

“COLONEL MUSTARD, IN THE BILLIARD ROOM, WITH THE REVOLVER”:
JONATHAN COE'S WHAT A CARVE UP! AS A POSTMODERN WHODUNIT

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Klincksieck | « Études anglaises »

2011/4 Vol. 64 | pages 427 à 438

ISSN 0014-195X

ISBN 9782252038048

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-anglaises-2011-4-page-427.htm>

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“Colonel Mustard, in the billiard room, with the revolver”:
Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* as a postmodern whodunit

This paper proposes to confront the tenets of detective fiction and postmodernism in Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* (1994), principally by focusing on one of the main assumptions related to both domains, which is that they mainly entail playfulness, either through the solving of an enigma or through parody and pastiche, and may therefore be impervious to politics and affects. The analysis of *What a Carve Up!* will show to what extent the novel uses and abuses the codes and conventions of the whodunit in a playful way, and displays some of the specific features of postmodernism (epistemological and ontological concerns, narrative games, self-reflexivity. . .), so that it may be seen as an example of metafictional detective story. At the same time however, the novel proposes a satire of the social and economic ills of British society during the Thatcher years and unveils collective and epidemic crimes committed during that era. The novel thus moves beyond the enclosed space and individual crimes of classic detective fiction and beyond the supposed playfulness and self-centeredness of postmodernism to encompass a broader political, social, ethical and emotional scope.

Cet article propose de confronter les principes du roman policier à ceux du postmodernisme dans What a Carve Up! (1994) de Jonathan Coe, et de se concentrer plus particulièrement sur l'une des principales idées reçues communes aux deux domaines, à savoir qu'ils reposent essentiellement sur le jeu, soit par la résolution d'une énigme soit par le biais de la parodie ou du pastiche, et sont par conséquent imperméables aux enjeux politiques et aux affects. L'analyse de What a Carve Up! montrera à quel point le roman use et abuse des codes et conventions du roman policier de façon ludique et déploie certaines des caractéristiques du postmodernisme (préoccupations épistémologiques et ontologiques, jeux narratifs, auto-réflexivité), si bien qu'on peut le considérer comme un exemple de roman de détection métafictionnel. Dans le même temps toutefois, le roman propose une satire des maux sociaux et économiques de la société britannique durant les années Thatcher et met au jour des crimes collectifs en série commis durant cette période. Le roman dépasse par conséquent l'espace clos et les crimes individuels du roman de détection classique, mais aussi la dimension prétendument strictement ludique et narcissique du postmodernisme, pour poser des questions d'ordre politique, social, éthique et émotionnel.

According to Brian McHale, detective fiction is the paradigm of modernism as it is the “epistemological genre *par excellence*” (16) which raises questions about the limitations of knowledge, while postmodernism’s paradigmatic genre is science fiction, “the ontological genre *par excellence*” (16), which is concerned with questions of being. One could argue however that postmodernist novels have appropriated and transformed detective fiction to such an extent that it has become a paradigm of postmodernism, which entails both ontological and epistemological questionings. At the end of the twentieth century detective fiction was no longer considered as a subgenre belonging to popular culture and many contemporary British writers were using its devices and narrative frame within their novels. Peter Ackroyd, Charles Palliser, Graham Swift, to name but a few, have all appropriated the detective genre and the figure of the detective in a creative way, placing them in the context of the postmodern episteme. Michael Holquist remarks that “postmodernism exploits detective stories by expanding and changing certain possibilities in them” (in Most and Stowe 165) and argues that in postmodernist texts, detective fiction plays the part that myth used to play in modernist literature. From a typological perspective, the detective novel can still be seen as a constrained genre, a type of formula literature, with specific criteria and codes or “limitations and potentials” that the individual work will either fulfil or deviate from (in Winks 123). The sociological and narratological approaches view it as “a set of conventions and formulas that reaffirm a culture’s dominant ideology” (Pearson 1), and thus serve social conformity. However, when one adopts a dynamic point of view, one realizes that the genre has greatly evolved both in method and scope, and “[t]he boundaries of the genre have become fuzzier than ever” (Matzke 3) so that literary novels now frequently use detective conventions. In order to analyse one form of this evolution, I propose to confront the tenets of detective fiction and those of postmodernism in Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* (1994), by showing to what extent the novel can be considered as an exemplar of a postmodern whodunit. I will examine how Coe both uses and abuses the conventions of detective fiction, and combines ontological and epistemological concerns. I will also focus on one of the main assumptions related to both domains, which is that they entail a form of playfulness, either through the solving of an enigma or through parody and pastiche, and as such, have been accused of being impervious to politics and affects.

