

The Perfect Detective Novel

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I had already chosen the topic for this talk last summer when I checked out *The Reader's Quotation Book: A Literary Companion* (edited by Steven Gilbar), and so I read with special interest the section of quotations on mysteries and detective stories. Edmund Wilson, for example, wrote that “the reading of detective novels is simply a kind of vice that, for silliness and minor harmfulness, ranks somewhere between smoking and crossword puzzles.”

On the other hand, Philip Guedalla called the detective story “the normal recreation of noble minds,” and I would have to agree with that view to justify my presence here today. As Betty said last week, mysteries are very popular. There are a number of reasons for this, but I think one of them has to be that they are short: the conventional detective novel usually runs less than 200 pages and can be read in a few hours, so mysteries are ideal for helping busy people unwind, and many public figures have confessed to reading them for that purpose.

FDR was evidently one of them, for he said that “a good detective story is the answer to Lowell's question, ‘What is so rare as a day in June?’” Really outstanding detective novels *are* rare, and I hope I'll be able to point you toward some of the better ones.

I've been getting pretty nervous about giving this “book review.” A few weeks ago I was sitting in front of the library when a friend of mine came out. He'd evidently just seen the book review schedule, and, noticing me, he said, “You look like someone who's an expert on the perfect detective novel.”

At the time, I replied, “I hope so” or “I guess we'll find out,” but the more research I did, the more ignorant and less expert I felt. I'm certainly not the first to have considered the question of what makes a good detective story. Quite a few writers before me have enunciated “rules” for detective fiction, including Ronald Knox, whose “Decalogue” is one of the handouts. I agree with most of these pronouncements, but I wanted this talk to be based solely on my own preferences.

You may have heard people say, “Well, I don't know much about art (or music or whatever), but I know what I like.” I've found, however, that I not only don't know much about detective stories, I'm not even sure what I like! I've tried to figure out what makes me like certain detective novels more than others, but my tastes vary from day to day, and they may be completely different from yours. I'm a great fan of mysteries of every type, but certainly I'm not any kind of expert.

Actually, it's not that hard to be an expert: you've probably heard it said that an expert is someone who doesn't know any more than you do but has it better organized and shows slides. Well, I don't know how well organized I am, but you'll be relieved to hear that I don't have any slides!

The last time I had any regular practice in public speaking was when I was teaching. Then I *was* an “expert”—with degrees and certificates to prove it. And the advantage of teaching

teenagers—especially if you’re teaching them Latin—is that there’s *just* a chance you can tell them something they don’t already know (though they may not be willing to admit it).

As I’ve worked to prepare this book review, however, I’ve realized that, in addressing an adult audience, I’ve taken on an impossible task. If you’re already a mystery reader, I probably can’t tell you anything you don’t already know, and if you’re *not* already a mystery fan, there’s probably not much I can say that will interest you or get you interested in reading detective novels.

Unfortunately, I’m stuck up here for the next half hour or so, and so, if you’ll bear with me and promise not to expect any startling new revelations or profound insights, I’ll share with you my own entirely personal opinion, based on years of voracious and relatively uncritical reading, of what factors contribute to a successful detective novel.

In assessing these factors, I decided that they can be broken down into characteristics of the novel itself, the detective, and the author, and I will treat them in that order.

The ideal detective novel should be, first and foremost, **a novel**. Although it may seem unnecessary to say this, I want to emphasize that my subject today is full-length novels only, not short stories or nonfiction accounts of true crimes. There are many excellent detective short stories, and some of the best-known authors have written almost exclusively in this form, but they are outside my scope.

Second, the novel **must be a mystery**. Of course, every novel with any sort of plot is a kind of mystery, as the reader must wonder what is going to happen next or stop reading. But mystery novels and detective stories, in addition to suspense, also make a mystery of what has already happened. There must therefore be some unknown fact that the detective is attempting to find out. This eliminates police procedurals (where the *reader* knows who the criminal is even if the police do not) and many thrillers, crime caper novels, and the like.

