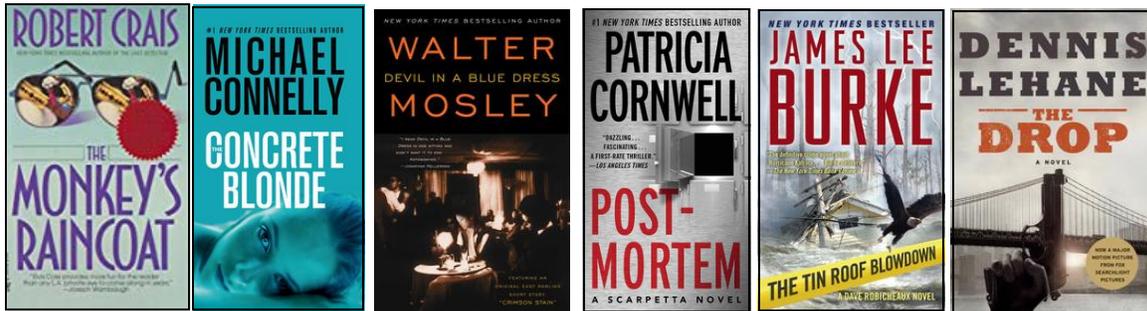


**Modern Hard-boiled Crime Fiction:
Explorations of conscience, morality and culture**

**5CLIR Seminar, Fall, 2017
Neil Novik, Moderator**

Thursdays, 10:00 AM – Noon, Lathrop Community, Easthampton



Hard Boiled Crime Fiction

Raymond Chandler, one of the inventors of the hard-boiled genre once said, it’s not the whodunit that matters in the end of a good detective novel, but the exploration of human nature, of the secrets that hide in daylight, of the darkness at the center of men’s souls that at times seeps out and drowns our natures in greed and despair and, of course, of the one man who spends his life in search of that “hidden truth,” abandoning everything except his honor.

This is the essence of hard-boiled crime fiction. Since its invention in the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s, most notably by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald, the genre has developed in unpredictable ways to meet the circumstances of an ever-changing, more complex and violent world with murkier moral and ethical boundaries: Women and minority writers and heroes entered the field; the lone private eye was no longer the only kind of hero—cops and even amateurs joined their ranks; sidekicks now play a role that was not envisioned decades earlier.

In this seminar, we will read and discuss six hard-boiled novels, all from about 1990 or later to explore some of the ways the genre has changed and adapted to a newer landscape. While there will be no formal presentations, the success of the seminar will depend on participants bringing to the table their own thoughts and insights on the books we read and the issues that they deal with, as well as their own enthusiasm for this kind of storytelling.

Passages

Each week, in addition to discussing overall themes, plots, characters, settings etc, there will an emphasis on individual passages within the books. Participants will be encouraged to highlight and read aloud any passage he or she believes has special significance, whether for its literary quality, political or social significance, cultural importance, etc. Passages can be as short as a single sentence to several pages in length. While this may be a new task for many readers of crime fiction, the purpose of emphasizing passages is to de-emphasize the “whodunit” quality of these books, and examine both the writing styles and broader themes that distinguish hard-boiled fiction. And because these sorts of passages can often stand alone, independent of the context of the story itself, there should be greater opportunity for wider participation in the discussion.

For the Fun of It

Despite the seriousness of these novels and our approach to discussing them, we should not forget that most people read hard-boiled fiction for the fun of it, whether it's for the joy of figuring out the mystery, the continuing development of an adored character, the occasional humor that exists throughout the genre, the sheer power and ingenuity of the writing or just the pleasure one finds in exceptional storytelling. Therefore, as moderator, I will also be dedicated to not taking the fun out of these books. Our discussions may use the books as starting points, but there will be nothing to stop them from going to other genres, other books or authors, or even real life. The discussions will go where they go. Such is the fun of great fiction.

Many more details about the seminar and a more precise schedule will be forthcoming and distributed to participants by mid-June.

BOOK LIST

***The Monkey's Raincoat* by Robert Crais (1987)**

The Money's Raincoat is Robert Crais's first novel, published in 1987. Featuring P.I. Elvis Cole and his powerful, dangerous, enigmatic partner, Joe Pike, it was nominated for four major mystery awards, and won two of them. Elvis is a version of Chandler's Philip Marlowe updated for the modern world. Like Marlowe, Elvis is a cynical, wise-cracking, mostly honorable hero, with a mostly clear moral compass. But since the modern world is so much tougher, a tougher hero is also called for, as well as an enigmatic sidekick, and that's where Joe Pike comes in. Quieter, yet more violent than Elvis, Joe is the perfect partner, and although they must navigate a much meaner and more violent landscape than Marlowe did, the general issues they confront are not so different than they were 50 years earlier. Crais's portraits of Los Angeles and Hollywood, and the people who live and work there, are razor sharp, and his stories combine these portraits with great suspense, surprising humor, some hapless cops (as well as some good ones), and some onstage violence that befits the story.

