

# Christianity and the Detective Story



# Christianity and the Detective Story

Edited by

Anya Morlan and Walter Raubicheck

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Edited by Anya Morlan and Walter Raubicheck

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*This volume is dedicated to Ralph McNerny  
Philosopher, Professor, and Mystery Writer*



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## PREFACE

# THE ART OF MURDER: G.K. CHESTERTON AND THE DETECTIVE STORY

DALE AHLQUIST

PRESIDENT, AMERICAN CHESTERTON SOCIETY

G.K. Chesterton was one of the most prolific writers who ever lived. His literary output has still not been calculated. He wrote in all genres. But he once said that he would like nothing more than to spend all his time writing detective stories, with the possible exception of spending all his time *reading* detective stories.<sup>1</sup>

I suppose we could say that this great purveyor of paradox was something of a paradox himself. A great lover of the faith, a great defender of the faith, a great lover of life, great liver of life, great defender of life. And yet he plotted and planned over fifty murders, and carried each of one them out—if only on paper, and if only for our pleasure.

Chesterton says that the great advantage that the literary murderer has is that he can “sit happily by his own peaceful fireside, devising fifteen or twenty ways of murdering his wife,” make money from it, and “yet retain his wife after all.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, the idea of exploring all the different ways in which to murder one’s wife brings up the first of the many important points that I wish to make. Chesterton really is the inventor of the cozy murder mystery. He’s the one who brought murder home because the home is where the most dramatic events of life really take place. Chesterton says, “Most [of the] great dramas, and nearly all tragic, terrible, butcherly and bloody dramas, were domestic dramas.”<sup>3</sup> Oedipus, Hamlet, Macbeth, and so on. That is because the domestic setting preserves the unity of the drama. It is “performed within a definite framework of time and space, and, above all, with a more or less definite cast of characters.”<sup>4</sup>

If this works for the drama, it especially works for the detective story: “A puzzle must consist of a definite number of pieces, or it is not a puzzle but a mere paralysis of the mind, a blank bewilderment.”<sup>5</sup> This is one of the reasons that Chesterton developed what is known as the locked-room mystery, the baffling crime committed in a confined space, with a limited number of suspects, and the reader and the detective on the same level, with same available clues.

Until Chesterton came along there were really only two kinds of detective stories. There were the Sherlock Holmes stories, and there were the bad imitations of the Sherlock Holmes stories. They all involved the super sleuth, the detective whose powers of deduction were somewhat unnatural. The sort of guy who can hear someone walking in the next room and figure out that one of his parents was Romanian.

But Chesterton did something totally different. He introduced the underdog detective, someone who is not merely on the same playing field as the rest of us, but who seems outmatched by his opponent. And who was this underdog detective? It was Father Brown.

The fact that Father Brown is a Catholic priest is important because in early twentieth-century England, Catholic priests were unimportant. That is the great inspiration for this character. He is in fact based on a real priest named Fr. John O'Connor, with whom Chesterton became friends, and with whom Chesterton was very impressed, but with whom other people were not particularly impressed. In fact, they were even dismissive of him because of the fact that he was a priest. Chesterton realized the possible advantage such a character would have because of his perceived disadvantage.

According to Ronald Knox,<sup>6</sup> who was also a detective story writer, and who was also a Catholic priest, Chesterton actually wrote the first Father Brown story because he was a writer and he needed money. He went to a publisher's office, and asked what was selling. “Detective fiction,” he was told. So he sat down right there in the waiting room and penned “The Blue Cross,” introducing to the world, “that officious little loafer” with “the face of dumpling,” Father Brown.

Chesterton would go on to write over fifty more Father Brown stories, and they continue to be the most popular thing he ever wrote. And there's a reason for that. It has less to do with Chesterton than with the reading tastes of the public (which happen to be reflected by Chesterton's own reading tastes.) The public likes detective stories. Why is that?

The cynical answer is that it likes bad literature. That is also the wrong answer. Chesterton explains:

The public does not like bad literature. The public likes a certain kind of literature and likes that kind of literature even when it is bad better than another kind of literature even when it is good. Nor is this unreasonable; for the line between different types of literature is as real as the line between tears and laughter; and to tell people who can only get bad comedy that you have some first-class tragedy is as irrational as to offer a man who is shivering over weak warm coffee a really superior sort of ice.<sup>7</sup>

Most people prefer detective stories and sensational shockers to other kinds of literature. "But, preferring a certain thing, they prefer it good if they can get it,"<sup>8</sup> which is why the Sherlock Holmes stories were particularly popular. The man on the street might prefer bad ale to good crème de menthe. But he also prefers good ale to bad ale. So also with the books he reads. Writers have a hard time understanding this. So do critics.

