



Although detective stories as a literary genre were generally considered to begin in the 19th century with Edgar Allan Poe and then develop after the syndication of the Arthur Conan Doyle Sherlock Holmes stories, Dr. Bendel Simso of McDaniel College and her assistants have transcribed, edited, and posted over 1500 detective stories, forgotten pieces that demonstrate how the genre developed, as they explore the roots of modern detective fiction. Bendel-Simso, Charles A. Boehlke, Jr., Engaged Faculty Fellow and Professor of English, is leading this web-based project—the Westminster Detective Library—that identifies, catalogs, and publishes all short detective fiction that was published prior to 1891 in the United States.

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Rachel Clevenger

Exploring the Roots of Detective Fiction at McDaniel College

Detective Fiction Improving Real-World Police Work

In 2007, Bendel-Simso was approached by Dr. LeRoy Lad Panek, Professor of English at McDaniel, as they shared an interest in detective stories, and because she's an Americanist, he knew she could approach their shared passion with some fresh angles and insights. Panek has authored ten books on detective fiction; he ultimately co-authored two books with Bendel-Simso. She is the co-editor of *Early American Detective Stories: An Anthology* and co-author of the 2017 *Essential Elements of the Detective Story, 1820-1891*.

Bendel-Simso's fascination with detective fiction stems from many academic interests, one of which being the way early detective fiction would propose seemingly bizarre approaches to solving a crime, ideas that years later would become an integral part of police work. For instance, dentist Rodriguez Ottolengui, author of "The Phoenix of Crime," presents a character who suggests a presumably far-fetched approach to solving a crime: analyzing bite marks. In addition to being one of the first to use x-rays in dental exams and pioneer methods for fillings, Ottolengui is considered by many to be the first fiction writer to use dental filling patterns in order to identify

a corpse. Gardener P. H. Foley in *The Journal of the American College of Dentists* notes that interest in the tale was revived a few years later when a young girl's body was found in Yonkers, NY. The local sheriff, familiar with Ottolengui's story, asked a dentist to create a chart of her teeth, which led to her identification.

On a similar note, in "The Long Arm" by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Joseph Chamberlain, published in 1895, the amateur sleuth who is investigating her father's death suggests dissecting the house into a grid to be explored. The story's heroine notes, "Tomorrow I begin my search. I shall first make an exhaustive examination of the house such as no officer in the case has yet made in the hope of finding a clue. Every room I propose to divide into square yards, by line and measure, and every one of these square yards I will study as if it were a problem in algebra. I have a theory that it is impossible for any human being to enter a house and commit in it a deed of this kind and not leave behind traces which are the known quantities in an algebraic equation to those who can use them."

In essence, though the idea was widely ridiculed as ridiculous by readers and critics at the time, Freeman and Chamberlain are the geniuses behind what we see today in modern detective shows such as "CSI: Crime

Scene Investigation" in any of its many incarnations—with the premise that some trace of the crime would be left behind, even in a room that appears to offer no evidence. However, French detective Edmond Locard—known as the "Sherlock Holmes of France"—is credited for the "every contact leaves a trace" concept, a basic principle of modern forensic science, known as Locard's Principle. He shared his theory in a seminal text *L'Enquête Criminelle et les Méthodes Scientifiques*, which was published twenty-eight years after "The Long Arm" was released. While truth may be stranger than fiction, detective fiction was often ahead of the real-world techniques for solving crime.

Debunking a Reigning Myth

In short, Bendel-Simso explodes the "reigning myth" that nothing of great import was growing from detective fiction between Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. In this lost era, she explains, when detective fiction was a popular form of entertainment, America was "both poor and huge," an environment where books were expensive, but newspapers were not.

As Bendel-Simso, Panek, and their student assistants began digging into the archives, they found hundreds of short stories that were relatively or completely unknown. While she acknowledges that the quality of the writing



was as varied as the subject matter, and that some are both “wretched” and even “incredibly racist” at times, she is excited by the way these pieces clearly show a “genre being developed.”

