

Conan Doyle's Predecessors

No author, at least in modern times, has created in a vacuum. Even what seem the most original creations have ancestors of inspiration. Tolkien's hobbits, orcs, and fairies can be traced to the Old English and Scandinavian sagas. Burroughs's Tarzan had his origins in the legend of Romulus and Remus (according to ERB) and Kipling's *Jungle Book*. So, too, Conan Doyle's Great Detective and other characters had forebears in literature. The best and the brightest aren't necessarily the first.

Sir Arthur was not just a mystery or detective story writer, and he certainly didn't want to be known just for that. His interests and influences were broader, but we won't try to cover them here. I have included them in a selected reading list. In many instances I could find no direct connection between Doyle and the works discussed here, but he was well read and most of these works were probably available to him.

Roots of the Detective/Crime Story

According to Julian Symons, in his *Mortal Consequences: A History from the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (1972), there are two views about the origins. Some, such as Dorothy Sayers, say early examples can be found in the Apocrypha, in chapters 13 (the tale of Susannah and the elders) and 14 (Bel and the Dragon) of the book of Daniel, as well as in the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus. However, Symons argues that these demonstrate cunning rather than detective skill. Others point to stories in the *Arabian Nights* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and an incident in Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747) in which the title character makes several accurate deductions to resolve a question. For that matter, James Fennimore Cooper's Hawkeye uses the deductive method in tracking people in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). But none of these involve crime per se.

That distinction belongs to *Caleb Williams* (1794) by **William Godwin** (1756–1836). It is considered the first novel with the basic elements of the crime/detective story—"a murder, its detection, and the unrelenting pursuit by the murderer of the person who has discovered his guilt." However, its theme is the injustice of the establishment and the need for its abolishment. This is the opposite of the standard detective/crime novel, which reassuringly affirms the possibility if not the inevitability of justice and so supports the status quo.

The second view holds that the story of crime and detection came about as a result of the establishment of the first organized police forces. In the 18th century, at first individual cities and towns had watchmen and constables. In 1749, Judge Henry Fielding (author of *Tom Jones*) established the Bow Street Runners, the first organized police force, to operate in London. They continued to function until 1829, when they were merged with the newly created Metropolitan Police, founded by Robert Peel (and nicknamed "Bobbies").

In France, the police force originated in the 16th century under Francis I. In 1811 the *Brigade de la Sûreté* (Security Brigade) was organized under **Eugene Francois Vidocq** (1775–1857), a former criminal. He was appointed under the theory "It takes a thief to catch a thief." His *Mémoires* (1828), a ghost-written account of his experiences on both sides of the law, were widely read. He described how he employed disguises to infiltrate criminal ranks, gather evidence, and make arrests. He also probably instigated many of the crimes that he solved, due in

part to the nature of the organization, which was paid by the arrest rather than a set salary. His memoirs captured the public's imagination and inspired writers including Balzac, Bulwer-Lytton, Poe, and Dumas pere. His ambiguous nature (is he good or bad?) is at the heart of much crime fiction, especially of the hardboiled variety.

Honore de Balzac (1799–1850) befriended Vidocq and used him as a model for detective characters in *Pere Goriot* (1835), *Lost Illusions* (1837), and *Cousin Bette* (1846). His master criminal, Vautrin, who appears in several novels of the Human Comedy, including *Pere Goriot*, could be a model for Moriarty. **Alexander Dumas's** (1802–1870) D'Artagnan does some deductive work at one point in *Le Vicomte de Bragelone* (1850), part of the Musketeers series. Vidocq is also the model for Monsieur Jackal in Dumas's *The Mohicans of Paris* (1854). In *Through the Magic Door* (1907), ACD claimed not to have read Balzac at all and had only sampled Dumas because their works are so "voluminous."

First Detective Stories and Novels

Those characters were not primarily detectives, or their actions were not the focus of the stories. The first stories actually featuring a detective and focusing on a crime were written by an American, **Edgar Allen Poe** (1809–1849), although he used French settings and characters. His amateur detective, Auguste Dupin, features in three stories, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841; first locked-room mystery), "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842; first armchair detective story), and "The Purloined Letter" (1845). Dupin is, according to Symons, "aristocratic, arrogant, and apparently omniscient," "solving problems presented to him by pure analytic deduction," his "brilliant intelligence . . . made to shine even more brightly through the comparative obtuseness of his friend who tells the story" (Symons, *Mortal Consequences*, 32). Sound familiar? Poe used the terms *detection* and *ratiocination* to describe Dupin's methods. Poe also wrote two other mysteries, "The Gold Bug," a puzzle mystery involving a coded message (think of "The Dancing Men"), and "Thou Art the Man," which involves tricking a confession through false clues and an elaborate hoax.

On the English scene, **Charles Dickens** (1812–1870), in his popular magazine *Household Words*, wrote and published articles about London's Detective Department, shaping the public's views of the police and criminal investigations. *Bleak House* (1853) includes Inspector Bucket "of the Detective," modeled on Inspector Field, whom Dickens had followed and featured in his magazine. Like Field, Bucket "is on familiar terms with lawbreakers, has an encyclopedic knowledge of their habits, and is greatly respected by them" (Symons, 42). He also is skilled in disguising himself. Dickens's last, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), is often classed as a mystery or detective story but does not feature a detective.

