

Fictions for Representing and Generating Semiotic Consciousness: The Crime Story and Educational Inquiry

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Fictions for Representing and Generating Semiotic Consciousness: The Crime Story and Educational Inquiry

Noel Gough

Deakin University, Australia

Abstract: *This essay appraises the work of fiction in representing and generating semiotic consciousness in education by examining three intertextual continuities between crime fiction and stories of educational inquiry. First, many reports of educational research resemble detective stories in their quests to determine the (or a) “truth” about something that is problematic or puzzling and this essay describes some of the ways in which the characteristic investigatory methods of fictional detectives resemble forms of educational inquiry. Second, the characteristic ways in which detective stories generate interpretations are compared with the textual strategies deployed in producing meanings and narratives in educational inquiry. Third, recent transformations of both detective fiction and educational inquiry are shown to be comparable — and intertextually linked — manifestations of cultural and semiotic shifts associated with postmodernity. I conclude by suggesting that authors of “anti-detective” crime fiction might provide more appropriate models of educational inquiry than do fictional detectives.*

Introduction

In this essay I appraise the work of fiction in both representing and generating semiotic consciousness with particular reference to the crime story and stories of educational inquiry. By fiction I mean any mode, medium, or genre of storytelling that (usually) is not construed as reporting only “facts”¹ (where “facts” are interpreted as testimonies to “real” experience). Although fictional narratives do not necessarily represent (or claim to represent) “reality,” I argue that they are capable of illustrating the active semiotics of consciousness, and are among the many meaning making processes that support the construction of reality in day-to-day learning, teaching, and educational environments. As Le Guin writes, fiction can be seen as “an active encounter with the environment by means of posing options and alternatives, and an enlargement of present reality by connecting it to the unverifi-

able past and the unpredictable future” (Le Guin, 1989, pp. 44–45). By connecting possibilities as well as “actualities,” fiction distinctively enacts semiosis rather than mimesis.

The uses of fiction in educational inquiry have been the subject of debate for at least 20 years (see, for example, Walker, 1981; Rowland et al., 1990; Eisner et al., 1996; Kilbourn, 1999) and a number of novels have been accepted as doctoral dissertations in education (for example, Sellitto, 1991; Dunlop, 1999). Some research texts are written in the style of genre fiction (e.g., Paul T— investigates, 1996) or use fictional archetypes as critical frames for interpreting data or other research texts (e.g., Couture, 1994; Gough, 1996). In *Touching Eternity: The Enduring Outcomes of Teaching*, Barone (2001) argues that apparently nonfictional life histories can sometimes best be utilized as if they were fictional. Close readings of fictions that exemplify ways of what Trifonas (1999) calls “crafting the literature of semiotic possibility” might help us and our research students to craft such literature in education. I am convinced that the qualities of writing many of us admire in novels such as Eco’s (1983b) *The Name of the Rose* are realistic aspirations for the literatures of educational inquiry.

The theme I develop here is a variation on Rorty’s affirmation of the virtues of “see[ing] the social sciences as continuous with literature” (1979, p. 203), with my particular purpose being to demonstrate that strategically positioned readings of crime fiction can inform our understandings of storytelling practices in educational inquiry.² Following Cherryholmes (1993, p. 1), this article is intended to contribute to breaking “the silence of the research literature on the textuality of research findings” by attending to some of the “many ways to read and interpret and criticize” research texts. Working from a poststructuralist position, I am disposed to read, interpret, and criticize stories intertextually — to seek to understand at least some of the ways in which, in the production of meaning, “every text is related to every other text” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 36). Consider, for example, the intertextual continuities between the literature of educational inquiry and crime fiction implied by the frequent appearance in each of variations on the word “investigate”:

Most qualitative researchers maintain a stance best described as ‘investigative’... . (Lancy, 1993, p. 30)

In undertaking educational research, the first problem is to find a problem to investigate. (Burns, 1994, p. 17)

... there is that word again — ‘investigate’ — invoking the crime narrative, that investigatory hermeneutic which seeks to reveal, disclose, to know, and thence, so the myth goes, to empower. (Munt, 1994, p. 173)

My strategy is to read crime stories by reference to the “investigatory hermeneutics” they seem to share with forms of educational inquiry, and to read stories of educational research by reference to the literary tropes (analogies, metaphors, synecdoches, etc.) and textual structures they seem to share with crime fiction. I emphasize that my interest is focused on the hermeneutic and semiotic codes shared by educational inquiry and crime fic-

tion rather than on the generativity of constructing the fictional investigation of crime as a metaphor for educational research. In this respect, my project complements, but also extends beyond, the work of other writers who have demonstrated the merits of understanding qualitative research metaphorically as, for example, jazz (Oldfather & West, 1994), and dance (Janesick, 1994, 1998).

