

THE PERMEABLE MEMBRANE
An Idiosyncratic Approach to the Elusive Border between Genre and
Literature, As Practiced by Writers of Mystery and Detective Fiction

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Why an “idiosyncratic” approach to that line between genre and literature?
Because I like mystery stories and I care a great deal about *how* a novel is written.
Above all, because I am a rationalist: finding *why* and *how* is important.

The Rainier Writing Workshop taught me to be a close reader. I thought I was a close reader before I enrolled. If I could discern consistent patterns in a novel, I was a happy reader. I started two reading clubs before reading clubs became a cultural phenomenon just so I could talk about these patterns. But my assumption was that patterns arose from the authors’ subconscious, not from their skill and craft. That’s just one way that RWW changed my life, hence my writing.

Once I was accepted by RWW, I planned to do my critical thesis on the work of Laurie King, a self-designated crime writer with the chutzpah to create a female Sherlock Holmes 30 years his junior, have them meet, fall in love, get married and have adventures.

So my third mailing, November 2006, was chocolate. My mentor, Kent Meyers, agreed I should read three Laurie King novels and write my critical papers on those books.

Laurie King came to Spokane for the annual Spokane Is Reading program a month before that mailing was due. She is attractive, spoke well and is, at a modest level, a celebrity. Her first novel and the one chosen for the city-wide event was *The Beekeeper’s Apprentice*, the first Sherlock Holmes-Mary Russell book, written in 1987,

but not published until 1995 after she had established herself as a crime fiction writer. Between 1993 and 2006, she published seventeen novels, six short story collections and contributed to three nonfiction volumes. She has a Masters in Divinity from Berkeley and wrote her thesis on the feminine aspects of Yahweh. She is a brilliant woman who reports of herself, writing “on average, 5,000-10,000 words a day and, when I’m really into it, 30,000-40,000 words a day.”¹

Then I read her with that damnable close-reading technique.

It was like catching one’s first love kissing one’s best friend. I was outraged. She came so close, so many times to the Real Deal, but either overwrote or played tricky or worse, played shell games. Kent suggested, perhaps with a note of wryness, that I might make that borderline between genre and literature the subject of my critical paper.

How Did This Whole Genre/Literary Debate Arise?

Entertainment, back in the Victorian era, was made up of concert- and opera-going for the upper classes and royalty, music halls for men with an extra shilling in their pockets, and church—for most of society. As literacy became the norm instead of the exception, the demand for books grew. Always the Bible, of course, expensive books for those upper classes, then novel serializations in newspapers and magazines like *The Strand*. The idea of mobs waiting in line for the next installment of *Pickwick Papers* or Sherlock Holmes might have seemed an archaic activity to us until J.K. Rowling and Harry Potter created an insatiable phenomenon with line-producing events at midnight of publication day. Compelling story is worth waiting for—even if you have to wait on the sidewalk.

Categories became natural segmentations: religious books and Bibles for the church-goers, a burgeoning of sweet, morally instructive tales for young ladies; tomes and good books—Thackeray, Trollope and Wilkie Collins for the middle classes, and Dickens' latest novels for those standing in line. Ultimately, that same popular demand produced “penny dreadfuls” and “pulp” novels to which the lowest common denominator applied.

Thus...genres.

Since this is a wholly personal essay, I formulate my own definition instead of using Webster or the OED. The borderline between genre and literature is crossed when one element—plot, most frequently in mystery and detective novels—overwhelms the other elements—character, point of view, setting, dialogue and/or beautiful narrative.

Back in the day, I collected the adventure-romance novels of Mary Stewart and Georgette Heyer, as well as Ballantine Books and editor Lin Carter's classic fantasy and science fiction novels. Exotic settings and plot bound the narratives. Character development, as we understand it now, was nearly irrelevant. However, I was also reading Tolstoy, Marlowe, Pirsig, all of Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams and Dorothy L. Sayers, and I knew the difference.

Fortunately, my tastes grew up. Just as I will never, ever drink Manischewitz again (also happily imbibed during that period), adventure-romance, most fantasy and science fiction are fond memories. I learned to filter.

Early Classics: The Lines Were Laid

For this thesis, I read new, international writers: Batya Gur, Sjöwell and Wahlöö, Jess Walter, and reread some of the greats: Wilkie Collins, Dorothy L. Sayers, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the oldest and lesser-known, Sheridan LeFanu.

Gothic tales were popular when Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* in 1818, which became the Mother of the Horror Story. Sheridan LeFanu (1814-1873) took elements of the gothic and mixed them with more than a dash of horror, fusing them into a rationalized tale, thus placing his brilliant, *Uncle Silas* (1865), squarely in the evolution of the detective story, though there is no detective.² LeFanu's tale of Bartram-Haugh, a thoroughly gothic, isolated country house burgeons with all the accoutrements: long shadowy halls, a wealthy, crazed old man and a governess from hell. His protagonist, Maud, narrates the story. She is the work of a craftsman with the courage to create a bold female with a keen sense of humor. Despite requisite references to her female "nervousness," Maud's powers of observation ride well above her emotions—a clear forerunner of the detective who sees and reasons regardless of threat. Milly, Maud's local cousin, is nearly Shakespearean in appearance and provides comic relief. Maud describes her:

She had an odd swaggering walk, a toss of her head, and a saucy and imperious, but rather good-natured and honest countenance [...]white cotton stockings, and a pair of black leather boots, with leather buttons, and for a lady, prodigiously thick soles, which

reminded me of the navy boots I had so often admired in *Punch*

[...]

“Hallo, cousin,” she [Milly] cried, giving my dress a smack with her open hand. “What a plague do you want of all that bustle; you’ll leave it behind, lass, the first bush you jump over.”