One of the characteristic features of postmodernist writing consists in bowing to, and borrowing from, the literary past, acknowledging that legacy both consciously and ironically through the use of pastiche and parody. *What a Carve Up!* seems at first to comply with the codes and conventions of classic detective fiction before veering off into parody. Even before one starts reading the novel, the cover to the first British paperback edition (Penguin) shows a boy with a magnifying glass, thus immediately directing the reader towards the detective

genre. Then the first sentence (which is also the last one of the book) sets up the ominous atmosphere: "Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale" (3, 498). In the prologue, we are told of two mysterious deaths: that of Godfrey Winshaw, killed in his RAF airplane above Germany in November 1942, a death his sister Tabitha believes is a murder orchestrated by their brother Lawrence. The second murder is announced with a similarly chilling sentence—"Death visited Winshaw Towers again that night" (8)—and strikes a man who tried to kill Lawrence in September 1961 but died in the ensuing fight, though the identity of the murderer remains unknown until the end of the first part. The second part grotesquely parodies the 1961 comedy horror film *What a Carve Up!* (itself loosely adapted from Frank King's *The Ghoul* [1933]), echoing the plots of both John Willard's *The Cat and the Canary* (444) and Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Niggers* (452). It depicts how the six children of the Winshaw family, gathered in January 1991 in Winshaw Towers—also nicknamed "the house of horrors" (192) and "Baskerville Hall" (193)—to hear their uncle's will, are murdered one after the other by a dead man not quite dead yet after all. Their biographer, an amateur detective, then dies in a plane accident after the official pilot has been killed and a manic one has taken his place.

A lot of blood thus flows in the novel and the reader is welcome to try and solve the various enigmas, aided by the protagonist Michael Owen who has been commissioned to write a chronicle of the Winshaw family and "brought up on a diet of Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes" (232). Owen, a professional author playing detective, is assisted by Findlay Onyx, a gay sleuth incapable of controlling his sexual urges, whose Islington apartment is furnished exactly like that of Thaddeus Sholto in Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (221). Owen (like his creator Coe) wrote detective stories as a child, the beginning of one of which, reproduced in the novel (284-87), is actually Coe's own creation, written when he was a child (in Tew 35): the Victorian detective and his assistant are described by Owen as "Holmes and Watson revisited, with a healthy dash of surrealism" (284). In "Diary of an Obsession" (2005), Coe explains that his passion for Sherlock Holmes's stories dates back to discussions with his grandfather and has even taken the form of an obsession when it comes to Billy Wilder's adaptation of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* which he has watched dozens of times (2005). *What a Carve Up!* thus situates itself within the tradition of British classic detective fiction (and not that of the American hard-boiled novel) though it also deviates from it and in the process reinvents the genre.

Apart from the intertextual and filmic references which self-consciously point to the postmodern awareness and acknowledgement of the literary past, the book contains all the conventional ingredients of an enjoyable whodunit with clues (the smell of jasmine, a coded message...), red herrings, manuscripts, the theft of photographs and

private documents, and a mysterious man tailing Owen and skulking in shadows. John Mullan makes a list of all the occurrences of the words “mystery” and “mysterious” in the novel and refers to the main enigma surrounding the reason why Owen was chosen by Tabitha Winshaw as the author of the chronicle: “the real mystery is you,” Onyx tells Owen (234). By bringing together all the various clues and threads as the French surrealists assembled words, the reader may come up with unexpected exquisite corpses, unless he prefers to view the novel as a macabre version of *Happy Families*¹ or of the *Cluedo* board game. In the June 1982 section, Owen and his friends are playing a few games of *Cluedo* amidst timely cracks of thunder and flashes of lightning until Owen realizes he is himself the culprit: “I wondered what it would actually feel like, to be present at the unravelling of some terrible mystery and then to be suddenly confronted with the falseness of your own, complacent self-image as disinterested observer: to find, all at once, that you were thoroughly and messily bound up in the web of motives and suspicions which you had presumed to untangle with an outsider’s detachment” (303). As it happens, Owen who had assumed the role of uninvolved observer (as in classic detective fiction), realises little by little that his life is intricately linked with that of the Winshaws as he probes into his own past. Terry Eagleton compares him to Oedipus, “the detective in pursuit of the criminal who is himself” (12). Robin W. Winks argues that “[t]he ideal detective story is one in which the detective hero discovers that he (or she) is the criminal” (5), and in the second part indeed, roles get reversed as detective Onyx is in prison for having given in to his reckless libido and Owen himself is accused by the Winshaw family of being the murderer of Henry and Mark Winshaw while Tabitha makes a different playful guess: “I think it was Colonel Mustard, in the kitchen, with the candlestick” (454). The convention of the detective figure as a “moral center” (in Pearson and Singer 17) is thus subverted as neither Owen nor Onyx can be said to fulfil that role.

