A Taste for Murder: The Curious Case of Crime Fiction

Introduction

Crime fiction is one of the world’s most popular genres. Indeed, it has been estimated that as many as one in every three new novels, published in English, is classified within the crime fiction category (Knight xi). These 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 fiercely contested, niches with contemporaries as well as many of their predecessors. Raymond Chandler, in his well-known essay The Simple Art of Murder, noted Ernest Hemingway’s observation that “the good writer competes only with the dead. The good detective story writer […] competes not only with all the unburied dead but with all the hosts of the living as well” (3). In fact, there are so many examples of crime novels works that, as early as the 1930s, one of the original ‘Queens of Crime’, Dorothy L. Sayers, complained:

It is impossible to keep track of all the detective-stories produced to-day [sic]. Book upon book, magazine upon magazine pour out from the Press, crammed with murders, thefts, anons, frauds, conspiracies, problems, puzzles, mysteries, thrills, maniacs, crooks, poisoners, forgers, garrothers, police, spies, secret-service men, detectives, until it seems that half the world must be engaged in setting riddles for the other half to solve (95).

Twenty years after Sayers wrote on the matter of the vast quantities of crime fiction available, W.H. Auden wrote one of the more famous essays on the genre: The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict. Auden is, perhaps, better known as a poet but his connection to the crime fiction genre is undisputed. As well as his poetic works that reference crime fiction and commentaries on crime fiction, one of Auden’s fellow poets, Cecil Day-Lewis, wrote a series of crime fiction novels under the pseudonym Nicholas Blake: the central protagonist of these novels, Nigel Strangeways, was modelled upon Auden (Scaggs 27). Interestingly, some writers whose names are now synonymous with the genre, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Raymond Chandler, established the link between poetry and crime fiction many years before the publication of The Guilty Vicarage.

Edmund Wilson suggested that “reading detective stories is simply a kind of vice that, for silliness and minor harmfulness, ranks somewhere between crossword puzzles and smoking” (395). In the first line of The Guilty Vicarage, Auden supports Wilson’s claim and confesses that: “For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol” (405). These doorways are, of course, art. But what is good in a detective novel is not life but the process of making life. Part and parcel of it is the effort to make what is not real real. It is, says Auden, “a vice, but not a vice of the lower order; that is, it is not vicious; it is not a crime” (405).

The debates that surround genre and taste are many and varied. The mid-1920s was a point in time which had witnessed crime fiction writers produce some of the finest examples of fiction to ever be published and when readers and publishers were watching, with anticipation, as a new generation of crime fiction writers were readying themselves to enter what would become known as the genre’s Golden Age. At this time, R. Austin Freeman wrote that:

By the critic and the professedly literary person the detective story is apt to be dismissed contemptuously as outside the pale of literature, to be conceived of as a type of work produced by half-educated and wholly incompetent writers for consumption by office boys, factory girls, and other persons devoid of culture and literary taste (?).

This article responds to Auden’s essay and explores how crime fiction appeals to many different tastes: tastes that are acquired, change over time, are embraced, or kept as guilty secrets. In addition, this article will challenge Auden’s very narrow definition of crime fiction and suggest how Auden’s religious imagery, deployed to explain why many people choose to read crime fiction, can be incorporated into a broader popular discourse on punishment. This latter argument demonstrates that a taste for crime fiction and a taste for justice are inextricably intertwined.

Crime Fiction: A Type For Every Taste

Cathy Cole has observed that “crime novels are housed in their own section in many bookshops, separated from literary novels much as you’d keep a child with measles away from the rest of the class” (116). Times have changed. So too, have our tastes. Crime fiction, once parodied in corners, now demands vast stands of prime real estate in bookstores, allowing readers to “make their way to the appropriate shelves, and begin to browse […] sorting through a wide variety of very different types of novels” (Malmgren 115). This is a result of the sheer size of the genre, noted above, as well as the genre’s expanding scope. Indeed, those who worked to re-invent crime fiction in the 1800s could not have envisaged the “taxonomic exuberance” (Derrida 206) of the writers who have defined crime fiction sub-genres, as well as how readers would respond by not only wanting to read crime fiction but also wanting to read many different types of crime fiction tailored to their particular tastes. To understand the demand for this diversity, it is important to reflect upon some of the appeal factors of crime fiction for readers.

