Detective Fiction

1860-1930

A STORY

What makes a good detective story?

Why such interest in detective stories?

G.K.Chesterton (1874-1936) says:

Detective stories are not popular simply because most people “bad literature”

Not only is a detective story a perfectly legitimate form of art, but it has certain definite and real advantages as an agent of the public weal.

So why are detective stories valuable?

1) The poetry of modern life

The first essential value of the detective story lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense **of the poetry of modern life.** Men lived among mighty mountains and eternal forests for ages before they realized that they were poetical; it may reasonably be inferred that some of our descendants may see the chimney-pots as rich a purple as the mountain-peaks, and find the lamp-posts as old and natural as the trees. Of this realization of a great city itself as something wild and obvious the detective story is certainly the Iliad.'

The lights of the city begin to glow like innumerable goblin eyes, since they are the guardians of some secret, however crude, which the writer knows and the reader does not.

Poetry of London

This realization of the poetry of London is not a small thing, A city is, properly speaking, more poetic even than a countryside, for while Nature is a chaos of unconscious forces, a city is a chaos of conscious ones. The crest of the flower or the pattern of the lichen may or may not be significant symbols. But there is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol— message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or a post-card.

Traitors within our gates

2) The romance of civilization

There is, however, another good work that is done by detective stories. While it is the constant tendency of the Old Adam to rebel against so universal and automatic a thing as civilization, to preach departure and rebellion, the romance of police activity keeps in some sense before the mind the fact that civilization itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions. By dealing with the unsleeping sentinels who guard the outposts of society, it tends to remind us that we live in an armed camp, making war with a chaotic world, and that the criminals, the children of chaos, are nothing but the traitors within our gates.

When the detective in a police romance stands alone, and somewhat fatuously fearless amid the knives and fists of a thieves* kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure, while the burglars and footpads are merely placid old cosmic conservatives, happy in the immemorial respectability of apes and wolves. The romance of the police force is thus the whole romance of man. It is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies.

Austin Freeman (1862-1943) says

Detective: John Evelyn Thorndyke

The Case of Oscar Brodski (1911)

The first part was a minute and detailed description of a crime, setting forth the antecedents, motives, and all attendant circumstances. The reader had seen the crime committed, knew all about the criminal, and was in possession of all the facts. It would have seemed that there was nothing left to tell. But I calculated that the reader would be so occupied with the crime that he would overlook the evidence. And so it turned out.

The second part, which described the investigation of the crime, had to most readers the effect of new matter. All the facts were known; but their evidential quality had not been recognized.

Outside the pale of literature?

The status in the world of letters of that type of fiction which finds its principal motive in the unravelment of crimes or similar intricate mysteries presents certain anomalies. By the critic and the professedly literary person the detective story—to adopt the unprepossessing name by which this class of fiction is now universally known—is apt to be dismissed contemptuously as outside the pale of literature, to be conceived of as a type of work produced by half-educated and wholly incompetent writers for consumption by office boys, factory girls, and other persons devoid of culture and literary taste.

A difficult task

The rarity of good detective fiction is to be explained by a fact which appears to be little recognized either by critics or by authors; the fact, namely, that a completely executed detective story is a very difficult and highly technical work, a work demanding in its creator the union of qualities which, if not mutually antagonistic, are at least seldom met with united in a single individual. On the one hand, it is a work of imagination, demanding the creative, artistic faculty; on the other, it is a work of ratiocination, demanding the power of logical analysis and subtle and acute reasoning; and, added to these inherent qualities, there must be a somewhat extensive outfit of special knowledge.

Not sensation only

A widely prevailing error is that a detective story needs to be highly sensational. It tends to be confused with the mere crime story, in which the incidents—tragic, horrible, even repulsive^ form the actual theme, and the quality aimed at is horror—crude and pungent sensationalism. Here the writer's object is to make the reader's flesh creep;

The distinctive quality of Detective Fiction

The distinctive quality of a detective story, in which it differs from all other types of fiction, is that the satisfaction that it offers to the reader is primarily an intellectual satisfaction.

This is not to say that it need be deficient in the other qualities appertaining to good fiction: in grace of diction, in humour, in interesting characterization, in picturesqueness of setting or in emotional presentation. On the contrary, it should possess all these qualities. It should be an interesting story, well and vivaciously told. But whereas in other fiction these are the primary, paramount qualities, in detective fiction they are secondary and subordinate to the intellectual interest, to which they must be, if necessary, sacrificed.

Detective story as an argument

Turning now to the technical side, we note that the plot of a detective novel is, in effect, an argument conducted under the guise of fiction. But it is a peculiar form of argument. The problem having 6ee,n stated, the data for its solution are presented inconspicuously and in a sequence purposely dislocated so as to conceal their connexion; and the reader's task is to collect the data, to rearrange them in their correct logical sequence and ascertain their relations, when the solution of the problem should at once become obvious.

Four stages of detective fiction

The construction thus tends to fall into four stages:

(1) statement of the problem;

(2) production of the data for its solution (‘"clues”);

(3) the discovery, i.e., completion of the inquiry by the investigator and declaration by him of the solution;

(4) proof of the solution by an exposition of the evidence.

The traditional elements of the detective story are:

(1) the seemingly perfect crime;

(2) the wrongly accused suspect at whom circumstantial evidence points;

(3) the bungling of dim-witted police;

(4) the greater powers of observation and superior mind of the detective; and

(5) the startling and unexpected denouement, in which the detective reveals how the identity of the culprit was ascertained.

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "detective story." Encyclopedia Britannica, Invalid Date. https://www.britannica.com/art/detective-story-narrative-genre.

Detective fiction as ‘release’

Inhibited by our unnatural existence, we find ‘release’ in books of blood and thunder. Through tales of abduction and poisoning, shooting and stabbing, we are able to wallow for a moment in adventures we cannot share, to lose ourselves for an evening in a world of excitement, and return next day 'to our dry-as-dust lectures, refreshed by vicarious violence. Unworldly, unnatural academics, who would deny us our brief moment's respite!

Marjorie Nicolson, Atlantic Monthly, 1929

No True Detectives

We come to the detective-story with a sigh of relief—the one form of novel to-day which does not insist that we must lose ourselves to find ourselves; the one form of contemporary literature in which our cool impersonality need never fail. That, of course, is the great difference between detective literature and contemporary journalistic accounts of murders, in which we have no interest. Not for a moment can you fool us, either, with collections of **True Detective Stories** or confessions of actual criminals. We seek our chamber of horrors with no adolescent or morbid desire to be shocked, startled, horrified. We handle the instruments of the crime with scientific detachment. It is for us an enthralling game, which must be played with skill and science, in which the pieces possess no more real personality than do the knights and bishops and pawns of chess, the kings and queens of bridge.

Perhaps we are protesting against a conception of the universe as governed—if governed at all—by chance, by haphazard circumstance; against a theory which interprets the way of life as like the river in the 'Vision of Mirza,' the bridge of San Luis Rey; against a conception of men and women as purposeless, aimless, impotent; against a theory of the world as wandering, devoid of purpose and meaning, in unlimited space.

OLDER Ethics and Metaphysics

In our detective stories we find with relief a return to an older ethics and metaphysics: an Hebraic insistence upon justice as the measure of all things—an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; a Greek feeling of inevitability, for man as the victim of circumstances and fate, to be sure, but a fate brought upon him by his own carelessness, his own ignorance, or his own choice; a Calvinistic insistence, if you will, upon destiny, but a Calvinistic belief also in the need for tense and constant activity on the part of man: last of all, a scientific insistence upon the inevitable operation of cause and effect.

MURDER MUST PAY

For never, in the just world of the detective story, does the murderer go undetected; never does justice fail in the end. No matter how charming, how lovable, the 'murderer, or how justifiable the killing, there is no escaping the implacable avenging Nemesis of our modern detective, Fury and Fate in one.

Escape from literature!

Yes, the detective story does constitute escape; but it is escape not from life, but from literature. We grant willingly that we find in it release. Our 'revolt'—so mysteriously explained by the psychologists—is simple enough: we have revolted from an excessive subjectivity to welcome objectivity; from long-drawn-out dissections of emotion to straightforward appeal to intellect; from reiterated emphasis upon men and women as victims either of circumstances or of their glands to a suggestion that men and women may consciously plot and consciously plan; from the 'stream of consciousness' which threatens to engulf us in its Lethean monotony to analyses of purpose, controlled and directed by a thinking mind; from formlessness to form;

Master of Mystery (1931) Douglas Thompson

In its simplest form the detective story is a puzzle to be solved, the plot consisting in a logical deduction of the solution from the existing data.

[...] I am insisting that the construction is essentially synthetic and scientific.

The detective story is, then, a problem; a dramatic problem, a "feather to tickle the intellect." The basic element is rational theorising. In "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" Sherlock Holmes takes Dr. Watson to task for not confining himself to a bare record of the logical synthesis, "that severe reasoning from cause to effect."

"If I claim full Justice for my art, it is because it is an impersonal thing—a thing beyond myself. Crime is common. Logic is rare. Therefore, it is upon the logic rather than upon the crime that you should dwell. You have degraded what should have been a course of lectures into a series of tales,"b

The sensational element or art

Let us now turn our attention to the other principal element in the detective story, which has been labelled “the sensational element,” but which, owing to the base connotation of that term, you may prefer to call the romantic or even the artistic element. Mental gymnastics are not sufficient to warrant the widespread popularity of our genre. Jaded business men or imaginative office boys are not so keen as all that on mind culture. The puzzle can be overdone, and it is fatal to deprive it of its trappings.

Ingenious publishers

One ingenious firm of publishers, putting their shirts on human nature, tried out a scheme whereby they sealed up the latter half of their mystery stories, and undertook to refund the money for the book if the reader returned it to them with the seal intact. Such is the puzzle fever!

Poetry of modern life

Excitement may be had without the wholesale dissipation of anarchy, and romance without its toll of victims. Mr. Chesterton has boldly called the atmosphere of this setting "the poetry of modern life," It is unnecessary to dwell on its familiar effects the dangers lurking in darkened alleys; the mystery of a large city at night; the secrets and the tragedies it harbours; the perpetual all but annihilation of law and order; the hero-detective as the saviour of society.

Dark and lonely mansions

so often do we stumble in the dark on lonely mansions which hold some diabolical secret, so often are we held close prisoners by their desperate denizens, and such relish do we take in our predicament, that we cannot—to be honest with ourselves—^welcome Mr. Crofts's attitude. Surely the compelling reason for our delight is a sense of the dramatic, and the higher the stakes played for, the more is it intensified. Should, however, this explanation fail to satisfy the realist, we must be content to submit the criterion of excitement as a substitute.

MURDER

It is time in parenthesis to say a few words about murder. I have been assuming all along that the proper subject of detection in literature is murder, as being the consummation of crime; while all other forms, theft, blackmail, larceny, arson, abduction and the like should scarcely come within its province, as not meriting ''the grand manner." This may appear heresy in view of the paucity of murders in the Sherlock Holmes tales; but, it should be remembered, we have here to deal with just these artistic and dramatic values to which reference has been made. From an aesthetic point of view, the theft of a Rajah's diamond remains a base act, on a par with the pilfering of a string of Giro pearls. With murder it is different; we are on a higher plane. "The base element," wrote Schiller of murder, "disappears in the terrible." Where there is no murder, it almost seems like wasting the detective's valuable time. Van Dine is reported in an interview to have said that he considered "murder" the strongest word in the English language.

Male readers or Female Readers

The average male reader reads the detective story for the problem, the female reader for the excitement of the setting. The man in the street loves a problem. There is always an excuse to solve it round the corner.

The matrix

Of respectable antiquity (E.M.Wrong)

Apocrypha (Daniel helping Susanna)

Herodotus (Egyptian robs the royal treasury)

No Roman time detectives

Why was there no flowering under the Roman Empire, when an urban population sought amusement in the butchery of the circus, and might have been more cheaply appeased by stories of law-breaking and discovery?

Perhaps a faulty law of evidence was to blame, for detectives cannot flourish until the public has an idea of what constitutes proof, and while a common criminal procedure is arrest, torture, confession, and death.

