

As Howard Haycraft sensibly points out in *Murder for Pleasure* (1942), his seminal history of detective fiction, stories that are literally “detective” fiction only came into being when professional detectives arrived on the scene in the nineteenth century. As the present volume illustrates, there are a number of ways in which this narrow definition is misleading and overly restrictive for any exploration of the deep history of crime writing. Indeed, this broad genre has played a role in the social construction of values, attracted the attention of readers over centuries, and had a strong, shaping impact on media such as television, film, and the internet in our own time. Why should we not point to the fifth-century BCE play *Oedipus Rex* as a distant precursor to William Hjortsberg’s 1978 novel *Falling Angel*? Such connections would seem to enrich both our understanding and enjoyment of literature and our insights into the cultural inheritance of the west, as well as the place of crime writing in a global context. It is hardly the case that the reputation of Sophocles would be besmirched by the association. There is a far longer tradition of writing about crime—including Daniel’s role as investigator and arbiter in the biblical court tale of Susannah and the Elders (second century BCE), Chinese court case stories from the sixteenth century, Shakespeare’s early seventeenth-century account of Macbeth’s bloody crimes and the murderer’s undoing—which we can unapologetically read, study, and appreciate, and in which an investigative character carries the societal values and unusual degree of insight that we expect in a detective. This detective figure may be a professional (that is, a private investigator, a police officer, or another representative of law enforcement, such as a medical examiner, attorney, or judge) or may be an amateur who undertakes an investigation out of curiosity or some more compelling motivation. “Crime writing,” then, is a broader category than detective fiction, but the focus of this volume is not on the careful delineation of which works fit into or are

to be cast out of particular categories. We have chosen, rather, to be inclusive, as a way to examine the richness of the field of crime writing and the many ways in which crime, its depiction, and its investigation cross narrative, national, and other boundaries. This inclusivity results in a diversity of perspectives—in terms of culture, as well as the significance of point of view (whose story is it, after all?) in telling the tale of a crime—that may offer support to our own closely held ideas of good and evil or make us reexamine our assumptions about community, individual rights, and even the structure and purpose of the law itself.

In addition to being inclusive, this collection is integrative. Rather than providing what have now become conventional chapters on gender, race, and class as reflected in crime writing, those subjects are integrated, as appropriate, in each of the essays or in ways that are silent. The chapters that open this collection are indicative of this approach. Ruth Anne Thompson's survey of the cultural and historical context in which detective fiction appeared and grew emphasizes the relationship between the rise of different kinds of crime writing and the class-based differences in literacy and taste in industrializing nineteenth-century England and America. In her essay about the reception of detective fiction at different points in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Elizabeth Foxwell gives due prominence to authors Anna Katharine Green and Margery Allingham and carefully notes the unmistakable sexism in the reviews that greeted their works, works now recognized as essential contributions to crime writing as we know it today. Foxwell points out that it is difficult to judge the early reactions to their works when so many reviewers filtered their responses to the authors through their surprise or dismay at the authors' sex. In this volume's "critical lens" chapter, which analyzes one work of distinction in the genre, we offer Kerstin Bergman's timely and innovative examination of Stieg Larsson's phenomenal *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the story of a powerful woman who crosses boundaries of both genders and genres. Norlisha F. Crawford's chapter offers a comparative analysis of three writers of detective fiction whose works provide mystery

and entertainment, as well as an opportunity to study the evolution of ideas about race and race relations in twentieth-century America.

Several chapters of this volume examine practices of crime writing in regions whose names—China, Japan, Latin America, Scandinavia—would seem to safely delineate the topics. What we see, however, beginning with Jeffrey C. Kinkley’s chapter on Chinese writing about crime is that nation-state boundaries are permeable to varying degrees, with results that are plainly displayed in the crime writing they help construct. Kinkley emphasizes both the continuity and discontinuity of Chinese crime writing. In one sense, the Confucian-inflected law of centuries past is alive and well in contemporary Chinese law enforcement’s insistence on criminal confession and on an idea of “social justice” synonymous with social stability, rather than attention to individual rights. On the other hand, Chinese writing from the early twentieth-century to the present day is an almost infallible barometer of the political currents that have swept across the nation, affecting self-expression and, especially, the expression of ideas associated with the West. In fact, how does one talk about “detective fiction” in a society that, for specific cultural reasons, has no term for it? Amanda Seaman, in her chapter on the fiction of Japan and East Asia, sees not only much cross-cultural borrowing, including assimilation of Western literary traditions, but also the growth of very distinctive cultures and practices in Taiwan and Korea. As Seaman notes, the latter have both had a complicated and fraught relationship with Japan, one in which China is also implicated. The popularity of Japanese detective novels in translation in China brings these two essays together in a way that reveals an ongoing cultural exchange between two very different countries. The crime writing and detective fiction coming from Latin America has seen an explosive growth since the 1980s and a similar set of distinctions arising from the histories—of colonialism, of dictatorship, of oppression, and of racial and ethnic inequality—specific to each Latin American nation. As Natalia Jacovkis reports in her chapter in this volume, “the conventions of the genre will serve its