The novel ends with the death of all the members of the Winshaw family, either through murder (the six children), euthanasia (Mortimer) or suicide (Tabitha), thus proposing closure, which is fairly conventional for crime fiction, but less in the spirit of postmodernism which favours open endings. There possibly lies a crucial distinction between traditional crime fiction and the postmodern episteme. While Lyotard defined postmodernity as an incredulity towards metanarratives, Coe opts for the form of the detective novel which, according to Eagleton “is the meta-narrative *par excellence*, in which random odds and ends are woven into a shapely closure, and opaque events are lifted into the light

1. When the novel was first published in 1994, Penguin printed a special set of playing cards, based on the English game *Happy Families*, with cartoons of the Winshaw family instead of the familiar characters. These illustrations were included in the book at the beginning of the sections devoted to the Winshaw family members.

of an omniscient knowledge" (12). *What a Carve Up!* combines the two strands: it achieves that closure at the family mansion through the series of murders that puts an end to the Winshaw dynasty and brings individual and poetic justice (as the Winshaws are killed in a way that is related to their own crimes), thus confirming the idea that detective fiction is "moral fiction" (Winks 9). But instability is then re-introduced through the detective-writer-narrator's untimely death at the end of the novel, before he has completed his chronicle, and the insertion of a "preface" which, in a circular mode, ends with the repetition of the first sentence of the book, whose narrative voice is uncertain. Through this narrative device Coe manages to both inscribe and subvert the emblematic telos conventionally provided by crime fiction. One could argue moreover that the death of the Winshaws does not put an end to the corrupt and greedy system they represent so that even when the murderers' identities have been revealed, order is still not restored, which, according to Carl D. Malmgren, corresponds to the decenteredness of the postmodernist world of detective fiction as opposed to the resolution provided by the modernist universe of mystery fiction: "Detective fiction. . . operates in a decentered and chaotic universe, in which order cannot be restored by the discovery of truth" (Pearson and Singer 17). Stefano Tani argues that one of the characteristics of postmodernist writers is indeed to "intermittently use detective conventions with the precise intention of expressing the disorder and the existential void they find central to our time in a genre designed to epitomize the contrary" (Tani 34). Such novels thus do not offer neat and reassuring denouements but are rather "machines without exits" (Porter 246).

The book's playfulness is not restricted to the whodunit dimension; it is also embedded in the postmodern narrative games played by an author who starts his novel with a prologue and ends it with a preface, alternates chapters in first- and third-person narration, does away with chronology and gleefully sprinkles his text with analepses and prolepses. Coe's narrative brio (or is it biro?) also leads him to interweave a multiplicity of literary genres (including tabloid newspaper articles, the minutes of a board meeting, interview transcripts, a diary, autobiography, letters, parodies of horror stories and gothic tales. . .) and, in the process, erode the distinction between high and popular culture, a typically postmodernist trait (Jameson 2), but also privilege fragments over the presentation of a unified whole. In a recent interview, Coe explained the reason for this multiplicity of genres and narrative modes: "the fragmented, fast-changing nature of the reality I was trying to capture dictated that no single narrative approach would be adequate" (Coe 2011). The writer also deliberately confuses ontological levels so as to blur the frontiers between fiction and reality (Guignery 48-50), a common feature of postmodernist writing: Owen, for whom film images (or simulacra) have taken over the real world, walks through the screen and becomes the main actor in the film he

is watching; his dreams become reality and fictional characters meet real-life figures, an “ontological scandal” according to McHale (85). Moreover the detective strands are introduced only to be (apparently) forgotten while the narrator tells us about his personal story in odd chapters, and alternate chapters present the careers of the abominable Winshaw children one after the other so that the genre to which the book belongs (autobiography? chronicle? detective fiction?) becomes uncertain. In a postmodernist way, the main story ramifies into a multiplicity of adjacent stories and forking paths.

