

THE GOLDEN AGE of CRIME
FICTION
1920s 1930s

Edwards, Martin. *The Golden Age of Murder: The Mystery of the Writers Who Invented the Modern Detective Story*. London: Harper Collins, 2015.

BRITISH:

Margery Allingham (1904–1966)

Anthony Berkeley (aka Francis Iles, 1893–1971)

G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936)

Dame Agatha Christie (1890–1976),

Msgr. Ronald Knox (1888-1957)

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957)

Who Cares Who Killed
Roger Ackroyd?

Edmund Crispin (1921-1978)

Dame Ngaio Marsh (1895–1982)

BELGIAN: Georges Simenon was from Belgium and wrote in French; his detective, Jules Maigret, was a Frenchman.

AMERICAN: S.S. Van Dine, John Dickson Carr, Ellery Queen. Also Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain, (more **hard-boiled**, American style.)

THE DETECTION CLUB (1930)

26 founders:

Anthony Berkeley, Dorothy Sayers, G.K.Chesterton, Ronald Knox, Agatha Christie, Henry Wade among others.

THEIR OATH

Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God?

KNOX'S COMMANDMENTS

- The criminal must be mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to know.
- All [supernatural](#) or [preternatural](#) agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
- Not more than one secret room or [passage](#) is allowable.
- No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
- No Chinaman must figure in the story.
- No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
- The detective himself must not commit the crime.
- The detective is bound to declare any clues which he may discover.
- The "sidekick" of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal from the reader any thoughts which pass through his mind: his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
- Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

RONALD KNOX, 1929

A detective story must have as its main interest the unravelling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end.

Who Cares Who Killed
Roger Ackroyd?

S.S. Van Dine rules (1928)

The detective story is a game. It is more--it is a sporting event. And the author must play fair with the reader. He can no more resort to trickeries and deceptions and still retain his honesty than if he cheated in a bridge game. He must outwit the reader, and hold the reader's interest, through sheer ingenuity. For the writing of detective stories there are very definite laws--unwritten, perhaps, but none the less binding: and every respectable and self-respecting concocter of literary mysteries lives up to them.

Herewith, then, is a sort of Credo, based partly on the practice of all the great writers of stories, and partly on the promptings of the honest author's inner conscience. To wit:

- 1. The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described.**
2. No wilful tricks or deceptions may be played on the reader other than those played legitimately by the criminal on the detective himself.
3. There must be no love interest in the story. To introduce amour is to clutter up a purely intellectual experience with irrelevant sentiment. The business in hand is to bring a criminal to the bar of justice, not to bring a lovelorn couple to the hymeneal altar.
4. The detective himself, or one of the official investigators, should never turn out to be the culprit. This is bald trickery, on a par with offering some one a bright penny for a five-dollar gold piece. It's false pretenses.
5. The culprit must be determined by logical deductions--not by accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession. To solve a criminal problem in this latter fashion is like sending the reader on a deliberate wild-goose chase, and then telling him, after he has failed, that you had the object of his search up your sleeve all the time. Such an author is no better than a practical joker.
6. The detective novel must have a detective in it; and a detective is not a detective unless he detects. His function is to gather clues that will eventually lead to the person who did the dirty work in the first chapter; and if the detective does not reach his conclusions through an analysis of those clues, he has no more solved his problem than the schoolboy who gets his answer out of the back of the arithmetic.

