2002

The rise of mass culture theory and its effect on golden age detective fiction

Sarah Jean Trainin

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project

Part of the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation

http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project/2255

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses Digitization Project by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.
THE RISE OF MASS CULTURE THEORY AND ITS EFFECT ON GOLDEN AGE DETECTIVE FICTION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
Literature Concentration

by
Sarah Jean Trainin
September 2002
THE RISE OF MASS CULTURE THEORY AND ITS EFFECT ON GOLDEN AGE DETECTIVE FICTION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

by
Sarah Jean Trainin
September 2002

Approved by:

Renée Pigeon, Chair, English

Jacqueline Rhodes

Bruce Golden

7/25/02
ABSTRACT

By examining the rise of Mass Culture Theory and its effect on the perception of popular fiction and the popular press, this thesis will explore the segregation of detective fiction from the general fiction market between 1920 and 1940. Critics of that time based the decision to lower the status of detective fiction because of an emerging notion that detective fiction represented substandard literature. This belief stemmed from the effects of the American literati’s adoption of the British cultural elite’s fear of “Americanization.” A significant editorial shift in the much-revered Saturday Review of Literature will be presented as a case study that focuses the literary debate and subsequent decline in the seriousness with which works in the genre were received and reviewed. The format change in the Saturday Review is the result of two primary factors: the internal debate within the genre of detective fiction, and the external conditions of the divide drawn between high and low culture.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge my husband, Guy, without whom this would never have happened. His love and support are responsible for my success, and I thank him sincerely, though the words “thank you” seem so insufficient.

To my children, Erez and Asaf: Whenever life seemed to be too difficult or too demanding, you both made it all worthwhile. Also, there is nothing quite as amazing as having two “men” who see you in a black polyester gown and oversized cardboard-filled hat tell you that you are beautiful with utmost sincerity.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks and appreciation to my parents, Judge Marvin D. and Carol L. Rowen and to my in-laws, Drs. Ze’ev and Rita Trainin for both their financial and moral support during the pursuit of my degree.

To the members of my thesis committee, I am eternally grateful for their guidance and patience but wish to especially thank Dr. Renee Pigeon, who was encouraging always and apprehensive when necessary. Her high expectations and high standards are responsible for the quality of this thesis. In addition, a sincere “thank you” to Dr. Jacqueline Rhodes, whose door was never locked (though often closed), and whose sense of humor and
knowledge in the field of Cultural Studies, made the
"process" a pleasure. To Dr. Bruce Golden, I wish to
express my heartfelt appreciation for his time and input
in the review of my thesis. His suggestions and comments
were both helpful and encouraging.

Though each of the professors who taught and guided
me in the program brought me new knowledge and insight, I
would like to make special note of Dr. Rong Chen. As
Graduate Adviser of the English Department, he was
responsible for "getting me in" and "getting me out." In
addition, the courses I was privileged to take with him
have had a significant impact on my future plans, for
which I am eternally grateful.

Additionally, I would like to express my thanks to
the California State University, San Bernardino for the
financial support given to me both in the form of grants
and fellowships.

To the Dean and Staff of the Graduate School of
Education at the University of California, Riverside, I
owe a debt of gratitude both for allowing me to repeatedly
adjust my work and my schedule and for the encouragement
and understanding that was given me throughout my studies,
and primarily during the writing of this thesis.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................. iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................... iv
LIST OF FIGURES .......................................................... vii
CHAPTER ONE: DETECTIVE FICTION AND MASS CULTURE THEORY
   Introduction .............................................................. 1
   The Rise of Mass Culture Theory And Its Effect on the Status of Detective Fiction .... 11
CHAPTER TWO: "COZY" VERSUS "HARDBOILED"
   The Difficulty in Defining the Genre ......................... 24
   The “Hardboiled” Challenge ................................. 29
CHAPTER THREE: WHO WERE THE SATURDAY REVIEW EDITORS AND WHY DID THEIR OPINION COUNT?
   Then, Now and the Who’s Who of the Saturday Review .......... 33
   The “Why” and “How” of The Saturday Review ......... 41
CHAPTER FOUR: LOOKING AT DETECTIVE FICTION IN THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE
   A Change in the Format .................. 52
   Who Made it Out of “The Box” and Why ................. 62
CHAPTER FIVE: SOME CONCLUSIONS
   A Summary of Coincidences ............................ 73
   Lasting Results or Temporary Setback? .................. 79
APPENDIX A: SAMPLE REVIEWS ............................................. 82
WORKS CITED ............................................................... 85
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The Criminal Record ....................... 64
Figure 2. Over the Counter .......................... 69
CHAPTER ONE

DETECTIVE FICTION AND MASS CULTURE THEORY

Introduction

Detective fiction was created in 1841 with the introduction of Edgar Allan Poe's Augustine Dupin, literature's first "consulting detective."¹ This new fiction was, for nearly a century, received and reviewed along with general fiction -- without critical distinction. By the mid-1920s changing attitudes towards art and mass-market production resulted in the partitioning of the general fiction market. Works in the genres of detective fiction, romance, westerns, and science fiction were classified and evaluated based not only on their own merits, but also in terms of how they compared to the classical nineteenth-century-style novel. Detective fiction came to be devalued by critics -- seen and reviewed as a type of writing generally far below the novel. Taken in its historical context, the shift in the

¹ Augustine Dupin appears, for the first time, in The Murders in the Rue Morgue. Poe is generally credited with creating the "modern detective" with this character.
status of detective fiction was almost unavoidable. As soon as the intellectual elite, the self-appointed champions of "high" culture, felt compelled to draw a line in order to retain moral, political, and educational control over the mass public, it was clear that anything that met the "hit list" of criteria for mass (and therefore low) culture, was going to be sacrificed (Strinati 3).

Critics relegated detective fiction to the muddy arena of the masses because of its formulaic style, eminent readability, and intrinsic connection to the popular-fiction market. They saw it as crude and devoid of art, and even though acclaimed authors and university-trained intellectuals wrote the vast majority of texts, nothing, it seems, could have saved this genre from the derision cast upon it by critics. Authors found themselves in the unenviable position of having to justify their opting to write in a "lesser" format.

Earnest arguments erupted between authors and critics over the literary value of detective fiction that too quickly declined into tongue-in-cheek critiques and "how to" lists. One of the results of the genre's internal debate was a split within the mystery/detective fiction field that eventually contributed to the permanent
devaluation of the genre as a whole. The speedy attenuation of how the popular press received and reviewed works reflected the style’s demotion.

An exemplary case in point of this public downgrading of the genre is the format shift that occurred in the *Saturday Review of Literature* (hereafter, *Saturday Review*) in 1933. The *Saturday Review*’s editorial staff decided to relegate the review of detective fiction to a four-inch box divided into one-inch squares that included only title, author, and a two-to-four word quip.

As a weekly newsstand paper, the *Saturday Review* was as vulnerable to the upsurge in the negative association of mass production and its artifacts (known as Mass Culture Theory) as any other easily produced publication. The paper either had to find a way to distance itself from other general-issue newspapers or risk being regarded as just another artifact of the cultural malaise created by new twentieth century technologies. The format change in the *Saturday Review* is clearly an example of one devalued genre, the newspaper, attempting to rise above classification as a mass culture artifact at the expense of another mass culture artifact, in this case, detective fiction. By demoting detective fiction the editors of the *Saturday Review* were attempting to prove that they could,
and should, be associated with “good” literature and thus high culture, as was the stated intention outlined in their original mission statement. Ultimately, their plan worked and the paper came to be regarded as one of the “gate-keepers” of high-culture literature.

As a case study, what happened to detective fiction in the *Saturday Review* signifies a much larger effect of the rise of Mass Culture Theory and the American response to the British fear of “Americanization” which represented, to the cultural elite on both sides of the Atlantic, all things cheap, easily obtainable, and artless.

“Genre fiction...and other works,” writes Arthur Berger in *Cultural Criticism*,

“are often described as subliterary, formulaic works that are created for the so-called lowest common denominator, or the largest number of people possible. The theory suggests that the lower the taste level in the text, the larger the number of people it will appeal to” (17).

---

2 See *The Saturday Review of Literature* inaugural edition dated August 2, 1924.
This definition of low-text is the threat detective fiction faced -- having its popularity associated with some type of vulgarity. That the texts were often formulaic did not help in the genre’s attempt to be received as art rather than artifice.

Perhaps the distinction between detective fiction and traditional novels can be found elsewhere. Andrew Milner theorizes that the elevation of certain types of literature results from traditional literature being parsed into an academic discipline and imbued, because of its educative nature, with higher moral qualities than other types of literature. “Literature,” he says, as an academic discipline was not so much ‘informed’ by value-judgments, as positively saturated in values, to such an extent that any attempt to eliminate them...would have been to eliminate the discipline itself. For literature has been the study not of writing per se but of valued writing (LCS 16). He further insists:

What eventually came to distinguish “reading English” at university from reading books on the train...was the ability to “discriminate,” to “evaluate,” to “criticize” (LCS 7).
While this does go some of the way in explaining why some fiction was seen as "good," it doesn't quite explain why genre fiction, in particular, detective fiction, was devalued. The burden of literary merit rests almost entirely upon the audience that reads it and how they assess its moral value. Some critics have suggested that works of mystery/detective fiction can be seen as types of morality plays and therefore, by Milner's criteria, should carry no less value than other types of literature.

Hillary Waugh offers yet another explanation in his 1954 article, "The Mystery Versus The Novel," where he attempts to discern the differences between composing mystery/detective fiction and traditional nineteenth-century-style novel writing using an item-by-item analysis strategy. He wrote:

If we are to separate the mystery from the novel and recognize the similarities and the differences, we must...adequately define our terms. We must find the areas of distinction that identify one and not the other. We must construct a discriminatory sieve that will firmly hold the likes of Earl Derr Bigger's Charlie Chan Carries On in the mystery genre and turn loose such as Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy.
Beginning with the most obvious and frequently cited differences, Waugh runs through items such as length:

...Length, though indicative, is not a valid measure...There are too many gems of classic fiction...that deliver their message in beautiful brevity (MS 63).

and style:

Another totem that is supposed to identify mystery is that it is read for “entertainment.” The mystery is supposed to be light reading, something that doesn’t require serious involvement; a piece to be ingested for relaxation, for fun, for pleasure (MS 63).