I am not simply asserting that educational inquiry resembles the fictional investigation of crime, but also that readers and writers of research texts and crime stories are materially connected by the cultural articulations of the discourses and semiotic systems in which they are interpellated. I also emphasize that both detective stories and research texts are, as Cherryholmes writes of the latter, “subject to multiple readings” (1993, p. 2), and thus recognize that the readings I offer here are partial and incomplete. Nevertheless, I argue that generating intertextual relationships between educational research literature and other literary forms is pertinent to teaching graduate programs in educational research methodology, interpreting reports of educational research, and to choosing textual strategies for narrating educational research — all of which can be understood as forms of semiotic consciousness-raising. Indeed, a number of my former graduate students are among the authors I cite in this article (e.g., Kinney, 1998; Thomson, 1998; Moss, 1999; Moss, in press; Harwood, 2001).

At least three kinds of intertextual continuities appear to link stories of educational inquiry with detective fiction, and I explore each of them here. First, and perhaps most obviously, reports of educational research resemble detective stories insofar as they narrate quests to determine “the truth” about something that is problematic or puzzling — stories in which “investigators” seek (to reiterate Munt’s terms) “to reveal, disclose, to know, and ... to empower.” In considering this analogy, my concern is with the extent to which the characteristic investigatory methods of fictional detectives resemble forms of educational inquiry. Second, following Eco’s aforementioned characterization of the novel as “a machine for generating interpretations” (1984, p. 35), I consider the extent to which the characteristic ways in which detective stories generate interpretations resemble the textual “machineries” used in the discursive production of educational research. Third, I consider some of the ways in which recent transformations of both detective fiction and educational inquiry can be understood as comparable — and intertextually linked — manifestations of cultural and semiotic shifts signified by various notions of postmodernism and postmodernity.

Watching the Detectives

For more than a century, detective fiction has both modeled and provided a critique of culturally privileged forms of social inquiry, although the extent to which detective stories are indeed critical of dominant social institutions and discourses is a matter for debate. For example, Mandel sees the “original detective story” (as exemplified by Sherlock Holmes stories) as “the purest, most elementary expression of bourgeois society” (Mandel, 1984, p. 84) whereas Jim Collins argues that the proliferation of crime fiction in the

nineteenth century represented a widespread disillusionment with the state (Collins, 1989, p. 35). Nevertheless, when teaching research methodology courses, I invite students to consider undertaking educational research by “watching the detectives”³ — that is, by imagining educational inquiries conducted in the manner of fictional detectives with whom they are familiar and by relating their investigatory methods to various paradigms or traditions of social inquiry.

Even a fairly superficial analysis of this kind reveals that educational research might not always have kept pace with developments in the methods of fictional detection that have accompanied the cultural changes of the late modern era. Scientific rationalism is still privileged in much educational research even though its apparent personifications in fiction — notably Sherlock Holmes and other heroes of the classic “logic and deduction” detective story⁴ — are no longer taken for granted as appropriate models of how we can or should obtain worthwhile knowledge of the world. During the 1920s and 1930s the detachment and “objectivity” of Holmes’s method of inquiry began to give way to a variety of more involved and subjective approaches. For example, Christie’s (1930) Miss Marple approaches detection in the manner of an ethnographer: her detailed observations (thick descriptions) of life in the village of St. Mary Mead provide her with a grounded theory of human behavior which she deploys in solving mysteries both within that community and elsewhere.

“Hard-boiled” detectives such as Hammett’s (1930) Sam Spade and Chandler’s (1939) Philip Marlowe display a different kind of involvement and subjectivity; they often are deeply implicated (as actors rather than spectators) in the mysteries they are called upon to explicate. In addition, Marlowe and his successors usually tell their stories in the first person, a change in narrative perspective that further problematized the role of the participant–observer in the dialectic of truth versus deception decades before interpretivist styles of inquiry seriously challenged positivistic social science.

