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Editorial

Contemporary Crime Fiction: A Surfeit of Riches

Contemporary crime fiction presents us with a surfeit of riches. As an enthusiastic crime fiction reader, you might feel like a kid in a sweet shop: too much to take in, where to look, what to read first. Examining the wealth of publications appearing in print every year, crime fiction presents an enormous breadth of generic variety, characters, locations, historical periods, political priorities and cultural diversity. This special issue of American, British and Canadian Studies features a collection of scholarly and creative material addressing major trends and preoccupations in crime fiction today. It comprises innovative critical articles by crime fiction scholars, creative contributions from prominent crime fiction authors, poems about true crime, and reviews of crime fiction as well as of scholarly works on the genre.

The popular appeal of contemporary crime fiction is underpinned by regular newspaper features discussing subjects such as “the best crime novels of the year,” guides to the best crime fiction from different eras and countries (including Golden Age, Nordic Noir, Domestic Noir, Eco Crime Fiction, etc.). The fascination held by the crime genre is described by the critic Barbara Fister in the following terms: “Crime fiction, a genre that deliberately exploits anxiety in the reader, taps into topical social concerns using familiar formulas to produce suspenseful narratives. Our fascination with crime has deep cultural roots” (43). This statement is an indication of the dynamic nature of contemporary crime fiction. However, it is also evident from Fister’s remarks that crime fiction, through its thematic content and structural focus on problem-solving, offers readers opportunities to critically analyse a range of those social and cultural problems that dominate in our tumultuous contemporary times. As we shall see in this special issue, contemporary crime fiction investigates urgent questions, whether they be power abuses in the domestic realm, and thus often invisible to the outside world (as in Domestic Noir), or violence and corruption perpetrated in the public sphere (as in historical crime fiction, or postcolonial crime fiction). These critical dimensions of contemporary crime fiction appeal more than ever in today’s politically fraught world of volatile change.

This special issue examines the diversity and proliferation of American, British and Canadian crime fiction in the contemporary period, and traces thematic and formal priorities that have emerged in crime writing during the late 20th to early 21st century. As Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn state in their recent collection of essays, Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction, commenting on the proliferation of the genre:

Much attention has been devoted to research on specific aspects of the crime genre in recent years, for instance on the various schools such as classic, hard-boiled or police procedural, and on specific area studies such as French, Latin American and European production, or on feminist and postcolonial detective fiction. (1)

The call for papers for the special issue sought original essays addressing themes and questions in crime fiction such as “location, marginality, postcolonialism, identity and gender, political and social issues, historical revisioning, formal experimentation, critical analyses of specific crime fiction authors, and more.” We received a diverse and questioning set of essays which in their differing ways all contribute to throwing light on contemporary crime fiction and explore why the genre has developed into the vital and intriguing form that it is today.

Crime fiction is as popular now as it has ever been, both in the academe and among global-wide readerships. Its long history as a genre reflects an enduring fascination with criminality, as the critic John Scaggs argues. Commenting on the continued appeal of the genre, and arguing that it resides in the idea of crime itself, he states that: “It is worth noting [...] that while the old adage that crime does not pay might well be true, crime has nevertheless been the foundation for an entire genre of fiction for over one hundred and fifty years” (Scaggs 1). Despite this central conceptual focal point, crime fiction has evolved and diversified over the years. A further indication of the acceptance of crime fiction into the literary mainstream can be seen in the increasing recognition the genre enjoys in higher education teaching and learning. A number of English Literature undergraduate degrees at British and international universities now offer modules or courses on crime fiction.

Following a highly successful 2013 exhibition about detective and crime fiction, entitled “Murder in the Library,” at the British Museum in London, the newspaper The Independent published an article which looked further into the phenomenon of crime fiction and its development as a genre over the past 100 years. In it, the author Rebecca Armstrong asks:

But more than 80 years after the Golden Age’s prime, does the whodunit have a place in modern crime fiction, or has it been bumped off by serial killers, scalpel-wielding pathologists and sophisticated cynicism? And are readers even given the chance to be have-a-go heroes anymore?