SENSATION vs DETECTION

But if was sensation rather than reasoning that they sought, and crude sensation is better provided by real crimes than by imaginary.

UNREALISTIC?

Some criticize detective fiction because it is not realistic, gives inadequate scope for character drawing, looks chiefly to one thing only, and that mechanism. That is its nature, but there can be an art of plot as well as an art of the mimicry of life; art is not limited to realism but can show itself in diverse forms.

The first detective story

The first detective story was “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” by Edgar Allan Poe, published in April 1841. The profession of detective had come into being only a few decades earlier, and Poe is generally thought to have been influenced by the Mémoires (1828–29) of François-Eugène Vidocq, who in 1817 founded the world’s first detective bureau, in Paris. Poe’s fictional French detective, C. Auguste Dupin, appeared in two other stories, “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1845) and “The Purloined Letter” (1845).

Investigator and sidekick

Poe set for all time one of the two lines on which the detective story has grown—a private investigator chronicled by an unimaginative friend;

Detection and Romance = The Moonstone

It was the other and less rigorous form that flourished till Sherlock Holmes was to revive the Dupin canon, and its leading English follower was Wilkie Collins. In i860 The Woman in White made a happy connexion between villainy and detection; in 186

Crime and Detection 81 came The Moonstone, more orthodox because more of a pure puzzle.

Charles Dickens – Edwin Drood (1870)

he criminal theme attracted Dickens, worn-out though he was with popular lecturing, and in the autumn of 1869 he began what some regard as potentially his greatest novel. The first number of Edwin Drood appeared in April 1870; two months later Dickens was dead, and his mystery had not got as far as the discovery of the corpse. There are some who even deny that there is a corpse to be discovered, and speculation rages still over the identity of Datchery. Whatever the secret, every lover of detective fiction would sooner have the unwritten chapters than all the lost books of Livy.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s name must stand, in the history of the detective story, only a little lower than Poe’s. He wedded plots nearly as elaborate as Gaboriau’s to the methods and tradition of Poe;

Revealing and concealing

Holmes was a really great achievement. From him dates the expansion of the last thirty years, and the crystallizing of one type of detective story. The canon is not exclusive but it is fixed; a friend of the detective tells the tale, as he did in Poe; he sees or can see all that the detective does, but never understands what deductions to draw from the facts. Thus the chief relevant incidents are in reality concealed from the reader though there is an ostentatious parade of openness. The detective's friend acts in the dual capacity of very average reader and of Greek chorus; he comments freely on what he does not understand.

Evolutions

For a time it seemed that this might become the only accepted form of detective fiction. Mr. Morrison followed it in Martin Hewitt, softening the detective's eccentricities, making him more of a business man, and giving him a less striking coadjutor than Dr. Watson. Dr. Austin Freeman took the same line with Thorndyke, improving on Sherlock's science, raising the narrator to average intelligence, and providing mysteries more cunning and obscure. Miss Christie's Poirot follows the tradition, though he distrusts the laboratory and relies on "the little grey cells" of his brain; he is assisted by the most admirably foolish of all Watsons, Captain Hastings. But some writers have revolted against the domination of a Boswell-Watson, and have preferred to tell their stories in the third person. A school has arisen modelled more on the Collins-Gaboriau tradition than on that of Dupin-Holmes, and the technique of the art has of late widened considerably.

Two schools

Collins-Gaboriou

External clues
Mobility
Action

Or

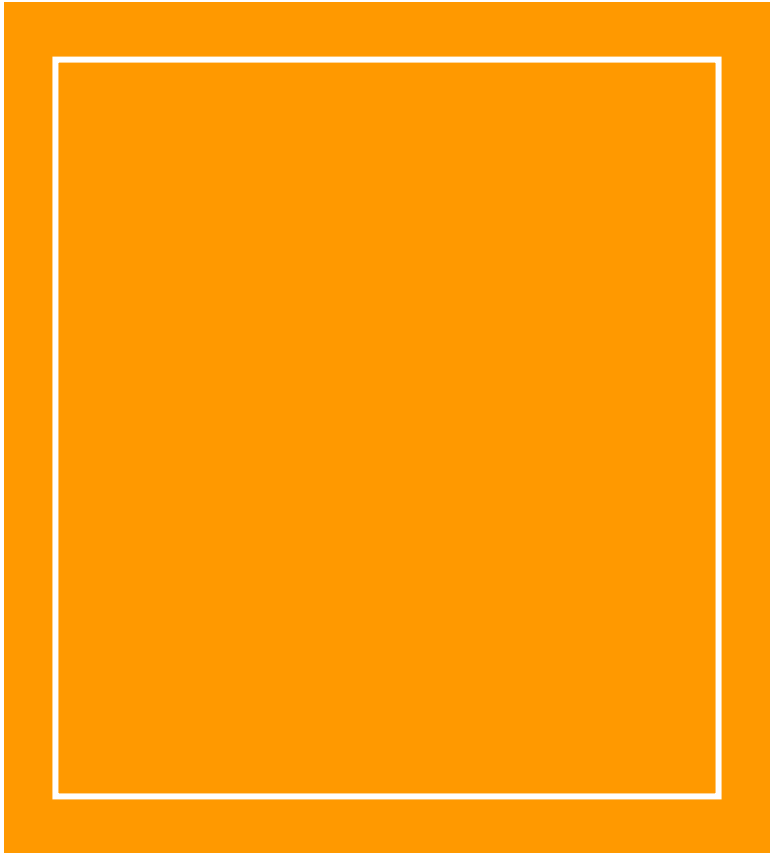
Intuitionist detective (Father Brown)

Dupin-Holmes

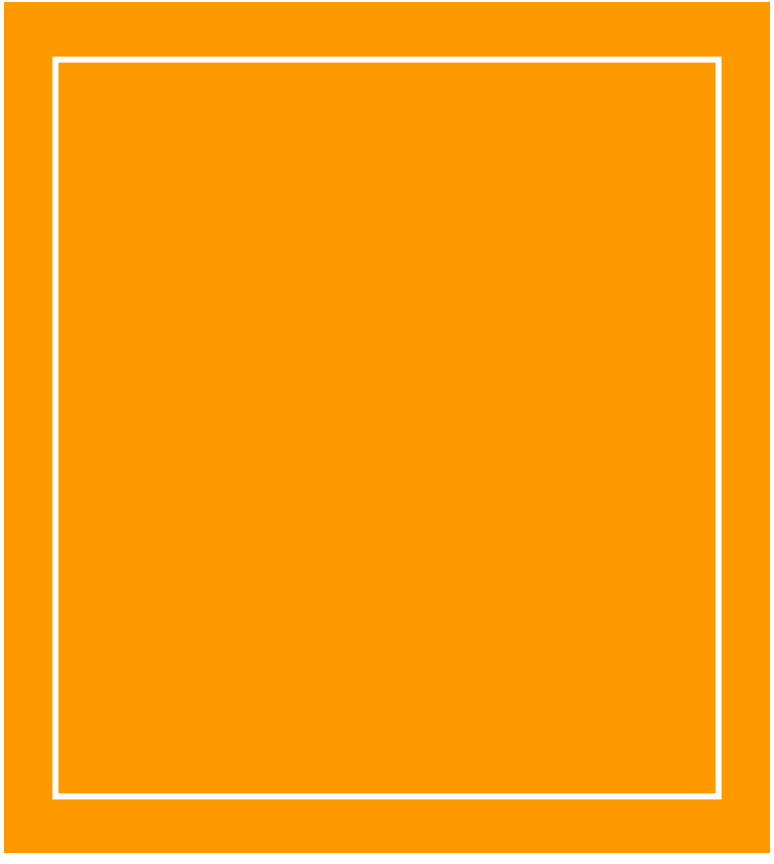
Deduction

The Golden Age of Detective Fiction

From 1920 on, the names of many fictional detectives became household words: Inspector French, introduced in Freeman Wills Crofts's The Cask (1920); Hercule Poirot, in Agatha Christie's The Mysterious Affair at Styles (1920), and Miss Marple, in Murder at the Vicarage (1930); Lord Peter Wimsey, in Dorothy L. Sayers' Whose Body? (1923); Philo Vance, in S.S. Van Dine's The Benson Murder Case (1926); Albert Campion, in Margery Allingham's The Crime at Black Dudley (1929; also published as The Black Dudley Murder); and Ellery Queen, conceived by Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, in The Roman Hat Mystery (1929).



MYSTERY – DETECTION – HORROR



The once lowly whodunit (Haycraft v)

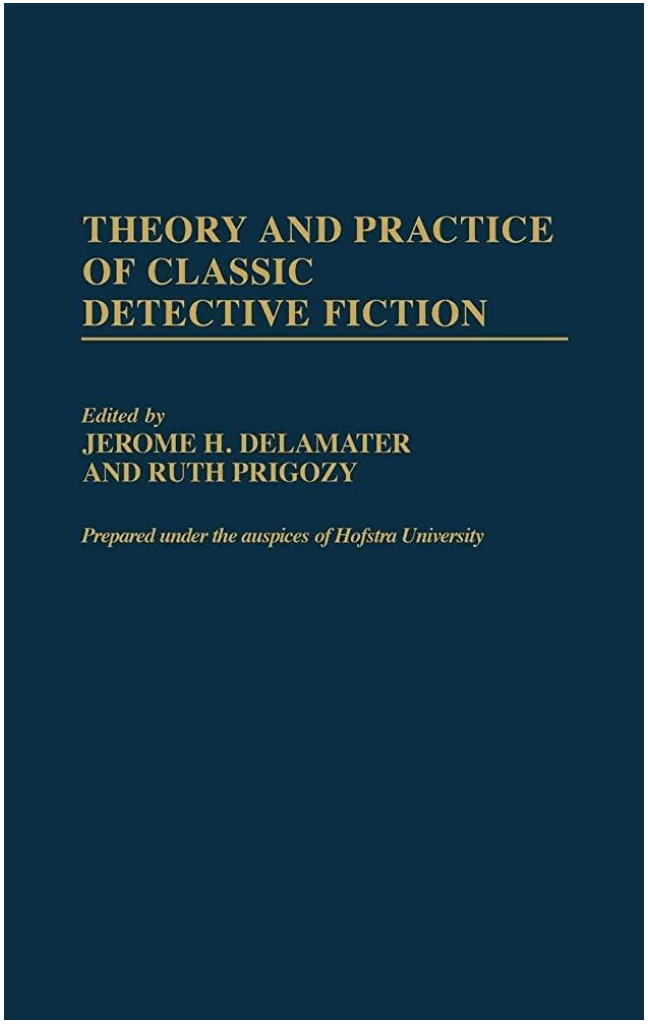
It is as if, to establish a distinctive awareness in the national consciousness, particular places must see themselves portrayed in the detective story. In this way, detective fiction is becoming our most serious and complex form of popular literature.

Detective Fiction: Theory

P.D.James on Detective stories

Detective stories help reassure us in the belief that the universe, underneath it all, is rational. They're small celebrations of order and reason in an increasingly disordered world

(Newsweek October 20, 1986).



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CRIME FICTION as a REPOSITORY

Detective fiction as the REPOSITORY of important social and cultural attitudes (Cawelti)

(CLASS GENDER RACE RELIGION)

Increasingly the detective story has become a genre in which writers explore new social values and definitions and push against the traditional boundaries of gender and race to play imaginatively with new kinds of social character and human relations. The creation of representative detective heroes has become an important social ritual for minority groups who would claim a meaningful place in the larger social context.

THE REGIONAL/ETHNIC or RELIGIOUS DETECTIVES

women detectives from Chicago
Cajun detectives from New Orleans Catholic detectives from Detroit

Catholic detective (Father Brown – by G.K. Chesterton) Jewish detectives (Harry Kemelman – by Rabbi David Small) Latino detectives (Dell Shannon – by Luis Mendoza) Native American detectives (by Tony Hillerman)

HARD-BOILED DETECTIVES

—the creation of the hard-boiled detective in the late 1920s revolutionized the genre by creating a plebeian detective with subversive undertones, and the detective story increasingly moved in that direction.