This is one characteristic that really distinguishes detective novels from mainstream fiction, especially much of the modern fiction that aspires to be “literature.” Often you can finish a modern novel and not only have no idea what will happen next but also be somewhat unsure what has already happened. In his talk last week, Monroe Thompson said that his novels have “a beginning, a middle, and an end.” This is exactly what attracts mystery readers. The Rev. William J. Rewak, president of Spring Hill College, in a 1990 article in the *Mobile Register*, was quoted as saying: “I read an awful lot of detective stories—I’m not sure why. Maybe because they have very clear beginnings, middles, and ends. I like puzzles all wrapped up, and to see clean solutions.” Mystery fans generally like this puzzle aspect; many of them also enjoy crossword puzzles and other similar mental stimulations.

P. D. James, in a television interview following PBS’s “Mystery” presentation of one of her novels, said that murder mysteries are generally concerned with the restoration of order. A criminal distorts the fabric of society by committing a crime, and it is the purpose of the detective to restore order and see that justice is done. Sometimes “justice” does not mean “punishment” of the guilty party (whose crime may seem justifiable), but at least the guilty party is found out and held to account.

The detective novel, needless to say, **must have a detective**. This eliminates romantic suspense and gothic novels. The detective may be someone whose job is to solve crimes, either

as a policeman or as a private investigator, or he may be an amateur who happens to have specialized knowledge or talents that help him solve some particular type of crime. As you can see from the handouts I've distributed, the primary professions of fictional detectives are extremely varied. For the detective who is not a policeman, however, it is extremely convenient to have police connections; many fictional detectives are married to policemen or have close friends on the force, and some detectives, such as Kinsey Millhone, Carlotta Carlyle, Fred Carver, and Matthew Scudder, used to *be* policemen.

The next criterion of the perfect detective novel is that **a crime must have been committed**. Although there are some exceptions, even in some of the best detective stories, this crime is usually murder. P. D. James explains that this is because murder is much more important and interesting than theft, burglary, embezzlement, or other crimes. As she puts it, we may be mildly interested in someone "pinching Aunt Gertie's diamond necklace," but our interest is aroused more by someone "*doing Aunt Gertie in* for her necklace." Moreover, the act of murder inherently eliminates one of the most important witnesses to the crime, making it more difficult to solve.

The next requirement is that **the detective must solve the crime**, not just witness its solution. This means that he or she must be actively engaged in investigation from the beginning, not just helpfully provide the one needed clue in the end. This does not eliminate first-person novels told by a sidekick or "Watson," as the detective is still solving the crime, but since we tend to identify with the narrator of a first-person novel, it is more satisfying if this person is the detective or at least takes some part in the investigation.

Fifty or sixty years ago, it was much more common for the *reader* to be actively engaged in solving the crime. The reader pitted himself against the fictional detective and attempted to guess "whodunit" before the author revealed this knowledge. In Ronald Knox's introduction to *The Best Detective Stories of the Year, 1928*, in which he also enunciated his well-known Decalogue, or Ten Commandments for detective stories, Knox also gives, for each of the stories, a cue to what he calls the "caesura," the point at which the reader should lift his eyes from the page and attempt the solution for himself. Early Ellery Queen stories also indicated this point and challenged the reader to match wits with Queen.

The current TV generation of readers are much more apt to be content to be spectators, just reading along without much involvement. In all fairness, however, it should be pointed out that the solution of the crime is rarely all that is going on in the modern detective novel. There are subplots, psychological undertones, character development, and other distractions. But even "couch potatoes" still want the *detective* to take an active role.

The perfect detective novel should have a **distinct set of suspects**, and the perpetrator (murderer) must be one of them. There are many devices for limiting the number of suspects; perhaps the most extreme is marooning them on an island as Agatha Christie did in *And Then There Were None*. But it is not fair to the reader to devise a murder that, for example, could have been committed by any one of the residents of New York City. Moreover, the murderer must be introduced early on and not produced out of a hat at the end. If "the butler did it," then the writer had better be very sure that he is a clear suspect from the beginning.

