

# H.R.F. Keating

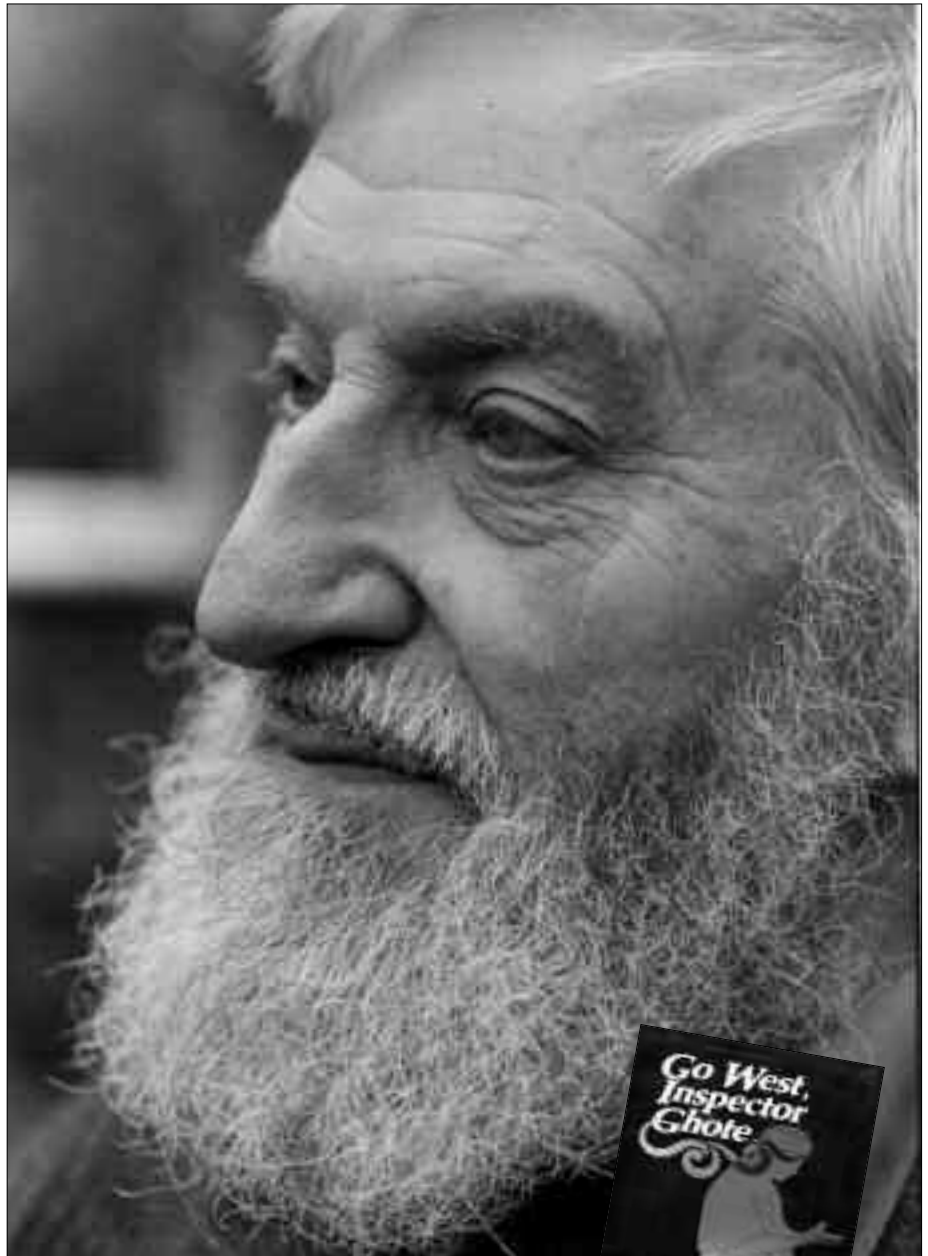
## Putting the Reader First

by  
*Martin Edwards*

H.R.F. Keating is to be the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement award at Malice Domestic XVII and it is an honour that is justly deserved. Along with two legendary figures of a previous generation, Julian Symons and Michael Gilbert, Harry Keating was undoubtedly one of the towering male writers of British crime fiction in the second half of the 20th Century and, now that we are in the 21st Century, he is heading serenely towards the 50th anniversary in 2009 of the publication of his very first crime novel.

