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# The Encyclopedia *of* Murder and Mystery

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The Encyclopedia  
*of*  
Murder and Mystery

BRUCE F. MURPHY

palgrave

for St. Martin's Minotaur

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MURDER AND MYSTERY

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

In addition to general works of reference literature, a number of specialized sources were consulted in the writing of this book. They include *A Catalogue of Crime* (1971, rev 1989) by Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor; *Bloody Murder* (1972, rev 1985) by Julian Symons; *Detecting Women* (1994) by Willetta L. Heising; *Murder for Pleasure* (1941) by Howard Haycraft; *Whodunit?* (1982) by H. R. F. Keating; *Encyclopedia Mysterosa* (1994) by William L. DeAndrea; *The Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection* (1975) edited by Otto Penzler and Chris Steinbrunner; *Les auteurs de la Série Noir* (1996) by Claude Mesplède and Jean-Jacques Schleret; and *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, edited by Lesley Henderson.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book contains entries on authors, characters, individual works, terminology, famous criminal cases, slang, subgenres and plot devices, murder techniques and poisons, all of which are part of the matter and manner and context of crime and murder literature. Entries are also provided for select slang terms that I have come across in my reading. Commonly known terms or those with obvious derivations have not been included, such as the many versions of the verb “to kill” (to chill, to cool, to waste, to rub out, etc.). Mysteries that fall under children’s literature (such as the Encyclopedia Brown mysteries) fall outside the scope of this work. In some plot summaries, ambiguities have been deliberately left in so as not to spoil the mystery for the reader.

Cross-references using small capitals have been added to direct the reader to other entries in the book. To make the book as readable as possible, however, not all terms have been cross-referenced, but only those germane to the subject at hand, and where several occur in a single sentence only the most particular has been placed in small capitals (thus, if a book has an entry, the title is in small caps but not the author’s name, for example “Dashiell Hammett’s RED HARVEST”). Words that appear constantly are also not cross-referenced, such as “p.i.” and “short story.” Though articles such as “the” and “an” that appear at the beginning of titles have been placed in small capitals they are not used in alphabetizing. In some cases, single words have been cross-referenced to indicate multiple word entries (for example, PULP, in order to direct a reader to the entry on PULP MAGAZINES).

Bibliographies are appended to entries for series characters, listing the books not discussed in the entry itself. Complete bibliographies of all of an author’s published works can be found in such sources as *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers* or *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Dates of publication are usually those of publication in the country of origin, i.e. first U.S. publication for an American book, first U.K. publication for British books, etc. In cases where a date is not known or is not available, asterisks (\*\*\*) or question marks (?) have been inserted instead. Along with dates of publication are abbreviations indicating the type of book: coll: collected, repr: reprinted, ed: edited, tr: translated, retr: retranslated, rev: revised, exp: expanded, pub: published, orig: original.

## PREFACE

### THE TRIUMPH OF THE MYSTERY STORY

W. Somerset Maugham wrote in a famous essay that when twentieth century literary history came to be written, future critics might “pass somewhat lightly over the compositions of the ‘serious’ novelists and turn their attention to the immense and varied achievement of the detective writers.” This apparent justification of the mystery was seized upon by Ellery Queen and others as proof that the detective story had arrived as a respectable genre. Moreover, Maugham seemed to be saying that the mystery had already surpassed the “serious” novel, which had gotten bogged down in modernism and lost its popular audience, leaving the field wide open for detective fiction. But to see Maugham as the champion of the genre one had to overlook that his essay was actually entitled “The Decline and Fall of the Detective Story” and that in less publicized passages he declared the genre virtually dead. Maugham’s equivocal message illustrates one of the ironies of the mystery genre: although the question of whether mystery and detective novels could achieve the same level of craftsmanship and literary significance as the “serious” novel was long ago laid to rest, mystery writers themselves keep digging it up again. Ross Macdonald said that the detective novel was “still available for the highest art”; Julian Symons said that the best writers of mysteries have been artists, not artisans; and the South African writer Wessel Ebersohn wrote that “it is possible for a thriller to be a work of art.” Those mystery writers who have gained reputations as “serious” authors are often the staunchest defenders of the genre’s past achievements and potential—and the harshest critics of its failures and also-rans.

No author illustrates this phenomenon better than Raymond Chandler. His famous essay “The Simple Art of Murder” has been the touchstone for partisans of the genre for more than fifty years. He credited Dashiell Hammett and the hard-boiled writers with taking murder out of the drawing room and putting it in the street, with restoring the mystery’s attachment to life by portraying real people with real emotions who commit murder suddenly with whatever comes to hand—more likely a hammer than curare-tipped darts. Privately, Chandler wondered whether he was not the best writer in the United States and asked whether he would have been more recognized had he written outside of the genre. But Chandler also (like Maugham) criticized the “serious”

novel, believing that it had lost the popular audience because of its pretentiousness, stylistic contortionism, obscurity, and political line-toeing. At the same time, he attacked other mystery writers—and not only English ones—for slick products with cardboard characters and feeble motives.

