

FORGETTABLE MYSTERIES: AN EXPLORATORY INQUIRY

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A version of this essay was published electronically on the blog **Murder by 4** (January 11, 2012)

Many times, while browsing the mystery section in used bookstores or the public library, I come across a book (even by a familiar author) whose title strikes no note of recognition, and I find myself wondering whether I've already read it. I study the front cover, and the blurbs on the back cover, and perhaps scan the first paragraph or two, but still can't tell whether I've encountered it before. So, hoping for the best, I take it home and settle in for a pleasurable read—but (somewhere in the first or second chapter) discover, to my dismay, that I *have* read the story previously (and know for sure that I don't wish to read it again). Perhaps you've had this experience too. It's happened to me enough times that I've often been led to ask, Why did this book and its title prove to be so forgettable? (And, on the heels of that: Conversely, why are some other mysteries so hauntingly memorable—even after only one reading?)

I'm tired of asking these questions. It's time to explore some possible answers to both of them. Following the advice of the King of Hearts in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, I'll start at the beginning, and hope that when I get to the "end", I'll be able to stop.

Since Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* appeared in 1841, the mystery story has evolved through many permutations into a rich and diverse genre with many subcategories. While specific works may variously foreground such elements as forensic science, police procedure, amateur sleuthing, courtroom drama, psychological profiling, cryptanalysis, ethical dilemmas, deadly pursuit, erotic romance, and specialized information on such topics as medicine, coal-mining, the theatre, gambling, Egyptian archaeology, computers, horse breeding, glass blowing, vampires, cats, quilts, and food, the fundamental purpose of mysteries is to provide *entertainment*. Whatever else readers of mysteries may learn about the human condition or cooking soufflés, they read them basically to be entertained.

By its nature entertainment is evanescent, experienced in the present moment, confined to the "here and now". Once the moment has passed, the entertainment is over, and the quality of the experience can at best reside in one's memory. With some entertainments, the quality of the experience can be vividly recollected. With others, the memory of the experience fades into oblivion.

Ephemeral entertainments aren't to be disparaged: popular culture has always valued them. Though they offer transitory experiences, the persistence in society of melodramas, penny dreadfuls, gossip tabloids, vaudeville and circus acts, sentimental romances, celebratory song and dance, whimsical cartoons, stand-up comedy, board games, strip clubs, radio and TV variety shows, formula Westerns, "weird tales", sitcoms and soap-operas attests their value in satisfying people's needs for adventure, humor, escape,

diversion, titillation, competition, spectacle, etc. And so with mystery stories: if they provide entertainment while being read, that's principally what's asked and expected of them; while they're doing their job and being enjoyed, whether or not they'll be remembered isn't the point.

And typically, fans don't read mysteries with an eye to remembering them. They read to relish the moment: enjoying the chase, matching wits with the detective(s), watching the interplay of interesting characters, participating in crime-solving investigations and the apprehension of the perpetrator(s).

Professional mystery writers, on the other hand, are concerned with making creditable contributions to the genre and building a loyal base of readers that will net them sales. As contributors to popular culture, *their* primary goal is to provide remunerative, enjoyable entertainment. They may be quite content to garner sales by producing ephemeral (and forgettable) works. But there is a bonus for them in writing memorable books: the more memorable their stories are, the greater is their remuneration in the long term, for readers who recall a good experience will return to enjoy their other books, and will spread the word to friends.

For readers, whether a book is remembered or forgotten is largely a matter of individual taste. That will vary from person to person, and book to book. Those who don't like police procedurals may not be able to recall those they've read; those who *do* like and remember specific procedurals may have negative reactions to (and forget) the cozy whodunits they've read, the psychological thrillers, or mysteries set in remote historical periods. Readers who don't like Nero Wolfe or Miss Marple may not recall the stories featuring them that they've read, but *may* remember the books they've liked featuring Sharon McCone or Lord Peter Wimsey.

While personal taste and specific preferences may determine which books we remember and which we forget, there may be other determiners as well. For example, while reading a particular book, we might be so distracted by external life circumstances that we're unable to focus sufficient attention on the story to experience it fully. Both of these—readers' individual tastes and their degrees of distraction—are beyond the author's control; and if either or both cause a book not to be remembered, there is no way the author could have prevented it.

But there are a number of things over which authors *do* have control that may determine whether a particular story is remembered or forgotten.

Since people read mysteries to be pleasurably entertained, it's likely that a story with little entertainment-value will not easily be remembered. Therefore, if authors *want* their books to be remembered, they must take pains to keep readers continuously entertained with engaging characterizations, the development of an unusual premise, interesting settings, engrossing action (including chases and physical conflict), suspense, misdirections, moody atmosphere, witty dialogue, and puzzles to solve. But authors should be aware that even if mysteries *do* provide pleasurable entertainment they still may be forgettable.

In my opinion, the following (which decrease the entertainment-quotient) will go far toward assuring that a story will be forgotten:

1) Flaccid, poorly drawn characters who are feebly developed and realized. Characters that are flat, static, stereotyped, excessively shallow, irksome, boring, or dull tend to be forgettable.