There are a lot of writers out there who are convinced that they have written a great novel, but they despise the man in the street, and then they are surprised when no one wants to read their book, and angry when no one wants to publish their book. And so, says Chesterton, they have "no right to expect to be as popular as [Arthur] Conan Doyle any more than a man who made . . . telescopes would expect them to sell like umbrellas. But it would be odd to deduce from this that the ordinary man has a weird and occult tenderness for a bad umbrella."<sup>9</sup>

Again, Chesterton reflects the tastes of the common reader when he says: "I would rather have the man who devotes a short story to saying that he can solve the problem of a murder in Margate than the man who devotes a whole book to saying that he cannot solve the problem of things in general."<sup>10</sup>

The critics have been unkind to detective fiction, but they don't come out and say what their chief criticism is: it is the notion that if it is popular, it can't be good. The common man cannot be trusted. But by "a curious confusion," says Chesterton, "many modern critics have passed from the proposition that a masterpiece may be unpopular to the other proposition that unless it is unpopular it cannot be a masterpiece."<sup>11</sup>

Chesterton's greatness as a literary critic is that he is the voice of the Common Man. He does not tell the audience what it *should* feel. He explains to the audience what it *does* feel. He puts our emotions into words, which is one of the things that great writers are able to do.

So why do we like detective stories? How does Chesterton explain that? First of all, we like detective fiction because we have an innate sense of justice, and we are pleased to see justice acted out. The best sort of detective story usually begins with an act of justice, that is, a dead millionaire. Millionaires for some reason make the best corpses. But if a

millionaire isn't available for some reason, some other corpse will have to do. Chesterton says if there isn't a fresh corpse under the sofa by the end of the first chapter, there is very little reason to keep reading.<sup>12</sup>

He says the problem with the modern intellectual novelist is that he will squander his talents by creating an interesting, subtle character who is a skeptic or a free-lover, and then, when he is ready to be murdered, "when he is in every detail of his character demanding and requiring and, as it were, crying aloud to be murdered, the novelist does not murder him after all. This is a serious waste of a fine opportunity."<sup>13</sup> "A novel without any death in it is . . . a novel without any life in it."<sup>14</sup>

But of course, as much as we enjoy a good murder, we enjoy even more the murder being solved (which I hope is what you thought I was going to say when I was talking about justice.) The detective is a moral figure. He is also a poetic figure. There is a reason we can't let murderers get away with murder. The moral order has to be preserved. And why does the moral order have to be preserved?

One of Chesterton's earliest published essays is "A Defense of Detective Stories," and there he writes that it is the

constant tendency of the Old Adam to rebel against. . . civilization, to preach departure and rebellion. . . . By dealing with the unsleeping sentinels who guard the outposts of society, [the detective story] tends to remind us that we live in an armed camp, making war with a chaotic world, and that the criminals, the children of chaos, are nothing but the traitors within our gates. When the detective in a police romance stands alone... fearless amid the knives and fists of a thief's kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure. . . . The romance of the police force is thus the whole romance of man.<sup>15</sup>

As for the criticism he once heard from a real detective who said that mystery writers know very little about the business of detecting crimes, Chesterton responded: "It seems to me quite a complete retort, to say that the detectives know very little about the business of writing stories."<sup>16</sup>

Every good story is a moral story. Children, who love stories more than anyone, understand this; in fact, they demand it from a story. Chesterton says, "Children are innocent and love justice, whereas we who are guilty naturally prefer mercy."<sup>17</sup>

A good murder mystery is always a moral tale. Chesterton argued this point early on: "Sensational novels are the most moral part of modern fiction. . . . [I]t is, I think, the abstract truth that any literature that

represents our life as dangerous and startling is truer than any literature that represents it as dubious and languid.”<sup>18</sup>

But by the end of his life, Chesterton saw an increasing tendency in detective fiction to reflect the morality of the modern world, or rather the lack of morality. When there is no code of morals, “anybody may murder anybody because anybody may marry anybody.”<sup>19</sup>

Obviously a character like Father Brown represents the good. In representing the moral order, Father Brown defends the faith, but he also defends reason:

People will tell you that theories don’t matter and that logic and philosophy aren’t practical. Don’t you believe them. Reason is from God, and when things are unreasonable there is something the matter.<sup>20</sup>

You might almost say that Father Brown makes reason one of the virtues, or at least shows how it is connected to the virtues: “People who lose all their charity generally lose all their logic.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the moral aspect, there is another reason we like detective stories. We like surprises: “The detective story differs from every other story in this: that the reader is only happy if he feels a fool . . . The essence of a mystery tale is that we are suddenly confronted with a truth which we have never suspected and yet can see to be true.”<sup>22</sup>

Detective stories are sensational, but the greatest sensation is surprise. And the best part about the surprise is that we are shocked by something we already know. The answer was sitting there the whole time, but we just didn’t see it. The best example of this is the Father Brown story “The Invisible Man,” in which Chesterton figures out that the murderer is . . . oh wait! I can’t tell you!

This device of surprising us with what we already know is not only basis of good detective fiction, but it is also the basis of good literary criticism. (Chesterton excelled at both genres.) The good critic also tells us what we already know; that’s why we recognize it to be true. But he reveals this truth in such a surprising way that we believe we are seeing it for the first time.

