



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1982 Volume I: Society and the Detective Novel

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## Introduction

Increasingly detective and mystery fiction is receiving close attention from literary critics, historians, and secondary school teachers who wish to help their students learn how to think clearly from evidence. Historians have long known that they are, in effect, detectives and that the processes of reasoning they apply to the evidence they gather are similar to the processes set out in the best mystery novels. Teachers and students of literature have also long understood that good detective fiction may exemplify in apparently simple (though in truth, often quite complex) ways the traditional elements of good fiction: strong plot line, narrative sweep, well-integrated descriptive detail, and clearly-heard dialogue. More recently teachers have also come to see that popular culture—film, science fiction, even the comic strip—not only reveal much about society but may also be used effectively in teaching. The seminar to which the following contributions were made was an exploration of these assumptions.

Because of my own conviction that society's fears are best revealed through trends in detective, mystery, and spy fiction, the seminar was called "Society and the Detective Novel." It proceeded through several specific opportunities that arise in detective fiction, and in twelve meetings the seminar Fellows demonstrated a variety of ways in which such fiction could be used in the classroom. Some twenty-four books were explored, both to show the varieties of the fiction and ways in which it might be taught. At three of the meetings we were fortunate enough to have the authors of the books being discussed present in the classroom, so that one could ask them why they chose to deal with specific problems in specific ways.

The seminar was organized around the following subjects:

Can detective fiction be "great literature" and what, in fact, does society mean by "great literature"? Virtually all the Fellows agreed that while much trash may be found in popular literature, much that is very fine is overlooked because of the labels applied by society: Geoffrey Household's *Dance of the Dwarfs*, for example, which was the initial book read, was found to be fully as significant as the major novels of the Victorian period which are so readily revered.

Into what categories ought one best divide this type of literature, in order to study it more closely? We ultimately concluded that the traditional "clue-laden" mystery novel, at which English authors are particularly strong, was perhaps best for teaching students attention to detail; that an American "police procedural" might well be the best open door into an understanding of what troubles society most at any given time; that a well-written spy thriller set in an attractive landscape best exemplified narration (and might also teach something of value about descriptive nature writing); and that the American "hard-boiled private eye" novel was, most probably, best for exploring modern speech through dialogue. Examples of books read, for this and all the questions explored, are given in the seminar syllabus at the end of this introduction.

Aware that students today are in search of their identity, we explored this question in two meetings, one devoted to ethnicity and one to sexuality. Novels dealing with a Black detective in the American South, or a Navajo Tribal policeman in the Southwest, helped show how environments also contribute to the definition of both crime and appropriate punishment. A fine novel by an English writer, P.D. James (who is Phyllis white), *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, helped us to explore how society defines sexual roles.

We asked whether this type of fiction can help a student understand a quite different culture, and in using James McClure's *The Steam Pig* examined a subject (*apartheid* in South Africa) that would most likely be too difficult or too distant for most students if approached directly through social science. Novels set in England, Eastern Europe, France, Sweden, Canada, and of course the United States helped us explore how a good book can convey a sense of place, so that students might learn how to see rather than merely to look at their own environment.

We then turned to classically constructed examples of the types of fiction within the *genre*: A closely-plotted mystery set on a New England college campus, in which students are invited to reason on the basis of evidence both seen and implied; an English pre-World War II spy thriller which conveyed the sense of dread associated with post-Munich international developments; a novel based on thinly-veiled actual events. This offered an opportunity to explore the ways in which such fiction mirrors the headlines.

Two sub-themes were persistently developed as we moved through the seminar: whether translating—literally, from French into English or Swedish into English; or figuratively, as from English English to American English or from a criminal or generational argot into standard American English—produces special problems, and what those problems reveal both about society and about how we as teachers habitually use words. We also, of course, persistently asked, What is a good story? Can this book, as opposed to that book, be used in the classroom? If a particular book cannot be used in the classroom, what does this conclusion tell us about our schools and our society?

In the end we came to two questions central to our society, to young people in our society, and to history and literature. What is a “hero”? Do heroes differ from time to time or culture to culture? To what kind of person does a junior or high school reader best relate? And how, through these figures, is a concept of justice (surely one of the most complex of abstractions) conveyed? Civics course teach *about* justice; truly able detective fiction will *demonstrate* justice in all its ambiguities. Thus, setting aside two final books read because they draw together a number of elements which might be summed up simply as “pleasure,” we concluded with one classic and one modern examination of justice, Dorothy Sayer's *The Nine Tailors* and Rex Burns' *Angle of Attack*. The one, written by a Dante scholar, the other by a professor of English, one English and one American, stood as summaries of the seminar.

Finally, as each Fellow prepared the units that follow, which deal with all these subjects and more, we asked ourselves which books were the best as teaching tools in the classroom. From the syllabus that follows, the books selected for introduction into history or literature courses by most of the members of the seminar were John Ball's *In the Heat of the Night*, P.D. James's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, Hillary Waugh's *Last Seen Wearing*, and Robert Parker's *Mortal Stakes*. There is no teacher and no student who would not be the better for having read any or all of these books.

Robin W. Winks

## SOCIETY AND THE DETECTIVE NOVEL

March 22, Organization		
April 20, Definitions	Geoffrey Household, Dance of the Dwarfs	Robin W. Winks, Modus Operandi
May 11, Categorization	Agatha Christie, Murder of Roger Ackroyd	John Buchan, The Thirty-Nine Steps Raymond Chandler, The Big Sleep or The Little Sister Ed McBain, Killer's Choice
May 18, Ethnicity	John Ball, In the Heat of the Night	Tony Hillerman, The Dark Wind
May 25, Sexuality and Identity	P.D. James, An Unsuitable Job for a Woman Joseph Hansen, Gravedigger	
June 1, In a Foreign Land?	James McClure, The Steam Pig	Robert Littell, The Debriefing
June 8, Detection and Discovery	Hillary Waugh, Last Seen Wearing . . . (Mr. Waugh will be a guest of the class and reception to follow.)	
June 15, The Spy Novel	Eric Ambler, Journey into Fear or	Gavin Lyall, Midnight Plus one and Ian Adams, S: Portrait of a Spy (Mr. Adams will be a guest of the class.)
June 22, Translating: Words and Cultures	Dorothy L. Sayers; The Nine Tailors Maj Sjowall and Per Wahloo, Roseanna (Lois Roth, translator of Sjowall and Wahloo,	will be a guest of the class.)
June 29, "The Hero"	Adam Hall, Kobra Manifesto or The Tango Briefing	Rex Stout, The Doorbell Rang
July 6, Justice?	Nicholas Blake, The Beast Must Die	Rex Burns, Angle of Attack
July 13, Summations?	Robert Parker, Mortal Stakes	William F. Buckley, Marco Polo, If You Can

Basic bibliography and books for background reading remain as provided on the original syllabus. Out-of-print books may be ordered through Murder, Ink, in New York. The Cross Campus Library has most though not all of the books. Bookhaven and the Yale Co-op will stock those that are in print. Most are in paperback, though Hillerman, Hansen, and Burns are not as yet, and Buckley may only become so in July. The Adams will be advance-of-release copies, and the Stout will be a Larger Type edition, no other being available.

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