

Judging a book by its cover

European crime writers make their mark

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

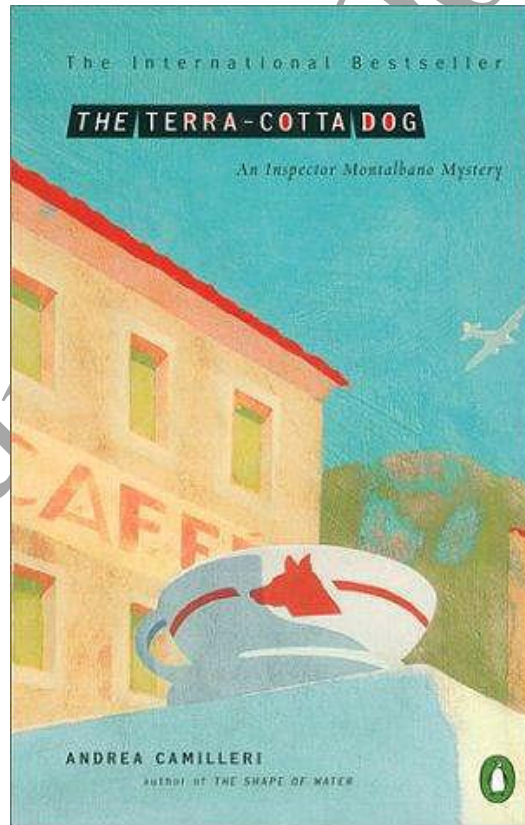
It is tempting to think of mystery and crime fiction as exclusively a product of English-speaking writers, and indeed there are good reasons for this. The very first detective novel, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, was penned by an American, Edgar Allan Poe, in 1841; and the luminaries of the genre who followed—writers like Arthur Conan Doyle, Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler - on up to those of our own day—remain primarily English-speaking.

But there is a wealth of fine crime fiction published every year that is not, in its origins, English; and delving into these works can offer fresh insights not only on the genre of crime fiction, but on life in other places as well. This week, then, we look at an Italian author perhaps not well known on this side of the Atlantic, but whose works are rapidly growing in popularity.

Andrea Camilleri

Born near Agrigento, Italy, in 1925, Andrea Camilleri came of age during the Second World War, somehow managing to retain his intellectual independence within Fascist Italy. Following the war he moved into screenwriting and producing for Italian television, bringing to the screen the works of Pirandello, Becket, and Ionesco, and the Simenon novels of Inspector Maigret, which

undoubtedly exerted an influence on his own writing.



Camilleri's novels present a candid and unvarnished portrait of Sicilian life, combining insightful social commentary with wry humour in depicting the earthy and often convoluted events of that tiny island, at once a part of Italy and yet forever separate from it. His Inspector Montalbano series has been adapted for Italian television and translated into German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Japanese, Dutch, Swedish, and

most recently, English. Camilleri is married with three children and four grandchildren, and lives in Rome.

No book is ever better than it's translator, and Camilleri's English translator, Stephen Sartarelli, is a prize-winning translator, as well as the author of three volumes of poetry in his own right. His translation is generally on target, although there are a few unhappy turns-of-phrase that slipped past the editors.

The Terra Cotta Dog
(Viking Penguin, 2002)

In *The Terra Cotta Dog*, Inspector Montalbano must contend with the ghosts of the Second World War and the contemporary dealings of the Mafia. Set in the fictional town of Vigàta, the story opens with the inspector's curious tête-à-tête with a mafioso who curiously seeks to be arrested, some loot inexplicably abandoned from a supermarket heist, and a man's dying words that lead Montalbano to an illegal arms cache hidden in a mountain cave. There, he finds a harrowing scene: two young lovers, murdered fifty years earlier and still embracing, presided over by a life-size terra-cotta dog. Determined to solve this puzzle, Montalbano embarks on a journey through the island's past and into a family's dark history amid the horrors of World War II.

Captures the essence of place

Camilleri offers us an entertaining portrait of a Mediterranean police inspector, but one seasoned with a healthy dose of Inspector Morse; for the sardonic Inspector Salvo Montalbano is well-read, and combines a knowledge of classical music with a developed palate for the finest cuisine. Montalbano is a curious yet likeable figure: a contemplative observer of life in its many

forms, doggedly pursuing criminals while equally resolute in avoiding all efforts by his superiors at promotion or public recognition. His attitude toward women who are attracted to him is, to put it mildly, rather off-hand, and as a result Montalbano spends much of his time trying to cope with their understandable rage. But when he is not busy extricating himself from the hostility of women he has ignored, avoiding criminals bent on ending his life, or negotiating the intricate labyrinth of Sicilian Officialdom, the always enigmatic Montalbano can often be found in a nearby café, indulging his passion for food and a good book.

In Camilleri's novels character development and mood are as important as plot, and devotees of the classic puzzle mystery, where plot is primary, may come away disappointed. But like any work of art, a novel should be approached on its own terms: Camilleri captures perfectly the essence of a place and its people. But his books are engaging even for readers with no interest in Sicilian society per se, simply for their sense of humour and the pleasure of a tale well told.

The Terra-Cotta Dog is the second in the Inspector Montalbano series that have been translated into English. Other novels include *The Shape of Water*, *The Snack Thief*, *Voice of the Violin*, *The Excursion to Tindari* and *The Smell of the Night*. Since the later novels draw on characters and events in the earlier books, they are best read in order.

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