Chesterton says a good detective story should be simple:

Now the essential of a good detective story is that it is simple. It is almost the definition of a bad detective story that it is complicated. The ideal story does not depend on a mass of details that nobody could possibly know; it depends on one fact which anybody could easily guess—but nobody does. For the murder story has for its high and holy purpose the pious intention of making the reader feel a fool. It is thus an encouragement to Christian humility, and a most excellent leveler of the foolish and the wise. The

reader thus religiously enlightened should leap from his chair with a yell, crying aloud that he is an accursed ass, for not having seen something so obvious and simple as the mystery.<sup>23</sup>

It is almost an act of repentance—because it means admitting we were wrong, now that the truth has been revealed. This act of revelation is important to the detective story:

The true object of an intelligent detective story is not to baffle the reader, but to enlighten the reader; but to enlighten him in such a manner that each successive portion of the truth comes as a surprise. In this, as in much nobler types of mystery, the object of the true mystic is not merely to mystify, but to illuminate. The object is not darkness, but light; but light in the form of lightning.<sup>24</sup>

Or, as Father Brown says, “Real mystics don’t hide mysteries, they reveal them.”<sup>25</sup>

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Chesterton was the first writer to use the term “mystery story,” which he did in an essay in 1907.<sup>26</sup> “Mystery story” would come to compete with “detective story” as the generic name for this branch of fiction, and Chesterton would insist that “mystery story” was the better choice, because the emphasis would be on solving the puzzle, and not on the personality of the puzzle-solver, the detective.

There are two kinds of mystery. There is the mystery that is a puzzle to be solved, the temporary mystery, and there is the mystery that is a marvel to be contemplated, the permanent mystery. Solving the puzzle, the temporary mystery, satisfies us, but it only satisfies us once. The eternal mystery is endless, and yet in contemplating it we are endlessly satisfied.

The ultimate mystery, the mystery of life, the mystery of God, is not something we can solve and then walk away from. It is an ongoing mystery that we keep walking into. We face it again at every turn. As Chesterton says, “The mystery of life is the plainest part of it.”<sup>27</sup>

We come upon strange events in life, things that cannot be explained, because the explanation is bigger than we can comprehend, the meaning more than our minds can hold. Father Brown wisely tells us, “We are here on the wrong side of the tapestry. The things that happen here do not seem to mean anything; they mean something somewhere else.”<sup>28</sup>

What are the connections between the two kinds of mystery, between the puzzle to be solved in a few pages and the ultimate truth that keeps revealing itself from age to age? What is the connection between the

detective story and Christianity? And why *should* we consider such a connection? I will call on Chesterton to explain that to us.

First of all, there is the connection between faith and reason that I mentioned earlier. The thing about this connection is that the modern unbelieving world does not see it. And Chesterton refers to a detective story by someone else to demonstrate the disconnection between faith and reason in the modern world. “The Dragon Murder Case” by S.S. Van Dine, opens with the following line: “Philo Vance who stood aloof from the eschatological and supernatural implications of the case . . . as therefore able to solve the problems on a purely rationalistic basis.” Chesterton says that the modern world imagines that the word “supernatural” is some way opposed to the word “rationalistic”:

. . . to be rational . . . to follow the reason; wherever the reason may lead. Now it is not in the least self-evident to the reason that the reason cannot lead to a belief in the supernatural, any more than in the natural. Even reasonable men do not always agree about what is reasonable. They may dispute with each other about the evidence for a *supernatural* occurrence. But so they may dispute with each other about the evidence for a *natural* occurrence. For natural or supernatural events there is normally no test but evidence; but those who testify to supernatural events produce plenty of evidence.<sup>29</sup>

Chesterton performs a wonderful twist with our expectations in *The Incredulity of Father Brown*, a series of stories where there is a baffling crime and there seems to be no explanation except a supernatural explanation. The materialists are ready to give up their materialism, and it is only Father Brown, the Catholic priest, who is skeptical about the supernatural solutions and uses the evidence to show that there is a purely natural explanation. The irony is that it is the unbelievers who are willing to give up reason as soon as the going gets a little rough. It is the man of faith who has to defend reason.

And so the connection between the two kinds of mysteries—the detective mystery and the ultimate mystery—is the same connection between faith and reason. But besides this, there are four Biblical principles that form the basis of good detective fiction.