Although Owen will eventually reveal the identity of the various murderers, the frustration the reader may feel when the investigation is relegated to the shadows brings to mind the genre of the anti-detective novel, “the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination” according to William Spanos (154), which, by refusing to solve the crime, questions the validity of the epistemological and hermeneutic approach (critics usually refer to novels and stories by Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov and Alain Robbe-Grillet as well as Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*). Owen is more of a self-reflexive and introspective writer than a traditional sleuth and Coe’s novel may be said to partake of the metaphysical or metafictional detective story marked by “hermeneutic skepticism and generic self-reflexivity” (Pearson 6), which “refuses the detective access to a metaphysical position, a position, above or beyond the events he experiences, from which to discover their true meaning” (Sorapure 85).

As a postmodernist narrator and writer, Owen is self-conscious and thus repeatedly lays bare the narrative devices, breaks the frame of fiction, reveals his awareness of the constructedness and instability of narrative and discourse, and confesses that he is sometimes “fleshing out incidents. . . , speculating on matters of psychological motivation, even inventing conversations” (90) when solid and demonstrable facts are missing. He even acknowledges his status as a character in the story: “I thought I was supposed to be writing this story. . . but I’m not. At least not any more. I’m part of it” (472). The issues of authorship and authority are questioned as the narrative voice keeps shifting from one chapter and one genre to the next, and the origin of the voice in some chapters remains uncertain, thus calling for the reader’s skills of detection (Guignery 47-48). Owen fails all the more to retain control over his narrative as he is eventually killed by the very woman who commissioned the chronicle of her family.

In the end, the mystery which remains unsolved is not so much the identity of the murderers as the status of the book itself. In the prologue, Owen self-reflexively refers to Tabitha Winshaw, “the patron and sponsor of the book which you, my friendly readers, now hold in your hands” (3). The chronicle of the Winshaws commissioned by Tabitha cannot however be *What a Carve Up!*, the book the reader holds in

his hands, as the latter includes chapters dealing with Owen's own life (which would have no place in a chronicle of the Winshaws) and the last chapter relates Owen's death, which he could not have written himself. Moreover, the section devoted to Henry Winshaw is composed of extracts from his diary, published in 1995, and a footnote directs the reader to "Michael Owen, *The Winshaw Legacy: A Family Chronicle* (Peacock P, 1991)" (120), which is indeed the title that appears on the facsimile of the cover of Owen's book, just before the editor's preface (495). In the preface, the editor, Hortensia Monks, reveals herself as the author of the second part of the book, "An Organization of Deaths," an account of the murders which took place at Winshaw Towers in January 1991 (498), but also as the author of the "Prologue 1942-1961" as she states: "my intention in the remainder of this Preface is to summarize, in a few concise, vivid pages, the entire early history of [the Winshaws]" (498), and the last sentence of the book ("Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale") is the first of the Prologue. The last part of the sentence refers to the 1991 murders and so cannot have been written by Owen as he died in a plane accident without having completed his chronicle. Is the Prologue therefore entirely written in the first person by Hortensia Monks? But then, on the fourth page, the narrative voice refers to some of Tabitha's relics which "came into the hands of the present writer" (6), i.e. Owen. In a private communication with the author on 7th June 2011, Coe wrote: "There is meant to be some ambiguity about whether Michael writes that first sentence or not. At the very end of the novel, the reader is supposed to realise that the opening scene is in fact a continuation of Hortensia's 'Preface'. At some point, Hortensia's words must stop and Michael's must begin—but it's never clear where that point is. Perhaps immediately after that sentence . . . I don't really know—for God's sake, I'm only the author after all!"

