

G. K. Chesterton's fame as a detective-story writer has spanned many years, and who among us is brave enough to predict when Father Brown will be forgotten? But G. K. Chesterton as detective-story reviewer is rather less well known, though he did review for a periodical called "G. K.'s Weekly," from which the following charming, witty, and penetrating piece is taken.

HOW TO WRITE A DETECTIVE STORY

by G. K. CHESTERTON

LET IT BE UNDERSTOOD THAT I write this article as one wholly conscious that he has failed to write a detective story. But I have failed a good many times. My authority is therefore practical and scientific, like that of some great statesman or social thinker dealing with Unemployment or the Housing Problem. On making a rough calculation I find I must have failed at least 54 times to write a detective story; and my failures are bound up in three books and many magazines. I do not pretend that I have achieved the ideal that I set up here for the young student; I am, if you will, rather the awful example for him to avoid. Nonetheless I believe that there are ideals of detective writings, as of everything else worth doing; and I wonder they are not more often set out in all that popular didactic literature which teaches us how to do so

many things so much less worth doing; as for instance, how to succeed.

Indeed, I wonder very much that the title at the top of this article does not stare at us from every bookstall. Pamphlets are published teaching people all sorts of things that cannot possibly be learned, such as personality, popularity, poetry, and charm. Even those parts of literature and journalism that most obviously cannot be learned are assiduously taught. But here is a piece of plain straightforward literary craftsmanship, constructive rather than creative, which could to some limited extent be taught and even, in very lucky instances, learned.

Sooner or later I suppose the want will be supplied, in that commercial system in which supply immediately answers to demand, and in which everybody seems to

be thoroughly dissatisfied and unable to get anything he wants. Sooner or later, I suppose, there will not only be textbooks teaching criminal investigators, but textbooks teaching criminals. It will be but a slight change from the present tone of financial ethics; and when the shrewd and vigorous business mind has broken away from the last lingering influence of dogmas invented by priests, journalism and advertisement will show the same indifference to the taboos of today as does today to the taboos of the Middle Ages. Burglary will be explained like usury; and there will be no more disguise about cutting throats than there is about cornering markets. The bookstalls will be brightened with titles like *Forgery in Fifteen Lessons* and *Why Endure Married Misery?*—with a popularization of poisoning fully as scientific as the popularization of Divorce and Birth Control. But, as we are so often reminded, we must not be in a hurry for the arrival of a happy humanity; and, meanwhile, we seem to be quite as likely to get good advice about committing crimes as good advice about detecting them, or about describing how they could be detected.

I imagine the explanation is that the crime, the detection, the description of the detection, and the description of the description, do all demand a certain slight element of thought, while succeeding

and writing a book on success in no way necessitate this tiresome experience. Anyhow, I find in my own case that when I begin to think of the theory of detective stories, I do become what some would call theoretical. That is, I begin at the beginning, without any pep, snap, zip or other essential of the art of arresting the attention, without in any way disturbing or awakening the mind.

The first and fundamental principle is that the aim of a mystery story—as of every other story and every other mystery—is not darkness but light. The story is written for the moment when the reader does understand, not merely for the many preliminary moments when he does not understand. The misunderstanding is only meant as a dark outline of cloud to bring out the brightness of that instant of intelligibility; and most bad detective stories are bad because they fail upon this point.

The writers have a strange notion that it is their business to baffle the reader; and that so long as they baffle him it does not matter if they disappoint him. But it is not only necessary to hide a secret, it is also necessary to have a secret, and to have a secret worth hiding. The climax must not be an anticlimax; it must merely consist of leading the reader a dance and leaving him in a ditch. Dr. Watson may be a fool, but he must not be an April fool. The climax must

not be only the bursting of a bubble but rather the breaking of a dawn; only that the daybreak is accentuated by the dark. Any form of art, however trivial, refers back to some serious proofs; and though we are dealing with nothing more momentous than a mob of Watsons, all watching with round eyes like owls, it is still permissible to insist that it is the people who sat in darkness who have seen a great light; and that the darkness is only valuable in making vivid a great light in the mind. It always struck me as an amusing coincidence that the best of the Sherlock Holmes stories bore, with a totally different application and significance, a title that might have been invented to express this primal illumination—the title of *Silver Blaze*.

