

# Intersectionality and Decolonisation in Contemporary British Crime Fiction



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By

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## PERMISSIONS

One of this book's chapters is based on a previous publication which has been extended and updated. I am grateful to the publisher and editor who have given their kind permission for me to reuse this previously published article in my book:

“There's nothing people won't do to one another, if the circumstances are right': Male Rape and the Politics of Representation in John Harvey's Police Procedural *Easy Meat*.” This article was originally published in *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 31, no. 2 (2013):102-11, by McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

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## INTRODUCTION

# CONTEMPORARY BRITISH CRIME FICTION AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

### **Aim and Purpose of This Book**

Contemporary British crime fiction is a vibrant textual space of thematic and stylistic innovation, as well as social and political engagement. Yet the politics of representation in this body of work is under-researched. Decolonisation and intersectionality are prominent themes in contemporary British crime fiction, making the politics of representation a compelling dimension of this body of work. The preoccupation with intersectionality and decolonisation is a response to past patriarchal, heterosexist, classist and racist representations perpetuated through the crime fiction genre and the literary canon more broadly. However, the concern with decolonising the genre, inclusivity, and representation of diversity is also a creative and critical response to an evolving multicultural society with increasing visibility of gender and LGBTQ+ concerns. Yet British society and culture continue to be marred by various extensive inequalities, including race, gender, religion, sexuality, region, and class. To date, critical and scholarly assessments of crime fiction to have overlooked the role of contemporary British crime fiction as a specific body of work which uses the genre and its conventions to address and to challenge current social, cultural, and political debates. Crime fiction criticism sorely needs a more extensive evaluation of the progressive dynamics in contemporary British crime fiction. Thus, in this book, I turn my attention towards these urgent questions by presenting an examination of two key themes, namely intersectionality and the politics of representation, in selected contemporary British crime fiction novels. I argue that contemporary British crime fiction is a field of contestation where values, as well as ethical and social questions, are explored and debated. In investigating the politics of representation in contemporary British crime fiction, I undertake an extensive, detailed analysis of four contemporary British crime fiction novels written in the period 1996 – 2018. They are, in the order of discussion, John Harvey, *Easy Meat* (1996); Stella Duffy,

*Mouths of Babes* (2005); M.Y. Alam, *Annie Potts Is Dead* (1998); and Dorothy Koomson, *The Brighton Mermaid* (2018). As we shall see, intersectionality and decolonisation serve as useful overarching concepts for the creative and critical exploration of these questions. This in-depth introduction is the first to link decolonisation and intersectionality to contemporary British crime fiction explicitly, tracing how these dimensions are influencing the genre's thematic and stylistic developments.<sup>1</sup>

At this point it is important to clarify my use of the term "British" and the range and coverage which the examination in my book provides. In using the term "British," this study bounds its investigation geographically and culturally, reflecting the definition of "British" as "of or relating to Great Britain or its inhabitants."<sup>2</sup> My book offers an in-depth thematic examination, using the term "British" to denote national identity as the conceptual boundary for its detailed investigation of intersectionality and decolonisation in selected contemporary British crime fiction novels. However, in prioritising this approach, my study differs from the wide-ranging overview of British crime fiction from all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom offered by books such as Barry Forshaw's *Brit Noir: The Pocket Essential Guide to British Crime Fiction, Film & TV* (2016). Whereas Forshaw's book is divided into distinct chapters providing coverage of crime fiction set in individual nations of the United Kingdom, my book provides a deep dive into a smaller number of crime novels and investigates specific themes. A thematic approach such as mine demands a distinct depth of focus from a comprehensive or encyclopaedic overview or an approach dictated by geographical place and political organisation. My book offers a detailed and theorised examination of intersectionality and decolonisation in the selected novels under investigation, the focus being on those specific themes and their effect within the genre, rather than on complete regional coverage. As my analysis in this book uses terminology such as "black British" and "British-Pakistani" to denote identity, the term "English" would not be appropriate as a description. However, this book does not base its analysis on the fallacy that Britishness is the same as Englishness. Extending its representation of Britishness and crime from what Catherine Phelps refers

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<sup>1</sup> See also Charlotte Beyer, "Investigating Privilege: Teaching Race, Gender, and Intersectionality through the Lens of Crime Fiction," *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 40, no. 2 (2022): 119-122.

<sup>2</sup> "British." *Dictionary.com*, accessed 1 September 2022.  
<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/british>

to as “metropolitan meta-narratives,”<sup>3</sup> this book investigates a range of settings and locations within Britain, including Bradford, Nottingham, Brighton, and London, as well as presenting racial and ethnic diversity.

In assessing my book, critics may point to the absence of crime fiction from all four nations of the United Kingdom as well as the various regions. An investigation of such a scope and range would certainly be an important undertaking; however, for the reasons I have explained, it is one which lies outside the scope of my present project. Moreover, there is a strong and demonstrable argument for the case that crime fiction from these regions requires specific scholarly attention. As critics have established, Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish crime fiction has been regarded as separate literary traditions. Examples of scholarly examinations of these nations’ crime fiction as separate literary traditions include Brian Cliff’s chapter on Northern Irish crime fiction in his 2018 book, *Irish Crime Fiction*, and Len Wanner’s examination of Scottish crime fiction in his 2015 book, *Tartan Noir: The Definitive Guide to Scottish Crime Fiction*. Catherine Margaret Phelps examines Welsh crime fiction as a distinctive body of work in her doctoral thesis, “[Dis] Solving Genres: Arguing the Case for Welsh Crime Fiction” (2013). Recent works focusing on literature generally, rather than crime fiction, also emphasise separate traditions, such as Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton’s edited volume from 2019, *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, Caroline Magennis’ 2021 book *Northern Irish Writing after the Troubles: Intimacies, Affects, Pleasures*, and Matt McGuire’s *Contemporary Scottish Literature* from 2008. Scholars have gone as far as to describe national literatures within the United Kingdom as a separate genre, as in Matt McGuire’s book.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, other recent scholarly books on British literature employ a historical, thematic, and textual lens, rather than a regional one, to significant effect. Peter Boxall’s edited 2019 volume, *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980–2018*, is an excellent case in point. While acknowledging and recognising “the heterogeneity of British identity,”<sup>5</sup> my study has a different priority which, however, emphasises inclusivity and diversity. In providing this necessarily selective examination, I am not claiming the existence of a monolithic “Britishness” which erases all differences and distinctions. Rather, I am hoping to stimulate further academic debate about the complexities of contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Margaret Phelps, “[Dis] solving Genres: Arguing the Case for Welsh Crime Fiction,” (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2013), 13.

