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English 401

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Social Commentary in Charlotte Murray Russell's *The Message of the Mute Dog*

When the topic of mystery novels is brought up, authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie might spring to mind. Perhaps readers envision Sherlock Holmes and Watson, the mustachioed Hercule Poirot, or the elderly Miss Marple. As for subgenres, readers might picture grisly police procedurals or hard boiled whodunnits. From a scholarly perspective, critics hone in on the role of the female detective in an old-fashioned society. Less often, readers think of cozy mysteries. Cozy mysteries are characterized by their lighter subject matter, small town setting, amateur sleuth protagonist, non-graphic violence, and a final meeting of the main characters that neatly wraps up the case. When readers think of cozy mysteries, they often focus purely on the entertainment aspect, and how fascinating the mysteries are. While these topics have their own merits, this analysis will discuss how detective fiction holds up a mirror to a society's values as a whole, especially during times of turmoil. There are some essays that concentrate on the Golden Age of detective fiction from 1920 - 1939. Oftentimes, these essays focus on British mysteries, and British struggles during the interwar years. The time period that is not mentioned as often is World War II, and even then, cozy mysteries remain understudied and underappreciated. This paper aims to highlight an underappreciated voice: Charlotte Murray Russell, an American mystery writer from Illinois. Russell's literary career consisted of cozy mysteries that she wrote from the Great Depression up until a few years after World War II. Today, however, Russell has been mostly forgotten. Her work has largely fallen into obscurity,

only available in a select few places, or worse, out of print. There is no literary criticism centered around her. But the content of her novels are rich with history. In particular, Charlotte Murray Russell's novel *The Message of the Mute Dog* promotes topics such as patriotism and national defense during World War II. Through her protagonist, Jane Amanda Edwards, Russell finds a platform to tackle commonplace views of the time, such as foreign espionage and anti-German sentiment toward American citizens, as well as views on Communism. *The Message of the Mute Dog* shows that even though cozy mysteries have lighter subject matter, they still engage with the society that produced them in a meaningful way.

Charlotte Murray Russell was born in 1899 in Rock Island, Illinois. Not much is known about her early life, other than she was the daughter of Thomas and Clara Murray. She went to Rock Island High School, then attended both Augustana College and Knox College before graduating from the University of Chicago. Before she became an author, she taught French and Latin at Rock Island High School for five years. She married Marcus Russell in 1925, and had one daughter with him in 1933. Russell's foray into detective fiction came about in an unusual manner. In 1933, the local newspaper the *Rock Island Argus* hosted a contest where readers were told to write the final chapter of an ongoing mystery. Russell won that contest. After that, she went on to write a full-length book titled *Murder at the Old Stone House* starring her spinster detective, Jane Amanda Edwards. Her writing was not for fun, but a means of survival. America was slowly coming out of the Great Depression, and her husband Marcus had lost his real estate business. On top of that, they had to care for their newborn baby. Thus, the Russell family had very little money. Her writing was a way to help her family ease their financial burdens. Using the royalties from her books, the Russells were able to flourish. Her career as a writer spanned from 1935 - 1953, during which she penned twenty cozy mystery novels. Twelve mysteries

feature Jane Amanda Edwards, four of her novels feature the detective Homer Fitzgerald, and four of her novels are not part of either series. Many of Russell's stories are situated in the Midwest, where she lived for most of her life. Along with being an author, she gave at least two lectures about writing detective novels to the Moline Women's Club, which were hosted by the club's arts department. Her novels and lectures were advertised in local newspapers like the *Moline Daily Dispatch*. Her work also gained publicity outside of Illinois, and even wound up getting advertised in *The New York Times*. As she grew older, she felt like the quality of her work had deteriorated. When she got tired of writing, she put down her pen in 1953 and worked as a cataloguer in the Rock Island Public Library for ten years. Toward the end of her life, local historian William Roba reached out to her and her family to document her life. Russell died on her 93rd birthday on May 22, 1992. She is survived by her five grandchildren, who all live in various parts of Illinois.

As mentioned above, Russell's work was well-known locally throughout the Quad Cities, consisting of Rock Island and Moline in Illinois, and Davenport and Bettendorf in Iowa. An important facet of her career was the local newspapers. The newspapers broadcast a wealth of information pertaining to the war and everyday life. In the *Moline Daily Dispatch*, one page would advertise her Moline Women's Club lecture, and another page broadcast rumors that the Germans were building better fighter planes. The tension between the escape of entertainment and the turmoil of the war is reflected in Russell's work. Although Russell's mysteries are primarily for entertainment, some of them reflect the turbulent times in which she lived, such as World War II. *The Message of the Mute Dog* incorporates the war into the plot, as well as a local Midwestern lens to national issues.

