

Detectives And Their Victims

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figure in a detective story. Of course, our snooper may be at the right place at the right time to see Lady Pilfer snitch the defense plans from the ambassadors' dispatch case, but if the solution to the entire case falls in his lap, then is he a detective?

Of course not. What better example than Dupin's deduction that if the purloined letter wasn't in any of the places he looked, and he knew it was in the room, then it had to be right under his nose because that was the only place he didn't look?

I wish I had a buck for every time that simple trick has been used in the one hundred and twenty-some years since it was written. But you get the idea. The tradition comes down to us without much change—using the head to solve what appears to be an insoluble mystery.

What has changed is the guy who's head is being used, and the things he uses it on. Dupin was a number of steps removed from even being a private eye. He was, in fact, more than a little bit weird, as he never (to my knowledge) left his suite before the sun had set.

Highly trained mind

What he did have was a highly trained analytical mind, and he used it well. Poe's imitators, and there were hundreds over the next 75 years, developed different characters but continued with the eccentric but superior individual.

Which leads to a dead end. How many strange geniuses can there be solving increasingly unbelievable crimes?

The British when they started writing them, made a hash of the whole thing, and almost killed off the detective story. Sherlock Holmes (and I have a two-volume annotated collection which I have read from front to back and thus am entitled to say this), just wasn't all that hot. If you've read one recently, you'll see what I mean—alright for 12 year-olds, but that's about it.

Holmes wasn't the absolute worst, of course—there are bushels of bad British stories with incredible plots solved by unbelievable sleuths without the slightest bit of action, suspense or dash.

Copying the British

And in this country they are copying the British. How can good detective stories be written if people are copying Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple or Parker Pyne, ad nauseum? I mean, when Poirot "begins to use the little grey cells," the question that always pops into my own cranial matter is who gives a damn? By the time he or Jane Marple get to the conclusion, your mind is parched from the arid writing and lifeless characters. Who cares if Lord Creep-sworth fiendishly devised a system of introducing trained Anacondas into the guest bath, to kill off 16 of his fellow heirs to the Stoneybroke mines? I mean really.

The big change (and if I haven't gotten in enough trouble already by saying the British write crummy detective stories), came with the introduction of the tough, realistic American private-eye. The British can't hold a candle to him. He saved the detective story by making it believable again.

Dashiell Hammett

Most of the credit goes to Dashiell Hammett. He took the detective story away from the effete and put sense and reality back in. His detectives were not nice guys doing Aunt Sarah a favor by solving the crime in between tennis sets, but instead were hard-edged characters trying to stay honest by their own standards and make a buck at the same time. Just like in real life.

Oregon Daily Emerald

That can't be stressed enough. Raymond Chandler once wrote that "Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley. (He) gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare, and tropical fish."

The British and their American imitators didn't give up (and they haven't yet). In her 1929 introduction to *The Omnibus of Crime*, Dorothy Sayers wrote, "the detective story is part of the literature of escape, and not of expression. (There is) a possibility that the detective story will some time come to an end."

Hand-boiled streets

No wonder she felt that way—she was writing stories about the exploits, (gentle, of course), of Lord Peter Wimsey. The amazing part is that she wrote that introduction five years after Hammett had delivered *The Dain Curse*, which introduced his Continental Op, of the Continental Detective Agency, a purposely nameless character from the hard-boiled mean streets of San Francisco, who in that story had to deal with real-live quack American faith-healers, a morphine-addicted heroine, and a highly believable, honest to God murderer who shot people.

Needless to say, Hammett wasn't represented in Sayers' *Omnibus*—he could revitalize the genre, but the hold-outs weren't buying. Sayers, Christie, (and a hundred others) went on writing, and people went on reading them, but Hammett made them old-fashioned, as each generation of readers has discovered.

And he did the same thing to his Americans compatriots. Reading the adventures of Philo Vance or the early Ellery Queen will show why. They dealt with nicely packaged little tricks of logic without relation to what was going on in the streets.

Spade—Bogart

The gap widened when Hammett introduced Sam Spade, and Humphrey Bogart portrayed Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. Spade was tough, uncompromising, but independent of standard morality. While everyone else was after the bejeweled statuette, Spade was seeking his partner's murderer, even though Spade couldn't stand him. It was a point of honor—nobody shoots my partner.

