

Medieval Detective and Crime Fiction: Religion and Nostalgia in Secular Modernity

Carole M. Cusack

Abstract

The medieval detective novel as a literary genre dates to 1977, when Ellis Peters (Edith Pargeter) published *A Morbid Taste For Bones*. Detective fiction is a modern genre that reflects the expectations of the contemporary West: individualism, the detective as a dispenser of order and righter of wrongs (in a post-religious manner), and a liberal understanding of society that has little to do with the reality of life in the Middle Ages. From the origins of the genre in the nineteenth century, the village mystery (the classic exponent of which was Agatha Christie) vied with the harder-edged urban crime novel, where the city plays a major role as setting. The retreat of institutional Christianity, perceptible from the start of the industrial revolution but gaining momentum after the 1850s (a decade of rapid social change, including the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, and the emergence of Spiritualism,) resulted in fewer people believing the theological tenet that life is meaningful and good and evil do not go unpunished, even if that punishment is delayed till after death. The detective, exemplified by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, was one possible replacement for the religious confessor or priest in the process of ascribing meaning to the otherwise random *minutiae* of existence. It is thus no accident that some later novelists chose to merge the detective and the religious functionary; there are now multiple series of novels about medieval detectives, religious and secular, male and female, broadly historical and highly imaginative. While these are products of secular modernity, the genre evinces nostalgia for an imagined past when society was safe and filled with faith.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Detective Fiction, Christianity, Secularisation, Crime, Nostalgia

Introduction

The novel as a literary form became popular in the eighteenth century, and the expanding middle classes provided the literate and financially enabled audience for such fictional diversions.¹ The detective story as a distinct genre emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Before this date, stories involving crime and its investigation existed, though the detective who discovers the culprit and solves the mystery was absent.² The retreat of institutional Christianity, perceptible from the

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¹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001 [1957]).

² Malcolm Gaskill, 'Reporting Murder: Fiction in the archives in early modern England', *Social History*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1998), pp. 1-30.

beginnings of the industrial revolution but gaining increased momentum after the 1850s (with the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the emergence and popularity of Spiritualism, and rapid social change) resulted in fewer people adhering to the religious worldview that life is meaningful and good and evil do not go unpunished, even if that punishment is delayed until after death. In the vacuum caused by such a loss of faith, "[t]he figure of the detective, exemplified by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, was one possible replacement for the religious confessor or priest in the process of ascribing meaning to the otherwise random *minutiae* of existence."³ It is thus no accident that some novelists chose to merge the detective and the religious functionary; G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Harry Kemelman's Rabbi David Small, and Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael, among others, are popular examples of this trend.

Secularisation, which Peter Berger defines as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols,"⁴ is the predominant theological, social, and cultural trend in the developed world from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. This process resulted in dramatic changes in Western society being wrought over a comparatively brief period of time. Scholars of religion usually combine secularisation with other significant characteristics of Western modernity: for example, individualism and consumer capitalism.⁵ All these phenomena reflect a shift away from cohesive, group-oriented, culture and inherited occupations and values (including religion), to the choosing self as arbiter of values and creator of identity (including personal spiritualities) through patterns of consumption.⁶ What this means is that certain aspects of religion are detached from their institutional contexts and are appropriated by those Colin Campbell calls "seekers,"⁷ who are spiritual consumers and crafters of hybrid spiritualities. This phenomenon does not prevail in a thoroughgoing manner, as some people are content with traditional, institutional religion, and others are decidedly non-religious.⁸ However, what is significant both for religion and for the genre of detective fiction is that (to use postmodern terminology) the metanarrative is obsolete, the one 'big story' that everyone previously adhered to is now irrelevant.⁹

The detective story as originally conceived was a conservative literary form. Its relationship to theology meant that good must triumph and evil must be punished. The plots therefore generally featured a static community, which is disturbed by violence, usually murder.

³ Carole M. Cusack, 'Scarlet and Black: Non-Mainstream Religion as 'Other' in Detective Fiction', in *The Buddha of Suburbia: Proceedings of the VIIIth International Conference for Religion, Literature and the Arts 2004*, eds. Carole M. Cusack, Frances Di Lauro and Christopher Hartney (Sydney: RLA Press, 2005), p. 161.

⁴ Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 107.

