

ESSAYS ON DETECTIVE FICTION

Edited by
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Introduction

The auteur theory, which has had an important impact on film criticism, would hardly be applicable to works of literature, where it would seem both obvious and redundant. Yet detective fiction is a subgenre that allows for a rather special approach: the importance and pervasiveness of the detective as the instrumental personality has always held a dominant position in reader response. That almost every fictional detective has a serial role to perform and becomes so well known book after book – in some instances in dozens of novels over scores of years – has resulted in the cultic significance of a Sherlock Holmes or a Lord Peter Wimsey. Not that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Dorothy L. Sayers have been relegated to obscurity, but they often have to share the limelight with their fictional creations, and on occasion find themselves somewhat eclipsed by these phantoms. *Essays in Detective Fiction* focuses on the authors who have written some of the most enduring and important works in that genre – as authors who have created not only compelling fictional sleuths but works of fiction.

For a corner of literature that has usually been dismissed as repetitively given to formulaic constructions, detective fiction has indeed proven itself an unusually diversified form, as much so as any other branch of the literary family. Sayers is as different from Conan Doyle as Jean Renoir from D. W. Griffith – and not just in the gap between generations. Contemporaries are sometimes remarkably unlike: few would mistake the work of John D. MacDonald for that of Ross Macdonald, or Ruth Rendell for P. D. James. The Amsterdam of Nicolas Freeling has been replaced by the Amsterdam of Janwillem van der Wetering, with distinctive changes in the population and fictional landscape. The really dedicated writer of crime fiction strives for individuality of style and tone, and more often than not achieves uniqueness. Most of them publish a regular succession of books with a central detective (or, as in the case of Dame Agatha Christie, two or

three), while rare authors like Josephine Tey and Dashiell Hammett defy the conventions by working outside the serial-detective form and produce only a handful of novels.

Productivity has also been an uneasy factor in evaluating crime fiction as a serious component of our literature. That Erle Stanley Gardner could grind out books by the dozens has relegated him to the status of a competent hack, yet Raymond Chandler, who expressed the wish that Gardner had taken more care with his work, none the less used one of his narratives as a model from which to learn the craft. Georges Simenon has provided a certain respectability for the prolific writer of crime fiction, and although we are as much aware of his structured approach to his material as we are of the genuinely specific Simenon touches, few have ever faulted Simenon as careless or uncaring. For every Chandler who needed two or three years in order to polish a finished piece of work, there is the novelist who can offer highly literate and exquisitely styled books at a yearly pace. The twenty Nicholas Blake volumes (most of them Nigel Strangeways crime novels) seem to be a reasonable output for a practising poet and essayist, and only when a John Creasy manufactures a multitude of works under a multitude of pen names does an application of the auteur theory begin to founder.

The essays in this volume are by various hands on a handful of detective writers, a dipping of the skimmer into the reservoir. The operative process of selectivity has been the choices made by those who agreed to participate, and by the good fortune that comes from having expert critics involved, the selections offer an excellent cross-section, from the English classical puzzle specialists to the American hard-boiled school of private operatives, from the writers of the Golden Age to the New Wave of realists, and from the Anglo-American hegemony of the international genre to the continental Europeans who have successfully exported their national products. And the critical yardsticks applied by the essayists here are as diverse as the authors under consideration. *Essays in Detective Fiction* takes a close look at some of the finest writers, a good sampling of those who have made the fictional form as internationally respected as it is universally read.

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1 Death Deferred: The Long Life, Splendid Afterlife and Mysterious Workings of Agatha Christie

DAVID I. GROSSVOGEL

It is not uncommon for the demise of an author's popularity to coincide with his actual death, the chance of resurrection awaiting the archaeological whims of future scholars and critics. Not so Agatha Christie: even though she has been gone since 1976, even though the worlds she described are, for the most part, no longer with us, even though the very genre she helped fashion is largely obsolete – in great part because of the disappearance of those worlds – Dame Agatha, her worlds and her particular notion of a genre still seem to be defining for an exceptionally large readership.

Part of this anachronistic phenomenon seems to be due to the truly huge size of that readership developed by Agatha Christie during the course of a career that spanned well over half a century, a hundred titles (titles that number, in addition to her detective stories, plays, romantic novels written under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott, an autobiography, and so on), translations into more than a hundred languages: the size of that readership is impossible to evaluate accurately, but close to half a billion is the figure generally guessed at.

