

## A Note on Detective Fiction

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Semon Strobos

**B**ecause I don't like detective stories very much, I have wondered what people read them for. What I mean by "detective stories" is the popular whodunit, as begun by Poe and picked up by Dickens and Conan Doyle, as written by Agatha Christie and her ilk, and to a lesser extent I mean Raymond Chandler's work and that of others of his school. I'm distinguishing these from thrillers, in which suspense and terror rather than whodunit are foci.

I usually love the characters and scene setting, which are old fashioned technically, but more simply written than the nineteenth-century novels they resemble: altogether relaxing. I like English villages or 1930's California either one. But I start to lose interest when the logistics start: who was where at what time and date, and how long it took, and who saw him, etc.

"Murder on the Orient Express" for instance was a blast at first: neat characters, romantic setting, lots of stories, even the murder is an exciting event. Then you get the same scenario told (*told*, in a movie) by different people four more times—kind of a thoughtless *Rashomon*. Not even the interesting part of the story either: just more logistics. Other fiction tends to leave out how people get places and how long it takes, because other fiction strives to be less boring and time consuming than life its own self. But detective stories spend a lot of time on the least interesting part of the plot, on the "McGuffin" as Hitchcock called it (the Maltese falcon or whatever) rather than on people.

Of course, I was watching a detective movie starring Susan Sarandon, whom I like, with my roommate. Sarandon's character is inclined to have an affair with the detective but she's married, though having problems with her husband. All three

characters are well done. She and the detective stop talking about this interesting situation to start talking about where the murder weapon was found blah blah blah. I turned to my roommate and said, "This is the same old boring stuff. The interesting part is this affair they may have."

He said, "But they have to talk about something. There's got to be a story." He's a graduate student in physics and never reads anything if he can help it. I realized that dates in America, visits, opportunities for meeting people also probably have to have pretext: a baby shower or some story going on. Perhaps people aren't comfortable just talking about what's happening between them, or about whatever comes up. We don't live in a cafe society, like Eastern Europe's, and it shows in our businesslike sense of narrative.

The characterization in detective works tends to be thin—only what's needed to get the plot moving along. It's mechanically done too: set up as exposition rather than allowed to transpire. And modern fiction as a whole has lost belief in such complex plots: Shakespearean doubles, coincidences, hidden relationships, villainy. These things survive mostly in crime writing, though it's interesting that Dickens and *Tom Jones* also go in for them and have also been read as primal restorations: as allegories of the incestuous family.

Few of the realities of the criminal nature (what psychiatrists *DSMIIIR* now calls "Anti-Social Personality Disorder") or of the policeman penetrates detective stories. The detective tends to be an amateur outside and often in opposition to the police force, or a maverick within it. She or he is an amateur who has no truck with police SOP but uses his/her own, invariably described as original and unusual. The detective is in fact a kind of academic, or naive rationalist, employing entirely rational methods.

I once asked the late Richard Danae ("Ellery Queen") what he thought crime fiction's lure was. He said, "People have always been interested in crime and murder: Dostoevsky, Shakespeare."

But detective fiction isn't about murder or crime. It has no interest in what motivates a murderer (besides "motive"), or in his psychology or upbringing, or what he feels like; no interest in the effect the crime has on the family, society, and friends of the murderer or the victim; and no interest in the criminal act

itself, which is narrated at a safe remove. Other than 'whodunit' and 'with what' the murder is often not described at all, unlike in the thriller, where teasing about such a scene occupies much of the film or book, and the scene itself, always foiled, is the climax.

I pass briefly to a few things which are obvious. The plot is a puzzle or parlor game, an adult Easter egg hunt with clues. Usually so much freedom of possibility remains—since psychological realism is so much in abeyance—that by the end, any number of suspects could still have done the murder, if one accepts involved and improbable *modus operandi*. Still, for some readers, the puzzle has its interest, at least in the form of suspense.

Three things about this genre account to me for its appeal. First, the atmosphere, rather than chilling, is cuddly. The detective has a best friend or mate—often the narrator—with whom he has a warm and supportive relationship (Holmes and Watson; Marple and the entire English village; Poirot and his joker English detectives; Nero Wolfe and Archie). Jokes or teases are played, usually by the detective. The main tease is his withheld knowledge of the murder. Policemen (adults, as it were) warn him not to involve himself for his own safety. The society of the detective is also warm, not only Miss Marple's delicious English village, but Holmes' London, Nero's hermetic household. The atmosphere of the murder is a contrast, an episodic picaresque situation which leaves the society of the detective unaltered. The murder is held at a safe remove: someone finds the body of her father and within sentences she's worrying about "clues." The detective and his cohorts are neither murderer nor victim. Even the picaresque background is frequently warm, with a "client" or sympathetic main suspect (innocent).

Second, the solution is highly improbable. The murderer has created a puzzle rather than a crime. I imagine in real murders it is either immediately obvious whodunit, or not obvious precisely *because* of the simplicity of the act, rather than because of its puzzle-like complexity.

