

Emptying The Venetian Vase

The door was opened by a breathless and flustered Mrs. Hudson.

"Forgive me, sir, but there's a gentleman . . ."

He gently placed his hand on her shoulder and eased past her into the room. His "jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting V under the more flexible V of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another smaller, V. His yellow grey eyes were horizontal. The V motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down from high flat temples to a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond Satan".

He sauntered toward a chair. His slow look took in the chemistry table, the bullet-hole V over the fireplace and the tobacco-filled slipper on the mantle. Without an invitation, he seated himself across from his stern-faced host, withdrew a hand-rolled cigarette from behind his ear and lit it. Smiling through the smoke he said, "Hi Sherl, how's business?"

At that moment, it was recorded that Sherlock Holmes bit completely through the stem of his favorite calabash. In St. Mary Mead, a few miles from London, Miss Jane Marple dropped two stitches in the baby blanket she was knitting for the church bazaar. At that very moment Hercule Poirot dropped his cup of tisane and Ellery Queen observed a run in his best silk tie. From that very day, Charlie Chan developed a tic on his otherwise inscrutable face and Lord Peter Wimsey's monocle was out of focus.

Something happened that day that changed the course of crime fiction for all times. Sam Spade had arrived on the fictional scene.

With apologies to the Baker Street Irregulars in our midst, these are fictional characters. My very fictional anecdote is intended to illustrate a point. What I want to talk about is the change that happened in an important and popular branch of world literature. And, most importantly, the change brought by an American writer to an American-born literary genre. In other words, a literary form which was conceived by an American in 1841 and copied widely throughout the literary world and which was, some 80 years later, impacted by an American in a significant and lasting way.

That branch of world literature is called crime fiction. You can parse its foundations (and many have) but the true founder

was a moody, dark poet from Baltimore named Edgar Allen Poe.

Poe's short and tragic life of 40 years began in Baltimore in 1809. The son of theatrical parents, he was orphaned early in life. When he was six, his godfather, John Allan, took him to England for 5 years. After their return to America in 1820 his relationship with Allan steadily declined. Poe entered and left several schools including West Point. He enlisted in the Army but rejected a military career.

In 1831 he published his first book of poems. Supporting himself with work on newspapers and as a critic, he continued to write poems and short tales of horror.

His personal life was filled with sadness. He married his 13-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm in 1836. Eleven years later she died of tuberculosis. He suffered from severe alcoholism. In October of 1849, after a bout of drinking, a friend found him dead.

During his life, Poe's work achieved some recognition. He was admired by the French literary establishment. Poet Charles Baudelaire translated his work. He is credited with influencing the symbolist school of Rimbaud, Mallarme and Valery. Despite an unscrupulous literary executor, his impact on world literature was eventually acknowledged.

His short story, "The Murders In The Rue Morgue", first published in 1841, was the beginning of a long and still vibrant literature which has brought pleasure and insight into human personality. It is not a stretch to say it has enriched world culture.

Poe followed up the "Rue Morgue" story with "The Mystery of Marie Roget" in 1842 and "The Purloined Letter" in 1845. These were the first-ever crime fiction pieces. Each of them describes a crime (two deaths and a stolen letter). In each story a man, Auguste Dupin, sets out to solve the crime. He does not always investigate the scene of the crime; he is not even an official with the responsibility for solving the crime. He is a sort of philosopher who is described as sitting for hours in quiet contemplation in a dark room filled with his pipe smoke.

His general intelligence on many matters is recognized. In the first two stories Dupin has only newspaper accounts as a source of information about the crimes. From careful assimilation of the facts and the use of deduction, he solves the crimes. In "The Purloined Letter" a baffled Prefect of Police presents the evidence to the now renowned Dupin. Dupin visits the scene and solves the crime again with common sense reasoning. When others express incredulity at his conclusion, his step-by-step explanation makes the whole thing seem obvious. It almost undercuts the initial admiration you feel for the accomplishment.

Poe's work was published at a time of fascination with the processes of the mind. The human mind was under examination by physicians, poets, jurists and theologians. It was a time of interest in phrenology and the spirit world. The process of logical thought was popularly called "ratiocination".

In his short life, Poe introduced us to the philosopher-detective (thoughtful, but eccentric), the admiring but unsophisticated partner (sometimes the chronicler of the story), the locked room mystery, the mystery solved by decoding a baffling cryptogram, the dark streets of the city as a setting for crime, the intellectually challenged police, the seemingly-irrelevant remark which later proves crucial, and other core ingredients of countless pieces of crime fiction published since then.

