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Abstract

This paper explores the inter-war collaborative works of the Detection Club as a source of commentary and insight on the ludic and dialogic nature of Golden Age detective fiction. Less well known than the single-authored works of Detection Club members, the multi-authored *Behind the Screen*, *The Scoop*, *The Floating Admiral*, *Ask a Policeman* and *Six Against the Yard* capitalise upon the genre's capacity for intertextual play and self-conscious engagements with literary formula and convention. By adopting a range of collaborative approaches and working in different combinations, the joint authors (including Berkeley, Christie, Crofts, and Sayers) construct playful textual 'spaces' that foreground gameplay and dialogism as key dynamics in the writing and reception of detection fiction. The discussion deals with the texts and their games in two groupings, showing the appositeness of Barthes' notion of the 'writerly text' and Bruner's concept of subjunctivity to the first grouping, and of Bakhtinian dialogism and 'carnival' to the second. Attention is thus drawn to the richness of these texts as a source of commentary and illustration of the signature playful dynamic of Golden Age detective fiction.

Keywords: Golden Age detective fiction, the Detection Club, play, dialogism, intertextuality, collaboration.

Green, A. and Dalrymple, R.

Playing at Murder: The collaborative works of members of the Detection Club.

Introduction

Playfulness and pleasure are essential components in the production and reception of literary texts. In *The Parliament of Fowls* (383, l. 15), Chaucer reflects on the balance between 'lust' and 'lore' in written texts, thus conceiving of them as textual 'spaces' of entertainment and playfulness, as well as of learning. Heidegger, in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (44), proposes that literary works release unique creative possibilities for the forging and articulation of meanings that would otherwise remain hidden. These two commentators, among many, signal the unique place of literary texts in allowing writers and readers to play with potential meanings and the 'selves' that lie behind literary production. Each text represents a creative 'playspace' within which the known world and its potential meanings can be broken down and reshaped.

If this propensity can be claimed for all literary production, its implications are nowhere more patent than in Golden Age detective fiction. The classical detective novel takes as its central dynamic the play of difference and competing possibilities. Each text embodies competing versions of events, ascribes shifting significance to clues of place and time, and engages readers in the central intellectual challenge of unmasking the malefactor before the novel's denouement. Todorov's classic analysis of the

genre has shown how each example of the form offers not one story but two: the 'absent but real' narrative of the crime itself, and the 'present but insignificant' story of the detective's efforts to uncover the truth (45–6). In negotiating the ontological-epistemological gulf and interplay between these two narratives, each detective novel becomes distinctive in its use of motifs, conventions and expectations. Self-reflexivity serves as a means of defining a detective novel's shape and keeping each new example of the genre fresh. The result is an engaging dynamic of play and ultimately, as Green argues, a degree of generic self-criticism.

This paper draws attention to the co-authored works of members of the Detection Club as a valuable source of commentary and illustration of the playfully self-referential character of Golden Age detective fiction. Written in the early to mid-1930s, in a period when the Club was inaugurated and its membership and practices consolidated, these joint-authored works have garnered scant critical attention to date[1] and have never been considered synoptically as a collection of related texts. Yet as the paper aims to show, the Detection Club's joint efforts reward close attention, not least in their extension of the genre's signature ludic dynamics into new dimensions of literary practice. For while these works had a pragmatic impetus behind them, being written to fund procurement of meeting premises for the Club in Soho, they are strikingly experimental in method, offering implicit commentary on the inherently playful dynamics of the genre. Five in number, these collaborative texts will be dealt with in two groups. In the first, comprising the novellas *Behind the Screen* and *The Scoop* and the novel *The Floating Admiral* (all written in 1930 and 1931),

we illuminate the works' textuality with reference to Roland Barthes' concept of the 'writerly text' and Jerome Bruner's notion of 'subjunctification'. In the second, comprising the novel *Ask a Policeman* (1933) and the short story collection *Six Against the Yard* (1936), we apply Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of carnival and polyphony to illuminate this ludic design.[2] As we shall see, each of these works takes as its starting point a distinctly different approach to the process of collaborative writing, and each, therefore, inevitably engages the authors involved in different kinds of literary and detective game-playing.

Behind the Screen (1930)*, The Scoop* (1931) *and The Floating Admiral* (1931): Brunerian 'Subjunctivising space' and the Barthesian 'writerly text'

In *Behind the Screen*, *The Scoop* and *The Floating Admiral*, the authors play out a sequence of compositional games that test the parameters of detective fiction. They explore not only the implications of collaboration upon the writing of literary texts, but also the experiences of reading detective fiction and the role this plays in the composition of meaning.

