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The Great Detectives

An investigation of the modern mystery story and its fascination to devotees the world over, in which we attempt to unravel the puzzle of why Sherlock Holmes, Inspector Maigret and the rest should live although they were never born . . .

□ The cookbook called for white instead of red wine in the coq-au-vin, with just a drop of sloe gin 15 minutes before serving. The author, French food critic Robert Courtine, explained that this is what Madame Maigret prepares and "simmers with love" for her husband Jules, better known to detective story fanciers around the world as Chief Inspector Maigret of the Paris police. Courtine had pieced the recipe together from references in several Maigret stories. Since Madame Maigret is from Alsace, he specified an Alsatian Traminger both in the sauce and to be drunk with the dish.

The use of the present tense in the recipe is instructive in that it shows how certain literary creations can loom so large in our minds as to become virtual living persons. Every reader of the Maigret stories knows that Maigret is frequently detained from sitting down to his wife's delicious offerings by the untimely demands of his work. Readers also know that Madame Maigret keeps a tight rein on her patience when this happens. They sympathize with both of them; she in her kitchen with the dinner over-cooking, he sitting with his stomach grumbling in a car on some shabby side-street waiting to confront a suspect. To Maigret enthusiasts, the Chief Inspector and his good wife are alive and — apart from the occasional bout of indigestion — well.

In the world of detective fiction Maigret stands with the great Sherlock Holmes himself on that transcendental plateau of literature where their fictional doings are, to the reader, intimate reality. We have come into their households just as they have come into ours — in Holmes's case a very strange household indeed.

It has been said, though with no such definitive proof as the subject himself would demand, that Sherlock Holmes is the best-known character in all of English literature. He is a member of that most exclusive group of imaginative creations who have outlived not only their creators, but their era. Through films, radio, television and comic strips, the peculiarities of Holmes's personality are known to vast numbers of people who have never read the original Holmes stories. In what must be the ultimate test of immortality, many madmen evidently believe they are Sherlock Holmes.

This probably would have pleased his creator, Arthur Conan Doyle, a spiritualist who dabbled in the ways of immortality. Conan Doyle hugely enjoyed the game of persuading readers that Holmes was a real, if somewhat shadowy, human being. He did this by deftly scattering references to actual persons and events throughout his stories. Their tongues in their cheeks, Holmes scholars are only too happy to keep the game going to this day.

The first thing they will tell you is that the Holmes stories were not written by Conan Doyle

at all, but by a rather stuffy but good-natured chap named Dr. Watson. Sherlock Holmes societies everywhere (and they *are* everywhere) operate on the elementary premise that Holmes and his apostle really did make their headquarters in their lodgings at 212B Baker Street. The address does not exist now, but they explain that is because of demolition and rebuilding since Holmes's and Watson's heyday. It is reported that the firm which occupies the nearest number to 212B regularly receives mail addressed to Sherlock Holmes.

So, long after the last hackney vanished from the gaslit streets of London, Sherlock Holmes still strides conceitedly across the stage of fancy, practising what Watson called his speciality — omniscience. Since Conan Doyle's copyright finally lapsed a few years ago, new books and films about Holmes's adventures by other authors have been appearing regularly, supposedly culled from hitherto-undiscovered documents. Holmes is still capable of bowling over readers and audiences with the might of his mental processes. He is doing very well for a man of 125 years of age.

What is it that makes fictional detectives, above all literary figures, live on agelessly in our imaginations? A conversation among any group of mystery story fans — which means almost any group of people who like to read for relaxation — will turn up endless minutia about the lives of characters who never existed in the strict sense of the word. You might hear about how Charlie Chan not only has a number of sons but a daughter; about how Hercule Poirot once failed to tell someone who thought he was French that he was really Belgian; about how Nero Wolfe might just be Sherlock Holmes's illegitimate son, the issue of a liaison between the great detective and a forgotten lady long ago in Montenegro (the clue is the similarity in the spelling of the two names; note the identical vowels).

In at least one instance a fictional detective may be found slipping into this state of mind himself, with the curious effect that his excursions into unreality lend him a special air of reality. Inspector Van der Valk of the Amsterdam police, the creation of author Nicholas Freeling, is an avid reader of Maigret stories. He often wonders when faced with a particularly difficult problem what Maigret would do in a case like this.

Obviously the lasting appeal of the imaginary detectives has much to do with the type of story in which they are the leading players. Everybody loves a mystery. Small children are enthralled by the mysterious, hence their passion for riddles and hide-and-seek. Adults tend to like puzzles of all kinds, none more than the puzzle of who is responsible for the corpse on the drawing-room floor.

Other heroes come and go, but detectives go on forever

In common with characters in comic strips and television serials and situation comedies, fictional sleuths owe at least part of their familiarity to the fact that they keep appearing in one story after another. But while the other types soon fade from memory when their stint in the limelight is over, the detectives retain their prominence through constant retellings of their adventures in reprinted paperback books and fresh adaptations for television, film and the stage.

Yet, despite the fact that no lesser a literary figure than Edgar Allan Poe is credited with writing the first modern detective stories and such splendid writers as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler have specialized in them, detective fiction is still not fully recognized as a serious art form. The more earnest literary critics frown upon mysteries. Only recently an historian of the detective genre put it down as "pre-eminently the literature of the sick-room and the railway carriage". But if art is any reflection of the preoccupations of society, then the persistent demand for crime fiction in all media should make it an important variety of art.

In the television age, the literary critics have been joined by their counterparts who sit in judgment on TV in suggesting that the public really

ought to turn its mind to something better than crime and mystery. They complain that far too many tough cops and clever sleuths come and go on the screens in our homes. But it should be noted that as fast as such shows go, new ones emerge, and old ones make a reappearance. Their attractiveness must say something about the inner feelings of their consumers, including an atavistic fascination with robbery and murder. Still, if people are interested in crime for its own sake, they are also interested in punishment. They like the thrills that go with deception and pursuit, but they are not on the side of the criminal. They want to see justice triumph in the end.

