

Crime and Comedy: The Lighter Side of Murder and Misdemeanor

Crime and comedy would seem to be polar opposites. Most crimes create victims, while comedy makes its audience laugh. But comic elements have been cropping up in crime fiction since Edgar Allan Poe wrote the first detective story. In that story, Poe's detective, C. Auguste Dupin, determines that the grisly murders, including one in a locked room, of two women in the Rue Morgue were committed by a sailor's pet orangutan. Although literary analyses, emphasizing the human-likeness of the orangutan, suggest a sinister meaning of the tale, its solution is undeniably comic. In the third Dupin story, "The Purloined Letter," the object in question has already been found by the detective when the bumbling prefect of police, who knows his procedure but is limited in imagination, comes to him for help. The narrator, Dupin's housemate, says the prefect "had a fashion of calling everything 'odd' that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of oddities." Literal minded, inept, and sometimes corrupt policemen have become stock figures in comic crime fiction, and again, the solution to the crime--that the letter was "hidden" in plain sight where one might expect to find a letter--is comic.

Comic elements have traditionally been associated with certain subgenres of crime fiction--the cozy, the country house or village mystery-books that often feature unlikely detectives, such as Miss Marple, red herrings (false clues), and impossible crime scenes (locked room murders). But hard-boiled detective fiction also has a comic tradition. Dashiell Hammett's last novel, The Thin Man (1934), "presented the mystery as a novel of manners, and set the pattern for husband/wife detective teams" (Encyclopedia Mysteriosa). The novel derives much of its comedy from Nora Charles's naivete:

"What's a junkie?" she asked.

"Hop-head."

She looked at me. "Was Morelli-?"

"Primed to the ears," I said.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she complained. "I miss everything."

Hammett's original novel was his most successful, but in the final analysis is less humorous than the series of movies, radio programs, and television series based on the characters of Nick and Nora Charles. (Hammett was involved with only the first three movies, and the famous Asta of the novel was actually a Schnauzer, not the Wire-haired Fox Terrier of film fame.) Raymond Chandler's novels use language for comic effect to develop his hardboiled narrator-detective hero, Philip Marlowe. "She looked almost as hard to get as a haircut," says Marlowe of a character in *The Little Sister*. When asked

by a Mexican gangster how he hurt his arm, Marlowe responds, "I tripped over an enchilada" (The Long Goodbye).

However, none of these authors--Poe, Christie, Hammett, or Chandler--nor their imitators and contemporaries can be defined as writers of comic crime fiction. For the most part, any comic effects in their books are only side effects. Today, however, writers of comic crime fiction abound, transcending existing genres and creating new ones. Classes on how to write comic crime fiction are offered at universities and on the internet, and former romance novelists and country western musicians have succeeded in this relatively new genre.

In some comic crime novels, the heroes are the criminals and crime does pay, as in Evelyn E. Smith's series featuring high-society hitwoman Miss Melville or Lawrence Sanders's burglar series. Sometimes the comedy derives from poking fun at the crime genre itself or at well-known writers of detective novels, as in P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster and Jeeves stories, Sanders's *The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams*, and Parnell Hall's *Cozy*. It may all be Dashiell Hammett's and Asta's fault, but many contemporary cozy novels depict heroes with cats or dogs as sidekicks (M.C. Beaton's Hamish Macbeth and Agatha Raisin, Lillian Jackson Braun's Qwilleran, and Kinky Friedman, among others), and often the cats or dogs are instrumental in solving the crime. In this series, both Sanders and Hall pay comic tribute to this trend, and the events in Wodehouse's novel are led, to some extent, by a Scottie named Bartholomew.

In this series, only Parnell Hall's Stanley Hastings is actually a private detective. All of the other protagonists become investigators because of circumstances. In *The Code of the Woosters*, Bertie Wooster's Aunt Agatha fears she will lose her French chef and his friend Gussie Fink-Nottle fears he will lose his fiancée, and both call upon Bertie to solve their problems, although it is Bertie's valet Jeeves who facilitates the solution. In *The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams*, Bernie Rhodenbarr is in danger of losing his bookstore and is accused of a crime he didn't commit. In *Native Tongue*, Jo Winder loses his job and his girlfriend while trying to find out what's really going on at the Amazing Kingdom of Thrills. In *One for the Money*, Stephanie Plum, who has lost her job as a lingerie buyer, decides in desperation to work for her cousin Vinnie as a "fugitive apprehension agent." And even Stanley Hastings in *Cozy* is not employed as a detective. As his wife Alice asks, "What is this, a busman's holiday? You're a detective and you're on vacation, so you're going to make up a mystery wherever you go?"

The Code of the Woosters

by P.G. Wodehouse

Although P.G. Wodehouse was not strictly a writer of crime fiction, he was a master of comic fiction and a major influence on other writers of comic fiction who followed him. Wodehouse does, however, pepper his works with the practical jokes and petty crimes of the upper classes who often find themselves at odds with simple country police officers, particularly in those stories featuring Bertie Wooster and his "gentleman's personal gentleman," Jeeves. Stealing policemen's helmets and a silver creamer shaped like a cow is among the criminal acts in *The Code of the Woosters*, as well as blackmail and breaking and entering. Bertie, on the hunt for a notebook stolen from Gussie Fink-Nottle by Stephanie Byng, takes advice from the detective novel he is reading and prepares to search her room. Aunt Agatha, in possession of the stolen object, is also a reader of mysteries:

"...We've got to hide the thing somewhere. But where? It's the old problem, of course--the one that makes life so tough for murderers--what to do with the body. I suppose the old Purloined Letter stunt wouldn't work?"