ENDURING MOTIVES

enduring motives—greed and ambition—which spark enduring crimes—murder and theft.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTION

detective characters contribute to a reader’s "psychological adaptation to the challenges and demands of day-to-day living."

UPHOLDING THE MORAL CODE

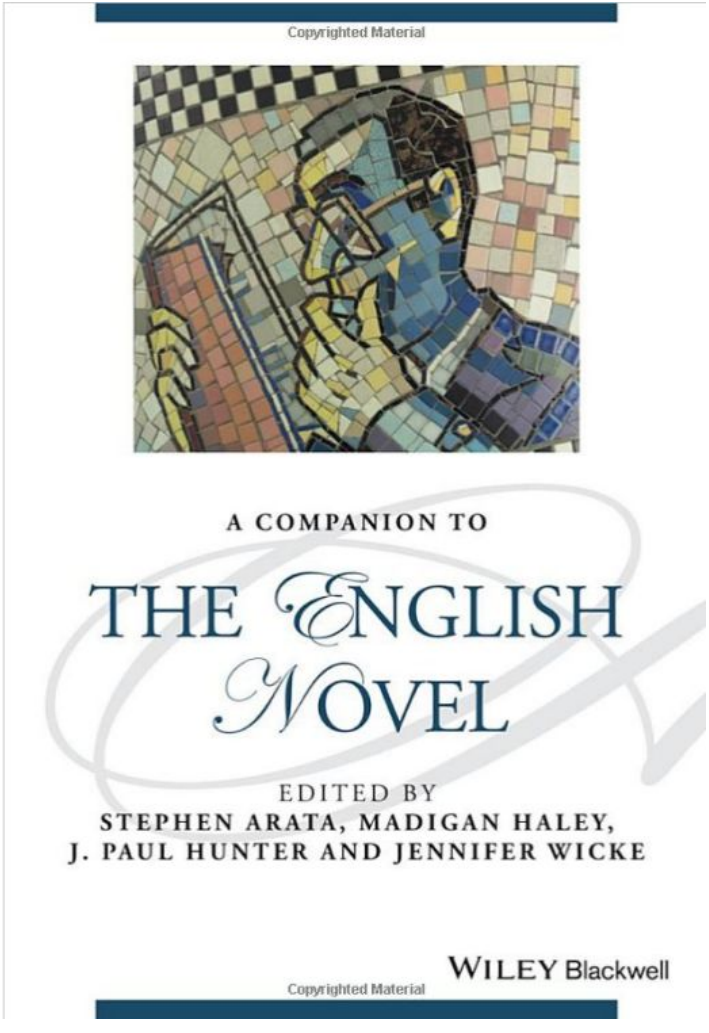
The "ideal imago" (in Michael Eigen’s term) detectives, known more for themselves than for the actual crimes they solve, uphold the moral code in a disordered world and help explain the wide variety of mature readers who make detective fiction so popular.

SECRET

A principle shared by the crime story and the detection story it motivates the plot

PARODY

"the detective's actions parody those of the murderer” (Jacques Lacan) POSTMODERN QUALITY OF DETECTIVE FICTION The genre’s "game rule" structure constantly provides the opportunity to subvert the formulas so clearly set down in the form's progenitors, and subversion is basic to a postmodern detective.



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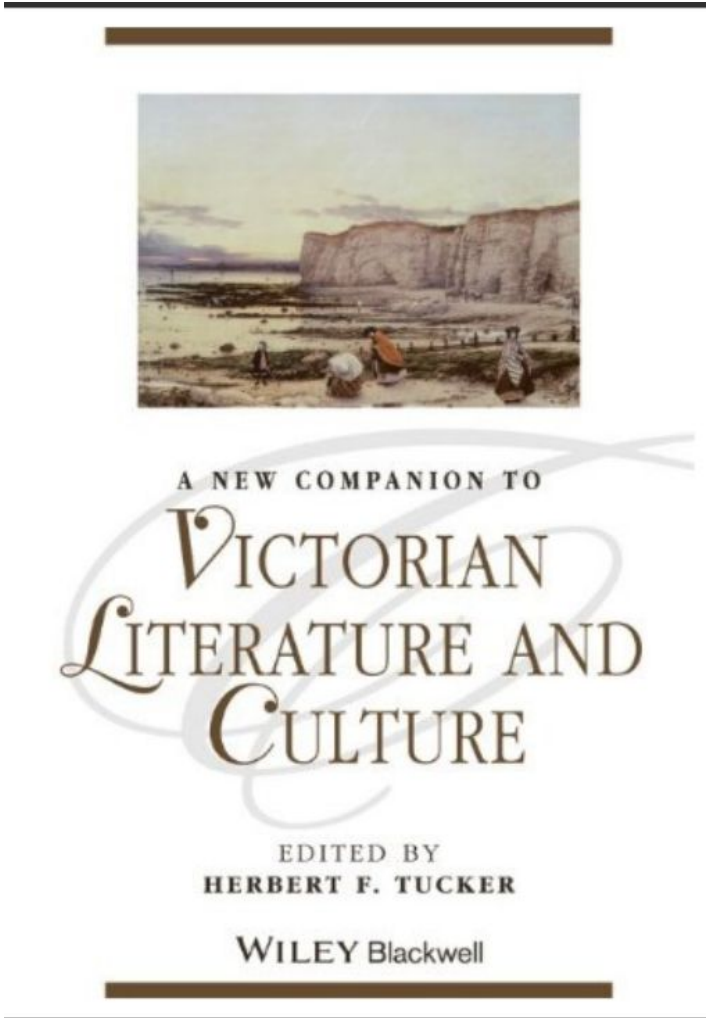
Chapter 3 – The 1850s

Chapter 22 – London

Chapter 15 – Affect in the English novel



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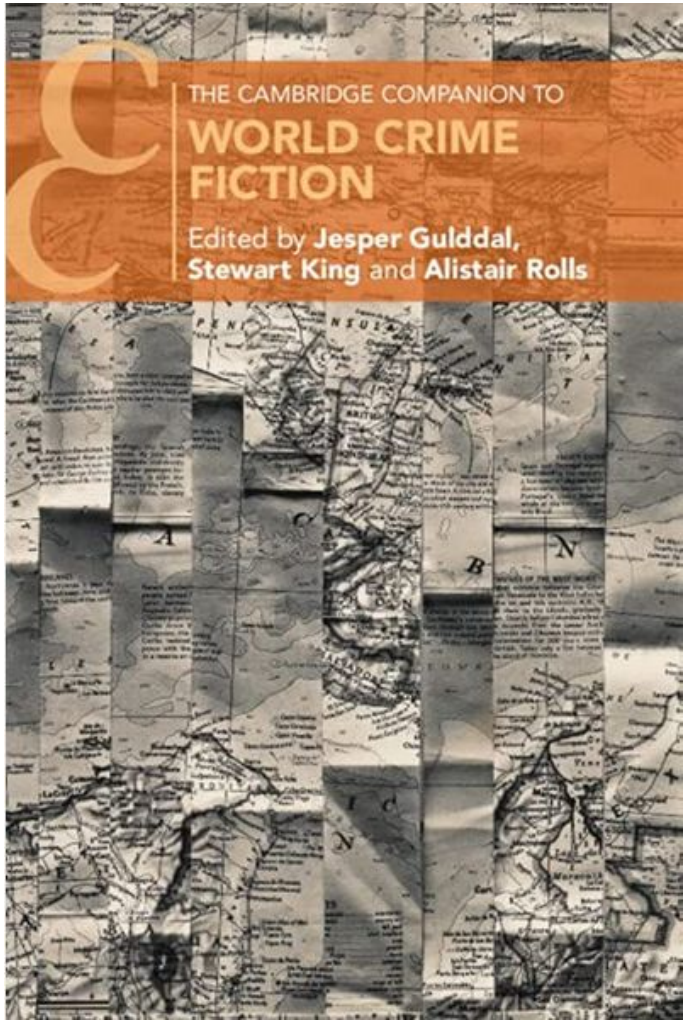

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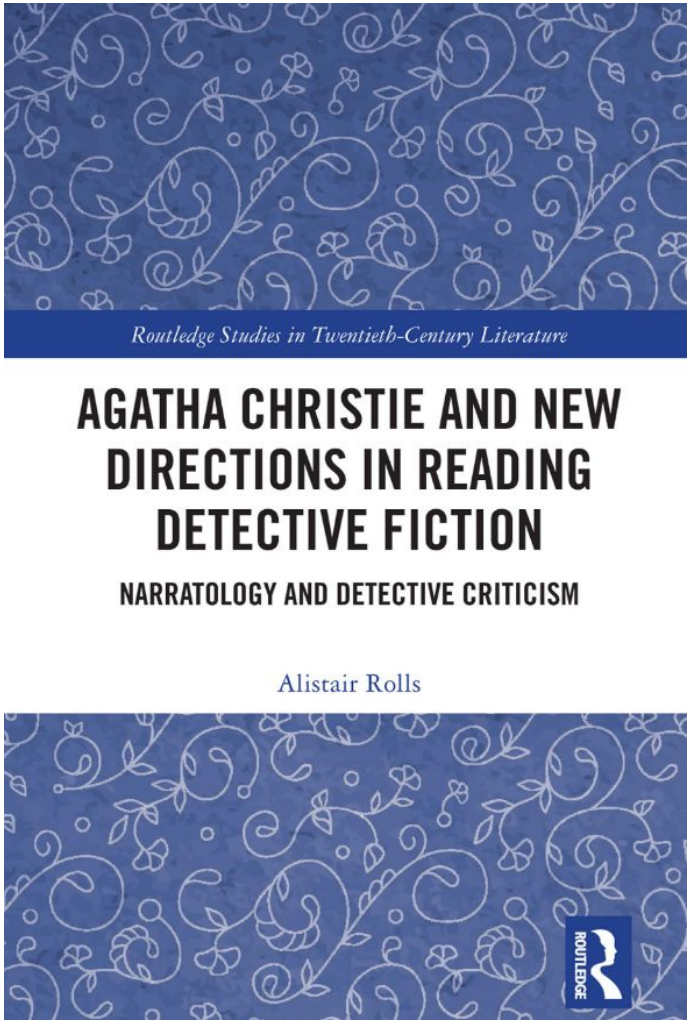

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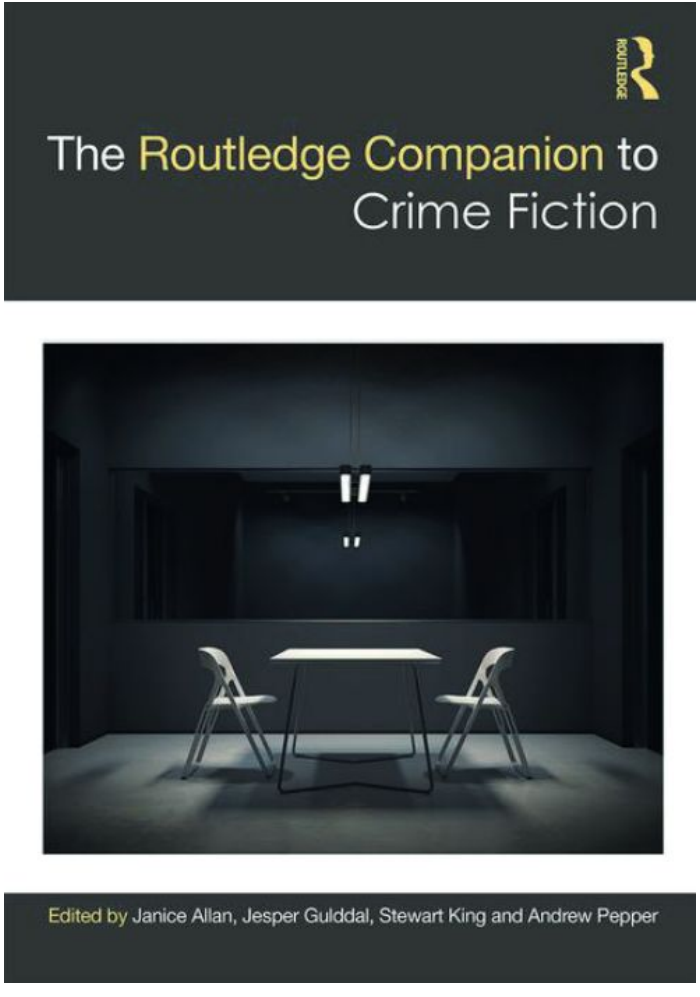

