

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, palm facing down, with a significant, bloody laceration on the back of the hand. The hand is resting on a dark, coarse-grained surface, possibly asphalt or gravel. A single, dry, yellowed leaf is visible on the left side of the frame. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the skin and the blood.

JEANNETTE SLONIEWSKI
AND MARILYN ROSE
EDITORS

DETECTING CANADA

ESSAYS ON CANADIAN
CRIME FICTION,
TELEVISION, AND FILM

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DETECTING CANADA



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*This book is dedicated to
the active Canadian Crime Writing community
and our fellow researchers in this lively emerging discipline.*

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INTRODUCTION

Jeannette Sloniowski

Marilyn Rose

In assembling this first collection of critical essays in this field it seems appropriate to provide both some context for and a rapid overview of the rich and varied array of crime fiction that exists at this point in Canadian history. To undertake such a quick sweep is a daunting task. David Skene-Melvin's historical survey, which appears in our collection, ends with the third quarter of the twentieth century. Since that time, the production of crime fiction in Canada—in the form of novels, short stories, films, and television series—has burgeoned, and practitioners are now literally too many, and the landscape changing too rapidly, to do the field justice in a preface such as this one.

Surprisingly, however, given its strength, resilience, and popularity as a genre, there has been no full-length book published to date on Canadian crime fiction. Worldwide, detective fiction is the most published form of popular narrative, and increasingly Canadian writers have taken their place alongside the rich and famous in international crime fiction. And here at home, writers such as Peter Robinson, Giles Blunt, Alan Bradley, Louise Penny, and Linwood Barclay, for example, are award-winning authors both in Canada and abroad.

Our book is a first step in addressing this gap. We do not claim to set out the parameters of a distinctive "Canadian School" of crime writing. To begin with, it seems premature to make such grand claims given the amount

of critical work that remains to be done—especially given the lack of availability of much early Canadian crime writing in the past and hence a lack of close scholarly attention to pre-modern works in this genre to date. However, this book represents, we hope, the beginning of more concentrated scholarly engagement with this particular field in Canadian popular narrative. The time seems right, especially given the potentialities of the increasingly rich electronic “archives” that characterize the Internet at present. Not only are books, television, and film increasingly available through online vendors such as chapters.indigo.ca and amazon.ca, but scholarly sleuths—many of them graduate students in our flourishing programs in popular culture in Canada—are now able to access a great deal of early Canadian crime writing directly online.

Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, any attempt to create a homogeneous category or even a sense of a dominant aesthetic in Canadian crime fiction is bound to falter given the heterogeneous nature of Canada as a nation and consequently the complexity of its “national imaginary.” Manfred B. Steger defines social imaginaries as “deep-seated modes of understanding that provide the most general parameters within which people imagine their communal existence.” He notes that this concept draws upon Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community, and goes on to say that “the social imaginary offers explanations of how ‘we’—the members of a particular community—fit together, how things go on between us, the expectations we have of each other, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations” (12–13). Canada, however, in Rosemary Coombe’s words, is marked by a “remarkable cultural pluralism,” and may be best understood as a “multinational democracy” that continuously “negotiates and embraces (or contains) relations between founding nations, first nations, diasporic nations, an ethos of multiculturalism and various forms of transnationalism under neo-colonial and post-colonial conditions.” To Coombe’s list might be added regionalism and class divisions that also characterize this sprawling and diverse nation in which a plurality of social imaginaries circulates and intersects.

This is not to say that there are no commonalities as we survey the range of types and approaches evident in Canadian crime writing. David Morley, in “Broadcasting and the Construction of the National Family,” emphasizes the role of mass media and popular culture in general in the creation of national imaginaries, and cites the work of Lauren Berlant in arguing that “through the accident of birth within a particular set of geographical and political boundaries, the individual is transformed into the subject of

a collectively held history and learns to value a particular set of symbols as intrinsic to the nation and its terrain" (420). Berlant contends that "in this process the nation's traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals and narratives provide an alphabet for collective consciousness and national subjectivity" (20). Because crime writing is part of Canadian *mass* culture, then, it is to be expected that its iterations in the form of novels, films, and television will reflect certain overarching aspects of a Canadian national imaginary that reinforce national themes and stereotypes that permeate the popular media. The first of these is undoubtedly a preoccupation with law and order, which reflects the long-standing notion that Canada was founded on an ethic of "peace, order, and good government." As our book illustrates, the frequent focus in Canadian crime fiction on the "Mounties" (from earliest times to the present) reflects that aspect of the national imaginary, as does the plethora of police or amateur detectives who see themselves as labouring to uphold civic order in a nation convinced of its essential civility. Other pan-national themes that thread themselves through crime fiction in Canada include a focus on the importance of universal health care, the need to address Aboriginal issues, issues related to immigration and multiculturalism, matters of poverty, gender, and class, and—of course—a fascination with and implications of the national game, hockey.