A few weeks ago, Betty Savage told us that her sister distinguished two kinds of reading, one for information and the other for "running away from home." Although detective stories are

generally thought of as escape fiction, I think that the perfect detective novel should also be **educational**. It seems to me that the stories I have enjoyed most are those that introduce me to some profession, craft, or hobby. This was one of John D. MacDonald's trademarks, and Dick Francis has proved remarkably ingenious in coming up with new careers related to horse racing. Similarly, Tony Hillerman's books inform the reader about Navajo culture, and Harry Kemelman's demonstrate the Talmudic art of *pilpul*. The novels of both Jonathan Gash and Mollie Hardwick are full of tidbits about antiques, and Carolyn Hart is almost too didactic about mystery writers. All of these are entertaining as well as informative. And, although I'm not much of a cook, I'm always intrigued by murder mysteries that include recipes!

Another way in which detective stories can be educational is in providing **local color** for exotic locales. This is true to some extent for novels consistently set in particular locations, such as those of Roderic Jeffries in Mallorca or Magdalen Nabb's in Florence, but descriptions of foreign places are usually more vivid when the detective is just visiting, as when CIA agent Emily Pollifax sets off for the Middle East or Scotland Yard detective Roderick Alleyn is sent to Ngaio Marsh's native New Zealand. Some detectives never seem to take on two jobs in the same place, and most detectives travel at least occasionally, as when Rabbi Small makes a pilgrimage to Israel or Toronto policeman Charlie Salter goes to Montreal. Although Lawrence Sanders, in his book *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit*, describes how foreign settings can be contrived without leaving home by diligent use of guidebooks, most authors have personal knowledge of the scenes they describe, and they can provide the vicarious pleasure of armchair travel.

Although I like detective stories to be educational, and historical fiction can certainly be very enlightening, I want my detective novel to be **set in the present**. I sometimes enjoy reading mysteries *written in the past*, but when present-day writers try to write in fancy dress they become name droppers, and the effect is spoiled. Novels written in the '20s, '30s, and '40s are unself-conscious and the differences between their times and ours come out in subtle ways. But the novelist writing in 1991 has to lard his prose with forgotten brand-names and descriptions of obsolete appliances to make it clear what period he's dealing with. The result is that some of the worst books I've read are George Baxt's *The Dorothy Parker Murder Case*, Andrew Bergman's *The Big Kiss-Off of 1944*, and K. K. Beck's novels set in the 1920s.

One notable exception to this rule is Ellis Peters' Chronicles of Brother Cadfael, which are set in twelfth-century England. She describes medieval life so naturally that it is unobtrusive, and her dialogue somehow manages to avoid present-day idiom without sounding archaic. The history of this troubled period is subtly woven into every plot and yet does not overwhelm the books. But this is a tour de force that few authors could match.

So the perfect detective novel should be set in the here and now. But it shouldn't be like reading the morning newspaper. Sometimes I wonder why "true crime"—at least as reported piecemeal in the press—is so much less interesting than detective fiction. Partly this is because fiction is *organized*. It is part of the writer's art to include only those facts that contribute to the story, and so there are no extraneous details. This means that we learn the telling features of the characters, including their inner emotions, and not just externals. But my perfect detective novel is also **not too realistic**. Murder is a violent crime, and murderers threatened with discovery can be very dangerous, so a certain amount of violence and physical threat is inevitable, especially in the "hardboiled" genre of detective stories. But my perfect detective novel is not grisly; it does

not have gratuitous violence or physical threat; after all, my perfect detective must live to detect another day!

Because ideally my perfect detective novel is **one of a series**. When you have discovered an author and detective you like, you want to be able to return to them again and again; so you want the author to write lots of novels about the same detective. I would exempt Dick Francis from this rule, since the varying detectives in his novels are really all the same person (basically himself, he says) with a different name. And of course some authors manage to carry on several series about different detectives.

Distinctive titles are a great help in establishing a series. Probably all of you are familiar with Erle Stanley Gardner's "The Case of the Something Something," usually using alliteration. John D. MacDonald's titles all had colors, and B. J. Morison has written three novels using beverages in the titles (*Beer and Skittles*, *Champagne and a Gardener*, *Port and a Star Boarder*). Sara Woods' titles are all lines from Shakespeare, and Martha Grimes uses names of English pubs. M. C. Beaton's are "Death of a (Gossip, Cad, Perfect Wife, etc.);" and E. X. Giroux's "A Death for a (something beginning with 'D')." Harry Kemelman started his rabbi series on Friday, and when he had exhausted the days of the week, he had to go on to "someday" and "one fine day." Sue Grafton has assured herself a longer run by using the letters of the alphabet.

