PART III
CONCEALING MINDS
Let us remind ourselves what a strange affair a typical detective novel is. Here is one of the masters of the genre, Dorothy Sayers, on the integrity of the craft:

There you are, then: there is your recipe for detective fiction: the art of framing lies. From beginning to end of your book, it is your whole aim and object to lead the reader up the garden; to induce him to believe some harmless person to be guilty; to believe the detective to be right where he is wrong and mistaken where he is right; to believe the false alibi to be sound, the present absent, the dead alive and the living dead; to believe in short, anything and everything but truth.¹

In other words, we open a detective novel with an avid anticipation that our expectations will be systematically frustrated, that we will be repeatedly made fools of, and that for several hours—or even days, depending on how fast one reads—we will be fed deliberate lies in lieu of being given a direct answer to one single simple question that we really care about (i.e., who done it?). Ellen R. Belton observes that the reader of the detective story is motivated “by two conflicting desires: the desire to solve the mystery ahead of or at least simultaneously with the investigator and the desire not to solve it until the last possible moment in order to prolong the pleasures of the mystery situation.”² The desire “to prolong the pleasures of the mystery situation” rings immediately recognizable and true, and yet how can we explain this perverse craving? After all, what is so “pleasurable” about remaining in the dark for a long time about something sinister and threatening that you really, desperately, passionately want to know now? I
do not think that many of us would find such a suspended state particularly delectable in real life.

One way to approach this question is to suggest that the enjoyment we derive from whodunits is akin to the enjoyment some people derive from watching/reading suspense thrillers: they get to experience the emotional thrill of danger, of chase, of relief, and then, perhaps, of a renewed danger, all the while remaining safe and warm and not at all threatened by a homicidal maniac posing as a kind next-door neighbor one has known for five years (hmm . . .). Moreover, we can stand being kept in the dark for three hundred pages because we know from our previous experience and from certain cultural conventions associated with this genre that ultimately the mystery will be fully explained. What makes suspense largely unpleasant in real life is that there is no guarantee that we will ever get a complete, or even a partially true, answer to any perplexing question. We can thus enjoy being lied to in the highly structured world of a murder mystery because it offers us a *safe setting* in which to relieve our anxieties about the uncertainties and deceptions of real life. Or, as Erik Routley puts it, it is the “matter of . . . assurance: it’s . . . being allowed for a space to go out of the draught of doubt—that’s what the detective story reader thanks his author for.”

I cannot argue with this explanation or with many other fine explanations put forth by literary critics and aficionados of the detective genre in the last hundred or so years. But neither can I pretend to be satisfied with them, for each of them feels incomplete once you start probing deeper. For example, the concept of “relieving-our-anxieties-about-real-life-deceptions” in a safe setting of the novel is useful because it allows us to make some immediate sense of the apparent paradox inherent in our interaction with detective stories, but it does not have any predictive capacity. Postulating that as readers we enjoy dwelling in a state of cruel uncertainty which we would by all means try to avoid in real life implies that, everything else being equal, we should derive pleasure from reading about *any* activity or about *any* state of mind that makes us anxious in reality. To a certain limited extent this is true,4 but it sets no boundary condition for its truth. It cannot predict or explain why reliving some of our numerous anxieties in fiction could be a pleasure and reliving others is a nightmare. Even more important, it does not explain why this experience should differ so radically from one reader to another, for plenty of people cannot stand whodunits and thus apparently derive no pleasure, to quote Routley again, from “being allowed” this particular literary “space to go out of the draught of doubt.”
This part of the book develops an explanatory framework that can be used to address some of the very basic and yet at the same time very complex issues informing our interaction with detective novels. I approach the question of why some people may enjoy being lied to in the context of the detective narrative by arguing that, although any narrative engages our metarepresentational ability, whodunits tend to “work out” certain aspects of this ability in a rather focused way. I then speculate on the larger implications of this argument, considering the possibility that our genre designations, such as “detective” or “romance,” could be viewed as shorthand expressions of our intuitive awareness that certain texts engage one particular cluster of cognitive adaptations to a slightly higher degree than another. Finally, I check my argument about metarepresentationality and the detective novel against John Cawelti’s warning about the dangers of reducing a literary text to psychological factors, and I discuss an important difference between a more traditional psychological approach to fiction and the one made possible in the context of cognitive framework.

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WHY IS READING A DETECTIVE STORY A LOT LIKE LIFTING WEIGHTS AT THE GYM?

Poirot smiled at me indulgently. “You are like the little child who wants to know the way the engine works. You wish to see the affair . . . with the eye of a detective who knows and cares for no one—to whom they are all strangers and all are equally liable to suspicion.”

“You put it very well,” I said.

“So I give you then a little lecture. The first thing is to get a clear history of what happened that evening—always bearing in mind that the person who speaks may be lying.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Rather a suspicious attitude.”

—Agatha Christie, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, 111

Bringing in what we currently know about our metarepresentational ability can begin to explain our strange hankering for being deceived again and again as part of our experience of reading detective novels. I suggest that detective stories “work out” in a particularly focused fashion our ability to store representations under advisement and to reevaluate their