

Issue Editors' Notes

Introduction to *Hybridization and Generic Experiments in Crime Narratives*

Renáta Zsámiba, Angelika Reichmann, and Zsolt Győri

HJEAS

This issue has grown out of the desire to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the status, genealogy, and criticism of crime fiction, foregrounding the genre's hybridity and intertextual playfulness through generic experimentation to deconstruct long-standing reductive views that have prioritized crime fiction's adherence to rules and strict narrative patterns. The new millennium has produced a heightened interest in the revision of the genre, and a number of acclaimed academics, such as Gill Plain,¹ Maurizio Ascari,² Andrew Pepper,³ Alistair Rolls, Stewart King, or Jesper Gulddal,⁴ have drawn attention to the critical shortcomings of the previous decades. These include the insistence on the rigorous boundaries between literary and genre fiction, the definitional problems due to the critical oblivion, the entanglement of various forms, styles, and genres—which result in a great diversity of crime narratives—as well as crime fiction's flexibility to address pressing local and global historical, political, and cultural concerns. Added to these is the recognition that crime fiction is not exclusively a Western European—British or French—and American product, but “has always been a resolutely transnational genre” (Allan et al. 1).

The accumulation of critical voices to advance a paradigm shift in the scholarship of crime fiction in the past two decades ultimately led to the publication of the edited volume *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction* in 2020, which undoubtedly highlights this critical turn. The editors, Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper emphasize that their volume is dedicated to discussing, first and foremost, “some of the new developments in crime fiction itself, particularly its hybridisation of forms, its engagement with digital technologies and social media, its interventions in the major political issues of our time, its transnationality and, perhaps most strikingly, its global circulation.” Second, it addresses the latest theoretical approaches to the genre which they “consider to be [contributions to] an ongoing dual paradigm shift in recent crime fiction studies” (1), bringing to the fore the complexities of individual texts as well as crime fiction's interaction with and departure from established narrative patterns within national literary traditions (1).

Despite this breakthrough in academia, only few international academic conferences have been organized in the past few years dedicated to hybridity and generic experiments in crime narratives. The scarcity of international academic platforms to explore crime fiction's potential in the twenty-first century, especially the vivid interest in liberating the scholarship from the rather limiting, often paralyzing critical perspectives on narrative styles, forms and techniques, triggered the organization of the *Eleventh Captivating Criminality: Hybridization and Generic Experiments* international conference, held at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger (Hungary) between June 27 and 29, 2024, and co-organized with the International Crime Fiction Association. The three-day conference hosted scholars of crime fiction from around the world who were committed to critically re-reading crime narratives, ranging from classic texts—such as the nineteenth-century locked-room mysteries, the whodunit, or the hard-boiled—to more contemporary representatives of the genre, such as the postmodern, ecological, historical, or ethnic crime fiction. The conference participants' shared aim was to broaden the horizons of genre criticism by demonstrating how individual texts escape typologies and definitions as a result of their active interaction with other literary forms, styles, and genres. This ambition definitely calls for open-mindedness and goes against the orthodox critical views of the previous century, handling this huge field as a homogenous collection of texts, and, as Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King argue, “emphasi[z]ing the stability and prescriptiveness of genre norms.” Therefore, as the authors continue, “the first shift involves a re-description of crime fiction as a motley and spacious genre defined by hybridity and mobility rather than adherence to rules” (13), and the second shift ensues as a result of “the internationalization of the crime fiction universe,” which sheds light on the transformations and unique blends of crime fiction tropes and patterns outside Anglophone literary traditions (13).

The present volume consists of a selection of articles expanding on the papers presented at the *Eleventh Captivating Criminality* conference. They demonstrate how the focus on the idiosyncrasies of individual texts—from different historical epochs—and their unique blending of forms, styles, and genres can (re-)vitalize critical approaches and raise awareness to crime fiction “as a field in flux where mutation, contamination and innovation take precedence over the purity of canonical forms” (Gulddal and King16). The term “hybridization” can aptly grasp the continuous process by which modes of crime fiction writing can be characterized since the genre's appearance as an established narrative form. While genre hybridity has

always been a recognized trait of crime fiction, Heather Duerre Humann points out that “the major expansion of the genre’s boundaries” accelerated with postmodernism and globalization (58) “with its overt rejection of fixity, purity and authority in favor of pluralism and indeterminacy” (59). Although a general overview of the evolution of crime fiction reinforces this claim, the arrangement of the papers in this volume does not prioritize the chronological approach but follows the thematic connections between the articles. They, in turn, focus on genre hybridity in individual texts from the turn of the nineteenth century to the contemporary period to illustrate not only the dynamic amalgamation of literary genres but also how their unique blends comment on cultural and intercultural practices.

