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Abstract

This paper explores the inter-war collaborative works of the Detection Club as a source of commentary and insight on the ludic and dialogic nature of Golden Age detective fiction. Less well known than the single-authored works of Detection Club members, the multi-authored *Behind the Screen*, *The Scoop*, *The Floating Admiral*, *Ask a Policeman* and *Six Against the Yard* and wauthor 0.00gn71 0e W* n T /d132 842 04re W* self BT /F3 12 Tf 1 0 0 1 376.6 conscious engagements with literary formula and convention. By adopting a range of collaborative approaches and working in different combinations, the joint authors (including Berkeley, Christie, Crofts, and Sayers) construct

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**Playing at Murder: The collaborative works of members of the
Detection Club.**

Introduction

Playfulness and pleasure are essential components in the production and reception of literary texts. In *The Parliament of Fowls* (383, l. 15), Chaucer

written texts, thus

of entertainment and playfulness, as

well as

Origin of the

proposes that literary works release unique creative possibilities for the forging and articulation of meanings that would otherwise remain hidden.

These two commentators, among many, signal the unique place of literary texts in allowing writers and readers to play with potential meanings and the

literary production. Each text represents a creative

within which the known world and its potential meanings can be

broken down and reshaped.

If this propensity can be claimed for all literary production, its implications are nowhere more patent than in Golden Age detective fiction.

The classical detective novel takes as its central dynamic the play of

difference and competing possibilities. Each text embodies competing

versions of events, ascribes shifting significance to clues of place and time,

and engages readers in the central intellectual challenge of unmasking the

genre has shown how each example of the form offers not one story but two:

subjunctification . In the second, comprising the novel *Ask a Policeman* (1933) and the short story collection *Six Against the Yard* (1936), we apply Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of carnival and polyphony to illuminate this ludic design.² As we shall see, each of these works takes as its starting point a distinctly different approach to the process of collaborative writing, and each, therefore, inevitably engages the authors involved in different kinds of literary and detective game-playing.

***Behind the Screen* (1930), *The Scoop* (1931) and *The Floating Admiral* (1931): Brunerian Barthesian**

In *Behind the Screen*, *The Scoop* and *The Floating Admiral*, the authors play out a sequence of compositional games that test the parameters of detective fiction. They explore not only the implications of collaboration upon the writing of literary texts, but also the experiences of reading detective fiction and the role this plays in the composition of meaning.

The first of the Detection Club collaborations was *Behind the Screen*, a short work composed in six instalments by collaborating authors Hugh Walpole, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Anthony Berkeley, E. C. Bentley and Ronald Knox, serially broadcast on the radio with a transcript also published in *The Listener* in the summer of 1930. Centred upon the murder of middle-aged businessman Paul Dudden, whose stabbed corpse is found stowed behind the titular screen in the parlour of the

parameters of the fictive world with which they are presented. In the collaborative and competitive dimensions of *Behind the Screen*, we see an outworking (severa

contestation and disputation of competing versions of events. This scope for

ns posed by Milward

Kennedy to *Listener* readers at the end of the second instalment. While

restricted options are represented

death Murder, Suicide or Accident?), Question A3 is more open, evaluative

wider scope to consider the potential implications and meanings of

potentialities of the tale. Still other questions offer the opportunity for fuller

readers, in not more than

charge of

for murder ensue (219).

The competition thus allows

own investigator, Inspector Rice, Rice2ff*13.42 191.9 347.476936tm7000008871 0 595.32 842.04 re

solution, and Rice

bilities of this first joint Detection Club effort show evident relish in engaging multiple parties in the game of speculating and

The following year the Detection Club authors adopted a different compositional approach in their second novella and serial broadcast work, *The Scoop*. In this work, whose opening premise depicts the murder of both a young woman and the *Morning Star* journalist who is assigned to cover the story, the contributing authors operate to a shared design from the outset. Sayers (whose prominent role as spokesperson and apologist imply her central role in the writing and theorisation of all of these collaborative works), provides us with an interesting insight into the ways in which the

outline by all the authors in the committee before the broadcasting of

develop his own style a

Author

Dennis Oliver investigates the murders in parallel with the Yard's Chief

forms a preoccupation throughout the text: vignettes of the physical printing presses in motion frame the work in Chapters 1 and 12 while in between

forming perceptions, and the dubious ethics of

The

Scoop

one suspect is provided by a radio broadcast time signal. And when that alibi is finally broken and the radio signal is exposed as a fake, the criminal is unmasked as none other than the *Morning Star*'s general editor. In a development which may well have elicited a chortle from Sayers and her cohorts, the organising intelligence behind the text is exposed as engaging in fakery and attempts to frame his colleagues.

