

DETECTIVE FICTION

"It's Tough, That's What It Is,"
Says **NGAIO MARSH**

(A Radio Talk from 3YA on July 30)



GOOD evening everybody. I come before you in the dubious capacity of a perpetrator of detective fiction. I feel some hesitation in assuming this notorious role because I am very well aware of the opinions many of you must hold about detective novels. You probably regard them as the illegitimate result of an unholy union between the true novel and the thriller. Some of you may even dismiss all detective stories under the contemptuous generalisation—thrillers. And I must, at the outset, assure you that we have our pride, poor toiling wretches that we are, and we won't allow this generalisation. It cuts us to the quick. "The detective story," we bleat unhappily, "is not a thriller."

We don't say our brows are any higher than the brows of the thriller-wallahs, but they're a different shape. So are the books. The fortunate thriller-monger simply has to provide decently written thrills. One major and several minor thrills per chapter and a perfectly stunning hum-dinger of a thrill for the last. He can deceive his readers, conceal information, let his hero behave like a dunderhead with no more motive than "an irresistible impulse that he was quite unable to explain." His book can amble along as scattily as an errant heir, it need have little shape or form.

Detective-Writers Mustn't Amble

Admirable it may be, but it's a different animal, and I must say I do rather envy its maker compared with us, he's a carefree creature. Because, look at us! We can't amble. We've got to write to a form as austere and precise as that exacted by the old dramatic writers. Our miserable detectives can't pick up some lovely clue simply as the result of acting on an impulse they are afterwards unable to explain. Nothing comes easy to them. And not only do they have to make valiant deductions but they've got to give the reader every possible chance of beating them at their own game. And if the reader does that he won't think the deductions are so brilliant. He will be inclined to think the detective a bit of a mutt and the author no end of a mutt. "Why," this too modest reader will exclaim, "I guessed why the butler cut his toe nails in the pantry and why the Colonel wore dress preservers—I didn't think much of that book."

And then think of the things we have to mug up. Why, dash it all, we have to sound as if we're fourteen bound volumes of the Encyclopædia Britannica, Taylor's Medical Jurisprudence, Common and Criminal Law, and Police Procedure all rolled into one. True, we forget it all in between times, but we have to sound like the real thing, and the devil of it is that the people who read detective stories—Heaven knows

why—are doctors, lawyers, and politicians. The very people who are best equipped to find us out and grin in a beastly superior sort of way at our discomfiture.

The Double-Cross Business

Then there's that cross-double-cross business. It's enough to send you dotty, so it is. It goes on incessantly between us and the reader. This is pretty obvious, we think to ourselves, but with any luck the reader will say it's so obvious it can't be right, or will he think we've thought of that or will he think we've thought of him thinking we've thought like that, or will he—and it depends on your stamina as a detective novelist how long you can go on like this without getting cross-eyed and trying to disguise yourself as yourself disguising yourself. We as well as the reader get attacks of the dazbles when walking up the garden path. You see what I mean?

Plots and Love-Interest

And then, plots! There are only about three plots but we've got to make it look as if there are hundreds, and if you do hit on something a bit ingenious what do the readers and the critics or even our publishers say? They say we're getting too elaborate. And what about love-interest? I've got exactly the same number of letters from kind readers asking me to prolong the courtship of my detective and his girl as I've got letters from kind readers begging me to cut the love-cackle and get to the sharp or blunt instrument as the case may be. And while I'm on the subject of plot, I may as well freely confess that, for me, all good detective stories begin in Baker Street. And in case any of you should be so hopelessly lost to all good 'eckery as to wonder "why Baker Street?" I should say that it was in Baker Street that Mr. Sherlock Holmes shared a glorious stuffy set of rooms with poor

Dr. Watson. We've all become very cunning and subtle and knowallish since those famous days, but not one of us has equalled the enchanting atmosphere of coal fires, fog, and pleasant anticipation that blesses the opening of those stories. At its best it's a thick stormy night, the gas lamps are haloed in mist and Baker Street is deserted. Presently, above the sighing wind, we hear the clomp-clomp of a cab-horse's hooves, and Holmes, laying down his violin, tells Watson that he believes they are to have a visitor and that he is an elderly master-plumber suffering from chronic dyspepsia. And in a minute or two a man sits before the fire with a piece of lead piping protruding from his pocket, unfolding a not too subtle mystery, and interrupting himself from time to time with the slight belch so characteristic of chronic dyspepsia.