Many rules have been promulgated for the writers of crime fiction to follow. Ronald Knox produced a set of 10 rules in 1929. These included Rule 3 “Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable”, and Rule 10 “Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them” (194-6). In the same year, S.S. Van Dine produced another list of 20 rules, which included Rule 3 “There must be no love interest: the business in hand is to bring a criminal to the bar of justice, not to bring a lovelorn couple to the hymeneal altar”, and Rule 7 “There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better” (189–90). Some of these directives have been deliberately ignored or have become out-of-date over time while others continue to be followed in contemporary crime writing practices.

In sharp contrast, there are no rules for reading this genre. Individuals are, generally, free to choose what, where, when, why, and how they read crime fiction. There are, however, different appeal factors for readers. The most common of these appeal factors, often described as doorways, are story, setting, character, and language. As the following passage explains:

The story doorway beckons those who enjoy reading to find out what happens next. The setting doorway opens widest for readers who enjoy being immersed in an evocation of place or time. The doorway of character is for readers who enjoy looking at the world through others’ eyes. Readers who most appreciate skillful writing enter through the doorway of language (Wyatt online).

These doorways draw readers to the crime fiction genre. There are stories that allow us to easily predict what will come next or make us hold our breath until the very last page, the books that we will cheerfully lend to a family member or a friend and those that we keep close to hand to re-read again and again. There are settings as diverse as country mansions, exotic locations, and familiar city streets, places we have been and others that we might want to explore. There are characters such as the accidental sleuth, the hardboiled detective, and the refined police officer, amongst many others, the men and women—the good and the bad—who have grown to admire and trust. There is also the language that all writers, regardless of genre, depend upon to tell their tales. In crime fiction, even the most basic task of describing where the murder took place can range from words that convey the gentility—"The room of the tragedy" (Christie 62)—to the absurd: “There it was, jammed between a pallet load of best export boneless beef and half a tonne of spring lamb” (Maitely 51).
Punishment will be meted out to the ‘bad characters’ that have broken society’s moral or legal laws; the ‘good characters’ may continue to read the genre because, generally, the concluding chapter will show that justice, of some form, will be done. But, to other readers, such as these provide a space for reflection about the world around us but rarely spark an immediate response of how great this world is to live in (Franks 136). Another example can be found on the last page of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four when Winston Smith “gazed up at the enormous face” and he realised that he “loved Big Brother” (311). Distraction seems to be really trying (9).

For Auden, the definition of the crime novel was quite specific, and he argued that referring to the genre by ‘the vulgar definition’, ‘a Whodunit’ is correct (407). Auden went on to offer a basic formula stating that: “a murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies” (407). The idea of a formula is certainly a useful one, particularly when production demands—in terms of both quality and quantity—are so high, because the formula facilitates creators in the “rapid and efficient production of new works” (Caswell 9). For contemporary crime fiction readers, the doorways to reading, discussed briefly above, have been cast wide open. Stories relying upon the basic crime fiction formula as a foundation can be gothic tales, clue puzzles, forensic procedurals, spy thrillers, hardboiled narratives, or violent crime narratives, amongst many others. The settings can be quiet villages or busy metropolises, landscapes that readers actually inhabit or that provide a form of affordable tourism. These stories can be set in the past, the here and now, or the future. Characters can range from Edgar Allan Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin to Kerry Greenwood’s Honourable Phryne Fisher. Similarly, language can come in numerous styles from the direct (even rough) words of Carter Brown to the literary prose of Peter Temple. Anything is possible, meaning anything is available to readers.

For Auden—although he required a crime to be committed and expected that crime to be resolved—these doorways were only slightly ajar. For him, the story had to be a Whodunit; the setting had to be rural England, though a college setting was also considered suitable; the characters had to be ‘eccentric (aesthetically interesting individuals) and good (instinctively ethical)” and there needed to be a “completely satisfactory detective” (Sherlock Holmes, Inspector French, and Father Brown were identified as “satisfactory”); and the language descriptive and detailed (406, 409, 408). To illustrate this point, Auden’s concept of crime fiction has been plotted on a taxonomy, below, that traces the genre’s main developments over a period of three centuries. As can be seen, much of what is, today, taken for granted as being classified as crime fiction is completely excluded from Auden’s ideal.