<sup>4</sup> See the book’s description on <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/contemporary-scottish-literature-9780230506701/>, accessed September 3, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Phelps, “[Dis]solving Genres,” 13.

British crime fiction from all four nations and their regions – the scale of discussion which is out of scope for this book to undertake. What makes my book unique and timely, then, is its in-depth thematic study of two key current ideas within British crime fiction, based on selected works of fiction by authors who are representative of British racial diversity and intersectionality and whose works I argue present major thematic and stylistic innovations within British crime fiction.

My own position as a scholar investigating this material is complex. I am a non-native English speaker who has lived through the complex and often increasingly polarised recent historical period that the works under investigation here engage with, including enduring Brexit, Trump, post-truth, and the recent “war on woke.” Contemporary British crime fiction has served to provide me with a focus for these complex and often contradictory developments, and has also given me hope that justice may be achieved for the victims of crime. As a white cisgender woman and academic, I hold a privileged position; although I do not experience the oppression suffered by people of colour, the working-classes, the disabled, or LGBTQ+ individuals and communities, as a non-native English speaker I have experienced and do frequently experience marginalisation and unconscious bias in society generally. As a cultural outsider, an immigrant to Britain studying British crime fiction in my second language, my own position in relation to the material I examine in this book is necessarily complex and mediated through various displacements peculiar to my situation. These experiences, I believe, make me perceptive to the issues and problems raised in the literary texts that I examine here, and they are my motivation for wishing to examine the ways in which contemporary British crime fiction writers strive to effect social, cultural, and political change.

Why examine contemporary British crime fiction exclusively, when recently, crime fiction critics such as Barbara Pezzotti, have argued that the genre is best considered in its global manifestation, and that there has been an overemphasis in crime fiction criticism on national or regional literatures, to the detriment of considering transnational flows of creative influences?<sup>6</sup> Stewart King holds that criticism focusing on national or regional crime fiction has contributed to the conceiving of the genre as “nationally

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Pezzotti, “Transnationality,” in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, eds. Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (Routledge, 2020), 94-101.

bounded,”<sup>7</sup> thereby perpetuating marginalisation and exclusions compounding Anglo-American privilege. King makes a compelling case for the benefits of reading crime fiction as a global genre, and I do not dispute the absolute necessity of evolving crime fiction criticism through a global focus. However, in this book, I argue that the continuing effects of the Empire and colonialism, along with global changes, mean that it is necessary and important to consider how national, historical, and cultural-specific factors impact on contemporary crime fiction. Furthermore, in this book, I demonstrate how contemporary British crime fiction is engaging creatively and critically with key ideas such as intersectionality and decolonisation. Vital and compelling social developments and cultural changes have happened during this particular historical period that need to be understood within the realm of specific national and cultural conditions of literary production, and my book provides that unique and timely examination. Critical evaluations of nationally bounded bodies of literature do not necessarily per se negate global focus analyses, or vice versa. On the contrary, these analyses can and do coexist in a vibrant and constantly evolving critical space by complementing and strengthening one another. It is my hope that this book will complement and strengthen the scholarly contributions of other critics in the diverse and dynamic growing field of crime fiction, including those critical works which explore Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish crime writing. Through its focus on contemporary British crime fiction’s exploration of progressive forces such as multiculturalism, intersectionality, race and ethnicity, my book contributes to these ongoing debates, demonstrating how this specific and nationally bounded body of literature exceeds one-dimensional and limited definitions of both British identity and the British crime fiction tradition.

My study argues that contemporary British crime writing is a body of work that has rarely been considered at length in its national and cultural specificity. However, considering the field’s dynamism and the growth of crime fiction criticism, it is clearly important to investigate what the themes are that inform authors in the contemporary period. Commenting on the use of crime as a literary theme, Heather Worthington explains that: “Crime in fiction is a mode of expression for contemporary social anxieties and speaks eloquently of its cultural context.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, this book for the first time considers radical and ground-breaking thematic and stylistic features in

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<sup>7</sup> Stewart King, “Crime Fiction As World Literature,” *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 32, no. 2 (2014): 9. <https://doi.org/10.3172/CLU.32.2.8>.

<sup>8</sup> Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan Education UK. Kindle Edition), 32.

contemporary British crime fiction which call attention to the politics of representation. Furthermore, my study provides an in-depth and detailed consideration of specified works by authors leading these innovations. Drawing on selected crime fiction novels written in the period between 1996-2018, I provide an accessible and critically informed examination of their employment of the crime genre to explore intersectionality and decolonisation. This investigation involves examining their use of the genre to critique contemporary social and political themes and developments, such as Black Lives Matter, police violence, sexual violence, and LGBTQ+ issues. In using the term LGBTQ+, I draw on the definition provided by the Human Rights Campaign. They define it as, “An acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer” with a “+” sign to recognise the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of our community.”<sup>9</sup> In analysing and reflecting on these perspectives and representations, I position myself as an ally who is actively supporting LGBTQ+ sexualities and their depiction in contemporary British crime fiction. Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser examine intersectionality and define the term. They state that,

One of the most important developments of recent decades has been an acknowledgment of what legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw has called “intersectionality.” An intersectional approach foregrounds the conviction that sexuality, race, class, nationality, age, and ability—to name just the most frequently cited categories of difference—intersect with one another to form intricate variations upon oppression and privilege.<sup>10</sup>

In my employment of the term “decolonisation” of the crime genre, I focus on the ways in which the selected crime novels challenge gender, sexuality, race, and class privilege and its inscription through the genre, and redefine Britishness to encompass diversity.

