

Mystery Fiction Criticism

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Murder in the Caribbean: In Search of Difference

Lizabeth Paravisini

Crime fiction is traditionally associated with certain locales: the isolated manor or the small English village in the case of the classic detective story; the criminal fringes of urban life in the case of the hard-boiled detective novel. To a large extent these settings determined the type of characters and situations likely to predominate in the genre. But as writers have attempted to stretch these two original variations of the genre beyond the limits imposed by their settings, others types of stories (i.e. police procedurals, thrillers) and other types of locales have been incorporated into mystery fiction. Among these "new" locales we find the islands of the Caribbean.

In setting out to examine the contributions of the Caribbean setting to the development of detective fiction, my basic premise is that there is a closer connection between setting and plot possibilities in mystery fiction than in most non-formulaic genres, and that a radical change in setting significantly alters the traditional elements of the mystery story. I will attempt to show how the use of the Caribbean as a setting transforms some of the elements that are generally considered to be basic to the genre. This transformation is accomplished through: (1) the use of means other than reason for the solution of a mystery; (2) the

immersion of the heroes in "psychological" adventures possible only in a place foreign to their natural surroundings; (3) the depiction of characters and situations as the embodiments of the phantasms that haunt the Western subconscious; and (4) the questioning of the possibilities of a return to the original state of innocence after the solution to the mystery.

Peter Dickinson's *Walking Dead*¹ is the work that best exemplifies the use of the Caribbean as a setting, and it will be discussed in some detail below; but I would like to begin with a brief survey of four works set in the Caribbean which illustrate some of the elements common to detective novels set in the Caribbean: Agatha Christie's *Murder in the Caribbean*², Elmore Leonard's *Cat Chaser*³, Norman Lewis' *Cuban Passage*⁴, and Donald McNutt Douglass' *Rebecca's Pride*⁵.

They share with Dickinson's novel such elements as: the ominous and sinister exoticism that characterizes the representation of the Caribbean in the genre; the greater variety of human types—different in class, race, and national origin—brought together in Caribbean settings; the explosive political situations (the shades of Papa Doc, the Tonton Macoutes, and *Emperor Jones* that characterize the depictions of the political climate); and the use of vodùn and other magico-religious beliefs which conjure visions of mysterious deaths, secret rites and dark saturnalia.

Ironically, the remarks that open Christie's *Murder in the Caribbean* seem fairly appropriate to describe the relationship between the real Caribbean and the one depicted in mysteries: "Take all this business about Kenya," said Major Palgrave. "Lots of chaps gabbing away who know nothing about the place." (p. 13) And indeed, the Caribbean is the most unreal of backdrops in Christie's novel. The plot, fairly well known to readers and TV viewers, focuses on English and American characters and could have easily been set in an English village. It revolves around a husband's attempts to drive his wife to suicide by making her believe she is going insane. The symptoms of insanity are produced by mixing a combination of drugs in her facial cream. There is little in the characterization and the process of detection

to separate this work from another successful Christie novel, except for the hints of mysterious potions in the method used to drive the heroine to a suicide attempt, and in the way Miss Marple discovers the key to the mystery—the clue that makes the solution possible is given to her by an exotic Venezuelan woman who insists that the murdered Major had the "evil eye".⁶

The introduction of suggestions of madness, potions and magic, fairly inconspicuous as they are in this novel, are nevertheless accepted as forming a natural part of the Caribbean landscape, and will appear repeatedly in other works set in the region.

If madness, potions, and magic are commonly associated with popular images of the Caribbean, so are the tendency towards irrational violence in Caribbean political figures, and the representation of the Caribbean as a place where sexual repressions are abandoned, which are the elements that dominate the Caribbean episodes of Elmore Leonard's *Cat Chaser*.

Cat Chaser is set in part in the Dominican Republic, with a Dominican as one of the central characters. The plot is reminiscent of the drug smuggling plots familiar to viewers of the hit series *Miami Vice*. It deals with a former U.S. Marine who has planned a soul-searching return trip to the Dominican Republic, which he had visited before during the 1965 American invasion of the island. Once there, he throws care to the wind and has a long-desired affair with a woman he has chastely admired for years at a private country club in Miami, where they both live. But (alas!) she is the well-guarded wife of a former Dominican General known for his brutal interrogation methods and for feeding the bodies of his victims to the sharks. A complex web of violence and revenge ensues when, once back in Miami, their affair is discovered.

There are two aspects of this visit to the Caribbean that I would like to highlight in the context of our discussion: one, that the voyage to the Caribbean is envisaged as a voyage of recovery of important aspects of the self and its past, and that this attempt at soul-searching results in the breaking of the barriers that had kept the lovers separated; two, that what sustains

the level of suspense is our willingness to accept that there is a higher potential for violence associated with a Dominican general than there would be with any other type of character (except perhaps the Latin American and Caribbean drug dealers of *Miami Vice*). There is in the prevalent popular stereotype of the Caribbean military man something pathologically violent and unrestrained; as there is in the popular image of the tropics a sense of unrestrained, semi-narcotic sensuality that leads to the abandonment of the moral scruples that prevail elsewhere. Both play important roles in Leonard's novel.

