at the chance. What an opportunity!

But, alas Chapman only mumbled monosyllabic, unenlightening responses to my penetrating questions. "The Brains" of Murder, Inc., was just plain stupid. He demanded a greasy cheeseburger from the Foster's down the street , which I dutifully got him and had to watch his messy consumption of

same, accompanied by burps and more unintelligible grunts .

The secrets of Murder Incorporated were certainly safe in the dim and limited bulb that was Abie the Trigger's cerebellum.

So fiction does, indeed, trump reality.

"Come, Watson, come. The game's afoot!"

##

Credits...

I have used as sources and quoted from:

P/ D. James: "Talking about Detective Fiction

Rosemary Herbert's "Whodunit?"

Professor G J. Demko's "Landscapes of Crime."