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EDITORIAL

DEOS has now been in operation for more than a year and has proven its value to distance education around the world. Due to the continuing growth of DEOS and its need for expanded resources, I would like to establish an advisory board that can provide advice and contribute to the future operation of DEOSNEWS and DEOS-L. My plans to leave Pennsylvania State University this fall have also contributed to this decision. I am especially looking for board members who can contribute to quality control, marketing, financing, and operation of DEOS. If you are interested in serving on the DEOS Advisory Board, please send a note to Morten Flate Paulsen <MFP101@PSUVM.PSU.EDU> and explain how you can contribute to the future of DEOS.

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Amateurs, Tough Guys,
and a Dubious Pursuit:
Crime and Correspondence Study
in Popular Culture

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I opened a letter and read it. It offered me a six months' correspondence course in finger printing at a special professional discount. I dropped it into the waste basket

Phillip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, by Raymond Chandler, 1939.

While little more than a century old, correspondence courses have become a fixture in the media of American popular culture. References to correspondence courses and schools frequently appear in films, novels, short fiction, and plays featuring detectives. The amateur sleuth who had trained through a correspondence course quickly became a comedy cliché. As time passed, the correspondence school became a metaphor for seediness, marginality, and incompetence in the hard-boiled genre of detective novels and films. Occasionally, the correspondence school has even provided an ideal scene of the crime.

Many large, respected American universities operate correspondence study programs. The American military enrolls millions of personnel annually, making the Department of Defense the largest single provider and user of the medium. The better proprietary schools register millions of students a year in sound, practical courses of instruction. Correspondence study, therefore, represents a solid, established medium of education. Yet the public's image of this method, at least as expressed in works of popular film and literature, is that of the worst of the proprietary

institutions. Such schools are portrayed as entrepreneurial ventures featuring flashy, misleading advertising, extravagant promises of wealth and success for their graduates, and frequent legal scandals. According to the administrators of collegiate programs, this image of superficiality, hype, and, sometimes, even criminality has retarded the growth of correspondence study as a legitimate instructional format within postsecondary institutions (Wedemeyer and Childs 1961). The image of the proprietary correspondence schools has never fully recovered from the stereotypes inspired by its more reckless, irresponsible, and criminal practitioners.

From the beginning, the most popular content areas offered by the proprietary schools have been writing and private investigation, both of which appear frequently in crime fiction (Flagler 1956). Writers and film makers have enjoyed skewering both. They quickly made the correspondence school-prepared "detective" a stock character in popular entertainment and fiction. He (always "he") was a comic figure, incompetent but usually lucky, in a bumbling sort of way.

The Correspondence School Detective

As early as 1930, this character had already become a cliché. James Hulbert, a University of Chicago English professor, complained to a meeting of university extension program administrators that this stereotype had harmed legitimate, university-level correspondence study by casting doubt on the instructional method itself:

The lack of belief in the method has gone so far that correspondence teaching is, at times, the object of ridicule; in fact, it used to be rather a common thing in the cinema or on the stage, to have a character, who revealed himself as a graduate in crime detection from a correspondence school and who was represented as having not much more sense than one of Shakespeare's fools. (NUEA 1930, 122)

Professor Hulbert correctly linked this stock character to correspondence study's developing image problem. He erred, however, in assuming that by 1930 the correspondence school detective had passed from the scene.

Perhaps the first correspondence school detective/fool--and certainly a prototype--appeared in the 1913 novel, *Philo Gubb: Correspondence School Detective*, by Ellis Parker Butler. Butler, largely forgotten today, was a renowned American humorist during the early years of this century. His protagonist, a paperhanger living in an Iowa river town, represented exactly the kind of naive fool about whom Professor Hulbert would later complain.

Philo Gubb had enrolled in a correspondence course offered by the Rising Sun Agency of Slocum, Ohio in response to a magazine advertisement promising students "big money."

"We can make you the equal of Sherlock Holmes in twelve lessons," Rising Sun had claimed (Butler 1913). That Gubb, a semi-literate, gullible rube easily graduates from Rising Sun's course testifies to its lack of rigor. In fact, in his first case, Gubb is bamboozled by a mysterious "doctor" who takes his instructions from a book entitled *The Complete Con Man*, which had been advertised on the same page of the same magazine as the detective course.