(LeFanu 188-189)

Not only is Milly as capable of leaping over bushes, but we see, through Maud’s eyes that her own bustle-wearing fashion didn’t keep her from either admiring Milly’s navy boots or admitting that she reads *Punch*.

The novel achieves balance between character and narration, setting, dialogue and plot. It is intellectually and emotionally satisfying. I place it squarely on the literature shelf.

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Wilkie Collins (1834-1889) wrote *The Moonstone* in 1868. The novel is generally considered the first detective novel in English.³ *The Moonstone* was published nearly at the end of Dickens’ writing career, so may well incorporate something of Dickens’ prodigious ability to create characters that have kept pace with our best efforts to outdate them.

The moonstone in question, isn’t. It is a large yellow diamond, stolen from the forehead of a four-handed Indian god of the moon (hence, moonstone), brought to England, accompanied by a trail of blood and betrayal and three Hindu priests determined to bring it back. Very colorful, very Victorian, and if the story were only plot, it would

be available through the Library of Congress, not Amazon. However, Collins' characters far surpass the thinness of plot.

The story is told through a series of first-person narratives: Betteredge, old Verinder family retainer; Drusilla Clack, cousin of Lady Verinder and ultimate religious spinster; Matthew Bruff, solicitor and narrator of the upper class (though not himself an aristocrat); Franklin Blake, the aristocrat and love interest of Lady Verinder's daughter, Rachel. Blake befriends Jennings, a troubled black doctor and wonderfully sympathetic character, who picks up the narrative with his own chapter, which then reverts to Blake, and finally, back to Betteredge. Weaving his own way through the story is Sergeant Cuff, a retired policeman with a single-minded obsession for perfectly cultivated roses. Very much a Sherlock Holmes, some 30 years earlier.

Betteredge's narration is basically that of the kindly but dim, straight man:

My lady had discovered that I was getting old before I had discovered it myself, and she had come to my cottage to wheedle me, if I may use such an expression, into giving up my hard-out-of-door work as bailiff, and taking my ease for the rest of my days as steward in the house. I made as good a fight of it against the indignity of taking my ease as I could. But my mistress knew the weak side of me; she put it as a favor to herself. The dispute between us ended, after that, in my wiping my eyes, like an old fool, with my new woolen waistcoat, and saying I would think about it. (Collins 14)

The diamond is purchased by Franklin Blake and given as an engagement gift to Rachel. It is stolen that night and, after the clamor diminishes, Miss Clack takes up the narrative.

I am indebted to my dear parents, both now in heaven, for having had habits of order and regularity instilled into me at a very early age.

In that happy by-gone time I was taught to keep my hair tidy at all hours of the day and night, and to fold up every article of my clothing carefully, in the same order, on the same chair, in the same place at the foot of the bed, before retiring to rest. An entry of the day's events in my little diary invariably preceded the folding up. [...]

It [keeping a diary] has enabled poor Me to serve the caprice of a wealthy member of our family. I am fortunate enough to be useful, in the worldly sense of the word, to Mr. Franklin Blake.

(Collins 181)

As tempting as it is to quote each narrator, my intent is to set a framework for these fully-embodied characters. Look at Miss Clack, "poor Me," who folds every article of clothing precisely, writes the day's events (while expressing her debt of gratitude to her parents in heaven) in her "little" diary. Or Betteredge's sentimental, but genuine humility as he ages under the watchful eye of his mistress.

Literature, throughout.

* * * * *

When I first read Sherlock Holmes, I was in the seventh grade, long before PBS and Jeremy Brett brought the series to life for decades of viewers. Thoroughly entranced by this intellectual paragon, I wept copiously, writing in *my* little diary that Sherlock Holmes had DIED. I was so naïve, it never occurred to me that I was only halfway through the book. What might have happened if I'd flipped a few pages over, checking for, "Holmes said"? Probably Early Onset Cynicism.

Even as London lined up to read the latest Sherlock Holmes, I was not alone in my seduction by this old misanthropic curmudgeon. How did Conan Doyle make his hero so compelling? Early in "The Greek Interpreter," part of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894), Watson says:

During my long and intimate acquaintance with Mr. Sherlock Holmes I had never heard him refer to his relations, and hardly ever to his own early life. This reticence upon his part had increased the somewhat inhuman effect which he produced upon me, until sometimes I found myself regarding him as an isolated phenomenon, a brain without a heart, as deficient in human sympathy as he was pre-eminent in intelligence. His aversion to women and his disinclination to form new friendships were both typical of his unemotional character, but not more so than his complete suppression of every reference to his own people. (Doyle 177)

A difficult man to clutch to one's newly developing bosom. Yet we never see Holmes except through Watson's eyes. Even when the story, as in the Reichenbach Falls account, is told first person by Holmes, it is Watson who has recorded it. Watson, nearly

invisible, yet his world-view infuses every page. His loyalty and sensibilities become our loyalty, our sensibilities. It is as neat a literary trick as can be pulled off. Conan Doyle earned his niche in literature, genred detective story notwithstanding.