More recently, fictional detectives have adopted socially critical standpoints such as feminism, exemplified in different ways by Cross’s (1981) Kate Fansler and Paretsky’s (1993) V.I. Warshawski. By means of their journals and other writings, a number of my students have reported that they have been pleasantly surprised by the generativity of making such comparisons. For example, students who have read many “cozy” mysteries for recreation, have found it intriguing to speculate on how the investigative methods of Christie’s Miss Marple might translate into educational research and compare these with, say, the approaches taken by Cross’s Kate Fansler. This comparison brought into sharper focus the differences between (and different consequences of) essentialist and interactionist interpretations of human behavior.

However, methods of fictional detection are not strictly analogous to the forms of social inquiry that they might at first seem to resemble. For example, although Sherlock Holmes often appears to emulate procedures stereotypically associated with research in the natural sciences, the relationships that are assumed to hold between “facts” and the meanings that

can be ascribed to them are very different for fictional detectives and natural scientists. The “facts” that natural scientists “discover” are usually produced in circumstances designed and more or less controlled by scientists themselves and thus are already the result of many acts of interpretation. Conversely, the “facts” to which fictional detectives ascribe meaning often result from deliberate acts of deception by guilty parties. But the problem of deception — deliberate or otherwise — is by no means irrelevant to educational research, especially when it comes to interpreting what students and/or teachers say and/or do when they are being observed or interviewed or are responding to questionnaires.

As a methodological issue, the possibility of deception often is subsumed by questions about “authenticity” — questions frequently raised in circumstances involving research subjects who are clearly less powerful/privileged than the researchers, as in much research on minority groups (see, for example, Foster, 1994, 1999). Critics of such research argue that we cannot assume that people who see themselves as oppressed, exploited, or marginalized by culturally dominant groups will necessarily tell the truth when interrogated by members of those groups. However, the question of whether or not researchers are being “told the truth” in the course of their investigations might be pertinent in many more situations than are suggested by these criticisms.

One of Sherlock Holmes’s well-known dialogues exemplifies another way in which the classic fictional detective departs from conventional understandings of scientific rationalism:

“Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

“The dog did nothing in the night time.”

“That was the curious incident,” remarked Sherlock Holmes.⁵

Holmes’s willingness to apprehend and ascribe meaning to a silence — to perceive the absence of a trace as itself being a trace — is a disposition that, in retrospect, seems more in keeping with recent critical and postcritical discourses of social inquiry than with nineteenth century conceptions of “scientific method.” However, in terms of the broad analogies that can be constructed between fictional detection and social inquiry, it might be more significant to note that this dialogue is just one among many instances of a fictional detective’s methods — often represented as eccentric or idiosyncratic — being compared with the more conventional methods used by the police, usually to the latter’s disadvantage.

Variations on this kind of comparison are also found in the “police procedural” type of crime novel, where the more “successful” detectives often are those whose methods are in some kind of conflict (ranging from subtle subversion to outright rebellion) with bureaucratized versions of “official” knowledge. For example, Kinney (1998) bases part of her argument for using experiential knowledge and unobtrusive observations in educational inquiry on a comparison of the methods used by the (unsuccessful) police

detective and the (successful) amateur investigators in the Alfred Hitchcock film, *Rear Window*. We can use such characteristics of crime fiction to frame and generate questions about educational inquiry, including questions about the relative strengths and limitations of individualistic and collectivist forms of inquiry and the merits and demerits of institutionalizing research efforts. Is there, for example, any place for “private investigations” in educational research? Under what circumstances, if any, might it be defensible to assert that “this is my investigation — it’s not a public inquiry” (Knopfler, 1982)?

Although it is important that such questions should be raised in the study and critique of educational research methodologies, I want to emphasize that, as a pedagogical strategy, I see “watching the [fictional] detectives” chiefly as an accessible and pleasurable preliminary to exploring the much more interesting questions that arise from watching (as it were) the ways in which stories of fictional detection generate interpretations.

Crime Fictions as Model Narratives of Inquiry

The meanings that any given text generates are, at least in part, a function of the storytelling genre in which authors and readers perceive it to be situated. When we read an article in *Educational Researcher* we are likely to mobilize a very different set of expectations and intertextual referents from those that we bring to reading a crime novel. Each storytelling practice incorporates a particular selection of semiotic conventions and narrative strategies, the implicit or explicit knowledge of which influences author’s craft, the audience’s expectations, and the meanings that are mutually constructed. However, given that both research reports and crime stories are narratives of inquiry, it seems reasonable to ask if we can learn anything by comparing them.

