7.

Finding the Key: Teaching Detective Fiction in the Developmental Classroom

Pamela M. Price-Anisman

When I proposed to create a teaching unit on detective fiction, I suspected that, for the first time in many years, I would have to read several books in order to gain a sense of this unfamiliar genre before I began to teach it to my students. I was dead wrong. I discovered that I would have to read many (oh yes—many many) varied examples of detective fiction. First, there were novels that served as a foundation for my own growing expertise but that might not be approachable or appropriate for the developmental classroom. Second, there were books that would become classroom reading as a result of my research. The seminar, therefore, became the landscape for my own investigative work. I would first become both student and detective, solving an unfolding series of questions about the body of literature. I would then become a guide who would translate this information into the keys that would lead my students to their own individual "puzzling out." The clues that screamed out, "This project will be a breeze," were all red herrings.

After several major metamorphic changes, the present unit has become a distillation and extension of my participation in Professor Robin W. Winks' seminar, "Society and the Detective Novel." At the outset, an attempt will be made to define the importance of the detective fiction genre as a teaching tool in relation to both style and social commentary. Novels that represent certain traditions (the "classics," if you will) will be briefly overviewed, offering any teacher an opportunity to establish a working knowledge of the genre.

The narrative that follows is an adaption of the original unit. Designed to be immediately accessible and useful both to the author and to other educators, the complete project includes additional material helpful to an audience largely made up of middle and high school teachers. The classroom version incorporates sections on four books that are discussed both as extensions of stated definitions and as individual (and teachable) works

of fiction; all four will be mentioned but only two will be characterized in any detail. A collection of original classroom activities, also not included here, follows the narrative, forming a "hands on" companion piece to it. The activities serve two purposes parallel to the material presented here. First, they include specific passages from the books that are discussed which highlight certain "investigative" skills students need to develop. The second function of the activities is to reinforce recognition of general characteristics of detective fiction that they can employ while reading independently. A list of "detective terminology" was compiled and is included in the original text that establishes a working vocabulary for the genre.

Robin W. Winks, seminar leader, detective fiction puzzle-solver and author of (among many others) *Modus Operandi,* defines mystery detective fiction as "the underliterature of our culture." If we do not read it, "In the end, we are missing out on an entire set of clues. . .which most reveal the modus operandi of modern America."[1] Delving into the dark side of human nature becomes a necessary ingredient in the mystery novel which, "though a puzzle, is primarily an investigation of character in relation to crime as society defines it."[2]

Most inner-city students exist in a world of violence, deprivation, dashed hopes. These same students have strong opinions about right and wrong, crime and criminals, what is just and what is evil. For most, whatever a person can get away with is fair play—as long as no one in the teenager's own family is hurt or victimized or insulted. Crime, in the abstract, is almost seductive. Beating the system has always been a popular—albeit risky—game.

Without realizing it, these young adults perpetuate what they wish they could leave behind. But where does the cycle begin? Or end? With the individual? His actions? His society? All such questions form the real basis of good detective fiction. If we are lucky, students will begin to notice that the lines are quite fuzzy in what they read. The hunter becomes the hunted; the detective becomes the criminal; the criminal ends up the victim. New lines should emerge that are less reassuring (because they are less definitive) but more realistic. This last part sounds like I believe the good guys, the teachers, always win in the end. I know better than that; but at least we have to give ourselves a running start.

Our urban society is what the students think they know the best. Much of their self-image is built around talking "street talk" and on being "street wise." Cops and criminals, private eyes and perpetrators—all have mistakenly assumed that outsmarting or outliving each other will lead to success. Good detective fiction makes certain that winning the game does not happen too quickly, if it happens at all (and then, at what price).

The detective novel usually is an author's exercise in formula writing.

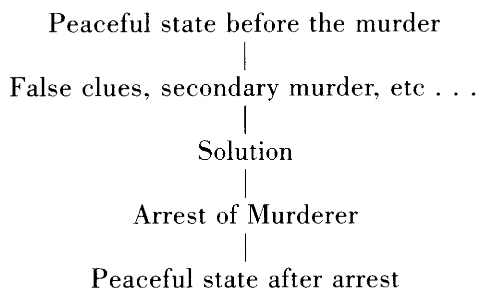
This limitation is also one of its strong advantages in the developmental classroom. The student's sense of accomplishment is tied to recognizing the expected steps in each work; once the how and why of the solved crime is understood, the student knows that he/she has successfully completed the assigned trick. We are not talking miracles here; developmental readers often thrive in a structured environment. In this unit, the "safe" environment offered is the technical landscape of the novels.