"Mrs. Travers is alluding to the well-known story by the late Edgar Allan Poe, sir," said Jeeves, seeing that I was not abreast. "It deals with the theft of an important document, and the character who secured it foiled the police by placing it in full view in a letter-rack, his theory being that what is obvious is often overlooked."

Jeeves is both better read and better able to read "the psychology of the individual" than his employer, and he is able to solve everyone's problems with a little underhandedness of his own.

The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams

by Lawrence Block

A very prolific author, the majority of whose works are hard-boiled in the extreme, Lawrence Block has also written a series of comic mysteries featuring Bernie Rhodenbarr, a Greenwich Village bookseller who makes most of his money burglarizing people he believes can afford to lose a little. Bernie's best friend, with whom he regularly shares lunch and occasionally a crime, is Carolyn, a lesbian pet-groomer. In this book, Bernie discovers a locked room murder, and calls all the suspects together, a la Hercule Poirot, to present the solution to several crimes. The novel opens with Bernie selling a copy of Sue Grafton's "*B*" for too little money to his new landlord. Throughout the novel Bernie and Carolyn invent new titles for Grafton novels,

and Carolyn speculates about the true character of Kinsey Millhone, even though Bernie points out, "Carolyn, she's a character. In a book."

Native Tongue
by Carl Hiaasen

Carl Hiaasen's first career was as an investigative reporter for the *Miami Herald*, and his discoveries of corruption among politicians, corporations, developers, and others and his personal passion for the ever-dwindling undeveloped wilderness of Florida come together in his novels. He doesn't write simply to make his readers laugh, but also to make them think about the effects of greed on the environment. *Native Tongue* centers around the theft of a pair of rare blue-tongued mango voles from the Amazing Kingdom of Thrills and the plans of the Amazing Kingdom's owner, Francis X. Kingsbury, to further develop and destroy the environment by building the Falcon Trace Golf and Country Club Resort Community. Former investigative reporter Joe Winder, who has sunk to writing press releases for the Amazing Kingdom, discovers that neither the voles nor Kingsbury are what they appear to be. With some unlikely allies--a former governor of Florida who now goes by the name of Skink and subsists on roadkill (a recurrent character in some of Hiaasen's other novels) and the elderly Molly McNamara who heads a radical environmental group consisting of senior citizens--Winder attempts to thwart Kingsbury's plans.

One for the Money
by Janet Evanovich

Janet Evanovich began her writing career as a romance novelist. She wrote her first comic crime novel featuring big-haired Jersey girl, and bounty hunter, Stephanie Plum in 1994, and readers have been making her novels best sellers ever since. *One for the Money* is the first in the series. At the outset of the novel, Stephanie has been unemployed for six months but has yet to tell her parents. Even though she's thirty-years-old, her mother and other people's mothers feel free to criticize her, but now she's about to lose her car, has hocked most of her small appliances and furniture, and hopes that her parents can help her. It's her father who suggests that she apply for a filing job with her cousin Vinnie, a bail bondsman, but that job has been filled. Instead, Stephanie decides to try her hand at apprehending Vinnie's clients who have skipped bail. With a crash course in fugitive apprehension from another bounty hunter, Ranger, and a new large purse filled with a gun (with which her grandma Mazur shoots a roast chicken on her mother's dining room table), handcuffs, and other bounty hunter paraphernalia, Stephanie embarks on her new career. She has some second thoughts--she can't even "watch reruns of *Cagney and Lacey*" for pointers, since she hocked her television--but she perseveres.

Cozy

By Parnell Hall

Parnell Hall's detective, Stanley Hastings, generally works for a personal-injury lawyer, signing up clients, taking their statements, and taking photographs of the sidewalks or stairs where they were injured, and occasionally stumbling over a dead body himself. In *Cozy*, Stanley and his wife, Alice, have dropped off their son, Tommy, at summer camp and are spending their own vacation at an inn (or a bed and breakfast) in New Hampshire. In Stanley's imagination, a cast of characters, randomly encountered before arriving at their destination, comes together at the inn. He has brought along an Agatha Christie novel, one that he realizes he's already read, the inn's cat decides to spend his nights with Stanley and Alice, and one of the guests has a dog that is also fond of Stanley. When an attractive young woman falls dead at dinner, Stanley fears that the plodding chief of police believes either he or Alice is the murderer, so he sets out to solve the crime himself. And true to a frequent contemporary cozy tradition, *Cozy* also features recipes for some of the dishes served at the inn.

For further reading, visit your public library or local bookstore.

For a sampling of comic crime stories from Mark Twain to Donald E. Westlake, check out *The Mammoth Book of Comic Crime* edited by Maxim Jakubowski (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2002).

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