**David Papineau**

ROBERT B. PARKER Stardust 256pp. New York: Putnam. 318.95. 0 399 13537 5 ELMORE LEONARD Get Shorty 292pp. Viking. £13.99. 0 670 83500 5

*[From the Times Literary Supplement 30 November 1990]*

When Ludwig Wittgenstein went to live in isolation in Connemara in 1948, he had trouble maintaining his supply of detective stories. By chance, however, he found an old favourite, *Rendezvous with Fear*, by Norbert Davis, in the village shop. He wrote to a friend:

It may sound crazy, but when I recently re-read the story I liked it again so much that I thought l`d really like to write to the author and thank him. If this is nuts don't be surprised, for so am I.

However, as Ray Monk explains in his new biography (reviewed in the *TLS* of October 19), Wittgenstein never found out what address to write to. This was bad luck for Davis, since by 1948 he was broke, and reduced to asking Raymond Chandler for hand-outs. The next year he died in poverty. So he never knew, as Monk observes, that he had probably written the only book Wittgenstein liked enough to want to write and thank the author.

Wittgenstein was no normal don, but he shared a taste for detective stories with many of his university colleagues. Nor is the connection between universities and detective stories restricted to the provision of readers. There are also university authors, from Dorothy Sayers and Michael Innes to Umberto Eco. There are university settings, from Colin Dexter's Oxford to Sarah Paretsky's University of Chicago. There are even, of all things, university detectives, like Charlotte MacLeod's Professor Shandy, or Amanda Cross's and Joan Smith's literary sleuths from Departments of English.

The reason for all this donnish enthusiasm is that detective stories provide fantasies for academics. Even geniuses like to dream, and what more pleasant dreams could there be, for people whose worth depends on their brains, than stories in which the intellect triumphs over evil? What is more, in detective stories the enemy is real evil, murderous evil, not just the evil of the editor who turns down your articles, or the professor who schedules your lectures for Friday afternoons. In detective stories we can face up to opponents who are worthy of us, master-devils like Moriarty, or poisonous scumbags from the mean streets, in place of the petty functionaries who demean our real lives.

The superior intellect of the detective shines out all through the story. In addition to solving crimes, the detective is cool in a crisis. When quick action is called for, and those of smaller brains would get flustered, the detective's poise remains undisturbed. At the climax of *The Maltese Falcon*, the fat man warns Sam Spade, "Sir, men are likely to forget in the heat of the action where their best interest lies and let their emotions carry them away." But fictional detectives are not as other men, and, from Spade to Lord Peter Wimsey, emotion never stops them picking the precise moment to leap across the room and disarm the villain. (The business of disarming villains itself illustrates the superior force of the detective's intellect. The normal procedure, when threatened by some dummy with a gun, is simply to remove it from his grasp before he can spot what you are doing. "I hope you're not letting yourself be influenced by the guns these pocket-edition desperadoes are waving", Spade says to the fat man, later in the same scene, when Joel Cairo and his accomplice start cutting up nasty. "I've practised taking them away from both of them.”)

It gets even better. Not only does the detective's superior brain leave the criminals helpless, but the detective has endless opportunity to draw attention to his or her cleverness. You don't even need a crime. The most mundane pretext entitles a Holmes or a Poirot to display his abnormal ratiocinative powers, and every time the onlookers reel about in fond amazement. Every intellectual's dream, in a nutshell.

The logic of this fantasy, however, imposes constraints on the genre. If the detective is so smart, then the reader cannot share the detective's point of view, lest the sleuth's superior problem-solving ability short-circuit the narrative. So the standard solution, from Poe's Dupin stories onwards, is to have some not-so-bright friend who reports the evidence as it happens, but waits with the reader for the solution. Few writers have managed to make much of this contrivance. Holmes's Watson is a real character, I suppose, and handy in a tight corner, but of his essence he is dull. Perhaps the best compromise is in Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe stories, where Wolfe's sidekick, Archie Goodwin, is a fast-talking lad about town, a smart fellow in his own right, but not quite as smart as his employer, and so capable of missing the odd vital inference. But even in the Wolfe stories we have to suffer the interminable final scene in which the detective spends pages explaining the ingenious reasoning which led him to the murderer.

