



The Skeptical Poetics of Colin Dexter's Morse Novels

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Abstract. This article argues that DCI Morse is a different figure in Colin Dexter's novels than the popular television series. The author locates Dexter's novels in British postwar crime fiction, with attention to representations of the social reality of Oxford and gender issues, and reads *The Wench Is Dead* to argue Morse's hermeneutic approach to investigation reveals an ironic skepticism about truth.

Between 1975 and 1999, Colin Dexter published 13 novels and one collection of short stories and created one of the most popular detectives of modern crime fiction. Especially thanks to the TV series *Inspector Morse*, *Lewis*, and *Endeavor*, his characters have remained on TV screens almost continuously since 1987 (see Bird; Taylor). *Inspector Morse*, as a representative of quality TV, currently attracts more critical and academic attention than Dexter's work, even though the TV series brings a much smoother view of social reality and motivation of the characters than the original novels (see, for example, McCaw; Thomas). From this point of view, one aim of the present study is to return attention to Dexter's novels. The particularity of Dexter's novels is that they combine clue-puzzle stories with an unadorned (and sometimes satirical) image of contemporary reality. However, Dexter differs from his contemporaries in that he equipped his hero with an original investigative method, which cannot be said to conform to standard police procedures, so that his novels cannot be classified as police procedurals. This article will first focus on how Dexter realistically portrays Oxford in his novels and on Morse's sexist attitude toward women as manifestations of a hard-boiled school influence. The second part

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