



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1995 Volume I: Gender, Race, and Milieu in Detective Fiction

Tough Guys For Tough Guys

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by Edward Fitzpatrick

For the past couple of years, a colleague and I have taught a self-contained eighth grade class of the school's problem kids. Behavior problems, learning problems, emotional problems,—you name it. In spite of these obstacles, the group always seems to turn out well. They respond nicely to the academic structure and discipline of the room, and they come alive intellectually.

I think it is in part because they feel relaxed with us and with each other. They are all tough guys, remember, and by guys I mean, of course, both guys and girls. And they have proven their toughness, year in and year out, battling their way through the public schools. Somehow, however, all of them being together in one room produces an eerie sort of calm. Everybody knows everybody's reputation. There is no need to prove anything. So, after some fits and starts, everybody settles down and things go relatively smoothly.

We do an inordinate amount of reading in the room everything from daily newspapers to bona fide novels. And what we have learned as teachers is that tough guys like to read about tough guys.

Enter detective fiction and the closely-related form called the police procedural, certainly genres that are full of interesting tough guys who operate on both sides of the law. I am counting on the fact that these characters will appeal to students, and it is really my job in teaching the unit to make that happen. Guided by our seminar readings and discussions, I have tried to select books that contain detectives who are solid and stable in an ethical sense. It may not always be clear whose side these tough guys are on, even when they are acting ostensibly on society's behalf as policemen. But they all have an instinctive virtue, a point that I will emphasize to students throughout the unit. What these tough guys think of people and situations, we as readers can trust. We can trust them to know good from bad.

The question of why this is so will lead as I hope to point out in the unit, into a discussion of atmosphere and the nature of locale in the books, and onto the idea of "placeness". Thus "toughness" as embodied by the virtuous tough guy and the idea of "placeness" will be linked to provide the pedagogical themes that tie the unit together.

First a word about "place". Underlying everything about the teaching of literature is the need to create a "fiction addiction" on the part of students—that overwhelming desire to read and the simultaneous arousal of curiosity about the reasons behind this desire. I think that the analysis of this curiosity has been one of the prevailing themes of the seminar. And just as the seminar members became more aware, so students must realize that reading fiction is not just reading about character and plot. This is not what causes us to return

again and again to books. The missing ingredient that readers overlook when discussing the appeal of fiction is “place” or “milieu”—the appeal of being there.

It must be stressed when teaching the unit that when we talk of place we are not talking about tourist bureau exoticism. The place can be anywhere or anyplace. It can be an ugly setting or someplace you really do not like. But the point to make is that fiction is place saturated, and, in fact, our consciousness is place saturated. Books tell us at every turn how much place matters. Writers like Tony Hillerman and Walter Mosley are always talking about landscape, weather and the urban milieu. We discussed in the seminar how writers use the idea of “place” to remind themselves, their characters and the readers that they are alive. “Atmospherics” was one of the terms I think we used by which writers convey the feeling of being alive. Where we are is where we are alive, hence the importance of place. The special importance of this idea, especially in a genre that features people who take away life, must be pointed out to students. What we have is a genre full of tough guys who murder and maim in the name of good and evil, and in doing so destroy the human spirit of “placeness” and the sense of being alive. It is this link between “toughness” and “placeness” that should help unify things for kids as we read the books.

This unit will be taught over the course of a year. With a self-contained class, we can afford to go at a leisurely pace. The selection of books will focus on the “tough guy” theme, the ingredient of “place” in fiction—and also the importance of serialization in literature, which is another secret behind the inducement to read. Every time we surprise the kids with a good book in class, or a good film that they have never seen, they ask about the sequel. As pointed out in the seminar, there is a real pedagogical importance involved in working with serials when teaching kids, and adults for that matter. In detective fiction there is tremendous comfort and anticipation involved in working with and meeting the same detective in a series. The concept of a series and the combination of good setting and good character within it can lead students into that “fiction addiction” we’re looking for.