Poe's reputation at the time he first published crime fiction rested primarily with the horror story. It was after he published "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque" that he began writing his stories of ratiocination.

The horror stories shocked his readers (and shock us today) because they bring into a world of reason and order the disturbing and upsetting unreason and disorder. The horror stories usually leave you with that sense of disorder. But the Dupin stories went one step further. They introduced a character who could return the world to sanity through the use of reason. Years later the critic Joseph Wood Krutch said: "Poe invented the detective story in order that he might not go mad."

Poe single-handedly presented these hallmarks of crime fiction to us. Quickly, the form spread around the world. It was widely copied and developed. It met with considerable success.

In the years that followed, amateur detectives and their often-admiring (sometimes skeptical) partners brought reason to bear on the crimes which threatened to upset the order we find or want to find in the world. Holmes and Watson, Poirot and Captain Hastings, Ellery Queen and his father Inspector Richard Queen, Father Brown and Flambeau, Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, Peter Wimsey and Bunker, Miss Marple and various Detective Inspectors, delighted us with tales of ratiocination, all in the Poe mold.

The history of the development of the literature of crime fiction during this period is worth an essay of its own. One story illustrates: In 1889 a representative of the American publisher Lippincott came to London to visit his overseas office. Before he returned to America, he was advised to meet with two British authors who had demonstrated some promise. One had published a short piece earlier which he had great difficulty marketing. He had given up the idea of writing. The publisher invited the two to dinner and encouraged them to resume their

efforts. Both reacted enthusiastically. One of them, Arthur Conan Doyle, sent the publisher the manuscript of "The Sign of Four" which Lippincott published first in his magazine and then as a novel. It was Doyle's first success. Incidentally, the other author at the dinner party was Oscar Wilde. He sent Lippincott "The Picture of Dorian Gray".

The fiction detective began to pop up in traditional literature. Dickens' "Martin Chuzzlewit" and "Bleak House" have detective characters who contribute significantly to the story. Indeed, Dickens' "Mystery of Edwin Drood", the famously unfinished last work, could be called a detective novel.

In 1860 Wilkie Collins, a friend of Dickens, published "The Woman In White", a mystery novel of substitute identity. It was followed by the more famous "The Moonstone" in 1868.

In 1891 George Newnes took his profits from a successful magazine publishing business and founded a new British magazine he called "The Strand". It was an eclectic publication designed to appeal to a wide audience. The first issue sold out at 300,000 copies. Five months later, Mr. Newnes sent Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle of 2 Devonshire Place, London W, a check for 30 guineas for the first of six short stories.

It was quickly apparent that Mr. Newnes had hit on something. Strand circulation almost doubled to 500,000. Foreign publishers (including America's Ladies Home Journal and McClures) courted Doyle.

What developed was a story which was usually short on characterization but long on ingenuity. It featured a crime (or attempted crime), a problem, and a solution reached through the skill of a detective; all of this within the confines of the short story form. The detective was a protector of the innocent, a watchdog against evil.

In 1922 the editors of an influential American magazine called The Smart Set were looking for fresh new writers. H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan had provided a place for new young writers to try for a market among sophisticated readers. Dashell Hammett had submitted several short pieces to The Smart Set which were published.

Although they didn't want their friends to know it, Mencken and Nathan were also publishers of several cheap pulp magazines, among them The Black Mask. Mask had established a reputation for crime fiction of the ratiocination school. Mencken showed a copy of the pulp to Dashell Hammett and urged him to write for it.

Hammett was appalled and disgusted with the magazine. The stories were all cheap, florid imitations of the Doyle school. He knew at first hand, the real world of crime. For some seven

years he had been a Pinkerton detective. He had solved real crimes using real tools of detection.

Samuel Dashell Hammett was born May 27, 1894 in Maryland. His family was poor and when he was 14 Samuel left school to help support the family. Over the next seven years he worked as a freight clerk, a stevedore, a timekeeper in a machine shop, a yardman, a cannery worker, a junior clerk in an advertising agency and as a nail-machine operator in a box factory. In later years he recounted all this and said, "usually I was fired."

In 1915 he was out of work. A newspaper advertisement asked for someone with "wide work experience and the freedom to travel". Intrigued, Hammett found himself at the Baltimore offices of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The Agency regarded his peripatetic work career as a plus. They wanted young men who could respond to all situations.