The first of the Detection Club collaborations was *Behind the Screen*, a short work composed in six instalments by collaborating authors Hugh Walpole, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Anthony Berkeley, E. C. Bentley and Ronald Knox, serially broadcast on the radio with a transcript also published in *The Listener* in the summer of 1930. Centred upon the murder of middle-aged businessman Paul Dudden, whose stabbed corpse is found stowed behind the titular screen in the parlour of the

household where he has been lodging, the novella pursues a literary 'game'
in two respects. First, the contributing authors playfully re-construe each
other's clues and plot devices adding twists and turns to the narrative and
highlighting a carousel of different suspects as the literary relay race
unfolds. Second, the broadcast audience/magazine readership is encouraged
to engage in their own competitive sport: they are to write to *The Listener* to
propose their own solutions to the mystery. The contest was adjudicated by
novelist Milward Kennedy who eventually awarded the first prize of ten
guineas to one E. M. Jones of Harbone, Birmingham, third prize –
appropriately enough – going to a joint entry between two collaborating
competitors (*Screen* 225).

In this rich context of competition and gameplay the joint authors
sketched out a narrative design that was partly independent and partly
shared. Sayers relates how: 'the first three authors carried the story along
according to their own several fancies; while the last three used their wits, in
consultation, to unravel the clues presented to them by the first three' (228–
9). Thus, the more improvisational writing of Walpole, Christie and Sayers
in the first three instalments stands in contrast to the jointly constructed
second half of the novel, in which Berkeley, Bentley and Knox advance
their agreed solution. With the contributing authors thus competing as much
as collaborating, and the audience/readership actively encouraged to
propose solutions of their own, this first experiment in the joint-authored
detection novel can helpfully be considered in relation to Roland Barthes'
distinction in *S/Z* between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts – texts which
respectively discourage or encourage readers to challenge the premises and

parameters of the fictive world with which they are presented. In the collaborative and competitive dimensions of *Behind the Screen,* we see an outworking (several decades before Barthes' text appeared) of the 'writerly' text in practice. The work's textuality actively opens up spaces for contestation and disputation of competing versions of events. This scope for 'writerly' intervention is signalled by the questions posed by Milward Kennedy to *Listener* readers at the end of the second instalment. While Question A1 is more redolent of the 'readerly' text, where closed or restricted options are represented by a multiple choice (Was Paul Dudden's death Murder, Suicide or Accident?), Question A3 is more open, evaluative or 'writerly' in nature: 'By whom were the wounds in Dudden's neck inflicted? When? Where? With what motive?' Here entrants are given a wider scope to consider the potential implications and meanings of Walpole's and Christie's instalments and to become active 'writers' of the potentialities of the tale. Still other questions offer the opportunity for fuller 'writerly' engagement with the text. Question C, for example, requires readers, in not more than 200 words, either to outline how 'a charge of murder could be brought against one or more persons, and what persons' or to 'outline the strongest arguments available for the defense' should a trial for murder ensue (219).

The competition thus allows readers as much freedom as the text's own investigator, Inspector Rice, to pursue their interpretations and give rein to their imaginations, and it is evident from Kennedy's subsequent report on the competition that many exercised considerable creative energies and imagination in their responses. While ultimately the competition had to

be judged upon the 'correctness' of responses according to the authorised solution, and Rice the detective thus exerts a 'readerly' power over the text, the 'writerly' possibilities of this first joint Detection Club effort show evident relish in engaging multiple parties in the game of speculating and positing what exactly has been concealed 'behind the screen'.

The following year the Detection Club authors adopted a different compositional approach in their second novella and serial broadcast work, *The Scoop*. In this work, whose opening premise depicts the murder of both a young woman and the *Morning Star* journalist who is assigned to cover the story, the contributing authors operate to a shared design from the outset. Sayers (whose prominent role as spokesperson and apologist imply her central role in the writing and theorisation of all of these collaborative works), provides us with an interesting insight into the ways in which the 'game' is different this time. The plot, she reveals, 'was planned in rough outline by all the authors in the committee before the broadcasting of Chapter 1' (228). While each contributor was then left relatively free 'to develop his own style and method', reference back to the shared design was required in the development of key incidents and plotting: 'any point of detail which arose in the course of working the chapter out being decided in consultation with myself and his other fellow-authors' (228). Finally, the extent of inter-collaborator play was this time further restricted by the repeat involvement of the authors, each producing not one but two chapters of the work (Figure 1):