![Crime Fiction: A Personal Journey](image)

**Crime Fiction: A Personal Journey**

I discovered crime fiction the summer before I started high school when I saw the film version of The Big Sleep starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. A few days after I had seen the film I started reading the Raymond Chandler novel of the same title, featuring his famous detective Philip Marlowe, and was transfixed by the second paragraph:

> The main halfway of the Stannwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armour rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn’t have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the visor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn’t seem to be really trying (9).

John Scaggs has written that this passage indicates Marlowe is an idealised figure, a knight of romance rewritten onto the mean streets of mid-20th century Los Angeles (82); a relocation Susan Rolland calls a “sacred form of the divinely sanctioned knight errant on a quest for metaphysical justice” (139); my kind of guy. Like many young people I looked for adventure and escape in books, a search that was realised with Raymond Chandler and his contemporaries. On the escapist scale, these men with their stories of tough-talking detectives taking on murderers and other criminals, law enforcement officers, and the occasional femme fatale, were certainly a sharp upgrade from C.S. Lewis and the Chronicles of Narnia.

After reading the works written by the pioneers of the hardboiled and roman noir traditions, I looked to other American authors such as Edgar Allan Poe who, in the mid-1800s, became the father of the modern detective story, and Thorne Smith who, in the 1920s and 1930s, produced magical realist tales with characters who often chose to dabble on the wrong side of the law. This led me to the works of British crime writers including Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy L. Sayers. My personal library then became dominated by Australian writers of crime fiction, from the stories of bushrangers and convicts of the Colonial era to contemporary tales of police and private investigators.

There have been various attempts to ‘improve’ or ‘refine’ my tastes; to convince me that serious literature is real reading and frivolous fiction is merely a distraction. Certainly, the reading of those novels, often described as classics, provide perfect combinations of beauty and brilliance. Their narratives, however, do not often result in satisfactory endings. This routinely frustrates me because, while I understand the philosophical frameworks that many writers operate within, I believe the characters of such works are too often treated unfairly in the final pages. For example, at the end of Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, Frederick Henry “left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain” after his son is stillborn and ‘Mrs Henry’ becomes ‘very ill’ and dies (262–69). Another example can be found on the last page of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four when Winston Smith “gazed up at the enormous face” and he realised that he ‘loved Big Brother’ (311). Endings such as these provide a space for reflection about the world around us but rarely spark an immediate response of how great that world is to live in (Franks 136). The subject matter of crime fiction does not easily facilitate fairy-tale finishes, yet people continue to read the genre because, generally, the concluding chapter will show that justice, of some form, will be done. Punishment will be meted out to the ‘bad characters’ that have broken society’s moral or legal laws; the ‘good characters’ may
Crime Fiction: A Taste For Justice

Superimposed upon Auden’s parameters around crime fiction, are his ideas of the law in the real world and how such laws are interwoven with the Christian-based system of ethics. This can be seen in Auden’s listing of three classes of crime: (a) offenses against God and one’s neighbor or neighbors; (b) offenses against God and society; (c) offenses against God” (407). Murder, in Auden’s opinion, is a class (b) offense: for the crime fiction novel, the society reflected within the story should be one in “a state of grace, i.e., a society where there is no need of the law, no contradiction between the aesthetic individual and the ethical universal, and where murder, therefore, is the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis” (408). Additionally, in the crime novel “as in its mirror image, the Quest for the Grail, maps the ritual of space and timetables (the ritual of time) are desirable. Nature should reflect its human inhabitants, i.e., it should be the Great Good Place; for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of murder” (408). Thus, as Charles J. Rzepka notes, “according to W.H. Auden, the ‘classical’ English detective story typically re-enacts rites of scapegoating and expulsion that affirm the innocence of a community of good people supposedly ignorant of evil” (12).