Another angle of attack in trying to establish the idea of “place” in fiction for kids might be to investigate the idea of a non-place, or no place. We briefly mentioned in the seminar the “Mad Max” films with Mel Gibson, and the post-holocaust landscape he rumbles through. That backdrop is in stark contrast to his “Lethal Weapon” series and the eye-popping LA. scene. Robert Parker’s place in his book Double Deuce from the Spenser detective series, is certainly a place where you do not want to be. But this points to the fact that a no-place or anti-place is gripping in itself and shows that it is “placeness” and not place that matters.

Walter Mosley is the genuine article in detective fiction writing, and I will very likely begin the unit with his series. Like a great running back in football, Mosley does a lot of things and does them all well. There is sex, violence and strong language in his books, but only in whiffs, brushes and faits accomplis. We witness people leaving scenes and we know very well what happened, but we are spared most of the grisly details. There is a certain elegance to his rough and tumble stories that I think will tantalize students and draw them into the mix.

One of the great features of this series is how subtle Mosley is in his handling of the material. Sure he is writing stories of adventure and romance. But this is also the beginning of a chronicle, the history of a community. Mosley is teaching as he entertains.

We discussed in the seminar how it seems to be Mosley’s intent to write a history of the L.A. community of Watts, maybe right up to the Watts riots. And within this history there are many issues for students to address.

There is an understanding in the series of the role of black soldiers in World War II and the military establishment's fear of empowering them to become killing machines. There is the economic issue of jobs after the war for black men. Certainly there were jobs in places like the defense industry and they paid well. But as Mosley's creation Easy Rawlins puts it: ¹

A job in a factory is an awful lot like working on a plantation in the South. The boss sees all the workers like they're children, and everyone knows how lazy children are. So Benny(the boss) thought he'd teach me a little something about responsibility because he was the boss and I was the child . . .

Specific immigration patterns in the U.S.A. can also be seen at work in Mosley's series. Many in his cast of characters migrated from Houston, Texas to L.A. They were part of the westward migration, the period of expansion in California when people of all colors saw it as a land of broad opportunity. But with migration comes the theme of disillusionment in a place, the idea of someplace not being what you hoped it would be. For Mosley's folks, Houston, the place they escaped from, becomes the place they long for. Houston becomes a pastoral place in their minds—a simpler city with a simpler life style. Easy Rawlins thinks about this over a fifth of vodka and a gallon of grape soda: ²

Looking out of the window is different in Los Angeles than it is in Houston. No matter where you live in a southern city (even a wild and violent place like Fifth Ward, Houston) you see almost everybody you know by just looking out your window. Every day is a parade of relatives and old friends and lovers you once had, and maybe you'd be lovers again one day.

This should strike a chord with students, especially Hispanic kids who come to New Haven from small towns and rural areas in the Caribbean—very different places with a very different sense of place.

Easy Rawlins is unique in Mosley's cast of characters. He is a man who wants to be somebody. He has a firm grounding in his place. He can walk the mean streets of Watts and he can take his lumps, but he draws on the life and vitality of the place. His consciousness is definitely place saturated, and where Easy is, is where he is alive.

Easy is different from the mostly itinerant cast of characters in the series, in that he owns a house. He is a man of property and in Mosley's fictional world property equals independence. Easy loves his house. Just how much is seen when he takes a risky job that forces him to deal with some very rich and very menacing white folks—folks straight out of the "hard-boiled" detective fiction tradition that Mosley draws on. Why does Easy take risk? ³

But that house meant more to me than any woman I ever knew. I loved her and I was jealous of her and if the bank sent the county marshal to take her from me I might have come at him with a rifle rather than to give her up.

The house is a miniature of placeness. It stabilizes Easy in an ethical sense. We can trust him to know good from bad. He has an instinctive virtue and what he thinks of characters we can trust. This is so because he is a person in place. He has a house and he likes the peace that this property brings to him. It is this peace that stems from the possession of property that makes for the overall sense of community, be it in Watts or elsewhere. Unfortunately for Easy, there is always a threat to his peace. In confronting these threats we encounter Easy Rawlins the tough guy. The tough guy who will take away life to preserve his peace and sense of "place".

