

# Contemporary Crime Fiction



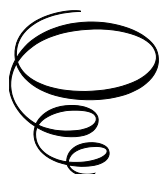
# Contemporary Crime Fiction:

*Crossing Boundaries,  
Merging Genres*

Edited by

Charlotte Beyer

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
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Contemporary Crime Fiction: Crossing Boundaries, Merging Genres

Edited by Charlotte Beyer

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This book is dedicated with all my love to my daughter Sif  
and husband Stuart.



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## PERMISSIONS

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“Bloody Women: How Female Authors Have Transformed the Scottish Contemporary Crime Fiction Genre”, by Lorna Hill.

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# CONTEMPORARY CRIME FICTION: A SURFEIT OF RICHES

CHARLOTTE BEYER

## **Introduction: Analyzing Contemporary Crime Fiction**

The demand for crime fiction is higher than ever.<sup>1</sup> And this genre is continually reinventing itself with vigor and ingenuity as can be seen in contemporary crime fiction, the subject of this book. The parameters for this volume's examination of contemporary crime fiction are set by the inclusive historical definition of "contemporary". In this particular context, the term "contemporary" is to be understood as the period of time ranging from the late twentieth century up to and including the present moment. The book's dual focus on contemporary crime fiction and innovative and experimental uses of genre is signaled by the title phrase "crossing boundaries, merging genres". The preoccupation with the merging of genres and crossing of boundaries between crime fiction and other genres is stimulated by the more general tendency towards textual experimentation and exploration of hidden narratives characteristic of postmodernist fiction. Contemporary crime fiction as a genre is exceptionally multi-faceted, ranging from traditional detective-focused narratives, experimental fiction, short stories, crime-centered texts, police procedurals depicting the crime-solving work of police detectives in their teams, domestic noir, psychological crime, and historical crime fiction, to environmental crime writing and crime fiction focusing on LGBTQ+ and social justice perspectives. For the purpose of this book, texts which focus on the representation of crime and the generation of suspense are included in its scope.<sup>2</sup> However, although the terms "text" and "crime text" are understood in an inclusive way in this volume, "crime fiction" for the purpose of the book does not include film

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<sup>1</sup>Alison Flood, "Research finds reading books has surged in lockdown", *The Guardian*, 15 May, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/15/research-reading-books-surged-lockdown-thrillers-crime> . Accessed 28 July 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See also John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

and TV adaptations of crime. Although the study of film and televised representations of crime and detectives is an important endeavor, its mode of signification and representations of crime differ from the strictly literary dimensions which we center on in this book. The chapters presented here, then, concern themselves with contemporary crime fiction, specifically its use of subgenres and literary tropes and themes which illustrate the innovation and experimentation of the form. Their broad common theme is the investigation of how and why contemporary crime fiction exceeds boundaries and norms and transgresses thematic, formal and aesthetic conventions. Investigating particular preoccupations and themes within contemporary crime fiction, this book is structured into four parts which reflect these concerns, ensuring that the chapters speak to and echo one another, thereby enhancing the critical impact and resonance of their respective examinations. The four parts comprise of: Gender and Genre; Domestic Noir; Genre and Literary Experimentation; and Place and Crime. These key topics within the genre serve to anchor the individual chapters' discussions of the strategies used in contemporary crime fiction to explore the boundaries of the genre through experimentations of various kinds.

Whether sampling the field of crime fiction reading for pleasure, or conducting a scholarly investigation of the genre, the sheer amount of crime fiction available to the reader can feel almost bewildering. Contemporary crime fiction presents us readers with a surfeit of riches. An enthusiastic crime fiction reader may at times feel like a kid in a sweet shop: too much to take in, where to look, what to read first. Examining the wealth of new authors emerging on the scene nationally and internationally, new publications appearing in print every year, crime fiction presents an enormous breadth of generic variety, characters, locations, historical periods, political priorities and cultural diversity. In navigating this demanding field, this book features a collection of scholarly essays thoughtfully addressing major contemporary crime fiction authors, trends and critical preoccupations within the genre today. The volume comprises innovative critical essays by international crime fiction academics examining important works by prominent crime fiction authors, extending current debates in, and advancing new readings of, this most diverse of literary genres. The book particularly preoccupies itself with the complex ways in which contemporary crime fiction takes inspiration from various literary subgenres, innovating form, themes, characters, plots and narrative forms. Through this investigation, this book thus provides important new insight into specific significant and compelling areas in the genre which signal future developments within contemporary crime fiction, particularly those which demonstrate a distinct emphasis on experimentations with textuality and genre. Critical perspectives