7. There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better. No lesser crime than murder will suffice. Three hundred pages is far too much pother for a crime other than murder. After all, the reader's trouble and expenditure of energy must be rewarded. Americans are essentially humane, and therefore a tiptop murder arouses their sense of vengeance and horror. They wish to bring the perpetrator to justice; and when "murder most foul, as in the best it is," has been committed, the chase is on with all the righteous enthusiasm of which the thrice gentle reader is capable.
8. The problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods for learning the truth as slate-writing, ouija-boards, mind-reading, spiritualistic sÈances, crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo. A reader has a chance when matching his wits with a rationalistic detective, but if he must compete with the world of spirits and go chasing about the fourth dimension of metaphysics, he is defeated ab initio.
9. There must be but one detective--that is, but one protagonist of deduction--one deus ex machine. To bring the minds of three or four, or sometimes a gang of detectives to bear on a problem is not only to disperse the interest and break the direct thread of logic, but to take an unfair advantage of the reader, who, at the outset, pits his mind against that of the detective and proceeds to do mental battle. If there is more than one detective the reader doesn't know who his co-deductor is. It's like making the reader run a race with a relay team.
10. The culprit must turn out to be a person who has played a more or less prominent part in the story--that is, a person with whom the reader is familiar and in whom he takes an interest. For a writer to fasten the crime, in the final chapter, on a stranger or person who has played a wholly unimportant part in the tale, is to confess to his inability to match wits with the reader.

11. Servants--such as butlers, footmen, valets, game-keepers, cooks, and the like--must not be chosen by the author as the culprit. This is begging a noble question. It is a too easy solution. It is unsatisfactory, and makes the reader feel that his time has been wasted. The culprit must be a decidedly worth-while person--one that wouldn't ordinarily come under suspicion; for if the crime was the sordid work of a menial, the author would have had no business to embalm it in book-form.
12. There must be but one culprit, no matter how many murders are committed. The culprit may, of course, have a minor helper or co-plotter; but the entire onus must rest on one pair of shoulders: the entire indignation of the reader must be permitted to concentrate on a single black nature.
13. Secret societies, camorras, mafias, et al., have no place in a detective story. Here the author gets into adventure fiction and secret-service romance. A fascinating and truly beautiful murder is irremediably spoiled by any such wholesale culpability. To be sure, the murderer in a detective novel should be given a sporting chance, but it is going too far to grant him a secret society (with its ubiquitous havens, mass protection, etc.) to fall back on. No high-class, self-respecting murderer would want such odds in his jousting-bout with the police.
14. The method of murder, and the means of detecting it, must be rational and scientific. That is to say, pseudo-science and purely imaginative and speculative devices are not to be tolerated in the roman policier. For instance, the murder of a victim by a newly found element--a super-radium, let us say--is not a legitimate problem. Nor may a rare and unknown drug, which has its existence only in the author's imagination, be administered. A detective-story writer must limit himself, toxicologically speaking, to the pharmacopoeia. Once an author soars into the realm of fantasy, in the Jules Verne manner, he is outside the bounds of detective fiction, cavorting in the uncharted reaches of adventure.

15. The truth of the problem must at all times be apparent--provided the reader is shrewd enough to see it. By this I mean that if the reader, after learning the explanation for the crime, should reread the book, he would see that the solution had, in a sense, been staring him in the face--that all the clues really pointed to the culprit--and that, if he had been as clever as the detective, he could have solved the mystery himself without going on to the final chapter. That the clever reader does often thus solve the problem goes without saying. And one of my basic theories of detective fiction is that, if a detective story is fairly and legitimately constructed, it is impossible to keep the solution from all readers. There will inevitably be a certain number of them just as shrewd as the author; and if the author has shown the proper sportsmanship and honesty in his statement and projection of the crime and its clues, these perspicacious readers will be able, by analysis, elimination and logic, to put their finger on the culprit as soon as the detective does. And herein lies the zest of the game. Herein we have an explanation for the fact that readers who would spurn the ordinary "popular" novel will read detective stories unblushingly.

16. A detective novel should contain no long descriptive passages, no literary dallying with side-issues, no subtly worked-out character analyses, no "atmospheric" preoccupations. Such matters have no vital place in a record of crime and deduction. They hold up the action, and introduce issues irrelevant to the main purpose, which is to state a problem, analyze it, and bring it to a successful conclusion. To be sure, there must be a sufficient descriptiveness and character delineation to give the novel verisimilitude; but when an author of a detective story has reached that literary point where he has created a gripping sense of reality and enlisted the reader's interest and sympathy in the characters and the problem, he has gone as far in the purely "literary" technique as is legitimate and compatible with the needs of a criminal-problem document. A detective story is a grim business, and the reader goes to it, not for literary furbelows and style and beautiful descriptions and the projection of moods, but for mental stimulation and intellectual activity--just as he goes to a ball game or to a cross-word puzzle. Lectures between innings at the Polo Grounds on the beauties of nature would scarcely enhance the interest in the struggle between two contesting baseball nines; and dissertations on etymology and orthography interspersed in the definitions of a cross-word puzzle would tend only to irritate the solver bent on making the words interlock correctly.

