

LITERATURES AS WORLD LITERATURE

Crime Fiction as World Literature

Edited by
Louise Nilsson
David Damrosch
Theo D'haen



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Series Editor: Thomas O. Beebee

While crime fiction is one of the most widespread of all literary genres, this is the first book to treat it in its full global and plurilingual dimensions, taking the genre seriously as a participant in the international sphere of world literature. In a wide-ranging panorama, twenty critics discuss crime fiction from Bulgaria, China, Israel, Mexico, Scandinavia, Kenya, Catalonia, and Tibet, among other locales. By bringing crime fiction into the realm of world literature, *Crime Fiction as World Literature* gives new insights not only into the genre itself but also into the transnational flow of literature in the globalized mediascape of contemporary popular culture.

“Here we have a study of crime fiction that, for once, is not satisfied with rounding up the usual suspects, but is fully aware that, like crime itself, crime fiction is a worldwide phenomenon. What is more, true to its ‘world literature’ perspective, this collection of essays has a close and rewarding look at the market mechanisms and the vicissitudes of translation without which crime novels (and novels in general) would be doomed to stay within their national orbits.”

HANS BERTENS, *Distinguished Professor of the Humanities, Utrecht University, the Netherlands, and former President of the International Comparative Literature Association*

“Crime fiction is read around the world in many different languages, and now we have an excellent and comprehensive collection of critical essays on world crime literature for those with a taste for murder and mayhem.”

CLIVE BLOOM, *Emeritus Professor of English and American Studies, Middlesex University, UK*

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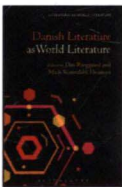
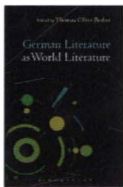
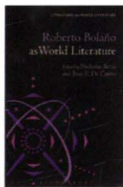
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Crime Fiction as World Literature

Literatures as World Literature

Literatures as World Literature takes a novel approach to world literature by analyzing specific constellations—according to language, nation, form, or theme—of literary texts and authors in their world-literary dimensions. World literature has been mapped and theorized in the abstract, but the majority of critical work, the filling in of what has been traced, lies ahead of us. *Literatures as World Literature* begins the task of filling in the devilish details by allowing scholars to move outward from their own area of specialization. The hope is to foster scholarly writing that approaches more closely the polyphonic, multiperspectival nature of the world literature we wish to explore.

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Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Introduction: Crime Fiction as World Literature <i>Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen</i>	1
Part 1 Global and Local	
1 The Knife in the Lemon: Nordic Noir and the Glocalization of Crime Fiction <i>Andreas Hedberg</i>	13
2 After Such Knowledge: The Politics of Detection in the Narconovelas of Elmer Mendoza <i>Michael Wood</i>	23
3 Red Herrings and Read Alerts: Crime and its Excesses in <i>Almost Blue</i> and <i>Nairobi Heat</i> <i>Tilottama Tharoor</i>	33
4 The Detective is Suspended: Nordic Noir and the Welfare State <i>Bruce Robbins</i>	47
5 Four Generations, One Crime <i>Michaela Bronstein</i>	59
Part 2 Market Mechanisms	
6 With a Global Market in Mind: Agents, Authors, and the Dissemination of Contemporary Swedish Crime Fiction <i>Karl Berglund</i>	77
7 So You Think You Can Write ... Handbooks for Mystery Fiction <i>Anneleen Masschelein and Dirk de Geest</i>	91
8 Covering Crime Fiction: Merging the Local into Cosmopolitan Mediascapes <i>Louise Nilsson</i>	109
9 Surrealist Noir: Aragon's <i>Le Cahier noir</i> and Pamuk's <i>The Black Book</i> <i>Delia Ungureanu</i>	131

Part 3 Translating Crime

- 10 Detective Fiction in Translation: Shifting Patterns of Reception *Susan Bassnett* 143
- 11 Making it Ours: Translation and the Circulation of Crime Fiction in Catalan *Stewart King* 157
- 12 “In Agatha Christie’s Footsteps”: *The Cursed Goblet* and Contemporary Bulgarian Crime Fiction *Mihaela P. Harper* 171
- 13 A Missing Literature: Dror Mishani and the Case of Israeli Crime Fiction *Maayan Eitan* 187
- 14 World Detective Form and Thai Crime Fiction *Suradech Chotiudompant* 197

