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## The Secret of Father Brown: What is Christian Detective Fiction?

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Early in the summer of 2003, when preparing a talk for Taylor University's C. S. Lewis and Friends Society the following September, I began to consider the idea of "Christian detective fiction." I had always enjoyed G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories, and wondered if that spirit of Father Brown, a peculiarly Christian blend of the physical and metaphysical, was present in other works of detective fiction. I decided to explore the phrase "Christian detective fiction" and see where it took me.

I thought I knew what that phrase meant. My original intention was to examine the Father Brown stories, unpack what Chesterton was doing, and scout out modern writers doing the same thing. Reality, however, sent me in a different direction.

I read several mysteries from Christian publishing houses, such as Bethany; some were good, and some not so good. I was lucky to find Jon L. Breen and Martin Harry Greenberg's excellent and thorough (up to 1990) *Synod of Sleuths: Essays on Judeo-Christian Detective Fiction*. I was excited at first, because it seemed that Breen and Greenberg had done most of the work for me. However, once I began reading it, I realized that, far from answering my questions about Christian detective fiction, it simply clarified the ones I had, and raised even more (the authors focus on listing religious protagonists, but provide only minimal discussion, due to the scope of the study).

I began to wonder if Father Brown were exceptional to the point of being unique. There is, of course, only one Chesterton, but I thought there might be at least a few imitators. No one seemed to be able to reproduce Chesterton's delicate balance: writers were either ham-handedly evangelical, with Bible verses and prayers coming from characters' lips in a forced, unnatural fashion (Donna Fletcher Crow's *The Castle of Dreams*); or they were satisfied to keep the Christian element at a cultural and moral level (for instance, the Miss Marple-esque churchgoing older lady detective, in

Jeanne M. Dams's Dorothy Martin series).

In attempting to make sense of the issue, I broke down the main question ("What is Christian detective fiction?") into component parts: What is Christian fiction? What is detective fiction? Assuming one can combine the two, what does that look like?

The idea of "Christian" fiction is more complex than a glance at the local Family Bookstore or Inspirational section at Wal-Mart would attest. From one angle, Christian fiction looks like stories that have biblical themes, or strongly Christian characters, or an evangelistic message. The *Left Behind* series, the novels of Frank Peretti, and the romances of Grace Livingston Hill would seem to fit this category. Such books are probably the first examples that most people would think of upon hearing the phrase "Christian fiction."

I would argue, though, that there is room for a more sophisticated or complex view of Christian fiction. The previously mentioned works are excellent examples of their genres, but they fall into the category of "popular entertainment with a message." What about people who are interested in reading and writing work that is more "literary" than "popular" (I use the terms loosely)? And what if they don't want a blatant "message," but still want to explore the world through the eye of faith? To put it in detective fiction terms, what if one would rather read Dorothy L. Sayers than Mary Higgins Clark?

Speaking of detective fiction, what does that term mean in the shadow of a worldview that accepts the supernatural? If Christianity is best understood in terms of both faith and reason, what to do with a genre that is reason-based? This "reasonable" approach was perhaps most memorably expounded in the oath of the famous Detection Club (founded in 1928 by Dorothy L. Sayers and others):

Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them,

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using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence or the Act of God? (Lupoff par. 16)

Since “divine revelation” and “acts of God” are (generally) forbidden, some Christian readers feel that detective fiction may not have a place in “Christian” literature. *Christian Literature & Living* is a “monthly online journal devoted to the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ through literature, and through living according to his Word” (CLL). Its January 2002 issue contains a review of D.J. Delffs’s *The Judas Tree*. The reviewer gives Delffs some credit for a “well-written” story, but questions the very nature of the book:

However, the place of detective fiction as a sub-genre within the discipline of Christian Literature is not certain. Is it because the detective novels that claim to be part of Christian fiction continue to focus more on entertainment, logic, reason, and suspense than on the transforming ministry of Jesus Christ? (“Potter”)

What the (unnamed) reviewer means by focusing “more” on the transforming ministry of Jesus remains unclear, as does how this different focus would fit into the detective fiction genre. The author seems to question whether any type of literature that isn’t strictly evangelical would be able to be considered “Christian.” The review ends, however, in hopeful fashion:

Will he also do some new and bold experimentation with detective fiction and help transform the genre to be truly Christian? I believe that even with the retention of entertainment, logic, reason, and suspense, detective works may be so created as to revolve around the redemptive ministry of the Holy Spirit. (“Potter”)

The *Christian Literature & Living* reviewer may not have laid out a plan for Christian detective fiction (beyond making it “redemptive”), but we should try. What does a Christian detective story look like?

One possibility is that such stories would deal with Christian themes, such as justice, mercy, and redemption. Justice is, generally speaking, already part of the genre; nearly all detective stories end with the demise of the villain in some form or another. Mercy is sometimes shown to the villain, depending on the circumstance (Sherlock Holmes often does this), but usually the characters (and readers) are interested in

retribution. Redemption, on the other hand, is a theme that could certainly be explored more. Redemption of the villain is rare (usually the reader wants to pack him off to Justice as soon as possible), although redemption of the detective through the work of detection (or other personal means) has received some attention.

If Christian themes are to be explored, a writer must write books that dig deep into characters’ lives, such as Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Gaudy Night*. Getting to know the detective and/or other characters well enough to see their development is key; the type of novel that is superficial and a puzzle for puzzle’s sake (for instance, Sayers’s *Five Red Herrings*) would leave little room for redemption or other themes.

A sub-category of the Christian themes idea is a general belief in a higher power, or higher justice—some moral authority to whom we owe allegiance, and to whom we can appeal. Whether this belief can always be considered “Christian,” however, is debatable; probably it only works when the general cultural milieu of the “believing” characters is Christian (for instance, Sherlock Holmes in Victorian England).

Another way to write a “Christian” detective story would be to make the detective or other major character Christian. A Christian main character eases the way for discussion of Christian ideas and concerns and offers the author room to show what a Christian lifestyle looks like. It provides the most “organic” means of introducing Christianness to the story. A twist on this might be to show a devout minor character, or to allow readers to follow along with a character who is not Christian, but is taking a faith journey in that direction.

Perhaps the best way to look at Christianity and detective fiction is to consider the question in light of the Bible. Dr. Dennis Hensley, associate professor of English at Taylor University (Fort Wayne Campus) and author of over forty books (including three novels and dozens of short stories in the mystery genre), offers this consideration: “The Bible has mysteries,” he says, “and only some are solved by God.”

God himself is mysterious, and He has given humans curiosity that makes them interested in both the Creator and his Creation. The whole Bible can be seen as a detective novel; it begins with the introduction of a “death” (sin). The consequences of this death are played out; we meet more characters. But instead of the detective adding up clues to figure out the solution to the murder, justice is served in an unexpected way. The clues are given by the redeemer—HE (God) will pay the justice owed to himself. Why? Because of His mysterious nature: a Love that we cannot understand. The “story” ends not with the retribution, but with mercy, leading to redemption, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this is what we should ask when defining Christian detective fiction: is not only justice served,

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but mercy? Is redemption possible? Does it happen? After all, the Father Brown stories' Flambeau character was redeemed, going from a thief to being a detective himself, sharing in Father Brown's work. To be Christian, then, detective fiction must move beyond merely including a cosmetic or surface Christian "message" (through characters, themes, or whatever). Christian detective fiction must mirror the greatest mystery of all: the redemption of humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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