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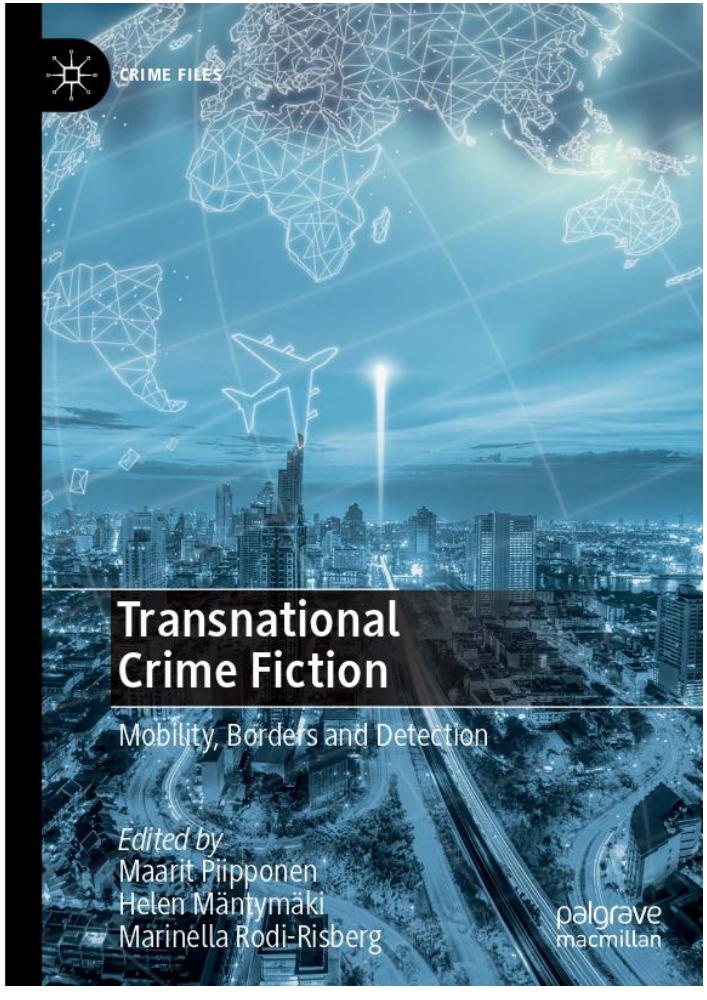

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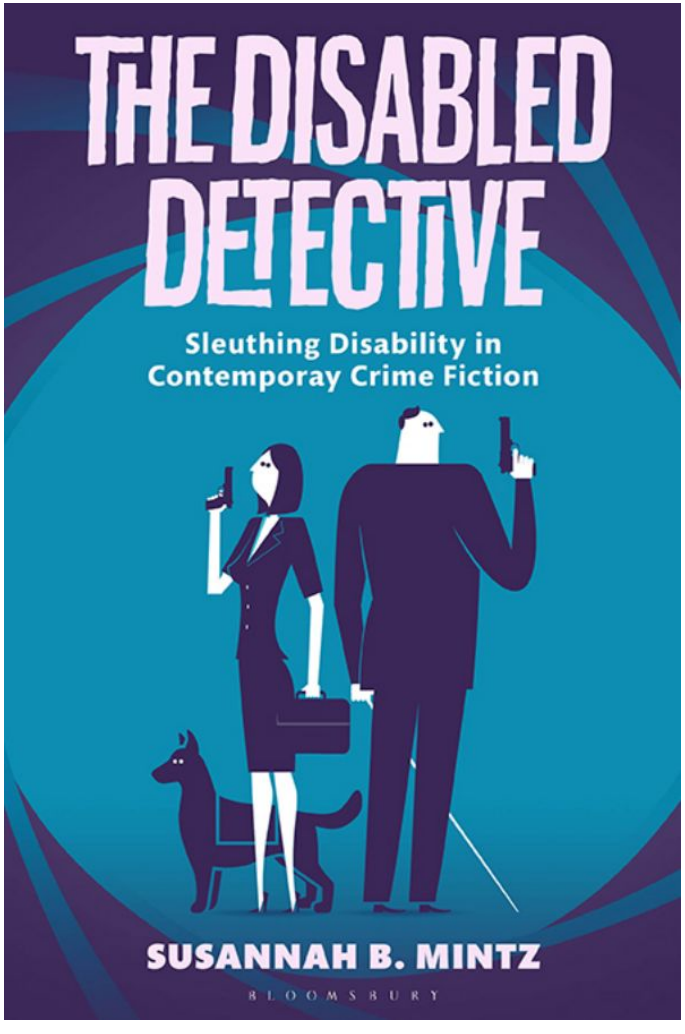

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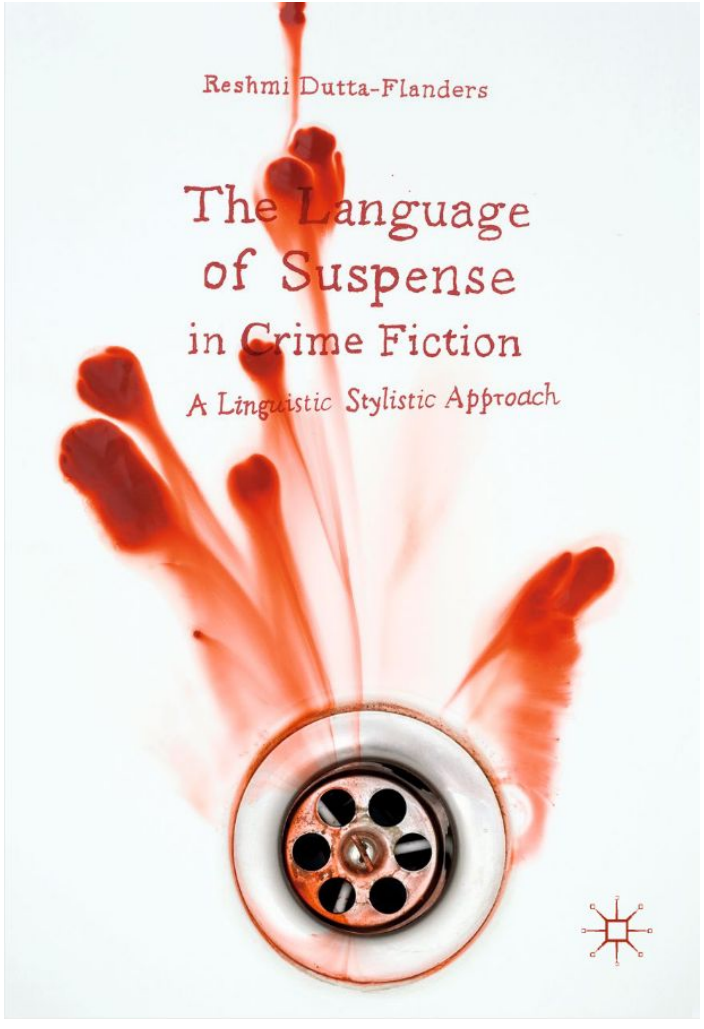

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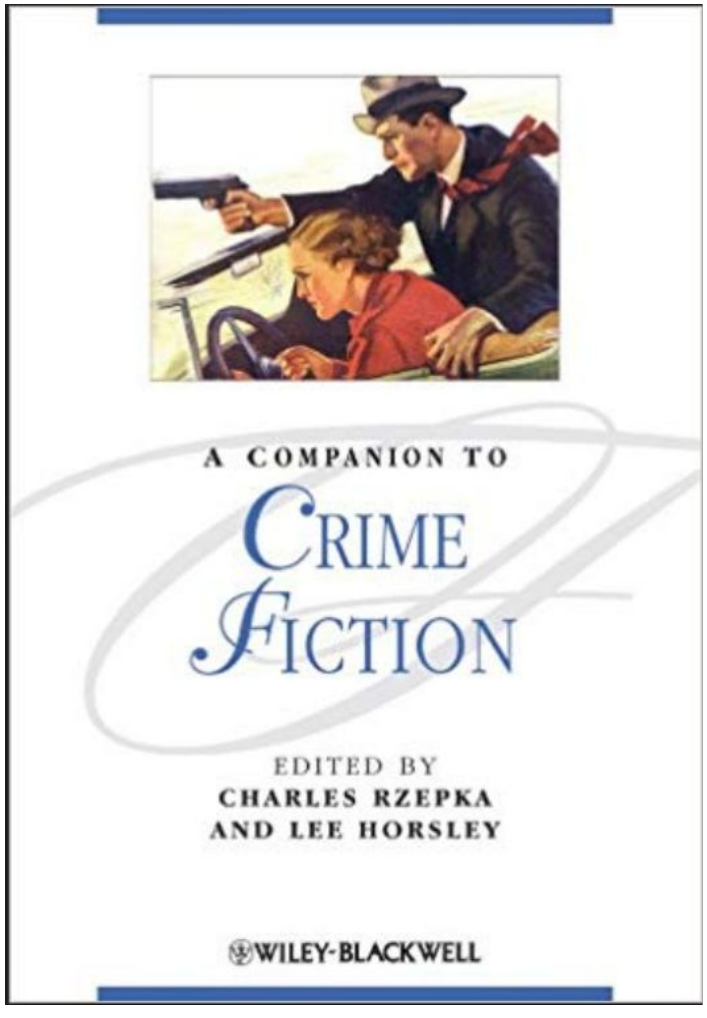

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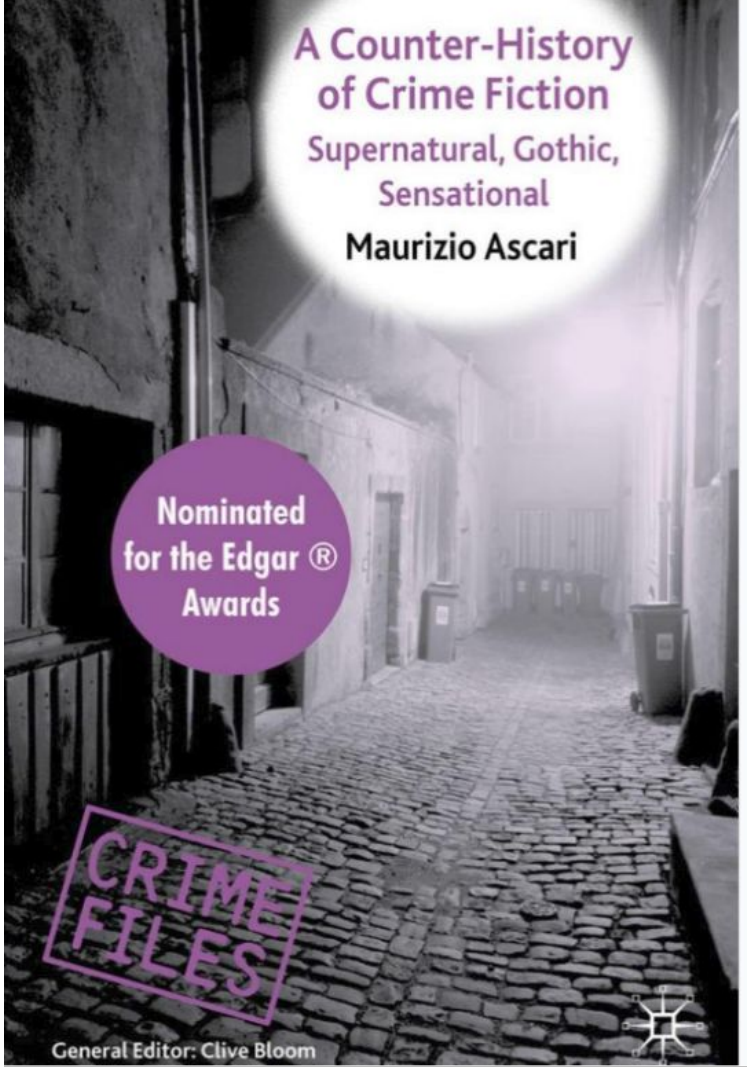

