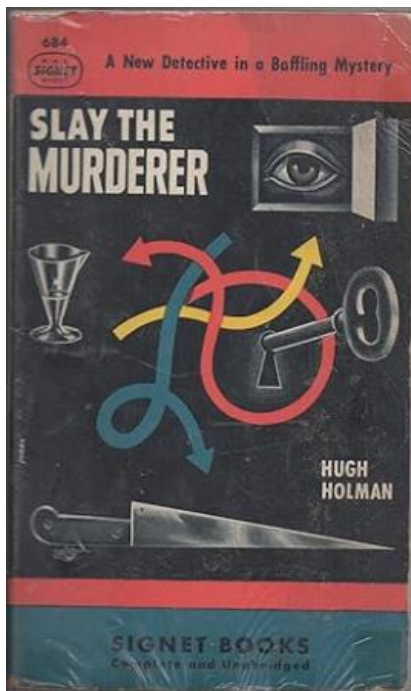


9-21-98

Mysteries

My long love affair with whodunits began in 1948 when I was a novice instructor in the Department of English at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. I had just received my Master of Arts at Southern Methodist University after serving as a graduate assistant for a couple of years. What I didn't know about teaching and especially about teaching a sophomore course in twentieth century fiction was easy to spot. I was fortunate to begin a wonderful relationship Hugh Holman, a kind member of the large fish-bowl office I had been assigned to.

Our friendship began when Hugh asked me if I found it was uncomfortable to teach some of the contemporary fiction to the rare class which had a girl in it. UNC's historic male student body had been recently invaded by undergraduate women who lived in Chapel Hill; I had the dean's daughter in my class. "As a matter of fact," I replied, "any class I teach is automatically of mixed gender. So, a rare female student hardly alters the situation. I always face delicate situations." We frequently discussed classroom problems when we had a cup of coffee in a nearby student bookstore and coffee shop.



One day Hugh mentioned a newly published mystery, uncovering my snobbish prejudice that mystery stories were for unthinking, shallow readers. With some amusement, Hugh began to demolish my biased stance, citing the many famous people, including Winston Churchill, and Franklin Roosevelt, among many, who found mystery novels both excellent mental stimulus and relaxing pastime. Not only that, Hugh had financed his graduate school education by writing and publishing three books which featured a Shakespeare-quoting, rural South Carolina sheriff as the clever detective. I began by reading those and found them delightful reading. When I asked him for his

recommendations for additional reading, he mentioned S. S. Van Dine. Hugh was an accomplished story-teller. He gave me a fascinating background of Van Dine and his popularizing of modern mysteries.

When the Van Dine books first appeared, they were acclaimed not only for their clever plots but also for the excellence of their writing.

(Note: it is a “mystery” why this remained unfinished. A couple of times, I bought a stack of \$1 mysteries at the Roanoke Public Library as Christmas gifts. She seemed very pleased with them.)