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These two recent books from Palgrave could be jointly titled “All Crime Big and Small.” Reading them as a pair risks a bit of critical vertigo as one moves from Stephen Knight’s jam-packed, comprehensive survey of crime fiction written in English since 1800 (this updated second edition covers material through 2007) to Emelyne Godfrey’s much more local look at how attitudes towards self-defense shaped the male city-goer in mid- to late-nineteenth century London. Together, these quite different books show how big the fields of crime writing and criticism about crime and culture have become.

Knight sets his sights on the enormous range of production whereas Godfrey uses three very specific areas (responses to garroting fears, two Anthony Trollope novels and the Sherlock Holmes canon) as a lens through which to examine changing ideas about crime and masculinity.

Knight’s second edition is necessary, he explains in the Preface, as “the writing, buying and reading of crime fiction has accelerated” (xi). The analyzing has also increased as 70 of the critical studies he mentions are from the past six years. While one
is staggered by the amount of reading Knight had to do to write this book, the argument of the book itself is not earthshattering. Unlike his still quite useful 1980 work, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, this volume aims for comprehensiveness rather than detailed analysis. It is really like a narrative encyclopedia. Given that there is a glossary, a chronology, as well as an extensive reference section of both primary and secondary works in the back of the book, it is a useful text for both the scholar beginning or enlarging his/her work in the field.

That is not to say that there is not an argument. There is and it is revealed in the subtitle “Detection, Death, Diversity.” Over the past two centuries, crime fiction has moved from uncertainty over how to represent crime for a rapidly urbanizing reading public, to belief in the authority represented by detectives and other agents of the criminal justice system, to a new period of uncertainty represented by innovations in the genre (formal innovation as well as the influx of writers with a varied range of racial, gender, national, and sexual perspectives). But the bulk of the book is a rapid-fire account of names, characters, locations, and plots. Knight’s aim is to connect the dots: and there are a lot of dots. Knight traces the development of several sub-genres, most notably: the clue-puzzle, a form associated with the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction where the reader is given enough information to attempt to solve the mystery without too much other information in the way of plot or style; the private eye, a form associated with the American private detective; and the police procedural, in which the emphasis is on the police officer who manages to work within the system while taking the reader realistically through the minutiae of crime-solving.
All the usual suspects are here in Knight’s examination of the first century of the
genre, beginning with its eighteenth-century stirrings in *The Newgate Calendar* and the
Fielding brothers and continuing through William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794);
Eugène François Vidocq (a real criminal who rose to the head of the French Sûreté in the
early nineteenth century); Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin; Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*
(1868); the stories of Émile Gaboriau in the middle decades of the century; and Arthur
Conan Doyle’s “detective apotheosis” Sherlock Holmes (55). Knight, however,
surrounds these famous names with several lesser-known practitioners—a dizzying if
satisfying context for a genre that all-too-often becomes a kind of Justice League of
famous figures. There is a particularly interesting section on the “après-Holmes
movement” of ironic anti-heroes (71).

The so-called Golden Age of detective fiction between the two world wars saw
the rise of the clue-puzzle with famous British authors such as Agatha Christie, Carolyn
Wells, Mary Roberts Rinehart, and Dorothy Sayers and, in America, S. S. Van Dine,
Ellery Queen (the writing team of two cousins, Frederick Dannay and Manfred B. Lee),
and Rex Stout. Knight makes the curious point that as more women enter the field, death
becomes a central concern (as Van Dine would say there “simply must be a corpse in a
detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better” [93]). The clue-puzzle sub-genre is
typically short on social context (one off-shoot of this sub-genre is “the cozy,” a
relatively non-threatening mystery usually taking place in a small town and often
focusing on animals or food [147]). As writers “recognized a need for some sort of
realism” (136) in both writing and subject matter (Raymond Chandler makes this point in
his famous critical essay “The Simple Art of Murder” [*The Atlantic Monthly*, December
1944), private-eye stories and police procedurals began to grow in popularity and number. Dashiell Hammett and Chandler are given relatively thorough treatment, providing an important context for other hard-boiled Americans such as the ultra-violent Mickey Spillane. The private-eye and police procedural stories tend to focus on white, male, middle-class individuals, but Knight makes the interesting point that these works nevertheless contain the seeds for more diverse contributions: “the use of police procedures as a focus of inquiry and value is also common in fiction which explores new ethnic and post-colonial self-consciousness” (161).

