

MEAN STREETS AND FROZEN STARS: The Private Detective in American Literature and Culture

INSTRUCTOR: Jerry G. Holt

Most know that the figure of the private detective was invented by Edgar Allan Poe in 1837, when he created an infallible sleuth named Auguste Dupin. That creation fulfilled certain needs for Poe personal—but evidently others needed the character as well. From Poe’s time through the Gilded Age; through World War 1 and into the Noir World of post-atomic America, the character has not only survived, but has shown a remarkable ability to adapt with the times. Poe’s Dupin, after all, was a bringer of order—a kind of God figure in a chaotic world. Modern detective often find that very chaos overwhelming them: they are tarnished knights on the “mean streets” of one dark American city or another—and their reward is often isolation on life’s “frozen star,” as Raymond Chandler would have it.

It is my hope that this course will be interdisciplinary in all aspects; we want to locate these detective figures and their creators in their times and places, and that will involve bringing history, culture, geography, and anything else we deem important to our pursuit. This will be my first offering in my new teaching environment, and I will do all I can to make it information and memorable!

PRIMARY TEXTS

The Maltese Falcon, by Dashiell Hammett, Vintage Crime-Black Lizard, Reissue 1992.

The Long Goodbye, by Raymond Chandler, Vintage Crime-Black Lizard, Reissue 1988

Devil in a Blue Dress, by Walter Mosley, Washington Square Press, 2002.

Eight Million Ways to Die, by Lawrence Sanders, Avon, Reissue 2002.

F is for Fugitive, by Sue Grafton, St. Martin’s Paperbacks, 1989

Fallout, by Sara Paretsky, William Morrow, 2017.

Desperado—A Mile-High Noir, by Manuel Ramos, Arte Publico Press, 2012.

SECONDARY READINGS

“A Taste for Murder: The Curious Case of Crime Fiction,” by Rachel Franks, M/C Journal, 2014 (online) <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/770>

“The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” by Robert Warshow , Partisan Review, 1948, (online) <http://www.andreelafontaine.com/uploads/4/5/1/1/45112963/warshow-gangster.pdf>

“The Simple Art of Murder,” by Raymond Chandler, The Atlantic, 1944, (online) <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/chandlerart.html>

“The New Female Detective,” by Carolyn Heilbrun, Yale Journal of Law and Feminism, 2002, (online) <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1200&context=yjlf>

“Plot, Character, and Setting: A Study of Mystery and Detective Fiction,” by Patrick Velardi, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 1989, (online) <http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1989/4/89.04.09.x.html>

“The Case of the Disappearing Black Detective Novel,” by Sarah Weinman , The New Republic, 2015, (online) www.newrepublic.com

“At the Borders of American Crime Fiction,” by Rachel Adams, from Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature, Dimock and Buell, Editors, Princeton University Press, 2007, (online) <http://www.racheladams.net/articles/AtTheBordersOfAmericanCrimeFiction.pdf>

SCHEDULE

SESSION ONE	Welcome and Introductions. Where It All Started: The Edgar Allan Poe Story
SESSION TWO	Reading Assignment: <u>The Maltese Falcon</u> The Pinkerton Agency and the Birth of the Hard-Boiled
SESSION THREE:	Reading Assignment: <u>The Long Goodbye</u> Chandler’s Mean Streets: Los Angeles and the Private Eye

SESSION FOUR: READING ASSIGNMENT: Devil in a Blue Dress

The Private Eye and the African-American Experience

SESSION FIVE: READING ASSIGNMENT: Eight Million Ways to Die

The Mean Streets of New York and The Private Eye's Alcohol Problem

SESSION SIX: READING ASSIGNMENT: F is the Fugitive

The Female Investigator

SESSION SEVEN: READING ASSIGNMENT: Fallout

The FEMINIST Investigator

SESSION EIGHT: READING ASSIGNMENT: Desperado—A Mile-High Noir

The Mexican-American Investigator
