

ENTER THE DETECTIVE

In Hollywood, if you look hard enough, underneath the false tinsel is
the real tinsel.

Bob Schiller (1947)

The fictional detective is a catalyst.

Raymond Chandler (1950)

Can I call you “Frank”?

John Cleese (1971)

Philosophers’ search for truth resembles a detective story.

Jostein Gaarder (1991)

In science, detective movies, love or any other area of life, when one
is confronted with a situation in which the old assumptions are no
longer working as they used to, it is perhaps time to look for new
questions to ask.

Lee Smolin (1997)

Considered in this milieu, the detective—in his role of disentangler
of enigmas—becomes an investigator into the mysteries of the
cosmos.

Lawrence Frank (2003)

What we will do first, she says with a straight face when I ask how we’re going to approach our quest, is gather up the wisdom of the ages.

It turns out that by we she means me. And the wisdom of the ages? What exactly does she mean by that? I must have missed the course in college. So tongue in cheek I check it out. Only about 500,000 hits or so says Google. Of course when I click my way through the first hundred or so the estimate is down to 216,000. And hit 689 turns out to be the last of ‘the most relevant results’. The *Wisdom of the Ages For Now Anyway* jumps off the first page. It’s from the *New York Times*. Journalist McKinley quotes a Kansas bookseller as telling him, ‘You don’t have to read 20 books to get this wisdom. I’ll give it to you in a \$14 paperback.’ Then I see this wisdom was in *Fashion & Style*. Back to Google, I can soon see I *will* need to read 20 books. Maybe more. And write too. *My job*, she says more than once, is: Write. She doesn’t mention who will do the other jobs, the hard work, I assume.

Next I check out who else set out on the same quest. She was close to the mark. Digging deep I find a few. And they found glimpses, so my searching of

their searches says, but no one claims the grail.

So what *is* this stuff that I'm to write? I mean, it would be grouse—as some may say in Strine, the slangy dialect of Brit they use in Oz to keep the Brits at bay—to know. Not least because to do it well I need to pitch the lingo apropos. I put this to her, more politely, and she fesses up. It's like, it seems, not tea but text for two. But maybe this, she says, will turn into the book. *Be* the book more likely I imagine. It's okay by me, but why not say so?

Even now, she doesn't lay it on what *kind* of writing she expects to buy. But watching her look at my notes I soon think I can tell. She's okay with snappy and sarcastic is no problem. But she likes, she almost *oozes* happy feelings over, eloquence. Saying great things in a simple style. Oliver Goldsmith, I believe. Excuse me and whatever. She is paying; I am writing. My words are my own but my styles are for sale. I can do eloquence. With good material I like it, and I'm tapping heavy writers here. They have heavy things to say. *Big* questions and deep thinking.

Breaking into my musings she up and says now we need an investigator—her latest label—who will help us find our way. She says it's about evidence; an experienced detective will bring the right perspective to the file. I could say: Not. I don't. And so it's back to work. First order of the day: Detectives.

According to her there are analogies between a crime scene and the universe today. They could help us finger what we want. The analogies, she says, are simple: Something happened. An event. We want to find out what. So, she says, as if it follows, we need a detective. Maybe, I think, a *fictional* detective.

This Beginning she and I have, so she says, set out to understand is nothing like a crime. But then detective fiction's never really about crime. It's about detecting.

The puzzle posed for the detective—or the reader—hinges on the simple fact there is no witness to the murder. Once the body is discovered, experts clamber all around the scene. They have their views about the clues. The clues are central to the story. The detective has to reconstruct the crime from clues that seemingly are unconnected. Poe establishes these rules with the world's first detective-fiction story. And—is this coincidence?—it is written with a backdrop of debates about the way the universe begins.

The same rules—event, no witness, puzzle, experts, clues and reconstruction—could apply to the Beginning. But the detective on *this* case faces a much tougher task: He (I soon see that he's a he) is on the trail of an event that is unique. There is no body of experience to help him to intuit how the universe began. How then can he do it?

The hallmark of the fictional detective is a distinct investigative strategy.