The past few decades have seen an explosion in the genre around the idea that “detection in crime fiction need not be patriarchal to be heroic” (184). Knight suggests that he has tried to include contemporary writers “who are shaping, rather than merely repeating” the genre (xii). He includes the contributions of Chester Himes and Walter Mosley to the African American male detective story, as well as Barbara Neely’s working-class, African American hero, Blanche White. Knight reserves a special place for lesbian feminist detection, such as that by Barbara Wilson, which he calls “one of the most striking signs that crime fiction is still capable of representing … issues of real and new importance to its authors and readers” (179). These better-known interventions in crime fiction are again surrounded by more local sub-genres, such as “tartan noir,” which deals with the imbrication of crime and national identity in Scotland (e.g., Ian Rankin), “Florida noir” (Carl Hiassen) or “Tart noir,” postfeminist works which take a more irreverent attitude towards gender.

Knight concludes by accounting for a move toward the sub-genres of urban collapse and the seemingly ubiquitous serial-killer story. Crime fiction has long featured
psychothrillers, such as works by Patricia Highsmith, as it examines “the psychic trauma that can surround crime” (148). These works represent “a conscious rejection of the simplistic Christie-esque notion that murderers were essentially evil” (153) as they look toward greater complexities of motive, victimization, and power. Works by James Ellroy and Andrew Vachss as well as Thomas Harris and Patricia Cornwell take the violence that has always been part of the crime story and explore it as theme rather than plot.

The most innovative aspect of Knight’s work is the way he complicates the national boundaries that have traditionally demarcated sub-genres. There is, he argues, more cross-fertilization than we suspected and “much misunderstanding has been caused by reading the [clue-puzzle and private-eye story] as being only national in nature” (131-32). For example, Knight suggests that Collins knew the work of the American Charles Brockden Brown, and that the hard-boiled American private eye that we associate with the California mean streets had important corollaries in England.

The enormous task of pulling myriad texts into a coherent story results in a few drawbacks. The “Detection” and “Diversity” sections make more sense, whereas the “Death” section seems like an under-theorized catch-all. (Why exactly would more women writers gravitate toward this theme?) The organization is a bit choppy, which is both part of the classifying task of such a work as well as symptomatic of Knight’s effort to work against such boundaries, as they tend to “falsify the complex, overlapping and multiple ways in which sub-genres and their authors and audiences operate” (85). Moving so fast can result in generalizations impossible to explore or defend: for example, “Psychoanalysis became so normal in American culture that it may be that as explanation or motive it became domesticated in both the crime novel and the private-eye tradition
and was not felt exotic enough to need a breakaway to a separate sub-genre” (155).

Similarly Knight talks about “feminism” as though it were a self-evident set of principles (165). With more space, his analysis might have explored how feminism might be self-evident in works by female hard-boiled detectives such as Sue Grafton, but how it becomes inflected by race and class concerns in works by Barbara Neely.

In contrast to Knight’s sweeping range, Godfrey drills down into some very specific sites. She does so to show how changes in the way men protected themselves against real (and imagined) threats of urban crime tell a story about masculinity in mid-to-late Victorian England. In the current era of color-coded threat levels and fears of terrorist attack, it seems particularly relevant to go back and reflect on how people have responded to “the demands created by the perceived perils of urban living” (1). The book is also organized into sections on the phenomenon of garroting, on violence in Trollope’s *Phineas Finn* (1867-69) and *Phineas Redux* (1873-74), and, finally, on forms of combat in the Holmes stories. Godfrey takes up Martin Wiener’s invitation, made in his *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (2004), to explore “sources beyond statistics and government reports” (7): she looks at plays, periodicals, fiction as well as a variety of weapons from the life-preserver to the walking-stick and umbrella.

Godfrey explains that two factors contributed to a shift in attitudes about masculinity and self-defense: 1) an understanding of the “perceived limitations of the police force in their responses to violent crime”; and 2) the “key middle-class value” of “self-help” as explained in Samuel Smiles’s popular 1859 book of that name (4). In the 1830s and 1840s, Godfrey suggests, “restraint and abstinence from violence became a
marker of the bourgeois persona…. Yet this ideal was riddled with paradoxes,” not the least of which was the model of “middle-class physical capability” found in works like *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857) (6).

