Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

In introducing "Across the Curriculum with Detective Fiction for Young People and Adults," I have no temptation to change the title of the seminar. All the authors in this volume took very seriously the selling point of the seminar, which was that detective fiction is not only fun to read—which makes it great for reluctant readers—but sets more parts of the brain to work than nearly any other kind of fiction that gets assigned. The curriculum units written for this seminar could certainly be arranged in more than one way. Three units each, for example, focus on Walter Mosley and Arthur Conan Doyle, respectively, and there are other patterns too among the authors chosen, but it just didn't seem as close to what really was on all the fellows' minds to arrange them this way. Their main concern, as was likewise the case in my children's literature seminar last summer, was just getting their students to the point where they're willing to read by drawing on various parts of the school curriculum, not just the standard "English" rubric. I've ordered the table of contents, therefore, around different angles of approach to this objective: 1) Reluctant readers (two units); 2) logical reasoning (two units); 3) creative writing (one units); ethnicity, identity, and community ethics (four units).

Jessica Colbert has the daunting task of teaching slow readers and bright students who are maladjusted, all in the same middle school classroom. For the purpose she has chosen one novel, Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*. While this novel is meant for adults, it is technically—according to word-scanning techniques—written at the fourth or fifth grade level, and Colbert means to exploit this range of appeals while preparing reading and even audio exercises that suit her students' range of abilities. **Cathy Kinzler** is a school librarian who spends time in the library encouraging groups of reluctant readers. She has chosen a short novel for adolescents about a teenage fratricide that a friend of both brothers is reluctant to bear witness to for a variety of reasons. (Reluctance to "snitch" was on several teachers' minds, and this a theme Kinzler shares with Shaub.'s unit described below.)

Two teachers took a special interest in the potential of detective fiction for enhancing skills in logical and inferential reasoning. **Ella Boyd** is a seventh grade science teacher whose first task is to teach students who have had no exposure to science something about the scientific method, especially the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning. Her main commitment is to science, of course, but she intends to introduce both some three-minute mystery problems for younger readers by Donald Sobol and some Sherlock Holmes stories to illustrate her lessons, and to do some across-the-curriculum teaching while she's at it. **Mary Lou Narowski** will also use Sherlock Holmes as her main vehicle, but her focus apart from reading, and to enliven reading, is the encouragement of students to invent their own games of detection, at three different levels of sophistication according to their respective talents. The guidelines for these exercises, and their payoff, constitute the unit's unique contribution.

As a teacher of creative writing, **Deborah Dabbs** had worked reluctantly with the curricular directive from on high to get her students writing narratives on the "epic" model—whatever "epic" in this context might be supposed to mean. Not surprisingly, she leapt at the chance to use detective fiction for this same purpose, and she has written a unit using a variety of short detective stories together with Christie's *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as models both for free composition and for exercises such as rewriting outcomes and writing plausible first sentences.

Bonnee Breese hopes to teach primarily African-American high school students lessons across the curriculum in identity, community ethics, and understanding historical context by using a sequence of novels by Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and Chester Himes. Historical specificity can be taught through Mosley's sequence of Easy Rawlins novels from postwar into the Watts years and through Himes's late Harlem Renaissance ethos, while Neely focuses not only racism but infra-racial tensions, especially in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. **Laura Zoladz** uses Mosely, Neely, Tony Hillerman, and Sharyn McCrumb to reinforce a high school curriculum in American literature that is meant to examine such topics as the American Dream. She sees these authors as offering excellent ways to imbue such topics with nuanced skepticism—especially nuanced in the case of Hillerman. **William Lewis** too is interested in a writer about Native American matters, the Wyoming-based Craig Johnson, but the novel he chooses for his unit entails the visit of Johnson's detectives to Philadelphia, where Lewis teaches. Hence his unit is simultaneously an introduction to the form of detective fiction and an examination of Philadelphia as neighborhood and familiar backdrop. Finally, **Christine Shaub** teaches vocational-technical students a course that prepares them for paralegal work. She is concerned that their views of snitching can scarcely allow them to be objective in their chosen field, so she has decided to stage a series of pointed conversations about the social circumstances of witnesses and the withholding of evidence, using a sequence of young adult novels that focus this issue as starting points for discussion.

How to "hook" students on reading? These units offer nine very promising possibilities.

Paul H. Fry