shaped by the impacts of feminism, postmodernism, postcolonialism and intersectionality are to the fore in the various chapters featured in this volume. The ordering of chapters into thematic sections groups serves to ensure that individual chapters speak to one another and illustrate current critical conversations within crime fiction criticism, inviting further reflection and debate. The individual chapters complement each other in compelling and instructive ways, ensuring that the debates and analyses they forward are foregrounded in such a way that existing scholarship is further enhanced and revitalized through new and original critical thought and practice. Through their original scholarship and innovative approaches, these chapters are producing vital new insights which is essential for energizing and inspiring crime fiction criticism as it evolves and moves forward with the genre which it investigates. This book is very proud to present the works of this group of international scholars whose contributions to the book promote unique and compelling insights into the reading, writing, and theorizing of contemporary crime fiction. Just as the boundaries of contemporary crime fiction are challenged by influences from other textual and visual forms, so too crime fiction scholarship is multidimensional and constantly developing and growing, reflecting and benefitting from global as well as local perspectives.

## **The Popular Appeal of Crime Fiction**

Crime fiction is as popular now as it has ever been 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”.<sup>3</sup> While retaining this central conceptual focal point, crime fiction has evolved and diversified over the years. The crime fiction under examination in this volume is broadly regarded as having popular appeal with wide readerships. The popular and commercial appeal of contemporary crime fiction is regularly the topic of discussion in newspaper features discussing subjects such as “the best crime novels of the year,” guides to the best crime fiction from different eras and countries, subgenres, and so on. The fascination that the crime genre holds is described by the critic Barbara Fister in the following terms: “Crime fiction, a genre that deliberately exploits anxiety

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<sup>3</sup> Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 1.

in the reader, taps into topical social concerns using familiar formulas to produce suspenseful narratives. Our fascination with crime has deep cultural roots”.<sup>4</sup> 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 analyze a range of those social and cultural problems that dominate in our tumultuous contemporary times. As we shall see in this book, 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 environmental crime fiction).<sup>5</sup> As Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn state in their collection of essays, *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction* (2009), commenting on the genre’s multiple aspects:

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 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.<sup>6</sup>

This breaking down of the barriers between cultural forms can be seen as a feature of postmodernist art. In several of the chapters featured in this book, 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 chapters in this book, 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. In his 2019 essay, “Contemporary Crime Fiction, Cultural Prestige, and the Literary Field”, critic Eric Sandberg argues that “Crime fiction laboured for many years under a persistent foundational anxiety over its cultural status. However, the cultural landscape has changed considerably in recent years, and many critics have identified a transformation in crime fiction’s

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Fister, “Copycat crimes: crime fiction and the marketplace of anxieties.” *Clues: a journal of detection* 23 (2005): 43.

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Beyer, “Introduction: Crime Fiction”. In *Teaching Crime Fiction*, ed. Charlotte Beyer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn, “Investigating Identities,” in *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*, eds. Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 1.



positioning as central to this transformation.”<sup>7</sup> Sandberg further uses the example of Val McDermid serving as a judge on the 2018 Booker Prize panel as an implicit signal of establishment acceptance of crime fiction practitioners and “the changing status of crime writing.”<sup>8</sup> We thus see clear evidence of crime writing’s successful and sustained experimentation with and echoes of other literary genres. 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. Here, the author of the article, Rebecca Armstrong, asks. “[b]ut 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?”<sup>9</sup> 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 essay “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.”<sup>10</sup> 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”.<sup>11</sup> However, Plain also points out that this definition of crime fiction is limited and one-dimensional, fails to recognize the genre’s complexities and to acknowledge its diversity. Plain argues that crime narratives “cannot be reduced to the sum of their resolutions; they

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Sandberg, “Contemporary Crime Fiction, Cultural Prestige, and the Literary Field.” *Crime Fiction Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 5-22.