* * * * *

Writing a few years later, *The Wisdom of Father Brown* (1913), last of a four-part series by Catholic theologian, G.K. Chesterton, is a different matter entirely. From the first story of the first volume to the last, we learn almost nothing about Fr. Brown. He has no parish. He travels anywhere in Europe Chesterton wants to use as a setting. He merits a single description, repeated in nearly every story: “the odd little priest standing there like a small Noah with a large hat...” (39) and “He was dressed poorly but respectably in black, from the old black top hat on his head to the solid black boots on his feet (99).” In the penultimate story, Chesterton varies the black hat descriptor to a coy “clerical gentleman collecting his heavy hat and umbrella” (186). On the other hand, Chesterton shows a neat ability to write evocative descriptions:

The consulting rooms of Dr. Orion Hood, the eminent criminologist and specialist in certain moral disorders, lay along the sea-front at Scarborough, in a series of very large and well-lighted French windows, which showed the North Sea like one endless outer wall of blue-green marble. (9)

While questions about what might make someone a specialist in moral disorders do hover, the windows showing the North Sea as an endless wall of blue-green marble is lovely. Chesterton’s Father Brown, however, suffers the most terrible of fictional fates:

he is boring. The stories are only puzzles because no personality seduces the imagination. Ultimately, the blatant racism killed the series for me.

* * * * *

Among the early greats is Dorothy L. Sayers, particularly, *Gaudy Night* (1936). Up to this point, the books we've considered would not have been classed as genre. They were written by recognized writers and admired as engaging novels. While successfully touching the general reading public, these authors didn't write down to their audience. That denigration came later, probably through the development of "yellow" and "pulp" fiction.

Lord Peter Wimsey is Dorothy Sayers' contribution to detective fiction. One might write an entire paper on her choice of an aristocrat needing to do something more useful than collecting first editions or consulting with royalty. Wimsey, himself, scandalized members of his family by not only working with a "common" policeman, but encouraging his sister, who fell in love with said policeman, and facilitating their marriage.

Sayers throws puzzles of considerable density and detail into her mystery stories—poisons, hemophilia, bus schedules, change-ringing, life in the copy room of an advertising agency, the stigma attached to female scholars who dare to demand equal authority within the university. But she never stops with the puzzle.

In *Gaudy Night*. Harriet Vane is the protagonist, working with the faculty at Shrewsbury College, Oxford, to discover the source of poison pen letters that are scandalizing and frightening faculty and students. By this point in the series, Lord Peter

has fallen in love with Harriet and is regularly proposing marriage. She declines just as regularly.

We know from previous books what Lord Peter looks like: the parrot beak of a nose, the monocle, the blond hair. In this scene, Harriet and Peter are punting on the River Cher. Peter is reading a manuscript Harriet has asked him to evaluate. She watches—

...his half-averted face [...] tolerably familiar to her, but now she saw details, magnified as it were by some glass in her own mind. The flat setting and fine scroll-work of the ear, and the height of the skull above it. The glitter of close-cropped hair where the neck-muscles lifted to meet the head. A minute sickle-shaped scar on the left temple. The faint laughter-lines at the corner of the eye and the droop of the lid at its outer end. The gleam of gold down on the cheek-bone [...]

He looked up; and she was instantly scarlet, as though she had been dipped in boiling water. Through the confusion of her darkened eyes and drumming ears some enormous bulk seemed to stoop over her. Then the mist cleared. His eyes were riveted upon the manuscript again, but he breathed as though he had been running. (Sayers 247)

Scrollwork of an ear, minute scar, the droop of the lid, then, and here is the surprise, Peter's reaction to Harriet's close attention—breathing “as though he had been running.” What a delicious piece of writing.

Sayers has also loaded the scene with subtext. Harriet had asked for Peter's reaction to her detective story because she is unsatisfied with it. He asks, following this scene, why Wilfrid (the protagonist of her story) "must be such a mutt?" They discuss it until Peter says,

"Could you make Wilfrid one of those morbidly conscientious people [...]? Give him a puritanical father and a hell-fire religion."

"Peter, that's an idea...he'd be interesting. But if I give Wilfrid all those violent and lifelike feelings, he'll throw the whole book out of balance."

"You would have to abandon the jig-saw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change." (255-256)

As part of the story, Sayers embarks on a discussion of women's colleges. The conventional wisdom of the day assumed that these celibate women scholars (only support staff could have families) living together were at best frustrated and probably, perverse. It is a lengthy narration, taking up far more space than it should, because it traps Sayers in a long-since outmoded issue with neither suspense nor tension.

Annie, writer of the poison pen letters and a widowed scout, is taking revenge on the college who hired the woman responsible for revealing that Annie's husband had cheated on his thesis, invalidating it and ruining his career. He took his own life as a result, many years previously. Not a great source of tension. While Annie's actions grow more malignant and ultimately, life threatening, they never rise past plot fodder. Once confronted by the administration, Annie erupts in vitriolic hatred, cursing all the "barren" women who know nothing about real life.

The driving tension of the novel is Harriet herself: her love of the cloister of the university and her need for freedom and urban living; her desire to be a scholar and an effective novelist; and this lurking, unacknowledged love of Peter linked to terror that she would lose her individuality if she opened herself to that love.

Harriet's surrender to Peter takes place following a performance of a Bach Chorale in the college chapel. They are both dressed in academic garb. Peter asks her once again to marry him, the last time he will raise the issue:

“Peter!”

She stood still [...] laid both hands upon the fronts of his gown, looking into his face while she searched for the word that should carry her over the last difficult breach.

It was he who found it for her. With a gesture of submission he bared his head and stood gravely, the square cap dangling in his hand.

“Placetne, magistra?”

“Placet.” (383)

Latin, the language of scholarship. “Does it please you, Teacher?” “It pleases me.”

As light and passionless an exchange can hardly be duplicated, yet in Sayers' hands, the restraint itself becomes passion.

