

The Poisoned Chocolate Case: Humouring crime in Golden Age Detective fiction

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Abstract

*Anthony Berkeley breaks away with the spoon-fed tradition of writing detective fictions while writing his work *The Poisoned Chocolate Case*. He not only challenged readers' certain assumptions about detective stories, but also their credulity. The essay is an examination of how his detective novel with a touch of humour defies the various detective fiction commandments prevalent during his time. He puts to test the readers' blind belief that detectives are infallible, that their work can only be marvelled at and also that detective fictions are unquestionable or perfect. Berkeley has cleverly critiqued the classical detective conventions without betraying their primary function as popular entertainment by keeping the 'puzzle-element' alive through the book.*

The appetite for crime and mystery stories during the Golden Age Detective Fiction reached such a height that the period saw the largest number of production and sale of detective fictions in 1920s and 1930s. While some of them became huge commercial successes, some were of mere disposable value. The detective fiction genre attained the zenith of its success with its publication as the 'yellowbacks', cheap but popular novels so called because of their yellow covers. The popularity of the sub-genre even gave rise to certain standardized conventions and golden rules on how to write a good detective fiction. So in 1929, we have Ronald Knox who came up with his 'Decalogue' of rules, the ten rules of Golden Age Detective Fiction, which further solidified the cultural and generic assumptions common among writers and readers of detective fiction. Some of his rules state: No Chinaman should figure in the story; no accident should help the detective; supernatural agencies should be ruled out etc.

Breaking away with this spoon-fed tradition of writing detective fictions, one has Anthony Berkeley (1893-1971) who not only challenged readers' certain assumptions about detective stories, but also

their credulity. Berkeley wrote under several pen-names, including Francis Iles and A Monmouth Platts. He has published many detective novels and short stories as well. To mention a few: *The Silk Stocking Murders* (1928); *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* (1929); *The Second Shot* (1930); *Top Storey Murder* (1931); *Murder in the Basement* (1932). In this essay, I will examine how his detective novel *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, defies and breaks away from the various detective fiction commandments prevalent during his time.

In *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* there are six amateur, over-zealous detectives who are members of the Crime Circle run by Roger Sheringham. The club launches what inspector Moresby calls a ‘massed-detective attack’ to solve the case of the death of Mrs Joan Bendix who died of poisoning. So, one has Roger Sheringham a novelist; Alicia Dammers, a novelist again; Sir Charles Wildman, a barrister; Mrs Fleding Flemming, a playwright; Mr Ambrose Chitterwick, a self-proclaimed fan of detective stories and another detective novelist writer Percy Robinson who writes under the name Morton Harrogate Bradley. Against the single Great Detective, here in this book, Berkeley provides the readers with multiple detectives to solve a crime. None of the characters in particular, unlike the Great Detective, is attractive or likeable. There is a certain oddity about each one of them. Berkeley seems to take malicious fun in creating his ‘flawed’, ‘unheroic’ detectives. Sheringham is rather snobbish, Chitterwick diffident, and Sir Charles is introduced with sweeping irony: “There was no one at the bar who could so convincingly distort an honest but awkward fact into carrying an entirely different interpretation from that which any ordinary person would have put upon it...The number of murderers whom sir Charles in the course of this career had saved from the gallows, if placed one on top of the other, would have reached a very great height indeed” (Berkeley, 2010). Thus, the readers are introduced to a group of highly unlikely detectives who do not conform to any traits of a great detective.

The detective novel so far has appealed to the readers by interpreting what GK Chesterton writes in his essay “A Defence of Detective Stories” (1901), “There is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol- a message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or a post-card.” Reading and finding message, putting them together to form coherent narrative has been the crux of detective work and the readers are expected to follow suit. Berkeley takes a dig at this illusion that everything in the world is significant and comprehensible, that the universe is full of meaning. To him, this point of view is at naive and self- satisfied. He puts to test

the readers' blind belief that detectives are infallible, that their work can only be marvelled at and also that detective fictions are unquestionable or perfect. He challenges the general presumption of the detective hero's goal is to correct the wrongs by uncovering facts. Thus, Berkeley has openly modified the most conservative features or rules of the detective fiction in order to question the readers' assumptions about the sub-genre and the world and to free them of their blinkered way of looking at things or events.

