Teaching What I Like: The Mystery Novel In A Variety Of Courses

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A few years ago, a colleague asked if I would be interested in teaching an Elderhostel course on the mystery novel. He knew that I am an avid reader of the novels, and even though I knew doing so would play some havoc with my teaching schedule, I immediately agreed to do the course. Almost as immediately, however, as I started to prepare the course, I realized that the topic was much broader and more complex than I had anticipated. The real problem was that I had not thought very much about the mystery novel as a literary form. In this case, I faced a significant transition between being a reader and making sense of that reading as a teacher of literature.

Topics

Since I had to fill four 1 1/2–hour classes, I began looking for broad areas that I might cover in each class. Because I was worried about filling the time, I was not worried about being somewhat superficial. Indeed, because I *expected* that my treatment of the topics would be somewhat superficial, I chose to cover the following four very broad areas: a general history of the mystery novel; the major sub–genres of the mystery novel; the regional nature of the mystery novel in the United States; and the mystery novel outside the United States. To develop the first two presentations, I relied heavily on several classic books and essays on the form (listed in a bibliography at the end of this article), but in developing the third topic—the regional nature of the mystery novel in the United States—I started to find my own thesis, or at least my own voice and my own approach to the material. It suddenly struck me very pointedly that the mystery novel had become the most regional of all American novels, and I began to wonder how it was defining our sense of America's geographic regions and how it was redefining regionalism as a literary phenomenon. I began to become somewhat excited about the possibilities

in approaching the mystery genre as literature, albeit popular literature.

For a while, I did not find the opportunity to pursue the answers to those questions, but the very fact that I had formulated and considered them made me more open to using the mystery novel in other contexts. One summer I was looking for a fresh way to do a five–week comparative studies course on nonwestern literatures and decided that the students might enjoy reading mystery novels by Latin American, African, and Asian writers. I put together a course in which we covered Alex Abella's *The Killing of the Saints*, Paco Ignacio Taibo's *Leonardo's Bicycle*, Jorge Ibarguentoia's *The Dead Girls*, Alejo Carpentier's *The Chase*, and Lisa Lee's *The Flower Net.* The students did enjoy the readings and seemed more willing to engage in class discussions—discussions which often ranged into more complex literary issues that are usually beyond the scope of this general education course and into more substantive thematic issues that are usually beyond the students' interests. For instance, when we were discussing the Abella novel, the students became very animated in discussing how devotees of *Santeria* might react to the depiction of its most sinister, as well as its most ennobling, possibilities. Several fundamentalist Christians were especially concerned that readers would focus too much on the negative side of the depiction and disregard the positive.

Mysterious Problems

But there were several major problems with the shape of the course. It was very difficult to find titles that were still in print. Unless written by Erle Stanley Gardner, John D. MacDonald, or Elmore Leonard, mystery novels in general do not usually remain in print for a long while. I was naive to think that translated and/or imported mystery novels that had been on my shelves for several years would still be in print. Because I wanted to use novels written by writers native to the regions in which they were set, I added another level of difficulty to the selection of readings. The narrowness of the choices available to me in the texts for the course created several problems. First, four of the five novels were Latin American, only one was Asian, and none were African. Second, two of the books were actually written by a Cuban–American, Abella, and a Chinese–American, Lee. And, third, when I did the course again

two quarters later, only the Carpentier novel, which is something of a classic, was still in print. So, I realized that each time I did the course in this manner I would pretty much have to start from scratch—something that no teacher at a regional campus really wants to do.

