Detective Stories is a one-credit 15-person seminar focusing on a particular branch of the popular culture genre crime-writing. The course begins with a 19th-century text not because “crime” and “mystery” and “detection” began then, but because in that century growing mass literacy and new lucrative platforms for publication supported the rise of a particular kind of crime story organized around the figure who “detects.” Other contributing cultural factors included the centrality of cities and the perception of overworlds and underworlds there, the new phenomenon of “the police,” and intense public discourse about “public” and “private” and how gender, race, and class impacts or collapases these “spheres.” Our class texts follow the figure of the “private detective” into the twentieth century, and we’ll share responsibility for initiating discussion about them. We’ll also discuss the way the genre turns more recently from the “private” or “amateur” detective to the one paid by the “public” to take responsibility for Law and Order. The final text in the course, the one chosen individually by students in discussion with me, may deal with any of these categories of detective stories.

Schedule of readings and discussions:

Tues. Jan. 28: Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Man with the Twisted Lip” (1892, pdf sent with syllabus). Please bring notes for discussion of key topics -- the figure of the detective, the presentation of the city and its contribution to the nature of the crime, and anything else that interests you. Broader questions might include: what are the pleasures and dangers of the detective “series”? how is the genre both “radical” and “conservative”? how does it use science, romance, history?

Tues. Feb. 4: Ellery Queen’s Cat of Many Tails (1949): discussion includes reading up through the end of chapter 8. (As noted in a previous email) this text suddenly went out of print: it is available on Kindle and in used versions on Amazon and Ebay: I will also put a copy on reserve in O’Neill, as I will the other two novels.)

Tues. Feb. 11: finish reading/discussing Cat of Many Tails. 2-3 page paper due in class.


Tues. Feb. 25: finish reading/discussing Looking for Rachel Wallace. (Conferences this week, or sooner, about your choice of final text.)

SPRING BREAK


Tues. Mar. 18: finish reading/discussing Hard Time. Choices of individual texts should be finalized.
Tues. Mar 25: Roman Polansky's film "Chinatown" (1974) time and place TBA (class viewing; recommended). Conferences this week on your chosen text.

Tues. Apr. 1: final class meeting: reports on your chosen texts.

Monday April 7: please turn in final paper on your chosen text or final take-home exam to me in person in Stokes S465).

Some Critical Visions of The Detective Story:

W. A. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," (1953)
'The detective story requires a closed society so that the possibility of an outside murderer (and hence of the society being totally innocent) is excluded; and a closely related society so that all its members are potentially suspect.

Stages: (supposedly) peaceful state before murder (false innocence); discovery of crime; false clues (false location of guilt); true clues and solution (location of true guilt); arrest of murderer/catharsis/true innocence.

Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944)
The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing.

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man. But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world, and a good enough man for any world. . .The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure.

Robert A. Rushing, Resisting Arrest:Detective Fiction and Popular Culture (2007)
Ferverely, to return to the Lacanian conception of anxiety, this deliberate dissatisfaction is precisely why detective fiction soothes us. It is not because it offers us the familiar, or reassures us that the social hierarchy is intact, or because it promises a kind of general order in the universe, but rather because all of its basic tropes are aimed at frustrating our desires, at casting us back into a circular movement. We are soothed by the certain knowledge that our desire will not be fulfilled, that at the end of the story we will be able to say, once again, “repeat.”