<https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/cfs.2020.0004> . Accessed 28 July 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Sandberg, “Contemporary”.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Armstrong, “How Crime Fiction Has Moved On.” *The Independent*, 19 February, 2013. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/how-crime-fiction-has-moved-on-8500257.html> . Accessed 28 July 2020

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Franks, “A Taste for Murder: The Curious Case of Crime Fiction.” *M/C Journal* 17.1 (2014). <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/770> . Accessed 28 July 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 6.

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"<sup>12</sup>. These debates over the genre's history and evolution, and the relative merits of early versus later manifestations of crime fiction, are not easily resolved. This book aims to showcase the rich and compelling diversity of contemporary crime fiction and to examine its relationship to other genres and general use of textual and thematic experimentation through a series of critical investigations into particular current texts, themes and subgenres.

## Contemporary Crime Fiction and Challenging Boundaries

The 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 chapters in this book examine some of these issues, which range from blackmail and murder; sexual assault; domestic, political, social and religious abuses of power, environmental crime, and more. In so doing, they show how crime fiction confronts the brutal realities of contemporary social and political cultures as well as the hidden and unspoken aspects of human psychology. 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 victimization of women have regularly been highlighted as problematic features of contemporary crime fiction<sup>13</sup>. Crucially, Plain asserts, "Crime fiction in general, and detective fiction in particular, is about confronting and taming the monstrous"<sup>14</sup>. 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".<sup>15</sup> 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. The

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<sup>12</sup> Plain, *Twentieth-Century*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 50.

<sup>14</sup> Plain, *Twentieth-Century*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Fister, "Copycat", 45.

chapters in this book all center on aspects of genre experimentation and textuality in contemporary crime fiction, and examine themes that serve to enhance or foreground these aspects. The capacity of crime fiction to creatively incorporate and playfully enhance other generic and textual dimensions is a point of discussion and contention in all the chapters in this book – whether this undertaking is approached from a stylistic, thematic or creative perspective. Cornelia Macsiniuc’s chapter 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.” These experimentations with genre test the boundaries of the crime formula, thereby demonstrating the ability of postmodern literature to both explore and exploit the parameters of crime. My chapter, “‘I Stand Out Like a Raven’: The Female Detective and Tudor History in Nancy Bilyeau’s *The Crown*,” explores contemporary 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 questions which this genre raises for authors, readers and critics, my chapter proposes that Bilyeau’s novel uses the prism of crime fiction to investigate Tudor history and to question its traditional representations. As Nünning 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

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<sup>16</sup> Richard B. Schwartz, *Nice and Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 84.

novels"<sup>17</sup>. These two chapters and the works they examine thus investigate and highlight how contemporary crime fiction explores historical dimensions and influences from literary fiction in order to write back to dominant cultural narratives and challenge genre boundaries.

One of contemporary crime fiction's key features is its critical and creative scrutiny of gender and the politics of representation. The chapters in this book explicitly or implicitly investigate and address the gendered dimensions of crime writing and gender as a theme. As Krajenbrink and Quinn point out, "Questions of identity have traditionally been central to crime and detective fiction"<sup>18</sup>. Gillian Plain concurs with this view, contending that: "Gender transgression and the 'disruption' of normative sexuality have always been an integral part of crime narrative"<sup>19</sup>. Such questions of identity in crime fiction have been interrogated through feminist theory, and several chapters in this book explicitly draw on feminist criticism in their analyses of crime fiction and the various gender-political dimensions of the genre. As is evident from the chapters in this book, 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. Several of the essays concern themselves with the subgenre of domestic noir. The term domestic noir was coined by crime author Julia Crouch in 2013, in a blog post entitled "Genre bender". Describing the types of themes and storylines treated in domestic noir, Crouch argues that it "takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants."<sup>20</sup> Victoria Kennedy's chapter "'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 "humor and horror." The subgenre of Chick Noir reflects both of these responses, Kennedy argues,

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<sup>17</sup> Ansgar Nünning. "Crossing borders and blurring genres: Towards a typology and poetics of postmodernist historical fiction in England since the 1960s." *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 1. 2 (1997): 217.

<sup>18</sup> Krajenbrink and Quinn, "Investigating Identities," 1.

