

ENTREVISTA A JULIAN SYMONS

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Q.: Do you think that the words «detective novels» describe clearly these kinds of novels, or would the terms «mystery stories» or «crime stories» or «crime fiction» be better?

A.: I think the term detective novels ought to be confined to books which really have a detective in them; that may sound simple, but it is not actually so, because quite a lot of detective stories or books with some detection don't have an unofficial detective like Lord Peter Wimsey, and they don't have an official detective who is an inspector or superintendent, so, I wouldn't call those novels detective novels, I would call them crime stories. Generally the move has been away from the detective story towards what I call crime novel.

Q.: Was the first book you wrote a detective novel?

A.: The first book I wrote was a collection of poems in the 1930's. I edited and published and had printed a small poetry magazine, and in it I printed works of the younger poets which included myself, and some of them afterwards, became famous. I don't write very much poetry now, but that magazine is very much respected. We called it *The Little Magazine*.

Then, still in the 1930's, I had a friend who was the secretary of the first surrealist exhibition which came to England: we had never seen surrealist pictures. I used to go to the exhibition and we said how funny would be if we wrote a detective story together and we set it in some kind of surrealist exhibition, we invented our art movement and we killed off one of our friends under another name and we made the murderer some other friend, it was a joke. Well, this friend, who planned it with me, never wrote the book, I wrote it and I called it *The Immaterial Murder Case*: the art movement I had invented was called «Immaterialism», the idea was that you painted things that were not there, that were immaterial, and so, this was in a way quite a funny detective story. It was in the tradition of the detective story. I had two detectives in it, one official who was called Inspector Bland and one unofficial. So that was my first book. It appeared long after it was written.

My first three novels were all of them about a detective, they all had Inspector Bland in them; they all had a detective and they were all detective puzzles so they were what I would call absolutely detective stories. After having published them, I found these were not really the kind of thing I wanted to write and so the first book I've written that I was pleased with was my fourth crime story which was called *The 31st of February*. It had no detective, this really is a crime novel. And since then, some of the books I've written I would call crime novels, some of them are very light-hearted.

Q.: Did you enjoy reading detective stories when you were young?

A.: I read detective stories like many other children in England and in other countries, too. I read the Sherlock Holmes stories when I was 9 or 10 years old, I suppose, and I was interested, I liked reading detective stories ever since then. It would never have occurred to me when I was a child that I could possibly be paid money for reading books that I would enjoy, I was a critic in newspapers of detective stories.

Q.: Do you write detective stories exclusively? Is it a personal necessity or the demands of the reading public? Have you ever thought of writing another kind of fiction?

A.: I've thought of writing other kind of fiction but I found crime novels sufficiently satisfying not to do that. And it has been suggested to me once or twice that I should write what we would call in England a straight novel, but then, one of my publishers said to me: of course, if you do that you would have to publish it under another name. But I couldn't do that, I started writing detective stories under my own name I would have to start writing novels under pseudonym. Remember what happened for example with Michael Innes. He is a Don, an Academic, and so, I think, probably partly, for that reason, he did not use his own name, J. I. Steward, but now, he found much later on in life that he wanted to write novels, so he writes his novels under his own name and he separates them, in that way, from his detective stories.

But I also write a lot of other books; I've written a lot of detective stories since, although I only write one about every two years. In the meantime, I write biographies, literary criticism of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens etc. And I've written a book about the 1930's, a book about the General Strike of 1926. I've also written books on military history.

Q.: Which is your favourite detective story writer?

A.: Well, it is a very difficult question because, in a way, my favourite is still the writer of *The Sherlock Holmes Stories*. People rather look down on them now, I think the best are the short stories not the novels, they are really marvellous, they are such very good stories. But if you ask me what I think is the best crime story of this century, it would be Dashiell Hammet's *The Glass Key*. Of course that's not a detective novel in the sense you mean, although in fact, you see, it is a detective story, it has detection in it. It doesn't have a detective, an official detective, but it has a very skilfully organised puzzle in it, too. Anyway, it would be my answer.

Q.: What do you think of authors such as P. Ackroyd who combine the detective stories in *Hawcksmoor* with literary innovations?