At the same time Canadian crime fiction is diffuse and variable. Each of the sub-genres that characterize detective fiction elsewhere is evident in Canadian crime writing of the modern period, which is to say from roughly the 1980s on—from police procedurals through those featuring private investigators ("hard-" as well as "soft-" boiled) and amateur investigators who come across remarkable numbers of homicides requiring investigation on their otherwise quite crime-free home turfs. So too are sub-generic categories represented, such as works of detection reflecting ethnicity; demographic divides such as the urban, suburban, and rural; gender and/or political issues; and post-modern play with traditional crime-writing conventions and codes. However, given the diversity of Canada—which includes substantial Aboriginal and immigrant populations, the existence of provinces and territories with separate and powerful governments and statutes, and regional formations with their own habits and identities—it is the heterogeneity in dealing with such issues, the way that gender, ethnicity, and class intersect in particular ways in particular local environments within the nation as a whole, that is noteworthy. A brief look at the work of a number of Canadian crime writers will demonstrate the reach and range that characterizes Canadian crime fiction.

At times Canadian crime writing tackles issues at a clearly national level, as is the case with Barbara J. Stewart's *The Sleeping Boy* (2003), which is set on the American side of the border between Canada and the United States. Stewart's fiction probes the American health care system from the Canadian side of current debates over the delivery of health care in North America: Canada's universal health care (or socialized medicine) is set against the American system of very expensive individually purchased health care packages, with an emphasis on the downside of states that do not provide reasonable health care services to all. In the novel, issues of cost result in murder. Here is a Canadian author, enmeshed in the Canadian health care philosophy, if you will, critiquing a different, and in the novel, inferior system of caring for citizens and reflecting a particular Canadian imaginary—the idea of universal health care free to all—to reflect a salient perceived difference between Canada and the United States. Canada's health care system as intrinsic to national identity, and concerns about its viability, are also reflected in Giles Blunt's John Cardinal novels, where Cardinal's wife, suffering from severe depression, struggles with an increasingly damaged health care system unlike the system that Blunt knew when he left Canada for several years as a younger man. Pat Capponi's novels, set in the Parkdale area of Toronto, deal with the lives of recently released mental patients, some living in squalor in group homes, invisible to other Torontonians and neglected by the system.

At other times, though, the notion of a singular Canadian imaginary is refracted through specific national *and* local lenses. In writing about Howard Engel, for instance, we have argued that he should be read more as an interpreter—and interrogator—of a particular culture, that of Southern Ontario's Niagara region, than as a simple purveyor of humorous “soft-boiled” Canadian detective fiction as he has so often been categorized. Drawing upon his experience as a citizen of Niagara for many years, Engel has set about portraying the particular ethnic/cultural values that have governed Niagara for generations—conventions of class and ethnicity and inclusion/exclusion that are easily recognizable to Niagarans as characteristic of their place in Ontario. Engel underscores locality—and a demonstrable Canadian imaginary—by naming popular places, restaurants, factories, and a university in “Grantham,” a city that stands as a recognizable though fictionalized St. Catharines, and its neighbouring communities of Thorold, Welland, and Niagara Falls. In so doing, his Jewish gumshoe Benny Cooperman exposes the class and ethnic biases that animate this community and complicate ideas of villainy, reprisals, and retribution. While much

that Engel reveals is generally “Canadian” and transferrable to other anglophone cities of Canada’s post-settlement period, the United Empire Loyalist foundations of cities like Grantham are particular in their construction of edges and margins that militate against “Others,” the different, even in late-twentieth-century Canada.