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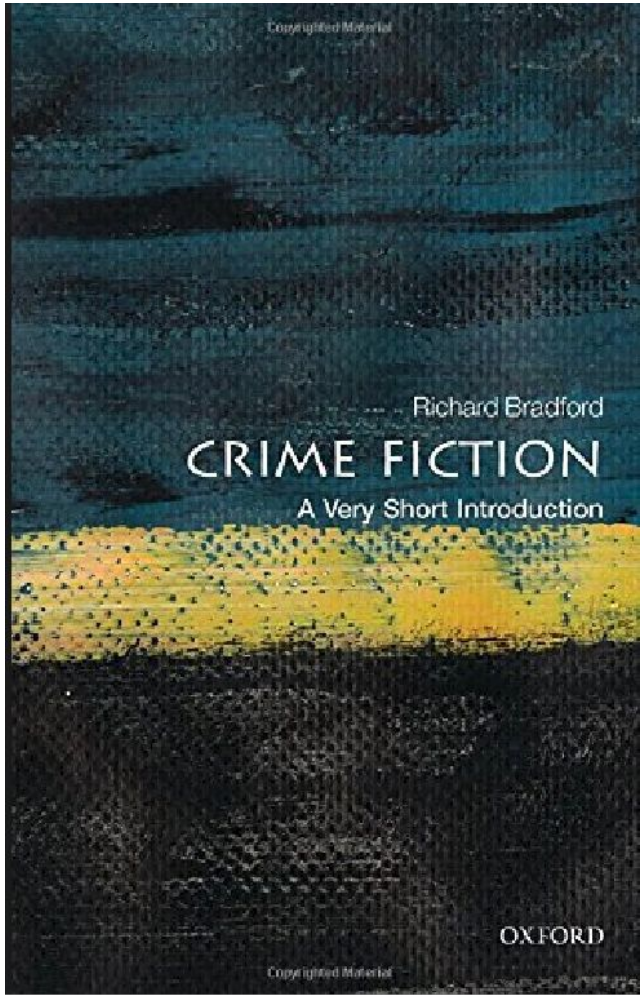

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Crime has featured in literature for more than two millennia:

Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus precursor to the modern detective: conducts a meticulous investigation to unmask the murderer of his predecessor King Laius.

Herodotus in *Rhampsinitus and the Masterthief* (jewel thief stealing jewels from a sealed vault)

Cacus the cattle thief (punished by Hercules)

Susanna in the Old Testament Book of Daniel victim of a blackmail plot when two elders threaten to expose her, falsely, as an adulterer if she refuses to have sex with them; Daniel intervenes in the manner of a modern barrister, causing the two blackmailers to contradict each other; and justice is served.

More recently in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*,d every motive and act originates from Claudius' murder of Prince Hamlet's father; indeed until Act II Scene III when Claudius confesses while in prayer, his guilt is a matter for speculation, prompting comparisons with the mystery-driven narrative of modern crime fiction.

But there is a difference:

In these stories, the crime is mostly a way of exploring other major themes or issues.

We have no notion here of the kind of excitement by disclosure that is typical of Detective Fiction per se.

Tzvetan Todorov's FORMULA - from *The Typology of Detective Fiction* (1977) in *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977)

The classic crime novel consists of TWO STORIES:

1) **STORY ONE**: the story of the crime itself (usually before the narrative opens)

2) **STORY TWO**: characters reveal or disclose or explore aspects of story one

Not comprehensive

The thriller or suspense novel is slightly different

the reader might become aware of the identity of the perpetrator and the circumstances of the criminal act before these are known to the principal characters in story two.

EXCITEMENT and UNCERTAINTY

We are excited by the prospect of uncertainty, of being uncertain of whether the crime will be solved.

William Hainsworth's Jack Sheppard (1839)

REVERSING FACT and FICTION (a Newgate novel)

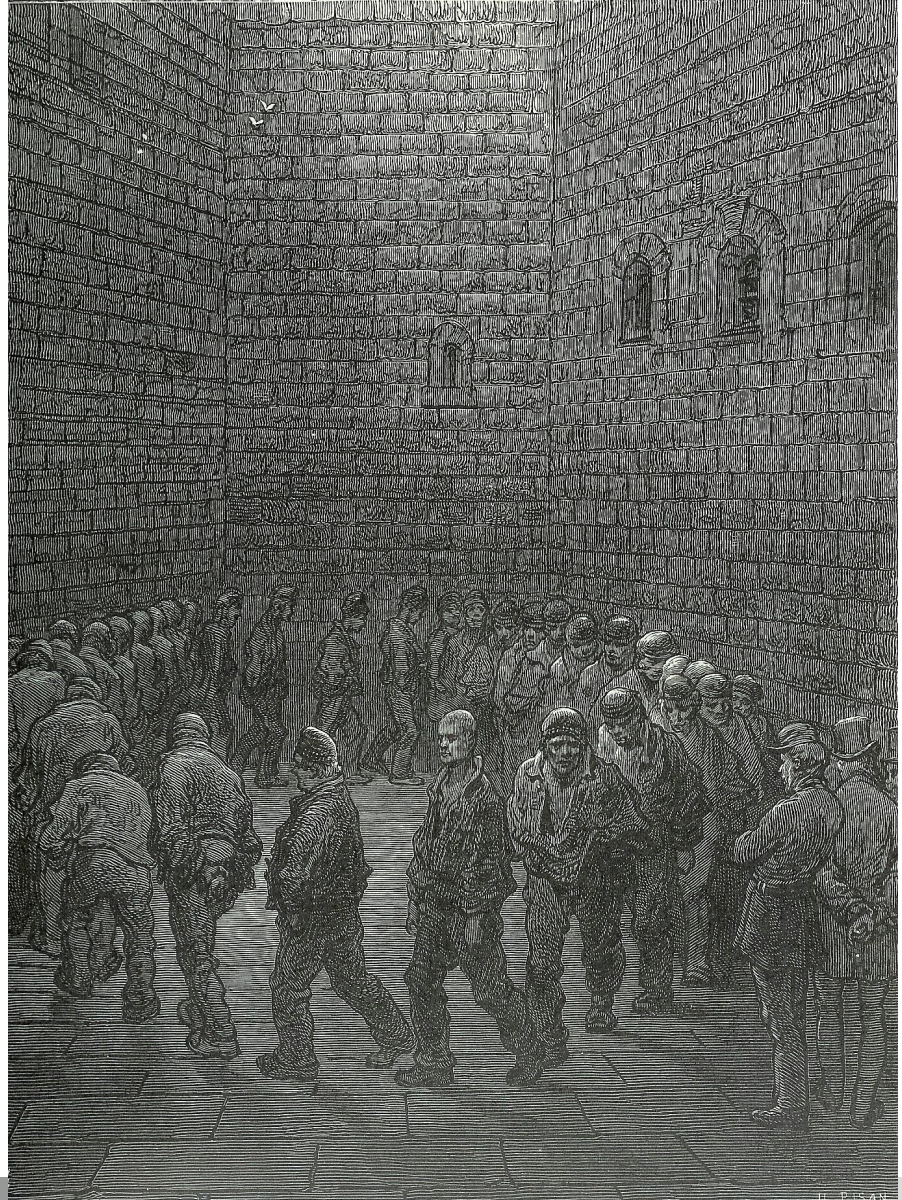
An actual, legendary criminal whose exploits are here reworked to cause uncertainty and excitement about what will happen to him

→ even though there is no detective, this can be called a fledgling detective novel

→ Hainsworth was accused of glamorizing the outlaw

Newgate prison (1188-1904)

Newgate
c. 1801



Newgate exercise yard, 1872, by Gustave Doré

METROPOLITAN POLICE

The novel was published only ten years after Sir Robert Peel founded the Metropolitan Police Force and in 1839 it was a somewhat shambolic institution, merely a slight improvement on the system of parish watchmen and constables it was designed to replace. A plainclothes division was not officially founded until 1869, though officers had sometimes worked undercover before that.

Other Newgate novels about crime (but without a sleuth)

William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794)

Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1839)

The reader is charged with determining guilt and identifying the perp(petrator).

Edgar Allan Poe's implausible detective stories

The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841)

The Mystery of Marie Roget (1842-3)

The Purloined Letter (1844).

Poe's claim to being the originator of detective fiction is undermined by evidence that Dupin's role in the provision of solutions to crimes is incidental to his author's other somewhat idiosyncratic concerns. Before and after these three stories Poe published a considerable number of pieces in which mendacity, bizarre behaviour, and outright sadomasochism are the prevailing themes

Eugène François Vidocq (1810s)

Burglar, womanizer, bigamist, duellist, fraudster

Several arrests and several disguises (as a sailor/nun/woman)

Eventually becomes a PI (police informer; mouton) and leads a group of reformed criminals called *Brigade de la Sûreté*, effectively the first ever plain-clothes detective branch of a police force. He commanded the *Sûreté* until 1827 and is recognized as the father of modern criminology.

Introduces many features of modern investigative practice (chemical compounds, ballistics)

Vidocq published his memoirs (*Memoires de Vidocq, chef de la police de Sûreté, jusqu'en 1827*) a year after he resigned as head of the Sûreté. The book became an immediate bestseller partly because it read like a novel.

Emile Gaboriau (1832–73)

L'Affaire Lerouge (1865), featured a detective called Le Père Tabaret, an unashamed borrowing from Poe's Dupin, and by implication from the very real Vidocq. Thereafter his fiction was dominated by the presence of Monsieur Lecoq, a police detective without a Christian name and once again modelled on Vidocq. Lecoq too is a reformed criminal-turned-*Sûreté* detective. Significantly, Gaboriau is unconcerned with Vidocq/Lecoq as an unwitting avatar of the endemic inequalities and hypocrisies of French society. He is more interested in the complex and ingenious methods of detection that Vidocq described in his memoirs.

Monsieur Lecoq

Lecoq is possessed of an almost superhuman capacity to decode the motives and techniques of murderers and eventually to unmask the perpetrator of the crime. Gaboriau, with thanks to Vidocq, offers the reader a lesson in logic and deduction; on how a sequence of apparently unrelated clues and events can be shown to be a narrative of motivation, cause, action, and eventually disclosure. In this respect he provided a bridge between Poe and Conan Doyle. The latter saw himself as the worthy successor to Poe but his proper inspiration came from Gaboriau's Lecoq whose methods of detection are replicated by Holmes. The latter's disparaging reference to Lecoq as 'bungling' is, one assumes, a backhanded compliment and acknowledgement of his assistance.

Penny Dreadfuls (1850s-1870s)

short novellas aimed at young urbanized working class men with a taste for the macabre. They were popularized versions of the Newgate novel, **stylistically crude and concerned only with the graphic nature of usually violent criminal acts.** Detectives hardly, if ever, featured in them and their seemingly unlicensed glorification of misconduct prompted the journalist and social commentator James Greenword to condemn them in 1874 as ‘impure literature’, ‘contagious trash’, and ‘pen’orths of muck’.

Sensation Novels (1860s)

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859)
Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1860–1)

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–2)

Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863).

all characters are from an apparently decent, moneyed, upper-class background, which provides the ideal setting for narratives based on conspiracy, or fears of conspiracy, inheritances disputed or denied, and suspicions involving such secrets as bigamy and illegitimacy.

Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868)

T. S. Eliot called it 'the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels' in 'a genre that was invented by Collins and not by Poe'; and Dorothy L Sayers and G. K. Chesterton agree that in their respective opinions it is the 'best' and the 'finest' detective story ever written.