We are still tied to a past we never knew through a few strands that fray even as we hang on to them and, sooner or later, disappear: Agatha Christie is one of those strands. We believe that the detective story as we know it began with Edgar Allan Poe and, some forty years after his death, was popularised by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. What we may be less aware of is that we are linked to these historical inception through the presence of Agatha Christie. The author of Sherlock Holmes was writing, and would still be writing for a number of years, when young Agatha

Mary Clarissa Miller decided to try her hand at the genre. This was towards the end of the first world war: Agatha, born in 1890, was in her late twenties. For many years, she and her sister had been avid readers of Conan Doyle and they 'had always argued a lot about whether it was easy to write detective stories':¹ challenged by her sister, Agatha began writing what was to be *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, first published in 1920. From then on, and until 1973 when she wrote her last detective novel (*Postern of Fate*), Dame Agatha supplied an increasingly large and expectant audience with a steady flow of stories that owed to Conan Doyle two fundamental attributes which are unmistakably his even though they are not generally mentioned: a fondness for bucolic settings and a strong admixture of improbable occurrences (when one considers the supreme urbanity of Sherlock Holmes, it is striking to note how many of his adventures take place on distant moors and within halls of rural estates, drafty with an unurban otherness; and if one considers further that Sherlock Holmes is the child of that *esprit de finesse* Auguste Dupin, a reader of exceptional good will is required to grant their authors a criminal who turns out to be, against every rational expectation, an orang-utan, as in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, or a trained snake, as in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*). It was only after Conan Doyle that rules of fair play evolved, owing perhaps to an increasing desire of the genre to be the accurate reflector of a sociological scene (as with, for example, the 'hard-boiled' Americans).

When Agatha Christie began, she opted for a sunnier countryside than Doyle's, and one which she could people with the homey or homespun types that may have been the romanticising of her own Devonshire youth. Its crystallisation was the village of St Mary Mead (in the 1930 *Murder at the Vicarage*), with its representative spinster, Miss Jane Marple, who was to become, after Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's most ubiquitous detective. Miss Marple enjoyed from the very start an acuity and acquaintance with evil that belied her grand-auntish frailty. Over the long half-century of her author's writing, she became more and more that disabused acuity while the bucolic dream faded in England, as elsewhere, and the discontents of an industrial civilisation reached from urban centre to urban centre across a dwindling rural space that had been able once to better conceal a less expected evil. (It was that undisguisable awareness that things

were no longer what they had formerly been, however much they might still appear to be, that allowed Miss Marple to perform successfully in one of the more interesting of Agatha Christie's later stories, *At Bertram's Hotel*, in 1965. Even before that, in the 1950 *A Murder Is Announced*, Miss Marple had begun noticing what upward and other mobilities had done to traditional structures and how amenities and a security formerly taken for granted had systematically eroded.²)

It is therefore in the nature of a cavil to note that, in a more enduring world, Miss Marple remained a sleuth in the tradition that assumed the unconditional omniscience of the detective and preserved that omniscience by imparting information to the heroine that had not necessarily been vouchsafed the reader, or by contriving circumstances so improbable as to be acceptable only to that heroine and her entourage of fictional listeners at the final disclosure.

Agatha Christie came to fame in 1926 with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and aroused the susceptibilities of such defenders of fair play as were already about by turning the narrator into the murderer; she ended Poirot by making *him* one of the killers – but by this time the defenders of fair play had all yielded to Dame Agatha, who had meanwhile turned the supposed victim into the assassin in *Peril at End House* (1932), and done the same to a corpse in *Ten Little Niggers* (1939). In the words of Robert Barnard, 'When the time for a solution came round, the most unaccountable rabbits were produced from her hat: the murderer was the investigating policeman, he was a child, he was one we had thought already dead, he was all the suspects together.'³ And all along, that inveterate gardener, Jane Marple, led uncomplaining generations of readers down primrose paths known only to her (usually by offering those readers a great diversity of paths, all but one of which they were supposed to pay any attention to).

