

DETECTIVE FICTION

Letter to a Student studying English 666

Eric Wright

DEAR MISS GROBY:

Thank you for your letter asking me for some help with your term paper. I am not sure I can do much for you because I'm afraid I haven't studied the subject in a formal way, and I have practised it only intuitively, feeling my way as I go. Still, I have been asked most of your questions before so I have worked out a few responses, and even in the areas where I have no competence at all perhaps my answers will help you to "limit your topic," as they say in first year. From the range of your questions, I suspect you are still casting about for a subject, let alone narrowing it down to term paper size. But that's your problem. Here goes, then.

Why do I write detective stories?

This is really two questions. The first one is why I write at all. Orwell's answer will do here. First, then, egoism. I want to be known for doing something well. I want my enemies to see me in print. I would have preferred to write great lyric poetry, but it never came so I settled for the detective story. Self-satisfaction is another reason, although this comes largely through the sentence and the paragraph. This is what Orwell calls "aesthetic enthusiasm." As far as I can tell, Orwell's two other reasons, "historical impulse" and "political purpose," play no part in my writing.

Certainly not for money. I have held off from writing novels until I am adequately provided for. I had a greater need to satisfy first: born poor, I am now middle-class, and in the eyes of my relatives extremely successful. But having taken care of my relatives, I am now getting my own back on the rest of the world who snubbed me in childhood (I'm still working off Orwell's essay). I want to emphasize this point; because detective stories are called popular or commercial fiction it is usually assumed that they are written to make money, but in my experience the impulses behind them are the same ones which prompt all writers. This is not to say that money is irrelevant. It is an important index of success, and if there is enough of it I could fly Concorde instead of Wardair. But,

to repeat, like a number of people I know, including some very successful writers in other fields, I have turned to the detective story for fame and aesthetic satisfaction.

The second half of your question concerns why I choose to write detective stories, instead of, say, historical romances. Do I hear a note of wonder, perhaps even judgement, in this question? Writers of detective stories are very sensitive on this point. We are always being condescended to by literary fools who think that detective stories should not be confused with real writing, that they are word-processed by formula on a machine called a hack. Last year one of these people was on a jury to decide the best first novel of the year, and confronted with David Glover's *Precious*, complained that she did not know how to read it. But these people are making a virtue out of ignorance. They don't read detective stories because they have been aware from birth that they are not worth the attention of serious persons. The best reply to them is Jane Austen's in *Northanger Abbey*, made at a time when the novel itself had to be defended against prigs.

I write detective stories because I read them, have always read them, and think the best of them superior to much mainstream fiction. I think that all writers imitate what they admire that they judge is within their scope. I do not write detective stories in my spare time. My hobby is verse. I began writing them by accident. Having written a number of unpublished novels, I was advised by a friendly agent to teach myself something about plotting. It seemed likely that a detective story would be a useful exercise in this regard, so I wrote one. I had wanted to for many years, but thought it might be too difficult, more difficult than a *bildungsroman*, say. Now, I think I came to the detective story at the right time, when I had learned enough about writing from my earlier attempts at more conventional novels.

How do I plan a story?

I begin with the plot, the mystery, if you like, and once I am satisfied that I have a sufficiently strong peg to hang a story on, I begin. The mystery or puzzle, I must confess, is the least of my interests, and one or two reviewers for whom this element is paramount have pointed out the weakness of my plots. So be it. I am always glad to get the solution out of the way, to my satisfaction, at least, so that I can get on with the real writing. But much as I find the construction of the mystery difficult and boring, I have learned not to neglect it. On one occasion I proceeded without a decent mystery, fooling myself that what I had would do, and the result was a disaster that had to be restarted from scratch. But what I have learned from constructing plots is how liberating they are once you have constructed them. When you know exactly how the story ends, it frees you to get on with your work. I expect this is true of all fiction.

Next I need a setting I am very familiar with — Toronto, England, Winnipeg — somewhere I have lived long enough so that I don't have to do any research. It should not surprise anyone that my first murder took place at a Learned Societies' Conference, and the investigation was largely conducted in a Toronto college.

Finally, what interests me most is the story, which in its most limited sense means the killer's motives, but in its widest sense includes the life and times of the chief characters and even a theme. (Is there a hint here of Orwell's "political purpose"?) My first book was about middle-aged men, the victim and the detective. In the second book I got interested in the values of some old men. The third book was a holiday book, a *divertissement*, and right now I'm trying to write a book about lonely women. The sequence, then, is plot, setting, story, but it is the story that matters to me.

Have you tried other forms of fiction?

Yes, I have, and I will again. In my files I have a novel about a young man with an unfortunate childhood, and another about the adventures of a legally-landed immigrant, both of which I think I have abandoned. I have two others which I haven't abandoned, but I don't want to talk about them. I have written some short stories — nice, old-fashioned stories with a twist at the end, and some verse.

Which writers do you admire? Who has influenced you?

