



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1999 Volume IV: Detective Fiction: Its Use as Literature and as History

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## Using Detective Fiction To Raise Interest in High School Readers

Curriculum Unit 99.04.09  
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### INTRODUCTION

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Finding the right keys for ninth graders with reading problems can open the door to remediation. Lack of experiences with the world and shallow personal interests often cause the poor reader to push aside appropriate reading materials. In addition, if they are poor readers, they are often handed material that does not spark interest in people their age. The reading level may be appropriate, but the interest level may be too low. As a result, they do not practice reading nor do they experience the enjoyment which reading can bring. One of the major tasks in front of today's urban high school teacher is to provide reading instruction beginning at the independent level of the student, to encourage the expansion of the world of experiences for their students, as well as to increase the skill levels.

The goal of this unit is to increase the world of the students' experience, their interest in reading and, therefore, the number of books read by the students each year. A secondary goal is to identify ways to allow for specific reading instruction, decoding words, building vocabulary recognition and comprehension, finding meanings and inferences, and increasing speed. Teaching reading to teenagers is difficult. Most people assume that everyone knows how to read by the time that they reach high school. However, standardized test scores indicate that a large percentage of today's urban high school students can benefit from what might be considered elementary skill development.

Unfortunately for teachers, we are not in an age when older students enthusiastically accept the traditional novels and reading materials for their reading grade level. They arrive for the Fall semester without having read the required summer selections and without having voluntarily attempted any of the other selections on the distributed summer reading lists. This dilemma launches the ever-present quest for engaging reading materials. Many high school teachers will readily recognize the challenge of identifying the reading interest and appropriate books.

To conduct this unit of study, teachers must create an environment in the classroom where visual displays such as bulletin boards and table libraries encourage the exploration of detective fiction and mysteries. Bulletin boards may have postings about videos, television shows, and web sites that students might use. Students must be surrounded with the written word, good detective stories in books and magazines. A wide selection of disposable reading materials, books and magazines, must be accessible. However, the actual instruction will be concentrated on one book that will be read by the entire group in the second or third

marking period of the year.

This unit is designed for regular English classroom use, although interdisciplinary techniques will complement work in reading. Teachers of the other content areas must be in tune with the fact that the expectation is that students will read, read their text books, as well as assigned references and books and articles of their own choice. In addition, the English teacher must rely on both math and science teachers to reinforce the everyday use of logical thinking skills and the scientific method. The social studies teachers should be encouraged to cooperate by specifically teaching map skills using the locations in the literature or generally referring to historical events and geographic information about locations outside of the City of New Haven.

## **DESCRIPTION OF STUDENTS**

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The Advancement Academy at Hillhouse High School is a name given to a program for students who have been provided with a special opportunity to overcome an obstacle identified in a previous grade. It is a specific program within the larger comprehensive, urban high school. The young people are the targets for system wide drop out prevention interventions. In 1998-99, most of the students placed in this group were new to the school, whether they were ninth graders or upperclassmen. These students moved from class to class. However, unlike their peers, the group of students moved to the same classrooms with a team of teachers selected for their ability to deal with the variety of problems within the classroom. Finding suitable teaching materials and innovative instructional methods posed constant challenges.

A classroom profile for this group includes the following characteristics:

- 20 African American with two or three students of other ethnic groups;
- Mostly male;
- Intensively sensitive to "put downs" and other peer pressures;
- Abnormally self conscious;
- Interested in blood, sex, gore and sports;
- And mildly, or vehemently, distrustful of everyone.

Further, these students are young people with adult interests, low reading abilities, and a general lack of interest in reading and the written word. At first glance, these students might appear far more ordinary than they truly are. As you can see, there are several distinctions from the average or normal urban teen of today. They have missed instruction in academic areas, causing significant problems in terms of their progress toward graduation. They often lack interest in ordinary school activities and classes. Television and video may be the only media that capture their attention. They are usually multi problemmed, in the midst of rather constant family and/or neighborhood turmoil. The young people are unable to identify significant conclusions

in their lives. They feel they are constantly in the middle of several grueling situations. Their attention span is extremely short.

Truancy is a major problem. Seventy five per cent of the class is active with at least one local social service agency. Approximately 50 per cent of the class is involved in the juvenile or adult justice system. In fact, for all of them, their urban setting puts them in frequent contact with local police officers. They express varying degrees of admiration or dislike of "cops". However, the officer of the law is an ever-present figure in their daily lives. They respond well to instruction using literature based on their perception of real life issues, issues or situations that usually involve blood, gore, sex and sports.

## **IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENT INTEREST**

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This school year, I taught a unit on "the unknown" in the Globe Literature Series with this group of students. The purple edition is designed for use in ninth grade basic courses where reading ability is below grade level. Students who are more advanced or on grade level use other editions. The Advancement Academy students became engaged in the subject matter. They were able to read and visualize "Death" in several different ways. They found that the readings gave them a new view of the Loch Ness Monster, poltergeists, and other mysteries. They were able to expand their thinking. And they read with little urging. Even the most immature students involved themselves in the literature and discussions. They seemed to enjoy reaching their own conclusions and relating their own experiences to the mysteries that we explored.

