

Detective Fiction: A few theories

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).

Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction

J.Delamater and R.Prigozy

Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1997.

In the first essay, John G. Cawelti traces the history and development of the detective story as it relates to the "canon" of English and American literature.

He explores the new directions literary criticism has taken in the past decade and indicates the extent to which the detective story plot has served as a repository of important social and cultural attitudes. His essay both describes the past and points to the future of the genre.

The rise of the detective novel closely parallels the development of police forces as we know them and the reliance on scientific techniques that we deem basic to modern life.

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REPOSITORY

Detective fiction as the REPOSITORY of
important social and cultural attitudes

(CLASS GENDER RACE RELIGION)

ENDURING MOTIVES

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

Psychological interpretation

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

Detective as IDEAL IMAGO

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.

SECRECY

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

PARODY (not just a form of ridicule)

"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.

DETECTIVE FICTION and “THE CANON”

*Canonization, Modern Literature,
and the Detective Story*

John G. Cawelti

CONSERVATISM and SUBVERSION

Rationality and Decadence (Opium)

HARD-BOILED DETECTIVES (US, 1920s)

—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.

The hard-boiled story was initially dominated by male writers and had a distinctively antifeminist and even misogynistic animus, though, aside from this rampant sexism, the hard boiled story had a socially liberal and even, in some ways, radical ethos

→ But that has changed

See Sarah Paretsky and Sue Grafton

Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski is not only an archfeminist but also of mixed Italian and Polish parentage, so that she represents ethnic minorities as well; indeed, Warshawski is the kind of character who was typically either villain or victim in the traditional hard-boiled story

Warshawski is tough; she runs, does judo, and is able to handle herself in a fight. She bitterly resents the attempts of various men to seduce her

a genre more open to women

Because considered a form of “light” entertainment

WOMEN WRITERS of DETECTIVE FICTION

women had an influence on the development of the detective story much greater than they had in any other literary genre except the romance. One of the first successful detective novelists was the American Anna Catherine Green, while the best-selling detective story writer of all time is Agatha Christie.

Writers like Christie, Margery Allingham, Dorothy Sayers, Patricia Highsmith, Ngaio Marsh, and Josephine Tey were certainly as important in the so-called golden age of the detective story as their male counterparts

BLACK and WHITE

the detective story has provided a frame for the exploration of black and white partnerships within the important Hollywood tradition of the "buddy" movie.

BLACK and WHITE

full-fledged black-white detective teams
Beverly Hills Cop (Eddie Murphy)

Ethnic or religious detectives

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)

Lesbian or Male Homosexual detectives

Katherine Forrest (1980s)

Dave Brandstetter by Joseph Hansen

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 DETECTIVES

women detectives from Chicago

Cajun detectives from New Orleans

Catholic detectives from Detroit

A serious form of literature

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.