Edgar and the Internet: The Mystic Arts of Erasing All Signs of Death and The Girl She Used to Be

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Edgar and the Internet: The Mystic Arts of Erasing All Signs of Death and The Girl She Used to Be

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Introduction

We pick up once again our topic of the impact of the Internet in mystery or crime fiction [1]. By reading works selected as noteworthy by the jurors of the Edgar Allan Poe awards, we will encounter works which are not selected simply because we know them to focus on the Internet. This is not then, truly a review, but rather an analysis that proceeds from a detailed examination, including, unfortunately, plot spoilers.

The Edgar awards are given annually to mystery or crime fiction in several categories. Such fiction is usually, above all, about the discovery of information by the sleuth. Now information is increasingly transmitted by the Internet and often a click away as opposed to discoverable only by the Sherlock Holmes among us. As such fiction has a long and much-analyzed history—the Edgars were first awarded in 1946. We are able, then, to systemically assess the changes wrought by the Internet.

In this piece we discuss two books, each nominated for an Edgar for 2010. Neither work won; we analyzed the winners in these categories earlier [2]. Here, in order to extend our analysis and
broaden our sample, we look at some also-rans. Both, however, are excellent works and each does tell us quite a bit about the Internet, although in very different ways.

**Charles Huston, The Mystic Arts of Erasing All Signs of Death.**

Huston is a highly published author. His protagonist here, Webster Fillmore Goodhue, belongs to the “clueless sleuth” category, a hapless soul—described by the author as “a slacker”—who blunders into a crime requiring that he solves it to survive [3].

The impact of this work lies in large part in the unique employment of the protagonist. After failing at everything he has tried, Goodhue winds up cleaning trauma sites, such as suicide locales, and the homes of recluses discovered weeks, if not months, after their death. While this might initially seem an unpromising, if not totally off-putting premise, the author has previously demonstrated his mastery of contemporary popular culture. He has several fiction series going, including superheroes and classic comic books, as well as, from this work, what may turn out to be an HBO series [4].

The work is post-modernist and contemporary (he refers to his style as pulp) in that it has an ironic undercurrent in which the author continually signals his distance from not only the protagonist, but also from the audience. The gruesomely described trauma sites are nothing if not sensationalized, as though to draw attention from an otherwise rather thin plot.

The author has suggested that his style has in part been driven, as were earlier pulp authors, by the need to write very quickly to survive as a writer. The quality he seeks is described as “velocity” [5]. Huston’s style is distinctive, relying heavily upon dashes in lieu of quotation marks to develop velocity, and indicating changes in voice by identifying the speaker’s actions rather than using the “he said…” of conventional fiction.

These devices result in passages such as these:

*I walked to the section of bookcases that was in line with the open bathroom door.*
—*He had some nice books.*
*She watched me.*
—*Yeah, he loved his books...*  
*She dropped her voice an octave.*
—*Too much to do sweetheart, why bother reading about some made-up life when you can live it yourself?*  
*She brushed dark curly hair from her forehead, and bit her lip.*
—*Is that bad, that it makes a kind of sense to me?... [6]*

These make the dialogue a series of statements interrupted by physical action, as in the above series where the speaker is one woman, hectically watching, dropping, biting, and brushing within three statements, while quoting her dead father as well. The author certainly achieves velocity, but often at the expense of clarity. This is not really a style which can sustain complex
plot development or intricate dialogue. It is intended to leap off the page and be apprehended perhaps more emotionally than intellectually [7].

Among the icons of pop-culture, frequently dissed in this work are both computers and videogames. Computers are portrayed as ultimately a shallow entertainment, comparable to television, and merely a way of filling time.

The poor quality of the Internet and of its audience is suggested by a humorous passage in which one of the more witless characters (among many such) details plans to make his fortune by investing in the careers of two video artists who attracted a large audience on Youtube by showing clips of animals eating their own feces. The character intends to lock up their output for ten years and to attract an audience initially by providing a steady stream of such literal dreck, via a subscription-only website, followed by other equally humorous content [8].