This is where the fictional detective comes in — as an instrument of justice. He is the man (or, in rare cases, she is the woman) who overcomes all the perplexing and occasionally dangerous obstacles to see to it that wrong-doers pay for their crimes. Moreover, the detective achieves justice when it seems as if it will not be done through ordinary channels. If it were not for his skill and diligence in penetrating to the heart of the mystery where less intelligent and intrepid people would have failed, the culprit would have got off free.

The image of the detective as a modern knight errant

According to some historians, the detective's non-fictional antecedents are considerably less noble. The original detective, they say, was at best a spy and at worst a stool-pigeon who operated on the seamy fringes of the centralized police forces of the cities of Europe in the mid-19th century. Detectives were regarded with suspicion and hostility by the public and looked down upon as a necessary evil by the police.

A more literary approach to the history of the detective gives him a more aristocratic pedigree. Here he is seen as the successor to the knight errant of old, that wandering figure who comes into a situation at a moment of crisis, rights the wrongs, and then rides off in search of new wrongs to right. Could it be that our classic modern sleuth, our Philip Marlowe or Lew Archer or Kojak, is really a reincarnation of that man riding in pursuit of a holy grail, that rescuer of endangered maidens? If so, does that account for the detective's pull on the imagination? Is there something deep within us that makes us want to believe in the reality of such a man, even though we are aware that he exists only on paper or on a screen?

There can be no question about our psychological need for heroes. A hero is someone bigger than life, and the detective certainly fills that bill. He is smarter and, in most instances, stronger than most of us, and he has a keener sense of integrity. He is usually as much a protector of the weak and innocent as a hunter of the guilty.

Softness and humanity in the chief of the homicide squad

Perhaps the most unusual of all detective heroes — and some think the greatest — is the above-mentioned Inspector Maigret. Maigret makes a good focal point for any discussion of the differences and similarities among fictional detectives, and of why they are capable of living in our minds.

Maigret is the creation of an acknowledged writer of genius, Georges Simenon. Simenon has written more than 150 novels, the bulk of which are not mystery or detective stories; Maigret figures in only about one-third of the author's works. In his other novels, Simenon deals with themes like sickness, old age, ignorance, suicide and madness.

It was into this nightmare world that, in 1930, Simenon introduced the serene and reassuring figure of Inspector Maigret. Critics have seen two faces to Simenon's work: tragedy and wisdom. The wisdom shines forth in the Maigret stories, where the stark themes of tragedy, subjected to the uncompromising glare of Simenon's artistry, come under the softening influence of Maigret's humanity.

Softness and humanity are not words one would normally associate with the chief of the homicide squad in a great city. But the reader soon finds that Maigret is closer to essential human concerns than the other great sleuths. Their personalities and lifestyles set them apart from everyday life and ordinary people. Most of them are bachelors with a pretty insensitive approach to the opposite sex. Almost all are eccentric in one way or another. They usually make a point of thumbing their noses at convention.

Maigret, on the other hand, is one of us — a quiet, pipe-smoking, rather overweight fellow who would make a good neighbour. He is no tough guy of the American pattern, forever punching out or shooting down his adversaries. On the contrary, he is touchingly vulnerable.

In Maigret's eye, the question is not "whodunit", but why?

His thinking runs counter to that of the general run of fictional detectives. Mystery stories usually hinge on a puzzle that demands a solution; in the orthodox "whodunit", the overriding consideration is to unknot the puzzle and thereby solve the crime. Maigret is not so much interested in who did it as in *why* they did it. The killer's identity is often revealed at least half-way through the story. In one famous case, we are told in the title: *Le Charretier de la Providence.*

All of which might seem to lead to the conclusion that Maigret is so different from the others as to be in a class by himself. Actually, though, he is the exception that proves the rule. For he is above all a public protector, as are all his confrères in the realm of fictional crime detection. They all bring their wits, their instincts, and sometimes their muscles to bear on the task of restoring the social certainties that have been upset by the commission of a crime.

"In the complex and perilous world of the metropolis he acts as the defender of embattled innocence and the champion of the dominant social morality," literary historian Ian Ousby wrote of the fictional detective. Whether an upper class gent like The Saint or a rough diamond like J. D. MacDonald's Travis McGee, the detective's place is on the side of the standards of honesty and decency to which the majority subscribe.

Seen in this light, our paper detectives really are modern knight errants. It is difficult to picture Agatha Christie's Miss Marple or G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown riding in on horseback to rout villains and vandals, but that is basically the tradition they followed every time they applied marvellous intellects to the question of who disturbed the social order by exterminating another human being.

We can only hope that heroes like these really do exist

In addition to the fact that detective stories are fun and make excellent harmless tranquillizers, they would indeed seem to owe some of their enduring popularity to a human need for knight errant images. Moral philosophers have said that knight errants represent the conscience. Even Don Quixote tilting ridiculously at the windmills is an expression of the latent nobility of man coming out to confront the dark forces that trouble the soul.

The question of why we should want to believe in these mythical creatures to the extent of pretending they actually exist leads us back into the comforting, tobacco-scented presence of Inspector Maigret. Maigret is good, strong, simple, wise, and understanding. Who would not want to believe in a man like that?

The same goes for all the other great detectives (take your pick) suspended in time as they strive in their own particular ways to accomplish justice. For without the possibility that people with the will and skill to deliver us from evil walk the earth, where would we be? We can only hope that such people exist not only on paper — that somewhere there really are heroes fighting for the freedom from molestation that is the basis of everyday civilized life.

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