# What Is The Appeal Of Detective Fiction?

*Gavin Holman – April 1981*

The detective story in its various forms is one of the major fields of work in contemporary English literature. As popular fiction it is read by most people to some extent, and enjoys a great following of dedicated readers. The detective story lies within the genre of thriller fiction, a vague term covering anything from international spy intrigues to Gothic mysteries. However, the detective story should be differentiated from the other aspects of thriller fiction so that a clear idea of what is being discussed can be formed.

The detective story is one in which the primary interest lies in the methodical discovery by rational means of the exact circumstances of a mysterious event or series of events, usually posing a puzzling problem concerning a crime. The mystery and crime stories are often considered analogous to the detective story although, ideally, they should be considered as separate.

Crime stories are tales of criminals and the crimes they commit, with emphasis in the plot on the crime itself and events leading up to it, with attendant causes and effects. They provide the reader with as escape or insight into the world of the criminal, which may consist of an adventurous, dazzling exploit or a mundane description of the life of the majority of real criminals and their natural enemies, the police force.

Mystery stories are those which have some mystery at the core of the story, but which is either not resolved , or is revealed by change or with little or no solution by the investigator. They are purely escapist stories dealing with the unknown or unimaginable, often with a grand climax in which wrongs are righted and the truth is disclosed to all.

However, with the detective story, the requirement is not a fast moving piece of descriptive writing or an unresolved mystery. The interest is an intellectual one. The mystery exists, the crime or event has taken place and it is the detective's job to unravel the mixture of threads surrounding the truth to solve the mystery. in providing the initial mystery the author is challenging the reader to use his own powers of deduction, logic and reason to establish the true sequence of events and thence the ultimate solution, before his own detective does. If the reader fails, a case which is hoped for by the author or his sales would soon drop, the reader does not lose anything. The revelation he receives as the detective lays bare the facts of the case can often be more satisfying than solving it himself.

The general thriller story is usually an adventure type of story in which some unstable situation is unfolded and eventually resolved, to the good or not. Any crime or detection involved is purely of a secondary nature and does not form part of the plot in any major way. Perhaps the most common type of thriller over the last thirty years is that of the spy or political thriller in which the hero is used as a pawn or puppet in the struggle between two large powers.

Having separated the detective story from its close relations we can investigate it by itself. There are three basic elements to detective fiction:

- The crime or event which forms the mystery basis for the story. The crime is usually murder, probably due to the extreme emotions that murder causes amongst the general public, and the wealth of motives, opportunities and methods available to the author. However, it is not exclusively murder, the next most favoured event is the theft of some article. Whatever the event that forms the mystery, it has a perpetrator, normally a single person, whose identity is hidden to the reader amongst other characters in the plot.

- The detective. This character may be someone with acute perception, unlimited knowledge, undaunted perseverance, which enables him to expose the criminal and to reveal the method by which the crime was committed. He may be a more mundane type of character, relying on technique and footwork rather than flashes of inspiration and genius. A second character, the detective's assistant or confidant, may also be present. Usually of "normal" intelligence, perhaps a little slow, he acts as a buffer between the brilliance of

the detective and the reader. He is someone to whom the detective has to explain his thought processes, and hence the reader obtains those thoughts second hand.

- A series of observations and events, trivial, commonplace and apparently unconnected. The significance or lack of significance of these is discovered by the detective, who links them all into a chain of clues to lead him to the criminal and the final solution.

The appeal of detective fiction to the reader may have many different forms. Certainly there are several different theories for the success of the genre, put forward by critics, psychologists and the authors themselves. Two psychologists, Rycroft and Pederson-Krag have theorised that people read detective stories because they are subconsciously reverting to feelings from childhood, satisfying the curiousity of infancy, the victim being the parent, and the criminal and the detective being the reader, thus "redressing the helpless inadequacy and anxious guilt unconsciously remembered from childhood". This may be so, but I compare it to the psychologists' explanation of smoking - that it is a retrogressive mother/nipple substitute - i.e. an interesting and amusing idea, but not a reason which is easily accepted. The qualification of Pedereson-Krag's original ideas by Rycroft's addition of the concept of the reader indentifying with the criminal or detective, with the ideal situation being where the detective is the criminal, may be explained with the help of inferiority and superiority complexes and schizophrenia, but again I feel this can not be a true reason. Agatha Christie perhaps most sensationally used this theme in her The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, but once used this idea soon becomes passé, and most people are against "trickery" of this sort in detective fiction.

