

# Reading Between the Crimes: Reflections on a Genre

by Frank Kersnowski

To paraphrase John Fowles, if we're paying attention to the plot of a mystery, we know who done it by the time the story is half over (135). Not because we're so smart, but because the writer usually has other concerns and lets us see the murderer-rapist-thief-banker-government flunky and can then direct our attention to the circumstances that nurture such flagrant disregard for the common good. Perhaps because the mystery has such close ties to popular culture, such circumstances are part of life at the time the works are written rather than life in the historical past. But such a concern alone would not raise the mystery novel to the level it now enjoys. It is a genre attractive to readers of all levels of sophistication and to writers of acknowledge brilliance. Even stories intended for the readers of pulp fiction share with those often considered serious fiction an often brooding concern with the human condition. There is always underlying sense that something is awry, not simply in Hamlet's Denmark but in the very identity of our species: a need to reject the social order and to act without regard for the rights of others. In short, to rebel, to consider ones own desires above the law, a condition unfortunately as evident in the actions of nations as individuals. And this bleak view of humanity stains everything in the genre, simply because it is intrinsic.

That Edgar Allen Poe began the genre of the mystery with such tales as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is a truism, at least as far as the elements of plot and the character of the detective or sleuth, though neither term would be acceptable for Chevalier Auguste Dupin, Poe's "bizarre" being who makes evident what is hidden. Dupin used the term "bizarre" deprecatingly in contrasting chess with draughts (or what we call checkers). In chess the complex is considered profound while draughts relies on an acute intellect perceiving the situation, mainly because the "analyst throws himself into the spirit of the opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not infrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation" (478). Obviously, the "analyst" if not actually in possession of a superior intellect at least possesses one that departs from the ordinary and so, according to the OED is "bizarre". Dupin in "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" claims that his method relies on looking closely at "all apparent impossibilities" (501) until he arrives at the probable, to paraphrase Sherlock Holmes as well as Dupin, for Holmes said in "The Sign of the Four": "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth". In the case of the murders on the Rue Morgue, Dupin concludes that entry to the locked room had to be through the seemingly inaccessible route of the window and finds the sailor whose ape committed the crimes. Later, in "The Speckled Band" Holmes will find that a murder has been committed in a locked room when the murderer employed as his agent a snake secreted into the room. That the methods of Dupin and Holmes succeed where the

pedestrian efforts of the police fail sets into place forever the role of the investigator as superior in thought and action to the police and unfettered by, indeed above, the law.

In “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” Dupin solved the murder of the young woman without ever seeing the body or inspecting the evidence. He simply analyzed the police report and the accounts of the disappearance of the woman in Parisian newspapers.

Without even sending his friend to do leg work, as Nero Wolf would later do with Archie, Dupin employed his method of observation, elimination of the impossible, and deduction without leaving his rooms. The story, then, is a masterful presentation of Dupin’s method. Poe developed Dupin’s method further in “The Purloined Letter,”

though Dupin had to leave his rooms. A letter sensitive to the reputation of an important person has disappeared. Though the culprit is known and the police have thoroughly searched his residence, the letter remains missing. Knowing, as do the police, that the importance of the letter demands that the man who purloined it have it readily at hand, Dupin concludes, as did the police, that it must be in his residence, not on his person which would make it susceptible to theft, Dupin reveals the final, and most unusual, part of his method. The minister who has concealed the letter is both a distinguished mathematician and poet. The latter distinction leads the prefecture of police to view him as a fool, but leads Dupin to understand that the minister will not choose the predictable concealment of inserting it in a hollowed out chair leg or under floorboards, for instance. Having found the letter clearly in view in the minister’s apartment and then given it to the astonished prefecture, Dupin explains that like a schoolboy of his acquaintance who always won in a schoolyard game of chance by observing the demeanor of his opponent and adapting it until he thought like him, he too became his opponent. Then using the minister’s accomplishment as a mathematician, and the prefecture’s reliance of the predictability of such a one, Dupin dismisses the general value and applicability of the accomplishments of mathematicians:

I dispute the availability, and thus the value, of that reason which is cultivated in any special form other than the abstractly logical. I dispute, in particular, the reason educated by mathematical study. The mathematics are the science of form and quantity; mathematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity. The great error lies in supposing that even the truths of what is called pure algebra, are abstract or general truths. And this error is so egregious that I am confounded at the universality with which it has been received. Mathematical axioms are not axioms of general truth. What is true of relation—of form and quantity—is often grossly false in regards to morals, for example. (588)

Dismissing mathematicians, Dupin as well dismisses all those who are simply trained to solve a problem, not to be problem solvers and, thus, able to apply method not just repeat

a learned task. Surely, this statement by Poe should be given directly to politicians and academics who only advance the interests of what they can measure, generally the solving of specific problems rather than be proponents of what we call a liberal arts education, which may also do more than math, Milton, or malt to justify the ways of man to man.