FOUR NARRATORS: skewed and partial

Gabriel Betteredge, the Verinders' head servant; **Drusilla Clack**, a disagreeable Evangelical Christian and Rachel's impoverished cousin; **Mr Bruff,** the family solicitor; and **Ezra Jennings**, assistant to the family physician Dr Candy, deformed, incurably ill, and addicted to opium. The fact that each of these observers is either slightly abnormal or by virtue of their social status marginal to the principal events causes us to discern the main characters and follow the narrative in ways that are variously partial and skewed. None can be relied upon as an entirely trustworthy witness for the simple reason that they know less about the events than those directly involved and this adds another layer of tension to the basic question of who stole the diamond.

A Police detective: sergeant Cuff

Cuff is diligent and intelligent but he reaches the wrong conclusion. Instead the crime is solved by Franklin Blake, a gentleman adventurer who eventually marries Rachel.

Conan Doyle - A study in Scarlet (1887)

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (1891-1894) short stories published in *The Strand* magazine.

The Final Problem (1894)

The Hound of the Baskervilles (1894) serialized in *The Strand*

→ *4 novels and 56 short stories (until 1927).*

FASCINATION and ADORATION

Supernatural ability to solve crimes?

Patchy knowledge?

During an aside for the reader Watson assesses Holmes's knowledge of literature, philosophy, astronomy, politics, botany, and geology on a scale from nil to twenty and finds that only occasionally does he rise above the former. His knowledge of chemistry is, perversely, 'profound' while as an anatomist he is 'accurate' but consistently 'unsystematic'. He has an 'immense' familiarity with 'Sensation' novels, plays the violin well, and is an exemplary boxer and swordsman. However, as the stories unfold Holmes gradually discloses a familiarity and competence in virtually all of those areas that in the first novel his friend judged him inadequate.

Sherlock: a puzzling character

Watson is the LENS for our PERCEPTION of HOLMES's personality

CAPRICIOUS ILLOGIC

Several BLUNDERS by Holmes (his method at times fails bluntly; or he disregards evidence)

CRIME FICTION for the UPPER CLASSES

The Holmes–Watson fictions enabled crime writing to appeal to an audience for whom the very notion of criminal misconduct was anathema: they were a class above the people who routinely committed such acts. At the same time the peculiar relationship between Holmes and Watson allowed them to experience the thrill of peeping at something dreadful in their neighbours' sitting room, while keeping their own curtains securely closed. This as we will see would be the keynote of the so-called 'Golden Age' of crime fiction.

WATSON as a STEADYING PRESENCE

Watson was the steadying presence, the mirror image of the male middle-class reader, but he was also the gatekeeper to a world of fantasy. Holmes is a fabric of uncertainties. We are never quite sure about his background; his relationships with women are brief, tenuous, and largely beyond Watson's comprehension; and he operates as a morally astute alchemist, able to restore some sense of truth and justice to situations that confound both those involved and the police. For the reader on his train to the suburbs he offered escapist access to a cocaine-fuelled existence, unaccountable to authority, an employer, or family. He invites the reader to go with him from Todorov's story two to the secrets of story one, but once this reader leaves the train the focus shifts back towards Watson, Holmes's devoted but slightly disapproving acolyte.

COUNTRY HOUSE CRIME and PRIVILEGE

Eliot does not substantiate his claim that Collins founded detective fiction but it is easy enough to postulate his rationale. Cuff is dealt with sympathetically but not without a hint of resigned condescension. The intellect, and by implication the breeding, of Blake triumphs and the gentleman amateur detective is born, as is the haughtily disconnected 'country-house' crime. Those who do not quite 'belong', by virtue of family or class, are consigned to the realms of puzzlement (and again this includes Cuff). Only those who share the same levels of discernment and discretion as the perpetrator of the crime are able to sift through the layers of false clues, suspects, and circumstantial red herrings to claim access to the truth. Crucially, the reader is caused to believe that they too belong within this circle of privilege

G.K.Chesterton's Father Brown (1913-35)

G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories (1913–35) are a rejoinder, part of a dialogue, with Doyle. Brown deals with evil and injustice according to the maxims of his Roman Catholic vocation, and the fact that Holmes had brought him into existence indicates that crime fiction had become a forum for the exchange on fundamental precepts of existence.

DETACHED and ALIENATED sleuths

The legacy of Doyle's Holmes and Chesterton's Father Brown: figures who are by their own choice alienated from the worlds they investigate and are consequently granted a unique perspective on them.

THE TWO AGES: GOLDEN and HARD-BOILED

GOLDEN AGE (1914-1945)

Most crime novelists of the Golden Age were British, notably Agatha Christie, Marjorie Allingham, Anthony Berkeley, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Michael Innes.

Crime, at least in the hands of these novelists, is not so much romanticized as dressed with **a gloss of seemliness and propriety**. In this respect the Golden Ageists were scions of the Sensation fraternity of half a century before, but while both are singularly snobbish regarding the matter of where, how, and by whom the deed is committed, the writers of the 1920s and 1930s seem intent on securing the entire genre of crime fiction against any accusations of realism or plausibility.

Outsiders but like us: Poirot, Miss Marple,

Christie's Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot predominate as investigators and both are outsiders, in the most unthreatening and innocuous sense. Poirot is a Belgian expatriate practising his skills as amateur detective among the English middle classes and gentry.

Christie causes them to become intermediaries between the reader and the puzzle of the narrative. They are, like us, not quite part of the network of suspicions and deceptions that underpin the crime but at the same time they are our conduit to the tantalizing mystery of the novel.

Miss Marple

Marple is, by virtue of her isolation and insularity, a proxy reader. A murder has been committed but Marple's preoccupation with the motives and movements of those potentially involved sanitizes it, cleanses it of its macabre and grotesque features. Instead it becomes a quiz, in which the characters become less like real people, variously

Cardboard cutouts

For the Golden Age writers, however, plot and puzzle were often so tightly intertwined as to leave no room whatsoever for the characters to display even a glint of independence. **They frequently became automatons, servants to lifeless formulae.**

None of the reviewers finds that any of Christie's creations are endowed with prominent characteristics, endearing or otherwise. Certainly they behave according to rank and post (Major Blunt is the archetypal big game hunter, John Parker the dutifully routine butler) but beyond this they do not seem much possessed of a personality. **Instead they are ciphers, embodiments of crossword-style clues.**

Lord Peter Wimsey and Bunter

Aristocracy and detection

Peers vs yokels?

Puzzles in escapist prose

Golden Age elitism

Dismissal of the Golden Age writers as class elitists who made use of improbable wrongdoings to reinforce their notion of an intellectual and moral hierarchy VERSUS

a later brand of realism involving policemen, probably of modest background, who have to deal with mundane acts of violence or theft in the English provinces.

Mid 1960s to the present

From the mid-1960s to the early 21st century the mainstays of British detective fiction have been Reginald Hill, Colin Dexter, Ruth Rendell (aka Barbara Vine), R. D. Wingfield, Ian Rankin, and P. D. James. All have regularly produced bestsellers and their creations have become embedded in our cultural infrastructure via television adaptations. **They have two particular features in common: a tendency to reinforce the legal ordinances and moral codes that are supposed to maintain order in our society and a preoccupation with class that endures as the legacy of Christie, Allingham, et al.**

Recent American

Patricia Highsmith - *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)
John Ball - *In the Heat of the Night* (1965)
George V. Higgins -*The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1970)

They are extraordinarily different writers both in terms of technique and subject matter yet at the same time they share a significant common factor. Each goes much further than any of their British counterparts in their attempt to turn crime fiction into a genre that challenges our notions of violence, the law, and the social fabric that claims to account for both

An imperfect society: the law as morally compromised

A question remains, however, regarding the very different trajectories taken by British and American crime fiction since the 1960s. It could be argued that the latter has shifted more toward representations of the law and its agents as morally compromised, not in order to sell more books to readers with a taste for gratuitous violence, but rather because they function as the collective conscience of an imperfect society. But does this mean that their more circumspect British counterparts prefer not to mention what they know or suspect (with the notable exception of figures such as Arnott and James)?

Ronad Knox's Detective Story Decalogue

In 1929 Father Ronald Knox, a US priest whose bishop eventually forbade him from writing crime fiction, published the 'Detective Story Decalogue', ten rules that every respectable crime writer must observe to ensure 'fair play'.

Characters must conform to the roles allocated to them as functionaries in the puzzle and their personality must neither become too complex nor unpredictable to distract from this.

American Pulps (the equivalent of Penny Dreadfuls)

Pulps were the American equivalent of the 19th century British penny-dreadfuls with prurient thrills offered at the expense of style, characterization, and plot

James M. CAIN (1892-1977) –

Dashiell HAMMET (1894-1961) – Sam Spade

Raymond CHANDLER (1888-1959) - Philip Marlowe

Again and again one will find them compared with Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Faulkner as practitioners of a medium by parts spare, unforgiving, and eloquent

Each of these could claim to be just as realistic as anything by Chandler, Cain, or Hammett, in the sense that they treat crime as symptomatic of some endemic failure in a collective will towards decency or fairness.

Hard-boiled and Noir

The three most celebrated practitioners of what became known as the ‘hard-boiled’ or ‘noir’ brand of detective fiction were Hammett, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler. Dashiel Hammett went on to write two of the best-known crime novels of the 20th century, *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and *The Glass Key* (1931).

Julian Symons compares *The Glass Key* with the best of Dickens’s writing,

Whodunit formula and Caustic realism

Hammett defers to the whodunit formulae of the late 19th century and the Golden Age but he does so with caustic resignation; he is, he implies, a writer who will connive at populism but carry into it more profound concerns. In Symons's view a 're-reading of [his best work] offers fresh revelations of the way in which a crime writer with sufficient skill and tact can use violent events to comment by indirection on life, art, society …' (p. 158).

Sam Spade

Sam Spade of *The Maltese Falcon* has nothing in common with the amateur detectives of Conan Doyle and Christie. He involves himself in other people's messy and sometimes illegal activities only to make a living and he is himself a morally ambiguous figure. His world is one of deceit, greed, and sexual potency intercut by a narrative style that is cynical and ruthlessly sardonic

Disturbing features and blurring of motives

The novel begs comparison with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as a depiction of our more disturbing compulsions, yet at the same time Hammett's blend of wit and melancholy takes us in a different direction. It shows us a society that is unreformable, one that baits our worst ambitions; yet it robustly avoids moral judgement. The fact that these divergent elements are strung together by a single plot-line of transgressive criminality enables us to classify it as detective fiction, but at the same time causes us to wonder about the boundaries that separate this genre from the mainstream novel

Crime and sex

James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and his novella *Double Indemnity* (both 1934) were at the time controversial because of their emphasis upon sex as the primary motive for killing. In both, married women exploit the mutual attraction of haphazard encounters in order to persuade men to assist in the murder of their husbands.

The narrative resembles a lengthy dramatic monologue, where his ostentatiously confident manner gradually fragments until we are left with a man no longer convinced of anything, including who he is.

Raymond Chandler's *The Simple Art of Murder 1944 essay Atlantic Monthly*

Black Mask in 1933 and his debut novel, *The Big Sleep*, did not appear until 1939 when he was 51. He has, however, received far more esteem than any of his peers both from fellow crime writers and within the broader literary world. There are myriad reasons for this, not least the enduring respect earned by film adaptations of his work; but another factor is his authorship of a 1944 essay called 'The Simple Art of Murder', first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Chandler versus Golden Age writers

It was the first eloquent and intellectually challenging argument that crime fiction should be taken seriously. He treats Conan Doyle, Christie, Sayers, E. C. Bentley, and Allingham with something close to contempt, accusing them of producing ‘light’ fiction involving such quaint curiosities as ‘hand wrought duelling pistols, curare and tropical fish’. On the Golden Age of crime fiction he comments that ‘The English may not always be the best writers in the world but they are incomparably the best dull writers’.