⁵ David Loy, 'The Religion of the Market', in *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*, eds. Harold Coward and Daniel C. Maguire (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

⁶ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Oxford: Polity, 2002 [2000]), Chapter 5, 'Shopping for a Self', pp. 73-96.

⁷ Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization," *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, vol. 5 (1972), pp. 119-136.

⁸ Stephen Bullivant, 'Explaining the rise of 'nonreligion studies': Subfield formation and institutionalization within the sociology of religion', *Social Compass*, vol. 61, no. 1 (2020), pp. 86-102.

⁹ Hayden Ramsay, 'A Man Loses His Faith', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 91, issue 1035 (2010), pp. 511-527.

The violence is solved by the detective, a representative of order and justice, and the community returns to stasis, reassured in its traditional values. The murder plot (or Thanatos instinct) is balanced by the marriage plot (or Eros instinct).¹⁰ Stephen Knight says of the detective novels of Agatha Christie (1890-1976), for example, that:

[m]any of her stories end not with the solution to the problem, but a final linking of two lonely lovers. Plainly borrowed from romantic novels, this is not only a gesture to feminine feeling. It asserts that a new family order can arise from the family disturbed by murder; it has a healing, renovating effect similar, in its often bathetic way, to the final sequence in a Shakespearean tragedy where the emergent controller of the wounded state, speaks in calm, ordered tones.¹¹

It is important to consider briefly why Agatha Christie became such a popular novelist. She was a prolific writer, producing approximately eighty detective books (collections of short stories and novels), six romance novels (as Mary Westmacott), and *The Moustrap*, a play that has been on the London stage from 1952 to 2020 when the Covid 19 pandemic closed theatres.¹² Critics have often remarked that her characters are cardboard cut-outs, her plots are improbable, and her concerns inane, petit-bourgeois and deeply racist, class-bound, and conservative. She manifests a distrust of the police and her detectives (principally the comic Belgian Hercule Poirot and elderly Miss Marple, both single and de-sexualised) are shrewd individualists. Knight observes that Christie's world "is a dream of bourgeois rural living without the heights, depths or conflicts of real social activity. It is a projection of the dreams of those anxious middle-class people who would like a life where change, disorder and work are all equally absent."¹³ Christie never actively promoted Christianity as the cement holding society together, or the source of its values, though the saintly vicar Reverend Caleb Dane Calthrop and his intelligent and devoted wife Maud feature in two novels as a paradigm of the Christian church as both holy and engaged in the protection of society from evil, including murder.¹⁴

The persistence of the popularity of Christie's novels is closely related to the fact that rapid change characterises contemporary Western society, and throughout the twentieth century philosophers have challenged traditional approaches to epistemology, metaphysics, logic and ontology. The popular manifestations of postmodernism include eclectic approaches to culture, aesthetics, and self-construction, and the collapse of fixed genres and the creation of hybrid genres

¹⁰ John Wren-Lewis, 'Adam, Eve and Agatha Christie: Detective Stories as Post-Darwinian Myths of Original Sin', *Australian Religion Studies Review*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1993), pp. 20-21.

¹¹ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1980), p. 116.

¹² 'The Moustrap: St Martin's Theatre marks 50 years of hosting play', *BBC ONLINE*, 31 March (2024). At: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-68667979>.

¹³ Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 118.

¹⁴ The novels are *The Moving Finger* (1942) and *The Pale Horse* (1961). See Nick Baldock, 'The Christian World of Agatha Christie', *First Things*, 8 April (2009). At: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2009/08/the-christian-world-of-agatha-christie>.

(e.g., theatre of the absurd, surrealism and so on).¹⁵ Detective fiction and crime fiction are separate genres, with crime fiction favouring the jarring but more realistic effects of unsolved crimes and unconsolated characters and readers. These sorts of novels peel away the conventions of the classic detective story to reveal the struggle for meaning, morality, and human dignity in an apparently bleak and godless universe.¹⁶

A Short History of Detective and Crime Fiction

The detective novel is a cultural product of modernity, appearing in the nineteenth century and becoming ubiquitous in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century it shows no sign of losing market share in fiction sales and has retained a high readership in an era when some genres have almost become extinct (the western novel and the adventure story being the clearest examples).¹⁷ An examination of the development of the genre reveals much about the social anxieties of the people who wrote and read detective novels. One crucial social change was the retreat from authority and the public sphere of institutional Christianity. Stephen Knight observes that:

[i]t is easy enough to see that these two systems of detecting crime, personal guilt and social observation, could only develop in a deeply Christian world, with small social units where everybody is known, where hiding is hard and socialisation tends to be public. That had been the general situation in medieval England – though the notorious difficulty of finding and convicting medieval criminals suggests that the crime-control system implicit in *The Newgate Calendar* [1773] was never more than a brave hope. But in the period when the stories were printed, the implied social model was disappearing. Not everybody was devotedly Christian, many people lived in large and increasing conurbations, and there was a hardened and relatively successful criminal class, hostile to the ‘normal’ society, which had, in London at least, its own fortresses, later known as the ‘rookeries’ of central London. In fact *The Newgate Calendar* is not offering a real account of crime control: it is ideological in that it offers hope and comfort to people, and in that it is itself based on ideologies, the twin beliefs that we are all Christian at heart and that our society is integral and at root a single healthy body. This would be what is normally called a ‘strain ideology’, that is, an optimistic account selecting and ordering material to provide a consoling fable in the face of disturbing reality.¹⁸

Critics have often explained the appeal of the detective story in terms of secularisation; this draws

¹⁵ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991 [1961]); Kim Grant, *Surrealism and the Visual Arts: Theory and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Tony Hilfer, *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Gary J. Hausladen, *Places for Dead Bodies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Part of the problem is that these novelistic genres are deeply imbricated with racism and White colonialism. Craig Thompson, ‘Feelings of Ambiguity: Pulp Westerns and Popular Culture’, *Journal of the Southwest*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2013), pp. 175-192; Robert Dixon, *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo-Australian Popular Fiction 1875-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1980, p. 13.

attention to another very significant shift. Religious values are commonly presented as timeless and eternal; the evolution of the detective genre indicates that cultural products and values (including religion) change with time and are inextricably linked to the broader social and political environment.

W. H. Auden anticipated the postmodern merging of high and low culture when he suggested that detective stories functioned like Greek tragedies, allowing readers to experience emotions through vicarious identification with victims and murderers.¹⁹ This case is made most effectively by the late John Wren-Lewis, a scientist and religious pundit: “[t]he ascendancy of detective as we know it coincides with the post-Darwinian period when religious belief was declining sharply among the literate Western public. The detective emerged as a saviour-image as people began to lost faith in those more traditional saviours, the holy man, the righteous ruler, and the knight in shining armour. Also, stories about evil as a mystery became popular as ancient myths about the so-called ‘problem of evil’ began to seem discredited.”²⁰ The progress of the detective fiction genre through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflects broader social changes. The first acknowledged detective, C. Auguste Dupin, featured in the novellas of Edgar Allan Poe (‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ in 1841 and ‘The Mystery of Marie Roget’ in 1850, among others) and the later, very similar Sherlock Holmes (Conan Doyle’s first story was published in 1887), were gentleman amateurs.²¹ There was no police force in England until 1829 when Sir Robert Peel founded the London Metropolitan Police Force, with an initial one thousand constables (known as ‘bobbies’ and ‘peelers’ after him). The first detective novel with a policeman detective, the redoubtable Sergeant Cuff, was Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone* (1868). In the twentieth century, women detectives became more common (initially, like Christie’s Miss Jane Marple and Patricia Wentworth’s Miss Maud Silver, amateurs), and the detective fiction genre splintered into subgenres. “Private eye” novels (often described as “hard-boiled” or “noir”) featured investigators (often ex-policemen) who were outside the system of the law and were frequently morally dubious.²²

Later, in the 1970s, female police officers came to prominence. This reflects the feminist movement and concomitant social changes. Irmgard Maassen notes that:

[i]t is tempting to account for the appeal of the fictional woman sleuth in mimetic terms. Crime fiction, as a genre firmly tied to realism, could thus be taken to merely reflect what is happening in society at large, where women are infiltrating the most stubbornly patriarchal bastions of the labour market. Thus Ruth Rendell resorts to the terms of realism

¹⁹ W. H. Auden, ‘The Guilty Vicarage,’ in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), pp. 15-24.

²⁰ Wren-Lewis, ‘Adam, Eve and Agatha Christie’, pp. 20-21.

²¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Doubleday, 1984); Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories, Volumes I and II* (New York: Bantam, 2003).