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Hercule Poirot was created before Agatha Christie brought Miss Marple into being. Curious, because he seems a far more developed character. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), she uses a technique that is familiar now, but certainly was not at the time. Each person involved in the story could have committed the murder. It is all plot, very clever, very drawing room. Hercule Poirot is a Belgian refugee, the outsider, the man who talks funny, who isn't an Englishman. Isn't even a Frenchman, though being French would hardly have won friends in that era. Consistent with our chronology, Poirot also succeeds through reason and instinct: the "little gray cells" giving him answers the police force and Inspector Japp can never match. His Captain Arthur Hastings is Christie's answer to Dr. Watson. Although Watson learns, and we watch his growth, Hastings remains unchanged: loyal and charming but dim, I think, only providing the straight man to Poirot, as well as assuring the suspicious English that we can actually trust this odd little Belgian.

In the first Miss Marple story, *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), written six years before *Gaudy Night*, it seems to me that Christie has assumed her own writerly voice. Miss Marple is all-English, a familiar little soul, staple of every village and suburb in England. While Christie's crimes are real enough, the context in which they are set reassures the reader that good will triumph and authority can be trusted. The *Vicarage* murder is replete with floor plans and timetables, unlimited sources for red herrings. Miss Marple is the ultimate source of information about what *really* happened, due to her hyper-vigilance about who's doing what to whom and when, and what kind of people they *really* are. These are easy, uncomplicated reads.

Miss Marple paves the way for the early subgenre “cozy” mysteries, so named in contrast to the new American variety of “mean streets,” tough male detectives with poor nutrition and an embarrassing lack of taste.

Sleeping Murder (1975), written a year before Christie’s death, picks up the then current interest in repressed memories, a potential for character development instead of floor plans and timetables. But her Gwenda remains one more of the dozens of sweet, innocent girls whose lives are vastly improved through the acquisition of an honest, chipper, straight-shooter of a husband. Christie flirts with the character of Gwenda’s father and a tormented brother obsessed with his half-sister. But the gloves—Miss Marple’s or otherwise—never come off.

For Poirot, there is character development during his 55 year career. *Curtain (1975)*, is set in Styles Court, the same house as the first Poirot story, in which Christie suggests that the lives of a house’s occupants affect the very air of the house. With Poirot, I think, Christie moves toward the literary novel, because character development weighs at least as heavily as the plot. As to the death of Hercule Poirot, it is more artificial than the “death” of Holmes at Reichenbach Falls. But at least Poirot stays dead once he has executed the final stroke of justice.

Romance is still the psychic fuel that drives Christie stories: the difficulties of marriage, bad marriages, renewed marriages frame and sustain both characters and plot.

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Edmund Crispin is closer to Dorothy Sayers, both in who he was and how he put together his detective, Oxford don, Gervaise Fen. In life, Crispin was Robert Bruce

Montgomery, a graduate of St. John's College, Oxford. He was a successful composer and ultimately, a writer of screenplays. The Gervase Fen stories are wholly tongue-in-cheek. No ambiguity of characters: good means marriageable or in love; evil equals dead; stupidity, the butt of jokes. His *Swan Song* (1947) pulls together operatic prima donnas, a neat little plot and a delightful bit of metafictional winking. At one point, Fen is having lunch at an actual pub in Oxford whose name, the Eagle and Child, is known by regulars as the Bird and Baby. That pub was the hangout of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and a few others who met on Tuesdays to read and discuss their current writings. During the lunch in question, Fen and several others are discussing the case when Fen looks up: "There goes C.S. Lewis," said Fen suddenly. "It must be Tuesday (Crispin 62)".

I had a half pint and shepherd's pie at the Bird and Baby in 1976, and am happy to report that even now, according to Wikipedia, the pub is still in business.

Crispin's dialogue is quick, spirited, contemporary. If he didn't write literature, he produced a half-dozen jolly little mysteries.

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The next group of mystery-detective writers—Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, Michael Innes, even Josephine Tey regularly published through the '50s and '60s—kept up the English tradition of the "cozy". These are literate writers producing stories well worth reading, but they did not push the borders (or membrane) of their craft. Josephine Tey's *Daughter of Time* did cross an unexpected kind of boundary—that of revisionist history. While her detective Alan Grant, lies flat on his back in a hospital throughout the

entire book, Tey (through Grant) picks up the photo of a striking painting of Richard III and, with all Grant's friends running errands for him, makes a case for Richard's innocence of at least, the murder of his nephews, if not the entire passel of victims. Henry Tudor, she said, needed a clean slate in order to assume the monarchy, so paid Thomas More to rewrite Richard's reign. Shakespeare picked up More's story and the rest is... The book hit the general public and societies were formed proclaiming Richard's innocence. Novelist Elizabeth Peters following close behind, wrote *The Murders of Richard III* (1994, reissued in 2004) in which houseguests at an English manor house find themselves dying in satiric sequence of the "historic" murders. There are still collections of believers, active and writing papers.

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All of this—authors, books, time period—seems to fall within the Literary Entertainment category. Ruth Rendell broke the ice of the next era, I think. A British aristocrat, Baroness Rendell of Babergh, CBE, introduced Inspector Wexford in 1964 in *From Doon with Death*.

Inspector Wexford mysteries are plentiful, have been PBSed and break the multi-decade plateau of nicely-written genre pieces because Rendell is as interested in the why of criminal behavior as the who.

Doon begins with men: Parsons, the abandoned husband, Wexford and his assistant, Burden, assorted police officers. Then the women emerge—a farm girl, the wife Margaret, who strayed and was murdered, a girls' school, round and round among the women until finally the insanity of Doon herself emerges: a wealthy married woman

who never lived beyond her obsession with Margaret Parsons. As the story unfolds, the scenes move from penury to countryside to posh houses and stylish wardrobes. And characters' names change. Margaret was Meg, and before that, Minna. There are old love letters written to Minna from Doon, the revelation that Doon has come to town and have lunch together just before Minna's death.

