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Whatever Happened to Sherlock Holmes?: Detective Fiction, Popular Theology, and Society

Robert S. Paul

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Robert S. Paul suggests that the reason detective fiction has won legions of readers may be that "the writer of detective fiction, without conscious intent, appeals directly to those moral and spiritual roots of society unconsciously affirmed and endorsed by the readers."

Because detective stories deal with crime and punishment they cannot help dealing implicitly with theological issues, such as the reality of good and evil, the recognition that humankind has the potential for both, the nature of evidence (truth and error), the significance of our existence in a rational order and hence the reality of truth, and the value of the individual in a civilized society.

Paul argues that the genre traces its true beginning to the Enlightenment and documents two related but different reactions to the theological issues involved: first, a line of writers who are generally positive in relation to their cultural setting, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Conan Doyle; and second, a reactionary strain, critical of the prevailing culture, that begins in William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and continues through the anti-heroic writers like Arsène Lupin to Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and John MacDonald.

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