Following this experience and coupling it with their interest in police, it seems that mystery novels, detectives, and spy thrillers will also attract attention. My intent is to construct a unit for ninth grade students with low level reading abilities. I wish to introduce literature which is found in the local bookstores and which students might share with other family members. My goal is to put these children into the main stream so that when they become adults, they are reaching for one of the many mysteries sold in the United States. These will be books everybody reads. In this case, it is hoped that the term, everybody, includes family and friends of the Academy students. Because the world of police and detectives plays such a prominent role in their lives, the one book chosen will involve a police presence.

I anticipate that students will be interested enough to read at least one full book as a class and, then, be encouraged to continue reading independently. This unit is based on the premise that, with the capture of their interest, there will be opportunities to provide reading instruction. In addition, the emphasis on the procedure of the detective relates to the scientific method and critical thinking - both skills needed for obtaining good scores on standardized tests and the completion of high school. Students appear to like mystery, revealing of clues, the unveiling of motive, the discovery of the answer, the closure presented by the solution of a crime. If all of the clues remain true, the completion of this unit of instruction will allow these students to escape from their daily lives into the world of interested readers.

## CREATING TEACHABLE MOMENTS

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It is a skilled teacher who can create a truly academic environment within a comprehensive urban high school. The teacher who uses this unit must become personally excited about detective fiction and mysteries in order to motivate students successfully and to encourage the cooperation of other school personnel.

Students bring such a wide variety of interests to school each day. The traditional use of printed materials competes fiercely with the students' preference for audio and visual media. To date, traditional teachers have struggled to compete with cassette and compact disc players and television. With the advent of the computer and the Internet, the art of discussion is on the decline. Even the most highly educated instructor struggles to create those absolutely necessary teachable moments throughout a school year. Most master teachers will cite only single instances during a week when a majority of students engage in a good lesson. And at best, these moments are unpredictable.

Because reading improvement may be hampered by a teenager's poor self-image, a six-foot tall male who reads at an elementary level will gain confidence among his peers if he can show that he is reading a "regular" adult book. He shines when he can demonstrate how well he can handle some aspect of the story or a discussion on a particular related subject. A lesson that allows him to bring a familiar officer from his neighborhood police sub station to class may give him enough confidence to tackle the printed word in a mystery. Guests from the New Haven Police Department or the Yale Police Force will be invited into the class several times during the progress of the unit. The class might be able to meet this officer at a local bookstore. In doing that, they can take quick look at the section on mysteries, or any book for that matter. It may be interesting to visit the police department forensic laboratory or the medical school to speak about the use of science in detective work. Medical interns can show students how various preserved body parts can be used to identify a murder victim.

It is also assumed that, if students discover the interest and pick up a book or magazine, a reading or classroom teacher, a tutor, a volunteer, or a parent can use the opportunity to teach a missing reading skill. Any one can provide a quick, mini lesson on decoding unknown words or even higher level skills such as increasing speed. In addition, a referral to a reading specialist may be more palatable if a student, particularly a six-foot tall male, can take an adult book to the instructional session. This kind of material is far more palatable than the "kiddie" books that are sometimes offered to low level readers.

Nobody said that learning has to be serious at all times. Sometimes, knowledge can be transmitted in a game. A teacher can use this game aspect to create some welcomed lighter moments in class. A detective story can be considered an intellectual game, with its own set of rules. There is usually a murder. The reader needs to see the clues. Good detective fiction does not allow for tricks. The reader should be able to draw logical conclusions. The detective or the character who acts as the detective must not be the criminal. The game may be simply a logic puzzle that serves as a warm up activity or homework.

## SELECTION OF MATERIALS

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Teachers in schools where the population is mainly African American often select reading materials by African American authors rather automatically. It is assumed that such will be most attractive to the students. There is some question as to the validity of this stance. The point remains debatable. For the purpose of this paper however, that premise is accepted. One of the first thoughts about the criteria for selecting reading material for this unit is that students will react more quickly to materials written by African Americans and portraying contemporary African American characters. It is assumed that black writers will provide literature that is more familiar to the type of urban, African American students for whom this unit is planned. After all, say Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, general editors in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, "Many contemporary African American writers have preserved and drawn on a sense of distinctive African American cosmologies and mythologies." (page 2014) This specific body of literature pays "heed to controversial issues of language and social identity."

I also considered literature to which students and their families would have ready access. Early on, it was decided that the books involved in this unit would be on the shelves at the local library, in downtown bookstores, and, perhaps on the shelves of the personal libraries of family and friends. Therefore in the classroom, I concentrate on a single book that everybody reads. Many people from diverse walks of life can offer their own review of the book.

The setting of the works was also a main consideration. Therefore, a novel set in what appears to be a city in the Northeastern United States, or at least an urban area, will be most appropriate. City life is a most familiar setting for the described youngsters. It is effectively in line with their real world, the neighborhoods of New Haven, and the world of their selections for television viewing. Urban America is their mainstream.

