



Foul and Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction

Marty Roth

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Foul and Fair Play is an examination of classic detective fiction as a genre--an attempt to read a wide variety of texts by different authors as variations on a common and relatively tight set of conventions. Marty Roth covers the period from the "prehistory" of detective fiction in Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. G. Wells up to the 1960s, which marked the end, he says, of the classical period--"the end of an extremely conservative paradigm."

The detective fiction genre, as Roth defines it, includes analytic detective fiction, hard-boiled detective fiction, and the spy thriller. Roth insists on the structural common ground of these three types of writing and places them in the larger system of mystery fiction that preceded and surrounds them.

The first part of the book consists of a reading of conventions: conventions of character (the detective, the criminal), of gender and sexuality, of narrative style, of settings, and of the curious rules of exchange and coincidence that operate in the realm where detective stories take place. The second section deals with the convoluted epistemology of mystery and detective fiction, depending as it does on other major intellectual developments of the late nineteenth century, such as psychoanalysis.

An extremely original study, *Foul and Fair Play* offers many insights into the literary and cultural history of a popular genre.

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