Refuting these and many other assertions of the genre’s critics, Waugh attempts to uncover where the difference really lies. He writes:

Are we to conclude [then] that books of merit are literary spinach: (“You won’t like it, but it’s good for you”)? That argument won’t wash. Shakespeare, Dickens, Austen, Hardy -- the list is long -- were, and are, enormously popular. Dull novels are bad novels and will not sell, but dull mysteries won’t sell either. So it is not a matter of bad writing versus good writing, or fun reading versus dull
reading, short books versus long books, or crime stories versus non-crime stories.\(^3\) The subgenre of the mystery is isolated from the rest of fiction by other criteria (MS 64).

Waugh bases most of his argument on what he refers to as the "bones" of the mystery. Briefly he asserts that the so-called "rules" of mystery writing are the same rules, cleverly disguised, for all fiction writing. Initially, this seems to indicate no fundamental difference exists between traditional novel writing and mystery/detective fiction. Ultimately, though, he does devise what he perceives to be a defining distinction. Hillary Waugh believed that "mystery novels are not equipped to carry messages like traditional novels" (MS 80). He concludes:

> The author of the highly disciplined detective story is tightly fenced, his limitations severe...The mystery writer does not have the freedom to digress into his philosophy of life while the action stands still.

---

\(^3\) Waugh uses Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment* earlier in his article as an example of this non-distinction.
In the mystery novel the story is the core, the be-all, the end-all, the Heart of the Matter. This is its glory, and its liability. This is what sets it apart from the straight novel (MS 75; emphasis added).

His last comment is perhaps the one distinction that the majority of the period’s critics seem to agree upon -- actual content. He suggests:

In short, the one ultimate distinction between the mystery and the novel, and the one which, it seems to me, must always mark the difference, is the question of -- appropriately -- motive. If the motive is "mystery" then the story (suspense, of course) is the core, and a mystery it is. If the motive is otherwise, then story (no matter how gory) is not the core, it is the means, and a mystery it is not (MS 80).

Whether or not Waugh’s conclusions, or Milner’s, or a host of other critics who addressed this same issue,⁴ are

---

⁴ Similar arguments on this subject were made by Aaron Marc Stein in “In Cultural Perspective,” W.H. Auden in “The Guilty Vicarage,” and George Grella in “The Formal Detective Novel,” among others.
correct, is not essential here. What is important is that this debate existed and was waged, revised, and re-invoked throughout the genre’s “Golden Age” and beyond. This necessity to define the genre and thereby ensure the status of the genre (either high or low) was both the result, and the cause, of effects like that of the genre’s ultimate demotion in the Saturday Review.

This debate was not merely academic. The participants, including critics, authors, and fans, felt strongly about the virtues of their respective positions and were willing to use any means they could devise (including dividing the genre itself) to ensure that the genre’s status be fixed. Whether the genre should be permanently placed alongside the novel or below it, was the driving force of the debate and both sides of the argument supported themselves vigorously using the best, and the worst, examples of traditional novel and detective fiction writing.

This thesis examines this phenomenon and shows how a combination of factors, including Mass Culture Theory,

---

5 The publishing dates of the articles mentioned in the text and in the above footnote range from the early 1930s to the 1980s.
format changes in the Saturday Review, and the generic division between “cozy” and “hardboiled” styles, converged and resulted in the demotion of the mystery/detective fiction genre at a time when most of the participants in the genre felt they were producing the best of their art and creating their self-termed “Golden Age.”

The Rise of Mass Culture Theory And Its Effect on the Status of Detective Fiction

The advent of mass media and the increasing commercialization of culture and leisure at the turn of the twentieth century gave rise to issues, interests, and debates in all spheres of western society. Although the idea of mass culture became conspicuous in the 1920s, because of the increasing development of mass-communication, similar issues were raised as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the writings of Pascal and Montaigne that linked mass culture’s emergence with the rise of market economy. Some scholars go further back and place the birth of mass culture in the time of the Roman Empire, citing the function of the “bread and circuses” in that society (Lowenthal 148-149). The most persuasive argument associating Mass Culture Theory with modern western society comes from those who suggest that
the modern idea of popular culture is likely the result of intellectuals attempting to construct popular culture as national culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The division between "high" or "learned" culture and popular culture can be found in the writings of several late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century authors (Burke 8).

Raymond Williams, referring to the "shift in perspective" during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writes:

"Popular was being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour or power over them. Yet the earlier sense had not died. Popular culture was not identified by the people but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment); as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, which, of course, in many cases, their earlier senses overlap" (199).
The idea of popular culture brings to issue both the concept of how popular culture can be defined, and what different definitions may imply situationally.

The literature that analyses mass and popular culture raises three primary questions: who determines popular culture, what is the influence of industrialization and commercialism on popular culture, and what is the ideological role of popular culture (Strinati 3).

In determining popular culture the question becomes one of source and influence. Is it a case of the general population establishing their combined interests and tastes, or is it imposed upon the masses by those in positions of power as a way of creating or maintaining social control? Do the upstairs feel the presence of the downstairs, or is the upstairs finding new and more subversive ways to influence the downstairs, passing on conventions that make the masses not only comfortable with, but desirous of their effect? When commercialization and industrialization become key factors, the questions become those of profitability and whether or not quality is sacrificed for profit. Does the ability to produce something easily automatically lower its value? Can “real” art exist in a market economy?

Lastly, there is ideology. What is the purpose of popular
culture? Is popular culture the means by which societies indoctrinate their members -- getting them to agree to adhere to some set of rules and values that will somehow ensure the dominance of the privileged class? Or is it about the people rising up to establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with -- an entity with power and the ability to resist the status quo?

Each of these questions received considerable attention in the 1920s and 1930s in the U.S. and Great Britain because of increasing access to popular media. Film, radio, and the popular press were easily produced and disseminated to a growing public. New technologies made mass production inexpensive and resulted in large quantities of cultural artifacts, like newspapers and penny-press books, being readily available to individuals, regardless of their class or gender.

This new accessibility created a significant backlash. The elite were in the uncomfortable position of needing to reassert themselves and their right to remain elite. Mass culture came to be redefined as something not only undesirable, but borderline evil. Members of a mass society, who consumed mass culture artifacts and thus created popular culture, were said to be "atomized people, people who lack any meaningful or morally coherent
relationships with each other” (Strinati 6). The result of this moral decay, it was claimed in the 1920s and 1930s, would be the decline of those socializing (and stabilizing) entities that gave order to the people. Churches, villages, and families would all be sacrificed by the desire for, and obtaining of, the artifacts of the new market-based society.

Nowhere was this fear of cultural sacrifice more prevalent than among the cultural elite of Great Britain. Numerous articles, books, and academic addresses by scholars, critics, and occasionally, politicians treated this subject. In a pamphlet published in 1930 by the Cambridge University Press and entitled, Mass Civilization and Minority Culture, F.R. Leavis warned his fellow scholars of impending cultural doom. He wrote, “Such pronouncements [the condemnation of poetry] could only be made in an age in which there are no standards...and no discrimination” (18). He cautioned them of their own precarious position in British society:

"High-brow" is an ominous addition to the English language. I have said earlier that culture has always been in minority keeping. But the minority is now made conscious, not merely of an uncongenial, but of a hostile environment (25).
These comments mirrored closely the opinions of an established British intelligentsia that saw America as the embodiment of the horrors of mass society, where popularity meant success, regardless of the means by which it was obtained, or the lineage of the holders.

American social democracy gives equal weight given to everyone -- both in political convictions and in general cultural preferences. The British elite feared America because of the "bad influence" of American social democracy already visible in a young generation trying to emulate societies portrayed on screen and in press (Hoggart 189). Democracy, as embodied and represented by an Americanized society, meant that the traditional hierarchies of class and taste could be broken down, allowing the "mass" or "mob" to determine cultural standards. Because educational systems and curricular content were affected by this American-style democratic structure, there was a genuine fear of the "reduction of all questions of the moment to the lowest common denominator" (Strinati 7), an attitude clearly expressed throughout Leavis' pamphlet and in similar articles by British scholars and critics, including T.S. Eliot and Richard Hoggart.
According to the British cultural elite, “Americanization” represented the conglomeration of all the worst of mass culture. This fear began before the turn of the nineteenth century, but the real impact of a society where anyone could “grow up to be President,” wasn’t realized until new technologies made exporting this ideology cheap and easy. In short, the exports of American social democracy and their influence on the “children of Britain” were taxing an elite already pressed on several fronts by changes in world politics and social policies.

The literati were especially vocal in their battle against the threat of a mass-market culture because this new market-driven ideology meant that authors and their products could be reevaluated and their worthiness challenged or established by anyone -- not only a highly educated, moneyed upper class. Greatness (and the availability of publishing contracts) could be determined by popularity alone, by sales figures, and not by some elusive sense of intellectual and/or moral value. Where, how, and why a given work was accepted became a matter of pride and survival for authors, publishers, and critics alike.
The intellectual elite began to find it necessary to differentiate themselves from the "automatons" of a potentially immoral and certainly indiscriminate mass society. An influential educated elite created a ladder of literary standards, and how high or low an individual author was placed on that ladder, and by whom, became integral to that authors' work being received and accepted as either art or artifact.

Mass societies were seen as being incapable of creating and/or appreciating "real art" due to their "lack of taste and discrimination" (Strinati 8). Critics and scholars said that for the masses to be "satisfied, everything [had] to be reduced to the lowest common denominator of the average or the mass" (Strinati 8). Though a pattern repeated throughout the history of western art and literature, as mentioned earlier, this fight was reborn with an intensity driven by the ease of cross-cultural and cross-national access.

