

A Partner in Crime?

Gero Guttzeit

Abstract:

For the series of "Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture", editors Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley offer *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (2010), an essay collection aimed at undergraduate and graduate students. The 47 contributions to the volume focus on the British-American genres of detective and crime fiction and are written by literary and film critics as well as practitioners in the fields. Covering the period from the origins of crime fiction in the eighteenth century up to the present day, the detailed essays in the Companion are based on a variety of theoretical approaches and methodologies ranging from formal criticism to race, class, and gender studies as well as more encyclopaedic approaches. Despite a few terminological shortcomings, such as the inconsistent narratological distinction between detective and crime fiction, the volume constitutes a recommendable introduction, which might also help to further the scholarly discussion of the genre.

How to cite:

Guttzeit, Gero: „A Partner in Crime? [Review on: Horsley, Lee; Rzepka, Charles J. (eds.): *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. San Francisco/Toronto/West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2010.]“. In: *KULT_online* 27 (2011).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2011.603>

© by the authors and by KULT_online

A Partner in Crime?

Gero Guttzeit

Rzepka, Charles J.; Lee Horsley (eds.): *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 66). 629 pp., hardcover, £110.00/€132.00. ISBN: 978-1-4051-6765-9

The act of reading detective fiction has long lost the criminal air that it possessed for early aficionados like Bertolt Brecht. Today, the genre of detective and crime fiction is one of the most read and viewed, constituting a wide field in the academic study of popular fiction. The essays in *A Companion to Crime Fiction* together serve as an introductory handbook and at the same time showcase some of the diverse work going on in the field.

The scope of this 629 page volume is wide indeed. Spanning the period from the eighteenth century to today, *A Companion to Crime Fiction* comprises not only chapters on the history, criticism, and culture of crime fiction as well as its various genres and subgenres (such as the 'golden age cosy' and 'hard-boiled writing'), but also on authors from William Godwin and Edgar Allan Poe to Sara Paretsky and Walter Mosley, as well as film directors Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, and John Woo. While some readers might wish for a chapter on crime on the stage and a discussion of recent TV shows *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, other TV shows, films, radio features, comics, and graphic novels are discussed—and not treated identically, but rather in different fashions, including but by no means limited to approaches of political criticism. The Companion includes studies of gender, race, politics, and cultural stereotypes; essays exploring narratological and formal aspects or questions of the canon; as well as more traditional contributions based on biographical approaches and encyclopaedic overviews of the history of the genres of detective and crime fiction and their artists.

Another of the assets of the volume is its readability. Most of the authors manage to resist the temptation of going into vigorous scholarly debate in favour of accessible texts that, while developing a standpoint, do not lose themselves in intricacies. It is no surprise that the few straightforwardly 'scholarly' chapters cover the most well-trodden paths in the study of detective and crime fiction, such as the "'Classical' Model of the Golden Age", which, in Susan Rowland's uncommon interpretation, embodies the quest for the holy grail. The five essays which make up the first part of the volume ("History, Criticism, Culture") can serve as a short introduction in their own right, and the other two parts on genre and artists, respectively, work to deepen this basic understanding. While authors such as G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) of Father Brown fame and the 'chieftain' of Scottish tartan noir, Ian Rankin (1960-), are not given individual articles, their works are discussed in some passages and can be found via the

index of artists, scholars, and work titles. Cross-references in the chapters are numerous and the combined bibliography serves as a good vantage point for further research.

Besides fulfilling their introductory function, quite a few essays make for valuable contributions to the scholarly study of the genres in question. Some are especially helpful in moving the debate beyond standard positions developed in the 1980s which treat detective fiction as a mere reproduction of conservative ideology. John A. Hodgson's magisterial essay on Sherlock Holmes is noteworthy here in showing the extent to which Holmes is involved in the detection of cultural values rather than in their perpetuation. A lesser known author included in the artists section is hard-boiled writer David Goodis, whose importance for re-writings of masculinity David Schmid demonstrates. Only occasionally do the interpretations lapse into incoherence, as, for example, when Alexander Moudrov argues that the nineteenth-century tendency to dehumanize criminals can best be seen in Poe's inauguration of the detective story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", because the "brutal murders" are perpetrated not by a man but an orangutan (p. 135); Moudrov's anthropomorphizing of the ape obscures the difference between human murder and animal killing, and hence misses the exploration of the difference between speaking humanity and the merely imitating ape in the story. However, since many of the essays in the Companion pass the same milestones, critical disagreement between the authors might even be made productive by the reader, in this instance with Maurice S. Lee's concise chapter on Poe.

One major shortcoming with regard to theoretical considerations remains. It has become common to title textbooks dealing with detective and crime fiction with the name of the latter genre, only. One would have wished for the editors—and Rzepka himself stresses the distinctive features of detective fiction in his homonymous introductory monograph (Cambridge: Polity 2005)—to have withstood this trend. Despite the Companion's title, an equal number of chapters deals with detective fiction, which has been justly regarded as a literary form defined by its peculiar way of presenting the plot, and not by its 'criminal' material. The definitory problems arising from this indeterminate genre designation show, for instance, in David Seed's article on "Crime and the Spy Genre", which is in fact—and convincingly so—an exploration of its relation to detection. Fortunately, one does not have to look far for a piece that puts the two genres into a narratological perspective. Heta Pyrhönen, in her lucid essay on "Criticism and Theory", not only stresses the form of detective fiction as its specific difference, but also highlights its importance for literary theory, in general, and narratology, in particular.

A desideratum for future research emerges from the Companion: the question of the cultural origins and intercultural aspects of narrative genres in general. Detective fiction, specifically, is a narrative form which came into being and was predominantly developed in a British-American context, leaving us with questions as to why this was so and how such a clear-cut narrative form changes when it is translated into other cultural contexts. Questions such as these are not the focus of Sue Neale's essay on "Crime Writing in Other Languages" nor Ed Christian's chapter on postcolonial crime and detection, but other publications such as Krajenbrink and Quinn's *Investigating Identities on contemporary international crime fiction* (Amsterdam/New

York, NY: Rodopi, 2009; cf. the review in this magazine, KULT_online 22 (2010)), have begun laying the groundwork for this direction of research.

In all, despite its shortcomings in terms of narratology and a few logical inconsistencies, Rzepka and Horsley's Companion to Crime Fiction offers a broad-ranging and well-argued introduction to this field of popular culture. Beginning students will certainly profit from its thematic diversity and wide historical reach. Not only postgraduate students but also scholars looking into new fields can make the book the starting-point for their own furthering of the scholarly discussion. It is a companion one might well want to team up with—both in crime and its detection.