²² Christopher Mallon, ‘Crossing shadows: Bridging the voices of hard-boiled detective and noir crime fiction’, *Text*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2015).

when she retrospectively defends her choice to make Inspector Wexford male: 'There were no women police officers then, not at that level. If I was starting now...' ²³

Recent novels have featured female private investigators, including Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, and Sarah Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, and these women are as tough as their male counterparts.²⁴ Other conventions that have been challenged include the normativity of heterosexuality and genre itself, with many novels failing to adhere to the conventions of either detective or crime fiction, while borrowing conventions from both (and combining them with elements from romance, chick lit, thrillers, horror and other genres).²⁵

Finally, the crime genre has embraced the uncertainty of the real world, in which the guilty are often unpunished and the innocent suffer. There are various ways of reading this, which include the reader identifying with the criminal and desiring him or her to escape, to triumph. In some police procedurals crimes are never solved and there is a sense of purposelessness, in that police are overwhelmed by new cases and the sheer number mean many must remain unsolved.²⁶

Medieval Detective Novels: Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980)

Ellis Peters' first Brother Cadfael Novel, *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, was published in 1977 but the genre quite possibly would never have risen to prominence without the publication of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (Italian 1980, English translation 1983). Eco, rather than Peters, established the stereotype of the medieval detective fiction author.²⁷ Eco (1932-2016), who had a distinguished academic career at the Universities of Turin, Milan, and Florence, was an expert on Thomas Aquinas and medieval aesthetics, and a semiotician. His first novel exhibited deep knowledge of the Middle Ages and was made into a successful film in 1986 by the renowned director Jean-Jacques Annaud, starring Sean Connery (1930-2020) as William of Baskerville and Christian Slater (b. 1969) as his young novice Adso of Melk. The book's name is taken from the poem *De contemptu mundi* ('Contempt of the World') by Bernard of Morlais, a monk of Cluny,

²³ Irmgard Maassen, 'An Unsuitable Job for a Woman? Gender, Genre and the New Detective Heroine', in *The Art of Murder: New Essays on Detective Fiction*, eds H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight (Tubingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1998), p. 152.

²⁴ Scott Christianson, 'Talkin' Trash and Kickin' Butt: Sue Grafton's Hard-boiled Feminism', in *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction*, ed. Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995), pp. 127-147.

²⁵ The Cassidy Blair novels of Australian Kirsty Brooks combine hard-boiled with chick lit, in the fashion of American authors Janet Evanovich and Sarah Strohmeyer. Australian Jan McKemmish's *Only Lawyers Dancing* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1992) is a postmodern lesbian murder mystery that is resolutely high-art and does not offer a satisfactory solution. At one point McKemmish notes, "The trouble is you keep expecting it to make sense, like a serial moving tortuously through the labyrinth of side plots and byways toward an order, a clarity, a closed book." The English writer Joan Smith's five Loretta Lawson novels all involve crime and often murder, but are musings on what being a feminist academic in 1970s and 1980s Britain is like in terms of the battle between the sexes, and the nosiness of establishing a career and reputation. See 'The detective Novels of Joan Smith', *A Gallimaufry*, 29 May (2020). At: <https://gallimaufry.typepad.com/blog/2020/05/the-detective-novels-of-joan-smith.html>.

²⁶ The excellent series of novels by Dell Shannon (Elizabeth Linington [1921-1988]) featuring Detective Luis Mendoza fit this model.

²⁷ Anne McKendry, 'Medievalism, the Detective, and the Quest for Whodunnit', in *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*, ed. Helen Young (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015), pp. 155-178.

and is an example of the ‘ubi sunt’ *topos*, like Jacques Villon’s later and more famous *Mais ou sont les neiges d’antan?* (‘where are the snows of yesteryear?’, quoted in Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch 22*). Bernard of Morlais’ poem suggests that all departed things leave true names behind them (an idea appealing to a semiotician), and as Eco argues “language can speak of both the non-existent and the destroyed.”²⁸ Before arriving at this title Eco considered *The Abbey of the Crime* and *Adso of Melk* as other possibilities, the former drawing attention to the “murder mystery” element of the story, whereas the latter was more “neutral”.