W.H. Auden proposed that the detective story has a magical function, mirroring the Arthurian Quest for the Holy Grail, where the ideal stories are set in idyllic surroundings and the crime brutally shatters the peace and calm. He believed that these stories ease our personal sense of guilt by transferring it to the characters in the story.

Professor Roy Fuller compares the detective story to the Oedipus myth with the "illustrious victim, the preliminary riddles, the incidental love interest, the gradual uncovering of the past, the unlikeliest criminal", and suggests that the detective story helps to purge the reader of the dregs of Oedipus complex in his mind.

In the case of murder, the psychological theories ofter refer to primitive society where the murderer is seen as the permanent scapegoat. An evil deed has been done, someone has suffered, so a sacrifice is required. This sacrifice is seen as ridding the individual or group of its guilt through its ritualism and symbolism, and restoring the balance between good and evil in the world.

These then are the main psychological answers to the appeal of detective fiction. On the social side of life, detective novels, as seen with all other literature, reflect the social scene of their times. Apart from a few of the early detective stories which glorified the criminal and admired his expertise and astuteness, the great majority of tales of detection have sided firmly with law and order. The criminal is an antisocial animal, upsetting the accepted order of things, devaluing the standards of the society he offends. As a result he is regarded as someone who has to be reprehended and forced to cease his activities and, usually, accept some form of punishment for them. The detective story sets out to apprehend the criminal and does not give satisfaction unless he is eventually brought to justice, or at least that the detective has done all in his power to find the villain before being forced to give up his inquiries. Of course, in reality, the detective does not always catch his man, although in fiction the efforts of the investigator almost invariably win in the end. If the detective did not solve the mystery, the story would no longer be classified as a detective story, it would then be a crime novel or a mystery novel depending on conditions.

However, I feel that the appeal of detective fiction lies mainly in the fact that it is essentially an intellectual challenge or an admiration of the prowress of the detective. The cause of the mystery should be a crime, or at least an attempted crime. Whatever the problem, whether solved by evidence, cool reasoned deduction, Edgar Allan Poe's technique of ratiocination, or a hastily penned cryptogram, it is detected, not guessed. The interest of the detective story depends on arousing the reader's curiousity. Every detail of the plot must sustain and heighten an intense determination to know the solution.

Uncertainty is a vital factor in the detective story. The prime issue in doubt is that of the identity of the criminal. The suspects are paraded in front of the reader, each one seeming more likely than the last. It is the author's task to keep the reader guessing, though not to keep him in the dark, as all the facts and shreds of evidence available to the detective should also be available to the reader, and only the reader's own powers of ratiocination should

prevent him from solving the mystery. The evidence on which the detective, and hopefully the reader, bases his solution is of necessity spread throughout the plot and the reader, lacking the detective's (author's) insight has to separate the red herrings from the bona fide clues, although some of these are indicated to the reader directly from the text - as in the Great Detective's cry of "Ah! But what do we have here?", or from an indirect source via a reference to the clue later in the plot.

Jacques Barzun believes that the short story is the true medium of detection, even although the novel offers better concealment opportunities, e.g. one clue on page 10 and another on page 100 - "the problem having been stated, data for its solution are presented inconspicuously and in a sequence properly dislocated so as to conceal their connection."