Colors and heat intensify. In the denouement, Wexford confronts Doon, now known as Fabia Quadrant. Fabia "looked like a girl...a yellow dress made of some expensive creaseless fabric that fell straight and smooth like a tunic.....the sun made a brighter splash on her [friend's] bright blue skirt...the window was reflected ten times in her mirror-like nails (188ff)." Ultimately, Doon's reason is overwhelmed by all the old emotions as the love poetry she had written to Minna is read:

"She did deserve to die! She did!" She [Fabia] took hold of the lapels of Wexford's coat and stroked the stuff. "I loved her so. May I tell you about it because you understand? You see, I had only my letters." Her face was pensive now, her voice soft and unsteady. "No books to write." She shook her head slowly, a child rejecting a hard lesson. "No poems. But Douglas [her husband] let me write my letters, didn't you Douglas? He was so frightened...." Emotion came bubbling up, flooding across her face till her cheeks burned, and the heat from the window bathed her.

"There was nothing to be frightened of!" The words were notes in a crescendo, the last a scream. "If only they'd let me love

her...love her, love her..." She took her hands away and tore them through the crest of hair. "Love her, love her..." (Rendell 193)

Writing madness has been a staple of gothic and horror fiction. Rendell's forerunners, Christie, Conan Doyle, even Wilkie Collins used madness. But here we move inside Doon's mind. Rendell, having made the jump, opened a new world in detective fiction, even as the evaluation of mental competency became standard in the courts.⁴

While Rendell's *The Tree of Hands* (1984) is also a story of madness and includes some fine writing describing a mother's anguish over the death of her two-year-old son the secondary storyline is hard to follow, not smoothly executed. The classic inevitability of the resolution doesn't exist, which is frustrating, because it seems that Rendell reined in her considerable skill. Apparently the ability (or desire) to combine an intense psychic narrative with a cogent plot isn't an automatic conjunction.

* * * * *

However, a new generation was coming into print sporting an interesting twist, from America. Martha Grimes and Elizabeth George are so immersed in all things British, they successfully pulled off a marriage of British "cozies" with American "mean streets."

Martha Grimes published *The Man With a Load of Mischief*, her first Richard Jury mystery, in 1981. Twenty-one novels later, she is still carrying the series, each title the name of an English pub.

Mischief is a delightful concoction of weird “country” characters, an extraordinary plot, and the introduction of Melrose Plant, aristocrat playing detective. Grimes’ characters are clearly drawn, attractive or annoying, and given unmovable positions in the village hierarchy. Sustaining a cultural wink, self-designated “Lady” Ardry, Plant’s aunt, mirrors the physical appearance of actress Margaret Rutherford, who played Miss Marple in the earliest films based on Christie’s Miss Marple stories.

In this lighter vein, Grimes assumes the spirit of Edmund Crispin’s Gervase Fen for a new generation. But, as every failed comedian knows, the same joke can’t be endlessly repeated. What was perky and clever the first two times out—*Load of Mischief* and *Old Fox Deceiv’d*—after twenty years becomes downright dreary.

Because Grimes is a competent writer, she sets her crimes in some very dark areas. However, the psychic commute between tragedy and farce gets hard to manage. Melrose Plant has to grow up—except she never gave him space to mature from dabbling neophyte. It is also relevant that she produced nine Richard Jury novels between 1981 and 1989, and has written only eleven in the last nineteen years.

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We’ve now arrived at Ruth Rendell’s friend, P.D. James, Baroness James of Holland Park, OBE, and considered the current “Queen of Crime” by many. She’s earned accolades as well as a considerable fortune.

Her detective, Adam Dalgleish is a broken-hearted poet working for New Scotland Yard. His wife and son were killed in a car accident. That loss haunts him throughout his career. Praise for the early books notes her “deliberate pacing”. This is

true. Her pace might be considered glacial. Movement from the case at hand to introducing new characters was lengthened, sometimes interminably by her drive to create three-dimensional characters, allowing one to two-paragraph backstories for the most minor of her “spear-carriers.”

By 1975 and *The Black Tower*, she came into her own. She was fifty-five. 1975 was also the year that Agatha Christie published her last Miss Marple story, *Sleeping Murder*, at age eighty-five. The “Queen” was dead. Long live the “Queen.”

In *Black Tower*, Dalgleish goes to the Dorset coast to recuperate after a near-fatal illness.

Before he turned again to the car, his eye was caught by a small clump of unknown flowers [...]. Dalgliesh walked over and stood stock still, regarding in silence their unpretentious beauty. He smelt for the first time the clean half-illusory salt tang of the sea [...]. He was suddenly suffused with happiness and...intrigued by the purely physical nature of his joy. (James 14)

James neither hangs her story on plot twists—which are many and twisty—nor Dalgleish’s recovery. Her scope is broader. Dalgleish’s place for recovery is in the apartment of a friend at a rest home for the disabled young. James looks at the indignities of aging, of people trapped in bodies that betray them at every turn, paralleling Dalgleish’s recovery with their chronic stasis. Yet once the passion of the narrative turns to greed, the plot becomes political. We move back into detective story and the initial resonances fade.

However, in *The Lighthouse* (2005), her energy is the bedrock of family identity that affects every character, playing itself out with more or less disastrous consequences. The fact that the setting is a James standard—remote island, limited transport to the mainland—is almost incidental. That there are murders that must be solved does not propel the writing as much as James’s turning over the rocks of parenthood, love, sex, old families. Dalgleish’s fear that the woman he loves will cast him off is genuine, not coy, and the resolution well-done and satisfying.

Incidentally, the primary murder is that of a well-known writer, losing his skill at sixty-eight (though James writes of him at age seventy-five). A nice *sotto voce*: James saying, “You, perhaps, but not me.”

