



Prologue

Who Reads Ross Macdonald?

Jacques Barzun, for years the dean of the Columbia University Graduate School and the highest of brows championing “modern” philosophy, music, and literature, was also, like many cosmopolitan intellectuals, a devotee of detective novels. He sandwiched his admiration for Dorothy Sayers between layers of Darwin and Berlioz. Barzun wrote more than one defense of the time he spent reading in a lower brow, and in them all he shied away from claiming full literary status for the genre. In “The Aesthetics of the Criminous” (1984), Barzun is scrupulous to label the detective writer a “practitioner of the genre,” not a novelist or an author. In the same essay he concedes that since “one or another element of good fiction must be sacrificed” to the needs of the genre, no detective novel ever rises unscathed to the level of literature.¹ In “A Catalogue of Crime” (1989), he makes a strategic retreat: “Stories of crime . . . are not, properly speaking, novels at all. They are tales.”² Tales may be spun by rustics or the naive; their meanings are simple and may be conveyed in bold print. Novels are made by literary artists with sophisticated intellects; they capture the complexities of the times. The highbrow knows the difference. In his reluctance, Barzun is like many “defenders” of the detective novel: very careful *not* to attribute too much cultural value to what, he fears, is ultimately a guilty pleasure.

In “Why Read Crime Fiction?” (1999) Barzun shows that he is well aware of the periodic skirmishes over the literary status of the genre and that he knows the scorn literary critics have been known to heap upon the genre and its defenders. Edmund Wilson’s infamous antagonistic essay “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?” charged that the entire genre lacked an intellectually respectable reason for being and that regular readers were fooling themselves with claims to the contrary.³ Barzun, although he writes decades after Wilson’s salvo, defends his years of reading in the genre by slipping around the original charge. Detective novels are meant not to exercise the mind but to entertain it. “Entertainment, then,” Barzun continues, “is the prime intention of the tale

and it is a pity that in our times people are so addicted to entertainment that they must restore their dignity and self-respect by pretending that some things they like are not for pleasure, but uplifting, informative, *educational*.”⁴

Detective novels are for idle hours, with the intellect at half-speed or less, and it is a mistake to call upon them for more than simple rest and relaxation. Besides, Barzun claims, the Golden Age of the detective novel spanned the years from 1920 to 1970 and was governed by Sayers, Allingham, Heyer, Christie, and Marsh—not an American among them. Not only, then, is reading detective novels harmless to the properly cultured mind, it is nostalgic as well, for “the art form has reached exhaustion and nothing more can be done with it . . . [except] to recall its best days and reread the classics.”⁵

Even such a staunch defender of the “art” of the detective novel as John G. Cawelti is ambivalent in his claims. In *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, Cawelti likens the experience of reading in the genre to the simple pleasure of childhood reading, when all “conventional expectations” were fulfilled. Rather than argue for the inclusion of the detective novel, as novel, in the category he calls “mimetic fiction” (18), Cawelti proposes a separate classification, “a specialized literature of escape,” with its own rules and protocol⁶ (13). Separate, though, is never equal. Moreover, in discussing the American counterpart to the British Golden Age, Cawelti devotes a chapter to “Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane”; although he mentions Ross Macdonald with praise, he omits his novels from the mainstream of his discussion.

I spend so much time debating critics with whom I disagree because the temper of Barzun’s understanding and the heft of Cawelti’s theorizing are exactly wrong for reading Ross Macdonald’s detective novels. Although raised and educated from elementary school through college in Canada, Kenneth Millar (1915–83)—who published under his own name and pseudonyms John Macdonald, John Ross Macdonald, and ultimately Ross Macdonald—adopted the specifically American literary tradition of the detective novel practiced in the twentieth century by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, “practitioners” wholly omitted from Barzun’s literary history. Macdonald also did more to merge the formulaic and mimetic novels than Cawelti seems to recognize. On the strength of eighteen novels featuring his detective Lew Archer, Macdonald stretched the power of the genre well beyond Hammett and Chandler; in some individual novels in his series he closed the supposed gap between “formula” and literature, far surpassing the need for a default defense as talespinner rather than novelist.