<sup>19</sup> Plain, *Twentieth-Century*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Julia Crouch. "Genre Bender." *Julia Crouch* 25 August 2013.

offering a unique and compelling crime fiction format which examines the predicament of the modern Western woman today, by questioning the limitations of her empowerment and agency and investigating the fictional constructs which continue to define and entrap her. Kennedy's chapter is not the only one focusing on the important and influential domestic noir subgenre. In her chapter, "The 'Gone Girl Effect': 'Girling' the Femme Fatale in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*", Rosie Couch investigates the representation of femininity and girlhood, focusing specifically on Flynn's influential 2012 domestic noir novel. Investigating Flynn's contemporary twist on the femme fatale figure which has haunted and disrupted crime fiction for decades, Couch's incisive analysis argues for the vital function served by the domestic noir subgenre as a site for feminist critique and the representation and construction of feminine experience. Using a feminist critical framework, Couch argues that "*Gone Girl* enables a new reading of both the femme fatale figure and the slippage between girlhood and adult femininity or, rather, the 'girling' of adult femininity." It is thus clear from these discussions that domestic noir crime fiction presents a complex "genre bending", to use Julia Crouch's phrase, of crime fiction, the psychological thriller, and the feminist novel. Such challenging of the boundaries between genres and experimentation with form and style as those examined by Couch are central to this book's concerns.

Several of the chapters in this volume preoccupy themselves with gender as a disruptive dimension in crime fiction and investigate the textual aspects and thematic manifestations of gender. This undertaking involves reflection on the issue of gender as it impacts on the author's character creation, and the gendering of detective and sidekick roles in crime fiction, and ways of disrupting and changing fixed patterns. In her chapter, "Bloody Women: How Female Authors Have Transformed the Scottish Contemporary Crime Fiction Genre," Lorna Hill also concerns herself with questions of genre and gender, but from a creative perspective. In a fascinating critical reflection on her own writing, Hill examines the impact of Scottish women crime writers on her creative practice. Through the lens of creative reflection, Hill examines the considerations and priorities which form part of 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. Hill's chapter thus illustrates the unique dimensions that creative innovation of genre brings to contemporary crime fiction. Discussions around gender and creativity also inform Elena Avanzas

Álvarez' chapter, "More than a Secretary, More than a Sidekick: Robin Ellacott in the *Cormoran Strike* Series by Robert Galbraith". In her chapter, Álvarez examines the portrayal of Robin Ellacott, the female sidekick character in Galbraith's first three detective novels, focusing specifically on the gender-political dimensions of this depiction. Often sidekicks exist in the shadow of their detective friends and colleagues, only rarely given the opportunity to appear at the center of the narrative, in the role of detective and authority themselves. However, Álvarez persuasively argues that Galbraith's novels subvert the conventional pattern by providing counter-representations of Ellacott carrying out detecting of her own, rather than remaining in the shadow of private eye Cormoran Strike. Offering fascinating insight into the crime fiction written by Galbraith/JK Rowling, Álvarez' chapter draws on a range of critical perspectives in order to analyze Galbraith's representations, producing vital new and original perspectives on the hitherto underresearched "other" oeuvre of this most popular of authors. Read together, these essays illustrate how, in Plain's words, "[t]he 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".<sup>21</sup> Those gender-political dimensions of fiction are key to this book's investigation of the genre's contemporary experimentations.

Place is another central theme in contemporary crime fiction which this book examines, investigating its psychological, physical, and geographical dimensions. Critic David Geherin has written extensively about the meanings of place and setting in crime fiction. He argues that, "when a writer uses location as more than backdrop by weaving it into the very fabric of the novel, affecting every other element of the work, the reader gets far more than local color."<sup>22</sup> Contemporary crime fiction explores the complexity of place and psychogeography through its experimentation with genre and imaginative engagement with the politics of cultural and geographical specificity, ranging from the metropolis and its anonymity and the wilderness, to the chocolate box village or the postcolonial struggle for independence. Geherin argues that "[c]rime and mystery novels present an ideal opportunity to examine some of the artistic ways setting is used in fiction."<sup>23</sup> In her chapter, "Place as a Character in the Contemporary Crime Fiction Series", Elspeth Latimer investigates the creative and imaginative methods and techniques which crime writers utilize in order to produce

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<sup>21</sup> Plain, *Twentieth-Century*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> David Geherin. *Scene of the Crime: The Importance of Place in Crime and Detective Fiction*. (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008),3.