Clues are perhaps the most renowned aspect of detection. Their quality and inconsequentiality often determine the quality of the story. However, great care must be exercised not to over-use the clue as an aid to detection. Generally, what is searched for is found, thanks to the divining powers of the author, and the detective triumphantly ferrets out infinitesimal clues that have been most carefully placed by the author. When Sherlock Holmes looked for, and found, a burnt match in Silver Blaze he explained: "It was invisible, buried in the mud. I only saw it because I was looking for it." "What! You expected to find it?" "I thought it not unlikely." The clues, which together will construct a picture of the crime, are articles or events of no consequence in any ordinary way, but when related with other clues, or subject to the mental powers of the detective, they assume a prime importance, shadowed only by the eventual uncovering of the criminal. The process of extrapolation from clues has never been satisfactorily explained. Sherlock Holmes' assistant, Dr James Watson, describes a magazine article, purported to have been written by Holmes, which states: "from a drop of water a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other."

Material clues offer the author a vast range of possibilities. They are dropped, left or placed in locations which are foreign to them, or are disarranged in some significant way. They may even be conspicuous by their absence as Holmes discovers in Silver Blaze: "Is there any point to which you would draw my attention?" "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time." "The dog did nothing in the night-time." "That was the curious incident" remarked Holmes.

Sherlock Holmes was perhaps the greatest detective to make a fine study of material clues. His powers of observation and analysis applied to the tiniest shred of tobacco or splinter of wood leave other detectives far behind. However, in the modern era, particularly after the second World War, the romance of deduction based upon a thread of blue muslin or a drop of blood on document, for example, pales when faced with the accomplishment of modern forensic science. The conclusions reached by the great detectives, based on their phenomenal powers and years of research, are today reached by painstaking scientific analysis using modern technology. Consequently the moden detective uses his talents to investigate the immaterial clues, those of the situation, alibis, motives, contradictions and opportunities.

A view of the "old school" of detectives is given by H.J. Holt in Midnight at Mears House:"As I smoked, my gaze travelled idly about the room until it rested upon the big brass candlestick smeared with melted tallow, which we had found that morning on the dining room table. If I were only another Sherlock Holmes, I thought, I should be able to reconstruct the entire tragedy from that candlestick, supposing of course the murderer used it. An intelligent smell of the wick would tell me what particular brand of matches he used to light it, and it would only be necessary to visit the one dealer who kept them, and get from him a photo of the man, or a sufficiently accurate description, to make his arrest a matter of only a trifling difficulty!"

The clues formed by non-material things are of an even more diverse variety, not being restricted to the absolute quantities and qualities of solid objects. Many factors usually combine to provide each clue, the general situation being the basis. Once the author gets into the realm of clues arising from events and characterization and the intricacies of the plot, he is limited only by his imagination and the credulity of his readers. The general trend of detective stories between the Wars played a great deal on this type of scheme, concentrating on characterization and manipulation of events. Many of these stories dealt with crime in rural areas involving the higher classes of society. This period has been called the Golden Age of the detective story. The original detectives of the Victorian age, Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Poe's Dupin, Jacques Futrelle's Professor Van Dusen, etc. are all very gifted amateurs, set apart from the rest of humanity by their own choice and their intelligence.

In the 1920s the detectives continued to be rather eccentric amateurs, but rather less antisocial and remote, and there was a trend towards ordinariness. The social scene in this period was one of unrest and unreality, without a sense of purpose, due to the effects of the Great War and the ensuing depression. In all fields of art artists were striving for new expressions and methods to escape the dismal life of the times. The detective stories of this time reflected the general trend in art, and ignored the inequalities and tragedies of real life to take the reader into a fairy-tale land where murder was committed over and over again without anyone getting hurt. This was the era when "the butler did it", even if he did not. The reader is introduced to great intricacies of plot and characterization and is helped to some extent with maps and plans of the scene of the crime, or the manor house in which it occurred, and tabulated clues, where a resume of facts to date are collected together for the detective's benefit (in order to keep the reader up to date). The growth of mechanized transport and mass communication methods provide an opportunity to baffle the reader with details of railway timetables and timings in general.

A fine example of this type of story is The Cask (1920) by Freeman Wills Croft, which is highly detailed and completely thorough in its painstaking demolition of the "unbreakable" alibi which arises in it. Croft went on to introduce Inspector French to the reader, a police detective noted for his methodical investigations, and a wholly ordinary character as opposed to the brilliant amateurs created by other authors.

