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978-1-107-62221-0 - Reader's Guides: Third Series: Detective Fiction

Compiled and Introduced by W. B. Stevenson

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

As to old women and the majority of newspaper readers, they are pleased with anything as long as it is bloody enough. But the mind of sensibility requires something more.

—Thomas de Quincey

DETECTIVE FICTION has undergone considerable changes since the last NBL Reader's Guide on the subject was published in 1949. New writers have appeared, many of the older practitioners have ceased writing, many hundreds of novels have gone out of print: above all the novel of detection has changed in form in much the same way as contemporary fiction. There has been little diminution in the number of detective stories published. Nearly five hundred of them appear annually in Britain and America, and this total does not include paperback reprints. Although detective fiction continues to be neglected by the literary historians, it cannot be long before they take into account a form that has been popular for over a hundred years. Criticism of the detective story is taken a good deal more seriously than it was ten years ago, for few literary weeklies are without their column of reviews of new publications, while Francis Iles and Anthony Richardson in England, with Anthony Boucher and James Sandoe in America, bring to their criticisms standards as high as those held by their fellow reviewers of 'pure' literature. This guide sets out to indicate some trends in modern detective fiction, while pointing out some of the milestones on the road it has travelled.

The publication in English of *DEE GOONG AN* and the appearance this year of *THE CHINESE BELL MURDERS* may incline the future historian of detective fiction to credit the

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Chinese with the invention of the form just as they have been credited with the invention of paper and explosives. Certainly these six eighteenth-century cases of Judge Dee have many of the characteristics of the modern detective story—the mysteries, the falsely accused persons, and the solutions arrived at by piecing clues together. It is equally certain that many such stories were in popular circulation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China. It would be less pedantic, however, to date the detective story from 1841, for in an issue of *Graham's Magazine* for that year appeared Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'. Auguste Dupin, with his learning and eccentricities, his intuition and his 'peculiar analytic ability', is the father of the modern amateur detective. His successors were Sherlock Holmes and Philo Vance, Lord Peter Wimsey and Gervase Fen. The line of amateurs is dying out: the professionals and private investigators are taking their place.

The history of detective fiction, however, cannot be dealt with in this short introduction. The reader is referred to Howard Haycraft's well documented *MURDER FOR PLEASURE* which remains the most comprehensive history available. It can be supplemented by some of the books noted at the end of this list.

The continued popularity of detective fiction, the novel of crime and violence, in a world where violence is an everyday occurrence, must give rise to some speculation. Is the detective story merely a means of escape, a substitute for the fairy story 'the folk-myth of the twentieth century' as C. Day Lewis suggests? Or is it, as Bertrand Russell writes 'an outlet for satisfying harmlessly the instincts we inherit from long generations of savages'? It is a fact that all kinds of people read detective stories—the don, the doctor, the clergyman, the technician and the scientist. Some of them read for relaxation, some for the thrill of the chase, others

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for the puzzle element: but all, surely, read them for the satisfaction of the deep seated instinct that right and wrong *do* exist, and that retribution certainly follows crime. The plots of detective stories are generally intricate, and this in itself is an additional satisfaction to readers weary of novels full of introspection and almost without plot.

What then constitutes the detective story? It must, first of all be logical and true to life, and it must keep to certain rules. The rules have been set down once and for all by Ronald Knox in his essay, 'Detective Decalogue'. The writer must be fair to the reader and the criminal must be introduced early in the book. All the detective's clues must be revealed, and as far as possible, his conclusions from them. The detective must not be the criminal. There must be no supernatural agencies introduced into the story, and no poisons unknown to science. There are prohibitions regarding twin brothers and sisters and too many secret passages. The rules are not hard and fast ones, and many eminent writers have broken one of them with telling effect. Agatha Christie's *THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD* reveals the narrator as the criminal—but how satisfying and logical the story is! Even Sherlock Holmes concealed evidence and produced it triumphantly at the conclusion of the case. But few good writers break more than one rule at a time. It is possible, however, to 'invert' the story and reveal the criminal at once, as did Francis Iles in *MALICE AFORETHOUGHT* or R. Austin Freeman in *MR. POTTERMACK'S OVERSIGHT*. The pattern of hunter and hunted is capable of a great deal of variation in the hands of a good craftsman. The rules, however, do exclude the shocker with its improbabilities, its heroes made of steel and rubber, its mysterious Chinese and its secret passages.