aspects of

Behind the Screen and *The Scoop*, both are apposite frames of reference for

length collaborative novel, *The Floating Admiral*. Produced in the same year as *The Scoop*, this time the compositional design is the most audacious yet, with a total of fourteen contributing authors working independently of one

the quiet seaside town of Whynmouth. This bold compositional strategy

appears to build on a suggestion made by Sayers in the *Listener*

correspondence relating to the earlier *Behind the Screen*. Here, she suggests

properly, those clues can be picked up and worked to a satisfactory

Screen 229).

This notion is fully put to the test in *The Floating Admiral* where all contributions were prepared independently and serialistically. Only one

work of all the others before penning his contribution, and that was G. K.

Chesterton, which was composed last of

-setting

flashback but largely floating free of what follows, eleven independently-

written chapters narrate the mysterious di

adrift in a rowing boat and the investigation that follows. Sayers relates

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preceding chapters without having the slightest idea what solution or

solutions th *Admiral xviii*). It falls to the

final contributor, Anthony Berkeley to knit together the conclusion and

provide a convincing solution to the mystery.

The novel thus provides an opportunity for a collaborative testing of

Say

the novel. T

others, ranged from Victor Whitechurch, and husband-and-wife writing

team G. D. H. and M. Cole effectively breaking the rules of the game by

produc

solutions of Christie, Kennedy and

Sayers, complete with double identities and masquerades. Clemence Dane

solution

The Floating Adm

memorandum of questions, his textual rumination mirrors that of the reader:

Floating Admiral, our great detectives may have to learn to express themselves mo

allowing fictional sleuths the

(1) and proclaiming an equivalent agnosticism as to his own compositional
a plot to fit the title and thus commences the three-part structure of the book:

Part Two in which established Detection Club sleuths investigate and
Milward Kennedy ties together the various threads and resolves the mystery
notably along lines which none of the sleuths had entirely anticipated.

This interchange between narrative and epistolary voices is at its
most pronounced in t

ger Sheringham; Gladys
, whose own Sir John
Saumarez is rendered by Mitchell. This premise, wittily ascribed to a
-joking between
the contributing authors as they engage in varying degrees of literary
impersonation and parody of each other's protagonists. The result ranges
beyond the aforementioned Barthesian and Brunerian effects towards an
between epistolary and narrative modes and the parodic renderings of each
-to-face w
Dostoevsky 280).

-

eminent suspects at all but rather a mischievous schoolboy at play: no one would have expected Comstock to be shot by accident, by a boy of fourteen, convalescent from mumps, and fooling about with an air-rifle that was anything but a toy (306).

reflect on the multivalency of the text in offering up four distinct yet individually plausible solutions under the investigative efforts of the four parody sleuths. The impression at the frustration at the circumvention of the customary rules of the game, but rather a delight in the range of ingenuity and invention at work in the text. And whilst liberties may indeed have been taken with the rules of the De sense of arriving full circle when Kennedy reveals that the key witness to it is usually advisable

The members of the Detection Club took their own advice and did here, *Six Against the Yard* (1936). In this text, the competitive spirit of the Cl time, judgement of their success is passed not by club peers but by an authoritative external party – retired Scotland Yard Superintendent George published his memoirs only the previous year, offering reminiscences that charted his journey from police constable in Victorian Whitechapel through to his oversight of high-profile

metropolitan murder cases of the 1930s. Upon his retirement Cornish had
suf

In his commentaries, Cornish repeatedly shows his affinity for the fictional worlds the contributing authors have created and reflects his own extensive reading

that a precedent for the bizarre details of the crime will indeed be found in

In a development of this dialogic pattern and
fact/fiction boundary- checks
Cornish within the fictional world of the story alongside the most celebrated
forensic scientist of the age, gamely foregrounding the intertextual premise

Sir Bernard Spilsbu

.³

Indeed, an emerging implication from the Detection Club/Cornish
interplay in *Six Against the Yard* is the ultimate textuality of all crime

suggests this interpenetration of the literary imagination with the textuality

the start o

doubt further shaped by the role of
press reportage in accounts of true crime cases, it would appear that the
popular criminological imagination in the inter-war period approached
crime fact and crime fiction within largely the same frame of reference. The
construction and execution of *Six Against the Yard* offers an implicit
commentary on this dialogic exchange of crimes real and imagined, while
exploiting its literary potential.

being furnished in the text for good measure (Crofts). These examples sort well with suggestion, in terms reminiscent of Bakhtin, of the (6) in the wider Golden Age genre, and imply that in these joint-authored ventures, the scope for rule-breaking and inversion is not restricted but rather broadened in a context of dialogism, parody, and intertextual play.