I have put these two questions together because they come to the same thing if, as I assume, you mean crime writers. When I sat down to write my first crime story, my heroes were Nicolas Freeling, Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, Reginald Hill and Van de Wetering. Since then I have discovered Patrick McGinley and K. C. Constanini. I doubt if you will find the influence of any of these writers in my stories, but that's your problem. What you *will* find, if you read carefully enough, are some other kinds of influences, not on my stories but on my sentences and paragraphs. I start each day with the ambition of not writing an uninteresting sentence, and when my prose gets soggy I turn to one of several writers for a refresher course in rhythm. These writers are Patrick Campbell, Evelyn Waugh, James Thurber, and Graham Greene, especially the first three pages of *The Human Factor*, from all of whom I can quote from memory. That should tell you something.

But I think you want to know who I do not admire, not so? This is more difficult because the list is very large, and includes most of the practitioners of crime writing, simply because I have not read them. Since I began writing I have been constantly embarrassed by readers who know far more than I do about the

genre, and want to know if I share their taste. Invariably they enthuse about people I have never read. But I am dodging. Who do I not admire that I *have* read? Agatha Christie, for one. With that admission I should add — and all other writers whose chief attraction is the intricacy of the puzzle. I don't care who did it, and if that is the only attraction, then I read ten pages and turn, with the mildest curiosity, to the last three. I don't care who did it in the writers I like, either. I am happy to let the author have his surprise, only asking that he entertain me along the way. What I read for is story, character, and a distinctive voice, just what I read other kinds of fiction for. The test is, can I re-read it? I don't read thrillers, except *Dirty Story* by Eric Ambler. Finally I don't read hard-boiled private-eye stories including *The Maltese Falcon*. At this point you are entitled to observe that I may be in the wrong business, but I am just trying to be straight with you. To say I do not admire these people means only that they lie outside my interests; none of them arouses in me the desire to imitate them, or read any more. The only books I can think of that I admire enormously without wanting to write them are the "witty caper" novels, such as, particularly, *Metzger's Dog* and *Any Four Women Could Rob the Bank of Italy*.

How would you classify your books in critical terms?

Again, this is your job, not mine, but I have wondered about this, and I'll tell you what I think. In reading the academic criticism of the genre I have come across, I have found very little that has been helpful to me in understanding what I am doing. The Freudian criticism is so reductive as to be useless, except to students of psychology, and of the rest, only what is called archetypal criticism have I found to correspond to my own instincts, perhaps because as a student of literature, I stopped reading critical theory after I got through the first essay in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, when I had what I needed. So, using Frye's terms, it seems to me that crime fiction is of three kinds. The first is the romance, which includes all private eye fiction in which the hero is superior to the reader. Robert Parker is perhaps the outstanding crime romance writer practising today. The second kind is low mimetic, or comedy, in which the hero is like us, there is a world in disorder which is corrected by a revelation at the end of the action, and the ending is happy. (I suppose that in the rare crime story where the hero fails to restore order, you get Frye's "irony," but I haven't got a grip on that term yet. The term "naturalism" still makes more sense to me.) Apart from being low mimetic in genre, these stories also lend themselves to humour. This is what I think I am doing — writing low mimetic fiction with some funny bits in it. The third form is melodrama, which is what I would call the thriller. Frye calls melodrama "comedy without the humour" and he would lump all detective fiction under the heading, but he is wrong about this.

What is the difference between detective fiction and mainstream fiction?

This is your most interesting question and I'm still working on it. Some would say there is no difference, and cite *Crime and Punishment* and *Oedipus Rex* as detective stories. But I can't go along with that. I think the answer must lie in the arrangement of the parts of the plot. A detective story stands or falls by the proper arrangement of parts. That is what makes it "play" as actors say. Detective stories go backwards; novels may go forwards. Or try this: at the end of a detective story the reader is surprised; at the end of a novel it is the author who has been surprised. I'm not much help, here, so if you come across a better answer I would be glad if you would let me know.

Would you comment on the current scene in Canada?

No, sorry. I am on good terms with many of the crime writers in this country, so you couldn't trust what I said. Try Robert Weaver's article in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* which, though published a year earlier, supercedes the article in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. But if you are tempted to sum up Canadian crime fiction in your essay, be sure to read first the enormously sensible letter by Peter Robinson in *Books in Canada* (May 1985). It is a bit soon for any talk of assessment.

One last word. When I published my first book, a colleague observed that writing detective fiction is really an old man's game. Her comment hurt at first and I cancelled my reservation at Club Med, but now I think there is meat for you to ponder. How many people of your age write detective stories? Thrillers, yes, but the kind of stuff I write perhaps requires the author to be of mature years, if not actually mature. It may be, too, that the novel really is dead, and the detective story is its epilogue, a last place for us old men to practise an old-fashioned genre.

Good luck with your essay.

PRODUCT OF TURKEY

Wm. B. Robertson

Figs are not attractive fruit
to my Canadian children
unfamiliar fruit they need
explanation before eating