6-1-2010

Forward to a New Article Series

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Description
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Forward to a New Article Series: “Edgar and the Internet.”

Posted on June 1, 2010 by Editor

By Jeffrey Barlow

Introduction: This piece is the beginning of an extended project to analyze the impact of the Internet over the last decade (2000-2010) by a study of mystery or detective fiction. The works analyzed will be those awarded an Edgar Allan Poe award (“The Edgar”) by the Mystery Writers of America. In this forward we discuss the reasons for the project and our methodology.

There are many well-established current methods for evaluating the impact of the Internet. Most of them involve measuring classes of users, penetration of technology, numbers of web page, etc. Such measures have the advantage of facilitating comparisons between time periods and groups of users, among many others. However, such approaches fail to come to grips with the human mind. What has the Internet really meant to us, and how can we understand its impact on our thinking, our dreams, and our behavior?

In an effort to say something useful about these more humanistic impacts for some time we have been reviewing selected works of fiction at Interface to gauge the penetration of the Internet into popular culture [1]. We have learned a great deal from doing so, and hope that readers of the reviews we have published have done so as well. We will continue to use this approach, but it has serious limitations.

These pieces have been reviews, with all the conventions demanded in writing in this genre, such as avoiding too much depth of coverage lest the reader not want to read the book, feeling obliged to lean over backwards to identify some audience which might find the work useful or entertaining, and above all avoiding “plot spoilers”.

We propose a more systematic and potentially more extensive approach: the analysis of a very old and popular genre of writing, mystery or detective fiction. The genre is almost inevitably about something that is not known—who the villain is, or if already known, why he or she did the deed.
among multitudinous other possibilities. It is also often about communication between individuals as these facts are uncovered. Both of these functions, discovery of information and communication, have been transformed by the Internet.

Before the Internet, the working methods of sleuths [2], while somewhat variable, were limited. The author had, as a matter of course, to give his or her detectives strong personalities and appropriate approaches to their work.

Some sleuths (the clueless detective) blunder around making a nuisance of themselves until the perpetrator literally hits them on the head or shoots them in some non-vital part of their anatomy, as does Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer. Others take the opposite approach, seeming disengaged while collecting seemingly unrelated evidence or innocent facts and ratiocinate until the answer to the central puzzle is revealed, like Rex Stout’s Nero Wolfe. Most do a bit of both, of course, like Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes who relied in part on “modern” techniques such as physical analysis of evidence, and in part on logical reasoning.

Each of these archetypes has thousands of variants, old and new. But for almost all, the journey begins with the crime, works through the known facts to discover the unknown, and thence to the solution.

But now we have the Internet. Much of the process of collecting evidence, drawing connections, uncovering related crimes, identifying missing twin brothers, and all the other common “MacGuffins” [3] are now potentially digital. The protagonist need no longer send his or her faithful sidekick to the library, call a contact at the morgue of the local newspaper, secure a police file through marginally legal means, or any of the many variants of these search techniques because the data is now often a click away.

Mystery fiction, then, offers a very rich trove of materials from which to better understand the impact of the Internet. The problem, as usual with deep collections of data, is how to sort it. In our earlier reviews, we have simply scanned mass-market works, identified particular authors, often those with good technical experience and credentials, and evaluated their works.

This approach has been broadly educational, and permitted us to follow some authors over time, seeing, for example, how Jeffrey Deaver’s paraplegic sleuth, Lincoln Rhymes, adapts to the impact of digital data, or how Michael Connelly’s Jack McEvoy, an old-style investigative journalist, reacts to the death of traditional print journalism while dealing with the deaths of the victims of an arch-hacker [4]. But this selection process has several shortcomings.

First, it takes works dealing with the Internet and tries to generalize from them while avoiding the many counter-examples of works which completely ignore the Internet or so fabulize it that little can be learned. It also easily becomes repetitive as it often focuses on writers who have developed sleuths whose key ability is sophisticated hacking as has John Sanford in his “Kidd” series [5], and more recently the marvelous Stieg Larsson, whose detective team is composed of...
a female hacker and a dogged male journalist [6].

