

Mysterious Public Relations:
A Work in Progress About PR Practitioners in Mystery Novels

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Years ago I published an article in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* that analyzed depictions of public relations practitioners in entertainment media.¹ That project was supposed to be a quick-and-dirty, fun alternative to the dissertation research on the history of Hill and Knowlton that had been preoccupying me for years. Instead, I ended up reading about and watching hundreds of fictional depictions of PR professionals in a study that took several years to complete. I swore I'd never go down this road again, but the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC) Database² changed my mind. I have a long love of crime fiction (I even have a mystery book and movie review blog called "How Mysterious!"), so when the IJPC's Joe Saltzman mentioned the "Novel-Mystery" designation on the IJPC database, I couldn't resist.

My study of "Mysterious Public Relations" is a work in progress; I'd only completed about one-fifth of the books on the IJPC database mystery novel list at the time of this pre-conference session. Here are my research questions and approach, along with some very preliminary findings. The project asks three questions:

- How are PR professionals portrayed in mystery novels?
- Why are PR professionals imagined to be good sleuths?
- How is the PR profession portrayed in mystery novels?

To answer these questions, I'm examining the 89 mystery novels listed in the IJPC

database, reading only those books in which the public relations person is a lead character.

(Saltzman also recommended looking through the larger “novels” list, in case any mysteries were overlooked, so there may be more.)

For the first research question, asking how PR professionals are portrayed, I am reading each book and noting the character’s qualifications, including education and experience, as well as their roles within organizations. Preliminary research suggested that most of the PR professional characters had college degrees, often in communication fields, and most have professional experience, with many having worked previously as reporters. They are generally respected by their employers, and often have acquired a reputation for sleuthing — in part, the latter is part of the nature of the series format that is popular in the crime fiction genre.

For the second research question, which attempts to understand why PR professionals are imagined to be good sleuths, I am examining personality characteristics mentioned in the books. Even in the early stages of the study, several characteristics have emerged as dominant: ability to think on your feet; ability to lie or conceal; desire to do the right thing or correct a wrong; curiosity and inquisitiveness; and the ability to deal with people, seeing and understanding different points of view. Evidently, authors of mystery novels perceive these characteristics to be important for both public relations and sleuthing.

The third research question asks how the PR profession (as opposed to its practitioners) is portrayed. To answer this question, I am examining the strategies and tactics professionals are shown to use on the job. The early analysis shows a broad range of activities, including writing, event planning, advising clients or employers on PR issues, and perhaps especially, media relations. In addition, crisis communication and reputation management are both heavily emphasized; both of these areas are particularly relevant to plots in crime fiction.

Based on my preliminary reading, two themes have begun to emerge. First, a primary reason that PR people are considered good sleuths, aside from the shared characteristics described above, is the proximity PR characters have to power. They are shown to have access to the players, so to speak, especially what I call the “Corrupt Politician” and the “Evil Corporation.” In this sense, the proverbial “seat at the table” that PR professionals and scholars often advocate for can actually be seen as a negative — that is, public relations’ proximity to power gives people more reason to suspect it.

A second emerging theme is the awareness on the part of both authors and PR characters of the poor reputation of public relations. For example, the book *Balancing Act* (1997) by Anita Richmond Bunkley focuses on the PR character’s attempts to balance her loyalty to community and to employer (the Evil Corporation’s chemical contamination is killing people in the neighborhood where the PR woman grew up).³ The character’s father at one point stands up in a town meeting and announces that people pay no attention to his daughter because she has to say what the company tells her to say. This author thus recognizes that PR can be used to cover up the truth, even when the PR character is inspired to help people.

In another mystery, Carole Nelson Douglas’ *Catnap*, the PR character herself notes, “PR people as a group were often stereotyped as devious, shallow, and phony.”⁴

Although this project is definitely in its early stages, it seems clear that there is more to be learned from studying the image of public relations in popular culture. I would encourage other scholars to use the IJPC database to identify other research projects.

Endnotes

¹ Karen S. Miller, “Public Relations in Film and Fiction, 1930-1995,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 11:1 (1999), 3-28.

² IJPC Database. <http://www.ijpc.org/page/introdatabase.htm>.

³ Anita Richmond Bunkley, *Balancing Act* (New York: Dutton, 1997).

⁴ Carole Nelson Douglas, *Catnap* (New York: Tom Doherty, 1992), 30.