***The Concrete Blonde* by Michael Connelly (1994)**

In the 1950's, interest in crime fiction based not on the traditional Private Eye, but on the nuts and bolts of real police investigation began to grow. During the next several decades, writers such as Ed McBain and Joseph Wambaugh developed the so called "Police Procedural," adding dimensions not imagined decades earlier. But in the modern age, I believe no writer has done more for the police procedural and for the cop/hero than Michael Connelly. Heironymus (Harry) Bosch, a homicide cop in the L.A. Police Department, often in conflict with authority, and not caring at all for the politics of police work, lives by the code "everybody counts or nobody counts," and so investigates every crime with equal vigor, regardless of the victim's status in society.

The Concrete Blonde explores the investigation of a serial murder case known as the Dollmaker case, and combines a civil rights trial stemming from Harry's killing of the prime suspect two years earlier, with an investigation of a new murder fitting the Dollmaker pattern but occurring two years after the suspect's death.

Connelly's attention to detail, his Chanderlesque portrait of Los Angeles, and his descriptions of the darkness that inhabits Harry's world has made him one of the top-tier hard boiled writers working today.

***Dance Hall of the Dead* by Tony Hillerman (Optional) (1973)**

Tony Hillerman, who passed away in 2008, is best known for his series of eighteen books featuring Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn, two cops in the Navaho tribal area, in the Four Corners region of the American southwest. *Dance Hall of the Dead* (1973) is Hillerman's second book, a Leaphorn book, and, as all of the series books do, offers detailed observations on Navaho culture, traditions and rituals. In choosing books for this seminar, Hillerman's series proved the most difficult to choose from. So instead of talking about just the one book, we will spend one hour of the seminar discussing the series and Hillerman's influence and contribution to the genre. I am betting that most people who read crime fiction have some familiarity with Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn, but if you don't, *Dance Hall of the Dead* is a great place to start.

***Devil in a Blue Dress* by Walter Mosley (1990)**

"I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar." With those words, the first line of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy Rawlins stepped into the hard boiled genre. Walter Mosley broke the racial barrier in modern crime fiction, placing Easy in the post-WWII Watts section of Los Angeles, an area where black labor was vital, but black skin was despised. Easy gets 'trapped' into working as an unofficial P.I. for a white man, and so has to carefully navigate two worlds—the black neighborhoods and characters of Watts, and the rich white man's world of greed and corruption.

Mosley's mysteries have all the elements of solid hard-boiled fiction (with the exception of a Professional P.I.), including a dangerous sidekick, Mouse, who has no moral compass at all, but who can usually be counted on to work with Easy without killing him. Mosley himself has often said he uses his fiction to explore broad philosophical questions, such as trying to be perfect in a wildly imperfect and unpredictable world, and it is probably true that *Devil in a Blue Dress*, like so many books in the genre, raises more questions than it answers.

***Post-Mortem* by Patricia Cornwell (1990)**

Postmortem represented a turning point, not only in crime fiction by women, but in crime fiction overall, winning all the major awards for crime writing, the only book ever to receive all these honors in the same year. Though Cornwell's heroine, Dr. Kay Scapetta, a Virginia medical examiner, is not the first crime fiction heroine in the modern hard-boiled era—most credit Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone and/or Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski with that honor—she is the first female physician crime fighter and more importantly, probably the first (male or female) to use modern forensic science so directly in the investigation.

Scarpetta operates in the male-dominated world of police, forensic medicine, lawyers and politicians, without the benefit of support from female colleagues, and her isolation, an important

theme in *Postmortem*, recurs throughout the series. And although the forensic details of the investigation and physical examinations vital to the investigation, the crimes in the book occur "off-stage," so our exposure to violence is minimized.

This is a ground-breaking book about a true crusader for justice, told with ingenuity and compassion, and opening doors for many female crime writers whose characters break the gender barriers of science based investigations.

***The Tin Roof Blowdown* by James Lee Burke (2007)**

Pulitzer nominee and two-time Edgar winner James Lee Burke is best known for his series featuring Dave Robicheaux, originally of the New Orleans PD, now working out of neighboring New Iberia. The book, written mostly in the first person voice, opens with Robicheaux dreaming about his time in Vietnam, and awakening to say that he thought he would "never again have to witness the wide-scale suffering of innocent citizens, nor the betrayal and abandonment of our countrymen when they need us most...but that was before Katrina." At times difficult and heartbreaking, *The Tin Roof Blowdown* is not only a story of senseless violence, the criminal incompetence of government and of lost faith, it is, at the same time, also a story of redemption, courage and conscience.

Few writers can match Burke in the art of wordcraft. He is constantly weaving beautiful, poetic prose into his fiction to describe basic truths about human beings as well as the physical and social environment surrounding their struggles.

***The Drop* by Dennis Lehane (2014)**

Difficult to pigeonhole into a specific genre, *The Drop* has all the atmosphere of a hard boiled novel with almost none of its hallmarks: No P.I., a cop who is on the outside looking in, no real investigation. At the same time the darkness of the novel is set against a budding love story, the rescue of a dog, and a softly told search for belonging. I think this is an extraordinary novel, much deeper and more revealing than the movie from which it emerged (Lehane wrote both). Its character portraits range from gentle to tragic to frightening, but are always authentic. Combine all this with streets that can hardly be meaner, and this novel remains one of my favorite Lehane books among all his brilliant works