

# The Scene of the Crime: Detective Fiction Discovers America

"Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" Edmund Wilson asked in the title of a famous 1945 essay attacking detective fiction. The answer, then as now: millions of Americans. Last year, they tuned in to television's weekly *Mike Hammer* series (based on Mickey Spillane's novels), lined up at movie theaters to see sleuths in action in films such as *City Heat* and *Blood Simple*, and bought several million copies of mystery and detective novels. The art form is changing. For one thing, Los Angeles, Florida, and New York are no longer the only locales of detective stories; the heroes and villains increasingly are denizens of America's hinterland cities. In this essay, Yale University's Robin Winks surveys the latest developments and cites some of the new regional sights, sounds, and flavors.

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by Robin Winks

Detective and mystery fiction have changed enormously since the Golden Age of the 1920s and '30s, when Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Agatha Christie reigned supreme.

No longer do the best murders occur in the homes of the best people. Every now and then, a corpse is still found in the locked drawing room of a fine old mansion; a genteel successor to Hercule Poirot still sometimes gets to demonstrate awesome powers of deduction.

But much of the fiction today is on the move, so violent, so swift, that neither the reader nor the detective has much leisure to practice the gentle old art of ratiocination.

The growing band of academics who study detective fiction has pretty well dissected most of the post-World War II changes in the genre. Some shifts stem from new sensibilities. While racism was common in much of the early hard-boiled fiction, some of today's detectives are black, and there are a few Chica-



*Stephen Greenleaf's fictional detective, John Marshall Tanner, as depicted on the cover of *Death Bed* (1980). Finding San Francisco's scenery crowded with competing private eyes, Greenleaf has dispatched Tanner on missions to nearby Berkeley and even to Iowa.*

nos and Native Americans (notably Tony Hillerman's Joe Leaphorn), not to mention homosexuals, dwarfs, blind men, and paraplegics.

Women have been in the detective business since the days of Nancy Drew, but in the wake of P. D. James's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972), a much larger number of female sleuths have hung out shingles.

There has also been a shift to moral ambiguity. In the days of Nick and Nora Charles (the elegant protagonists of Hammett's *The Thin Man*), it was certain that good would triumph over evil in the end, that the malefactors would be brought to justice and society returned to normal.

Many Americans will not swallow such assumptions any more, and detective fiction reflects that fact. Most readers now anticipate a good deal of soul-searching over the nature of

crime and punishment—on the hero's part if not on their own—when they settle down for a read.

And no longer are marriage and death banished from the careers of series heroes. Wedlock is still rare. But today it is not unknown for a hero with whom the reader has become comfortably acquainted after several books—Nicholas Freeling's Inspector Van der Valk, for example—to be cut off in mid-novel, struck down by a sociopath while on his way to lunch at his neighborhood McDonald's.

Finally, explicit sex scenes and strong language are now standard—much to the dismay of the murder-in-the-drawing-room group of mystery readers. In the hands of skillful writers such as K. C. Constantine, if not in the hands of Mickey Spillane, this new freedom has allowed a further expansion of the craft of detec-

tive storytelling.

Anyone who follows detective fiction is aware of these trends. But there seems to me to be one trend that is little noted: the regionalization of American detective fiction.

Many of today's novels are set in cities that, two decades ago, could have been called places that crime forgot. This, too, reflects American reality. Hideous and inexplicable killings now seem to occur in South Bend or Fayetteville or Boise nearly as frequently as they do in Brooklyn. These locales are now plausible backdrops for mystery fiction.

#### Atlantic City's Glitz

Believability is not the only explanation for what is going on. The detective novelists seem to be filling a vacuum left by America's writers of conventional fiction, who have largely deserted the "provinces" for the East and West coasts.

The Big Three traditional American locales for mayhem are New York City and its suburbs (especially the seedier parts of New Jersey and the wealthier parts of Connecticut), California (chiefly Los Angeles and Santa Barbara), and Florida.\* Chicago is a close fourth.

