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DONALD HAMILTON

Firearms for the Mystery Reader

Years ago I had some correspondence with Erle Stanley Gardner, author of the Perry Mason mystery novels. I chided him gently for referring to an automatic revolver in one of his books. I pointed out that there was an automatic revolver once—just once. (Since then I've come across references to a couple of others, but I've never seen one of them; hardly anyone has.) The weapon in question was a British Webley-Fosbery, if I remember the name and spelling right; and it had a peculiar self-rotating mechanism that entitled its operation to be called automatic. But modern revolvers are not automatic, and modern automatics do not revolve.

Mr. Gardner's answer was that since people tended to get the two types of firearms confused anyway, he was just making life easy for them by employing this bastard expression, although he knew it to be totally inaccurate. I must say that I was disappointed to find this attitude in a writer who'd given me a great deal of reading enjoyment, and I never felt quite the same about Perry Mason books afterwards. If Gardner's hotshot lawyer hero was so sloppy about his gun terms, could I really trust all those fancy law terms he kept throwing at me?

It may be a petty way of judging literature, but we do read our mysteries for the background as well as the suspense and action. How an author treats the subject of guns is, in my opinion, a good indication of how meticulous he is with all facts in his book. It's a way of telling if he has, or hasn't, done his homework. So, as an old shooting man, as well as an old sailing hand, let me give you a quick

way of determining how far you can trust the author of that gory volume you're planning to read while you wait in your snug anchorage for the weather to improve and let you continue your cruise.

First of all, let's not be unreasonable. Certain words have taken root in the language in spite of the fact that the purists feel they're inaccurate. The word gun itself is one. Calling everything a gun that goes bang is really equivalent to calling everything a cow that goes moo. If you're a cattle expert, you say bull when you mean bull, you say steer when you mean steer, you say heifer when you mean heifer; and you only speak of a cow when you're actually referring to an adult female bovine. Similarly, if you're a highpowered firearms expert, you say pistol when you mean pistol, you say rifle when you mean rifle, and you only say gun when you mean shotgun. The only other legitimate use of the term, according to the purist, is for large artillery pieces or naval ordnance.

Well, we can be too strict in our search for authenticity. In my books, I'll happily refer to anything from an 18-inch naval cannon to a .22 pistol as a gun; and I'll allow the same leeway to other authors. I hope you will, too.

Now let's consider the long guns, the shoulder weapons. We'll take the real gun first: the shotgun. This firearm has a smooth unrifled bore and, generally, a very large hole in the end. I was under the impression that everybody knew the difference between shotguns and rifles. However, the other day I read a book by a lady writer who had somebody crippled at a gentlemanly British grouse shoot by a heavy shotgun "bullet" that lodged against his spine. I gaped at this, thinking that the lady simply had to be kidding; or that she was planting a clue. She wasn't. She really meant it; she'd just been too busy researching the ladies' period costumes, I guess, to be bothered with checking on the firearms appearing in her book.

For the benefit of this author, and the readers who actually don't know, let me explain that when used for its primary purpose—shooting birds on the wing as in the situation mentioned—a shotgun is never loaded with a single, large projec-

Continued ▶

tile. It's loaded with hundreds of fine shot pellets that spread to cover an area of several feet out from the target. The reason is obvious: there isn't one marksman in a thousand who can hit a fast-flying bird with a single bullet. In fact, a mediocre shot like me is very happy when he gets one duck with every three or four shots, even using a shotgun.

Rifles are next; here we get into real precision marksmanship. A rifle is more accurate than a shotgun because its barrel is provided with spiral grooves—the rifling—that impart a spin to the bullet, stabilizing it in flight and making accurate long-range shooting possible. Target shooting is sometimes done at a thousand yards or more, but this is very specialized stuff. Even 500 yards is a long, long shot. If the fictional rifleman you're reading about wants to commit homicide at that range, the author had better make him a hell of a shot and let him spend a lot of time tuning his weapon and getting acquainted with it. Just having him casually pick a strange gun off the rack and knock somebody off at a quarter of a mile—well, I suggest you forget that book and find yourself an author who knows his gun business. I won't mention any names.

I won't even try to explain the mysteries of rifle-cartridge nomenclature. The .30-06, for instance, is a .30 caliber military rifle issued in 1906. The .30-30, on the other hand, is a .30 caliber civilian rifle using 30 grains of powder. You can see that if I tried to cover this field, we'd be here all week. But we can discuss the ammunition in general, regardless of load and date and caliber. Here there's a very simple rule; we may call it the Bullet Rule. Whenever you read a book in which a character loads his rifle, or any other firearm, with a bullet, you know the author is faking.

There's one exception to this rule: an old-fashioned costume drama in which the hero, or villain, pours into his muzzle-loading weapon a measured amount of loose powder, on top of which he rams a separate lead ball, or bullet. Modern ammunition comes in cartridges (shells, in the case of shotguns) that contain in one handy package the projectile(s), the propellant and the primer that sets the whole thing off. Just having a character fill his weapon with a lot of inert hunks of lead makes you wonder what he's planning to do with it, use it as a bludgeon?