Author	Chapter numbers	
Dorothy L. Sayers	1	12
Agatha Christie	2	4
E. C. Bentley	3	8
Anthony Berkeley	5	9
Freeman Wills Crofts	6	11
Clemence Dane	7	10

Figure 1: Distribution of chapters in *The Scoop*

This meant that each contributing author in *The Scoop* must necessarily remain invested in the serialistic development of the narrative, re-engaging with it at a later stage and taking, as it were, a second 'bite at the cherry'. This greater sense of investment in the game is further nuanced by the differing distribution of each author's two chapters (see Figure 1). The fact that Sayers, for example, writes both the first and the last chapters, means that her 'power' in the game is, arguably the greater, being both the starter and the finisher of the tale. Christie's involvement – and perhaps her investment – in the game may be of quite a different order, as both of her chapters are completed within the first half of the novella.

Interestingly, the balance of competition and collaboration evident in the writing process, is mirrored in the text itself: *Morning Star* journalist

Dennis Oliver investigates the murders in parallel with the Yard's Chief Inspector Bradford but the two ultimately team up towards the plot's denouement when a murder attempt is made on fellow *Star* employee and love interest of Oliver, Beryl Blackwood.

With the collaborating authors working to a shared design and with the element of reader competition discounted this time, the 'writerly' features of *The Scoop* are less pronounced than was the case in *Behind the Screen*. Yet the overall character of the project remains sufficiently ludic that we might apply another lens from theory to illuminate its aesthetics, this time drawn from educationalist Jerome Bruner. In *Actual Minds: Possible Worlds*, a text which engages with Barthes and a wide range of both literary and educational theory, Bruner distinguishes between the 'narrative' (tale-telling) and the 'paradigmatic' (meaning-making and extrapolation) domains of a text. He argues how these interwoven 'modes of thought' operate simultaneously within literary texts, each providing 'distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality' (Bruner 12). Made possible in literature as not always in life, the convergence of the two modes creates, in Bruner's term, a 'subjunctivising space' of possibility and significatory play where acts of exploratory synthesis, (re-)creation and (mis-)reading are possible with the result that stories create a reality of their own' (43).

Bruner's notion resonates with the pronounced ludic dimension of *The Scoop* which, as its very title implies, engages in a good deal of in-jokery centred on the implication of the text in the joint media of print and radio (see Weedon). The 'subjunctivised space' of the daily newspaper

forms a preoccupation throughout the text: vignettes of the physical printing

presses in motion frame the work in Chapters 1 and 12 while in between

much commentary is proffered on the public's taste for crime sensations, the

print media's role in forming perceptions, and the dubious ethics of

procuring and printing a 'scoop'. In a comparable knowing nod to *The*

Scoop's other medium of dissemination, the apparently unbreakable alibi for

one suspect is provided by a radio broadcast time signal. And when that

alibi is finally broken and the radio signal is exposed as a fake, the criminal

is unmasked as none other than the *Morning Star'*s general editor. In a

development which may well have elicited a chortle from Sayers and her

cohorts, the organising intelligence behind the text is exposed as engaging in

fakery and attempts to frame his colleagues.

If Barthes' and Bruner's notions illuminate the ludic aspects of

Behind the Screen and *The Scoop*, both are apposite frames of reference for

considering the equally playful effects of the Detection Club's first full-

length collaborative novel, *The Floating Admira*l. Produced in the same year

as *The Scoop*, this time the compositional design is the most audacious yet,

with a total of fourteen contributing authors working independently of one

another to construct the mystery of retired Admiral Penistone's murder in

the quiet seaside town of Whynmouth. This bold compositional strategy

appears to build on a suggestion made by Sayers in the *Listener*

correspondence relating to the earlier *Behind the Screen*. Here, she suggests

'There is no reason why a perfectly "correct" detective story should not be

produced, even where the plot is not planned in collaboration at all' so long

as 'each writer writes with a definite solution in mind and lays his clues

properly, those clues can be picked up and worked to a satisfactory

conclusion by a subsequent writer' (*Screen* 229).

This notion is fully put to the test in *The Floating Admiral* where all

contributions were prepared independently and serialistically. Only one

writer in this particular collaborative 'game' had the benefit of reading the

work of all the others before penning his contribution, and that was G. K.

