

Dickens wrote some novels—*Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Edwin Drood*—which contain the elements of the modern story of mystery and detection, but, like Dreiser and Dostoevski, always remembered his proper business. As Edmund Wilson puts it (*New Yorker*, October 14, 1944), he “invested his plots with a social and moral significance that made the final solution a revelatory symbol of something that he wanted seriously to say.”

A few years ago, when it became obvious that the intellectual classes were now reading thrillers, the customary defence was that they were a “harmless form of relaxation.” *The Press*, Christchurch, published in 1937 or thereabouts a symposium containing the views of a clergyman, two members of Parliament, two professors, a farmer, a soldier, the town clerk, a doctor, a detective, and one or two others. All except one member of Parliament, the detective (!), and the doctor (“I read them when I was twenty, but I have never become twenty again”) were more or less regular readers of detective stories, and three of them defended their taste on the above ground. The clergyman said, “most of them are harmless and enjoyable, provided they keep off unpleasant subjects, which are not at all necessary. I think that a clever mystery tale trains the mind”; one professor said, “I find them a good form of mental relaxation”; the soldier said, “they are often a source of harmless relaxation.” In an article contributed a year or two later to the literary page in the *Wellington Evening Post*, “A.M.” went further: “The intellectual, poor chap, is expected to be strung up all his waking hours. Very seldom does he live up to such a standard; he believes in relaxing now and then. Thereby he strengthens his taste and widens his sympathies.” He went on to suggest that a cause of the great popularity of the thriller was “dissatisfaction with the tiresome psychology and sex-saturation of so many contemporary ‘serious’ novels”—an explanation that was echoed by the Dean of Durham when he stated: “The modern novelist has driven some of the most respectable of us to detective stories where, if one is not on the side of the angels, one is at least on the side of

the police.” More recently still, Joseph Wood Krutch and Bernard de Voto have repeated this explanation in slightly different form, arguing that the serious novel has become so philosophical, psychological, and symbolic that readers have abandoned it for the detective novel which remains true to the story-telling tradition.



These explanations and excuses really all carry their own reply; they are boomerangs of a devastating sort that in themselves supply convincing evidence that the critical judgment of the educated has deteriorated. Consider the excuse of “harmless relaxation.” Applied to reading, “relaxation” can have only one meaning—“lowering our standards and accepting books that we know are not good for the sake of an ephemeral excitement.” The descent of the clergyman and the others from the higher to the lower level means, of course, that harm has already been done to their taste, else they would not feel the need or the desire to read at the lower level. A.M.’s contention that, by relaxing, the intellectual “strengthens his taste and widens his sympathies” is an amusing sophistry, like the clergyman’s, “I think a clever mystery tale trains the mind.” If the questions are asked “Strengthens taste for what?” “Trains the mind for what?”, the logical answers must be “Strengthens the taste for detective stories and their like,” “trains the mind