The 'thriller' is more difficult to define. Probably Dorothy Sayers's dictum is best: that in the thriller the reader asks

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‘What happens next?’, in the detective story ‘What happened first?’. Thus the tale of pursuit or suspense (the form taken by so many modern novels) comes within the ambit of detective fiction, for we are generally asking ‘why?’. The spy story, however, can generally be classed as a thriller. The definition is not, and cannot be an exact one: for there will always be ‘borderline’ stories such as Graham Greene’s *MINISTRY OF FEAR* or Michael Innes’s *THE JOURNEYING BOY*.

During the last ten years, detective fiction has gradually changed in form and content. The long and slow-paced puzzle story, dependent on alibis and timetables, has almost disappeared. The ingenious methods of murder have run through most of their permutations. The large house-party with its press of suspects is a thing of the past, and writers have had to strain their ingenuity to bring all their suspects together long enough for a crime to be committed. The ‘butler did it’ formula is finished, because there are few butlers left. In fact, detective fiction is becoming more realistic, and detectives instead of being changeless and seemingly immortal figures, are growing old and moving with the times. Raymond Chandler’s scathing criticism of ‘murder in an English rose-garden’ may have had some effect, and the characters in the detective novel live in a modern, workaday world. As Miss Kay Dick has said ‘Few detectives have time to sit down and think nowadays’.

One cannot doubt that this realism has come about through the impact of American fiction. In the stories of Hammett, Chandler and Macdonald action is the keynote and the narrative, written in a muscular prose, moves swiftly to a conclusion. Everything is seen through the eyes of the detective and the *denouements*, though surprising are always logical. The best of them as Gilbert Highet says ‘come from the whole effort of the reader and the author working together’.

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The imitators of the method are legion, and the formula rarely survives transportation across the Atlantic. But in their more sober British way, a similar realism is the foundation of the police stories of 'J. J. Marric' and Maurice Proctor, and the novels of John Trench.

A further change has come about. The cosy and talkative novel, with long stretches of conversation over the teacups, is being replaced by the tale of terror or pursuit. The study of criminal psychology has brought about a new attitude, and the 'had I but known' story is almost a thing of the past. The most eminent practitioner in this new type of novel is Margaret Millar, whose *A BEAST IN VIEW* combines detection and terror in a virtuoso manner. John Bingham in his *FIVE ROUNDABOUTS TO HEAVEN* provides an equally convincing British study in the psychology of crime.

The list of authors that follows is an attempt at providing a basic list of writers of detective fiction. The first section of the list, *THE OLD MASTERS*, is a reminder of the pioneers of the form and authors of the present century who have ceased writing, but whose books are still satisfying. A number of writers mentioned in the previous Guide have been omitted, chiefly because so many of their books are out of print and difficult to obtain. The second part, *THE MODERNS*, includes those authors writing today from whom the reader may expect certain standards of logic, literacy, good plotting and characterisation. Their names have been chosen to exhibit the variety, freshness and vitality of modern detection. The list may seem to be a small one: it is a selection from possibly four hundred who have some claim to inclusion, and represents a choice made after much reading and consultation of authoritative criticism. The choice of individual books is the compiler's. It has not been possible to include in the limited space available more than a few authors who have only one or two outstanding books to

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their credit, or those who have published little during the last ten years. Such are Helen Eustis who has not provided us with a successor to her brilliant *THE HORIZONTAL MAN*, and Glyn Daniel, who writing as 'Dilwyn Rees' has not followed up *THE CAMBRIDGE MURDERS* and *WELCOME DEATH*. In the second category are Anthony Boucher, H. C. Branson, Dorothy Hughes and Percival Wilde. Only the outstanding Continental detective—Simenon—appears in the list. One can note such single books as Catherine Arley's cynical *WOMAN OF STRAW* or the cold-blooded and ferocious *THE LAW OF THE STREETS* of Auguste le Breton. Also worth recording are the macabre tales of Boileau and Narcejac, or that curious Swiss incursion into crime, Friedrich Durrenmatt's *THE JUDGE AND HIS HANGMAN*. There are also crime writers in Germany, Japan and Mexico, but none of them are available in book form in Britain, though the curious may search for them in the pages of *ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE*.

