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The Academic Mystery Novel: A Study in Genre

Abstract

This dissertation aims to delineate characteristic generic features of the academic mystery novel with a view to underlying its postmodern hybridity, where the inherent metafictionality of the classical detective novel meets textual, generic, and cultural elements typical of the academic novel. The academic mystery novel is usually perceived either as a subgenre of the classical detective novel (the cozy mystery) or as a subgenre of the academic (university) novel. This double classification constitutes the basis for the subsequent discussion concerning the characteristics of the academic mystery: a genre where a criminal intrigue is set in the academic milieu and all characters typical of the classical detective formula, including the amateur detective, are academics from different echelons of the university hierarchy.

The authors of the novels in question are well-established scholars, who enrich the generic convention of the detective novel with various issues from their fields of study. On the one hand, the convention projects the reader's generic expectations concerning the pattern of action, types of characters, setting, etc. On the other hand, it is supposed to "block" the potential educational and pedagogical functions of the text (except for the inevitable punishment for the crime committed). Like the authors, the protagonists of academic mystery novels are scholars, with a knack for solving criminal conundrums, who utilize their academic expertise – analogous to that of the authors – in the course of the criminal investigation. Their analytical and interpretive skills as well as first-hand knowledge of customs and mores of academia turns them into amateur detectives without whom the official police investigators would have definitely more problems with identifying the perpetrator.

This dissertation consists of the introduction and three chapters which propose an analysis of selected academic mystery novels with regard to different theoretical approaches. The texts are scrutinized in view of the classical detective novel (Chapter One), the academic novel (Chapter Two), and as supplementary reading materials to be used during academic courses in different fields of study – a popular form of gaining knowledge (Chapter Three). In the concluding chapter, it is claimed that the academic mystery novel should be classified as an important subgenre of academic fiction which aims not only to present and comment on the problems the contemporary academia is haunted by, but also to inspire the reader to explore various aspects of scientific and cultural knowledge.

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