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Dear Colleague:

Many academics, myself included, are avid readers of detective fiction. Auden offers the original view that we of the ivory tower are racked by guilt and seek compensatory primal innocence in fictional worlds, in which only one person has committed a murder and hence only one person is guilty. My own view is less original, but still worth (I hope) retelling. It is that we academics are outsiders and universalists, who sometimes doubt our usefulness to society. Well, sleuths are also outsiders and universalists, but their usefulness to society is not in doubt.

Let me explain what I mean by outsider and universalist. American sleuths are tough, streetwise guys, whose use of the English language is not of the Establishment. They are comfortable--indeed, they are thoroughly at home (as Lyn Lofland) has pointed out--in a World of Strangers. Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's hero, never solved a problem in Belgium: he couldn't have because in his home country he would have lost the advantage of the impersonal, outsider's view. Sherlock Holmes was, of course, the supreme sleuth, and a reason is that he was both a cocaine-sniffing outsider and someone who appeared to be thoroughly at home in all layers of society and anywhere in the world. Chesterton's hero, Father Brown, was both a member of the universal Church and a minority religionist in England. His technique rested not so much on universal reason as on universal psychology; and by universal psychology I mean the belief that one human individual can enter deeply into the thoughts and feelings of another, no matter how different that other happens to be at the superficial levels of culture.

Curiously, although some of the most distinguished and prolific of mystery writers are women, few of them have invented female detectives. P. D. James's hero, for instance, is Adam Dalgliesh, and when she did introduce a female detective it was into a book with the title An Unsuitable Job for a Woman. Agatha Christie, when she tired of Poirot, brought Miss Marples on stage. Now, Miss Marples appears to owe her success to the fact that she was the complete insider. But was she? Even in England, spinsters are not the norm.

Conclusion: in a world of uncompromising Diversity, in which each person is embedded in his or her own group and culture, no murder can be solved--and detective fiction will disappear from the face of the earth.

Best wishes,

