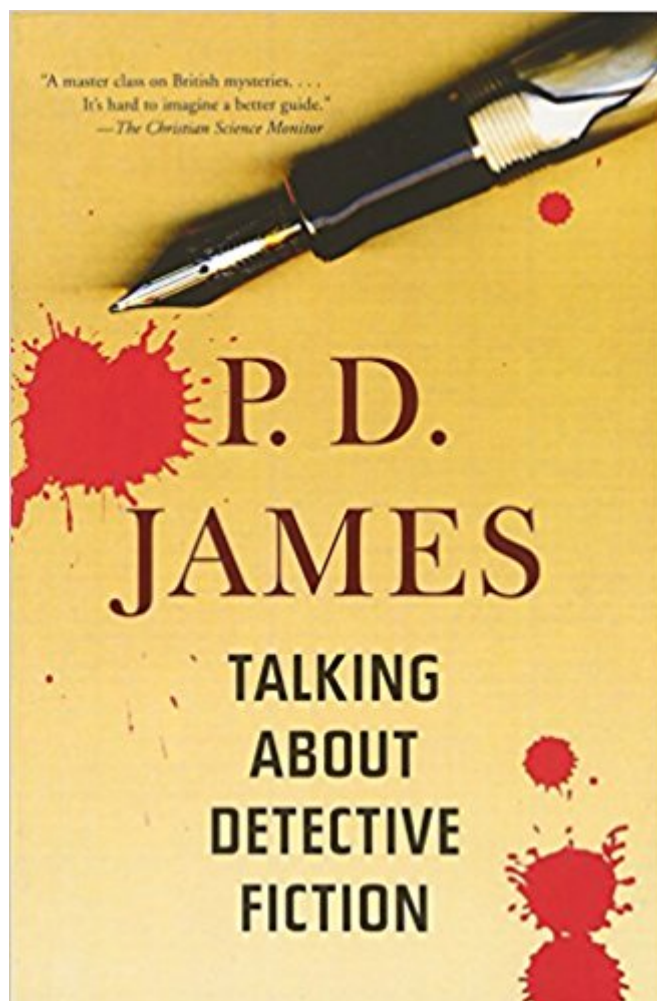




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Talking About Detective Fiction



Synopsis

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

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A Q&A with P.D. James Question: What made you decide to write a book about detective fiction?

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

mysteries from the earliest writings and no doubt tales of mystery and murder were recounted by our remote ancestors round the camp fires by the tribal storyteller. Murder is the unique crime, the only one for which we can make no reparation, and has always been greeted with a mixture of repugnance, horror, fear, and fascination. We are particularly intrigued by the motives which cause a man or woman to step across the invisible line which separates a murderer from the rest of humanity. Human beings also love a puzzle and a strong story, and mysteries have both. Question: Do you think there is (or was) a Golden Age of detective fiction? P.D. James: The years between the two world wars are generally regarded as the Golden Age of detective fiction and certainly, in England in particular, there was a surge of excellent writing. The detective story became immensely popular and a number of very talented writers were engaged in the craft. I feel that there are so many good novelists writing mysteries today that we may well be entering a second Golden Age. Question: Do you feel that your own Adam Dalgliesh owes anything to any particular literary detectives who came before him? P.D. James: I don't feel that Adam Dalgliesh owes anything to a particular literary detective as the heroes of the mystery novels which I particularly enjoyed in the Golden Age were usually amateurs, and I was anxious to create a professional detective. Question: If you were to recommend 3 or 4 books that represent the best of detective fiction in all its forms, which books would they be? P.D. James: It is difficult to know what books to recommend as personal taste plays such a large part and modern readers may feel out of touch with the Golden Age mysteries which I so much enjoyed. Among them are *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, *Tiger in the Smoke* by Margery Allingham, *Murder Must Advertise* by Dorothy L. Sayers, and *Tragedy at Law* by Cyril Hare. It would take a much longer list to represent the mystery in all its forms, and it would certainly include the American hard-boiled school. (Photo © Ulla Montan) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