(Authors can increase a book's entertainment-quotient (and memorability) by creating contoured, three-dimensional characters who dynamically undergo change; who are individualized, complex, "imperfect", capable of surprising themselves and the reader, and of evoking the reader's curiosity, concern, and sympathy.)

2) Uninteresting dialogue that doesn't advance the story or reveal character.

(Talk that doesn't lead anywhere, that's tedious, repetitious, banal, predictable, and full of cliché provides nothing to linger in memory.)

3) Disruptive pacing that frustrates or bores the reader, and works at cross purposes to the development of plot or storyline.

(Pacing orchestrates the reader's emotional responses by regulating the relative speed at which events unfold, crises arise and are resolved, information is presented, and secrets revealed; it adjusts dynamics by balancing mounting tension with breathing space and calming respite; it determines the duration of scenes, highlights certain elements for emphasis, and maintains forward motion. Failure in any of these functions can weaken the narrative, causing it to become less effective, and therefore less memorable.)

4) Not playing fair with the reader.

(Readers of mysteries expect authors to challenge them, and they willingly give themselves over to the entertainment promised; but they in turn expect authors to play fair with them, providing them with all the clues they need to solve the crime, not disturbing them with inconsistencies, contradictions, and unresolved questions (very irritating), and not pulling rabbits out of hats by springing information on them that hasn't been prepared for previously. When authors don't play fair, readers feel cheated. Even angry—which is not conducive to their remembering the book as a pleasant entertainment. Even if they forget the book itself, they will remember the author as one who cheats, and avoid other books from that pen.)

5) Boring, predictable incidents which readers have encountered a hundred times before;

6) Inaccurate facts and information recognized as such;

7) Irritating, careless word-choice;

8) Sloppy writing in general.

(All of these tend to make a story forgettable.)

Both in life and in fiction, crimes—particularly heists, kidnappings, and murders—often exhibit repetitious similarities from case to case, familiar and predictable patterns in their motivations and execution. These similarities tend to make fictional crimes blend together in the reader’s memory, where, in time, they become indistinguishable and no longer uniquely identified with the books in which they occurred. When this happens, the memory of having read specific books frequently dissipates altogether.

This tendency can be contravened—as, for example, by an author’s making the circumstances surrounding a particular murder (including the killer’s motives and the mechanics of its execution) so unusual, shocking, or bizarre (and the methods of solving it so ingenious) that the murder stands out from others which readers have encountered elsewhere. While a clever author may succeed in presenting a murder “memorably”, the basic *reasons* why murderers kill are few and quickly stated. Most murders are premeditated and volitional (though some killings can occur without planning “in the heat of the moment”). I discern four basic types, which I’ll respectively designate ‘wanton’, ‘aggressive’, ‘defensive’, and ‘punitive’; each type has certain motivations associated with it.

WANTON MURDER (which excludes warfare, and accidental or inadvertent homicide) is caused by various psychopathologies :

- (a) *sadistic cruelty*;
- (b) *envy and jealousy*;
- (c) *delusional fixations* that produce serial killings, random massacres, or the slaughter of family members;
- (d) *terrorism, and other fanaticisms*, where assassination of specific individuals (or perhaps the killing of multiple victims) serves specific ideological or political ends;
- (e) *hate* that focuses on particular groups;
- and
- (f) *lack of empathy*, that enables professional assassins to carry out contract killings for hire.

In AGGRESSIVE MURDER, perpetrators kill
to gain something they desire (money, power, advantage, position, status, sexual access, etc.) and/or
to remove obstacles that prevent them from achieving their desired ends (such as rivals or obstructionist and inconvenient “gatekeepers”).

In DEFENSIVE MURDER, perpetrators kill
out of fear (of discovery, of being exposed, of being bested or humiliated; of losing possession or control of something desired (money, power, status, position, reputation, love, turf, life itself). This category would include pre-emptive strikes when threatened, and killings to conceal the commission of crimes.

In PUNITIVE MURDER, perpetrators kill

to achieve revenge, retaliation, retribution. This category would include state executions [judicial murder], feuds, duels, “honor killings”, and perhaps arranging contracts of murders for hire.

Since avid readers of murder mysteries have been over this familiar ground repeatedly, it's not surprising that they will forget some of the books they've tramped through. Many of the books weren't written specifically to *be* remembered, but were conceived as ephemeral entertainments; others, which might have had aspirations to be memorable, were too mediocre and unimaginatively pedestrian to provide anything for the mind to feed upon. To understand why some books *are* memorable, we're led back to those indispensable features already discussed: pleasurable writing; the working out of an unusual and intriguing premise; sound plotting; effective pacing; original, engaging characters; accuracy of specialized information; interesting and stimulating dialogue. I suspect it's much harder to write a memorable book than one that's forgettable.

To conclude this inquiry, I should mention the role that titles play in forestalling or assuring a book's forgettability.

