

[T]he sharp social conscience of Agatha Troy Alleyn was another reason I loved [New Zealand detective fiction writer Ngaio] Marsh's novels. When I finished the last one, perhaps while I sat at the counter of what was then the 24-hour Midtown IV Diner on the northeast corner of 20th and Arch Streets one night in April 1986, I was bereft. So, when I returned to Philadelphia after my sophomore year at Yale ended, I returned to the tall bookcases filled with mysteries at The Book Trader.

My eye was drawn this time to a Bantam paperback entitled The Skeleton in the Clock by "Carter Dickson." The back of the book, first published in 1948, told me this was a pseudonym used by John Dickson Carr. As with Death and the Dancing Footman two years earlier, I was intrigued, so I paid \$1.50 (about \$3.50 in 2019) to buy it.ⁱ Later, I found an essay in Murder Ink by Matthew J. Mahler called "WHODUNIT: A Guide to the Obvious." It opens:

*"I once knew a man who thought he could outsmart John Dickson Carr. He was reading The Skeleton in the Clock, and along about page 56 he decided he knew who done it. In fact, he was absolutely convinced of it. He was all wrong, of course, his thinking detoured by one of the most devious minds in the business. Several years later, the same man picked up the same book and decided to reread it. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice, he said, not him. He'd forgotten everything about the book except whom he'd chosen as the murderer the first time around, so, carefully ignoring that person, he went on to finger someone else and, as you've probably guessed, missed again."*ⁱⁱ

Like Mahler's friend, I was fooled, but I was also mesmerized, launching an obsession that would last more than a decade. Including biographies and critical analyses, I own 81 books related to him, excluding the eight editions of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* I bought for Carr's "The Jury Box" column. That summer, I lived a short walk from a terrific used bookstore on 16th Street in the Adams Morgan section of Washington, DC. There, I bought—also for \$1.50—a 1959 hardback anthology of The Arabian Nights Murder, The Burning Court and The Problem of the Wire Cage. A few days later, I sat on the back porch of the house in which I rented a room to eat breakfast, and I turned to the Foreword by critic and historian Howard Haycraft. After describing Carr's appeal—locked room mastery; deft characterization; sense of the bizarre and macabre; humor and vitality—Haycraft summed up my own feelings:

*"I am not sure which I would rather be: the reader who meets these stories for the first time, with the joy of discovery still before him, or one who savors this hearty and heady fare for the second time."*ⁱⁱⁱ

When the summer ended, I returned to New Haven to start my junior year. Yale undergraduates are assigned to a residential college, each with its own interior courtyard, dining hall, library, seminar rooms, Head of College (what used to be called “Master”) and Dean; I was in Ezra Stiles, one of what were then 12 residential colleges. Each semester, residential colleges host two “college seminars,” often taught by instructors from outside Yale.

A college seminar Branford offered the spring semester of my junior year was “Power and Pleasure in Modern Crime Fiction.” It was taught by contagiously-enthusiastic doctoral student Richard S. Lowry, now professor of English and film studies at the College of William and Mary. As I later wrote, this seminar “grabbed me by the collar, shook me and forcibly expanded my literary horizons.”^{iv} Our final project was to design a detective fiction course, complete with syllabus and detailed exposition. In doing so, I not only heeded Professor Lowry’s call to read “tons and tons of detective fiction,” I also read Haycraft’s landmark Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story and Julian Symons’ Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel. Given my burgeoning obsession, I wanted to construct my course entirely around Carr, but after being gently dissuaded, I opted for a squishy middle ground.

“The Development of Detective Fiction, from Edgar Allan Poe to John Dickson Carr,” had two parts: one featuring “usual suspects” like Poe, Doyle, Christie and Marsh, and one devoted solely to Carr—with James and Josephine Tey shoehorned in at the end for...reasons. Students were asked to read at least five of nine Carr novels: It Walks by Night (23-year-old Carr’s 1930 debut) or The Lost Gallows, The Arabian Nights Murder or The Three Coffins, The Case of the Constant Suicides or The Skeleton in the Clock, The Plague Court Murders or The Judas Window, and The Nine Wrong Answers. While multiple works by an author would be discussed each week, a student only needed to buy and read one of them, even though “it is to [a student’s] advantage to read all of the works listed.” I shake my head now at the absurdity: how can a work of detective fiction be adequately discussed without revealing its ending? As for Professor Lowry, while he appreciated my “extensive knowledge and fine critical eye” in “judiciously” selecting the readings, he decried my presentation’s “lack of grappling w/ critical questions and an approach that seems too much of the style of Symons & Haycraft.” He also could not tell which issues and larger cultural and social aspects would be debated and discussed each week. Still, he gave the paper a B+/A-, and I earned an A- in the course.

From the perspective of film noir, however, the most important thing about this seminar was reading two books of stunning black-and-white photography that captured the urban night of the 1930s and early 1940s. The first was Brassai’s The Secret Paris of the 30’s.^v George Brassai, born Gyula Halász in Romania in 1899, deftly photographed the

Paris people rarely saw, everything from its nightclubs and street fairs to the men who cleaned the cesspools. The accompanying text spins a tale as oneiric as the photographs, one that begins at dusk and ends at dawn.

As riveting as Brassai's collection was, though, I was absolutely knocked flat by the second book: Weegee's Naked City. Having already discussed my well-thumbed copy in the previous chapter, I simply note that when a retrospective of Weegee's work appeared in the Philadelphia Art Alliance at 251 S. 18th Street, ½ block south of Rittenhouse Square, in late February 2002,^{vi} I eagerly attended with the Yale friend who heard the "cousins on the boat" story. His girlfriend—now wife—did not understand why we wanted to see such dark photographs. Because they are gorgeous, was my response.

