The Postmodern Detective: Contemporary London Crime Fiction
Transcript

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I am here today to talk about the good guys of London fiction. For the blood and the gore, and the dangerous and the difficult, you will have to come back next week, when the list of authors is slightly more daring than I am attempting today.

As I have promised in my title to be postmodern, I had better begin by deconstructing that description: the detectives that I want to talk about today are not always good and they are not always guys. Detectives come in all shapes and sizes these days, and they may not always be wrapped in tobacco smoke and London fog, as Holmes is. But my general questions today are really: do these new detectives still share the same common characteristics of the detectives that we saw emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century and at the end of the nineteenth?

The genre has survived into the twenty-first century, still going strong, reinventing itself in a variety of ways. What is it that we get from detectives? What do we want from them? What is it that they do that other literary characters cannot do? I also want to ask what it is that the crime story can tell us about London that other forms of literature cannot. Where can the crime story take us that realist fiction, romantic fiction, cannot take us? What can the crime novel do that literary fiction cannot? Can we find some correlations between literary fiction and the crime novel as well?

I also want to ask how the idea of the detective as an archetypal London figure has survived into the twentieth century, and how it is being used in London narratives that may not always be classified as “detective fiction”. Is the idea of logical detection that inspired Conan Doyle and which laid the framework for the genre still intact? Or have we, in these supposedly postmodern times, lost faith in the idea of a solution, and lost patience with the stories that offer the temporary balm of a case closed?

Before I go any further, I just want to pause and think about an idea that is quite central to my lecture today: the idea of London as a place that needs to be interpreted or needs to be known in a special kind of way. This seems to me to be central to the idea of the detective story, that we ask the detective to be an interpreter for us, and that the reader is invited to be an interpreter in the same way.

I want to start with a long quotation from a novel that is not in fact a detective novel at all: Penelope Lively’s City of the Mind. In this novel, Lively describes a child looking at London. This is Jane moving through London with her father:

And so they ride through the city, father and child seeing each a different place. Jane, with the liberation of childhood, without rationality or expectations, sees an anarchic landscape in which anything is possible and many things are provocative. She wrestles with language, scans advertisements, shop signs, logos on vans and trucks. She pays professional attention to other children, in the way that animals are more sensitive to their own species. She searches out the things that tether her to a known world: a bus with a familiar destination; a hording that proclaims her favourite brand of chocolate; Volkswagen cars that are like her father’s. She does not know what to expect, and therefore can assess what she sees in its own terms. She does not interpret, and therefore can construct her own system of references. The Arabic script on the windows of the Bank of Kuwait become little dancing figures. The carotids outside the church in Euston Road are ladies wearing bath towels with books on their heads. For her, the city is alternatively mysterious and familiar, baffling and instructive. She tests her own capacities against the view from the window of the bus. She rhymes and puns, she counts, she classifies, she plays games with words and sounds, she flexes her imagination, she takes the place as she sees it and twists to her own ends.

I think it is a really beautiful description of London, and also a really interesting idea, an opening up of an alternative view of the city, one which takes a consciousness far removed from that of a detective. This is someone who does not interpret, who sees everything according to her own frame of references, rather than linking it with any others. She puts forward the idea that the city needs to be read. It is not immediately self-evident. I think that almost childish idea of the city as mysterious and unreadable is an impulse that we find again and again in the detective novel. It is there all the time, in all sorts of different stories, with different kinds of detectives: London needs to be read and it cannot be easily understood. From the nineteenth century onwards, the detective is an intensification of an older idea of a mysterious London that requires a guide – think of those seventeenth century poems which talk about the dangers and the difficulties of St Giles, for example. What we really need is a guiding consciousness, an expert on London, to take us through the dangers and make sure that we do not fall into traps set for the unwary.

Let me start with the spadework of defining the crime story. I noticed that several of you coming in had some
very thick books with you, and I am sure that there are fans of the various genres dotted all around the hall; perhaps, at the end, you will be able to share with me your particular favourite London detective stories. But we all know that the idea of the detective story in London has a long history.