The subtle handling of material by Walter Mosley can also be seen in the detective series of Tony Hillerman, another author who figures prominently in the unit. Both men spin a great yarn. But there is much more to it than that. Students should understand that both are beginning a chronicle of sorts, a history of a community on the one hand and a modern tale of an ancestral land on the other. Hillerman's chronicle is set in the southwest, in New Mexico in particular, the ancestral land of the Navajo, Hopi and Apache among others. Yet both Mosley and Hillerman write without any of the dryness kids expect from history lessons.

Hillerman's characters are tough guys and he evokes as strong a sense of place as anyone. He does it all a bit differently from Mosley, yet in a way that should keep kids focused on the themes and add variety to the unit. Let's first take a look at the landscape. We talked in the seminar about the beautiful and the sublime and how the latter relates to Hillerman's landscape. Exploring the distinction might be a good starting point for students. There is tourist bureau beauty in landscape that everyone can recognize and enjoy, and there is the sublime. By the sublime in terms of Hillerman's place, I think we mean something that has to be elevated or converted into something of higher worth. You have to be convinced of its appeal, of its attraction as "home". You have to look beyond the feeling that the land is a bit inhuman, that it is a place that lacks the presence of the hand of man. Therein lies the beauty, and I think Hillerman exploits this in his writing.

As New Englanders we live in the midst of a shopping-malled, water-saturated, cozy little world. But Hillerman can transport us. As far away as it is and as unearthly as it is, there is something familiar and gripping about Hillerman's locale—gripping and appealing. Detective fiction for him is not just character and plot. An important ingredient, maybe the most important, is place or milieu, the appeal of being there. Hillerman is always telling us about how much place matters. He is always talking about landscape and weather and remoteness. The atmospherics of his writing are what bring it alive and what breaths life into the characters.

And it is all handled in a subtle fashion. Hillerman, like Mosley, is always instructing as he entertains. We, as readers, are just not always aware of it. There is a balance and harmony in Hillerman's writing that mirror what his Navajo characters strive for in their lives. His mysteries for example tell us more about the plight of Native Americans than any newspaper article or sociological study, yet there is never a fuss made about it.

In his book, *A Thief of Time*, for instance, a speech by a Navajo evangelist named Slick Nakai underlies the dilemma confronting any Navajo who wants to preserve the traditional ways. ⁴

Right up the highway here. . . . you have Huerfano Mesa. We been taught, us Navajos, that that's where First Woman lived, and First Man, and some of the other Holy People, they lived there. An' so when I was a boy, I would go with my uncle and we'd carry a bundle of aghaal up there, and we'd stick those prayer sticks up in a shrine we made up there and we'd chant this prayer . . . But I want you to remember something about Huerfano Mesa. Just close your eyes now and remember how that holy place looked the last time you saw it. Truck road runs up there. It's got radio towers built all over the top of it. Oil companies built them. Whole forest of those antennae all along the top of our holy place.

I plan to use *Skinwalkers* and *A Thief of Time* in this unit, books in which Hillerman brings together his two Navajo tribal policemen, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. The two policemen are completely different in temperament and attitude. It is a stroke of genius to place them side by side where we see each of them through the other's eyes. Leaphorn, the older of the two, is, in some ways, a sleuth in the tradition of Poe's Dupin and Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. He is an archrationalist and has, in a way, turned his back on Navajo beliefs. But he is by no means interested in assimilation, and while he can be tough and absolutely unyielding on issues like bootleggers and witchcraft, he also has his quirks. He takes a benign view, for example, of some

ghastly circumstances in *A Thief of Time*.