Though Sherlock Holmes frequently complained to his chronicler, the ever attentive Dr. Watson, devoted undue attention to the actions in a case than to his scientific methods, Dr. Watson did in fact provide almost constant examples of Holmes's remarkable powers of observation and deduction, as in this one from "A Scandal in Bohemia" when Holmes mentions that he sees Watson has renewed his medical practice:

I see it, I deduce it. How do I know you have been getting yourself very wet lately, and that you have a most clumsy and careless servant girl" (8).

Holmes relieves Watson of his bewilderment at such accurate readings of his life by his usual close observations of what is before him and deducing from them the only circumstances capable of producing them.

Through Watson (as Conan Doyle's representative) frequently provides such examples, thereby distinguishing Holmes from most of us, Poe makes Dupin's method of observation and deduction central to his chronicles of his friend's cases. Conan Doyle never denied his debt to Poe, but we must look closely to see what that indebtedness actually was. The method of Dupin and Holmes is, essentially, the same. And there are similarities between the two detectives, or analysts as Dupin called himself. Each has extensive knowledge of arcane subjects. In "The Mystery of Marie Roget," Dupin is able to ascertain the time of the death of they young woman because he has knowledge of the decomposition of bodies in water that is more accurate than that of the police or those who write for the newspapers. Holmes's knowledge of arcane subjects is legion: tobacco, various kinds of earth, gem stones, to name a few,

Both men, then, are clearly of their time, when the accumulation of knowledge and the classification of it was virtually a defining principle of the culture. We need only look to the Victoria and Albert Museum or remember the odd accumulation of material one could request in the old reading room of the British Library. Yes, the Victorian Age, and its reciprocal time in the United States, was a time of empire building, with the seeming oddities of the conquered or coerced lands brought home by the adventurers and explorers. The Victorians desire to know, and to conquer, seems insatiable, yet naïve. For as Thomas Henry Huxley said: you must "follow humbly whatever end and to whatever abyss nature leads, or you shall learn nothing" (413-160 Those of us who view the Victorians in retrospect may be equally naïve in observing that the Victorians never looked deeply enough to see the dark. Naïve because our facile view must ignore such examples as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and ignore as well the way Poe and Conan Doyle portrayed their protagonists.

Both Dupin and Holmes have their dark sides, of brooding lassitude at best. As Poe portrayed Dupin between cases, intellectual puzzles actually:

Upon the winding up of the tragedy involved in the deaths of Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter, the Chevalier dismissed the affair at once from his attention, and relapsed into abstraction. I readily fell in with his humor; and continuing to occupy our chamber in the Faubourg Saint Germain, we gave the Future to the winds, and slumbered tranquilly in the Present, weaving the dull world around us into dreams. (518-19)

Holmes is legendary for his use of drugs, cocaine and morphine, when bored and waiting for the next challenge from the world of crime. And we travel with Holmes frequently into the byways and strange ways of London as he assumes disguises that put his readers into their own everyday life. Sometimes he is a rough and tough groom looking for work in the stables and sometimes a tattered bookseller. Conan Doyle took his readers into their own everyday lives as his detective prowled the great city, which is as much a character as the reliable Watson. Poe never made the city an actual character, and not even Paris distracted him from his attention to the obsessive and neurotic Dupin. Certainly, his own city would not have drawn him away from the detective, and Baltimore would have to wait for Laura Lippman’s novels about Tess Monaghan and for “Homicide,” the television crime show set in Baltimore.