The first section traces some of the complexities of masculinity in its consideration of garroting, which began to stir alarm in 1851 around the time of the Great Exhibition. Godfrey looks primarily at newspaper coverage and plays and argues that representations of the “skulking garrotter” provided a foil for an emerging ideal of gentlemanliness (23). This takes on a new dimension as British journalists linked garroting with the crime of *thuggee*, allegedly practiced by criminal gangs in India and the subject of many popular stories. Fascination with and fear of foreign crime become mixed with local anxieties to produce a complicated challenge to the middle-class English male’s sense of self. It also spurred the manufacture of “urban armour” (42) such as the anti-garrote glove, the anti-garrote collar (which looks like a studded dog collar) and the belt-buckle pistol (44-45). But the “reliance on weird anti-garrote devices was often portrayed as unmanly” (50) and “overarming was presented as a form of hysteria” (57).

These types of threats and the response to them are explored in Part II. The backdrop for *Phineas Finn* and *Phineas Redux* was the Second Reform Bill and the Hyde Park demonstration of 1866. The latter unrest raised questions about “the link between the appropriate articulation of aggression and the fitness to vote” (64). Godfrey shows how Trollope’s fiction covers a range of types of violence, including political violence but also dueling and boxing. Godfrey’s reading of the garroting scene in *Phineas Finn*, in which Finn saves an MP and, therefore, a symbol of government, shows nicely how
other narratives are constructed in the representation of responses to violence. The Reform Bill gave larger numbers of Irish men living in England and Wales the vote. “In 1869,” Godfrey writes, “Trollope’s readers would have been aware of the political significance of the Irish Finn defending the Scottish Kennedy in an attack which takes place in London” (91). Trollope seems to be walking a line between condemning aggression and admiring physical bravery. Finn, however, finds himself on the other side of that fine line when he brandishes a life-preserver, a weapon like a police truncheon. The novel is critical of “the over-use of weaponry for urban protection” and suggests that this is a weakness in Finn’s character which he must overcome (102).

Part III shows how Holmes, who is both a thinking machine and an accomplished boxer, navigates the constant threats that are his occupational hazard. Doyle makes it quite clear that Holmes knows how to use a gun. In “The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual” (1893), Watson describes Holmes decorating the wall “with a patriotic V. R. done in bullet-pocks” (121). Here, Godfrey points out, Holmes’s use of a weapon is both skilled and patriotic. But it is in his use of hand-to-hand combat, specifically Bartitsu, a mixed martial art that blended British boxing, French kickboxing and Japanese jujitsu, that Godfrey sees Holmes as embodying manly self-control. The final chapter describes some of the Japanese enthusiasm for Holmes and provides a comparison of the ideas of Edward William Barton-Wright, the originator of “Baritsu” [sic], and his Japanese assistant Sadakazu Uyenishi.

By working with periodicals, Godfrey provides an interesting context for the more familiar fictional texts. For example, Trollope wrote an article titled “The Uncontrolled Ruffianism of London as Measured by the Rule of Thumb” for Saint Paul’s in 1868,
midway through the novel’s serialization in that magazine. Similarly Holmes’s use of “Baritsu” is read in the context Barton-Wright’s 1899 article for Pearson’s Magazine titled “The New Art of Self-Defence: How a Man may Defend Himself against every Form of Attack.” Godfrey claims that the changing attitudes she traces toward self-defense and masculinity were fueled by “changes in print culture”: “From 1855 to 1860—the years of the garroting scares—the circulation of daily newspapers increased threefold” (2-3).

I did wish for more of a theoretical framework linking the book’s various considerations of violence including garroting, political violence, dueling and use of weapons such as life-preservers and pistols. Her argument is clear: the self-control displayed in the face of violent threats shaped a middle-class sense of masculinity. But the case unfolds in relatively distinct sections within each of the book’s three parts–each reads like a separate essay–and there is not a great deal of analytical material connecting them and no conclusion. Locating these interesting close readings in, for example, the century-long debate about whether to arm the police might have extended her insights to the relationship between crime and national (not just personal) identity. But both of these books prove beyond a reasonable doubt how textual representations of crime provide a crucial site for understanding how individuals define themselves in and against a constantly changing society.

Biographical Notice:

Caroline Reitz is an Assistant Professor of English and Interdisciplinary Studies at John Jay College of Criminal Justice/CUNY. She is the author of Detecting the Nation:
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