Much detective fiction is written pseudonymously, many authors using two or three pen names, writing a different type of story under each. The Gardner-Fair alternate is now well known, but others may not be, and it is of interest to note such dual personalities as Crispin-Montgomery and Innes-Stewart, one a musician, the other a Shakespearean critic. All known pseudonyms have, therefore, been noted. The compiler has made much use of the writings of Howard Haycraft and Frederic Dannay. More personal acknowledgement is made to James Sandoe for his all-embracing knowledge of the American scene and his support and enthusiasm; and to Helene Zaiman for her notes on many years reading of detective fiction.

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MENTIONED IN THE INTRODUCTION

- Arley, Catherine. *WOMAN OF STRAW*. Collins 1957, 12s6d.
- Bingham, J. *FIVE ROUNDABOUTS TO HEAVEN*. Gollancz 1953, 4s6d.
- Christie, Agatha. *THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD*. Collins 1926, 6s (*Fontana*), 2s6d.
- Daniel, Glyn. *WELCOME DEATH*. Gollancz 1954, 10s6d.
- Van Gulick, R. A., trans. *DEE GOONG AN: three murder cases solved by Judge Dee*. Kegan Paul (*Oriental Department*) 1949.
- Van Gulick, R. A., trans. *THE CHINESE BELL MURDERS*. M. Joseph 1958, 13s6d.
- Durrenmatt, F. *THE JUDGE AND HIS HANGMAN*. Jenkins 1954, 5s.
- Eustis, H. *THE HORIZONTAL MAN*. Hamilton 1947.
- Freeman, R. Austin. *MR. POTTERMACK'S OVERSIGHT*. Hodder & Stoughton 1930.
- Greene, Graham. *MINISTRY OF FEAR*. Heinemann 1943, 8s6d.
- Haycraft, H. *MURDER FOR PLEASURE*. Davies 1942, 15s.
- Iles, F. *MALICE AFORETHOUGHT*. Gollancz 1931, 8s6d. *Pan*, 2s.
- Innes, Michael. *THE JOURNEYING BOY*. Gollancz 1949, 6s.
- Le Breton, A. *THE LAW OF THE STREETS*. Collins 1957, 10s6d.
- Millar, Margaret. *A BEAST IN VIEW*. Gollancz 1955, 10s6d.
- Rees, Dilwyn (Glyn Daniel). *THE CAMBRIDGE MURDERS*. Gollancz 1948; Penguin, 2s6d.

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Reading List

All publishers are London firms except where otherwise stated. Dates of original publication are given; copies now available are in many cases later reprints. Prices (net and subject to alteration) are those prevailing in February 1958 and are given only where a book is known to be available new as this list goes to press.

THE OLD MASTERS

Bailey, H. C. **THE BISHOP'S CRIME**. *Gollancz* 1940.

Reginald Fortune, M.D., first appeared in **CALL MR. FORTUNE** (*Methuen* 1919), and Josiah Clunk in **LITTLE CAPTAIN** (*Gollancz* 1941; published in U.S.A as **ORPHAN ANN**).

Bentley, E. C. **TRENT'S LAST CASE**. *Nelson* 1913; new edn. 5s.; *Dent* 7s6d; *Penguin* 2s6d.

Philip Trent, connoisseur, is one of the earliest and most likeable of amateur detectives.

Berkeley, Anthony (Anthony Berkeley Cox). **TRIAL AND ERROR**. *Penguin* 1937, 2s6d.

A sound series of books, with Roger Sheringham as detective. The 'inverted' stories such as **MALICE AFORETHOUGHT** (*Gollancz* 1931, 8s6d; *Pan* 2s.) written under the name of Francis Iles are the best of their kind.

Bramah, Ernest (Ernest Bramah Smith). **MAX CARRADOS MYSTERIES**. *Hodder* 1927.

Bramah's blind detective worked by intuition and logical deduction, the stories have ingenuity and sound writing.

Brock, Lynn (Allister McAllister). **THE STOAT**. *Collins* 1940.

Slow-moving and absorbing; worthy of revival.

