

# A LIGHTER SHADE OF NOIR

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS BY  
*Patrick Derksen*



**CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE**

## Introduction

A hilarious send-up of the film noir genre, packed with witty dialogue, larger-than-life characters, and a mystery that will keep you guessing and laughing until the very end.

## Playwright Bio

Patrick Derksen is a playwright who specializes in creating comedies with large, flexible casts perfect for schools and community theatres. His work often plays with familiar genres and story structures, finding humor in the tropes and archetypes that audiences know and love. He has a knack for writing sharp, fast-paced dialogue and creating memorable, quirky characters that give many actors a chance to shine.

## Synopsis

Trent Trowel is a private investigator. In his own mind, he's the best in the business — a lone wolf cleaning up the mean streets of a tough city. In reality, he's a bit of a bumbler, kept afloat by his sharp-as-a-tack secretary, Miss Flannigan. His world is turned upside down when a beautiful and mysterious *femme fatale*, Clarice LaTriche, warns him that something terrible is going to happen at the annual International Private Detective Gala.

Reluctantly, Trent attends the gala, only to find himself surrounded by the world's most famous (and eccentric) detectives: the brilliant Shirley Holmes, the suave Jean-Louis-Philippe Eustache, and the deceptively sharp Ms. Beatrice, each with their own long-suffering sidekick in tow. When a crime inevitably occurs, this all-star team of sleuths must work together — or, more accurately, compete with each other — to solve the case. Trent Trowel is determined to prove he's not just a dime-store detective, but can he solve the mystery before the real pros do?

## Characters

### The Detectives

**TRENT TROWEL:** A tough-talking but somewhat incompetent hard-boiled Private Investigator. He narrates his life in dramatic monologues that everyone else can hear.

**TRACY DYCK:** A no-nonsense police detective who has little patience for private eyes like Trent.

**SHIRLEY HOLMES:** A confident, highly intelligent, and famous British detective.

**JEAN-LOUIS-PHILIPPE EUSTACHE:** A refined, sophisticated, and very French inspector.

**MS. BEATRICE:** An elderly woman who seems like a sweet old lady but is a master detective who knows it all.

### The Sidekicks

**MISS FLANNIGAN:** Trent Trowel's sharp, witty, and perpetually exasperated secretary.

**DR. WATSON:** Shirley Holmes' loyal but long-suffering assistant.

**MONSIEUR SILENCIEUX:** Eustache's very quiet, long-suffering butler.

**JANE:** Ms. Beatrice's kind and long-suffering niece.

**SERGEANT MALONEY:** Tracy Dyck's subordinate on the police force.

### The Villains

**BIG BILL:** A shadowy, feared crime boss.

**CLARICE LATRICHE:** A classic *femme fatale* with mysterious motives.

**MAUREEN ARTEE:** A cunning and artistic villain.

**LE CAMBRIOLEUR:** An infamous and stealthy cat burglar.

## Themes

- ★ Parody and satire
- ★ Appearance vs. reality
- ★ Clichés and stereotypes

- ★ Secrets and deception
- ★ Incompetence and ego
- ★ Overcoming odds

## Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “detective story”? What are some common elements (characters, settings, plot points)?
- ★ Have you ever seen an old black-and-white movie? What gives them their unique “feel”?
- ★ Do you know what film noir is? What characterizes film noir?
- ★ What is the difference between a parody and a regular comedy?
- ★ Think of a character who believes they’re much smarter or cooler than they actually are. What makes that character type funny?
- ★ What is a *femme fatale*? Can you think of any examples from movies or books?

## Pre-Read Activities

### Research Project: Film Noir

- ★ Ask students: What do you know about film noir? What does the term evoke?
- ★ In small groups, research the genre of film noir. Look for key elements:
  - » Visual style (lighting, camera angles)
  - » Character archetypes (the hard-boiled detective, the femme fatale)
  - » Common settings (dark city streets, smoky offices)
  - » Typical plots (murder, betrayal, mystery)

- ★ Each group will create a short presentation (e.g., a slide deck, poster, or short video) to share their findings with the class.