Not only should the detective novel not be too grittily realistic, it should ideally be **told with humor**. Murder is too serious a subject to be entertaining escape fiction if told seriously, and even police detectives are not serious all the time. One caveat here, however: although I enjoy them very much when I'm in the right mood, at other times the novels of Dorothy Cannell, Charlotte MacLeod, and Elizabeth Peters can seem just *too* silly, and I get impatient with them.

The perfect detective novel should be at least **literate** if not literary. The erudite detective is now almost a thing of the past; the public-school-educated Scotland Yard man who capped quotes with the scholars he interviewed was impressive but perhaps a little intimidating. But now even college professor detectives who are the creation of college professor authors are guilty of some shocking solecisms, and publisher's editors seem to turn a blind eye. Some of the best of the current writers are very good indeed. P. D. James is capable of tremendous psychological insights, and Sue Grafton's thumbnail descriptions can be breathtakingly apt. I enjoy good writing, and I don't want to be distracted from the story by typos and grammatical howlers. So my perfect detective novel should be not only well written but also well edited and proofread.

The novel should have **interesting, colorful, memorable characters**. The trend in the best of the current crop is to have a small cast of continuing characters associated with the detective; sometimes they have their own subplots, so that the novel is more an ensemble piece than a star vehicle. But even the incidental characters can be vividly sketched without descending to caricature.

The detective should be one of these characters. He should be introduced early on and described in enough detail to be recognizable. I have read several books by Anthea Fraser and should know better by now, but somehow I always miss her detective when he first appears on the scene. Her technique is to get the reader involved in the characters who will ultimately provide the murder victim and suspects, and this goes on for half the book before the murder is committed and her detective is called in. By this time, I've gotten so wrapped up in the other

characters that her detective is just a mild distraction—a generic policeman, like Chesterton’s Invisible Man.

Which brings us to the qualifications of the detective.

First of all, the ideal detective should be **a man—or a woman**. Arguments can be made for both, and each has its place, though that place is changing. In the past, most police detectives and private investigators were men. Female detectives were usually curious spinsters or some other form of defensible busybody. Today the hottest trend is the female “hardboiled” detective. Sara Paretsky’s V. I. Warshawski, Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone, Marcia Muller’s Sharon McCone, and Linda Barnes’s Carlotta Carlyle are some good examples of this genre. I’ve noticed that there is a great deal of cross-pollination going on here, and Sue Grafton seems to be leading the pack: V. I. Warshawski, for example, on one occasion remarks that Kinsey Millhone is undoubtedly more organized than she is. And Elizabeth Peters in “Liz Peters, PI,” has her narrator praying to “the patron saint of private eyes”—“Saint Kinsey”!

The detective should be **well rounded**. As I’ve already said, he or she should not be a vague, faceless character. This is not ordinarily a problem in today’s novels, where the detective is usually well developed. Indeed, P. D. James’s Adam Dalgleish and Elizabeth George’s Thomas Lynley seem to have so much angst they can hardly do their job!

At the very least, the detective should have a **full name**. There are numerous examples of detectives who violate this rule. Inspector Morse was dubbed “Pagan” at school because he wouldn’t admit to having a Christian name. Jonathan Gash and Robert B. Parker tacitly omit to give their characters a first name; Lovejoy and Spenser don’t make heavy weather of it; they just have only one name. But Jill McGown’s Inspector Lloyd makes an intentional mystery of his first name, and his sergeant, Judy Hill, is determined to find it out. These are gimmicks. The epitome of such gimmickry must be Bill Pronzini’s “Nameless Detective,” who assumes a different alias for each novel.