In order to prove their place above the mass, literary critics fought over worthiness and began to categorize works beyond the general divisions from the previous century of fiction and non-fiction. Within the fiction market, certain types of novels were separated and elevated above other works. Genre lines were more firmly
established and authors, once associated with a certain genre, were kept there -- frequently against their wishes.

For detective fiction writers and critics, this separation became a matter of deep and boisterous contention. While there were some authors who had no regard or concern over how they were marketed, many found demotion on the literary ladder unjust and fought rigorously for their return to a position alongside that of the novel. But, if the implication that popularity denotes the reduction of a work to its "lowest common denominator" is true, then detective fiction, which was both extremely popular and formulaic, seemed to be the embodiment of all of the evils of the effects of mass culture on society and could not be, under any circumstances, considered artistic creations.

One of the key issues for detective fiction genre writers was the concept of "readerly" versus "scholarly" texts. Readerly texts were those that demanded little of the reader. The language, structure, and content presented no challenge to the reader when understanding

---

6 Agatha Christie was one of many to make this point in a variety of interviews; Rex Stout was another.
the material because they presented no challenge to the author when creating the material. Readerly texts were commonly associated with the same low ideals and cheap thrills attributed to all artifacts of mass culture already equated with low culture. These texts were also seen as the domain of women who, unlike men, could "waste time" embroiling themselves in stories that provided only emotional, passive content (Tuchmann 164). According to Tania Modleski, this interpretation of texts in popular culture "has provided for the practice of countless critics who persist in equating femininity, consumption, and reading on the one hand, and masculinity, production, and writing on the other" (41).

The idea that "readerly" texts were the domain of women was especially problematic for supporters of detective fiction in the 1920s and 1930s. During that time, the genre was dominated by women writers and had its highest sales to women readers (Publisher's Weekly, May 5, 1989). Authors and critics had to combat the notion that readerly writing was content-free writing. This position became increasingly difficult as the genre divided along national and stylistic lines (the British "cozy" versus the American "hardboiled").
Over two decades, a series of articles, some by critics, but most by detective fiction authors, discussed the genre's merit in relation to the novel in an attempt to close the divide between the schools and to help elevate detective fiction on its own merits, not at the expense of either style and not on the back of the novel. Hillary Waugh wrote:

There is an awareness on the part of most readers that the mystery per se is something separate and distinct from the novel itself. This fact of fiction is acknowledged by both the devotees of the mystery form and by its detractors; the term "mystery" is applied to a specific type of novel to set it apart from the so-called "straight" or "serious" novel.

There is a difference, that is true, but the degree of difference depends upon how we define the term "mystery" ...Shakespeare wrote about crime, but he was not a mystery writer in the sense that Agatha Christie was a mystery writer. Inasmuch as the mystery novel...has traditionally been regarded as second-class fiction and its top practitioners as less worthy of note than the most hapless of straight novelists, the insistence of mystery writers in
embracing the literary giants of history as kissing
kin may well be nothing more than an attempt to
overcome an ill-begotten inferiority complex" (MS 63;
emphasis added).

Though reprinted and respected, these views did not serve
to quell the rising debate with in the genre. Desperate
to disassociate themselves from the “low culture” stigma
that had attached itself to genre writing, authors became
more vehement in their arguments with one another. What
was “high culture” and more importantly, what was “art”
seemed to generate forests of commentary and analysis,
both from within and without the genre -- each group
clearly determined either to overcome or emphasize the
position of being mass produced and extremely popular, in
a time when that could influence your permanent position
in your chosen profession.

Of all the commentary, from the Rev. Ronald Knox’s
tongue-in-cheek rules for detective fiction writers, The
Decalogue, to Edmund Wilson’s scathing denouncement of
detective fiction in Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?,
it was the exchange of opinions by Dorothy L. Sayers and
Raymond Chandler, in their respective anthologies, that
best characterized the internal turmoil and displayed how
the influence of the ideas and ideals of Mass Culture Theory affected the genre in its Golden Age.
CHAPTER TWO

"COZY" VERSUS "HARDBOILED"

The Difficulty in Defining the Genre

In The Uses of Literacy, Richard Hoggart focuses on how texts can be used to not only define the cultural divisions in groups, but also to create hegemonies within divisions. The generic division of mystery and detective fiction in the 1930s is a direct result of this type of practice. Because mass culture was under attack in the 1920s, the literature produced for mass consumption found itself embroiled in a status battle. Authors whose work had previously been considered meritorious found that they were being reassessed based on a new standard that included specific criteria for inclusion inside even more specific genre. The general title of "fiction" became reserved for certain types of novels, mostly in traditional nineteenth-century style, while all others were parsed into genres. To be placed in a "genre" meant to be first removed from the "novel" category. Different standards were created for merit within a given genre and authors (and their works), once identified with a genre, found it difficult, if not impossible to break away from that identification.
One result of this external imposition was a newly created need for those who had been relegated to marginalized groups to define and defend their genre, if they wanted to have their work taken seriously. For writers of detective/mystery fiction, this challenge posed a significant problem. Because many of the more prominent and critically acclaimed writers were allowed to produce detective fiction as a side-line to their more “serious” work (e.g. C. Day Lewis, W.H. Auden, A.A. Milne), the “artfulness” of the genre was under attack almost before the genre became clearly defined.

Perhaps the greatest problem within the genre was that its own authors approached their subject with a lack of seriousness. Not realizing the ultimate effect their tongue-in-cheek criticism would have, mystery writer’s societies, genre-friendly critics, and authors all took turns creating sets of criteria for their fiction. One of the more famous and earliest how-to lists was the Decalogue created by the Reverend Ronald Knox in 1928, that reads as follows:

1. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
2. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
3. Not more than one secret or passage is allowed.
4. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
5. No Chinaman* must figure in the story.
   *or other mysterious alien
6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
7. The detective must not commit the crime.
8. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.
9. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

Though originally intended to be humorous, this laundry list for prospective mystery authors became the rules by
which critics outside the genre judged the products of the genre. By reducing the genre to its bare essentials, in a way that had not been done for the traditional novel, Dr. Knox helped open the door to serious questioning from within.

Dorothy L. Sayers, an Oxford-trained theologian but better known as a fiction writer and for her Lord Peter Wimsey series, questioned not only the artistic merit of the genre, but the intrinsic value of a literary form that she believed to have outlived its potential by 1929, more than a decade before the end of the genre’s “Golden Age.” In the introduction to her Omnibus of Crime she writes:

It [detective fiction] does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement.

...There are signs, however, that the possibilities of the formula are becoming exhausted...

...It certainly does seem a possibility that the detective-story will some time come to an end, simply

---

Many others subsequently wrote similar lists and guides including Howard Haycraft’s “Rules of the Game,” published in 1941, but The Decalogue is the best known and the most referenced.
because the public will have learnt all the tricks (DF 77, 80, and 82).

She concluded by lamenting the foreseeable demise of the best of the genre -- those types of detective fiction that align themselves stylistically with the traditional novel. The public's thirst for adventure, she felt sure, would result in the permanent retention of the "adventure" style of detective fiction, because she determined that detective fiction is purely "part of the literature of escape, and not of expression" (DF 82). In other words, as Waugh was to specify later, detective fiction, she believed, lacked the wherewithal to carry messages, though it was capable of, and in fact, best suited to, telling stories -- to entertaining the reader.

Sayers highlighted what was to become the focal point of an inter-generic war between traditional, mostly British, "cozy" style mystery writers and American "hardboiled" detective fiction writers. The question of art versus artifice, of "arid" versus inspired, was addressed specifically in her article and taken, by many,

---

8 See Waugh, Hillary. "The Mystery Versus the Novel."
to be a gauntlet thrown in the face of authors wishing to defend their work.

In her desire to explore the virtues of detective fiction, she created a body of evidence ready-made for those literati who were already becoming critical of such a highly stylized form of fiction writing. As an insider, successful, esteemed, and eminently literate, Sayers represented, to them, a sane voice whose negative opinions could be trusted as intelligent, insightful, and perhaps most of all, accurate.

The "Hardboiled" Challenge

Of all of the responses to Sayers, the best known, and most scathing, was the article written by Raymond Chandler as the introduction to The Simple Art of Murder. In defense of his genre, Chandler attacked Sayers both on a critical and personal level. He wrote, "her kind of detective story was an arid formula which could not satisfy even its own implications" (Haycraft, Art 262). Chandler insisted that it was not the genre’s style that was responsible for its decline, but, in his opinion, the misguided notion that the content of the story was of greater importance than the quality of the writing. He wrote, "some very dull books have been written about God,
and some very fine ones about how to make a living and stay fairly honest" (Haycraft, Art 232).
Later, in a letter written to James Sandoe, critic and University of Colorado librarian, Chandler complains: You are certainly not without company in your wish that “something could be done about the disadvantages of the redlight segregation of detective stories from novels by the reviews.” Once in a long while a detective story writer is treated as a writer, but very seldom.
...the essential irritation to the writer...is the knowledge that however well and expertly he writes a mystery story, it will be treated in one paragraph while a column and a half of respectful attention will be given to any fourth-rate, ill-constructed, mock-serious account of the life of a bunch of cotton pickers in the deep south (SLRC 26-27).
In both his personal letters and his published commentary Chandler defends continuously the merit of his art, insisting that hardboiled writers like himself and his mentor Dashiell Hammett had a better grasp on “good” writing than most novelists. In The Simple Art of Murder he concludes, “A more powerful theme will provoke a more powerful performance. It is always a matter of who writes
the stuff, and what he has in him to write it with” (Haycraft, Art 232).

This attempt to confirm the status of the American “hardboiled” style was made at the cost of the rival, primarily British, “cozy” school. Chandler accused the “cozy” writers of creating weak “cardboard” characters who moved around in “an artificial pattern required by the plot” (Haycraft, Art 232) and additionally claimed that the “cozy” style, was “not about things that could make first-grade literature” (Haycraft, Art 232). Though intended to serve as a defense of his genre, Chandler inadvertently provided confirmation, and ammunition, to those critics who were convinced that no detective fiction had the stuff of “first-grade literature.”