17. A professional criminal must never be shouldered with the guilt of a crime in a detective story. Crimes by house-breakers and bandits are the province of the police department--not of authors and brilliant amateur detectives. Such crimes belong to the routine work of the Homicide Bureaus. A really fascinating crime is one committed by a pillar of a church, or a spinster noted for her charities.

18. A crime in a detective story must never turn out to be an accident or a suicide. To end an odyssey of sleuthing with such an anti-climax is to play an unpardonable trick on the reader. If a book-buyer should demand his two dollars back on the ground that the crime was a fake, any court with a sense of justice would decide in his favor and add a stinging reprimand to the author who thus hoodwinked a trusting and kind-hearted reader.
19. The motives for all crimes in detective stories should be personal. International plottings and war politics belong in a different category of fiction--in secret-service tales, for instance. But a murder story must be kept gemütlich, so to speak. It must reflect the reader's everyday experiences, and give him a certain outlet for his own repressed desires and emotions.
20. And (to give my Credo an even score of items) I herewith list a few of the devices which no self-respecting detective-story writer will now avail himself of. They have been employed too often, and are familiar to all true lovers of literary crime. To use them is a confession of the author's ineptitude and lack of originality.

20. a. And (to give my Credo an even score of items) I herewith list a few of the devices which no self-respecting detective-story writer will now avail himself of. They have been employed too often, and are familiar to all true lovers of literary crime. To use them is a confession of the author's ineptitude and lack of originality. Determining the identity of the culprit by comparing the butt of a cigarette left at the scene of the crime with the brand smoked by a suspect.
- b. The bogus spiritualistic séance to frighten the culprit into giving himself away.
- c. Forged finger-prints.
- d. The dummy-figure alibi.
- e. The dog that does not bark and thereby reveals the fact that the intruder is familiar.
- f. The final pinning of the crime on a twin, or a relative who looks exactly like the suspected, but innocent, person.
- g. The hypodermic syringe and the knockout drops.
- h. The commission of the murder in a locked room after the police have actually broken in.
- i. The word-association test for guilt.
- j. The cipher, or code letter, which is eventually unravelled by the sleuth.

"ROUND ROBIN" MYSTERY NOVELS

A **round-robin** story, or simply "**round robin**," is a type of collaborative **fiction** or storytelling in which a number of authors write chapters of a **novel** or pieces of a story, in rounds. **Round-robin novels** were invented in the 19th century, and later became a tradition particularly in science **fiction**.

THE SCOOP **AND** **BEHIND THE** **SCREEN**

Two short detective stories
written in the early thirties
for broadcast serialization
now appearing for the first
time in volume form

BY E. C. BENTLEY • ANTHONY BERKELEY
AGATHA CHRISTIE • FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS
CLEMENCE DANF • RONALD KNOX
DOROTHY L. SAYERS • HUGH WALPOLE

Gollancz
Detection



The second chapter of
'THE SCOOP,'

the serial detective story by six
 different authors, will be broadcast
 by
AGATHA CHRISTIE
 tonight at 9.20

2. HORACE KENNY
(Concerto)
 3. TARRANT BAILEY, Inc.
(Radio Solo)
 4. HENRI MERIDON
(La Primavera, March)
 5. RUPERT HAZEL AND BLAISE TAYLOR
(The Harpists)
 6. JACK PAYNE and his BUREAU DANCE
 ORCHESTRA
 7. THE MELODY MATES
(The Harpists)
 8. ALEXANDER AND MOSE
(The Dark Suspects)
 and
 JACK PAYNE and his BUREAU DANCE
 ORCHESTRA
(The Harpists, Concerto, etc.)
- 9.15 'The Second News'
*(Weather Forecast, etc., by the National News
 Bureau)*
- 9.17 Shopping Forecast
- 9.20 'The Scoop'
*A Serial Detective Story—II
 Mrs. Agatha Christie*
- 9.45 An Orchestral Concert

