

Capital Crimes: Reading and Writing Crime and Cities

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Postgraduate posters and presentations

The Country and The (Capital) City:

Women's Crime Fiction of the Interwar Years and Beyond

Emma Sterry (Strathclyde)

The popularity of both the American hard-boiled novel and the British country-house murder has led to the construction of a transatlantic divide in interwar crime fiction, that juxtaposed the gritty urbanity of American crime fiction against the more domestic and rural British detective novel. At a time when Modernism was permeating urban culture on both sides of the Atlantic, however, the influence of metropolitan developments can be traced even in the 'cosy' British crime fiction of the Golden Age. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which British crime fiction written by women engages with modern developments in the metropolis, examining references to capital cities in fictions such as Dorothy L Sayers' *Unnatural Death* (1922) and Josephine Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948). I will look in particular at how these texts employ and subvert the literary traditions of the 'country house' murder to illustrate how rural crimes were symptomatic of both the anxiety over the decline of the Edwardian upper classes and the associations of the metropolitan with sexual transgression. This discussion will illuminate the way in which interwar crime fiction can be repositioned within the discourse of cultural hierarchies, and further suggests that a more explicit recuperation of the genre into middlebrow culture can enhance our understanding of female interwar writing.

Detection and the City.

Knowing and unknowing in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* and *CSI: New York*.

Samantha Walton (Edinburgh)

In *The New York Trilogy*, Paul Auster defines the private eye as signifying both 'I' -- "the tiny life bud buried in the body of the breathing self" -- and 'eye' -- "the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him." In this paper, I explore why in these contemporary narratives the chaos of the city, which figures such as Holmes and Dupin were able to process and unify, either overcomes would-be detectives, or must be delegated to compositing technologies,

Auster's text abounds with madmen, inscrutable clues and non-existent crimes. His protagonists perform the role of the detective as a reassuring fiction which cannot counteract the disarming ulterity of the metropolis. In *CSI: New York*, the traditional work of the detective is done without the interference of chance or misinterpretation, through technologies which

enable the indubitable mapping of urban space. While the complexity of the city means that it is no longer possible to rely on individual reasoning, technology transforms the classic fantasy of a comprehensive view into the phantasm of a reality

The New York Trilogy and CSI: New York, seen in juxtaposition, demonstrate a departure from the classic view of the detective as the 'subject supposed to know', which, I will argue, exemplifies contemporary urban detective fiction's loss of confidence in any one 'eye' to know the city.

“The very last person you’d dream of suspecting”¹Criminal detectives in 1890s magazine fiction.

Clare Clarke (Queens University, Belfast)

Focusing on Arthur Morrison’s critically neglected *Dorrington Deed-Box* (1897), a series which was originally published in *The Windsor Magazine*, this paper looks at the emergence of criminal detectives in 1890s magazine fiction arguing that such stories undermine claims for the Victorian crime genre’s inherent conservatism. Whilst in many ways attempting to replicate the success of the Holmesian model these stories also rather daringly destabilize the notion of the detective as moral exemplar. I will argue that in these stories Dorrington employs the respectable characteristics of the detective to cover his criminality. The detective in these stories, therefore, rather than reading, decoding and solving the social and moral chaos of late Victorian London, as had Holmes, is in fact the source of its chaotic state. As such these stories begin to destabilize accounts of the trajectory of the crime genre, like Mandel’s (*Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*, 1984), which argue that, in the C19th, the bandit hero was completely replaced by the more conservative, lawful and reassuring detective hero.

This paper will also argue that the characterization of Dorrington draws upon a particular set of anxieties about the crime in the city common to late Victorian Londoners. I will argue that the figure who is both criminal and detective speaks strongly to a common belief that, in the city, appearances could be deceptive and that behind respectable facades could lurk potential criminality. By attributing this duplicity to the figure of the detective, rather than simply to the criminal, I will suggest that Morrison is forcibly subverting the convention of detective as moral centre of a broken universe. The result is an ethically and politically complex vision of late Victorian London which is much more unsettling to the reader than the messy but ultimately reassuring Holmesian city.

¹Grant Allen, *The Great Ruby Robbery* (1892), 24.

Centre Vs Periphery: The (dis)placement of British women writers' criminographic narratives (1850-1865).

Kate Watson, Cardiff University

This paper will seek to read fictional crime and the city in terms of gendered literary positions in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. The city, representative of a literal powerful centre, can be mapped onto a masculine hegemony over the 'territory' of crime fiction in this period. The British Victorian male exponents of the crime genre such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, William Russell, and later Arthur Conan Doyle and his London-based detective Sherlock Holmes, were valorised in contemporary reviews and have received much critical attention in the modern day. By contrast, Victorian women writers who turned to crime found their narratives (dis)placed, relocated from city to country, present to past, or even to other continents. Like the miscreants their writing represents, these 'criminal' accounts were transported and set elsewhere from and as 'other' to the commanding, masculine city. Nonetheless, as this paper will demonstrate, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Mrs Henry (Ellen) Wood made significant contributions to the burgeoning crime genre; writing from the periphery they both speak back to their masculine counterparts at the centre and speak outwards to other locations, initiating conversations with other nations and other women writers of crime.

Alternative visions of the city: Paris seen through the utopian lens of Fred Vargas

Sue Neale, Warwick University

Fred Vargas is an archaeozoologist and historian who, since 1986, has achieved worldwide popular and critical acclaim for her crime narratives that resist generic or literary categorisation. She calls her 13 novels to date 'rompols', a playful shortening of 'roman policier' that avoids the more specific term 'polar'. My doctoral thesis considers her whole oeuvre and the varied 'ways of seeing' (Berger) that are discernible in her fictions. After positioning Vargas in terms in relation to important generic writers (Poe, Gaboriau and Malet), I investigate the different 'optiques' (Goulet) through which she views contemporary French society. From prehistoric times storytelling has functioned for man as a way to explore fears about the unknown (monsters) and deal with them, achieving catharsis, a role which Vargas considers crime fiction now fulfils. The combination of scientific rigour and imaginative extrapolation necessary for the archaeologist to envisage past human/animal interactions permeates Vargas's fictions; Insignificant traces can offer clues to whole lives. The importance of her gender and her political engagement subtly colour her portrayals of women and unusual characters, often defined as marginal, but on examination are far from that. Finally I examine the significance to her writing of the city, specifically Paris, but not as we know it. This alternative timeless vision of Paris is what I will explore here today.

Maigret's Paris

Bill Alder

Georges Simenon (1903-1989) was one of the most successful twentieth-century authors of crime fiction, whose 75 Maigret novels and 28 Maigret short stories published between 1931 and 1972 found international success. His Maigret stories are regarded by many as having established a new direction in crime fiction, emphasising social portraiture rather than focussing on a 'puzzle' to be solved or on 'action'.

Speaking about Paris and Maigret, the Belgian writer Michel Carly states that 'Rarely have a city and a literary character been joined to this extent. The one identifies the other.' In this presentation I will examine the nature of the identification of Paris and Maigret in the social imagination in comparison with the representations of Paris in the Maigret stories and the role of the city in the narratives. I will consider the evolution of Paris over the forty one year period of the publication of the Maigret series in terms of social class and social change before evaluating how the class positions of Maigret and his creator influence the portrayal of the city. I will conclude by returning to the relationship between social reality and the social imagination in the production and perception of Maigret's Parisian enquiries.