Two of the great mistresses of the detective story began their work in this period. Both Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers are renowned for their mastery of the art. Sayers' central character is a young aristocrat, Lord Peter Wimsey, whose excursions into the detection of crime are aided by a Wodehousian "man" and confidant, Bunter. Sometimes the detective element takes second place to Wimsey's family affairs and his long running romance with Harriet Vane. The Nine Tailors (1934) is a tale which is set in the East Anglian village of Fenchurch St Paul, and involves murder most foul amongst a group of bell-ringers. Wimsey solves the case as much through his knowledge of campanology as through his powers of deduction. Sayers also produced a classic detective story which is completely bloodless, without a single murder, in Gaudy Night. Revolving around Wimsey's fiancée and an outbreak of poison pen letters, it nevertheless maintains the suspense and brilliance of plot expected from any great murder story.

Agatha Christie, known as the Queen of detective fiction, was a highly prolific writer whose character studies and in-depth analysis of motive and situation have endeared her to millions of readers throughout the world. The Mysterious Affair at Styles (1920) was her first story, introducing the retired Belgian police officer Hercules Poirot as her "great detective". However it was not until 1926, with the publication of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, and her own personal disappearance for a time, that her popularity became established. This novel caused a storm with the reading public, and the issue it raised is still hotly debated today. The device, or trick, that she used as the ultimate revelation was that of the narrator being the criminal. Readers were split into two opposing camps, those who cried "foul play" and those that maintained that it is the reader's business to suspect everyone. This landmark in the genre gave rise to the adjective "acroidal" which refers to any story with a similar basis.

Hercule Poirot is a professional detective of dapper appearance, and a tidy mind with masses of "little grey cells", and he is called upon to solve some of the most entertaining mysteries with a method which perhaps symbolises the profession more closely that any other since Holmes. He spurns the Holmesian method and the aid of science, relying totally on the use of theory and logical thinking over matter.

Christie was a great technician of her art but, as in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, she was quite often not totally fair with her readers. Two of her other works display this is their use of devices which hitherto had not been exploited in the genre, or at least not before so many readers. The Murder on the Orient Express finds Poirot investigating the murder of a child-murderer and having the whole carriage of people as suspects. As it turns out they were all responsible, an example of the mass-murderer. Ten Little Niggers is set on a remote island where the guests find themselves being murdered one by one, with prime suspects being killed almost as soon as the reader becomes convinced of their guilt. This story hinges on the device that one guest, presumed dead, is still alive and is hence an unsuspected murderer.

The use of various devices which characterize detective novels is almost universal. However, most of them have become clichéd or have roused feelings of unjustness amongst readers. Many of the stock devices and props date from this era, and the Victorian age. There are the footprints in snow or damp ground which prove to be vital in relation to the amount or time of the precipitation. Fog and mist provide a suitably mysterious and shrouding

background for tales of misdeeds. Secret panels, bodies in the library, and packets of top-secret papers were favourite props for the author.

Personal and initialled items found by, or near, the deceased almost invariably turn out to be false clues, and the use of animals or thieves to explain away the disappearance of vital evidence is certainly overworked. There are of course the "stage properties" which in themselves could almost give a synopsis of the plot; the weapon, papers, a safe, jewels, the alibi, a magnifying lens, the desk and its blotter, the ever-revealing wastebasket, the omnipresent taxi driver (or his equivalent), the deserted room and mistaken identity.

These devices and artifacts, and many more, give the reader the tools with which to form his own solution. New situations, methods and implements are still appearing, being built around the basic idea of A kills B.

S.S. Van Dine, an American author, created a transatlantic counterpart to Sayers' Wimsey in Philo Vance, a young social aristocrat whose encyclopaedic knowledge was far in excess of that of Wimsey, and who conducted his cases with a resigned superiority. Van Dine's The Canary Murder Case broke all publishing records in 1927. Philo Vance's method of following a code of rules, with each detail investigated concisely until the whole fell into place like a jigsaw puzzle, found great acclaim in the United States and enjoyed a more moderate success in Britain. The irrelevance to real life and remoteness of Van Dine's stories followed the general trend of the times.