Raymond Chandler. ‘The murder novel has always a depressing way of minding its own business, solving its own problems, and answering its own questions.’ (Chandler, 1944)

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (pp. 991–2)

RADICAL CRIME FICTION and the IMPERFECT WORLD

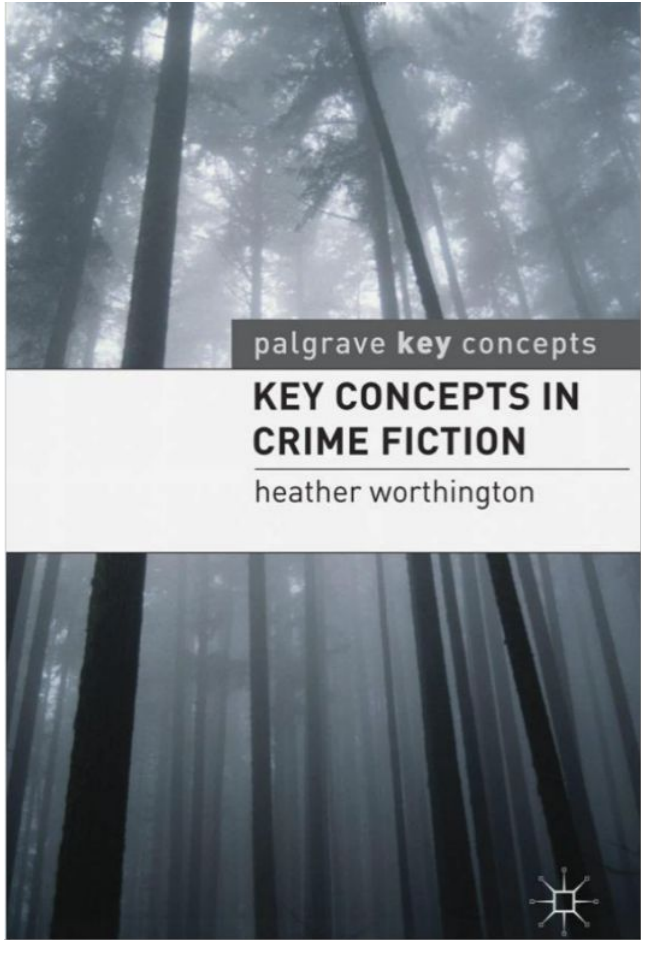
In Chandler's view Dashiell Hammett had opened a door on new vistas for the crime genre, an escape from its cloying middle-brow status towards a radicalism that holds up a mirror to a very imperfect world. In particular he praised Hammett's adoption of 'American language' as an unfiltered medium for realism and claimed that he 'gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse'. The phrase is rather chillingly ambiguous in that he seems to suggest that Hammett makes fictional murders more credible in terms of their circumstances and motives while at the same time allows for the possibility that Hammett might, commendably, be writing for the sort of people who are themselves capable of committing serious crimes.

Julian Symons *Bloody Murder (1972)*

a shrewd assessment of the state of their profession by crime fiction writers, though neither can be treated as entirely unbiased. Symons's overview is far more extensive than Chandler's, taking us back to the early 19th century and involving a detailed comparison between Britain and America. He finds that some things have changed, notably in the US where the Chandler generation have inspired a sequence of even more radical departures from the steady formulae of pre-1930s writing.

Post-war Britain detective stories: DULL

Most of his early novels are based on police procedures conducted in the dull provinces of post-war Britain but these concessions to realism are always matched by an instinct to inject something like farce and caricature into the investigations of figures such as the appropriately named Inspector Bland, a man whose meticulous efficiency can bore suspects into paroxysms of confession. In the novels and in *Bloody Murder* he appears to have confronted and accepted an impasse: Britain, its police, and its criminals, are irretrievably dull and to write of them in any other way is a perversion of fact.



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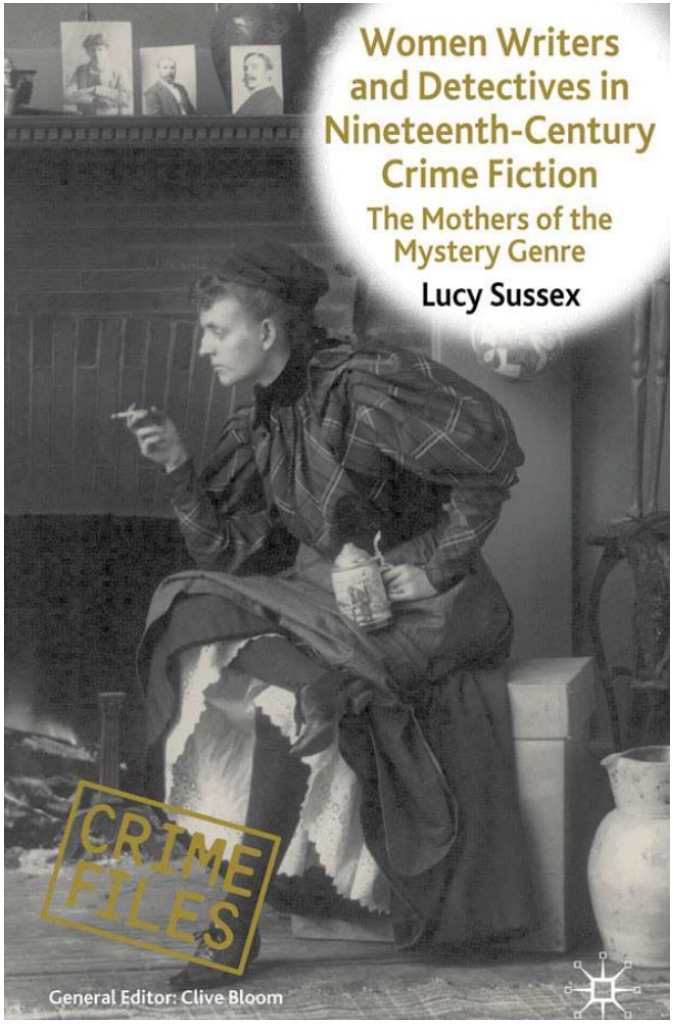

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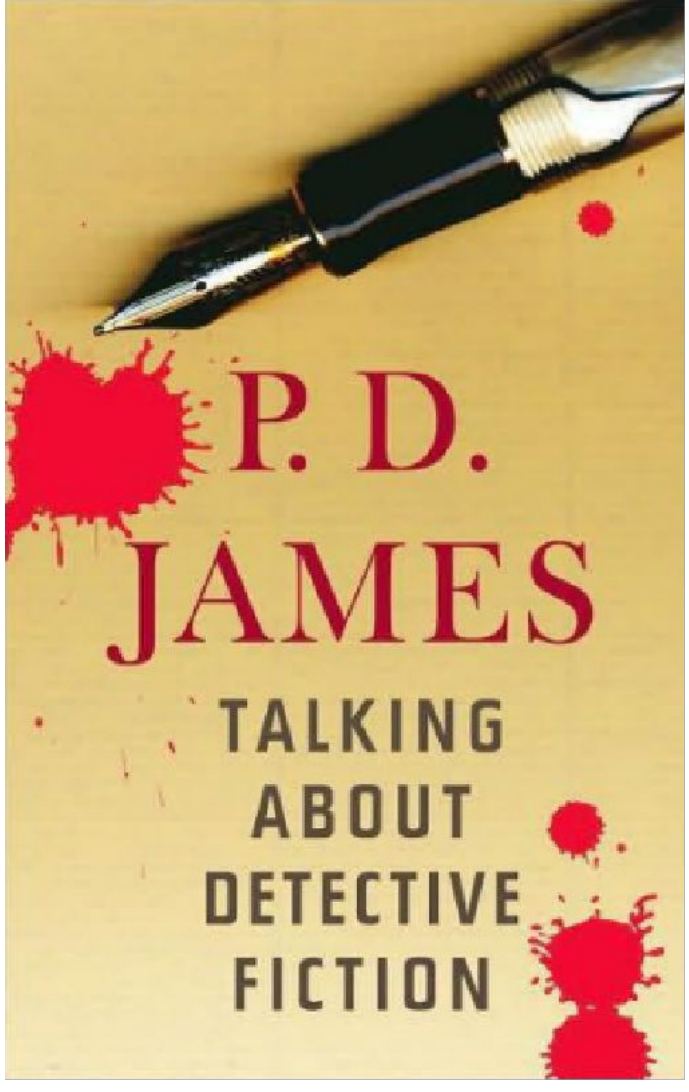

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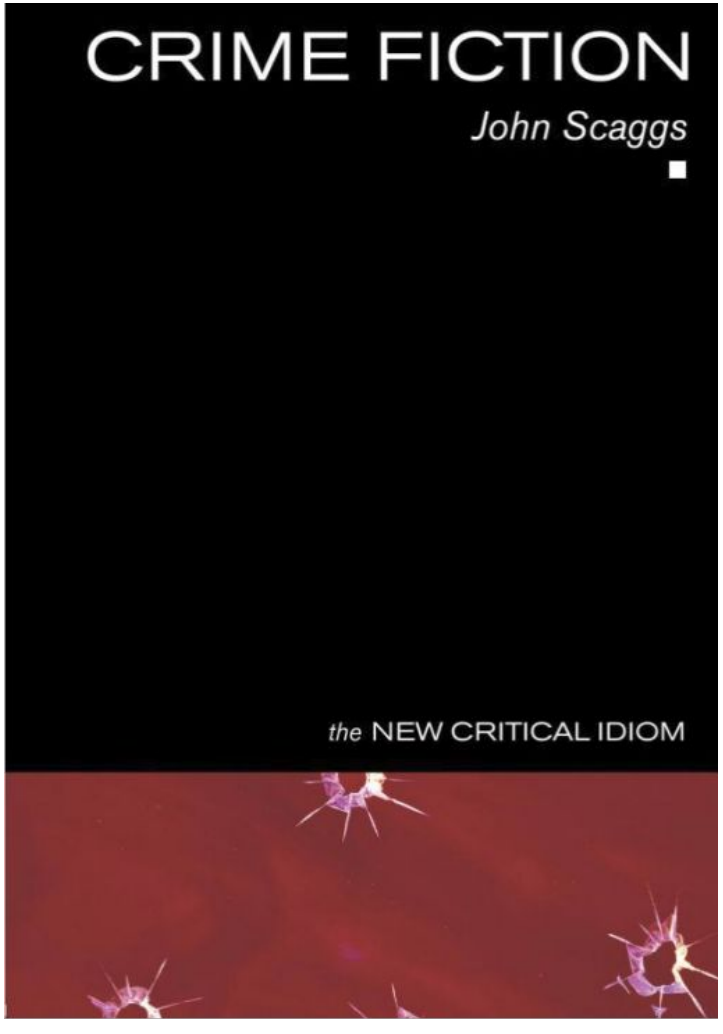

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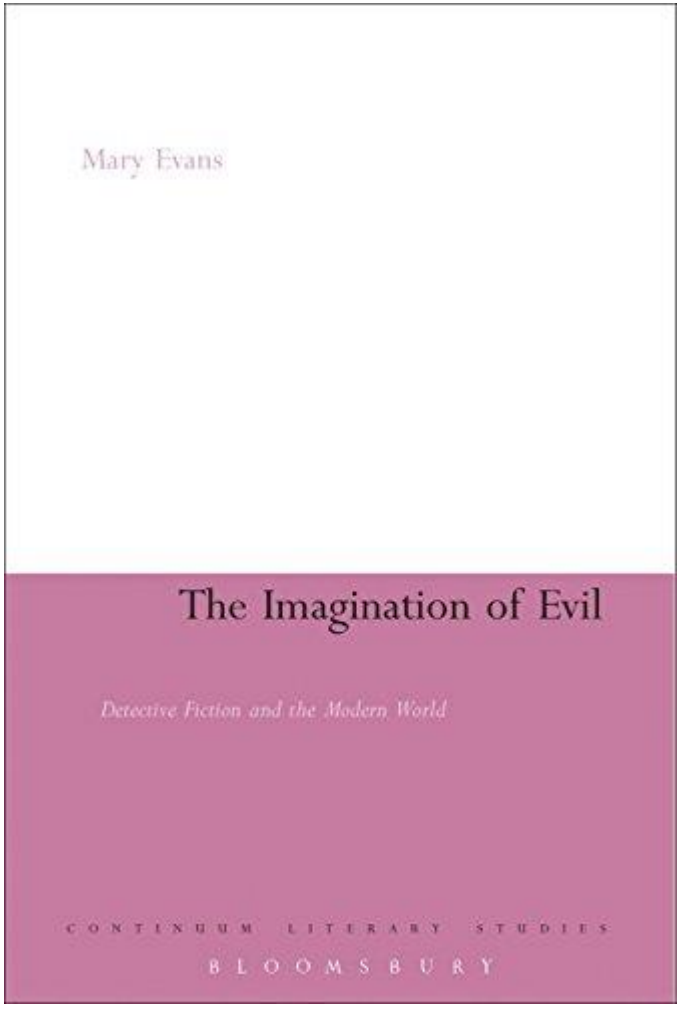