### Detective Tropes Brainstorm

- ★ As a class, create a list of all the clichés and tropes associated with film noir or detective stories. Think about:
  - » Characters: The cynical P.I., the mysterious woman, the dumb henchman, the tough police chief
  - » Setting: Rainy city streets, smoky offices, fancy nightclubs
  - » Dialogue: “The dame walked in, and she was trouble.” “It was a dark and stormy night.”
  - » Costumes: Trench coats, fedoras, fancy dresses
- ★ Keep this list handy while reading the play and see how many tropes the playwright uses and makes fun of.

### The Hard-Boiled Monologue

- ★ Trent Trowel’s signature trait is his inner monologue that isn’t so inner.
- ★ Have students write a short (3–4 sentence) monologue in this style about a mundane, everyday event. For example: “The bell rang. Another day in the joint was over. I grabbed my bag and headed for the door, but I knew the homework was waiting for me out there... like a shark in the water.”
- ★ Have students perform their monologues in the style of a film noir detective. Look for some film noir music to play underneath them!

### Create-a-Detective

- ★ In small groups, have students invent their own detective who could attend the gala.
- ★ They must decide on a funny name, a country of origin, a specific detective quirk (e.g., can only solve crimes by smelling clues, is obsessed with knitting), and a long-suffering sidekick.

- ★ Have each group present their detective to the class.

## Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *A Lighter Shade of Noir* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

### Read One: What is happening?

1. What is the first case/client we see in Trent Trowel's office?
2. Who is Clarice LaTriche and what does she warn Trent about?
3. Where does the Private Detective Gala take place?
4. Name the four other main detectives who show up at the gala.
5. What has Ms. Beatrice been waiting over an hour for?
6. Who is Big Bill?
7. What country is Eustache from?
8. What do the items on the table at the gala represent?

9. What is the only reason Tracy Dyck is at the gala?
10. Why doesn't Tracy Dyck like Trowel?
11. Who rescued Beverly Stewart when she was kidnapped?
12. How many cases has Tracy Dyck solved?
13. Who is Holmes' supreme nemesis?
14. What does Ms. Beatrice accuse Ethel of doing?
15. What did Big Bill hide under the trapdoor in the ballroom?
16. Who did Maureen Artee go on a date with?
17. What is Le Cambrioleur's true identity?
18. Who was writing love letters to Miss Flannigan?
19. Who kidnapped Beverly Stewart?

### **Read Two: How does it happen?**

1. Parody: How does the playwright make it clear that this play is a parody? Point to specific characters, lines, or situations that are exaggerated for comedic effect.
2. Running gags: A running gag is a joke that is repeated throughout a story. What are some of the running gags in this play (e.g., Trent's monologues, the sidekicks' suffering)?
3. Character archetypes: Each detective is an archetype (The Great Mind, The Tough Cop, The Old Lady, etc.). How does the playwright use these familiar character types to create humor?
4. Character purpose: What is the role of the sidekicks in the play? Are they just there for comic relief, or do they serve a more important purpose?

5. Dialogue: Look at the way Trent Trowel speaks versus how Shirley Holmes or Jean-Louis-Philippe Eustache speak. How does the playwright use different styles of dialogue to define the characters?
6. Pacing: How does the playwright build suspense and comedy by having so many detectives trying to solve the same crime at once? Does it create order or chaos?
7. Analysis: Based on Clarice LaTriche's language and personality, how would you costume her?

### **Read Three: Why does it happen?**

1. What is the playwright satirizing about the detective genre? Is he making fun of it, or is it a loving tribute? Explain your answer.
2. Trent Trowel is the protagonist, but he is often wrong and incompetent. Why do we root for him? What makes him a likable hero despite his flaws?
3. The title is *A Lighter Shade of Noir*. Why is this a perfect title for the play? What does "noir" mean, and how is this play a "lighter shade" of it?
4. What is the play's ultimate message about teamwork and ego? Do the "greatest" detectives succeed because of their individual genius or in spite of it?