A.: I don't regard *Hawcksmoor* as a detective story at all, indeed I thought it very much overrated, I wouldn't call it a detective story. I'd call it a kind of box of tricks, which is ingenious but I don't like it. I know that I would be in a minority because it's been very highly praised.

Q.: What do you think of *The Daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey?

A.: I'm afraid I've been very sour but I didn't admire *The Daughter of Time*. I don't understand why people think it is so good. The theory about Richard the third, which is advanced in the book, has often been said, I really didn't understand why it's supposed to be so good. I do admire some of Josephine Tey's books, especially *The Franchise Affair*.

Q.: And what about *The Black Tower* by P. D. James?

A.: It's very good, indeed, very good. The great originality of P. D. James is not mentioned in my book *Bloody Murder: from the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History*, because it was published too early. In the new edition of the book I talk about P. D. James and about Ruth Rendell.

Making the kind of division between writing like Dorothy Sayers and the more modern writers like Ruth Rendell, P. D. James is rather like Dorothy Sayers in the sense that her books are very well and solidly constructed. The dialogue is alright but it doesn't sparkle while I think that sometimes the dialogue of Agatha Christie, whom P. D. James rather despises, sparkles, it is lively, it is amusing. P. D. James's dialogue is rarely, not very often amusing. As she is in person, she is very amusing and lively. On the other hand Agatha Christie was very difficult to talk to. The great originality of P. D. James, I think, lies in the settings that she uses, and *The Black Tower*, as you'd know, is set in a home of incurables, for people who are terminally ill. No detective story writer, like Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers, would ever have dreamed of setting a book in such a place, and the book *Shroud of a Nightingale* which is set in a hospital, that's very good factually about the hospital and the murder with which the book starts it's quite horrific, again this book never would have been done by Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers.

Q.: Does the British reader prefer a Victorian setting for crimes, like the one you used in *The Blackheath Poisonings*?

A.: This is one thing that people like, yes, I wrote *The Blackheath Poisonings* because I always liked to try to produce something original, to do something different. I don't want to write crime stories that are all the same, and so, I thought I would try to write a Victorian crime story and this was *The Blackheath Poisonings*, and I enjoyed doing it, it worked very well. I thought I was pleased with it when I finished it, so I then wrote another one, although rather a different kind, it was *Sweet Adelaide* which also had a Victorian setting. I tended to be orig-

inal. It was about a real Victorian murder case, but I invented, I used the facts; it's a non-explained murder, really, and with the facts, I tried to construct a novel. It was a case of a woman, who obviously didn't like her husband very much, and he died of an overdose of chlorophorm, a tremendous amount, and it really couldn't be explained how such a large quantity of chlorophorm got into his stomach. If she administered it to him, it was impossible to see how she could have done it, and so she was tried for his murder. It was suggested that he committed suicide, but again it's thought he couldn't have swallowed such a large quantity of it and she was acquitted and after she was acquitted, one of the great medical specialists who'd been involved in the case said, now that she's been acquitted she should tell us, in the interest of science, how she did it. But nobody ever knew, so I tried to construct an explanation to it. I thought it was good. And then I wrote a third one which I thought rather poor although in fact it was rather successful. Then I thought I wouldn't want to go on writing Victorian crime novels although I might perhaps go back again. Well, to answer your question, yes, this is quite a popular form, stories which are set in the past. Indeed, there are some books written recently by a woman who uses the name «Ellis Peters» and whose hero is a monk in the twelfth century and all the books have a background of murders which are committed in that period, I don't like them very much but they are very successful. But this is only one form, one kind of popular form in England. Another popular form still is what I would call the Agatha Christie book where you are not meant to take anything seriously at all, but it is clever. It has an ingenious and clever puzzle, not such a clever puzzle I think as Agatha Christie's, who used to create clever puzzles.

Q.: Why is a Victorian setting such a favourite setting for the people?

A.: Well, I think the Victorian period, especially is so different from our own, I mean chiefly that people have an immensely uncertainty about what is going to happen, they don't like to talk too much about things like nuclear bombs and so on although they are present in people's minds even though we don't think of them consciously. The Victorians had, or seem to have to us, an absolute certainty for what was morally right or wrong. That's why it is a very attractive period to us. More than, for example, the Edwardian period that succeeded it. Because by that time the certainties were beginning to fade. I think it is a very interesting period, but it is not, for that reason, so much what people want to read about and again if you went back a little further in British history to the first half of the 19th century, that wouldn't be as interesting either because it is so remote from us. We can recognise the Victorians as people like ourselves although their lives were so different.