practitioners to critically map contemporary society and/or to question official, hegemonic discourses about the national past,” including the question of whether “the whole system is corrupt and the state is the biggest criminal of all.” In Sara Kärholm’s chapter on Scandinavian crime writing, the problem is first one of defining what is meant by “Scandinavian.” The reasons for that are, in themselves, a brief education in history, culture, and cultural influences. It is, she says, hard to discuss a “specifically Scandinavian tradition” when each of the nations involved has its own national identity and culture. In fact, two of the nations—Iceland and Finland—are not, strictly speaking, “Scandinavian,” but the five northern European countries, including Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, have in common a somewhat similar development as social welfare states in the post–World War II period. And in a development that could hardly be more different from the crime writing of China, Scandinavian writing, like that of Latin America, is usually informed by social critique. In Scandinavia, it is the failed welfare state, society itself, from which criminal behavior springs, while in Latin America, the writing shows that the rule of law is swept away by political and social failure, whether the society is a dictatorship or a neoliberal democracy.

Joseph Paul Moser’s chapter on connections between hard-boiled literature and film noir brings an element of social critique to exploration of detective fiction and noir fiction in the period of the 1930s to 1950s and their cross-genre concern with pre- and post–World War II American masculinity. The familiarity of the modern reader and viewer with the traditions of writing and film covered by the terms “hard-boiled” and “noir” is often made up of a confusion or conflation of writing and visual images. This chapter traces the thematic concerns and tensions that bind literature and film together during this period so crucial to our contemporary understanding of the depiction of crime and criminality in the two media. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney’s chapter on “metaphysical” detection demonstrates that in the same period, detective fiction—both golden age and hard-boiled—made the

conventions and artfulness of detection so familiar and unmistakable that it opened up the genre to a self-consciousness in which crime writers could begin to give readers metanarratives on crime, detection, and the impossibility of finding and knowing the truth or sorting through multiple truths. Detective fiction is about knowing and thus ripe for subversion in the postmodern era that acknowledges the impossibility of knowing. Different ways of knowing, or acknowledging that knowing is not possible in the conventional Enlightenment sense, are crucial in the practice of detection in the many novels that feature Native American detectives. As we see in Rhonda Harris Taylor's chapter on Native American detective fiction, definitions and boundaries come into play in this area as well. Any consideration of this subgenre of detective fiction must begin by defining who is Native American and by addressing the question of non-Native Americans who write about Native Americans from outside their lived experience.

Given the focus of this collection on detective fiction and crime writing as a global, if not globalized, practice, Malcah Effron's concluding chapter, on the contemporary Anglophone publishing industry and the publication of translated texts, is crucial to considering the future of crime writing and its audience. Effron succeeds in turning the question away from the exhausted issue of American ethnocentrism, to which the success of several translated authors including Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson has brought a pause, if not a close, to look in detail at the more interesting question of what kinds of books do succeed in translation and what can be learned from their success. The books that do succeed on the scale of Larsson's Millennium trilogy are likely both to offer the comfort of generic familiarity that attracts readers of crime fiction and to serve as the impetus to greater creativity, particularly in the area of social critique, by Anglophone, and especially American, authors. In this regard, it is significant that four full years after *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* burst on the US market, a volume in Larsson's trilogy remained in the top twenty-five titles on the *New York Times*' Paperback Trade Fiction list and a crime book by

relative newcomer Jussi Adler-Olsen, *The Keeper of Lost Causes*, appeared in the twentieth position on that same list. *The Keeper of Lost Causes* was originally published in Danish as *Kvinden i buret* and has been met with great acclaim on the US market. This *Critical Insights* volume looks both backward in time and forward to provide a rich context for understanding texts of the past and the works that will move this consistently appealing genre into the future.

## The Metaphysical Detective Story

---

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney

The first detective story, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), is "metaphysical"—that is, concerned with abstract and philosophical thought—because it focuses not only on a brutal crime but also on the mental processes entailed in solving it. Investigating this particular crime, moreover, leads to provocative questions about the nature of language. The story also prompts readers to pay attention to their own thinking as they read, especially because Poe's sleuth partly unravels the mystery by studying newspaper articles and reference volumes. All detective stories are "metaphysical," in fact, to the extent that they emphasize (and make readers aware of) the acts of thinking, reading, and analyzing.