Keating is, and perhaps will remain, best known as the creator of Indian detective Inspector Ganesh Ghote, but his achievements have been diverse. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he has served as Chairman of the Crime Writers' Association and the Society of Authors and as President of the legendary Detection Club. He has written many short stories as well as "straight" novels and much non-fiction. For fifteen years, he reviewed crime for *The Times* and, in addition to editing and introducing books, he has written countless articles—no least for *Mystery Scene*.

Symons, in an essay written for *The Oxford Companion to Crime & Mystery Writing* not long before his death said: "The tone and manner of Keating's crime stories are wholly original in modern crime fiction. They spring from a mind attracted by philosophical and metaphysical speculation, with a liking for fantasy held in check by the crime story's requirement of plot. Early books like *Zen There Was Murder* (1960) and *A Rush On The Ultimate*



Credit: Simon Keating

(1961) gave readers the pleasure of seeing a writer kick up his heels in defiance of any critical perception of what a crime story ought to be like."



Henry Raymond Fitzwalter Keating (no wonder he is universally known as Harry!) was born in 1926. He says: "I always wanted to be a writer, a novelist." Like many before him, he spent a number of years working in the newspaper business and came round to the view that "it would be easier to get a crime story published" than a mainstream work of fiction. He wrote a couple of mysteries "which got nowhere" and a third did not meet with the approval of his original literary agent, because it was "a bit odd."



# The lightness of touch and generosity of spirit that are the key characteristics of Keating's crime fiction also inform his writing about the genre.

Undaunted, Keating sent the manuscript to Gollancz, whose yellow-jacketed crime novels were at the time synonymous with quality in the genre and one morning Victor Gollancz himself telephoned Keating to say that he wanted to publish *Death And The Visiting Firemen*. At that point, Keating had not thought of writing a follow-up, but he found a more sympathetic agent who made it clear to the young writer that he ought to have the manuscript of his second book with the agency at the moment when the first was published.

Keating acknowledges that his aim in writing *Death And The Visiting Firemen* was “pure entertainment” but adds: “When my copy came, I turned it over in my hand and it occurred to me that I could use this simple whodunit form to become the novelist I had vaguely always wanted to be.” He conceived the notion of writing about Zen Buddhism and behind the whodunit plot asked the question: “What is truth?”

It was Keating's yearning to break into the American market that prompted the creation of Inspector Ghote. His first five books were published in the U.K. but not in the States, evidently because they were perceived at the time as being “too British”. Keating therefore asked himself how he could be “less British” in his writing. Although, at the time, he had never travelled to India, the thought of writing about the sub-continent appealed to him and he thought it might well appeal to American readers too.

Keating offers a fascinating insight into his work in the introduction to his short story collection *Inspector Ghote, His Life And Crimes* (1989):

I had it in mind to write a crime story called *The Perfect Murder* that would be somewhat of a commentary upon the problem of perfectionism, and one of the few notions I had about India was that things there were apt to be rather imperfect. Good symbolic stuff.

Then, out of nowhere, into my head there came this man, or some parts of him... A certain naïveté, which should enable him to ask the questions about the everyday life around him to which my potential readers might want answers ...

At this point, however, I saw Ghote's life as being a short one, a single book's span. My speciality in 1963 was detective novels without a running hero, but within each a different, more or less exotic background... I saw India as just one more in that series. But the book unexpectedly won the Gold Dagger Award for 1964, and an Edgar Allan Poe award in America...

Ghote was granted an indefinite extension of life.”



