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The Private Life of the Series Detective

Like Philip Marlowe, the detective of contemporary detective series may keep a bottle in a drawer, but if he does, he very likely also has an acknowledged drinking problem. Similarly, if he meets a sexy blonde in a bar, she probably is his steady but problematic girlfriend, or the mother of his children. There is nothing one-dimensional about contemporary detectives; they are seldom simply tough, or intellectual, or street smart. Whether male or female, straight or gay, they may be tough but vulnerable, intellectual and depressed, street smart but self-conscious, and afflicted with ulcers, diabetes, divorce, sick children and relatives with Alzheimer's. In short, the former cardboard figure has over the last thirty years or so turned into a dynamic character, with a private life and personal problems. The detective series, moreover, has developed from a chronicle of murder cases to a life story in installments, the private life of the series detective.

In what I see as a clear shift of focus from detecting to detective, from case to life story, character development is a key feature. Dorothy L. Sayers predicted this future for the detective novel in her essay "Gaudy Night"¹ and heralded it in the novels that depict the developing love affair between Lord Peter and Harriet Vane. However, other characters in Golden Age detective fiction were generally sketchily drawn and unlikely either to develop from book to book or to let themselves be influenced by the cases or the people they investigated.

In one of the chapters of *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Stephen Knight discusses some of Agatha Christie's most successful works, and concludes that her one-dimensional characters and simple motives are in

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers: "Gaudy Night". Howard Haycraft (ed.): *The Art of the Mystery Story*. New York: 1946, 208–221 (209).

fact evidence of her particular skill. In Christie's world, Knight says, "[m]arionettes are provided to play out the extraordinary complicated action, the puzzle plot is made possible, suspicion of all can be created without probing the real roots or mechanisms of unsocial behaviour."² The result is a text that resembles not so much the traditional novel as folk tales, children's stories, and gossip. "In all these forms, characters have a few crucial features, motivation is simple and only explained in terms of deviance from good," Knight argues.³ As I will show, however, this would not describe most contemporary detective series, which in fact do resemble traditional, realistic novels in that psychological processes are part of the plot and developing characters are the sources of action.

An important difference between the early detective novels and those that are more recent is of course the much developed series form. Although the detective series has a long history, the modern kind bears little resemblance to the early series where a protagonist simply recurred in a number of novels with no distinguishable order, and with no development of life or character. In the new kind of series the protagonist is followed from one adventure to the next, but also from one boyfriend to the next or to marriage, from one house to the next, from health to illness and back to health, etc. There is an emphasis on narrative order within the series; cause in one novel is followed by effect in the next, and there are numerous references to the past, chronicled in earlier installments. The protagonist is moreover affected by these events and can be seen to change, develop and mature as the series progresses.

In this way character in contemporary series is connected to seriality, to the concern with narrative order within a series.⁴ In the early series, however, it does not matter in what order you read the Hercule Poirot novels, because Poirot is always the same. Although we learn a few details from the private life of Hercule Poirot – his obsession with symmetry and neatness, his sweet tooth, his fear of pain at the dentist,⁵ and so on – these details are all presented as part of his original type, provided to reinforce our first impression of his character. They are not there to suggest a developing

² Stephen Knight: *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. Bloomington: 1980, 124.

³ Knight: *Form and Ideology*, 125.

⁴ Seriality is my term for the (almost self-conscious) concern with internal order seen in modern series of detective and other fiction. These novels are firmly interconnected and there are numerous intraserial references that encourage reading them in narrative order. Seriality is discussed at length in my dissertation, *The Dynamic Detective: Special Interest and Seriality in Contemporary Detective Series*. Uppsala: 2002.

⁵ Agatha Christie: *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*. (1940). Glasgow: 1981.

character, and are in no way related to the story. If you pick up a Reginald Hill or a Walter Mosley novel, however, the changes in their detectives' private lives are presented as part of the plot. Their characters fall in love, have children, get divorced or come out as gay and these events trigger other events in the same or later novels in the series. It is certainly possible to read these novels out of order with enjoyment, but the sustained seriality adds an extra dimension. Intraserial references become meaningful to readers as well as to characters, and although the murder story attains closure in each volume, the life story of the detective continues in subsequent books, and the wish to follow *this* story becomes a reason for reading the series. This, I claim, is true of many contemporary detective series.