In Norman Lewis's *Cuban Passage*, the elements found in *Murder in the Caribbean* and *Cat Chaser*—magic, madness, unrestrained violence, murky sensuality—become central to the plot. The story is set in Havana on the eve of the fall of the Batista regime, and concerns Dick, a psychologically disturbed sixteen year old English boy who murders his beautiful mother's Cuban lover, a sadistic Batista henchman and notorious hypnotist who is believed to have ensnared the mother through the use of mysterious drugs and telepathic powers. The lover belongs to the Cuban cult of "santería"—a complex belief system akin to Haitian vodùn. The story moves beyond the casual introduction of non-traditional elements into the genre by systematically using Dick's emotional instability as the means of blurring the lines that separate the world of mystery fiction from the Cuban world of revolution and magical practices. It is unclear to Dick, for example, whether or not he murdered Stilson under hypnotic suggestion—a difficulty which is not unique in detective fiction but which here is given credence by the fact that we can only accept the young and sympathetic mother's affair with the sinister and brutal murdered man if it can be explained as the result of drugs or hypnosis.

The resolution of the plot involves a descent into what we can call "the belly of the beast"—in this case a prison-cum-mental asylum where Dick is taken after his arrest, a prison from which he will escape only with the aid of Castro's revolutionaries. Dick emerges from the experience with a new sense of self, his psychological problems seemingly resolved, the unity and

strength of his family restored, as if the voyage into the dark practices of Cuban magic and political brutality—the very opposite of his sheltered middle class English existence—had exorcised the demons that haunted his subconscious. We will find this type of exorcism again in *Walking Dead*.

Of this group of novels, Donald McNutt Douglass' *Rebecca's Pride* is the one to make the most conscious effort to be true to the social and economic landscape of Caribbean Islands. It is also the closest to a classic detective story in structure, with a proper murder and a proper detective—in this case a 300-pound Black police captain who is also the narrator of the story (giving the novel its characteristic voice). The process of detection in *Rebecca's Pride* follows Captain Manchenil's intuitions rather than reason, which in itself is not untypical of detective fiction. What is unusual is the role played by voodoo in the solution to the mystery. Pitted against an investigator from Washington, Manchenil observes:

Maybe assistant attorneys in Washington, D.C. don't run up against murderous villains with forty million dollars or dowager queens who mother a darky or feudal princes whose pride is their most cherished regard. Or voodoo. Down here we have to cope with these things. (p. 123)

Not surprisingly, since voodoo is presented here as an intrinsic part of the landscape, Manchenil's explanation of the mystery comes to him through the warning of an old voodoo-man singing a calypso. "Liquour dulls the senses, clouds and obscures the mind," Manchenil explains, "but it can, sometimes, open long-shut gates to the deep subconscious". (p. 154) And it is through the tapping of voodoo on the sub-conscious that the solution comes.

The "liberating tapping of voodoo on the subconscious" is an apt description for what happens to David Foxe in Peter Dickinson's *Walking Dead*. Foxe, a lab researcher who specializes in working with laboratory animals, finds himself thrown into a complex maze of political corruption, revolution, murder and the occult.

The novel opens in Austria as Foxe concludes an important experiment with monkeys. His girlfriend Lisa-Anna has just left him, claiming he is only at home in the ordered, rational world of the laboratory and essentially dead to depth of emotion, one of the "walking dead" as she herself puts it. The multinational company he works for offers him a temporary assignment in the Caribbean island of Hog's Cay, where he quickly discovers that, outside the laboratory, there is a world alien to his, where people believe in magical powers, mysterious potions and the Sunday Dwarf. The complex plot centers around the sinister Prime Minister's staging of a murder in Foxe's lab in order to force Foxe to conduct an experiment on human prisoners; and around the sinister Prime Minister's even more sinister mother and her conviction that Foxe and his companion in the ordeal—Quentin, a laboratory rat with a purple "Q" dyed on his fur⁷—have "the Power."

It is clear than in this novel, as in *Cuban Passage*, the voyage to the Caribbean is meant as a voyage into a world alien to the self, the equivalent of a voyage into the subconscious from which a new David Foxe, one acceptable to Lisa-Anna, can emerge. What makes the Caribbean an apt location for this voyage into the self is precisely the writer's (and his readers') perception of the essential otherness of the Caribbean world.⁸ As one of the native characters explains to Foxe:

You come here but you don't belong here, like these bloody tourists don't belong. We're two worlds. You got your own knowledge and your own power and we got ours. Your science, our science.... You, man, you live all in your world. What I tell you about the sorry-bush, that makes you laugh inside. You tell yourself, How can the leaf of a plant stop a man from doing murder? How can it make him a good man? Show me. Find me two hundred murderers and let me test them with my shining instruments. That's what you say, right? (p. 37).