Yet, in the tradition of the rustic innocent, Gubb uses good will, a stout heart, and extraordinarily good luck to prevail in case after case. And Butler takes care to keep the correspondence school connection in the foreground. Gubb graduates from Rising Sun in the early chapters, but continues to quote from its texts as he pursues his investigations. He also buys all manner of worthless gadgets and disguises from the agency. Thus, the correspondence school detective is an enduring "sucker."

With Philo Gubb, Ellis Butler--firmly and in great detail--established as a stock character the innocent who tries to investigate crimes after

taking a correspondence course. Gubb is not a real detective, merely someone who purchased spurious credentials through the mails from a shady operator. This stereotyped character soon began to reappear with considerable frequency.

The comic amateur detective established by Butler, trained in schools like the *Rising Sun*, turned up repeatedly in the entertainment media of the 1920s. Such a character appeared on Broadway in the 1924 play *Badges*, a comedy by Max Marcin and Edward Hammond. A "frail and absurd little hotel clerk" graduates at the top of his detective class in a Brooklyn correspondence school. He is inept, but sincere, as he mistakes swindlers for postal inspectors while trying to help a "dumb blonde"--another stereotype of the day--recover some stolen bonds. His persistence and comic dumb luck win the day (Young 1924).

Fox Studios adapted *Badges* into the 1929 motion picture "The Ghost Talks." In this film, an early "talkie," the hotel clerk/correspondence course detective becomes an even more absurd character. He identifies with Sherlock Holmes to the point of keeping a deerstalker cap and a calabash pipe under the hotel desk. *Variety's* review labeled the correspondence detective "sappy"; *The Motion Picture Guide* called him "daffy." According to contemporaneous reviews, his skills and education are even less important than they were in the play, and his dumb luck is even dumber (*Variety* 1929; *The Motion Picture Guide* 1927-1983; Hall 1929).

Between "Badges" and "The Ghost Talks," several silent films used an inept correspondence course detective for comic effect. In the 1924 "Sherlock, Jr.," for example, Buster Keaton is a hapless movie projectionist and janitor who takes a crime detection course by correspondence. He loses his girlfriend to a rival, who, to make matters worse, steals the girlfriend's watch and pins the theft on Keaton. While trying to solve this "crime," Keaton only manages to exhaust himself. He falls asleep, then finds himself, his girlfriend, and his rival on the screen, characters in the movie he is projecting. In the end, naturally, he recovers his girlfriend and her watch (*The Motion Picture Guide: Silent Film 1910-1936*; *New York Times* 1925).

Metro-Goldwyn Pictures, the producers of the 1925 Lon Chaney film *The Monster*, based on a 1922 play by Crane Wilbur, apparently intended to make a horror film. However, *The Monster* includes so much comic relief that the *New York Times* review called it a "slapstick melodrama" (Hall 1925). Lon Chaney is a crazed surgeon who likes to abduct passing motorists in order to perform experiments on them. One of his victims is fortunate enough to have in his employ a junior clerk who has just received his diploma, a badge, and a pistol from a detective correspondence school. The clerk begins a search for his employer. His ineptitude enables the doctor to take more captives, including the clerk's sweetheart. In the end, however, the clerk manages to summon help, just before Chaney places his scalpel on the girlfriend (*The American Film Institute Catalog: Feature Films 1921-1930*; *The Motion Picture Guide: Silent Film 1910-1936*; *Variety* 1925).

All of the correspondence school detectives featured in these 1920s plays and films fitted the stereotype that Professor Hulbert lamented in 1930. And while the use of stereotypes would generally take another direction thereafter, they were not a thing of the past, as he had hoped.

After 1930, references to correspondence study in crime-genre films and fiction became less direct, farcical, and good-humored. While authors and film makers by no means took correspondence study seriously as a means of education, they began to use it as a means of establishing mood, setting, or character, usually with brief, almost throwaway, lines.

Raymond Chandler, in particular, skillfully used quips about correspondence study to characterize people, places, or situations on the margins of society. Such references helped establish his hardboiled tone. In the quotation given at the beginning of this article, Chandler tells the reader something about Phillip Marlowe's life and detective practice by

having him review his mail. An offer from a correspondence school for a course in fingerprinting tells us what kind of world Chandler's private eye lives in, one in which only people running scams and collecting debts bother to communicate with him (Chandler 1939).

Also in *The Big Sleep*, Chandler describes an office building by having Marlowe read its directory:

Plenty of vacancies or plenty of tenants who wished to remain anonymous. Painless dentists, shyster detective agencies, small sick businesses that had crawled there to die, mail order schools that would teach you how to become a railroad clerk or a radio technician or a screen writer--if the postal inspectors didn't catch up with them first. A nasty building. (Chandler 1939, 161)

The last three words are scarcely needed. This description leaves no room for doubt about what kind of building Marlowe is walking into, and what kind of people he will encounter there.