It seems to me that the author desires to break with conventional fiction, both speeding up narrative through a variety of devices such as those discussed above, and by embedding the story in a horrific context of mindless violence, both the commission of which and the messy aftermath is described in detail.

Lest this analysis be taken as a simple longing on my part for the back-in-the-day Miss Marple-style of crime fiction—which I personally find laboriously slow—I think that, in fact, the author is addressing a real problem. Fewer and fewer young people read mystery fiction; its audience is aging dramatically. The goal now for an author, like Huston, is to find new audiences by breaking into television, film, and adult comics, thus becoming a one-person media conglomerate. These all require an increasingly violent pace and must be deeply imbedded in pop culture, because the audience is an impatient one that shares no other cultural reference points. All of these characteristics can be attributed in part to the Internet. The audience for fiction is increasingly less educated, the pace is necessarily fast so as to suit a web-speed attention span, the level of information conveyed, and plot complexity necessarily ever more shallow.

Huston’s career shows that this approach, whatever else may be said of it, works. He has a large audience in a variety of genres and perhaps, as of this writing, a TV series in the works. However, the author is, at the bottom in this work at least, almost contemptuous of his characters and his audience, and would like, I think, to be accepted as a WRITER. The fact that the work was nominated for an Edgar suggests that other writers feel this same contradictory pressure.

David Cristofano, The Girl She Used to Be.

Our second work was nominated as a first novel and comes to us via quite a different route than did the previous one. Cristofano’s back-story includes having worked in Washington D.C. He has degrees in Government and Politics and in Computer Science [9]. The degree in CS might suggest that this work would have a great deal to say about the Internet, as most new writers do follow the ancient advice, “write about what you know.”
The Girl She Used to Be, however, turns on an almost an anti-Internet MacGuffin [10]. The protagonist, Melody, witnessed a mob killing with her parents, who then testified in court. She has been in the Federal Witness Protection Program since she was six years old. At the time the book begins, she is twenty-six and her parents have been killed some years ago by the mob, and only she had escaped. Having been in the program for twenty years she has moved a great many times and has had at least eight identities, so many that she is not quite sure who she is, or even who she was.

Melody’s confusion is self-inflicted in part because, whenever she gets bored, she falsely reports a threat, is given a completely new identity, and re-located once again. In the course of the identity change that opens the book, the son of the gangster whose crime initially drove her family into the federal protection program suddenly confronts her.

Melody is peculiarly vulnerable. None of her series of identities has ever given her the sense of security that would allow her to establish a sexual relationship. The one time she had made an attempt to shed her virginity resulted in a real exposure of her identity, and she again had to flee.

The mobster, about her own age, is sophisticated, charming, and wealthy. He persuades her that he has come to save her life. He explains that she had dropped out of the purview of the gangsters after her family had been killed, but recently they have learned where she is through a mob informant in the federal program. The young man has been ordered to kill her. He prefers to protect her; in fact, he has been following her for some time.

With this one event, her life is turned upside down; now the enemies are among the Feds, perhaps even the one supposedly taking her to her new location. The young gangster seemingly wants to protect her, and is a very likely, and likeable, candidate to relieve her of her virginity, which she intensely desires.

His plan, however, is simply to take her home and introduce her to the family as his girlfriend, thus saving her life. However, she has been on the run too long to contemplate such a plan. As she says, “it’s like bringing a deer to the front door of a hunting lodge [11]."

Part of the appeal of this work is not only what may be a unique MacGuffin, but the protagonist’s very strong voice. While the above description may seem overly complex, the very straightforward first person voice renders it all quite believable. Melody has been on the run so long that she has become very self-reliant and perhaps because of her isolation, a very singular character. She is also a math whiz, which proves helpful at points.

