

## **Craig Howes, Professor of English Sisters in Crime Hawaii, February 2, 2011**

Guest speaker: Craig Howes, professor of English at UH Manoa; director of its Center for Biographic Research; and editor of *Biography Magazine*. He is also editor (with Jon Osorio) of *The Value of Hawaii*, a collection of 28 essays, (UH Press, 2010).

Craig treated us to a unique look at the mystery novel, both its origins and ways for us to approach it.

### **The talk: Origins of the Mystery**

Craig focused on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Sophocles, St. Augustine, Sigmund Freud and Alfred Hitchcock.

He started by giving us insight into poet/playwright William Butler Yeats. He married George Hyde-Lees, who was deeply involved in the literary scene. They had two children. "Georgie" began demonstrating automatic writing. Yeats was fascinated by this, as well as by mysticism and Eastern religions. Georgie's automatic writing, channeling, involved her hearing voices that she called "the guardians." Oddly, the guardians were feeding her the type of material that had already appeared in Yeats's writings and inspired his book called *A Vision*. Yeats told Georgie, "Please tell the guardians that I will no longer write poetry and will spend my life relaying their messages." Alarmed that this Nobel Prize-winning poet would turn into a secretary for the voices, Georgie explained that the guardians had come merely to give Yeats metaphors for his poetry. That seemed to appease him. Mysticism provided origins for his work.

**Early literature can be thought of as a gigantic reserve, a thrift shop, from which you, as writers, can take what you need and use what you want.**

St. Augustine did just that. He cited the Biblical story of the Exodus. Many of the Israelites were in positions of power, especially Joseph, of course. They knew where their masters kept all their valuable stuff, so when they fled Egypt, they took as much of it with them as they could. St. Augustine called it "*mining Egyptian gold: take what you need and don't worry about the rest.*" No piety is necessary. Craig emphasized that there is an incredible reserve of literature sitting there to be grabbed; for us to use: Aristotle, Horace, Freud, Nietzsche, etc.

**Mining Egyptian Gold.** The most obvious source is the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). *It's the first detective story.* There's a missing murderer threatening the entire community and a rampant plague. Oedipus takes it upon himself to bring the murderer of King Laius to justice and in so doing, also stop the plague. He begins as the judge, becomes also the prosecuting attorney, and ends up being the criminal.

*In modern literature, the detective in pursuit of the criminal eventually finds that he is looking for someone else, or that he himself is involved. Or that somebody has set him up to lead him to a particular conclusion.* Each witness provides information, plus red herrings. Oedipus runs as fast as he can away from his parents because he has heard a prophesy that he himself is the murderer.

Then he finds out his “father” is dead. But it turns out the dead man wasn’t his father. Oedipus’s birth parents had put him out for adoption, because they knew he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother.

Fifty years after Sophocles’s death, Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*, a guide to writing tragedy. He was a great admirer of *Oedipus Rex*.

**Comic Characters.** Comic characters are a way of providing distraction, hiding important details that become key to the story, i.e., in *Oedipus Rex* and also in Sophocles’s play *Antigone*, where two brothers fight in a civil war over possession of the throne and kill each other. Their sister, Antigone, becomes the victim of convoluted, ironic miscarriages of justice. In *Antigone*, information comes on stage via a goofy soldier, a lower-class character, who seems to present a plain comic relief role, but actually relays information that something else is going on: the fact that the body has been buried (the knowledge comes too late). The side character presents a *turn of the screw*, where the detective becomes the bad guy.

Misdirection, a turn of the screw, is a useful tool. (*Turn of the Screw* is also the title of a Henry James novel.)

Another classic case of side characters and their importance is Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. They were Hamlet’s friends; he has them killed off.

Virginia Woolf wrote a delightful play called *Flush*, a memoir from the viewpoint of a dog. The dog is really Elizabeth Barrett Browning; it’s the dog’s perspective on her. An invalid, she eloped with the much younger Robert and her father disapproved; it was one of the major literary romances. *Flush* is an example of changing the point of view, a concept 2000 years old. Again, *mining Egyptian gold*.

In *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, what makes for good tragedy? In Eco’s play we think we only have the first half of *Poetics*: the tragedy treatise; there’s no comedy. The precious comedy manuscript is in the library; it’s the second half of the *Poetics*. The library burns down, so we never get it.

**Contemporary narratives, i.e., movies, etc. have six components, spelled out in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In order of their importance:**

#1. Plot. Shakespeare took his plots from Plutarch, prose romances, etc. It’s what you do with a plot, not where you got it. Plots work because the people being described are convincing. Character comes second. In genre fiction, detective fiction, character is revealed to unravel the plot. Craig cites the movies *Psycho* and *Adaptation*.

#2. Character. You think you know the characters, then a revelation happens and you find you didn’t understand them at all and the plot thickens. Aristotle provides a recipe book for keeping people interested. Plot is more important than character.

#3. Reasoning, the reason you tell the story to get across a particular moral or lesson. After-school specials have some of these lessons, i.e., friendship is more important than fashion. But stories suffused with ethical issues of evil, philosophy, etc. are the most compelling, such as Harry Potter. Bottom line: what keeps you going is the narrative.

#4. Diction, fine writing is important. But if writers get too literary in mysteries they lose the reader.

#5. Music is used in classical tragedy, such as the chorus, to tell what's happening. Aristotle says forget the music and dancing.