I was most interested in identifying an American policeman or private eye with the capability to become hero material. I thought that, for young people, a vigilante for justice in an urban environment or police procedural idealizing the police force would lend some moral or character instruction. I explored Ed McBain's books on the fictitious 87th precinct. I reviewed snatches of John Ball's books which were the basis for "In the Heat of the Night", an extremely popular television series.

I also searched for a book that has enough blood, gore, and sex to capture the interest of the students. But, it was important to find an author, who did not offer profanity for its shock value only or inappropriate, valueless, and extensive sex scenes or pornography. I wanted a book that would allow my students to become a solver of the crime.

## CHOICE OF WALTER MOSLEY

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Walter Mosley "fits the bill." Since the publication of *Devil in the Blue Dress* in 1990, this author has gained nationwide respect among his peers.

It was Gates and McKay who said, "in the 1990's Walter Mosley's writings extended African American literature into the genre of the hard-boiled mystery... " (page 2019) Walter Mosley's writing represents an attitude not too distant from the Advancement Academy students. He is popular among many Americans. Yet, according

to Gates (page 2594), "Mosely has swiftly entered into the company of contemporary American novelists whose work is expected to last." Gates goes on to describe Mosely's chosen vehicle, a series of mystery novels set in postwar Los Angeles featuring a reluctant black investigator, Easy Rawlins.

From the first chapter of any book within this series, the people and the world presented becomes familiar. The character, Easy Rawlins offers particularly good opportunities for student interest and reading instruction. Over the series of books, this man becomes even more vivid. Rawlins is presented as a human being dealing with both his community and a greater society as he seeks to solve crimes. He "wrestles with his own demons as well as the villains, white and black, whom he encounters in his perambulations around Los Angeles." (Gates and McKay, page 2595) Moreover, he is presented as a real, and sometimes very ordinary, person. It will be helpful to these students to explore Rawlins' battle with his own capacity for violence. He lives in a string of rented apartments and has a family of two adopted children whom he does not share with the white people he works around. As Mosley himself states in an interview with a reporter from the Hartford (CT) Courant, "Anyone who knows my work and has paid any attention to it knows what to expect. They know there is going to be a black man at the center of the story. And he's going to be struggling for identity, for redemption, for some kind of comprehension of who he is in a world which doesn't really care about that." (June 6, 1999, page G7)

Once a reader suspends belief, as I predict most will readily do, the reader becomes Easy Rawlins. One takes on the character. The reader becomes the investigator. Such engagement makes for quick reading of short novels.

Advancement Academy students may recognize Easy Rawlins as a favorite, adventuresome uncle. He lives in the North, but maintains his ties to the South. He cherishes his living quarters, whether it is that little house in Watts or an apartment in another urban neighborhood. These are his homes, not just places to sleep. He cleverly maintains two worlds - home and work. He is gainfully employed in various jobs and frequents the "joints", where everybody knows him, only after the job ends and the pay is earned. His relationships are solid. He thinks about his "Mama" and former girl friends down there, back home where ever that is. Even their names will ring bells with the Academy students. In *Devil*, there is Coretta, the girl friend of a friend; Lips, the sax player in one of the joints; and Junior who protects his mother every night at her after hours joint.

Easy's language lends to this familiarity. Readers can become Easy through Mosley's skillful handling of the American language. His images are well presented and rich, leaving enough room for the reader's imagination to construct a setting and watch the characters function in it. His words trigger the imagination. Because the Easy Rawlins series is written in the first person, the reader hears him think. Like his speeches and dialogue, this novel is written in rather brief, uncomplicated, sentences. His metaphors are vivid. The words are clear and concise, like any detective, but with a tinge of a Southern drawl. Without using undecipherable Ebonics or exaggerated passages of what some consider African American language, the language of Mosely's characters will most likely ring ordinary to the ears of these young people. The conversations are distinctly African American. Some of the phrases are in that code which could be considered the first language of some urban African Americans. However, with a minimal effort, just about everyone can understand the speech of Mosley's characters.

Los Angeles just after World War II is the setting for *Devil in a Blue Dress*. *Devil in a Blue Dress* gained immediate critical and commercial success and made a popular place for Easy Rawlins. This may lead to an understandable criticism that Mosley writes for a particular audience. Whether Los Angeles or New York City, his settings are urban America and this label has grown to mean an African American environment. Even

though there is room for an argument about the universality of the character, I will admit that there is truth in the statement. Easy's world, viewpoint, and demeanor are African American. He lives in an African American setting that Mosley introduces to a greater world.

My selection of Walter Mosley was swayed by the discovery of the movie version of *Devil in a Blue Dress* because Academy students appeared favorably impressed with the story as shown recently on prime time network television. This is a popular movie version of this film. The females in class enjoyed actor Denzel Washington in the role of Easy Rawlins. Overall, it is a good film that can easily be used in a high school classroom. The movie script has been sanitized. Even though, removing some of the blood, gore and sex does change the story, viewing the movie will make a good supplemental activity for the class.

