

THE DETECTIVE IN PHILIPPINE DETECTIVE FICTION: A Defiance of Popular Convention

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When one talks about detective fiction the writers that immediately come to mind are: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe, Agatha Christie, and Dashiell Hammett, to name a few; with stories of the mindboggling investigations of characters like, Sherlock Holmes, Inspector Dupin, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, and Sam Spade, how they always solve their cases and bring to justice those responsible. It is these writers and so many more that have set the standard for what detective fiction ought to be. With these early works, conventions were established on how to write detective stories, how lead investigators were supposed to appear, behave, and operate in these stories, and how all the supporting characters, such as sidekicks, witnesses, and suspects were supposed to act. Soon after the publication of Conan Doyle's *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and Allan Poe's *Murder in the Rue Morgue* the term "Holmes—Dupin" model was coined to describe the character of a detective.

According to Stanton O. Berg in his article "Sherlock Holmes: Father of Scientific Crime and Detection," which was published in 1971 in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Sherlock Holmes is a "master detective" who employs pure logic and deduction in solving cases. (Berg, 1971). For a while this was the common convention until events occurred that would have an effect on the conventions of detective fiction. According to David Geherin in his book *The American Private Eye: The image in Fiction*, the Holmesian method or the Holmes—Dupin method only works in a society *where peace is the norm and crime is an anomaly*. This was no longer the case after Prohibition, the Great Depression and World War II. Society now needed a detective who was willing to rely on "gut instinct" and willing to employ violence when needed. (Geherin, 1985)

For Geherin, the modern detective should be someone who is willing to “shoot first, ask questions later,” because for him, crime has become commonplace in society and therefore there is no more room for the logic driven investigator.

The Character of the Detective in Philippine Detective fiction defies these conventions

Western detective fiction tells us that a protagonist detective can either be Holmesian or modern, a man of logic or a tough guy who relies on instinct, gut feeling and field work. However, the Philippine detective protagonist is capable of being both *at the same time*, even the logical detective utilizes gut feel or instinct and at times intuition.

An example of this is in F.H. Batacan’s *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, a novel that deals with the deaths of children in Payatas, and the investigation, which utilized intelligence, logic and patient gathering of evidence in solving the cases. But the value of instinct and field work were still present. Both priests used these in assessing what they were being told by witnesses.

The Protagonist investigator in the novel, Father Gus Saenz, is a priest who also works as a Forensic Anthropologist. With the help of his colleague and fellow priest Father Jerome Lucero, he utilizes the logic involved in profiling and evidence analysis, choosing to dig deeper, instead of simply accepting the evidence that is in front of him. However, because he is a priest, he also has intuition which he uses when interviewing witnesses. He can sense when people are hiding something and he uses his empathy to find out what he needs.

Another example is Charlson Ong’s *Blue Angel, White Shadow*, which relies more on instinct and fieldwork. But there are also points in the story where we see the protagonist detective Cyrus Ledesma using his logic to identify suspects.

Ong’s novel, follows the investigation into the suspicious death of Laurice Saldiaga, singer at the Blue Angel bar at the heart of the Filipino–Chinese community. It is discovered that Laurice had many important figures of the community obsessed with her and the case takes a complicated turn when these figures take steps to conceal their involvement with the victim.

The protagonist detective in the novel, Cyrus Ledesma, is a police officer with a checkered past, which includes a history of murder. While his

profession requires logic and analysis in investigating a case, Cyrus Ledesma was chosen to take the case because of his familiarity with the community and his friendship with the people involved in the case. His use of logic is secondary in his investigations and he relies primarily on his relationships and instinct to solve the crime.

Nick Joaquin's *Cave and Shadows*, combines the idea of the traditional detective novel with Philippine legends and folklore, in a novel that centers around the investigation into the mysterious death of Nenita Coogan. She is a girl with a history of troubled behavior, as well as an obsession with the local Pre-Christian movement, which believes that her (Nenita Coogan's) soul was simply called by their goddess the Ginoong Ina.

Jack Henson applies induction and deduction while conducting the investigation. However because he was afraid of divulging too much information to friends as his evidence would implicate them, he also had to use his instincts and intuition. In the end, he chooses to rely on his logic especially when his intuition tells him to consider the possibility of supernatural intervention to be the cause of Nenita's death.

There is also Maria Fres-Felix's *Crimetime*, a series of short stories focusing on the investigations of SJ Tuason into various murders happening in her precinct. This short story collection focuses not only on the analysis that goes into an investigation, but also reveals the difficulty that police officers face, such as the issues of transportation.

There was always a scramble for police cars with enough gasoline because of the difficulty of getting reimbursement for gasoline expenses. Unfortunately for Tuason and Joshua, they seldom had access to such rarity. (Fres – Felix, 33)

The Short story collection also shows the problems of being a female working in a male dominated profession.

She suspected that Big Mac was just covering his ass. He did not want to be put on the spot and say the wrong things, or be misquoted. She was the convenient scapegoat if things unraveled. But she knew she had to follow orders. This time. As one of only two token females in the force in Lakeview, she could not afford to mess up. (Fres - Felix, 21)

Crimetime for the most part, also focuses on logic and deduction. However, her protagonist detective SJ Tuason also has a sense of intuition

which is shown in her trust in her “bullshit meter”, which she is able to feel in her ears.

