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BOOK REVIEW

The flaws in the structure of *The Floating Admiral* by the Detection Club.

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The Floating Admiral

Author(s)- G.K. Chesterton, Victor L. Whitechurch, G.D.H. & M.Cole, Henry Wade, Agatha Christie, John Rode, Milward Kennedy, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ronald A. Knox,

Freeman Wills Crofts, Clemence Dane, Edgar Jepson, Anthony Berkeley (All members of the Detection Club)

First published in 1931 by Macmillan, London.

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ABSTRACT:

This book review shall begin by looking at the structural flaws in *‘The floating Admiral’* despite being a part of the Golden age of Detective Fiction. A compilation of incongruent twelve chapters written by twelve prominent detective fiction authors, this text breaches the sacrosanct equation between the reader and the author(s) where the author should provide the reader with equal opportunities and clues to detect the criminal. In fact, it defies many rules formulated and widely circulated by the same authors. I chose this text published in 1931 because it throws light on the detective fiction writing process and detection beyond the actual text and detective fiction as a genre during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. Not much has been written about it as it is not a good specimen of the genre but its importance lies in how it bloats the flaws in the detective fictions of this age.

The first published collaborative work between a group of fourteen professional and published detective fiction authors, *The Floating Admiral* despite bearing the markers of a typical detective fiction is not a blue blood of the genre. As Dorothy Sayers mentions in the introduction to the novel, *The Floating Admiral* is the detection game as played out on paper by certain members of the Detective club among themselves. The novel itself becomes a site of chase for these detective fiction authors. Every author is questioning

the clues provided by the previous author/s. Every certainty is questioned. Even the confirmed identity of the victim is speculated in the middle of the novel.

“Inspector Rudge says ‘We have to question everything, sir, as you know’”(The Floating Admiral, 169)¹

This excessive exercise in detection leads to the damning of the project. Too many detectives in the garb of detective fiction authors spoil the suspense. Probably, it is more fun for the author to have concocted the plot than for the readers to read it. The absence of a controlling author and an omniscient author makes the plot suffer. As every author adds to the mystifying burden of truth, the truth becomes too complicated to be managed by the end. No wonder, Anthony Berkeley names the last chapter to the novel written by him as 'Clearing up the mess'. He struggles to tie down the loose ends left by the previous authors. Berkeley says 'I deem more like the curate's egg, good in spots but essentially rotten' ²

Despite Sayers' declaration of the two rules to be followed by each writers, every author is pre-occupied in proving his or her own wit. The rules clearly state that each writer must construct his or her own chapter with a definite solution in mind. He or she must not introduce new complications merely to make it more difficult. To make sure that every author is playing fair, each author is bound to deliver the manuscript of his own chapter, with his own proposed solution of the mystery. These solutions are printed at the end of the book for the interest of the curious readers to know what each author intended to do with the clues he or she has provided. Also, each writer is bound to deal faithfully with all the difficulties left for his consideration by his predecessors

and leave enough space for the next author to build his case. Yet not all of it has been followed sincerely. Every author does frame a chapter and a solution but fails in smoothly incorporating the information provided in previous chapters. So much so that at one point there is a discord regarding the name of the Floating Admiral- Penistone or Pennystone. One of them confesses the arbitrariness of these chapters and says 'I am frankly, in a complete muddle as to what has happened and have tried to write a chapter that anybody can use to promote anything they like.'³ Considering the different approaches and rhetoric of the authors of this group, each chapter adds to the literary game of unprecedented consequences. If G.K. Chesterton is rich in prose, Agatha Christie supplies a talkative female inn-keeper. John Rhode elaborates the complicated science and timings of the tides through Neddy Ware and Berkeley chooses to let the real murderer die in the jail cell thereby furnishing no sense of justice in accordance to his modernist approach. The flow of the plot is disturbed by the new style of each author. Clemence Dame complains about the plot and its relation to the final revelation in her notes to the penultimate chapter as 'quite inexplicable to me'². However a closer study of the text may help us understand the problems of such a collaborative detective fiction.

There is sacrosanct contract between a mystery reader and the author. The way the author cannot use intuitions, ghosts and dreams to reveal the mystery, the author also cannot use foul play or opacity while revealing the mystery. In the oath taken by the members of the Detection Club, the detective fiction authors do promise that the detectives will detect the crimes presented to them using wits and not by relying on

divine revelation, intuition, magic, coincidence or acts of God. This sets a ground for the readers to have a fair chance at guessing the guilty party. However, a lot of it is not followed in the text. The readers lose their shot at guessing the murderer of the floating Admiral because of the pantheon of authors with no certain frame work.