Though crime stories, the bastard sibling of the mystery, do not purport to venture into the secret world of mystery, they do overlap. As in Conan Doyle’s “The Final Solution,” in which he attempts to kill off Holmes and free himself for finer writing, there is no mystery involved, merely a depiction of Professor Moriarty and his many offences. What Conan Doyle did, though, was to make clear the Victorian idea of crime: a revolutionary action intended to disrupt the social order. When Holmes calls his ultimate foe “the Napoleon of crime,” he aligns him with the ultimate revolutionary for the English of his time. Not the “unmotivated evil” of Shakespeare’s Iago, he is a man who has chosen to establish evil as a contrary to social good, an idea T. S. Eliot nicked in *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* when he created Macavity the mystery cat in the image of Conan Doyle’s Moriarty. Along with the superior intellect of Holmes and the social order he represents, Conan Doyle’s greatest contribution to the genre of mystery and crime is, probably, the idea of an organization devoted to crime, of an unremorseful and violent mastermind who acquires and destroys whatever he wishes. Outside the understanding of the law, he can only be disrupted by someone like Holmes, who also functions outside the law, which is created in the image of the society it exists to protect.

This idea of law that through its functionaries exists to protect the citizenry and maintain order, though, is questioned even by Conan Doyle. Frequently, his police and detectives struggle with bureaucrats as dedicated to developing and maintaining power as Professor Moriarty himself. And as we know, any institution takes its character from the top. Conan Doyle does not question the right of the existing social order to exist, especially the right of royals to rule. In fact he shows the workings of envy and desire in such a story as “The Hound of the Baskervilles,” to disrupt the orderly succession of title and property. Other stories recount violence brought on by desire, “The Cardboard Box” for

instance, in which a sister's erotic attraction to her sister's husband causes him to commit a crime both against his own nature and against the social order: the preservation of the family. As much as did Milton's Satan, these who commit criminal acts would change the nature of order and reality and would write history without reference to the past, an unsustainable effort. Such a failed attempt was made by the now past Bush administration when they ignored the past and asserted that they wrote history. The story of central Asia in the nineteenth century could have been instructive. Russia and Great Britain found conquering Afghanistan beyond their power and means.

Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie will continue the paradigm established by Conan Doyle as their detectives unravel arcane mysteries that befuddle the pedestrian police. Their problem solvers take us into those parts of English life most suited to produce such minds: that of the privileged and well-bred. Miss Marple and Lord Peter Wimsey have equal access to country houses and crime scenes, which are often the same. The detective with a bottle of bourbon in the desk drawer will have to wait until California is advanced enough to deserve stories about its mysteries and crimes.

The political and cultural commitments of Dorothy Sayers emerge full grown from her forehead in *Gaudy Night*. This story of increasing mischief at a women's college at Oxford was clearly based on Sayers' own time at Somerville College. The plot is not a complex one. Offensive notes and drawings are found by several members of the college, and this mischief escalates into harm to property and to people. Clearly evident not far into the novel is that the perpetrator has become unbalanced by the actions of a woman, or women, who exist outside the traditional role of devotion to children, church, and kitchen. Several of the main female characters mention Hitler's Germany in this regard, as in the passage below in which the treatment of people demonstrating aberrant behavior is also discussed:

"I suppose they ought to be kept in hospitals at vast expense, along with other unfit specimens," said Miss Edwards. "Speaking as a biologist, I must say I think public money might be better employed. What with the number of imbeciles and physical wrecks we allow to go about and propagate their species, we shall end by devitalizing whole nations".

"Miss Schuster-Slatt would advocate sterilization," said the Dean.

"They're trying it in Germany, I believe," said Miss Edwards.

"Together," said Miss Hillyard, "to the relegation of woman to her proper place in the home."

"But they execute people there quite a lot," said Wimsey, so Miss Barton can't take over their organization lock, stock and barrel". (336)

Though fascist culture is not approved of in this, or any other, passage, either Dorothy Sayers seems unaware of the anti-Semitism of Germany in the thirties or she is a passive participant. Lord Peter's nephew when he needs money his father will not provide thinks first of contacting Levy. The creation of the other, a being not subject to human consideration, frees the one effecting, or perpetuation, of discriminatory actions from social sanctions. Hence, probably, the Nazis could practice final solution without guilt, an action to which Sayers was unaware when she wrote *Gaudy Night*.