This book offers a fresh critical examination of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century British crime fiction texts, through a thematic and critical approach informed by contemporary social and cultural debates which pays specific attention to the politics of these novels’ representations. I investigate how the genre attends to issues such as class, gender, sexuality, and race, exploring contemporary crimes such as sexual violence, race related

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<sup>9</sup> Glossary of Terms. Human Rights Campaign, n.a., n.d., accessed April 23, 2022. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>

<sup>10</sup> Robyn Warhol, and Susan S. Lanser, “Introduction,” in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol, Susan S. Lanser (Columbus: Ohio State University Press. Kindle Edition), 6-7.

crime, adultification, robbery and prostitution, homophobic harassment and hate speech. Kaye Mitchell argues that,

literary critics have paid increasing attention to popular genres previously viewed as “mere” entertainment rather than “proper” literature, attending to the ideological complexities of the content, motivations, readerships, and reading experiences of popular texts, as well as the material contexts of their production, dissemination, consumption, and reception.<sup>11</sup>

In my examination, I extend Mitchell’s attention to the politics of representation and literary production in popular genre writing, focusing specifically on selected contemporary British crime fiction novels to investigate key debates and problems which these novels foreground through the prism of crime. My aim with this investigation is to contribute a long overdue critical assessments of contemporary British crime fiction and its engagement with the contemporary world. Through this study, I aim to enhance scholarly awareness of the diversity of contemporary British crime fiction, arguing for the importance of new critical evaluations of this field. Importantly, my focus on decolonisation and intersectionality serves the purpose of bringing issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as genre experimentation, to the forefront. As we shall see, this explicit focus brings overdue and important recognition of the contributions made by key British crime authors, whose work has, to date, largely been overlooked by mainstream crime fiction critics in the academy, yet whose compelling and powerful novels are radically changing the landscape of British crime writing.

My two key areas of focus in this book’s examination are representations of intersectionality and decolonisation of the crime genre in selected British crime fiction novels published in the period between the mid-1990s up to 2018, a period of profound change and political turbulence in British culture, reflected in the crime fiction produced. These two subjects also divide the book’s structure into two parts, which treat distinct but interrelated themes and issues as I shall go on to demonstrate. Contemporary British crime fiction provides a compelling and unique insight into the themes and concerns of the culture from which it springs. As Heather Worthington explains,

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<sup>11</sup> Kaye Mitchell, “Popular Genres and ‘Lesbian’ Culture: From Pulp to Crime, and Beyond,” in *Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. Jodie Medd (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 154.

The genre offers new and exciting insights into the cultures that produce it; its very status as popular and accessible literature means that it responds quickly to change, that it can incorporate cultural and social shifts almost immediately into its texts. We see clearly, in crime fiction, the anxieties, the morals and values of the contemporary society.<sup>12</sup>

The themes and concerns under consideration in this book demonstrate that crime fiction offers a powerful lens through which to evaluate and examine the politics of representation. The phrase “the politics of representation” refers to the focus placed in the texts I analyse here, on themes and ideas which have a particular political (feminist, racial, class-related, sexuality-related) importance, and the way in which crime authors use the genre to investigate and critique specific social and cultural issues. Maureen Reddy states, in her book *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (1993) that, “not only masculinity but also whiteness and heterosexuality are fundamental elements” of 1940s hard-boiled crime fiction.<sup>13</sup> My book focuses specifically on those issues, their significance, and the textual, generic, and thematic means used to problematise those issues in the crime fictions examined here. This study is informed by intersectional feminism, a methodology which enables me to analyse the textual themes and narrative strategies presented in these crime novels which address the politics of representation. My present analysis does not draw on one specific theory or critical perspective. I draw on theoretical and critical insights from a number of academic disciplines, as I have deemed this approach to be appropriate and right for the analysis of the complex representations and issues under investigation here.

I have selected John Harvey’s *Easy Meat*, Stella Duffy’s *Mouths of Babes*, M.Y. Alam’s *Annie Potts Is Dead*, and Dorothy Koomson’s *The Brighton Mermaid* due to the detailed and explicit treatment these particular crime fiction novels provide of race, class, decolonisation, sexuality, and intersectionality. A further reason for selection is the complex way in which these novels harness those specific themes and literary strategies which serve to enhance those important current preoccupations. A key factor in my rationale for text selection is the innovative and dynamic way in which these novels use the crime fiction genre and its conventions as a lens for social and cultural critique. A key priority of mine was to ensure critical treatment of authors whose work have thus far enjoyed less critical

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<sup>12</sup> Worthington, *Key Concepts*, ix.

<sup>13</sup> Maureen T. Reddy, *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (Rutgers University Press, 2003), 7.



coverage, to address this gap in the research. Furthermore, my selection rationale centres on representation of racial and intersectional diversity, an aspect which is often overlooked in scholarly work on contemporary British crime fiction. M.Y. Alam is a British-Pakistani author who represents race and cultural diversity prominently in both his creative and academic work, drawing on a Northern English Bradford setting. Dorothy Koomson is a black British author who places black female characters at the centre of her diverse fictions, and whose novel is set in Brighton in the South-East of England. Stella Duffy consistently portrays LGBTQ+ themes and issues in her crime novel which is set in the capital of London and its suburbs. Set in Nottingham in England's Midlands region, John Harvey's novel centres on the homophobia and social class inequality which a repressive political regime produces. As we shall see, these preoccupations underpin the authors' diverse portrayals of intersectionality and decolonisation in the crime fiction genre, their use of regional settings enhancing the strength of their diversity representation. In representation of diversity, racial diversity is a central preoccupation in this book. Through the exploration of diversity in sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity and class, the crime novels examined here demonstrate the increasing representation within the genre and the critical perspectives engaging with it. As such, my book serves a vital function in calling attention to and celebrating diversity within contemporary British crime fiction.