Some characters may have a good reason for being secretive about their names, and the reader who is told the reason—and the full name—can forgive this. Who could not understand why Irwin Maurice Fletcher would want to be called “Fletch”? Or why Horace McFarland would write under the name of J. J. MacFarland and prefer to be called “Mac”? In Margery Allingham’s early novels, we are given to understand that “Albert Campion” is a pseudonym. It is hinted that Campion is actually named “Rudolph” and is some kind of royalty, but he has renounced all titles.

V. I. Warshawski (“Vic” to her friends) has perhaps the best excuse for being reserved about her name. In the first place, her mother, an Italian who adored both Victor Immanuel and opera, saddled her with the mouthful Victoria Iphigenia. But she explains that she began using her initials in her first career as an attorney because it was harder for men to patronize her if they didn’t know her first name.

Some characters might as well not have first names: doubtless many readers could not supply the appropriate first names for Misses Marple, Seeton, and Silver or even Mrs. Pollifax. And some might suspect that Inspector Roper and Superintendent Bone had been given titles as names, like Judge Reinhold and Senator K. Thorvaldsen.

It is a definite advantage to a detective to have a *very* full name. For example, in *Murder Must Advertise*, in which Lord Peter Wimsey is working undercover in an advertising agency, he uses the name of Death Bredon without qualms since his full name is Peter Death Bredon Wimsey.

I would also be tempted to make it a requirement that a detective's name be **pronounceable**. The reader can accept it as a quirk of the quaint Scots that Reginald Hill's detective, spelled Dalziel, is pronounced "Dee-ell"; at least Hill warns us about that. Sara Paretsky is not so helpful; although she frequently has bad guys *mispronounce* her heroine's name, I'm still not exactly sure how to pronounce it correctly. Kinsey Millhone is another anomaly; there is only one possible reasonable pronunciation, but the spelling seems intentionally difficult. And what about Linda Barnes's Michael Spraggue? Characters say, "Is that Spraggue with two g's?" leading me to assume it must be pronounced "Sprague" unless the author pronounces Sprague "Sprag." One more detective who has always given me pause is H. R. F. Keating's Inspector Ghote. Even without worrying about making him sound like a barnyard animal, his name is uncomfortably close to "g-h-o-t-i," which I learned in my schooldays is pronounced "fish"—"gh" as in *enough*, "o" as in *women*, and "ti" as in *fiction!*

The detective is more interesting if he or she has **outside interests**. Most modern detectives have hobbies, and often, especially if they are amateur detectives, these lead them into the situations where they become involved with a crime. If the number of actor-detectives were any indication, it would seem that the stage is an extremely risky career in more than a financial sense: Tessa Crichton, Charles Paris, Michael Spraggue, Josh O'Roarke, and others illustrate this combination, and many of Ngaio Marsh's novels have a theatre background as well, reflecting her own interest in the theatre. Barry Cork's Angus Straun plays golf, and Maggie Rome, V. I. Warshawski, and Inspector Morse all enjoy music. Inspector Morse also composes crossword puzzles. Some detectives like to cook (and even provide recipes), others paint or collect art, and others have various other interests.

Another tendency of modern detectives, as mentioned before, is to be surrounded by a close group of friends and relatives whose lives are intertwined with the plots of the books. One good example is Dorothy Simpson's Luke Thanet, who is a police detective in the fictional town of Sturrenden, in Kent, England. His wife, Joan, is a probation officer, and they have two children, Bridget and Ben, whose adolescent difficulties have often featured in the stories, as when Ben was caught watching pornographic videos or Bridget was worried about passing her school-leaving exams. In addition, Luke's sergeant, Mike Lineham, has problems at home because his career ambitions are inconsistent with his wife's desires with regard to family life, and she almost persuades him to leave the force. In Simpson's latest book, *Doomed to Die*, Bridget has gone off to a famous cookery school in London, but almost before the Thanets have time to miss her, Joan's mother has a heart attack. Luke's superior is distracted by his wife's leukemia, and Mike's wife Louise is having doubts about returning to her nursing career now that her youngest child has started school.

Even single detectives may have family involvements. Carlotta Carlyle, for example, has adopted a young Hispanic girl through the "Big Sister" program, and Elizabeth George's Barbara Havers has a soul-destroying home environment with two batty parents.