So much for the long guns. Pistol nomenclature is also tricky, and just

about the trickiest part for the author is figuring out what to call the things in the first place. Currently the term handgun is getting a big play. Well it says what it means, and there's no objection to it. On the other hand, Saturday Night Special may once have been legitimate police slang, but nowadays it's a derogatory term employed chiefly by self-righteous people who don't know anything about guns except that they don't like them. If your author has his characters prattle loosely about Saturday Night Specials, you can figure he probably doesn't know too much about guns.

Historically, you can get a lot of argument on this subject. My personal preference is for the word "pistol." Early, there were singlebarreled pistols and doublebarreled pistols. Later, more tubes were added and the whole monstrous bundle of barrels was made to rotate to bring each priming device under the hammer in its turn. This ingenious but bulky device was called a pepperbox because of all the holes in the end. Then a certain Samuel Colt (at least he got the glory) had the bright idea of dispensing with all those extra barrels and simply rotating the part that held the powder and lead behind a single barrel. The revolving pistol was born—later shortened to revolver. Later came the automatic pistol, automatic for short. This weapon employed a totally different system that fed its cartridges automatically into the firing chamber from a magazine that was generally located in the butt.

A revolver needs no safety device because it's pretty tough to fire accidentally. In the neighborhood of ten pounds of effort are usually required to either work the double-action mechanism or cock the hammer. If the literary character you're reading about finds a safety on his revolver, his creator is probably talking, or writing, through his hat. (The same applies to a silencer; for technical reasons silencers don't work worth a damn on revolvers.)

Automatic pistols are different. Once a cartridge is fed into the chamber, the piece is ready to fire at a touch; a safety device is therefore required to keep the gun from accidentally blowing a hole in the hero's pocket or the heroine's purse, and maybe in their respective anatomies as well. (Silencers work on automatics.)

For a fast once-over, that about covers the field of fictional ballistics for the mystery reader. However, let's note that there is a way out for the author. It was used regularly by one of the all-time

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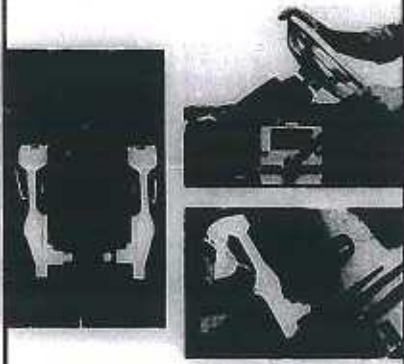
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HAMILTON *Continued*

greats in the mystery field: Rex Stout. When Nero Wolfe sent his Number One Boy, Archie Goodwin, out on dangerous business, Archie would pull open a drawer and grab the firm's old Marley .38 for protection. The fact is that there is no such gun. Rex Stout knew it and expected his readers to know it. This was his way of telling them he just wasn't going to get into that firearms hassle; he was more interested in orchids. A cop-out, to be sure, but quite legitimate, since Mr. Stout was making no pretense to expertise he didn't have.

So an author can usually avoid the whole problem if he really wants to, without stigma. We can't very well object to a writer who admits he doesn't know, about guns or anything else; it's the writers who pretend to know and don't whose books let us down so badly.

Next time you're stymied on your boat with a stack of mysteries (I hope a big one) this article may help you to spot the firearms fakery. Good reading. ♡

CHOCOLATE BAYOU *Continued*

brackish, depending on rainfall amounts. It constitutes an interesting area for fishermen because of the intermingling of fresh and saltwater species. Under the proper conditions, it is possible to catch largemouth bass, blue catfish, redfish (channel bass), speckled trout and flounder all in the same spot—and on the same bait!

Lower Chocolate Bayou and Chocolate Bay are prime areas for speckled trout, reds and flounder, as well as croaker, sheepshead, drum and sand trout. Crabbing is excellent through all but the coldest months. Live shrimp are sold at the marinas and on floating bait barges anchored near popular fishing spots. Live bait for freshwater angling may be found at the Outdoor Sport Shop in Alvin or at Knappe's Bait Stop on Highway 35 near the bayou. During last winter's hard freeze many large redfish and trout were killed in Chocolate, along with one snook of 3-4 pounds—evidence that the bayou harbored more and larger fish than most of us realized.

For up-to-date information on Chocolate Bayou, contact either Vernon Perkins at Perkins Marine (713) 393-1936 or Tom Wheelis at Lute's Marina (713) 393-1021. Those in the Houston area, or driving through, might want to listen to the Bob Stevenson Outdoor Report on AM 1070 each morning from 4 a.m. to 6 a.m. or call Bob on the air at (713) 390-5111 for a daily update on conditions in the Chocolate Bayou area. ♡

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