



History/Mystery: Regionalism and Ethnicity in the American Detective Novel

Guide for Curriculum Unit 82.01.03
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This unit is designed to acquaint students with the pleasures of reading worthwhile mystery novels, and while so doing, have them recognize the mystery as a legitimate literary genre based on established conventions. The unit suggests a brief review of major events in American history in order to enable the class to discern the correlation between these events and the themes and the characters depicted in the novels read. The students will be invited to recognize parallels in their own lives and in other aspects of contemporary life that may have resulted from some of these events. Four novels have been selected for class reading, all by American authors and all set in distinct regions of the United States. They feature sleuths and other characters identified with four specific ethnic groups, and all have plots centered around elements intrinsic to the region or the ethnic group involved. The novels featured in the unit include:

“Last Seen Wearing” (Hillary Waugh) Straightforward depiction of how a good police team solves the murder of a college student, excellent portrayal of the New England college town and of the town-gown relationships.

“In the Heat of the Night” (John Ball) Set in a hot Southern town before desegregation, the plot involves a black detective in a chance encounter with the solving of a murder amidst racial and professional tensions.

“Angle of Attack” (Rex Burns) A Chicano detective in Denver solves the murder of a teenager in a city suffering from the stresses of tensions among various ethnic groups and of urban upheaval.

“The Dark Wind” (Tony Hillerman) A Navajo Tribal detective solves several overlapping mysteries that occurred when the peoples of the reservations came in conflict with the ways of the white world and with other rival Indian tribes.

Class activities relating to details of the novels, the types of crime, dangers of stereotyping, the judicial system, and mystery in everyday life are included, along with suggested additional readings in mystery novels and comment and criticism on the genre.

(Recommended for 9th grade English I; Possible co-operative teaching project with Urban Studies course; and 10th, 11th, and 12th grades English II, III, IV)

Key Words

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