When Sayers reveals the perpetrator as a servant in the college whose husband had been destroyed because a member of the college had rejected his thesis (on the grounds of scholarly impropriety), there is no surprise. In fact, the threatened members of the college show little interest in the offender, especially since life in the college can return to normal. Portrayed as signs of mental instability (and aligned with fascism) the woman's passionate admission and her attack on the women who place the life of the mind first receives far less attention than life at Oxford: dinners at high table, conversations in the Senior Common Room, punting on the Isis, the donning of robes, and scholarly life:

There, eastward, within a stone's throw, stood the twin towers of All Souls, fantastic, unreal as a house of cards, clearcut in the sunshine, the drenched oval of the quad beneath brilliant as an emerald in the bezel of a ring. Behind them, black and grey, New College frowning like a fortress, with dark wheeling about her belfry louvers, and Queen's with her dome of green copper; and southward, Magdalen, yellow and slender, the tall lily towers, the Schools and the battlement front of University; Merton, square-pinnacled, half-hidden behind the shadowed North side and mounting spire of St. Mary's. Westward again, Christ Church, vast between Cathedral spire and Tom Tower; Brasenose close at hand; St. Alda's and Carfax beyond, spire and tower and quadrangle, all Oxford springing underfoot in living leaf and enduring stone, ringed far off by her bulwark of blue hills (*Gaudy Night* 451).

No wonder Jude was both awed and obscure and found that he, like other interlopers, must find ways to justify his presence. And like Jude, in this novel generally unseen are the women who serve in the college and the one man who is the porter. When they are seen, they are in their subservient and polite roles speaking an English appropriate to their role and class.

As I read this novel, I thought of a stay I had at an Oxford college some years ago. Life was very much as Sayers described it except for one morning when I had overslept. Not wanting to wander around Oxford looking for breakfast, I went to the dining hall as usual to find that the men and women who worked at the college were having their breakfast. Having spent much of my life among working class people and having worked in kitchens and dining rooms, I felt comfortable going up to the kitchen with everyone else to get my eggs and rashers. Not so fast.

“Well, sor, if you'll go sit over there, I'll be bringing you your breakfast.”  
“I don't want to sit over there all by myself”.

So plate in hand, I seated myself between two women who outweighed me a good twenty pounds each. All went well until one of the women wanted to put me in my place and reached across me to get the tea. Conversation paused, then continued, and paused again when I reached across her to get the toast. As a sociologist friend told me, among some African tribes, there was a saying: “When in the land of the pigmy, stoop.” That evening in the senior common room over sherry, I recounted my breakfast with my host at the college. And while an elderly don grumped and mumbled behind his newspaper (*The*

*Times*), my friend chortled and said: "So you chatted up the scully maids, did you". After my admission that they declined to speak with me, he said with glee: "I'm not surprised. They could not have expected a senior student to have breakfast with them. And in the six hundred year history of the college, no one from high table has ever had breakfast with the scully maids. And wouldn't you know, an American would do it!"

Not to spin too large a theory on a pinhead, I yet think the commitment to a social order with such a fixed view of class is in itself expressing a discrimination that is so unsupportable that it, in fact, removes itself from understanding the reality all creatures share. The rejection of this shared reality at the level of animal cruelty, for instance, provides an indicator of a person inclined to be someone likely to commit crimes of violence.

Although the English mystery with its sense of culture and propriety still exists, witness Colin Dexter's Morse, the emergence of the hard boiled detective from American pulp fiction changed the genre for just about everyone. This new "refinement" of the genre was created by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain. All were, like Hemingway, brought to their initial understanding of life by World War I, in which all served. And all three were tempered into their querulous and often cynical maturity as writers and men by the Depression. Though of very different lives, they found the same venal and violent potential in humanity, and all distrusted the idea that wealth and power in the hands of the few benefited the majority. They would not have been proponents of the trickle down theory of economics. In fact, both Hammett and Chandler voiced a decidedly leftist politics, which often led to their casting their mysteries in the homes of the privileged and very wealthy for reasons starkly opposite to those of Sayers. Yet all the writers were equally concerned with the culture in which the crimes and offences occurred, more so generally than with the actual crimes.