Of course everybody jumped on Hammett's bandwagon. And it's still going strong, too, right down through Chandler's Phillip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, to Spillane's Mike Hammer to the present.

Hammett's tough realism opened the door to believable police procedural's too,

the best (in my opinion) being the 87th Precinct series of Ed McBain. Populated by realistic characterizations of real-live cops, McBain depicts the grinding procedures and human effort that solves most crimes. Dumb cops, slightly crooked cops, tired cops—the same types that collectively perform any organized task, except here they seek out axe-murders and psychopathic killers.

It also brought on a whole wave of new amateur sleuths, but with a difference. They are real people, caught up in murder and mystery that is literally up the reader's alley—photographers, cab drivers, reporters, medical examiners, and even a librarian or two.

Motivation for crime

The solution, in these stories, no longer depended on the hero's great knowledge of Paleontology or Etruscan hieroglyphs, and the motivation for crime more importantly, was made credible. Granted that fiction depends on the willing suspension of disbelief, Hammett's heirs, unlike their British cousins, discovered as he had that it needn't be stretched in order to tell a good detective story. That in fact, the reverse was true.

Which brings us down to the present, and where do we go from here. The detective story is strong, and doing well. The first detective novel a writer produces is good for 4,000 hard covers, and I don't know how many paperbacks. Somebody's reading them, and coming back for more.

Lots of crap is being produced, too. Some of the worst comes from Richard Prather in the form of Shell Scott, an overgrown juvenile delinquent, and John J. McDonald's Travis McGee. Scott, blasting around Hollywood in his chalk-white hair and Cadillac, humping every broad in the book, could be out-witted by an aged paraplegic. McGee, with his sophomoric sex fantasies of winning the reserved, abused women who populate each and every one of his adventures, couldn't detect smoke if his upper lip was on fire.

But they've got nothing on Donald Hamilton, and the Matt Helm series. Helm is a joke that's been carried through millions of copies. His stupid stories aren't worth the time it takes to read them—no plot, paper-thin characters and huge glops of incredible sex. The sort of thing that turns off readers before they discover the better stuff.

Lee Archer

But there are, in compensation, some greats around. One is Ross McDonald's Lew Archer, who was born out of McDonald's complex mind during the closing days of the Second World War,

could be the son of Hammett's Sam Spade, grown up in a post-war world cut off from its moral and philosophical moorings. Archer's a detective solving crimes as part of an unspoken, unstated quest for human understanding and some sort of durable inner peace. He's traveling, at one level, an Odysseus-like road through the social and physical horrors of California today, and reporting with painful realism just exactly what's going on.

But don't be put off by that. Archer's a heavy dude, as rough as they come. For example—"I shot to kill. Una died on her feet, a smudged hole in the temple, and thumped to the floor." McDonald has related modern crime in a modern setting, and put his over-age, divorced, childless hero smack in the middle of today.

Which means that someone will come along (if he or she hasn't already and I just haven't read them yet), and advance right into tomorrow. What that will be like, I don't know. But as long as there are writers, there will be detective stories. The class will again become stilted and dry, and again someone will break through, just as it happens in every other type of literature.

Irresistable appeal

Because the appeal of the detective story is irresistable, and people will want more of them. For example:

I held the pen-light between my teeth, and jimmied the file cabinet lock with my picks. The first two drawers held nothing more than the musty records of twenty years in the freight business, a tattered and thumb-printed collection of inventories, storage receipts and damage claims.

I found them in the bottom drawer, out of order and in the wrong file, jammed between two yellowed brochures for diesel trucks. I held the pen-light close to the bill of lading, and then to the copy, and back to the original.

"Both of them have been tampered with," I said to myself. "Somebody has changed the date, which means that the platinum wire was still in the Stiles St. warehouse, and something else was hijacked. Two dead, three wounded, and the stuff was sitting on a pallet, marked 'baby bottles' or something. Somebody got double-crossed."

I put the papers back the way they had been, and was locking the file again when he hit me. The force of the blow shot my head down into the top of the filing cabinet, giving the proceedings a nasty one-two effect I could have done without. Before I could turn around, he hit me again, and that was that. I remember the last thing I thought as I went down was, "Twice in the same week."