To a certain extent, *What a Carve Up!* is thus decidedly a joyful and playful postmodernist novel which confuses ontological levels, mixes genres and self-consciously "uses and abuses" the conventions of the detective novel (Hutcheon 3), both inscribing them and subverting them through the use of parody. One of the common reproaches addressed to postmodernism is however precisely its excessive reliance on formal games, an accusation that has also been directed at the puzzle format of classic detective fiction, a highly coded genre which has been said by some to be disconnected from the real world, in opposition to the hard-boiled novel, which proposes a more realistic reflection on its times (Chandler 12-14; Chauvin 143). According to Roger Caillois, the traditional detective novel is "not a tale but a game, not a story but a problem" (in Most and Stowe 10). For Fredric Jameson, the detective story is "a form without ideological content, without any overt political or social or philosophical point" (in Most and Stowe 124) and as such, like some postmodernist novels, permits pure formal and stylistic

experimentation. Does *What a Carve Up!* confirm that the whodunit is a coded game played by members of the gentry in a cloistered place, and the postmodernist novel a self-centered enterprise indulging in its own self-reflexive games? Or is there more to the book? Is there more to postmodernism? Is there more to the whodunit?

Terry Eagleton wrote that *What a Carve Up!* was “one of the few pieces of genuinely political Post-Modern fiction around” (12), two adjectives that are viewed by some theoreticians (such as Ihab Hassan or Lyotard) as incompatible, since postmodernism is often presented as separate from politics and economics, as a cultural phenomenon related to notions of randomness, contingency, arbitrariness, chaos, an incredulity towards metanarratives and the dissipation of truth in a multiplicity of micro-narratives. On the other hand, Eagleton and Jameson considered postmodernism as the manifestation of certain political and historical circumstances, and Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* actually proposes a fairly coherent political and economic picture of contemporary British society. The crimes which are being investigated in Coe’s novel are not only the farcical murders of the Winshaws, but also the despicable crimes perpetuated by the Winshaws themselves during the Thatcher epoch, either through the manufacture of arms sold to rival countries which will end up killing soldiers and civilians in Irak (Mark), the drastic cuts in health budgets which lead to the severe deterioration of the National Health Service (Henry), the mass production of food high in saturated fats that clog arteries and cause heart diseases (Dorothy), or the rip-off of pension funds by bankers, depriving elderly people of their life savings (Thomas). It suddenly dawns on Michael that the heart attack his father (or the man he believes is his father) died from might have been caused by Dorothy’s junk food—“*Does this mean that Dorothy killed my father?*” (256)—as well as by Thomas’s take-over of the company for which his father had worked all his life, and which suppressed the pension funds—“*Does this mean that Thomas was an accessory to my father’s murder?*” (324)—while his girlfriend Fiona’s death has certainly been precipitated by a series of errors in the understaffed hospital where she was admitted. The detective novel thus uncovers more deaths, and history and individual tragic fate become intertwined.

Beyond the fate of his own family and friends, Michael’s investigation into the careers of the Winshaws for the purpose of his chronicle unveils a series of direct or indirect crimes committed against a large portion of the population in the name of greed. *What a Carve Up!* thus moves beyond postmodern playfulness and beyond the enclosed space of the detective novel’s isolated English country house and the featuring of individual guilt and punishment. It encompasses instead a broader picture, satirizing the social and economic ills of British society during the Thatcher years and pointing to collective and epidemic crimes for which responsibility is widespread and therefore more difficult to grasp. As such, the novel, just like various forms of detective

fiction, is a “mirror to society” and reflective of its times (Winks 7). Like Coe's *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, *What a Carve Up!* borrows from the tradition of the social realistic novel and the state-of-the-nation novel to satirize the ruling corrupt class. In a postmodern way, it acknowledges the legacy of Victorian literature and in particular a writer such as Dickens whom Coe admires “for his social commitment and his high spirits” (in Tew 38). In her analysis of the novel, Pamela Thurschwell compares *What a Carve Up!* to *Bleak House* and the Winshaws to Dickensian villains. *What a Carve Up!* seems therefore both to conform to the postmodernist agenda and to revert to more conventional realistic fiction. According to Eagleton, “Coe's novel is so flagrantly Post-Modern, so shrewdly conscious of its own busily parodic technique, that it has the curious effect of parodying Post-Modernism too, raising it to the second power, and so, to a certain degree, allowing it to cancel itself out. What it then cancels into is realism” (12). The two forms (realism and postmodernism) but also the genre of detective fiction end up being both used and questioned.