What is called "the hard boiled detective" grew out of the action packed pulp fiction of the twenties and thirties. Hammett brought the form to narrative complexity after he left the Pinkerton's following the murder of a union organizer. Hammett had been a strike breaker, but he did have his limits, ones with which I sympathized since I grew up in the coal mining area of Virginia and West Virginia, places in which F.D.R. and John L. Lewis were spoken of reverentially. As Hammett's perverse novelist character, Fitzstephen, in *The Dain Curse* says the writer's task is to deal with "the soul," Hammett's own fiction is tied so closely to the action of crime and violence that the soul shines through dimly, as is also true of his political views. These were leftist enough to get him called up before the McCarthy Committee in 1953. After which, as Sara Paretsky observed, all of his books were removed from American consulates and embassies. As is also true of James M. Cain's fiction, what political views exist in them do so through the development of characters and their action, not through any politically explicit statements. In both *The Dain Curse* and *Farewell My Lovely*, Hammett characters who have wealth and social position, who have maids and chauffeurs, and yet become either the perpetrators of social and criminal offenses or are the willing participants in them. These novels written in the twenties are still news, speaking as they do of sex, drugs, the greed and excesses of the wealthy, the opportunism of the outsider. In both, the offspring of intelligent and affluent fathers become the willing prey of perverse parvenus, of

blackmailers and people simply blinded by sexual appetites. Cain will reflect the same characters and circumstances in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Mildred Peirce*, though without Hammett's attention to trade craft. Sam Spade, the Thin Man, and the Continental Op come directly out of Hammett's work with the Pinkertons, as do many of the situations in his action packed novels. His own summary in *The Dain Curse* is mind boggling in its complexity and profusion:

Yeah. Gabrielle's father, step-mother, physician, and husband have been slaughtered in less than a handful of weeks—all the people closest to her. That's enough to tie it all together for me. If you want more links, I can point them out to you. (154-55)

The summary continues to list almost a dozen other murders, an excessive display he would not repeat or match in his other novels. In *The Maltese Falcon* and *Farewell My Lovely*, murder is less important than manipulation, though perversion continues to be cloaked by greed. Intrinsic to Hammett's fiction, after he freed it from an overdose of action, is a culture of predators and scavengers, by implication the inevitable workings of unregulated capitalism. Cain is not far behind him. In fact, Cain adds to the sexual venality so strongly that his books inspired censors to act, as the nature of the crimes dwarfed the crimes. Murder and seduction, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, share the same time and place and must call into question the nature of a species capable of such action.

But the essential writer in this mode is Raymond Chandler, and *The Long Goodbye* is his masterful blending of all into a coherent whole. Though continuing to uphold the superiority of the private detective, now the shamus, to ordinary policemen, Chandler's Philip Marlowe has at least one policeman who shares his, and Chandler's, view of wealth and politics. Bernie Ohls and Marlowe in this conversation sum up the hard bitten dick's view of money and, at the same time, comment on Hammett's being called up before the McCarthy committee:

“There ain't no clean way to make a hundred million bucks,” Ohls said.

“Maybe the head man thinks his hands are clean but somewhere along the line little guys got pushed to the wall, nice little businesses got ground out from under them and had to sell out for nickels, decent people lost their jobs, stocks got rigged on the markets, proxies got bought up like a pennyweight of old gold, and the five per centers and the big law firms got paid hundred grand fees for beating some law the people wanted but the rich guys didn't, on account of it cut into their profits. Big money is big power and big power gets used wrong. It's the system. Maybe it's the best we can get, but it still ain't any Ivory soap deal.”

“You sound like a Red,” I said, just to needle him.

“I wouldn't know,” he said contemptuously. “I ain't been investigated yet. You liked the suicide verdict, didn't you?” (227)

As well as being an apt and pungent summary of the views of at least Hammett and Chandler, this comment is as up to date as today's news, suggesting that if Bernie Madoff didn't exist, someone would have to invent him.

Granted that Chandler writes a good story, nowhere any better than in *The Long Goodbye*, but here he puts strong political and social views in the mouths of his characters, seeming to illustrate the venality and arrogance of those who use money and power to manipulate the lives of people who, at best, disenfranchised victims and, at worst, sacrificed victims. After Berne Ohls extends his view of the culpability of the rich and powerful and the governmental skills they fund, Marlowe dismisses Ohls's view as too personal, to tied to the idea that someone is to blame and offers a more cynical answer:

“We're a big rough rich wild people and crime is the price we pay for it, and organized crime is the price we pay for organization. We'll have it with us for a long time. Organized crime is but the dirty side of the sharp dollar” (290)

And there isn't “a clean side” in a society in which crime is not a disease but a symptom.

