

Seminar in American Literature: Crime Fiction
Spring Semester 2014, Wednesdays 4:30-7:20
Dr. Rosemary Johnsen

Crime fiction is a popular genre known for its strong narrative arc and material specificity. The genre's detailed presentation of society, from its material circumstances to its values, makes it ideal for the study of context-rich literary history; it has also been the basis for important theoretical work in literary study, such as Franco Moretti's twenty-first century hypotheses about "distant reading." Crime fiction has been an international literary phenomenon from its inception, and American writers have played an influential role in its development. This semester's crime novels reward study, and they represent authors who have contributed to genre developments in the US and internationally.

Our reading will begin with Poe's 1840s Dupin stories, considered by many to be the first examples of detective fiction, and follow that with Anna Katharine Green's *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), which first presented key features of the "whodunit" style of crime fiction. Like Green, Mary Roberts Rinehart was hugely successful in the genre; we will read her 1908 novel, *The Circular Staircase*. The so-called hardboiled subgenre, pioneered by Dashiell Hammett in late 1920s, is represented here by Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), and Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* (1950), made into the well-known Hitchcock film (1951), is an important instance of the psychological crime thriller. Ed McBain's *Cop Hater* (1956) is one of the earliest police procedurals; it is the first of what would be over 50 books in the 87th Precinct series which McBain/Hunter wrote for nearly 50 years. We will end in 1982, with Sara Paretsky's *Indemnity Only*, the first of her Chicago-set series that updates the hardboiled private eye subgenre to feature a woman investigator and informed social commentary. We will supplement our primary source reading with selected film interpretations, and we will further develop our understanding of American contributions to the genre through engagement with scholarship in the field. Written work this semester will include a series of short responses to the crime fiction, a scholarly monograph review-essay and presentation, and a seminar paper.



Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe in "The Big Sleep" (1946)