The Agency was founded in 1850 by Glasgow-born Allan Pinkerton. He arrived in America to take up a career as a barrel maker in Chicago but practiced "amateur crook catching" on the side. The mayor of Chicago appointed him a city police detective. But the enterprising Pinkerton resigned and founded his national agency.

It is hard for us to understand the role of this private national detective agency today. For one thing, there was no government-run national police agency. The Army was not a practical enforcer of criminal law. Yet the population was becoming increasingly mobile. Commit a crime and get out of town. Your only worry was the occasional bounty hunter.

Pinkerton filled the gap. His customers were not only police agencies in cities and states, but he was hired by the federal government and private companies. Although the Pinkerton agency survives to this day, it is no longer in the business of enforcing criminal law. In an article in The New Republic in 1933, Murray Kempton claimed that the first nationalization of private business by the United States government was when they created the Federal Bureau of Investigation and ran Pinkerton out of business.

At the time of Hammett's employment in 1915 (at a starting salary of \$21 a month) the agency had been functioning for over six decades and was operating out of twenty offices across the nation. Its history was wild and colorful. Pinkerton operatives had trailed outlaws across the badlands of the Wild West, infiltrated Confederate lines in the service of Abraham Lincoln, pursued lawbreakers into the jungles of Central America, policed boxing matches, traced stolen gold and assisted law enforcement officers throughout the land. In fifteen years they had apprehended over a thousand forgers, burglars, sneak thieves and hold-up men.

To demonstrate their versatility, Pinkerton called his men "operatives". His advertisements featured a large human eye with the slogan "We Never Sleep". Thus was born the phrase "a private eye" to describe a detective-for-hire.

Samuel Hammett found a home. He worked for Pinkerton a total of seven years. He built a reputation as a crack detective, especially known for his ability to shadow suspects despite his conspicuous height and shock of premature white hair. He was so good he trained other operatives in the skill. Later captured, some subjects did not recognize him, even though he had been within sight of them for several days.

Hammett's Pinkerton career took him across several states. On one case he was required to be hospitalized for three months to gather evidence on his roommate. He went underground several times posing as a criminal. While accompanying a group of operatives sent to arrest a gang of dynamite thieves, he was caught up in a fight and was stabbed in the leg.

He found humor in some of his experiences. There was the time when he was following a suspect. The man was obviously lost. Hammett stepped forward and put him back on course and then resumed the shadow. There was the time a local sheriff gave him a full description of a fugitive: color of hair, height, weight, color of eyes, known haunts. When he caught the man Hammett said, "he neglected to mention one helpful thing: the man had only one arm."

One case had consequences in Hammett's later life. He was assigned to the Anaconda Copper case in Montana. The company hired Pinkerton to break up a labor organizing attempt. "Union busting" was a Pinkerton specialty. "Back then I had no political conscience", he said. "I just did my job." But in later years when he became a life-long champion of social justice causes, his friends said he traced his feelings back to his union-busting days.

Hammett resigned from Pinkerton in 1918. He joined the Army but became a victim of the influenza epidemic. He had a "tubercular chest" which plagued him all his life.

After recovery, he returned to Pinkerton. He trapped a forger in Paco, Washington, ran down a jewelry thief in Stockton, California, arrested an Indian for murder in Arizona, and tracked a fugitive swindler in Seattle. He shadowed the actress and comedienne Fanny Brice for several weeks when Pinkerton was trying to find her boyfriend Nicky Arnstein.

The strenuous life of a Pinkerton Op finally proved too arduous for Hammett. He resigned and entered a hospital for lung treatment. During his frequent hospitalizations, he read widely

on diverse subjects. His self-education was fueled by boredom, but it paid off in his later writing and political careers.

Clearly he needed to find a new vocation. During his Pinkerton days, Hammett had been admired for a clear, direct writing style in his many written reports. He decided a career in newspaper reporting was attractive. He enrolled in a technical school writing class and began submitting short pieces to magazines as a writing exercise. This was the writing which attracted Mencken's attention.

Mencken's offer appealed to him: a life of writing was easier on his body. He decided that if he was to write about crime, he would make it true to life as he had learned it. Years later a critic put it: "He was not a writer learning to write about private detection, he was a private detective learning how to write."