Chandler doesn't leave us with a cheery view of humanity. At best, he implies, as did Voltaire at the end of *Candide*, that we'd better just tend to our own gardens, even though he shows no inclination to do so himself. In fact, in his essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” he unequivocally states that gangsters run countries, corporations, the courts, and the police, although they are protected by their power (17) .

As with Conan Doyle, Hammett, Chandler, and Cain make place a character in their stories. Moving as they do through California's great cities and even into Mexico, Their detectives, and those they follow, encounter the evolving life of America as it moves through the twentieth century. The city becomes a sanctuary as much as a threat, a source of life as much as a place for death. As diverse as Holmes's London, Los Angeles and San Francisco are the subjects of the novels as much as are the crimes. And like James Joyce, Hammett and Chandler could probably have said that if destroyed their cities could have been rebuilt from their descriptions. But the cities in the novels are, in fact, fictional, as are the other characters. And citizens of those cities would, I am certain, find themselves at frequent dead ends if they used the novels as city maps. My own city of San Antonio, Texas, has its own mystery writer celebrant, Rick Riordan. Though his descriptions of the citizens are so exact I can give them names of people I know, his San Antonio is fictional, compressing and rearranging the actual city to suit the needs of his detective, Tres Navarre, and the innocents and miscreants he follows, often with the unwitting hindrance and help of his splendidly erratic mother and those characters I can put names to. Cities, and countries, matter very much in the mystery novel; for the writers accept as given that to understand a person one must understand the culture. In a global society, the task is, of course, very difficult.

And so as I move into that period of mystery, conspiracy and intrigue, the Cold War and its aftermath, I remind myself of the hopeful adage about our constitutional democracy: the idea of American democracy will outlive and correct any and all violations and crimes done in its name. What had been an implicit understanding in much of the mystery writing before is explicit in what now occurs: crime at whatever level is a sign of social

corruption. And in the writing I look at from here on, the corruption is institutional and societal, recalling Hamlet's observation: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark".

When John le Carré began writing about spies and spycraft, he spawned not just a readership but an industry, fortunately since the appetite of the readership is greater than Mr. le Carré's desire to keep feeding it. Here, then, as above and soon to be below, I will look at representative writers and works. Mr. le Carré's novels about his essential English spy, Smiley, must be looked at. Since Mr. le Carré devotes considerable attention to the life and offences of "the cousins," code for members of the C.I.A., I feel justified in including in this discussion the novels of William F. Buckley, Jr. These two men share elitist educations, personal experience as members of their respective intelligence communities, urbanity and wit, and a remorselessness in looking at the doings of their world and are as irresistible to a critic of the genre as was Cleopatra to Anthony. Lest I succumb to their civilized prose, I must (as indeed must all writers) remind myself of Dr. Johnson's comment about Shakespeare: "A quibble [pun] was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it" (44)

John le Carré, as is well known, so mastered the genre of the spy novel that his particular diction was even adopted by some intelligence agencies, joes for instance as undercover agents and moles for double agents. Unlike the writers discussed earlier, Mr. le Carré does not mainly reveal his political and cultural affinities through settings and the background of his characters. He is very focused on the political and cultural situations of his initial fictional world: the Cold War. Ultimately, he may be said to endorse Mercutio's dying complaint: "A plague on both your houses". None of the agencies, in final summing up, do their jobs with honor. Though transparency of operations is not an option in the spy trade, Mr. le Carré implies that a transparency of motive should be. Ultimately, enemies become one another, the danger in any conflict as winning demands using ones opponents' tactics to combat them. The problem, then, is keeping tactical concerns from becoming strategic and those from becoming philosophical. No one succeeds if, though ultimately when, the lives of people are less important than tactical success, thus precipitating the cascade effect in the previous sentence.

The story of Smiley begins almost innocently, when he is lured away from his intended obscurity as a scholar of seventeenth-century German literature to the anonymity of the intelligence community. As his tutor suggests, scant differences between the two exist: "Give these people a try, Smiley, they might have you and they pay badly enough to guarantee you decent company" (*Call For the Dead* in *An Incongruous Spy* 9). Interviewed by distinguished scholars from Oxford and Cambridge in 1928, Smiley is accepted and undergoes training, which Le Carré simply summarizes: "... anonymous country houses, anonymous instructors, a good deal of travel and, looming ever larger, the fantastic prospect of working completely alone" (10). Buckley in *Saving the Queen* will not pass so lightly over his hero's educational experiences or his training after he is recruited into the CIA when he graduates from Yale. The similarities do, however, suggest that the cousins learned their craft from the older agency in England. Buckley's attraction to the ins and outs of the spy game is obvious, much as is his describing

Oakes's various friends and excursions. Detail is strong and narrative often inconsequential.