In their book *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition* Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones include a brief section on the consequences of the series form, in which several authors of detective series emphasize the character developing aspect of the series. "I love writing series fiction. I love being able to peel back another layer of character with every new book, to allow them to tell me things about themselves I never knew, to watch them grow," says Dana Stabenow, author of the Kate Shugak series. Similarly, Valerie Wilson Wesley, author of the Tamara Hayle series, notes that she likes the series form because "it allows you to develop a character in ways that you may not be able to in a different kind of book."⁶ Carolyn Heilbrun who, under the pseudonym of Amanda Cross, writes the series about Kate Fansler has also emphasized the importance of character development in a statement about her character: "Kate [Fansler] was gutsy. She also held a few opinions I now consider retrograde [...] but she has changed with time, she's learned, and that's all one can ask of anybody."⁷ These authors all point to the series form's suitability for character development, something I want to take a closer look at in this article. My examples come from two best-selling detective series, one British and one American: Reginald Hill's Dalziel and Pascoe series, and Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins series.

Reginald Hill published his first Dalziel and Pascoe novel in 1970 and his latest to date in 2002. His main characters are Chief Inspector Peter Pascoe, Ellie Pascoe, Peter's wife, Superintendent Andy Dalziel, and Sergeant Wield. In Hill's series, as well as in many other modern detective novels, the main themes are usually played out repeatedly, but slightly dif-

⁶ Priscilla L. Walton, Manina Jones: *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*. Berkeley: 1999, 57.

⁷ Carolyn Heilbrun: *Writing a Woman's Life*. London: 1989, 116.

ferently, by the different characters, in that professional agendas are mirrored by personal concerns. Thus, in *On Beulah Height* (1998), a police case concerning the disappearance and death of several little girls is investigated against the background of Pascoe's daughter's "disappearance" into unconsciousness due to illness.⁸ This mirroring is a common enough narrative technique, but in good series fiction like Hill's, it becomes part of characterization. It is a personal drama offering insight into Pascoe's character and personal life, and into the police case in the narrative present, as well as something that is very likely to resurface later on and become a link to the detective's personal history, and a clue to his subsequent behavior.

In Hill's novel *Under World* (1988), set in a post-strike mining community, plot and characterization are inextricably connected with the setting and its inherent conflicts.⁹ The relationship between Peter Pascoe, the dutiful policeman, and his wife Ellie, who is a radical feminist, is a recurring point of interest and latent conflict in this series, and seldom more so than in this novel where they end up on opposing sides in the conflict. Hill's main characters are not only seen through the eyes of the mining community and in the light of what occurs there, they are also seen as reacting to, and changing because of these events. By the end of *Under World*, Peter Pascoe is seriously injured in an accident down an old mine, and ends up spending a long time in hospital. When he returns, in *Bones and Silence* (1990), we learn that experiences drawn in his last case have caused him to reconsider his relationship with his wife.

Prior to the case which left him with his still painful leg, he had confided without inhibition or censorship in Ellie. If asked then, he would have said he did it out of complete love, complete trust. [...] Finally had come a time when they had found themselves in public and private opposition and, retrospectively, he found himself identifying a certain perverse satisfaction in having reached a boundary.¹⁰

In this novel, even though this case too has many personal connections, Peter's newly recognized boundary between his public and his private life stops him from confiding in Ellie, a decision he has reason to regret. Peter can no more return to the life and marriage he had before *Under World* than Sergeant Wield can go back to the way he lived before his coming out as gay in the earlier novel *Child's Play* (1987). As we can see, these characters have histories, and readers are encouraged to take them into account.

⁸ Reginald Hill: *On Beulah Height*. New York: 1998. Hereafter abbreviated OBH.

⁹ Reginald Hill: *Under World*. London: 2001.

¹⁰ Reginald Hill: *Bones and Silence*. New York: 1991, 149.

Some novels later, in *On Beulah Height*, we learn that another case (*The Wood Beyond*, 1996) is still disturbing Pascoe. “[Ellie] looked after him, troubled. She knew something was wrong and she knew where it had started. The end of last year. A case which had turned personal in a devastating way and which had only just finished progressing through the courts.” (OBH, 36) In fact, when the new case opens, Pascoe comes very close to refusing to respond to Superintendent Dalziel’s call.