With a mental map of these four locations at hand, most readers of classic American detective fiction

\*Resorts always breed crime, at least in fiction, being full of seekers after pleasure and those who batten on them. Florida has produced so many sun-and-sand murder mysteries that a list would require pages. Indeed, Allen J. Hubin, in his exemplary bibliography of crime fiction, *Crime Fiction, 1749-1980: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (1984), lists 367 Florida-based crime novels.

could recognize the signposts on the way to Dénouement.

No longer. Today, you have to know all about Commonwealth Avenue and Larimer Street and Ezzard Charles Drive and downtown Hamtramck.

Elmore Leonard reached both the best-seller lists and the cover of *Newsweek* this year with *Glitz*. Most of Leonard's fine earlier books were set in Detroit; ironically, *Glitz* deals mostly with Atlantic City. Norman Mailer, not known as a crime writer (for good reason), contributed *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, a 1984 best-seller. Its action occurs in Provincetown, on Cape Cod.

Boston is the new capital of crime. There has always been crime in Boston (103 pre-1980 novels were set there), but up until recently it did not seem a good market for private eyes. The change is due in good measure to the works of Robert B. Parker, who taught English for years at Boston's Northeastern University.

#### Boston's Ritz

His burly, fortyish protagonist, Spenser—no first name, just Spenser—is clearly derived from Spenserian romance. Parker believes that fighting evil offers people the opportunity of moral regeneration; violence, Spenser declares, "is one of those places [where] you can be honorable." Every now and then Parker exposes Spenser's vulnerability, his obsession with an almost medieval code of honor, and the soft spot of sentimentality at the core of Spenser's being. Indeed, in his more recent novels, Parker has grown so in-

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### DETROIT AT DUSK

*From Loren D. Estleman's The Midnight Man (1982), a view of Detroit as a painter of the Ashcan School might see it:*

It was 8:30 and still light out, although the sun was below the skyline, sucking red and purple streamers down with it. West of the city you could read a newspaper by natural light until 10, one of the advantages—if you could call it that—of living on the extreme western edge of the Eastern Time Zone, with a little help from Uncle Sam turning back the hands on the clock like a small boy trying to finagle an extra hour before bedtime. On the horizon the cylindrical towers of the Renaissance Center were lit up like a whorehouse on Saturday night. . . .

Most of the street lamps on the lower east side were broken, which was a blessing aesthetically. Warehouses and tenements wallowed in the mulch of decades, their windows boarded up as if in an effort to shut out the world around them. Yellow mortar oozed out of brick walls covered with obscenities sprayed in black and candy-apple green; . . . heaps of stale laundry shaped vaguely like human beings snored in doorways with their heads leaning against the jambs and their open mouths scooping black, toothless holes out of their stubbed faces. As I swung onto McDougall the beam from my headlamps transfixed a bloated rat perched atop a mound of shredded plastic garbage bags, twin beads of red phosphorescence glowing from its eyes. Entering my intended block, I realized suddenly that I'd been breathing through my mouth for the past five minutes and closed it.

terested in exploring Spenser's very modern relationship with his girlfriend, Susan Silverman, Ph.D., that the mystery has taken a backseat.

Nevertheless, Parker writes in the hard-boiled tradition. Dropping by Boston's chic Ritz Hotel for a drink with a client, the detective notes, "They'd put up a second tower beside the hotel and filled it with condominium apartments that sold for a lot. . . . It didn't improve anything, but it didn't look like a bad case of mange either."

Jumped by two thugs, he tells them: "Look, you guys, I'm trying to get clammy with fear, and I can't."

Some readers find Spenser unbearably macho. (Others think that he is a food slob, though he claims to be a gourmet, and Parker's full-course descriptions of the meals Spenser prepares subtly make a case

for both views.) Yet there is a lot more to Parker's books than killings and bodybuilding sessions in the gym. All this comes together best in *Looking for Rachel Wallace* (1980), in which Spenser's job is to protect a famous radical lesbian feminist from kidnappers. Keeping company with his client, he learns that most people do not listen to the answers when they ask gays "Why?"