The day that Maugham foresaw has arrived, and Chandler's view has prevailed. Looking back on the twentieth century, we can see that the crime story has progressively displaced the "serious" novel as the center of fiction, so to speak. Not only are the best crime writers taken seriously; but numerous writers who have already established literary reputations have chosen to write crime and mystery novels. Murder is made a basis for plot, for example, in works by Robertson Davies, E. L. Doctorow, Timothy Findley, Roselynn Brown, Thomas Keneally, William Trevor, and Thomas Berger. Today mystery, detective, and crime literature have a permanent lock on the bestseller lists. One certainly is entitled to ask why, for as Jacques Barzun wrote, "murder and detection in real life can give pleasure to very few. The one evokes anger and misery, the other boredom."

There are many reasons for the inexorable growth of the crime and mystery genre. Some of them are obvious sociological ones: people like to read about what's bothering them. As crime becomes more and more of an international obsession, particularly in the country that has a larger proportion of its population incarcerated than any other industrialized nation (the United States), every novelist who responds to reality must perforce be a crime novelist. It is no accident that the rise of the detective novel parallels that of the industrial revolution; heightened anonymity, social insecurity, and urban poverty are like fertilizer for criminality. As soon as people began clamoring for police forces to protect them from increasing urban violence, writers (Charles Dickens among them) began writing stories about how the detectives went about doing so. In the process, the traditional hero of Western literature was revised in the image of the sleuth. More than one critic has traced the mystery detective back to Arthurian legend and the knight errant. Errancy meant being on an adventure apart from one's group or *comitatus*—in modern terms, without backup. Being essentially alone is as much a part of Philip Marlowe's character as it is Sir Gawain's. On the other side (the side of evil), the figure of the villain has been traced to the original Napoleon of crime, Satan. Dorothy L. Sayers pointed to Biblical passages as the earliest models for the genre; the modern criminal-as-hero is easily seen to be a descendant of the fascinating Satan created by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Thus, crime and mystery fiction responded to contemporary social developments but merged with the ancient patterns of Western literature. Sin became Crime.

There will always be those who claim that a fascination with the murder story is unhealthy, and that the success of the genre rests on ghoulishness. No doubt there are and always will be some bloodthirsty

readers. But the beauty of the mystery story, and what, when well done, gives it its power and raises it to the level of “serious” fiction, is how it reveals human weakness. Tough guys crack wise and entertain, but the emotional center of good mysteries is weakness of character and such failures of courage or surrenders to temptation as can turn reasonably good men or women into criminals and at worst, murderers. (The “psycho,” the monster whose motivations are incomprehensible, is for that reason one of the most boring characters in popular literature.) Whether seen as crimes or sins, the acts that drive the plots of mysteries and the emotions behind them rivet our attention. It is possible to view the succumbing to temptation in the mystery novel as a version of the Fall. It has also been seen as Oedipal. What is important is that the well-wrought crime story makes us aware of our intimate knowledge of the archetypal tempter and our horrified fascination with the figure of the fallen, which is well expressed by Leo Perutz in *Master of the Day of Judgement*:

We are all creatures who have disappointed the Creator’s grand design. Without suspecting it we have a terrible enemy inside us. He lies there motionless, asleep, as if he were dead. Woe if he comes back to life.

One reason for the recent explosion of interest in crime fiction is that the moral-psychological territory it explores has been largely abandoned by serious fiction. The criticisms of the modernist novel made by mystery writers at mid-century apply today even more strongly to the postmodern novel. When Chandler’s Philip Marlowe tries to read a novel by Hemingway, he asks why the writer keeps saying the same thing over and over. Hemingway, however, wrote about violent and passionate subjects. One wonders what Marlowe/Chandler would have thought of the novel that purports to be about language itself, or fiction that has completely detached itself from the concept of story. Admirers of postmodern writing may find the detective novel hopelessly unsophisticated because of its straight-ahead focus on content, plot, and resolution. The critic Geoffrey Hartman wrote that

Most popular mysteries are devoted to solving rather than examining a problem. Their reasonings put reason to sleep, abolish darkness by elucidation, and bury the corpse for good. Few detective novels want the reader to exert his intelligence fully, to find gaps in the plot or the reasoning, to worry about the moral question of fixing the blame. They are exorcisms,

stories with happy endings that could be classified with comedy because they settle the unsettling.