There had been a strange moment back there, when his feet refused to move him through the doorway and his tongue tried to form the words *I shan’t go*. [...] If he’d opted not to go then, he doubted if he would ever have gone again. He’d known this when Dalziel rang him. He’d known it every morning when he got up and went on duty for the past many weeks. He was like a priest who’d lost his faith. His sense of responsibility still made him take the services and administer the sacraments, but it was mere automatism maintained in the hope that the loss was temporary. (OBH, 37)

However, in this novel the connections between Pascoe’s personal and professional lives finally help him regain his faith in his job and his duty.

It would be nice to kick off his shoes and lie down here with his wife and child, and wake with them in a little while. But there was work to be done. A debt to be paid. What had Ellie called him? Pious Aeneas, always on his way to the Lavinian shore. How the gods must love irony to let the sight of those he loved most both tempt him from his duty and give him the strength to do it. (OBH, 547)

In other words, Pascoe is once again able to gather strength from his family. Pascoe’s character here may not seem particularly modern, but this kind of insight into the private life of the detective, especially as part of a pronounced subplot and the dynamic characterization of the hero, is definitely a modern development in this genre.

Hill’s series is a long-lived one, however, and this emphasis on developing characters was not part of its original make-up. When asked, in an interview, how character development has influenced the books, Reginald Hill answered:

Well, in the past, I’ve imagined the books as being a kind of morality play. Pascoe is the everyman, he’s in the middle. You’ve got on one side the good angel and on the other side the bad angel, who keep tugging at him. But the good angel is not always Ellie, and the bad angel is not always Dalziel. They’re interchangeable too, and they’re moving too. But Pascoe, how shall I put this, he’s the bit of seaweed that’s been hung out. You see the change of the weather in Pascoe: he’s the one

that changes most, but the others have to change too. And it's the fact that they are changing and developing that keeps them going for me, keeps them alive for me.¹¹

Hill's words point both to the gradual change of his series and of the genre, and to the change in his characters. They also emphasize the present-day importance of secondary characters like the family of the detective, and his or her social and working community. Hill's characters, and many others in novels that follow more or less in the British clue-puzzle tradition have undoubtedly become more socially motivated and three-dimensional than their early ancestors. When I now turn to the hardboiled detective of today, his development in this regard is perhaps even more conspicuous.

Like the clue puzzle, early hardboiled detective fiction was typically quite superficial in its drawing of characters, and although the detectives themselves usually got a somewhat fuller characterization, Marlowe and Spade were never part of a community. On the contrary, Chandler, who is generally considered to have created a rounded character in Marlowe, made a virtue of presenting the detective as a type characterized by marginality in relation to society, and by invariability in his responses to it. "The hero [...] has nothing to learn from or share with other people; his lonely quality is enough to inspect, judge and dismiss them,"¹² says Knight of Marlowe. My examples from today's hardboiled subgenre come from Walter Mosley's series about private eye Easy Rawlins. His novels, written between 1990 and 2002 but set in Watts, Los Angeles, in the years 1948 through 1965, adhere to the hardboiled tradition but are totally modern in their characterization and emphasis on family and community.

In this series the main character, Easy Rawlins, tells his own story in retrospect, often interrupted by memories and reflections. In *Devil in a Blue Dress* the year is 1948 and Rawlins is recently back from the war, a young black man with a strong sense of being "just as good as any white man" but also convinced that the American dream is spelled possessions. He reflects that "if I didn't even own my front door, then people would look at me just like another poor beggar, with his hand outstretched."¹³ Rawlins sets out, reluctantly, on his first case because he has a mortgage to pay, a house to care for. As we follow him in his search for Daphne Monet, we see that the house is not just a house. It is Easy's jealously protected sanctity; a symbol of his freedom and his integrity, but it is also his connection to the Watts

¹¹ "Hill-Talking – An interview with Reginald Hill". Harper Collins 2001. <http://www.fireandwater.com/Authors/interview.asp?interviewid=56> (18.11.2002.)

¹² Knight: *Form and Ideology*, 145.