Have these traditional dimensions been completely written out of today’s crime fiction? Contemporary crime fiction is frequently compared to the classics of the genre, and not always in flattering ways, as the scholar Rachel Franks points out. In her article “A Taste for Murder: The Curious Case of Crime Fiction,” Franks states that: “new entrants to the market are forced to jostle for space on bookstore and library shelves with reprints of classic crime novels; such works placed in, often fierce, competition against their contemporaries as well as many of their predecessors.” Certainly, one of the central reasons for crime fiction’s popularity can be found in the genre’s narrative drive towards closure which is central to its capacity to project disorder and then promote the restoration of order. As critic Gill Plain has it, “Crime fiction has been fixed in a rigid set of critical and historical paradigms that define it as a narrative of the always already known” (6). However, Plain also points out that this definition of crime fiction is limited and one-dimensional, failing to recognise the genre’s complexities and lacking in acknowledgement of its diversity. She argues that crime narratives “cannot be reduced to the sum of their resolutions; they must also be

considered in the light of the conflicts and tensions that they mobilise [...] crime, like its counterpart respectability, is seldom quite what it seems” (6). This thematic and stylistic complexity of crime fiction contributes to the continuing popularity of the genre, but is also an acknowledgement of the serious crimes, social problems and taboo topics regularly addressed in contemporary crime fiction.

The articles in this special issue examine some of these issues, which range from blackmail and murder; sexual assault; domestic, political, social and religious abuses of power, and more. In so doing, they show how crime fiction confronts the dark and unspoken aspects of our culture and human nature. This ability of contemporary crime fiction to explore and examine taboo has at times led to criticisms of the genre. Depictions of extreme violence, particularly sexual crime, and victimisation of women have regularly been highlighted as problematic features of contemporary crime fiction (Worthington 50, see also Hill). Crucially, Plain asserts, “Crime fiction in general, and detective fiction in particular, is about confronting and taming the monstrous” (3). Commenting on this capacity of crime fiction to “tame the monstrous,” Fister notes the genre’s ability to elucidate and provide explanatory narratives. She has it that: “Crime fiction is popular in part because it addresses our anxieties by taking us beyond the surface of things into its depths, attributing meaning and pattern to elements of the story, suggesting the mysteries of human behaviour can be solved” (Fister 45). Clearly, these problems are literary manifestations of a contemporary society in crisis, where social, moral and ethical norms are increasingly questioned or even disregarded, and where literature is struggling to negotiate its role and function in mediating and critiquing this crisis.

One of the compelling features about the special issue on contemporary crime fiction is the eagerness, apparent in the contributions, with which crime authors experiment with the genre. Rachel Franks comments on the popularity with readers of certain types of crime fiction over others, arguing that:

These appeal factors indicate why readers might choose crime fiction over another genre, or choose one type of crime fiction over another. Yet such factors fail to explain what crime fiction is or adequately answer why the genre is devoured in such vast quantities.

The second point which Franks makes is pertinent. Clearly, commercial success in itself cannot be regarded as a justification for a wholesale dismissal of crime fiction as trivial or intellectually lightweight. As Fister notes:

Yet criticisms of fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century were almost identical to those now leveled at television: popular novels were considered culturally deficient, addictive, and likely to promote passivity and moral dissipation. The distinction between “trashy” fiction and literary fiction continues to this day, but with rare exception this trash isn’t considered toxic. (45-46)

This breaking down of the barriers between cultural forms can be seen as a feature of postmodernist art, as

many critics have shown. In several of the articles featured in this special issue, the crime fictions under consideration attempt, explicitly or implicitly, to bridge the boundaries between literary fiction and genre writing. However, as we will see from the articles in this issue, the blurring of boundaries and breaking down of hierarchies can also be said to be specifically facilitated by crime fiction and its interrogation of notions of hierarchy and value.

Turning now to the publications in the special issue, Cornelia Macsiniuc's article on "Discipline and Murder: Panoptic Pedagogy and the Aesthetics of Detection in J.G. Ballard's *Running Wild*" examines the preoccupation in Ballard's writing with violence and transgression, and explores his investigation of the role of technology and surveillance in citizens' daily lives in the novel. The setting of Ballard's *Running Wild* emerges as a significant dimension of this complex novel and its examination of criminality. Commenting on the role and function of setting in contemporary crime fiction, Richard B. Schwartz notes:

Classic discussions of the novel have often tended to focus on character and plot and their interrelations while devoting significantly less attention to the third narrative leg: setting. In genre fiction, however, setting has always played a prominent role and been expected to do so by its readers. (84)