One: “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.”<sup>30</sup>

Chesterton says that when a banker is found stabbed, and a notorious thief is found standing over him holding a bloody knife, we can be sure that whoever is guilty of this murder, it won’t be the notorious thief with the bloody knife. He is too obvious a suspect. No. The killer has to be the last person we suspect. If the story is well-managed, we should have “a real moment of disturbance when the minister of the banker’s church is



summoned before his bishop and charged with the crime.” And “another moment of pleasing emotion” when the crime is pinned on the bishop himself.<sup>31</sup>

The judgment at the end of any sensational detective story is, says Chesterton, “like the judgment at the end of the world; it is unexpected.” Just as the author of the story reveals the spotless aristocrat as the instigator of some unthinkable misdeed, “so the author of Christianity told us that in the end the bolt would fall with a brutal novelty, and he that exalted himself would be abased.”<sup>32</sup>

Two: “Seek and ye shall find.”<sup>33</sup>

Chesterton says humanity “hates the idea of anything being hidden, that is, it hates the idea of anything being successfully hidden. Hide-and-seek is a popular pastime; but it assumes the truth of the text, ‘Seek and ye shall find.’ The pleasure is all in the poignant moment of passing from not knowing to knowing. Mystery stories are very popular . . . but that is because the author of a mystery story reveals [what is hidden].”<sup>34</sup>

We seek because there are clues leading us to the answer. We examine the evidence because it points to the solution: “The mystery of man is exactly like the mystery of God. That is, we have to suffer in both cases, not from an absence of evidence, but from an extravagant welter of evidence. The detective in human and Divine affairs goes mad from the abundance of clues.”<sup>35</sup>

Three: “Love your enemies.”<sup>36</sup>

This third Biblical principle of good detective fiction is one that Chesterton excelled at more than any other writer of the genre. His character Father Brown not only seeks till he finds, but he also tracks down criminals not in order to condemn them but in order to forgive them. And that is precisely the mission of the Church: to hunt down sinners, to find them out, to make them confess their crimes . . . in order to forgive them. Father Brown always solves the crime, but he often lets the criminal go, because he’s more interested in saving his soul than in punishing him. And the Father Brown series may be unique in the genre of detective fiction in that it is the only one in which the arch-enemy of the detective ends up becoming his chief ally and sidekick. It happens because Father Brown completely wins him over. Loving our enemies does not mean crushing them; it means converting them, turning them into our friends. It is because we care about the truth that we want to bring all men to the truth. And bringing men to the truth brings us to a fourth Biblical principle for the detective story. Perhaps the most important one.

Four: “The truth shall set you free.”<sup>37</sup>

Not only does the criminal need to confess his crime, but we need to be released from the mystery. We need to know the truth. Anything that keeps us separated from the truth is the work of evil.

Father Brown says: "The true God was made flesh and dwelt among us. And I say to you, wherever you find men ruled merely by mystery, it is the mystery of iniquity. If the devil tells you something is too fearful to look at, look at it. If he says something too terrible to hear, hear it. If you think some truth unbearable, bear it."<sup>38</sup>

There is a joy in solving the puzzle, because there is a joy in the truth. Or as Chesterton says, there is "a joy in the right realization of things."<sup>39</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton (unless otherwise noted all references are by Chesterton). *The Thing. The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 136.

<sup>2</sup> "Advice to Literary Murderers," *The Tribute: Tendered by Artists, Authors and Advertisers of the Empire on the Anniversary of His Majesty's Recovery* (London: John Horn, 1930), 163.

<sup>3</sup> *Illustrated London News* (hereafter *ILN*), February 25, 1933.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*.

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- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ronald Knox, *Literary Distractions* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 193.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens, *Collected Works*, Vol. 15. 98.
- <sup>8</sup> "Sherlock Holmes," *A Handful of Authors* (NY: Sheed and Ward. 1953), 170.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 171.
- <sup>11</sup> *ILN*, August 19, 1922.
- <sup>12</sup> See "Fiction as Food," *The Spice of Life and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: DuFour Editions, 1966).
- <sup>13</sup> *ILN*, August 28, 1920.
- <sup>14</sup> "Fiction as Food," 34.
- <sup>15</sup> "A Defense of Detective Stories," *The Defendant* (NY: Dodd, Mead. 1904), 122-3.
- <sup>16</sup> *New York American* (hereafter *NYA*), October 27, 1934.
- <sup>17</sup> "On Household Gods and Goblins," *The Coloured Lands* (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1938), 195.
- <sup>18</sup> "Fiction as Food," 35.
- <sup>19</sup> *NYA*, March 13, 1935.
- <sup>20</sup> "The Red Moon of Meru," *The Complete Father Brown* (NY: Penguin, 1981), 565.
- <sup>21</sup> "The Vampire of the Village," *Ibid.*, 707.
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- <sup>25</sup> "The Arrow of Heaven," *The Complete Father Brown*. 346.
- <sup>26</sup> *ILN*, August 10, 1907 (Later collected as "On Political Secrecy," in *All Things Considered*).
- <sup>27</sup> *William Blake* (NY: EP Dutton, 1910), 131.
- <sup>28</sup> "The Sins of Prince Saradine," *The Complete Father Brown*, 110.
- <sup>29</sup> *NYA*, February 10, 1934.
- <sup>30</sup> Matthew 20:16.
- <sup>31</sup> *NYA*, February 16, 1935.
- <sup>32</sup> *Daily News*, April 20, 1907.
- <sup>33</sup> Matthew 7:7.
- <sup>34</sup> *ILN* August 10, 1907.
- <sup>35</sup> *Daily News*, November 21, 1903.
- <sup>36</sup> Matthew 5:44.
- <sup>37</sup> John 8:32.
- <sup>38</sup> "The Purple Wig," *The Complete Father Brown*, 253.
- <sup>39</sup> "Eric Gill and No Nonsense," *A Handful of Authors*, 186-7.