And so did Poirot. But Poirot was also walking – even as was Jane Marple – a more interesting path, one leading, at least in the fiction, from Styles Court to Styles Court, through some fifty years and as many adventures, across the changing landscape of our times. On that long journey, moral notions evolved, social circumstances changed, what had once been clear markers became either difficult to read or were obliterated altogether, leaving the journeyer with the residual sense of our times, an anxiety that filtered at last beyond the covers meant to contain

the adventure, and which transcended the spurious suspense of the detective genre.

I have analysed elsewhere (*Mystery and Its Fictions*, 1979) the (relatively) innocent world of which, and within which, Agatha Christie first wrote. In that innocent world, the detective-story writer did not propose so much a solvable problem as a disposable one. Agatha Christie's first readers read her in order to purchase at the cost of a minor and passing disturbance the comfort of knowing that the disturbance was *contained*, and that at the end of the story the world they imagined would be continued in its innocence and familiarity.

The nature and consequences of that disturbance are crucial, for ultimately they are the key to Agatha Christie's huge popularity and her yet-enduring readership. A sense of Dame Agatha's climate in her early works will be obtained instantly through contrast with the hard-boiled variety mentioned in later chapters. In the latter, a relatively sordid private eye does battle with openly sordid forces loosed by the urban chaos. That private eye – Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe or Mike Hammer – encounter what is intended to be 'real' corruption, whether in a politician, a sexuality (most frequently a woman's, against which is successfully matched the demonstrative virility of the detective), a corpse. This 'reality' entails a specificity; the detective performs acts that particularise him even though they have nothing to do with the functional gestures required of him by the case he is on: he drinks, he makes love, he lets all and sundry know that he is 'tough'. He walks the back alleys of a city whose surfaces are fully analysed. As Zola discovered a century before, such 'slice-of-life' realism not only entails specificity, it also assumes a burden of 'truth' which, more often than not, it feels able to demonstrate only by exposing its seamier parts.

Agatha Christie was far more stylised. For her, the game was merely a puzzle (or a series of interlocking puzzles) told in the form of a story. The story required people, of course, but their creation was left largely to the imagination of the reader.

Writing in the years immediately after the end of the first world war, Agatha Christie was instinctively striving for a delicate balance, but one that was still possible at that time. It consisted in an intrusion upon the reader's ideal world, but an intrusion not so intense as to cast doubt on its eventual dissipation. She achieved this balance by identifying accurately her middle-class audience

and its hankering for an Edwardian gentility.⁴ Dame Agatha offered these readers recognisable posters of a world which they had experienced only through posters: they were offered a journey to a land that they knew well, but only in the world of their social fantasising and bygone dreams of empire. Poster and book served the selfsame purpose: they preserved the awareness of a world that must have existed for someone; it was a far better world than the known world and doubly comforting because of a suspicion that if it had indeed existed once, its days were now numbered.

In 1920, Styles Court was the province of the upper-middle class.⁵ Like most parts of the worlds which it supposed, it endured mainly in the reader's private storehouse of prides and prejudices. Styles Court was a functional set of lexical stimuli, never anything more precise than a 'fine, old house', with 'a broad staircase' which you descended in your mind's eye after having 'dressed' for 'supper . . . at half past seven' (due to wartime conditions, 'We have given up late dinners'). It had an 'open French window' in order to disclose 'the shade of a huge sycamore tree' beneath which 'tea' was ritualised in summer, and beyond which was located the leisured class's tennis court.

Part of the world adumbrated by Styles Court was a poster village, Styles St Mary, which was exactly like Jane Marple's St Mary Mead (ideal images being perforce identical), nestling in a small verdant world of scrubbed and loyal people – working or farming – with its quaint vicarage for an effortless accommodation of spiritual needs and a half-timbered inn for the mundane counterpart.

Through these postcards of rural England walked a few other stock types – a suitable clergyman for the vicarage, a jovial landlord or two for the pub, a third-generation solicitor for the competent handling of material vexations, servants whose starched surface hid a heart of gold, matrons on their way to the local flower show, elderly majors retired from colonial wars. The reader knew these people without having encountered them and they were therefore exactly suited to his expectations.