### **Post-Read Questions**

- ★ What is one question you still have about the play?
- ★ Which detective-and-sidekick pair was your favorite, and why?
- ★ What was the funniest moment or line in the play for you?
- ★ If you were to direct this play, what would be the most important element to get right (the comedy, the mystery, the "noir" style)?
- ★ Did you correctly guess the solution to the mystery? Why or why not?

## Post-Read Activities

### The Sidekick's Revenge

The sidekicks in this play put up with a lot.

- ★ In pairs, have students write and perform a short scene in which two of the sidekicks (e.g., Miss Flannigan and Dr. Watson) meet up after the case is closed to complain about their bosses. What do they say? What are their biggest frustrations?

### Staging the Reveal

- ★ In a small group, have students rehearse and stage the final scene where the culprit and the solution to the mystery are revealed. Focus on how each of the different detectives reacts to the solution. Is anyone surprised? Is anyone smug because they knew it all along? How does Trent Trowel react?

### Noir Movie Poster

- ★ Design a movie poster for *A Lighter Shade of Noir*. Your poster should capture both the “noir” style (shadows, dramatic poses) and the comedic tone of the play. Be sure to include a funny tagline.

### The Villain's Monologue

- ★ Have students choose one of the villains from the play (Big Bill, Clarice, Maureen, etc.). Write a monologue from their perspective explaining their evil plan and why they think they can get away with it. Perform it for the class in an appropriately over-the-top villainous style.

## **Playwright Process**

*Patrick Derksen talks about their process of writing A Lighter Shade of Noir. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.*

### **What was the inspiration for writing this play?**

As a teacher, my students often suggest ideas to me, and they were craving a mystery. I love writing comedies, but I also wanted to create a genuine mystery with clues and red herrings that sharp-eyed detectives in the audience could solve.

### **What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?**

I had a passing interest in mysteries, but was definitely lacking in knowledge enough to write a multi-detective parody on the scale of my idea. I therefore took the time to watch and read famous mysteries and detective shows before moving forward. I also discovered that mysteries need to be written ending-first, so it took more planning. All the prep work meant most of the play had to be written in two short weeks before rehearsals started! Then we completely re-wrote the ending after the first read-through. It turned out well, but I learned from that experience to get an earlier start.

### **What was it like to see the play performed?**

It's always the best part — I still love seeing it performed by new productions and seeing their creativity and perspectives. I'm always honoured and amazed when the small seed of an idea I had is brought to life by a team of dedicated people.

### **As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play and why?**

My favourite character changes over time, but I do always enjoy Tracy Dyck's personality and how she cuts through all the nonsense, deflating the giant egos in the room. As far as favourite moments, there are some sneaky jokes that rarely land with an audience, and somehow that makes me like them even more.

### **Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?**

First drafts are tough because the hardest part for me is the discipline of setting aside time and space to write when there are a hundred other things competing for that time.

## **What's your writing process like?**

Once I have an idea, it usually goes onto the backburner and cooks for a while. I'll make notes and sometimes write entire sections out of order. Eventually I need to block out time to do the actual writing, and it usually takes a while to really get going. But it is extremely satisfying to get in the zone and watch the words flow out of the fingertips like there's nothing I can do to stop them! Rewrites happen as I go (rather than whole separate drafts). At a certain point, you need to get the scripts into the actors' hands. But it's never really over; I'm always making alterations, even after productions.

## **What engages you about playwriting?**

I've always liked creating stories — I think so many kids do, but then priorities shift and they 'grow up.' I don't want that to happen to me. Playwriting is a great way to mix creative and practical energies: the stories come to life. I like creating the productions, but I also love handing off a script to a director and seeing what they do with it.