Detective/Mystery Fiction and the Impact of the Internet: The Edgar Nominees for 2011

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Detective/Mystery Fiction and the Impact of the Internet: The Edgar Nominees for 2011

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Edgar Award Nominees, 2011, and the Impact of the Internet

Harlan Coben’s, Caught (Dutton Adult, 2010)

David Gordon’s The Serialist: A Novel (Simon & Schuster, 2010)

This is another installment in an Interface series weighing the impact of the Internet by analyzing award winning detective or mystery fiction. 1 The works we examine are selected from the nominees of the most highly regarded of U.S. awards in this category, the annual Edgar Allan Poe awards presented by the Mystery Writers of America. 2 The Edgar nominees for 2011 (for books published in 2010) were announced on January 19th 2011 on the 202nd birthday of Edgar Allan Poe. The winners will be announced in New York on April 28, 2011. 3

Our methodology is a very simple one. We are interested almost solely in how the award-winning authors incorporate (or inappropriately ignore) the Internet

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1 For previous pieces in the series see: Forward to a New Article Series: Detective Fiction and the Internet: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=691 See also the review of C.J. Box, Blue Heaven, found at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=698 and the review of John Hart's work, The Last Child at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=728
2 For the current Edgar awards site, go to: http://www.theedgars.com/nominees.html
3 The nominees are: Best novel
   • Caught by Harlan Coben (Penguin Group USA – Dutton)
   • Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter by Tom Franklin (HarperCollins – William Morrow)
   • Faithful Place by Tana French (Penguin Group USA – Viking)
   • The Queen of Patpong by Timothy Hallinan (HarperCollins – William Morrow)
   • The Lock Artist by Steve Hamilton (Minotaur/Thomas Dunne Books)
   • I’d Know You Anywhere by Laura Lippman (HarperCollins – William Morrow)

Best first novels
   • Rogue Island by Bruce DeSilva (Tom Doherty Associates – Forge Books)
   • The Poacher's Son by Paul Doiron (Minotaur Books)
   • The Serialist: A Novel by David Gordon (Simon & Schuster)
   • Galveston by Nic Pizzolatto (Simon & Schuster – Scribner)
   • Snow Angels by James Thompson (Penguin Group USA – G.P. Putnam's Sons)
in constructing their plots. This is a particularly useful approach for evaluating the impact of the Internet because, by its nature, the genre of mystery or detective fiction is most often focused on missing information. Usually that information is the identity of the perpetrator or criminal. The slang title for these works, “whodunit,” is particularly appropriate.

The classical works in the genre have almost invariably begun with a crime, and then set a sleuth to solve that crime by parsing the known information to arrive at the solution. Authors have gone to incredible lengths to complicate the puzzle thus set for the sleuth and for the reader. Such complications have often reached kabuki-like stylizations. For example, the old “locked room” subset of the genre presents a scene within which the crime—usually murder—seems to be impossible. The crime scene was locked or otherwise isolated, no weapon is found, the cause of death is unclear, and any number of other tropes is introduced. Works range from Poe’s own 1841 piece, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (often said to be the earliest fully developed example of the type), to many foreign language examples. However, despite their occasional uses, such stylized scenarios as the locked room or the isolated island no longer seem realistic to contemporary readers.

The advent of the Internet has complicated mystery plotting because so much more information is available to both the sleuth and the reader. The reader is not likely to remain long interested in a detective who is too dumb to take the obvious first step in any research—going on line for related information.

There are a number of ways to avoid this problem. Some stories do not, of course, require outright evasion because of the setting; often the story develops in the past. Authors have many legitimate reasons for ignoring technology. A recent nominee for the Edgar Award for 2010 in the category Best Critical / Biographical Work, P.D. James’ *Talking About Detective Fiction*, discussed one such reason. For James, the classical pre-war and post-war mystery authors, such as Agatha Christie, wrote in the golden age of detective fiction. They set their stories in a much less troubled past, often in an almost timeless village, precisely because they wanted their readers to escape from the real world. In those setting the universe of information was very circumscribed and plots often depended upon character development.

The current time period seems to us to be one of transition. The Internet or digital communications are omnipresent now. But authors are still not entirely
comfortable with it. Reactions range from authors who all but ignore the Internet, to those who are learning to make good use of it in their stories.

However, ignoring the Internet now is not easy. In analyzing Edgar winners for 2009 and 2010, we made this observation:

“The Internet is unavoidable in even relatively isolated plot settings provided that the time period includes it. But plotting often demands that it be carefully restricted in its use until crucial moments. The trope then, requires some explanation for the failure to employ the Internet until the necessary moment.” ⁵

In our opinion the Edgar winners for Best Novels in 2009 or 2010 failed to deal adequately with the impact of the Internet. In that sense, the genre is potentially in trouble. Audiences must not feel deliberately misled, nor should questions as to the wisdom of the sleuth arise in their minds. Newer and younger audiences in particular want some sense of cultural relevance in their readings.

This year we are reading all the works that are not set in a time before the Internet which have been nominated either for Best Novel, or for Best First Novel. We choose both categories on the assumption that the authors in the latter may be younger, and possibly more comfortable with the Internet. Dame James, a winner of the Mystery Writers of America Grand Master title in 1999 and author of the superb British series featuring Inspector Adam Dalgliesh, as well as many other works, had something to say about computers and age groups. After describing the evolution of the technology with which she has written over thirty years, she wrote: “Finally it (a manuscript) is sent simultaneously to my publisher, agent, and editor through cyberspace, a system which I can neither operate nor understand.” ⁶ This unfamiliarity with the Internet is not a problem for Dame James, because most of her works are set before its advent.

