

Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World

Nels Pearson and Marc Singer (eds.)

220 pages, 2009, \$99.95 USD

Farnham, Ashgate

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Detective fiction not only constitutes a “good read” but has also been the object of much justified literary criticism. The “hard-boiled” subgenre, for example—famous for its depiction of social trouble, psychologically deviant characters, and harsh violence—has been claimed to offer insightful commentaries on cultural and societal ills. However, as Maureen Reddy has observed, early works of hard-boiled fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, like classical detective novels, constructed a cultural image of the detective which presented whiteness, heterosexuality and conventional masculinity as normative.

In response to these exclusionary politics, many writers from various ethnic and/or cultural minorities have renovated the detective genre by reflecting on the conventions associated with their own historical situations and socio-cultural realities. A number of scholarly works have responded to the challenges raised by these representations of cultural alterity in recent ethnic, multicultural, and/or postcolonial detective fiction, as illustrated by titles of numerous studies on the topic such as: *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder From the Other Side* (1999), *The Post-Colonial Detective* (2001), and *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (2006).

Nels Pearson and Marc Singer’s edited collection of essays, *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*, which brings together eleven essays, owes a critical debt to this recent scholarship and is notable for its continuity with such works. According to the two editors, however, most scholarly works on the late transformation(s) of detective fiction “ha[ve] been limited to the study of detective novels by and about distinct racial or ethnic minority groups” (7) and to how these works “interrogat[ed] the imperial histories and racial ideologies that helped spur [their] own generic development” (8).

Pearson and Singer’s collection, of course, has similar objectives but differs from previous academic studies on the topic in two distinctive ways. Firstly, the collection elaborates on the useful yet traditional—or in some ways outdated—postcolonial concepts of binary models such as oppressor/oppressed or colonizer/colonized, and does not limit itself to insightful readings of these models in the context of specific nation-states’ histories. Rather, Pearson and Singer’s volume analyzes the implications of investigations that take place at the crossroads or “intersections of postcolonial and transnational or multicultural life” (8). The essays of the collection use various methodological approaches to examine the flexibility of the

construction of geopolitical spaces, and the detective's growing difficulty in bringing justice in an increasingly globalized world where policies and notions of justice constantly shift. As a result, the investigators studied in the present volume not only function as *others* denouncing the discriminatory politics of (neo)colonialism but also as figures who recurrently "cross borders both external and internal, figurative and literal" (10-11).

In this respect, Haiqing Sun's essay on Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *Death in Mystery* (1993), is illuminating. She argues that the detective of the novel—Lituma—takes up "multiple roles" and functions as a connector between "the world he comes from" (a coastal urban space in Peru) and the more rural Andean world in which he is investigating the cases of three missing persons (109). Although his function as a detective impels him to somehow reconcile both worlds, with their competing understandings of social realities, he does not manage to do so. In fact, Sun contends that Lituma "lose[s]" himself between "modern" and "indigenous" life, between "nostalgia" and "indifference," between the conflicting and yet valid ideologies of the different communities of the Andes, i.e. the local population suffering from economic repression and the Peruvian communist militias (109). Lituma thus crosses and straddles geographical as well as social and psychological barriers but is nevertheless, as Sun claims, lost in a postcolonial and/or transnational "space that cannot be located in a specific territory" (109).

The multiplicity of perspectives that originate from different geopolitical spaces demonstrated in Sun's essay intersects with the volume's second elaboration on the transformation(s) of detective fiction in comparison to previous scholarship. Former works on postcolonial detective fiction already emphasized how detectives from ethnic minorities problematized knowledge construction and acquisition. Various commentators have indeed argued that whereas the classical narratives of the genre present a murder/mystery and provide a solution via logical understanding, postcolonial investigators constantly challenge Western epistemology. *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*, however, goes one step further in this line of reasoning. Numerous essays draw parallels between the fragmented nature of postcolonial and transnational contexts and the ways detectives realize that justice and truth are multi-faceted concepts. As such, many essays in the present volume also interrogate the generic conventions of detective fiction and, most notably, the detective's ability to restore order through rational thinking.

An enlightening example of this is Maureen Lauder's study of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995). In her essay, Lauder shows that the author, as well as the detective, questions logical understanding and manipulates "knowledge and knowability against the reader" (55). She argues that the investigator Murugan, an Indian settled in New York, lacks detective skills precisely because he is rooted in an academic environment which promotes Western rational epistemology. Like Llosa's detective moving between worlds and communities, Murugan also stands for the divides between rational

Western scientific research and “Eastern” knowledge. By extension, he also embodies the ambiguity of the imperialist and/or capitalist tensions between the American and Indian settings of the book. Yet, he cannot access an alternative space between “worlds of certainty and indeterminacy” (61).

On the whole, a majority of the essays brilliantly respond to the editors’ objectives and aims mentioned in the introduction. Firstly, they “highlight the increasing number of postcolonial and [...] transnational authors who adapt detective and crime fiction and conventions” (3). The essays address the works of a large palette of novelists from numerous postcolonial and/or transnational spaces such as Peru, India, and the French Caribbean who each renovate detective fiction principles in various fashions. Secondly, the essays also examine, from several angles, how these detective texts “dramatize the challenges of formulating a genuinely democratic approach to knowledge-production, justice, and human rights” (3). In this respect, Robin Goodman’s analysis of US interventionism in two novels dealing with the drug trade in Colombia in the late 1990s and early 2000s is perceptive. Goodman argues that the “War on Terror” started well before the aftermath of 9/11. He shows how the detectives of the novels he is studying question the nature of US security intervention policies and challenge Colombia’s sovereignty, its political decisions in terms of law enforcement, and its implementation of justice.

The volume thus opens up new perspectives for the study of detective fiction through the theoretical frameworks of the postcolonial, the transnational and the global—surprisingly not mentioned in the title. In a similar fashion to the genre it is examining, the collection definitely constitutes a “good read” and offers estimable food for thought.

Works Cited

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