Ruth Heholt’s opening study, “The Folk Horror and Crime Fiction Hybrid in *Heart of Darkness*,” sheds new light on Joseph Conrad’s essential contribution to the English modernist canon and the literary representation of colonization from the perspective of generic hybridity: it discusses Conrad’s novella as a mixture of literary and genre fiction, specifically crime fiction and folk horror. The article identifies *Heart of Darkness* (1899), retrospectively and for the first time in its critical reception, as a folk horror text, thus contextualizing it through a generic term coined only recently and originally applied to post-1960s films. By meticulously tracing the four essential tropes of folk horror in Conrad’s text, Heholt convincingly demonstrates the relevance of the generic label to *Heart of Darkness*, and thereby the necessity to extend the genre’s history well beyond its established timeframe and medium. Just as importantly, her scrutiny of generic hybridity contributes to the discussion of Conrad’s imperialism—featuring landmark texts by Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, and Benita Parry, to name only a few—by highlighting how Conrad’s fundamental critique of colonization is partly formulated with the help of nuanced but all the more significant deviations from the classic folk horror patterns.

Remaining within the (post)colonial context, the second article by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács shows the other side of the coin by demonstrating how generic hybridity is utilized in the critique of racism in recent African-American crime fiction. “Hard-boiled Reinvestigations of African American History in Barbara Neely’s *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) and *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994)” discusses the intermingling of crime fiction—the female hard-boiled detective story—and the neo-slave narrative in the two eponymous novels to investigate how they rewrite racial history at the interface of the two seemingly incompatible approaches of unrelenting skepticism and hopeful optimism, which define the two genres, respectively.

Kovács argues that in *Blanche on the Lam* the eponymous protagonist of the four-volume series succeeds as an amateur detective through consciously exploiting the Mammy stereotype and using it as a cover in a narrative that fundamentally restages the captivity and liberation scenario of slave narratives in a contemporary environment of interracial racism. Yet, Blanche's limited opportunity to seek justice reflects the inherent skepticism of hard-boiled fiction rather than the hope for regeneration associated with neo-slave narratives. *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* is, if possible, even more skeptical in bringing to the limelight intraracial racism among the African-American elite of US society and tracing it back historically to W. E. B. Du Bois's highly influential notion targeted at promoting the social upward mobility and political representation of African-Americans. It is this historical arch that, Kovács demonstrates, qualifies the novel as a neo-slave narrative, though one that is nevertheless fully devoid of the genre's hope for healing and regeneration.

The third article, Michael Pronko's "Just how dangerous is he?"—Cormac McCarthy's Hybridized Crime Fiction," remains within the context of specifically American genres to tackle comprehensive concerns of hybridization in crime fiction, such as the search for novelty, the melting of literary and genre fiction to address a wide audience, and the interrogation of social evils—wars, for instance—beyond the rationale of the actual "petty" crimes committed in a given narrative. Pronko demonstrates how generic hybridity is created and consistently maintained in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) through narrative technique: the novel is an amalgam of three narratives told from the perspectives of three characters—Chigurh, Moss, and Sheriff Bell—who are distinctly rooted in three genres: horror, thriller, and the Western, respectively. For Pronko, the emergent generic hybrid is a blatant example of the "cross-pollination" between literary and genre fictions, which blurs the always permeable boundaries of the two in an artistically fruitful manner; in fact, blending the three genres and yet denying the narrative the conventional straightforward resolution of most crime fiction is, Pronko argues, key to McCarthy's artistic achievement. He fully exploits, Pronko adds, the tensions inherent in generic hybrids to create a postmodern crime novel. Though the article does not provide a systematic comparative analysis of McCarthy's novel and its 2007 film adaptation, it does rely on the evidence of the Coen brothers' inspired interpretation to substantiate its claims about generic hybridity.