About a year later, I was planning an interdisciplinary Honors seminar to be called "Great American Cities: A Look at the Distinctive Cultures of New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and San Francisco." As I started to define the key factors in the formation of each city's cultural mix, I found myself going back to the notes I had compiled for the Elderhostel course in discussing the mystery novels set in each of the cities. I usually have the students do some sort of supplementary readings in these Honors seminars, and it seemed suddenly very natural that I should use mystery novels in this case: one of Ed McBain's 87th–precinct novels, *Lullaby*, for New York; one of Robert Campbell's Jimmy Flannery novels, *The Lion's Share*, for Chicago; one of James Lee Burke's Dave Robicheaux novels, *Dixie City Jam*, for New Orleans; Raymond Chandler's classic Philip Marlowe novel, *The Long Goodbye*, for Los Angeles; and Dashiell Hammett's cycle of stories, *The Continental Op*, for San Francisco. The readings very much complemented my lectures and our class discussions, and the students were able to write articulately and insightfully about the connections—about the ways in which the novelists made use of the cities' distinct milieus in developing characters, incidents, and themes. The one minor and unforeseen problem with using the mystery novels in this way was that the novels were rawer—and in the case of the first three, actually raunchier—than I had recognized when I had read them in leisure. (One student actually apologized for having used a few mild vulgarities in her essay on the McBain novel. She remarked, perceptively, that to avoid any vulgarities somehow didn't seem true to the tone of the novel.) I don't know how I could get around this problem except to assign mostly pre–World War II mysteries.

Pre–World War II Mysteries

This is exactly what I did this past fall when I chose the mystery novel as my special topic for an Honors section of English 101. I provided students with the background information and pointed them towards

Libnet (Wright State University's online library net) and Internet materials that would allow them to write the following essays: first, a definition essay in which they would discuss the key characteristics of the hard–boiled detective novel, using Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* as a source of illustrations; second, a contrast essay in which they would focus on the key differences between the hard–boiled detective novel and the cozy mystery, using the Hammett novel and Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* as sources of illustrations; third, a simple analysis essay in which they would delineate the ways in which Rex Stout deliberately attempted to combine and balance the hard–boiled and cozy style in his series featuring Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, using *The Golden Spiders* as a source of illustrations; and, lastly, an interpretive analysis essay in which they would consider whether Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer represents an attempt to combine the physical and cerebral detectives in one figure, using *The Underground Man* as a source of illustrations. In lieu of a final exam, the students also attempted to write a three–minute mystery after we had read a number of selections from two books called *One–Minute Mysteries* and *Five–Minute Mysteries.* (The students were very anxious about doing this last assignment, but most did a very nice job with their puzzle narratives by developing some clever variations of those we read.)

Given that this was the first time that I presented the course, it went quite well. Even though it turned out that many of the students had had little previous interest in reading mystery novels, I largely succeeded in preparing them to write each essay. Yet, I concentrated so much on the basic structure and development of each essay that the overall course was much drier than it should have been. (One student remarked in the course evaluation: "The professor was very animated about the material, and the novels and films were more interesting than I expected them to be. But I never really got as excited about this course as I think I might have. And even though I feel as if I've learned a lot about writing essays, I think I should have enjoyed the process a little more than I have.") I showed videos of the novels when they were available, but I think the course would become more engaging if I used more video clips and multimedia slides. I think it would also be helpful if we read aloud from each of the novels, focusing on stylistically significant passages, and if I forced more student participation by having them deliver informal sort

reports on the readings.

In the Fall, I also taught an independent study section of English 440: Regional and Ethnic Literatures. Focusing on the Anglo–American, Native American, and Latino writers of the American Southwest, I included not only works by Edward Abbey, John Nichols, Frank Waters, Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Rudolpho Anaya, Denise Chavez, and Sandra Cisneros, but also mystery novels by Tony Hillerman and by Cecil Dawkins. These mystery novels provided a nice point of comparison to the more serious or literary novels and stories. After all, it might be credibly argued that the Hillerman novels will have the greatest influence of all the selections in shaping the future literature of the Southwest. And in his case, the influence will, it seems, be largely positive—rather than pointedly negative as in the post–World War II reaction of Western novelists against the conventions of the popular Western. This comparison of popular and literary works became especially pointed when we considered Rudolpho Anaya's work in the mystery genre, the series featuring Albuquerque P.I. Sonny Bacca.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that, sometimes, in teaching what you like, you may discover approaches to material, if not whole topics that your students may also enjoy. You may also find yourself pursuing stimulating new directions in your scholarship. I am now developing a special topics course on the mystery–detective novel. In addition, I have received a $1,000 research grant to support a thorough classification of professional and amateur fictional detectives called *Detectives, By Profession.*

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Biography

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