Mystery and detective fiction are more reminiscent of the puzzles and riddles of childhood than any other form of fiction; the secret is in the solution—and the comprehension of that solution. The creation of any puzzle begins with its conclusion; the whole is then divided into material that may or may not be rearranged but is always there to be retrieved. The child whose jigsaw puzzle is missing even one small piece has every right to call foul. The dedicated crossword puzzler is also justifiably horrified when a clue is genuinely misleading or an answer incorrectly spelled. No one is demanding straightforwardness in what students read; however, clues should be cleverly mysterious without ever cheating the reader. The underlying and, therefore, controlling factor is fair play: what the reader discovers must contribute to, not block, the solution. If the student can have confidence that, in each work he reads, the puzzle pieces will eventually fall into place, he will no doubt try his hand at the stuff more than once.

Numerous critics have written analyses of the structure of detective fiction. Most argue that the genre is skeletal. What hangs on the outside makes each work unique; the inside process, however, follows a fairly consistent pattern. The construction of most mystery and detective novels revolves around four basic elements. The author begins with the statement of the problem (the crime). Next, he must create, invent, or produce the information (clues) during an inquiry that leads to a solution of the problem. Then, the author completes the investigation at the point where the investigator declares that he or she knows the answer. More often than not, the novel will continue into a final phase: proving the accuracy of the declared solution to the reader through a careful explanation of the evidence.[3]

In most detective fiction, the major crime committed is against a person because (a) it more personally engages the fears and sensibilities of the reader, and (b) it naturally produces a general cry for an investigation. Murder is a most useful crime in detective fiction because it destroys the victim, forcing society, and, by extension, the reader, to seek the offender and to reconstruct the crime. The act of murder also creates a villain who is desperately searching for a way out of the web of disaster he has produced. The stakes are obviously quite high. Furthermore, in good detective fiction, the deadly game is played out by two adversaries who

are equally clever, relentless, and seemingly untouchable. In thematic terms, the two players become the symbols of good and evil, morality and immorality, law and lawlessness, in modern society. The villain and detective are linked by the body of evidence that surrounds the crime. They approach that information from opposing positions: "The detective, of his own free will, discovers and reveals what the murderer, of his own free will, tries to conceal." W.H. Auden's essay, "The Guilty Vicarage," establishes a parallel between Aristotle's theory of tragedy and accepted elements of detective fiction. The most important common elements are, "Concealment (the innocent seem guilty and the guilty seem innocent) and Manifestation (the real guilt is brought to consciousness)." Preoccupation with the fine line that exists between guilt and innocence is woven into the fabric of the detective fiction formula. Auden's more formal diagram for the genre follows:



Here, too, the reader does not know the whole truth until after the detective and criminal have their opportunity for a final confrontation. Before the puzzle is solved, discovery of much of the evidence occurs out of sequence, creating the illusion of incomplete data and uncertain progress. After the solution has been stated, the detective can then calmly recreate the crime logically and efficiently for the eager reader turned participant. Emotionally and intellectually, the audience is finally satisfied.[4]

The teacher understands the duality involved in the genre. On one side, there is the dramatic action-filled effect of the story itself that is so attractive to the students. On the flip side, there is the logical problem beneath the narrative that may not have been solved at the same time the solution was revealed. For the developmental reader, the investigator bridges this gap in the reader's ability to understand fully; the detective is viewed as the hero of the action side of the novel and also as the guide that leads the student to the recognition of how and why the crime happened in the first place. The formula can lead the developmental reader to a real sense of independence as a direct result of the main character's ability to answer those questions that otherwise might have fallen back on the teacher or, more commonly, might have remained unanswered

altogether. Puzzle pieces now in place, the student feels, and rightfully so, that he or she has seen the process through to the end.

In our seminar, Professor Winks posed the questions of who and what to read. The first task was to create a common background for the group. We read representative types from the four major schools of detective fiction. Any educator interested in doing a thorough job in the classroom should read examples of each type. A bibliography is included in the original format of this teaching unit that suggests appropriate titles.