In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe needs to locate a physician about whom he has virtually no information. He reflects on how difficult a task this will be:

There are eight counties within a hundred miles of the City Hall and in every town in every single one of them there are doctors, some genuine medical men, some just mail-order mechanics with a license to cut corns or jump up and down on your spine. (Chandler 1953, 76)

Correspondence schools and their students, then, were believable and appropriate tenants of Chandler's mean streets.

In *Farewell, My Lovely*, Marlowe is kidnapped, beaten, and drugged. As he struggles to regain consciousness, he hallucinates about having become a detective through correspondence study: "So you want to be a detective? Earn good money. Nine easy lessons. We provide badge. For fifty cents extra we send you a truss." He seems to remember that the school had even sent him the fine set of fingers on his hands. Even as he begins to become lucid, Marlowe cannot quite shake his hallucination:

I took hold of the corner of a rough sheet and wiped the sweat off my face with the numb fingers the correspondence school had sent me after the nine easy lessons, one half in advance, Box Two Million Four Hundred and Sixty Eight Thousand Nine Hundred and Twenty Four, Cedar City, Iowa. Nuts. Completely nuts. (Chandler 1940, 157-158)

A mail-order background obviously represents the height of absurdity to a true, tough-guy detective.

In the 1946 film version of *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe, played by Humphrey Bogart, uses banter about learning the investigator's trade to fend off Lauren Bacall's curiosity about why her father has hired a private eye, and what he has so far revealed. In a scene charged with sexual tension, Bacall asks what Marlowe's first step will be. He tells her, "The usual one." When she asks what that is, he replies,

It comes complete with diagrams on page 47 of *How to be a Detective in Ten Easy Lessons*, correspondence school textbook, and uh, your father offered me a drink.

Thus, the screen writing team, which included William Faulkner, maintained Chandler's tone with respect to Marlowe's opinion of correspondence study.

Recent Works

In the years since Chandler, a number of authors and film makers have used references to correspondence schools to mark something or someone as second-rate or marginal, or to establish a character as incompetent or suspect. A few words can suffice. In English fiction, such usages tend to

be understated or even gentle. American works are usually more sarcastic.

In her extremely successful 1954 play, *The Mousetrap*, Agatha Christie has her novice innkeeper protagonists wonder about their lack of commercial experience. The young husband tells his wife and partner,

I can't help thinking we ought to have taken a correspondence course in hotel keeping. We're sure to get had in some way. (Christie 1978)

The audience immediately knows these two are in trouble.

John Mortimer's crusty London barrister Horace Rumpole is renowned for welcoming and defending dubious clients. In "Rumpole and the Judge's Elbow," he is able to sum up a new client quickly when he learns that the man, who owns a chain of massage parlors, has earned his degree in theology from a Canadian correspondence school. Rumpole is dubious about the value of his client's supposed theological training. It might be helpful, Rumpole says,

if you want to be well up in the Book of Job or if you want to carry on an intelligent chat on the subject of Ezekiel. I just don't see how it helps with the massage business. (Mortimer 1987, 126)

His correspondence work, the client tells Rumpole, has led him to develop a theory of the "spiritual alignment of the bones," which his employees practice and which the police have called prostitution.

"So that your defense," Rumpole asks, "is that without your knowledge your girls turned from sacred to profane massage?" (Mortimer 1987, 127).

Correspondence education also foreshadows or defines character in a number of American works. In *Hoopla*, a 1983 novel based on the 1919 Chicago "Black Sox" baseball scandal, author Harry Stein portrays pitcher Eddie Cicotte, the key player in the fixing of the World Series, as a man deeply troubled by the knowledge that his career is in its last years. In order to deal with his worries about supporting his family, Cicotte constantly orders information about correspondence courses in such varied areas as law, bookkeeping, public speaking, dressing for success, and electricity. Thus, he becomes easy prey for the gamblers. A man who would enroll in correspondence courses is a man who would criminally defile the national pastime (Stein 1983).