Another convention of detective fiction that Filipino writers defy is the convention of emotional non-involvement. In both literary works and popular media, detectives are discouraged from showing any form of emotion in the course of the investigation. Filipino detectives, are more human; they are capable of showing their emotions. They are not as dispassionate as some Western detectives tend to be—focused entirely on the job and wanting only to finish the investigation and move on to the next one. The Philippine detective protagonist shows emotion; in fact expressing their emotions becomes beneficial to them as investigators. It is Father Gus Saenz’s empathy towards the victims and their families that encourages people to cooperate in the investigation. SJ Tuason, feels the need to express her emotions through her hobbies, in order to ensure that she can go back to the job without her personal conflicts getting in the way. These hobbies include wood carving and kickboxing. In Ong’s novel, Cyrus Ledesma’s emotional attachment to Rosemarie Misa keeps him from committing senseless murder, thereby redeeming himself as a police officer. Throughout the case Jack Henson in Nick Joaquin’s novel has been a mess of conflicting emotions, torn between revealing the evidence to the proper officials and protecting his friends, between his duty and perhaps his lingering love for his ex-wife and his feelings for Chedeng. Henson also ends up feeling torn between the evidence implicating Alex Manzano, and the feeling that this solution is too obvious.

For the Philippine protagonist detective expressing emotion is not a hindrance to the investigation. In fact, when the detective allows his emotions some room, he becomes a better detective. When the protagonist detective is sympathetic like Father Saenz, he gets the people to cooperate. For a flawed detective like Cyrus Ledesma, allowing his emotional attachments to take control creates the path towards his redemption as a police officer. SJ Tuason releases her emotions through her hobbies and then goes back to the investigation with fresh eyes, usually leading her to the path of the killer. Whereas when she holds back her emotions regarding her family, she becomes confrontational with a suspect in the interrogation room. Jack Henson’s feelings for Chedeng and his hesitation about publicly implicating her husband lead him to look into other possibilities, which eventually bring him to Pocholo Gatmaitan.

Another convention that makes the Philippine detective protagonist different is that he always has a redeeming quality. Based on the three novels and short story collection that have been used in this analysis, Philippine detective fiction presents an unvarnished, unbiased picture of how crime is investigated in the Philippines. In American and English detective fiction, all crimes are treated as equal in importance, where the investigators are concerned, and detectives work hard to solve the case, never giving up until the case is solved.

Philippine detective fiction accepts the fact that there are some investigators who are like Ben Arcinas from F.H. Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles*. They only investigate crimes if there is incentive to do so. Arcinas chose only to look into crimes that would bring him fame. Big Mac in Maria Fres–Felix's *Crimetime* makes SJ Tuason take care of the statements to the press, so as not to be blamed if anything goes wrong in the investigation.

But Philippine detective fiction seems to seek some form of redemption within the system. This is where the protagonist detectives come in. In a country where some crimes are only given the minimum attention, due to the victims' low financial status or lack of political connection, there are people who are committed to making a difference, like Father Saenz and Jerome Lucero.

These people have to work within a system that is extremely flawed. Given the fact that people do not trust the police due to their reputation for being corrupt, police *are* actually corrupt, investigating a crime is a near impossible task. This is what Philippine detective fiction tries to change. Philippine detective fiction shows that it is possible for crimes to be solved regardless of the victim's financial status and political connection, because of the character of the detective.

Philippine detective fiction is not all focused only on the crime and the victims. It also reveals the many difficulties that law enforcement officers face when investigating crimes. Fres–Felix's *Crimetime* shows how SJ Tuason and her partner often have to take her personal vehicle to get to crime scenes and to interview witnesses and suspects, because it is difficult to find police cars with gas.

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In F.H. Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, the investigators who actually want to help solve the crime like Director Lastimosa and his assistant Jake Valdes have difficulties with witnesses. In Charlson Ong's *Blue Angel, White Shadow* most of the suspects and witnesses refuse to cooperate because each of them is hiding secrets of their own.

Philippine detective fiction first reveals, in no uncertain terms, the flaws in the system and the problems that law enforcement officer's face when trying to solve crimes. Then, it tries to find something positive within that flawed system—someone who actually empathizes with the victims or even someone who just does his/her job thoroughly rather than just the bare minimum in the investigation.

One unique characteristic of the Philippine detective protagonist is that he or she is easy to relate to.

Based on the three novels and the short story collection analyzed here, the Philippine detective protagonist always possesses a characteristic that makes him relatable to readers. Despite their many flaws, and the fact that people rarely trust policemen and detectives, these protagonist "detectives" come across as relatable to the people that they are talking to for a variety of reasons. Cyrus Ledesma was not chosen to investigate the death of Laurice Saldiaga because of his expertise in the field. In fact, with his corrupt past he should not have been leading an investigation at all. He was chosen because of his ties to the community. Laurice Saldiaga died in a predominantly Chinese - Filipino community and Cyrus was chosen to lead the investigation because he spoke Chinese and had close ties with people in the area.

As chauvinistic as this may seem, SJ Tuason, despite being a straight-laced police officer, is relatable because she is a woman and people tend to see a woman as being a sympathetic person. When people are faced with the prospect of being interviewed by SJ or her partner Joshua they would much rather talk to SJ. Fr. Gus Saenz is the epitome of the relatable character because while he is a forensic anthropologist, he is also a priest, and people do not feel intimidated by men of the cloth. In fact, since Saenz is a priest people feel comfortable talking to him. Jack Henson is relatable simply because most of the people he needed to talk to throughout the course of his investigation into Nenita Coogan's death are people he has known since his school days. The fact that he also seems detached and objective makes people want to talk to him because they feel they will not be judged.

It was written for the West who created conventions of detective

fiction and protagonist detective. Filipino writers decided to defy these conventions especially where the characters of their protagonist detectives were concerned. As shown in the three novels and short story collection cited in this essay, the Philippine detective protagonist defies both traditional and modern conventions. He or she is uniquely Filipino.

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