According to Tzvetan Todorov, the most important feature of a detective fiction is not the story of the crime but the story of its detection by the detective⁴. The real pleasure of the narrative lies in the questioning of the witnesses and the scrutiny of the available clues. This assumes that the story of the crime is defined and locked in the past. The detective does not have the luxury of reconstructing the story of crime from the past. All he can do is deal with the emerging consequences of the past that has seeped into the present. The material evidences that he has of the past serves him as clues or as red herrings. His complete lack of knowledge of the past can be filled if he is able to follow the right clues and not red herrings. John Cawelti thinks that this might set the detective on unknown and fruitless quests that might become increasingly ambiguous and exasperating even for the plot and/ or yield multiple versions of the mystery.⁵ The Floating admiral is an exemplary text proving this point. Though the story of the crime is not as important as the story of detection, its flaws may disorient the story of detection. Here, the authors of the text are developing the story of crime along with the story of detection. Traditionally, the story of detection should meet the story of crime somewhere close to the denoement. This, further ruptures the smooth flow of the plot towards the final revelation of the mystery. A few authors send Inspector Rudge on wild goose chases. Ronald Knox in his chapter confesses:

'What could that evidence be? Rudge tortured his imagination vainly over the problem'
(The Floating Admiral,163)¹

Further, when the plot gets too thick to handle and nowhere close to the revelation of the mystery, Dame cleverly introduces the second murder, the murder of Celie in the penultimate chapter to clear out a lot of suspicion. Still, the unfortunate Berkeley has to incorporate all these in his final solution.

One of the most fatal inclusion in the novel is the chapter by Ronal Knox- Thirty nine articles of doubt. Knox sends Inspector Rudge on an uncharted adventure of cataloguing the doubts. Knox uses this chapter to fancy his vagaries. He directly or indirectly foregrounds the Chinese link of every character involving the murder. Against his own Decalogue on detective fiction, he amusingly declares in his notes to the chapter 'I once laid down that no Chinaman should appear in a detective story. I feel inclined to extend the rule so as to apply to the residents of China.'⁷ Later it is evident that not just the murdered, Walter Denny, but the Admiral , Walter Fitzgerald, Neddy Ware, and Mr Holland have been to China which seems an overdoing it. Not just that, Knox also accepts the double identity of Walter Fitzgerald-impersonating the Admiral in China while defaming his position and as the legal guardian of Elma providing consent to Mr. Holland to marry Elma.

In this process the puzzle element is lost. The presentation of the mystery followed by the golden rules of detective fiction is disturbed. No more, the readers are able to carry on their own search for the truth, using the clues and their own reasoning abilities as the rules have been flouted. Berkeley even casually dismisses the whole

chapter by Knox when Inspector Rudge says

'Well, there already were the answers to any number of his thirty-nine article of doubt.'¹(The floating Admiral,163)

With the wealth of details given to the readers and the succeeding authors, the later authors have to discredit a few clues from the first half of the novel. For instance, when the superintendent asks Rudge about the copy of the evening newspaper in the dead Admirals pocket. Rudge says

'No, Sir. He must have picked it up in Whyemouth, perhaps at the Lord Marshall. I dont think there is much importance to be attached to it'¹. (The Floating Admiral ,252)

However, it should not go unnoticed that despite the burden of every unnecessary details, we are not told about the night before the arrest when Rudge puts together the pieces of the puzzle. It seems accidental and an act of coincidence. As Wright describes in his 'Twenty rules for writing detective stories' - 'The Culprit must be determined by logical deductions- not by accidents or coincidence or unmotivated confessions. To solve a criminal case in this latter fashion is like sending the reader on a deliberate wild- goose chase..' ⁸ This kind of leap in plot has left the denoement as opaque to the readers till Rudge explains it to us.

A detective fiction is constructed backwards with the denoement determining the order and causality. All the circumstances of the case must be explained to the readers immediately in terms of the solution provided, or the whole premise upon which the readability of a detective fiction is based cracks open. This regulating

principle defines the method of the detective who seeks to reconstruct the past by reasoning. Yet, none of the authors abide by it in the collaborative novel '*The Floating Admiral*'. Every author of this novel tries to complicate the denouement or create a new one within the allotted chapter. The story of detection is suppose to unfold the story of crime. While all the authors except lets say Berkeley, choose to layer the plot with their own individual insights revealed in the solutions provided in the end. Not many of them try to build the plot as much as they want to etch their own stories complimented by their own solutions.

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Collaborative novel, Detection Club, Breach in the Author- Reader relationship, Golden rules of Detective Fiction, Faulty denoeument

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