The lightness of touch and generosity of spirit that, to my mind, are the key characteristics of Keating's crime fiction also inform his writing about the genre. He has written a number of books and edited, introduced or contributed to a great many more. If Julian Symons is the pre-eminent British crime fiction critic, then Keating (whose judgements tend to be rather gentler) is not too far behind. Much of his writing about the genre has sprung from his experience of reviewing and publishers have regularly beaten a path to his door with commissions for non-fiction projects. An early example was an approach by an old college friend, which led to Keating's writing a brief and affectionate account of British detective fiction in the Golden Age, *Murder Must Appetize* (1975). Four years later, he came up with *Sherlock Holmes, The Man And His World* (1979), which he regards as one of his most successful studies. *Crime & Mystery: The 100 Best Books* (1987), boasts an admiring foreword by the legendary Patricia Highsmith. Although their books were very different, Highsmith and Keating got on famously after they met through Keating's neighbour, who happened to be Highsmith's editor in the UK. Highsmith even agreed to read through a book that Keating set in the U.S. to see whether he had effectively captured the American idiom—and Keating recalls that she kindly pointed out to him that “to knock up” in the sense of an early house-call had a rather different meaning in America than in the U.K.

He included in his selection of 100 classics of the genre Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *The Tremor Of Forgery*. Any exercise in selecting “the best” from a large field is bound to be highly subjective, but Keating makes an appealing case for his choices, which include amongst the classics

such unfamiliar titles as *The Sands Of Windee* by Arthur W Upfield, *The Last Best Friend* by George Sims and *All On A Summer's Day* by John Wainwright.

Keating joined the list of those who have sought to pass on their professional expertise when he published *Writing Crime Fiction* (1986; second edition 1994). This is one of the shorter guides of its kind, but in my opinion (and I confess that I have read most of the others) it is one of the best. Especially illuminating is that Keating points out that a crime writer may also seek to slip the reader “a Mickey Finn by way of telling you something about this world you live in”. As he says: “The crime story can, to a small extent or to quite a large extent, do what the pure novel does. It can make a temporary map for its readers out of the chaos of their surroundings—only it should never let them know.” The book offers a good deal of wisdom, not least in Keating's words of caution about writing short stories:

“The crime short story is perhaps the most difficult branch of crime fiction to write, except in the mere matter of the number of times it is necessary to put finger to word-processor key. Yet it is there. It holds out a challenge. Few crime writers can resist it forever.”

One can only be grateful that Keating has so often yielded to the temptation to write short stories himself. They include a collection featuring the cleaning lady Mrs. Craggs, *Mrs. Craggs: Crimes Cleaned Up* (1985), and also *In Kensington Gardens Once ...* (1997). I had first-hand experience of his sheer professionalism when I invited a number of luminaries to contribute to *Mysterious Pleasures* (2003), an anthology celebrating the Golden Jubilee of the formation of the Crime Writers' Association. Harry Keating was the first to respond to my overtures, and the first to write a story for the book: even more importantly, “The Hound Of The Hanging Gardens,” a brand new

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Ghote story, was typically enjoyable.

Keating's literary style is by nature quirky and interesting. The very way in which he tends to form sentences is slightly off-key, yet arresting and appropriate. The same is true of his approach to writing novels and non-fiction. *The Bedside Companion To Crime* (1989) opens with an introduction entitled: "A Word Before You Nod Off." He explains that his aim was to "have garnered as many of these fun facts as I could find or remember and arrange them in neat piles, with little flags on top like the ones on sandwiches at big tea parties to give a hint

of what's inside." For good measure, he addresses the often-asked question of why people read crime stories and provides answers both sociological and psychological, yet in his usual pithy and readable style. He acts as a persuasive advocate for crime fiction "as a powerful and beneficial factor in life" and it is impossible not to warm to a commentator who includes in his amiable assessment of the genre's byways a section of on the part played in classic detection novels by "breakfast, lunch and tea."