The selected novels thereby demonstrate their vital contribution to the evolution of the genre's decolonising development in Britain and their textual and thematic innovations. Rather than providing a discussion of multiple texts from all of the United Kingdom's nations for the sake of regional coverage, this present book offers an in-depth thematic analysis of specified, selected complex crime texts where the focus is on thematic depth and innovation, rather than on comprehensive regional coverage. As I will go on to discuss in more detail in what follows, these novels have been selected for several reasons. Firstly, they span over a specific historical period – 1996 to 2018 – which has witnessed crucial and multidimensional social, political, and cultural changes in Britain, as well as highly significant developments both within the genre itself and in the literary criticism brought to bear on it. Furthermore, I should add that the preoccupation in this book is not with crime fiction as state-of-the-nation literature. Rather, my study concerns itself with identifying key cultural and literary themes and questions in the changing landscape of the contemporary British crime novel. My dual focus on decolonisation and intersectionality in contemporary British crime fiction serves as a lens for examining thematic content as well as narrative strategies and textual techniques employed in the novels under

investigation, and placed within a dynamic national, social, and cultural context.

## Challenging the British Crime Fiction Tradition

This book explores how, through thematic and textual innovation and politicisation, contemporary British crime fiction is writing back to the country's genre tradition and canon. Through its focus on wrongdoing and social and individual responses to crime and transgression, crime fiction as a genre demonstrates the capacity of popular literature to not only reflect but also to impact on our understanding of crucial social and cultural issues and debates. Contemporary British crime fiction uses this capacity for critique to write back to the crime fiction genre and its unspoken and explicit assumptions. Outlining those assumptions and the values that underpin them, Deborah Henderson explains that:

Crime in literature takes advantage of two basic assumptions: (1) that the storyline generally begins with a crime (very often murder) that underlies the subsequent narrative, often serving as the driving force of the story; and (2) that the crime itself and its narrative implications will be rooted in the actual workings of a culture's justice system at any given moment in time. Consequently, crime literature in particular provides readers with a snapshot of prevailing attitudes about the nature of justice in a society and the basic fears about crime that threaten its collective conscience.<sup>14</sup>

These two key elements also emerge strongly in contemporary British crime fiction, reflecting an added awareness of the British specificity of its representations and a postcolonial, intersectional reckoning with the genre's elitist conventions. Contemporary crime fiction is particularly well placed to perform this kind of social and cultural critique. Carla Rodriguez Gonzalez argues that,

Crime fiction has served to channel social criticism of various kinds, be it against ethnic bigotry, homophobia, or gender asymmetries. Indeed, given the fact that the vast majority of readers of crime fiction are women, it is not surprising that this, together with the progressive incorporation of more women writers into this tradition, has contributed to the regeneration of the genre by making use of conventions already familiar to the public to explore

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<sup>14</sup> Deborah Henderson, "Cultural Studies Approaches to the Study of Crime in Literature," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Crime, Media, and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780190494674.001.0001/a cref-9780190494674-e-42>.

issues ranging from sexism, in general, to more specific forms of discrimination against women, such as employment discrimination or gender-based violence.<sup>15</sup>

As my analyses of the novels in this book show, the “regeneration” and reclaiming of the genre by contemporary British crime writers serve the specific purpose of challenging social and cultural inequities. Through their innovative wielding of the crime fiction genre, the texts examined in this book challenge constructions of Britishness and explore the politics of representing identity. In this study, I examine how contemporary British crime authors use the genre’s conventions to write back to and transform the genre and its traditions. I specifically focus on how contemporary British women crime writers and crime authors of colour reassess and reimagine the genre, using the form and its conventions to write back to the white male-dominated literary tradition. I argue that they do so specifically within the crime genre and the way in which it has reflected inequalities of literary and cultural production in Britain. This book’s focus on the politics of representation in contemporary British crime fiction enables a detailed examination of the ways in which individual crime texts foreground, problematise, raise awareness of, and critique specific issues and problems through their thematic and structural engagement with themes of crime and inequality. Using genre as a lens for social and cultural critique is not unique to crime fiction. However, through its narrative and thematic focus on criminality, victims, and the restoration of justice, crime fiction can not only draw attention to, but call out and problematise the definition of crime. This capacity for describing and critiquing crime renders the genre uniquely suited for articulating social and cultural criticism.

Contemporary British crime fiction has long struggled to emerge from the long shadow cast by the Golden Age and its representations of class, race, gender, and privilege. The Golden Age ranged from the 1920s to about 1940, and centred around a stylised portrayal of crime, social class, and particular settings. These aspects were principally expressed through the country house setting and the conservative upper-class social and cultural values it reflected. Describing the conservatism of much Golden Age crime fiction, Peter Messent observes that,

“Golden Age” detective fiction – the name usually given to British detective fiction written in the period between the two world wars working within the

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<sup>15</sup> Carla Rodriguez Gonzalez, “Geographies of Fear in the Domestic Noir: Paula Hawkins’s *The Girl on the Train*,” *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 56 (2017): 110.

classical tradition – can be set in either a rural or an urban environment, but there is usually little attempt to portray a full social panorama, and such settings are usually very restricted in type. So, Christie is conventionally associated with the British country house murder, an act committed in a well-off setting and for purely private ends, and lacking any connection to the pressing social problems of the day.<sup>16</sup>

In her analysis, Henderson further pinpoints the social structures and class hierarchy which Golden Age crime fiction both exposes and upholds:

Although writers of the Golden Age may not have written about the everyday lives of ordinary Englanders, their stories did capture an underlying colonial mentality with its focus on genteel manners, assumed stability, and orderliness imposed and maintained by the British ruling class, the expected subservience of the working class, and the tacit belief that their way of life would continue unchallenged by rapid change in other parts of the world. One can read these earlier mystery novels and have a very good sense of how England's more affluent perceived the world.<sup>17</sup>

Scholars have recently been at pains to investigate the subversive sides to Golden Age crime fiction. Golden Age crime fiction has been variously examined by critics such as J.C. Bernthal, in *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden age of Detective Fiction* (2016), Megan Hoffmann, in *Gender and Representation in British 'Golden Age' Crime Fiction* (2016), and Samantha Walton, in *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (2015). These critics and others have produced incisive analyses of this body of work and its best-known authors. Golden Age crime fiction is itself a complex and fascinating body of work which resists attempts at generalisation or oversimplification. However, this book argues that it is precisely because Golden Age crime fiction – or perhaps rather the stereotypical construction of the Golden Age – has been so influential that important new ground-breaking themes and innovations within contemporary British crime fiction have been overlooked by critics. As Martin Priestman states, “is still too often seen as an indecisive hangover from the privileged fantasy-world of the pre-war ‘Golden Age’, or as palely reflecting trends which really belong to America.”<sup>18</sup> There is not the scope in this current examination to tease out the complexities of Golden Age crime fiction,

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Messent, *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (London: Wiley Blackwell, Kindle Edition), 31.

<sup>17</sup> Henderson, “Cultural Studies Approaches,” 11.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Priestman, “Post-War British Crime Fiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 173.

although I would say that the disruptions and ambiguities conveyed through the genre with regard to gender, sexuality and class are greater than the stereotypical perception of the genre would permit. Nevertheless, what I am concerned with here is the general popular perception of British crime fiction as traditional, even conservative, class-fixated, and an upholder of an outmoded status quo. In this book, I argue that contemporary British crime fiction is moving away from these values and the way in which they informed portrayal of crime and criminality, reflecting recent attempts to decolonise the genre through the impact of feminist, LGBTQ+, and multicultural authors and representations. I argue that these developments mark a highly significant point in the evolution of British crime fiction, and that the specific novels examined in this book trace, explore, and extend these developments through both themes and style.

Similarly, much later twentieth century British crime fiction has been associated with the police novel<sup>19</sup> and the reiteration of white male privilege through the portrayal of detective figures who embody exactly these establishment values. The British police novel has been analysed by critics such as Gill Plain in her article “Structures of Authority: Post-war Masculinity and the British Police” (2015) and Peter Messent, in *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (2013). These works are among those that have accounted for the rise of the post-war British police novel; however, critical analysis of the social and cultural topics treated in this form has tended to concentrate on televised shows, rather than fiction, as in *The Best Murders Are British: Essays on the International Appeal of English Crime Dramas*, edited by Jim Daems (2020). Commenting on the relative dearth of genre innovation within the British police novel which is mirrored in a gap in scholarship on the topic, Priestman asserts that, “Perhaps because it is still rapidly evolving and has no clearly defined ‘golden’ past of iconic stereotypes to look back on, police fiction has a far lower profile in critical circles than amateur or private eye detection.”<sup>20</sup> However, contemporary British crime fiction is not defined by either Golden Age or the police novel, and my investigations in this book demonstrate how diversity and determination to address current political, social and cultural themes are central to the genre. I further demonstrate through the detailed theorised examinations this book provides, that far from being stuck in or defined by the themes, styles and politics of the past, contemporary British crime novels are forging rich new paths of innovation and politicised debate. The novels examined here connect explicitly and implicitly with current cultural

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<sup>19</sup> Messent, *Handbook*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Priestman, “Post-War British,” 173-174.

debates over Black Lives Matter, intersectionality, the family, homophobia, hate crime and bullying, the politics of sexual violence and political repression, police violence against people of colour, and more.

This book specifically focuses on books published in the period between the mid-1990s and the present day – the period of third- and fourth-wave feminism, decolonisation, scrutiny of race, class, masculinity, and sexual crime. There is not the scope within the present book to elaborate on this extensive generic and literary history and its changing social and cultural contexts. Rather, my book seeks to draw connections between political and cultural trends in Britain and British crime fiction in the contemporary age, and the specific impact on the genre by hard-boiled crime fiction discourses, decolonisation within the genre, short and experimental fiction, challenging victim-perpetrator roles and the gendering of those roles, the aesthetics of violence, and writing back to dominant discourses of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Some contemporary British crime texts continue to draw on nostalgia and pastiche in their portrayal of British culture and its traditions. Tiffany Bergin discusses this tendency in her 2013 article, “Identity and nostalgia in a globalised world: Investigating the international popularity of *Midsomer Murders*.” Bergin shows how television series such as *Midsomer Murders* draw on a rural nostalgia which appeals to British and non-British audiences alike, chiefly and precisely because of the nostalgia. Bergin further traces the hankering for this nostalgia back to the Golden Age and its clue puzzle portrayals of crime. She has it that,

one of the central reasons for *Midsomer Murders*’ global popularity is its deliberate evocation of the British crime fiction/drama tradition. More specifically, the programme draws upon the conventions of the British ‘Golden Age’ crime fiction tradition.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, as Bergin reminds us, one of the key criticisms levelled against *Midsomer Murders* is its lack of ethnic and racial diversity, a feature completely at odds with contemporary British realities.<sup>22</sup> This erasure of ethnic and racial diversity from what is perceived as a traditional British crime drama is highly problematic, and my book examines how, in contrast to the portrayals offered by television shows such as *Midsomer Murders* and *Inspector Morse*, contemporary British crime fiction puts people of colour at the centre of its narratives. The novels I investigate here all foreground

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<sup>21</sup> Tiffany Bergin, “Identity and Nostalgia in a Globalised World: Investigating the International Popularity of *Midsomer Murders*,” *Crime, Media, Culture* 9, no. 1 (2013): 86.

