



# Race and American Detective Fiction in the Contemporary Classroom

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**Abstract.** This essay discusses teaching novels by Raymond Chandler and Walter Mosley as a strategy for helping students connect American racial politics from the 1940s and 1990s with their contemporary world and the Black Lives Matter movement.

My teaching of crime fiction as a political genre has been influenced by my institutional contexts. As someone who has worked at conservative colleges for the better part of a decade, I have taught crime fiction as a means to promote racial justice, since such advocacy might be less likely to succeed if presented more overtly. I have had success pairing Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) with Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) to underscore the stark differences between the two novelists' depictions of Los Angeles. Teaching these two texts in sequence allows students to recognize disparities between the accounts of characters' lived experiences as well as their own backgrounds (the institutions at which I have taught each have white student populations of more than 60 percent). These small realizations of difference are designed to help students reflect on the continuation of inequalities that Mosley describes in contemporary American society and the function of social movements like Black Lives Matter.

The obvious commonalities between the two novels—the 1940s Los Angeles setting, the hard-boiled private investigator, the search for a missing woman concealing her true identity, the disaffected and corrupt police force—establish them as strong texts for comparison for students. Chandler's famous prose tends to delight as well as distract students,

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