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## INTRODUCTION

### ANYA MORLAN AND WALTER RAUBICHECK

Christianity and the Detective Story is one of the many products of the fertile mind of that twentieth-century genius, G. K. Chesterton. In 1908 he published *Orthodoxy*, one of that century's most important books of Christian apologetics, influencing the conversion of C. S. Lewis and the religious writings of Dorothy Sayers, among many others. In this text Chesterton considers and rejects nineteenth century materialism, atheism, and aestheticism for the insanity of their intellectual positions, which for him culminated in his two bêtes noir, Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde. Instead, he affirms the sanity of the Western theological tradition passed on from the New Testament authors to Augustine, and then through Aquinas to the modern world. Chesterton's arguments for the Christian solutions to the problems of the world are at once compelling and delightful, conveyed as they are with his wonderfully witty, paradoxical style.

Chesterton's fiction always reflects the themes of his essays, and his most important novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, also published in 1908, is the fictional counterpart to *Orthodoxy*. Like the essay, the novel is a spirited defense of traditional values and the adherence of the common man to the natural law, unless he has been perverted by a devil. And, even more than *Orthodoxy*, it presents orthodox Christianity as a romantic adventure always taking place against a backdrop of the waste land, with faith, hope, and charity the only sources of hope and renewal.

That he did this while also writing a thrilling detective novel makes the work even more remarkable. As a full-length mystery it has few predecessors: Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* and the longer Sherlock Holmes tales such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. It precedes his close friend Eric Bentley's landmark detective novel *Trent's Last Case* by five years. Of course, much debate has ensued over whether *Thursday* is a proper detective novel at all, or whether it should be considered more of a metaphysical spy novel whose plot prefigures John Buchan's espionage novels more than it does Agatha Christie's mysteries. But Gabriel Syme certainly defines himself as a detective, and he is officially hired in that

capacity, something Father Brown himself never is. True, this detective rarely examines clues, but he certainly interrogates suspects (who could forget the chilling interrogation scene of Doctor Bull, he of the opaque glasses) and finally does lead his colleagues on to discovering the terrifying secret of Sunday. (Why has this book never been made into a film??). And not all detectives, even in the Golden Age of the twenties and thirties, work out of a consulting room.

Of course, Chesterton's most well-known detective fiction are the Father Brown stories, which are still recognized as among the most important in the history of the genre. As great as the Sherlock Holmes stories are, the Brown tales are superior in the sense that each one contains a theme that is the driving force behind the narrative, as opposed to the crime, the clues, and the revelation. And of course the theme is always explicitly or implicitly Christian. To compare the two detectives is to understand the difference between the two series: Holmes, the unforgettably eccentric man of startling deductive power—and Brown, the nondescript little priest who is a saintly model of humility. Holmes solves crimes through the use of his mind—Brown through his insights into the effects of Original Sin on the human soul. Only in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* does Conan Doyle extend his imagery into the realm of symbolism—the moors come to represent the primitive unconscious beneath the civilized conscious psyche—but Chesterton's Father Brown stories start with the dark potentialities of the soul—and also its wondrous ones—and never leave. At the emotional and intellectual core of every Father Brown story is some basic tenet of Christian anthropology, especially as articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas. And yet, Chesterton's wit, his sense of paradox, and his striking imagery enable him to convey his orthodoxy through an orthodox aesthetic: to delight as he instructs.

The first Father Brown stories were published in book form in 1911, though they began to appear in magazines several years earlier. The first two hard cover collections are *The Innocence of Father Brown* and *The Wisdom of Father Brown*, and, in the opinion of most critics of detective fiction, they are the best. So the century began with one of its greatest detective novels in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* and one of its greatest detectives with Chesterton's Father Brown. One hundred years later we lovers of the detective story are still marveling at the genius of this man.