The public debate in published articles and prefaces to collections waged between Sayers and Chandler crystallized the general debate between authors in both schools of detective writing. Though not always treated seriously by the participants, the weapons each side found to use against the other provided ample support for those from the outside to conclude that neither side was “better” than the other and, consequently allowed for the denigration of the genre as a whole.
Though detective fiction continued to be reviewed by literary critics, the space the reviews were given decreased (in some cases, substantially), and the language the reviewers used in their critiques took on the same terse, flippant characteristics that the inter-genre debaters were using in their essays, articles, and speeches.

Perhaps the most significant change at the time, and certainly the most costly to the overall perception and reception of the genre, was that of the *Saturday Review*. Regarded as the vanguard of good taste and high-culture, the opinions that appeared in the *Saturday Review* had a tremendous, and in the case of detective/mystery fiction, deleterious, effect.
CHAPTER THREE
WHO WERE THE SATURDAY REVIEW
EDITORS AND WHY DID THEIR
OPINION COUNT?

Then, Now and the Who's Who of
the Saturday Review

It is a widely accepted notion in publishing that who
reviews a book goes a long way in determining how that
work is received. Today, if a book review appears in the
New York Times or Publisher's Weekly, then authors are
given credit for having, at least, begun to establish
themselves and their work. The literary merit of a given
work is set in nearly direct proportion to the type,
depth, and content of its review. The critical weight of
the location of a particular review, or the opinion of a
particular reviewer, carried even greater impact in the
1920s and 1930s, a time when the reading public was much
more homogeneous in terms of education and social status
and newspapers were more widely read and reviews more
substantially relied upon by book buyers.

Though in some cases today being a popular author is
often seen as equally important to, or as a signifier of,
being a good writer, in the years between 1920 and 1940
being popular generally worked against an author. This
shift in perspective was due to the effects of Mass Culture Theory and the primarily British, but American-adopted notion that mass production driven by mass consumption resulted in lesser quality.

For an author (or a given work by an author) to be accepted as meritorious, it was necessary that a review appear in certain well-respected newspapers and/or journals. Because of its status as a cultural guardian, being reviewed in the Saturday Review could make or break an author, or a given work by that author. The editors of the Saturday Review, by virtue of their histories, both personal and professional, were both seen and saw themselves as the gatekeepers of high culture in literature. Even established authors could find themselves being reassessed based on the comments and opinions that appeared weekly in that newspaper.

It is, at first, curious to think that a mass-culture artifact like a weekly newspaper could have that kind of an effect on high-culture society, but a close look at the editorial staff provides an explanation for the phenomenon.

The founding editors of the Saturday Review were not what were generally thought of as "newspaper people" though they all had prior experience writing and editing
Henry Seidel Canby, William Rose Benét, Amy Loveman, and Christopher Morley joined together in 1924 to create an embodiment of the literary cultural elite. They were quickly accepted as guardians of culture because they were representatives of cultural elitism. They were also, with the exception of Amy Loveman, well respected, published authors of criticism, classical fiction, and poetry.⁹

Henry Seidel Canby, the founder of the Saturday Review, was characterized by historian Allan Nevins as the "chief moderator over the literary energies of a whole generation" (Galenet Dec. 1997). Canby grew up in an upper-middle class milieu in Wilmington Delaware. He received a Ph.B.¹⁰ from the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale University in 1899 and a Ph.D. in English in 1908 from the same institution. He was subsequently appointed to the Yale faculty in Literature. Canby was the first

---

⁹ The following biographies are taken from various volumes of the Dictionary of Literary Biography published by the Gale Group.

¹⁰ This is a Bachelor of Philosophy degree granted by East-coast institutions, including Yale University.
professor at Yale to specialize in American literature and was deeply involved in establishing its legitimacy.

In 1920 Canby became the first editor of the New York Post's weekly supplement the Literary Review. Canby published both serious essays and lighter commentary on modern literature in that weekly. He supplemented its content with poetry, cartoons, and "enlightened gossip" about authors. When the Post was bought in 1923, the Literary Review ceased publication due to differences that arose between Canby and the new owner, Cyrus H.K. Curtis. When he left the Post, Canby took contributing writers William Rose Benét, Christopher Morely, and researcher/editor Amy Loveman with him.

The Saturday Review was founded by Canby and his former Post associates in 1924. Under his editorship, from 1924-1936, the paper became the leading literary weekly in America. Canby was also appointed the first chairman of the Book of the Month Club, which he remained until the late 1930s.

William Rose Benét, though best known as the brother of Stephen Vincent Benét, was, like Canby, a Yale graduate. He was also a Pulitzer Prize winning poet. Born in New York to a career army officer, Benét at first followed his father's footsteps into army life, but
quickly discovered a love of verse. While attending Yale, he became editor of the Yale Record, and upon his graduation in 1907 went to work for a variety of periodicals. His first volume of poetry appeared in 1911.

During the First World War, Benét volunteered for service in the U.S. Signal Corps where, though grounded due to poor eyesight, he earned the rank of Second Lieutenant before being honorably discharged. In 1918, a second volume of his poetry was published to mixed reviews. Beginning in the 1920s, Benét became a mentor to several poets, including his brother and his future wife, Elinor Wylie. Though his poetry was never considered consistently first-rate, he did win the Pulitzer Prize for *The Dust of God*, in 1941. Benét remained an associate editor of the *Saturday Review* until his death in 1950.

Amy Loveman, the only female member of the editorial staff of the *Saturday Review*, was also educated at an elite Ivy League University. Born in 1881 to highly educated emigrant parents, she graduated first from Horace Mann School and then from Barnard College where she received her degree in 1897. Loveman began work as an editor and contributor for her uncle Louis Heilprin (the *New International Encyclopedia* and Lippincott’s *Pronouncing Gazetteer of the World*). She became a book
reviewer for the New York Evening Post where she joined with Henry Seidel Canby, William Rose Benét, and Christopher Morley in creating the newspaper's literature review section.

In 1924 she was named as one of two associate editors for the Saturday Review, for which she also wrote the column "Clearing House." Loveman received the Columbia University Medal of Excellence in 1945. She also worked for the Book-of-the-Month Club from its inception in 1936 and was made editor of BMOC in 1951.

Christopher (Darlington) Morley, a noted novelist, essayist, and poet was a part-time editor of the Saturday Review. He was born in Haverford, Pennsylvania to immigrant parents, who, like those of Amy Loveman, were highly educated (His father was a noted mathematician at Johns Hopkins). Morley first attended Haverford College, receiving his B.A. in 1910, and then went on to become a Rhodes scholar studying at New College, Oxford. Upon his return to America in 1913, he began work as an editor at Doubleday, Page, and Company. Morley is best known for his popular novels Parnassus on Wheels and The Haunted Bookshop, but had more than sixty published books by the end of his career. He and his brothers (both also Rhodes scholars) began the Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts' society
known as The Baker Street Irregulars. Throughout his novel-writing career, Morley continued to act as editor, both for collections of literature and for the newspapers -- *The New York Evening Post* (1920-1923) and the *Saturday Review* (1924-1941). Christopher Morley was a vocal supporter of popular fiction and, in an early article in the *Saturday Review*, said, "To make literature alive and vital, it must be infused into the lives of the entire citizenry, not merely those of an intellectual clique" (Galenet Sept. 1981).

Morley's egalitarian perspective was shared by his fellow *Saturday Review* editors, as is evident from both the content of their literary works and from the history of their employment. Each of the newspaper's founders vigorously supported "literature for the masses" (the Book-of-the-Month Club, for example, was specifically designed to bring literature to the mass public).

Henry Siedel Canby was the father of American Literature studies at Yale University and insisted, in a variety of articles and speeches, that American Literature was as worthy as traditional British literature. Each of the editors of the *Saturday Review* had equal, if not as visible, respect for the merits of American fiction, but made their argument contingent upon its value in terms of
its relation to British fiction "Fear of Americanization," it seems, was not only a problem for the British elite. These editors, who wished to be viewed as cultured, found it necessary to strongly align themselves with their very vocal and ardently anti-American British contemporaries. Lines had to be drawn, decisions had to be made. In order to ensure their high-culture status, and thus ensure that they would continue to be considered "guardians," the Saturday Review editors needed to prove that they knew the difference between "good" and "bad" literature-for-the-masses.

The editors chose to attack the same type of American fiction that the British critics railed against. Though Romance novels and Westerns closely followed the fate of detective fiction, the decision to pick detective fiction as a starting point can clearly be tied to the shift in status the genre suffered as the result of the rise of Mass Culture Theory and the American literati's acceptance of the British fear of "Americanization."

The internal debate waged within the mystery/detective fiction genre most likely made it easier for the Saturday Review to take the position they did, and by doing so -- by choosing to state, in writing, the questionable status of mystery/detective fiction, these
extremely influential editors accomplished two things: first, they positioned themselves clearly with respected elitist critics like Edmund Wilson and Richard Hoggart, and second, they helped seal the fate (and position) of the genre as a whole.

The “Why” and “How” of The Saturday Review

The power and impact of the Saturday Review becomes clearer when the original mission statement and the policy change for new book reviews are viewed in relation to one another. The mission statement, drafted in 1924 covers nearly four full columns over two pages of the first edition of the Saturday Review and reads, in part, as follows:

Good and Bad Reviewing

Even in this demi-literate nation there is a host of readers of good books far too sophisticated for the reviewer whose stock in trade is fluency and a will to be kind. Forty years and more of intensive work in scholarship by our best universities has fixed at least two ideas in the general intelligence -- that accuracy is a virtue and that a writer must have knowledge of what he presumes to discuss. The day of
critical omniscience is no longer glorious...Great scholars make great critics only if they have art.

In this opening statement, Canby seems to be separating his editorial staff from those critics who have either have no schooling, only schooling, or only literary publishing history. By insisting that good critics must have in their arsenal both the art and architecture of literature, he, at once, ensures the status of himself and his staff.