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⁵ To see my full analysis of this conclusion go to: [http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=698](http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=698)

In discussing e-readers, after expressing her commitment to conventional books, she writes:

"What is surprising is not that the detective story has altered, but that it has survived, and that what we have seen since the interwar years has been development, not a rejection, followed by renewal." 7

We too are pleased that the genre is undergoing a renewal. Below we review two Edgar nominees for 2011, to see what more may be learned about the impact of the Internet on the genre.

**Warning: Plot Spoilers Below...**

To begin, we selected from among the nominees Harlan Coben’s work, Caught. Coben will be a familiar name to most who read in mystery or detective fiction. 8 He is not only a prolific best-selling author, but also a critically acclaimed one who has already won one Edgar and been nominated for two others. He has also won several major British awards as well as the French Le Grand Prix des Lectrices de Elle for fiction. On the basis of success and reputation, many might consider Coben to be the favorite in this year’s Edgar competition.

*Caught* is also very useful in our attempt to analyze the use of the Internet in mystery fiction. It would be difficult to contrive a more Internet-centered plot. It is, however, a very convoluted plot and certainly not easy to summarize.

The protagonist, “Wendy,” is a TV personality who has exposed “Dan” on the air. He is accused of stalking a teen-ager on the Internet. Wendy’s program was built around a sting intended to brand him as just that: a stalker of young girls. However, her exposure of him leads to his murder by a vengeful relative of a missing girl. Wendy, however, begins to trust her reportorial instincts more than the circumstantial evidence she has followed which had apparently gotten Dan killed.

Coben presents the Internet in a very realistic fashion. It becomes a major factor in both the crimes and in their solutions. Wendy is a facile and experienced Internet researcher. She moves from simple uses of the Internet to accessing large databases and then on to Facebook, which turns out to be a critical source of evidence. For an audience with some experience with similar social sites, her path seems both logical and self-affirming. This is the way we would do it too.

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8 See the author’s page at: [http://www.harlancoben.com/static/bio.htm](http://www.harlancoben.com/static/bio.htm)
But Wendy’s search begins to suggest that Dan was the victim of a very sophisticated smear artist who had used email and the Internet to entangle him in her sting. From there, she herself becomes a victim, as the possible perpetrator (who is perhaps involved in the abduction and murder of the missing young women himself) smears her on the Internet as a harassing seductress who will stop at nothing in building her career. She is fired. This then requires that she become personally involved in an informal search to solve the crime, although with great help from a bevy of friends and contacts.

*Caught* was successful throughout in incorporating new media, the Internet, pop culture (such as music), a poor economy, dying newspapers, and all the tropes of our present digital world. Wendy seems an appropriate hero for the present who employs the tools of her profession in solving crime, much as Sherlock Holmes employed his own scientific knowledge.

We have no clue, of course, as to whether or not *Caught* will win the Edgar for Best First Novel this year. But so far as making good use of the Internet and constructing a plot around such timely issues as identity theft and online bullying, not to mention Coben’s previous career, the work is certainly a major contender.

Because we want to see if younger authors are indeed more likely to incorporate contemporary technology like the Internet, for our second review, we selected a nominee in the category of Best New Books, David Gordon’s *The Serialist: A Novel* (Simon & Schuster).

Gordon says of himself in his blog:

> “David Gordon was born in Queens and lives in New York City, with stops in New Jersey, London and Los Angeles along the way. He attended Sarah Lawrence College, holds an MA in English and Comparative Literature and an MFA in Fiction Writing, both from Columbia University, and has worked in film, fashion, publishing and pornography.”

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The book, like Gordon's thumbnail bio above, suggests a romp through popular culture. The protagonist is a writer attempting to survive despite the adverse impact of the Internet on publishing. Here is a bit of the flavor of the character and of the author's style:

“Still I’m a professional, of sorts, and since this is a Mystery/Suspense (shelve accordingly), I want to open in the classic style, with a hook, a real grabber that holds the reader hostage and won't let go, that will keep your sweaty little fingers feverishly turning the pages all night long. Something like this: It all began the morning when, dressed like my dead mother and accompanied by my fifteen-year-old schoolgirl business partner, I opened the letter from death row and discovered that a serial killer was my biggest fan.”

In The Serialist, the Internet is a factor serving as a sort of symbol of the whirl increasingly overtaking our culture. The protagonist has lost much of his work as a writer because the Internet has destroyed the small serial magazines that were his primary market. He has been reduced to ghosting term papers for wealthy prep school students. But the Internet is not otherwise particularly important. In that way, it may be said to be a very realistic use of it—as we all know, sometimes it is useful, other times not.

Gordon’s plot is not so much driven by a search to discover information as by events. The plot is pushed forward when things happen to the protagonist, in the style of the hapless detective of other writers. He is, by his nature, inherently out of control. Under such conditions, we do not much care about the author’s use of the Internet. The book has some problems, but they are not relevant to the narrow focus of our inquiry; we will leave its fate to the judges of the Edgar awards.

In reading the Edgars systematically over three years now, it seems to me that there is a very big gap between authors nominated for the Best New Novel award and those nominated for the Best New Book. The former are often highly experienced heavyweights who have learned their craft by publishing books well into the double-digits, while the latter are very much beginners. Perhaps they are talented ones, like David Gordon, but nonetheless beginners.

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We have many books left to read before the Edgar Awards are announced in late April. At this point, we feel that, as P. D. James wrote in *Talking About Detective Fiction*, “... how far, if at all, these (changes (in technology) will actually affect the variety and type of fiction produced remains to be seen.”

As in all things, we are in a transitional period in the use of the Internet in detective fiction, and perhaps authors will adapt while refreshing the appeal of the genre.

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11 James, Loc 1612, (Kindle Edition)