<sup>22</sup> Bergin, “Identity and Nostalgia,” 92.

ethnic and racial diversity as a key feature of their plot and central characters, thus illustrating the drive to decolonise the genre through representations of intersectionality. Commenting on the significance of intersectionality in contemporary crime fiction, Somali Saren argues that, “Contemporary authors, by introducing detectives from minority groups—be it in terms of race, gender, class or sexual orientation—have repeatedly proven that the structure of crime narrative is favorable for the discourse of identity politics.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, in contrast to the longing for a bygone era of British life and culture explored in many contemporary crime texts, and rather than focusing on nostalgia and Golden Age pastiche, my study examines the compelling ways in which contemporary British crime fiction engages critically with current social and cultural debates. Furthermore, in its depiction of the 1990s and 2000s, the British crime novels I examine certainly contest faux nostalgia about the recent past. These novels evade celebrations of pop culture phenomena and constructs such as “Cool Britannia,” “Girl Power,” and Britpop, instead exploring the pervasive and persistent inequalities of contemporary Britain as a crime scene perpetuating inequality, racism, sexism, and homophobia.

The broader discussions within literary and cultural criticism over challenging the white malestream literary canon certainly also impact on crime fiction. Challenging white male privilege and its domination within literature generally and crime fiction specifically is, of course, a key priority in decolonisation. The books selected for examination in this book all engage critically and creatively in complex ways with the politics of representation, lending themselves to investigation through the prism of contemporary theoretical and critical discourses and vocabularies, such as textual analysis performed through feminist, postcolonial and intersectional criticism. British crime fiction in the period examined in this book is open to multicultural influences and modes of storytelling, demonstrating how authors of colour reclaim the genre and reassess its priorities. Referencing cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Deborah Henderson asserts that:

to study popular culture one must take seriously the fact that cultural forms and activities produced by a people are always already influenced by the struggle for cultural power [...] The study of popular culture is valuable because it represents the ongoing battle between power and resistance,

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<sup>23</sup> Somali Saren, “Sacred Games: The Interplay of Nationalism and Existentialism in a Multicultural Nation,” In *Crime Fiction and National Identities in the Global Age: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie H. Kim (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020) Kindle edition.

marking the ever-shifting boundaries between the dominant ideas of the time and those that struggle for cultural space.<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary British crime fiction very much forms a part of these ongoing conversations about cultural power and who holds it, and also registers the tensions and shifts as the culture evolves into the twenty-first century. My book investigates the representation of intersectionality and the impact of intersecting modes of oppression through the lens of crime fiction. This includes paying attention to the ways in which sexual diversity is portrayed within contemporary crime fiction. Crime fiction serves as an important textual site for the articulation and negotiation of ongoing cultural debates around intersectionality, sexuality, and gender. Commenting on sexuality and the politics of its representation in fiction, Rebecca Pohl argues: “cultural production is crucial to any discussion of political resistance, one form of which is sexual dissidence.”<sup>25</sup> In several of the novels examined, we see how sexuality is criminalised and marginalised by a repressive political regime, and how this repression can lead to increased violence and sexual crime, such as sexual violence against and the rape of men as well as women. The novels under examination here depict crimes such as bullying, drug-facilitated sexual assault, hate speech, and homophobia.

My book investigates the way in which the novels examine the politics of representing those themes through their creative and critical engagement with the genre and its conventions. I argue that, through the employment of an array of textual techniques, experimentation with literary form and genre, the crime fiction novels investigated here serve as case studies of novels interrogating the politics of representation through textual and creative innovation. The politics of representation is a vital issue in contemporary British literature and culture. As Caroline Edwards argues, genre fiction, such as crime fiction, can no longer be regarded as tribal or niche, nor can it be regarded as a lesser form because of its popular appeal: “the distinction between ‘literary fiction’ and ‘genre fiction’, which has always been rather difficult to sustain, has become particularly unstable in recent decades.”<sup>26</sup> Up until now, critical examinations of contemporary British crime fiction as a unique body of work have been scarce. Esme Miskimmin’s edited

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<sup>24</sup> Henderson, “Cultural Studies Approaches,” 2.

<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Pohl, “Sexual Dissidence and British Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980–2018*, ed. Peter Boxall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 226.

<sup>26</sup> Caroline Edwards, “Experiment and the Genre Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980–2018*, ed. Peter Boxall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Kindle Edition) 151.



volume from 2020, *100 British Crime Writers*, is a first step towards addressing this, however, providing only short entries on many authors rather than in-depth analyses of their works. Rather than giving an encyclopaedic overview of a highly diverse and complex body of literature, in this book I have chosen instead a detailed and extended analysis of a few selected works. My rationale for this approach is that, by critically examining this smaller range of texts, my book provides an in-depth extended textual and thematic analysis alongside contextual discussion. I consider this detailed textual treatment to be required to present compelling case studies of the ways in which contemporary British crime fiction explores and focuses on the politics of representation. Recent single-author scholarly monographs on crime fiction have tended towards discussions of multiple texts, often international, such as Peter Messent's *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (2012), John Scaggs' *Crime Fiction* (2005), or Heather Worthington's *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (2011). Alternatively, single-author scholarly monographs have tended to examine particular subgenres in British crime fiction, such as Megan Hoffman's *Gender and Representation in British 'Golden Age' Crime Fiction* (2016) and Samantha Walton's *Guilty but Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (2015). Albeit all incisive works of criticism, the two latter books both reflect the enduring preoccupation in crime fiction criticism with the Golden Age, whereas in this book I offer in-depth and expansive readings of specified contemporary British crime novels and the strategies they employ for investigating the politics of representation. Key to my investigation and the texts examined here are the central motifs characteristic of crime fiction, used here by the authors to explore and interrogate the politics of representation, namely crime, the detective character's search for truth, and the struggle to achieve justice for victims.<sup>27</sup> These plot elements drive the crime narratives I investigate in this book, and I argue that although these elements are key to the crime genre generally, they have a particular weight to them when forming part of a crime plot which explores the politics of representation. As we shall see, such a critical and contextual approach is necessarily focused on the topics and genre which form the chief preoccupation of this book.