Weedon, A. '“Behind the Screen” and “The Scoop”’: a cross-media experiment in publishing and broadcasting crime fiction in the early 1930s' *Media History*, 13 (1), 2007, pp. 43 – 60.

Attacks on the genre (1940s)

Edmund Wilson, "Who cares who killed Roger Ackryod?" *The New Yorker*. June 20, 1945.

Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder", *The Atlantic Monthly*". December 1944.

Raymond Chandler --> Hard-boiled genre

The English may not always be the best writers in the world, but they are incomparably the best dull writers

The classic detective story has learned nothing and forgotten nothing.

Introduction to the
Omnibus of Crime (1929)

Dorothy L. Sayers

The Art of Self-Tormenting

THE art of self-tormenting is an ancient one, with a long and honourable literary tradition. Man, not satisfied with the mental confusion and unhappiness to be derived from contemplating the cruelties of life and the riddle of the universe, delights to occupy his leisure moments with puzzles and bugaboos.

EARLY HISTORY

Both the detective-story proper and the pure tale of horror are very ancient in origin. Ail native folk-lore has its ghost tales, while the first four detective-stories in this book hail respectively from the Jewish Apocrypha, Herodotus, and the Aeneid. But, whereas the tale of horror has flourished in practically every age and country, the detective-story has had a spasmodic history, appearing here and there; in faint, tentative sketches and episodes, until it suddenly burst into magnificent flower in the middle of the last, century.

THE LION and THE FOX

“Why do you not come to pay your respects to me?” says Aesop's lion to the fox. “I beg your /Majesty's pardon,” says the fox, “but I noticed the track of the animals that have already come to you; and, while I see many hoof-marks going in, I see none coming out. Till the animals that have entered your cave come out again, I prefer to remain in the open air.” Sherlock Holmes could not have reasoned more lucidly from the premises

POLICING

Cites E.M.Wrong:

a faulty law of evidence was to blame, for detectives cannot flourish until the public hail an idea of what constitutes proof, and while a common criminal procedure is arrest, torture, confession, and death.” One may go further, and say that, though crime stories might, and did, flourish, the detective-story proper could not do so until public sympathy had veered round to the side of law and order.

English → exactness in external details of men and things

German/French → psychological truth

Law in UK/USA/France vs
Law in the South (Mediterranean)

THE DOCTOR, THE SCIENTIST, THE POLICEMAN vs THE KNIGHT ERRANT

The electric telegraph circled the globe; railways brought remote villages into touch with civilisation; photographs made known to the stay-at-homes the marvels of foreign landscapes, customs, and animals; science reduced seeming miracles to mechanical marvels; popular education and improved policing made town and country safer for the common man than they had ever been. In place of the adventurer and the knight errant, popular imagination hailed the doctor, the scientist, and the policeman as saviours and protectors.

MYSTIFICATION and REVELATION

For though the reader likes to be mystified, he also likes to say, “I told you so,” and “I spotted that.” And this leads us to the third great advantage of the Holmes-Watson contention: by describing the clues as presented to the dim eyes and bemused mind of Watson, the author is enabled to preserve a spurious appearance of frankness, while keeping to himself the pedal knowledge on which the interpretation of those clues depends.

ECCENTRICITY

Dupin, we are informed, had a habit of living behind Closed shutters, illumined by "a couple of tapers which, strongly (perfumed, threw out only the ghastliest and feeblest of rays." From this stronghold he issued by night, to promenade the streets and enjoy the "infinity of mental excitement" afforded by quiet observation.