There has been some disagreement through the years among mystery writers and critics as to whether detectives should be married. Many early writers felt a wife would be a distraction to a

detective; one gets the impression, reading their comments, that they felt their detectives were modern Sampsons whose strength would be sapped by the love of a woman. Dorothy Sayers actually married off her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, as a way to be free of him. And it was usually the tendency of the “hardboiled” detectives (always men, of course) to have one romantic attachment per book; this woman was usually killed off to get rid of her.

But there have gradually arisen a number of married male detectives with successful careers. In many cases, the wife is a partner (one thinks of Henry and Emmy Tibbett, for example), and in other cases, such as Pam and Jerry North or Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, they are a detecting team. It seems to me it works out best for male detectives, if married, to have wives who either share their career or have demanding careers of their own so that they are not moping at home worrying about what may be happening to their husbands. This is true, for example, of Troy Alleyn, a painter, and Joan Thanet, a probation officer.

Very few married female detectives operate independently. If they do, some excuse for getting rid of their husbands must be found, but for the most part they work as a team. The “hardboiled” female detectives are all single, though some are divorced (Kinsey Millhone several times). Their authors seem to be still inventing this genre, and the problem of a love life has not entirely been worked out, but both Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton, after experimenting with the “one lover per book” formula of their male counterparts, seem to have abandoned it as unworkable. The main men in their lives at present seem to be Vic’s neighbor, Mr. Contreras, and Kinsey’s landlord, Henry Pitts. This is a welcome sign. One reason I can never wholeheartedly enjoy Antonia Fraser’s books is that I find it deplorably irresponsible, especially in this AIDS era, for Jemima Shore to have an affair with a new man in each book, especially with no more emotional commitment than she seems to display.

On the other hand, many detectives have long-standing nonmarital relationships with members of the opposite sex, such as Augustus Maltravers with Tess Davy or G. D. H. Pringle with Mavis Bignell. After a trial period of several books, some of them—such as Claire Malloy and Peter Rosen or Jenny Cain and Geof Bushfield, Emily Pollifax and Cyrus Reed, or Kate Fansler and Reed Amhearst—eventually marry. Sometimes the combination doesn’t work out, as seems to be the case with Josh O’Roarke and Phillip Gerard or Kinsey Millhone and Jonah Robb. But it is most satisfying for the reader to be able to expect a couple to remain a couple. Therefore, I think it is a requirement of the perfect detective novel that the detective, whether married or single, have a **stable love life**.

The fact that I need mention this at all arises from the fact that most modern detectives grow and develop from one book to the next. I am ambivalent about this. With the classic detective you always knew what to expect; no matter where you dropped into Rex Stout’s series of books, you would find the same Nero Wolfe, living in his brownstone on W. 35th Street in New York, sitting in his office in the chair specially constructed to hold his one-seventh of a ton, between his two inviolate daily shifts in the rooftop greenhouse where he grows orchids, drinking beer and putting the caps in his desk drawer, listening to Archie Goodwin, his “Watson,” give a verbatim account of a conversation, from which he will draw the conclusions that allow him to solve the crime without leaving his home. From *Fer-de-Lance* in 1934 to *A Family Affair* in 1975, Wolfe (who was already 40 when the first book was written) does not age or change in any significant way, and this makes Stout’s books extremely accessible to the modern reader.

The modern detective, by contrast, meets people, forms relationships, and acquires a history that can be fascinating to readers—provided they get in on the ground floor. It can be confusing, however, to readers taking the books out of order. Still, this new approach allows the author to define his (or usually her) character gradually; she doesn't have to get him (or her) exactly right the first time, and this ultimately serves the reader by making the books more enjoyable. So I would tend to state it as a criterion of my perfect detective novel that it should **permit character development**.