One of the most widely read and respected writers of detective fiction, James (*The Private Patient*) explores the genre's origins (focusing primarily on Britain) and its lasting appeal. James cites Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, published in 1868, as the first detective novel and its hero, Sergeant Cuff, as one of the first literary examples of the professional detective (modeled after a real-life Scotland Yard inspector). As for Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, James argues that their staying power has as much to do with the gloomy London atmosphere, the enveloping miasma of mystery and terror, as with the iconic sleuth. Devoting much of her time to writers in the Golden Age of British detective fiction (essentially between the two world wars), James dissects the work of four heavyweights: Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh. Though

she's more appreciative of Marsh and Allingham (declaring them novelists, not merely fabricators of ingenious puzzles), James acknowledges not only the undeniable boost these women gave to the genre but their continuing appeal. For crime fiction fans, this master class from one of the leading practitioners of the art will be a real treat. 9 illus. (Dec.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Who better than P.D. James herself to provide this short history of the detective story? This book of less than 200 pages can be read in a few hours, but it contains valuable insights into the development and crafting of a literary form which some affect to despise but most find enormously appealing. James begins with the original detectives Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown (with, since she's concentrating on British writers, a short nod to Edgar Allan Poe), then takes on the inter war Golden Age, pauses to consider the "hard boiled" school, and then comes to my favorite chapter dealing with the four great women detective story writers: Christie, Sayers, Allingham, and Marsh. The book rounds off with a discussion of why some like detective stories while others don't and an overview of more modern stories, with some predictions as to future trends in the oeuvre. Naturally, since it comes from an experienced and accomplished writer, the book reads very well, with James' trademark wit and penetrating analysis very much on display. Because the format is so short, it often seems as if one is listening to a lecture (and how wonderful it would be to actually hear James give such a lecture!) and occasionally one wishes for more. But James kindly mentions a number of works to which her readers can turn for more information, and also provides a very handy bibliography. I will treasure this book alongside my collection of favorite mysteries, which needless to say includes many of James' own works!

This small book focuses on British detective fiction, but discusses the Americans, too, from Poe to Hammett. It is both a history of the evolution of the detective story, as well as a social and psychological analysis of why it is so popular among more civilized cultures and readers. The elements and structure of the most enduring novels and short stories is revealed as they were invented and refined, from the late 18th century through the 1960s. You don't have to be a huge fan of detective or other crime novels to get a lot out of this book; but any aspiring author in this genre would be remiss to not absorb every page carefully.

If you needed more proof that great writers are also great readers, this book adds to the evidence.

James has written an entertaining survey of the detective fiction she likes, and she likes a lot. Don't expect a broad survey. Instead, she focuses on her favorites. She devotes a large part of the book to the four giants of British detective fiction, Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Dorothy B. Sayers, and Ngaio Marsh, but she also gives Conan-Doyle and the American giants, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler their due, along with many others. She also spends a fair amount of time considering the role of women, both as authors and characters. And she provides a little, though not as much as fans might like, insight into her own books. Given how prolific, and sometimes uneven, some of her favorite authors were, James' recommendations on specific books provides a good starting place for checking out new writers. The book is now about 15 years old, and James clearly has a preference for the 1930s for British mysteries and the 1950s and 60s for American, so don't expect as much on the latest authors, though she does have some recent favorites, including Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton. Overall, a good read for fans of detective fiction.

P. D. James's nifty little mystery history should be a welcome addition to any whodunit reader's library. At just under 200 pages and small enough to fit into a handbag, it makes a nice take-along book for sit-and-wait situations, an inspired gift for a mystery lover friend and, for many readers, an introduction to writers who'll likely be as new to you as they were to me. Except for a chapter on Hammett and Chandler of the American hardboiled school and some admiring, but brief, tips of the hat to Sara Paretsky, Georges Simenon and Henning Mankell, James concentrates her attention on her fellow Brits--Conan Doyle, Chesterton, Crispin, Christie, Sayers, Allingham, Marsh, Rendell and others--with particular emphasis on the so-called "Golden Age" when the plots were ingenious, the murders horrible and bizarre and the villains superhumanly cunning ... "not the days of the swift bash to the skull followed by sixty thousand words of psychological insight." She also looks at how the genre has evolved since the Victorian age and why it has remained so popular. Then, perhaps most interesting of all, she takes us inside the writing process for a closeup look at some of the challenges peculiar to detective-story writing in general and to her own Adam Dalgliesh novels in particular. Most illuminating.

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