A distinctive and memorable title may help readers to remember that they've read a particular book—even though it may not help them to recall specifically the substance of the story. (Examples: Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*; Dashiell Hammett's *The Dain Curse*; Ross Macdonald's *The Far Side of the Dollar* and *The Way Some People Die*.) Besides its being a convenient and more or less unique call-name for a book that's favorably impressed a particular reader, the title can also serve as a branding signifier that comes to be a memorable icon in itself: *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*; *The Maltese Falcon*; *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. I say *can*, because not all titles are able to achieve this status—in and of themselves, or for particular readers.

P. D. James's title *Shroud for a Nightingale* helps me to remember that I've read the book it names, and something of the story as well; but her title *Devices and Desires* draws a blank on both counts. Tony Hillerman's titles (e.g., *Listening Woman*, *Skinwalkers*, *A Thief of Time*, etc.) are sufficiently distinctive that I not only remember *them*, but know *from* them whether I've read the books. However, even when I know I've read the books, his stand-alone titles don't help me recall the *substance* of their stories; to recover that, I would have to sample the text.

Authors of a lengthy series sometimes establish similarities linking the individual titles to signify the books' membership in the series and/or their sequential position within the run; but this device may offer scant help to readers trying to recall whether they've read a particular book in the series. Sue Grafton's titles in her alphabet series (*'A' is for Alibi*, *'C' is for Corpse*, *'D' is for Deadbeat*, *'E' is for Evidence*, etc.) are too generic to provide much memory-jogging information about the respective stories they name; I've read many of the books in the series, but when I'm in the bookstore or the library, I cannot remember whether I've read *'K'* or *'F'* or *'T'*. (Although I very much enjoy her books while reading

them, I nonetheless find them quickly forgettable *as individual stories*; and the alphabet titles provide little help in recalling them.)

The same is true of Bill Pronzini's Nameless detective series. I enjoy the books, but they leave me with little more than a general impression of an entertaining read, an engaging protagonist, and competent writing. Pronzini's single-word titles (*Undercurrent, Hoodwink, Deadfall, Breakdown, Hardcase*) are almost no help in letting me know whether I've previously read a specific book (and none at all in recalling the story). John D. MacDonald, in his twenty-one Travis McGee novels, includes a color in each of his rather poetic titles (e.g., *Pale Gray for Guilt, A Tan and Sandy Silence, Free Fall in Crimson, The Lonely Silver Rain*), and though I've read all of the books in the series, from the titles alone I find it difficult to remember almost anything about the individual stories themselves. Erle Stanley Gardner's eighty-two Perry Mason mysteries all have the same formulaic title, "The Case of the _____" (the blank to be filled with such potentially helpful phrases as "Terrified Typist," "Lucky Loser," "Duplicate Daughter," "Restless Redhead," "Troubled Trustee," "Worried Waitress," "Glamorous Ghost," and "Grinning Gorilla"). But even with alliterative and clever call-names to jog the memory, eighty-two of them are a lot for readers browsing the shelves to recognize and recall.

Rex Stout's eighty-seven Nero Wolfe mysteries have individualized, non-linked titles much like those of stand-alone novels, and—not surprisingly—share the same general strengths and limitations of stand-alone titles for recalling the books themselves and their stories. Of course, some titles (whether linked or stand-alone) *do* provide cues that help one to remember both the book *and* its story's substance. Agatha Christie has a few titles that, for me, seem to be helpful in both of these regards: *And Then There Were None, Murder on the Orient Express, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and *A Pocket Full of Rye*. Also, for me, Eric Ambler's *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, Laura Lippman's *Baltimore Blues* and *Charm City*, and Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* seem to fulfill this double function.

Please note that I've specified these titles as helpful "for me"—a necessary qualification, since, inevitably, every reader will have a personal set of responses. It can't be otherwise; each of us has our own reading history, our own inventory of tastes and preferences, likes and dislikes, our own unique experiences with the works we've encountered. In view of this, my attempt, in the present inquiry, to reach a generalized understanding of *why* it is that we find some titles and stories so forgettable, and some so memorable, seems, on its face, to be palpably absurd—especially since we haven't even read the same books! Where is the common ground, the shared experience that would validate my generalizations?

Well, the common ground is our shared experience of standing in bookstores and libraries trying to determine if the book we've just pulled off the shelf is one that we've previously read. In this inquiry I've tried to suggest some reasons why we might have trouble remembering. Some causes are personal to us as readers. Some reside in the works themselves. As a type of genre fiction, mysteries (and all their various subcategories) are subject to certain conventions and narrative protocols that impose broad similarities upon them. It takes an exceptional work to exceed the constraints of the genre; and if we are able to read *those* works under ideal conditions, and with proper attention, they will have a

good chance of being remembered. But the great majority of mysteries in a fan's reading history will *not* surpass the genre's conventions; many will have been designed by their authors as ephemeral entertainments to serve the moment, and many others will be dull, boring, unimaginative, or poorly written. In other words, for most of us who read a large number of mysteries, the majority of those that we read won't easily be retained in memory. Consequently, we probably should resign ourselves to the sad necessity of resigning ourselves to frequently having to wonder, "Now, have I read *this* one before . . . ?"—and simply taking our chances.

I can hear the King of Hearts saying, "All right, you've come to the end. Now stop." And stop I shall.

THE END

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