The book provides a more suitable depiction of characters and much more vivid scenes and the object is to have students decipher the words on the page and comprehend the story. However, because the ending of *Devil* as written by Mosley involves starkly presented sex with a white woman, I shied away from this selection of this particular book to be read in the class. I did not want to spend time on the issue of black/white romantic relations, since the strategy is to move through the plot with deliberate speed. Although a teacher using this unit must be prepared to respond to the issue, the major issue of intergroup romantic relations and pertinent education on that aspect of diversity can be addressed in a separate arena. That is not the focus here.

Mosley is a master at using sex in his plots in a manner that allows the reader's attention to remain on the unraveling mystery. In fact, sex is an important part of the plot in many of his novels. He tastefully entwines this aspect of human behavior into the story and yet he does not allow sex to become the central focus of any of his works. Advancement Academy students often bring their own sexual interests and questions into the class. At times, their personal escapades or fantasies are discussed openly with their permission. Using the works of Walter Mosley will allow a teacher to develop an attitude that sex is a rather ordinary part of adult life and, when tastefully placed as Mosley usually does, sex does not have to be taboo or shocking. At best, it is a normal part of adult life. And, at best, this will create opportunities for appropriate sex education.

## **A NOTE ON USING PASSAGES OF SEX IN THE CLASSROOM**

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My attitude about using materials with sexual references in the classroom is this: An appropriate reference to real life sex, not perversion, is acceptable. The teacher will have to judge the suitable level for a particular group of students. "Suitable" in this context means that students are mature enough to approach the subject. Further, it means that the issue can be discussed in a mixed group. A teacher must be able to proceed without major objections by the students and their families. The teachers' introduction of reading materials that contain sex scenes should not completely upset the academic environment. This judgement will rely more on the tone set in the classroom from the very beginning, than on the student's maturity.

However, before embarking on this, the teacher must take several steps to present a natural acceptance of the fact that people are sexual beings. Any opportunity, over the year, to let students understand that there are few, if any, big secrets should be taken. References to the sex act between men and women should be accepted, as a matter of fact and tasteful questions about sex from students in other contexts should receive swift, matter of fact responses. If the need arises, school clinic personnel should be enlisted to present appropriate information to the students, with parental permission.

The teacher using this unit must reference all administrative policies and procedures on the use of adult materials with foul language and sexual references. In order to protect one's self professionally and legally, the teacher should use several different mechanisms to let parents and families know that this approach will be taken. For instance, each syllabus must contain reference to the fact that adult materials with sexual references will be used. There should be a separate notice to parents at the beginning of the marking period when *A Little Yellow Dog* is to be taught. The notice should tell the parents that the book contains sexually explicit scenes and parents should be required to sign off on the use of the book. In addition, school administrators should be notified of the use of adult materials, again.

Students must understand that a mature attitude is expected. The author's use of sex will be viewed in terms of its place in the works, its literary value in the plot.

## **CLASSROOM ACTIVITY**

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Any teacher contemplating the use of this unit must be prepared to spend a full year on detective fiction. Because a teacher is often a model for student interest, it is important that they see the teacher reading detective fiction from the beginning of the year. They must hear the teacher talking about mysteries. The establishment of an active interest is major. This will whet the appetite of the class.

The teacher will establish the use of the Socratic method in the classroom from the beginning of the year. The use of the well-placed question in a high school can be difficult. Often, the well-placed question is the key to solving the mystery, whether that be in the story or in deciphering an unknown word.

The state of Connecticut is moving toward standards for each grade level. These standards influence instruction in specific areas. They encourage using many types of instruction, including student centered learning and the Socratic method. In addition, most teacher training institutions do not teach the Socratic technique to people preparing to become teachers. Teachers must prepare carefully for this. Eventually, the construction of the well-placed question, on the spot, can become an immediate tool. Until that time, daily lessons for the marking period must contain examples of the well placed questions. Student discussions can be satisfactory self teaching opportunities. Teachers must be prepared for criticism when they do not stand before the class and lecture. They must establish a classroom atmosphere where student thoughts are respected and substantive, student centered discussions can happen. For Advancement Academy students and young people in general, the introduction of group discussion on academic subjects helps to establish an important skill, useful for both academic and social settings. It lets them know that it is all right to talk, to present an idea, within a context. It teaches and reinforces the use of the question as the initial step in learning.

For the first marking period, this means scheduling in time for questioning and diversions from the planned lessons. It means practicing group discussions. The fact that a teacher may only complete fifty per cent of his/her plans has to be accepted, if other success measures, like hearty exchanges based on reading materials, are achieved.

During the second marking period and directly preceding the use of this unit, the teacher will present several informal motivational activities - the introduction of a shelf of mysteries, the showing of a related film, a mystery game, etc. This will also serve as a measure for the ease or difficulty of the tasks ahead during the



more formal instruction.