According to Barthes (1978, pp. 84–88), the crime story sets up a central enigma to be explicated by the detective and/or the reader. Indeed, as Zizek writes, detective fiction can be understood as a quest to tell a story that concludes not when the solution to the mystery is revealed but when the detective is able to tell “the true story” of the mystery in the form of a coherent linear narrative:

What we have at the beginning is a void, a blank of the unexplained, more properly, of the unnarrated: How did it happen? What happened on the night of the murder? The story encircles this blank; it is set in motion by the detective’s attempt to reconstruct the missing narrative by interpreting the clues. In this way, we reach the proper beginning only at the very end, when the detective is finally able to narrate the whole story in its “normal,” linear form, to reconstruct “what really happened,” by filling in all the blanks. (Zizek, 1992, p. 58)

In the classic form of detective fiction this “missing narrative” is often reconstructed in the form of an historical recount. The author — usually through the voice of an “omniscient” narrator or the detective’s Watsonian

companion — opens what Porter calls a “logico–temporal gap” (1981, p. 24) between the time of the crime’s commission and the time of its telling; it is the function of the detective — and of the narrative — to close that gap and restore the logical temporal order. In hard-boiled crime fiction the “missing narrative” is more likely to reconstruct a map of social order or disorder. These stories usually are narrated in the first person by the detective him/herself and the “gaps” opened by the narrative tend, at least metaphorically, to be spatial. For example, Jameson notes that the form of Raymond Chandler’s books reflects an initial “separation of people from each other, their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle” (Jameson, 1983, p. 131).

Such differences in narrative perspective and strategy between classic and hard-boiled crime fiction have clear parallels in social and educational inquiry. These include the shift away from impersonal styles of reporting — the supposedly “objective” accounts in which the researcher’s voice is “a presence hidden in the text” (Jones, 1992, p. 21) — towards textual strategies that foreground the subjectivity of the narrator and the ways in which she or he is implicated in, and indeed responsible for, the story. As crime fiction and educational research have evolved during the past half-century, authors in both fields seem to have become more self-conscious of the inherent reflexivity of their respective narrative forms — increasingly aware that they are telling stories of quests to tell stories. According to the view of cultural dynamics explicated by Hayles — that “issues become energized in theories because they are replicated from and reproduced in the social” (Hayles, 1990, p. 285) — these parallels are not coincidental but, rather, reflect the multiple discursive currents and feedback loops through which the production of educational theory and popular fiction are culturally connected.

Such currents and feedback loops also operate in the consumption of educational theory and popular fiction and it is thus reasonable to ask how our approaches to reading and writing educational research might be influenced by what we learn about structuring narratives of inquiry from reading crime fiction. As Eco (1984) suggests, our curiosity about “the structure of conjecture as such” is one plausible explanation for the popularity of crime fiction:

I believe people like thrillers not because there are corpses or because there is a final celebratory triumph of order (intellectual, social, legal, and moral) over the disorder of evil. The fact is that the crime novel represents a kind of conjecture, pure and simple. But medical diagnosis, scientific research, metaphysical inquiry are also examples of conjecture. After all, the fundamental question of philosophy (like that of psychoanalysis) is the same as the question of the detective novel: who is guilty? To know this (to think you know this), you have to conjecture that all the events have a logic, the logic that the guilty party has imposed on them. Every story of investigation and of conjecture tells us something

that we have always been close to knowing (pseudo-Heideggerian reference). (Eco, 1984, pp. 54–57)

It is not difficult to make a case for asserting that “the fundamental question” animating much educational inquiry is also “the same as the question of the detective novel: who is guilty?” For example, much socially critical educational research — feminist, neo-Marxist, antiracist, post-colonialist — is concerned with identifying “who is guilty” of reproducing a given society’s structural inequalities through its education system. To determine this, critical educational researchers “have to conjecture that all the events [the power relations and material conditions that constitute structural inequalities] have a logic, the logic that the guilty party has imposed on them” — the “guilty party” being (as many such researchers “have always been close to knowing”) the patriarchal hegemony constructed by white, middle-class, Eurocentric, heterosexual, able-bodied men and their fellow travelers. The notion that critical research in education “tells us something that we have always been close to knowing” is captured by Reid’s characterization of curriculum inquiry conducted in this vein:

The assumptions underlying such work ... are: that no worthwhile curriculum improvement is possible without a radical transformation of social and political institutions; that abstract concepts like “class,” “capitalism,” or “hegemony” are, in some way, “real” and provide the key to what is wrong with society; that the needed remedies are already known, at least in principle, and that the function of research and theorizing is to increase the power of already known facts. (Reid, 1981, p. 165)

The analogy between critical educational research and crime fiction can be taken further. As Žižek writes, “the scene of the crime with which the detective is confronted is ... as a rule, a false image put together by the murderer in order to efface the traces of his [sic] act” (1992, pp. 53–54). The scene’s “organic, natural quality is a lure, and the detective’s task is to denature it” by decoding the “doubly inscribed” signifying materials that become known as “clues” (1992, p. 54). These doubly inscribed signifiers are sometimes verbal, as in the Sherlock Holmes story in which a dying woman’s words — “It was ... the speckled band!” — are used by her murderer to throw suspicion on gypsies camped nearby. The “true story” is told when Holmes is able to read “band” as a synonym for “ribbon” rather than “gang.”⁶ However, in the majority of cases, the doubly inscribed signifying materials are nonlinguistic although, as Žižek notes, they are nevertheless “already structured like a language” (1992, p. 54) because they are elements of a story written by the guilty party. Critical educational researchers are similarly concerned with decoding doubly inscribed data. They do not “read” events such as the participation rates or achievement levels of girls in science and mathematics as part of the educational scene’s “organic, natural quality” but set out “to denature it,” to reveal the “true” structure of the story inscribed by the guilty party. For example, in “Ned Ludd was framed,” Thomson (1998) offers an alternative interpretation of the historical events and circumstances that produced the term “Luddite” as a pejorative description of someone that is reluctant to take up new technologies.

Thomson suggests that the story of the Luddites as misguided vandals is “framed” by a dominant discourse that silences and forecloses debate on social and technological change by reinforcing a simple binary opposition between those who are for and against “progress.”

There is, of course, another reason for the “clues” at the scene of a fictional crime already being “structured like a language,” namely, that the scene is indeed written by an author whose intent is not so much to delude the fictional detective and the fictional representatives of “official” knowledge but, rather, to mystify the “real” reader. The “false” solution towards which readers are enticed is so ubiquitous as a narrative strategy in detective fiction that Zizek (1992) concludes that it a “structural necessity” of the mystery story form:

The status of the false solution is epistemologically internal to the detective’s final, true solution. The key to the detective’s procedure is that the relation to the first, false solutions is not simply an external one: the detective does not apprehend them as simple obstacles to be cast away in order to obtain the truth, rather it is only through them that he can arrive at the truth, for there is no path leading immediately to the truth. ... The detective does not simply disregard the meaning of the false scene: he [sic] pushes it to the point of self-reference, i.e., to the point at which it becomes obvious that its sole meaning consists in the fact that (others think) it possesses some meaning. (1992, pp. 54, 57)

I have no systematic empirical evidence to support the view that the “false” solution is also a “structural necessity” of the stories produced in the traditions of critical (or, indeed, any other forms of) educational research. However, the rhetorical strategy of demolishing a so-called “straw” argument as a means of advancing a counter-argument is hardly unknown in the literature of educational inquiry. Furthermore, given that the objects of most postpositivistic methods of educational research are assumed to be social constructions rather than “naturally occurring” phenomena, it seems likely that the narrative structures of conjecture that they deploy are indeed analogous to those of crime fiction. One point at which the analogy might break down is in ascribing such qualities as “guilt” and “deception” to the agents of the “false” solution.

If narratives of educational inquiry are structurally analogous to crime stories then it seems reasonable to suggest that those of us who write educational research might find some clues to the improvement of our textual practices by examining some of the more innovative and adventurous examples of crime fiction. During the past twenty years or so, one relatively superficial innovation has been to characterize the detective as a much less stereotyped identity — we can now find many more fictional detectives than previously who are something other than white, middle-class, Eurocentric, heterosexual, able-bodied men. However, it seems to me that relatively few of the stories that are categorized as, say, feminist detective fiction have departed markedly from the dominant narrative forms of the genre. Among the possible exceptions are the Kate Fansler stories written by “Amanda Cross,” a pseudonym of Carolyn Heilbrun whose more academic publica-

tions include studies of the representation of women in such narrative forms as literary fiction, biography, and autobiography (see, for example, Heilbrun, 1989; 1997; 1999). Like her creator, Kate Fansler is a professor of literature and the mystery novels in which she features can be read as critiques of taken-for-granted representations of the storylines which give substance and pattern to the dominant cultural discourses into which women's subjectivities are interpellated.⁷ Moss (1999; in press) takes a similar approach to interpreting the practice of inclusive schooling in Tasmania, Australia, between 1996 and 1998 as an "educational detective story" — a quest to expose the relations of dominance perpetuated by the special education knowledge tradition.