What antipathy le Carré feels for the cousins is more than matched by Blackford Oakes's antipathy for England that is so intense the agency questions his viability as an agent. The difference between the two is indicative of the narratives themselves. Buckley's hero had been in an England public school just before the United States entered World War II, and he was outspoken in his belief that his home country should stay out of the war. Having made himself liable for punishment, he is given nine strokes with the birch by the headmaster, who ends the punishment by saying: "*Courtesy of Great Britain, sir*". Oakes withdraws himself from the school and never completely forgets and forgives, as is shown when he is in bed with the young and desirable Queen of England, to whom after giving her nine strokes he says: "*Courtesy of the United States, ma'am*". To which the obvious comment by a countryman should be: "We expect you, your penis, and the Republic for which it stands to acquit yourself better than nine strokes!" Much caught up with the glamour of the service, Buckley has his hero find pleasure not only with the Queen, but also with a very special prostitute in Paris, find pleasure as well in exquisite meals, well tailored clothes.

All this is certainly due to a man so handsome as to make giddy the Queen and so talented as to become a minor air ace in the war. His role in saving the Queen from embarrassment and jeopardizing Anglo-American relations is so sensitive that his superiors debate whether he can be allowed to live. Both the debate, the character of Oakes, and Buckley's development of him indicate the telling difference between Buckley and le Carré.

Smiley, as is typical of le Carré's heroes, is nothing like Oakes. Smiley is a small, grey man, whose tailor treats him badly, who is cuckolded by his wife before she leaves him, and passed over for advancement until he is the absolutely only person who can save the ship. Also, as is also typical of le Carré's heroes, he is a solitary who always needs a family. And the service fills that need and protects him as he does his jobs whenever possible. There is little room in le Carré's fiction for escapades in Paris or nights at Morey's because he does not have the movie star life of Buckley's Oakes, whom one of his superiors refers to as "Van Johnson". And to be honest, Buckley's counting the strokes and detailing the Parisian cavorts seems a bit at odds with his conservative view of life. After all, he did not write *God and Man at Yale and Man in the Sack*. But my view of conservatives may be a bit idealistic, even after Atwater, Rove, Cheney, and Bush (one and two). I still remember well my undergraduate days when I had summer jobs at a resort hotel in Maine. One of my favorite guests was Elihu J. Root, Jr., whose father had been Secretary of the Treasury under Harding. Mr. Root wore sneakers, chinos, and Harris tweed jackets, drank bourbon on the rocks, and painted seascapes. When I mentioned that I admired his Harris tweed and the way he drank his whiskey, he replied that he was glad to see a conservative among the young: "Two signs of a real

conservative are Harris tweed and bourbon on the rocks". Though Buckley's tailoring suggests he might be sympathetic to such a view of conservatism, his

Blackford Oakes speaks of and to a far different right, one that Buckley documents amply in his novels.

Though Buckley stays the fictive course he set for his hero, le Carré steadily progresses to an increasingly politically active role as a writer. He doesn't abandon the genre he established so much as expand it. In *Absolute Friends*, for instance, he follows two friends from their student activist days in Berlin before the wall came down to their deaths in Germany after 9/11. They are killed in a trumped up plot by a spin off group of CIA operatives and like minded minions. To do so, the operatives create the idea of a threat by casting some either naïve or innocent placebos as serious terrorists intent on destabilizing governments through violence. In this novel, as in le Carré's most recent one, *A Most Wanted Man*, "rendition" functions to destroy, painfully, the innocent. The naïve are, usually, simply killed. In both novels, Mr. le Carré develops characters, as he has always done, to indicate their susceptibility to the overtures of recruiters and their vulnerability, especially in a culture in which there is no nuance.