Macsiniuc deftly concludes that, through his representations in *Running Wild*, Ballard, "bend[s] the formulaic constraints of the genre, [and] turns crime fiction into a vehicle for prophetic proclamation, making it cautionary instead of escapist." Charlotte Beyer's article, "I Stand Out Like a Raven': Depicting the Female Detective and Tudor History in Nancy Bilyeau's Historical Crime Novel *The Crown*," explores historical crime fiction, examining constructions of Tudor history and gender in Nancy Bilyeau's 2012 novel. Investigating the rise in popularity of historical crime fiction and the issues it raises for authors, readers and critics, Beyer's article proposes that Bilyeau's novel uses the prism of crime fiction to investigate Tudor history and to question its traditional representations. As Nunning states, commenting about historical crime fiction: "The crossing of boundaries between fact and fiction, history and myth, historiography and historical fiction, individual stories and collective history has become one of the hallmarks of postmodernist historical novels" (217). These two articles and the works they discuss thus highlight the significant and multi-faceted contribution made to contemporary crime fiction by historical dimensions and influences from literary fiction respectively.

Another prominent trait in contemporary crime fiction is the gender-political focus of many of the articles featured in this special issue. As Krajenbrink and Quinn point out, "Questions of identity have traditionally been central to crime and detective fiction" (1). Plain concurs with this view, contending that: "Gender transgression and the 'disruption' of normative sexuality have always been an integral part of crime narrative" (6). As is evident from the articles in this issue, the preoccupation with gender inequality and the impact on crime fiction of women writers' engagement with the form has resulted in compelling and thought-provoking research on the connections between contemporary crime fiction and gender politics. Victoria Kennedy's article, "*Chick Noir*: Shopaholic Meets Double Indemnity," presents a compelling

and vibrant example of this line of scholarly enquiry into the genre. Her essay on the subgenre of crime fiction called *Chick Noir* deftly presents a series of popular crime fictions concerned with gender and the domestic. Kennedy contends that crime fiction and chick lit deal with the complications of contemporary existence through two main responses respectively, namely humour and horror. The subgenre of *Chick Noir* reflects both of these responses, Kennedy argues, presenting a crime fiction format which examines the predicament of the modern Western woman today, by questioning the limits of her empowerment and agency. In her article, "Bloody Women: How Female Authors Have Transformed the Scottish Contemporary Crime Fiction Genre," Lorna Hill also concerns herself with questions of genre and gender. In a fascinating discussion of her own writing, Hill examines the impact of Scottish women crime writers on her creative practice. She discusses the creation of strong independent female detective characters as the solvers, not the victims of crime, and investigates the literary language employed to represent these female characters. Hill furthermore considers the implications these characters have for her own creative practice as a crime fiction author, drawing parallels to and points of contact with her own creative work.

As part of its interrogation of subjectivity and selfhood, contemporary crime fiction brings into scrutiny the central character at the heart of conventional crime fiction: the detective. The detective figure in contemporary crime fiction is often depicted as troubled or problematic, reflecting a contemporary questioning of authority, and suggesting that the detective's position as an authority may be under revision. This reflects contemporary times, as Plain suggests: "The professional detective is no longer sufficiently specialised to cope with a modern world of on-line identities and DNA coding" (7). Carla Portilho's fascinating article, "A Japanese-American Sam Spade: The Metaphysical Detective in *Death in Little Tokyo*, by Dale Furutani," explores the position and representation of the detective figure in contemporary crime fiction, investigating the traditions and generic conventions employed. Through an analysis of Furutani's 1996 novel *Death in Little Tokyo*, Portilho examines the construction of the metaphysical detective as a means through which to challenge 'positivistic certainties' and the nature of subjectivity. In her article, Portilho furthermore investigates the complicated relationship between Anglo-American generic conventions and traditions and contemporary multicultural writing, thus throwing light on this crucial and increasingly visible dimension of contemporary crime fiction. These articles all illustrate how, in Plain's words, "The increasing centrality of gender to studies of crime fiction is the inevitable outcome of a belated critical acknowledgement that the genre's profound investment in dynamics of power inevitably incorporates discourses of gender and sexuality" (8).