Part 4 Holmes Away from Home

- 15 Holmes Away from Home: The Great Detective in the Transnational Literary Network *Michael B. Harris-Peyton* 215
- 16 Sherlock’s Queen Bee *Theo D’haen* 233
- 17 Sherlock Holmes Came to China: Detective Fiction, Cultural Meditations, and Chinese Modernity *Wei Yan* 245
- 18 A Sinister Chuckle: Sherlock in Tibet *David Damrosch* 257
- 19 Detecting Conspiracy: Boris Akunin’s Dandiacal Detective, or a Century in Queer Profiles from London to Moscow *Elizabeth Richmond-Garza* 271

Notes on Contributors 291

Index 297

List of Illustrations

5.1	“Four generations” comparison chart	62
8.1	Covers for Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, <i>The Laughing Policeman</i> , and for Arne Dahl, <i>Misterioso</i>	115
8.2	Cover Arne Dahl, <i>Misterioso</i>	117
8.3	Covers for Håkan Nesser, <i>Am Abend des Mordes</i> , and for Arne Dahl, <i>Ungeschoren</i>	122
8.4	Cover for Kristina Ohlsson, <i>Engelbewaarders</i>	126
18.1	Cover for Jamyang Norbu, <i>The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes</i>	269

Introduction: Crime Fiction as World Literature

Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property . . . and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

—Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (1848)

Well, we haven't had a good, juicy series of sex murders since Christie. And they're so good for the tourist trade. Foreigners somehow expect the squares of London to be fog-wreathed, full of hansom cabs and littered with ripped whores, don't you think?

—Alfred Hitchcock, *Frenzy* (1972)

In Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Frenzy* a serial killer hunts down women in London and strangles them. The quote above is from a scene showing two men in a bar talking about the killer. They dwell upon the desire behind the need to kill, reflecting on the fascination people feel for serial killers. As Marx and Engels would have expected, this fascination has come to have a worldwide literary market with substantial economic consequences, not only for bestselling writers such as Agatha Christie but even for the tourist trade. There's something that captures human attention, and that sells, when it comes to gruesome murders, and crime fiction has a long history of entertaining readers as well as moviegoers. Today the genre is a multimillion-dollar industry and its stories circulate in a multimedia landscape, through books and television and movie adaptations that spread the world over. In cities all over the world "crime tourists" follow the trails of their favorite fictional characters, while on crime-novel-ridden

campuses scholars try to figure things out when it comes to the phenomenon of crime fiction and its popularity.

This collection treats crime fiction as a significant participant in the international sphere of world literature. Our point of departure is the question of world literature in relation to society, for which crime fiction offers a particularly rich area of inquiry. Often discussed largely in terms of elite productions, world literature has been studied too little in terms of more popular writings, even though bestselling genre fiction fully illustrates what Marx and Engels enticingly describe as world literature's "intercourse in every direction." By bringing crime fiction into the sphere of world literature, this collection aims to open up further knowledge about the transnational flow of literature in the globalized mediascape of contemporary popular culture, and to offer new insights into the crime fiction genre itself, as our contributors follow the creative transformations of transnational plots and motifs in very different local settings around the world.

Crime fiction is certainly one of the most widespread of all literary genres. It is both part of our literary heritage and intimately intertwined with the rise of today's consumer society. Crime novels are read worldwide, and crime writers around the world inspire each other. The genre's history and development are connected to modernization and industrialization, and exemplify today's globalization and the changes in the book market. The switch from national publishing houses to international multimedia conglomerates, digitalization and the rise of the e-book, and the rapid circulation of popular authors in translation are all topics to be discussed in this collection.

Crime fiction circulates in ways that go quite beyond common understandings of the diffusion of the novel from European centers to non-Western peripheries, as traced by Franco Moretti, or the competition for recognition in Paris or New York emphasized by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*. It is notable that the first modern detective stories were written not in Europe or the United States but in China, where several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers elaborated old tales of a Tang Dynasty magistrate named Di Renjie, famous in the eighth century for his acumen in solving crimes and punishing the criminals. In 1949 the Dutch diplomat, linguist, and writer Robert van Gulik published *The Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* in Tokyo, where he was then stationed. The book is a translation of the eighteenth-century Chinese detective novel *Dee Goong An*. Van Gulik went on to write a further series of detective novels based on the figure of Di Renjie, published originally in Chinese and Japanese, later in English in which Van Gulik had originally composed them.