Over the course of the second or third marking period, students will read *The Little Yellow Dog* by Walter Mosley, covering the 42 chapters in sections over approximately ten weeks. The task for the classroom teacher is to vary the strategies so that various learning styles can be accommodated and the book gets read. There should be silent reading and journal entries and writing in conjunction with straight reading. Even though these are high school students, it is important to include several read-a-loud experiences. In addition, the teacher will pull at least 50 vocabulary words directly from the text. Students will be asked to record the meanings of these words in their notebooks and to add their own unknown vocabulary entries. In addition to quick weekly quizzes on the vocabulary, the teacher will construct factual tests on the story, the characters, the related aspects of the life of the author, and the themes presented. While reading the entire book is key here, it is assumed that family will assist the students to complete most of the reading at home so class can be reserved for the well placed questions, motivation, and check up.

This novel is available on audiotape and the use of this media, perhaps from seven to ten minutes at a time, is most appropriate. Paul Winfield, an accomplished actor, delivers a reading that captures the compelling drama of Mosley's writing. His voice is accompanied by some well-chosen music at the beginning of sections. However, I do not encourage listening to the tape in its entirety. Students tend to put their heads down and even drift into sleep no matter how good the oral presentation. In addition, I found that the oral and written presentations of the story were very different. The narrator provides his own interpretations. Another difference lies in the fact that material used for the audiotape has been edited and student will miss the rich language of the author, if they only listen to the story. His metaphors are vivid. Mosley gives a reader enough for the individual's own interpretations to take shape.

It is extremely important that student work involve at least one classroom visitor, an officer of the law and, if it can be arranged, a visit to a local police headquarters, forensic laboratory, or a crime scene. One classroom session in the media center should be designed to have the students examine the print resources available and to search electronic resources. This library visit might be related to a special project which the students will be expected to complete.

There are many activities which can be conducted to make this unit successful. However, the teacher must be sure that time remains available in the school year for follow up and evaluation.

## **OTHER RELATED ACTIVITIES**

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An initial list of some other mystery or detective fiction by African American authors is attached to this unit. It is important that a good number of the "right" books are available to students. Teachers who will use this unit are encouraged to build a classroom collection of 20 to 25 disposable volumes, along with magazines. These volumes should provide a wide variety of subject matter and, should students so desire, they should be encouraged to borrow the literature for reading periods in class or leisure reading at home all year round. A reading table with several issues of appropriate magazines with detective fiction can also spark interest. Teachers also are encouraged to put up at least one large-scale display on mysteries in the classroom, the library media center, or in the hallway.

It is important that the classroom have an array of books, magazines, newspapers and other reading materials

involving the same themes for silent reading. The classroom teacher should work with the school media specialist to create a student bibliography of both print and electronic resources. While it will be worthwhile for each student to have a copy of this list for personal use, an enlarged version prominently displayed in the media center will benefit everyone, including other teachers. Setting up a bulletin board on detectives in the library may be a class project. It may be a boost to the esteem of the Advancement Academy students if movies of some of the titles were shown for an audience wider than those enrolled in the Academy. This might be offered in the after school program. All that is needed is the space and a TV VCR.

I encourage the involvement of the talents of other staff people. The teacher lounges and cafeteria are excellent places to demonstrate the excitement that reading mysteries can produce. For example, a conversation, although brief, regarding meeting Walter Mosley this Spring and attending a reading of a new work, a play was infectious. It created a different atmosphere in the small circle where it happened. We talked about something professional, rather than griping about the cafeteria food or whatever. This type of concentration and excitement on the part of the teacher generates a more cooperative spirit. The biology teacher may understand more fully the contribution his/her teaching and the use of the scientific method make to this unit and to the general education of high school students. In addition, the teacher may be able to practice openly the use of the Socratic method with these kinds of groups.

Others may actually conduct some of the activity for this unit in the school. For instance, a successful component of the 1998-99 school was a cooperative effort with Hillhouse's Career Services Center. Academy students began a four-year program, which focuses individuals on career exploration, choices and preparation. They took a computer-based survey of careers and their preferences, worked with practice employment applications and interviews, and constructed a simple resume. Career Services personnel also came to class several times to understand the general interest and on the school wide career day, the classroom visitors were especially selected according to these interests. They were a female police officer and a free lance news reporter with experience on the police "beat". This type of cooperation fulfills the state mandate to provide career exploration in each classroom setting.

I encourage any teacher thinking about using this unit to seek one activity in which the entire school, or several classes, can participate. These can be one of a range of activities from an entire grade attending the showing of a movie, to a scavenger hunt, to sharing the vocabulary. Walter Mosley lives in New York City. I met him in Hartford at a reading for a new play. The class might arrange and host a visit by the author. Such activities will confirm that any one in the school can use the general direction of this unit. It will make the Advancement Academy students very ordinary, not set apart from the others. At the same time, if a larger scale activity can be accomplished, the accomplishment will enhance the self-esteem of the Academy student.

