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# Investigating Privilege: Teaching Race, Gender, and Intersectionality Through the Lens of Crime Fiction

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**Abstract.** The author explores how intersectionality, race, and feminism can be taught using traditional and contemporary crime fiction in the diverse undergraduate classroom. Examining the relationship among privilege, social justice, and crime portrayed in the crime genre, the author seeks to nurture an inclusive teaching and learning space where crime fiction can illuminate contemporary cultural debates.

Crime fiction explores a range of transgressions and offences, including racist, sexist, and homophobic violence. In the following, I reflect on pedagogies for teaching crime fiction that acknowledge the need to decolonize the genre and extend critical analysis of its characters, tropes, and conventions. I discuss examples of intersectional crime fiction novels taught on my undergraduate crime fiction module. I also consider how I design my teaching of this material to encourage students to reevaluate the canon, its themes, and the privileges it upholds (Beyer, *Literature Curriculum*). I teach at a smaller UK university; student cohorts in the English and Creative Writing degree programs reflect diversity, but a considerable proportion of students is white and British. As a white woman, I am privileged in not experiencing racism; however, as an immigrant from a non-native English-speaking background

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and as an older woman, I have experienced marginalization in society generally. As I teach crime fiction, these contexts inevitably affect my pedagogical practice and priorities in complex ways.

Issues of intersectionality and race profoundly inform my pedagogy and teaching practice in relation to crime fiction content. Commenting on feminist criticism, Brittney Cooper states, “the term *intersectionality* has become the key analytic framework through which feminist scholars in various fields talk about the structural identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality.” Incorporating these insights into my teaching practice, I regularly review the syllabus on my crime fiction module to ensure inclusivity and diversity. This evaluation process prioritizes crime fiction works that foreground and problematize current cultural, social, and political issues. The present political and cultural climate in the United Kingdom is rather polarized on debates around gender, sexuality, and race. The so-called “war on woke” perpetrated by some sections of the popular media and by certain politicians specifically targets higher education institutions, accusing them of “wokery” (Webber). Similar controversy has been observed around Black Lives Matter protests. In this polarized context, I consider it essential to provide an inclusive space where literature can be used to teach students about intersectionality and to promote examinations of diversity (Beyer, *Literature Curriculum*).

Teaching crime fiction to second-year English and Creative Writing undergraduates, my approach focuses on two key lines of inquiry: first, reassessing past works from the canon through recent critical and feminist scholarship; and second, teaching innovative contemporary crime fiction works that demonstrably write back to the genre’s conventions. Students are generally highly receptive to the investigation of these ideas and welcome the opportunity to examine topics that are relevant and important to them in their everyday lives and to further consider questions of representing intersectionality, race, and justice. My teaching approach enables students to critically examine problematic or controversial representations in crime fiction texts from the past (Beyer, “Fille Fatale”). We reflect in class on portrayals of race, class, and gender in Agatha Christie’s *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964), which demonstrate the persistence of colonial power inequalities (Beyer, “Politics”; Linares). In class, we also examine homophobic and sexist depictions and tropes in Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) and the implications of these portrayals for his representation reflecting hard-boiled, white, and masculine values (Berlatsky). I thus use canonical crime fiction texts from the past as case studies for the identification and critique of privilege, discrimination, inequality, homophobia, and oppression.

Teaching such canonical material through an intersectional lens enables me to establish a solid critical foundation for students as we move on to examine contemporary crime texts. One of the most successful contemporary crime novels I have taught countering Chandler’s representations of femme fatales is Paula Hawkins’s *The Girl on the Train* (2015). Students respond to the novel’s complex representations of femininity enhanced through its use of narrative perspective and discuss its explicit feminist analysis of patriarchal oppression. Through classroom examination of terms such as *toxic masculinity* and *gaslighting*, along with passages from *The Girl on the Train*, we analyze crime fiction as a vehicle for feminist social and cultural critique as well as problematize the novel’s whiteness (Cooke). This contextualized analysis enables the class to examine how crime fiction both responds to and drives feminist, decolonization, and intersectional debates.

In 2022, I also taught the recent crime novels Nekesa Afia’s *Dead Dead Girls* (2021) and Dharma Kelleher’s *TERF Wars* (2021) in my crime fiction module. The addition of these

recent novels was highly successful and generated vital new explorations and discussions with students of crime fiction about the politics of representation. A historical crime novel, Afia's *Dead Dead Girls* is set during the Harlem Renaissance and focuses on race and sexuality as part of its crime plot, placing a woman of color at the center. The protagonist Louise, a young Black lesbian woman, occupies a precarious position in a racist and homophobic society. Kelleher's *TERF Wars* focuses on the dangerous work of bail enforcement agents. Jinx Ballou, the novel's detective character, a trans woman, gives visibility and voice to a socially marginalized group often demonized in popular discourse (Beyer, "TERF"). These intersectional crime fiction novels thus provide opportunity for classroom discussion of current cultural and social debates.

Teaching crime fiction—both canonical and contemporary—involves extensive analysis of the politics of representing crime in the genre. In class, we examine important questions in crime fiction, like the relationship between privilege and crime, and the drive toward achieving justice for victims. In these explorations, students demonstrate a keen engagement with reassessing canonical crime texts, naming crimes, and understanding their context by using contemporary critical vocabulary such as *gaslighting*, *toxic masculinity*, and *coercive control*. I have observed that students are eager to explore contemporary crime texts challenging the canon's employment of problematic stereotypes and narratives that reinforce privilege and inequality. Evaluating students' assignments and reflecting on their critical and creative engagement with this material, I conclude that teaching crime fiction provides a welcome opportunity to encourage reflection and debate with students in an enabling and inclusive space. Crime fiction thus offers a compelling and unique lens through which to investigate representations of race, gender, and intersectionality.

*Keywords:* Crime fiction; feminism; intersectionality; pedagogy; race

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