Chesterton – the writer of the novel's Prologue, which was composed last of

all. After Chesterton's oblique prologue, proffered as scene-setting

flashback but largely floating free of what follows, eleven independently-

written chapters narrate the mysterious discovery of the Admiral's corpse

adrift in a rowing boat and the investigation that follows. Sayers relates

how: 'each contributor tackled the mystery presented to him in the

preceding chapters without having the slightest idea what solution or

solutions the previous authors had in mind' (*Admiral* xviii). It falls to the

final contributor, Anthony Berkeley to knit together the conclusion and

provide a convincing solution to the mystery.

The novel thus provides an opportunity for a collaborative testing of

Sayers' earlier contention that rational method and adherence to what we

might recognise as Bruner's 'narrative' mode will produce a satisfactory and

logical result if all contributing authors attend sufficiently to each other's

implicit textual promptings and clues, 'playing fair' by the rules of the

game. Thus, the contributors were not simply writing into the void in an

elaborate and extended form of the game of consequences. Instead, they

were required not only to produce their own chapter but also to supply the

'solution' towards which they were working, produced in an Appendix to

the novel. These 'solutions', some much more elaborate and considered than others, ranged from Victor Whitechurch, and husband-and-wife writing team G. D. H. and M. Cole effectively breaking the rules of the game by producing 'no solution', to the detailed solutions of Christie, Kennedy and Sayers, complete with double identities and masquerades. Clemence Dane took this 'fair play' approach particularly to heart, averring in her solution that 'I am, frankly, in a complete muddle as to what happened, and have tried to write a chapter that anyone can use to prove anything they like' (352). Dane's comment reveals how, even while conducted in a context of 'fair play', *The Floating Admiral* includes plenty of scope for ranging into Bruner's 'paradigmatic mode' by including shock reversals, masqueraded identities, repurposing of clues, and events reconsidered from a new angle. Perhaps the best example of this mode comes in the form of the novel's detective, Inspector Rudge, whom each writer is obliged to reinvent, both retrospectively (in the light of extant clues and previous writers' presentation of Rudge's 'reading' of them) and also prospectively (in order to make possible their own projected 'solutions' to the case) . Readers' sense of Rudge's character, his methods, his conclusions and so on are continually in 'play' as the writers negotiate their way through the developing narrative with him.

Thus, initially presented as a solid if rather dogged and pedestrian investigator – 'Inspector Rudge, we must admit, was a quite ordinary man' (160) – the detective gradually reveals himself to be an ideal reader of the serialistically produced crime narrative that the collaborating authors have assembled. When, at the midpoint of the novel, he draws up for himself a

memorandum of questions, his textual rumination mirrors that of the reader: 'as each question was reduced to a verbal shape he looked up at the ceiling and let his mind play around the possibilities which it suggested' (160). Likewise, in Berkeley's concluding chapter, Rudge's advocacy for Ockham's razor resonates as wry commentary on the project of the collaborating authors: '"It seems a pity," said Rudge, "to bother to find complicated explanations when there's a simple one handy"' (286). In a final clever twist, Berkeley reveals Rudge's ordinariness to be something of a blind, the detective exhibiting an unanticipated capacity for *legerdemain* when he prevents the suicide of a chief suspect by switching a fatal preparation for three tablets of bicarbonate of soda.

The Floating Admiral succeeds in retaining an impressive degree of artistic unity whilst emphasising the subjunctified nature of the detective fiction space where, like Penistone's drifting boat, meanings and significances can 'float' some considerable distance from their original semiotic moorings. As Sayers' introduction to the text recognises, it is as if the joint venture behind *The Floating Admiral* highlights pluralities and ambivalences that are not a function of the collaboration itself but are rather intrinsic to the detective fiction form, despite the tendency of the genre to allege the existence of unitary meanings and irrefutable truths:

We are only too much accustomed to let the great detective say airily: "Cannot you see, my dear Watson, that these facts admit of only one interpretation?" After our experience in the matter of *The*

Floating Admiral, our great detectives may have to learn to express themselves more guardedly' (xix).

To offer a Barthesian gloss on Sayers' comments, Golden Age detective fictions are potentially doubly 'writerly' – allowing fictional sleuths the freedom to interpret widely how crimes might have been committed, and also allowing readers, should they so wish, to develop their own readings of detectives' solutions, and even to dispute them should they see fit. Sayers' observations point the way to a mode of critical engagement only recently pursued in print, such as Pierre Bayard's suggestion that the authorised 'solutions' to both *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Bayard 2001) and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Bayard 2008) are simply wrong.