In order to fully understand how Russell incorporated real life context into her book, one must know exactly what her book is about. *The Message of the Mute Dog* is Russell's ninth novel. Set in the fictional town of Rockport, Illinois, the story follows Jane Amanda Edwards, a middle-aged spinster who lives with her brother Arthur and her sister Annie. At the very beginning, Annie went to a lecture for war relief in Britain, as the story takes place during World War II. When Arthur gets a job at a defense plant, a strange series of events follows. His lunchbox is stolen and turned into a bomb. Blueprints to a minesweeper go missing. A few days later, the factory is set on fire and his boss, Austin Barrett, gets murdered. Almost immediately, Jane begins to investigate alongside the police. Henry Platt, the defense plant's manager, is all too willing to cooperate. Suspects include John Storm, a local labor agitator of German descent; Jasper "Jappy" Carillo, a factory worker also of foreign extraction; and Julian Norbury, the murder victim's nephew seen fleeing the crime scene. As the investigation goes on, Jane grows frustrated with how George Hammond, the police chief, is handling everything. On the victim's desk is a porcelain dog statue, which is an heirloom belonging to Judith Barrett, Austin's eldest daughter. Jane finds a coded message hidden inside of the statue, and tries to decipher the code before giving it to the police or the FBI. She also tries to find the second dog statue. This vital clue turns the case into something much more dangerous. With the help of the police, Jane sends out a letter to each suspect in order to lure out the culprit. Toward the end, Jane searches the trailer of Jappy Carillo, one of the suspects, only to find her brother and sister snooping around as well. It turns out that the killer is Henry Platt. He is an international spy who planned on stealing the blueprints and selling them to foreign governments. Not only that, but the killer has an accomplice; Jappy Carillo. During the climax there is a shoot-out, and Platt is shot by his

accomplice. Afterwards, Jane invites Hammond over for dinner and gives a neat summation of the case, ending the novel on a lighthearted note.

Early reviews of this book are positive. They span no more than a page, and concentrate on the entertainment value in the novel. On January 28, 1942, Jack Ketch of the *New York Tribune* described the novel as “amusing, eventful, and ultimately satisfactory” and for readers who “don’t mind ubiquitous and talkative spinster sleuths” (Ketch 17). His review was only a paragraph long, and does not delve into the plot at all. Curiously, the crux of the review focuses on the humorous aspects of the book. He is not the only reviewer to take this approach. On February 1, 1942, a brief section in the *New York Times* gave a more detailed summary of the investigation. The anonymous author claimed that the Edwards family goes through “some perilous adventures and some that are merely comic” before concluding that Jane Amanda Edwards “can always be depended on for thrills and comedy” (274). Like Ketch, this reviewer focuses more on the novel’s tone rather than specific parts of its content. Both reviewers treated the novel like a simple cozy mystery, and they are not entirely wrong to do so. At first glance, *The Message of the Mute Dog* follows the cozy mystery formula to a tee. The story is set in a small Midwestern town based on Rock Island; the protagonist is a middle-aged woman with no official police experience; the tone of the novel is relatively lighthearted; the violence in the novel is briefly described without being graphic; and Jane does a final summation of the case over dinner with her friends. It is easy to see why these reviews would narrow in on these tropes in the novel.

However, these reviews overlook an important aspect; the social commentary and views within. Although the Midwest is often stereotyped as a place where nothing happens, historical documents disprove this notion. During World War II, the Rock Island Arsenal was used to