Hammett's first detective was the Continental Op, a member of the fictional Continental Detective Agency. The Pinkerton office where Hammett first worked was located in the Continental building in Baltimore. He wrote some three dozen Op stories which were published. They were admired for their realism and new approach.

For a year or two he earned a good living at writing. He knew his stories had much to do with the success of Black Mask and asked for a raise. Refused, he left them and got a job writing advertising copy for a jewelry store. On the side he took book criticism and short article jobs. But the editors who recognized his talent convinced him to write a novel. The result was "The Red Harvest" published in 1929 by Knopf. It was a violent saga of a western town, Poisonville, riddled with corrupt government, crime and violence. The Op gradually drains the poison from the town in scenes of violence seldom written in popular main-line fiction of the day. It received critical acclaim from serious literary magazines as well as the pulp reviewers.

That success inspired "The Dain Curse", a second novel featuring the Continental Op. It was more violent and disturbing than the first novel, but was again lauded for its realism and writing style.

Emboldened by success and encouraged by his publisher, Hammett dropped the Op and created a new character and placed him in a novel which became a classic, not only in crime fiction, but in American literature. The detective protagonist was Sam Spade and the novel was "The Maltese Falcon".

Falcon was a story about a two-man detective agency. Spade and his partner, Miles Archer, are hired by a beautiful young woman to find her missing sister. Archer is killed and Spade sets

out to find his murderer. Along the way he becomes involved in the hunt for a statue of a bird encrusted with rare jewels.

Black Mask ran the novel in serial form and Knopf published the entire novel in 1930. It was an instant critical and popular success. Town and Country magazine said, "Until Mr. Hammett appeared, no American writer had taken the detective novel seriously enough to do more than ape the outstanding characteristics of the British school." In England the Times Literary Supplement said: "This is not only probably the best detective story we have ever read, it is an exceedingly well written novel." Judge magazine said: "He writes with a lead pipe and stands alone as ace shocker. . .The writing is better than Hemingway, since it conceals not softness, but hardness." Knopf quoted the Hemingway comparison in their ads and added a comment by the respected critic Carl Van Vechten, "Hammett is raising the detective story to that plane to which Alexandre Dumas raised the historical novel."

The enthusiastic reception for his novel changed Hammett's life. He dropped all other writing plans, Although he was strongly pressured by the pulps, he wrote just one more Continental Op story to satisfy a Black Mask contract, He began work on another novel featuring a new detective, John Gould. The novel, The Glass Key, was praised and considered successful. But Hammett considered it "hurried" and not as well polished as he would have liked. The reason was pressure from his publisher and agent. Hollywood called. It was there during various attempts to film his novels that he met Lillian Hellman. Although never married to each other, they lived together, off and on, in a relationship much like the one Hammett described in his last published novel, The Thin Man.

Few movie buffs remember the novel, The Thin Man. But many recall the motion picture version. The tall, handsome, urbane protagonist played by William Powell (a Hammett look-alike in life) and his glib wise-cracking wife (played by Myrna Loy) were carbon copies of the Hammett-Hellman duo.

By the summer of 1934, at the age of forty, Hammett's career was over. In just twelve years Hammett had published over ninety pieces of fiction. He had also written a dozen nonfiction pieces and well over a hundred book reviews.

Hammett did not make a conscious decision to quit writing. For the rest of his life he considered himself a working writer, just about to publish something new. But in fact he never again published a piece of fiction. He did accept lucrative contracts in Hollywood to help convert his and other works for the screen. But his serious writing instincts seemed satisfied by his serving as in-house critic, editor and advisor to Hellman whose career began to blossom at this time.

The impact of Hammett's work was profound. The world of crime fiction would never be the same. However, it is misleading to leave the impression that from this time all crime fiction fit the Hammett mold. Crime fiction with roots in the Poe-inspired tradition is published and read to this day. As our culture grows and shapes all writing, it has influenced this genre too. But the Poe roots are discernable.

So, what was this big change? How different are the two styles? Can we tell them apart? It is easy to describe the difference between pre- and post-Hammett writing. It is not always as easy to categorize any particular writer.

Let's examine the difference:

In the pre-Hammett world of crime fiction, the detective was an unusual man. He was intelligent, probably eccentric, and was removed from the quotidian world. He was approached with problems, given information and solved the problem eventually, sometimes without visiting the scene. He was aided by a sidekick, an amanuensis, who usually admired the detective. He did the legwork, brought information to the detective and provided a sounding board. Many times he was the voice of the story. The detective was usually admired after the solution.