Jim Chee, on the other hand, is imbued with a degree of mysticism. Why this is so is never clarified, and it is troubling in a genre like detective fiction where one likes to tie up loose ends. But throughout the series Chee is intent on recovering Navajo folkways and spirituality. This is all well and good for putting one in harmony with the universe. But, given the Navajos' feelings about corpses and ghosts, it makes for some uneasy moments for Jim Chee the cop. Actually, it's a nice touch by the author, as it adds a degree of menace to every death scene involving Chee. In keeping with his inclinations, Chee is the more intuitive of the two policemen. The figure of the intuitive policeman/detective is very much in keeping with the detective fiction tradition, and Chee's training as a Navajo holy man furthur grounds him in the history of the genre. The prototype of the intuitive detective is G.K. Chesterton's, Father Brown, another "man of the cloth," so to speak.

There is a nice paragraph in *A Thief of Time* that catches Leaphorn thinking about Chee, and also gives us some insight into Leaphorn. ⁵

An odd young man, Chee. Smart, apparently. Alert. But slightly. . . . slightly what? Bent? Not exactly. It wasn't just the business of trying to be a good medicine man—a following utterly incongruous with police work. He was a romantic, Leaphorn decided. That was it. A man who followed dreams. The sort who would have joined that Paiute shaman who invented the ghost dance and the vision of the white men withering away and buffalo coming back to the plains. Maybe that wasn't fair. It was more that Chee seemed to think an island of 180,000 Navajo could live the old way in a white ocean. Perhaps 20,000 of them could, if they were happy on mutton, cactus and pinon nuts. Not practical. Navajos had to compete in the real world. The Navajo way didn't teach competition. Far from it.

Another nice thing about teaching Hillerman is that while he is very precise in pointing out cultural, religious and individual differences, he does not make a polemic out of it. The themes are in place in the books and that is that. There is a spirit of generosity about everyone and everything. In an ironic way though, it cripples him a bit as a writer of detective fiction. There are no real bad guys in his books. Everyone seems to have a redeeming quality, or a reason for acting as they do.

The spirit of generosity is certainly missing from Rex Burn's Denver, Colorado detective Gabe Wager. The appeal here for my students is that Wager is a hard nosed Hispanic policeman. He is a Chicano who insists as a matter of cultural pride on referring to himself as a Hispano. By any title he is small, tough and abrasive, a perfect example of the universal middle school student!

Burns is no Walter Mosley or Tony Hillerman, but he does write good stories with high stakes and uncertain outcomes. And presenting Burns along with these two can have its pedagogical rewards. It can be pointed out to students that writers of detective fiction have to consider not only their readers, but also their rivals and predecessors in the field. It has been said by many critics of the genre that the good writer of detective fiction, "competes not only with all the unburied dead but with all the host of the living as well".⁶ The writer has to create a detective character distinct enough to stand out in the crowd of other creations, but someone who still fits into the tradition—someone, that is, who still meets our expectations at least halfway.

Rex Burns has certainly done this and his series fits nicely into the police procedural tradition. Procedurals differ from the detective novel in their heavy reliance on a realistic presentation of police methods. The process is important here. It's all about nuts and bolts and lots of blind alleys and the frustration of detection. It is a genre that, thanks to T.V. and films, is very familiar to students.

During this portion of the unit I will rely heavily on TV by using taped episodes from the likes of “Hill Street Blues” and “N.Y.P.D.” It might even be worth viewing some old “Dragnet” videos, a television series that began in the late 1940’s, not only for their insights into police procedures, but to see how they evoke the flavor of the era—an era with a direct connection to the Mosley series.

In most police procedurals teamwork is a requirement of the form. To emphasize this point we might read something by Ed McBain from his “87th Precinct” series. McBain is certainly the most prolific writer of procedurals and his series about a big city police force features a team of detectives working together on more than one case. I would include McBain if only to introduce students to the character of Detective Meyer Meyer, one of my personal favorites in the history of detective fiction. Meyer is a Jew in a predominantly gentile environment, a fact that presumably gives him a kind of balancing detachment. That it does, in addition to providing a steady stream of unintended levity in the midst of some grisly scenarios .