The second great principle is that the soul of detective fiction is not complexity but simplicity. The secret may appear complex, but it must *be* simple; and in this also it is a symbol of higher mysteries. The writer is there to explain the mystery; but he ought not to be needed to explain the explanation. The explanation should explain itself; it should be something that can be hissed (by the villain, of course) in a few whispered words or shrieked; preferably by the heroine before she swoons under the shock of the belated realization that two and two make four.

Now some literary detectives make the solution more complicated than the mystery, and the crime almost more complicated than the solution. The explanation is something like this: "The vicar's first curate did indeed intend to murder him and loaded and then lost his pistol, which was picked up by the second curate and placed on a particular shelf in the vestry to incriminate the third curate, who had a long and lingering love affair with the niece of the organist, who is not really the niece of the organist but the long-lost daughter of the vicar; the organist, being in love with his ward, transfers the pistol to the coat pocket of the second curate, but the coat is accidentally put on by the first curate, who pulls out the pistol in mistake for a pocket handkerchief, and the vicar mistaking him for the real owner of the coat (who had done him a deep and complicated injury twenty years ago in Port Said) rushes furiously upon him (the pronouns are getting mixed like everything else) so that the holder of the pistol (whoever he may be by this time) is forced to fire in self-defense and the vicar falls dead."

Now anyone who will attentively study that explanation, as given in the above words, will realize the extreme difficulty of uttering it in a shriek before falling in a swoon, or even of hissing it in a few well-chosen words into the

car of a pallid listener before gliding swiftly from the room. But the first principle is, as I have said, that the whole story ought to exist for the sake of the sentence so shrieked or hissed. A detective story is built for that explanation as a big gun is built for the explosion. And it would be an exaggeration to call the paragraph above quoted explosive.

Thirdly, it follows from this that so far as possible the fact or figure explaining everything should be a familiar fact or figure. The criminal should be in the foreground—not in the capacity of criminal, but in some other capacity which nevertheless gives him a natural right to be in the foreground. I will take as a convenient case the one I have already quoted: the plot of *Silver Blaze*. Sherlock Holmes is as familiar as Shakespeare; so there is no injustice by this time in letting out the secret of one of the first of these famous tales.

News is brought to Sherlock Holmes that a valuable race horse has been stolen, and the trainer guarding him murdered by the thief. Various people, of course, are plausibly suspected of the theft and murder; and everybody concentrates on the serious police problem of who can have killed the trainer. The simple truth is that the horse killed him. Now I take that as a model because the truth is so simple. The truth really is, as

Sherlock Holmes said to Watson, so very obvious. At any rate, the point is that the horse is very obvious. The story is named after the horse; it is all about the horse; the horse is in the foreground all the time, but always in another capacity. As a thing of great value he remains for the reader the Favorite; it is only as a criminal that he is a dark horse. It is a story of theft in which the horse plays the part of the jewel until we forget that the jewel can also play the part of the weapon.

That is one of the first rules I would suggest, if I had to make rules for this form of composition. Generally speaking, the agent should be a familiar figure in an unfamiliar function. The thing that we realize must be a thing that we recognize—that is, it must be something previously known, and it ought to be something prominently displayed. Otherwise there is no surprise in mere novelty. It is useless for a thing to be unexpected if it was not worth expecting. But it should be prominent for one reason and responsible for another.

A great part of the craft of writing mystery stories consists in finding a convincing but misleading reason for the prominence of the criminal, over and above his legitimate business of committing the crime. Many mysteries fail merely by leaving him at loose ends in the story, with apparently nothing to

do except commit the crime. He is generally well off, or our just and equal law would probably have him arrested as a vagrant long before he was arrested as a murderer. We reach the stage of suspecting such a character by a very rapid if unconscious process of elimination. Generally we suspect him merely because he has not been suspected.

