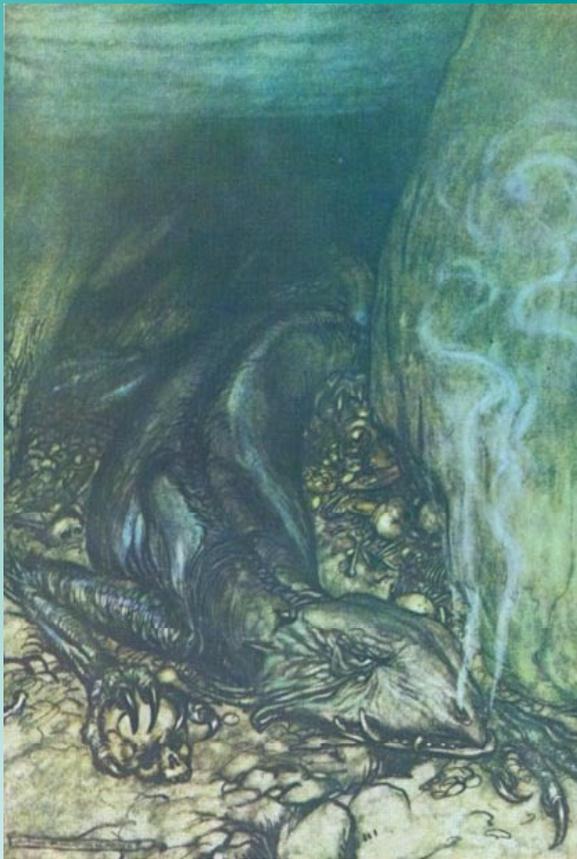


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Of Modern Dragons



and
other
essays
on
Genre
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John Lennard

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Of Modern Dragons

and other essays on Genre Fiction

John Lennard

Tirril: Humanities-Ebooks, 2007

For
Reginald Hill



*a criminally great novelist
with admiring thanks for Mid-Yorks.,
the Unholy Trinity,
serendipitous Joe Sixsmith,
an unswerving civility and kindness,
and very many happy hours of reading.*

*For Hea'en and Hill begin wi ane letter,
And if Hea'en's good, yon Hill is aye better.*

Acknowledgements

Photograph of Reginald Hill © 2007 Reginald Hill

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The cover illustration is of Fáfnir, by Arthur Rackham, from Richard Wagner’s *The Ring of the Nibelung ... Translated into English by Margaret Armour with Illustrations by Arthur Rackham* (London: William Heinemann, & New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1910).

I would like to thank Tamora Pierce for waiving her share of the permissions fee for reproducing her map of Tortall and Hinterland, and for facilitating the deal. Thanks also to Francis Ingledew, Claire Kilroy, Rosemary Daley, Gregorio Stephens, James Robertson, and Julian Lobban for readings and suggestions.

Many years ago my brother David Lennard told me to start reading Reginald Hill, while Roger Luckhurst (now of Birkbeck College) told me to start reading Octavia Butler—recommendations for which I remain deeply grateful. Most of the other writers discussed here I discovered for myself, but for some of the older ones, and for my habits of reading in general, I am, always, fundamentally indebted to my father, Michael Lennard, sine qua non.

A Note on the Author

John Lennard took a B.A. and D.Phil. at Oxford University, and an M.A. at Washington University in St Louis. He has taught for the Universities of London, Cambridge, and Notre Dame, for the Open University, and for Fairleigh Dickinson University on-line; he is now Professor of British & American Literature at the University of the West Indies—Mona. His publications include *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Clarendon Press, 1991), *The Poetry Handbook* (1996; 2/e, OUP, 2005), with Mary Luckhurst *The Drama Handbook* (OUP, 2002), and the Literature Insights *Hamlet*. He is General Editor of the Sightlines series, for which he has written on Reginald Hill, Walter Mosley, Octavia E. Butler, Ian McDonald, and Tamora Pierce.

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Foreword

As the first more-or-less explains, these essays are the product of trying to think professionally about more than 30 years of reading genre and series fictions. Neither my subjects nor the tones and movements of prose that have seemed right for them are always in the Academy's current *Manual of Lit. Crit.*, and as I imagine myself writing as much for fellow readers as for a narrower academic audience, I let them stand. That does not mean scholarship or rigour are disregarded, and footnotes appear informatively or discursively as they ought. It does mean, however, that (for example) details of fictions merely cited appear only in the Bibliography, and cultural events etc. are assumed as common territory between writer and reader. Alternatively, a  [Web-link](#) may be provided, for those who wish to use it. It also means that even with novels considered at length I have tried not to give away needless spoilers, that those who like the sound of one can read with full pleasure.

