

David Cook
ENLS 311-01
Prof. M. Holt
30 October 2009

Detective Fiction: Progeny of Journalism

Right after the Christmas holidays of 1831, Edgar Allan Poe, then living in Philadelphia, would have been immersed in a prominent public debate over the creation of a police force. Some were protesting certain provisions of business mogul Stephen Girard's will that proposed to fund an endowment to establish a police force. Debates like this were emerging all over the country. Police departments, in the modern sense of the word, did not exist until then. What law enforcement there was, was a side job for the army. Crime, which had been something more prevalent in rural areas, became an intolerable scourge in cities as they rapidly grew. So, police departments were seen as a solution. (Haycraft 5). In Britain they had been organized to prevent crime. Because they were not effective at crime prevention, the departments began trying to investigate the crimes they failed to prevent. In America, organizers tried to copy the British model (Panek 50). The debate centered on fears of invasions of privacy by the police, and this was the reason that uniforms were introduced—to make cops conspicuous. Politicians fought for control of police departments, mayors against city councils, and city governments against state governments (51). These developments and the explosion of newspaper circulation would soon spawn the detective novel.

Before there can be detective novels, there must be detectives, and until these new police departments had been established the word detective didn't even exist (Haycraft 4). Many detective novels are built around the newspaper accounts of real murders, and they often mock the perverse motives and ineptitude of the police as a core element of their plots.

While Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," is widely regarded as the first detective fiction story, it is not about murders at all, or any crime for that matter, but the acts of an escaped wild orangutan. Poe did however begin the practice alluding the weaknesses of the police. His detective Chevalier Auguste Dupin called the real head of the Paris police "a good guesser." Poe's sequel, *The Mystery of Marie Roget* instead was the first crime detective story (Sova 164). The story was fictionally set in Paris and the detective was again Dupin, but this time it was indeed about a murder. Poe based story on the facts surrounding the actual 1841 murder of Mary C. Rogers in New York, which remains unsolved. He wrote the story while the murder was still being actively investigated and published it serially in a women's magazine. At one point, Poe even delayed publication and rewrote an installment of his story because developments in the real case contradicted the "facts" in his story (Walsh 69).

Meanwhile, incompetence, internal fighting and corruption, abuse of power, and undue influence by political and social heavyweights quickly rendered the newly introduced police agencies ineffective at preventing or investigating crime and earned them an unfavorable public image that was so pervasive that Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1871 to address the "deprivation of civil rights under the color of law" (USC). Their sullied reputation further undermined their plausibility as the heroes in detective fiction. Combined with the fact that many novels advance subversive agendas (Michels 83), the golden age of newspapers developed conditions in which journalism would play a large part in development of the detective fiction novel.

Yellow journalism had been replaced by a focused effort to be ethical, truthful, thorough and fair. So, when a mutilated body was found stuffed into two barrels floating in the Charles River in November, 1872, the police were quickly exposed as unprepared to investigate the

murder. Reporters at “a Boston newspaper” investigated and solved the case in a few days by tracking the victim’s last known movements, and interviewing the relatives and friends of the victim (Journalism...). What are now considered elementary but the most effective methods of death investigation never occurred to the police. However, they were then and still are fundamental newsgathering and reporting skills.

Detective fiction writers began making the conduct of the police the central theme of their stories and the logic puzzle, while present, less important. Raymond Chandler, who had been a journalist in the early stages of his writing career, is best known for his vivid descriptions of Los Angeles at a time when the city was dominated by such a powerful crime syndicate that corruption was endemic and integrity deviant (Nolan 227). In “The Simple Art of Murder,” which is now considered an important piece of literary criticism in mystery writing, Chandler describes the things that most inspire writers of detective fiction:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of moneymaking, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge (Chandler—Simple Art 17).

This was not merely the product of Chandler’s imagination. The magnitude of corruption in Los Angeles in the early 1900s cannot be overstated; a mammoth syndicate made over the

municipal government itself into a flourishing criminal enterprise. In the 1930's, the city had more than 600 brothels, 300 casinos, and nearly 2,000 bookies operating openly and protected by the police from competing startups. (Nolan 227). Chandler's writing was filled the treachery of these conditions. For example, Chandler used a scene in *The High Window* in which his narrator Philip Marlowe is being questioned by the police about his knowledge of a recent murder. Marlowe tells the cops a story about the police bungling a double-murder investigation to protect powerful people.

