



Talking About Detective Fiction

By P. D. James

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P. D. James, the undisputed queen of mystery, gives us an intriguing, inspiring and idiosyncratic look at the genre she has spent her life perfecting.

Examining mystery from top to bottom, beginning with such classics as Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, and then looking at such contemporary masters as Colin Dexter and Henning Mankell, P. D. James goes right to the heart of the genre. Along the way she traces the lives and writing styles of Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, and many more. Here is P.D. James discussing detective fiction as social history, explaining its stylistic components, revealing her own writing process, and commenting on the recent resurgence of detective fiction in modern culture. It is a must have for the mystery connoisseur and casual fan alike.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A Q&A with P.D. James

Question: What made you decide to write a book about detective fiction?



P.D. James: I wrote my book, *Talking About Detective Fiction*, because the Bodleian Library, one of the great libraries of the world, asked me to write about detective fiction in aid of the Library. I said I would do so when I had finished writing *The Private Patient*. Detective fiction has fascinated me both as a reader and a novelist for over 50 years, and I enjoyed revisiting the books of the Golden Age which have given me such pleasure, and describing how I myself set out on the task of writing a detective story which can be both an exciting mystery and a good novel.

Question: How do you explain our seemingly unending appetite for mysteries? What is it about the mystery that so engages our minds and imagination?

P.D. James: The human race has had an appetite for mysteries from the earliest writings and no doubt tales of mystery and murder were recounted by our remote ancestors round the camp fires by the tribal storyteller. Murder is the unique crime, the only one for which we can make no reparation, and has always been greeted with a mixture of repugnance, horror, fear, and fascination. We are particularly intrigued by the motives which cause a man or woman to step across the invisible line which separates a murderer from the rest of humanity. Human beings also love a puzzle and a strong story, and mysteries have both.

Question: Do you think there is (or was) a Golden Age of detective fiction?

P.D. James: The years between the two world wars are generally regarded as the Golden Age of detective fiction and certainly, in England in particular, there was a surge of excellent writing. The detective story became immensely popular and a number of very talented writers were engaged in the craft. I feel that there are so many good novelists writing mysteries today that we may well be entering a second Golden Age.

Question: Do you feel that your own Adam Dalgliesh owes anything to any particular literary detectives who came before him?

P.D. James: I don't feel that Adam Dalgliesh owes anything to a particular literary detective as the heroes of the mystery novels which I particularly enjoyed in the Golden Age were usually amateurs, and I was anxious to create a professional detective.

Question: If you were to recommend 3 or 4 books that represent the best of detective fiction in all its forms,

which books would they be?

P.D. James: It is difficult to know what books to recommend as personal taste plays such a large part and modern readers may feel out of touch with the Golden Age mysteries which I so much enjoyed. Among them are *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, *Tiger in the Smoke* by Margery Allingham, *Murder Must Advertise* by Dorothy L. Sayers, and *Tragedy at Law* by Cyril Hare. It would take a much longer list to represent the mystery in all its forms, and it would certainly include the American hard-boiled school.

(Photo © Ulla Montan)

From Publishers Weekly

One of the most widely read and respected writers of detective fiction, James (*The Private Patient*) explores the genre's origins (focusing primarily on Britain) and its lasting appeal. James cites Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, published in 1868, as the first detective novel and its hero, Sergeant Cuff, as one of the first literary examples of the professional detective (modeled after a real-life Scotland Yard inspector). As for Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, James argues that their staying power has as much to do with the gloomy London atmosphere, the enveloping miasma of mystery and terror, as with the iconic sleuth. Devoting much of her time to writers in the Golden Age of British detective fiction (essentially between the two world wars), James dissects the work of four heavyweights: Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh. Though she's more appreciative of Marsh and Allingham (declaring them novelists, not merely fabricators of ingenious puzzles), James acknowledges not only the undeniable boost these women gave to the genre but their continuing appeal. For crime fiction fans, this master class from one of the leading practitioners of the art will be a real treat. 9 illus. (Dec.)

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From [Booklist](#)

In 2006, the Bodleian Library at Oxford University asked celebrated novelist P. D. James to write about British detective fiction. Had they requested this of James 20 or even 30 years ago, the result would have been much the same. James pontificates on detective fiction, primarily British but with an occasional nod to American writers, as if she has just emerged from the 1950s or 1960s. Except for a reference to Sara Paretsky, which sticks out like a body in the library, this overview is decidedly old school. What makes her fairly conventional history worthwhile, however, is the personality of James herself. She talks about her own methods for coming up with ideas and for plotting. She talks about how Agatha Christie broke some of the most cherished rules of crime fiction. And the book is filled with quirky asides—for example, James holds that the formation of a British police force in 1842 made detective fiction possible. It's like sitting across from James over tea, and that, naturally, is a delight. --Connie Fletcher

Users Review

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