I dare mention video and audiotapes of good mysteries. After all, this unit is essentially constructed to teach reading. However, good video and audio versions of the Mosley's stories and the works of other authors do exist and can not be ignored. It is paramount that the teachers guide students to supplement their reading with other media, not to replace reading. They use cassette players and television so much in their lives. Teaching students the difference between taking in the original written words and the interpretation of these words on tape or the screen is time well spent. The students can be presented with real examples of the differences between the actual words and the visual and audio images presented by someone other than the original author.

## THREE SPECIFIC LESSONS

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Each lesson must have specific reference to the Connecticut standards and the New Haven frameworks for curriculum. The New Haven Public Schools have adopted set frameworks in each subject for each grade level. Specifically, the section on language arts for grade nine should be reviewed as each lesson plan is made.

I suggest that the first lesson involve having some students read aloud to find out who might benefit from the services of the reading specialist/teacher and making the appropriate referrals for readers with serious reading problems. The second lesson involves using *The Reader As Detective* in class as a demonstration of independent use of reading materials. This is a paperback workbook that contains passages from traditional literature. Each passage is interrupted to give the reader a chance to solve the mystery and, then, reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises conclude the lesson. The third lesson is geared toward setting the tone for reading *A Little Yellow Dog* in class and at home with friends and family and reporting in class in discussion and other ways. As stated earlier, I strongly advocate the use of the Socratic method for this. I have added a written test to this lesson so that students are engaged for a block period of 90 minutes, rather than the normal 45 minutes.

## EVALUATION

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How will one know that this unit is successful?

Simply answered, the teacher will be able to see evidence of student interest in the novel selected and others. One of the most indicative dilemmas that may occur is that some students may finish the novel before the teacher's schedule is accomplished.

The teacher will be able to use fiction to teach several different reading skills. In the end, well-received instruction may result in more decoded words, improved vocabulary recognition, an improved grasp of meaning and inferences, and increased speed. The hard data on improved reading ability will surface in various test scores. The anecdotal notes, if they are kept, will reflect that students really read the book and that it may be the first time they have completed an adult novel. The notes may summarize conversations about the characters or a newfound interest in investigation whether they are police related or otherwise.

Over time, there will be indications of more independent reading, an increase in the number of books read annually.

It is important to think back as the school year ends. Did the lesson plans as executed fulfill the mandates in the state standards and local curriculum frameworks? Did the instruction allow students to improve their language skills? Do they read, write, and think better than when they entered class?

If this unit is successful, the entire school community or individuals within the community will remark about the improved tone of the Advancement Academy classroom and the positive behavior of the Academy students around the building. The Academy students will find that, with a new interest and improved reading skills, their self-esteem allows them to interact in a positive way with other members of the school community. In addition, other teachers, academic resource personnel (such as the reading specialists and career center staff) will be able to tell about the work of the unit. The custodians, who hold special places in a school

environment, might even read and discuss Easy Rawlins.

## LESSON ONE

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### Objective

Setting the tone for reading *A Little Yellow Dog* in class and at home with friends and family and reporting in class in discussion (Socratic method) and test, a lesson for a block period of 90 minutes

### Materials and equipment needed

Copies of the novel will be given to each student.  
Short test of comprehension for chapters 1 through 3

### Pre class activity

Read chapter 1 at home with parent or adult. This chapter contains a sex scene between Easy and schoolteacher in classroom.

### The lesson in class

Warm up the class by asking, "how did you like the beginning of the story?"

Listen to ten minutes on audiotape. Begin the tape at the end of chapter one.

Ask "what is the significance of the dog." What role does Etta Harris play in this chapter? Can you predict any future action? How does Easy Rawlins feel about his kids? Cite the passages that indicate this. This takes place in November. Can you tell what part of the United States is the setting? What is Easy's relationship with his supervisor like? Is Easy Rawlins a thief? Leave time for questions and discussion.

Allow at least 15 minute for reading of third chapter silently.

Before the class ends, the teacher should administer a written check up, about five items, on comprehension of chapters 1 through 3. What are the full names of three characters? Where does the story take place? Name Easy's job title and describe some of his duties. How much time elapsed between the beginning of the book and the end of chapter 3.

Homework

Read chapter 4 at home with parents

## LESSON TWO

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Objective

Reading aloud to find out individual reading deficiencies and identifying who might benefit from the services of the reading specialist

Material and equipment needed

Independent exercises

A classroom helper, the reading specialist if possible

Lesson

Tell students that you will be looking at how they read. They must know that you will be diagnosing their abilities.

Have four students, volunteers, read out loud from the novel. Provide quick reading help, decoding words, injecting tone and vitality, and questioning comprehension for each one. Be careful to avoid embarrassment.

Ask the class to continue to read while you take time for one to one diagnosis of reading, good points and deficiencies. The helper can walk among the group to be sure that students are on the correct page and reading. If the helper has expertise in teaching reading, the roles may be reversed.

The helper will continue to do this while the teacher takes more students aside or outside of the class to read aloud and provide diagnosis of reading ability.

Continue until entire class has been given a private view of reading needs including a preliminary prescription for personal growth

#### Homework

Ask each student to discuss the conversations about their reading abilities with their family.