This premise—of good versus evil—supports Auden’s claim that the punishment of wrongdoers, particularly those who claim the “right to be omnipotent” and commit murder (409), should be swift and final:

As to the murderer’s end, of the three alternatives—execution, suicide, and madness—the first is preferable; for if he commits suicide he refuses to repent, and if he goes mad he cannot repent, but if he does not repent society cannot forgive. Execution, on the other hand, is the act of atonement by which the murderer is forgiven by society (409).

It is argued here that this “much wider population” connecting with the task of punishment can be taken further. Crime fiction, above all other forms of literary production, is one for those who contribute to the maintenance of their respective legal systems, facilitates a feeling of active participation in the penalising of a variety of perpetrators: from the issuing of fines to incarceration (Franks Punishment). Crime fiction readers are therefore, temporarily at least, direct contributors to a more stable society: one that is clearly based upon right and wrong crime fiction: punishment, in this context, focuses exclusively upon retribution and deterrence, incapacitation is achieved by default, but the idea of rehabilitation is completely ignored. This, in turn, ignores how the reading of crime fiction can be incorporated into a broader popular discourse on punishment and how a taste for crime fiction and a taste for justice are inextricably intertwined. One of the ways to explore this connection between crime fiction and justice is through the lens of Emile Durkheim’s thesis on the conscience collective which proposes punishment is a process allowing for the demonstration of group norms and the strengthening of moral boundaries. David Garland, in summarising this thesis, states:

So although the modern state has a near monopoly of penal violence and controls the administration of penalties, a much wider population feels itself to be involved in the process of punishment, and supplies the context of social support and valorization within which state punishment takes place (32).

It is claimed here that this “much wider population” connecting with the task of punishment can be taken further. Crime fiction, above all other forms of literary production, is one for those whose work is criminal activity, contributes to the maintenance of their respective legal systems, facilitates a feeling of active participation in the penalising of a variety of perpetrators: from the issuing of fines to incarceration (Franks Punishment). Crime fiction readers are therefore, temporarily at least, direct contributors to a more stable society: one that is clearly based upon right and wrong crime fiction: punishment, in this context, focuses exclusively upon retribution and deterrence, incapacitation is achieved by default, but the idea of rehabilitation is completely ignored. This, in turn, ignores how the reading of crime fiction can be incorporated into a broader popular discourse on punishment and how a taste for crime fiction and a taste for justice are inextricably intertwined. One of the ways to explore this connection between crime fiction and justice is through the lens of Emile Durkheim’s thesis on the conscience collective which proposes punishment is a process allowing for the demonstration of group norms and the strengthening of moral boundaries. David Garland, in summarising this thesis, states:

It is, furthermore, argued here that the idea of the story is one of the more important doorways for crime fiction and, more specifically, the conclusions that these stories, traditionally, offer. For Auden, the ending should be one of restoration of the spirit, as he suspected that “the typical reader of detective stories is, like myself, a person who suffers from a sense of sin” (411). In this way, the “phantasy, then, which the detective story addict indulges is the phantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law” (412), indicating that it was not necessarily an accident that “the detective story has flourished most in predominantly Protestant countries” (408). Today, modern crime fiction is a “broad church, where talented authors raise questions and cast light on a variety of societal and other issues through the prism of an exciting, page-turning story” (Sisterson). Moreover, our tastes in crime fiction have been tempered by a growing fear of real crime, particularly murder, “a crime of unique horror” (Hitchens 200). This has seen some readers develop a taste for crime fiction that is not produced within a framework of ecclesiastical faith but is rather grounded in reliance upon those who enact punishment in both the fictional and real worlds. As P.D. James has written:

[N]ot by luck or divine intervention, but by human ingenuity, human intelligence and human courage. It confirms our hope that, despite some evidence to the contrary, we live in a beneficent and moral universe in which problems can be solved by rational means and peace and order restored from communal or personal disruption and chaos (174).

Dorothy L. Sayers, despite her work to legitimise crime fiction, wrote that there: “certainly does seem a possibility that the detective story will some time come to an end, simply because the public will have learnt all the tricks” (108). Of course, many readers have ‘learnt all the tricks’, or most of them. This does not, however, detract from the genre’s overall appeal. We have not grown bored with, or become tired of, the formula that revolves around good and evil, and justice and punishment. Quite the opposite. Our knowledge of our own failings, as well as our faith in, the genre’s ‘tricks’ gives a level of enjoyment that is looking for endings that punish murderers and other wrongdoers, allowing for more satisfactory conclusions than the, rather depressing, ends given to Mr. Henry and Mr. Smith by Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell noted above.