<sup>23</sup> Geherin, *Scene*, 8.

portrayals of place that render it far more than merely a backdrop, but instead promote the idea of setting as a complex and compelling character in its own right. This dimension is vital, she argues, in much contemporary crime fiction which derives its dynamism and drive from representing setting in this fascinating way. Drawing on crime fiction criticism and works by Ian Rankin and Tana French, Latimer explores significant themes such as the characteristics of place and the relationships that evolve within crime settings, and the agency of place when it comes to committing and/or solving crime. An additional factor in Latimer's investigation is her specific focus on the crime series as a specific manifestation of crime fiction, foregrounding aspects of evolution and change and their importance to the reader's continued engagement with the genre. Through the deployment of the concepts of storyworld and charactericity, Latimer's original and thought-provoking investigation thus identifies questions that are highly significant to this book's analysis of genre experimentation in contemporary crime fiction and the genre's popular appeal.

As part of its interrogation of identity, contemporary crime fiction brings into intense 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 questioning is emblematic of our 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"<sup>24</sup>. Carla Portilho's fascinating chapter, "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 through the prism of crime fiction. In her chapter, Portilho furthermore investigates the complicated relationship between Anglo-American generic conventions and traditions and contemporary Japanese-American writing, thus throwing light on this crucial and increasingly visible dimension of contemporary multicultural crime fiction. The blending of and experimentation with generic conventions highlighted by Portilho's chapter, then, are crucial traits common to all this book's chapters. The result of the investigations

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<sup>24</sup> Plain, *Twentieth-Century*, 7.

discussed here is a highly stimulating, wide-ranging, questioning and original set of essays which all contribute vitally to throwing light on contemporary crime fiction, exploring why the genre has developed into the vital and intriguing form that it is today and scoping out new areas of interest.

### **Conclusion: Contemporary Crime Fiction and Global Issues**

At crucial points in our cultural history, crime fiction has demonstrated an acute ability to observe and portray the pervading sentiments of its times. For example, contemporary crime fiction offers critical representations of neoliberalism as it impacts on the lives of women, mothers and families in the domestic noir subgenre; issues examined in Roberta Garrett's 2020 book *Writing the Modern Family: Contemporary Literature, Motherhood and Neoliberal Culture*. Several chapters in the book investigate domestic noir, a genre which reflects neoliberalism, using crime fiction as the prism through which to explore the representation of femininity and motherhood. However, as Katarzyna Paszkiewicz states, in her chapter "It all stays in the family: the revival of domestic noir in 21<sup>st</sup> century crime fiction." (2019), argues that, "[i]n critical discourses that circulate around novels labelled as domestic noir – most of which are authored by women – the genre has been trivialized because of its focus on "feminine" private preoccupations, such as relationships, family and motherhood. In contradistinction to this critical derision, then, I call for a reappraisal of domestic crime fiction, in which a number of contemporary writers have pursued observant cultural commentary on the gendered inequities of family life."<sup>25</sup> Environmental crime fiction is another growing contemporary subgenre which has enjoyed increasing critical as well as creative attention in recent decades, focusing on various forms of environmental crime and exploring themes which reflect debates around animal rights, climate change, and resource exploitation. Environmental crime is also included for consideration in this book, through my chapter on American author Martha Grimes, "'She Looked West': Martha Grimes' Environmental Crime Novel *Biting the Moon*". In it, I investigate Grimes' narrative strategy of blending the environmental crime genre with the classic American road trip motif, in

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<sup>25</sup> Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, "It All Stays in the Family: The Revival of Domestic Noir in 21st Century Crime Fiction." In *Family Relationships in Contemporary Crime Fiction: La Famiglia*, ed. Bill Phillips (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2019), 22.



order to generate a new non-conformist teen-age female detective who stands up for animal rights and the underdog in her quest to discover her true identity. As critic Samantha Walton argues, in her chapter “Studies in Green: ecological crime fiction”, setting and location in crime fiction is of central importance to the examination of the nature of crime, as it brings to the fore ethical and moral dimensions that are key to the relationship between self and other. Walton argues that, “Reading ecological crime fiction and reading crime fiction ecologically demand a shifting of focus to features of a text often dismissed as backdrops to human activity: rivers, forests, landscapes, climate or the planetary ecosystem. It provokes an adjustment of temporalities, urging scholars to situate human activity in seasonal, anthropological, evolutionary and deep timescales.”<sup>26</sup> These vital questions and problems all contribute in different ways to forming the complex hinterland of this book’s compelling investigations of crime fiction’s most thought-provoking themes.

