

Crime Fiction Reloaded

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Edwards, Martin. *The Golden Age of Murder*. London: Harper Collins, 2015. 528 pages. ISBN 0008105960. Hb. £16.59.

Martin Edwards's *The Golden Age of Murder* (2015) might disappoint those who hunger for theoretical discussions about Golden Age detective fiction but proves to be an indispensable book for anyone in search of a thorough and comprehensive historical study of the genre. It is astonishingly rich—sometimes too much to handle at one sitting—in stunning details about the original members of the Detection Club, the diversity of their themes and narrative techniques they used to shape their own style within the boundaries of the formula. Edwards clearly defines the purpose of his work in the “Introduction” by pointing out that even though Golden Age detective fiction remains a critically neglected field, it continues to have a tangible presence in the twenty-first century. It prepared the ground for many popular contemporary themes in crime fiction such as forensic pathology (J. J. Connington's *The Four Defences* [1940]), serial killing (Anthony Berkeley's *The Silk Stocking Murders* [1928]), miscarriages of justice (Agatha Christie's *Five Little Pigs* [1942]), sexual perversions (Gladys Mitchell's *Speedy Death* [1929]), justified murders (Milward Kennedy's *Sic Transit Gloria* [1936]), and mentally disturbed criminals (Anthony Berkeley—published under the pen name of Francis Iles—*Malice Aforethought* [1931]).

This thematic diversity of Golden Age crime fiction may surprise both the reader and the researcher. Edwards claims it was disregarded for so many years, because of the restrictions on the patterns available for a “good” detective story limited by S. S. Van Dine's twenty rules. The second reason is the widespread assumption that this type of fiction tends to be definitely cozy, lacking morbid scenes or upsetting social issues, and is conservative in its political ideology. The latter argument has a further important corollary: Edwards seems to imply that the leading figures of the interwar period, such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Anthony Berkeley, exercised such a powerful influence on shaping the narrative features and socio-political attitudes of Golden Age detective fiction that they might have prevented critics from attempting to carry out a more comprehensive study. *The Golden Age of Murder* is essential in its readiness to tackle and reassess such myths—suggesting that the rigid pattern might have discouraged readers or scholars

from looking under the surface, while offering to revise the orthodox views of the genre.

The idea that the members of the Detection Club formed a homogenous group with similar thematic preoccupations, social status, and political ideology is suspect because they came from all walks of life and maintained very different ideas about contemporary social and cultural changes. Some examples of the group's diversity are the Hungarian baroness Emma Orczy, who made her name with *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905), and Arthur Morrison, who used his gift as a writer to escape London's slums. The latter's humble background proved extremely important as he could demonstrate a clear understanding of the working class beyond either Sayers or Christie. His book, *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894), with its London East End locations, appealed to and anticipated the atmosphere of American private-eye stories. Moreover, the most successful writers of the age were so influential in the genre that their political views—often identified with the right wing—caused a “peculiar amnesia to afflict critical discussion of the Golden Age” (68). Among Golden Age authors some joined the Communist or the Liberal Party, such as Douglas and Margaret Cole, “the leading lights of the Left among Golden Age detective novelists” (69).

The novelty of Edwards's insights into the abundance of themes and structures of the genre lies in his recognition of the connection between the disconcerting biographical details of some of the Club members and the secrets or repressions their characters suffer from in the novels. He points out that Sayers suffered immensely from having an illegitimate child, whose existence had to be kept a secret. He also mentions Christie's mysterious eleven-day disappearance, which nobody could inquire into or account for, Berkeley's obsessive campaign over Edward VIII's abdication—“the most striking symptom of an increasingly troubled mind” (339)—and Gladys Mitchell's, known as Mike for her friends, lesbian disposition.

Another asset is the book's immense background information about true crime events that fascinated and inspired the writers. From this perspective, one can conclude that Golden Age writers greatly contributed to the documentation of the most scandalous murder cases of the age. One such example is Sayers's *The Documents in the Case* (1930), which was inspired by the Bywaters Case, in which Edith Thompson and Frederick Bywaters were both charged with the murder of Edith's husband and were executed. The peculiarity of the case was that the execution was still carried out despite the petition signed by one million people to acquit Edith claiming that no woman had been hanged in Britain for sixteen years. The uncertain circumstances of

true crime cases, where missing facts or evidence often lead to an inability to reconstruct the real events, incited Golden Age writers to fill in the gaps with fictional elements and find a reasonable answer for the crime and the motives. In many unsolved cases, these authors longed to try themselves as actual detectives. Edwards explains this feature as a sign of the return to the origins of the genre itself by pointing out that Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), which "showed how to transform a real-life case into detective fiction" (98), fascinated the succeeding generation of crime writers. Another example is Agatha Christie's imagining herself as a real-life detective just as Sayers did. Christie was intrigued by an unsolved Victorian domestic mystery, the Bravo case, as a result of which she published an article in 1929 about possible suspects.

Many of us are familiar with the type of crime narrative, represented by the *Columbo* series, which, deviating from the usual narrative structure of the whodunit, murder-investigation-solution pattern, inverts this logic, starting by showing the reader a "foolproof" crime, and then describing how the detective solves it. It was Richard Austin Freeman who devised this type of crime writing, focusing on the "how [of] the discovery" (286). Despite their groundbreaking inversion of the classic formula, his stories received little attention, and Freeman abandoned the form before the First World War. Sayers, who proved to be the heart and soul of the Detection Club and raised the standard of literary criticism of crime/detective fiction, encouraged some of her colleagues, for instance, the Coles and Freeman Wills Crofts, to continue writing inverted stories in the interwar period. Henry Wade's *Heir Presumptive* (1935) is considered an outstanding inverted crime novel; nevertheless, the form reached its widest audience only in the 1970s, when *Columbo* appeared on television.

Edwards also provides a thorough description of a relatively forgotten form, the round-robin novels, written by a team of writers. A notable example is *The Fate of Fenella* (1891-92), a serialized detective story with contributors like Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker. Similarly to inverted crime stories, the form received only sparse consideration until Sayers urged her fellow writers to plunge themselves into writing *The Floating Admiral* (1931), which remained the most illustrious model of the Golden Age round-robin novel.

Martin Edwards's *The Golden Age of Murder* may well become a key study which reveals peculiar facts and secrets about the first members of the Detection Club. Beyond discussing intriguing biographical details and how these affected their writing, its strength lies in pointing out how Golden Age

detective fiction influenced or promoted post-war, contemporary crime fiction in terms of themes and form. Anyone setting out to read the book will face the challenge of keeping this lengthy work under control, with its many details that occasionally result in a surfeit, but will eventually recognize its merits and enjoy its witty and informative way of sharing everything with the reader.

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