In *Behind the Screen*, *The Scoop* and *The Floating Admiral*, then, it is evident that the collaborative process has engaged the writers in a dialogue with their own practices and with the nature and possibilities of their genre. In addition to the Brunerian view we have adopted of these texts as subjunctified spaces, and the Barthesian cast of these 'writerly' texts, the authors' gameplaying also recalls Mikhail Bakhtin, who reflects on the nature of language as vehicle between addresser (author) and addressee (reader or fellow author): 'every word is directed towards an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates' (*Dostoevsky* 280).

It is employing this Bakhtinian lens that attention now turns to our

second grouping of pre-war Detection Club texts, where notions of dialogue and 'the answering word' are salient.

Ask a Policeman (1933) and *Six Against the Yard* (1936): Detective Fiction as Bakhtinian Dialogic Play

In *Ask a Policeman* and *Six Against the Yard*, the ludic thrust of the joint authors is played out through the exchange and contest of distinct voices. These voices are varied and multiple, ranging from the authorial to the epistolary and the mimetic – and even the wholly authentic when the voice of a retired Scotland Yard Inspector joins the gameplay.

The first of these works, *Ask a Policeman*, is concerned from the outset with the interplay of contrasting voices. The work's very title encourages us to engage in jocular dialogue ('If You Want to Know the Time Ask a Policeman' being the title of a popular Victorian music hall song, still widely recalled in the 1930s), and the text opens not by laying a classic crime scene straight before the reader but with an answering pair of letters between contributing authors John Rhode and Milward Kennedy. Rhode relates how he has often been quizzed on his compositional method for detective stories ('Do you think of a Murder and then work it out, or do you think of a Solution and do it backwards?') and reveals, playfully enough, that his method is free-form: 'I have never discovered the answer' (*Policeman* 1). He informs Kennedy that he has recently lighted upon the current book's title which 'ought to suggest a nice murder, surely?' (1) but finds he has no inspiration, asking his peer to advise. Kennedy's reply is

made in comparably humorous part, describing detective writing as a 'vice' (1) and proclaiming an equivalent agnosticism as to his own compositional method. Nevertheless he takes up Rhode's 'veiled suggestion' (2) to supply a plot to fit the title and thus commences the three-part structure of the book: Part One in which Rhode sketches the premise of 'Death at Hursley Lodge'; Part Two in which established Detection Club sleuths investigate and propose solutions; and Part Three, titled 'If You Want to Know…' in which Milward Kennedy ties together the various threads and resolves the mystery – notably along lines which none of the sleuths had entirely anticipated.

This interchange between narrative and epistolary voices is at its most pronounced in the book's middle section where, in a new departure for Detection Club gameplay, the collaborating writers 'swap detectives' for their respective chapters: Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey is voiced by Berkeley, while Sayers in reciprocation renders Berkeley's Roger Sheringham; Gladys Mitchell's Mrs Bradley is taken up by Helen Simpson, whose own Sir John Saumarez is rendered by Mitchell. This premise, wittily ascribed to a 'clerical error' by Kennedy (67), facilitates a good deal of in-joking between the contributing authors as they engage in varying degrees of literary impersonation and parody of each other's protagonists. The result ranges beyond the aforementioned Barthesian and Brunerian effects towards an outworking of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism: in the constant interplay between epistolary and narrative modes and the parodic renderings of each other's detectives, the joint authors find themselves face-to-face with 'the profound influence of the answering word' (*Dostoevsky* 280).

The novel's game-play element is further heightened by the drama of the opening premise and the high status of the suspects. John Rhode's scenario presents 'Death at Hursley Lodge' where a thoroughly dislikeable press Baron is found dead, apparently dispatched by the eminent hand of the Assistant Commissioner of the CID. Or is the culprit the Archbishop of the Midlands? Or just possibly the government Chief Whip? With such an eminent and politically sensitive list of suspects in the frame, the Home Secretary (who also at one stage becomes implicated in the enquiry himself) commissions tactful amateurs Bradley, Wimsey, Saumarez and Sheringham to take up the case, rather than risk the embarrassment of an official police investigation. The four sleuths arrive at an equivalent number of conclusions, each finding a different member of the cast of illustrious suspects responsible for the murder. The fictional detectives having brought the narrative to an impasse, the epistolary voice of Milward Kennedy returns at the start of Part Three, noting 'here are four different solutions – and each of them selects a different Murderer' (277) while also conceding that each solution is equally plausible and compelling. In embarking on his attempted closure of the work, Kennedy thus declares that the only route open to him is to take 'an Editorial Liberty to invent facts and to "play unfair"' (277), thus breaking the 'Rules to which my fellow-members of the Detection Club always, and I on all occasions but this, make it a point of honour to adhere' (278). The rules of the Detection Club itself – and their conscious transgression – have in themselves become a part of the self-reflexive game.