The Children of Men (1992), sets James in the canon of literary novelist. It is a stand-alone story, without a detective though with a great deal of crime. Her premise is to explore a world without a newborn for twenty-six years due to pandemic infertility.

We can experience nothing but the present moment, live in no other second of time, and to understand this is as close as we can get to eternal life. But our minds reach back through centuries for the reassurance of our ancestry and, without the hope of posterity, for our race if not for ourselves, without the assurance that we being dead yet live, all pleasures of the mind and senses sometimes seem to me no more than pathetic and crumbling defenses shored up against our ruins. (13)

As James looks at what happens to the aged in such a society, she describes a government-sponsored program called Quietus. Bonuses are given to family members

who persuade their elderly to board barges for a one-way voyage ending in mass drownings.

There is also a pathetic lust for babies of any sort: dolls extravagantly dressed and treated as children, a kitten baptized in church—with compassion.

Her scenes are wonderful: good people stealing a car and supplies while they apologize to the old couple they have tied up, the hellacious paganism of the Omegas, the last babies born, coddled into psychopathic killers.

The movie released several years ago simplifies this multi-layered novel to nearly a single level. In doing so, it erases her quiet, provocative, heart-breaking story of “What if...?”

* * * * *

James Wood, an editor of the *New Yorker* and author of a new book, *How Fiction Works*, proved to be a splendid guide to my search for articulation of this Membrane. He says:

One way to tell slick genre prose from really interesting writing is to look...for the absence of different registers. An efficient thriller will often be written in a style that is locked into place: the musical analogue of this might be a tune, proceeding in unison [...] without any harmony [...] written in only one unvarying register—a solid block, like everyone agreeing to wear black at a funeral. (196)

A little later, Wood gives a nuanced definition of genre writing. He suggests that writers’ consistent use of “photographic fidelity” as a means to achieve realism actually

renders the opposite true (240). He goes on to say that “art selects and shapes” and is the corrective for photographic fidelity (240).

Culturally, we (Americans, mostly) spent an excruciatingly long time looking at “art” that was more photographically accurate than most photographs. What started with the genuine art of Andrew Wyeth in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, moved to hyperrealism, saturated color and, eventually to sentiment: tots with enormous eyes and television painters preaching “Anyone can paint.”

* * * * *

Elizabeth George, the other American writer of British mysteries, created the Thomas Lynley series, beginning with *Great Deliverance* (1988), a fine and disturbing novel. George and Thomas Lynley have become exceptionally popular, in part, I think, because she links Lynley, an aristocrat of Lord Peter Wimsey’s stripe with an aggressively lower class, slovenly partner who despises Lynley for the first several books in the series. Gone are Bunter and Dr. Watson, replaced by Barbara Havers, who has a powerful backstory that weaves its way through most of the first dozen novels.

In *Great Deliverance*, Lynley and Havers investigate the beheading of a “proper” Yorkshire farmer, William Tey; whose enormously obese daughter Roberta sat beside the body until the police arrived, maintaining that she had done it. William’s wife, Tessa, left him when Roberta and her sister, Gillian, were small. William began molesting Gillian. When she ran away as a teenager, Roberta had to take her place.

Lovers and children tangle, not only in the crime, but with Havers and her dead brother, even with Lynley, guilty of causing an auto accident that crippled of his best

friend. Loss and memory, guilt and shrines cripple and punish. Who is responsible and where does culpability lie? George rejected stereotypes and the assumed divide between criminal and detective as she spins out her story. While the following passage may err on the side of overwrought emotion, I also see a Scotland Yard detective so horrified by the events that led Roberta to behead her father, he confronts the local priest with moral failure. The priest speaks:

“He swore to me—”

“He swore? On what? The Bible that he used to make Gillian believe she had to give her body to her father? Is that what he swore on?”

“He stopped confessing. I didn’t know. I—”

“You knew. From the moment he started on Bridie, you knew. And when you went to the farm and saw what Roberta had done, the real truth came crashing right down, didn’t it?”

“I couldn’t . . . it was the silence of the confessional. It’s a holy oath.”

“There is no oath more important than life. There is no oath more important than the ruin of a child [...] for twenty-seven years of physical abuse. For two ruined lives. For the death of their dreams. There is *no* understanding. There is *no* forgiveness. By God, not for this.” (George 302)

While the outrage is certainly authorial, it is consistent with the character of Lynley, and it is honest. Not conjured to evoke a “dramatic” confrontation, therefore guilty of the sin of sterility—writing high emotions without conviction.

Nearly twenty years later, after great success and acclaim, George wrote the following passage in *With No One As Witness* (2005). Thomas Lynley and Barbara Havers are driving to the scene of a murder:

A railway viaduct shooting out from London Bridge station comprised the north perimeter of Crucifix Lane. Bricks formed it, so deeply stained with more than a century of soot and grime that whatever their original colour had been, it was now a distant memory. What remained in that memory’s place was a bleak wall done up in variations of carbonaceous sediment [...]

The tunnel here was some sixty yards long, a place of deep shadows whose cavernous roof was bandaged with corrugated steel plates from which water dripped [...] (George 150-151)

This location is not the site of the murder. It is simply the view from the car window on the way to the site. It is a superb exercise in “photographic fidelity,” rendered without selection or shaping. It is sterile, laden with authorial vocabulary—“carbonaceous sediment” instead of soot and grime; the roof “bandaged” with steel plates. And why Crucifix Lane? Perhaps it *is* the name of the street, but I am bruised with the faux import of it all.

The plot swirls around a serial killer whose victims are young, mixed race boys. A youth center, Colossus, is central to the plot. Each member of the staff is introduced,

commented on, even their routes to work are described, probably to expand the suspect list. There are cluttered descriptions of London slums and shopping centers. Tensions between characters flare (though not within this reader). The media is thrown into the mix. At the “height” of the action, as many as twenty people are milling around. It feels like red herrings have become a shoal.