Read next chapter.

## **LESSON THREE**

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#### Objective

Using The Reader As Detective in class as a demonstration of independent use

#### Materials and equipment needed

Ten or twelve copies of the workbook or copies of one lesson from the book

A logic puzzle

## Lesson

Give students a logic puzzle to solve prior to the end of the class.

Discuss detectives. Talk about how Easy Rawlins, although he is not employed as a detective, behaves as one.

Referring to page 3, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," introduce Sherlock Holmes by comparing him briefly to Easy.

Give the students an oral summary of pages iii to v which provides the purpose of the book and the methodology of the lessons.

Explain that the intent is to use this book periodically in class. Each lesson completed will be a part of the marking period grade.

Allow them time to complete the 15 questions in sections I and II. Because vocabulary work will focus on A Little Yellow Dog, students will be allowed to skip the vocabulary section. Section IV provides a lesson review and that should be completed.

## Homework

Continue reading the novel.

## **READING LIST FOR STUDENTS**

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### African American and Other Authors of Mystery Fiction

Bland, Eleanor Taylor. *Dead Time*. New York, Signet/NAL, 1993. *Done Wrong*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1995. *Gone Quiet*. New York, St. Signet/NAL, 1995. *Keep Still*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1996. *Slow Burn*. New York, Signet/NAL, 1994. DeLoach,

Nora. *Mama Saves a Victim*. Los Angeles, Holloway House, 1997. *Mama Solves a Murder*. Los Angeles, Holloway House, 1994. *Mama Stalks the Past*. New York, Bantam, 1997. *Mama Stands Accused*. Los Angeles, Holloway House, 1995. *Mama Traps a Killer*. Los Angeles, Holloway House, 1995. Dexter, Colin. *Last Bus to Woodstock*. New York, Ivy Books, 1975. Haywood, Gar Anthony. *Bad News Travels Fast*. New York, Putnam, 1995. *Fear of the Dark*. New York, Penguin, 1989. *Going Nowhere Fast*. New York, Putnam, 1994. *It's Not a Pretty Sight*. New York, Putnam, 1996. *Not Long for This World*. New York, Penguin, 1991. *You Can Die Trying*. New York, Penguin, 1994. *When Last Seen Alive*. New York, Putnam, 1998. Himes, Chester. *All Shot Up*. New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1996. *The Big Gold Dream*. New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1996. *Blind Man with a Pistol*. New York, Random House, 1989. *A Case of Rape*. New York, Carroll and Graf, 1994. *Cast the First Stone*. Chatham, NJ, The Chatham Booksellers, 1973. *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*. New York, Random House, 1988. *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. New York, Random House, 1988. *The Crazy Kill*. New York, Random House, 1989. *The Heat's On*. New York, Random House, 1988. *Plan B*. Jackson, MS, University Press of Mississippi, 1993. *A Rage in Harlem*. New York, Random House, 1989. *The Real Cool Killers*. New York, Random House, 1988. *The End of a Primitive*. New York, Old School Books, 1997. *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*. New York, Old School Books, 1998.

McBain, Ed. *Killer's Choice*. NY, Warner Books, 1958.

*Lady Killer*. NY, Signet Books, 1974. McClure, James. *The Steam Pig*. London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1971. Mosley, Walter. *Devil In A Blue Dress*. NY, Pocket Books, 1990. *Black Betty*. New York, W. W. Norton, 1994. *A Red Death*. New York, Pocket Books, 1992. *White Butterfly*. New York, Pocket Books, 1993. *Gone Fishin'*. Baltimore, MD, Black Classic Press, 1997. *RL's Dream*. NY, Washington Square Press, 1995. *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*. NY, Washington Square Press, 1998. Neeley, Barbara. *Blanche on the Lam*. New York, Penguin, 1993. *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. New York, Penguin, 1995. *Blanche Cleans Up*. New York, Penguin, 1998. Parker, Robert B. *Looking for Rachel Wallace*. New York, Dell Books, 1980. Phillips, Mike. *Blood Rights*. New York, Doubleday, 1989. *The Late Candidate*. New York, Doubleday, 1991. *Point of Darkness*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1995. *An Image to Die For*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997. Wesley, Valerie Wilson. *Devil's Gonna Get Him*. New York, Putnam, 1995. *When Death Comes Stealing*. New York, Putnam, 1994. *Where Evil Sleeps*. New York, Putnam, 1996. *No Hiding Place*. New York, Putnam, 1997.

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN DETECTIVE SERIES**

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### For Further Exploration

Nikki Baker, Virginia Baker Charlotte Carter, Rhode Island Red Grace F. Edwards, *If I Should Die*, Mali Anderson Mysteries Louis Edwards, *N: A Romantic Mystery* Robert O. Greer, C. T. Floyd Mysteries Terris McMahan Grimes, Theresa Galloway Series Gary Hardwick, *Cold Medina and Double Dead* Hugh Holton, Larry Cole Mysteries Yolanda Joe, *Falling Leaves of Ivy* Lee E. Meadows, *Silent Conspiracy* Lisa Saxton, *Caught in a Run Down* Tracey Tillis, *Flashpoint* Blair Walker, *Up Jumped the Devil* Valeria Wilson Wesley, *Easier to Kill*

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS**

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Bailey, Frankie Y. *Out of the Woodpile: Black Characters in Crime and Detective Fiction*. Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1991.