DUPIN and HIS CHRONICLER

The fumbling side-kick/colleague: a device to flatter the reader (who sees “better” than the admiring side-kick)

SHERLOCK HOLMES will dominate (and there will be reactions to that → ORDINARY DETECTIVES)

WOMEN DETECTIVES

There have also been a few women detectives, but on the whole, they have not been very successful. In order to justify their choice of sex, they are obliged to be so irritatingly intuitive as to destroy that quiet enjoyment of the logical which we look for in our detective reading. Or else they are active and courageous, and insist on walking into physical danger and hampering the men engaged on the job. Marriage, also, looms too large in their view of life; which is not surprising, for they are all young and beautiful.

EDGAR ALLAN POE

The Murders in the Rue Morgue (182

The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Three typical motifs in Poe:

Strongly suspected man

Hermetically sealed chamber

Solution by unexpected means.

Superiority in inference (Dupin draws deductions the police are unable to draw)

Superiority in observation (Dupin discovers clues ignored by the police)

Why these charming creatures should be able to tackle abstruse problems at the age of twenty-one or thereabouts, while the male detectives are usually content to wait till their thirties or forties before setting up as experts, it is hard to say. Where do they pick up their worldly knowledge? Not from personal experience, for they are always immaculate as the driven snow. Presumably it is all intuition.

In this story also are enunciated for the first time those two great aphorisms of detective science: first, that when you have eliminated all the impossibilities, then, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth; and, secondly, that the more outré a case may appear, the easier it is to solve. Indeed, taken all round, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" constitutes in itself almost a complete manual of detective theory and practice

The Purloined Letter

the method of psycho trick is the forerunner of the diamond concealed in the tumbler of water, the man murdered in the midst of a battle, Chesterton's "Invisible Man" (the postman, so familiar a figure that his presence goes unnoticed) and a whole line of similar ingenuities.

The *Mystery of Marie Rôget*

It consists entirely of a series of newspaper cuttings relative to the disappearance and murder of a shopgirl, with Dupin's comments thereon. The story contains no solution of the problem, and, indeed, no formal ending—and that for a very good reason. The disappearance was a genuine one, its actual heroine being one *Mary Cecilia Rogers*, and the actual place *New York*.

THE MOONSTONE

Taking everything into consideration, The Moonstone is probably the very finest detective story ever written. By comparison with its wide scope, its dove-tailed completeness and the marvellous variety and soundness of its characterisation, modern mystery fiction looks thin and mechanical. Nothing human is perfect, but The Moonstone comes about as near perfection as anything of its kind can be.

SHERLOCK HOLMES' INFLUENCE

A Study in Scarlet (1887)

FAIR PLAY

For many years, the newness of the genre and the immense prestige of Holmes blinded readers' eyes to these feats of legerdemain. Gradually, however, as the bedazzlement wore off, the public became more and more exacting. The uncritical are still catered for by the "thriller," in which nothing is explained, but connoisseurs have come, more and more, to call for a story which puts them on an equal footing with the detective himself, as regards all clues and discoveries

MASKING and SHOWING

How can we at the same time show the reader everything and yet legitimately obfuscate him as to its meaning?

Various devices are used to get over the difficulty

SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE

WRONG OBSERVATIONS or DEDUCTIONS

You will be none the wiser, unless you happen to have an intimate acquaintance with the fauna of local ponds; the effect of belladonna on rabbits; the physical and chemical properties of blood; optics; tropical diseases; metallurgy; hieroglyphics, and a few other trifles. Another method of misleading is to tell the reader what the detective has observed and deduced—but to make the observations and deductions turn out to be incorrect, thus leading up to a carefully manufactured surprise-packet in the last chapter

SHIFTING VIEWPOINTS

Viewpoint No. 1 is what we may call the Watson viewpoint: the detective's external actions only are seen by the reader.

Viewpoint No. 2 is the middle viewpoint; sees, but are not told what he observes.

Viewpoint No. 3 is that of close intimacy with the detective; we see all he sees, and are at once told his conclusions.

