The Mysterious Case of the Academic Mystery
by Mark Montgomery

(This essay appeared in the Mystery Writers Journal, Winter 2006-2007.)

Why in the world would anyone write an academic mystery? This question haunts me because I’m … well, an academic mystery writer. Wouldn’t it have been more sensible, I ask myself, to choose some other mystery format? Truthfully, I would much rather write a novel based on my years with the CIA in Pakistan, training daring young operatives to infiltrate terrorist groups. That would make a fascinating book. Two things, however, prevent me from writing it: 1) Its revelations could compromise national security, and 2) I didn’t actually do any of that stuff. I’ve never even been to Pakistan, and the CIA has yet to respond to my application for employment, submitted in 1973. Consider the similar case of my wife and coauthor, Tinker Powell. She wants to write about her struggle to follow in the footsteps of her father, a rough-hewn, but respected police captain in the South Bronx’s most dangerous precinct. Bad luck, though. In real life her father was a professor of economics at a small Iowa college, and she followed his footsteps with uncanny precision. We both did. So, here we are, two professors who unfortunately lack that nitty-gritty, real-life experience of crime and violence that can so invigorate a mystery author’s tale. Here’s how bad the situation is: Tinker and I have been continually in school – whether as students or teachers, it doesn’t much matter – since John F. Kennedy first took office. (In my case, it goes back to Eisenhower.) I exaggerate, slightly: I had one year off; she had two. But the point is that in terms of producing a gripping tale of murder and intrigue, we have a weaker background than, say, John Le Carre. I expect that many other academic mystery writers feel equally disadvantaged.

I know, I know, truly imaginative writers can transcend the limitations of their own experience. It is unlikely that Charles Dickens was ever a pick pocket, J.K. Rowling probably knows few wizards, and the society Margaret Mitchell wrote about was gone with wind long before she showed up. Still, “write what you know” the experts advise, and what Tinker and I happen to know is …. school. So we became academic mystery writers, simply by default.

Why is this a problem? Because there are special challenges, I think, in setting a mystery in academe. Recall, for example, that you rarely see “Inspired by actual events” on the book jacket of an academic mystery. The sad fact is that college campuses are not a common venue for murder and mayhem. Well, not murder, anyway, and mayhem is usually confined to homecoming weekend. The trouble is a not a lack of homicidal impulses. Most students want to kill at least one professor, faculty feel ample urges to strangle students, especially when grading midterms, and just about everyone on campus would gleefully shoot the dean. The problem is in the execution (so to speak). The
setting for a mystery ought to be populated with the kind of characters who could plausibly commit a murder. People like drug dealers, gang members, guys who’ve done serious prison time — and not for wussy crimes like embezzling athletic funds, either. Unfortunately, a relatively small fraction of this key demographic group – dangerous criminals – tends to enroll in a college or university. Indeed, the more selective the school, the more severe the problem: the violent crime rate among National Merit Scholars, for example, is appallingly low. You want to write *Murder at Stanford*? Forget it.

And then there is the problem of how the act of murder will be committed. Faculty and students at colleges (unlike many high schools) infrequently carry knives or guns. As a denizen of academe, I’m pretty happy about this; as a mystery writer, I find it constraining. The general lack of weapons on campus makes it hard, for example, to have the adulterous history professor be stabbed to death in a fit of passion. Or to have the football coach be riddled with bullets — too few potential suspects will be packing any heat. Even simpler methods like garroting, neck breaking, and Kung Fu won’t become viable until more ninja assassins start earning Ph.D.’s. In Tinker’s and my mystery the perpetrator had to fall back on a reliable, but somewhat Paleolithic method: clubbing victims over the head. Not too creative, perhaps, but at least credible. Even here there were difficulties, however. Two victims had to be killed with the same blunt instrument — an important clue in solving the puzzle. To make that blunt instrument available for two murders separated in time, the killer had to keep it on his or her person throughout the mystery. The implausibility of this never ceased to worry us.

Now then, if the things I’ve said above make any sense – and I’m already beginning to doubt that myself – the question remains. Why are there so many academic mysteries? Being a social scientist, naturally, I’ve developed a theory to explain this phenomenon. (Economists are so good at generating theories that we come up with new ones every few weeks.) First of all, counterpoised to the disadvantages described above, there are some advantages to setting a mystery in academe. As Henry James famously observed, “Character is plot”. Well, the academy never lacks for characters, it has scads of them. Even better, the writer can create the sorts of characters that readers will recognize from their own college days. Who among us did not know a disturbed genius, ala John Nash, a perennially-stoned dorm rat, a non-stop partier, a secret bulimic? Among our professors we remember some who were brilliant (and often arrogant), others who were impossible-to-please, at least one lecher, and, of course, that weird old guy who really cared about pagan iconography’s influence on medieval frescoes. And maybe there was a professor who truly changed our lives. The college years expose us to a broader range of interesting, not to say wacky, people than perhaps any other period of our lives. This is all grist for the mystery writer’s mill.

I offer a second explanation for the prevalence of academics mysteries: professors like to write. This isn’t news, we write all the time, of course. But I mean that we like to occasionally write something interesting. And by that I mean of interest to more than, say, the 10 other people who know which mollusks are fossilized in the Burgess Shale, or that small coterie who can quote from Beowulf. In Tinker’s and my case, once in while we like to author a manuscript that does not contain phrases like $y_i = \beta x_i + \epsilon_i$. So we
write mysteries! Through the mystery novel we academics can temporarily escape those tedious, technical, and abstruse documents that are the bread and butter of our professional lives.

Did someone mention professional lives? This brings me to the third and final component of my theory about the prevalence of academic mysteries. Consider the obverse case: a non-academic person writing a mystery novel. For illustrative purposes, assume it’s a highly paid professional, such as a lawyer or investment banker. Further suppose this person to be a conscientious and dedicated literary artist who spends hours and hours each day plotting, composing, and polishing her mystery novel. So many hours, in fact, that her performance at the office noticeably suffers. Clients get annoyed, colleagues start complaining, irate calls come down from upper management. Finally, on the morning she skips a staff meeting to write query letters to literary agents, her boss storms into her office. “I’ve had it with you and that book,” he shouts, “you’re fired!” This non-academic mystery writer does not have the option of turning to her boss, smiling sweetly at his flushed face, and calmly saying,

“Fat chance, Bucko, I have tenure.”