"I'm going to make a point, and it's an important point. Just look at the Cassidy case. Cassidy was a very rich man, a multimillionaire. He had a grown up son. One night the cops were called to his home and young Cassidy was on his back on the floor with blood all over his face and a bullet hole in the side of his head. His secretary was lying on his back in an adjoining bathroom, with his head against the second bathroom door, leading to a hall, and a cigarette burned out between the fingers of his left hand, just a short burned out stub that had scorched the skin between his fingers. A gun was lying by his right hand. He was shot in the head, not a contact wound. A lot of drinking had been done. Four hours had elapsed since the deaths and the family doctor had been there for three of them. Now, what did you do with the Cassidy case?" (Chandler – High Window 1071).

When Marlowe is done telling the story, he says:

"Until you guys own your own souls you don't own mine. Until you guys can be trusted every time and always, in all times and conditions, to seek the truth out and find it and let the chips fall where they may—until that time comes, I have a right to listen to my conscience, and protect my client the best way I can" (1071) .

In the universe of the novel, Marlowe afterward said that he made up the murder story—but he hadn't and neither did Chandler (Moss). On the night of Saturday, 16 February 1929, police were called to a mansion in Beverly Hills where the bodies of Edward Doheny, Jr., son of oil tycoon Edward Doheny, Sr., and his secretary were found dead, each with a bullet in his head (DOHENY 1). The dead men had been waiting to stand trial for their part in the Teapot Dome oil-rights lease and bribery scandal, which for the first time sent a Presidential cabinet secretary

to prison for malfeasant conduct in office (Senate). Relatives and the family doctor were summoned to the house two hours before the police and district attorney were called. It was too late at night for the story to run in the Sunday paper, but it ran nationally on Monday. *The Los Angeles Times* ran nearly a dozen stories about the death on the first day. It was absolutely the biggest story nationwide. The Doheny family was already at the center of the largest criminal investigation in the United States up to that time (Senate). The district attorney promised a “sweeping investigation” of the murders. However, the next day, the “murder/suicide” was “solved” and the investigation closed because both men were dead (NO INQUEST 1), and the story was immediately killed in the Los Angeles papers, and soon after the national press dropped it as well. Robert F. Moss, a reporter for *The Los Angeles Times* explains on his website devoted to the analysis of Chandler’s writing, that years later, Leslie White, the DA’s investigator at the scene, later wrote in his autobiography *Me, Detective* that the facts as he observed them contradicted the official story, that he believed that both men were murdered, and that District Attorney Buron Fitts, had made “a valiant attempt to get at the truth” but that there was no way to buck the forces around him. However, Fitts’ career later collapsed amid corruption. Budd Schulberg, the son of a studio mogul and a screenwriter during Fitts's era, told Moss that, “Buron Fitts was completely in the pocket of the producers. You could literally have somebody killed, and it wouldn't be in the papers” (Moss).

After World War II, big-city police departments developed into professional organizations as returning veterans began filling the ranks, and the overwhelming hegemony of the syndicates declined as the police began cracking down on organized crime, rather than assisting it (May). Real murders, now genuinely investigated by the police, continued to inspire detective novels. Perhaps most famously, the still unsolved 1947 murder of actress Elizabeth

Short (Sex 2), whom the media, in one day, branded “The Black Dahlia” (Black... B3). James Ellroy’s mystery novel by the same name depicts the police effectively investigating the murder in spite of sensationalized news coverage:

“Two former boxers, who had fought under the monikers “Fire” and “Ice,” later work as police officers Dwight Bleichert and Leland Blanchard for the Los Angeles Police Department. In an effort to promote a bond measure to raise money for the police, they agree to fight in a highly publicized match right before Election Day. The two fight, the bond measure wins, and they begin working on a backlog of warrants.

A woman discovers the butchered corpse of Short in a field while the two cops are in a firefight with mobsters across the street. The media, there to cover the gunfight, get pictures of the body before it is covered. The resulting media frenzy makes the treatment of the JonBenet Ramsey case look like the very essence of respectable journalism (Cook 7).”

In the dark underworld of lesbian pornography and drug addiction, the two cops finally figure out who did it, only for the perpetrator to kill her self in a revolver-in-the-mouth suicide scene.