The effect is brought to a suitably playful conclusion when the agent responsible for the press baron's death is revealed not to be one of the

eminent suspects at all but rather a mischievous schoolboy at play: 'no one would have expected Comstock to be shot by accident, by a boy of fourteen, convalescent from mumps, and fooling about with an air-rifle that was anything but a toy' (306).

With Comstock's death revealed as an accident, the reader is left to reflect on the multivalency of the text in offering up four distinct yet individually plausible solutions under the investigative efforts of the four parody sleuths. The impression at the work's close is thus not one of frustration at the circumvention of the customary rules of the game, but rather a delight in the range of ingenuity and invention at work in the text. And whilst liberties may indeed have been taken with the rules of the Detection Club in forging the work's conclusion, there is at least a pleasing sense of arriving full circle when Kennedy reveals that the key witness to Comstock's accidental death is the local constable: 'in a matter of this kind, it is usually advisable – well, to ask a policeman' (307).

The members of the Detection Club took their own advice and did indeed 'ask a policeman' in the last of the collaborations to be considered here, *Six Against the Yard* (1936). In this text, the competitive spirit of the Club members is invested in trying to design the 'perfect murder' only this time, judgement of their success is passed not by club peers but by an authoritative external party – retired Scotland Yard Superintendent George Cornish. 'Cornish of the Yard' had published his memoirs only the previous year, offering reminiscences that charted his journey from police constable in Victorian Whitechapel through to his oversight of high-profile

metropolitan murder cases of the 1930s. Upon his retirement Cornish had sufficient public profile for the *Daily Mirror* to characterise him as a 'Murder Wizard' and to recall his role in the solution of the 'Charing Cross trunk murder', 'the Soho shop murder' and other celebrated cases of the era (Cornish 322). A presumably welcome mutual publicity thus attended the premise of *Six Against the Yard*, where the reputations of the Detection Club authors and the retired Scotland Yard official only stood to be further enhanced by this application of a genuine policing intelligence and methodology to the imaginative crimes of the contributing authors: Margery Allingham, Anthony Berkeley, Freeman Wills Crofts, Father Ronald Knox, Dorothy L. Sayers and Russell Thorndike.

In this fact/fiction interplay a further dialogic dimension soon emerges in the constant transition between the spheres of imagined crimes and real-world detection. No cold and impassioned observer, Cornish does not confine himself to pointing out flaws in the purportedly 'perfect' murders of each story (forensic evidence; unanticipated witnesses; evidential chains between killer and victim) but also presents himself as thoroughly drawn into the imaginative worlds of each story, with assumed license to intervene in the 'writerly' texts set before him. This dynamic is established as early as his riposte to the opening tale in which Allingham's narrator dispatches her friend's abusive partner by pushing him from a window ledge. Cornish suggests that such was his absorption in the story, its conclusion has him up on his feet and heading out on a mission of arrest before he recalls 'it was only a story anyway' (*Yard* 46).

In his commentaries, Cornish repeatedly shows his affinity for the fictional worlds the contributing authors have created and reflects his own extensive reading in both the classical Golden Age texts and the equivalent 'hard boiled' detective tradition, the latter reflected in his observation that Berkeley's story is 'a clever and amusing parody of the new manner in American fiction' (143). Clearly an aware and informed literary reader, Cornish elaborates and speculates on details beyond what the author has specified. Apropos of Allingham's story, he introduces, without textual justification, the possibility that an incriminating suicide note, left by the spouse of the murder victim, will come to light and will blow the murderer's cover. Of Ronald Knox's story, Cornish wittily entering the game on its own terms, exclaims that this codifier of the decalogue of detection (1929) has himself not 'played fair' (92), while in his riposte to Sayers' story, he crosses the fact/fiction boundary to express his regret that he has not had the opportunity 'to discuss [the case] with Lord Peter Wimsey' (240). Cornish's contributions thus range well beyond the remit of detached criminological commentator; instead, in the spirit of Bakhtinian dialogic (*Imagination*), he imaginatively participates in the fact-fiction interplay proffering suggestions which are often more redolent of crime fiction motifs than of documented crimes – as witness his suggestion of a voice on a gramophone record being used to supply an alibi over time of death (96).