¹³ Walter Mosley: *Devil in a Blue Dress*. London: 1992, 16. Hereafter abbreviated DBD.

community. In the course of the series, however, Easy develops from a character who puts his property first to, at least partly, a family man, for whom property is not a goal in itself but a means of supporting his family.

Easy's commitment to his property recurs as motivation in the second novel, *A Red Death*.¹⁴ Here Easy has gone from happy owner of a small house which, in the previous novel, "meant more to me than any woman I ever knew" (DBD, 20) to the proprietor of three apartment buildings, bought with a windfall of originally stolen money, property which soon becomes the source of trouble. As the Internal Revenue Service threatens to investigate his tax history, Easy reflects: "During that time I thought about all that I was going to lose; my property, my money, my freedom." (ARD, 40) In order to protect all this, Easy has to lend his services to the FBI and become a spy in their 1953 communist hunt. Later, in *White Butterfly* (1992), set in 1956, Easy is married and lives with his wife Regina, their baby girl Edna and Easy's foster son Jesus, but he continues to lie about his business and cannot make himself tell his wife about what he owns or how he came to own it. "I planned to tell Regina everything about my money [...]. I just needed time to get the words straight."¹⁵ It slowly dawns on Easy that this inability to share his history with either his wife or his friends may be worse than the alternative.

When I cradled the phone I felt very lonely. All of what I had and all I had done was had and done in secret. Nobody knew the real me. Maybe Mouse and Mofass knew something but they weren't friends that you could kick back and jaw with. I thought that maybe Regina was right. But the thought of telling her all about me brought out a cold sweat; the kind of sweat you get when your life is in mortal danger. (WB, 179)

In this novel, approximately half way through the series, we meet a protagonist who is slowly realizing his dependence on other people and the severe problems caused by his own character, however tragically developed. In one very brutal scene Easy comes home drunk and rapes his wife, and although he does not see his own act in light of the murders of several young women that he is investigating, he has to face the consequences. Just when Easy is becoming aware of the blessings of family life, his wife Regina leaves with their daughter Edna. Possibly in a gesture of atonement, Easy takes in a second foster child, Feather, and becomes more and more involved in the family lives of his neighbors and business associates. At the

¹⁴ Walter Mosley: *A Red Death*. New York: 1992. Hereafter abbreviated: ARD.

¹⁵ Walter Mosley: *White Butterfly*. New York: 1993, 86. Hereafter abbreviated: WB.

beginning of the next to last book in the series, Easy, now working as a janitor in a local school, feels that he has at last straightened out his life.

I had spent most of my adult years of hanging on by a shoestring among gangsters and gamblers, prostitutes and killers. But I never liked it. I always wanted a well-ordered working life. The Board of Education didn't pay much in the way of salary, but my kids had medical insurance and I was living a life that I could be proud of.¹⁶

But this is not the whole picture. Easy is still juggling a double, or triple, life; he is a janitor and property owner, and also still in the business of “favors”, which is how he describes his occasional private investigations. And while he in the first part of the series often used to tell lies out of fear, we now see him lie because “keeping in practice keeps you alive.” (ALYD, 65) Easy has become more sophisticated in his dealings with the police, but even when it would be perfectly possible, and in many ways preferable, to tell the truth, to be the honest, everyday janitor he claims he wants to be, he is not able to do it. He does, however, reflect upon this fact and tries to offer an explanation. Again, his family is uppermost in his mind.

There are moments in your life when you can tell what's right and wrong about yourself – your nature. I wanted my job and my everyday life. I wanted to see Jesus get his track scholarship at UCLA and Feather to become the artist I knew she could be.

All I had to do was say, ‘yeah, she said she'd been fightin' with her husband.’ [...] Instead I said, ‘Not that I know of.’ [...] I was a fool; but I was my own fool. (ALYD, 68–69)

Easy may not be able to go against his nature, but an important point, and a substantial difference from the early hardboiled series is the fact that we see this struggle for a family life, and that we see it depicted as a character development over time. In 1948, Easy's strongest motivation was his house and his pursuit of happiness. In 1963, however, he has his growing children to consider. The fact that both Pascoe and Rawlins, two male detectives, one policeman and one private eye, one Englishman and one American, concern themselves so much with their young families merits some consideration. The early detectives rarely had steady girlfriends or boyfriends; families with children were practically unheard of. Nowadays however, most detectives seem to have children. If they do not raise their own, like

¹⁶ Walter Mosley: *A Little Yellow Dog*. New York: 1997, 11–12. Hereafter abbreviated: ALYD.