An alternative solution is to have less puzzle-solving and more action. This is the main difference between American detective stories and British whodunnits. The central premiss remains the same: the detective wins because he is smart. But in the American hard-boiled genre, the detective uses his wits to anticipate and foil his opponents' manoeuvres, rather than to unravel them afterwards. While dispensing with the need for a secondary narrator, this shift away from puzzle-solving does, however, leave the American detective without the normal means of drawing attention to his razor-sharp wit. So instead of amazing the bystanders with virtuoso feats of deduction, he stops them in their tracks with wisecracks. "You're even dumber than you think I think you are", J. J. Giddes tells the investigating officer in *Chinatown*, that perfect movie distillation of the private eye story, and is on his way before his audience can figure out what he's said.

The American genre is superior not only in pace and excitement. By replacing the static tableaux of the whodunnit with the urgent questing of the private eye, the hard-boiled form opens up a larger social canvas. Along with this move into a wider world, the hard-boiled story also offers new moral challenges to the detective's rationality. Since he is no longer merely an observant buffoon, a voyeur of wrongdoing, but himself caught up in the action, the detective must now choose a path which metes out deserts in due proportion. When Sam Spade sends Brigid O'Shaughnessy up the river, or when Philip Marlowe turns away from Terry Lennox at the end of *The Long Goodbye*, they show a nicety of moral judgment which complements the rest of their intellectual powers.

For some readers, the insistent masculinity of the wise-cracking American sleuth is a draw-back. This charge, however, no longer applies. While the original hard-boiled novel was certainly a male preserve, in marked contrast to the many women authors and heroines of whodunnits, the last couple of decades of feminism have created room for women detectives who act first and talk fast with the best of them. Nor is it any longer accurate to refer to the hard-boiled novel as American, since by now there are probably versions of the genre set in every country on earth. Of course some of these exports are more successful than others, and not every milieu happily accommodates the style, but it is hard to deny that the American detective story injected life into a slowly dying form. Certainly Wittgenstein knew what he liked. At one point in his stay in Ireland. he had nothing left to read except Dorothy Sayers. "This was so bl . . . foul it depressed me", he wrote to the friend who sent him *Black Mask and Detective Story Magazine*. "When I opened one of your mags it was like getting out of a stuffy room into the fresh air."

Robert B. Parker is widely regarded as the modern successor of Chandler. The author of twenty-odd best-sellers featuring the Boston private eye, Spenser, Parker was recently chosen by the Chandler estate to complete an unfinished manuscript by the master. This re-construction was published as *Poodle Springs* earlier this year (it was reviewed in the TLS of August 24), and reads as a faithful, if minor, addition to the Chandler canon, for which Parker is to be thanked. But his own Spenser series has suffered a sad falling-off, after a strong beginning, and the latest offerings are about as close to Chandler as Barbara Cartland is to Emily Bronte.

Parker himself is a classic example of the academic connection. Before turning to detective stories, he was Professor of English at Northeastern University, Massachusetts. It is no accident that the name Spenser echoes Chandler's Marlowe. The early volumes in the Spenser series brought literacy and wit to tight, fast-talking plots in the classic mould. But since then Spenser has contracted a terminal case of new-mannism, and is slowly suffocating himself with his obsessive apologies for his natural inclinations. The rot set in as early as the second volume, *God Save the Child*, when Spenser traded in his affable blonde girlfriend for the earnest olive-skinned psychotherapist, Susan Silverman. And by the time we get to the seventh, *Looking for Rachel Wallace*, in which Spenser learns to respect the radical feminist he is hired to protect, he can't drink a beer without tying himself up in some elaborate rationale for his unfortunate masculinity. Spenser still keeps in shape, with regular visits to the gym, but by now this is as much for the moral uplift as from professional need, and in the last few volumes Spenser and Susan have become a parody of the modern American fantasy: regular work-outs and a good therapist will conquer all.

