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Dear Colleague:

If you like detective stories I recommend the Dutch scholar Robert van Gulik's translation of a Chinese detective story of the eighteenth century, called Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee (NY: Dover, 1976). The Chinese detective story differs from the Western one in several interesting ways. To take one difference, the Chinese author typically says little about how the crime is committed, but a great deal about how the apprehended criminal is punished and executed. One of the mildest forms of execution is by strangulation. But before you opt for it, consider that the regular process goes by the name of "three times loosening and three times tightening," which means that the executioner makes the victim nearly suffocate two times first before administering the coup de grace. The severest punishment is called "lingering death". The executioner kills the victim by gradually slicing and cutting his body to pieces, a process that may take several hours. As if all this gruesome account isn't enough, the author offers the reader another chance to savor the torture by describing in loving detail how the murderer suffers through it again at the hand of the judge of the underworld.

Before you condemn the heathen Chinese, think how popular public torture was in Europe in premodern times. The stocks and the pillory, the gibbets and the gallows were part of the normal landscape. And, as though these horrors were insufficient, eighteenth-century French theater was known to offer its audience dramatized executions that took longer (for adequate savoring) than real-life occurrences. As for Western detective stories, don't you just relish this passage from The Hound of the Baskervilles ? "Somewhere in the heart of the great Grimpen Mire, down in the foul slime of the huge morass which had sucked him in, this cold and cruel-hearted man is forever buried." Served him right--take that, and that!

But all this vengeance belongs to the Dark Ages. In a modern detective story, what the reader is expected to enjoy is the suffering and death of the victim rather than of the murderer, who is merely caught and presumably sent to prison. The modern mystery story, unlike Chinese mystery stories (or even those by Conan Doyle), tells us so much of the social background and psychology of the criminal that the reader understands, and, of course, to understand is to forgive.

Best wishes,

J. Fu