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Investigating Crime in Margaret Atwood's Oeuvre

Shead, Jackie. *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. 232 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1472450630)

The influence of crime writing on literary fiction, and the blurring of boundaries between the genres, is becoming increasingly evident in contemporary popular writing today. Presenting an exciting new approach to this celebrated writer's fiction, Jackie Shead's 2015 monograph, *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre*, presents a lucid and compelling critical analysis of Margaret Atwood's employment of crime fiction motifs and narrative elements. Shead's book sustained engagement with Margaret Atwood's experiments with literary genre and use of crime fiction conventions and motifs in her work. *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* aligns with one of the central themes in this special issue: namely the blurring of boundaries between literary fiction and genre writing, and the significance of this for the ways in which we read and assign value to literature.

Margaret Atwood is without doubt the most successful contemporary author at traversing the divide between literary fiction and genre fiction. Her multifaceted oeuvre testifies to her talent, intellectual curiosity, and creative risk-taking. Atwood's fictional portrayals have contributed to drawing attention to a wide range of compelling topics, such as postcolonial national identity, creativity, sexual politics, motherhood, and relations between women. Much scholarly material has been written about Atwood's work over the years. Her use of the gothic and science fiction has received much recent critical attention recently, as has her poetry. Ground-breaking critical work has been published over the years, analysing Atwood's writing, such as Coral Ann Howells' *Margaret Atwood* (Palgrave, 2005), Fiona Tolan's *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Rodopi, 2007), and Reingard M. Nischik's *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* (University of Ottawa Press, 2010). More recently, critics have focused on Atwood's treatment of dystopia, and investigated the gender-political dimensions and innovative qualities of this work. It is encouraging to see scholars continuing to consider Atwood's employment of popular genres into the twenty-first century, especially the attention paid to crime fiction. Negotiating and interrogating the boundaries between high art and genre is an ongoing project, and the ingenious ways in which writers and artists engage with this project continue to intrigue readers.

Jackie Shead's book opens with an examination of the construction of Margaret Atwood as crime fiction author. She discusses how Atwood perceives "popular art as material for serious art" (5), underlining the significance of breaking down these generic boundaries for art in our contemporary times. Atwood's treatment of genre is, in Shead's words, 'subversive' as well as 'expansive' (5). It is this willingness to take creative risks and challenge limits which makes Atwood's employment of crime fiction conventions so successful and compelling. Commenting on this, Shead argues that, "Atwood achieves radical effects by recentring the genre through a female focalizer" (13). Chapter Two proposes a re-reading of Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing*, recasting the book as a detective murder mystery, by examining the "psychological condition representing the female and the colonial subject's experience as a decentred consciousness" (40). The theme of violence, so central to the crime genre, is discernible throughout *Surfacing*, Shead argues, even (or especially) in its more experimental or poetic moments, thus demonstrating the creative capacity of crime fiction. In Chapter Three, Shead examines Atwood's 1981 novel *Bodily Harm* and its use of conventions from the spy thriller. Her discussion argues that Atwood's creative engagement with the crime and espionage genres in *Bodily Harm* results in a politicization of these literary forms, through her critique of

oppressive political regimes, corruption, and pornography, thus making postcolonial connections between use of genre, the topics treated and the settings of the novel. The historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996) and the figure of the doomed detective is the subject for Chapter Four. Here, Shead's inventive reading of *Alias Grace* shifts the critical focus away from the character of Grace Marks, to the detective figure Simon Jordan. The effect achieved by Atwood is, according to Shead, exposing and examining the male detective's sexualising and appropriating project. Chapter Five examines the motifs of conspiracy and confession – prominent dimensions in crime and suspense writing – in *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

Shead investigates notions of redress and retribution in *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008) and other selected writings in Chapter Six. In her own words, the chapter explores: “an age-old concern of crime fiction: getting even. It looks at why, and how, Atwood's characters do, and sometimes do not, reckon up the wrongs done them, what redress they seek” (135). She discusses Atwood's representations and reflections of moral and ethical values such as fairness and her critique of the construction of power relations and the inequalities they imbed. Examining non-fiction writing, this chapter offers another dimension of Atwood's examination of the questions regarding values and ethical concerns that haunt crime fiction. Chapter Seven explores the overall concept of the metafictional detective story, examining the means by which Atwood elicits the reader's response. Through the analysis of the textual and thematic strategies Atwood employs in order to “turn her readers into detectives and accomplices, and her purposes for doing so” (157), Shead's analysis explores issues of collusion and corroboration, and the relationship between reader, narrator, and text. Chapter Eight discusses Atwood and her relationship to the rise of postcolonial crime fiction. Recent years have seen several critical volumes published on postcolonial and transnational crime fiction, such as Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen's edited volume, entitled *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (Rodopi, 2006); and Marc Singer and Nels Pearson (Eds.) *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* (Ashgate, 2011). As Shead points out in her introduction, Atwood was a keen reader of crime fiction in her teen-age years, and would have been keenly aware of the genre's male-dominated focus and outlook. Underlining the postcolonial and feminist dimensions of this project, Shead argues that “Atwood's wider project is to explore a repressed national past, just as detective work unearths a suppressed tale” (89). Although individual chapters are devoted to the study of specific texts, there is nevertheless a good deal of overlap, in terms of discussion of particular themes or ideas. This is useful as it allows the reader to draw connections outside the specified strict parameters of each chapter's remit.

Shead's *Margaret Atwood: Crime Fiction Writer: The Reworking of a Popular Genre* presents a compelling new perspective to Atwood's creative engagement with crime fiction. The study is energetically written and accessible, theoretically and critically astute, and provides engaging textual analyses and thematic discussions. Her careful examination of Atwood's employment of the crime genre is a prime example of this important work currently being carried out to bridge the gap in critical perception between literary fiction and genre writing. As Shead states, “A feature which becomes more marked in [Atwood's] work over time is the pitting of one literary form against another to interrogate generic boundaries and so disclose their silences and omissions” (13). This central idea of Shead's persuasive book is especially significant. It confidently shows that the gap between literary fiction and genre writing is constantly bridged by contemporary writers who use their familiarity with popular culture to infuse the traditional novel with new vigour, forcing it to ask new searching questions of the role and function of art.

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