A critical analysis of African American detectives and other characters in crime fiction and mysteries.

Chapman, Anne, Editor. *Making Sense: Teaching Critical Reading Across the Curriculum*. New York, The College Board



Publications, 1993. Gates, Henry Louis Jr. and McKay, Nellie Y., general editors. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. New York; W. W. Norton and Company, 1997. Paul, Richard, Binker, A.J.A., Martin, Douglas, and Adamson, Ken. Critical Thinking Handbook: High School. Rohnert Park, CA, Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, Sonoma State University, 1989.

This is a guide for redesigning instruction. It encourages the adaptation of the Socratic method. The authors discuss standard approaches and, then, offer remodeled lesson plans.

Rizzo, Frank, Staff Writer. A Conversation with Walter Mosley. Hartford (CT) Courant, June 6, 1999.

While discussing a workshop production of a new play, Mosley provides insights into his accomplishments and his characters.

Soitos, Stephen F.. The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction. Amherst, MA, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

A critical history and analysis of the genre

Soto, Mari. Home>Arts/literature>Books/Authors>Mysteries>Articles.

This site repeats a credo for writers that was first published by S.S. Van Dine in American Magazine, September 1928.

Swartz, Robert J. and Parks, Sandra. Infusing the Teaching of Critical and Creative Thinking into Content Curriculum. Pacific Grove, CA, Critical Thinking Press and Software, 1994.

Although this volume is designed for elementary school students, will be helpful in infusing teaching critical thinking into reading lessons focused on decoding words and comprehending pages of written words. There is a variety of graphic organizers and thinking maps that can be reproduced.

Winks, Robin, Editor. The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence. NY, Harper and Row Publishers, 1968. Woods, Paula L., editor. Spooks, Spies, and Private Eyes: Black Mystery, Crime and Suspense Fiction of the 20th Century. New York, Doubleday, 1995.

I used her 1988 compilation that I found at <http://www.bookbrowser.com/Diverse/AfroAmerMyst.html>.

This volume is an anthology of African American detective fiction.

African American Mystery Page, a site hosted by WebCom Globe Literature Series, purple edition

This is one of the basic text series used by the English Department Of Hillhouse High School. The purple edition is the lowest level, for students needing low level, high interest reading materials and basic instruction.

## **MATERIALS FOR CLASSROOM USE**

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Goodman, Burton. The Reader as Detective. New York City, Amsco Publication, 1994.

Based on the premise that a good reader is a detective, this book consists of 18 short reading selections, each of which allows the reader to predict the ending. It actually provides exercises in basic reading skills. Each student should have a book or copies of

several lessons.

Mosley, Walter. *The Little Yellow Dog*. Pocket Books, a division of Simon and Schuster. New York, 1996.

There must be a class set (25 copies) of this novel.

Audiotape of *A Little Yellow Dog*. CA, Audio Renaissance Tapes, 1996.

Paul Winfield, an accomplished actor, narrates this rendition. It is excellent for emphasizing certain dramatic points as well as for assisting oral learners.

The Center for Applied Research in Education in West Nyack, NY 10995, publishes a catalog of resources for grades five through twelve. Crime Scene Investigations provides real life science labs. Brain Games provides 170 thinking exercises. Teachers will find the reproducible reading exercises in various publications useful. Dictionaries

Two large display boards

A table or shelf for related reading materials

The teacher should be prepared to lose some of these materials, although a check out system can be established. There should be enough material so that students can use them, if desired, during silent reading periods.

Videos

*Devil in the Blue Dress*

This film stars Denzel Washington and Jennifer Beals and created stardom for Mosley in 1995.

*Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*.

Laurence Fishburne, Natalie Cole, and Cicely Tyson are featured in this film written by Walter Mosley.

Specific magazines

*Mystery Buff Magazine* has cross word puzzles, along with new works, reviews and interviews. *Murderous Intent Mystery Magazine*, Madison Publishing Company, PO Box 5947, Vancouver, WA 98668-5947

The Spring 1999 issue has an interview with Robert Parker.

*New Mystery*, 175 Fifth Avenue, Suite 2001, The Flatiron Building, New York, New York, 10010-7703

The Winter 1999 issue contains "Third Santa from The Left" by Gar Anthony Haywood.

*Math Puzzles and Logic Problems*, Dell Magazines, Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855, July 1999.

Along with many number problems, this "fun" Magazine contains brain teasers that can be used as warm up exercises.

Good Time Variety Puzzles, Penny Press. 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk CT 06855, July 1999.

These puzzles involve vision and language clues. Some call for careful reading to solve the puzzle.

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