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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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One of my favorite places to eat in the Charleston area is a restaurant called Poe’s Tavern. The eatery’s namesake, Edgar Allan Poe, was stationed at Fort Moultrie on Sullivan’s Island in 1827, just down the street from the tavern. It was during Poe’s stint in the South Carolina lowcountry that he was inspired to write such tales as “The Gold Bug” and “The Balloon Hoax.” Though LeRoy Lad Panek speculates that Poe, the inventor of the detective story, was influenced by crimes that took place in Philadelphia and New York City, I can’t help but wonder if he might have also been influenced by the superstition and legends that permeated Charleston society in the 19th century. By nature, legends are shrouded in mystery, and it is only fitting that Poe should eventually create a hero to solve such mysteries.

In his book The Origins of the American Detective Story, Panek explores the detective fiction in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The first chapter is a wash of the first 50 years of sleuth stories, highlighting similarities and differences of their stories. The second chapter focuses on Arthur Conan Doyle’s great detective, Sherlock Holmes. Panek analyzes Doyle’s success through the development of the mass media, dramatic adaptations and parodies of his work, and other writers’ use of Doyle’s literary style. In chapter three, Panek investigates why the police were not central characters in early detective fiction; he attributes some of this to the then-infamy of the police detective profession. Chapter four tackles the role of science and the scientist in crime stories — some of the excerpts provided by Panek read like an early 20th century version of CSI’s popular tale of forensic pathology. The most interesting chapter might be the fifth, which examines “breakthroughs” in 19th and 20th century pseudoscience; phrenology, racism, and sexism certainly had their turns in the spotlight when it came to “understanding” the minds of criminals. Chapters six through ten each focus on different heroes of detective fiction: journalists, private investigators, women, lawyers, and “everybody else.” Panek rounds out his book with “last thoughts” in chapter 11.

While Panek’s work offers a broad overview of the birth and childhood of detective fiction, Lisa M. Dresner wears a more focused lens in her book The Female Investigator in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture. In her introduction, Dresner states that no one has created a “comprehensive theory that adequately theorizes the place of the female detective” (1). She provides an overview of the literature about female detective fiction and concludes that such fiction presents female investigators as “fundamentally flawed” (2). With hopes to bridge the gaps in female detec-

tive theory, her book focuses on four themes: the female investigator in gothic novels, lesbian detective novels, television, and film.

Dresner’s coverage of each topic is all-encompassing — it is obvious that she has taken great pains to complete thorough research into a variety of female sleuths. In the first chapter, which focuses on the female investigator in gothic novels, Dresner highlights five best-sellers: The Mysteries of Udolpho (Ann Radcliffe), Northanger Abbey (Jane Austen), Jane Eyre (Charlotte Bronté), and The Woman in White and The Law and the Lady (Wilkie Collins). Each of these novels is scrutinized and all references to the heroines’ “almost-detective” status — that is, the heroines’ reliance on a man to ultimately solve the crime — is spelled out. The second chapter, which focuses on the female investigator in lesbian detective novels, highlights a variety of protagonists: Nell Fury, Nancy Clue and friends, Virginia Kelly, Harriet Hubbley, and Kate Delafield. These investigators’ stories receive the same meticulous analysis as those in chapter one, and the common thread of car trouble appears throughout. The third and fourth chapters, covering female investigators in television and film, delve into characters from Angela Fletcher to each of Charlie’s Angels (both the small and silver screen versions). Dresner concludes with a chapter about Rebecca — a novel that embodies each of her themes by originating as a gothic novel, inspiring a lesbian detective novel, and hitting both the small and large screens. It must be said that Dresner’s narrative voice is not necessarily one of female power. I expected to find tribute to the dominant, intelligent female detective; however, Dresner points out that even the books, television shows, and movies that entertained me — such as Jane Eyre, Moonlighting, and Silence of the Lambs — type the female leads as incompetent and/or slightly insane.

Both The Origins of the American Detective Story and The Female Investigator are academic in scope — Panek and Dresner include extensive bibliographies and indexes, and Dresner’s notes comprise 30 pages of text. If you seek a quick guide to specific characters or milestones in detective fiction, then these are not the books for you. If, however, you wish to access in-depth information about each authors’ subjects, then you will find a wealth of knowledge in these works.