



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

Introduction

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In addition to the categories mentioned in the title of this seminar, the syllabus also featured mystery stories written for children and adolescents. Half the teachers in the seminar wrote units on this material, in each case stressing the advantages of using serialized recreational reading involving a mystery element to teach cross-curricular skills: problem-solving, social studies, reading and writing, interpersonal and ethical judgment. These five units I have arranged first, in alphabetical order, in the table of contents. Next come three units concerned with aspects of “adult” detective fiction—although one of these, Soraya Potter’s, I have made transitional because it adapts a classic text for the use of young children. The last two units concern dramatic aspects of detective literature.

Vanessa Clayton proposes the interesting experiment of teaching the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew to inner-city students. She uses a “classic” Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew to point up contrasts between city life (“in towns much like New Haven”) then and now, and then turns to recent “Casefiles” updates of each series. Gail Hall emphasizes scientific problem-solving in a unit on the Einstein Anderson series including useful comparisons along the way with the better-known Encyclopedia Brown series. Mary-Alice Howley offers serial stories calibrated for first through fifth grade reading levels: Super Snoop Sam Snout, Cam Jansen, Boxcar Children, Baby Sitters Club, Sports Mysteries, and Dinosaur Detective, respectively. Seminar Coordinator Roberta Mazzucco develops a plan for the writing of a mystery story, explaining the relevance of this exercise to every aspect of the curriculum. June Pellegrini offers a unit featuring Nate the Great and Cam Jansen for very young children, with lesson plans making use of the pleasure and suspense of such readings to emphasize fundamental decoding skills.

Soraya Potter takes *The Hound of the Baskervilles* for her central exhibit, using this text as a springboard for lesson plans meant to move impartially among the “multiple intelligences” described in current education theory. Marilyn Gaudioso takes a historical approach to the formative phase of the detective genre, offering an instructive chronology as background for central texts by Poe, Doyle, and Christie. Edward Fitzpatrick’s unit appeals to a classroom of troubled middle school youths by turning to recent variants on the “hard-boiled” mode and stressing ethnic diversity and “the sense of place” in Walter Mosley, Tony Hillerman, and Rex Burns.

Yel Brayton ranges from the classics of the genre (including Poe, Doyle, and Christie) but ranging from the *Oedipus* of Sophocles to contemporary film (*Star Chamber*)—and passing stories by Futrelle, Maugham, and Carter Dickson in review, together with various TV serials—in order to stress the element of judgment, frequently as seen in the drama of the courtroom. And Angelo Pompano, finally, creates a courtroom drama out of Christie’s “Miss Marple Tells a Story,” to be researched, written, produced, and acted by all his students

in cooperation with all the teachers of pertinent subjects—and few are not pertinent —at their grade level.

What’s special about the common topic of these units, it seems to me, is that it needs no rationale. The materials chosen by these teachers teach themselves. Add to that the diligent research and classroom savvy that mark all these units and you have ten sure-fire formulas.

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