The locked room mystery is an evergreen plot in detective fiction and the variations on this theme must exceed those on any other. John Dickson Carr was the greatest writer of this type of story, devoting almost all his tales to the investigation of one form or another, coupled with a supernatural or horrific atmosphere created by the murderer. His protegé, Dr Gideon Fell, in The Hollow Man (1935) stimulates a discussion of the locked room mystery and all its possible types and variants.

Perhaps the most famous author in the United States over the last forty years in the field of detective fiction has been Ellery Queen, which is a pseudonym for two cousins, Frederic Dannay and Manfred Lee. Queen wrote his stories with himself as the detective, the son of a regular police detective who often resorts to his son's talents to help solve a case.

Ellery Queen, detective, is a detective story writer with a sense of humour and an intellectual nature. Ellery Queen, author, has produced works exemplifying the detective story with meticulous plots, entertaining characters and a subtle blend of the dramatic and the intellectual. His fame rests not only on his stories but also with his anthologies that he has editied and the various periodical publications which promote the detective story, notably Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

Margery Allingham's stories concerning the mild, engaging, bespectacled Albert Campion, span a period which marks a change in the style of detective fiction. The trend towards the end of the 1930s and through the Second World War was towards greater realsim and more attachment to everyday life and the "man in the street".

In the United States Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler heralded the arrival of the tough, down to earth detective who works for his living and who is involved with the real, nasty side of crime, and encounters violence with violence. Hammett's The Maltese Falcon, The Glass Key and The Thin Man in the early 1930s introduced the Continental Op. and Sam Spade to the reader. Their methods, language, and the frank characterization however did not detract from the essential plot and the diligence of the investigator in his task.The rebellion of new writers against the accepted format and style of detective fiction was supported by the reading public who seemed to enjoy the change in pace and situation, from the largely leisurely and upper class to the fast and mundane. Raymond Chandler's first novel The Big Sleep portrays the detective Philip Marlowe as an underpaid, harassed sleuth working for a living as a private detective.

Although most of his cases involve crimes in rich American circles, the overall impression is that of reality, exposing the wealthy for the frauds that they are. Marlowe is not a highly intelligent, dominant figure, but could almost be described as ordinary, often losing his grip on the situation and being caught up in events before he finally solves the crime. The feeling of triumph and achievement of a detective at the successful conclusion of a case often turns to sadness, disenchantment or weariness. Marlowe, in The Big Sleep, reflects at the end of the novel: "What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? You just slept the Big Sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. On the way downtown, I

stopped at a bar and had a couple of double scotches. They didn't do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-wig, and I never saw her again."

Detective stories have always thrived on violence, although usually of a subdued or second-hand nature. However, after the Second World War, direct violence, as part of the action in the plot, increased. The crimes themselves became more violent, and descriptions of the victims and the events of the crime became more vivid and detailed. This trend continues to today and readers in general do not disapprove of it. Violence in fiction may appeal to the reader in many ways, but two main reasons for the acceptance of violence seem to be a morbid satisfaction and enjoyment of the details, and "safe" excitement or thrills at the action.

Chandler, in addition to writing fiction, also wrote several pieces on the genre, and contrasts the view of M. Nicholson that: "the charm of the pure detective story lies in its utter unreality" with his views that: "to ensure credibility, the detective story must be about real people in a real world", and that when characters in the genteel detective story did unreal things, they ceased to be real themselves.

In these days of mass communication and information at one's fingertips, the amateur detective is in decline, and the emphasis is on the professional, whether official in the case of the police, or unofficial in the case of the private investigator, and retired examples of both.

The police detective has been treated by many writers, but perhaps the most "literary" stories come from Michael Innes, which follow the career of Detective Inspector John Appleby through the police force, his knighthood and retirement. Innes produces richly tapestried novels with ingenious plots, and Appleby is seen as an extremely literate and intellectual policeman who frequently drops quotations upon his suspects and uses his knowledge to solve the crimes, which often occur in an academic or intellectual background.