Q.: What is your opinion about the scalating of violence in the contemporary detective story?

A.: Yes, there is in fact a scalation of violence in the contemporary British crime story, there is a distinct increase in violence especially in the last ten years a great increase also in the use of what we would call four-letter-words, which were al-

most never included into the detective stories although they did into the contemporary novel, they do now into the detective stories. This is simply a reflection of the increase of violence in Britain and in other countries too, of the society we live in.

Q.: How do you compare the British detective or crime novels with the American, the Neo-Polar French or the Spanish contemporary detective novels?

A.: They are less violent. The old detective stories are not very common in France or Spain, they are in a different tradition from anything else, I think, in Europe, and this is one of the reasons why Spanish or South American crime story writers say that British writers are isolates. It is not true but it has a basis of fact, yes. The American crime stories, when they started, copied that sort of British detective stories absolutely, if you know the works of S.S. Van Dine, or the early work of Ellery Queen, although they have their own originality, they really were based on the British detective story of that period.

The British crime novels, quite a lot of them, might be not quite like the crime novels produced in other European countries, but they are not so very dissimilar. I mean, Ruth Rendell's books are detective stories, there are detectives in them. They have two policemen, one of them is very rude, the other one is not so, they work together. I mean, that is a new development. Sometimes, not always, crime stories are very brutal. Again this moving away from the genteel tradition of the traditionally English detective novel which is often, not always, written by woman, is an interesting thing.

Q.: Do you think that crime fiction is part of literature or is it a minor genre of lesser importance?

A.: It is part of literature *but*, one mustn't push these things too far, ninety per cent of crime literature, at least, is rubbish, I mean, it may be very entertaining, for reading for two hours, very enjoyable two hours, but that's all. The other ten per cent should be considered as serious literature.

Q.: What is the role of the detective story in the general outlook of the contemporary British novel?

A.: The contemporary British novel, like the contemporary American novel and perhaps in other countries, too, is moving away from narrative and away from plot, so that very often, almost nothing happens or appears to happen. The crime story separates itself rather from the main stream of British novel as it is written by somebody like Iris Murdoch, where a real plot is fairly important. The crime story, in which the narrative structure is truly vital, has its own role.

Q.: Do you prefer to keep an ace up your sleeve till the last page of the book or do you have the reader deciding on his own with all the cards on the table?

A.: Well, I like to have some sort of puzzle to be solved, some sort of question that needs to be answered. It is not necessarily the question of who committed the crime, it might be any other question. One of the books of mine, I think it is one

of the best, is a novel called *The Man Who Killed Himself*, where you know who the criminal is, but you don't know what is going to happen to him and you can't imagine what is the next turn in the process. So, I would like to have some element of surprise; sometimes, as in a book called *A Criminal Comedy*, almost my last book, I've really kept the answer until the very last pages. I'm very satisfied by having some sort of question that is got to be answered at the end. I've even been so far, once or twice, as to leave it open to the reader. There is another book called *The Man Who Lost His Wife* in which at the end of the story you are not quite sure exactly what had happened, it is up to the reader to decide, but that was not very popular.

Q.: Do you know the solution, the outcome of your enigma when you sit down to start your novel?

A.: In general, I know what is going to happen. In *The Blackheath Poisonings* for example, I knew what was going to happen, but, as the story developed I found I was introducing so many characters, you might intend to introduce the beginning but they really seem to play no part or role in the story and I had to rewrite it and cut out about half of the book, and this often happens. You know, a character whom you did visage in the beginning, turns out not really to have any part to play and not to be very interesting. Another character whom you have introduced because you needed to, turns out to develop well and you enjoy writing about him or her, so he or she takes much more part in the plot that you intended. I think, in a way, it would be better in an ideal world, if one were able to plot the whole thing up in advance, carefully over several pages. Some writers can do this, I can't do it. I hardly ever start with more than just a couple of pages in notes as to the way the story ought to go, as to what the answer would be and roughly speaking as to what the characters would be like.