The fourth article, Renáta Zsámba's "Wartime Knitting in Agatha Christie's *N or M?*" links to the previous discussion of generic hybridity in

crime fiction through the theme of war, and presents a perfect counterpoint to it by introducing the feminine tradition of Golden Age crime fiction, with a pronounced focus on the domestic sphere and female agency. As the author highlights, Christie's spy novel of 1941—just like her other Tommy and Tuppence narratives—suffers from both critical neglect and hostility. To counter the offhand dismissal of *N or M?* as “jingoistic” war propaganda, Zsámbo offers a meticulous analysis of the knitting motif to argue that this spy novel—by definition a generic mixture of the adventure tale, detective, and espionage fiction—provides a platform for making sense of the inexplicable experience of the war from a feminine perspective. That goes hand in hand with addressing concerns of wartime xenophobia, spy fever, and misogyny, as well as subverting the propagandistic images of patriotic femininity through an exemplary representation of female agency. The article provides a nuanced discussion of the novel's multifaceted subversions through an inspired interpretation of *knitting magenta* against the backdrop of cultural history and historical semiotics to demonstrate that hybrid crime fiction can and does gesture beyond the actual crime structuring its plot to tackle highly complex social and political issues in an aptly complex manner.

Continuing the discussion of Golden Age crime fiction, the fourth article, co-authored by Jiří Jelínek and Jana Jelínková, provides a comparative analysis of another Christie novel—incidentally published in the same year, 1941, but featuring Poirot and thus being a core item of the Golden Age canon—with a focus on the motif of the sea. Evoking both cultural historical and myth critical contexts to underpin their analysis, the authors of “Turning Tides, Changing Times: Sea in *Evil Under the Sun* and *Journey to the South*” juxtapose Christie's canonical text with a twenty-first-century Czech postmodern novel to highlight how the detective genre contributes to the generic hybrid represented by the latter. At the same time, they draw attention to the manner in which the postmodern anti-detective story as literary fiction renegotiates the conventional connotations of the sea motif in genre fiction, exemplified by Christie's text, in accordance with the philosophical underpinnings and poetics of postmodernism. More specifically, they treat the two novels as representative of the two different worldviews, whose dissimilarities are brought into relief by the diametrical opposition of the two novels' respective treatment of the sea motif in shaping a (crime) narrative.

“Between Genre, Parody, and Criticism: Gilbert Adair's *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd*,” the fifth article of the collection, resonates closely with

Jelínek and Jelínková's approach in comparing a Golden Age crime novel with a postmodern metafiction. A major and significant difference between the two studies results from the fact that, in contrast to the relatively loose intertextual connections between *Journey to the South* and *Evil Under the Sun*, *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (2006) is, as Felicitas Mayer emphasizes, a highly self-conscious parody of crime fiction, with countless echoes of specific Golden Age whodunits. As Mayer explains, consistently working with the conventions of the whodunit in his intricately intertextual postmodern metafiction, Adair retrospectively highlights the germs of these features in Golden Age crime fiction proper, thereby confirming the relevance of the genre in a postmodern context. In fact, Adair's exaggerated and therefore parodic use of generic conventions does not simply blur the boundaries between "fact" and "fiction" to call attention to the artificiality of the former, Mayer contends, but by doing so asserts an awareness of the same artificiality in Golden Age crime fiction.

While these two studies focus on how Golden Age crime fiction blends into and informs readers' understanding of hybrid postmodern texts, the sixth article of the collection returns to a mode of writing that has been a permanent component in the hybrid texts *per se* of crime fiction from its birth: the Gothic. Yet Šárka Dvořáková's "Peter May's *The Lewis Man* and Rebecca Wait's *Our Fathers*: A Scottish Gothic Reading of Island-Set Crime Fiction" neatly ties in with the previous articles by addressing contemporary fiction—Scottish novels from 2012 and 2020, respectively—and focusing on a definitive aspect of their sea-bound setting: the island. Dvořáková's argument is premised on a special feature of contemporary Scottish Gothic, namely the fact that the island has become its frequent setting, regardless of the location's wide-ranging associations with other modes of writing and genres, such as utopia/dystopia or the Robinsonade. Drawing on the implication that the island setting is an indicator of Gothic undertones in Scottish crime fiction, Dvořáková sets out to meticulously disentangle the connotations of this motif as well as other typically Scottish Gothic tropes in the two representative novels of her choice. Their interpretation both confirms the hybrid nature of the two novels discussed and suggests that it is through their Gothic components that the novels seem to comply with the demand to address complex social issues—in this case, the legacy of the colonial past and the intricacies of Scottish national identity—posed to crime fiction.