Another author who has produce detective stories of a high literary quality is John Dickson Carr. His tales display great craftsmanship in their plots. Nicholas Blake again brought a literary and donnish flavour to the genre with his detective, Nigel Strangeways. The Beast Must Die is a very good study of criminal psychology which opens, rather disturbingly: "I am going to kill a man. I don't know his name. I don't know where he lives. I have no idea what he looks like". His other novels, particularly Minute for Murder and The Worm of Death, show masterful handling of tension and suspense, and an acute observation of character.

The aspect of humour in detective fiction is not entirely absent, although many stories concentrate on the crime and its detection and do not lighten the plot with humour, since crime is not generally an amusing matter. Edmund Crispin, however, manages to inject humour and true charm into his stories. His detectives, Dr Gervase Fen in particular, are amateurs and solve mysteries which are in unusual settings. The Moving Toyshop concerns a toyshop in Oxford which apparently moves its location mysteriously. Love Lies Bleeding is about the discovery of a lost Shakespearean play. Fen, like Ellery Queen (detective), is a detective story writer, whenever he is not too occupied with his literary duties as an Oxford don. Crispin's sense of light comedy and original humour combine with his academic settings to produce stories of wit and learning of a less heavy type than Michael Innes.

Ngaio Marsh's detective novels all concern the Scotland Yard "gentleman" detective, Roderick Alleyn, a perfect police detective with slight links to the aristocracy. He depends entirely upon police methods in his investigations although, as with all detectives, the real work is done in his head. Alleyn has an active home life which is often allowed to encroach into the plots of the stories, and Marsh's portrayals of society and life often dominate the criminal investigation. However her novels are entertaining and light reading, and the routine of police work applied to the cleverly structured crimes lift them from the mundane to become fine examples of the police detective story.

Georges Simenon and his detective, Inspector Maigret, have become very popular outside their native France. Maigret is an average Frenchman by background and his methods are those of tedious police work interspersed with brief periods of brilliant ratiocination. Simenon portrays the people and the countryside of France with an astute observation. The poor and needy are often the victims and each story brings to light the human problems involved in crime. It is accepted, that to get to the truth, people must be hurt or disadvantaged, and that crime is inherent in society and will not be vanquished by the day to day efforts of a single policeman. The style of detection in Simenon's stories is quiet and routine, with none of the exhilaration of British and American authors. Maigret himself is the centrepiece of each story with events all revolving around him. Simenon's contribution to

the genre must be that of a style of writing which is concerned with the characters, and a series of stories which develop the character of Maigret as a believable policeman of great patience.

The detective story today exists in many forms with differing types of detectives. There are stories built around common themes, such as Emma Lathen's novels about crime in the financial community in New York. Humorous or entertaining stories, for example those of Colin Watson in his Flaxborough Chronicles, and H.R.F. Keating's stories of Inspector Ghote of the Bombay police. There are the police detective stories, championed by Ed McBain and his tales of the 87th Precinct detectives in Isola, John Wainwright's series of novels about the police in a fictional northern English town, and Nicholas Freeling's stories of Dutch crime involving Inspector Van Der Valk. The amateur detective can be found in Rabbi David Small, the creation of Harry Kemelman, a part-time detective in a small jewish community in the United States.

The genre of detective fiction has so many aspects that it is impossible to evaluate a general reason for its popularity. It has been described as "What, where, when, why, who, how", perhaps the most concise definition of all. The action of the detective against the criminal may be equivalent to that of the reader and the text of the story. Suspense may play a large part, as Julian Symons writes: "it is a mystery prolonged by the obstinate refusal of the characters to reveal essential facts". The fitting together of clues into a working theory by the reader provides a challenge but, as Raymond Chandler once wrote: "the solution, once revealed, must seem to have been inevitable". However, I think that a proving of the improbable is perhaps the essence of the detective fiction. Gideon Fell, John Dickson Carr's sleuth, in a discussion of the genre, states: "It seems reasonable to point out that the word improbable is the very last which should ever be used to curse detective fiction in any case. A great part of our liking for detective fiction is based on a liking for improbability."

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