



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

Introduction

Mystery and detective fiction is the most widely read body of literature in the United States and Great Britain, and yet it is little read and even less studied in our classrooms. One hears that students read far less today, less skillfully, with shorter attention spans, than a decade or more ago. One might think that mystery, detective, and spy fiction, with their plot-driven narrations, their often realistic descriptions of life in the streets, and their frequently short and direct sentence structure would be used in schools to attract students to reading. But this does not appear to be the case.

The best of this fiction is well-written, clear, descriptive, and engaging. Perhaps eighty percent of the books published in the genre are little more than entertainments - not to be dismissed, as Graham Greene well demonstrated when he called some of his best books by this somewhat denigrating work - but twenty per cent is surely as demanding as any modern novel. Often the fiction reflects reality; equally often it reveals our most basic fears. The structure of the traditional mystery is ideal for teaching how to read closely, how to ask good questions, and how to interrogate a text which deliberately privileges a narrative voice and thus misleads. The classic questions of the reporter and the historian - when, where, what, who, how and why - are set out in most mystery novels. Surely in reading one's way across the landscape described by these questions, even quite young readers can come to understand the continuum from cause to effect to responsibility. "Whodunit" is about accepting responsibility, or having responsibility placed upon a protagonist's shoulders by the processes of investigation, enquiry, and logic. This is what the classroom is about, and a reluctant reader can stalk these issues while (dare we say it?) enjoying a text.

There are problems with such fiction, of course. Often detective novels lend credibility to language which is not permitted in the classroom (though the coin of the street). Often descriptions of violence, drug use, sexual relations are raw in a way more "serious" literature blunts. Yet the gains from reading what one experiences outside the classroom will, for many young people, outweigh the problems. This seminar is based on the assumption that it is better to be reading than not to have read at all.

The units that follow offer material adaptable to a variety of age levels, from the early grades to advance readers in high school. They reflect the four broad categories within the literature: the puzzle novel, or English "cozy" so well represented by Agatha Christie; the private eye novel associated with Raymond Chandler, which closely resembles the "Western" or cowboy novel of an earlier time, in which a single individual operating outside a public bureaucracy make a difference (and, at times, resorts to a form of vigilante justice); the story of steady interrogation of evidence and of people, of testing the irrelevant clue against the environment, as in the police procedural, so nicely represented by the work of Ed McBain (who is Evan Hunter and who knows his classrooms); and the classic novel of espionage, of the exercise of power over others

through the finding and possession of information and the spread of disinformation. We are all detectives in our daily lives and this fiction mirrors the tasks we often set ourselves. These units reflect this mirror and will provide useful points of entry into this vast body of popular literature, the novel of crime in all its forms.

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