Another step in the evolution of detective fiction that seems to have preceded an analogous transformation of educational research is signaled by the emergence of what Spanos (1987) calls the "anti-detective story": stories which "evoke the impulse to 'detect'... in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime" (p. 154).⁸

Anti-detective stories can be seen to have evolved as part of the wider cultural transformations that tend to be subsumed by the concept of postmodernism. As Ewert notes, "the detective novel is eminently suited to postmodern manipulation because its tacit dependence on the hermeneutic code offers the possibility of disabling that code" (1990, p. 167). While postmodernist skepticism towards modernist versions of rationality and agency supports Tani's (1984) suggestion that the classic detective story is "doomed," literary postmodernism continues to provide explicit and implicit narrative models of "detection" — of methodological and textual inquiry strategies. Thus, the explication of continuities between educational inquiry and postmodernist anti-detective fiction may be helpful in framing educational research as a postmodernist textual practice.

Postmodernisms and Fictional "Detection"

In some ways, the detective story can be regarded not so much as a modernist form of storytelling but as *the* modernist genre *par excellence*. McHale argues that modernist fiction is characterized by an "epistemological dominant," its plot organized as "a quest for a missing or hidden item of knowledge" (McHale, 1992, p. 146). Thus, in its structure and thematics, "a modernist novel looks like a detective story," centrally concerned with "problems of the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the individual mind's grappling with an elusive or occluded reality" (1992, p. 147). The detective is the archetype of the modernist subject — a quest(ion)ing "cognitive hero," an "agent of recognitions ... reduced synecdochically to the organ of visual perception, the (private) eye," seeking to understand the *universe*, a unified and objective world. Modernist fiction may offer multiple perspectives on the world, but does so without disturbing the essential unity of the self: "each perspective is lodged in a subjectivity which is itself relatively coherent, relatively centered and stable" (McHale, 1992, p. 254).

By contrast, McHale sees postmodernist fiction as being characterized by an "ontological dominant" in which neither the world nor our selves are

assumed to be unitary (1992, p. 247). Rather, postmodernist fiction explores the possibility that we function in an ontologically plural *multiverse* of experience — that selves and worlds operate in many modalities. According to McHale, the characteristic genre of postmodernism is SF (an acronym for something more complex than many popular stereotypes of “science fiction”)⁹, with its stock-in-trade of a potentially infinite variety of bodily forms, beings, and cultures,

while epistemologically-oriented fiction (modernism, detective fiction) is preoccupied with questions such as: what is there to know about the world? and who knows, and how reliably? How is knowledge transmitted, to whom, and how reliably?, etc., ontologically-oriented fiction (postmodernism, SF) is preoccupied with questions such as: what is a world? How is a world constituted? Are there alternative worlds, and if so, how are they constituted? How do different worlds, and different kinds of worlds, differ, and what happens when one passes from one world to another, etc.? (McHale, 1992, p. 247)

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore what narratives of educational research might look like if they were modeled on SF rather than detective fiction (however, see Gough, 1995; 1998). SF narrates ontological inquiries by such strategies as exposing a plurality of worlds by staging confrontations among them (or focusing attention on boundaries between them) rather than by personifying inquiry in the figure of a detective. Indeed, as Bukatman (1993, p. 142) notes, SF detective stories have rarely enjoyed success — the combination is difficult because the boundary between possible and “impossible” in SF is so flexible and, since SF stories are often predicated upon some imagined future event or technological innovation, the “solution” to the mystery may involve an unforeseeable twist (aliens, a time machine).¹⁰ *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (Adams, 1988) is a rare case of SF and detective genres being blended, albeit in the guise of a humorous parody of both.¹¹ However, the Dirk Gently books are also examples of the anti-detective story which, in the light of McHale's reasoning, can be read as a postmodernist literary deconstruction of modern fiction's paradigmatic genre.