Happy Conan Doyle!

Now you can't bet that sort of thing for atmosphere, and though we may smile gently at some of Mr. Holmes' deductions, our smiles should be tinged with regret for our own sophistication, while we confess that one touch of the warmth of Baker Street is worth a whole volume of Taylor's Medical Jurisprudence. Happy Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who romped so felicitously in fresh fields and pastures comparatively new. Unhappy us or we (as the case may be) who tread the beaten highways of detection and pretend we are newcomers to those paths. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Far be it from any of us to complain. It's grand being an author and all that, but in our darker moments when the time-table hasn't worked out and we've forgotten why the Bishop couldn't button his gaiters in Chapter Two, and some minor character has bolted and turned into a superfluous major character—why in these darker moments we cannot be blamed if we think enviously of the thrillers and mutter to ourselves, "It's tough, that's what it is—it's tough."

Radio Personalities

(17) T. J. KIRK-BURNNAND

T. J. KIRK-BURNNAND, who has been musical adviser for the NBS over the past three-and-a-half years, is volatile as well as versatile. As a musician he composed, conducted, adjudicated, and performed. He took a leading part in organising inter-Departmental Rugby matches and threw a useful forward's weight into the scrums. He could be relied upon to take a part in a radio play. He conducted the Band of the Royal New Zealand Air Force. Now, volatile as ever, he turns up as Company Sergeant-Major Kirk-Burnnand, in the 13th Railway Construction Company, on leave this month from Ngaruawahia. He is 35 years of age.

Before he came to work at the NBS Head Office, he was programme organiser for 4YA and after that for 1YA.

He was educated in Auckland, at the Grammar School and University College, and studied piano and all branches of musical theory with Dr. W. E. Thomas. With Colin Muston he studied the violin.

Well Known In Dunedin

In Dunedin he soon became widely known. He was conductor for the Dunedin Operatic Society, the Dunedin Grand Opera Club, Royal Dunedin Male Choir, the Dunedin Orphans' Club, the Kai-korai Band, and was guest conductor for the Dunedin Philharmonic Society. Before then he had worked for many years with Fuller's, Hugh Ward, and the J. C. Williamson companies, as an instrumentalist, playing the piano, violin, and trumpet.

In Wellington he performed as a conductor of orchestras and bands, as studio



Spencer Digby photograph

T. J. KIRK-BURNNAND

pianist, and as a solo pianist. To his credit are several compositions, notably a recent cycle of children's songs, and he has turned out several pieces of incidental music for broadcast plays.

As a Flying Officer of the R.N.Z.A.F. he became conductor of the Air Force Band.

Musical Memories

This busy musical life have given him many pleasing memories. He recalls the Budapest String Quartet as the greatest musical combination brought to New Zealand by the NBS, together with Kipnis. For sheer fun as well as artistry his next favourites are the Comedy Harmonists. Percy Grainger he believes to be the most outstanding composer we have seen—"a real musical genius."

Among local artists he pays a tribute to the younger school of brilliant pianists at present in New Zealand. New Zealand teachers are producing some who are quite outstanding, he said.

Many vocalists were good broadcasting artists but he found among singers a tendency to hurry their training. It took years to be a first class musician-singer.

Teachers, said Mr. Kirk-Burnnand, should be selected carefully. If teachers charged high fees that did not necessarily mean that they "had the goods."

The greatest fault he had to find with New Zealand musicians was that they would try to conduct when they were totally unsuited to the job. There were very few really good conductors in the country.

Now out of the Air Force grey and into khaki, he admits that he likes bandsmen, "but I don't like band music very much—except hymn tunes, well played."