Interestingly, the editors of the papers were not schooled in the best way to publish the stories, and often the story’s twist would be revealed in a headline—or the paper might offer a summary of the entire story before the opening lines.

In addition to watching the genre grow, Bendel-Simso is drawn as well to the nature of the crimes that served as popular topics. Rather than the murder-mysteries the modern reader expects in crime fiction, the stories focused on forgeries, shoplifting, and the challenges often faced by wards.

One focused on a canine jewel thief, and many others offer “ridiculous stories with sleepwalkers.” Many of them, nearly half she would guess, are anonymous pieces written as if memoirs by “fake” detectives.

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The Irony of Stolen Crime Fiction

Complicating the research into all these unexplored short stories is that America was not yet concerned with copyright law, so papers would “get anything and steal it.”

Some stories appeared under different titles more than thirty times. As the project grew over a decade, they began to get more financial support—both from the college and from an Andrew W. Mellon grant.

She was able to hire assistants for archival research, so students could help her locate, transcribe, edit, and ready the stories for digital publication. As students were able to travel with Bendel-Simso to delve into archival material, learning to work with microfiche for the first time and seeking new pieces in the original publications, they learned “both the tedium and excitement” of scholarly work.

“It was through working with Dr. Mary that I realized my passion for the powerful, small details of a work—the nuances of word choice and the subtle framing of punctuation. Here was a whole history of a genre—one no one was even looking for. And Dr. Mary was key in unearthing it.” — ANNE MATHEWS

Archival Diving with Dr. Mary

Camden Ostrander, a senior English major with a secondary education minor, is one of three McDaniel students who is currently working as an undergraduate research assistant on the Westminster Detective Library.

Ostrander explains that he’s never heard Bendel-Simso called anything other than “Dr. Mary,” which is an important distinction for him because he believes this title “captures the sense of both academic excellence and personal connection that she brings to the classroom.”

Additionally, Ostrander shares that Bendel-Simso’s support extends beyond the classroom

—she invited Ostrander and other student assistants to weekly dinners in her home in Westminster throughout the summer and they all stayed at her childhood home in Minneapolis, while doing archival research “deep in the University of Minnesota’s library.”

Unearthing the History of a Genre

Anne Mathews, a 2013 graduate of McDaniel, worked on the Westminster Detective Library while there, a project she enjoyed to such a powerful degree that the work inspired her current career as a copy editor at The Oxford Club. “It was through working with Dr. Mary that I realized my passion for the powerful,

small details of a work—the nuances of word choice and the subtle framing of punctuation,” Mathews explains. “Here was a whole history of a genre—one no one was even looking for. And Dr. Mary was key in unearthing it.”

Equally inspiring for Mathews is the way her mentor was passionate, enthusiastic, kind, and thoughtful—while also being “a spirited individual and a force to be reckoned with.” In short, Mathews adds, “There is no one better to have on your side.”

The Task and Honor of Documenting a Transition

Cassandra Berube is a 2014 graduate of McDaniel who now works as an associate editor at Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. Her internship with Westminster Detective Library offered her the opportunity “to immerse myself in a fascinating topic to which I would not otherwise have been exposed.”

Fascinated by watching stories evolve and the layers of plot develop, as they were offered the chance “to read the evolution of this genre as it happened,” Berube feels fortunate to



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have been given the task and the honor of documenting that transition.

Berube notes of Bendel-Simso, “As a mentor, she engaged in intellectually vibrant discussions while encouraging me to create my own understandings of literature.” Because her work involves project management, Berube is benefitting from the critical thinking skills and painstaking attention to detail that the internship demanded.

Perhaps even more importantly, Berube learned from her mentor the “bravery to pursue your own opinions against the odds.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Rachel James Clevenger earned her B.A. and M.Ed. degrees from Mississippi College. After finishing her PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, she taught and served as the University Writing Center Director for Birmingham Southern College and University of Alabama at Birmingham. Currently, she teaches Business Communications at Samford University.



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