Viewpoint No. 4 a true explanation if fully given at the end of the story by a narrator

DETECTIVE FICTION as an ART

In its severest form, the mystery-story is a pure analytical exercise, and, as such, may be a highly finished work of art, within its highly artificial limits.

It possesses an Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle, and end

It does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement. Though it deals with the most desperate effects of rage, jealousy, and revenge, it rarely touches the heights and depths of human passion. It presents us only with the *fait accompli*, and looks upon death and mutilation with a dispassionate eye.

A too violent emotion flung into the glittering mechanism of the detective-story jars the movement by disturbing its delicate balance.

EMOTION and INTELLECT

There is the whole difficulty about allowing real human beings into a detective-story. At some point or other, either their emotions make hay of the detective interest, or the detective interest gets hold of them and makes their emotions look like pasteboard. It is, of course, a fact that we all adopt a detached attitude towards “a good murder” in the newspaper. Like Betteredge in *The Moonstone*, we get “detective fever,” and forget the victim in the fun of tracking the criminal. For this reason, it is better not to pitch the emotional key too high at the start; the inevitable drop is thus made less jarring.

LOVE INTEREST

The instances in which the love-story is an integral part of the plot are extremely rare. One very beautiful example occurs in *The Moonstone*. Here the entire plot hangs on the love of two women for Franklin Blake. Both Rachel Verinder and Rosanna Spearman know that he took the diamond, and the whole mystery arises from their efforts to shield him. Their conduct is, in both cases, completely natural and right, and the characters are so finely conceived as to be entirely convincing

A casual and perfunctory love-story is worse than no love-story at all, and, since the mystery must, by hypothesis, take the first place, the love is better left out.

WHODUNIT?

In early mystery fiction, the problem tends to be, who did the crime? At first, while readers were still unsophisticated, the formula of the Most Unlikely Person had a good run. But the reader soon learned to see through this.

the real criminal must be suspected at least once in the course of the story

THE MOST UNLIKELY PERSON

UNEXPECTED MEANS

Here is a brief selection of handy short cuts to the grave: Poisoned tooth-stoppings; licking poisoned stamps; shaving brushes inoculated with dread diseases; poisoned boiled eggs (a bright thought); poison-gas; a cat with poisoned claws; poisoned mattresses; knives dropped through the ceiling; stabbing with a sharp icicle; electrocution by telephone; biting by plague-rats and typhoid-carrying lice; boiling lead in the ears (much more effective than cursed hebenon in a vial); air-bubbles injected into the arteries; explosion of a gigantic “Prince Rupert’s drop”; frightening to death; hanging head-down-wards; freezing to atoms in liquid air; hypodermic injections shot from air-guns; exposure, while insensible, to extreme cold; guns concealed in cameras; a thermometer which explodes a bomb when the temperature of the room reaches a certain height; and so forth

TRENDS

John G. Cawelti, "Canonization, Modern Literature and the Detective Story" in

Delamater, Jerome, Ruth Prigozy, and Hofstra University, eds.
Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction. Contributions to the Study of Popular Culture, no. 62. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997.

Towards ethnic and gender diversity

Anglo-American bourgeois /WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant)

(Misogyny)



Plebeian/Hard-boiled



Feminist Hard-boiled (Sarah Paretsky; Sue Grafton)



Black Latino



Gay/Lesbian

The QUEST for TRUTH

RATIONAL EXPLANATION

ABSOLUTE SKEPTICISM

Deductive logic

Psychological analysis

TOTALITARIAN OPPOSITION to D.F.

Nazi Germany and Stalin both
ban detective fiction as a
product of bourgeois
individualistic ideology

METONYMY and SECRECY

- an aesthetics of masking and unmasking
- Mystification and demystification
- CONSPIRACY THEORIES
- PARODIC ELEMENTS
- IDEAL IMAGO

A question of MOTIVES

Detective fiction enhances our sensitivity to the complex tangle of motives and motivations that affect the actions of humans and human agencies.

Detection trains us to mistrust simplistic explanations/accounts of human events and to avoid scapegoating