In 12 novels, from *The Godwulf Manuscript* (1973) to *The Catskill Eagle* (1985), Parker has proved that he is the true heir to the classic West-of-the-Mississippi gang: Hammett, Chandler, and Ross Macdonald. They established the literary conventions of private eye fiction, and despite dozens of good and hundreds of bad imitators, only now has their equal emerged.

But Parker cannot take all the

credit for the renaissance of crime in Boston. There are a dozen Beantown detective novelists, and at least three of them are very good.

Rick Boyer has created an interesting and adventurous dentist (now *there* is a departure) named Doc Adams who lives on Cape Cod and frequently roams Greater Boston. Apparently he has few patients.

#### Murder at Harvard

In *Billingsgate Shoal* (1982), Boyer brings the Cape to life. Of a cottage set on a bluff overlooking fictional Billingsgate Sound, he writes: "At low tide, it is a place of frightening vastness, haunting noises, and optical tricks. . . . Occasionally, the wind will bring the sound of laughter, or a mother calling a child, from miles away. And it is weird, even unsettling, to hear the voices and laughter clearly, coming from these tiny dots that move slowly to and fro on the shimmering sand far, far away."

In his latest book, *The Penny Ferry* (1984), Adams gets involved in a case that takes him all the way back to the 1920s and the Sacco and Vanzetti murder trial—and gives Boyer an excuse to delve into contemporary life in the Italian-American community of Boston's North End. Indeed, he becomes so fascinated with local color that his exploration of Boston threatens to obscure his plot.

Fascination with locale also tends to get in the way of Jane Langton's detective, Homer Kelly. At their best, however, Langton's books, illustrated with her own sketches, can make readers feel as if they are sitting in the middle of a New England village green.

Kelly is a distinguished Thoreau scholar who also happens to be a retired police lieutenant. A mild-mannered and somewhat absent-

minded man, he happens on murders in various New England outposts of academe.

Langton pins Harvard ears to the wall in *The Memorial Hall Murder* (1978), in which the university's ugliest building is blown up. The mystery: Was the blast meant to kill the chorus master or was it a bizarre aesthetic protest? In *Natural Enemy* (1982), the author's portraits of the quiet byways of Concord (and her impressive knowledge of spiders) vividly bring the rural spaces just outside Boston to life.

Best of all, in *Emily Dickinson Is Dead* (1984) Langton captures with comic precision the petty rivalries and intrigues of a group of academics gathered for the Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium in Amherst, Massachusetts.

#### Mayhem in Pennsylvania

One academic delivers a paper on patterns of capitalization in Dickinson's poems while another fantasizes that his disquisition will win him a spot on the front page of the *New York Times*—and it does, though not in the way he had imagined. Meanwhile, an insanely jealous (and obese) graduate student named Winifred Gaw clumsily eliminates the beautiful coed (as well as two innocent bystanders) whom she imagines to be her rival for the attentions of Professor Owen Kraznik. No secret here—Langton's readers are in on the killer's identity from the beginning. The fun is in Langton's descriptions and deft sense of humor.

Further inland, Rocksburg, Pennsylvania, has arrived with a bang. Rocksburg is Mario Balzic's turf, created by the pseudonymous K. C. Constantine. Balzic is the town's chief of police, a stout family man who spends a little too much time

sampling the good red wine at Muscotti's Bar and Grill.

Each Constantine book—there are seven so far—is a sharp, yet affectionate, study in the language and customs of a decaying small town somewhere near Pittsburgh, populated by Italians, Greeks, and blacks.

### Sex in Cincinnati

Describing an outlying neighborhood built and then abandoned during the 1950s by a big coal mining company, he writes: "If a miner managed by some luck to gain title to the house he occupied . . . that miner cared for it as though it were his second mother. . . . He painted her, puttied her, shingled her roof, caulked her crevices, and manicured her grounds. He doted on her, and pity the ignorant fool who approached her indifferent to the labor she required or the esteem in which both she and the labor were held."