The creative contributions to this special issue also reflect the range and breadth of contemporary crime fiction. We are pleased to feature in this special issue a number of powerful creative fiction writings. They include an extract from Alex Kudera's crime fiction novel *Auggie's Revenge* (published by Beating Windward Press in 2016), and a crime short story, "Ulysses of Embra" by British author, Paul Johnston. Described as "America's major novel on the pay-per-course adjunct issue" and "a comic literary novel and a gritty crime thriller" (Beating Windward Press website), Kudera's novel employs the crime fiction genre with a contemporary twist on the campus novel, in order to call attention to the difficult financial conditions and precarious employment situation facing many academics today. Paul Johnston's "Ulysses of Embra" presents a hard-boiled, experimental crime short story set in contemporary Scotland. His compelling literary

style mixes intriguing intertextual references with a hard-boiled sensibility and the creation of memorable characters. "Ulysses of Embra" furthermore extends the interest in Scottish crime fiction and settings explored by Lorna Hill in her essay. Johnston's narrative thus exemplifies the creative energy and capacity for experimentation illustrated by the contemporary crime short story (Beyer 44).

Both of the crime poems in this special issue, "What Big Teeth She Has" by Ella McLennan, and "True Crime" by Charlotte Beyer, reflect a contemporary interest in true crime. Commenting on the popularity of the genre, the critic Jean Murley says of her own fascination with true crime that, to her, it, "was more than just another formula, another genre, another story – it was about real things that had happened to real people, and the stories of murder were both terrifying and oddly reassuring" (1). This concern with identifying an element or dimension of truth in crime fiction appears to be another aspect of the genre's postmodernist preoccupation with blurring boundaries. Indeed, as Farhat Iftekharuddin states, "One of the predominant themes of postmodernism is the blurring of lines between fiction and nonfiction" (23). The poems investigate a range of dimensions contributing to the popularity of and fascination with true crime. In examining the gruesome crimes and the perpetrators of crime, the poems examine the role of popular history, gender, class and agency in shaping definitions of criminality, thus contextualising true crime and its depiction in relation to the present day.

*The reviews featured in this special issue present a further demonstration of the diversity of contemporary crime fiction, and further demonstrate the impact and influence of crime fiction on literary fiction, and vice versa. The authors of these reviews concern themselves with the various dimensions and functions of contemporary crime fiction, examining specific questions treated within critical works, as well as commenting on scholarly publications investigating the ways in which contemporary writers blur the boundaries between literary fiction and high art versus popular culture and genre writing. The special issue includes a review of Alex Kundera's *Auggie's Revenge* by Don Riggs, thus providing further welcome critical insight into this author's crime writing. Rebecca Martin's review surveys a range of recent scholarly volumes and monographs on crime fiction from different publishers, and Charlotte Beyer's review examines Jackie Shead's recent monograph on Margaret Atwood as crime writer. Stuart Hunt's review reflects on the fascination with "Soviet history as crime scene" explored in recent crime novels by William Ryan, Sam Eastwood and Tom Rob Smith. Hunt concludes that, "What each of these writers share is the understanding, either explicit or implicit, that history is as much narrative and is re-created in its very re-writing as their fictions." Commenting on the complex role and function of historical crime fiction, Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser argue that it "registers the actions of the people of the past, recording how they influenced, both good and bad, their future, – and our present" (2). Finally, Charlotte Beyer's second review, of Heather Duerre Humann's *Gender Bending Detective Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Selected Works* (2017), looks at the critical assessment of crime fiction representations of cross-dressing and transgender offered by Humann. These diverse reviews thus all seek to provide an insight into the historical, creative and critical dimensions of writing and researching crime fiction as a genre.*

It is evident from the various crime fictions examined in these articles, and the creative work and book reviews presented, that contemporary crime fiction deserves its place in world literature today, and that

the genre has more than earned its popularity among wide readerships. Yet popularity itself is fraught with pitfalls, as Franks argues: "Crime fiction stories that are popular today could be forgotten tomorrow." It is its capacity for experimentation and revision of accepted narratives that gives contemporary crime fiction an edge, in a packed and sometimes confusing cultural landscape. Commenting on this dimension, Alta Asa Berger states that: "Boundary-busting and blurring genres are common postmodern themes" (219). Gill Plain concurs with this point, suggesting that: "Perhaps [crime fiction's] concern with the transgression of boundaries makes it a particularly appropriate mode for the fin-de-siècle" (6-7). Crime fiction has an important role to play in our ever-changeable modern world, in addressing power imbalances and abuses through its multifaceted representations of criminality and the individuals and/or collectives that perpetrate them. Combining powerful and compelling topics and problems with well-crafted writing and complex characters and settings, contemporary crime writing engages with both the history of the past and the contemporary times. Contemporary crime fiction, then, it would seem, really is "a surfeit of riches."

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