

DEVICES AND DESIRES

Introduction by the Author

A special message for the first edition from PD James.

When I began writing my first novel over thirty years ago it never occurred to me to begin with anything other than a detective story or, as my American friends so appropriately call it, a mystery. There were a number of reasons for this deliberate choice. I had always enjoyed reading mysteries; Dorothy L. Sayers was a potent influence in my adolescence. I was in no way tempted to write the usual strongly autobiographical first novel, to use the more traumatic events of my own life as the raw material for fiction. I felt that if I could write a detective story successfully this popular genre might stand the best chance of acceptance by a publisher. But above all I was intrigued by the <sup>formal</sup> structure of the mystery, <sup>and the creative potentiality</sup> and I am still. The classical detective story with its formal constraints and internal tensions, its need to balance ~~plot~~ plot, setting and character, presents a formidable challenge to an aspiring <sup>novelist</sup> writer. Tackling its technical problems would, I thought, be an excellent apprenticeship to someone setting out to be eventually regarded as a serious <sup>writer</sup> novelist. Then, as I advanced in my craft, I came to believe that it was possible to remain within the conventions of the traditional <sup>mystery</sup> ~~detective story~~ and yet say something true and important about men and women and the society in which <sup>he live and die.</sup> ~~they live.~~ E. M. Forster has written: "The King died and then the Queen died is a story. The King died and the Queen died of grief is a plot. The Queen died and no one knew why until they discovered it was of grief is a mystery, a form capable of high development." To that I would add: The Queen died and everyone thought it was of grief until they discovered the puncture-mark in her throat. That is a ~~murder mystery and it, too, is capable of high development.~~

The mystery is the most paradoxical of the popular literary forms. The story has at its heart the crime of murder, often in its most horrific and violent form, yet the mystery is often regarded as entertainment, a comforting, even cosy, relief from the anxieties, problems and irritations of everyday life. Its prime concern, indeed its *raison d'etre*, is the establishment of truth yet it employs and glories in deceit. The murderer attempts to deceive the detective, the writer sets out to deceive the reader, ~~to make him believe that the guilty are innocent, the innocent guilty,~~ and the better this deception the more successful the book. The mystery deals with the great absolutes; with death, retribution, punishment; yet in its clue-making it employs the trivia of daily existence as the instruments of justice. It upholds the imperatives of law and order yet its attitude to the police and the official agents of that law has often been ambiguous; the private detective in particular demonstrates the triumph of the <sup>maverick</sup> individual over orthodoxy and officialdom. At the nub of the plot is <sup>violence and disruption</sup> ~~violent death~~, yet the form itself is controlled, conventional, orderly, affording a familiar and secure structure within which the imaginations both of writer and reader can safely confront the unthinkable.

How then does one set about tackling this difficult but intriguing genre? ~~One of the questions a crime-writer is most frequently asked is: How do you make a beginning? Does the book start with an idea for an original method of murder, with a character or a place?~~ For me it is nearly always the setting which sparks off my creative imagination and sets in motion the complicated and often lengthy process which results in a novel. Setting, important in any work of fiction, is particularly so in

a crime novel. It helps to create atmosphere, the necessary aura of suspense, menace and mystery. It can provide both a contrast to and a relief from horror. It roots bizarre events in the firm soil of reality and established place. It influences fundamentally the details of the plot and is important to characterisation since people react to their environment and are influenced by it. <sup>NP</sup> For me the spirit of a place works very strongly on my imagination. Devices and Desires began when I visited a remote coast of Suffolk in East Anglia in Autumn two years ago. I stood on the low, sandy cliffs and looked south over a pebbly beach to the waste of the North Sea. There was a small fishing-boat drawn up and nets drying in the sun and I reflected that the scene hadn't changed since Vikings had invaded this coast. And then I turned north and saw on the horizon the stark bulk of an atomic power-station. I thought of all the centuries of change on that desolate coast, the contrast between its ruined abbeys and churches, some claimed by the great storms of the seventeenth century and now lying under the sea, and the symbol of <sup>a new</sup> modern and terrifying power. ~~And from that sense of time passing grew Devices and Desires. I moved the setting north from Suffolk to Norfolk and began peopling my imaginary headland with killer, victims, suspects.~~ <sup>NP</sup> A classical detective story must be carefully structured and meticulously plotted before the writing begins if one is to achieve the right balance between puzzle, setting and characterisation. ~~I find that I take as much time on the planning and research as I do on the actual writing.~~

<sup>NP</sup> But a good novel, however carefully planned, grows, develops and changes in a hundred subtle ways during the actual writing, and this was certainly true of Devices and Desires. The creative process is to me mysterious as I suspect it is to many writers. It often seems to me that the story, the characters, the theme

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and the setting already exist in some limbo of my imagination and that what I am doing is not creating my characters but getting in touch with them so that I may bring them alive in words for a wider audience; an act not of creation but of revelation.

And what of the future? Interestingly enough it seems to me that there is a resurgence of interest in the classical detective story, carefully plotted and clued ~~and rationally~~ and unambiguously set in its time and place. We can never return to the 1930s <sup>British</sup> mystery with its deference to hierarchy, its comfortable orthodoxies, ~~its snobbery~~, its naive and simplistic

view of law and order. Today the mystery has moved closer to ~~the straight novel~~ <sup>mainstream fiction</sup> and ~~in my view~~ <sup>now</sup> this process will continue.

What we are doing is ~~studying~~ <sup>exploring</sup> the response of men and women to ~~violent death~~ <sup>the ultimate crimes</sup>, demonstrating how fragile are the bridges which we construct over the abyss of social and psychological chaos.

And although ~~today~~ <sup>modern</sup> the mystery is more violent, more sexually explicit, less confident in its affirmation of law and order

and closer to the novel of social realism it ~~is~~ <sup>remains</sup>, I suggest, basically a reassuring genre. It distances for us the ~~fear of~~ <sup>traumatic</sup> death and by fictionalising ~~it~~ and, to some extent, transforming

it into an intellectual puzzle helps us to come to terms with its inevitability. It affirms the sanctity of human life and confirms our belief that we live in a generally benevolent and rational universe and that even the most difficult problem is capable of solution by human intelligence, human courage and

human perseverance. ~~I see the modern detective story as a small~~ <sup>The mystery is for me</sup> ~~affirmation~~ <sup>Celebration</sup> of order and reason in our increasingly disordered

world.

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