Today, American crime writers are as likely to be inspired by Swedish authors as the reverse, while writers in Bangkok closely follow the work of their Japanese and Italian peers. In his “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000), Franco Moretti emphasized the importance of not approaching world literature as an object but as a problem that has to be analyzed from new angles and with new methods. A significant factor here is the globalization of the novel. Through worldwide literary systems of distribution, both digitally and in print, widely read works of national literature become a shared world literature. Rather than reflecting a single, “flat” economic landscape, international publication and distribution involve complex, overlapping, disjunctive networks and sub-networks. In this context, crime fiction becomes a highly relevant area for investigation. To date, however, studies of crime fiction have largely been confined to individual national or at most regional traditions, generally within the realm of studies of popular fiction. Typical of such studies are Barbara Pezzotti’s *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction* (2012), or the numerous studies dealing primarily with British and/or American crime fiction, including *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003), Andrew Pepper’s *The Contemporary American Crime Novel: Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Class* (2000), Hans Bertens and Theo D’haen’s *Contemporary American Crime Fiction* (2001), Peter Messent’s *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (2013), and most recently Richard Bradford’s *Crime Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (2015) or Peter Swirski’s *American Crime Fiction: A Cultural History of Nobrow Literature as Art* (2016).¹

Various collections such as *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (1999) have included Continental as well as Anglo-American writers, and studies have begun to appear that take a directly transnational approach, such as Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn’s collection *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction* (2009) and Vivien Miller and Helen Oakley’s *Cross-Cultural Connections in Crime Fictions* (2012), which discusses relations between Swedish and English-language novels and films. Yet with the partial exception of Anderson, Miranda, and Pezzotti’s primarily European collection *The Foreign in International Crime Fiction* (2012), no study of truly global scope has yet been attempted.

Scholars of world literature have neglected crime fiction, focusing instead on elite writers in preference to mass-market or “airport” novels. Yet while crime fiction is among the most popular of genres, it has a long history of interrelation with more elite productions as well. Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* provides an early

example of a work centered on the investigation of a crime, in a drama already showing a sophisticated play on expectations as the royal detective discovers that he himself is the object of his search. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) gives a signal case of the use of popular fictional form by a major world writer, a pattern that can be seen today in novels such as Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*, whose vivid opening chapter is narrated by a recently murdered Ottoman miniaturist, eager to enlist the reader's aid in determining his killer's identity.

Conversely, fine art and literary classics often play a role in crime fiction, serving not only as plot devices but also as a means by which cultural knowledge is spread. In one way, if you read about Henning Mankell's detective Kurt Wallander you learn about opera, and Michael Connelly's detective Harry Bosch (named after Hieronymus Bosch) listens to jazz artists such as John Coltrane and Art Pepper. If you read Thomas Harris you find a serial killer obsessed with William Blake, and if you watch David Fincher's movie *Seven* you learn about Milton and about Dante—whose *Commedia* was memorably translated for Penguin by the prominent detective story writer Dorothy Sayers. T. S. Eliot was a great fan of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

Traditionally the focus of studies in comparative and world literature studies has been on a Western classical canon, but over the past fifteen years the field of world literature has rapidly expanded to include much more of the world's literatures. By exploring the genre of crime fiction, we want to show the value of not dividing literature into watertight categories of high and low art and culture. The most ambitious crime novels occupy a space in between both categories or even participate in both, varying according to time, place, and readership. Even the most purely popular crime fiction shares important features with elite works of world literature, especially the characteristic of combining universal themes with local settings. At once highly stylized and intensely localized, crime fiction is a preeminently "glocal" mode of literary creation and circulation.

The globalized and hybridized genre of crime fiction, dealing with universal questions about life and death, crime and punishment, conflicting values and moral systems, is known for portraying the darker sides of society and formulating a social critique upon its own native context. At the same time, it is a genre that entertains readers worldwide, and its authors write within a tradition, continuously reshaping the genre's way of telling stories about crime. Within the genre, cities like Bangkok, Beijing, Cairo, London, Los Angeles, Milan, or

Stockholm become settings for exciting plots while at the same time highlighting vernacular and national discourses that, with the novels' translation, spread to a cosmopolitan audience for whom the works become ambassadors for their country of origin.