Because the editors of the *Saturday Review* were all both classically trained and published authors, Canby claims that they make the best and most capable (and therefore, most trustworthy) reviewers. His insult to the "demi-literate" is well aimed, as this would allow readers, those who could appreciate the difference between his newspaper and those others designed for the general populous, to place themselves inside the realm of the cultural elite, simply by virtue of appreciating that difference, and choosing to listen to his staff over the, in Canby's opinion, lesser qualified.

To guarantee the enlightened understanding of his readership, he explains the necessity of multiple qualifications in the following paragraphs:
It requires as much art to see a book as it really is and then convey that perception by nicely chosen words as to write a short story -- more art than to write a standardized short story (emphasis added)...It is a pity that long imputation and practice of hack writing has made appreciation of the delicate and admirable achievements possible in reviewing rare...Except for poetry it (review writing) is the only art of words that still has votaries without number who sacrifice cash to credit; yet it is love of books and an almost passionate desire to get what is best in them that makes the best critics.

The remainder of the mission statement is an explanation of what divides the typical newspaper critic from those of the Saturday Review and a definition of what makes good literature.

A literary review without a program is like a modern man without his clothes -- healthy, agile, functioning in all his senses, but regarded as less than respectable, even by his friends.

...The Saturday Review is to have a guiding purpose, that must be drawn not from the temperament of the
editorial staff, but from things as they are in literature.
This statement seems to sit juxtaposed to his initial comments regarding the necessity for a certain quality of staff, but allows the editors to excuse their choices in material for review. It allows them to review both "high" and "low" literature, because the "temperament" of his elite staff is going to be mitigated by the status and content of the available literature market.

He gradually places the burden of distinction on the audience by arguing that, "Men and women who do not find good books interesting are either too dull or too vivid."\textsuperscript{11} Canby eases some of the pressure from his readership by allowing them to understand that he (and his eminently qualified and discriminating staff) believe that "literature is one of the great subjects and, like all great subjects, to be taken with both good humor and utmost seriousness, to be loved and made fun of, to be pondered and fought for." But he cautions his readers. Not wanting them to think lightly of his purpose in

\textsuperscript{11} Here, and in later articles, Canby equates the word "vivid" with vulgarity.
creating the Saturday Review, he warns them that "good" reviewing must not be equated to the quantity of critical word plying (as it is defined by vast numbers of book reviews -- a method used by the New York Times and others, where large numbers of texts were reviewed in brief over each week). He explains the difference between the competing papers and the Saturday Review's approach to reviewing:

The modern fashion, however, does not regard literature -- or at least contemporary literature -- as a harsh and crabbed female, but rather as a much advertised show girl, bought and paid for, and to be written about at so much a word. In the hearts of those who assess good writing as if it were pig iron or ladies' hose, good humor and sympathy are dead as soon as born.

Canby further defines the critical difference between the typical book reviewer and those employed by the Saturday Review:

A critic of literature must be aware of his good fortune and unashamedly embrace his subject, leaving reticence and prejudice behind...But in pursuing literature, a literary review...must have two purposes, especially in America (emphasis added).
At this point Canby, still speaking for the combined staff, shifts perspective away from self-advertising and begins to directly address the issues of what he believed made "good" literature that was worthy of review. He separates literature into two categories, "Timely," that is literature that is relevant in the current day's terms, and "Timeless," that is literature that remains relevant despite the passage of time. He writes:

There are two functions of literature that, so far as I am aware, have not been clearly distinguished in their modern aspects, although the general difference has been the cause of many a lively row. Literature can be timely and literature can be timeless.

...In a generation where size seems hopelessly confused with excellence, and civilization is written in terms of the advertising pages, the spiritual reserve in great books may not need defending, but must constantly be sought out and interpreted.

This complaint is a restatement of the vast amount of anti-American criticism that was coming out of England at this time. By including this statement, Canby is both informing his American readership of the problem and aligning himself, and his newspaper, with his contemporaries overseas. Still an American and a
confirmed literary egalitarian, he justifies his alliance by indicating that his involvement will help raise the estimation of the American literature that is worthy of elevation. In his words:

Good books in their general function are entrances into the life of the spirit, but they are also slow swinging doors leading from crowded corridors into seclusion.

...If the Saturday Review, in its purpose to uphold literature, can help to set right the curiously warped estimates of so-called American classics, it will earn a right to subsistence.

...Good new books especially, whether they contain great art or little, are new of human nature as it is at the moment. We do not read a new book because we think it will live, we read it because it is alive.

...the United States has become after all a model for the world -- and I do not mean in virtue, wealth, kind of government, or mould of character. In the United States, that form of society which we still call democratic for want of a juster word, has reached its fullest development, and every civilized country is year by year borrowing, adapting, self-developing, with an equivalent society as an end
almost in sight. *England has Americanized, in this sense almost unbelievably since 1900* (emphasis added).

The British notion of "Americanization" and all the issues of quality, morality, and culture begin to be addressed by Canby here in the mission statement. Over the course of his editorship, he will address this issue and attempt to define the term on his own in a series of front-page articles, most of which mirror the following sentiment:

...It is not properly speaking an Americanization, it is the results of the industrial revolution working out into a changed life for every individual...but mass production, mass knowledge, mass communication have produced a society where every man can move, eat, read, hear with all the power that results, although wisdom is just as hard to attain as ever, and self-control much harder. A vulgar society of great energy, flexible, hysterical, confused is the outcome: a society of infinite possibilities for slow good, or rapid evil.\(^12\)

---

\(^12\) See Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*, of which this sentiment is a paraphrase.
Canby concludes his statement by equivocating and justifying the need for the elite to protect and elevate the mass, "I am neither praising the American mass civilization nor condemning it," he writes and further explains the relationship between "good" and "bad" reviewing:

...We Americans who read, and we who edit, cannot remain indifferent to the mere reporting [of literature]. Every attempt to present it in history, sociology, psychology, biology, as well as in pure literature, or pure comedy, must be interesting, must be for a Review as vital as the enduring values of literature.

In these combined statements, both on the quality of reviewing and on the qualities of a society as they are revealed by the literature it produces, Canby clearly indicates how aware the editors of the Saturday Review were of the anti-American commentary coming out of England, and how, while agreeing with the sentiment, they felt that the overarching criticism was unjustified. Great pains are taken in these statements to ensure that readers of the Saturday Review understand both the values and intentions of the editorial staff. For all that they insist that the "purpose" must not be "drawn" from "the
temperament of the editorial staff," it is clear that they propose to set themselves apart from the "practices of hack writing" they believed to exist in their American contemporaries, and thus serve the greater good by allowing the British to see the un-Americanized valuable American fiction. In the face of a stated belief that "timely" literature could have as much (or more) value than "timeless" literature, the editors draw a clear line between what they refer to as "good books" and the "so-called American classics." They go far in supporting the fears and frustrations expressed by their British counterparts regarding the quality of both American fiction and American audiences.

The editorial staff plainly had an abiding desire to be seen as well above other American literature reviewers and, perhaps, one of the easiest ways to ensure their position, not only in the eyes of their readers, but also in the eyes of the literati, was to continue to closely align themselves with the opinions and modifications in taste of the British high-culture critics. Early in the 1930s, England became awash with criticism focused on American pulp fiction and movies. The general consensus seemed to be that these genres embodied the worst elements of mass-market America -- violence, graphic sex, and
formulaic style. As a result of this critical upsurge, detective fiction became an easy and obvious target for the worst of the denigrating comments.

Until 1933, The Saturday Review put its review of new detective and mystery fiction in a general category with all new fiction. As the popularity of detective fiction rose between 1927-1932, these book reviews began to take up a great deal of space. Periodically, the editors created separate columns for detective fiction reviews, including one titled "Thrillers" and another titled "Murder Will Out," though neither was a mainstay of the paper. These columns, which carried the same high standard of reviews as other similar columns, disappeared entirely in February of 1933. The change of format that ensued in April of that year represented a disturbing downward trend in the critical treatment of mystery/detective fiction and will be examined in-depth in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR
LOOKING AT DETECTIVE FICTION
IN THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Change in the Format

The equanimity with which the editors viewed and critiqued American fiction until April 1933 makes their collective decision to devalue detective fiction, first through discontinuing the review of it and subsequently by changing the format for reviews, both astonishing and curious. The only viable explanation for severely limiting the review of new works of mystery/detective fiction is that, as members of the cultural elite and as self-appointed but generally accepted guardians of that elite, the editors found it necessary to ensure their status at the cost of their philosophy. After a two-month hiatus, in which no reviews of new mystery/detective fiction were published, a short explanation of a format change appeared at the head of the “New Books” section of the paper. The editor’s note informed its readership that mystery/detective fiction would no longer receive full reviews.
Whether this decision was wholly driven by the desire on behalf of the editors to ensure their status as guardians of high-culture by adopting the practices of their British contemporaries, or the combined result of those external factors and the heated debate that raged with in the genre, this shift in format in what was becoming the most prestigious of literary review journals had a lasting, detrimental effect on the genre as a whole.

The explanation for the format change in the "New Books" section of the Saturday Review appeared just under the headline of that column on April 24, 1933 and read as follows:

This week the Saturday Review begins to review detective and mystery fiction according to a new plan. The department appearing on the next page under the heading The Criminal Record is designed to cover promptly all books in this field (with the exception of obvious ineptitudes). The Criminal Record is inaugurated in the belief that readers of detective stories can determine the possible interest in a book more easily from this brief, classified comment than from a conventional review; that they want prompt and complete information on certain major points, rather than detailed criticism. Books which
fit partially into this category but which possess wider literary value will be reviewed separately as heretofore.

Though appearing to be a change for the benefit of a finicky reading public, this adjustment in format carried a clear and critically significant message -- like their British contemporaries, these American editors also believed that (with few exceptions) mystery and detective fiction was not quality literature and therefore not worthy of equal treatment. Coming from these guardians of culture and exemplars of literary democracy, this demotion was a significant setback. In one swift move, the editors of the Saturday Review helped to solidify both the division of detective/mystery fiction from general fiction and its subordinate position in relation to the novel.

