Books to Die For
The World’s Greatest Mystery Writers on the World’s Greatest Mystery Novels
Also by John Connolly

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BOOKS TO DIE FOR
The World’s Greatest Mystery Writers on the World’s Greatest Mystery Novels

Edited by
John Connolly and Declan Burke

Editorial Assistant:
Ellen Clair Lamb

HODDER & STOUGHTON
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Introduction

Why does the mystery novel enjoy such enduring appeal? There is no simple answer. It has a distinctive capacity for subtle social commentary; a concern with the disparity between law and justice; and a passion for order, however compromised. Even in the vision of the darkest of mystery writers, it provides us with a glimpse of the world as it might be, a world in which good men and women do not stand idly by and allow the worst aspects of human nature to triumph without opposition. It can touch upon all these facets while still entertaining the reader – and its provision of entertainment is not the least of its many qualities.

But the mystery novel has always prized character over plot, which may come as some surprise to its detractors. True, this is not a universal tenet: there are degrees to which mysteries occupy themselves with the identity of the criminal as opposed to, say, the complexities of human motivation. Some, such as the classic puzzle mystery, tend towards the former; others are more concerned with the latter. But the mystery form understands that plot comes out of character, and not just that: it believes that the great mystery is character.

If we take the view that fiction is an attempt to find the universal in the specific, to take individual human experiences and try to come to some understanding of our common nature through them, then the question at the heart of all novels can be expressed quite simply as ‘Why?’ Why do we do the things that we do? It is asked in Bleak House just as it is asked in The Maltese Falcon. It haunts The Pledge as it
Introduction

does *The Chill*. But the mystery novel, perhaps more than any other, not only asks this question; it attempts to suggest an answer to it as well.

But where to start? There are so many books from which to choose, even for the knowledgeable reader who has already taken to swimming in mystery’s dark waters, and huge numbers of new titles appear on our bookshelves each week. It is hard enough to keep up with authors who are alive, but those who are deceased are at risk of being forgotten entirely. There are many treasures to be found, and their burial should not be permitted, even if there are some among these authors who might have been surprised to find themselves remembered at all, for they were not writing for the ages.

And so, quite simply, we decided to give mystery writers from around the world the opportunity to enthuse about their favourite novel, and in doing so we hoped to come up with a selection of books that was, if not definitive (which would be a foolish and impossible aim), then heartfelt, and flawless in its inclusions if not its omissions. After all, the creation of any anthology such as this is inevitably accompanied by howls of anguish from those whose first instinct is always to seek out what is absent rather than applaud what is present. (We could probably have given the book the alternative title *But What About…?*)

With that in mind, let’s tackle just one such elephant in this particular room. It’s Raymond Chandler, as is so often the case when mystery fiction is under discussion. *The Big Sleep* is the Chandler novel frequently cited as the greatest mystery ever written, often by those who haven’t read very much at all in the genre. In fact, so ingrained has this idea become that *The Big Sleep* is a novel beloved even of people who have never read it, or who have seen only the 1946 movie based upon it. Fond though we are of *The Big Sleep* – for there is much in it of which to be fond, and much to admire – there’s a strong case to be made that not only is it…
not the greatest mystery ever written, it’s not even the greatest mystery Chandler ever wrote.

_The Big Sleep_ is not the subject of an essay in this volume, but if not _The Big Sleep_, then what? Well, two of Chandler’s novels are discussed here. The appearance of one, _Farewell, My Lovely_, could probably have been anticipated, but the second, _The Little Sister_, is slightly more unexpected. When we were discussing this project with Joe R. Lansdale, who writes here on _Farewell, My Lovely_, we all agreed, with the misplaced confidence of those who are convinced that they can get the army to Moscow before winter sets in, that Michael Connelly would pick _The Long Goodbye_, as his affection for it was widely known (although that affection, as you’ll see when you read his essay, is tied up with Robert Altman’s 1973 film adaptation of the novel). While _The Long Goodbye_ does get a glowing mention in Connelly’s essay, he chose instead to focus on _The Little Sister_, because that book is more personal to him.

Which brings us to the main thinking behind this anthology. This is not a pollsters’ assembly of novels, compiled with calculators and spreadsheets. Neither is it a potentially exhausting litany of titles that winds back to the dawn of fiction, chiding the reader for his or her presumed ignorance in the manner of a compulsory reading list handed out in a bad school at the start of summer to cast a pall over its students’ vacation time. What we sought from each of the contributors to this volume was passionate advocacy: we wanted them to pick one novel, just one, that they would place in the canon. If you found them in a bar some evening, and the talk turned (as it almost inevitably would) to favourite novels, it would be the single book that each writer would press upon you, the book that, if there was time and the stores were still open, they would leave the bar in order to purchase for you, so they could be sure they had done all in their power to make you read it.
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If nothing else, that should explain the omission of any title that, even now, might prove to be a source of aggravation to you, the reader – and, in the great scheme of things, we’d hazard there are fewer than might be expected, and certainly few neglected writers, although, inevitably, there are those too, or else this book would be too heavy to lift. There is greatness in all of the novels under discussion in this volume but, equally, there is huge affection and respect for them on the part of their advocates.