In many cases in Canada the term “local” is interchangeable with “regional.” Lou Allin, for example, writes about the plight of senior citizens in the Canadian near north, examining the pitfalls for seniors relocating to Sudbury (or other northern cities), looking for places where they can retire, who tend to fall victim to a particularly noxious kind of criminal who exploits them for considerable gain. Anthony Bidulka, in *Amuse Bouche* (2003), examines not only the position of gay men in Canada’s conservative west, but also the evolving experience of the children of immigrants—in this case Ukrainian-Canadian immigrants—as they move away from their originating cultures, often at the cost of family breakdown as these children become absorbed into the new regional and national imaginaries. The figure of the Ukrainian-Canadian also plays an important role in other western Canadian crime writing, appearing in the works of Gail Bowen, Robert Harasymchuk, Murray Malcolm, and others, as markers of the western Canadian immigrant experience, another aspect of the Canadian imaginary. Ethnicity intersects with regional and immigrant themes in other regions as well, as in Rosemary Aubert’s Ontario-based Ellis Portal series, which focuses on a child of Italian immigrants, a child who succeeds brilliantly only to fall victim to overachievement and mental disease, ultimately washing up as a homeless resident of Toronto’s Rosedale Ravine. And at times regional localities are marked by Aboriginal themes, as in the Saskatchewan-based series wherein Gail Bowen seamlessly weaves a love affair, with all of its ethnic and class issues, between her Anglo heroine Joanne Kilbourn and an Aboriginal police officer Alex Kequahtoway, a reflection of that province’s social democratic leanings and large Aboriginal population whose progress must be ensured.

The place of immigrant writers in Canada is critical to understanding Canadian crime fiction. Many Canadian crime writers such as Peter Robinson, Maureen Jennings, and Eric Wright did not grow up in Canada but now, as immigrants to Canada, find themselves situated within a new and complex national imaginary. How then are we to interpret their works—particularly Robinson’s work, which is almost exclusively set in a fictional Yorkshire dale? Robinson is highly regarded nationally and internationally as one of Canada’s, and the world’s, top crime writers, but he does not write

much about Canada. To demand that Canadian writers write only about Canada is, of course, limiting and terribly prescriptive. However, the question remains: Can a Canadian national imaginary be attributed to Robinson's work? That Canadian places are seldom evident in his Inspector Banks series is perhaps less important than his world view, which can most certainly be seen as Canadian in nature. That his Inspector Banks is annoyed by the encroachment of "Americanness" upon British culture, and particularly upon small towns in the Dales, certainly mirrors a similar discomfort in Canada and a fear of cultural appropriation perhaps more terrifying in Canada because of our proximity to the United States and its cultural machinery, which floods this nation with a tsunami of American mass culture. In the end the "problem" of foreign-born immigrant writers seems something of a non-issue, since their works, even when set elsewhere, can be seen to incorporate Canadian experience and thus participate in the intersections that comprise the Canadian national imaginary.

Women have prospered as crime writers in Canada during the contemporary period, another example of the way in which the Canadian imaginary is comprehensive and diverse, in this case foregrounding gender. Several interesting authors and movements have appeared, most notably the development of a largely female form that Lou Allin has called "the Bush Cozy"¹—bringing to mind not only Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* but also more modern Canadian writers such as Marion Engel in her infamous novel *Bear*, which won the Governor General's Award for Fiction in 1976 and in which a female archivist from Toronto enjoys an erotic interlude with a bear. A number of other Canadian women writers such as Allin, R. J. Harlick, H. Mel Malton, and Nancy Dolittle write about middle-aged female amateur sleuths (or women who unexpectedly, and repeatedly, happen upon crimes) who live in arduous northern places, often in reduced circumstances, generally escaping bad domestic relationships or other serious difficulties in southern parts of Canada. These novels not only stress the rigours of the northern climate but also deal at considerable length with ordinary tasks that make up these women's daily lives. In *Bush Poodles Are Murder*, heroine Belle Palmer and a fancy, spoiled, southern breed of dog survive a terrible northern blizzard through their strong characters and good instincts despite their southern origins, while R. J. Harlick's Meg Harris is portrayed as escaping domestic abuse, and an incipient problem with alcohol, through a harsh and demanding, but sturdily independent life in the north. Such female sleuths endure and succeed despite their fears about their competence in a cold, dangerous environment as they set about

solving cases with imagination and more than a small degree of improvisational self-reliance.