One of the earliest and still one of the strongest critical studies of the three writers in this American tradition, George Grella’s “Murder and the Mean Streets: The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel,” analyzes the genre in search of identifying themes and styles and ranks Macdonald as superior in several respects

to Hammett and Chandler.⁷ Yet Macdonald's status in the "trinity" of Hammett-Chandler-Macdonald is too often overlooked. Cawelti was not the only critic to look away from Macdonald when he was in plain sight. Two recent critical studies of the contemporary American crime novel offer convenient examples. Andrew Pepper acknowledges Macdonald as one of the three founding fathers of "the apparently unitary figure of the white, male, hard-boiled detective"; nonetheless, he shuffles Lew Archer offstage in favor of Hammett's Op or Chandler's Marlowe when an example is called for.⁸ Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen add a layer to the neglect of Macdonald by clearly unintended slights such as tracing Chandler's influence in the 1980s and 1990s as "modified by Robert B. Parker," and by assaying the influence of Chandler and James Ellroy but not the obvious presence of Ross Macdonald in Michael Connelly's series of Harry Bosch novels.⁹

This book proposes to explore more fully the relationships among the three major figures of the twentieth-century American detective novel, and argues that Macdonald's novels call for the same quality of literary attention we customarily reserve for "the novel." They "aim at the representation of actions that will confront us with reality"¹⁰ rather than ease us into a parallel world of weightless, imaginative escape. Three book-length critical studies of Macdonald's fiction have been published, and two biographies trace his life.¹¹ Tom Nolan's *Ross Macdonald: A Biography* is indispensable, especially so in Macdonald's case because he used his life so intensively in his fiction. Nolan's work is, however, a biography: In a biography the life envelops art. In this book I want to reverse the relationship, to give the novels first claim on biographical data. Macdonald did, at the end of his life, rank "writer" as the first among his many identities. Matthew J. Bruccoli's *Ross Macdonald* stresses the publishing history of Macdonald from juvenilia to the final novel in the Archer series. Bruccoli's biography follows and is clearly based on his earlier *Ross Macdonald / Kenneth Millar: A Descriptive Bibliography*; he leans to the bibliographic history of the novels rather than to literary criticism. No one who reads Bruccoli's works on Macdonald will ever underestimate the grit, determination, and sacrifice of the writer's profession. But the novels as art still elude us.

There are literary studies of Macdonald-the-novelist, but each of the published literary studies of Macdonald's fiction seems pinched in one way or another. Peter Wolfe's *Dreamers Who Live Their Dreams: The World of Ross Macdonald's Novels* was researched and written with Macdonald's full and generous cooperation but still channels one thematic approach (the psychological one signified in the title) through the entire body of work, restricting our sense of the diversity (albeit limited) of Macdonald's writing. The "world" thus evoked is too hermetic and interior; there is very little sense that Macdonald's novels occupy the public world, often with tension between the need to represent that world fairly and the need to stick to the genre.

Jerry Speir's *Ross Macdonald* is a brief introductory book in a publisher's series, and it seems truncated, as if an editor arbitrarily hacked off sections to make the manuscript fit the requirements of the series format. Bernard A. Schopen's book in the Twayne series suffers a similar series fate, coupling plot summary with the record of published reviews. There is room for a book that strikes out after the novels with a diverse set of literary-critical approaches, aiming to see how Macdonald the writer responded to both interior and exterior "worlds"—the nature of his consciousness and the influences impinging on it from the outside. Late in his life (1977), when it was evident to him that he probably would not write another novel, Macdonald wrote in a journal: "Though I have attempted over the years to seek or invent other uses for myself, other reasons for living—husband, teacher, father, scholar, officer, environmentalist, grandfather, all of which have their validity—I am forced back to the ultimate recurrent realization that I am a writer." This book attempts to pay tribute to that writer, for writing was the ultimate "use" Macdonald found for his life on earth, and the one by which he asked to be judged.

For various reasons, then, none of the existing books satisfies the various challenges Macdonald's work presents to us. How does the mutual bond of text and life actually work? Is the transfer of information from lived life to printed page as one-dimensional as a bank deposit: you give ten dollars to the teller and your balance is increased by ten dollars? How did Macdonald's full-scale adoption of Freudian theories advance the genre? Many modern novelists have been critically explained in Freudian terms, but how many accepted the Freudian paradigm as a palpable fact, as "given" as one's genetic coding or genealogy? In general, using Macdonald's novels as examples, how does a popular genre marry with "literature," and does the marriage last? Can the "genre novel" ever graduate to the status of "the novel"? In other words, is Cawelti's distinction between mimetic and formulaic ultimately the most reasonable way to appreciate Macdonald's achievement?