The art of narrative consists in convincing the reader for a time, not only that the character might have come on the premises with no intention to commit a felony, but that the author has put him there with some intention that is not felonious. For the detective story is only a game; and in that game the reader is not really wrestling with the criminal but with the author.

What the writer has to remember, in this sort of game, is that the reader will not say, as he sometimes might of a serious or realistic study: "Why *did* the surveyor in green spectacles climb the tree to look into the lady doctor's back garden?" He will insensibly and inevitably say, "Why did the author *make* the surveyor climb a tree, or introduce any surveyor at all?" The reader may admit that the town would in any case need a surveyor, without admitting that the tale would in any case need one. It is necessary to explain his presence in the tale (and the tree), not only by suggesting why the town council put him there, but why the author put him there.

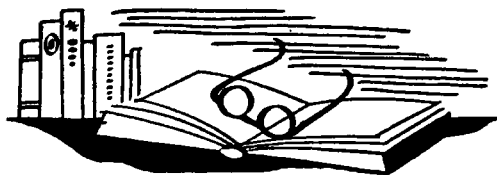
Over and above any little crimes he may intend to indulge in, in the inner chamber of the story, he must have already some other justification as a character in a story and not only as a mere miserable material person in real life. The instinct of the reader, playing hide-and-seek with the writer, who is his real enemy, is always to say with suspicion, "Yes, I know a surveyor might climb a tree; I am quite aware that there are trees and there are surveyors; but why did you make this particular surveyor climb this particular tree in this particular tale, you cunning and evil-minded man?"

This I should call the fourth principle to be remembered; as in the other cases, people will not realize that it is practical, because the principle on which it rests sounds theoretical. It rests on the fact that in the classification of the arts, mysterious murders belong to the grand and joyful company of the things called jokes. The story is a fancy; an avowedly fictitious fiction. We may say if we like that it is a very artificial form of art; I should prefer to say that it is professedly a toy, a thing that children "pretend" with. From this it follows that the reader, who is a simple child and therefore very wideawake, is conscious not only of the toy but of the invisible playmate who is the maker of the toy. The innocent child is very sharp and not a little suspicious.

And one of the first rules, I repeat, for the maker of a tale that shall be a trick, is to remember that the masked murderer must have an artistic right to be on the scene and not merely a realistic right to be in the world. He must not only come to the house on business, but on the business of the story; it is not only a question of the motive of the visitor but of the motive of the author. The ideal mystery story is one in which he is such a character as the author would have created for his own sake, or for the sake of making the story move in other necessary matters, and then be found to be present there, not for that obvious and sufficient reason, but for a second and a secret one. I will add that for this reason, despite the sneers at "love interest," there is a good deal to be said for the Miss Bradon tradition of sentiment and slower or more Victorian narration. Some may call it a bore, but it may be a blind.

Lastly, the principle that the detective story like every literary form starts with an idea, and does

not merely start out to find one, applies also to its more material mechanical detail. Where the story turns upon detection, it is still necessary that the writer should begin from the inside, though the detective approaches from the outside. Every good problem of this type originates in a positive notion, which is in itself a simple notion—some fact of daily life that the writer can remember and the reader can forget. Here again I might well take *Silver Blaze* as a good working model—where a perfectly fair deduction is founded on the opium being sprinkled on a dish of curry and not something more usual and less highly seasoned. Perhaps the whole story began with the dish of curry, and the coincidence of the drug and the condiment, and round it were built up the stables and the race-course and the whole stage scenery of the tale. But anyhow a tale has to be founded on a truth, if it be only the taste of curry; and though opium may be added to it, it must not merely be an opium dream.



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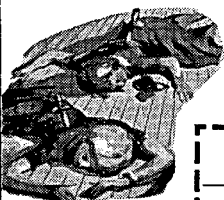
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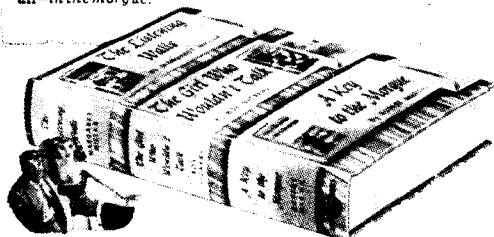
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