Moreover, in Coe's novel, realism goes hand in hand with self-reflexivity, and in one scene of the book, Owen and Graham hold a discussion about the situation of the novel at the beginning of the 1980s. Graham, who is on a film-making course, does not understand “why people write novels any more” (276), borrowing some of his arguments from the British writer B.S. Johnson (1973, 11-13), one of Coe's literary idols. While Graham hyperbolically laments the fact that “there is no tradition of political engagement” in the British novel (277), Owen expresses a wish in one of his literary reviews: “We stand badly in need of novels . . . which show an understanding of the ideological hijack which has taken place so recently in this country, which can see its consequences in human terms and show that the appropriate response lies not merely in sorrow and anger but in mad, incredulous laughter” (277). This could be a faithful, self-reflexive description of *What a Carve Up!* which combines political awareness with satire, choosing farce rather than tragedy, unless, as Thurschwell suggests, “farce . . . becomes the modern form of tragedy” (28).

Considering *What a Carve Up!* almost thirty years after its publication, Coe wrote that he found it a bit “preachy” and feared that his social and political satire would only convince the converted. He argued: “Satire . . . actually suppresses political anger rather than stoking it up. Political energies which might otherwise be translated into action are instead channelled into comedy and released—dissipated—in the form of laughter” (Coe 2011). Thurschwell for her part wonders if one can combine laughter and human terms, Greek tragedy and gritty social realism: “can you mix your pop and politics with your high literary leanings and emerge with a coherent message? Can you have your farce and tragedy, and eat it too?” (30). It might be one of the characteristics of postmodernist writing to mix genres, modes and styles, and

still come up with a valid depiction of society or human nature, if not necessarily “a coherent message”.

Moreover, the personal aspect of Owen’s story suggests that neither the detective novel nor postmodernist fiction preclude ethics or emotions, as has sometimes been suggested. In 1941, R. Caillois provocatively stated that detective fiction was “nothing but abstraction and demonstration. It does not attempt to touch, to move, to exalt, or even to flatter the soul with a representation of its troubles, its sufferings, and its aspirations. It is cold and sterile, perfectly cerebral. It gives rise to no feeling and evokes no dream” (in Most and Stowe 11). Jameson for his part famously referred to a “waning of affect” (10) in postmodern art which is characterised by irony, cynicism and emotional depthlessness. Jacob Winnberg contests this view however and asserts that “certain elements deemed foreign to postmodernism, such as an ethical consciousness, expressions of affect and spiritual concerns, may in fact be quite symbiotic with it” (33). In *What a Carve Up!*, if the Winshaws appear particularly ruthless and Owen passive and inefficient at first, living only through the images on his television, as the novel progresses, his encounter with Fiona opens up a new ethical and emotional dimension which culminates on her death bed when Owen finally reveals the identity of his father, a traumatic revelation which had led to his self-imposed isolation and loss of a sense of self for years. Thanks to Fiona, Owen relinquishes the solipsistic world of simulacra on television to risk a face-to-face encounter with the Other, to borrow Lévinas’ terminology. The writer turned detective also drifts away from rational explanations and the satirical and farcical vein to offer an emotional response. Owen is indeed not only searching for a specific truth and resolution of an enigma outside of him: he is also struggling with his own sense of identity which has been shattered by his mother’s revelation about his biological father who turns out to have been Lawrence Winshaw’s murderer. Again, the novel brings to mind the model of the metaphysical detective story which, according to Merivale and Sweeney, asks “questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot. . . . Rather than definitively solving a crime, then, the sleuth finds himself confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity” (2). To quote Madeleine Sorapure, “[d]etection becomes a quest for identity, as the mystery outside releases the mystery inside the detective” (77).

In *What a Carve Up!*, the genre of detective fiction exceeds its limitations and set formulas thanks to the great freedom and innovation provided by postmodernist strategies. Through the devices of pastiche and parody, and the intermingling of various literary traditions (including the detective novel), Coe interrogates the notion of Englishness at the end of the millennium with irony, emphasizing the corruption of the contemporary world in all domains (politics, economics, foreign policy, art. . .), but also raises more intimate questions of identity. Coe

thus moves beyond the supposed playfulness of postmodernism and the puzzle format of classic detective fiction to encompass broader issues and combine epistemological and ontological concerns. In *The Poetics of Prose*, Tzvetan Todorov wrote: “detective fiction has its norms; to ‘develop’ them is also to disappoint them; to ‘improve upon’ detective fiction is to write ‘literature,’ not detective fiction” (43). Jonathan Coe may not have improved upon detective fiction so much as used its conventions for his own playful but also political and ethical purposes; in the process, he certainly has written literature.

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