

What We Read About When We Read About Detective Stories

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Abstract

In considering Edmund Wilson's essay and the question he affects to ask, "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?" the author looks at two very different writers of detective stories, Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler. He suggests that one reason they are so different is that they come out of different traditions: Christie from what she calls "The Sherlock Holmes Tradition," and Chandler out of the American pulp fiction popular in the 1920s and 1930s. The author concludes that it is precisely their negotiation and navigation of these traditions that make their novels of interest and take us a step toward answering Wilson's question.

The idea that genre fiction can be as worthy of our attention as "literary" fiction, and that literary fiction is in fact just another genre, is now such a commonplace as to be unremarkable. There was a time, though, when people were happy to accept that detective stories were not literary fiction, but mere entertainment. Believing this, though, did not prevent them from taking their entertainment seriously, and from rising up in arms if someone was unwise enough to criticize it, as the eminent American critic Edmund Wilson learned when, in 1944, he published an article titled "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?" in the *New Yorker*.

Fans of detective stories were quick to realize that the article's title was a ruse: Wilson was not, in any neutral way, interested in what attracted people to detective stories. Rather, as mystery fans immediately understood, Wilson's question could best be paraphrased: Why do people waste their time on such childish garbage?

And they responded: Wilson received "letters of protest in a volume and of a passionate earnestness which had hardly been elicited even by [Wilson's] occasional criticisms of the Soviet Union" (Wilson, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" 257). Wilson doesn't say so, but just as his readers weren't as bothered by his criticisms of the USSR, one assumes that neither would they have responded as strongly to an article affecting to ask why people read literary fiction.

A lot of people, though, were hot and bothered in the 1940s and 1950s by detective stories. Wilson himself felt compelled to write not one but three long *New Yorker* pieces about them, and Raymond Chandler, one of the few writers of detective stories who Wilson can almost bring himself to praise, also entered the fray.¹

1 "To write such a novel successfully," Wilson wrote, "you must be able to invent character and incident and to generate atmosphere, and all this Mr. Chandler can do, though he is a long way below Graham Greene" (Wilson, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" 263).

In an essay called “The Simple Art of Murder” Chandler agrees, to a large extent, with Wilson’s assessment of the genre in which he worked:

. . . the detective story, even in its most conventional form, is difficult to write well. Good specimens of the art are much rarer than good serious novels. Second-rate items outlast most of the high-velocity fiction, and a great many that should never have been born simply refuse to die at all. They are as durable as statues in public parks and just about as dull. (Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” 978)

(One should probably note that he doesn’t think all that highly of literary fiction, or what he calls “serious novels,” either.)

Chandler and Wilson employ similar methods in their essays. They examine the work of detective story writers who have been highly touted, and among those highly touted writers is, inevitably, inescapably, Agatha Christie. It will not come as a surprise that both find her wanting. Chandler dismisses the Christie volume he is considering—and, by extension, Christie—in a single short paragraph ending “This is the type [of plot] that is guaranteed to knock the keenest mind for a loop. Only a halfwit could guess it” (Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” 984).

Wilson is less laconic:

[H]er writing is of a mawkishness and banality which seem to me literally impossible to read. You cannot *read* such a book, you run through it to see the problem worked out; and you cannot become interested in the characters, because they never can be allowed an existence of their own even in a flat two dimensions but have always to be contrived so that they can seem either reliable or sinister, depending on which quarter, at the moment, is to be baited for the reader’s suspicion. (Wilson, “Why Do People Read Detective Stories?” 234)

Wilson and Chandler, therefore, generalize about detective stories based on examples by authors taken to be at the forefront of the genre, and generalize about these authors’ work based on one or two books, or, in the case of Wilson, perhaps not even one whole book. “*Farewell, My Lovely*,” he admits, “is the only one of these [detective stories] that I have read all of . . .” (Wilson, “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?” 262). The case they make against detective stories is often witty and is convincing to the extent that an argument based in significant part on personal taste can be. Their arguments are not, however, grounded in close readings of the relevant texts—surprising, perhaps, in the case of Wilson, a literary man in the age when close reading reigned supreme. What, one wonders, would close, or at any rate, closer readings of Christie and of Chandler, the single writer of detective stories who Wilson almost likes, reveal?

Luminaries like W. H. Auden, a confessed detective story addict (Auden, 146), felt that Chandler could not be categorized with writers like Christie, mostly, it seems because Chandler’s concerns were not trivial, and his books not (only) entertainment, but art. Auden writes: “Mr.