And yet. When George allows Lynley his own space, the pace quickens and the writing improves. The shooting death of his wife and unborn child is as well-done as anything from *Great Deliverance*.

Elizabeth George hit the big time, writing eleven long novels in thirteen years and, for me, committing the unpardonable sin: she *gave* Lynley and Havers to the BBC, permitting the BBC to create television episodes that George had never written.⁵

* * * * *

Maj Sjöwall & Per Wahlöö are married to each other and have written ten Martin Beck novels to international success. *The Laughing Policeman* (1970) became a Walter Matthau movie, transposed, awkwardly I think, to San Francisco. But it is, in its original version, un-transportable. Stockholm is dark, cold and rainy. Its Central Bureau of Investigation cops are morose and coffee-dependent. Martin Beck has an unhappy marriage and, within the novels, rarely eats or sleeps.

In *Laughing Policeman*, Stenström, another member of the squad, has been killed in a massacre on a bus. His girlfriend, Åsa Torell, is interviewed. Initially, she seemed simply another “person of interest.” But the “real” Åsa emerges, in a singular way:

She [Äsa] plunged her half-smoked cigarette into the overflowing ashtray and remained standing beside the table with her hands loosely clasped over her stomach.

“Yes, what the dickens is it?” she asked irritably.

Kollberg [the policeman] looked at her searchingly. She looked small and wretched [...]. She had gooseflesh on her arms and although the blouse hung like a loosely draped cloth over her thin body, her large nipples showed as distinct protrusions under the material. (Sjöwall and Wahlöö 125)

Following a second, grueling interview with Stenström that involved a lengthy discussion of her sex life, the discovery of a pistol under her pillow and an exploration of what Stenström was up to with his off-duty shadowing, Kollberg says—

“This won’t do, Äsa. Come.”

Whirling around, she snarled at him. “Come, Where? To bed? Oh, sure.”

Kollberg looked at her. Nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand would have seen a pale, thin, undeveloped girl who held herself badly, who had a delicate body, thin nicotine-stained fingers and a ravaged face [...].

Lennart Kollberg saw a physically and mentally complex young woman with blazing eyes and a promising width between her thighs, provocative and interesting and worth getting to know [...].

“I didn’t mean that,” Kollberg said. “Come home with me. We have plenty of room. You’ve been alone long enough.”

She was hardly in the car before she started to cry. (138-9)

The scene is packed with tension: power, sexuality, misery and loss. But that simple phrase, “come home with me” is so precise, so decent, the persons of Åsa and Kollberg overwhelm and bring to life a Swedish police procedural.

* * * * *

Since this search for the permeable membrane began with Laurie King, I want to look more fully at her gifts and my frustration.

Her Mary Russell novels—that is, the Mrs. Sherlock Holmes novels—are well-written and strong. Some better than others, naturally. But once she established her place in the genre, she maintained it: genre.

Her stand-alone novel *Folly* (2001), is the story of Rae, a woman escaping a troubled past, moving to the San Juan Islands to build her house on the ruins of her great uncle, Desmond Newborn’s “Folly.” It opens simply: a boat pulling away from a dock, two people waving.

Go, she told them silently. *Don’t slow down, don’t even look back, just leave.*

But then Petra’s jacketed arm shot out from the boat’s cabin, drab and shapeless and waving a wild adolescent farewell. Rae’s own hand came up in an involuntary response, to wave her own good-bye—except that in the air, her wave changed, the hand reaching

forward, stretched out in protest and cry for help, as if her outstretched fingers could pull them back to her [...]. She caught the gesture before any of the three people on the boat could notice it, snapped the offending arm down to her side, and stood at rigid attention. (King ix)

It is almost wonderful. If she had excised the jacketed arm shooting out (is the arm attached to a person?) and omitted: “before any of the three people on the boat could notice it...” If only...

However King consistently maintains a remarkable ability to conceptualize and describe pieces of fine art. In *Folly*, the art is woodworking. Rae created a piece called Lacy Runner, into which she placed a lace table runner that had belonged to her grandmother.

The key element of the piece was that the woman herself was composed entirely of drawers, large and small, of myriad shapes and angles. With all the compartments in place, the figure was simply a runner with a wide band of lace arched over her upper body. When the drawers were all removed, from the side she remained the same, a running profile veiled by a lace archway, but from the front she was revealed as empty, a ghostly presence made of delicate wooden lace. (138)

That kind of writing bursts through the economical efficiency of genre, transporting the reader to another place, because the writer herself has been transported. I am a greedy reader. I want a more—a great deal more—from Laurie King.

* * * * *

One more writer. Batya Gur was an Israeli novelist who died in May, 2005 at the age of fifty-eight. I read *Literary Murder* (1993), and *Murder Duet* (1999). Her detective was Michael Ohayon, a Jewish Inspector Morse, it seemed to me, never at home, with police force or community, family or himself.

Gur describes closed communities: the university world and its literature department, isolation and rejection from an unfinished thesis; in *Murder Duet*, the symphony orchestra, cello music and an abandoned baby. For everything except that baby, Ohayon is observer. Yet once that involvement takes place, *Murder Duet* moves to a higher plane.

The irony in *Literary Murder* is that only with Professor Klein does Michael Ohayon develop a relationship. They have a long lunch and a lengthy (fully transcribed), scholarly conversation. Ohayon moved into a genuine relationship with Klein and his scholarly integrity, even as he realized that Klein murdered the head of the department. A murder committed, not through jealousy or hatred, but outraged integrity and decency. Ohayon's alienation overwhelms him, again.