Conclusion

For some, the popularity of crime fiction is a curious case indeed. When Penguin and Collins published the Marsh Million—100,000 copies each of 10 Ngaio Marsh titles in 1949—the author’s relief at the success of the project was palpable when she commented that “it was pleasant to find detective fiction being discussed as a tolerable form of reading by people whose opinion one valued” (172). More recently, upon the announcement that a Miles Franklin Award would be given to Peter Temple for his crime novel Truth, John Sultherland, the former chairman of the judges for one of the world’s most famous literary awards, suggested that submitting a crime novel for the Booker Prize would be: “like putting a donkey into the Grand National”. Much like art, fashion, food, and home furnishings or any one of the innumerable fields of activity and endeavour that are subject to opinion, there will always be those who judge within the world of fiction who claim positions as arbiters of taste. Yet reading is intensely personal. I like a strong, well-plotted story, appreciate a carefully researched setting, and can admire elegant language, but if a character is too difficult to embrace—if I find I cannot make an emotional connection, if I find myself ambivalent about their fate—then a book is discarded as not being to my taste.

It is also important to recognise that some tastes are transient. Crime fiction stories that are popular today could be forgotten tomorrow. Some stories appeal to such a broad range of tastes they are immediately included in the crime fiction canon. Yet others evolve over time to accommodate widespread changes in taste (an excellent example of this can be seen in the continual re-imagining of the stories of Sherlock Holmes). Personal tastes also adapt to our experiences and our surroundings. A book that someone adores in their 20s might be dismissed in their 40s. A storyline that was meaningful when read aloud may lose some of its magic when read at home. Personal events, from a change in employment to the loss of a loved one, can also impact upon what we want to read. Similarly, world events, such as economic crises and military conflicts, can also influence our reading preferences.
Auden professed an almost insatiable appetite for crime fiction, describing the reading of detective stories as an addiction, and listed a very specific set of criteria to define the Whodunit. Today, such self-imposed restrictions are rare as, while there are many rules for writing crime fiction, there are no rules for reading this (or any other) genre. People are, generally, free to choose what, where, when, why, and how they read crime fiction, and to follow the deliberate or whimsical paths that their tastes may lay down for them. Crime fiction writers, past and present, offer: an incredible array of detective stories from the locked room to the clue puzzle; settings that range from the English country estate to city skyscrapers in glamorous locations around the world; numerous characters from cerebral sleuths who can solve a crime in their living room over a nice, hot cup of tea to weapon wielding heroes who track down villains on foot in darkened alleyways; and, language that ranges from the cultured conversations from the novels of the genre’s Golden Age to the hard-hitting terminology of forensic and legal procedures. Regardless of these appeal factors is the capacity of crime fiction to feed a taste for justice: to engage, vicariously at least, in the establishment of a more stable society. Of course, there are those who turn to the genre for a temporary distraction, an occasional guilty pleasure. There are those who stumble across the genre by accident or deliberately seek it out. There are also those, like Auden, who are addicted to crime fiction. So there are corpses for the conservative and dead bodies for the bloodthirsty. There is, indeed, a murder victim, and a murder story, to suit every reader’s taste.

References


Keywords

Auden; crime fiction; justice; punishment; reading; taste

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This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
History & Fiction. Title Page. Copyright. The Curious Case of the Copper Corpse. By Alan Bradley. About the Author. In which eleven-year-old Flavia de Luce, chemical connoisseur, is immersed in her element. I was peering through the microscope at the tooth of an adder I had captured behind the coach house that very morning after church, when there came a light knock at the laboratory door. Murder! it said. Come at once. Anson House, Greyminster, Staircase No. 3, and it was signed J. Haxton or Plaxton. The writer had pressed so hard that the pencil had snapped in the middle of his signature, which seemed to have been hastily completed with the broken bit of graphite squeezed between a grubby thumb and forefinger. Murder, urgency, frenzy, fear: Who could resist?