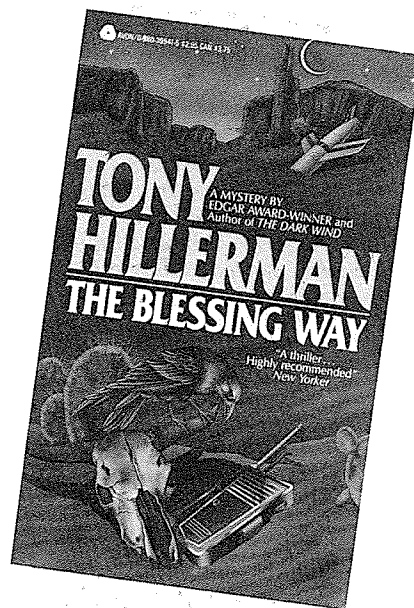
After he wrote his favorite, *A Fix Like This*, in 1975, Constantine went silent, returning in 1982 with *The Man Who Liked Slow Tomatoes*, an angry but compassionate story about how small town life corrupts, how men can sink into loneliness and violence. Having recovered his voice, Constantine is moving from strength to strength, establishing himself as a master of demotic American prose.

Consider this monologue by a jailed drug dealer setting Balzac straight on the facts of life: "It's this way. I'm a heavyweight pot dealer. Good week, I clear five hundred a week. Coke dealers, man, clear five thousand! When you're talking those kind of numbers, you got to have a bunch of up front money—or a bunch of \*\*\*—or the brains. Just wanting to go the big leagues, man, that don't make it. Unless, unless you fall into something. You luck

into a happy scene."

Not every city brings forth a detective novelist. St. Louis, for example, lacks one. Why should Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Detroit, and Seattle have suddenly exposed themselves to us?

Perhaps one answer can be found in the novels of Jonathan Valin and Michael Z. Lewin. Valin's Harry Stoner drives the rain-slick streets of Cincinnati, seeming to find sexual depravity everywhere. From *Final Notice* (1980)—someone is slashing library books and may be about to try his hand at librarians—to *The Lime Pit* (1980) to *Day of Wrath* (1982), Valin has put Ezzard Charles Drive on the crime map. The street, where once "plaster Negro jockeys" set out on front lawns in greeting, has been renamed in honor of a black boxer. Valin understands his city, its conservative values, its symbiotic relationship with the fleshpots of Covington, Kentucky, across the river,



its hidden virtues. Cincinnati is, in fact, a fine city, but not enough Americans know that.

### O, Indianapolis

Valin brings it to us solid, a little boring, very real. As he drives down one suburban street of "storied framed houses and spindle railed verandas," with the "householders propped sternly in their lawn chairs," Stoner reflects that "like a bar or a graveyard, this [is] not a place for the young."

Valin is so good that one wonders why he never wrote about St. Louis, which was, after all, his home when he started the Stoner series.

Some writers seem to need distance to find precisely the right ironic tone. Michael Lewin has captured Indianapolis, yet he lives in England. Some reviewers—those who share Chandler's crude dictum that the way out of a plot impasse is to have a man come through a door with a gun—have said that Lewin's books are dull. They are, in the sense that a day in Indianapolis might be dull to someone who cannot live without having croissants and the *New York Times* at breakfast. Lewin knows that Midwestern tastes are different, and he likes them.

His protagonist, Albert Samson, is truly seedy: Unlike today's California gumshoes, Samson has no hot tub in his back yard. His car is perpetually encrusted with the kind of grime that only slushy black Midwestern city snow can produce. In *The Silent Salesman* (1978), he is so down on his luck that he is reduced to advertising a "Gigantic August Detective Sale" (20 percent off on divorce cases). His \$2,000 "Never Touch" fund contains \$938.