Many mysteries—some of them discussed in this book—focus on precisely those difficult problems (such as fixing blame) that Hartman denies are examined in mysteries. In much of contemporary “literary” fiction, on the other hand, nothing seems to be at stake. It substitutes the nebulous for the precise and the obscure for the profound, and uses “openendedness” as an excuse for shapelessness and lack of technique.

The crime story is about consequences. In the mystery novel, infidelity leads to murder; in the “serious” novel, more often than not it leads merely to divorce and opportunities for characters to feel sorry for themselves. So-called literary fiction frequently deals with the relatively minor disappointments of the overprivileged. By contrast, in *The Ax* Donald Westlake writes a superficially humorous but deeply angry crime novel about corporate downsizing. James Ellroy’s *American Tabloid* explodes the myth of America and attacks the cynicism and greed behind state and corporate power. Contemporary crime and mystery fiction are most compelling when they probe the insecurities and fears of those confronted with situations and actions antithetical to the feel-good, sound-byte images sold by politicians and the media, and which we buy at our peril.

The detective story is thus not merely a toy created by Poe; it has become a form of serious fiction. That does not mean, however, that Maugham’s and Chandler’s criticisms of lesser writers do not still apply. No doubt many readers dismiss the classic and cozy mysteries as representing a fanciful world of impossible people with unbelievable motives. But neither are other subgenres inherently better or more “real.” It is not difficult to conceive shocking scenes that hit the reader in the stomach, or to base a novel on newspaper accounts of gruesome crimes. The writer who aims no higher than this will achieve nothing more than mere sensationalism. Similarly, thrillers often create suspense by the crudest method—simply by withholding information from the reader. The techno-thriller depends on technology rather than the detective’s intellect, experts and organizations rather than individuals. Mystery novelist Agnes Bushell has written that “mysteries, God bless them, follow the rules. In fact, the mystery may be the only literary genre left with a sense of honor. There’s no honor, however, in the thriller-for-film-rights genre books that clunk along like first-draft screenplays, and no honor in substituting ‘location’ for setting or using ‘natives’ as stage props.” Books that are merely manipulative or in which the hero is a computer or a new kind of jet airplane do not really belong to a genre that has always stressed the possibilities of individual action and (often) the weight of conscience. With the growth in the number of

published mystery novels that began in the eighties, there has also been a rush to establish series characters like those Bushell describes, and to somehow distinguish them from the ever-growing pack. What best reveals this eighties mentality is that, to tell us about himself, the detective thinks it is sufficient to tell us about his *things*—as spies in the James Bond mold have special guns and special cars, so detectives have signature weapons, strange quarters (in Dennis Lehane’s novels, the steeple of a church), and odd hangers-on. Stephen King has observed that “it has become ever more difficult to create a character with enough individuality to make him (or her) stand out, and as a result, a lot of writers have resorted to caricature rather than character. Put another way, they have resorted to cats of various shapes and colors . . . but all of them, alas, seem gray in the dark.”

A genre grows by setting up outposts and then exploring the intervening territory. One recent development, the “ecothriller,” deals with crimes against the environment, thus responding to our newly troubled awareness of a kind of violence that was always there. Many of those who come along to settle the outlying areas of an innovation are simply members of King’s army of “gray cats.” Others, however, set off in new directions. The approach of this book to the now enormous array presented by mystery and detective fiction is to show the genre’s depth as well as breadth while singling out the superlative for attention. To give as complete a picture as possible of the genre as a field of literature with its own historical development, factual background, and rich vocabulary, there are entries on the language and terminology of the mystery (including slang, the use of which the genre legitimized), on major and minor characters who are particularly intriguing, on the antecedents of the genre, and on true cases that have sparked debate among historians of crime and have sometimes produced fictional adaptations. Also included is information related to the mechanics of murder—poisons, weapons, and investigative tools such as fingerprinting.

It is hard to say how far the expansion of the mystery genre will go in the future, for it encompasses not only new work but revisions of the canon. For example, the *New Mystery Anthology*, edited by Jerome Charyn, contains several works that are neither new nor mysteries, such as Isaac Babel’s “The King” (Ray Carver’s excellent story “Cathedral” is the most unlikely selection). Charyn goes so far as to make the unanswerable remark that because of the evil in the world, “one might even argue that God himself is a crime novelist.” The mystery and crime genre is changing because, as Charyn’s anthology shows, the terms in which we think about it have changed. As the mystery novel shoulders its way even further into the mainstream, or center stage, of contemporary writing (how far we’ve come from the day when H. L. Mencken

dismissed his own mystery magazine, *Black Mask*, as “a louse”), our view of it will no doubt undergo further metamorphosis. I hope that mystery fans who pick up this book will not only find the old friends they are looking for, but will also make some new ones—as I have done over the years of writing it.