This brings us to the second purpose of this book. Because of the personal nature of the attachment that the contributors have to their chosen books, you will, in many cases, learn something about the contributor as well as the subject, and not a little about the art and craft of writing along the way. Thus we have Joseph Wambaugh, as a young cop-turned-writer, finding himself in the extraordinary position of discussing a work-in-progress with Truman Capote; Linwood Barclay, then only an aspiring novelist, sharing a meal with Ross Macdonald, a meal that arises out of the simplest and yet most intimate of reader-writer connections, the fan letter; and Ian Rankin encountering the extraordinary figure of Derek Raymond in a London bookstore. More importantly, as all writers are the products of those who went before them, those whom we love the most tend to influence us the most, whether stylistically, philosophically or morally (for, as someone once noted, all mystery writers are secret moralists). If a writer whose work you love is featured in this book as the subject of an essay, then there’s a very good chance that you’ll also enjoy the work of the essayist too. Similarly, if one of your favourite writers has chosen to write, in turn, on a beloved writer of his or her own, then you’re probably going to learn a great deal about how that contributor’s writing came to be formed, as well as being introduced to the novelist at least partly responsible for that act of formation.

While this volume is obviously ideal for dipping into when
you have a quiet moment, enabling you to read an essay or two before moving on, there is also a pleasure to be had from the slow accumulation of its details. Reading through the book chronologically, as we have done during the editing process, patterns begin to emerge, some anticipated, some less so. There is, of course, the importance of the great Californian crime writers – Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, and James M.Cain – to the generations of writers who have followed and, indeed, to one another: so Macdonald’s detective, Lew Archer, takes his name in part from Sam Spade’s murdered partner in The Maltese Falcon, while Chandler builds on Hammett, and then Macdonald builds on Chandler but also finds himself being disparaged by the older author behind his back, adding a further layer of complication to their relationship. But the writer who had the greatest number of advocates was not any of these men: it was the Scottish author Josephine Tey, who is a figure of huge significance to a high number of the female contributors to this book.

Or one might take the year 1947: it produces both Dorothy B. Hughes’s In a Lonely Place, in which the seeds of what would later come to be called the serial killer novel begin to germinate, and Mickey Spillane’s I, The Jury. Both are examinations of male rage – although Spillane is probably more correctly considered as an expression of it – and both come out of the aftermath of the Second World War, when men who had fought in Europe and Asia returned home to find a changed world, a theme that is later touched upon in a British context in Margery Allingham’s 1952 novel, The Tiger in the Smoke. But 1947 was also the year of the infamous, and still unsolved, Black Dahlia killing, in which the body of a young woman named Elizabeth Short was found, mutilated and sliced in half, in Leimert Park, Los Angeles. It’s no coincidence that John Gregory Dunne sets True Confessions, his examination of guilt and corruption, in that year, while
the Black Dahlia killing subsequently becomes a personal touchstone for the novelist James Ellroy, whose own mother’s murder in California in 1958 also remains unsolved. The pulp formula in the US then adapted itself to these changes in post-war society, which resulted in the best work of writers such as Jim Thompson, Elliott Chaze and William P. McGivern, all of whom are considered in essays in this book.

Finally, it’s interesting to see how often different writers, from Ed McBain to Mary Stewart, Newton Thornburg to Leonardo Padura, assert the view that they are, first and foremost, novelists. The mystery genre provides a structure for their work – the ideal structure – but it is extremely malleable, and constantly open to adaptation: the sheer range of titles and approaches considered here is testament to that.

To give just one example: there had long been female characters at the heart of hard-boiled novels, most frequently as femmes fatales or adoring secretaries, but even when women were given central roles as detectives, the novels were written, either in whole or in part, by men: Erle Stanley Gardner’s Bertha Cool (created under the pseudonym A.A. Fair), who made her first appearance in 1939; Dwight W. Babcock’s Hannah Van Doren; Sam Merwin Jr.’s Amy Brewser; Will Oursler and Margaret Scott’s Gale Gallagher (all 1940s); and, perhaps most famously, Forrest and Gloria Fickling’s Honey West in the 1950s.

But at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, a number of female novelists, among them Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky, but also Amanda Cross and, in her pair of Cordelia Gray novels, PD James, found in the hard-boiled mystery novel a means of addressing issues affecting women, including violence (particularly sexual violence), victimization, power imbalances, and gender conflicts. They did so by questioning, altering, and subverting the established traditions in the genre, and, in the process, they created a new type of female fiction. The mystery genre
embraced them without diminishing the seriousness of their aims, or hampering the result, and it did so with ease. It is why so many writers, even those who feel themselves to be working outside the genre, have chosen to introduce elements of it into their writing, and why this anthology can accommodate such a range of novelists, from Dickens to Dürrenmatt, and Capote to Crumley.

But this volume also raises the question of what constitutes a mystery – or, if you prefer, a crime novel. (The terms are often taken as interchangeable, but ‘mystery’ is probably a more flexible, and accurate, description given the variety within the form. Crime may perhaps be considered the catalyst, mystery the consequence.) Genre, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder, but one useful formulation may be that, if one can take the crime out of the novel and the novel does not collapse, then it’s probably not a crime novel; but if one removes the crime element and the novel falls apart, then it is. It is interesting, though, to note that just as every great fortune is said to hide a great crime, so too many great novels, regardless of genre, have a crime at their heart. The line between genre fiction and literary fiction (itself a genre, it could be argued) is not as clear as some might like to believe.

In the end, those who dismiss the genre and its capacity to permit and encourage great writing, and to produce great literature, are guilty not primarily of snobbery – although there may be an element of that – but of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of fiction and genre’s place in it. There is no need to splice genre into the DNA of fiction, literary or otherwise: it is already present. The mystery novel is both a form and a mechanism. It is an instrument to be used. In the hands of a bad writer, it will produce bad work, but great writers can make magic from it.

John Connolly and Declan Burke, Dublin 2012