Broadly speaking, the detective story arises from the penny dreadfuls and the police case book stories of the nineteenth century. It moves through Golden Age fiction, from the ‘soft world’ of Agatha Christie, linking up with the ‘hard world’ Chandler in the American school. The twentieth century sees a series of different styles of detectives, and even as we enter a new era of publishing, the genre shows no sign of getting lost in the fog.

Police procedurals have been reinvigorated by the science of forensic investigations in recent years. I am not going to talk about those very much today because I am a bit squeamish and I do not like the really violent stuff or the serial killer stories.

To match this diverse genre, there are various critical arguments about where we draw the generic lines between crime story, thriller, police procedural. However, the detective story, in which the detective is the central and driving figure, has traditionally been one which, to borrow Michael Holquist’s definition, operates around the pure puzzle, the question: what has happened; how can this be resolved; can we put back the pieces of this broken scene; can we make the sentence whole again and restore the rightful name, perhaps to the victim, but certainly to the killer or the wrongdoer? The primary driver of these kinds of stories is the investigation, rather than the context of the crime or an exploration of the social world of the criminal in which it takes place. A crime novel where we see through the eyes of the bad guys runs on the unruly energies of that world, pushed forward by the dangerous and the demonic. But the detective novel has the more difficult task of inviting those dangerous energies in, but then also controlling and subduing them, and finding a way, in the end, to close them off. It is perhaps an inaccurate cliché to say that the detective story is all about moving from order to disorder to order again because, so often, detective stories end with uncertainty, or at least a sense of anxiety. The master criminal may be seen off for a while, but he is likely to return. The fog may dissipate for this day, but it will inevitably return again.

We can look to the obvious example of Ruth Rendell for the difference between the detective story and the psychological thriller. Her novels featuring the dogged ‘good guy’, Inspector Wexford, are an example of the former; those novels written under a different name, Barbara Vine, fall into the latter category. In these psychological thrillers, there is no single detective but rather a buried family secret or some kind of trauma that needs to be excavated, remodelled, re-understood and put back together again in a different kind of way. There is no need, in these stories, for the absolute, central guiding consciousness of the detective-interpreter figure.

While I am on the topic of literary criticism, the detective novel has, despite being a ‘popular’ form, been of great interest to narrative theorists – those critics concerned with how stories work and how authors, texts and readers interact. Because the detective story is all about interpretation, movements from order to disorder and then back to order, questions of resolutions or solutions, the ends of stories as well as their complicated beginnings, narrative theorists have found in this genre a rich source of material.

One such theorist, Tzvetan Todorov, offered, in 1966, a typology of the detective story. He was interested in the structures of the form, the rules that it had to follow in order to be a detective story: the kinds of characters it had, the events it had to move through, the different timeframes on offer. The original crime is committed, followed by a period of investigation, followed by the back story being filled in at the end. Todorov suggested that, if the detective novel diverted from these rules, then it became something else - it was aiming for something properly literary and therefore could not really be called a detective story anymore. In the course of his discussion, he offered us this useful equation: “Author is to reader what criminal is to detective.” So, the author commits the crime, as the criminal does; the reader then has to emerge from the shadows, with the detective, and piece everything back together again.

If we use this as the basis for an ‘ideal reading’, we can see that authors are inviting the reader to read, interpret and master a mystery, to see their way through the fog.

Does this equation still hold true for the detective novels of today? Do we still hold onto the idea that the author is going to keep faith with their eventual detective, with their reader, and give them all the clues they need? What happens if that relationship is changed? This is what interests the narrative theorists about detective fiction, and it is one of the reasons why the detective novel became part of the postmodern project; it asks questions about what we know and how we know. This is an epistemological form. It asks us about how we get to know the world. And that is an interesting idea about the detective form: it is about what we know and how we come to know it.

Has the nature and person and purpose of the detective changed very much from this formulation? Has it changed through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries from its original inception? I am now going to talk about some of those changes and see how the London summoned in detective narratives has changed too.

To borrow from Michael Holquist again, he notes the legions of narratives which could retrospectively be seen as detective fictions, from Oedipus Rex onwards, but suggests that you cannot have detective fiction before you
have detectives. You can have people who investigate, you can have mysteries that need to be solved in gothic stories or sensation fiction, but the detective only really arises with the formation of the Detective Department of the Metropolitan Police in 1842. The popularity of stories such as Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin stories or works by Vidocq all centre around this new kind of character, this new figure, the police inspector involved in the darker sides of the metropolis. This figure becomes more and more common throughout the nineteenth century.