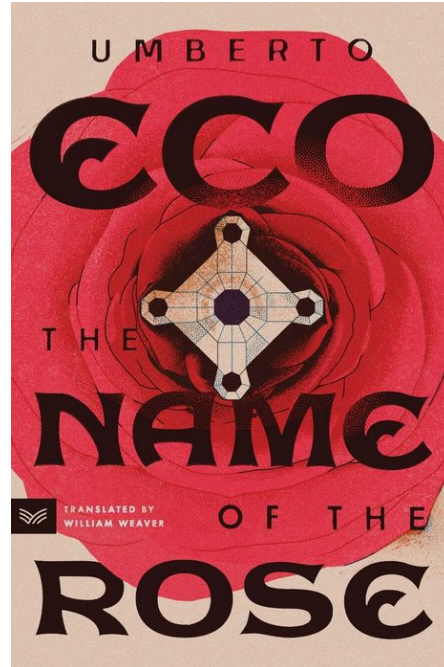


Figure 1. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (1980).

Concern with and reference to the *Book of Revelation* is also revealed in the apocalyptic themes and prophecies that run throughout the novel, not just in the interpretation of the pattern of the deaths. Part of these apocalyptic prophecies are the fixation on the workings and manifestations of the Antichrist. A learned and elderly monk, Ubertino di Casale, sees manifestations of the Antichrist and his lieutenants in the line of papal succession at the time.²⁹ Themes of the Apocalypse are carried through in the setting for the novel, the abbey is said to contain the largest collection of copies of and commentaries on the *Book of Revelation* in Christendom. Further, Ubertino di Casale, a real historical figure, was a Franciscan Spiritual, a break-away group in the Franciscan order who appropriated the views of a twelfth century Cistercian abbot, Joachim of Fiore, who in his exegesis of the *Book of Revelation* and Gospels foretold the coming of a new age, which he dated to shortly after the year 1200, which the Franciscan Spirituals associated with

²⁸ Umberto Eco, *Reflections on the Name of the Rose* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), p. 1.

²⁹ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Pan Macmillan, 1983), p. 61.

the coming of Saint Francis and his new Order.³⁰ The idea of the book is also important in *The Name of the Rose*. Medieval Christianity had a belief in the Bible's absolute totality of divinely inspired meaning and sanctioned the use of the book as metaphor for signifying systems. Eco appropriates medieval sign theory and the metaphors of the book in general (the mystery centres on the abbey's library) and the Bible in particular: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1, verse 1, quoted on p. 11). This can be linked to the abbot's defence of the old learning and the actions of the murderous Jorge of Burgos to preserve old learning rather than embracing the new: "the work of our order and in particular the work of this monastery, . . . the preservation of knowledge. Preservation of, I say, not search."³¹ Opposed to Jorge's desire to preserve the old and reject the new, it is the "detective" William of Baskerville who represents the 'New Man'. He possesses a number of machines (magnifying eyeglasses, for example) which even his novice and narrator, Adso, feared was "witchcraft" (p. 17). He is a disciple both of Roger Bacon and the new science, and William of Occam who represents new learning. Moreover, his place of birth recalls Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902).³²

Ellis Peters and Brother Cadfael: The Template for Medieval Detective Series

Despite this remarkable start for the genre of medieval detective novels, few that followed Eco could match his knowledge of the period, his narrative mastery, or his ingenuity of plot. Apart from Booker Prize winner Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play* (1995) the literary quality of medieval detective novels is limited and they tend to serve a market more reminiscent of the prolific Agatha Christie, where the reader likes a certain type of novel and reads many of them, disregarding their formulaic nature and similarities.³³ Like many other authors of medieval detective novels, Ellis Peters (1913-1995) wrote other novels under other names (for example, Edith Pargeter, Jolyon Carr, and John Redfern). Cadfael, her Welsh ex-crusader turned monk in the twelfth century abbey of Shrewsbury, created a pattern for medieval detective series. There are twenty Cadfael novels written between 1977 and 1994, a volume of short stories, and a television series starring Derek Jacobi as Cadfael. Shrewsbury in the Middle Ages is lovingly re-created, and the novels have stimulated the revival of the Guild of St Winifred at the Abbey of St Peter and St Paul and significantly boosted tourism. There is solid medieval history behind many of the plots (and the setting of the civil war between King Stephen and Maud, the "Empress," is skilfully employed). Peters' genre is closest to English village mysteries, where little that is genuinely disturbing happens, and murders happen off-stage.