Ross Thomas, one of the contemporary masters of the spy novel, establishes the restlessness of the father of his protagonist, Dill, in *Briarpatch*. Dill remembers that his father had been a professional student as long as the G.I. Bill had held out. Then,

he became a crop duster, then a Kaiser-Frazer salesman, and once in a while he would be Mr. Peanut--you know, for Planter's Peanuts. Then he turned promoter--junk car racing, donkey basketball, stuff like that, and finally he bought out an almost bankrupt foreign language correspondence school. (Thomas 1984, 37)

With the introduction of the correspondence school as one of a list of bizarre ventures, Thomas makes it clear that Dill is the son of a hustler, a man in search of a quick dollar, someone who rejected business orthodoxy. This, of course, helps establish Dill's persona. Readers know that this investigator will not be a by-the-book dilettante.

In Loren Estleman's *Any Man's Death*, an aging Detroit hit man tells the mobster who engaged him that he (the hit man) is no longer willing to carry out a previously agreed-upon contract. The mobster knows better. He is aware that the hit man's wife has cleaned him out in a divorce settlement:

You can't live on what's left and you are too old to learn meat cutting by mail. You turn loose of this job and you won't get the contract on a sick goldfish. (Estleman 1986, 168)

In other words, not only is aspiring to a legitimate occupation out of the

question, even a mildly tainted one is now beyond the realm of possibility. The mobster knows the hit man has no options.

Donald Westlake needed a female character of ambiguous background and character in *Good Behavior*. J. C. Taylor tells the protagonist about the various facets of her "mail-order business," which includes several schemes such as sex therapy manuals, a music business in which clients can send in a song and receive a melody, or vice versa, and that old standby, the private eye course:

Allied Commissioners' Courses; be a detective, send for a one-volume correspondence course. No tests, no instructors, no salesmen will call. Free handcuffs and badge included as a special bonus if you act now. Endorsed by police chiefs and police commissioners all across the country.

Her listener questions the last statement. Taylor replies that she reads the obituaries in the police trade journals, and, "You prove a dead man didn't give me an endorsement, and then we'll talk" (Westlake 1985, 85).

The Scene of the Crime

Because of their reputation for sham, sleaziness, deceit, and marginality, correspondence schools provide excellent settings for crime fiction. In *Hearts of the West*, a 1975 MGM release, an aspiring young writer, an innocent played by Jeff Bridges, is learning to write florid western novels with the help of a correspondence course from "Titan University" in Nevada. When his father and brothers ridicule him, Bridges decides to leave home to study on the Titan campus. He arrives in Nevada to find that Titan University consists only of a set of post office boxes. He soon encounters the crooks who run the school, then accidentally makes off with thousands of dollars they had just collected. The correspondence school's corruption foreshadows the depravity Bridges then finds in the film industry, where he becomes an actor in silent westerns. The film ends with a parody of a western movie shootout when Bridges confronts the correspondence school crooks and is rescued by an alcoholic fellow actor, played by Andy Griffith (Magill's *Survey of Cinema: English Language Films*).

Private-eye writer Shelley Singer places a murder in a correspondence school in her novel *Free Draw*. The Bright Futures Home Study Plan, Inc. is a corporate enterprise that sells not only correspondence courses, but also distributorships for marketing them. When the academic vice president is murdered, every department, from instructional materials to sales, harbors one or more suspicious persons who might have killed him. None are exemplars of higher education, or even seem to care much about it. The head of instructional materials development, for example, is "a burnt-out wire service reporter." The faculty includes "Some old woman who used to teach first grade, a couple of moonlighting high school teachers, a CPA for the accounting course, and a lawyer for the business law course" (Singer 1984, 29-30). Except for a couple of executives, who stand to make or lose a great deal of money on the school, none of the faculty or staff even believe in the efficacy of the correspondence method.

Singer displays a detailed and accurate knowledge of proprietary correspondence schools, right down to the cliches. She wrote *Free Draw* from first-hand experience, having once worked as a writer in one of the country's largest, best-known proprietary correspondence schools. It should be noted that she also worked for a pyramid sales scheme in California. Her experience in these companies, both of which must have had about the same ethical tone, contributed to the authenticity of the *Bright Futures Home Study Plan, Inc.* (Letter to author, 23 January 1991).

Instances of correspondence study in film and fiction cited in this article are by no means inclusive, but they are typical. Whether in passing

references or in extended treatments, correspondence study has a poor reputation in the media of popular culture. Merely by mentioning it, authors and film makers can introduce incompetence, low humor, suspicion, or criminality into their works. These stereotypes are blatant and frequent. The proposition that correspondence study might represent an effective educational medium receives virtually no credence in crime-related fiction and films. Crime and correspondence study continue to have a special, sleazy relationship.

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