A true metaphysical detective story, however, is less concerned with crimes, or even solutions, than with the very idea that mysteries can be solved. Typically, the detective discovers in the end that his explanation for the crime was incomplete, random, misguided, or fatally flawed—an outcome that led one critic, Stefano Tani, to choose *The Doomed Detective* as his title for a book on such fiction. The editors of another volume, *Detecting Texts*, define the metaphysical detective story as "a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader—with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (Merivale and Sweeney 2).

To encourage readers to consider such questions, metaphysical detective stories are often self-reflexive—that is, they refer to writing or reading the text within the text itself. Inevitably, this practice makes readers uncomfortably aware of their struggles to decipher the mystery and comprehend the story. In some metaphysical detective stories, the real detective or criminal or victim turns out to be the reader, in the literary equivalent of those lithographs by artist M. C. Escher in

which one level of reality turns into another. This is what happens, for example, in Julio Cortázar's short story "Continuidad de los parques" (1963; "Continuity of Parks," 1965), which describes a man in a green velvet armchair, reading the final chapters of a detective novel. In that novel, a criminal steals through the grounds of a country estate, into the house, up the stairs, and into a study—where his victim sits in a green velvet armchair, reading a novel.

Because the metaphysical detective story emphasizes reading texts—especially detective stories, as in "Continuity of Parks"—in this fashion, it seems appropriate to trace its development according to the relationships among writers and books from the beginning of detective fiction itself.

### **The Plot Thickens: Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics**

Indeed, many of these elements (especially the detective's failure and the story's self-reflexivity) appear in what might be considered the first metaphysical detective story, "The Man of the Crowd" (1840). Not only did Poe write this tale, but, more surprisingly, he did so before composing "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." The story opens by comparing crime solving to reading; according to Poe, however, the human heart is a text that "does not permit itself to be read. . . . And thus the essence of all crime is undivulged" (*Poetry* 388). The scene that follows this statement anticipates the beginnings of many later detective stories. The investigating protagonist—who also narrates the tale—sits in a coffee shop while idly deducing the occupation, status, and character of passersby based on their appearance, just as Sherlock Holmes might do. When he glimpses a sinister old man who defies such categorization, the narrator begins to follow him, but after a day and a half, he has discovered nothing except that the old man seems desperate to disappear into the crowd. Eventually, the narrator abandons his pursuit: Although the old man may indeed be "the type and genius of deep crime. . . . It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds" (396). The story ends by repeating once

more that the human heart is a book that cannot be read. “The Man of the Crowd” might be considered the first metaphysical detective story, then, because it not only compares crime solving to reading, but it also describes its investigator as a failed reader. In a sense, all metaphysical detective stories are texts that do not allow themselves to be read because they advocate and illustrate an interpretive methodology that leads nowhere.

When Poe published “The Man of the Crowd” in the early nineteenth century, other American writers, especially Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, were also composing allegorical crime stories that questioned the nature of evil and the limits of knowledge. In Hawthorne’s fiction, in particular, characters try unsuccessfully to penetrate the mysteries of the human heart. Hawthorne even compares such detection to reading a text whose meanings cannot be fully understood; consider, for example, Chillingworth’s efforts to detect Dimmesdale’s secret sin in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). And in England, not long afterwards, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1866), another crime narrative with disturbing implications about humanity’s hidden wickedness.

By that point, of course, Poe himself had already produced several remarkable tales, including not only “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842–43), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844), all featuring C. Auguste Dupin, but also “The Gold-Bug” (1843). These tales established the detective genre at the same time that they emphasized its self-reflexive aspects, as when Dupin finds a missing text in “The Purloined Letter” or Legrand deciphers invisible, encoded, enigmatic directions to buried treasure in “The Gold-Bug.” By the late nineteenth century, detective fiction had become an influential form, especially as adapted by Arthur Conan Doyle in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and other works about Sherlock Holmes. Although Doyle stresses dramatic action, vivid settings, memorable characters, and crisp storytelling rather than metaphysics, some of his tales raise interesting philosophical questions, as in “The

Man with the Twisted Lip” (1891), and all of them focus on Holmes’s mental processes.