In *Murder Duet*, Ohayon is strongly attracted to a concert cellist who is the mother of a little boy, living in the flat over his. The first murder is that of her father, an eminent conductor. Midway through the story, her brother is murdered. At one point, she is a suspect. Much tragedy, much discussion of music.

But Ohayon falls in love, not with the cellist, but with a tiny girl left in a box on his doorstep:

Unwilling to return her to her cradle, he left the baby lying on his chest for a long time after feeding her. He breathed in her delicate smell and gently touched her cheek with his finger [...] felt engulfed by a wave of warmth and compassion, feelings he thought he had lost long ago. There was no struggle here, only her simple need of him, which needed no defenses. When he looked at her he could believe that in her life everything was still possible.

(69)

Ultimately, the baby plays no role, is extraneous to the plot. Ohayon surrenders her to Child Services. While Gur's initial intention may have been the simple humanizing of her detective, she too, fell in love with that baby and, writing of her discovery, struck the fire of art. I was far more interested in Ohayon's keeping the child than who killed the conductor and first violinist.

* * * * *

Conclusion: Art as Gift

I fully expected to find that, as these writers wrote, their books would get better, closer to literature. So wrong. How disillusioning that success does not engender greater care, a higher exercise of craft, more intimate connections with their creations that in turn, link them more tightly to their readers.

Successful writing, with few exceptions, bred, not literature, but successful production of a commodity: of genre.

W. Lewis Hyde has written a great deal about the public commons—how our culture produces things of value, saying that after the creator has earned an appropriate living, their work should become gifts to the culture. In the introduction to his book, *The Gift*, Lewis says:

It is the assumption of this book that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity. Or, to state the modern case with more precision, that works of art exist simultaneously in two “economies,” a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art [...].

Usually, in fact, the artist does not find himself engaged or exhilarated by the work, nor does it seem authentic, until this gratuitous element [the inspiration, the gift] has appeared, so that along with any true creation comes the uncanny sense that “I,” the artist, did not make the work. [...]

That art that matters to us—which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living [...] that work is received by us as a gift is received. (Hyde xi-xii)

And here is the heart of the matter. I read of the baby on Michael Ohayon’s doorstep and my heart was touched. It was an authentic touching, I believe, because Batya Gur’s heart was touched as she imagined that child, cradled and smelled her.

It seems to me the question becomes, do those passages, those moments within the story that surely transcend genre, move the entire work through the membrane into the realm of a literary offering? I'm inclined to think they do.

Yet, there are also levels. Gifts are not created equal. Our refrigerators have all borne testimony to the gifts of scribbles, cherished because a child's heart was just under the fingerprint. Other gifts come to us: contracts, earned recognition, sometimes velvet boxes. But I have those scribbles in my filing cabinet. The velvet boxes...gone.

Beyond the hierarchy of gifts, there are the true artists: Bach and Shakespeare, Seurat and Picasso, Eudora Welty and Toni Morrison. Their works have not only been given to each of us who love and revere them, but to civilization itself.

I posit, finally, that the putative membrane ceases to exist when the writer's heart, through honesty and careful craft, makes an imaginative leap that brings life to the page, exposes beauty and pain through tragedy or comedy or great joy. When that happens, the reader enters the heart of the writer. Art has been created. A gift has been given.

Literature has been written.

NOTES

¹ King, Laurie R. “Spokane is Reading.” North Spokane Library, Spokane. October 19, 2006.

² Edgar Allen Poe is credited as inventing the first fictional detective with the 1841 publication of “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” I’ve never been entranced by Auguste Dupin so, from personal choice, I leave Poe’s contribution to the genre to others.

³ Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue” is a short story.

⁴ The 1960 landmark decision, Dusky vs. United States, affirmed the defendant’s right to a competency hearing.

⁵ Elizabeth George: “I gave the BBC permission to use my characters in their own crime stories as long as I could approve the script and as long as they made no changes in the characters personally or professionally. The two you have seen are among the 6 independent stories they've filmed with my permission. There are no novels to go with them.” The Elizabeth George website, still posted in January, 2009:

<http://www.elizabethgeorgeonline.com/faq_series.html>

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Despite detective fiction becoming one of the most popular of literary genres of the twentieth century, disputes over the point at which a story containing detection becomes a detective fiction story continued. What critical consensus there is on this topic suggests that the earliest writer of modern popular detective fiction is Edgar Allan Poe. In three short stories or "tales," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1843), and "The Purloined Letter" (1845), Poe established many of the conventions that became central to what is known as classical detective fiction. Perhaps reacting to the eighteenth-century Perhaps the best approach is historical, or genetic. What actually happened, and in what way did literature evolve up to the present day? There is a surprising variety of oral literature among surviving preliterate peoples, and, as the written word emerges in history, the indications are that the important literary genres all existed at the beginning of civilized societies: heroic epic; songs in praise of priests and kings; stories of mystery and the supernatural; love lyrics; personal songs (the result of intense meditation); love. While the number of genres and their subdivisions has proliferated since classical times, the division of the literary domain into three major genres (by Plato, Aristotle, and, later, Horace), is still useful. Fans of mysteries and detective stories will recognize the author as the namesake of the prestigious Edgar Award for outstanding mystery novels. Earliest Forms. Early instances of mysteries appear in ancient literature, for example in the biblical story of Susanna being accused of promiscuity in the Old Testament, in Oedipus Rex regarding the question of Oedipus' parentage, and in an ancient Chinese genre of Gong'an fiction in which magistrates oversee court cases often involving supernatural elements. The Makings of a Genre. Though fictionalizing real life events was a common practice when the story was written in 1842, it was the first time a murder was written into a detective story.