But some authors of police procedurals eschew the team approach and focus on a single protagonist. Rex Burns does this and I think this approach is more effective in terms of evoking a sense of place and the nature of the job. Detective Gabe Wager is a Chicano in a hostile environment—a kind of Meyer Meyer without the humor. His colleagues on the force don’t like him, the Hispanic community mistrusts him, and the region as a whole does not embrace Hispanic—Americans with open arms. There is still an aura of the wild west surrounding Denver, Colorado, including the racial contempt of that era. Wager’s personality is perfect for battling this type of antagonism. He gradually becomes a lone wolf, obsessed with his thoughts and caseload. And we as readers become privy to his musings and longings.

Wager is a man whose job firmly grounds him in place. It’s all he has. On the one hand he detests the bureaucracy—the compromising and the jockeying for power around him—but in the other hand he embraces the details of the job. He savors the lousy coffee, the peeling paint of the precinct walls and the stale odor of a squad car. It is an accumulation of these details and reactions and routines that help establish a sense of place.

In the book *Angle of Attack* , Wager’s longings are for old times and old places. Rex Burns, like Mosley and Hillerman, instructs as he entertains and we are given a primer on urban renewal Denver style. Detective Wager longs for places that are fast disappearing under the developer’s wrecking ball. Each time he cruises the old neighborhood another building or another block is gone, and with it the sense of community and continuity. Even his favorite restaurant “The Frontier”, is destined for destruction. The name of the place is a nice touch by the author, for as it goes so goes the frontier. The books in the series are really about a sense of communal loss of place. Both the good guys and bad guys feel this loss. The real villain here is progress, and the bad guys are the developers behind it. In this series, as in the others, we have the juxta-position of the feeling of being alive that is conveyed by “placeness”, and the presence of tough guys, in place, who take away life. Often the villains were once good guys, corrupted by the material lure of progress. And the good guys, who could be as tough and gritty as the villains, are trying to preserve life and with it the sense of “placeness”. I think it is a message that our kids can understand, living in the areas they do and seeing “progress” on a daily basis, as each new approach to “project” living comes and goes.

This unit was developed for our classroom, to be taught by a colleague and I. Self-contained class. Inter-disciplinary approach. The sophistication of the books might raise a few eyebrows, but isn’t that the point of the Institute? “Galvanizing jaded minds” as was said one day in the seminar.

We will make our way slowly and carefully through the books, sometimes reading out loud and sometimes listening to taped portions. The taping is essential, as it allows students of different levels to listen over and

over to key portions and therefore increase their comprehension. And the reading aloud is essential, as it can heighten the dramatic effect of passages and incidents.

Most of the material in the unit was covered in the seminar. That's my idea of what the institute is all about. Choose a seminar subject that you are interested in and would like to know more about. Immerse yourself in the readings and seminar discussions. With all this fresh in your mind, return to the classroom and teach it.

The big surprise for me was looking beneath the surface of the mysteries, and grasping the important issues raised by the authors. That's when I began to see the books as lending themselves nicely to an interdisciplinary approach and a year long study of detective fiction.

Lesson 1:

(It is understood that this is not necessarily the first lesson in the unit. It is a lesson that is suggested as useful during the teaching of the unit. The timing is dependent on teacher judgement.)

Objective:

The point is to begin to establish the sense of "placeness". The idea is taken from the Tony Hillerman series where Lt. Joe Leaphorn uses pins in a map, in an effort to establish a pattern and gain understanding of a series of murders. The irony of the situation should not be lost on students, that Leaphorn, an Indian, uses an automobile club map for his purposes.

Materials:

Automobile club map of Connecticut and city maps of New Haven, Hartford, and Bridgeport.

Daily copies of the *New Haven Register* and *Hartford Courant* , and a weekly copy of a local gazette like the *Hamden Chronicle* with a police blotter of local crime.

Method: Place maps on classroom walls. Each day consult the papers for crimes in different locales. Students will place pins in maps indicating crime locations, and will use different colored pins to categorize crimes.

Not only will students read the daily newspaper, but they will develop a sense of "place" by referring to the maps. And as pins accumulate, students can begin to search for patterns.

