

## Hard-Boiled Queer Detective Fiction

Ava King

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

King, Ava () "Hard-Boiled Queer Detective Fiction," *Articulāte*: Vol. 29, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol29/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

# Hard-Boiled Queer Detective Fiction

Ava King

...

From the 1940s atmosphere to the jazzy, snappy language of the narration, Stephen Spotswood's *Fortune Favors the Dead* appears at first glance to perfectly fit the world of noir, a modern take on hard-boiled detective fiction. However, with the injection of queer themes, readers begin to question how closely Spotswood's work mirrors the rough-and-tumble, often misogynistic genre it appears to be modeled after. For the purposes of this argument "to queer" something is defined to mean: to introduce LGBTQ+ themes in order to evoke a sense of marginality within a traditionally heteronormative framework. While adhering to key aspects of hard-boiled detective fiction, in his novel *Fortune Favors the Dead*, Stephen Spotswood queers gender and other features of the genre illuminating the social injustices embedded in the formula.

John Cawelti lays out the modern city, the relationship between detective and police, the depiction of female characters, and the detective's unique moral code as critically important elements of hard-boiled detective fiction. While his article explores other facets of the genre, the aforementioned remain the most appropriate to consider in the context of Spotswood's novel. Cawelti explains that the traditional detective story contains "this fantasy of the modern city as a place of exotic and romantic adventure," unlike the city's role in the hard-boiled genre (141). By debunking that fantasy, the hard-boiled author portrays the city as a place of temptation and illicit immorality that the detective

must reject in order to retain his sense of moral superiority. Indeed Cawelti mentions this sense of apparent moral superiority throughout his argument as a distinguishing characteristic of the hard-boiled detective. He explores the concept in his negative estimation of the relationship between police and detective in the genre. As Cawelti states, “the hard-boiled detective metes out the just punishment that the law is too mechanical, unwieldy, or corrupt to achieve” (143). Thus an inherent distrust remains within the relationship between the detective and the force. Cawelti explains that even in exceptional cases when the detective relies on an officer for help in an investigation, ultimately he will choose to distance himself from the institution because, unlike the police, the hard-boiled detective is interested only in true justice, which goes beyond the law and the corruption of governmental institutions (153).

Unfortunately the detective’s mistrustful attitude encroaches upon his relationships with female characters in the genre. Obviously classical hard-boiled fiction only explores sex and romantic relationships within the context of heteronormativity, and inevitably falls into misogynistic depictions of female love interests. Of sex in the hard-boiled detective story Cawelti writes, “it is an object of pleasure, yet it also has a disturbing tendency to become a temptation, a trap, and a betrayal” (153). Often the hard-boiled detective discovers that the woman he has been pursuing has committed the very murder or crime he has been investigating. Cawelti stresses that although the hard-boiled detective may be initially waylaid by a hypersexualized, femme fatale love interest he will inevitably overcome the distraction and leave the woman to suffer “justice” either by his own hand or the law’s (159). The detective’s choice to punish wrongdoing regardless of personal relationships harkens back to the concept of the detective’s moral superiority. “For the hard-boiled detective, a case is not merely a problem; it can become a crusade to root out and destroy the evils that

have corrupted the urban world,” writes Cawelti (151). Therefore the detective views himself as the necessary arbiter of justice, and the formula praises him for this. Readers are meant to sympathize with the detective, and while they may chafe at some of his more drastic measures, ultimately they will agree that his unsavory means justify his moral ends (Cawelti 151). The city, the police, women, and the detective’s sense of justice all contribute to the world of the hard-boiled detective, and each helps illustrate social injustices inherent in the genre, especially when examined through Stephen Spotswood’s contemporary and queer lens.