³⁰ Frances Andrews, 'The Influence of Joachim in the 13th Century', in *A Companion to Joachim of Fiore*, ed. Mattias Riedl (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 190-266.

³¹ Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 399.

³² Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London: Penguin, 2024 [1902]).

³³ Mariadele Boccardi, 'Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play*: Narrative, Detection, History', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, vol. 7 (2016), pp. 204-213.

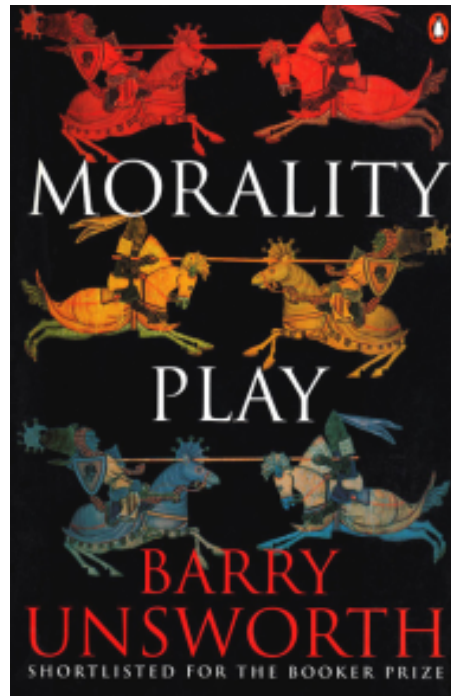


Figure 2. Barry Unsworth, *Morality Play* (1995).

The medieval crime solver must be an amateur, given that there is no equivalent of the modern police force. There are certain professions, such as the army, and the public service, ecclesiastics both cloistered and in the medieval universities, and the medical profession, which are life-callings involvement in which crime is more likely, and the skills to solve crimes more readily available. The monastery is a very popular setting, as it is a semi-closed community, and *The Name of the Rose* drew attention to the ways it resembled the modern isolated manor house or locked room subgenre.³⁴ Later, convents were featured, along with the rise of female “detectives”. These included Peter Tremayne’s Irish nun, Sister Fidelma – who as a legal practitioner has great freedom of movement³⁵ – and Margaret Frazer’s Sister Frevisse, whose life is more realistic in terms of the restrictions on women in the Middle Ages.³⁶

From the late 1970s when Ellis Peters began writing the Cadfael novels to the present there has been a change in the type of medieval crime novels being written. One important issue is whether these novels mystify or de-mystify the Middle Ages. Also, there has been a shift, in that the authors are often academics or at least trained medievalists (for example, Kate Sedley, Peter Tremayne, Catherine Jinks and P. C. Doherty). However, the novels they write are “modern”, filled with material that is notably absent from real medieval texts. This includes descriptions of sewage and garbage, and conveyance of the atmosphere of glamour that the city of London possesses. A

³⁴ Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014).

³⁵ Carole M. Cusack, ‘Fiction, Feminism and the ‘Celtic Church’: The Sister Fidelma Novels of Peter Tremayne’, in *Celts in Legend and Reality: Papers from the Sixth Australian Conference of Celtic Studies, University of Sydney, July 2007*, ed. Pamela O’Neill (Sydney: Sydney Series in Celtic Studies, 2010), pp. 315-342.

³⁶ The Sister Frevisse mysteries begin with *The Novice’s Tale* (1992) and by 2008 numbered seventeen books.

good contrast between the medieval and the modern may be gleaned through the comparison of Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth century *The Canterbury Tales* with the novels based on them by (academic) Paul C. Doherty. The Knight tells the first tale in both Chaucer and Doherty. The pilgrims set out from Southwark, which was a seedy red-light district in the Middle Ages. Chaucer makes no mention of this, but Doherty plays it up, to quite different effect.³⁷



Figure 3. Abbey of St Peter and St Paul, Shrewsbury (Wikimedia Commons).