It is here that the issue of the Internet intrudes. Part of what drives the character is supposedly her isolation. Because she dare not reveal her true identity or any of her multiple pasts to friends, she has none. Her human contact consists in part of hanging out at Hallmark card outlets and fantasizing that she is part of the sort of relationship that she thinks the card buyers probably have with the intended recipient; now a loving mother, now a sweetheart or even, a wife [12].
This putative isolation is, however, hard to sustain in the age of the Internet. We know that Melody is fully Internet savvy because when she needs to pull a new life together, she does so very quickly; she even finds a hacker she then bluffs into providing her with a new identity unknown to the feds or to the mob.

This competency is not surprising; Melody is, after all, a former teen-ager, and a math whiz at that. She is a classic geek if ever there were one, surely familiar with such social sites as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and the dozens of similar ones. She seems far more likely to cruise the Internet than to lurk at Hallmark displays.

We inevitably must wonder why she seems totally ignorant of the social utility of chat-rooms, or of massive online multiplayer games with their guilds and frequent real-world meetings of players under conditions permitting full anonymity. And why, in an age when one of the major preoccupations of parents is the threat of Internet predators, does she seem to find it impossible to meet sexual partners? Why, when a Google search on “hook up sites” will produce more than eight million hits [13], is this attractive young woman lonely?

This isolation in one so competent strains credulity. We can choose to believe that Melody is too frightened or too shy, but these qualities seem inconsonant with the character that we meet here. Her hilarious three-page long confrontation with a college boy making fun of her in a bar is a classic put-down. Her confidence and sharp repartee, it is suggested, not only inflicts instant impotence on him, but the condition will afflict him the rest of his life [14].

We think that this interpretation of the Internet—now irrelevant despite her well-established geeky identity, now a very useful tool—is another case of an author laboring to work within the time-worn conventions of crime fiction, despite the enormous changes wrought by the Internet. In this case, it is not an issue of how facts can remain unknown when almost everything is searchable, but how an attractive and highly competent woman can remain isolated despite her intense desire not to be so.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with asking an audience to suspend a certain amount of disbelief; it is a necessary aspect of every interesting book or film ever produced. And this is a very interesting book, but it rather ignores the elephant in the room once too often for an entirely satisfactory level of consistency.

**Conclusion:**

The changes wrought by the Internet as revealed in these two Edgar nominees, in 2010, are slightly different. The first work, Huston’s *The Mystic Arts of Erasing All Signs of Death*, suggests that, under the impact of the Internet, the audience for crime fiction is evolving rapidly. Authors seeking a mass audience may find it easiest to play to this evolution, as does Huston. But the desire to succeed as a writer in the conventional sense persists.

The second work, Califono’s excellent *The Girl She Used To Be*, tells us, however, that to
neglect the impact of the Internet in plot and character development can produce anomalies which eventually are disturbing. Again the conventional bounds of mystery or detective fiction have transgressed.

**Endnotes**

[1] The initial review article in this series is found at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2010/05/article.php?id=691 Reading it will clarify the methodology and assumptions behind this continuing project.


[3] For an essay by Huston on writing The Mystic Arts go to: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2010/05/article.php?id=691 Because the


[6] The elisions signaled by "..." here are my own in order to shorten the passage in which they appear.

[7] See, for example, the references at Huston, p. 117 and p. 240.


[9] Cristofano’s web site is found at: http://www.davidcristofano.com/

[10] 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.


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2 THOUGHTS ON “EDGAR AND THE INTERNET: THE MYSTIC ARTS OF ERASING ALL SIGNS OF DEATH AND THE GIRL SHE USED TO BE”

numerology
on February 1, 2014 at 8:46 AM said:

Have you ever considered creating an e-book or guest authoring on other blogs? I have a blog based on the same ideas you discuss and would really like to have you share some stories/information. I know my visitors would enjoy your work. If you are even remotely interested, feel free to send me an e-mail.

cork board ideas
on February 5, 2014 at 11:59 AM said:

Next time I read a blog, I hope that it does not fail me just as much as this particular one. I mean, Yes, it was my choice to read through, but I genuinely believed you would have something useful to say. All I hear is a bunch of crying about something that you could fix if you were not too busy seeking attention.