

June 2007

Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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Recommended Citation

Vaughn, Debbie (2007) "Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 19: Iss. 3, Article 24.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5381>

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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: **Debbie Vaughn** (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Column Editor's Note: *The onslaught of crime dramas on the small and large screens are but one piece of evidence of people's fascination with mysteries and detectives. Shows such as **House**, **Bones**, and **Numb3rs** consistently top ratings for their time slots, and the very fact that both **CSI: Crime Scene Investigation** and **Law and Order** have evolved from singular programs to multi-program franchises indicates that Americans can't seem to get enough suspense, inspection, and "ah-ha!" moments. No matter what the context is — be it a police precinct, a forensic laboratory, or even a hospital — folks are crazy about detectives.*

*This month, **Monographic Musings** celebrates the popularity of the detective genre with some investigations of its own—investigations into recent publications, that is. From the detective story's origin to a comprehensive look at female sleuths, this column has it covered. Happy reading, everyone! — DV*

Panek, LeRoy. *The Origins of the American Detective Story.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006. 0786427760 (10); 9780786427765 (13). 235 pages. \$35.00.

Dresner, Lisa M. *The Female Investigator in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007. 0786426543 (10). 9780786426546 (13). 240 pages. \$35.00.

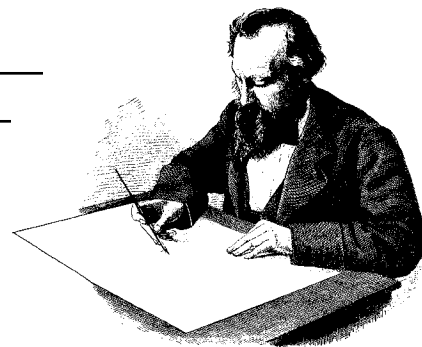
Reviewed by **Debbie Vaughn** (College of Charleston)

One of my favorite places to eat in the Charleston area is a restaurant called **Poe's Tavern**. The eatery's namesake, **Edgar Allen 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 obscurities.

In his book *The Origins of the American Detective Story*, **Panek** explores the detective in fiction during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The first chapter is a wash of the first 50 years of sleuth stories, highlighting **Poe**; the crime sensation novels of **Metta Fuller Victor** and **Anna Katharine Green**; the "ex-detective" work of **Emma Murdoch Van Deventer**; and the work of **Julian Hawthorne** (son of **Nathaniel**). **Panek** offers thorough

inspection of the progress of the genre in the first half-century, noting how the authors built upon their predecessors' work as well as the 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-infancy 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 **CBS's** popular tale of forensic pathology, *CSI*. 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 Brontë**), 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 Hubble**, 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. 🐾

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decide if the extra year's information is worth the added cost. However, given that the individual volumes can be purchased separately, another option might be to purchase the most recent edition for the region that you are most interested in. 🐾