The Caribbean emerges in this novel as the very opposite of the ordered and rational world of the laboratory, forcing Foxe to look for an escape from his imprisonment in powers other than those of reason.

Foxe's own imprisonment is a metaphor of this descent into the subconscious in search of long-repressed aspects of the self and for escape. He finds himself joining his "animals," the members of a quasi-religious political sect, the Khandhars, in an underground pit carved by a volcanic eruption. In the pit he confronts a world that, because of its emphasis on intuition, empathy and communality, becomes the mirror image of the rational, unemotional, dissected world of the laboratory. From here he will emerge only after his empathy with the Khandhars leads him to plan a clever and dangerous escape. The escape is like nothing found in the typical mystery or thriller since Foxe's only weapon is the guard's belief that he and Quentin have "the Power". (The prisoners are able to escape because the belief in Quentin's powers among the guards is such that Foxe is able to put them in a trance by having them stare at the rat while he blows on their faces.)

It is Foxe's relationship with Quentin that we find the clearest example of the power of this new world on the character:

He, Foxe, also seemed to believe in the power of the rat, not as a bearer of mighty magic, but as a charm, a totem.... It was only natural: his subconscious, much repressed, would reach out for symbols of help from the region in which Foxe really did have power. On perilous journeys it would seek to take with it a piece of Foxe's home territory, where the kindly and predictable gods of science rules. A lab-bred rat, for example. (p. 133).

Foxe's relationship with Quentin is akin to his relationship with Cocoa Bean, a Khandhar woman with special telepathic powers who becomes his lover during the period he spends hiding in the mountains after the escape:

Thus, between them, they had exorcised Foxe's self-horror. That first scene by the trees had begun it...From that point he had seemed to begin to walk away from the mirror-maze through which he had been wandering, seeing all the time vile images of nothing but himself; and once he was outside the maze he could also see that it must have existed long before the shocks and slaughter of the Pit.—It had always been there, waiting

inside him for something like that to open the door and let him out. (p. 227-8)

It is to the credit of Dickinson's ability as a writer that he manages to insert this type of psychological plot into what is, after all, an excellent thriller. It works so well perhaps because the inner voyage into Foxe's subconscious matches so effortlessly the outer descent into the pit. The correspondence, however, is only possible if framed by the accepted otherness of a foreigner's myth of the Caribbean; it works because of the common perception of the Caribbean as a place where a descent into "darkness" is possible. If we examine the elements Dickinson introduces into the genre by his choice of location—the descent into a volcanic pit, the liberation from sexual repressions, the accomplishment of justice through means other than reason, in short, the same elements used to a lesser or greater extent by the authors discussed earlier—we find in them a composite of a location that only exist as a quasi-mythical backdrop. This backdrop is one where historical elements—the Cuban Revolution, the Batista regime—and cultural elements—vodùn, santería, the race-class divisions in the society—are combined to create a backdrop that is the mirror image of Western culture, standing as the negative side of Western culture's concern with rationality.

Thus, it is interesting to note that the same concern with rationality that is challenged by the Caribbean setting is also one of the characteristic features of detective fiction. The elements that the Caribbean setting brings into the mystery story have traditionally had no legitimacy within the rules of the genre, since they break the internal logic of the narrative pattern to which the reader of this type of fiction is accustomed. By choosing the quasi-mythic Caribbean as a locale, these writers are pitting the genre against a setting where it cannot be but transformed, becoming no longer the same as before, but something that can only be called a "Caribbean mystery."

Notes

¹Dickinson, Peter. *Walking Dead* (New York: Pantheon, 1977). All references will be to this edition. Page numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.

²Christie, Agatha. *Murder in the Caribbean* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964). All references will be to this edition. Page numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.

³Leonard, Elmore. *Cat Chaser* (New York: Avon, 1982).

⁴Lewis, Norman. *Cuban Passage* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

⁵Douglass, Donald McNutt. *Rebecca's Pride*. (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1956).

⁶The "evil eye" in this case does not refer to magic, but rather to a problem with the murdered Major's eyes which made it difficult to determine what he was looking at.

⁷The "Q", an identifying mark used by Foxe for experimental purposes, is the inverted emblem of the religious/political group opposing the Prime Minister and thus has political and ritualistic significance.

⁸The myth of the Caribbean "otherness" is similar to the myth of the Dark Continent examined by Patrick Batlinger in "Victorians and Africans" The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," in Henry Louis Gates (ed.), *Race, Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985): "...the myth of the Dark Continent contains the submerged fear of falling out of the light, down the long coal chute of social and moral regression... the fear of backsliding has a powerful sexual dimension.

Dominique Mannoni has raised the question of the extent to which Europeans 'project upon...colonial peoples the obscurities of their own unconscious—obscurities they would rather not penetrate.' In European writings about Africa, Mannoni says,

the savage...is identified in the unconscious with a certain image of the instincts... And civilized man is painfully divided between the desire to 'correct' the errors of the savages and the desire to identify himself with them in search for some lost paradise (a desire which at once casts doubt upon the merit of the very civilization he is trying to transmit to them)."

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