Chandler is interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of a criminal milieu, the Great Wrong Place, and his powerful but extremely depressing books should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as works of art” (Auden, 151). Chandler, with the possible exception of the final phrase, would agree. He implicitly champions his own concerns when he writes that:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the finger man for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket. (Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” 991)

This world, to be sure, is not Christie’s world; she is not, in Chandler’s terms, a “realist in murder,” but still, would placing texts by these very different authors side by side and comparing them be fruitful? What would be revealed?

The first step is to choose representative texts by each author, and it seems only fair, especially with an author as prolific as Christie, to choose texts in which the writers are at their best. Given the praise it received upon publication, *The A B C Murders* seems, in Christie’s case, a good choice. In 1936, the year of the novel’s release, Isaac Anderson, long-time reviewer of detective stories for the *New York Times*, wrote, for example, in the *New York Times Book Review*: “This story is a baffler of the first water, written in Agatha Christie’s best manner. It seems to us the very best thing she has done, not even excepting *Roger Ackroyd*” (Anderson, qtd. in “The A.B.C. Murders,” Wikipedia). Nicholas Blake, in the *Spectator*, called it “a little masterpiece of construction,” and there was similar praise in a number of other venues. Chandler’s first Philip Marlowe novel, *The Big Sleep*, published three years after *The A B C Murders*, seems to have been greeted less rapturously upon publication, but modern critics have more than made up for that, with both the *Guardian* (McCrum) and *Time* (Grossman) placing it on their lists of the best 100 novels of all time.

The next thing to consider is what, in such very different novels, can be compared. There are no scenes in Chandler set in bucolic country villages, and Christie’s detective doesn’t spend much time anywhere that Chandler or his detective Philip Marlowe would recognize as “mean streets.” What the novels do have in common is an idiosyncratic, and—though tastes will differ—potentially captivating detective as its protagonist. Both novelists take some care in introducing their sleuths, so let us begin there.

Christie’s detective in *The A B C Murders* is the Belgian, Hercule Poirot. This is not the first time Christie completists will have met him. He first appeared in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* where he was described thus:

He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible; I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. (Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, xxii)

Because Christie could not assume that her readers all read each of her books in the proper order, she is compelled to reintroduce her detective at the beginning of each of the novels in which he appears. She, or rather Poirot's sidekick Captain Hastings, does so at the beginning of *The A B C Murders*, and it seems that Poirot has not changed a bit since the mysterious affair at Styles. Hastings remarks: "He was looking wonderfully well—hardly a day older than when I had last seen him" (Christie, *The A B C Murders*, 2). We are soon reminded, too, of Poirot's fastidiousness with regard to his appearance. He remains a dandy, and his concern with his appearance, we learn, has led him to dye his hair. Hastings is shocked at this, and suggests that Poirot dying his hair is as unlikely as the detective wearing a false moustache. "No, no, indeed, *mon ami*. That day, I pray the good God, is still far off. The false moustache! *Quel horreur!*" (Christie, *The A B C Murders*, 3).

This exchange reveals a few things about Christie's method. First, and obvious to those familiar with Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories, Christie is working within the tradition that Doyle initiated. She says as much in her autobiography: "[Hastings] and Poirot represented my idea of a detective team. I was still writing in the Sherlock Holmes tradition—eccentric detective, stooge assistant . . ." (Christie, *Autobiography*, 282). With the Belgian's French interjections, his odd English—"I pray the good God"—and his vanity we see Christie working hard to establish or reestablish in readers' minds, the eccentricity of her sleuth. (One suspects that for provincial English readers of the time, being a francophone was an eccentricity in itself.) He is shown to be eccentric not only with regard to trivial things such as hair dye and false moustaches, but also life and death. He craves, he reveals, a crime that is ". . . *recherché*—delicate—*fine* . . ." Hastings is surprised at the manner in which Poirot hungers for these, for him, delectable crimes. "Upon my word, Poirot," Hastings exclaims. "Anyone would think you were ordering a dinner at the Ritz" (Christie, *The A B C Murders*, 4). We later learn that the dish he desires is murder.

In addition to the eccentric genius detective, another aspect of the Holmes stories that Christie takes on board is the use of a narrator who is embedded in the story but is not the detective. Poirot, therefore, does not introduce himself to readers, but is introduced by his "stooge assistant." Chandler's detective, Marlowe, on the other hand, is not overly patient with stooges, so it's no surprise to find that he narrates his own story and therefore introduces himself. Chandler, we begin to understand, is not working in what Christie calls "the Sherlock Holmes tradition" (Christie, *Autobiography*, 282).