By the contemporary standards of the genre, the cases that Lewin has

Samson undertake are minor, of purely local significance. Samson has yet to find that the murder of an Indianapolis elevator attendant is tied to a plot to bomb the White House. He plugs along, a little stupidly at times, coming at things from the outside in. But Lewin knows how to *Ask the Right Question* (1971), understands *The Way We Die Now* (1973), and can make an exceedingly routine inquiry into a *Missing Woman* (1981) from Bloomington seem as authentically Hoosier as a high school basketball tournament.

### The Motor City

That crime-ridden Detroit should have an equally down-at-the-heels gumshoe is not surprising. Loren D. Estleman has created Amos Walker, put in his mouth an updated version of the language we associate with Philip Marlowe—"I could greet the clients in a caftan," he shoots back at a woman who suggests that he redecorate his shabby office, "play bongo music and read their palms and sock them 10 bucks a finger"—and set him loose to prey on the corporate corruption of *Motor City Blue* (1980).

In Denver, Mexican-American police detective Gabe Wager, chafing under the knowledge that enforcing the law does not always mean achieving justice, acts as a private avenger within—just barely—the law. Rex Burns, Wager's creator, envelops his books in a bleakness that owes less to Larimer Street's winos, the "brown haze that settle[s] over early-morning Denver" every day, or the topless bars out along East Colfax Avenue, than to Wager's inner vision. In Wager's world, the bad guys meet justice.

"Muggers, rapists, killers—they struck like any other animal, at the weak, the crippled, the defenseless,"

Wager broods in *The Avenging Angel* (1983). "They came out of dark crevices between buildings and went after the sure thing as a fish lunged after a wobbling minnow."

#### Soft-boiled in Seattle

In six novels, beginning with *The Alvarez Journal* in 1975, Burns, who teaches English at the University of Colorado, Denver, has been examining the peculiar mores of a city that, in his view, somewhere took the wrong track, succumbing to smog and congestion and crime.

Burns says it this way: "More office buildings, more commuter space, fewer homes to fill the evening streets with the glow of living-room lights. The city [is] becoming as functional as a draftsman's sketch. The starkly efficient plans of engineers, backed by the irresistible pressure of oil money, [are] creating a new city of smooth plastic facades."

If Denver was once the city of the future, Seattle is today. Richard Hoyt describes the beauty of Chinook salmon swimming in the Pacific Northwest waters—and how they wind up "planked" on backyard suburban charcoal grills. In John Denson he has created a smart, persistent detective—perhaps the first self-proclaimed "soft-boiled" one—who was once (like Hoyt) a newspaper reporter in Hawaii. Denson likes rumpled shirts and table wine in screw-top bottles, and he does not carry a gun. In *Decoys* (1980) and *The Siskiyou Two-Step* (1983), Denson wanders through Seattle and Portland (Oregon) yet always ends up out in the forests and mountains, where the complex ethics of the big city

meet the simpler survival code of the wild. Hoyt clearly prefers the latter.

American detective writers have always created their own special places. But in earlier years there was a pseudonymity, if not anonymity, to them: A. B. Cunningham's *Deer Lick*, or Erle Stanley Gardner's *Madison City*, or Hillary Waugh's *Stockford*, Connecticut. Today, most writers put their crimes on real maps, making the stories and the cities come to life on the page.

Why has so much detective fiction gone regional? Apart from the fact that violent crime itself is now more common (and thus plausibly fictionalized) throughout the country, there is the fact that more and more people are trying their hand at writing detective stories. Many of them are academicians whose jobs take them to Boulder, Eugene, East Lansing, or Albuquerque, and they write about what is close at hand.

These writers are not getting rich—all but a few of those described here depend upon university teaching jobs for regular income. An average detective story sells about 2,000 copies; successful authors such as Constantine claim hardcover sales of 10,000 or more. With sales 10 times the size of Constantine's and the premiere this year of *Spenser for Hire*, a new television series based on his books, Parker is the standout commercial success of the group.

The readers of crime fiction, like its authors, are also on the move. In a land where more and more people seem to come from "someplace else," reading localized detective novels is an easy way to revisit one's old hometown. It is also just plain fun.