Of course the Holmes stories, like all detective fiction of any seriousness at all, are concerned with moral judgment and good and evil by their very concern with crime, detection, and punishment. So it is no wonder that many practitioners of the genre with Christian leanings

personally, like Chesterton, would find it natural to bring a religious perspective to their work. For example, Agatha Christie is not usually thought of as a Christian novelist, but in fact a number of her novels have explicitly Christian themes, while the entire Miss Marple series relies on that protagonist's success as an amateur detective based on her unerring ability to detect sin. One example of a non-Marple Christian mystery is *They Came to Baghdad* (1951). Here a young female protagonist falls in love with a handsome charmer and goes to work for him in the Middle East. Eventually she comes to realize that he is the leader of a group of would-be Nietzschean Supermen, and she is determined to stop their insane Will to Power, despite her recognition that she will probably be killed in trying to do so: "‘After all,’ thought Victoria with sudden comfort. ‘I *am* a Christian. And if you’re a Christian, I suppose it’s a hundred times better to be a Christian martyr than a King in Babylon—and I must say, there seems to me a great possibility that I *am* going to be a Martyr.’"<sup>1</sup> And later, just before she faints, she adapts Milton by saying it’s better “to serve in Heaven than to reign in Hell.” When an observer says she has gotten Satan’s line wrong (“[it’s] better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven”), she replies “No, I haven’t,”<sup>2</sup> meaning that she knows she has just served God, as opposed to her former beloved, who, like Satan, just wanted to reign, no matter where. Charity trumps egotism here, as it does in all of Christie’s fiction.

Near the end of her career, Christie expanded on the plot and theme of *They Came to Baghdad* in one of the oddest detective novels ever written, *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970). Here the idea of the threat to world peace made by a race of Supermen reaches its apogee. The mastermind behind this new Aryan uprising uses a spokesperson, called the Young Siegfried, to charm the world’s youth into following him into a war of anarchy and destruction (reminiscent in some ways of the anarchist council in *Thursday*). And this old woman cries,

We must pull down, pull down all the soft institutions. Pull down the more humiliating forms of religion [read Christianity]. There is a religion of strength, the old religion of the Viking people.<sup>3</sup>

Our protagonist joins forces with other lovers of the old world to stop this insanity, and the book ends with a little girl saying her prayers before going off to be a bridesmaid at the protagonist’s Church of England wedding. Though the book fails to reconcile its original mystery plot with its later post-Nazi doomsday scenario effectively, it does serve to reveal quite stunningly Christie’s adherence to the idea of the necessity of

Christianity in the nuclear age and her ongoing desire to insist on this necessity in her detective fiction.

The success of the Jane Marple series is largely based on the paradox of the remarkable detective skills possessed by an aging, solitary woman from the tiny village of St. Mary Mead. But her ability cannot be separated from her Christian belief in Original Sin. The wisdom and insight stemming from this belief enable her to detect evil in the most apparently innocent of suspects: her glimpses into the human heart are what give her the advantage over the police detectives she regularly outwits. Here is a typical example of Miss Marple's penetrating analysis of a killer's motives from *A Murder is Announced*:

She *was* quite a kindly woman. What she said at the last in the kitchen was quite true. 'I didn't want to kill anybody.' What she wanted was a great deal of money that didn't belong to her! And before that desire—and it had become a kind of obsession—the money was to pay her back for all the suffering life had inflicted on her)—everything else went to the wall. People with a grudge against the world are always dangerous. They seem to think life owes them something.<sup>4</sup>

This, then, is the source of the murderer's crime: her "grudge against the world," her sinful hatred of life because of her invalidism. And Miss Marple adds this piece of Christian psychology: "I've known many an invalid who has suffered far worse and been cut off from life much more than she—and they've managed to lead happy contented lives. It's what's in *yourself* that makes you happy or unhappy."<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Agatha Christie's Christian vision has gone largely unnoticed, that of her Golden Age peer, Dorothy Sayers, has been taken for granted—not so much because of the novels themselves, but because of her later reputation as a Dante scholar and an effective Christian dramatist and apologist. Actually, most of Sayers' novels are humanist in theme rather than Christian: Lord Peter Wimsey, her detective and most celebrated literary creation, is a non-Christian who advocates a strong moral code that is hardly religious. Religion plays the central role, however, in two of her novels: *The Documents in the Case* (1930) and *The Nine Tailors* (1934). In the former, Sayers brilliantly fuses her rather complex theme with a—well, not so much a whodunit as a didhedoit, since there is only one suspect. The theme is a modernist update of a Romantic dilemma familiar to all the readers of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: can science duplicate Life in the laboratory? In *Documents*, however, Sayers brings to bear much of contemporary biology, chemistry, and physics on this question: our protagonist, a novelist and biographer, is both a seeker and skeptic on the



issue. In a letter to his finance he tells of a discussion he has had recently with a well-educated Parson:

The origin of life is our great stamping-ground for discussion. You can't make life synthetically in a laboratory—therefore he deduces it came by divine interference! Rather an assumption! But, after all, he is little worse than the man of science. 'In some way or other, life came,' they say. 'Sometime, somehow, we may learn how to make it.' But even if one could learn to make it, that doesn't account for its having arrived spontaneously in the first place....<sup>6</sup>

And indeed, the murderer is ultimately condemned because the synthetic poison he used is detected: it cannot replicate the molecular structure of the living fungus which was thought originally to have accidentally caused the victim's death. Thematically, the resolution supports the notion that there exists "a directive force, which enters upon the scene with Life itself...and which determines the course of [the atoms'] operation within the living organism."<sup>7</sup> The implication within the novel, of course, is that this force is an aspect of God, whose moral laws the murderer violated, just as the poison failed to replicate the mysterious structure of Life that God imparted to it.