Another factor should be mentioned in the rise of the detective story, and it's more a general social matter. The development of an educated middle class with leisure time during the 19th century led to popular newspapers and magazines that included fiction. We've mentioned Dickens's *Household Words*. In the mid-1800s, the "**penny dreadful**" became popular in England. This was a weekly serialized story printed on cheap pulp paper as a booklet and costing a penny. Subject matter included gothic thrillers, crime melodramas, highwaymen (e.g., Dick Turpin), and horror (e.g., *Varney the Vampire* and *Wagner the Werewolf*), as well as rip-offs of literature such as the novels of Dickens (*Oliver Twiss*, *Martin Guzzelwit*). In the US, the **story**

paper (beginning in the 1850s) and then the **dime novel** (beginning in the 1860s) filled a similar niche. The story paper was an 8-page newspaper with a variety of stories and features. The dime novel was essentially a paperback of about 100 pages. Initial stories focused on the American frontier, medieval romance, sea and pirate adventures. When series characters became popular, the Old Sleuth emerged in 1872 as the first dime-novel detective in a series of stories by **Harlan Page Halsey**. Nick Carter, another long-running series detective, began appearing in stories in 1886. Eventually, at the turn of the century, the dime novel was replaced by the pulp magazine, but that's a story for another time.

The first detective novel in English is, by most accounts, *The Notting Hill Mystery* (serialized 1862/book form 1865) by **Charles Warren Adams** (1833–1903; under the pseudonym Charles Felix). It is told as a series of letters and reports by an insurance investigator, Ralph Henderson, to his employer. (Fans of James M. Cain or classic noir films may be reminded of *Double Indemnity*.) In 1864 appeared two novels vying for the title of first female detective story. *The Female Detective* by **James Redding Ware** (1832–1909; as Andrew Forrester Jr.) concerns a Mrs. Gladden, who is a consulting detective. *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (published anonymously) features Mrs. Paschal, who works for the London police force.

Wilkie Collins (1824–1889) had included several mystery elements in his early novel *Hide and Seek* (1854) and a few short stories. His *The Woman in White* (1860) is more a crime melodrama or gothic than a mystery. It concerns a woman kidnapped and held captive until she can be declared dead and her brother inherit the estate. *The Moonstone* (1868) is truly a detective novel, featuring Inspector Cuff, who is based on another actual member of the Detective Department, Jonathan Whicher.

Meanwhile, back in France, **Emile Gaboriau** (1833–1875) established himself as the most popular mystery writer before Conan Doyle. *L'Affaire Lerouge* (1863) features both a police detective, Lecoq, and an amateur sleuth, the latter a retired pawnbroker, Tabaret, who makes sharp observations and deductions that help solve the case. In several following novels, including *Monsieur Lecoq* (1869), the title character is featured, but Tabaret still appears at the end to point out the clues Lecoq has missed. According to Symons, Lecoq is “self-seeking and vain, but he is also honest” and “a master of disguise” (Symons, 51). Gaboriau also wrote a non-series (if you will) detective story with particular interest for Sherlockians. “The Little Old Man of Batignolles” (1870) is a novelette narrated by a medical student whose neighbor, Mechinet, is a police detective. He accompanies Mechinet in the investigation of the murder of the title character, beside whose body, scrawled in blood on the floor, is the fragment of a name (can you say *A Study in Scarlet*?). We can't prove that one was a source or inspiration for the other, but we do know that Conan Doyle read Gaboriau. In his *Memories and Adventures* (1924), ACD said he was attracted to Gaboriau by “the neat dovetailing of his plots.”

The first woman to write a mystery featuring a detective officer was the American **Anna Katherine Green** (1846–1935). (**Mary Elizabeth Braddon**, in *Lady Audley's Secret* [1862], included an amateur detective.) Green's *The Leavenworth Case* (1879) includes police detective Ebenezer Gryce, who investigates each of the sisters of the victim but eventually decides none of them could have done it because the murder weapon, a pistol, had been cleaned, and women never do that! The book was a big seller, and Green wrote many more mysteries.

A New Zealand barrister, **Fergus Hume** (1859–1932), wrote and self-published *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886). He had been turned down by every Australian publisher with some version of the observation, “No Colonial could write anything worth reading.” He imitated Gaboriau, saying he was “determined to write a book of the same class: containing a mystery, a murder, and a description of low life in Melbourne.” Its eventual success in Great Britain (where it sold 350,000 copies) led him to write more than a hundred other mysteries and thrillers, although none were nearly as successful.

The next year saw the debut of the Great Detective in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), but his initial impact on the public was not great, and I would like to include one work that appeared before Sherlock became a household word. Bibliographer and editor E. F. Bleiler called *The Passenger from Scotland Yard* (1888) by **Harry Freeman Wood** (1850–1915) the best detective story between *The Moonstone* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The title character is Detective Byde of Scotland Yard, who is on the trail of stolen gems apparently worth killing for. Much of the action takes place on a Paris-bound train.

While it is probably true that a writer continues to be influenced by other writers throughout his career, we’ll stop here since we’re focusing on predecessors. His multitudinous progeny will have to wait for another time.