One of the most celebrated anti-detective stories is Eco's (1983) *The Name of the Rose*, which takes some well-known examples of generic detective fiction as its intertextual models,¹² but — as Eco himself puts it — “is a mystery in which very little is discovered and the detective is defeated” (1984, p. 54).¹³

In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco uses the form of detective fiction to deconstruct, disrupt, and undermine the rationality of the models of conjecture conventionally provided by the form — which is why, as Eco writes, his “basic story (whodunit?) ramifies into so many other stories, all stories of other conjectures, all linked with the structure of conjecture as such” (1984, p. 57). Eco provides a physical model of conjecturality in the abbey's labyrinthine library but also demonstrates that his detective — William of Baskerville — cannot decipher the complex social milieus of the abbey by assuming that it has a comparably logical (albeit complicated) structure.

Following Deleuze and Guattari (1983), Eco likens “the structure of conjecture” to the infinite networks of a rhizome rather than to the finite (and hierarchical) roots and branches of a tree:

The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space ... the world in which William realizes he is living already has a rhizome structure: that is, it can be structured but is never structured definitively... it is impossible for there to be a story. (Eco, 1984, pp. 57–58)

This message is repeated in other anti-detective stories, including Auster’s (1987) *New York Trilogy* and Calle’s (1999) remarkable *Double Game*.¹⁴ Høeg (1993) makes a similar point quite explicitly in the final paragraph of *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow* (published in North America as *Smilla’s Sense of Snow*):

Tell us, they’ll come and say to me. So we may understand and close the case. They’re wrong. It’s only what you do not understand that you can come to a conclusion about. There will be no conclusion. (Høeg, 1993, p. 410)

Thus, the anti-detective story not only subverts the rationality of the investigatory methods modeled by conventional detective fiction but also denies the defensibility of the dominant cultural expectations that animate such investigations — what Harding calls “the longing for “one true story” that has been the psychic motor for [modern] Western science” (1986, p. 193).

The literature of educational inquiry is replete with examples of researchers not understanding what they come to conclusions about, lured by the possibility of telling “one true story” and encouraged by the cultural pervasiveness of detective stories as intertextual models of how research should be narrated. The significance of anti-detective stories for educational inquiry is that they model ways of narrating research differently and, furthermore, they may help us to reshape our expectations about what it is possible and desirable to narrate. For example, Harwood (2001) names “being undetective” as a deliberate strategy for “working in ways that do not nourish searches for truth” but at the same time sustaining an “obligation to truth.” She quotes the narrator of *The Name of the Rose* who observes that “William was not at all interested in the truth, which is nothing but the adjustment between the thing and the intellect. On the contrary, he amused himself by imagining how many possibilities were possible” (Eco, 1993, p. 306). Harwood suggests that asking “how many possibilities are possible?” is an “undetective” way to create “vigilance to truth” without searching for the truth.

The pedagogical usefulness of *The Name of the Rose* in teaching and learning about educational research methodology is enhanced by the contrast between the postmodernism of the novel and the modernism of Jean-Jacques Annaud’s film version. As McHale observes:

the William of Baskerville whom we encounter in the film is a *successful* detective. He suffers a defeat, of course, in the burning of the library and particularly of the lost volume of Aristotle; but he has not been defeated as a detective, but rather (like Sherlock Holmes himself in story after story) vindicated in the end. By contrast, Eco's original William of Baskerville conspicuously fails as a detective. He discovers the truth, yes, but by stumbling upon it, not by a successful chain of deductions ... (McHale, 1992, p. 149)

William's failures as an exemplary modernist detective provide opportunities for the novel to foreground productive narrative strategies from postmodernist repertoires. Consider the following interchange between William and his "Watson," Adso¹⁵:

"What I did not understand was the relation among signs ... I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe."

"But in imagining an erroneous order you still found something... ."

"What you say is very fine Adso, and I thank you. The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless ... The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away." (Eco, 1983, p. 492)

William could equally well be describing the changed relationships between investigatory method — "detection" — and the problem under investigation that hold after poststructuralism. Once we have "found something" with the ladders and nets — the "erroneous order" — we have imagined, they can be thrown away since, in deconstruction, the method precedes the problem and is "meaningless" once it has served its purpose of foregrounding the effects of our uses of language in constituting that problem. But whereas structuralist ladders and nets lead us towards closure and a semblance of "order in the universe," poststructuralist ladders and nets tend to be temporary markers of ongoing processes of reconfiguration, leading not to closure but to new openings. The *Name of the Rose* is itself such an "erroneous order," which Eco emphasizes by the use of metafictional narrative strategies — strategies which expose its status as text and as fiction — to destabilize the projected world of the novel itself, thus drawing attention to the very processes by which it is constructed both as a world to be explored and the means of its own exploration.