Conclusions: still playing at detection

While the collaborative efforts of the Detection Club did not conclude with *Six Against the Yard*, there is a good case for distinguishing the first wave of Sayers/Berkeley-led texts explored in this article from the later (and certainly the post-war) works. Following the appearance of *Detection Medley*, edited by John Rhode, in the winter of 1939 (which, by virtue of being a short story collection without collaborative design had already moved away from the earlier pattern), the Second World War brought a pa

early flurry of collaborative writing did a good deal more than achieve its more instrumental objective of securing for the CI the purpose of eating dinners together at suitable intervals and of talking *Admiral*, xvi). Rather, the (inter-)textuality of this group of works yielded invaluable insights into the collaboratin methods, and the ludic character and propensities of the wider genre.

Perhaps the experience of writing in collaboration and employing such a variety of compositional strategies also served to open up new possibilities for the contributing authors in their subsequent individual endeavours. The joint works briefly moved Sayers and her fellow authors away from the individualistic activity of sole-authored works with their eyes to the possibility of other readings and to the adoption of a more equivocal narrative stance. Certainly it is suggestive that after reclaiming Lord Peter Wimsey from the ventriloquized rendering of Anthony Berkeley in *Ask a Policeman*, Sayers went on to develop a new depth and richness to the character in *Gaudy Night* – perhaps just one instance of many that suggest what the collaborating writers learned from their games of detection.

For readers of the wider genre, there is a good case to return to these first-wave Detection Club collaborations. Once attuned by them to the dialogic interaction and narrative experimentalism that can take place between writers and readers of detective fiction, we are better placed to discern how these elements are encoded within the wider genre of Golden Age detective fiction – as foregrounded in the recent radical re-readings of classic texts by Bayard, Gulddal and others. These inter-war collaborative works provide students of Golden Age detective fiction with a series of crucibles in which to observe at work some of the creative processes and dynamics that underpin the genre.

The fact that
1960s and 1980s have passed without the appearance of further joint-

authored works shows the ongoing desire of writers of detective fiction to enter into dialogue with others working within their genre. While the majority of these later works are best described as collections of independently written stories, joint-authored Detection Club writing has recently resumed in earnest under the Presidency of Martin Edwards. Since 2016, the multi-authored *Motives for Murder* and *The Sinking Admiral* have , some ninety years on, the ludic project of Sayers and her contemporaries remains alive and well.

The game is still afoot.

The inter-war collaborative works of The Detection Club

Title	Year of publication	Authors
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The Floating 1931 G. K. Chesterton, Canon Victor L.
Admiral Whitechurch, G. D. H. & M. Cole,
Henry Wade, Agatha Christie, John
Rhode, Milward Kennedy, Dorothy L.
Sayers, Ronald Knox, Freeman Wills^{3.3}

of Murder provide a wealth of information. Symon provides valuable background information about the Detection Club, its membership and the role of key figures such as Dorothy Sayers, Anthony Berkeley and others in the development of key aspects of classic detective fiction. Alexis We *Behind the Screen* and *The Scoop*: A cross-media experiment in publishing and broadcasting crime fiction in the early provides a specific two of the collaborative novels. Mark Green has also written a recent analysis of the relative reading complexity of the contributions of the participating authors in the collaborative works of the Detection Club, published online as part of *Bodies from the Library*

2. A sixth text, *The Anatomy of Murder*, a collaboration between Helen Simpson, John Rhode, Margaret Cole, E. R. Punshon, Dorothy L. Sayers, Frances Iles (a *nom de plume* of Anthony Berkeley) and Freeman Wills Crofts is primarily a work of non-fiction and is thus not included for substantive discussion but will form the subject of another paper.

3. In a further aspect of in-jokery, the narrator reveals that his crime smuggler parson Doctor Syn, sometime Vicar of Dymchurch-under-the- works penned by Thorndike himself.

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