The most sustained dialogic convergence between authentic and fictive voices comes in Cornish's commentary on Thorndike's 'Strange Death of Major Scallion'. Entitled 'Detectives Sometimes Read', Cornish's unpicking of this 'perfect murder' draws attention to the artificial 'stage-

setting of the death' and to the killer's extensive collection of criminological works (191). As a 'book conscious' detective, Cornish shares his confidence that a precedent for the bizarre details of the crime will indeed be found in the killer's own library. In a development of this dialogic pattern and fact/fiction boundary-crossing, Thorndike's narrator even name checks Cornish within the fictional world of the story alongside the most celebrated forensic scientist of the age, gamely foregrounding the intertextual premise that is in play: 'How would [past murderers] have fared with such a man as Sir Bernard Spilsbury or that other enemy to murder, Mr Cornish?' (p.153).[3]

Indeed, an emerging implication from the Detection Club/Cornish interplay in *Six Against the Yard* is the ultimate textuality of all crime 'cases', real or imagined. Reference to the Foreword of Cornish's memoirs suggests this interpenetration of the literary imagination with the textuality of crime: even as he is averring that the work is compiled with 'a strict regard for facts', the world of fiction is invoked as a yardstick in recalling the start of his career ('more than a little of the bad old days of Fagin and Bill Sykes still remained in the stews of the East End') and as a frame of reference for invoking later cases: 'The story of the Great Pearl Robbery is stranger than fiction' (Foreword). No doubt further shaped by the role of press reportage in accounts of true crime cases, it would appear that the popular criminological imagination in the inter-war period approached crime fact and crime fiction within largely the same frame of reference. The construction and execution of *Six Against the Yard* offers an implicit commentary on this dialogic exchange of crimes real and imagined, while exploiting its literary potential.

Given the demonstrable aptness of a Bakhtinian approach to the dialogism of *Ask a Policeman* and *Six Against the Yard* it is tempting to consider whether other aspects of Bakhtinian theory might illuminate these works further. While considerations of space prohibit an extended exploration of further dimensions, it is instructive to note, for example, the appositeness of Bakhtin's influential notion of the carnivalesque (*Rabelais*) to these texts. The concept certainly resonates with the subversive premise of *Ask a Policeman*, where for a brief season of misrule, the state-legitimated authorities of Home Secretary, Archbishop, Senior policeman, and Government Chief Whip are shepherded into the holding pen of suspicion while the Detection Club's fictional detectives are given *carte blanche* to investigate the case without fear or favour.

Likewise, a number of the 'perfect murders' propounded in *Six Against the Yard* range well beyond the stylised and tonally contained homicides normally associated with the single-authored works of Club members. Liberated by the possibilities of the short story form and by the sole narrative imperative that any connection between killer and the victim's death be obliterated, the contributing authors give free rein to their imaginations, resulting in some carnivalesque excesses. These include a (possibly inadvertent) killing by transfusion of incompatible blood types (Sayers); the removal of an unwanted spouse by exploding the domestic bathroom where he performs his ablutions (Berkeley); the highly grotesque and gothicised murder of a blackmailer by forced ingestion of poison-bearing beetles (Thorndike); and the dispatch of a second blackmailer by a Heath-Robinson style homemade bomb – a detailed diagram of the device

being furnished in the text for good measure (Crofts). These examples sort well with Shaw's suggestion, in terms reminiscent of Bakhtin, of the importance of '[i]nversion, overturning, ribaldry and joyous play' (6) in the wider Golden Age genre, and imply that in these joint-authored ventures, the scope for rule-breaking and inversion is not restricted but rather broadened in a context of dialogism, parody, and intertextual play.

Conclusions: still playing at detection

While the collaborative efforts of the Detection Club did not conclude with *Six Against the Yard*, there is a good case for distinguishing the first wave of Sayers/Berkeley-led texts explored in this article from the later (and certainly the post-war) works. Following the appearance of *Detection Medley*, edited by John Rhode, in the winter of 1939 (which, by virtue of being a short story collection without collaborative design had already moved away from the earlier pattern), the Second World War brought a pause to the Club's activities and confirmed the impression that the 'first wave' of collaborative writing was at an end. Yet, as we have seen, this early flurry of collaborative writing did a good deal more than achieve its more instrumental objective of securing for the Club suitable premises 'for the purpose of eating dinners together at suitable intervals and of talking illimitable shop' (*Admiral*, xvi). Rather, the (inter-)textuality of this group of works yielded invaluable insights into the collaborating authors' creative methods, and the ludic character and propensities of the wider genre.