The mass-market approach also all but ignores the issue of quality in the works, requiring that I sometimes review poorly-written works, usually in the Neo-Gothic “Beware The Internet” genre, just because they do focus on the Internet.

That approach has been useful, but flawed. It is time to develop a more systematic methodology. In this series (Edgar and the Internet), I select books not for their known relationship to the Internet, but for their worth as meritorious examples of the genre itself. I will analyze winners of the Edgar Allan Poe awards (“The Edgar”), given by the Mystery Writers of America [7].

Each year there are six nominees and one winner in a number of categories related to detective fiction. We have selected two categories, Best Novel Nominees and Best First Novel by an American Author [8]. We think it possible that there is could be a difference in the treatment of the Internet by older, more established authors, and those winning the award with a first novel.

We must, regretfully, ignore works that have no possibility of referring to the Internet, because of the time in which they were set. For example, Malla Nunn’s 2010 Edgar nominee, A Beautiful Place to Die, is set in one of our favorite environments for fiction, South Africa, but in 1952, so it is not useful to our research.

However, some other books which do not touch upon the Internet we will analyze, simply because the author has worked out some clever way of not mentioning the elephant in the room in order to sustain his or her plot. The authors of the books we analyze in this issue each worked out a clever way of restricting the impact of the Internet upon their plot, while not entirely ignoring it either.

We will present our findings regularly in Interface as review articles, complete with plot spoilers rather than as pure reviews, and then eventually synthesize our conclusions in a longer review essay, perhaps, like the Edgar awards themselves, on an annual basis.

We are feeling our way in this series, and it may be some time before I can say anything very useful. But I can say that I have read through five of the twelve nominees in the two categories for this year, and found them all marvelous reading, though some are irrelevant to this project. In short, I have repeatedly encountered the fabled book you cannot put down.

In this issue, we begin with an essay comparing Blue Heaven by C.J. Box, the 2009 Edgar winner for best mystery novel, and the 2010 winner, The Last Child, by John Hart.

Endnotes

[1] See a partial list of these reviews beginning at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/indexes/?category=authors&letter=B
[2] Of course, we could not avoid researching this term to see if it would give us some clue to the genre; we found that it apparently has a number of origins, is a very old term, perhaps Scandinavian in origin, and most often seems to mean “to track” in its early usages, some of which are very early indeed. It includes many variants, such as “sleuthhound” for a type of Bloodhound. Oxford Universal Dictionary and many web sources.

[3] A MacGuffin is defined as “a plot element that catches the viewers’ attention or drives the plot of a work of fiction” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacGuffin I find this Wikipedia site sufficiently authoritative, although it deals largely with films, because of its thorough analysis of plot elements in a great number of films, and a bibliography which is satisfactory, though it could be stronger.


[7] The awarded is broadly recognized as the highest honor given to authors in this genre. See the organization’s web site at: http://www.theedgars.com/ The awards have been given since 1946, though the categories have often changed. See the database as the group’s site above.

[8] The five best novel runner-ups were: The Missing by Tim Gautreaux (Random House – Alfred A. Knopf); The Odds by Kathleen George (Minotaur Books); Mystic Arts of Erasing All Signs of Death by Charlie Huston (Random House – Ballantine Books); Nemesis by Jo Nesbo, translated by Don Bartlett (HarperCollins) and A Beautiful Place to Die by Malla Nunn (Simon & Schuster – Atria Books). The winner was The Last Child by John Hart (Minotaur Books); The best first novel runners-up were: The Girl She Used to Be by David Cristofano (Grand Central Publishing); Starvation Lake by Bryan Gruley (Simon & Schuster – Touchstone); The Weight of Silence by Heather Gudenkauf (MIRA Books); Bad Day for Sorry by Sophie Littlefield (Minotaur Books – Thomas Dunne Books); Black Water Rising by Attica Locke (HarperCollins) and the winner was In the Shadow of Gotham by Stefanie Pintoff (Minotaur Books)

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