We can perhaps pinpoint Inspector Bucket, Dickens’ 1853 creation, as one of London’s first detectives. He arrives to shed light on that most destructive of country houses, Bleak House. This fiction was written in the context of numerous factual publications which claimed to be true accounts of the police force as it was operating in the nineteenth century, and the experiences of London’s detectives (e.g. The Recollections of a Detective Police Officer). These stories were melodramatic, over the top. They are part of a larger nineteenth century interest in documenting the city as far as it could be documented. So, although they might seem over the top and lurid, I would suggest instead that they are simply alternative ways of apprehending this mysterious place.

Following the various beginnings of the genre, we arrive at Holmes. I am not going to anticipate the lecture in a couple of weeks and talk too much about Holmes, but how can we not? He is the private or amateur detective par excellence. Conan Doyle’s narrative operates as a critique of the police and of institutional crime solving, in favour of more complex protagonists and a more complex relationship between author/criminal and detective/reader. This is where the puzzle begins – can you keep pace with Holmes or do you just stand back admiringly as he solves all problems and answers all puzzles?

However, almost from its very beginnings, the genre has encompassed many different styles of detecting. For all the vaunted superiority and frequent triumphs of its investigators, it contains tensions and contradictions that have sharpened critical interest in this popular form. So, the detective hero is not always in charge of himself and the city through which he moves.

Even in the case of authors of Golden Age detective fiction - the genre at its most comfortable - Susan Rowland writes: “They placed faith in the detective, who dominates the plot, organises the reader’s perception, or permits his sidekick to do so, and solves the mystery.” But most post-Holmesian London detectives (such as Lord Peter Wimsey, so profoundly affected by his experiences in the trenches of World War I, wresting painfully with his conscience over his investigations and the memories they conjure) have something a bit wrong with them. Rowland argues that, although post-Holmesian detectives might still assert their authority over a case and over the city, they do so with a more feminine intuition and the ability to be different kinds of characters, to move through different scenes, and even with a certain vulnerability. This style of detection is very different to Holmes’ detached and objective rationality.

Here is a description of a contemporary detective. This is Christopher Fowler’s Arthur Bryant, from the Bryant and May series. As I read this, try and picture this man in your mind.

Imagine a tortoise minus its shell, thrust upright and stuffed into a dreadful suit. Give it glasses, false teeth, and a hearing aid, and a wispy band of white hair arranged in a straggling tonsure. Fill its pockets with rubbish, old pennies and scribbled notes, boiled sweets, and leaky pens, and fill its head with a mad scramble of ideas: the height of the steeple at St Clement Danes, the tide tables of the Thames, the dimensions of Waterloo Station, and the methods of murderers. On top of all this, add the enquiring wonder of a 10 year old boy.

Fowler has recently said that he specifically wanted to make his detectives, Bryant and May “elderly”, to remove them from the heroic archetype: the detective who is physically able, always remembers everything that he needs to remember, is mentally strong and emotionally solid. Bryant and May are bad-tempered, they are slow, they have an entirely different way of moving through the city compared to a younger and more physically able detective.

If we are thinking about detectives who move away from the Holmesian ideal, we might also think about detectives operating in the outsider position. Maybe they belong to the police force, but they are slightly on the margins? Think, if you have the nerve to do so, of Derek Raymond’s nameless member of the disreputable A14 Squad, who operates both within and without official structures of investigation. Bryant and May, of course, operate for the Peculiar Crimes Unit.

Another type of contemporary crime fiction we might want to note is the ‘mystery novel’, which presents the reader with the same kinds of puzzle to unravel or the same kinds of city clues to pick through, but which offers a mediating character (or a group of characters) who does not have the same claim to detecting genius as Holmes. They do not have that almost supernatural ability to read whatever is going on around them, but they have other gifts to help them find their way to a satisfactory conclusion.