Murder within this English pastoral was not so much an evil act as one whose consequences would be unfortunate for a prescribed moment. Whereas a Mike Hammer or a Sam Spade might right their little piece of the corrupt, urban jigsaw puzzle while the complex itself remained corrupt and awaited the private eye's

attention to the next area of his concern, murder upon the mead was more in the nature of a washable and cathartic stain. For a while, these good people would become each and every one suspect (Agatha Christie, who built her reputation early on a disregard for established rules, showed as little unwarranted sentimentality here: however much tradition might have endeared a particular type to the reader, none was above suspicion). Within this dream of rural England, murder was trivial enough; the corpse upon which Philip Marlowe stumbled might not have had quite the stench of Laius', but in St Mary Mead or Styles St Mary the murder itself was antiseptic – already a part of the cleansing process (there were always half a dozen compelling reasons to kill the victim – and as many evident suspects). It was the wake of the murder that made things momentarily disagreeable: the country inn would lose its ruddy bonhomie; the vicarage might be pressed uncomfortably close to moral quandaries; and, worst of all, aliens would walk the pristine land. For just as the reader was able to people fully a world to which he aspired, the reader would temporarily jeopardise through his own malaise the harmony of the world he had conjured from his fiction. And here again, Dame Agatha remained supremely aloof, giving the reader only such few and accurate stimuli as were needed.

In the shadow of evil, clean-shaven Styles St Mary would begin to see beards with all the unEnglish and other unfortunate implications of that facial indecorum. Alfred Inglethorp, who is only very nearly the villain of the piece, strikes 'a rather alien note', according to bland Hastings, the narrator (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*). Hastings understands instantly why Inglethorp's son-in-law objected to the beard: 'It was one of the longest and blackest I have ever seen It struck me that he might look natural on the stage, but was strangely out of place in real life.' 'Real life' is of course Styles St Mary, and since Styles had never been under anything like the present cloud, the unnatural beard is contrary to what is normal and becomes a litmus of evil.

But that litmus comes from elsewhere as well, as demonstrated by another of the characters – Dr Bauerstein. Dr Bauerstein is merely here as a red herring – he turns out to be a spy who has nothing to do with the nasty business at Styles. But the early Christie readers thought they knew Bauerstein just as they thought they knew the Cavendishes and Styles St Mary itself. The

way this red herring affected those readers was articulated by Hastings – even though Christie had done no more than name Bauerstein and mention that he was a ‘tall bearded man’: ‘The sinister face of Dr Bauerstein recurred to me unpleasantly. A vague suspicion of everyone and everything filled my mind. Just for a moment I had a premonition of approaching evil.’ Bauerstein is after all a Polish Jew – twice an alien. He comes by his beard naturally. The Polish Jew has no ‘natural’ place in the average reader’s imaginings of Styles: Bauerstein brings to those fictional imaginings a parafictional unpleasantness from a world that is more intimate and habitual to that reader. Or so it was at least in 1920.

There was always a suspicion that Agatha Christie and Jane Marple had quite a bit in common.⁶ There were of course their moral and social beliefs; but there was also an acuity, a depth of *insight*. Just as Miss Marple was able to see the hidden snake lurking in Devonshire Edens, Agatha Christie was able to discern precisely what would give her reader the surest of twinges, though neither she nor that reader ever identified the causes to which they both referred.⁷ This being so, it might be unmannerly to repeat here that Dame Agatha was one to take unfair advantage of even such fundamental intuitions: in *Styles*, not only did the culprit turn out to be the most upright and prototypical of British stereotypes, but the author added insult to injury by hiding the culprit behind a (false) beard.

It was within a world distracted only momentarily by this kind of curable malaise that was born the detective destined to become one of the most famous of the genre: Poirot was able to dissipate the uneasiness, but he was also created and shaped by it to a great extent.

Like his prototypes, Dupin and Holmes, this sort of detective demonstrates a perfect intelligence within a multitude of flaws. The structural reason for this contrast results from a fundamental identity between the fictional detective and his circumstances: that detective is the reader’s assurance that his expectation of an end to a number of small annoyances will be met – the detective’s acuity is therefore absolute; but the reader’s concession in that contract requires that a semblance of doubt be maintained for as long as it takes to tell the tale – all else in the detective is therefore flawed.

However, the strangeness of Dupin and Holmes confirmed