#6. Special effects. Aristotle complains that a lot of theater in his day was about special effects, display, flashy stuff. It should be used judiciously. Today's movies: the director of *The Black Swan*, *The Wrestler*, etc. use sadism to shock.

### **Notions for plots are not “stealing gold” necessarily.**

*One source is the lives of the saints.* They're plot-driven. What happened to this person that qualified him or her for sainthood? St. Barbara got decommissioned like St. Valentine and St. Christopher. She got designated as a helper saint. She was pulled down because her father was worried about her virginity and put her in a tower when he went off on a trip. She escaped. She had noticed that her father had some workmen come in to construct a bathhouse; she offered architectural changes, adding a third window for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Dad returned and went nuts, killing his daughter for becoming a Christian. She was martyred. He climbed a hill and was struck by lightning. The irony: She became the patron saint of miners, who blow things up to extract ore. These kinds of stories give you insight into pathological behavior. At the start of the story, something really extreme is going on. How could these things plausibly happen? Modern detective stories try to make sense of them.

*The Silence of the Lambs*, a riveting story. The female prosecutor talks to Hannibal Lecter to understand his pathology; then she starts to become the victim. The closer she gets to the knowledge, the more she's victimized. Like Oedipus. The more he searches, the deeper he gets into pathology.

In mystery fiction of today, Stieg Larsson plays off the Greek narratives, the disturbing dynamic between father and daughter (*The Girl Who Played with Fire*). There's a different payoff here: the most dangerous person in your life is your father.

*Sigmund Freud's influence.* The natural state of human consciousness is that you think you know what's going on, but there's other stuff going on at the same time, other forces, sex and violence, etc. The mystery narrative works in that structure. Psychoanalysis: you work to figure out what those other forces are. The Oedipus Complex, for instance, and *The Interpretation of Dreams*. How can you create that effect without calling direct attention to it? If you have two things next to each other, that will create an assumption in the reader's mind that something is going on. Put one thing next to the other and the reader does your work for you. This technique also works in

films. Alfred Hitchcock shows how mystery and horror go together to create disturbance. If he shows a picture of Jimmy Stewart next to a picture of Christ, Jimmy Stewart is religious. Show us a bowl of soup, then a picture of Jimmy Stewart smiling, Jimmy is hungry. Aristotle says that's the way we process the world; we try to put things into sequences. Putting two things together implies that there's a relationship. But it may not be what you think.

Freud: Very important: what he says about the uncanny: certain things we encounter have such an effect we can't shake them. What is it that makes us remember one image instead of another? Why do a few particular images stick in our minds, like the shower scene in *Psycho*? Because there's an emotional investment (*The Exorcist*). What creates the feeling of unease? The unfamiliar enters into the familiar or the reverse. "Heimlich" (good, cozy, homey) and "unheimlich." The cozy becomes disturbing. The shower scene in *Psycho*. You normally feel safe in a shower. After the movie, you feel violated.

Samuel Pepys. 17th century. He witnessed the Great Plague and Great Fire of London. Even today, authentic Restoration Drama depends on his diaries, which were only discovered in the 19th century. The uncanny, the Great Fire of London, the juxtaposition of the familiar and unfamiliar. In his diary, he notes that the birds were freaking out. Their nests were burning. What makes it uncanny is that when they got close to the heat they exploded. Sinister. A cat found alive, but without a single hair on it. These are types of uneasy, disturbing images. Restoration Drama was the first time women were on stage.

Telling one story you can suddenly make the reader aware that you're telling another story, as in the film *Vertigo*. A familiar story becomes unfamiliar and jarring. Good detective fiction makes that work.

*The Sixth Sense*, by Director M. Shyamalan is a detective story. Why is this kid so disturbed? The detective starts to worry about his own sanity. The end: the kid does see dead people—and the detective is one of them. When you look back, you realize that not one single other character actually acknowledges the detective. The whole thing is uncanny. The scene you go back to is where you actually think he's talking to the kid. All of Shyamalan's subsequent films are poor, because in each one he's trying to reproduce the uncanny sense, which viewers now know he's trying to do. Another film: *Memento*. You want to know what the story is; the director keeps not giving it to you and by working it backward, each new day creates an uncanny feeling that the character doesn't know what is going on either.

*You don't have to work in a systematic mode; you don't need a membership card to capture this sense of the uncanny.*

Stephen King can scare you with a garbage disposal, a car, a clown. The homely, the ordinary become unfamiliar and frightening.

If you know that works, what do you do to fix the reader's attention? How do you subordinate that to the plot? The zombie film *Dawn of the Dead*: it's not just that the familiar becomes unfamiliar, *but also the reverse*. They're running from the zombies, hiding in a shopping mall,

and the dead get in. The zombies are marching through the shopping mall and you realize “those are my types of people,” juxtaposed. It looks like Saturday afternoon at Kahala Mall, the same glazed expression on the shoppers.

*The uncanny is a matter of shifting plots. You're watching one thing, then something else is going on. Aristotle calls it reversals. It all has to be done in the context of advancing plot.*

When the detective becomes the criminal, when he realizes something or someone close to him is involved, it puts him in a different perspective. Or when the detective's fingerprints become personal and make him look like the criminal. In the TV series *24*, it becomes personal. Somebody important is always implicated, even the president of the United States. *Lost* did it too. If you can make it work so the disruption of the plot makes the reader want to resolve it, then you're good. But if not, the reader or viewer changes channels.