Reflecting on urgent environmental issues and the relationship between humans and nature, it is of course impossible to complete the introduction to this book without commenting on the context of its final production phase – living and writing about crime fiction through the devastating global Covid-19 pandemic. No scholarly output happens in a vacuum. Every academic reflection takes place with a complex intersectional context. This work is no different. What does it mean to see and read the world through the threat of a worldwide pandemic? Writing this Introduction, I am acutely reminded of the urgencies of politicized and contextualized literature which responds in various complex ways to the immense pressures which the human race is confronting globally. Crime fiction has always played a central role in responding to social and cultural urgencies. Thus, readers have sought out crime fiction during this difficult and trying period. Media reports state that readers have increasingly turned to crime fiction during the period of Covid-19 lockdown. A *Guardian* article by Alison Flood, dated 15 May 2020, reports that “Research finds reading books has surged in lockdown. Survey of 1,000 people reports time spent with books has almost doubled, with thrillers and crime the favoured genres.” Investigating the reasons for the increase in reading and specific interest in and engagement with crime fiction, Flood cites research done by Nielsen Book, which suggests that, in reaching for crime fiction, “People want to be absorbed [...] that means they’ll go for any book where there’s a story that will pull them in and hold their attention. Crime and thriller fiction, that

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<sup>26</sup> Samantha Walton, “Studies in Green: Teaching Ecological Crime Fiction.” In *Teaching Crime Fiction*, ed. Charlotte Beyer (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018): 115.

broadest of categories, is all about that, even if it does it through the medium of tales where people do some very dark things.”<sup>27</sup> According to Flood’s article, the assumption is that readers associate genre fiction, particularly crime and detective fiction, with “comfort” and predictability. Contemporary British crime fiction author Peter May argues that, “And that is particularly relevant at a time when our world and everything familiar to us seems to have been turned upside down.”<sup>28</sup> A specific novel by crime writer Peter May is highlighted as having anticipated the pandemic plotline as the context for the portrayal of crime: “[w]hen Peter May wrote his thriller *Lockdown* in 2005, publishers thought the scenario imagining London shut down by bird flu was too far-fetched. But May, who has donated his advance to those on the frontline of the fight against coronavirus, has seen sales soar since it was published last month.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, after the lockdown was lifted, another article reported that readers flocked to crime fiction, above children’s literature, dystopian literature and literary fiction. This shows that contemporary crime fiction has a crucial role to fill in society as it seeks to address topics of major interest to readers which help them connect with the world at large and make sense of their culture. Far from being concerned merely with crime fiction upholding the status quo in a predictably traditional manner, the contributors in this book demonstrate that crime fiction has always been cutting edge in its critical treatment of crime and social justice through its storyline, style, themes and characters. Crime fiction has a crucial part to play not just in entertaining but also in guiding readers in times of great upheaval and trauma. It is thus evident 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.”<sup>30</sup> It is its capacity for experimentation and revision of accepted narratives that gives contemporary crime fiction its edge, in a busy and sometimes confusing cultural landscape. Commenting on this dimension, Alta Asa Berger states that: “Boundary-busting and blurring genres are common postmodern themes”<sup>31</sup>. Gill Plain concurs with this point, suggesting that: “Perhaps [crime fiction’s] concern with the transgression of boundaries

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<sup>27</sup>Flood, “Research”.

<sup>28</sup>Flood, “Research”.

<sup>29</sup>Flood, “Research”.

<sup>30</sup>Franks. “Taste”.

<sup>31</sup>Arthur Asa Berger. *The Postmodern Presence: Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1998), 219.

makes it a particularly appropriate mode for the *fin-de-siècle*<sup>32</sup> – and beyond, I would say. Crime fiction is leading an ongoing conversation with our ever-changeable modern world, addressing power imbalances and abuses through its complex representations of criminality and the individuals and/or collectives that perpetrate them. This conversation is majorly shaped by crime fiction’s willingness to engage creatively with other literary genres and popular cultural discourses. Combining powerful and compelling topics and themes with well-crafted inventive writing, contemporary crime fiction writes back to history and the tradition. Contemporary crime fiction, then, it would seem, really is “a surfeit of riches.”

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<sup>32</sup> Plain, *Twentieth-Century*, 6-7.

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