support the U.S. Army. According to the *Moline Daily Dispatch*, “During 1939 and 1940... efforts at the arsenal were concentrated feverishly in raising its production... and spreading contracts to... increase defense manufacturing.” Furthermore, On April 1st, 1941, the *Moline Daily Dispatch* asked the question, “Do you think the greatest danger to the republic is from within or without? Foreign or domestic?” According to the article, ninety-seven percent of respondents answered that the greatest danger was from within. At the same time, Texas Congressman Martin Dies created the House of Un-American Activities Committee, which also swayed opinions. According to the newspaper, “The investigations of the Dies committee have made a deep impression. Of the domestic enemies, more votes were given to subversive agents of foreign powers.” Fears of foreign spies ran rampant, and intersected with growing suspicion of German Americans. Anti-German sentiment rose during World War I, and continued to reach new heights during World War II. The impact of this bigotry was especially felt in the Midwest, which hosts a high population of German immigrants and Americans of German descent. Maris Thompson’s article “Stories of Trouble and Troubled Stories: Narratives of Anti-German Sentiment from the Midwestern United States” elaborate on its impacts on German Americans. According to Thompson, the German language was “targeted as an enemy language...and many states, including Illinois, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, passed English Only constitutional amendments in schools and public places” (Thompson). These amendments were put into practice in a number of ways. Thompson elaborates that “the curtailing of spoken German extended from larger public displays, such as changing street names or town names, to everyday items like German-associated food” (Thompson). An important fact to note is that the Quad Cities in particular had a high German population, which had been controversial for many years. In Davenport, Germans could only live in a specific part of town, isolated from the rest.

All of these elements are incorporated into *The Message of the Mute Dog*. Throughout the novel, Russell supports patriotism and national defense. From the very first page, Jane describes Rockport as “middle-sized, Middle Western, and... midway between alarm at the changing world and determination to do something about it” (Russell 9). Already, the novel establishes the patriotic values of the town. In the beginning, Jane’s sister Annie attends a lecture for war relief in Britain. Jane mentions that in 1918, during the first world war, she sent soldiers bundles that included “drop-stitch socks and... trench mirrors” (Russell 11). This indicates her support for the American soldiers fighting overseas, defending the country. After her siblings get home from the lecture, Jane criticizes some of the attendees for having ulterior motives. When one of the townspeople wants to fight in Canada, Jane believes he is “looking for an exciting change. Probably thinks it’ll be cooler up North this summer and he’ll get in a lot of fishing” (Russell 13). When Arthur wants to join the Royal Canadian Air Forces, Jane dismisses him and suggests, “If you want to help your country there are plenty of ways to do it right here” (Russell 13). Although Annie’s efforts for British war relief are unappreciated, Jane clearly supports her brother’s efforts to get a job that helps his country, and despises efforts to sabotage it. According to her, “It was clear that our country needed better defenses, more guns, more planes, more tanks, and dozens of other things I had never even heard of...if some selfish, traitorous wretch was trying to stir up a rumpus and reck the works, why, I was interested” (Russell 20). Outside of her brother’s job at the defense plant, Jane’s sense of patriotism influences her interest in the case. When Jane discovers the cipher hidden inside the dog statue, she brings it to the attention of Judy Barrett, the murder victim’s daughter. Jane tells her, “It looks to me as if we’d have a chance to perform a patriotic duty as well as punish the person who killed your father” (Russell 87). This quote sums up the crux of Jane’s motives for being involved in the case. Her sense of duty to her

country is combined with her sense of justice. It is also a message to readers that people from this part of the country have a sense of loyalty to their nation.

Since Russell supports patriotism, she derides people she sees as anti-American, such as Communists. But while she clearly dislikes Communists, she chooses not to make them the culprit. The biggest example of this is her character John Storm. In the scene when the bomb is first found in Arthur's lunchbox, Barrett names John Storm as one of the suspects. According to Barrett, Storm is a labor agitator, but he's employed at the plant because "it's [the company's] policy to watch any known Red. When they're on the payroll and under your eye it's easier to control them" (Russell 18). Barrett highlights John's Communist leanings as the source of trouble. Jane herself criticizes John Storm for his pro-union, labor-agitating ways, which she views as "anti-American propaganda" (Russell 134). The police devote their effort to staking out his house and movements, along with Jappy Carillo. In doing so, they overlook vital clues pertinent to their case, much to Jane's frustration. For example, while Jane looks through the possessions of a later suspect, she uncovers a revolver. But the police dismissed her. When the captain, George Hamond, claims that he's "got a man on John Storm every minute", Jane argues that he is "too slow" and "had time to catch a dozen spies" (Russell 129). This snippet encapsulates the tension between fighting against Communism and finding an international spy.

Along with patriotism, Russell's work reflects local fears of foreign espionage and traitors inside the country. Throughout the novel, both foreigners and native Rockport residents are suspected of being spies. In Chapter Five, when Jane stumbles upon the defense plant's fire and Austin Barrett's murder, the sheriff claims the culprits are "traitors to the government... it's foreign spies" (Russell 39). The discovery of secret messages inside the porcelain dog statue increases this suspicion. One of the main suspects is Jappy Carillo, a foreign factory worker.