We can claim novels as detective stories without there being a specific ‘private eye’ involved. Alison Joseph detects through a nun, Sister Agnes. Trish Maguire is a barrister. There are various different kinds of occupations which can be undertaken by the detective figure. Somebody who is just capable of eavesdropping or is in the right place at the right time to come across a mystery will do.
So, does the single, almost omniscient, detective still have a place in contemporary London fiction? Speaking not just about London fiction but detective fiction in general, P.D. James suggests that he certainly does. She wrote in Talking about Detective Fiction that: “The detective hero has survived and is still at the heart of the story, like a secular priest expert in the extraction of confession, whose final revelation of the truth confers vicarious absolution on all but the guilty. But, not surprisingly, he has changed.” I think James’ choice of words is very interesting. For a start, the detective is a hero. It is not a black and white character. He must be on the side of the angels. And he is still at the heart of the story. Again, these are stories which have hearts. They are not exploding mysteries that will go on and on and never be solved in a postmodern fashion. This detective is “like a priest” (though she qualifies that with “secular”), someone who should be on the side of the angels, one hopes.

“Expert in the extraction of a confession” - that sense of a skill, of someone who can draw something out of someone or something else, and then a “revelation”, an “absolution” – these are almost religious terms, are they not? So, PD James’ idea of a detective is somebody with this kind of absolute authority.

Feminist critics of detective tales are divided between celebrating the female detectives who triumph in a world where they might usually be cast as victims, and feeling really rather estranged from this kind of ‘Patriarchal Authority’, where the detective is master of the world and all knowledge.

We find different forms of detection and different relationships with knowledge when we move into the world of the female detective. Susan Rowland suggests a more intuitive style of knowledge. But even if we do not get into the abstract areas of how we know, but rather look into the pragmatics of how one goes about detecting, we see a change of style or a different way of talking about detectives from some of these female writers writing female detectives. Liza Cody said of her Anna Lee series, for example, that she wondered, “What would happen to an ordinary, competent English woman who happened to be a detective, someone who went unarmed, used the Yellow Pages a lot, and got hurt when she was hit?” So, this is a rather more human detective, someone who is not occupying the Holmesian, lofty realms of absolute knowledge.

Many of these female detectives have alternative jobs and posts: we have the nun, the barrister. Unfortunately, Natasha Cooper, the author of the Trish Maguire series, has said recently that she has made Trish too happy. Trish now has a child and a nice partner and is getting on well at work, and Cooper says, “You cannot have a happy sleuth.” So, she is moving on to an entirely new female detective figure. She is going to have to create a whole new unhappy character and then build her up again.

I suppose that, however the stories tell themselves, whoever the author is, whatever the underlying ideologies may be beneath their stories, the detective is still a key figure in investigative crime fiction. After World War One, the Golden Age of the form, often associated with the country house or the “Murder at the Vicarage” stories of Agatha Christie, the carefully constructed narratives which contain and control destructive criminal energies, could be seen as a response to a traumatised culture.

How do we think about our London detective stories in the same kind of way? Are they also a response to the city as a sort of trauma, the city as a problem?

Sally Munt describes the Golden Age novels in terms of “a bad apple being prised away from a peaceful Eden”. It is easy to agree with this formulation if you are talking about a vicarage garden or a country house. But perhaps because London is never Eden - it is very rarely described as somewhere so perfect or so ideal, even in the most optimistic fictions – it cannot return to an idealised and safe form. There is not really ever an order in London we can be returned to.

A change in setting, much like the change in detectives, gives us a new insight into how detective fictions are being written in the present day.

One thing I want to keep my eye on is the idea that the role of the detective has become a very important one for discovering all sorts of things about London, for underlining this idea that the city always needs to be read, whether you can interpret it or not.

London is certainly a city haunted by crime, and haunted by unsolved crimes in particular. London becomes, not just in detective fiction but throughout its literary history, a problem to be solved: how can it be understood, how can it be documented, written about or read about? And we have that swirl of images, which stay with us to this day, from the earliest literature onwards, reminding us that London is a labyrinth or a monster or a black hole - a city, as Iain Sinclair has most recently put it, “of disappearances”. It challenges anyone who seeks to know or to understand it.