I long thought that essays on different genres (Crime, SF, Children's Lit., Romance) needed to be separate, or at least sectioned-off, but those gathered here coalesced as a sequence. The subjects have in common their serial forms and my extended attention, but range as widely as authors' interests. Reginald Hill and 'J. D. Robb' (in that identity) are primarily crime writers; Octavia Butler, Ian McDonald, & the dragonfolk are SF writers; and Tamora Pierce is a children's writer. Then again, I'm damned if 'Robb' isn't also an SF *and* a Romance writer; Pierce similarly mocks generic distinctions; and Hill, Butler, & McDonald are all absurdly denied proper recognition *precisely because* they embrace genre and write in series. So my essays are what they are, and if that is unconventional, so much the better.

This collection also launches Humanities-E-Books' *Genre Fiction Monographs*, and in some measure therefore serves as model and manifesto. The series is avowedly open to *any* relevant proposal, because we don't yet know what proper attention to genre fiction should look like, but my willingness here to move between genres, concentrate strongly on the experience of reading, and go where that has taken me, are certainly meant as markers of intent. Very many people spend a good deal of time and money as serial readers, and the absence of serious thinking about the practice is as odd as it is improper, so please think of this e-book, and the series it launches, as seeking to redress a gross imbalance.

John Lennard
 Gordon Town, St Andrew, Jamaica
 February 2007

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1. Of Serial Readers

Living with Genre Fiction

I read for pleasure, for information, and for a living. My work as a teacher and professor of literature requires me to read new poetry and fiction, and bookish surprises are an invigorating part of my life. Books are therefore given and bought in such numbers that even the worthiest inevitably pile up awaiting attention, but each year among those I read most promptly are a dozen or so hardback instalments of series fictions, revisiting established protagonists, locales, and supporting casts for a further round of adventures.

This serial reading is a habit of long standing. The genres involved have ranged over more than 30 years through thrillers, science fiction of many kinds, and Napoleonic naval novels to children's literature (where Harry Potter provides the most obvious current example of mass serial reading), but crime writing has come to dominate. For more than twenty years I have had an annual meeting with Robert B. Parker's Spenser, a Boston PI with entertaining friends and superior dialogue, who in that time (however formulaic he may sometimes be) has confronted contemporary evils while evolving emotionally in ways I find compelling. For nearly ten I have had biannual dates with J. D. Robb's Eve Dallas, a New York cop in the late 2050s who as a romance heroine in an unreal world ought in many ways to be negligible, but isn't, because her childhood abuse and continuing struggle to be healed of its consequence provide a ballast that allows Robb to make of her populist and otherwise critically sinful books a vehicle for serious thought. My current crime list also features Reginald Hill, James Lee Burke, Lawrence Sanders, John Harvey, Ian Rankin, Bill James, Peter Robinson, Walter Mosley, Michael Connelly, Nevada Barr, Deborah Crombie, and Stephen Booth—some (like Hill, Burke, & James) companions for a decade or more, others (like Crombie & Booth) pushing their way in. Newcomers may expand the list, but time is limited, and old friends sometimes have to make way, falling back with consecutive disappointments from automatic hardback to occasional paperback purchase.

I usually read (and re-read) these books fast. Daily schedules may preclude it, but I have read many literally 'at a sitting', which for a fiction of 80–100,000 words lasts three to six hours. In a positive sense most genre novels are 'page-turners', generating that intense involvement in a fictive world that is one great joy of

reading, but such reading is often (and not only by professional critics) supposed ‘shallow’, as opposed to a ‘deep’ mode associated with ‘literature’—hence the persistent characterisation of genre fiction as ‘airport’ or ‘railway’ books, fit for journeys, not studies, and discardable without loss. Even without the curious but characteristic British denigration of ‘genre fiction’ as intrinsically *déclassé*,¹ readers who prefer ‘literature’ often suppose from the speed of writing implicit in series publication that quality of the kind they seek and praise cannot possibly be found in such books, and in parallel suppose from the speed of reading implicit in page-turning that such rapid consumption cannot reward serious attention. Literature, that is, should have been agonised over by its authors, as by its readers, while the generic should take as little effort to write as is invested in reading it.