Wilkie Collins began what Gavin Lambert calls the "first map . . . of a country in which the dominant reality is criminal."[5] Detective fiction began with sensational blends of both good and evil in both hunters and hunted. Collins led to the first traditional mystery school: the English country-house novel where snobbery and manners are mixed with violence. Of course, Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers reign here; however, their works are too remote, both in terms of language and traditions, to be taught to lower level readers. The spy novel, made famous by John Buchan in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, plunges a hero into a totally foreign environment where he must rely on his own resources and no one else to accomplish his mission. Again, the language and the shifting shades of truth make the vast majority of espionage fiction too difficult to teach (although Ian Fleming novels remain popular because of the Bond films).

The third type, the American hard-boiled mystery, has often been transferred to film. Chandler's Phillip Marlowe is the classic example of the tough outsider whose only concern is the search for the truth in a landscape that is "populated by real criminals and real policemen, reflecting some of the tensions of the time . . . and imbued with the disenchantment peculiar with postwar American writing."[6]

Finally, there are the English and American procedural novels that draw heavily on the actual day-to-day police routine that leads the tough cop to his solution. Usually well researched, these novels are overwhelmingly detailed, and, of course, gory. Students may well be attracted to the violence; however, as teachers, we must be careful not to select novels with particularly graphic material that might overshadow all other aspects of the work.

The novels chosen as texts for the classroom fall loosely into these categories. The importance for the teacher is not so much the label itself as the tradition behind the label. Not all popular fiction emerged from the typewriters with no sense of literary or cultural history.

What title would fall under the curtain of "the good mystery?" Isn't, after all, the child's hand clutching at a windowsill in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* both the invitation and key to the solution of a puzzle? Or the attempted murder of the heroine's lover, Rochester, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*—doesn't the crime fuel the mystery at the very core

of the novel? What could be more necessary, indeed, than the discovery by a king of another king's murderer? In *Oedipus Rex*, isn't it the solution of a crime that triggers all that occurs? Where am I leading? Follow the obvious clues.

There are literally thousands of novels to choose from that would include some form of mystery or detective story. Avoiding the obvious choices (Doyle, Poe, Christie) that students might choose to eventually read on their own, I have concentrated on one "laying down of clues classic" whose investigator is not a detective by trade, and three fairly contemporary novels where the culture will be fairly recognizable to the reader and where one or more crucial characters (victim, detective, or suspect) are the same general age as developmental seniors (18-20). Not one of the four would be judged to contain evidence of questionable teaching content. There is virtually no romance, no sex, no drugs. There is plenty of violence on or beneath the surface of all four; we do a disservice if we fail to recognize and confront what is also a major theme in our lives.

The popular detective novel is not a replacement for major works of literature. Detective fiction does offer the opportunity to complete successfully a longer work and then offers hope that a second can be read using skills learned from the first. There is a compromise for the die-hards who want to tread the beaten path once again. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is an excellent introduction to detective fiction that also adheres to "enduring" literary requirements. Obviously, background material on lawyers and members of Parliament in a socially stratified 19th century England will help students. Discussing "nice" streets versus run-down sections of a city—and how close these two sections will be—will help to clarify the essential element of the setting in the novel. Most important, the trained observations of an amateur detective (and the instinctual observations of a close friend) should help to make the students careful readers. We cannot expect critical judgments from people who have trouble reading complex sentences. We can expect that details will be noted and that opinions will be formed. The first section of *Jekyll and Hyde* should be read, if possible, aloud to the class. True, the teacher colors the interpretation with her/his oral emphases; better too many hints than none at all. Students cannot solve a puzzle if they haven't spied the pieces. No one is overlooking another obvious clue to the success of this venture; many students know who Jekyll/Hyde is from movies or television. But, I'll bet that not one of them knows why or how. Knowing some of the answers gives the students confidence. Because they will not feel threatened by total unfamiliarity, the students will be more willing to ask questions and look for answers. Finding the road signs will arm them for their next foray into a landscape of mystery.

