

Duck Watch: Mystery, Misery, and Mysterium

Preface

When Frank Kersnowski first proposed this volume, I wasn't so sure it would work, but the more we talked the more I became convinced that a connection between Trickster and mystery fiction is very germane. First of all, Trickster is all about reading signs – some times correctly, some times incorrectly, but always with a reading that tests the categories of experience. What else could so clearly describe the detective. From Poe and Doyle to Burke and Paresky, the detector (I change the term just to deflect and underscore the more lurid and garish nature of detective fiction) is a reader of signs, and as a conceit of the author, the reading clearly one that tests the limits of perception, the categories of social and cultural boundaries, and the capacities of the reader. That is trickster per se – sometimes joking, sometimes cynical, sometimes cunning, sometimes dangerous, but always revealing to his interlocutors insights they may have avoided, neglected or ignored. Once you walk with Trickster and play the mystery game, your comfort zone has changed and your look at your fellow human beings and yourself is not quite the same.

In the second place, mysteries are journeys both for the characters, the audience and the genre. As Jacques Barzun has written in “The Novel Turns Tale”

The fact is that from the outset detection has been written for and by highbrows. The genre has been the preserve of the intellectual and the cultured and (despite what people say) not so much for relaxation as for the stimulation, in a different setting, of the same critical and imaginative powers that these persons display in their vocations. Some highly intelligent people have, of course, never felt the pleasure afforded by detective fiction, but exceptions do not alter the generality. Historically, the theme of detection has aroused the imagination of writers from Voltaire, Balzac, Cooper and Poe to Dickens, Dostoevsky, Mark Twain, Henry James, Yeats, Eliot, and C. Day Lewis. Whatever it is, the detective story is not an idiot's delight.

So the mystery narrative, in all of its forms, is by definition a study of the unknown. From simple whodunits to the complex spy narrative, from peak-a-boo pot boilers to sophisticated film noir, from thrillers to metaphysical horror, from deceptive rhetoric to inspirational dogma, the mystery narrative recognizes the loss of the human condition, sometimes dwells on the misery of humanity, and seeks to modulate and defang the horrific surprise that constitutes the semiotic life of we verbal creatures.

Thirdly, any number of scholars, writers, and pundits have commented on the mystery narrative; they have critiqued it, deconstructed it, condemned it, written it and loved it. Ever since Poe and the blossoming of print culture, the dance of information, the play of perspective, and the puzzle

of discovery has fascinated those of us trying to walk in the new land of new media. When we lost semiotic innocence, we gained the mystery narrative and it has been with us ever since mirroring our handling of information as guide, comforter, or tempter, reminding us that we too can be gods – at oh so small a price! We find that the mystery articulates misery. As Conan Doyle, said, “When you eliminate all that is impossible, whatever is left, no matter how improbable must be the truth!” or to give it a cruel paraphrase “whatever is left, no matter how unpleasant or horrific must be true.” In short, there is always an implicit, and/or explicit, dark side to the journey. The detector, the detected, or the society is held to a light that shows its unseemly side. Violence, greed, betrayal, deception, misdirection, and murder most foul are always the reminder of Trickster’s more rapacious grin at our discomfitures with life and how we live it.

Finally, the mystery narrative plays the edges of the mysterium whether it be conspiracy theories of satanic overlords, black helicopters, or financial cabals. It is an ultimate believer’s or worrier’s trap. Like with all of Trickster’s questions that we find answers for, we sing like the Creature’s Bride in *Young Frankenstein*, “O Sweet Mystery of Life, I think I have found you.” Or like Jack Horner we return to our corners with our prized plums smirking at how bright we are and forgetting that Trickster is just waiting for another question about life at another time. We could like Job and Wittgenstein, just say wherein we cannot speak we must be silent, but tongue wagging creature that we are, silence is not really golden at all. Thus, the detector is always a trickster living in the land of mystery, mirroring the structures of society, discovering the dark of the unknown or the unthinkable, playing at the boundaries of culture, and articulating the shifting shapes of the informational world. Whether it is a game, a riddle, a puzzle, a quandary, or a quagmire, the detector exemplifies the process of discovery. A study in habit, logic, induction, deduction, and abduction, the detector is data processing and hypothesizing in its most compelling and most human form. It can be cheap, tawdry, and misdirecting. It can be intellectual, scientific, and philosophical. It is part magic, part bluff, and part manipulation, but it is central to human knowing and living.

Come, the game is afoot!