This is odd as each is cast in others' molds. Doyle bases Holmes on Poe's detective, Auguste Dupin. Indeed Watson on first meeting says to Holmes, 'You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin.' The which intended compliment Holmes turns aside. He says Dupin is an inferior fellow. With this he subtly shows he knows that he himself is just another fiction. In fact, in fiction Holmes is *the* acute observer; but like Dupin he reasons from effect to cause. And like Dupin he has a penchant for prosopographia—deducing people's lives and occupations from a brief inspection of some kind.

Christie creates Poirot in the Holmes tradition. At first Poirot mirrors Holmes' approach—he sees detection as an exercise of the trained and focused mind. He changes over time. To his author he becomes 'a detestable, bombastic, tiresome, ego-centric little creep.' His focus moves from concrete clues to interpersonal relationships. But his technique remains the same. He gets people to talk and 'in the long run, either through a lie, or through truth, people were bound to give themselves away.'

At the far end of the spectrum from Doyle's cerebral Holmes, Simenon creates the rural-French-become-Parisian Maigret. His may be the best-developed character of the detective genre. Maigret's investigative strategy is simple and *enchanteur*. He sets out to understand the perp. He gets to know the neighborhood. He soaks up its atmosphere. He hangs round; he's moody. He makes pit stops in the bars. It's an old-world approach. He chats up the locals. Anything unusual or out of character may be a clue. In the end the clues fuse in a single picture. Mentally he replicates the perpetrator's point of view. In that insightful instant he 'commits' the crime and so identifies the criminal.

A real-life murder mystery turns on a mundane item—a surveillance camera shot, a fingerprint, a hair with DNA. Solving it may take a lot of time but often not a lot of brain. In fiction the investigative strategy of each detective's suited to his clue-milieu. And there's not just one; there's a whole *book* of clues. Each is subtle, baffling, even esoteric; they are a confounding mess. Solving mysteries in fiction is all brain. The detective susses out an insight that makes sense of the whole mess.

The clincher is: To have a chance to pull this caper off she needs what Hauser calls 'a capacity for the promiscuous combination of ideas.' Well, the best bet for promiscuous combination of ideas is the fictional detective. The ideas that get combined in any of their cases are bizarre. I can fashion her a fictive *flic* who'll flit from physics to philosophy with ease. Surely she will see that this is so!

So she has me fashion a 'Professional Help Wanted' ad to run in local papers. I've laid it on her heavy yet she's unpersuaded. Does she think I'm kidding? Later it will seem to me that this, right here, is the beginning of the schism. Wanted, my

mind says to me, a composite detective. Of course she won't let me say that, but she easily agrees we need one who can take tips from the top role models. That'd be so easy if she'd go for fiction. Detective fiction is an imitative business.

So with my ideas in mind, she says, she up and hires a cop. He's ex-LAPD. Thirty years in homicide, he tells her, so she tells me. I try to look impressed. Retired several years ago. His wife died. The pension isn't bad but every day he wants to go to work. Not wants to work; he wants to *go* to work. His rates are easy. Tad too easy, I say to myself. Why would she discount-shop for a detective? His name, she tells me, is Frank. Just like, I think, a movie character. Frank from *Blue Velvet* is the image in my mind. He doesn't want his last name on the file. Maybe, I think, he has *his* doubts about this business? Well, I'm not about to ask. Besides, down by the beach I could say, as Chandler has his P.I., Marlowe, say: 'The cops don't like me too well, but I know a couple that I get along with.' I can get along with this one too. I make a simple plan: He reads the file. He starts to set up insights and to knock them down. He *haunts* the scene, inhales it, takes in every aspect, until somehow something starts to coalesce. No need for him to look for evidence. We are the perfect team. My job is to find the clues; his is to comprehend them. Maybe he needs expert help; she gets the help he needs. He asks probing questions and assumes the answers are untrue. He's looking at the biggest picture. It's the coldest case that ever was but there are new clues he might use. He's perfectly positioned to rethink it. Maybe she is right.

He stops by next day just to say hello. A little too much weight for five eleven. Slightly crummy-looking. In a trench coat on a warm and sunny day? Does he know that Marlowe says that every well-dressed toughie has one? But then that isn't Chandler's Marlowe speaking.