While there had already been crime stories, puzzle stories, stories of deductive reasoning very early in history, detective stories brought all of these together, but I think this couldn’t have happened without the rapid urbanization and subsequent invention of municipal police forces. Poe seemed to be questioning whether the new organizations would work, and if they didn’t, then what then? The hard-boiled style of detective fiction that Chandler perfected spent the next 20 years ridiculing the actual role of police in society. In the last 30 years, this has gone out of vogue as there has been an effort to make law enforcement apparatus more competent and accountable—the ridicule seems less deserved perhaps. Story lines have continued to be “pulled from the headlines.” The fictionalized methods of crime investigation are becoming increasingly illusory, such that there is now a debate in the media about a “CSI effect”—whether juries don’t believe prosecutors unless they bring enough state-of-the-art forensic technology with

them into the courtroom on one hand, or if juries are falsely led to believe that the police are doing everything on the up-and-up and that cutting corners to get convictions is rare on the other. The figurative jury is still out on that. The fictionalized accounts of real stories are perpetuating long debunked “science,” such as the widely held belief that everyone’s fingerprints are unique. The style and subjects of detective fiction progressed faster than changes in society. It would seem that the relationship between society and detective fiction has made a 180. Is detective fiction now having more influence on society that society on it?

Works Cited

"'Black Dahlia's' Love Life Traced in Search for Her Fiendish Murderer: Airline Pilot, Found in South, Cogy on Girl's Avowals, Denies Betrothal. " *Los Angeles Times (1886-Current File)* 18 Jan. 1947, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1986), ProQuest. Web. 29 Oct. 2009.

Chandler, Raymond. "The High Window." *Stories and Early Novels*. New York: Alfred A Knopf. 1942; New York: The Library of America. Print. 1995.

--- "Simple Art of Murder, The." *American Literature Archive, The*. U of Texas. Web. 28 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/chandlerart.html>>.

Cook, David E., "The Black Dahlia: Flawlessly accurate, but overly graphic." *The (Sacramento) Express*. p7. Print. 5 Oct. 2006.

"DOHENY MURDER INQUIRY DISCLOSES CONTROVERSY: Secretary Declared to Have Killed Employer and Sell Following Debate on Latter's Health. " *Los Angeles Times (1886-Current File)* 18 Feb. 1929, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1986), ProQuest. Web. 29 Oct. 2009.

Haycraft, Howard. *Murder for Pleasure: The life and times of the detective story*. New York: Carroll & Graf. Print.

"Journalism as a Detective Agency. " *New York Times (1857-Current file)* 17 Nov. 1872, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006), ProQuest. Web. 28 Oct. 2009.

May, Allan. "Frank Bompensiero San Diego Hit Man, Boss and FBI Informant." *Crime Magazine*. Web. 20 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.crimemagazine.com/bomp.htm>>.

Michels, Jeffrey Elton. *Minds made up: Conviction in fiction and the narrative theory of tolerance*. Diss. Brandeis U, 2001. Dissertations & Theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 29 Oct. 2009.

Moss, Robert F. "Cracking the Cassidy Case." *The Raymond Chandler Website*. Web. 29 October 2009.

"NO INQUEST ON DOHENY: Officials Close Inquiries Murder and Suicide Proved by Investigators of Double Shooting, Home of Multimillionaire's Son Guarded Against Curiosity Seekers. " *Los Angeles Times (1886-Current File)* 19 Feb. 1929, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1986), ProQuest. Web. 29 Oct. 2009.

Nolan, William F. *Black Mask Boys: Masters in the Hard-Boiled School of Detective Fiction, The*. New York: William Marrow and Co. 1985. Print.

Panek, Leroy Lad. *The Origins of the American Detective Story*. Boston: McFarland & Company, 2006. Print.

"Sex Fiend Slaying Victim Identified by Fingerprint Records of F.B.I. : 'Times' Learns Girl Wrote Mother, She Worked in San Diego Hospital. " *Los Angeles Times (1886-Current File)* 17 Jan. 1947, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1986), ProQuest. Web. 29 Oct. 2009.

Sova, Dawn B. *Edgar Allan Poe: A to Z*. New York: Checkmark Books. Print. 2001.

USC 18, § 13-242. Web. "Deprivation of Civil Rights Under Color of Law"

<<http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/18/242.html>>

US Congress. Senate. *The Senate, 1789-1989*, by Robert C. Byrd, S. Doc.100-20, 100th Congress, 1st sess., Vol. 1, 1988. Web. 29 October 2009.

<http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Senate_Investigates_the_Teapot_Dome_Scandal.htm>

Walsh, John E. *Poe the Detective: The Curious Circumstances behind "The Mystery of Marie Roget"* Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers UP. Print. 1968.