As long ago as 1972, Keating edited on behalf of the Crime Writers' Association an

anthology called *Blood On My Mind* which brought together new pieces by CWA members "about real crimes, some notable and some obscure." He contributed a chapter himself, about the Eugene Aram case, but this was a rare venture into true crime. As Keating told me recently, he prefers the ingenuity associated with fictional murder to the horrors of the real thing.

Keating's popularity amongst crime writers has contributed to his success as an editor. For *Agatha Christie: First Lady Of Crime* (1977), for example, he was able to persuade the duo who wrote under the name of Emma Lathen to contribute a chapter which remains one of the most incisive analyses of Christie's technique. *Crime Writers: Reflections On Crime Fiction* (1978) sprang from a BBC television series. Contributors included Symons, P.D. James, Reginald Hill and Troy Kennedy Martin, whose credits include the original screenplay for the classic film *The Italian Job*. Keating's own contribution to the book, "New Patents Pending," looks into the crystal ball. Of the young writers whom he picks out, Jacqueline Wilson soon abandoned the genre for children's fic-

## *A Selected H.R.F. Keating Reading List*

### INSPECTOR GHOTE MYSTERIES

The Perfect Murder (1964)\*  
Inspector Ghote's Good Crusade (1966)  
Inspector Ghote Caught in Meshes (1967)  
Inspector Ghote Hunts the Peacock (1968)  
Inspector Ghote Plays a Joker (1969)  
Inspector Ghote Breaks an Egg (1970)  
Inspector Ghote Goes By Train (1971)  
Inspector Ghote Trusts the Heart (1972)  
Bats Fly Up for Inspector Ghote (1974)  
Filmi, Filmi, Inspector Ghote (1976)  
Inspector Ghote Draws a Line (1979)  
Go West Inspector Ghote (1981)  
The Sheriff of Bombay (1984)  
Under a Monsoon Cloud (1986)  
Dead On Time (1988)  
The Iciest Sin (1990)  
Inspector Ghote, His Life and Crimes  
(short story collection; 1989)  
Cheating Death (1992)  
Doing Wrong (1994)  
Asking Questions (1996)  
Bribery, Corruption Also (1999)  
Breaking and Entering (2000)

### HARRIET MARTENS MYSTERIES

The Hard Detective (2000)  
A Detective in Love (2001)  
A Detective Under Fire (2002)  
The Dreaming Detective (2003)  
A Detective at Death's Door (2004)

### OTHER CRIME NOVELS

Death and the Visiting Firemen (1959)  
Zen There Was Murder (1960)  
A Rush On the Ultimate (1961)  
The Dog It Was That Died (1962)  
Death of a Fat God (1963)  
Is Skin-Deep, Is Fatal (1965)  
A Remarkable Case of Burglary (1975)  
The Murder of the Maharajah (1980)  
The Body in the Billiard Room (1987)  
The Rich Detective (1993)  
The Good Detective (1995)  
The Soft Detective (1997)  
The Bad Detective (1999)  
Jack the Lady Killer (Novel in verse; 1999)

### SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

Mrs. Craggs: Crimes Cleaned Up (1985)  
In Kensington Gardens Once (1997)

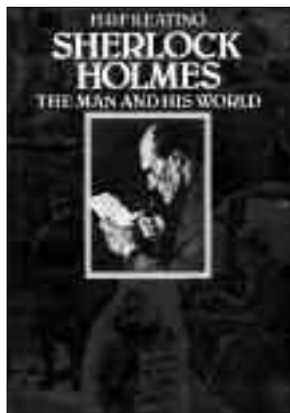
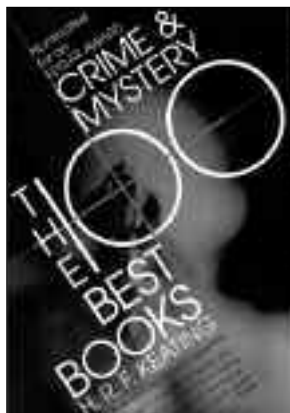
### CRITICAL WORKS