In *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, the readers are provided with six individual perspectives, six different solutions, and most surprisingly six different murderers of the same case. Different characters come up with different solutions, theories and verify their hypothesis supported by various findings they have made, and from the facts provided by Scotland Yard. Each character has a different 'voice' with particular exaggerations and eccentricity akin to their professional lives. The solution that each character comes up with somehow seems to correspond with their characteristic eccentricity. In fact, professional life seems to branch over the process of investigation. Interestingly, however, all the theories and findings they make sound credible. Without doubt all the members of the circle have knowledge in criminology, interest in various branches of science, possess knowledge of history of all cases and have constructive ability as are expected in a great detective. Each proposes a watertight case, both reasonable and convincing. At the first look, one cannot find fault with anybody's logic. But the book is structured in such a clever way that cases are built and then demolished. The book shows how easily writers can steer the reader one way or the other, based on the information provided. Berkeley has deliberately provided is a set of detectives who possess almost all the qualities of a great detective but do not succeed in solving a case. Thus, the idea of the 'Great detective' is highly undercut in the book.

Many writers of detective fiction became popular by conforming to their readers' self-serving ideas. And it has amused critics like W Stowe who writes in *Convention and Ideology in Detective Fiction* that the sub-genre (detective fiction) which is "an endlessly reduplicated form, employing sterile formulas, stock characters, and innumerable cliches of method and construction, should prosper in the two decades between the World Wars and continue to amuse readers even in the present day." He further says that, "Detective fiction tends to affirm rather than to question, to take social structures, moral codes, and ways of knowing as givens, rather than subjecting them to thorough, principled criticism." Charles J Rzepka too points out in his book *Detective Fiction* that detective

fiction has almost been conservative, and to use the words of Dennis Porter it is ‘a literature of reassurance and conformism’. Berkeley then breaks away from this tradition by confirming and then by breaking down the benchmarks of a good detective story and the great detective.

Instead of the single detective based fiction *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* has multiple detectives. The members of the club work independently and keep certain facts to themselves, but as each of them come up with their report, truth is unfolded layer after layer and a form of coordination is achieved. So, instead of a linear story, there is a repeated going-over of the same case, each time adding a little more detail. The progress of solving the case is not circular or linear but spiral as one by one each member’s theory is repudiated or torn to pieces, innocent suspects eliminated and the case gradually gets closer and closer to home. Each member uses his own methods; inductive, intuitive, deductive. Each report appears at first to conclusively incriminate a new suspect and each time the readers and the members are convinced of the case being solved until the theory is demolished by one or the other loophole. And what began as an amusing intellectual exercise begins to have frightening emotional implications. What was claimed by the police as a motiveless murder, the handiwork of a lunatic finally turns out to be a meticulously planned crime of passion.

The book is also ridden with humorous remarks and situations. For instance, everyone in the club is more worried about their colleague solving the case before them and at one point it seems nobody is really concerned about finding the truth but rather cracking the mystery one way or the other. This negotiating or bartering of truth, is pointed out by Peter J Rabinowitz, in his article *How Did You Know He Licked His Lips* when he says, “Sometimes the search is not for some empirically verifiable ‘truth’ but rather for some coherent story, preferably one with enough persuasive power to gain acceptance from whoever needs to be convinced.” So, there is the pompous Sir Charles relying on his oratory skills to convince his audience rather than his facts. Like a court proceedings he goes about explaining his theory in weighty legal tones. Then there is Mrs. Flemmings whose theory arises from what she calls ‘one of the oldest dramatic situations’: eternal triangle. In an overly dramatic manner, she accuses Sir Charles. "Thou art the murderer!" she cries, which seem to come directly from some Shakespeare’s onstage play. And Sheringham, the only character on whom the readers have high expectations, who is confident of solving the case ends up with huge goof ups. He turns out to be a detective who has a strong belief in chance and coincidence for solving a case. He cites to Moresby a list of cases which have been solved thus. His reliance on chance not only belittles

the work of many detective works but also puts a question mark on the functionality of reason and logic.