The editors of the Saturday Review typically received works of general fiction, even those considered avant-garde, by recognizing both their content and the talent of their authors. For example, on December 21, 1929, Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* received a review that ran two full columns in the main section of the paper. Beginning with a three-line quote in French, the review mixed English and Latin in commentary that concluded, "In manner, Mr. Wolfe is most akin to James
Joyce, somewhere between the ascetic beauty of the *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and the unpruned fecundity of *Ulysses* (SR). Of Sinclair Lewis, whose 1930 Nobel Prize in literature greatly upset the literary circles of Europe due to *Babbit’s* "prosaic Americaness," the reviewers said, "Sinclair Lewis of all our writers has given the imagination brooding over those [post-war] times the most to feed upon" (SR Nov. 22, 1930). From commentary on Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the editorial staff of the *Saturday Review* clearly maintained their pledge of deep and intelligent reviewing. Their commitment to the incorporation of "good reviewing" and "timely" literature at times overcame "the temperament of the editorial staff" in favor of "criticism [that was] keenly aware of both past and present, and a partisan of both" (SR Aug. 2, 1924). The high ideals and stern dedication to good reviewing so visible here were initially maintained for all fiction, including mystery/detective fiction, until the editors decided to abandon them in April 1933.

An examination of the format and language of reviews of mystery/detective fiction before and after April 1933 provides a clear perspective on the intensity and
resulting influence of the change. Two excerpts from the first year of the Saturday Review's publication follow. Both appeared in "The New Books" section of the paper, which included reviews for all types of fiction and non-fiction under categories including "Belles Lettres," "Biographies," and "Fiction." The first review is of a traditional novel, the second of a work of detective fiction:

SOUND AND FURY. By James Henle.

James Henle, a newcomer among novelists has set out to do an interesting and illuminating thing. He has attempted to show what sure failure the highly individualized, self-determining, fighting man must come in an impact against the organized, conventional upper middle-class society of our own day. To have succeeded completely in his aim would have been to produce a great book. But he has not succeeded.

RUE WITH A DIFFERENCE. By Charles Recht.

...Most of this book is devoted to analysis and exposition of the states of mind that lead to this clean-up. It is efficiently managed, though considerably overdone. Mr. Recht can be witty, and
neatly epigrammatic, and sometimes he attains a grim humorousness...

What needs to be noted is not the negativity of the two reviews but that the reviewer used both similar language in his analysis of each of the works and a correspondingly serious tone. It is clear from reading each of the reviews (which are also of similar length) that there was no significant difference in the treatment of detective fiction by the Saturday Review staff. This type of thorough, column-length review retained the goals of the paper as represented in the mission statement, that is, to review deeply rather than broadly.

Over the course of the next decade, the Saturday Review’s “New Books” section carried an average of forty full-length reviews of detective fiction a year and an average of four feature articles on mystery books, mystery authors, or related non-fiction subjects in the main part of the paper. The original version of Dorothy L. Sayers’ introduction to her Omnibus of Crime was printed in September 1930 in a full two-page-spread. Dashiell Hammett was a regularly appearing reviewer between 1927 and 1929. Full column reviews appeared for works, referred to as “novels,” by mystery fiction authors like Rex Stout and Agatha Christie. In a review of How Like A
God by Rex Stout the reviewer commented, "If I had not been told that this was Mr. Stout's first novel, I would not believe it" (SR, Oct. 26, 1929). The column-length review is full of praise and does not qualify that praise with comments like "for a piece of detective fiction," as was often done in later reviews. As for Agatha Christie, though less exuberant, reviews of her books were positive and typically focused on the "unsurpassed swiftness of pace" and the "main thread of interest" that "never sags" (SR, Dec 13, 1924). Her books were, without exception, referred to as "novels," even in reviews that were less than flattering. The language and style of the reviews was identical to that of reviews of general fiction, both in seriousness and in complexity. The reviewers focused on characterization, theme, and quality of writing rather than general readability. By the end of 1934 all that had changed.

From January to March 1933 the review of detective fiction went through several transitions, beginning with the development of a semi-regular column in the "New Books" section wholly devoted to the review of detective fiction and ending with a four-by-four inch box that professed to do the same. In the year that preceded the change in format, April 2, 1932 to April 8, 1933, there
were only nine full-length reviews of works of detective fiction; however, it was during that year that the editors introduced the two periodic specialized columns, "Thrillers" and "Murder Will Out," both written alternately by Eugene Reynes, Robert Innes and William C. Weber, who were either noted critics or publishing-house professionals. On one occasion, on January 21, 1933, the editors of the Saturday Review ran a full-page section devoted primarily (all reviews with the exception of one) to mystery fiction titled, "Murder and Miscellany." With the inclusion of those three specialized sections, the number of mystery/detective fiction reviews increased in that one year from nine to sixty-seven.

These specialized columns were the beginning of the decline for detective fiction reviews in the Saturday Review. Generally consisting of ten to fifteen reviews at a time, the comments were cursory and lacked both the language and seriousness of the lengthier reviews. For example, on September 24, 1932 William C. Weber reviewed fourteen new works of detective fiction. A typical example from one of his "reviews" follows:

The new A. Fielding story -- "The Upfold Farm Mystery" is much better than his recent "Death of John Tait," although the clever inspector doesn't
appear until the last eighth of the book and then solves the mystery of baffling murders with a few magic passes. The characters are artists, musicians, and writers -- so you know what wicked work to expect.

This review differs significantly, both in language, content, and tone from the reviews that appeared outside the column. Generally, the works reviewed in the preexisting format and under the general heading of "fiction" retained the same type of structure and content as those from the Saturday Review's first year of publication.

The change in format as it appeared in the two columns "Thrillers" and then "Murder Will Out," though considerable, still left room for considered opinion and evaluation of plot, character, theme, and authorial talent. Generally, in these columns, one or two works were given more space and deeper consideration, and the appearance of these columns did not preclude other reviews of mystery/detective fiction appearing in the same issue of the paper. The really monumental change was yet to arrive and when it did occur, it brought with it the full force of the editorial staff's disfavor.
Most of the new works of detective fiction appeared only inside the new box created for them, 180 in the first year of format change alone. It became a matter of both pride and consternation for authors to see their works and the works of their competitors reach the high level of merit required for serious review. It would become the goal of serious authors to write detective fiction "which possess[ed] wider literary value," the kind that would be appreciated and commented upon by critics like those of the Saturday Review. The evidence for this can be seen in excerpts from letters written by Raymond Chandler. For example, in a letter to Charles Morton, associate editor of the Atlantic, dated December 12, 1945, Chandler wrote:

...I am beginning to wonder quite seriously whether anybody knows what writing is anymore, whether they haven't got the whole bloody business so completely mixed up with subject matter and significance...and so on, that there simply isn't anybody around who can read a book and say that the guy who writes it knew how to write or didn't (59).

Chandler wrote similar letters to many of his detective fiction-writing contemporaries including Erle Stanley Gardner, author of the hugely popular Perry Mason series and George Harmon Coxe, a Black Mask contemporary.
From the content of Chandler's correspondence it is clear that the devaluing of detective fiction was very much on the minds of detective fiction writers. The letter to Gardner is a long "address to the judges" written to assuage Gardner's self-deprecating statement, "as literature [critics say] my stuff still stinks" (SLRC 67-70). In this letter, though not addressing the Saturday Review by name, Chandler does refer to the unwarranted snobbishness of a "very high brow" literary review. In exasperated response to Coxe's complaints about critics and publishers, Chandler writes, "I'm surprised that anyone writes or publishes the darn things [detective fiction] at all," (SLRC 5-6). This sense of frustration directed at critics permeates the vast majority of Chandler's letters to his contemporaries and represents a widespread feeling of injustice among detective fiction writers.

Who Made it Out of "The Box" and Why

In clear opposition to the 1924 Mission Statement, Henry S. Canby and the other editors of the Saturday Review made the decision, with the change of format in 1933, to favor quantity over quality in the review of new detective fiction. Though one of their sternest criteria
for "good reviewing" was to ensure that, "Every attempt [be made] to present [a review] in history, sociology, psychology, biology, as well as in pure literature, or pure comedy, [that is] interesting, [and] must be for a Review as vital as the enduring values of literature," the editors sacrificed what was "interesting" for what was functional. By relegating the vast majority of work in mystery/detective fiction to the four-by-four inch box they dubbed "The Criminal Record," they became perpetrators of what they had accused their original competition of doing -- shallow, manifold reviews that lacked both content and style.

The "look" of the "Criminal Record" was unique to the Saturday Review and contained the author's name, the title of the book, and a series of symbols or quips to indicate the "readability" of that book. Reviewers in the "Criminal Record" were unnamed and therefore given no visible credentials to verify their ability to critique. In contrast, short biographies of general fiction reviewers typically followed each of their reviews.