Murder Must Appetize (1975)  
Sherlock Holmes, The Man And His World (1979)  
Great Crimes (1982)  
Writing Crime Fiction (1986; 2nd ed. 1994)  
Crime and Mystery: The 100 Best Books (1987)  
The Bedside Companion to Crime (1989)

### EDITOR OF CRITICAL WORKS

Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime, 1977  
Crime Writers: Reflections on Crime Fiction, 1978  
Whodunit: A Guide to Crime, Suspense,  
and Spy Fiction (1982)  
Crime Waves (1991)  
The Man Who— (tribute to Julian Symons, 1992)

\*DATES ARE FOR U.K. PUBLICATION; U.S. PUBLICATION WAS  
GENERALLY ONE YEAR LATER.



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tion and went on to achieve enormous fame, but what is striking is how many of Keating's predictions have been borne out over the last quarter of a century. As he said, "this exploitation of our moral uncertainties is ... a trend I would expect to see running ahead for a good many years to come." He also forecast more "books where a woman takes a clearly leading role, and more violence." Above all, I suggest that he was right in his conclusion that: "One major movement can be detected. It is that the crime story is steering itself back into the general current of fiction. It has been slowly doing so for a long time, and I think that the process is accelerating." Few television tie-in books are as illuminating as *Crime Writers*.

*Whodunit?: A Guide To Crime, Suspense And Spy Fiction* (1982) again boasted a glittering array of contributors. Explaining how he writes his books, Keating said: "What starts me off writing a crime novel is, almost paradoxically, a philosophical idea. Flying a bit high? Well, like it or not, it is ideas of this sort—can the world ever do without violence? How many lies should we tell?—that give my imaginative faculty the necessary fire." The book also contains a fascinating, if highly idiosyncratic "consumer's guide to writers and their books," which highlights for the fan a number of intriguing but little-known novels.

Keating has also edited a CWA collection of fiction, *Crime Waves* (1991) and an 80th birthday tribute to Julian Symons by fellow members of the Detection Club *The Man Who-* (1992). (One hopes that his fellow Club members will produce something similar to celebrate Harry's own 80th next year).



When a writer has done so much and so well, it must be difficult to decide what to tackle next. Keating's solution to the problem

was to embark on a sequence of pairs of books. Thus we had novels about a "good" detective and a "bad" detective. A novel about a "soft" detective was to be succeeded by another about a "hard" detective—but Keating had trouble with this concept until he realised that he could write about a "hard" detective if she was a woman. Thus was born Harriet Martens, and a new series. Harriet's latest case is recorded in *A Detective At Death's Door* (2004), prefaced by a short note paying tribute to Agatha Christie "whose sure hand with her narratives taught me more than perhaps I even now recognise."

Over the years, Harry Keating has collected many accolades. *The Murder Of The Maharajah* (1980) earned his second CWA Gold Dagger and he received the U.K.'s premier award for crime fiction, the CWA Cartier Diamond Dagger, in 1996. He has been the subject of a full-length critical study, *H.R.F. Keating: Post-Colonial Detection* by Meera Tamaya (1993). And, throughout, he has succeeded whilst refusing to play safe. I am not sure whether it is more astonishing that he has written a lengthy crime novel in verse, *Jack The Lady Killer* (1999), or that the bizarre experiment is a great deal of fun. Soon after publication, he inscribed a copy to me with a twinkle in his eye and I found that he had written: "I dare you to have a go." So far, I am sorry to say, I have not managed to take up the challenge!

In *Writing Crime Fiction*, Keating said of the crime writer's special contract with their readers that the key pledge is to put the reader first. No one can doubt that, in this worthy aim, he has succeeded with a rare and admirable consistency. ✦

*Martin Edwards is the author of nine crime novels. The latest is The Coffin Trail (Poisoned Pen Press), a Lake District mystery.*