Before the novel even begins, his character bio claims he is a “very suspicious character” (Russell 0). Already, Russell gives a negative impression of him to the reader. When Jane first encounters him, she describes him as a “broad, swarthy, curly-haired man with unusually long, strong arms and an impassive countenance” (Russell 78). His physical appearance cements his status as the “other”, as an unusual foreigner in a small Midwestern town. Strangely enough, his ethnicity is left up in the air. His surname, Carillo, is both Spanish and Italian, which would fit with the above description. It’s even lampshaded by the police when George Hammond asks, “With a name like that he must be Italian, don’t you think?” (Russell 103). However, according to Jane, Jappy is “Austrian by birth, but... naturalized twenty years ago” (Russell 128). One would think with Jappy’s characteristics, the story would make a bigger point of stating where he came from. Russell also could have further specified that while he was born in Austria, he is of Italian descent. This ambiguity shows that many immigrants were negatively lumped together, regardless of their country of origin. Aside from his appearance, Jappy is shown to be a saboteur from the beginning. After a bomb is found in Arthur’s lunchbox, Barrett lists Jappy as one of the suspects. The second porcelain dog statue was found inside his trailer. Jappy’s involvement gives merit to fears about foreigners.

At the same time, Russell holds a mirror to the fear of treasonous danger from within the nation. While Jappy is complicit in the defense plant’s sabotage, he is not the mastermind behind the fire and murder. That honor goes to Henry Platt, the manager of the defense plant. The usage of Henry Platt as the killer enforces the fear of internal traitors. At first glance, Platt was just seen as another neighbor in Rockport. His role as the defense plant’s manager kept him above suspicion. When the murder is first discovered, after the sheriff claims foreign spies are responsible, he addresses Henry Platt, who “passed nervous hands over his smooth dark hair”

(Russell 39). At first, readers might dismiss this behavior as stress from the murder. Upon a second reading, however, one can see that Platt gets nervous after the mention of foreign spies, which, as it turns out, happens to be the case. When the case is wrapped up, Jane expands on the killer's true nature. According to her, Platt has "done espionage work in almost every country" (Russell 152). Furthermore, Platt gave Jappy orders to sabotage the defense plant. This shows how although Jappy was a threat, he was not acting alone. Choosing Platt to be the main villain reflects how residents in the Quad Cities feared both foreign espionage and sabotage by their own countrymen.

Throughout the novel, Russell subtly criticizes anti-German sentiment from American citizens. The biggest example of this criticism is John Storm's mother, a German immigrant from Hamburg. When Agnes Storm is first mentioned, Theresa, a cook employed by the Edwards household, tells Jane that she is a foreigner. At the time, Jane didn't question it, because according to her, "In Rockport the term 'foreigner' was all-inclusive" (Russell 20). It is a possible attempt by Theresa to imply that although she was a foreigner, she was not the kind of foreigner that had negative connotations like Jappy Carillo. In *The Message of the Mute Dog*, Rockport's attitude toward foreigners in general reflects real-life suspicions prevalent in the Midwest. The police chief George Hammond describes her as an "enemy alien" (Russell 128). Later, when Jane interviews Mrs. Storm to learn the whereabouts of her son, Jane asks what her life was like in Germany. Mrs. Storm is reluctant to speak of her former life because her husband had been murdered due to his "anti-Nazi" stance. (Russell 134). At the end of the novel, during the summation of the case, Jane describes Mrs. Storm as a "tired, frightened woman who only wishes to work in peace" (Russell 153). Jane's inquiries reveal how Mrs. Storm has never

supported the Nazi regime, and was in fact victimized for it. This subverts the stereotype of the evil German spy.

To sum it up, Charlotte Murray Russell weaves social commentary relevant during World War II into her cozy mysteries. In *The Message of the Mute Dog*, she shows her support for patriotism and national defense while subtly criticizing anti-German sentiment in the United States. She uses the murderer to examine and reflect local fears of espionage and infiltration of traitors. She uses Jane Amanda Edwards as a vessel to espouse these views. Despite reviews to the contrary, *The Message of the Mute Dog* disproves the notion that entertaining cozy mysteries have no social value. While Russell never reached the fame of Agatha Christie, her work generated publicity, and showcased local issues in an entertaining manner. Her stories deserve to be preserved and studied for these reasons. To dismiss them is to dismiss a piece of history. All literature, even the genres with less social commentary, have something of value to say about the culture surrounding it, and the people who read them.

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