The next article, Emily Alice Farmer's "In True Crime We Trust: The Artfactuality of John Douglas and Mark Olshaker's *Mindhunter: Inside*

the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit (2017) and Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017)" continues the discussion of contemporary crime fiction by problematizing in a case study the very nature of a hybridized subgenre *per se*: true crime exists, as Farmer points out, at the interface of fiction and non-fiction. Hence arises the problem of consumption, which resides, the article claims, in the widely acknowledged fact that many readers/viewers process true crime narratives uncritically, without taking into consideration their fictionalized and mediated nature, their artifactuality. Farmer goes on to demonstrate through analyzing both the book and television series versions of *Mindhunter*, how true crime's marketing actually encourages such passive, unthinking consumption, that is, interpreting the narratives as entirely factual and unmediated. Her findings inspire Farmer to call for a generally critical attitude to the true crime genre as such instead of an automatic acceptance of its authenticity.

The ninth and closing article in the thematic block discusses the television series based on a parody of the true crime genre: the Coen brothers' *Fargo* (1996). As Angelika Reichmann's "Postmodern Genre-Bending on Mainstream TV: A Case Study of *Fargo* Season 5" demonstrates, although this season of the eponymous series retains the Coens' paraphernalia of true crime, it does not even bother to pretend to verisimilitude. After the conspicuously artistic and artificial first shots, as Reichmann highlights, a perplexing generic hybrid ensues. It offers an apparently incongruous mixture of the realistic and the fantastic through evoking a wide array of genres, including, again, myth, the Gothic, and the Western, to name only the ones connecting this article with previous discussions of hybridity in the present volume. Reichmann contextualizes this versatility of genres by evoking the motive forces behind hybridization, on the one hand. On the other hand, she provides an interpretation of their incongruity through identifying their respective roles in conveying the highly political, (post)feminist message of the series—a protest against domestic violence—in an ambiguous and complex manner, which addresses both mainstream audiences and fulfills the more sophisticated intellectual and artistic demands posed to high-end television drama. Hybridization, Reichmann argues, is key to the series' ability to comply with manifold market pressures, and yet attract much critical acclaim.

The last article of the issue is unrelated to generic hybridity and the crime genre but with a focus on encounters between humans and animals, it extends *HJEAS*'s dedication to explore anthropocentrism and ecological dilemmas, and the growing engagement of the humanities with

environmental issues. Jessica Murray's "Snakes on a Page: Re-reading Monstrosity and Vulnerability in Selected Contemporary Fiction" uses Literary Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Vegan Studies, and Monster Studies as a theoretical framework to investigate three recently published novels, *Stay and Fight* (2019) by Madeline Ffitch, *Reptile Memoirs* (2022) by Silje Ulstein, and *Blue Skies* (2023) by T. C. Boyle. All three novels depict violent confrontations between children and snakes, the reptile enjoying a prominent position in Western (literary) imagination and whose representation endorses mainly negative stereotypes in the anthropocentric paradigm of animal representations. Murray's close textual readings convincingly argue that the three authors urge their readers to reconsider problematic and naturalized sociocultural assumptions about animals, the role they play in our lives, and the boundaries they are never supposed to transgress. The stories analyzed in the article relate critically to contemporary ethical engagement with the natural world and contain multiple examples of humanity's ever-expanding levels of self-delusional behavior. One shared motif is the antithetical arrangement of human vulnerability and animal monstrosity, a logic refuted by the authors who portray snakes attacking children as forms of monstrosity that implicate their owners or unfold in a framework of interspecies misunderstanding they created. By introducing a more-than-human gaze, Murray asserts, the novels destabilize and reverse the anthropocentric arrangement and propose a new one, that of human monstrosity and animal vulnerability.