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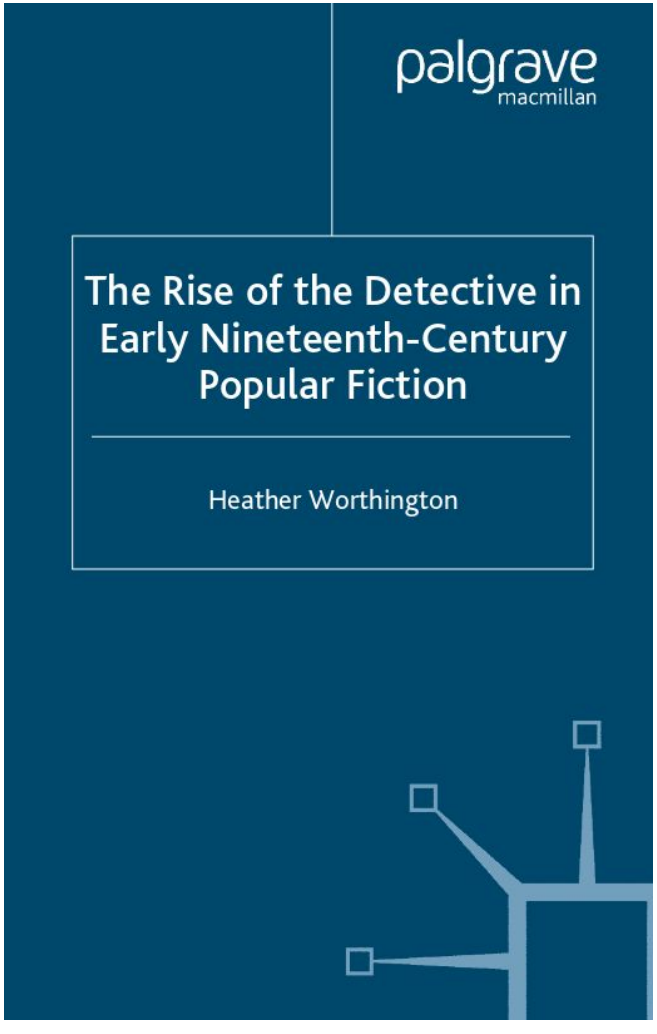

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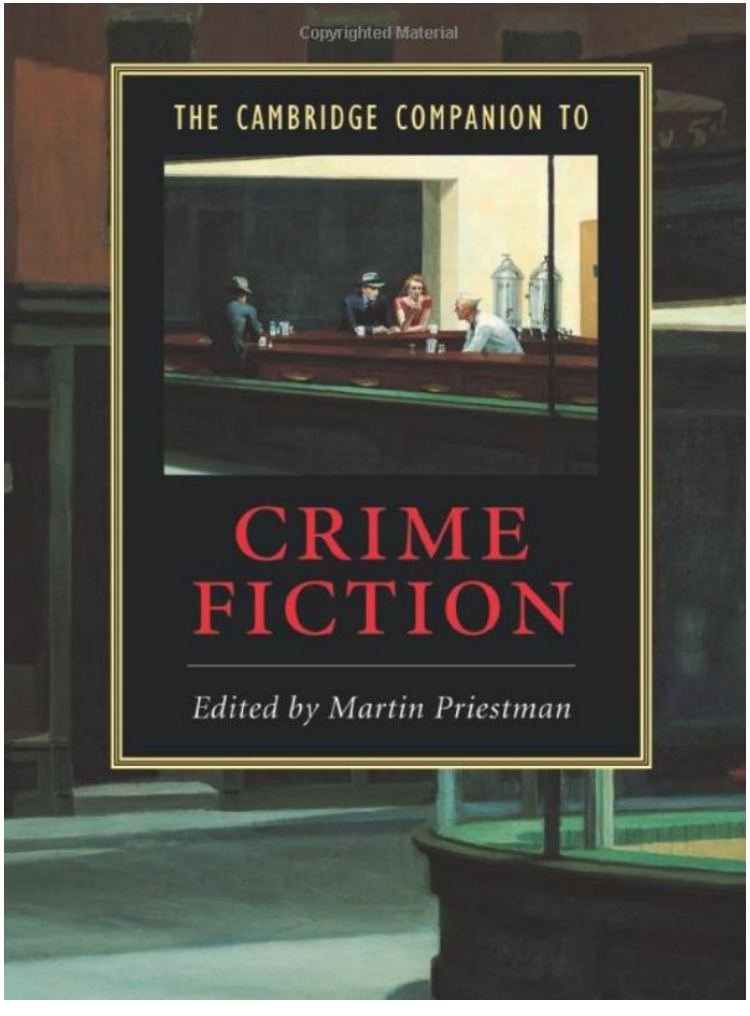

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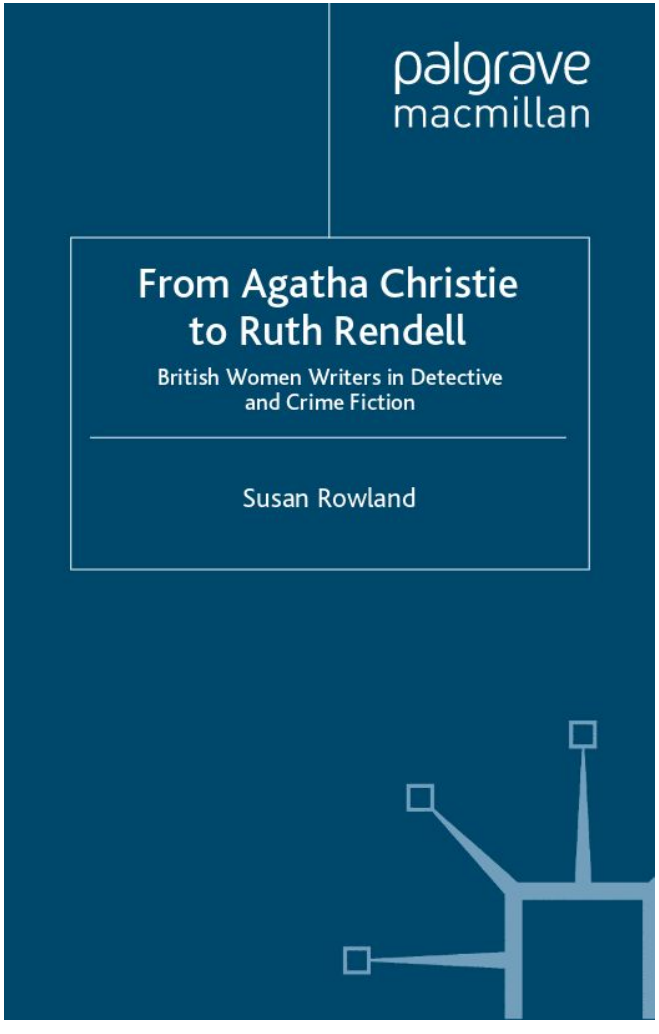

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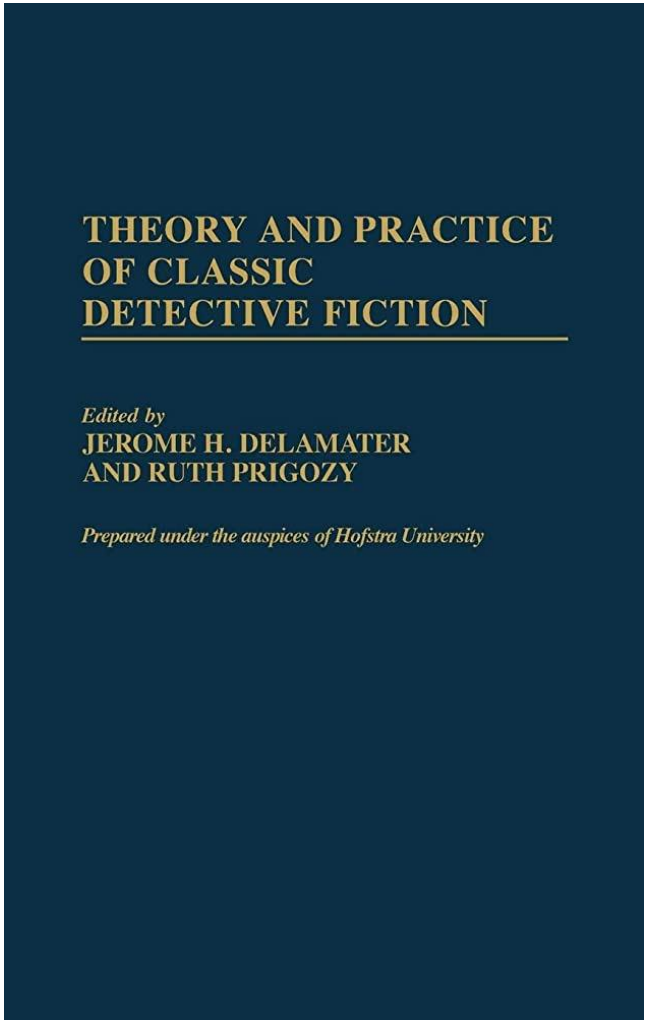

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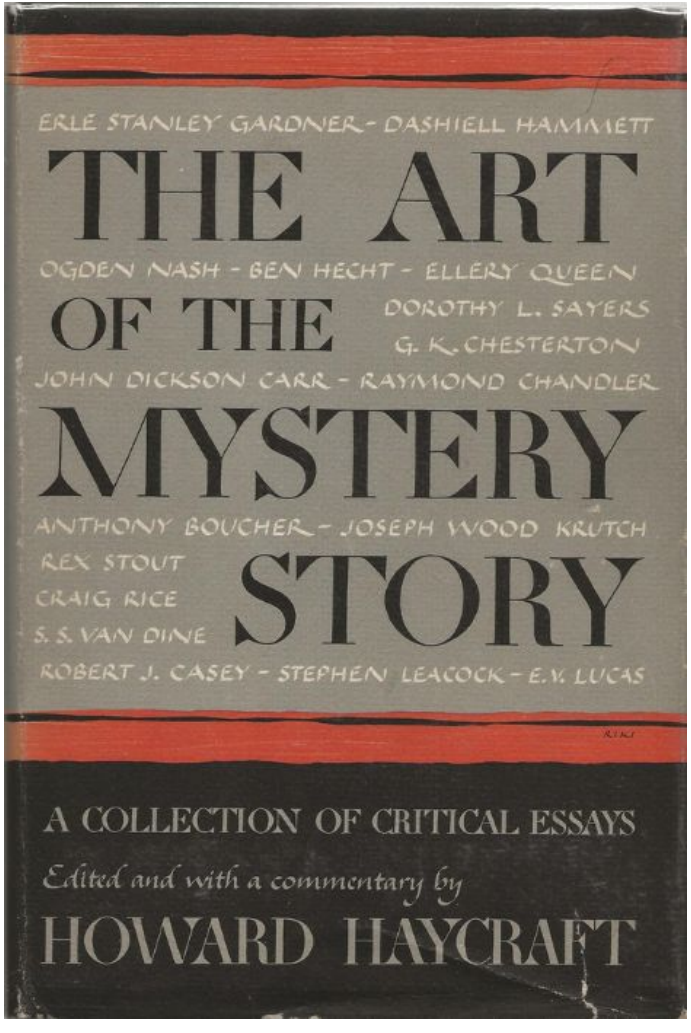

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