Peter Pascoe, they foster strays, like Easy Rawlins, or adopt nephews and nieces, or in some cases, have other family members that need care. This conspicuous sign of the new emphasis on the private life of the detective is also a clue to the possible reason for this change.

Before I return to this aspect, however, I want to point to a related, recent development in detective fiction, namely the way contemporary detective novels are set in a specific time in history, and very often in the (specified) present. Hill's novels, and many others, are set more or less in the years they appear, while Mosley's are set in specific years in the past. In most present-day detective novels the year can be approximated by numerous references made to sitting presidents, popular pop stars, or topical events, if it is not actually given. In the case of Easy Rawlins, since the series is set in specific moments in time with references to topical events, we get the carefully calculated effect of Easy's character developing in parallel with his society. Easy's life is described as part of the mixture of progress and discouragement experienced by the African American community in Los Angeles during the years 1948 through 1965. Other writers may not quite manage to match narrative time and real time as meticulously as Mosley does, but this is seldom a problem. Amanda Cross and Reginald Hill, for example, both let their detectives age rather slowly. But rather than setting their novels at a non-specific time where the hero can be forever thirty-five, they have the narrative world develop at an authentic rate, introducing computers, cell phones etc., and let their heroes deal with it.

But why? The answer that presents itself is simply that this trend, as well as the tendency to let detectives develop as characters and lead private lives which include children, follows from the genre's realistic mode, a "classic realism" in Catherine Belsey's sense.¹⁷ "Realism," says Belsey, "is plausible not because it reflects the world but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar."¹⁸ Like Barthes's "readable" text it offers the reader a code of reference, "an allusion to a shared body of knowledge."¹⁹ The early clue-puzzles prided themselves on a pedantic verisimilitude in their reconstruction of times and events, and the early hard-boiled thrillers loudly claimed realism in speech and location of perpetrators and investigators; yet few modern readers would call either subgenre particularly realistic today. As Belsey rightly points out, "[r]ealism is a

¹⁷ Catherine Belsey: *Critical Practice*. London: 1980, 70.

¹⁸ Belsey: *Critical Practice*, 47.

¹⁹ Belsey: *Critical Practice*, 50.

culturally relative concept,”²⁰ and modern detective series have to communicate with modern readers. My hypothesis is that the large and growing popularity of detective fiction is a result of its adaptability, its talent for incorporating new trends and tendencies into the genre.

If we look at popular culture today, the general fascination with private lives is undeniable. Private lives have become public concerns, not only in detective fiction but also in every arena from culture to politics. Details from the private lives of celebrities from film, television, sports, and politics are on offer everywhere, and even otherwise perfectly unknown people become famous, accessible, and therefore presumably more interesting, through expressing their private thoughts in talk shows like *Ricki Lake* or reality TV shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. Like the series form itself, references to private life seem to be an efficient way of involving an audience.

The many pages of plot and subplot devoted to personal concerns, and the precision with which many detective series are set in a specific time and place, are therefore, I would argue, intended to convey verisimilitude. In the days of Hercule Poirot and Philip Marlowe, children, if they existed, were presumably the responsibilities of wives, or nannies, and were therefore usually absent from the texts. Today, however, both Pascoe and Rawlins seem *more* realistic because they, like many contemporary readers, have families to consider. The fact that Rawlins’s children are being brought up in the 1950s and 1960s when single dads were quite unusual does not enter into this equation. Mosley’s character seems familiar, and therefore realistic, to his readers who take their references from the 1990s and 2000s. Furthermore, when Easy Rawlins is seen to react to the murder of John F. Kennedy that we know really happened in 1963, and when Peter Pascoe is affected by the aftermath of the authentic miners’ strike, these allusions to shared knowledge of the world make the characters more authentic. Realism, dependent on familiarity, is therefore doubly enhanced in these contemporary detective series which with every new installment offer yet another episode of the seemingly authentic private life of the series detective.

²⁰ Belsey: *Critical Practice*, 51.