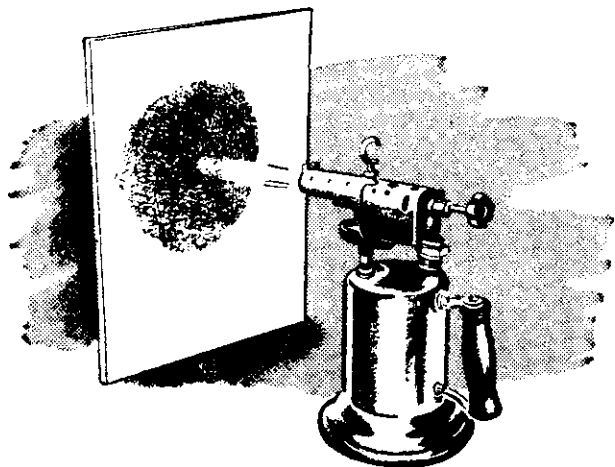


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Death Without the Sting

THE demand for crime novels is said to be so great that the supply of new books cannot fill it. In this one department of fiction, no matter what may be said of others, there is no falling away of interest. The explanation seems to be that thrillers satisfy the universal desire to be told a story. Even in the conventional detective novel, where much time is spent examining the evidence, a plot is being unravelled. The thriller, as distinct from a "detection," moves faster. There is action of some sort on every page, and the author's purpose is not merely to solve a mystery but to build up a state of tension which explodes into the climax.

Some of these novels are written very skilfully. This has tempted a few critics to see in them the most hopeful line of development for fiction. If it is the function of a novelist to tell a story, it can certainly be said that detective writers are preserving the narrative art in difficult times; but any claim beyond that would be hard to defend. Novels in the great tradition are concerned with character and situation, and from the moment a writer begins to think of living people the movement of his story is slower. It is one of the conventions of the detective story that the reader's sympathies should not be deeply engaged. If men and women are to be murdered for entertainment, we should not be allowed to know them too well; and the criminal must not arouse more sympathy than it is natural to feel for the hunted. Real life murders are sordid or tragic, whereas in a novel the facts of death are used to introduce a chase, and are not dwelt upon by the best practitioners.

Americans lean towards the more violent sort of crime fiction. Some critics have found this significant, as if it were a symptom of disorder in a collective mind. But the trend could be seen from the earliest times: it was noticeable in Edgar Allan Poe, one of the fathers of the detective story, who

liked horror as well as detection. In recent years, admittedly, the violence has been described with more gusto than is necessary. It is a mistake to have too many corpses—unless, as in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, there is great poetry to go with them; and brutal beatings are not much liked by adult readers. Yet it is all unmistakably fantasy. By the time a private detective has consumed enough liquor to make any living person incapable of further action, has survived various beatings and ambushes, and has shown that every woman in the story finds him irresistible, we know exactly where we are, and can float along for an hour or two in a state of mild exhilaration.

The background for death is generally softened by what is, for most of us, a pervading unreality. Luxury hotels and night clubs are much favoured; there is a constant starting and stopping of high-powered cars, and a frequent appearance of exotic females. One recent novel seemed to have been written after a close study of *Life*: several subjects for "photographic essays" in that journal—a luxury train, a settlement for retired people in Florida, and a commercial aquarium large enough to include sharks—resembled scenes incorporated in the story. Thrillers can be filled out in that fashion if the writer has a story to tell against the pasteboard settings: he is not writing of the world he knows, or indeed of a world that is known by anybody else. And everything happens so quickly that we do not stop to realise that we are watching the movement of puppets. The test comes afterwards. Nothing is forgotten more easily than yesterday's thriller. Not a face remains, not a voice can be heard; and the complicated plot is brushed aside like a cobweb. They say that good money is to be earned by writers of thrillers. But what a treadmill awaits the man who sets out to supply his public twice a year with the story of a murder that has never happened!

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 4, 1955.