In addition to harboring the corruption and violence expected from a hard-boiled detective novel, the city in *Fortune Favors the Dead* plays a vital role as a place where Willowjean and others can find acceptance for their queerness. In his examination of the hard-boiled detective genre, John Cawelti describes the city as, “a gleaming and deceptive facade [hiding] a world of exploitation and criminality” (141). By Cawelti’s estimation, the detective remains as the last truly virtuous character in a city that, although it may appear to symbolize a beautiful future for humanity, really illuminates the moral degradation of the modern age (Cawelti 141). Certainly Dr. Olivia Waterhouse would agree with Cawelti’s assessment of the city. When Will and her boss, Lillian Pentecost, reveal Dr. Waterhouse’s involvement in a string of crimes reaching back into Lillian’s past, Dr. Waterhouse recalls the corruption of the city saying, “it’s like we’ve learned nothing” (Spotswood 317). The venom with which Dr. Waterhouse speaks of the city - in her evaluation, a modern epicenter of depravity - explains her motivation for the heinous crimes she commits. In this way, perhaps Dr. Waterhouse and not Will emerges as a better analogy for the point of view expressed by the conventional hard-boiled detective in reference to the criminality of the city. Indeed, for Will the city allows her to express her queerness in a way that simply would not be possible in a

small town. Ms. Parker visits a club in the city described “as a sort of late-night limbo that catered to people of all shades and predilections” (Spotswood 162). The freedom of the city allows Will to slip under the radar, to be absorbed in the masses and largely overlooked, enabling her to live unapologetically. Of course the city’s acceptance of queerness has its limitations, as evidenced by the hate crime Will experiences later, but its role as a liminal space where societal boundaries are beginning to be pushed exemplifies Spotswood’s departure from the formula. Because of the queerness of the novel, the city can be appreciated for perhaps the very thing that a conventional hard-boiled detective would despise about it: its willingness to embrace deviance from social mores.

Spotswood’s depiction of the police in the novel aligns with the expectations of incompetence and corruption in the hard-boiled genre; however, his layered approach to Lieutenant Lazenby exemplifies a break from the mold. Furthering the corruption motif of hard-boiled fiction, Cawelti claims that “the police represent symbolically the limitations, inadequacies, and subtle corruption of the institutions of law and order” (153). We see this in Spotswood’s novel when Will meets sex workers in jail and remarks, “apparently the owner had missed a payment to a judge and the girls were paying the price” (16). From the beginning of the novel, Spotswood illustrates that the legal system is not in the business of achieving justice, at least not in the way the hard-boiled detective views it. The police are the most prominent branch of the justice system in hard-boiled detective fiction, and thus, as Cawelti agrees, the institution of the police cannot be viewed in a positive light. While Spotswood’s police match the cold and corrupt picture of them as laid out by Cawelti, his individual characters allow for more nuance in the depiction of the force. When Lieutenant Lazenby apprehends John Meredith, the perpetrator of the hate crime against Will, he encourages the district attorney to avoid a trial assuring

Will that she “wouldn’t have to parade [her] and Becca’s private life in front of a jury and roll the dice they didn’t vote not guilty by reason of [she] was asking for it” (Spotswood 253). Lazenby’s active choice not to press charges against Will or Becca criminalizing their homosexuality proves himself to be a better arbiter of justice than the force as a whole. Spotswood humanizes the Lieutenant through his careful handling of Will’s attack, and by suggesting that a policeman can be in it for true justice, he complicates the hard-boiled formula. The very nature of queering the genre allows for the abolition of black-and-white thinking in the novel, as illustrated by Spotswood’s nuanced portrayal of the police in *Fortune Favors the Dead*.

Although Will’s relationship with Rebecca Collins perhaps aligns more closely with hard-boiled fiction than any other aspect of the novel, unlike the sexually objectified irredeemable villain of pulp fiction and its kin, Becca survives the novel and retains her freedom despite her culpability as a double murderer. In hard-boiled detective fiction, “the intense masculinity of the hard-boiled detective is in part a symbolic denial and protective coloration against complex sexual and status anxieties focused on women” (Cawelti 154). Certainly *Fortune Favors the Dead* follows this pattern initially with Will showing romantic interest in and sexual attraction to Becca, later revealed to be the murderer. Both Will and the hard-boiled detective ultimately resist the sway of the femme fatale, but not after being under her spell for a portion of the story. Unlike traditional hard-boiled detective fiction however, Spotswood’s world depicts a female detective at its center and thus somewhat escapes the negative portrayal of women wherein their sexuality denotes their criminality. Because Will, as the narrator, views Becca through a decidedly female gaze, readers grow to empathize with Becca through Will’s first person point of view instead of viewing her solely as an object of sexual conquest as Cawelti describes. While *Fortune Favors the Dead* manages to escape the more sexist aspects of

