



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1989 Volume IV: Detective Fiction: Its Use as Literature and History

Introduction

Once upon a time junior and senior high school students cut their reading teeth on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, on George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens. Not all the students enjoyed these writers, of course, and it is at least arguable that some bright young minds were turned away from reading by being introduced too early to *The Mill on the Floss*. Times have changed, and it's not uncommon for students to have graduated from high school without ever having read one of those books we used to call the classics. Indeed, on bad days one is inclined to believe that the notion of "reading readiness" is damaging to the young, since they ought to know that reading requires tough thought, and always ought to read books they are not, in fact, quite ready for.

Nonetheless, there is the question, how do we get the young to read, especially in competition against television. Some voices of despair go so far as to say they are content if their students are reading anything. Anything at all? The Surgeon General's warning on packets of cigarettes? Cereal boxes? Comic books? Street corner pornography? The *TV Guide*? One presumes this is not what these teachers mean, but rather, that they are prepared to put aside the so called canon, and to encourage their students to read anything that is compelling, interesting, and just a little bit complex.

This is where detective and mystery fiction come in. A steady diet of such fiction is no more good for one than a steady diet of prunes, but in moderation detective fiction may well turn young people away from the repetitive car chases of television detection to the far more sophisticated cerebral processes of Miss Marple, Ellery Queen, or Sherlock Holmes. One must, of course, read such fiction for the right reasons. These reasons include introducing students to clearly written prose, free of the pseudo-profundities of half our syndicated columnists or of the misuse of language so common to the press and television news. (The other day a news broadcaster informed us that a person had been "brutally murdered." One wonders when we will learn of someone being "gently murdered." Oxymoron indeed, in two senses of the term.) Some writers—Tony Hillerman, Dick Francis, P.D. James—write such clean prose, such direct sentences, reading them cannot help but inform students about proper usage of the English language. The notion, heard from the lips of those who do not read mystery novels, that writers produce ungrammatical junk, is the sheerest snobbism.

As a historian, I have used detective fiction as history. First, the novels teach a method of inquiry that often is remarkably close to that of the historian. One has to learn how to ask good questions, and to sense when one has, at last, by stumble or logic, arrived at the right question. One has to know what is a side-track, a red herring, and what will carry an inquiry to its main goal. One has to learn to interrogate, and to distrust, evidence. One has to learn the art of inference. (Neither mystery fiction nor history is based on deduction, a serious misapprehension encouraged by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's use of the term. Both activities are based on

inference.) One has to learn how to relate one's findings to an audience, whether large and essentially anonymous, as the writer of detective fiction knows, or an audience of one when standing before the classroom giving a report. The methodologies of history and of detective fiction are closely related.

More than this, however, for the sense of place so essential to good mystery and detective (and some spy) fiction also conveys the substance of history. Both crime, and specific historical events, take place in a discrete setting, a setting which must be understood if one is to grasp historical causation (or answer either whodunit? or whydunit?) James McClure's mystery novels set in South Africa, revealing how a white Afrikaans policeman works with a black Zulu partner, tell us more about apartheid and the way in which it infects the smallest of daily life than any number of ponderous sociological works of scholarly can do. Tony Hillerman's *The Talking God* makes clear far better than newspaper reports do why Native Americans are angry about the desecration of burial sites. Tom Clancy, though not a stylish writer, manages to intrigue many minds not at all interested in technical matters with the incredibly complex problems of the nuclear age. I would assign any of these writers ahead of any scholarly work I am aware of if these were the questions I was addressing in my history class.

With this view in mind, a seminar was organized for the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, and the following units are the product of that seminar. The members of the seminar teach at different levels, under varying conditions, some to enrichment programs, others to students who have fallen behind. They judge best how to use detective and mystery fiction in the classroom, and each has produced a fascinating unit that reveals much about teaching, and young people, as well as about the adaptability of the literature of mystery.

We all read two books in common for each meeting. A question put to all books was, could this be used in the classroom? which classroom? how? What do we mean when we say, "Is this book any good," was a sub-inquiry throughout, since students' literary criticism often does not extend beyond concluding that they liked or didn't like a book. We discussed how to get students to think about what it is that they like or dislike about a book, a character, a situation, a location. We then moved on to questions specific to each book, about the reasoning employed in it, about what one learns of crime, and police methods, and the attitudes of society toward evolving definitions of anti-social behavior and criminality. We explored books that feature detectives of different ethnic backgrounds, women detectives, foreign detectives operating in unusual environments. From these discussions came many fresh insights applicable to the classroom and heightening of the pleasure of reading such a diverse body of fiction.

There are basically four major types of this fiction, and we explored both classics and quite recent examples of each. There is the classic mystery, clues laid down in the library, associated with the Golden Age of English detective literature, and especially with Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers. There is the American private eye, the hard-boiled dick, a Zane Grey figure who has stepped down from his horse. This school is best exemplified by Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald. There is the police procedural, which shows how a body of men (and increasingly women) go about performing a job: Hilary Waugh and Ed McBain, as well as South Africa's James McClure, opened this window for us. And there is spy and espionage fiction, virtually begun by John Buchan, whom we read, followed by those working in the same tradition. The result was a number of stimulating meetings, much pleasure, and the excellent teaching units that follow.

Robin W. Winks

The Books We Read

Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

Hilary Waugh, *Last Seen Wearing*

Colin Dexter, *Last Bus to Woodstock*

P.D. James, *Shroud for a Nightingale*

Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

Robert B. Parker, *Playmates*

Michael Gilbert, *The Danger Within*

Geoffrey Household, *Watcher in the Shadows*

John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*

Adam Hall, *Tango Briefing*

A.B.Guthrie, *Wild Pitch*

Dick Francis, *High Stakes*

Tony Hillerman, *Dancehall of the Dead*

James McClure, *The Steam Pig*

John Ball, *In the Heat of the Night*

Ed McBain, *Lady Killer*

Rex Burns, *Angle of Attack*

William Campbell Gault, *Don't Cry for Me*

Josephine Tey, *Daughter of Time*

Reginald Hill, *Underworld*

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