This collection works with an open definition of crime fiction, but with a primary focus on detective and police novels that are produced for the mass market and that have spread globally. An open definition of the genre is necessary, but we have chosen to let the presence of the detective be the starting point for our definition of crime fiction, given the character's central function in the genre. The detective can be found within institutional settings (the police/forensic science) or represent an individual (the private eye). The crime itself becomes a crime in relation to its society's legal apparatus and juridical system, which defines what to punish or what not to punish in the society in question. Through the detective's investigations, power structures, institutions, police procedures, and civil codes are portrayed, as are human behavior and psychology. As a genre, crime fiction is complex and comprises a spectrum of stories that can be grouped in numerous subgenres or categories, such as hard-boiled, suspense or noir fiction, the spy novel, lesbian crime fiction, the clue puzzle or whodunit, and historical crime fiction; these categories often merge and create subgenres.

A significant aspect our collection explores is the literary system that surrounds the books and makes them accessible to the reader—a sociological approach that is becoming increasingly important in world literature scholarship today. The spread of literature in a transnational context is fueled by commercial interests and by the international book markets. These activities in turn intersect with the globalized media market, and marketing is a crucial part of the process of distributing a book and selling it in the global market. Today world literature comes into play through international multimedia conglomerates and publishing houses, driven by commercial interests. The eminently worldly genre of crime fiction offers a particularly interesting lens through which to view these developments today.

This collection is divided into four parts. The first part, "Global and Local," features essays on the global spread of crime fiction and how these stories become ambassadors for a specific nation and culture, with special emphasis on political issues. The essays in this section examine how the novels give local expression to such global phenomena as human trafficking, human rights, upheavals in gender, class, or political relations, and globalization itself. Andreas Hedberg

argues that, when adapted to a new cultural milieu, the frame of the crime story can be filled with almost any narrative material, incorporating the latest fashion trends and current affairs. In this respect, crime fiction is world literature par excellence. Michael Wood shows how the Mexican crime novelist Elmer Mendoza portrays a world saturated by crime, from which the old theological certainties of classic detective fiction have vanished: crimes can be solved, as the genre requires, but then our detective has to solve the solution. None of his hard-boiled heroes are as hard-boiled as they think they are, and their cryptic, ironic tone that seeks to escape from emotion, often hides (or fails to hide) a distress that is thoroughly political.

Turning to readings across borders, Tilottama Tharoor discusses how two recent novels—Carlo Lucarelli's *Almost Blue* and Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ's *Nairobi Heat*—follow the narrative formula of prevalent crime genres: one is about serial killings set in Bologna; the other a trans-Atlantic murder mystery involving an African American detective. In both, though, the formulas and codes are displaced through red herrings and misdirections, necessitating relocations and reconfigurations—much as the assembling and interpretation of world literature requires. Bruce Robbins probes the complex relations between Swedish detective fiction and the welfare state that the noir detective seems to oppose but that the genre ultimately supports, a political valence that is largely lost on American readers, who tend to see the novels in terms of their own anti-statism. Michaela Bronstein examines the allure of what she calls “utopian crime” in a chain of novels by Dostoevsky, Conrad, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, ranging from nineteenth-century Russia to twentieth-century Africa and America. Utopian crime exposes the secret kinship between the ideology of aesthetic endurance and that of revolution: both appeal to the judgment of the future against the present.

Part 2, “Market Mechanisms,” focuses on the literary systems and marketing strategies that surround the genre. It sheds light on changes in the publishing industry, and on the use of different media to spread crime fiction globally, including film adaptations and remakes. Karl Berglund discusses the new global conditions for Swedish crime fiction as an illustration of changes in the contemporary book trade. Today, Swedish agents think big when they take on new crime writers, and Swedish writers are following suit. Ironically, then, Swedish crime fiction is increasingly being produced with translations, adaptations, and global popularity in mind, at the same time as the impact of the genre owes much to its regional characteristics (or its purveying of images of Nordic exoticism). Thus