### **Modernist Formulas and Fabulations: 1890s to 1930s**

As detective fiction grew more and more popular, largely due to the success of the Holmes stories, it also became increasingly repetitive. Readers delighted in tales featuring the same detective, even as writers tried to find new gimmicks by devising ever more bizarre ways to murder someone or ever more distinctive traits for an investigating protagonist. Such repetitiveness betrayed the genre’s artifice and lay the groundwork for later metaphysical detective stories that parodied its formulaic structure. A fundamental aspect of that formula, of course, was the sleuth’s ability to solve any mystery, no matter how farfetched. It seems inevitable that authors would eventually conceive of a hero who, for one reason or another, fails to solve the crime. By the early twentieth century, indeed, two writers had done just that in narratives mocking the genre’s assumptions about the infallibility of rational logic.

The first was G. K. Chesterton, who came up with a new variation on the amateur detective in Father Brown, a Roman Catholic priest. In “The Blue Cross” (1911) and some fifty additional stories, collected in *The Innocence of Father Brown* and other volumes, Chesterton’s hero uses his ability to understand the criminal mind—thanks to his experience in the confessional—to solve various bizarre crimes. As Jorge Luis Borges later pointed out in “Modes of G. K. Chesterton,” however, the crime in a Father Brown story always has two aspects: an earthly riddle, which the detective ingeniously solves, and a divine mystery, which by its nature defies human understanding. The plot thus invites readers to contemplate more profound mysteries that cannot be explained away. Indeed, the term “metaphysical detective story” was first coined by Howard Haycraft, in 1941 to describe this aspect of Chesterton’s tales.

Two years after the arrival of Father Brown, E. C. Bentley published his novel *Trent’s Last Case* (1913), which he dedicated to

## Additional Works on Crime and Detective Fiction \_\_\_\_\_

---

### Long Fiction

- Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler, 1940  
*In a Lonely Place* by Dorothy B. Hughes, 1947  
*The Killer Inside Me* by Jim Thompson, 1952  
*Les gommes* by Alain Robbe-Grillet, 1953 (*The Erasers*, 1964)  
*The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith, 1955  
*A Rage in Harlem* by Chester Himes, 1957  
*Den skrattande polisen* by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, 1968 (*The Laughing Policeman*, 1970)  
*The Continental Op* by Dashiell Hammett, 1974  
*Skinwalkers* by Tony Hillerman, 1986  
*Black Dahlia* by James Ellroy, 1987  
*LA Confidential* by James Ellroy, 1990  
*Faceless Killers* by Henning Mankell, 1991  
*Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* by Peter Høeg, 1992 (*Smilla's Sense of Snow*, 1993)  
*A Little Yellow Dog* by Walter Mosley, 1996  
*Death of a Red Heroine* by Qiu Xiaolong, 2000  
*Motherless Brooklyn* by Jonathan Lethem, 2000  
*Yogisha X no Kenshin* by Keigo Higashino, 2005 (*The Devotion of Suspect X*, 2011)  
*Abril rojo* by Santiago Roncagliolo, 2006 (*Red April*, 2009)  
*Calling Out for You* by Karin Fossum, 2007  
*The Eye of Jade: A Mei Wang Mystery* by Diane Wei Liang, 2008  
*21 Immortals* by Rozlan Mohd Noor, 2010

---

### Nonfiction

- Murder in Little Egypt* by Darcy O'Brian, 1989  
*Midnight in Peking: How the Murder of a Young Englishwoman Haunted the Last Days of Old China* by Paul French, 2012  
*A Wilderness of Error: The Trials of Jeffrey Macdonald* by Errol Morris, 2012

---

### Short Fiction

- The Complete Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle, 1960  
*New Orleans Noir* edited by Julie Smith, 2007  
*LA Noire: The Collected Stories* edited by Jonathan Santlofer, 2011

## About the Editor

---

**Rebecca Martin** comes to her interest in detective fiction through her early infatuation with Nancy Drew and a more mature engagement with the eighteenth-century English gothic novel. She completed degrees in English at the University of Oklahoma (BA), University of Iowa (MA), and City University of New York Graduate Center (PhD), where she wrote a dissertation on the early gothic novel, employing insights from modern film theory to examine the interaction of spectacle, repetition, closure, and the reading experience. In her academic career, she has published articles on Marcia Muller (creator of Sharon McCone, one of the earliest female private eyes) and mystery novelist Victoria Holt, as well as numerous essays on the gothic novel and film theory. She is a professor of English at Pace University in New York, where she teaches literature of crime and criminality, detective fiction, and film studies, including film history and American melodrama. She is working on a project on the detective novels and films of American director Oscar Micheaux and is cultivating an interest in contemporary Chinese crime writing. She is very happy to have a career in which she reads books and watches movies.