This revelation is Theistic rather than Christian; in fact, it could even be called Vitalist rather than Christian. In *The Nine Tailors*, however, the religious theme is grounded in Biblical references and Christian ritual. Once again, the revelation of how the murderer came to his own untimely end, the last mystery to be solved in the story, supports the novel's theme: the mysterious, yet ultimately just, ways of Divine Providence. *The Nine Tailors* simply abounds in references to Providence, some serious, some merely colloquial, and some both. When Lord Peter Wimsey arrives in Fenchurch St. Paul, a small town in East Anglia, by way of an automobile accident, it happens that one of the bell-ringers in the parish's medieval church has fallen ill. Wimsey reveals that he learned the art of bell-ringing as a boy, and the Rector immediately impresses him into service: "'Isn't it wonderful' cried the Rector. 'Is it not really Providential? That just at this moment we should be sent a guest who is actually a ringer and accustomed to ringing Kent Treble Bob.'"<sup>8</sup> Actually, this "guest" will solve a decades-old mystery that has haunted one of the parish's prominent families and will assist in saving the townspeople themselves when a flood—not quite of Biblical-proportions, but Biblical symbolically nonetheless—threatens the lives of all the men, women, children, and animals. When a hymn is to be sung at a graveside funeral service, it, of course, is called "God Moves In a Mysterious Way." When the Church serves as a veritable Arc for the

townspeople as the village is inundated by the nearby river, the Rector states that it is providential that, because of the Great War, the people know how to respond to the ringing of the Alarm bells. Indeed, the novel is ultimately a plea for recognition that the Church, Christianity itself, is the last bulwark of civilization against encroaching Chaos. Wimsey feels his own spiritual sensibilities growing under the influence of his interaction with people as holy and common-sensical as the Parson. Certainly he agrees with the Parson's closing statement that "the bells are said to be jealous of the presence of evil. Perhaps God speaks through those mouths of inarticulate metal. He is a righteous judge, strong and patient, and is provoked every day."<sup>9</sup>

Dorothy Sayers' natural successor, of course, is P. D. James, one of our best contemporary writers of detective fiction. Like Sayers, James has added to the traditional whodunit structure a concern for complex characters and rich physical description that marks the English novel of manners. And, like Sayers' view, hers is ultimately a Christian perspective on the ills of society, whether she be focusing on the publishing industry (*Original Sin*), the seminary (*Death in Holy Orders*), or the legal profession (*A Certain Justice*). Her most religious novel is *A Taste for Death*, the story of a British Baronet and Minister of the Crown named Paul Berowne, who is found with his throat cut in the vestry of St. Matthew's Church in London, along with a homeless man who has also been murdered the same way, a few days after Berowne had some kind of mystical experience in the same church and consequently resigned his ministry. The pastor, who came upon him shortly after Berowne's original visit to the church, even thinks he might have seen the signs of the stigmata on his wrists. Formerly as devoutly secular as everyone else in his family and small circle of friends, the Baronet's conversion to spirituality is just as shocking to them as is his subsequent murder. Dagliesh, James's series detective/poet who is assigned to the case, knew and admired Berowne and is just as puzzled and challenged by the circumstances surrounding his conversion and death as is everyone else.

As Dagliesh and his assistant Kate Miskin, another agnostic, investigate the death of Berowne and question a wide gallery of suspects, it becomes clear that Berowne had resigned not just from public office, but from a modern wasteland not too different from T. S. Eliot's: adultery and abortion are central to the case, as is the neglect of the old by the young and the extreme selfishness of the participants in the novel's so-called love affairs. The influence of what happened to Berowne at the end of his life, though, has a salutary effect on several of the characters: a rather mediocre priest courageously accepts the possibility of martyrdom, Kate herself

comes to love her neglected grandmother, and a worker in the parish, an older woman who has lost her faith, comes to the recognition with which the novel closes:

Then she remembered what Father Collins had once said in a sermon when she first came to St. Matthew's: 'If you find that you can no longer believe, act as if you still do. If you feel that you can't pray, go on saying the words.' She knelt down on the hard floor, supporting herself with her hands grasping the iron grill, and said the words with which she always began her private prayers: 'Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak but the word and my soul shall be healed.'<sup>10</sup>

As at the close of Eliot's poem, the ascent from the modern world of godlessness and purposelessness has begun. This is a truly remarkable novel.

Chesterton, Christie, Sayers, and James: four of the best writers of detective fiction of the past hundred years, and all of them Christian authors. And of course the field of contemporary mystery writing is filled with their successors: Ralph McInerny, to whom this book is dedicated, the author of the Father Dowling series; Andrew Greeley, the sociologist and author of the Father Blacky Ryan series; Ellis Peters, the author of the Brother Cadfael series, and others. Fans of detective fiction are passionate about their favorites, of course. When that passion can be incorporated into one's religious view of the world, it becomes even more personal and precious. It is certainly no surprise that crime fiction should engage Christians as writers and readers. And while the writers of detective fiction we have mentioned here specialize in detailing the horrors caused by that greatest of sins, pride, they do so out of a firm belief in its evil and an even firmer belief in the existence of the Good.