He seems friendly, though—perhaps from force of habit—he's a tad high-handed. Interesting work, he says. And then tells me to screen him from the limelight. What limelight does he have in mind?

So, she tells me later, here's the deal. He will head up the investigation. I will feed him leads. Of course I'll have to make my own sense of them first, to choose them. He'll provide the private-eye's-eye view, insider story, open window into his investigation. There's that word again. I'll write it up. He is Frank No-name, with no word on why. She tosses off an airy line: He understands the part that he's to play. What am *I* supposed to understand? What part? Or part of what? Whatever. I suppose she'll tell me anything I need to know. No future in my asking nosy questions. Shut up, write on. And so, I write.

He reminds me of Chandler's saying: 'He was a guy who talked with commas, like a heavy novel.' It is just his manner. He is like a character who's searching for an author. He seems like a blank—or blanked out?—page. And though he's been

around the block he doesn't know enough to be uneasy—as he ought to be—about this job.

She sits at her empty desk and checks my notes. A daily ritual. But just a glance; no more. Without the markup where I keep my private comments, they are thin. She doesn't seem to mind. She asks no questions, offers no remarks. And so I dip my toe into the murky water, asking what's expected. Right away she's like: They are my notes—so I should write them as I want. This would be easy if I knew what it's about.

In the morning our detective drops in for a chat. He must have walked a ways; his forehead shows a slick of sweat. He speaks as though he's on a secret mission. Between the lines it seems he means that strategy is central to his work. Maybe he's telling me he reads the notes. So notes is what I feed him.

The investigator of the universe, cast as a detective, will encounter strange events set in dramatic scenes. The challenge to make sense of them could overwhelm. But one thing's for sure: her Beginning won't be found by ordinary reason. Why not? Well, if it could be, someone would have bagged it long ago. This investigator must be different. Einstein, himself no mean investigator of the universe, suggests, 'No logical path leads to construction of a theory, only a groping design with meticulous consideration of objective facts.'

When Frank sees these words he tells me they look like his own approach. He's surprised, he says, to find he has so much in common with a physicist, especially *this* physicist. If he has *anything* in common with the maestro I'm a bender of bananas. Or did he just yank my chain?

At some other level, a detective and a physicist have deeply different strategies. Could this offer him a chance where many physicists have failed? A detective looks for the kind of holistic realization that looms into view full-formed—the kind where, as MacDonald has Harry Max Scorf advise: 'When you know enough, all of a sudden you know it all.' This is what the combination of ideas is about. And he has ignorance, another odd advantage. As Eisenstaedt says: 'Sometimes ignorance is a good thing.' Maxwell, long before Eisenstaedt, wrote of the 'conscious ignorance that is a prelude to every real advance in knowledge.'

So what he says next stops me dead. *He tells me* that for much of the last hundred years, physicists have tended to move incrementally, in small steps. Hawking, he says, likes this. Yes, it's guru Stephen Hawking's name he's dropping. Next he tells me that he disagrees with him! He says the stepwise strategy has not hit on the Beginning. It's like searching with a thick lens in the outfield as a way to find home base, is how he sees it. The physicists may think they're in the ballpark but it just makes them frustrated.

From him it's a speech. I must admit that he makes sense. I check his take on

Hawking and it's true. What kind of ex-cop would know this? Who is he?

Well who he is is easy. He brings out some well-worn pictures. Younger him with his young wife. His dad in LAPD uniform. His badge. He kept his dad's badge number, 235. His dad was killed on duty, shot, he says. I say I'm sorry. With this info he's an open book. But his book, it seems when he is gone, is fiction. Three of Google's top four hits are *fictional* detectives; all of them are called Columbo. Another search says that Columbo's name *is* Frank! Could he be kidding? Does she know about his little bit of fun, if fun is what it is? For no good reason suddenly my heart is pounding panic and the only thing that I can think is that I'm dying. Ten adrenalin half-lives go by before my reason reasserts its lazy grip. He's only fooling. The attack is gone and I move on.

Can Flatfoot play a useful role? He *is* my *raison d'être* but he is not about to figure how the universe began. So I wonder. Does she see him as her Marlowe, as a scientific Don Quixote in a private-eye disguise?