There is great deal of fun and humour in the exchange of dialogues between the Circle members. The club turns into a mini-battlefield whenever there is repudiation of someone's theory, gaps pointed out, and the member comes down almost to insults. So here are a supposedly like-minded people of a club with no commonality. Berkeley seems to be in complete command, be it the hilarity or the mystery or the depth of the characters. Inspector Moresby's struggle with his cigar, his grappling with it reminds one of Sherlock Holmes. He is almost a caricature of him. Mrs Flemming looks like a 'superior cook'. There is also abundance of dry wits at the expense of the sub-genre. For instance, all that Chitterwick could recall about real detection is that, "a real, real detective, if he means to attain results, never puts on a false moustache but simply shaves his eyebrows" (Berkeley, 2010). Miss Dammers too makes some scathing remarks on the favourite tricks employed by detective-writers. Her statement that "You state a thing so emphatically that the reader does not think of questioning the assertion" shows how a detective-writer influences and determines the direction of the reader's thought process.

The naïve use of probability comes in for a serve as Mr Bradley uses it to convict himself, claiming he must have committed the crime in a moment of amnesia. Berkeley also takes a swipe at the sub-genre through observations made by Chitterwick. He exclaims, "In books of that kind it is frequently assumed that any given fact can admit of only one single deduction, and that invariably the right one. Nobody else is capable of drawing any deductions at all but the author's favourite detective, and the ones he draws (in the books where the detective is capable of drawing deductions at all which, alas, are only too few) are invariably right" (Berkeley, 2010). Chitterwick even has a chart used by detective story writers, tabulating each suspect and their salient features.

In the end it is poor diffident Mr. Chitterwick who reveals the truth. He keeps the readers in suspense for a long time, but his ending, the kind of 'thunderbolt surprise ending' when it comes, is totally unexpected and well worth the wait. Moreover, it presents the Crimes Circle with an awful dilemma of its own. And that Berkeley should make Chitterwick of all others to be the one to solve the crime is a big blow to the figure of great detective and the readers' expectations.

Knox's rule number seven, 'The detective himself must not commit the crime' is completely toppled as one of the detectives turns out to be the murderer. Even at the end, when the murderer has been revealed, the case does not seem to end as the murderer proudly walks out of the room saying, "I very much doubt whether you will be able to prove it" and the club is left in complete chaos. No actual proof could be furnished to take up legal proceedings against murderer. One isn't sure if the so called 'state of grace' that WH Auden talks about in his essay, "The Guilty Vicarage" is attained or not. However, Rabinowitz points out that 'novels that appear to trifle with conventions end up firmly wedded to them'. He explains that there might be subversion of conventions by suggesting that more than one solution might fit the available facts and that one might be tricked by the false stories, but there is always an ultimate difference between true and false accounts, and they can be distinguished in practice. Similarly, Berkeley might multiply the number of possible explanations, but ultimately determines one to be the true story. Thus, Berkeley seems to have critiqued the classical detective conventions without betraying their primary function as popular entertainment by keeping the 'puzzle-element' alive through the book.

Works Cited

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The case in question begins with an infamous womaniser, Sir Eustace Pennefather receiving a box of chocolates at his club, supposedly sent from a chocolate manufacturer wanting his opinion on a new range. As you may have already surmised, the chocolates are poisoned and having eaten far more than her husband, Joan dies. I think Berkeley's dark humour is also present in the story especially in the scene when Joan Bendix is eating the chocolates, where she notes how they burn her mouth and give her a numb and tingling tongue, yet continues eating them trying to ascertain whether she likes them or not. Though to be fair to Berkeley male characters are also shown in less than brilliant colours and are subject to disconcerting and uncomfortable moments, Sheringham included. In many ways, the poison was the personality in Agatha Christie's stories—the element of surprise amid an otherwise reassuring collection of country-house clichés. Photograph by popperfoto/getty. In the course of her career, Agatha Christie killed hundreds of characters: some by drowning, some by stabbing, and one with a crowbar. The nineteen-twenties and thirties, when Agatha Christie began her career, are known as the "Golden Age of Detective Fiction," in which a cohort of mostly British authors defined the standards of the genre. Seen through the lens of Harkup's research, it seems equally to have been the golden age of poisons, after the first flowering of organic chemistry and before the stricter regulations that arrived after the Second World War.