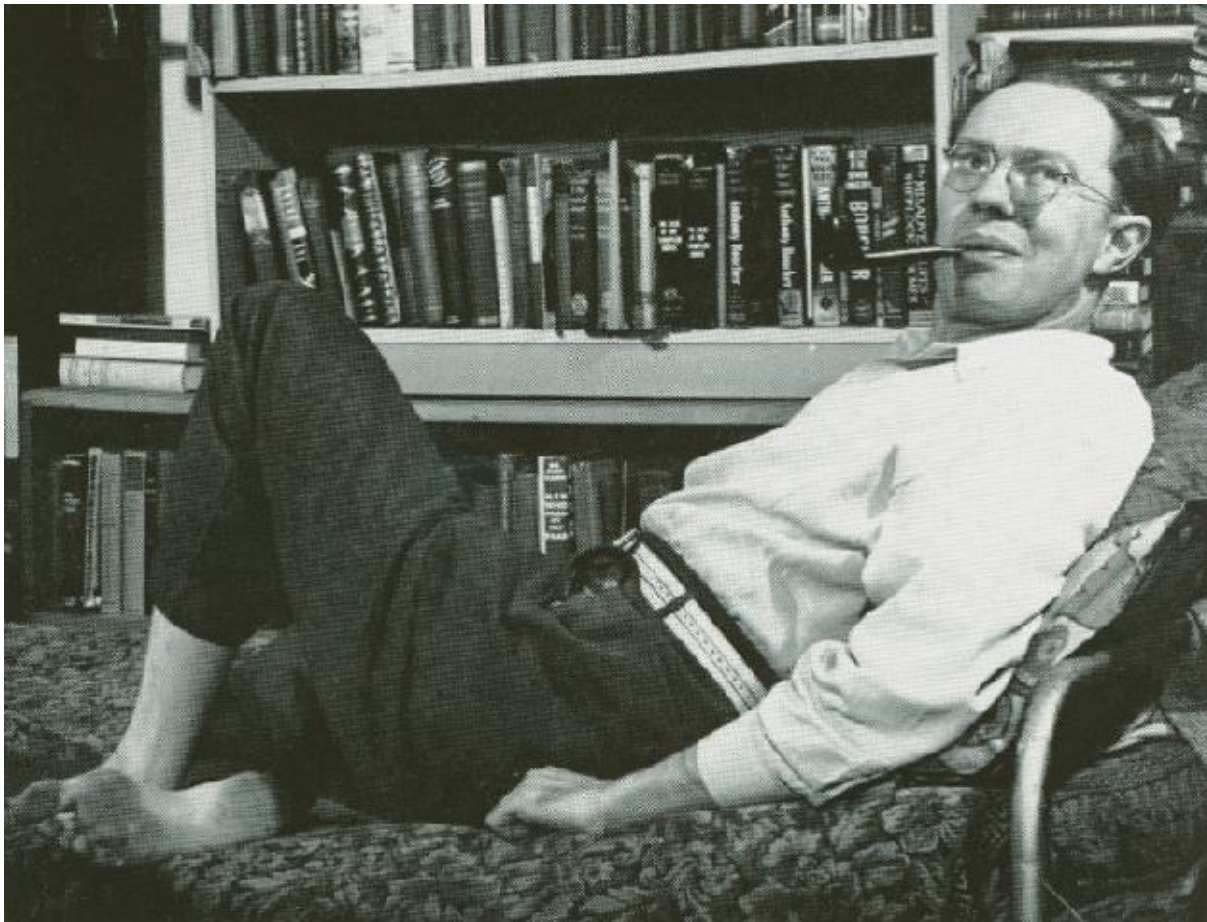


## WG and Anthony Boucher

Author, critic, editor, anthologist and translator William Anthony Parker White (1911-1968) wrote under names including Herman W. Mudgett and H. H. Holmes, but was best known as Anthony Boucher, a pseudonym he adopted at the start of his career because, he explained, with the Library of Congress listing seventy-five authors named William White, he felt in need of something more distinctive.<sup>1</sup>



[Anthony Boucher, who died of lung cancer \(note the pipe\) at the age of 56](#)

Boucher was born, raised, educated and lived his life in California. Though a proficient linguist, his ambition was to write and, to that end, spent two years from 1935 as theatre editor of the *Los Angeles United Progressive News*. His first novel, *The Case of the Seven at Calvary*, was published in 1937 after which he produced a further six titles in five years, all in the mystery genre. From 1942 to 1947 he reviewed mystery fiction for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and from 1945 plotted more than 100 radio episodes of *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* whilst also co-scripting with Jeffrey

Marks *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. In the summer of 1946 the pair launched their own mystery series, *The Casebook of Gregory Hood*. "I was turning out three scripts each week for as many shows," Boucher later said. "It was a mix of hard work and great fun." In 1948 he joined *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, for whom he translated Jorge Luis Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*, and two years later became fantasy reviewer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He reviewed from 1951 to 1963 as H. H. Holmes for the *New York Herald Tribune* and from 1951 until his death in 1968 as Anthony Boucher for the *New York Times*, where his *Criminals at Large* Sunday Book Review column appeared 852 times.