Lesson 2:

(This is a two part lesson focusing on Tony Hillerman's *Skinwalkers* .)

Objectives:

- A. To introduce the mystery *Skinwalkers*.
- B. To establish the idea of physical place and the sense of "placeness".
- C. To introduce the concept of harmony in Navajo culture.

Materials:

- A. *N.Y. Times* clipping of Navajo Special Olympic basketball team.
- B. CT. Motor Club maps of U.S. and New Mexico.

C. Old *National Geographic* magazines.

D. Photos of Navajo tribal police.

E. Photos of breed of cat known as Manx.

Method:

Ask students if any attended Special Olympics and if any saw or read of the Navajo basketball team. Read the N.Y. Times clipping of the team and let the discussion range. The idea is to bring the Navajos and their place to our place—in a way that will appeal to middle schoolers.

Focus on maps of U.S. and New Mexico and begin to give kids some idea of place and distance. Locate on the New Mexico map some spots mentioned at the outset of *Skinwalkers*—like Shiprock, the San Juan River and the Chuska Mt. Range.

Distribute and let kids peruse postcards, photos, National Geographies and travel magazines devoted to New Mexico.

Introduce the subject of cats, crucial to the book's first chapter, by showing pictures of my own three and then showing a picture of a Manx. This breed of cat is instrumental in saving Jim Chees' life in the first chapter. Compare and contrast to my domestic varieties. The idea is to draw kids in by making it personal. Talk about my three-pawed cat and how she has adapted and gotten herself in harmony with her life.

Lesson 3:

Objective:

Same as previous day.

Materials:

A. Paperback copies of *Skinwalkers* .

B. Taped Books version of the mystery.

Method:

Give a short biographical sketch of the author Tony Hillerman. Emphasize that while he is not a Navajo, his books are so good that they are used in Navajo Schools to teach cultural history.

Since there is an excellent version of *Skinwalkers* on tape, this allows for flexibility in presenting the mystery. In our own room we will combine reading aloud with listening to the taped version.

To introduce the mystery I will read aloud chapter one and the couple of paragraphs in chapter five that describe the cat. Point out that this book is unusual in that Tony Hillerman brings together his two Navajo policemen for the first time in one volume. What is also unusual is that Jim Chee, one of the policemen, appears on the first page. Explain that Hillerman generally waits to introduce his policemen.

During the reading, emphasize the description of the cat, the impression both policemen have of the cat, and Hillerman's description of the physical surroundings. Pay particular attention to the explanation in chapter five of how the cat has achieved harmony with his surroundings.

Some general questions to ask following the reading might be:

- A. What is the dictionary meaning of harmony?
- B. How is the cat described as being in harmony?
- C. Compare and contrast the cat's being in harmony with the idea of a Navajo being in harmony with his surroundings?
- D. Why does Jim Chee feel he is meddling in the affairs of nature? What do you think?

Notes

- 1. Walter Mosley. *Devil In A Blue Dress* . (N.Y.: Pocket Books), C.1990. P.2.
- 2. Walter Mosley. *Devil In A Blue Dress* . (N.Y.: Pocket Books), C.1990, P.49.
- 3. Walter Mosley. *Devil In A Blue Dress* . (N.Y.: Pocket Books), C. 1990, P. 11.
- 4. Tony Hillerman. *A Thief Of Time* . (N.Y.: Harper Paperbacks), C.1990, PP.74-75.
- 5. Tony Hillerman. *A Thief In Time* . (N.Y.: Harper Paperbacks), C.1998, P.227.
- 6. Raymond Chandler. *The Simple Art of Murder* . (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), C.1950, P.77.

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Student Reading List

Burns, Rex. *Angle of Attack*.

Burns, Rex. *Speak For The Dead*.

Hillerman, Tony. *A Thief of Time*.

Hillerman, Tony. *Skinwalkers*.

Mosley, Walter. *A Red Death*.

Mosley, Walter. *Devil In A Blue Dress*.

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