The detective should be **intelligent**. Miss Seeton's blunderings are amusing but ultimately less satisfying than watching a purposeful detective using his own knowledge to solve a crime, not stumble on a solution. And although the detective may have arcane knowledge, he **must share it with the reader**. As Ronald Knox states it:

Any writer can make a mystery by telling us that at this point the great Picklock Holes suddenly bent down and picked up from the ground an object which he refused to let his friend see. He whispers "Ha!" and his face grows grave—all that is illegitimate mystery-making. The skill of the detective author consists in being able to produce his clues and flourish them defiantly in our faces: "There!" he says, "what do you make of that?" and we make nothing.

The best detectives are not only intelligent but also **ingenious and self-reliant**, even those with handicaps. There are blind detectives (such as Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados), deaf detectives (Jack Livingston's Joe Binney, Ellery Queen's Drury Lane, and Dwight Steward's Sampson Terhune), and lame or handicapped detectives (M. K. Shuman's Micah Dunn and John Lutz's Fred Carver), and it is especially satisfying to see them get themselves out of jams. But even able-bodied detectives **should not be superhuman**; they should suffer realistically, not bounce back like cartoon characters.

Not only should the detective be intelligent and ingenious, he should also be **sensible**. Gervase Fen, the scholar-sleuth created by Edmund Crispin, once said, "If there is anything I hate it is the sort of book in which characters don't go to the police when they've no earthly reason for not doing so." This is one of the things that irritates me about Joan Hess's Claire Malloy. Her policeman boyfriend Peter Rosen warns her off the case, and then she keeps on with it anyway and is so determined to solve it without his help that she ends up making a mess of things and delaying the solution, which would be arrived at much more quickly if she confided in him. Much of this has to do with personalities: we can certainly understand how V. I. Warshawski's resentment of the paternal interference of her late father's police colleague Bobby Mallory makes her react to him with sarcasm and recalcitrance, and, although this makes trouble for her personally, it does not retard the plot. Even so, we hate to see characters behaving in such self-destructive ways.

One very important criterion of the perfect detective novel is that the detective have a **believable means of support**. There was a time when we accepted amateur detectives as being independently wealthy (or, in the case of such spinsters as Miss Marple, at least independently comfortable), but in modern novels the detective must have some way of earning a living and must be seen to be doing so. If he is a policeman, this is taken care of, even though we may not believe that he would be allowed to spend so much time on a single case. If he is a private investigator, he must not take on too many charity cases unless he *is* independently wealthy. It is easier to believe in detectives who are working on several cases at once; this is often true of

Kinsey Millhone, for example. If the detective is an amateur whose living is made in another profession, we must be given a plausible excuse for his not being engaged in that work (being on vacation, for example).

Finally, the perfect detective, like his author, should **have a sense of humor**. There is more scope for humor in the novel when the detective is the narrator, and most of the lighter detective novels are written in the first person, but even third-person narrative can show humor in the detective. Wit and wordplay are especially enjoyable, but I'll settle for at least the realization that life is sometimes less than earnest.

It may seem thoroughly presumptuous to prescribe criteria for the *author* of the perfect detective novel, and in fact I have but two. One is that detective novels should be written only by the original author. Although Youngman Carter, Margery Allingham's husband, did a creditable job of carrying on his wife's character (beginning by completing an unfinished manuscript), I have generally found that the modern versions of Nero Wolfe and James Bond are less satisfying than the originals.

The second criterion, an entirely capricious one, is that the author should use **only one pen name**. Although authors may have very good reasons for using more than one (the most common is a different pen name for each detective character), I can't keep track of them all, and our library cataloging system doesn't group them together. If you've read and liked something by John Creasey and want to read everything he's written, would it occur to you that he had also written under the names of Gordon Ashe, J. J. Marric, and 23 other pseudonyms, including Margaret Cooke and Elise Fecamps?

I've said a lot about what I like in a detective novel, and I wish I had time to give you more details about some of the authors and detectives I like best. The authors listed on the handouts, however, are some I've read and enjoyed lately and will read again, and the ones I've starred are those I've found dependably satisfying, even if they don't meet all my criteria.

As I warned you, though, my tastes may be very different from yours, and either mine or yours may change as a new detective appears on the scene. When all is said and done, therefore, no matter who the author or detective, no matter what the subject or the plot, the perfect detective novel is probably the one I'm reading right now—or perhaps the one I have checked out to read next!