

Holmes under the Magnifying Glass: Questioning the Conventions of Detective Fiction

Elizabeth McNeill

Abstract:

The bilingual anthology *Detective Fiction and Popular Visual Culture* provides an interdisciplinary study of contemporary developments in detective fiction. Throughout the collection, the testing of generic conventions reveals a readjustment of the detective-fiction tradition to fit modern reader-viewers, ultimately raising the question: Is it detective fiction if the detective is spotlighted over the murder mystery case, or even the detective-fiction tradition itself?

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In five heterogeneous sections, the bilingual anthology *Detective Fiction and Popular Visual Culture* aims to capture the spirit of Evelyne Keitel's multifaceted research on detective fiction in American popular culture. As a tribute on her 60th birthday and the 175th anniversary of the Chemnitz University of Technology, the editors compiled case studies, three short works of detective fiction, papers and presentations given at the 2011 "Detective Fiction in American Popular Culture" conference, and articles specifically written for this collection. Such topical and theoretical breadth ambitiously engages in many modes of academic discourse, ultimately indicating that the intersection between detective fiction and popular visual culture is an interdisciplinary study worthy of further consideration.

The testing of generic conventions is one of the principal components of contemporary detective fiction. In Cecile Sandten's presentation at the inaugural "Chemnitzer Krimipreis" awards ceremony in 2011, she asks, "Was macht einen guten Krimi aus?" – a question posed for centuries by famous philosophers and writers, many of whom are cited throughout the anthology (74). Sandten then describes the established rules for the centuries-old detective story: there must be a detective, a dead body, and a culprit; the murder must be committed due to personal reasons rather than accident or suicide; elaborate descriptive passages must be omitted; and, according to Bertolt Brecht, the reader's "Sicherheitsbedürfnis des Rezeptionsbewußtseins" must be sustained through slight variations in the "Ermittlungsteil" (74).

Indeed, many authors investigate the role of the reader in this ever-evolving genre. Gunter Süß seems to suggest that the viewer-reader is the second detective charged with, in the phrase of Karin Ikas, "search[ing] for answers and fill[ing] in the gaps" to solve the mystery of intertextual references – or the murder case (Süß, 105; Ikas 41). In "The Allure of the Supernatural: Twin Peaks and the Transformation of the Detective Story," Marcel Hartwig argues that the narrative complexity and readability of the TV series *Twin Peaks* "reverses the classical detective-as-reader analogy by teaching the viewer to become a reader, a creator of meaning" (140). The advent of VCRs ("rewatchability") and Internet communities ("extratextual participation") facilitated reader interpretation of the mystery, thereby rendering a "renegotiation of the narrative elements of detective fiction at the level of form" (145). Hartwig thus coins a

new subgenre of detective fiction, incipient detection, which fundamentally considers the reader's decision to either engage in the "narrative possibilities" or submit to the narrative's belief system (153).

Several papers bring to light the development of a detective figure that increasingly eclipses the murder mystery case itself. The sections "Detectives on Television" and "British Detectives in/and Different Contexts" spotlight the following characters in detective roles: Dr. Gregory House from *House M.D.*, Adrian Monk from *Monk*, FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper from *Twin Peaks*, Fitz from *Cracker*, James Bond from the decades-long film series, and Sherlock Holmes in the (post)colonial literary re-writes by Jamyung Norbu and Vithal Rajan. On the whole, the anthology's side-by-side treatment of detective characters offers an intriguing opportunity for analysis. Most of these men undoubtedly tread the fine line between genius and madness. Where Monk and his severe OCD embody the trend of the detective as "analyst and analyzed at the same time" (Meier 127), Fitz recognizes the evil capacities within himself ("evil empathy") in order to solve crimes (Stratmann and von Rosenberg 160). Cooper, on the other hand, knows that the key to solving Laura Palmer's murder is encoded in a supernatural dream (Hartwig 141), and House is institutionalized for a Vicodin addiction (Süß 112). In this way, the detective and his condition (or existential condition) are at the center of the narration.

The question therefore arises: Is it still detective fiction if the detective is placed in a position of greater significance than the case, or the detective tradition itself? James Bond provides a most compelling case study. In "Detective James Bond: From British Gentleman to Hard-Boiled American," Timo Müller traces the secret agent's filmic evolution from detective-esque special agent to full-blown action hero. In concluding his paper, Müller largely rejects Bond's pop cultural association with the detective paradigm, ultimately contending that the character and the films' narrative devices owe their origins to the detective tradition, yet have evolved with the film's audience and historical context to make the series "a rich resource for cultural history" (194).

Although the anthology's inclusion of multifarious sections may appear to complement its goal of an interdisciplinary approach, the unity of the collection becomes unbalanced with sections like "Popular Culture". Here, Sabine Sielke previews what will surely become a book on popular culture as a process and Stefanie Jahn weakly considers a polygamous Mormon family in the TV series *Big Love*. Indeed, the direction of the editing is often unclear, as are the priorities of the collection. In honoring Keitel's legacy, best solidified by her foundational book *Kriminalromane von Frauen für Frauen. Unterhaltungsliteratur aus Amerika* (1998), the anthology could have easily focused on *Krimifrauen* and scholarship done by women in the field of detective fiction and popular visual culture. In the same vein, the anthology attempts to demonstrate Keitel's stance that "academic work on popular phenomena can be intellectual rewarding, culturally and politically relevant, and 'fun' at the same time" (Sandten and Süß 2). However, the anthology's inconsistency in tone and writing standards distracts from this argument. Despite these shortcomings, *Detective Fiction and Popular Visual Culture* offers an interesting examination of contemporary developments in detective fiction.