Chesterton, G. K. **THE FATHER BROWN STORIES**. *Cassell* 1947, 21s. **FATHER BROWN SELECTED STORIES**. *O.U.P.* (*World's Classics*) 1954, 6s.

Paradoxical, unexpected and original, these stories of the lovable priest rank as classics.

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Connington, J. J. (Alfred Walter Stewart). DEATH AT SWAYTHLING COURT. *Benn* 1926, 4s6d.

Sir Clinton Driffield, Chief Constable and breaker of ingenious alibis, is the detective.

Crofts, Freeman W. SIR JOHN MAGILL'S LAST JOURNEY *Penguin* 1930.

Trains and timetables figure prominently in his complicated puzzle stories. THE CASK (*Collins* 1920) remains a landmark.

Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. SHERLOCK HOLMES COMPLETE SHORT STORIES; COMPLETE LONG STORIES. *Murray* 1928, 1929, each 18s. SELECTED STORIES. *O.U.P. (World's Classics)* 1951, 7s.

'More than a book—he is the spirit of a town and a time' (Hector Bolitho).

Collins, Wilkie. THE MOONSTONE *Tinsley* 1868; *Dent (Everyman)* 1957, 8s6d.; *Penguin* 3s6d.; *Collins (Classics)* 5s6d.; *O.U.P. (World's Classics)* 6s.

'The first, the longest and the best of English detective stories' (T. S. Eliot).

Freeman, R. Austin. THE DOCTOR THORNDYKE OMNIBUS. *Hodder* 1929, 18s.

John Thorndyke, K.C. was the foremost of scientific detectives, appearing first in THE RED THUMB MARK (1911). The 'inverted' stories such as MR. POTTERMACK'S OVERSIGHT (1930) should not be forgotten.

Gaboriau, Emile. THE WIDOW LEROUGE (1866), *Vizetelly* 1885.

The pioneer among French writers, with M. Lecoq his most famous detective.

Green, Anna Katherine. THE LEAVENWORTH CASE. *Putnam* 1878.

The first American detective novel.

Hammett, Dashiell. THE DASHIELL HAMMETT OMNIBUS. *Cassell* 1952, 21s.

'Every character is trying to deceive all the others . . . the truth slowly becomes visible through the haze of deception' (André Gide). This volume includes Hammett's masterpieces THE MALTESE FALCON (1930) and THE GLASS KEY (1931).

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Knox, Ronald A. FOOTSTEPS AT THE LOCK. *Methuen* 1928, 6s.
Miles Bredon, insurance investigator, appears in six excellent stories. This is the only one now in print.

McGuire, Paul. THE SPANISH STEPS. *Heinemann* 1940.
A much neglected writer worthy of revival.

Mason, A. E. W. INSPECTOR HANAUD INVESTIGATES. *Hodder* 1931, 21s.
AT THE VILLA ROSE (1912) and other cases of Inspector Hanaud, are among the best of their time.

Morrison, Arthur. MARTIN HEWITT, INVESTIGATOR. *Ward Lock* 1894.
Although fifty years old, many of these pioneer stories retain their charm.

Poe, Edgar Allan. TALES OF MYSTERY AND IMAGINATION *Dent (Everyman)* 1908, 7s.
Auguste Dupin, the most original of all private investigators, first appeared in 1841. Poe remains the first great master of the detective short story.

Post, Melville Davison. UNCLE ABNER. *Appleton, N.Y.* 1918.
Long out of print, these early stories have reappeared in ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (*Mellifont Press*).

Sayers, Dorothy L. THE NINE TAILORS. *Gollancz* 1934.
Scrupulous writing and authentic backgrounds are the foundations for the Lord Peter Wimsey stories, of which the above is the finest.

Van Dine, S. S. (Willard Huntingdon Wright). THE BISHOP MURDER CASE. *Benn* 1929.
Philo Vance, the man about town, figures in many complicated cases. The above and THE GREENE MURDER CASE (1927) are free from the authors later mannerisms.

THE MODERNS

Allingham, Margery (Mrs. Philip Youngman Carter). FLOWERS FOR THE JUDGE. *Heinemann* 1946, 8s6d.; *Penguin* 2s6d.
Good writing, fairness to the reader, and a delightful sense of humour make Miss Allingham's tales of Albert Campion outstanding.