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<sup>27</sup> See my examination of these key aspects of crime fiction, in Charlotte Beyer, "Crime Fiction and Migration," in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper (London: Routledge, 2020) 379-387.

## Contemporary British Crime Fiction – Histories, Contexts, Privileges

Contemporary British crime fiction challenges the long history of privilege and exclusion which has dominated the genre. The novels I examine in this book critically assess and reimagine constructions of Britishness and the role and function of crime fiction in not only representing, but also interrogating the meaning of British identities and histories. Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene comment on the changes and questions that influence British culture and literature during the 1980s-2000s period, showing that:

the final two decades of the twentieth century were marked by the speed of accelerated change in society's attitudes to class, subnational devolution, religion, sexuality and the Black and Asian Minority Ethnic experience, as well as how these complex and mutually imbricated discourses helped produce a notable sense of motion sickness in the literature of the period.<sup>28</sup>

This book argues that crime fiction is uniquely placed to register and problematise these issues, through the genre's focus on issues related to crime, justice, and the politics of representation. My placing of contemporary British crime fiction within a specific historical, social, and cultural context is necessarily a complex project, and one which has not been undertaken to any significant extent in prior scholarship. As I have noted elsewhere in this Introduction, there is a dearth of academic and critical scholarship offering detailed analyses of specifically contemporary British crime fiction and its diversity. Because of the contemporary focus of this book, there is not the scope to treat the history of British crime fiction and its evolution in great detail; nor is there the scope within this book to draw comparisons across the different historical eras between detectives, forms of crime, thematic content, and stylistic aspects. It is furthermore important to note that my investigation of the politics of representation does not involve aligning contemporary British crime fiction with actual party-political developments or changing governments or political ideologies. Rather, the politics of representation is to be understood as a symbolic, thematic, and textual area of investigation. Seeking to avoid generalisation, my discussions refer to "contemporary British crime fiction" as a common denominator, both for the group of novels under investigation here, and as a generic reference to a nationally bounded field of literature.

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<sup>28</sup> Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene, "Introduction" in *British Literature in Transition, 1980–2000*, eds. Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Kindle Edition).

The crime novels I investigate in this book all use the genre's conventions and its intense focus on identity to problematise Britishness and what it means to be British in a multicultural age of diversity and intersectionality. Few critics have examined contemporary British crime fiction in relation to decolonisation and intersectionality; however, some scholars have taken steps to open this important conversation, such as Caroline Edwards in her chapter "Experiment and the Genre Novel" in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction 1980-2018*. Edwards comments on how "crime fiction can harness generic form to address pressing questions of British identity."<sup>29</sup> My book expands on this observation, by identifying key themes within contemporary British crime fiction which address and explore the politics of representation, including the issue of Britishness. The novels examined in my book use the genre and its conventions to not only investigate but also interrogate Britishness and its changing definitions. A central part of this book's analysis is the impact of writers of colour on contemporary British crime fiction. There has long been a distorted association of Britishness with whiteness, a problem critiqued by sociologist Amy Clarke who explains that, "A connection between Britishness and whiteness is rooted in Britain's imperial history," resulting in "whiteness and class work[ing] together to co-produce a normative white middle-class British subject."<sup>30</sup> Millsom S. Henry-Waring also comments on the Association of whiteness with Empire and exploitation, explaining that, "The existence and identity of Whiteness is predicated upon defining, denigrating and exploiting Others, both domestically and internationally."<sup>31</sup> The association of British identity with whiteness serves to marginalise authors of colour, and this marginalisation also affects crime writers. Both British-Pakistani and black British crime writing is examined in this book; however, the two are distinctive forms as Felipe Espinoza Garrido and Julian Wacker point out. Garrido and Wacker note that, in recognising their differences, "it is necessary to treat each area as a separate and unique strand. Both draw upon a multitude of experiences and heritages and each comprises a heterogeneous field of written and

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<sup>29</sup> Edwards, "Experiment," 156.

<sup>30</sup> Amy Clarke, "Recognising British Bodies: The Significance of Race and Whiteness in 'Post-Racial' Britain." *Sociological Research Online* (2021): 13607804211032232.

<sup>31</sup> Millsom S. Henry-Waring, "'To be British you have to be White': Black British Women Challenging the Notions of Identity, Gender and the Nation-State." (2004) Proceedings of The Australasian Sociological Association (TASA), La Trobe University, Beechworth, accessed March 26, 2022.

<https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/items/8f65307a-75cd-515c-8522-dd9c0883cad8>

audiovisual material.”<sup>32</sup> Commenting on the definition of Britishness, Henry-Waring lists a number of easily recognisable cultural stereotypes which are effective as much through who they exclude as who they include. Henry-Waring further asserts that,

Britishness is reflected in a range of symbols like the Monarchy, the Union Jack, the Last Night of the Proms, the British Bulldog, the political right-wing groups such as the British National Party and the image of Britannia riding on the crest of the waves epitomised in the anthem ‘Rule Britannia’—all of which reflect largely White Anglo-Saxon Christian culture.