During his seventeen-year stint as the *New York Times* crime-fiction critic, Boucher reviewed nine WG novels and had some interesting – if not always complimentary – things to say about his fellow author. For some reason, the paper's review of *Fortune is a Woman* (Doubleday, 1953) was written by Rex Lardner; the first WG title to come to Boucher's notice was *The Little Walls* (1955). His appraisal concluded:

*Good backgrounds and dialogue, nicely arranged pursuit and love, a villain who attains a certain grandeur, and subtle ambivalence in personal interplay mark this as a superior suspense item.*<sup>2</sup>

But, then, Boucher believed, WG took a step back:

*Last year, Winston Graham's The Little Walls was a perfect blend of straight novel and detective story. Now his THE SLEEPING PARTNER abruptly turns into a whodunit after 40,000 words of straight fiction, and never quite succeeds in either medium.*<sup>3</sup>

In considering *Greek Fire* (1958), Boucher grouped WG with other writers, such as Victor Canning, Mark Derby or Martha Albrand, of "the suspense thriller that passes as a 'straight' novel", but

*unlike most practitioners of this in-between genre, [Graham] is an honest writer, refusing to oversimplify or falsify events and characters. The result is ... a highly satisfactory*

*entertainment ... High suspense, vivid Athenian background and [an] unusually believable love story.*<sup>4</sup>

In 1958 Doubleday launched their Crime Club Historical Mystery series with WG's *The Wreck of the Grey Cat* (i.e. 1945's *The Forgotten Story* renamed) and Boucher's reservations concerning the book sprang not from dislike – he considered it "an enjoyable story" and "good readable entertainment" – but from a feeling that it was an ill-judged choice on the part of the publisher because "the body of the book has not a hint of crime or suspense [thus] its status as a Historical Mystery is at best arguable."<sup>5</sup>

Boucher favourably reviewed *The Tumbled House* (1960):

*Winston Graham has written a powerful novel of intelligent, articulate, civilised human beings blindly intent upon destruction – of themselves along with their adversaries. That it is strongly plotted and vigorously told echoes the discipline of such superior suspense novels as his Greek Fire, Night Without Stars and The Last Gamble. The great length (over 150,000 words) may seem intimidating to the author's well-earned whodunit public. This reader (who is among that company) can only state that his interest in the characters and the flow of narrative never slackened.*<sup>6</sup>

and liked *Marnie* (1961) even more:

*Books by Winston Graham normally fall into the category of straight novels with the discipline of suspense – long, meaty, serious and shrewdly calculated, with strong emphasis on story telling and surprise. Few men handle this have-it-both-ways form more skillfully; and Graham himself has never done it better than in MARNIE ... the first-person life story of one of the most unusual of recent heroines ... With what seems (at least to a male reviewer) a phenomenally successful use of a woman's viewpoint, and with a rare and happy balance of psychoanalytic and novelistic method, Graham makes you know Marnie, even to the ultimate secret (unknown to her own unconscious mind) which turned her*

*to crime and away from sex. It's a novel as rewarding as it is suspensefully readable.*<sup>7</sup>

All very satisfactory – but then another failure to impress:

*Winston Graham attempts his most ambitious novel in After the Act, an examination of a successful murderer which scraps all accepted clichés about remorse and retribution and tries to analyze, completely anew, what his reactions must be. Much though I admire the intent, I am forced to report that this is a moderately tedious book, despite exciting glints of insight. It takes forever to reach its starting point, and then continues to move, at the pace of a snail who has given up all hope of the Olympics, through a fuzzy thicket of imprecise words.*<sup>8</sup>

WG considered *After the Act* (1965) one of his personal favourites,<sup>9</sup> so to read words like *tedious*, *fuzzy* and *imprecise* must have hurt. The book was followed in the UK by *Night Journey* (Bodley Head, 1966), a spy novel previously published in longer form in 1941. When Doubleday issued the revised version in 1968, Boucher was warmly receptive:

*NIGHT JOURNEY [is] a straightforward spy story of World War II, quietly understated and effective. Graham has rarely touched on espionage, but he has the gifts for it; this ... occasionally suggests early Hitchcock or Reed.*<sup>10</sup>

But published before *Night Journey* in America (though not the UK) was *The Walking Stick* (1967), which drew from Boucher his most provocatively outspoken WG review:

*Some novelists go along on an even plane of excellence. Some improve steadily with each book. Some vary so unpredictably you never know whether the newest book is going to be a fiasco or a triumph. In the last class is Winston Graham, who has written such outstanding blends of mainstream and suspense novel as the Crime Writers Association award-winning *The Little Walls* (1955), the vividly-remem-*

*bered Marnie (1961), and such foolishness as this year's earlier Take My Life. Now, with a far-reaching swing of the pendulum, he produces his finest novel to date in THE WALKING STICK ... a superbly plotted variant on one of the great classic forms.*<sup>11</sup>

When in December Boucher appraised 1967's crime-fiction crop, he wrote of *The Walking Stick*:

*One of the most successful fusions to date of the plotting technique of suspense with the serious novel of people; one of my two recommendations for Novel of the Year.*<sup>12</sup>

and in his penultimate *Criminals at Large* column, published just eight days before his death on 29 April 1968, Boucher was *still* championing WG's novel:

*This coming Friday the Mystery Writers of America ... will bestow its annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards. [Of the six nominees for Best Mystery Novel of 1967] I think my vote would go to [Donald E. Westlake's *God Save the Mark*], without disturbing my conviction, previously stated here, that the two [best] suspense novels of 1967 [neither shortlisted above] were John D. MacDonald's *The Last One Left* and Winston Graham's *The Walking Stick*.*<sup>13</sup>

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In June 1967, WG travelled with his wife from Washington to New York then on to Detroit, Chicago and San Francisco to publicise *The Walking Stick*, so was probably in the last of those cities on the day that, ten miles across the Bay in Berkeley, Anthony Boucher first opened his novel. It appears that the two men never met – nonetheless, Boucher's laudatory notice eventually found its way onto WG's desk, which prompted the author, on 8 November, to get in touch:

*I feel I must write and thank you for the splendid review of THE WALKING STICK that you gave me in the New York*

*Times. It really was good to see; my publishers made much of it, and rightly; and I'm most grateful.*

He then addressed Boucher's charge of inconsistency; of seeming to veer, from book to book, between "fiasco" and "triumph", between "his finest novel to date" and "foolishness":

*You speak of 'such foolishness' as TAKE MY LIFE, and that is exactly my own description of it. But it was first written in 1946<sup>14</sup> ... My agents pressed Doubledays to put it out in the U.S. [where it had never previously been published]<sup>15</sup> and they rather reluctantly agreed, and it has been in fact an enormous success ...*

Finally he gives his correspondent a heads-up about Doubleday's next planned release:

*In January next, I should warn you, they are putting out a book called NIGHT JOURNEY, which was first written in 1941 and has been re-published in England, with a foreword by me explaining that it is an old book [which] may have some historical interest in having been written in the darkest days of the war. To my considerable embarrassment it is being published in America as a new book, so that whatever small virtues it may have had: i.e. that it forecast something of the direction the war was going to take, and that it rather anticipated modern spy fiction by its anti-hero and by the political ambivalence of the spies, will now be completely lost, and I should think it will seem desperately old-fashioned. But apparently to re-issue a book in the U.S. is to condemn it unborn, so this is the way one suffers!<sup>16</sup>*

No doubt these few sentences helped to ameliorate Boucher's view of the novel, which he appraised more sympathetically (see page four) than both *After the Act* – a far superior work – and *Take My Life* – equally slight, but more fun – in perplexing fashion.

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## NOTES AND SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> The biographical information in the first two paragraphs is from the *New York Times*, 1 May 1968 and wikipedia

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, 18 September 1955

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, 14 October 1956

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, 26 January 1958

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, 20 July 1958

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, 31 January 1960

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, 8 January 1961

<sup>8</sup> *New York Times*, 15 May 1966

<sup>9</sup> *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Book Two, Chapter Eleven, Macmillan, 2003

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, 28 January 1968

<sup>11</sup> *New York Times*, 16 July 1967; Boucher's trenchant dismissal of *Take My Life* suggests that he read the book but considered it unworthy of review.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, 3 December 1967

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, 21 April 1968

<sup>14</sup> The *screenplay* was written in 1945-46, but the novel probably not until 1947. (*Take My Life* was published by Ward, Lock in December of that year; had they been able – i.e. had the completed manuscript been available to them sooner – they would surely have published in May/June to synchronise with release of the film.)

<sup>15</sup> *Take My Life* was published by Doubleday in January 1967 then again, to help promote *The Walking Stick*, from 17 September to 21 October 1967 in thirty-five unabridged parts in New York's *Daily* and *Sunday News*.

<sup>16</sup> The letter is among the papers of William Anthony Parker White held by the Lilly Library of Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA.

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