As for three writers who influenced the early development of film noir, I read nothing by Cain at Yale, but I did read Hammett's 1929 debut novel Red Harvest and Chandler's 1939 debut novel The Big Sleep in Lowry's course.^{vii} Before discussing these seminal authors, though, we take a quick detour into the 1990s. In June 1990, my then-girlfriend and I took a road trip which included stops in Washington DC; northern Virginia; and the Pennsylvania cities of Gettysburg, Pittsburgh and Uniontown. The latter, some 40 miles south of Pittsburgh, was where Carr was born on November 30, 1906. I had become so enamored with Carr's writing I had decided to write the first authorized full-length biography of the writer. Visiting Uniontown turned into a kind of research pilgrimage.^{viii} On June 26, we visited the Uniontown Public Library, where I gazed with awe on the first copy of the first edition of It Walks By Night. Carr had inscribed it "For O'Neil Kennedy – to whom [detective Henri] Bencolin is no stranger." Just over a year earlier, when my psychotherapist asked me what physical object I most wanted to be, I had answered "a first edition of It Walks By Night." I photographed the book and a 1910 map of Uniontown showing the Church Street house where Carr was born, though the latter did not develop properly. We also visited the Carr family church, Trinity United Presbyterian, and the offices of the *Herald-Standard*, where Carr had worked as a boy. Librarian Susie Steiner directed us to visit journalist Walter Storey and attorney Phillip Carr, the author's cousin. We did so, though all I remember is his generosity and photocopying a copy of a story about O'Neil Kennedy called "Bachelor Abroad."

The next day, Steiner photocopied some *Herald-Standard* articles about Carr and put them in a manila envelope addressed to me along with an 8x10 black-and-white glossy "morgue" photograph of Carr pointing with his right hand to a set of lawbooks in a bookcase. I framed it, and for years it looked down on me from one of my own bookcases. It now rests on its side on the edge of the higher of the two shelves housing my Carr books. Over the years, more than a few visitors saw that photograph then asked why I had a framed photograph of Walt Disney.

Earlier on the trip, meanwhile, we had visited Mystery Books, then located at 1715 Connecticut Avenue, NW in Washington. I discussed writing Carr's biography with the store's owner...and learned that someone was beating me to it; the name "Douglas G. Greene" followed us around Uniontown. On July 11, the Mystery Books owner — whose signature reads something like "Samuel Furay" — wrote me a postcard reading, in part, "The Bio...is apparently still in the early stages. It will probably not appear for another two years. The author was thrilled to know someone was interested. So, perhaps now he'll work faster." Two years was optimistic, as John Dickson Carr: The Man Who Explained Miracles was published in 1995.

That card, postmarked 1 pm, arrived the next day, because on July 12, I typed a two-page letter to Greene at Old Dominion University, sharing my thoughts on Carr, describing the trip to Uniontown and explaining my girlfriend was buying Carr's The Blind Barber for people because it was "so goshdarned funny." He called me five days later, then wrote a follow-up letter the next day explaining how I could obtain a copy of a book he had edited called The Door to Doom and Other Detections; it sits with my Carr volumes. We corresponded six more times over the next six years, as Greene and his wife published works of detective fiction under the imprint Crippen & Landru. Three were in 1995, when Miracles was released and my six years pursuing a never-completed doctorate at Harvard ended; I inquired about working for Crippen & Landru, but he urged me to complete my doctorate instead.

In August 1998, however, when I wrote to praise his recently-edited Detection by Gaslight, I had moved on from Carr and other golden age writers. By early 1991, in fact, I had read nearly everything Carr had written, and I began to read authors—Nicholas Blake, Wilkie Collins, Michael Innes, Ellery Queen, Rex Stout, Julian Symons—for whom, Queen and Stout excepted, puzzle mattered less than criminous atmosphere and plot. Reifsnnyder had introduced me to the locked room novels of Carr's friend, magician-turned-author Clayton Rawson. I also frequented Spenser's Mystery Bookshop on Newbury Street in Boston, just as I had Alibi Books in New Haven; both have long since closed.

ⁱ I clearly have not opened it in years, because just now when I pulled it off the bookshelf, I found three Walgreens coupons tucked inside, each of whom expired on May 9, 1992. The total savings was 98 cents on Celestial Seasonings Tea, Family Napkins (60 count) and Wrigley's Gum or Nestle.

ⁱⁱ Winn, pg, 281. "Matthew J. Mahler" is described only as "chairman of the Save the Red Herring Movement," so I suspect this is Winn writing under a pseudonym.

ⁱⁱⁱ Haycraft, Howard," Foreword" in Carr, John Dickson, 1959. Three Detective Novels. New York, NY; Harper & Brothers

^{iv} <https://justbearwithme.blog/2018/05/18/please-allow-me-to-explain-the-big-knockover/>

^v Translated from the French by Richard Miller. 1976. Pantheon Books: New York, NY

^{vi} "Philadelphia Art Alliance," *PI*, February 22, 2002, pg. W36

^{vii} Richard Lowry e-mail July 10, 2020

^{viii} That August, Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Terry Mulholland threw a no-hitter against the San Francisco Giants, I would idolize him for the next three years, cheering his All-Star Game start in 1993 and his victory in Game 2 of the 1993 World Series. I had no idea in June 1990, though, that Mulholland was also born in Uniontown.