The crime novels examined in this book foreground these issues, as they negotiate the tensions of racism and resistance to multiculturalism, including portraying the violence and toxic masculinity resulting from these ideological discourses. Bernardine Evaristo has analysed racism and denial in British culture, emphasising the importance of its portrayal: “We are used to the spotlight on racism being beamed across the Atlantic while little attention is paid to the perniciousness of systemic racism in Britain, about which there is much denial.”<sup>33</sup> Eileen Pollard and Berthold Schoene argue that,

already specialised literary canons split and multiplied, as in the branching out of Anglophone literatures from the former colonies of the British Empire. Whereas postcolonial writing continued to be preoccupied with the struggle to define and establish newly emergent national identities, home-grown Black and Asian Minority Ethnic writing sought primarily to assert post-imperial Britain as a society embarked upon multicultural hybridisation.<sup>34</sup>

M.Y. Alam, one of the crime authors I examine in this study, also comments on these developments, traced through the crime fictions examined in this book. He asserts that from the 1980s onwards, “new voices in the British literary scene started to write from their ‘British born’ vantage points. For the first time, Black and South Asian writers were exploring ‘dual’ cultural

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<sup>32</sup> Felipe Espinoza Garrido and Julian Wacker, “Popular Nobrow and the Frontline: Spaces of Contestation,” in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*, eds. Susheila Nasta and Mark Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition), 599.

<sup>33</sup> Bernardine Evaristo, “These are Unprecedented Times for Black Female Writers.” *The Guardian*, October 19, 2019, accessed April 18, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/19/bernadine-evaristo-what-a-time-to-be-a-black-british-womxn-writer>

<sup>34</sup> Pollard and Berthold, “Introduction.”

heritage alongside newer, hybrid forms of Britishness.”<sup>35</sup> As the genre contributes to challenging the privilege of the white male literary canon, so too within crime fiction, writers of colour and portrayals of race/ethnicity as central concerns within crime fiction not only impact on the genre, but change the genre. As Janine Hauthal calls it, “redeem and suspend the traditional racial and national coding of [...] crime fiction by rehabilitating black mixed-race characters.”<sup>36</sup> Only relatively few crime writers of colour have received in-depth scholarly treatment, and there has yet to be a broader range of scholarship developed which considers race and ethnicity in British crime writing. As Hauthal shows, black British authors such as Mike Phillips have introduced detective characters of colour. My study extends this critical engagement by examining crime novels by authors of colour who portray characters of colour centrally within their narrative plots. In her account of black American crime fiction, Henderson states that,

One can read the enormous impact of the Civil Rights and the Women’s movements on American culture in the evolution of American crime fiction since the 1960s. As policies, practices, and attitudes about race and gender changed, so must the worlds conjured in crime fiction. Once written, fiction helps support and embed those changes in the attitudes of the readers. As readers change their thinking, so must the published fiction that appeals to them as audience members.<sup>37</sup>

Although referring to black American crime fiction, the shifts in reader perception and expectation which Henderson describes are clearly also a discernible factor in contemporary British crime fiction, as we shall see. However, in this book, I argue that this situation is changing and, perhaps belatedly but now even more compellingly, contemporary British writers of colour are engaging with genre fiction more generally and crime fiction specifically. Hauthal explains how, in seizing the crime fiction genre, postcolonial and diaspora authors of colour are challenging the white western patriarchal heteronormative assumptions of the canon, instead

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<sup>35</sup> M. Yunis Alam, “Ethnographic Encounters and Literary Fictions: Crossover and Synergy between the Social Sciences and Humanities. Statement in Support of Application for Doctor of Philosophy by Published Works (1998-2012).” (PhD diss., University of Bradford, 2014), 17.

<sup>36</sup> Janine Hauthal, “Rewriting ‘White’ Genres in Search of Afro-European Identities: Travel and Crime Fiction by Bernardine Evaristo and Mike Phillips.” *English Text Construction* 10, no. 1 (2017): 37.

<sup>37</sup> Henderson, “Cultural Studies Approaches,” 15

establishing new perspectives on the genre.<sup>38</sup> Garrido and Wacker observe that:

such genre fiction is often driven by an emancipatory thrust, writing back against portrayals of a white hegemonic Britain. Acknowledging the complexities of black and Asian British experiences, these texts continually seek out new modes that challenge well-established literary norms, navigating their unique positionalities on the margins of Britain's various textual canons.<sup>39</sup>

As we shall see, the results in crime fiction of such writing back to the canon through critical and creative engagement are both compelling and timely.

Contemporary British crime fiction reaches wide audiences and readerships, and therefore can impact significantly on constructions of Britishness, using the lens of crime fiction to do so. The novels dealing with history and traditional elements of society like the family, the class system, racial inequality, sexuality, the prison service, the police, and educational establishments, demonstrate how intricately connected to and tuned into the contemporary contexts crime fiction is. Conventional British identity and constructions of Britishness have been challenged by multicultural and cultural diversity. As an academic from a non-native English-speaking background, I consider myself part of multicultural and diverse Britain, and I very much welcome efforts to open the British identity to inclusivity. As Philip Tew suggests, “issues of a pluralized ethnicity have extended an ongoing social and cultural dispute as to the direction, focus, representation, rewards, voicing and so forth of Britishness in all its forms”,<sup>40</sup> shown by the vote on Brexit and the recent anti-woke “culture war.” Outlining recent shifts in definitions of British identity and the connection to social, cultural, and political developments in the period from the 1990s to now, Peter Boxall asserts that:

Thatcherism, despite its nostalgic investment in Englishness, in the idea of a ‘nation of shopkeepers,’ acted to weaken the concept of national sovereignty, as well as welfare-statism, in order to replace the model of parliamentary democracy endorsed by the nation-state with the model of global capital, overseen not by national governments, but by the international corporation.

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<sup>38</sup> Hauthal, “Rewriting ‘White’ Genres,” 43.

<sup>39</sup> Garrido and Wacker, “Popular Nobrow,” 600.

<sup>40</sup> Bridget Chalk, “The 1980s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction: 1980–2018*, ed. Peter Boxall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Kindle Edition) 23–24. Quoting P. Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 36.