Feminist detective fiction thrives in Canada as well. Jan Rehner's terrifying novel *Just Murder* is a feminist story of revenge set in Toronto. The redoubtable Gail Bowen has written sixteen Joanne Kilbourn mysteries set in Saskatchewan, several of which have been made into movies-of-the-week for Canadian television. Barbara Fradkin is the author of the well-respected Inspector Green mystery series set in Ottawa, and is a winner of the Arthur Ellis Award for best crime novel of 2007, *Honour Among Men*. Male authors such as Peter Robinson also write with considerable skill about both men and women negotiating the gender divide. A general proliferation of female investigators—police, RCMP, or amateur sleuths—marks the incursion of women into a genre that has not always been open to them. An indication of the vitality of this sector is the existence of a women's crime-writing collective, "The Ladies Killing Circle," located in Ottawa, which includes Barbara Fradkin, Mary Jane Maffini, Vicki Cameron, Joan Boswell, Linda Wicken, Sue Pike, and the late Audrey Jessup, many of whom have published not only their own individual novels but also several short stories collections, such as *Fit to Die*, *Bone Dance*, and *The Cottage Country Killers*, among others.

To turn to other aspects relating to gender, gay detective fiction also addresses and characterizes the Canadian imaginary in terms of inclusion/exclusion. Saskatchewan's Anthony Bidulka has written eight Russell Quant mysteries, each taking on issues like gay bashing and the harmful effects of closed closets in a conservative community. Jeffrey Rounds has written four, soon to be five, detective novels that are more sexually explicit than Bidulka's, featuring either private eye Bradford Fairfax or missing persons investigator Dan Sharp. Lesbian writers have also prospered. Eve Zaremba, author of six police procedurals featuring lesbian detective Helen Keremos, is a prominent Toronto artist and feminist. Jackie Manthorne's novels feature lesbian investigator Harriet Hubble, and both Liz Bugg and Caro Soles have produced novels with a focus on gay culture.

The hard-boiled, seemingly somewhat less at home in often soft-boiled Canada, has nonetheless thrived in Canada since the 1950s. The first Canadian hard-boiled novels are thought to have been David Montrose's *The Crime on Cote des Neiges* (1951) and *The Body on Mont Royal* (1953), both recently republished. More recently, Ted Griffith has produced *Restoration: Murder, the Mob, and a 1964½ Mustang* (2005), a novel set in Hamilton, Ontario, among Mafiosi and other criminals, one example of what

has been called “Steeltown noir,” an evocative term sometimes applied to crime novels set in Hamilton and its mean streets. Brad Smith of Dunnville, Ontario, is also a hard-boiled writer with six novels to his credit, one of which, *All Hat*, has been made into a film. Howard Shrier is the winner of an Arthur Ellis Award for best novel in 2010 for *High Chicago*, one of three Jonah Geller novels. Geller, a tough hard-boiled private eye, works in Toronto, while Sean Chercover’s Ray Dudgeon deals out justice in Chicago. John McFetridge is also noted for gritty noir fiction, some of which is set in Toronto and all of which is stark, hard-nosed, and riveting.

Nor is Canadian crime fiction devoid of what might be called “legal fictions,” to return to the overarching theme that we contend informs the Canadian imaginary at its most univocal and cohesive—which is to say, the national concern with law, order, and social justice. William Deverell, a former journalist and a criminal lawyer, is known for his sixteen popular novels set largely in British Columbia and featuring the barrister Arthur Beauchamp. While witty and highly amusing, the novels—such as *Kill All the Lawyers* (1994) and *Kill All the Judges* (2008)—happily skewer legal eagles at all levels, but do so in a detailed political context that most recently (*Snow Job*, 2009) sees Beauchamp’s wife take the helm of Canada’s Green Party in Ottawa, a city that is rendered as cold in every way. Close on Deverell’s heels is Robert Rotenberg, another criminal lawyer turned novelist, whose three novels to date, culminating in *Stray Bullets* (2012), are set in Toronto and focused on local crime and the dispensing of justice (or so-called justice) in the criminal courts of Canada’s most multicultural city.

Historical crime fiction also prospers in Canada as part of both the Canadian local and national imaginaries. Post 1980s, Canadian history is seen as not only important, but interesting as rendered through the lens of Canadian crime fiction. Don Gutteridge has produced four Marc Strange mysteries set in Upper Canada during the Rebellions of 1837. Allan Levine from Manitoba has set four of his Sam Klein mysteries in Winnipeg and deals with important Canadian historical characters and events such as feminist Nellie McClung, the Winnipeg General Strike, and anti-Semitism in Canada at the turn of the last century. Thomas Rendell Curran writes of Newfoundland in the 1940s. Perhaps the most well known of the historical writers is Maureen Jennings with her Murdoch mysteries, police procedurals set in Toronto before the era of modern scientific police forces. Her detective hero, William Murdoch, struggles with his Catholic background in Protestant Toronto and with a police force skeptical of his interest in the newly created sciences of fingerprinting and ballistics. Her seven Murdoch

novels provide a rich and detailed portrait of Toronto of the 1890s and have not only been adapted as made-for-TV movies but also for a popular Canadian television series, *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008–present).

