

# Over the wall...

**Alan Maley**

wonders whodunnit?

In previous articles, I have ventured into genre fiction in the areas of travel writing and science fiction. This time, I shall be looking at one of the most popular of all genres, the detective novel.

## The tradition

It is interesting that the detective or crime story is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although some writers trace its origins back to *The Arabian Nights* and to ancient Chinese stories, the fact is that it only really got under way in the 19th century with Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, and with Charles Dickens's investigator, Inspector Bucket, in *Bleak House*.

The genre truly took off, however, with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's creation of the prototypical psycho-investigator Sherlock Holmes, G K Chesterton's whimsical Father Brown stories, and Dorothy Sayers's suave sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey in the early 20th century. And from there into the Golden Age of crime fiction, with its uncontested queen – Agatha Christie – and her perennial characters Jane Marple and Hercule Poirot, there was no stopping it.

## The modern detective

In more recent times, we have seen the success of characters like Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus, Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse, Ruth Rendell's Inspector Wexford, Patricia Cornwell's Dr Kay Scarpetta, P D James's Adam Dalgliesh – and a great many more.

The American tradition has tended to focus on the tough-guy private eye, with writers like Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler (creator of the unforgettable Philip Marlowe) and, more recently, Sara Paretsky and Elmore Leonard. And, of course, there are the phenomenally successful (and prolific) Perry Mason stories by Erle Stanley Gardner.

The success of the genre has been compounded by the fact that it lends itself easily to the cinema and TV, so that many of the books have been made into films or TV series. Moreover, the appetite for exotic crime locations seems unabated, as the recent TV series *The Killing*, *The Bridge* and *Montalbano* demonstrate.

## The attraction

What makes crime fiction so attractive to readers? Fairly obviously, by setting up a crime to be investigated, there is an immediate compulsion to find out

'whodunnit?' It is a puzzle to solve, and also a kind of competition to beat the author at their own game. The more intriguing and ingenious the plot, the better we like it.

Readers are also drawn by the possibility of vicariously sharing the lives of both the criminal and the investigator. (Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* is a good example of crime seen through the eyes of the criminal.) And the success of many crime writers rests on how successfully they have been able to create a detective who has enduring appeal. Once hooked, we look forward to the next book to renew our acquaintance with our familiar favourite detective, confident that we will find again all their endearing characteristics and idiosyncrasies as the plot unfolds.

## The location

There is, however, another feature of many detective novels which adds to their appeal, namely the way they open up new landscapes, cultures and contexts. I am thinking here of writers like Michael Dibdin, whose Aurelio Zen takes us into the world of Italian police work, with authentic-seeming places and faces. Or of Nicolas Freeling, with his Dutch backgrounds to many of the Inspector Van der Valk novels,





or the French and European settings of his Henri Castang titles. We not only enjoy the novelty of these settings, but we actually learn, incidentally, quite a lot about the world outside our own normal lives. At their best, they offer 'edutainment' which enriches our understanding of the world and of what makes people tick. So, below, I shall mention the work of four writers who take us into even more exotic locations.

### Alexander McCall Smith

The first is Alexander McCall Smith. His setting for the Mma Ramotswe stories is Botswana, 'a good country'. Mma Ramotswe has set up the *Number One Ladies' Detective Agency*. Her cases are not particularly spectacular, and usually involve resolving problems with personal relationships. What makes the novels memorable is Mma Ramotswe herself – a lady of ample proportions, a great capacity to draw out confidences from her clients, and who radiates gentleness, good humour, big-heartedness and understanding. A sub-plot, in the form of her relationship with Mr J L B Matekoni, her 'fiancé', runs alongside the main plot line in the stories. He runs the neighbourhood garage but can never seem to bring himself to pop the question. The stories are delightful to read and make you want to visit Botswana.

### Eliot Pattison

Next comes Eliot Pattison, who takes us into the remote mountain landscapes of Tibet. His detective, Shan Tao Yun, is, in fact, a former investigator for the Chinese government, disgraced for unmasking corruption at high levels and exiled to a labour camp in Tibet. In *The Skull Mantra*, he finds himself co-opted to solve a series of murders of Chinese officials. The mix of realistic description, religion, superstition, violence and mystery is compelling, as is the character of Shan himself.

### Shamini Flint

Shamini Flint has created the character of Inspector Singh of the Singapore police, who investigates in locations around

Southeast Asia – Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Cambodia. His superiors find him embarrassingly unconventional, so they send him off elsewhere to get rid of him. He is an unprepossessing man, somewhat overweight, unfashionably-dressed and overly fond of cold beer, but with surprising powers of observation, deduction and psychological acuity. In his Cambodian case, we learn a great deal about that country and its tragic recent history, as well as enjoying the company of Singh himself.

### Colin Cotterill

Finally, there is Colin Cotterill, whose coroner, Dr Siri, is perhaps my favourite of the four. The setting for the Dr Siri stories is Laos in the 1970s, shortly after the country had been taken over by the Communist Pathet Lao. Dr Siri is already in his seventies when he is appointed as state coroner – for which his only qualification is that he is the only doctor left alive in the country. He has fought with the guerrilla army and knows his way around, but he is an inveterate non-conformist and is constantly in conflict with his, largely incompetent, superiors. In the first book, *The Coroner's Lunch*, the bodies of three tortured Vietnamese soldiers are retrieved from Nam Ngum Lake, the dead wife of a party leader is brought in, and poor Dr Siri finds himself in the middle of a tricky situation. But with characteristic aplomb, acuity, disrespect for authority – and the help of his shamanic self – he gets to the bottom of the case. Siri is supported by a cast of equally colourful characters, and the descriptions of the Lao locales is totally accurate. I cannot recommend Cotterill's stories strongly enough. Long live Dr Siri!



In the teaching context, extensive reading is now acknowledged to be a key factor in acquiring a language. But such reading has to offer what Krashen calls 'compelling' content. What better than detective fiction for hooking our novice readers, particularly when the genre is already so familiar to them in their L1, and when they may already have read some English titles in translation? And if the originals are 'too difficult' – as some of them undoubtedly are – you could do worse than try one of Richard MacAndrew's graded readers, such as *Man Hunt*, which offer authentic crime fiction in accessible language. 

Cotterill, C *The Coroner's Lunch* Quercus 2004

Flint, S *Inspector Singh Investigates: A Deadly Cambodian Crime Spree* Piatkus 2011

McCall Smith, A *The Number One Ladies' Detective Agency* Abacus 2003

Pattison, E *The Skull Mantra* Arrow Books 2000

Other authors referred to (I have suggested just one title per author for reasons of space.)

Chandler, R *The Big Sleep* Penguin 2011

Cornwell, P *Book of the Dead* Penguin 2008

Dexter, C *Last Bus to Woodstock* Macmillan 1975

Dibdin, M *Ratking* Faber and Faber 1988

Freeling, N *The King of the Rainy Country* Bloomsbury 2013

Gardner, E S *The Case of the Perjured Parrot* Pocket Books 1939

Hammett, D *The Maltese Falcon* Vintage 1930

Highsmith, P *The Talented Mr Ripley* Vintage 1999

James, P D *The Lighthouse* Vintage 2006

Leonard, E *Get Shorty* Phoenix 2009

MacAndrew, R *Man Hunt* CUP 2012

Paretsky, S *Breakdown* Hodder 2003

Rankin, I *Noughts and Crosses* Orion 1987

Rendell, R *The Babes in the Wood* Arrow Books 2003



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