And for Mr. le Carré, such is the culture that emerged in the United States after 9/11. At the end of *A Most Wanted Man*, the German intelligence officer sees his carefully set up scenario destroyed because the Americans who take control of it make no distinctions and are motivated simply by "revenge" so that they kill or "render" the innocent and someone who is 95% innocent. A drop of bad blood, a chance association, colors the person as a threat to be eliminated:

"American justice, asshole. Whose do you think? Justice from the fucking hip, man. No-crap justice, *that* kind of justice! Justice with no fucking lawyers around to pervert the course. Have you never heard of *extraordinary rendition*? No? Time you Krauts had a word for it! Have you given up speaking or what?" (321)

We might well question Mr. le Carré's finding innocence and naivety as so endemic to agents, but he uses them well and on both sides of any conflict. Darby in *The Russia House* is another example of a man who fails to see the possibilities of duplicity by the two sides in the Cold War conflict who want to use him. Considering that such players, though essential, fall into the mindless category of "collateral" (with damage implied), we can understand the ease with which they can be manipulated: financial needs, emotional needs, ideological hopes. And always in such plots are the handlers in a conspiracy that seemingly has no end that can be shown, so far above documentation are the actual prime movers. As in *The Constant Gardener*, Mr. le Carré's novel about the abuses of the big pharmacology firms, the figure who seems to be in complete control is actually only a minor functionary. Mr. le Carré anticipates the charge that he is exaggerating the venality of such people in the "Author's Note": "But I can tell you this. As my journey through the pharmaceutical jungle progressed, I came to realize that, by comparison with the reality, my story is as tame as a holiday postcard" (506).

Although the attack on the United States 11 September 2001 gave new life to Mr. le Carré's favorite genre, the spy story, he had established credibility in his novels between this time and the end of the Cold War. Duplicity, greed, and a willingness to harm others are so prevalent in the world of global politics and economy that he had ready subjects.

As Gary Snyder wrote about another matter, when making an ax handle, the model is close to hand. He had only to look at the emerging capitalist thugs in Russia in *Single and Son*, at global pharmacy firms in *The Constant Gardner*, and without doubt the current global financial crisis to find players above and behind the political ones who had been his subjects for so many novels. The existence of conspiracies headed by brilliant but evil masterminds is, of course, part of the genre Mr. le Carré inherited; but as he has made clear, what he writes about is what is not merely the action in mystery novels.

I would like to think, in fact have so convinced myself, that the hard grittiness, the unflinching look at the human condition in Mr. le Carré novels (and fleetingly in Buckley's) came into being by the example of such American mystery writers as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and John M. Cain. These writers significantly shifted the scene and players from the talented and privileged amateurs of Poe, Conan Doyle, and Sayers to the professional detective. Granted that in time this creation became a cliché: hard drinking, rough, and terse of speech. But they, also, reflected a demographic shift: away from the niceties of European boulevards to the brutality of the backstreets of America. In doing so, they gave voice to the American citizen who emerged from the Depression and was tempered by World War II. Their politics were implicitly proletarian; and in the case of Hammett in life as well, so much so that he was called up before Senator McCarthy's committee. As Sara Paretsky observed, at that time all of his books were removed from the libraries of American consulates and embassies. He would pay a greater price, but his example, as Paretsky implied, influenced those who came after him. There are among them John D. McDonald and his son Carl Haissen who took for subject private and governmental abuses in Florida; Sara Paretsky who did much the same with Chicago as her field; Laura Lippman who generally stayed at home in Baltimore.

All of writers in the above paragraph, as well as those discussed earlier, found in the mystery genre a way to discuss humanity that continues to build an ever increasing readership. At the basic narrative level, they tell good and exciting stories in which people, good and bad, do such things as those of us constrained by law can never do. They are the linebackers turned loose at a cocktail party. Like it or not, we do, at least some of us, enjoy people who don't accept the constraints of taste, decorum, and even law. And so was born from our needs, the crime story, perhaps even with Odysseus on his return home when he slaughters the suitors or Grendel when he slaughters the noisy drunks in the mead hall. But beyond this narrative appeal is the portrayal of the time in which the stories occur, usually the time in which they were written. Here we find the values and the fears. And so, between the crimes, the real story is told.

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## Author Note

Retired from teaching, Frank Kersnowski holds the position of Research Professor at Trinity University. His principal interests have been modern Irish literature, Robert Graves, and Lawrence Durrell. His interest in mystery writing and writers grew out of his concern with literature as signs of the time as well as signs for all times. He has been, and remains, prickly about writing that is short sighted or merely self serving.