Additional challenges face Macdonald's readers because of the deliberate choice of literary tradition he made. Most published critical discussion (and passionate conversation) tends to analyze Macdonald's novels on the basis of internal structure alone; that is, does he fairly develop the case, disclose and camouflage clues fairly, motivate good and evil to realistic standards, keep the pages turning without coy posing or outright deception? More often, critical discussions deteriorate into partisan battles between Chandler loyalists, who still resent Macdonald's corrections to Chandler's preference for style over plot, and Hammett aficionados, who regret that too little blood and liquor are spilled in Macdonald's novels.

Such questions bring us back to Barzun, who prudishly declared: "Thus we can accept a private eye who thinks about political corruption and the vices of

the rich, and who is keen about jazz; but when he drinks and fornicates incessantly we cease to believe in his capacity for consecutive thought.”¹² Macdonald’s Lew Archer stands out in his time as a private eye who seems to err on the side of self-control; the novels of which he is the central character seem, therefore, not to deliver the vicarious experience of the mean streets and the self-destructive hero who walks them. Archer drinks, but only beer; and he fornicates, but far short of “incessantly.”

It is important to read Macdonald in his time, and both Barzun’s moralistic point of view and Cawelti’s Aristotelian classification do not point us in this direction. As Macdonald’s work progressed, he pressed the formula toward engagement with reality: the travails of his own family, the social and moral upheaval of the 1960s, America’s and California’s obsession with race, the environmental sins of unreflective development, and (finally) aging. My position will become clear as the chapters roll forward: I think that Macdonald took the American detective novel further than either of his twentieth-century predecessors, that his debt to Hammett was more benign than the one to Chandler, and that Macdonald ought to be read by the standards he projected rather than by those he eclipsed.

There are, as the history of criticism of the detective genre amply shows, many traps and pitfalls in the way of those who write about the genre. I cannot hope to avoid the pitfall of partisanship in the comparative discussion of Macdonald and his dual fathers (Hammett and Chandler). My position is that Macdonald eclipsed them both—one in a kindly and the other in an antagonistic contest. My argument in this dispute is confined principally to chapter 4. There is a second pitfall, perhaps larger than the first. Any author of a series of novels with the same characters and setting inevitably resorts to established patterns. James Fenimore Cooper moved Natty Bumppo from upstate New York to the edge of the Great Plains in his Leatherstocking series, but Natty was still Natty wherever he landed. William Faulkner moved Compsons and Snopeses all over Yoknapatawpha County and from one novel to the next, sometimes revising individual histories. Readers then come to expect, even demand, consistency of development. It often follows that critics fall into a monotonous, repetitive pattern too, following discussion of one book with discussion of the next, like beads on a rosary, relentlessly murmuring the same thesis. To avoid droning one thesis through a quarter-century of novels, I have (sometimes arbitrarily) used historical and cultural topics or themes for each chapter (for example, Freudian family romance, the myth of California, intimations of mortality, and others). Some of these choices reflect influences Macdonald consciously chose to engage, others simply enveloped him. The discussions of Macdonald’s novels are arranged chronologically, but the novels themselves are bundled with different thematic twine in each chapter. The twine might pinch at some points. (For example, is *The Goodbye Look* of 1969 the last novel of the 1960s or the

first of the “master” phase of the 1970s?) But, in a contest between critical thesis and novel, the nod always goes to the novel.

There is a third pitfall, peculiar to writing about detective novels: giving away the endings. Trying to withhold crucial information in preliminary drafts of the chapters resulted in stultifying coyness; there are simply no interesting ways to be vague. Be prepared to be told whodunit. I apologize in advance for spoiling some of the pleasure of narrative by assuming the reader knows the name of the murderer. Macdonald’s novels are so durable that you can read and reread them with renewed pleasure until the paper and glue wear out. I have, and I know I am not the only one.