The Appeal of Shrewsbury and Brother Cadfael

The Brother Cadfael novels of Ellis Peters are unusual in that they have spawned a wider cultural phenomenon. Shrewsbury Abbey is still standing, and the popularity of the novels has led to the establishment of a confraternity of Saint Winifred (which appears to have mostly American tourists as members). The linking of the real city of Shrewsbury into the novels is a technique encouraging readers to suspend their disbelief. For Ellis Peters the primary mode of authentication is geographical, with a broad historical framework. The map of medieval Shrewsbury is repeated with variations at the beginning of every novel. It is a scholarly and usable map, with verifiable detail (includes scale, for instance). When in Shrewsbury the tourist at the Abbey may purchase maps to go on “Brother Cadfael walks” around the town, to view houses and churches (among

³⁷ See P. C. Doherty, *An Ancient Evil* (London: St Martins Paperback, 1993).

other sites) featured in the novels. The map has enormous implications for the success of the series, as has the television film series starring Derek Jacobi (b. 1938).³⁸

The literary appeal is that they are very much classic English village mysteries, set in the Middle Ages. This stratagem places the “village mystery” in a context of national significance, the period of civil war during the reign of King Stephen (reigned 1135-1154). The personnel in the novel are generally middle-class or minor gentry, and there are not too many labouring people referred to. The narrow focus on Shrewsbury is opened up, in that events from the wider national, and international, scene impact on the town. For example, Hugh Beringar, the Sheriff, is away frequently, either fighting in battles for King Stephen, or attending assemblies at court and so on. Brother Cadfael is an unusual private investigator; he is pious and respected as a monk but with a distinctive understanding of the secular mindset, and aspects of his biography are gradually revealed in each novel. He has been a Crusader and a lover, and is a father also, so there is a distinctly secular side to him. He only joined the Benedictine Order at forty and is in his fifties when the series begins.³⁹



Figure 4. Badge of the confraternity of St Winifred (Wikimedia Commons).

His experience of the world gives him tolerance for human frailties, and tolerance for the narrowness of his brother monks. His sympathetic manner encourages people to confide in him (recalling the confessional rather than interrogation), and he has success in interacting with the secular leaders of the community. His talents as a healer and apothecary give him legitimate

³⁸ Marilyn Stasio, “SIGNOFF: That Healing Touch in a Brutal Century,” *The New York Times*, 3 January (1999). At: <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/03/tv/signoff-that-healing-touch-in-a-brutal-century.html>.

³⁹ McKendry, ‘Medievalism, the Detective, and the Quest for Whodunnit’, pp. 161-164.

reasons for being out of the monastic enclosure, and many opportunities to encounter the secular world. He therefore serves as a forensic scientist, which involves the establishment of unnatural death (his medical knowledge settles this), and like many amateur sleuths he has a good relationship with the authorities (for example, his close friendship with Hugh Beringar, the Sheriff, and his wife Aline Siward). He and Hugh work together effectively as a team.⁴⁰

These novels are classic “whodunnits”, set in a time when the values and workings of society are not alien. The benignly regimented monastic setting provides a cosy sense of institutional familiarity. Cadfael’s abbey is run like a boys’ boarding school, with Abbot Radulfus as an aloof but enlightened headmaster. Hugh Beringar’s role is that of the friendly local police inspector. The novels also lack ambiguity, in that there is always a murder and the motive is always clear.⁴¹ Hugh often detains someone in custody to smoke out a suspect. Brother Cadfael is sensitive and does not have his own agenda. He is a healer of both minds and bodies. This is inauthentic in terms of the Middle Ages, but highly attractive to modern readers.

Conclusion

The Middle Ages has grown in popularity as a source of alternative values in the West. Although there were scattered predecessors, the medieval detective novel as a significant cultural phenomenon begins with the publication of Ellis Peters’ *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (1977), featuring the Welsh Benedictine monk, Brother Cadfael. Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980) became a literary sensation and cemented the genre’s popularity. Though there are now secular medieval detective series, the clerical detective and the monastic/ conventual setting remain popular. It is here argued that the medieval detective novel as a cultural phenomenon may be used as evidence that the secularisation thesis is exhausted and the West is in a process of re-enchantment, with religious meanings being detached from institutional control and becoming “floating signs” that are assimilated by individuals into personal worldviews, values, and spiritualities.⁴² Yet, this is not the only possible interpretation; it may be that these literary productions are more indicative of nostalgia, and the desire to render life meaningful by escapism into an earlier era, where faith was strong, and God’s will prevailed.

⁴⁰ H. Wendell Howard, ‘The World of Brother Cadfael’, *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2008), pp. 149-162.

⁴¹ Anthony Hopkins, ‘The Moral World of Brother Cadfael’, in *Cordially Yours, Brother Cadfael*, ed. Anne K. Kaler (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1998), 39-52.

⁴² Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 42.