A popular critical idea has been that the detective story, as it exists today, arises from the ‘problem’ of London. Raymond Williams, in his classic analysis of the role of the urban/rural division in British writing, The Country and the City, suggests that the crime story emerges not just as a description of crime itself but as a response to the opaque complexity of modern city life. The new metropolis, with its rapid turnover of people, objects and architecture, its speed and its anonymity, cannot be easily understood or comprehended. This lack of certainty in modern city life comes to be represented by crime. And so, suggests Williams, “The urban detective begins to
emerge as a significant and ratifying figure, the man who can find his way through the fog, who can penetrate
the intricacies of the streets.”

There is often the almost clichéd sense that the detective has a tragic knowledge of the city streets, that they
are almost infected by it. They are almost sacrificial figures.

And it is of course a cliché that the investigator is in some ways damaged: a damaged person or damaged by the
worlds in which they must inhabit. Every film or TV detective, from Sam Spade to Jackson Brodie to Sarah Lund,
has a fatal character flaw of one type or another, be it alcohol or bad temper, a string of embittered ex-wives or
just bad dress sense. Whatever it might be, the detective struggles with the dark forces of life. Think of
Chesterton’s Father Brown, who says that he has to “think like the murderer in order to catch him, thinking his
thoughts, wrestling with his passions.”

Just as the detective must know the criminal, the detective must know London, and it is through the ways in
which we see individual detectives uncovering the places of London that authors can comment on the nature of
the city too. This may not be the main intention of the text. The detective novel is not always a treatise on the
condition of London in any given historical moment. But in every way it tries to tell the story, something is
revealed.

Moreover, the setting, form and structure of the detective novel are always closely linked. It is the form and the
conditions of the modern city that provide the occasion for the crime novel, as it moves away from those old
settings of the country house and the rural paradises that have to be put back together again after a crime.

The anonymity of the city, the potential for slippages of identity and anxieties around the untold variety of
threats brought in by new populations provide ready settings, rich composts for bad things to grow.

Again, to depart from detective fiction in particular and return to a nineteenth century view of what the city was
like, I shall read from Dickens’ Dombey and Son. This is Harriet Carker looking at people coming in from the
countryside and descending into London.

She often looked with compassion, at such a time, upon the stragglers who came wandering into London, by the
great highway hard by, and who, footsore and weary, and gazing fearfully at the huge town before them, as if
foreboding that their misery there would be as a drop of water in the sea or as a grain of sea sand on the shore,
went shrinking on, cowering before the angry weather and looking as if the very elements rejected them. Day
after day, such travellers crept past, but always, as she thought, in one direction, always towards the town.
Swallowed up in one phase or other of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by desperate
fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the river, fever, madness,
vice, and death, they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost.

Wonderful stuff! What Dickens does here is remind us of the scale of the city. This is a monstrous place, a place
which is sucking in the life and vitality of the country around it, and of the people from that countryside. The
people shrink in the immensity of this place. They become grains of sand, lost in its hugeness. They become
unimportant. They become anonymous. They are already on the way to becoming that. Even the weather is
angry, and we shall come to the importance of weather in these settings in a moment. This description lays the
groundwork for the detective novel, as it will come about. The detective novel has to find these people again. It
has to find these lost souls and try and put them back somewhere meaningful or tell their story.

The anonymity of the city, both for victims and villains, allows for crime. Individuals are lost and become invisible
in the crowd. “Everyone looks alike in the fog,” says a character in Margery Allingham’s The Tiger in the Smoke.

Detective stories often deal, of course, with death, with the ultimate disappearance. However, beyond their
immediate plots, they deal with a larger threat of extinction, and I think that is always lurking behind any
detective novel. Names and identities are lost, and the detective may be the only one who can return them to
their proper place. The darkest crime stories are those which open themselves most fully to this wall on the
other side of silence.

Derek Raymond’s novels are some of the most explicitly violent London fictions. Even Will Self seems rattled by
them, which is a good sign. He says, “They push the detective procedural as far as it will go down the road to
full-blown existentialist horror.” But Raymond’s novels are also strangely tender in their determination to bear
witness to the suffering of victims that many more exploitative books in different genres do not care very much
to do.

In this finding of the lost, in this listening out for the silenced, it is not just the actual documented horrors of
poverty and violence in the city, ready to trap all comers, that marks London as a place that needs to be solved.
It is the place itself that threatens to become illegible, and people not knowing their place within it that is the real
threat.

