



Colin Dexter's Classicism

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Abstract. Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse books, unlike any other detective novels, are saturated with references to Greek and Latin language and literature. This article explores the significance of Classics and classical scholarship in Dexter's world, and argues that the novels present a consistent (and consistently troubling) view of education and culture.

Questioning the distinction between genre fiction and Literature (with a capital L) has become a commonplace of criticism of the detective novel. As Martin Priestman has put it, "the normal assumption that detective fiction and literature *are* distinct is a revealing fact about our reading habits, and ultimately about our own society" (xi). Writers and publishers are themselves well aware of this assumption. They may decide, for various ends, to reject, downplay or self-consciously exploit the perceived tension between "high" and "low" modes of writing. Perhaps the easiest route to literary respectability is simply being *good*—that is, providing well-crafted prose, credible and complex characterization, thematic depth, intellectual satisfaction, and so on, of a type to appeal to grown-up readers in search of something more substantial than a mere plot. The better a novel is, the more likely it is to be seen as "transcending the limits of genre fiction" (favorite phrase of book reviewers and blurb writers). Other tactics might include metafictional play with generic conventions (as in the novels of Edmund Crispin, Jasper Fforde, and others), historical settings that demonstrate painstaking scholarly research (e.g., Josephine Tey, C. J. Sansom), flirtation with theological or philosophical ideas (e.g., G. K. Chesterton, P. D. James), or intertextual engagement with undisputed works of Literature (e.g., Michael Innes, Amanda Cross).

The detective stories written by the British novelist Colin Dexter between 1975 and 1999 signal their aspirations to the status of high culture in an unexpected fashion—by including copious references and allusions to Greek and Latin language and literature, by making their hero (Detective Chief Inspector Morse) not only a policeman but also a classically educated intellectual, and by choosing as their setting a version of the city of Oxford which is characterized as the domain of classical scholarship *par excellence*. This abundance

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