At first glance Marlowe's self-introduction may lead us to believe that Marlowe is a bit of a dandy himself. *The Big Sleep* begins with the detective telling us:

I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved, and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars. (Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 3)

It's the last sentence, of course, that demonstrates one of Marlowe's differences from Poirot. Poirot is a dandy because dandyism is an element of his character, an essential element in Christie's portrayal of him as endearingly eccentric. He takes on cases that he believes will be rich, savory, intellectual challenges. In this, and also in that he's an amateur seeking diversion, he is like his progenitor, Sherlock Holmes. Marlowe, on the other hand, is a professional willing to dandify himself if he thinks doing so might help him land a lucrative job, a little piece of that four million dollars. If this sort of peacocking were a constant feature of Marlowe's character he would feel no need to bring attention to the strategic dandyism he is practicing. A part of Poirot's eccentricity is that he sees nothing noteworthy about the extreme care he devotes to his appearance, and thus it is never Poirot, but always Captain Hastings, who comments on it.

This, of course, is a function of the narrative choices Christie and Chandler make. Christie uses an embedded first-person narrator who tells us about the detective and what the detective does. Chandler uses his detective as a first-person narrator to tell us about himself and his actions. Christie's narrative is thus, necessarily, more social. Her narrator, Hastings, a foil for the European Poirot, is an Englishman with all the stereotypical stolid stodginess, and good-natured jocularly with which Christie sees fit to endow him. He is commonsensical Englishness personified, and his English common sense is foregrounded by placing it next to the cerebral Poirot's European genius.

Chandler's Philip Marlowe, too, is a product and exemplar of the society in which he lives, a society in which individualism is a virtue. Thus Marlowe moves through that society as an individual for whom, most often, the burden of making sense of his world is his alone: there is no Hastings-like descendent of Dr. Watson to help him through. Thus, while Christie fleshes out her introduction of Poirot in *The A B C Murders* by letting the Belgian engage in jocular banter with Hastings for most of the first chapter, Chandler has his well-dressed and sober private eye head out into the world on his own. He's heading out in the hopes of landing a job, to be sure, but more importantly, "in search of a hidden truth" (Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," 992). Poirot and Hastings, on the other hand, do not head out in search of truth or anything else. They do not leave the "super-modern" service flat which Poirot has taken while in London, and which he chose, he admits, "on account of its strictly geometrical appearance and proportions" (Christie, *The A B C Murders*, 1).

That last detail tells us a little bit about Poirot—another one of his eccentricities—but very little about the world in which he exists. The apartment serves only to differentiate Poirot’s Gallic rationalism from Hastings’s British common sense. Later in the chapter, when Poirot shows Hastings the letter he has received from the murderer who will become his nemesis, this too is used to reveal not the society in which this criminal moves, or the world which moves the criminal, but to tell us a little more about Poirot and how he differs from his English partner.

Hastings reads the letter in which the writer threatens to commit a crime and first believes that the letter-writer must be drunk or a lunatic. When he finds that Poirot does not agree, but takes the writer seriously, practical Englishman that Hastings is, he implores Poirot to act: “If you really take it seriously, can’t you do something?” With, one assumes, a Gallic shrug, Poirot replies, “But what is there to do?” (Christie, *The A B C Murders*, 7). It is from these kinds of interactions between Hastings and Poirot that Christie builds the character of her protagonist and highlights his eccentricities; like Doyle, she is wedded to the idea that eccentricity, in a detective, is essential.

Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, on the other hand, is not eccentric. Chandler reminds us twice in the space of a paragraph in “The Simple Art of Murder” that the detective appropriate to this sort of fiction, the detective he endeavors to create in Philip Marlowe, is “a common man.” He is, Chandler allows, at the same time that he is common, “an unusual man,” but he is never eccentric (Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” 992). You won’t find Marlowe injecting cocaine and scratching away at a violin and neither will you note in him any Poirot-like affectations. Chandler, therefore, has no need to employ a conventional sidekick to throw Marlowe into character-defining relief. Rather, Marlowe is defined largely by the way he talks. His voice, of course, comes into play in Marlowe’s dealings with other characters, but just as often, and at least as important, is the voice we hear in Marlowe’s internal monologues.