As a point of reference I would just like to mention Arthur Morrison, author of the Martin Hewitt series of
detective stories. These appeared in 1894 and were popular with readers introduced to the idea of investigation by Conan Doyle. The detective, Hewitt, claims to have no system beyond observation and commonsense, but he does share Holmes’ chameleon-like ability to be thoroughly at home among any and every class of people. He is one of those detectives, like Holmes, who can move through the anonymous crowd.

In other works, in his more documentary works like Tales of Mean Streets, Morrison suggests that people just do not know what is out there. He says: “Many and misty are people’s notions of the East End and each is commonly the distorted shadow of a minor feature.” Morrison wants to show, as Dickens did, one side of the city to the other. He wants to try and explain it, and he uses the detective as a ratifying or an interpretative figure in order to do so. That sense of the deathly anonymity just beyond the known underlines the immediate confusion of the industrial city and aligns it with the unreadable state of modernity itself. The world has become a very confusing place.

This sense of the unknown or the detective story being able to deal with the unknown has led it to be of great interest to postmodern theorists and to postmodern authors, such as Paul Auster, Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges. These writers use the detective story, or ideas of detection and interpretation, to suggest the loss of certainty, the loss of self, the loss of solutions in a postmodern world. It is an intensification of the Dickensian sense of the lost in the nineteenth century urban, elevated to a philosophical idea.

There is also the ‘anti-detective story’ in postmodern fiction, and perhaps the best London example of this is Peter Ackroyd’s Hawksmoor. The challenge of the city is the press of history. The contemporary detective, Nicholas Hawksmoor, becomes deeply enmeshed in a complicated historical link with Nicholas Dyer, the architect of the Hawksmoor churches, and there is much toing and froing across the centuries. Hawksmoor feels it is the ghostly traces of the past which haunt contemporary London and eventually bring him down. He notes: “It was now a matter of received knowledge in the police force that no human being could rest or move in any area without leaving some trace of his or her identity, but if the walls of the Wapping Church were to be analysed by emissions spectroscopy, how many partial or residual spectra might be detected?” And he had an image of a mob, “screaming to be set free as he guided his steps towards the tower, which rose above the houses cluttered around Red Maiden Lane, Crab Court and Rope Walk.” Hawksmoor is eventually destroyed by his investigation, overwhelmed by the past and the malign powers of the city. Indeed, the idea of rational investigation is completely undone by the complexity and the darkness of the city’s history.

This postmodern or anti-detective move perhaps draws out and makes clear the tensions at the heart of any London-set detective story. If the city’s dangerous energies are too neatly contained, then the story is obviously artificial. If, however, it opens itself fully to that roar, then there can be only chaos. How do you resolve such a place?

I think it is not only for the obviously metafictional or postmodern narratives that these questions arise. G.K. Chesterton, in his Defence of Detective Stories, noticed this overwhelming challenge of London’s constant languages: “Every brick has as human a hieroglyph as if it were a graven brick of Babylon, every slate on the roof is as educational a document as if it were a slate covered with addition and subtraction sums. Everything which tends, even under the fantastic form of the minutiae of Sherlock Holmes, to assert this romance of detail and civilisation, to emphasise this unfathomably human character in flints and tiles is a good thing.” This is a rather romantic idea, that one could read all these mysterious hieroglyphs through the eye of the Sherlock Holmes type detective.

But how else do our contemporary crime fiction writers respond to this endless language, this endless speaking of London? How do they tie it down to the page and make it speak to the reader?

Whenever we are reading a detective novel, we can ask: how do they bring London before us and what do they make of it? How do they translate this heteroglosia into the written form, especially into a sparse form like the detective novel?

One trope we can notice in the detective novel is a loading of details, particularly street names, a litany of places and boroughs and postcodes. It is a literary trick that any writer with an A to Z can play, but it underlines the problems of what London is: how do you actually describe it to a reader? Even in the horribly heated rush towards the end of Derek Raymond’s I was Dora Suarez, we are permitted a brief litany of street names: “Off the South Circular Road, I started reading off the names: Neanderthal Avenue, Sobers Street, Gunter Passage. I said to Stevenson, “Lovelock Road ought to be on the left after the next set of lights.”” Neanderthal Avenue? I have never come across Neanderthal Avenue.