Jennings is, of course, among the most famous of the current group of crime writers, including Peter Robinson, Louise Penny, Giles Blunt, Allan Bradley, Linwood Barclay, and William Deverell, who have made the leap into international markets. Robinson's Inspector Banks series has not only won numerous awards but also has been used as the basis for a successful television series in Britain, now into its second season. Louise Penny, who sets her Inspector Gamache novels in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, writes extraordinarily sophisticated psychological village mysteries with compelling and unsettling gothic elements. Blunt, who spent several years in the United States writing novels and television scripts, is a talented, visually exciting novelist whose most popular series, starring police detectives John Cardinal and Lise Delorme, is set in Algonquin Bay, a stand-in for North Bay, Ontario. His *Forty Words for Sorrow: A John Cardinal Mystery* is a terrifying depiction of homegrown serial killers who have fallen through the Canadian mental health safety net. Linwood Barclay is a former newspaperman who became well known for his humour column in the *Toronto Star*. His first series of novels were comedic stories featuring Zack Walker, investigative reporter. More recently he has begun to produce more serious and troubling stories, including *No Time for Goodbye*, a bestseller in the United Kingdom in 2008, and *Too Close to Home* (2009), which won the Arthur Ellis Award for best Canadian crime novel of the year. Alan Bradley, a relative newcomer to the genre, has produced four Flavia de Luce novels, set in the 1950s and featuring an eleven-year-old chemistry genius who lives in a decrepit mansion with aggravating older sisters and an oddball father. Flavia plots serious chemical punishments for her nagging sisters and investigates crimes around the British village where she lives. The series debut, *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, won no fewer than seven international awards.

All of this having been said—and in light of our opening comments about the size of the body of Canadian crime fiction that now exists and the fact that a single collection cannot possibly address its fullness and potential—*Detecting Canada* seeks to make available a body of critical commentary on a Canadian genre that, while vital and recognized in terms of sales and by book awards, has had little attention paid to its history and its accomplishments as a popular genre.

Canadian crime fiction, as noted by David Skene-Melvin in his essay in this book, began early in Canadian history with tales of the North West

Mounted Police and other kinds of crime stories occasionally set in the Canadian North—but more frequently set elsewhere, in imperial centres such as England or America. Authors were as likely to be from elsewhere as from Canada. Homegrown crime fiction burgeoned in the early 1980s after a surge of Canadian nationalism and, slowly over the next century, strong Canadian-based stories by well-recognized Canadian writers such as Howard Engel and Eric Wright emerged, and with them a strong and distinguished national crime fiction genre. The Crime Writers Association of Canada, dedicated to helping Canadian authors develop their writing and get word out about their increasing number of publications, was formed in 1982. Today Crime Writers of Canada, with 170 professional crime writers and 106 associated aspiring writers, offers yearly prizes, such as the Derek Murdoch Award and the prestigious Arthur Ellis Awards, to Canadian detective fiction that is frequently world-class in concept and execution. Critical response to Canadian crime fiction has also developed slowly, generally through essays placed in widely dispersed and non-specialist academic journals such as the *Journal of Canadian Studies* or the *American Review of Canadian Studies*. Such work has attended mostly to the perceived “founders” of crime fiction in its print forms, and particularly to modern “fathers of the genre” like Engel and Wright. Our book begins by exploring the history of Canadian crime fiction, along with its post-colonial context. It then goes on to concentrate on present-day authors and widens the lens to include film and television directors and productions that fall within the now-expanded category of Canadian crime fiction.

The collection of essays presented here is eclectic, as befits an emergent area of study, and our authors have taken very different approaches to the field. David Skene-Melvin and Patricia Gruben, for example, write historical surveys of Canadian crime fiction and film. Their pieces, both of which take the form of descriptive catalogues, are pioneering surveys that mark the beginning of historical thinking about periods or generic clusters of Canadian crime writing and film. Beryl Langer’s essay is useful in placing Canadian detective fiction within a post-colonial context, as befits our status as a settler nation reflecting two imperial founding cultures, those of England and France in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. In writing the first theoretical essay on Canadian crime writing, and using her knowledge of Australian crime fiction as ground for identifying post-colonial qualities in Canadian crime writing, Langer argues that “articulating the Canadian Nation” begins with writing the differences that constitute the “local.”