



The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection

By David Lehman

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In this lively, enjoyable look at the best American and British detective fiction, David Lehman investigates the mystery of mysteries: the profound satisfactions we get from evil, disorder, mayhem, and deception--that we know will be put right by the last page.

As Lehman shows, the detective story draws deeply from ancient storytelling traditions. The mystery's conventions--the locked room, the clue "hidden" in plain sight, the diabolical double, the villainous least likely subject--work on us as childhood fairy tales do; they prey upon our darkest fears, taking us to the brink of the unbearable before restoring a comforting sense of order. The myth of Oedipus, for example, contains the essential elements of a whodunit, with the twist that the murderer the detective pursues is himself.

With their wisecracking gumshoe heroes, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler fashioned an existential romance out of the detective novel. More recent writers such as Ross MacDonald, P. D. James, and Ruth Rendell have raised the genre to a new level of psychological sophistication. Yet the form evolves still, and Lehman guides us to the epistemological riddles of Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco, who challenge the notion of a knowable truth.

Originally published in 1989, this new edition features an additional chapter on the mystery novels of the 1990s.

"A lively study of the development and varieties of the detective story since Poe, its relations with other forms high and low, and the latter-day appropriation of its techniques by such writers as Borges and Eco. . . . A thoroughly intelligent and readable book." --Richard Wilbur, Pulitzer-Prize winning poet

David Lehman is the series editor of both the *The Best American Poetry*, published by Scribner, and the *Poets on Poetry* series published by the University of Michigan Press. He is a former Guggenheim Fellow in poetry, a vice president of the National Book Critics Circle, and the author of several books of criticism and collections of poems.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Penzler Pick, May 2000: There have been numerous attempts to provide an overview of the mystery fiction genre in all its diversity. One of the first and, I would argue, the best is Howard Haycraft's *Murder for Pleasure*, written in 1941 when virtually no one considered it worthwhile to write about this back-of-the-bus literary genre. For its ground-breaking place in literary history; for its readable, lively, and literate prose; and for its comprehensiveness and intelligent insight into the books and authors who would stand the test of time this work towers above all others.

Julian Symons wrote *Mortal Consequences* in 1972 and it too is brilliant, though far more controversial in its appraisals. (In the copy Symons inscribed to me, he accurately describes it as "material for disagreement and argument," following one of our many disagreements and arguments--the one we had when he failed to accept the enduring brilliance of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe novels.)

David Lehman's *The Perfect Murder* was originally published in 1987 and has at last been reissued in paperback, with a new chapter on mystery novels of the 1990s. While Lehman is as opinionated as Symons, he is more generous in his taste and seems to prefer the best writers. (This actually means that his taste coincides with mine, which suggests that it is impeccable!)

Although mainly chronological in structure, *The Perfect Murder* jumps around some, even including references to modern films while discussing old books. Oddly, the chapter on Sherlock Holmes precedes the chapter on Edgar Allan Poe, but somehow it all makes sense. His list of favorite books at the end is one of the most intelligent selections I've ever encountered--with the exception of *The Name of the Rose*, which is impenetrable, and *The Singing Detective*, which just tries too hard to be cool.

If you are interested in mystery fiction but know little beyond the obvious classics, read this to be the biggest expert on your block. If you're already the biggest expert on your block, read it to learn how much you don't know, and be grateful for its perceptive insights. --Otto Penzler

Users Review

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