

This Week

Spring Book Number

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The Simple Art of Murder

RAYMOND CHANDLER

AS A WRITER I have never been able to take myself with that enormous earnestness which is one of the trying characteristics of the craft. And I have been fortunate to escape what has been called "that form of snobbery which can accept the Literature of Entertainment in the Past, but only the Literature of Enlightenment in the Present." Between the one-syllable humors of the comic strip and the anemic subtleties of the litterateurs there is a wide stretch of country, in which the mystery story may or may not be an important landmark. There are those who hate it in all its forms. There are those who like it when it is about nice people ("that charming Mrs. Jones—whoever would have thought she would cut off her husband's head with a meat saw? Such a handsome man, too!"). There are those who think violence and sadism interchangeable terms and those who regard detective fiction as sub-literary on no better grounds than that it does not habitually get itself jammed up with subordinate clauses, tricky punctuation, and hypothetical subjunctives. There are those who read it only when they are tired or sick and, from the number of mystery novels they consume, they must be tired and sick most of the time. There are the *aficionados* of deduction (with whom I have had words elsewhere) and the *aficionados* of sex, who can't get it into their hot little heads that the fictional detective is a catalyst, not a Casanova. The former demand a ground plan of Greythorpe Manor, showing the study, the gun room, the main hall and staircase and the passage to that grim little room where the butler polishes the Georgian silver, thin-lipped and silent, hearing the murmur of doom. The latter think the shortest distance between two points is from a blonde to a bed.

Somewhere up the family tree of the latter is the type of story that flourished in the pulp magazines of the late Twenties and early Thirties, to which I contributed more than perhaps was my proper share. Some literary antiquarian of a rather special type may one day think it worth while to run through files of these magazines and determine just how and when and by what steps the popular mystery story shed its refined good manners and went native. He will need sharp eyes and an open mind.

Pulp paper never dreamed of posterity and most of it must be a dirty brown color by now. And it takes a very open mind indeed to look beyond the unnecessarily gaudy covers, trashy titles, and the barely acceptable advertisements and recognize the authentic power of a kind of writing that even at its most mannered and artificial made most of the fiction of the time taste like a cup of lukewarm consommé at a spinsterish tearoom.

I don't think this power was entirely a matter of violence although far too many people got killed in these stories and their passing was celebrated with a rather too loving attention to detail. It certainly was not a matter of fine writing, since any attempt at that would have been ruthlessly blue-penciled by the editorial staff. Nor was it because of any great originality of plot or character. Most of the plots were rather ordinary and most of the characters rather primitive types of people. Possibly it was the smell of fear which these stories managed to generate. Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night. The mystery story grew hard and cynical about motive and character, but it was not cynical about the effects it tried to produce nor about its technique of producing them. A few unusual critics recognized this at the time, which was all one

had any right to expect. The average critic never recognizes an achievement when it happens. He explains it after it has become respectable.

The emotional basis of the standard detective story was and had always been that murder will out and justice will be done. Its technical basis was the relative insignificance of everything except the final denouement. What led up to that was more or less passage-work. The denouement would justify everything. The technical basis of the "Black Mask" type of story was that the scene outranked the plot in the sense that a good plot was one which made good scenes. The ideal mystery was one you would read if the end was missing. We who tried to write it had the same point of view as the film makers. When I first went to work in Hollywood a very intelligent producer told me that you couldn't make a successful motion picture from a mystery story because the whole point was a disclosure that took a few seconds of screen time while the audience was reaching for its hat. He was wrong, but only because he was thinking of the wrong kind of mystery.

AS TO the emotional basis of the hard-boiled story, obviously it does not believe that murder will out and justice will be done—unless some very determined individual makes it his business to see that justice is done. The stories were about the men who made that happen. They were apt to be hard men and what they did, whether they were called police officers, private detectives, or newspapermen, was hard, dangerous work. It was work they could always get. There was plenty of it lying around. There still is. Undoubtedly the stories about them had a fantastic element. Such things happened, but not so rapidly nor to so close-knit a group of people nor within so narrow a frame of logic. This was inevitable because the demand was for constant action



and if you stopped to think you were lost. When in doubt have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand. This could get to be pretty silly but somehow it didn't seem to matter. A writer who is afraid to over-reach himself is as useless as a general who is afraid to be wrong.

As I look back on my own stories it would be absurd if I did not wish they had been better. But if they had been much better they would not have been published. If the formula had been a little less rigid more of the writing of that time might have survived. Some of us tried pretty hard to break out of the formula but we usually got caught and sent back. To exceed the limits of a formula without destroying it is the dream of every magazine writer who is not a hopeless hack. There are things in my stories which I might like to change or leave out altogether. To do this may look simple but if you try you find you cannot do it at all. You will only destroy what is good without having any noticeable effect on what is bad. You cannot recapture the mood, the state of innocence, much less the animal gusto you had when you had very little else. Everything a writer learns about the art or craft of fiction takes just a little away from his need or desire to write at all. In the end he knows all the tricks and has nothing to say.

The mystery story is a kind of writing that need not dwell in the shadow of the past and owes little if any allegiance to the cult of the classics. It is a good deal more than unlikely that any writer now living will produce a better historical novel than "Henry Esmond," a better tale of children than "The Golden Age," a sharper social vignette than "Madame Bovary," a more graceful and elegant evocation than "The Spoils of Poynton," a wider and richer canvas than "War and Peace" or "The Brothers Karamazov." But to devise a more plausible mystery than "The Hound of the Baskervilles" or "The Purloined Letter" should not be too difficult. Nowadays it would be rather more difficult not to. There are no "classics" of crime and detection. Not one. Within its frame of reference, which is the only way it should be judged, a classic is a piece of writing which exhausts the possibilities of its form and can never be surpassed. No story or novel of mystery has done that yet. Few have come close. Which is one of the principal reasons why otherwise reasonable people continue to assault this citadel.

Raymond Chandler is the author of more than half a dozen mystery stories including "The Big Sleep."