The academic corollary of this speciousness includes a widespread Anglophone (especially British) prejudice, that while paid professors of literature are entitled (or even expected) to read some mass-market fictions ‘as a hobby’, and conversationally to grade the bestseller lists, they are not supposed to spill serious ink on the matter. W. H. Auden in his critical and poetic prime knew better (as poets often do), but the intensity and sacramental conservatism of his confessions about reading Golden-Age whodunits in ‘The Guilty Vicarage’ (1948) represent a very particular sensibility, and have obscured the nature and challenges of serial reading.² Auden’s comparison of Golden-Age whodunits with the great classical tragedies of pollution and ritual cleansing attracts critical citation precisely because it counters the imputation to crime writing (and reading) of unliterary shallowness, but it is clear that Auden’s critical response was *not* associated with deep and scholarly ponderings of one text, but rather with habitual and rapid reading that rejoiced in long series, narrative formulae, artful variations, and iterated structure.

In one sense the paradigm for most judgements of literary merit is a class system, leisured ‘literature’ being the nobility, and hasty generic scurriers through the market-place the proletariat or *petit bourgeoisie*—and class-privileges are always fiercely defended. In interesting parallel, European metaphors and etymologies point clearly to the literary (and political) use of validating *depth*: we get to the bottom of things and the heart of the matter, strive to be profound and deal with the basics and

¹ The real point often seems to be the reverse formulation, that ‘literature’ is somehow not ‘generic’. Thus Reginald Hill, despite his very varied output, is a ‘crime writer’ but the rather more limited Martin Amis, say, is a ‘novelist’ who can cleverly deploy crime topoi when he judges that right.

² In *The Dyer’s Hand and other essays* (1963; London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 146–58. Auden admits, for example, that he cannot re-read a whodunit, saying that he sometime started one only to realise “after a few pages” that he had read it already (p. 146).

fundamentals, so value comes with age and the overwritten surface. But US politicians and some critics instead ‘go the extra mile’, finding sincerity in extent, and the US mass-markets in newspaper features, genre paperbacks, and TV drama have been the great engines of serial writing and reading in the late century. Conversely, British critics in particular, beholden to literary snobbery reflecting class mores and blind to sincerity in instalments, have been uninterested in genre writing and the worlds of reading it generates. Yet it seems widely known, for example, often by people who have read none of them, that Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan write ‘literature’, while Ian Rankin and Peter Robinson do not; that attention to J. K. Rowling is (despite her extraordinary achievement in becoming the first authorial billionaire) at best a clever and well-executed jape; and that Salman Rushdie is intrinsically a more responsible and thoughtful writer than Reginald Hill.

Prizes are a prime arena for showing such prejudice. One of the more telling indicators of the true nature of the Booker Prize (founded in 1969) is that in nearly 40 years not one book usually regarded as ‘crime writing’ or ‘SF’ has been short- or even long-listed, let alone won.¹ During the decades since 1970 crime writing has undergone an astonishing efflorescence and (as the ever-growing crime sections of every highstreet bookshop demonstrate) been a mainstay of the fiction market. The intense absurdity of the British situation is limned in the fact that Dame P. D. James chaired the panel of Booker judges in 1987, but could never herself as a committed and serious crime writer have made even the shortlist, despite producing in *Innocent Blood* (1980) and *A Taste for Death* (1986) eligible novels that go far beyond any simple generic model, and were certainly among the most discussed and widely reviewed UK publications of their respective years. To say either ‘should’ have won the Booker Prize would be silly, but they were just as stupidly excluded from consideration on generic grounds, and continue to be vapidly supposed unfit for study or inappropriate to teach. As much might be said of SF, for despite its evident British strengths since the 1980s not one such book has troubled the Booker judges for even a moment. There may be fair questions about how genre fictions are best read, taught, and contextualised, but there are also false assumptions underlying this unhappy bias that must be foregone.

¹ Complete lists of winning and short-listed books from 1969, and long-lists from 2001, are available at <http://www.themanbookerprize.com/about/previous.php>. Arguably, only one acknowledged ‘genre fiction’ appears on any of them, Philip Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass*, long-listed in 2001. The fullest published analysis of the Booker is Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (1996).

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