Lastly, the world of detective fiction is virtually sexless. The detective, with few exceptions, is unmarried. The thin man (Nick Charles) may be an exception but his relationship with his wife is not very marital, at most courting and perhaps even childish play. There are suggestions that he drinks too much and

stays up too late to consummate the marriage. Marple, Holmes, Poirot, Wolfe: all aggressively single. Archie has his chase routine but it never comes to much until after the story is over. As Wimsey gets involved with Harriet Vane, his novels hardly any longer involve crime (murder). The murderer and his victim may have had and often did have a sexual relationship, for which, I suppose, they are punished, but it is rarely described in any detail, either emotional or physical. TV murders partake of the adolescent foreplay typical of the genre: *boy meets girl*, then . . . fade.

The detective is a neuter "genius" in the naive, Horatio Alger journalistic view of genius—a confusion of Knowledge and Thinking. She is a rationalist without human qualities or emotions, an eccentric who works with an all purpose brain, adept not at special cases or insights but rather a compendium of knowledge about everything. The detective is a connoisseur of wine, of flowers, of books, of trivia, of whatever is necessary, not merely to unravel the crime but to impress the interloper (adult) community. The detective belongs to the Romantic rather than "Realist" tradition in being seen from outside. She is never the narrator. She is childhood's magic parent, or the parents' "good" double, the pre-oedipal, non sexual father or mother. She is the comic wizard—in Northrop Frye's sense—who helps the New World of the ingenues to be born from the ashes of the Old World of parents, murderers, police.

This new world resembles other popular fiction. Wodehouse and Tolkein also have this cuddly prepubescent atmosphere. They also have their Uncle/Aunt ersatz father/mother figures—fantastic and improved parents like the detective who help the young at heart escape repression.

Thus these forms can be considered escapist in the direction of regression. Detective fiction seeks to deny mortality and even maturity. It allows the main family/friendship/sibling nexus of its primary and (even primal) group to remain pre-sexual, immature and unthreatened. The murder is highly improbable, treated as a removed puzzle object which never affects the "cuddlers"—including not only the detective and his cohorts but the "client" or favorite "suspect."

Puberty's forcible interruption, the knowledge of mortality, and the breakup of the nuclear family are held in abeyance. The

detective—magi-parent, like Peter Pan—holds at bluff, plays with, defeats the outside world of murder, sex, death, hostility, aggression and policemen, and preserves for his family circle a paradisiac version of prepubescence. This circle also includes the reader, who through narrative voice and point of view is made to identify with the “best friend” or “nephew” figure. The reader is encouraged to admire the ingenue—the innocent favorite suspect—but from a distance from where this admiration is kept to a presexual or at least fantasy level.

Raymond Chandler’s “The Simple Art of Murder” makes some similar points in excoriating what he calls “Mystery Fiction” of the Agatha Christie sort which predominated before him. Chandler claims that his own “Detective Fiction” is more realistic. It does not, for example, deny sexuality.

How true is this? Many rebels end up reverting to what they rebelled against, or, more subtly, accept its paradigm while rejecting content or symbols. So the rebel moves, perhaps, to the opposite extreme, an axis which affirms the same thing. The Liberator, putting the first foot wrong by fighting violence with violence, becomes a tyrant of another sort: a Castro or Napoleon.

Chandler’s “Detective Fiction: for me at best moves into adolescent fantasy sexuality: women characters, basically projections of naive desire, admire the hero’s macho. Vulnerability, even communication, is too scary for this adolescent sensibility, so the detective cannot respond in turn to the woman’s expression of interest. He’s busy detecting, which tends to involve fighting. Not a realistic view of how to meet women and get to know them, needless to say.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler made a similar point about the American novel as a whole: which is, he says, about “come on back to the raft, Huck, honey.” Men form attachments to men, with women at best as picaresque episodes. Or the women, ignored, capture the men into domesticity, like Mom making you stop touch football to wash your hands for dinner, or the bar girl who gets John Wayne in the Western’s penultimate scene, though he’s clocked maybe a minute of running time with her up to then. Then in the ultimate scene he rides off with the guys again.

While a society’s relationship to its fantasies is hard to

puzzle out, it's disturbing to find our art so fantastic (not about daily relationships) and the fantasies themselves so violent, alienated, antisocial, and so primitively masculine (adolescent).

So the crime novel is not about murder/aggression/hatred/crime/violence at all. It denies these things. It's a fantasy about playing with your buddies after school.

Nothing wrong with that. I still don't get the logistics. Do we view this as a necessary evil, like putting on our snowsuits and washing our hands? I think, instead, we can take a clue from the simultaneous birth of the detective and the industrial age. We watch *Robocop*, our children play with plastic toys which are half man and half machine. Somehow we have come to identify with machines: we see our cars not as expensive, homicidal, time-consuming inconveniences—an environmental and balance of trade disaster—but as freedom, the way the cowboy looked at his horse. We have become comfortable with being robocops.

And this is probably why I don't like detective stories. I like cuddling with my friends fine, but if half of me is a machine, I regard myself as a monster. I don't enjoy the scheduling, accounting and filing of forms modern life has made necessary. I'd sooner escape, when I'm reading, to some more human world. ☹