



# “UNTIL THERE WERE DETECTIVES...”

## A BRIEF LINEAGE

By Lily Wolff

“CLEARLY THERE COULD BE NO DETECTIVE  
STORIES UNTIL THERE WERE DETECTIVES.”

– Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*

**Detective Dupin:** “But it is in matters  
beyond the limits of mere rule that  
the skill of the analyst is evinced.  
He makes in silence a host of  
observations and inferences....”

– From *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*  
by Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe introduced his fellow Americans and the world to the first modern detective story in 1841. His protagonist, C. Auguste Dupin, however, is not an American himself, but a Frenchman - the C. is for “Chevalier,” the French knighthood, or the British equivalent of “Sir.” It is perhaps surprising that Poe didn’t choose to make the first modern detective an American, except when one considers that the profession of detection was not yet in existence in the United States. From whence came the first detectives? Why, from France, of course! Poe’s choice was entirely proper.

France was the first country to create a municipal police force in 1667, and the Sûreté Nationale, the criminal investigative bureau of the Paris police, was established later in 1812. The Sûreté, in turn, inspired the formation of London’s Metropolitan Police in 1829, but America was not similarly

centralized until the FBI was founded in 1908. It is fascinating to consider that both the detective branch of the Metropolitan Police and the genre of detective fiction evolved and emerged simultaneously. Poe was ahead of the times in his home country. Our first modern fictional detective appeared in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* before real-life detectives actually existed in the United States.

Dupin, whose name is derived from the word “dupe” or deception, went on to influence the portrayals of fictional detectives for centuries to come through his cold, logical methods of problem solving, emphasis on the intense reading of clues, and decidedly upper-class background.

**Detective Holmes:** “Detection is,  
or ought to be, an exact science  
and should be treated in the same  
cold and unemotional manner.”

–From *The Sign of the Four* by Sir Arthur  
Conan Doyle

Poe wrote just three stories featuring Detective Dupin before his death in 1849, while Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s British detective, Sherlock Holmes, would appear

in no less than 56 short stories and four novels, catapulting the genre to popularity. Holmes is one of the most prolific screen characters in history with adaptations beginning in 1914 with *A Study in Scarlet* and continuing into the 21st century with the likes of Robert Downey Jr. and Benedict Cumberbatch playing the leading role. Doyle introduced Holmes to the world in the Christmas edition of *The Strand* magazine in 1891. He emerged a mix of Poe's Dupin and Dr. Joseph Bell, a real-life doctor of medicine who taught Doyle at university. A key point of contrast between the tales of Dupin and those of Holmes? The addition of Dr. John Watson, the detective's perfect foil. While Holmes approaches a problem with complex and sophisticated solutions, Watson is perhaps more populist, simpler and more straight-forward in this approach. He frames each story, applying a relatable lens of equal parts amusement and reverence in observation of his brilliant friend.

**Detective Poirot: "It is the brain, the little gray cells on which one must rely. One must seek the truth within—not without."**

– From *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*  
by Dame Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie is arguably the queen of post-World War I detective fiction, the so-called Golden Age, in which the genre not only continued to rise in popularity but also began to receive serious critical attention. In an interview with *LIFE*, Christie described her work as concerning "murders of quiet, domestic interest," which we now categorize as its own sub-genre: cozy crime. Of course, *Murder on the Orient Express* proves the scope of her work far exceeds what David Barnett describes rather brilliantly as "the country house mystery, the landed gentry and Jazz Age good-time boys and girls whose ordered, privileged world is suddenly thrown into disarray by the fly in the ointment of a rather awkward corpse found in the library, or on the croquet lawn."

Christie grew up on Sherlock Holmes; it was her sister who challenged her to write a detective story of her own. She drafted the plot first, then began searching for her detective. At that time a group of Belgian refugees, who had fled in the wake of advancing German forces, were living in Christie's hometown of Torquay, England. As she says in her autobiography, "Why not make my detective a Belgian? There were all types of refugees. How about a refugee police officer? A retired police officer." Poirot made his debut appearance in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920. Yet much like Doyle with Holmes, Christie tired of her creation. While *Curtain* wasn't published until 1975, just a year before Christie's death, she actually wrote the novel in the 1940's during the Blitz. With bombs raining down on London, Christie refused to retreat to the relative safety of the countryside. She took just one precaution: her novel's manuscript was placed inside of a safe. Should a Nazi bomb find its target, her words would be spared, unlike the Queen of Crime herself, presumably. Thankfully, she survived the Blitz and went on to write about a dozen more Poirot novels. All the while her readers were blissfully unaware that Poirot had already been killed by his creator, entombed in a bomb-proof safe. When Agatha eventually decided the time had come to draw the curtain on Poirot for good, he became the first fictional character to receive an obituary in *The New York Times*. He made the front page.

**"Readers seek not only relief from the traumas and anxieties of their everyday lives, but an affirmation in their belief that we live in a moral, rational and comprehensible universe and that even death is a mystery that can be solved."**

– P.D. James, *The Strange Case of Hercule Poirot*