Before Hammett the crime involved murder by poison, exotic animals, or induced heart attacks. Above all, the crime was "clean". if possible, and we did not witness the event. We heard the details in a sanitized version. The motive was often money or a legacy or inheritance of property or titles.

If the detective confronted the guilty person, he was usually accompanied by the police who arrested the guilty party. If congratulated, the detective responded with gracious modesty.

The conclusion to a pre-Hammett story brought order back to an orderly world. Once more, normalcy prevailed. The community could resume a satisfactory life.

Characteristics of stories from the Hammett school are quite different:

The detective is one of the people. He is clever rather than intelligent. His world experience is extensive. He has lived among the people. He may have been tainted with crime in his personal life. He operates alone; he may have friends, but he rarely confides in them. If he has family he is probably alienated from them. He gathers clues from personal observation or one-on-one interrogation. He has first-hand experience in crime solving. When the solution is presented he is usually not credited. Indeed, many times, he is disliked by others who are proved inadequate or inconvenienced by his actions. If pressed he may say, "I only did what had to be done."

Murder in the Hammett world is usually violent. A gun is most often involved. If not it may be an implement like a knife or an axe. We are sometimes present at the scene of the crime. If not, we probably learn some of the shocking details. Many of the plots take place in the city, a place of corruption and violence. Money, as a motive, comes from drug deals, bribery or thievery.

At the conclusion of the story the detective almost always confronts the perpetrator face-to-face, often without authority present. A struggle may take place and either the detective "brings him in" or administers justice on the spot.

In the Hammett world, the end of the story rarely brings a happier world. It is the same dark place it was before. The crime presented at the beginning of the story has been solved or perhaps, resolved. But not much else has changed. The detective's motive is a fee or vengeance.

Terence Faherty, a local crime fiction author, said: "Before Hammett, writers said, 'Who among these otherwise innocent people committed this crime?' After Hammett they said: 'Who among all these guilty people committed this particular crime?'"

Perhaps the best description of this literary phenomenon came from Raymond Chandler. In 1944 the Atlantic Monthly asked Chandler to write an article on detective fiction. He wrote an essay, "The Simple Act Of Murder". It traces the origins of this "new fiction" from the Black Mask days. In it he recognizes Hammett as the father of it all. He said "Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it in the alley; it doesn't have to stay there forever, but it was a good idea. . .Hammett gave murder back to the people who do it for a reason, not just to provide a corpse and with the means at hand, not with hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they are, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes. . .He was spare, frugal, hard-boiled, but he did over and over again what only the best writers can ever do at all. He wrote scenes that seemed never to have been written before."

In 1933 Chandler began writing for Black Mask. He seized the chance to write in the Hammett style and brought it to a level which some consider the best it ever was. Like Hammett before him, the lure of the novel was irresistible. Before his career was over he had written several classic American novels, "The Long Goodbye", "Farewell My Lovely", and "The Lady In The Lake".

In 1939, Chandler published his first novel, "The Big Sleep". The second paragraph of the novel contains one of my favorite pieces of crime fiction writing. Please indulge me when I quote it. Chandler's protagonist, Christopher Marlowe, has

been summoned to the mansion of a wealthy man who wants to hire him to find his missing daughter. Marlowe has just entered the mansion and is describing the scene:

"The main hallway of the Sternwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance door, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the visor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying."

Let me make several points about this paragraph: First of all, it's just a good piece of writing. Secondly, it introduces you to the principal character. Marlowe is observant, witty and a little mouthy. But, like many good writers before him, Chandler telegraphs his story in this one paragraph. You may not realize it yet, but Marlowe is the knight, he will untie the knots only to find that the lady is part of the corruption.

An interesting question: what happened to the successful writers of crime fiction when Hammett was published? Did they notice or react to this challenge of a new format? There is evidence that some of them did:

Agatha Christie was at the top of her career at the time Hammett first published. There are some critics who say that two of her subsequent novels reflected the Hammett influence. All of Christie's novels introduce a crime into a closed group (a country house, a hotel, a train). We soon discover that each of the characters in the closed location had a motive to commit the crime. In 1934 Christie published "Murder On The Orient Express", a novel in which it is revealed that all the characters on the train committed the crime. In 1940 she published "And Then There Were None" in which all the principal characters were victims. There are those who will say that this was Christie acknowledging the Hammett world where all are guilty and all eventually come to a sad end.