Chandler’s ideal detective talks “. . . as a man of his age talks, that is, with a rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness” (Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” 992). Here Chandler is making clear the importance of the link between how a character talks and who the character is. The ideal detective’s voice should reveal his wit, his view of the world, and the moral revulsion he feels for sham and pettiness. The wit is abundant in the novel, though we catch only fleeting glimpses of it in the first chapter as when Carmen Sternwood, the daughter of his soon to be employer, tries to flirt with Marlowe as he waits to see her father.

‘Tall, aren’t you?’ she said.

‘I didn’t mean to be.’ (Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 4)

The repartee tells us a little about Marlowe, but we learn more from what the detective notices and how he describes it to himself than from what he says to others.

To introduce Poirot in all his glorious eccentricity, Christie spends pages of her first

chapter on the discussion between Poirot and Hastings about Poirot's apartment, hair, and moustache; Chandler, on the other hand, spends a substantial chunk of his opening pages sharing with us what Marlowe says to himself about what he sees in his soon-to-be employer's mansion. Marlowe sees the Sternwoods' furnishings, but not only does he see them; he sees through them to what they reveal about the family.

He sees "large hard chairs with rounded red plush seats . . . backed into the vacant spaces of the wall round about." He notices that "they didn't look as if anybody had ever sat in them." He sees a fireplace that is big, but notices that it is empty. He sees "two cavalry pennants," but notices that they are "bullet-torn or moth-eaten." Below the pennants hangs a portrait of "an officer in full regimentals of about the time of the Mexican War. The officer," Marlowe explains to himself, "had a neat black imperial, black mustachios, hot hard coal-black eyes, and the general look of a man it would pay to get along with," and guesses that he might be his potential employer's grandfather (Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 4-5). That is, he notices that the house, though well-furnished, lacks warmth, and not only because the fireplace is empty. He deduces from the evidence hanging on the wall that the family's glory is all in the past. We learn a lot about the family in this single paragraph, but more importantly, we learn that Marlowe's gaze is penetrating, and we learn this not from a dialogue with a stooge, but from the monologue in Marlowe's head.

To reiterate the obvious, then, Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler are very different writers. They both wrote detective stories, but their books grow from different seeds. Christie, as mentioned above, was, in *The A B C Murders* and many of her other books, firmly ensconced in the Sherlock Holmes tradition. She and Doyle both define their main characters in terms of their eccentricities and their genius (which, of course, is another eccentricity), and play them off sidekicks who are conventional and, to put it mildly, not geniuses. Chandler, on the other hand, comes out of the tradition of American pulp fiction, specifically the "pulp detective magazines which flourished during the late twenties and early thirties." He explains:

I began to read pulp magazines because they were cheap enough to throw away . . . and it struck me that some of the writing was pretty forceful, even though it had its crude aspect. I decided that this might be a good way to learn to write fiction and get paid a small amount of money at the same time. (Chandler, "Letter to Hamish Hamilton," 1040-1041)

The pulp tales he was reading, Chandler believes, "determine just how and when and by what steps the popular mystery stories shed their good manners and went native" (Chandler, "Introduction to 'The Simple Art of Murder,'" 1016).

It is not entirely clear what Chandler means by "go native" here. On the one hand, he seems to be suggesting that the sort of detective stories he and Dashiell Hammett were writing had shaken off the old world and become truly American, and thus distinct from the books Christie and her English cohort were producing. The bit about "shedding good manners," though,

suggests something else. It suggests the shaking off not just of Europe, but of civilization, the embrace not just of America, but of savagery.

Chandler learned from the pulp writers he found in disposable magazines, but he went on to produce writing far beyond what all but a handful of them could achieve. It is less clear whether Christie produced anything that transcended her teacher, Arthur Conan Doyle, but she was a worthy champion of the tradition in which she worked. A more fine-grained reading of Christie and Chandler than Wilson or, ironically, Chandler himself generally employed, reveals much about the traditions that formed these writers and also, at least in Chandler's case, the tradition he was working against. This knowledge does not tell us which writer we should prefer—that's a matter of personal taste. When, like Marlowe assessing the Sternwoods' furnishings, one looks beneath the surface of these stories to the societies and traditions out of which they grew and sees the history that makes Christie Christie and Chandler Chandler one finds plenty to hold one's interest. The rewards that a closer reading throws up move us a step toward answering the question that vexed Edmund Wilson: "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?"

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