Jekyll and Hyde can be taught successfully both as a carefully con-

structed theme piece and as an equally well-crafted investigative work. Mr. Utterson, a disciplined attorney, is well-prepared for the job he is undertaking. Students know, or think they know (aha! another classic tool of the mystery writer) what all lawyers do. Ask them. After the answers about big offices, fancy cars, and large fees (how true) have been cleared away, comments about cross-examination, looking at evidence, pleading with the jury (i.e., the world of the criminal lawyer) will follow. Some may even suggest that a lawyer builds his case by finding evidence as well as by using it. Utterson, then, may not be hard-boiled but he is, most certainly, capable of putting the pieces together. He is both sponge and analyst; so is any good detective.

London may seem like a forbidden city for slow readers. Students often miss the location and think they are in New York or New Haven or Boston. For those of us who are provincial about our cities there is a lesson to be learned from our students. A city is a city. The major rules of good and evil or of crime and detection are the same because the framework of all urban landscapes remains quite similar. The tables turn. The details observed about neighborhood conditions (as mentioned above) are clues as well as commentary. Checks, cane handles, clothing—these clues are accessible to our students; through their discoveries, they will become more sophisticated and satisfied readers. *Jekyll and Hyde* is a good beginning.

Any one of the three novels could make up a second half of a four-to-six-week unit in a developmental senior class. Using all four would involve half of a semester assuming that two novels could not be read simultaneously. In each, there is a cop or a detective trained by a cop. They then spend a lot of time watching. The advantage to all three detectives is that they are not armchair infallibles. They make mistakes; they go over evidence; they each get their man—eventually.

John Ball's *In the Heat of the Night* has one minor and two major advantages. The novel became a tremendously successful film that students may or may not have seen. In any case, they do have a face, Sidney Poitier's, for Mr. Tibbs. The character is rather stiff but he is recognizable and, therefore, readily accepted. More important, Tibbs is a good cop. The reader is both amazed by and attempting to catch up to Tibbs's conclusions. This detective sees the same evidence the reader sees but the clues fall together better for him.

Most chapters end with a last knowing word from Virgil Tibbs and the reader is left wondering, "How does he know?" For a mainly black student body, Virgil may be a little too proper, but he is still, most definitely, a BIG hero. Here is the second strong point about the novel: Virgil Tibbs, a black man caught accidentally in the deep South before Civil Rights legislation has reintegrated restaurants, bathrooms, and train stations,

functions at a social disadvantage to which he is unused—AND STILL WINS. A brief history that contrasts pre- and post-1964 conditions in the South should send kids home to their parents with all sorts of questions. They will savor Virgil's victory once they understand the obstacles his environment has created.

Ball's novel does offer, in Tibbs, a somewhat overstylized character. He is almost too cool, too professional to be truly likable. In the final analysis, he may have no choice. Working in a white Southern community that wants no part of him, Virgil must choose his road carefully. To fight back means to uncover and to close all doors to any "easy" solutions to the crime. To remain a distant, seemingly accepting detective gives him the ultimate satisfaction of solving the one case that has sent that same narrow-minded community into an uproar. Tibbs holds all the cards.

Two other novels are certainly worthy of note. Hillary Waugh's *Last Seen Wearing* fascinates any reader because finding a missing body is only half the puzzle; discovering the motive behind the murder is equally vital if the murderer is to be found and then caught. There are dead ends, wrong turns, tailspins. Much can be learned from the detail and construction of this novel. P.D. James's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* appeared only a decade ago. It is a wonderful novel about Cordelia Gray, a young woman detective on her first case, who is struggling to learn her craft from a combination of remembered advice (from a dead partner) and her own excellent instincts. Students will love Cordelia and will strongly identify with the suffering she undergoes in order to succeed.

These novels always lead back to questions that not only solve the mystery but also mirror concerns of both the character's and the reader's societies. Most students will be, for the first time, comparing their own world to a fictional one; as a result, they will make judgments about society, about values, about living. Fundamentally, that is what teaching is all about.

Notes

1. Winks, *Modus Operandi* (Boston: Godine, 1982), 4.
2. Winks, *Modus Operandi*, 80.
3. The four stages are dealt with in more detail in R. Austin Freeman's essay, "The Art of the Detective Story," *The Art of the Mystery Story*, Howard Haycraft, ed. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1936), 14–15.
4. W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," *Detective Fiction*, Robin W. Winks, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 14.
5. Lambert, "The Dangerous Edge," *Detective Fiction*, Robin W. Winks, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 47.
6. George Grella, "The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel," *Detective Fiction*, Robin W. Winks, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 105.