Christie's Poirot and Marple changed. Poirot dropped his relationship with Captain Hastings and became more of a "private eye". Miss Marple knitted on but seemed a little more rooted in reality.

Dorothy Sayers changed her Peter Wimsey stories abruptly in the Thirties. She married him off to a brilliant woman who began to outshine him in the novels before Sayers abandoned crime fiction all together.

Patrick Quentin, Edmund Crispin, Rex Stout and Margery Allingham all offer examples of novels and stories changed to be more "realistic" and believable. Stout's Nero Wolfe stories showed a dramatic shift caused by the Hammett revolution. Wolfe's sidekick, Archie Goodwin, became so much a tough private eye in the Marlowe mold, that he stole the spotlight from Wolfe in the later novels.

With World War II the crime fiction writer faced a readership now dealing with the reality of violence and evil on a world-wide scale. Those who tried to maintain the aloof, effete dandy as a detective either modified their character or, in many cases, abandoned him. One who resisted was Ellery Queen.

Ellery Queen was listed as the author and protagonist of an immensely popular series of novels and stories. Actually they were written by two men, Frederic Dannay and Manfred Lee. After the growing popularity of the Hammett genre they moved the locale of the Queen stories to a small upstate New York town and tried to toughen up their lead character without upsetting their readers. It was not entirely successful and the series eventually ended.

No more dramatic confrontation between the two worlds of writing could have been planned than the occasion when Dashell Hammett appeared on the lecture stage with the authors of the Queen series. In a Q and A session, Hammett asked the authors, "Mr. Queen, would you be good enough to explain your famous character's sex life, if any?" The authors response was that a wife, mistress or even love affair planted on their character after all these years would upset their readers.

The pre-Hammett days, often called the Golden Age of crime fiction, ended in the 1930s and 40's. The post-Hammett or hard-boiled school, probably had its last great practitioner in Ross McDonald who worked in the 1960s and 70's.

Both traditions continue to flourish but with embellishments that reflect new times, new problems and new technologies. Novels of straight detection by P. D. James continue to please fans of that genre. They do rely more on psychological factors than the old school, but that is only a factor of the times in which they are written.

I like to think that, if he were alive today, Hammett would look with delight on the Harry Bosch novels of Michael Connelly and recognize his literary son and heir.

And the entire crime fiction field continues to grow in all directions. There is a wonderful world of women authors today: Ruth Rendell, Sue Grafton and Donna Leon show that women writers can be as tough and jaded as their male counterparts.

Publishers know all about these trends. Hard cover books followed by their paperback versions appear in alarming numbers. Has there been a New York Times best-seller list published in the last 20 years without a crime fiction title in the top twenty? It has been said that two books of crime fiction are published every day in the United States.

Literary critics embrace crime fiction and have written lengthy essays on what is read and why. W. H. Auden, the poet and literary critic wrote about "the dialectic of guilt and innocence" in crime fiction. He said, "I suspect that the typical reader of detective fiction is, like myself, a person who suffers from a sense of sin". Jacques Barzun discusses crime fiction as an important literary movement in his magnificent survey of western culture.

The quite vocal exception was Edmund Wilson. He wrote "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" and "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?". Wilson thought crime fiction was formulaic and not very well written. When he published these feelings he faced such a strong reaction he responded defensively, "please do not write and tell me I have not read the right books" and "people ask me how much I am being paid by the non-detective fiction book publishers".

David Lehman in his excellent book "The Perfect Murder" tells us why crime fiction has enjoyed such high praise from critics: "Why has the detective novel been the darling of successive generations of highbrow critics? In part because the conventions of the genre are intrinsically interesting, in part because the form has attracted so many estimable talents, and in part because the ardor of its readership demands attention as a phenomenon in its own right. There is one other reason as well. Virtually all detective novels implicitly and automatically flatter the literary critic, whose own work so frequently resembles a species of detection".

Tracing future crime fiction trends, examining why we read crime fiction, predicting the future of the craft are all topics for other essays. They will be written. They will tell a story of an exciting literary form that began with the writing of a Baltimore-born American poet in 1841, that blossomed throughout the literary world and was impacted in 1930 by an unemployed Baltimore-born drifter who poured murder out of the Venetian vase and threw it in the alley.

- H. Richard Rosengarten

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