Thus, after poststructuralism, I believe that it is no longer defensible to consider undertaking educational research in ways that are analogous to the methods of Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Philip Marlowe, V. I. Warshawski, Dirk Gently, or even Kate Fansler. The more appropriate models for our practice are not detectives but authors. Our work is to fathom the mysteries we inscribe.

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Notes

1. I regret the frequent use of “scare” quotes in this article. These mark terms that I would prefer to be read under erasure.

2. For a more comprehensive account of the various ways in which fiction per se can inform educational inquiry, see Gough (1998).

3. This phrase is drawn from a popular song by Elvis Costello (1977) — one among many instances of the tropes and images of detective fiction spreading beyond the common forms of popular narrative media that constitute the genre (novels, comics, movies etc.).

4. Note, however, that a strong case can be made for reading Holmes’s method as *abduction* rather than deduction (see, for example, Eco, 1983a).

5. From “The adventure of Silver Blaze,” originally published in *The Strand Magazine* Vol. IV December 1892 and reprinted in Doyle (1986, pp. 271–296).

6. “The adventure of the speckled band” was originally published in *The Strand Magazine* Vol. III (February 1892) and reprinted in Doyle (1986, pp. 194–209).

7. In this judgment I depart from Munt (1994), who sees the Kate Fansler stories chiefly as expressions of liberal feminism. While I agree that the gender politics of these stories may appear to be relatively conservative, I believe that they make sufficient gestures towards poststructuralist conceptions of narrative framing — subtle dispersals of the subject, hints of multivocality — to interpret their textual politics as being rather more adventurous.

8. Few of the examples of anti-detective stories that Spanos cites — including Kafka’s *The Trial* and Greene’s *Brighton Rock* — evoke the detective fiction genre per se, but all were written prior to 1960, and it is noteworthy that Spanos sees them as relatively early gestures toward the postmodernist literary imagination.

9. As Haraway explains, SF designates “a complex emerging narrative field in which the boundaries between science fiction (conventionally, ‘sf’) and fantasy became highly permeable in confusing ways, commercially and linguistically”; SF also signifies “an increasingly heterodox array of writing, reading, and marketing practices indicated by a proliferation of “sf” phrases: speculative fiction, science fiction, science fantasy, speculative futures, speculative fabulation” (1989, p. 5).

10. Niven (1976) summarizes some of the difficulties that authors face in writing SF/detective stories. The distinctions that McHale draws between the detective and SF genres are demonstrated particularly clearly by Effinger (1988) whose SF detective, Marid Audran, literally and materially embodies the shift from epistemological to ontological investigation when he deliberately shifts his mode of “being” by augmenting and modifying his brain functions through the use of neural implants.

11. Parody is symptomatic of other attempts to postmodernize detective fiction. As Munt notes: "The few feminist crime novels appropriating a post-modern aesthetic express their sense of play and experimentation through parody" (1994, p. 173).

12. These include, for example, Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Sayers's *Gaudy Night*, and Poe's "The purloined letter."

13. By way of reflecting on my own textual strategies, I must point out here that I am not privileging Eco's interpretation of *The Name of the Rose* merely because he wrote it. I agree with the spirit of Eco's dictum that "the author should die once he [sic] has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text" (1984, p. 7). I quote Eco for the same reasons that I use or paraphrase other authors' words: because their formulations and interpretations are agreeable to me and because I am self-consciously writing in a genre of academic journalism characterized by the rhetorical deployment of frequent quotations and citations. For a thorough analysis of *The Name of the Rose* as both detective fiction and semiotic exegesis see Trifonas (1999).

14. *Double Game* deconstructs not only the detective "story" but also the performance of both detective and author.

15. Elsewhere (Gough, 1994), I have used excerpts from this passage to frame a comparison of the ways in which the concept of order is manifested in phenomenological and poststructuralist curriculum inquiry.

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Correspondence

Noel Gough, Deakin University, Deakin Centre for Education and Change, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria, 3125 Australia. Phone: 0417 311 219 / +61 (0)3 92; fax: +61 (0)3 9244 6752. email: noelg@deakin.edu.au.