Early in the series Parker tried to halt the decline by introducing Hawk, an omnipotent shaven-headed African-American who assists Spenser but lacks his scruples about violence, sex and unsound behaviour generally. After Spenser and Hawk have been holed up on a diet of muesli bars in *A Catskill Eagle*, Hawk is hungry "for some stuff ain't good for me, you know. Something with a lotta chlorestrol, maybe too much salt. Some additives." Hawk is a plus, despite the crassness of casting a black man as Spenser's dark side. But even Hawk is becoming infected with standards, and in Parker's latest, *Stardust*, we find him turning down a perfectly good offer from a glamorous television star simply because her soul is flawed.

*Stardust* is a tired effort. The world of television production provides a new setting for Spenser, but the plot is elementary mechanics. The glamorous star, an unhappy lush, receives unpleasant threats. Spenser tours the country interviewing the suspects, in strict rotation, until he finds the guilty party. At the end the star is taken off to Spenser's and Susan's cabin in Maine to undergo the inevitable cure by exercise and therapy.

The only thing that keeps these books going is the jokes. Spenser is still a fast talker, a good hand at puncturing pretension. But by now even the badinage has become perfunctory. "You don't have to be a wise guy", a character tells Spenser half-way through *Stardust*. "I know," he replies, "l do it voluntarily." This is the trouble with Spenser's latest adventures. The humour is suspended in mid-air, like the Cheshire Cat's grin, without any real body of narrative to support it.

Towards the end of his life, Chandler ex-pressed a dislike for the new generation of hard-boiled writers, "because most of them are travelling on borrowed gas, and I don't think you have any right to that unless you can travel further than the man from whom you borrowed the gas". However, if Robert B. Parker has been going nowhere for some time, Elmore Leonard has been taking the hard-boiled form to places it hasn't been before.

On first reading Leonard, you can have trouble finding your bearings. A typical Leonard protagonist might have done time inside, maybe he has a job in a car lot. he could even have tattoos on his arms. But he notices what's happening, he sees the funny side of things. He comes across some scam, some undeserving bad people are about to take some money from some undeserving rich people. A woman may be involved, she's in danger of being dealt out, so she teams up with our hero. And then, faithful to the genre, he uses his brains to outwit the bad guys, and arranges matters so that everybody gets exactly what they ought, which often includes a due share for him and his girlfriend.

Leonard is able to vary this formula freely, since he has new characters in each book (apart from the engaging car thief, Stick, who needs a second volume because he finishes in jail at the end of the first). Sometimes Leonard's heroes are policemen, though they are usually suspended or on leave, working on their own time. The locations switch, with Detroit and Miami as recurring favourites. Leonard's language is flexible and precise, demotic to the point of ungrammaticality, a sustained and triumphant verbal joke which out-Runyons Runyon. He uses this style to freewheel through his characters' points of view, showing us the chilling insides of a gallery of weirdos to set against the cool confidence of his laconic heroes. His plots are sculpted and satisfying, full of clever inversions, tension and comedy.

Leonard's most recent book, *Get Shorty*, has a slightly higher-toned hero than usual, since he is required to fit into a Hollywood setting. Chili Palmer is a pleasant, unassuming Mafia loan shark from Miami. He comes to Holly wood in pursuit of a man, and pursued by another. He meets a producer who is trying to make a film with the help of an ex-actress and money from some coke dealers. Chili is both trustworthy and smart, despite his background, so he eliminates the coke dealers, finds his man, outmanoeuvres his pursuer, gets the girl, and goes into film production himself.

*Get Shorty* is more of a confection than usual for Leonard, lower on menace and higher of humour. But this is because it is a book full of stories, and these stories leave less room for action. Along the way, we are told the story of the film the producer is trying to make, the story of the film the ex-actress wants to work in, the story Chili uses to trick his pursuer, and best of all, Chili's own story, the story we are reading, which is such a good story that, ever time Chili tells it to anybody, the hearer think it must be a film script, and wants to buy it. Except that it doesn't quite work as a film, the ending's not quite right, so, as the real story develops, Chili is continually revising his story to make it better. This is all quite effortlessly done, but it exposes the mechanics of story-telling just as effectively as the earnest self referentiality of the latest postmodernist. Elmore Leonard may only write crime stories, but he writes rings around most authors with loftier ambitions.