That might remind you of The Sign of Four, in which Sherlock Holmes rattles off the names: Wordsworth Road, Priory Road, Lark Hall Lane, Stockwell Place, Robert Street, Cold Harbour Lane.

Inspector Wexford has, in the most recent Wexford novel, The Vault, just moved to London and, rather sweetly, is finding his way around. He has to learn the names on his frequent walks through the city.

Weather is still important. The fog is still important. It is just that we might find it in different ways. For example, a
typical London scene from the beginning of Tiger in the Smoke describes “The fog, like a saffron blanket, soaked in ice water.”

By the time we get to the late Sixties, when the Clean Air Act has seen the smog off, how can the contemporary crime writer summon up this foggy world of mystery?

Jane Stevenson, in London Bridges, has it both ways: “London is a town for fog, mist swirling up from the river, the darkness between streetlight, but, although it is never summer in the London of the imagination, the streets are as answerable to sunlight and long evenings as those of any capital in Europe.” She mentions the fog and says that London is very foggy, but then she sets it in a contemporary August, a sunbathed London. This is a new world that she is creating, but she reminds us, she ties us to the world of the detective story just by the mention of that fog.

Places, of course, are important. Bryant and May take us into a different area of London with every book - a pub, railways, the underground, theatres. We are being taken on a tour of all the different corners and secret places that the city can offer.

Esme Miskimmin suggests that the important features of the city detective novel are the networks of alleyways, staircases, cellars and darkened doorways beyond or beneath the everyday spaces of London. I am sure we can find those in any contemporary crime fiction novel, in the same way that we used to find them in Conan Doyle.

The pressure of London’s history is one which bears down upon the contemporary crime novel and perhaps differentiates it from Conan Doyle. Doyle does not often mention London’s history, but it is always there in the contemporary crime novel. Bryant and May frequently refer to London’s history. Alison Joseph’s Sister Agnes, who conveniently moves around to a variety of locations where mystery can ensue - prisons and girls’ schools and so on - remembers the waifs and strays, the fallen women and the downright mad stumbling across the Thames, as she sits and thinks about the house in Bermondsey in which she is in.

So, in many of these stories, the detection of present crime turns into an awareness of the past, of that roar on the other side of silence, that huge weight of London’s history and past sufferings, and a sense of London as a place of signs, but perhaps no longer in the romanticised way that Chesterton sees it.

To finish, I would like to return to the idea of the way that a child might see the city, through thinking about children’s detective stories. We would think this might be a more simple form. There is much fun to be had in reworking adult forms for children, whether that is through retelling the Sherlock Holmes stories or through new mysteries. We have had the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, who visited London as part of their series, and there are also now more and more historical mystery stories for children set in London. I want to talk about two incidences where the role of urban interpreter and solver of mysteries falls to a child: the popular book for children The London Eye Mystery and Mark Haddon’s The Curious Case of the Dog in the Night-Time. In both cases, two boys who each have, to quote from one, “a funny brain that runs on a different operating system from other people’s” find their way around the city. This trope can also be seen in Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel about 9/11, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.

Can children be little truth detectives? Can they see things differently? In The Curious Incident... we have this scene where an autistic child, the narrator of the novel, arrives in London and this is what he sees. I do not know if you can see it terribly well here. He looks around to see if this is London and this is what he sees: a litany of signs and shops, a kind of confusing language he cannot hope to interpret.

The London Eye Mystery similarly tells of a child trying to pick their way through the clues and the problems of London to try and find their way to the end of a mystery. These discoveries are played out against a London that is a place of secrets and discoveries. One character, trapped in a block of condemned flats in Peckham, sees a different view of the city from his vantage point, one which casts the city into two halves in a dramatic play of light and dark, with the London Eye at its centre. The children here are agents of detection and of solving mysteries.

In these books, children are being encouraged to become detectives too, to take on the job of knowing and understanding the city in which they live or which they might one day visit. It is not anti-detective fiction and it is not postmodern, but it offers us an alternative view of the city, one which reminds us that there are lots of different ways of seeing the place and lots of different ways of unravelling its mysteries.

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