But what is the connection between Christianity and detective fiction, and why do so many detective writers choose to use a seemingly escapist entertainment genre to raise such vital questions of faith? Some of the essays in this collection address this issue, comparing the problems that greet the detective with the ones that greet Christians every day, such as the need to restore some semblance of order to the world that seems utterly chaotic. Like faith, the detective can provide answers that may allow for closure after a trauma, but solving a crime and bringing the guilty to justice still do not undo the wrong that was done to the victims. And so, where the detective is limited, Christian faith can comfort the suffering and give meaning to the loss endured. At the same time, the Christian Mystery can also remain the one unsolved mystery of the detective story,

thus reminding us that not all answers can be found by means of reason and logic.

It is precisely this intersection of the Christian Mystery and the mystery of the detective novel that forms the basis of our book, and so we begin by focusing on the connections between the two. After Dale Ahlquist's Preface, which pays tribute to Chesterton, focusing on the aspect of his work that is still his most popular: his detective stories, Part I: From mystery to Mystery opens with Sørina Higgins' examination of Inkling Charles Williams' *War in Heaven*, in which she questions the possibility of a Christian Mystery Story. Next, Angelika Zirker explores the meanings of the one specifically Christian mystery written by Ngaio Marsh, which juxtaposes the dichotomy of sincerity versus performance of one's religious beliefs with the detective genre's "inherent dialectic of innocence and guilt." Eric Biddy makes an association between detective and theodist, noting that both are "tasked with finding the underlying order in a seemingly absurd or malicious 'morass of objects and events,'" and Sue Sorensen identifies both Old and New Testament influences on the long tradition of "locked room" mysteries in the history of detective fiction. This section closes, appropriately, with Charles Franklyn Beach re-examining *War in Heaven* as both a work of Christian thought and a detective story.

Of course, unsurprisingly, Dorothy Sayers' work is well represented in this volume. In Part II: The Case of Dorothy Sayers, Christine A. Colón writes about her theology of gender, while Neal Robbins explores the tension in her work between the traditional nineteenth century novel and the modernist novel. Chris Willerton applies Sayers' ideas about the Trinity, explicated in her essay *The Mind of the Maker*, to the Lord Peter Wimsey novels, and Edmund Miller focuses on the posthumous Lord Peter Wimsey novels completed by Jill Paton Walsh, examining what these books tell us about justice, which "remains consistent against a background of radical social change."

The next part of our book shows the detective in the role of the prophet, who must reveal the deeper mysteries of life and raise questions about the morality of the world and the justice of righteous actions, while not remaining above, but being personally touched by the suffering of his community. And so in Part Three: Detective as Prophet, Peter Widulski finds Christian as well as Hindu themes in the Inspector Ghote novels of H. R. F. Keating, which teach us lessons in patience and compassion, while Maria Plochocki explores the metaphysical/Christian dimensions of Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse series. This section closes with Walter Hesford's analysis of Arnaldur Indridason's Inspector Erlendur novels,

which show it to be “the vocation of the prophet detective, like doubting Thomas, to feel the wound, even at the risk of losing his faith through radical, immediate encounters with suffering.”

The final section of our book asks whether a Christian Mystery/mystery is still possible in our contemporary and increasingly secular society. To that end, Wendy Galgan discusses the Christian elements of the *Saving Grace* television series, focusing on the connections it draws between the physical and the spiritual, reason and faith, detection and redemption. In turn, Maggie Froehlich analyzes the Jesuit influence on the *Homicide* series, highlighting the show’s focus on the morality and ethics of police work, as well as “its complex portrayal of spiritual struggle” and its “positive representation of Catholicism.” In the final chapter of our collection, Sister Brigid Brady shows that some Christian themes can never be outdated by noting the *Piers Plowman* analogies in the Brother Cadfael mysteries of Ellis Peters.

This volume demonstrates clearly that what Chesterton began in the first decade of the twentieth century is certainly flourishing as we begin the second decade of the twenty-first: the significant influence of Christianity on the world of detective fiction.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Agatha Christie, *They Came to Baghdad* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 232.

<sup>2</sup> Christie, *Baghdad*, 244.

<sup>3</sup> Agatha Christie, *Passenger to Frankfurt* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1970), 189.

<sup>4</sup> Agatha Christie, *A Murder is Announced* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 228.

<sup>5</sup> Agatha Christie, *Murder*, 228.

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<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Sayers, with Robert Eustace, *The Documents in the Case* (New York: Harper, 1995), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Sayers, *Documents*, 246.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (New York: Harvest, 1962), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Sayers, *Tailors*, 397.

<sup>10</sup> P.D. James, *A Taste for Death* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 459.