

## **Writing Crime (Fiction) around the Globe: Analyses of Identity in International Crime Novels**

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**Abstract:**

The twenty essays in this important volume, *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*, deal with the notion of identity from different angles, including cultural and stereotypical representations of ethnicity and race in crime novels from countries such as Spain, France, Chile and Germany. The authors underline their readings of crime novels with the application of major theories of both crime genre and identity, including those of Homi Bhabha and Benedict Anderson. Not only because it is one of the first studies that explore the crime genre to such an extent, but also because of its success in combining current issues of identity with multicultural and global contexts, the volume is highly recommendable to those scholars with an interest in current trends in popular literature and to serious readers of crime fiction.

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Crime fiction has been one of the most prolific literary genres for over a century. Consequently, it has become a popular area of academic investigation within the field of literary studies. Since the 1960s, a wealth of academic literature has emerged on the history and typology of crime fiction as well as on ideological frameworks and the social contexts in which crime novels took place. In the early 1980s, the groundbreaking studies of Stephen Knight and Dennis Porter focused on the relationship between ideology and the popularity of crime novels (Knight Stephen: *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980; Porter, Dennis. *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). These and other theories on crime fiction have been applied to various literatures, but so far only a few books have managed to combine numerous theories and methodologies into comprehensive analyses of international crime novels. In this respect, *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction* fills a crucial gap.

Edited by Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn, the volume is an important piece of scholarly work, bringing together as it does numerous authors writing on their respective specialities. Opened by a short but lucid introduction by the editors, the volume consists of twenty articles, each providing an analysis of the links between crime genre and identity. The chapters cover a wide spectrum of issues, such as nationality and gender and the epistemological dimensions of identity. The volume does not aim to use a common methodology or apply a single theory; instead, the chapters provide practical examples of approaching crime novels. These serve as explorations of current identity trends by focusing on numerous aspects, from narrative strategies to language, from the use of stereotypes to the crimes committed.

For example, Stewart King analyses the works of a single Spanish author, Vázquez Montalbán, in relation to regional cultural identity in Catalonia in post-Franco Spain. In a similar way, Sjeff Houppermans looks into the notion of ethnicity in multicultural France in the works of Jean-Cristophe Grangé. For their part, Ann M. White & Shelley Godsland, and also Willem G. Weststeijn, present rather extended analyses of, respectively, Spanish and Russian female authors, as they focus on gender.

Preceding nearly every contribution is a brief introduction by the individual authors. Each presents the historical development of the crime genre and/or debates on identity and familiarise readers with national contexts. This provides the reader with an opportunity to compare the genres' foundations in different literary traditions and cultural circumstances and under various political regimes.

That said, reading a volume as diverse as *Investigating Identities*, and one which encompasses as many issues and places as it does, may require more background knowledge than is presented at the beginning of each chapter. Fortunately, the first essay in the volume, "Nationality International: Detective Fiction in the Late Twentieth Century", by Eva Erdmann, sums up the changing international trends in crime novels – starting in the 1970s and continuing until the beginning of the twenty-first century – which run parallel to the process of globalisation. Her contribution provides an excellent conceptual basis for the articles that follow.

In subsequent contributions, Erdmann's main arguments are elaborated and exemplified. For instance, one can better understand Erdmann's claims about the changing thematisation of national characteristics in crime fiction with the use of well-known stereotypes and clichés within the context of globalisation (p. 22-26) by reading two remarkable studies also included in the volume. Arlene A. Teraoka brilliantly shows how Jakob Arjouni disrupts the stereotypical image of ethnic and national identities by playing with these clichés in his crime novels, whose protagonist is Kemal Kayankaya, a Turkish-German private investigator. Similarly, Christopher Jones explores the various functions of the "recycling of stereotypes and clichés" (p. 229) in Swiss German detective fiction. According to Jones, the use of stereotypes by Swiss crime writers has undergone a valuable transformation, because the authors not only depict foreigners and immigrants, but also their fellow citizens in one and the same manner. More importantly, they do so not to "reinforce existing power structures or to exclude social or racial minorities" (p. 242), but "in order to shine a powerful, revealing light on aspects of contemporary Swiss society and recent Swiss history" (p. 242). Analogous issues are discussed in other sections, e.g. the process of genre hybridisation: Hans Ester delves into the synthesis of the South African farm and detective novels, while White & Godsland and Houppermans examine the relationship between the crime novel and film.

The editors of the collection, aiming to "explore the ways in which the crime genre [...] has been used in recent decades to articulate and investigate notions of identity" (p. 1), have successfully done so, albeit with minor difficulties. First of all, there is too much emphasis on the cultural representations of national and ethnic identities; it would have been useful to see more examples of the construction of identity in relation to epistemological questions as well as a few articles on religious and sexual identity (not gender per se, but, for instance, the role of transsexual characters, which has been quite a common one in recent crime novels). Secondly, dividing the volume into parts would have provided a better thematic structure and facilitated the following of major aspects of identity. Internationality is the third minor problem: even though the volume is international in the sense that there are analyses of crime

novels from all over the world, the majority focuses on European literatures. A chapter on Israeli crime fiction, for instance, especially on Batya Gur's *Murder on a Kibbutz*, which Eva Erdmann even makes reference to in her introduction, would have been a great addition to the volume. None of these shortcomings undermines the success and importance of this book, however. As the editors state, “there is great scope for further work in this area” (p. 9) and one can only hope that studies like these will continue to appear in the future.