the stereotype of the femme fatale, ultimately the novel does allow some aspects of hard-boiled tradition to seep through; Becca serves as a romantic distraction for the detective that hinders their ability to recognize the love interest as the murderer and also, potentially, the instrument of their destruction. In the end Will does end their relationship when she and Lillian solve the mystery, but Spotswood does not allow Becca to be written off so easily. Instead he uses the tragedy of Becca's circumstances - the tragedy that she lost the only parent who truly understood her without the chance to understand him due to her mother - to inspire compassion for Becca from both reader and detective. Ultimately Lillian and Will decide to "sever the chain of these events so that no one else need suffer from them, innocent or guilty" (Spotswood 305). With this choice, Spotswood suggests that by queering the romantic relationship more space is left for compassion and nuance on the side of the villain especially compared to traditional hard-boiled detective stories where often the villainous seductress must die for "justice" to be achieved

While Will's sense of justice, the individuality of her worldview, and her marginality connect the novel to its hard-boiled roots, her queerness in relationship with these aspects ensures that Spotswood's work belongs to a category all of its own. Will resembles in this sense the hard-boiled detective "whose moral code [...] transcends the existing order" (Cawelti 151). Like her conventional contemporaries, Will takes action as she sees fit, to enact justice to her liking. In a particularly climatic and pivotal moment for Will, she physically confronts an acquaintance's abusive husband, and even after she has gained the upper hand chooses to punch his teeth in anyway, as both a warning against future retaliation, but also, as we are encouraged to understand, as a form of projected vengeance against Will's own abusive father from whom she could not save her mother. When Will recounts the incident she declares, "I felt better than I had in days"

(Spotswood 264). In choosing to handle the situation herself and not rely on law enforcement, Will reveals her own striking similarity to the hard-boiled detective with her unique sense of justice heavily influenced by her own history and personal values. With her distrust of authority stemming from her experience with her father as a negative patriarchal figure and her history of persecution as a circus member, Will has all the makings of a hard-boiled detective who turns to their own unique moral compass shaped by a lifetime of living outside of social expectations. However, because of her identity as a queer character as well as her socio-economic class, Will does not have the ability to evade social consequences in the way that Cawelti's detective can. Of the hard-boiled detective, Cawelti claims "he is as much a victim of the world as a voluntary rebel" (161). Unlike most hard-boiled detectives, Det. Parker's separation from mainstream society cannot be characterized as "voluntary." Her queer identity distances Will from the hard-boiled archetype; the social order of her time refuses to accept her sexuality and thus her marginalization is not a choice. Stephen Spotswood irrevocably alters key aspects of the genre by inserting queer characters and themes into his novel creating a world of higher stakes where society's poor grasp of justice directly impacts detective as well as victim.

At each turn in his novel *Fortune Favors the Dead*, Spotswood plays into expectations for the hard-boiled detective genre and proceeds to critique and question them, proposing that the traditional hard-boiled detective formula inadequately addresses social issues both of its own time, and of the present. Willowjean Parker certainly indicates a breath of fresh air from the often sexist and violent archetypal hard-boiled detective, and yet Spotswood includes many connections to the formula in order to create a genre of his own that retains the mood of the original with the addition of better addressing societal ills. Spotswood's queer subversion of hard-boiled detective fiction ultimately results in a



story with more nuance and verisimilitude as he adapts an inherently misogynistic and homophobic genre for a queer detective.

### Works Cited

- Cawelti, John G. "The Hard-Boiled Detective Story." *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, U of Chicago P, 1976, pp. 139-61.
- Spotswood, Stephen. *Fortune Favors the Dead*. Vintage Books, 2020.