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J.K. Van Dover, John F. Jebb. *Isn't Justice Always Unfair?: The Detective in Southern Literature.* O.H.: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996. 369 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87972-724-6.

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Analyzing Southern detective writing over the past 150 years, the authors reveal just what an extraordinary range of plot, theme, and character comes under this classification. Covered are over three dozen authors whose fictional settings range from rural Mississippi, Georgia, and the Carolinas to the contemporary blighted urban landscapes of New Orleans and Miami. Whether of the classical, ratiocinative school or the school of hard knocks, the detectives share a cluster of traits and legacies, many distinctly Southern–interests in the land, race, the past, law, and technology. Further, they are (or ultimately become in the case of Twain's David Wilson) "insiders," whose special vantage point within the local culture is essential in solving the crime at hand; and they know and feel comfortable with their place in their society (upper middle-class, usually; never aristocratic).

Certainly the greatest strengths of the book are its sound scholarship, thoroughness, and sense of proportion. Major chapters are devoted to Poe, who founded the genre with Parisian eccentric C. Auguste Dupin and Charleston eremite William Legrand of "Gold Bug" fame, self-exiled from Louisiana; Twain, who in addition to *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Tom Sawyer, Detective* also wrote several burlesques, the Simon Wheeler fragments, "The Stolen White Elephant," and "A Double-Barrelled Detective Story," send-ups of the Pinkertonian detective and Sherlock Holmes; and Faulkner, whose "practical idealist" Gavin Stevens confronts, and a number of ugly crimes and nasty social issues (especially the proper stewardship of the land in *Knight's Gambit* and *Intruder in the Dust*). Another full chapter focuses on the literary progenitors of Stevens: Meville Davisson Post's Uncle Abner and Irvin S. Cobb's Judge Priest.

Readers will be sure to find discussions of their favorite detectives, whether it be John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee or Brett Halliday's Michael Shayne, and their favorite books, from Stuart Woods' *Chiefs* to Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome.* Not all Southern literary detectives are white males, of course: many stories and novels feature protagonists who are black (James Sallis' Lew Griffin and John William and Joyce Hooper Corrington's Rat Trapp) and female (Joan Hess' Arly Hanks, Sharyn McCrum's Elizabeth MacPherson, Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta, Edna Buchanan's Britt Montero, Julie Smith's Skip Langdon, and Rita Mae Brown's "Harry" Haristeen among the most prominent). If questions of race and gender are signs of the times, so too is sensitivity to the environment as evidenced in James Lee Burke's New Orleans sleuth Dave Robicheaux, who takes Thoreauvian delight in his native Louisiana bayous, and Carl Hiaasen's heroes, who frenetically try to rescue southern Florida from those who would despoil it.

Not all readers will accept Van Dover and Jebb's criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Missouri, Delaware, and Maryland are Southern states; Texas is not. Though neither he nor his detective is Southern-born or raised, MacDonald is included because he became a Floridian and because he is "a very good writer" (p. 5). On the other hand, for all his merits as a writer and the brilliance of the novel, Everglades-set *Killing Mr. Watson* is excluded because Peter Matthiessen is "an outsider, a New England observer of a Southern world" (p. 325). And then there is the problem of Poe's Dupin.

Upon finishing the book, one cannot help but agree with Van Dover and Jebb's final assessment that "The detective illuminates the South, and the South illuminates the detective" (p. 359). Despite its primary Library of Congress classification under "detective and mystery stories," it is a book as much about the South as it is about detective fiction. Even high-brow students of Southern literature, if only for its consideration of Faulkner's Gavin Stevens, will profit greatly from it.

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