The issue draws to a close with some stimulating reviews, John McLeod's perceptive commentaries on an edited collection of essays by Florian Stadler, contextualizing Salman Rushdie's life and works, followed by Mária Kurdi's notes on Salomé Paul's *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy: Feminist Myths of Monstrosity*, an insightful study on the best-known contemporary Irish woman playwright. Especially dear to *HJEAS* is Nina Lykke's review of *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice*, edited by Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta Zampaki, two scholars who guest-edited the 2024/2 issue of this journal as a continuation of their research in the field of posthumanism. The review section concludes with Tibor Glant's informative assessment of *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writing*, "a thought provoking contribution to both travel writing and Wharton studies as well as to American intellectual history" by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, also a contributor to the present thematic block.

As Associate Editor of HJEAS, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Angelika Reichmann and Renáta Zsámbsa of Eszterházy Károly Catholic University for bringing a truly international band of scholars together and guest-editing this book-length thematic block on generic experimentation and hybridity in crime narratives. Let me extend my gratitude to colleagues in the academia who accepted our request to review essays, to fellow editors, and Donald Morse, Editor-in-Chief, for helping us complete the issue.

Renáta Zsámbsa is Senior Lecturer at the Department of English and American Studies at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Eger.

Angelika Reichmann is Professor of English Literature at the Department of English and American Studies at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Eger.

Zsolt Győri is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Debrecen and the Associate Editor of *HJEAS*.

Notes

1. Gill Plain's *Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001) was a crucial step in the re-reading of twentieth-century crime fiction with a critical approach to gender triggered by the oversimplification of the typologies of established subgenres, such as classical and hard-boiled, focusing on the detectives. Plain's book dismisses the historical overview of the literary traditions of detective fiction in favor of exploring "the complexity of popular fiction representations" (5) of the socio-cultural constructions of gender, sexuality and the body, which leads her to the recognition that the "corporeal landscape" closely examined in individual texts also reflects the adaptability of the form (6).

2. Maurizio Ascari's *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction. Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (2007) is probably the most significant book in its revision of the canon and twentieth-century criticism of crime fiction. Not only does he survey the early development of crime fiction, but he also discards the classic typologies designating the sharp boundaries between crime fiction and other genres. He is interested in "those hybrid zones where its [crime fiction's] conventions mingle with those of sensation fiction and the ghost story, or else are conflated with the discourses of pseudo-sciences" (Introduction xii). Re-reading texts either known too well or often discarded as falling outside the traditionally established borders of crime fiction (xi), used synonymously with detective fiction and associated with rationality and the quest for solution for decades ("Revising" 8–9), illuminates the fluidity of the genre and offers new insights into its development.

3. Andrew Pepper and David Schmidt's edited volume *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction* (2016) raises awareness to "the proliferation of crime fiction

cultures” and builds on Stewart King’s argument that contemporary criticism needs to consider crime fiction “as an example of world literature to gain greater insights into the global reach of the genre” and to explore “international connections between works” (King qtd. in Pepper and Schmidt 10). Not only does this foreground crime fiction as a transnational field, but it also re-describes and broadens critical perspectives on how it can or should be viewed in the twenty-first century.

4. Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Alistair Rolls’s *Criminal Moves. Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction*, published in 2019, is an edited collection of papers expanding on recent criticisms preparing the ground for a paradigm shift in crime fiction scholarship. The editors urge a serious re-consideration of earlier critical stances about “genre norms and conventions” (1) that prevent the engagement with what they “regard as the inherent mobility of crime fiction” (1, emphasis in original). They argue that crime fiction “must be seen as a genre constantly violating its own boundaries” (1) and can best be explored through its transnational circulation as well as the analysis of individual texts previously demonstrated by Gill Plain, Lee Horsley or Merja Makinen in the early 2000s. Finally, in 2022, Gulddal, King, and Rolls published their edited volume *The Cambridge Companion to World Crime Fiction* to bring together and reach beyond the critical findings of the past two decades with a special focus on the status and generic features of crime fiction as a global phenomenon (1). As the title of the volume promises, the collection moves beyond the exploration of Western crime fiction writing and attempts to identify its roots and literary antecedents in other cultures, not to mention the role of translations, which also helped establish local crime fiction cultures. The editors also point out that global adaptations of crime fiction formulas illuminate formal hybridizations resulting in local versions of crime writing (1).

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