Perhaps the experience of writing in collaboration and employing such a variety of compositional strategies also served to open up new possibilities for the contributing authors in their subsequent individual endeavours. The joint works briefly moved Sayers and her fellow authors away from the individualistic activity of sole-authored works with their univocal 'certainties', purpose and logic and perhaps opened their eyes to the possibility of other readings and to the adoption of a more equivocal narrative stance. Certainly it is suggestive that after reclaiming Lord Peter Wimsey from the ventriloquized rendering of Anthony Berkeley in *Ask a Policeman*, Sayers went on to develop a new depth and richness to the character in *Gaudy Night* – perhaps just one instance of many that suggest what the collaborating writers learned from their games of detection.

For readers of the wider genre, there is a good case to return to these first-wave Detection Club collaborations. Once attuned by them to the dialogic interaction and narrative experimentalism that can take place between writers and readers of detective fiction, we are better placed to discern how these elements are encoded within the wider genre of Golden Age detective fiction – as foregrounded in the recent radical re-readings of classic texts by Bayard, Gulddal and others. These inter-war collaborative works provide students of Golden Age detective fiction with a series of crucibles in which to observe at work some of the creative processes and dynamics that underpin the genre.

The fact that in the Detection Club's subsequent history, only the 1960s and 1980s have passed without the appearance of further joint-

authored works shows the ongoing desire of writers of detective fiction to enter into dialogue with others working within their genre. While the majority of these later works are best described as collections of independently written stories, joint-authored Detection Club writing has recently resumed in earnest under the Presidency of Martin Edwards. Since 2016, the multi-authored *Motives for Murder* and *The Sinking Admiral* have seen a return to the Club's collaborative gameplay, suggesting that, some ninety years on, the ludic project of Sayers and her contemporaries remains alive and well.

The game is still afoot.

The inter-war collaborative works of The Detection Club

Title	Year of publication	Authors
Behind the Screen	1930	Hugh Walpole, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Anthony Berkeley, E. C. Bentley and Ronald Knox
The Scoop	1931	Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Anthony Berkeley, E. C. Bentley, Freeman Wills Crofts and Clemence Dane

The Floating Admiral	1931	G. K. Chesterton, Canon Victor L. Whitechurch, G. D. H. & M. Cole, Henry Wade, Agatha Christie, John Rhode, Milward Kennedy, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ronald Knox, Freeman Wills Crofts, Edgar Jepson, Clemence Dane and Anthony Berkeley
Ask a Policeman	1933	Anthony Berkeley, Milward Kennedy, Gladys Mitchell, John Rhode, Dorothy L. Sayers and Helen Simpson
Six Against the Yard	1936	Margery Allingham, Anthony Berkeley, Freeman Wills Crofts, Ronald Knox, Dorothy L. Sayers, Russell Thorndike and Superintendent Cornish of the Criminal Investigation Department

Notes

1.   For overviews of the practices and works of the members of the Detection Club, Julian Symons' excellent monograph *Bloody Murder: From*

the Detective Story to the Crime Novel and Martin Edwards' *The Golden Age of Murder* provide a wealth of information. Symons' and Edwards' work provides valuable background information about the Detection Club, its membership and the role of key figures such as Dorothy Sayers, Anthony Berkeley and others in the development of key aspects of classic detective fiction. Alexis Weedon's paper '*Behind the Screen* and *The Scoop*: A cross-media experiment in publishing and broadcasting crime fiction in the early 1930s' provides a specific analysis in 'multimedia' terms of two of the collaborative novels. Mark Green has also written a recent analysis of the relative reading complexity of the contributions of the participating authors in the collaborative works of the Detection Club, published online as part of the British Library's *Bodies from the Library* proceedings: 'The Fogginess of the Detection Club'.

2.   A sixth text, *The Anatomy of Murder*, a collaboration between Helen Simpson, John Rhode, Margaret Cole, E. R. Punshon, Dorothy L. Sayers, Frances Iles (a *nom de plume* of Anthony Berkeley) and Freeman Wills Crofts is primarily a work of non-fiction and is thus not included for substantive discussion but will form the subject of another paper.

3.   In a further aspect of in-jokery, the narrator reveals that his crime library also includes tales of 'ingenious smuggler parson Doctor Syn, sometime Vicar of Dymchurch-under-the-Wall in the county of Kent' (153) – works penned by Thorndike himself.

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