Figure 1 is a reproduction of "The Criminal Record" as it appeared in the September 23, 1933 issue. Presumably, the editors of the Saturday Review believed that detective fiction readers did not require, or
deserve, proof of expertise from their critics since no names are attributed to the in-box reviews.

| The Criminal Record |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Title and Author** |
| **Crime, Place, and Sleuth** |
| **Summary Up** |
| **Verdict** |
| THE DOCTOR'S FIRST MURDER |
| Robert B. Hare |
| Longmans, Green: $2 |
| English medico carefully plans murder of colleague, sets out to commit it, finds deed done, just as he planned it. |
| Remarkable study in suspicion, fear, and general deviltry, with a grim conclusion that takes your breath away. |
| Grand |
| THE DEAD PARROT |
| Michael Kates |
| Crime Club: $2 |
| Rest cure on yacht for alleged homicidal maniac involves several murders. Jim Tremain uses more brains than brain to solve. |
| Flat characterization, superficial killings, both human and animal, conventional love story take edge off action. |
| Bloody |
| MURDER OF RAYSIDE |
| Raymond Robin |
| Crowell: $2 |
| Lawyer-detective tracks double murders – with very confusing clues – on Maryland estate with bad local rep. |
| Cunning criminal, with much knowledge of ballistics, leads reader to mercy, if technical, chase. Expert sleuthing. |
| Read-able |
| THIRTEEN AT DINNER |
| Agatha Christie |
| Dodd, Mead: $2 |
| Lord Edge was stabbed to death at dinner, by American actress poisoned; Point asks 5 questions. |
| Among the better efforts of an uneven author. Conclusion cheerfully ruthless. |
| Very good |
| HANGMAN'S HOLIDAY |
| Dorothy Sayers |
| Harcourt, Brace: $2 |
| Short crimes, some featuring Lord Peter Wimsey, others introducing motto-quoting salesman, Mr. Montague Egg. |
| Sayer's usual sense of humor, excellent characterization, ingenious ideas plus some O. Henry touches. |
| By all means |
| THE PUZZLE OF THE PEPPER TREE |
| Stuart Palmer |
| Crime Club: $2 |
| Miss Withers on busman's holiday at Catalina Island discovers who murdered Riparian passenger, who stole corpse. |
| Sunny atmosphere, action not too absorbing. Miss Withers's humor, knowledge of criminology, and N.E. zeal prove most entertaining. |
| Good fun |

Figure 1. The Criminal Record

Not only can the carelessness of the new format be seen in the plethora of typographical errors that appear (i.e. the possessive form of Dorothy Sayers), but the language, which is terse and familiar, reveals a general lapse in the usual standard of commentary that appeared in the paper. It was not unusual for the reviewers to use complicated sentence structure and very elevated, bookish
language in their reviews of novels; for example, in the same September 23rd issue, of the novel Deep Country, by Amory Hare, the reviewer writes, "We have often observed with regret that it is well nigh impossible to write of a fox-hunting milieu in any land with any real objectivity." This language is quite different from the "in box" blurbs, "more brains than brawn" and "takes your breath away." In subsequent "Criminal Record" reviews the language further deteriorates and the "Summing Up" column becomes rife with quips like, "fast-paced," "thrilling," and "thoroughly hardboiled."

The assumed knowledge on behalf of the reader is explained in the change of format paragraph, but even in cases where authors are producing first books, comments like "typical" and "what you'd expect" are common in these demi-reviews. Despite several of the editors being involved with, or fans of, detective fiction, it is apparent that, with very little exception, no work in detective fiction was given the same serious consideration as even the most "fourth-rate novelist," as Raymond Chandler complained in his letter to James Sandoe. Because of this, what becomes interesting is both who made it out of "the box" and who did not. Since the criteria for being given a full review was being a text "which
possesses wider literary value," a brief look at the first few years of the feature’s existence tells a fascinating story.

Agatha Christie, despite being by a tremendous margin the most widely read of mystery writers, never had a single book reviewed in full format once the format change had been made (though several of her books were reviewed up until that point). Dorothy L. Sayers only had one of her books, The Nine Tailors, reviewed, and the juxtaposition between what the reviewers in the Saturday Review had to say, in relation to what the reviewers in the New York Times had to say is almost comical.

The Nine Tailors is a “Lord Peter Wimsey” story in which, while on vacation in East Anglia, Wimsey is asked to solve a local mystery. Involving an unknown corpse in a re-dug grave and the history of both East Anglia and bell-tolling as a British Fen county tradition, the novel slowly winds its way to a bizarre conclusion that seems to be more the result of the author’s wish to write of East Anglia and bell-tolling than of murder and mayhem. Though mostly well received in its time, The Nine Tailors had its detractors, including Edmund Wilson who, in his criticism of the genre as whole, wrote, “I declare that [The Nine
Tailors] seems to me one of the dullest books I have ever encountered in any field" (DF 36).

At the time of the book's publication, The New York Times ran a review of The Nine Tailors that covered about one-half of a full column in "New Mystery Stories," the book review section that was dedicated to the review of mystery/detective fiction. Fundamentally, the reviewer, Isaac Anderson, concluded that despite the bell-ringing, the book is an excellent mystery: "You will probably enjoy what Miss Sayers has to say about [the bells] since her dissertation is all woven into a most fascinating mystery tale" (NYT March 25, 1934). In the Saturday Review, on the other hand, the opinion is given that despite the mystery, the book makes a good novel: "Nor do I remember [a mystery book] that left me more indifferent as to the identity of its murderer; for this book is much more than a crime story. I should still have enjoyed it if the mystery had remained unsolvable..." Apparently, the Saturday Review reviewers felt The Nine Tailors so worthy of recognition, that this book appeared both in full-review, taking up more than one full-column, and in "The Criminal Record," where it received the "verdict," "AAAAA." This is the only occasion after the institution
of the new format where a mystery book review appeared in both the "Criminal Record" and in the general reviews.

The language used in the review for Nine Tailors in the Saturday Review was of the level that was typically reserved for serious novels. The reviewer, Arnot Robertson, herself a published novelist, used phrases like, "extremely ingenious, humanly consistent and inherent," and "conjecture about the solution." The reviewer did not assume prior familiarity on the part of the reader; she explained who Sayers was, described prior works, and commented repeatedly on Sayers' style and wit. This respect and consideration was not made to other notable mystery/detective fiction authors.

One of the more remarkable decisions by the editors of the Saturday Review was to relegate all the works of both Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler to "The Criminal Record." For example, The Thin Man, hailed in the New York Times as, "in a class by itself," in a review that runs nearly one full-column length, is said to be "Extra-Swell" by the reviewers in the Saturday Review in the "verdict" box of the "Criminal Record." This disparity would be amusing were it not such a clear indication of the devalued state of detective fiction in the opinions of the guardians of cultural quality.

68
Spurred on by their apparent success with detective fiction, the editors created similar columns for Adventure fiction (including Westerns) and Romance novels. Even smaller than "The Criminal Record" and with just as flippant content and careless editing, the "Over the Counter" feature ran, on and off, for decades. This second change in format was not explained like the paragraph that appeared along with the first "Criminal Record" and was not modeled on similar features from other papers. Unlike "The Criminal Record," though, being reviewed in "Over the Counter" did not prevent a work or an author from being given fuller, even feature-length reviews of the same novel or novels with similar themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Over the Counter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Saturday Review's Guide to Romance and Adventure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trade Mark</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Flavor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JONATHAN'S DAUGHTER</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Study eventually rescues Ann from her devotion to an NG parent</td>
<td>Standard Plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Larrabee</td>
<td>(Macrae, Smith: $2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE OUTLAW</td>
<td>Western</td>
<td>Love, 10% -- Courage, 111% -- Compassion, 1%</td>
<td>Usual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max Brand</td>
<td>(Dodd, Mead: $2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMARADES OF THE STORM</td>
<td>Romantic</td>
<td>Two Depression victims chisel way from New York park bench to California sunset</td>
<td>Kyne's better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pee B. Rose</td>
<td>Adventure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kintey, 12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEN ARE ONLY HUMAN</td>
<td>Triangle</td>
<td>Gilfed, his wife, and the irreprehensible gal of his past</td>
<td>Eau de Woolworth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise Seibert</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mead: $2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASSIONATE PURITAN</td>
<td>Young</td>
<td>After her Galahad returns with another girl's brand, Janet faces the whirling world</td>
<td>Lollypop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Ross Pictures</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Dodd, Mead: $2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Over the Counter
While, for the most part, the editors chose how to categorize the novels that appeared in "Over the Counter" based on how they were marketed by their publishers (hence the category for "Label"), it was not uncommon for books with "mystery-like" content to be reclassified out of their publisher-given category into the genre of detective/mystery fiction. One example of this is the Baroness Orczy's book, The Way of the Scarlet Pimpernel which, though originally listed as a "story of high adventure" by its publisher (and its author), was included as an example of detective fiction in "The Criminal Record" by the editors of the Saturday Review.13

Authors were at the mercy of the Saturday Review's editorial staff. To appear in "The Criminal Record" while not necessarily detrimental, could hardly be viewed as beneficial since literary merit clearly had not been established, at least not in the eyes of these prestigious and influential editors. On very few occasions was new format used to the advantage of an author. One such occasion was when the publishers of Erle Stanley Gardner's

---

books decided to run a reprint of "The Criminal Record" as an advertisement for *The Case of the Lucky Legs* in February of 1934, but Gardner, who was already firmly entrenched in mass culture, by virtue of the radio-plays based on his stories, had already made it clear, both in interviews and in print, that he did not consider himself a "novelist" and was quite content to write stories. Authors like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, however, felt the lack of serious review to be both insulting and undeserved, as is evidenced in their letters and interviews.

Whether the changes in the *Saturday Review*, from general inclusion, to separate column, to full-page feature, to four-by-four inch box reflected a general trend, or were trend-setting in themselves, is unclear but is certainly indicative of a significant shift in the seriousness with which detective/mystery fiction was being perceived in the decades between 1920 and 1950. Either encouraged by the internal debate that waged in the genre or merely attempting to align themselves more fully with their high-culture British counterparts, the decision of editors of the *Saturday Review's* to so drastically change the format, style, and quality of detective/mystery
fiction reviews had a considerable effect on how the genre was received, reviewed, and ranked as a whole.
CHAPTER FIVE

SOME CONCLUSIONS

A Summary of Coincidences

There is no question after reviewing the evidence presented in the previous chapters that the status of mystery/detective fiction declined steadily from its inception at the middle of the nineteenth century. What remains to be evaluated is by what means that devaluation occurred and whether or not the lowered status became permanent.

Several factors combined, or converged, resulting in the demotion of detective fiction to a place beneath, rather than alongside the novel. In addition to an increase in the number of works published, some by more discriminating publishers, others by publishers eager to jump on a lucrative band wagon, the dynamics of a significant cultural debate had a tremendous impact on a genre already under strain from within.

Fear of "Americanization," the sense that anything mass produced and mass consumed must be valueless and morally corrupt provided critics of detective fiction ample ammunition to level against a popularity-driven style of writing. The British intellectual elite who felt
themselves engaged in a battle for their educated youth against the influence of Hollywood found the detective novel an irresistible target for derision and exclusion from consideration as "real" literature. Coming out of the penny pulp press, "hardboiled" detective fiction seemed especially suited for attack. While typical "cozy" British mysteries were viewed as merely substandard, the violent new American fiction was taken as threatening to the very foundations of proper high-brow culture.

