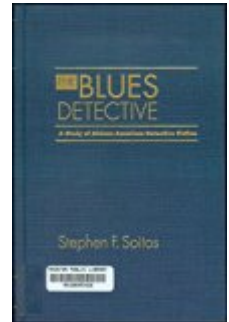


Stephen Soitos. *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996. xiii + 260 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87023-995-3.



Reviewed by Daniel Walden

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Stephen Soitos' *The Blues Detective* is a work of literary history and criticism that attempts to answer a number of questions suggested by James Baldwin: How many African American authors had written detective novels with conscious reworking of detective tropes? Why had African American authors chosen the detective form? Did the evidence of the black detective novel suggest important revisions of the detective personas and use what are called double-consciousness detective stories?

In working these questions out, Soitos noticed a pattern in African American writing first formulated by John Carweli and Dennis Porter, using popular detective story motifs. As he has learned from Sidney Kaplan, Bernard Bell, Houston Baker, and Henry Louis Gates, by using a white Euro-American popular culture form, black authors created important new tropes.

From Bell he derived a theoretical approach. From Houston Baker he got the title, from the broader use of the term "blues detective," and what is new, from Soitos, is the creation of a vocabulary that interprets works in an African

American way--that is, pertaining to the cultural tradition based on African American value systems with connections to the African past, ascertained by a number of disciplines in an assortment of African American creations and vernacular arts, including, but not limited to, language, music, and literature.

At base, Soitos was interested in showing how Pauline Hopkins, J. E. Bruce, Rudolph Fisher, Chester Himes, Ishmael Reed, and Clarence Major altered the formulas of detective fiction in significant ways. Soitos' development of a system of critical terminology, which he calls "the tropes of black detection," is a case in point. Contrary to the long-held opinion that the history of blacks in America was little more than a program report on acculturation (Berndt Ostendorf), or that blacks were only white people with black skins (Kenneth Stampp), or that the Negro was "only an American and nothing else" (Glazer and Mornihan), is the direct refutation by Bell, supporting the earlier work of Herskovits, that supports the view that "the conflicts between black culture and white society have resulted in creative as well as destruc-

tive tensions in black people and their communities." As Gates wrote of Zora Neale Hurston, the repeated use of these African American adaptations resulted in "the traditional recurring canonical metaphors of black culture." And vernacular contributions, deriving from black folk culture, concludes Soitos, make up the substantive building blocks of an African American culture.

The starting point for all Euro-American detective fiction is Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and the brilliant detective Dupin. Usually, histories go from there to Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle, and by leaps and bounds to Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, thereby ignoring the blues detective. But Pauline Hopkins and J. E. Bruce (as Soitos is careful to point out) wrote at the turn of the century, and the use of double-conscious tropes, that is, the "masking" tropes, was defined by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Of course Poe and Doyle were there first, but evidence from the black periodical literature shows that early African American authors, popular from the 1890s on, used black detectives as early as Pauline Hopkins' *Hagar's Daughter* (1901-2) and J. E. Bruce's *Black Sleuth* (1907-9) to dramatize black political and social concerns.

The first well-known black detective novelist was Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934), an M.D. and "Roentgenologist," who wrote *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932) and a short story, "John Archer's Nose" (1935), though some people know him only as the author of *The Walls of Jericho* (1928). Significantly, Arna Bontemps described Fisher as a Harlem Renaissance writer who in his short life "gave us pictures of ordinary work-a-day blacks who were largely neglected by other Renaissance writers." The first really major writer to use Harlem as his locale, in ten detective novels, was Chester Himes (1909-84). Harlem, as a "city within a city," was a microcosmic testing ground for his two black detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones. As Himes put it, after arriving in France in

1953, "I wanted to break through the barrier that labeled me as a protest writer. I knew the life of an American black needed another image than just the victim of racism." By means of his grotesque, colorful, truthful, yet absurd art, Himes aligned himself with a tradition of absurdist fiction that had both European and American antecedents. In his ten novels, from *For Love of Imabelle* (1957), through *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), to *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969), and the posthumously published *Plan B* (1993), Himes took the milieu of Harlem and his two detectives through the tropes of altered personas, double-conscious detection, black vernaculars, and hoodoo. Himes' Harlem was a distinct district of the mind as well as a physical reality. And Soitos' fifty-odd page chapter on Himes is a gem, a concentrated masterpiece.

There are six chapters and an afterword, and a superb bibliography. In this splendid introduction to and analysis of the "blues detective," Stephen Soitos has gone beyond the pioneering work of Frankie Bailey's *Out of the Woodpile* (1991), the first comprehensive look at African American characters in English and American fiction, and has used well the studies on the various writers and the investigative and theoretical work of Bell, Baker, Gates, and others. For the newcomer to African American detective fiction, as well as for the scholar, this is a highly recommended book.

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