

The 2009 Acorn Book Circle Program: Fall Workshop on *The Maltese Falcon* Literature and Genre Fiction: A Roundtable Discussion

1. Literature: “imaginative or creative writing, especially of recognized artistic value.”
(*American Heritage Dictionary*)

2. Genre (kind or type):

Franco Moretti: A literary “genre” is a form that becomes capable of being reproduced “with abundance, regularity, and without too many variations.” (*Signs Taken for Wonders* 263)

Hans Robert Jauss: a literary work’s aesthetic value and degree of historical influence depends on its distance from the “horizon of expectations” of its age. In general, the greater the distance, the greater the work’s influence and value. (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*)

3. Canon (from Greek *kanon*, a reed or rod used for the purpose of measurement: “rule”)
The Harper Handbook to Literature: “Canon. (1) The books of the Bible that are officially recognized. (2) An author’s works similarly accepted.”

Jonathan Brody Kramnick: “a pantheon of high cultural works from the past.” (*The Making of the English Canon* 1)

John Guillory: “a principle of selection by which some authors or texts were deemed worthier of preservation than others. . . . We must understand that the history of literature is not only a question of *what* we read but of *who* reads and *who* writes, and in what social circumstances; it is also a question of what kinds (or genres) of texts are written, and for what audiences. . . . The problem of canon-formation is one aspect of a much larger history of the ways in which societies have organized and regulated practices of reading and writing.” (*Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 233; 238-39)

4. Detective Fiction:

Tzvetan Todorov (literary theorist) defines the detective genre by its structural doubleness. There are always two stories: the story of the crime and the story of its detection.

Robert Scholes (literary critic): “Fictions of detection come so close to the heart of narrative itself. The double nature of these stories--the crime and the detection--doubles our narrative pleasure, and the notion of getting to the truth plays to our deeply rooted wish to know things. So the structure of the genre is powerful, and, when it is done well . . . it gives the reader a lot of pleasure.” (Narrative ListServ)

In an essay called “Why I like Detective Stories” (1937), experimental modernist writer Gertrude Stein calls detective fiction “the only really modern novel form”: the detective genre, she argues, has become the new form for telling stories in the twentieth century. (She actually wrote a detective story, called *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*.)

Dennis Lehane (contemporary crime writer): “I honestly believe—that the crime novel is where the social novel went. If you want to write about the underbelly of America, if you want to write about the second America that nobody wants to look at, you turn to the crime novel.” (Interview, dennislehan.com)

Possible Jumping-Off Points for Discussion

1. How many people regularly read detective fiction, crime novels or mysteries? Does anyone actively avoid this genre? What do you enjoy, or not enjoy?

--Is it important or useful to break down the genre into smaller categories (mystery, police procedural, thriller, etc.)?

--Are there significant differences between reading mysteries and reading other kinds of fiction?

--Are there significant differences between reading mysteries and viewing them on film or television?

2. How do you think about the differences or relationships between something called “literature” and something called “genre fiction,” or “detective fiction” in particular?

--Do we evaluate this kind of reading by the same standards that we use for other kinds of narratives? Or does each genre perhaps have its own standards of evaluation? Or does everything depend on the individual book/writer?

--Do the reader’s expectations play a role? What factors help establish a reader’s expectations?

--Is it valid to make a distinction between “literary” and “popular” detective fiction? What should—or does in fact—serve as the basis for such a distinction?

3. How might we think about the relationship between detective fiction and “realism,” or other kinds of realism in fiction (past and present)?

4. Poe referred to the Dupin stories as tales of “ratiocination,” and many readers liken the pleasure of reading detective fiction to the pleasures of puzzle-solving. Would you agree? As a reader, do you try to “out-guess” the detective before the end? Do you ever succeed? What factors prevent the reader from arriving at the correct solution?

5. The rise of detective fiction coincided with the rise of science in the 19th century. What might we identify as similarities between detection and scientific procedures, values, assumptions, or goals? Are there differences as well?

6. Why is our culture so fascinated by crime fiction?

Shel Veenstra (literary critic): “I have interpreted [Gertrude Stein’s] claim in relation to the advent of the information age: in a world in which everything can be known, and known almost instantaneously, we already know *what* happened. The only story left to tell, the only one that continues to engage readers, is the more psychologically motivated tale of *why* it happened, the quest for motives.” (Narrative ListServ)

--Would you agree or disagree with this hypothesis? Can you think of other factors that might be in play?