Educated Americans eager to be seen by their contemporaries, both overseas and at home, as culturally sophisticated, joined in the melee. The opinion seemed to be that similar enemies made similar culture.

Mass-culture artifacts, like newspapers, had to make critical decisions in regard to both style and content if they wished to be perceived as above the mass-culture from which they arose. This was especially important for the founders of the Saturday Review, as they, justifiably, believed themselves to be members of the cultural elite well before their involvement in the creation of that newspaper.

By publicly aligning themselves with the cultural elite of Britain both in statements made as part of their self-defined 1924 Mission Statement and in numerous
similarly themed essays that followed, the editors of the Saturday Review accomplished two things: first, they were able to situate themselves as acceptable, trustworthy guardians of literary culture, and second, they helped ensure that their opinions would have an impact beyond those of general reviewers from rival papers.

When the editors chose to classify detective fiction as unworthy of serious review, they sent a clear message both to members of the genre and to rival reviewers -- the genre cannot be seen, they seemed to indicate, except with great exception, as serious literature. Was detective fiction popular? Yes. Was it worth reading? Sometimes. Could it be considered meritorious? Almost never. The status these editors had already achieved, by prior experience, academic degrees, and literary accolades, ensured that the change in format would have more meaning for their readers than merely freeing up space.

In addition to the rise of Mass Culture Theory, the fear of "Americanization," and the need to rise above other mass-culture artifacts at the expense of a genre, the downfall of detective fiction was hastened by a sometimes flippant and sometimes vicious battle for status within the genre itself. "Cozy" writers squared off
against "hardboiled" authors in a debate that would both define and divide the genre.

The British "cozy" school, represented by such diverse authors as Agatha Christie, with her plethora of two-dimensional characters but easy-to-read gripping plots, and Dorothy L. Sayers, who could usually be counted on to introduce passages in either Greek or Latin at some point in the text, seemed to be either wholly unconcerned by the derision their popularity was causing them, or so over-anxious over it, that they felt it necessary to address the issue head on, with as much serious consideration as possible and much to the disadvantage of the genre as a whole.

On the American side, writers either felt the need, like Raymond Chandler, to defend their "art," generally at the expense of their British contemporaries, or, like Rex Stout, to make such a joke of the situation that no one could or would take the question of "art" or "artifice" seriously. It seemed that both sides shared the same split in their own ranks and both felt the need to better define the genre in the hopes of somehow saving it from ruination at the hands of unfriendly critics, and each other.
The purpose that drove these individuals was at once noble and harmful. On the one hand, they did achieve a better appreciation for the difference in the styles of writing and the need to have works from the two schools judged in relation to themselves and not one another, or to traditional novels; on the other hand, they fed the belief that neither side rose above even the most "fourth-rate" of novelists by constantly focusing on the faults and inconsistencies of the rival school.

Each of these elements was fundamental in causing the overall decline in respect for detective fiction, but it is impossible to determine which element had the most effect. Did the editors of the Saturday Review feel justified in changing their format because of the arguments they saw arising among the genre's authors, or did the change in format further convince rival schools that the other style was substandard thus giving rise to more and more vicious debates? How much influence did the British literati really have on the American intelligentsia? These questions can be examined and debated, but can never be definitively resolved because each phenomenon did not occur in sequence but rather in a variety of combinations, so that the lament written by Sayers came before the Saturday Review's format change but
the rebuttal by Chandler came after. Also, the
tongue-in-cheek Decalogue of the Rev. Knox was written
when Mass Culture Theory was still in its fledgling state
but the Saturday Review format change occurred at the
height of that theory's popularity.

This twisted, decade-spanning effect on detective
fiction is plainly visible, even at the most cursory
glance, but the way in which the elements that either
caused or were encouraged by it is less clear. What
remains, at this point, is the matter of longevity.
Having once been devalued could, and did, detective
fiction find its way back to its earlier
nineteenth-century position alongside the traditional
novel? There are those who would answer this question
with a "yes," and base that answer primarily on a direct
comparison of the elements that were typical of the
nineteenth-century novel and the elements that exist in
modern, late twentieth-century detective/mystery fiction,
and others who would consider the question ridiculous in
light of the changes both in novel writing and genre
writing over the last several decades.
Lasting Results or Temporary Setback?

Looking at the characteristics, as represented in the critical essays on novel writing by notables such as E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, for inclusion as a traditional nineteenth-century novel, it is possible to deduce that detective fiction is no longer plagued by the inability to "carry a message." This deficiency, once touted by Hillary Waugh as the defining difference between mystery/detective fiction and novels, seems to have been more than compensated for in the last thirty years of the genre. Current detective fiction writers like Ruth Rendell, P.D. James, and Walter Mosley address consistently serious social issues in the pages of their fiction. Audiences, it seems, no longer have the expectation of being merely "entertained" by detective fiction, though the entertainment factor of the genre is still critical. In addition to being able to "tell a story," mystery/detective fiction writers are assumed to be competent to grapple with the humanity of a given situation, an expectation once reserved for traditional novelists alone.

Despite Sayers' foreboding vision that the genre had reached the end of its evolution, "that the possibilities of the formula [were] becoming exhausted" (Winks 81), the
genre continued to redefine itself, to increase its artfulness and its quality, much in the same way Raymond Chandler insisted his "hardboiled" fiction would. Though the old-fashioned eccentric detective of the "cozy" is only rarely seen, as perhaps the "cozy" style did become an "arid formula" (Haycraft, Art 262), elements of that classic mystery/detective fiction style have been enriched by the possibilities provided by advances in forensic science and psychology. "Hardboiled" heroes usually have problems with sex, drugs, or alcohol in current detective fiction, making the realism touted by Hammett, Chandler, Cain, and others still key to the continued success of these new books.

Though still separated on booksellers' shelves, the genre has come back from its Golden Age reclassification as substandard literature. Reviews of works in the genre are made with the same seriousness, length, and style as works in traditional formats.\(^\text{14}\) It appears, that despite the best efforts of unfriendly critics, misguided defenses, and the rise and fall of British and American

\(^{14}\) See current editions of The New York Times and Publisher's Weekly, for example.
cultural elitism, the genre not only survived but has once again begun to thrive as another form of general fiction, no better perhaps, but also no worse, than the traditional novel.
APPENDIX A

SAMPLE REVIEWS
New Mystery Stories

By ISRAEL ANDERSON


DASHIELL HAMMETT is in a class by himself. His de-
teratives are not patterned after those of any other
writer. Quite probably they are
happy from life. This creator
should know his types, for he was
not any time a Bluebeard operatic.
At any rate, he impresses one as
being real. They are rough in their
methods, and in their methods, and
are not at all particular as to
how they get results so long as
they get them. Their language
is forcible, but it is not the sort
that was used in drawing-rooms in the
good old days that grandmother so
fondly remembers. In this new
story Mr. Hammett is at the top
of his form.

The central figure is Nick
Charles, a former private detec-
tive who has come into money
and has retired to ease, apparently, to
revert himself to an intensive
study of the Jeeves problem from the
consumer's standpoint. While
in New York he is made
or less dragged into a murder
investigation. A woman named Julia
Wolf has been murdered in her
apartment. She was, or had been,
secretary to Mark Whitney, a former
citizen of Nick Charles. Whitney
is missing, and the police are look-
ing for him. According to Charles,
Whitney is "a good man, but
poor."

The second part of this
description might equally well be
applied to the other members of
the Whitney family:DISPLAY, the
dughter, who drinks too much,
lastName and explains them away
with other roses; Gilbert, the son,
whose mind is sheltered up with
undesirable friends, and Miss,
the divorced wife, now married to a
man who calls himself Chie Jor-
genson.

Charles is asked to investigate
the murder on behalf of Whitney,
whose whereabouts are still un-
known, but he is by no means eager
to take a hand, even though his
wife, Nina, hints that she would
like to have him prove that he is still a good detective. The police,
in the meantime, suspect that he
is working on the case and try their
best to move information out of
him. While Charles never does
formally take up the investigation, he
is always ready to be called on
by the various members of the
Whitney family and with others who
are, in one way or another, involved in
the affairs of Whitney or his secre-
tary. He tries to avoid drawing
any his own conclusion from the
bits of information that come his
way. When he finally solves the
mystery, his wife finds the solution
"pretty unsatisfactory," but that is
because she has been expecting
something in the Jeeves world
manner, with every piece in place
before an arrest is made. The
tricks with this method, according
to Charles, is that the murderer
has plenty of them to swap, while
the last few pages are being filled
in.
THE RED LACQUER CASE. By Patricia Wemyss. Smith, Maynard. 1924. $3.

The portrayal of one character in this otherwise quite normal detective-mystery tale stands out as to lift the book above its class. The other authors are little more than the familiar stock figures (though well done and sufficiently animated for the needs of a puzzle story) but Etta, the former suffragette, who is a shop and tool of the aggregation of conspirator-villains of the piece is conceived with a subtle understanding; she is a striking psychological study. She had been a “militant” who found her occupation gone with the grant of “votes for women” and who turned, naturally, to queer cults and eventually to esoteric practices as an outlet for her energy. She is an excellent example of the type that easily becomes a “prey” to the charlatans, but the author manages to keep her entirely human — so much so that you sympathise with her, even as her simplest. She is often feminine.

For the rest, the tale is a skilfully built, crime-puzzle story, turning upon the disappearance and recovery of a priceless piece which contains the precious formula for the manufacture of a most deadly poison. There are also two ably depicted secretaries among the minor folk: the inventor and a bed-ridden old lady who can get up and walk upon occasion to surmount results. Both of these are deftly drawn, without cramping. The tale makes an attractive, entertaining yarn.
WORKS CITED


---. "Timely and Timeless." The Saturday Review 2 Aug. 1924.


---. "To George Harmon Coxe." 9 April 1939. Letter.


Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society.* London: Fontana, 1976.