What Crime Novels Don't Tell You

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Abstract

The paper examines the misrepresentation of victims, offenders, and the criminal justice system in crime fiction literature, an increasingly prevalent issue given the extreme popularity of the crime fiction genre. Misportraying elements of crime is detrimental to the public perception of crime; many readers derive the bulk of their perception of crime through fictional literature and media. Through the analysis of a range of texts, including crime fiction novels from different subgenres and eras, the paper has identified and described the most prevailing and damaging misrepresentations in crime fiction. From said analysis, it has been concluded that, though previously thought to be a significant issue, victim sidelining is not representative of the entire crime fiction genre, disproving the common critique of victims being treated as solely plot devices. However, as assumed prior to the investigation, the lack of nuance in offender archetypes (some of which promote criminal romanticisation), the infallibility of criminal profiling, the presence of a 'lone detective', and the speed of legal and forensic processes are all valid criticisms of the crime fiction genre. These inaccuracies shape how audiences understand crime and justice, creating unrealistic expectations and, in some cases, encouraging empathy for criminals over victims. Understanding these gaps is essential for both producers and consumers of crime fiction literature. Producers must ensure that their content is both compelling and accurate, while consumers should be well-informed of the misportrayals in their favourite crime fiction books.

Keywords: *Crime Fiction; Misrepresentation; Victim Sidelining; Criminal Archetypes; Romanticisation, Criminal Justice System; Public Perception*

Introduction

Crime fiction occupies a unique place in popular culture. The genre enthrals audiences with stories that merge suspense, mystery, and psychological intrigue. From classic whodunits to modern thrillers, the genre's evolution has mirrored society's fascination with crime. However, crime fiction goes beyond being a source of entertainment, as its narratives have the power to shape the public's perspectives

on criminality and the justice system, often blurring lines between fiction and reality ("Fiction vs Reality").

Crime entails a wide range of offences that can be anything from theft and blackmail to arson and murder. Crime fiction novels centre around a crime and its subsequent investigation to solve the case and unearth the motivations of the criminal. The investigation, seen as a pursuit of justice, is usually undertaken by a professional detective or amateur sleuth. Novels of this genre often feature a "pulsing pace, a race against the clock to save humanity, a killer to get off the streets" (Ellison). The thrill triggered by reading crime fiction draws people to the genre, which explains its popularity. In fact, "it has been estimated that as many as one in every three new novels, published in English, is classified within the crime fiction category" (Franks) and one-third of television programming since the 1980s has been dedicated to crime-related shows (Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn). This interest in fictional crime content extends over to true crime, as "57% of US adults consume true crime content" (Greiwe).

Given the extreme popularity of the genre, it is crucial to examine the common elements in crime novels that are either depicted inaccurately or left out. These omissions and inaccuracies can significantly influence societal beliefs on crime and criminal justice. Inaccuracies, simplifications, and omissions lead to a hindered understanding of the realities that crime fiction is trying to represent to a vast majority of the public.

This research paper aims to delve into several major elements of crime investigation that are missing or portrayed inaccurately in crime novels. One of the most significant issues is the limited attention given to victims. Additionally, the complexity of the judicial system is not captured, leading to misinformed notions about the system in real life. Furthermore, the genre tends to overuse a small set of criminal archetypes, and some of these characterisations lead to the romanticisation of offenders.

Literature Review

This section of the paper will outline a few pieces of relevant literature to provide context for the following investigation and build an understanding of previous research in the field. A few pieces of literature focus on different aspects of crime fiction.

"Let the Dead Speak: Examining the Depiction of the Victim in Detective Fiction" is a thesis that discusses whether the common critique that crime novels exploit or ignore their fictional victims is true. It does this through the textual analysis of four crime novels (Five Little Pigs by Agatha Christie, Ruth Rendell's From Doon with Death, Minette Walters's The Scold's Bridle and Tana French's The Likeness) that span over four different periods. However, the author concluded by saying that the criticisms are not representative of the genre and "...each work must stand or fall on its own merits" (Research Online). This conclusion contradicts the one from "A Typology of Victim Characterisation in Television Crime Dramas". That study looks specifically at "female victims of interpersonal violence, rape/sexual assault, and stalking", it was only able to divide the victims into three categories: 'innocent', 'unlikable but not culpable', and 'manipulative'. This suggests a limited nuance in the character of the victim. Additionally, the majority of the female victims were white and under the age of 21, which meant there were similar physical characteristics featured in these shows, too. (Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn).

"Lawyer as critic: analysing the legal thriller" is a paper that explores how works of John Grisham, Erle Stanley Gardner and Harper Lee show their lawyer protagonists as critics of the law and legal systems they are part of. Moreover, legal scholars argue that these works usually contain "...outlandishly happy endings." The article concludes by saying that "Indeed, this has become a narrative

expectation for legal thriller writers." (Bainbridge) Similarly, "Do we mistake fact for fiction?" is a paper that looks at another aspect misrepresented by fictional crime content. It suggests that people are acquiring inaccurate information from crime fiction about the accuracy of criminal profiling. The effects on society due to the criminal profiling illusion include "misled police investigations, hindered apprehensions of the actual offender(s), and wrongful convictions of innocent citizens…"(Greiwe) Both papers support the conclusion that many aspects of the criminal justice system are misportrayed.

"Criminals", a chapter from "The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction", determines the common archetypes of criminals in crime fiction. It notes that "ideal criminals are strong, evil and blameworthy" (Gregoriou) and has classified the preferred criminal archetypes into "monster", the "vampire" and the "spoilt child". Accordingly, due to the presentation of criminals within unrealistic, limited archetypes, another issue has emerged. As supported by articles like "Dark Obsession: The Romanticisation of Killers in Pop Culture" ("Dark Obsession"), certain portrayals of criminals can unintentionally romanticise and even justify their actions.

The following research will build upon preexisting research by providing a comprehensive explanation of the chosen flaws in crime fiction while supporting them with examples across multiple eras.

Discussion

All papers mentioned above in the literature survey and papers previously published look at the idea of inaccuracies in crime literature in some niche, whether it is focusing on a certain subgenre of crime or only looking at one specific inaccuracy. This paper, on the other hand, will take a more comprehensive approach, detailing the points mentioned in the introduction. It will use examples from published, well-known novels that come from different eras and sub-genres to justify the points made.

Part I: The Victim

A common critique of crime literature is that it often focuses on the sensational elements of crime. The gruesome details of a corpse at a crime scene. The thrilling pursuit of justice by determined detectives. Critics say novels fail to recognise that behind every crime is a victim. They are not just corpses, but people with families, friends, and stories to tell beyond their unfortunate death. Though the victims are fictional, sidelining or using them merely as plot devices to focus on the far more 'interesting' criminal affects people's perception of crime in the real world.

According to the chapter, "Victims" in the Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction, "Victims inhabit a fluid position in the criticism of crime fiction, shifting from the centre of the reading to the margins..." (Mills) This suggests that victims are brought to the centre to be examined for clues, but are sidelined after these clues are obtained.

The criticism that crime authors ignore or exploit their fictional victims especially applies to novels in the Golden Age. Writer S.S. Van Dine, in fact, laid out twenty rules for books of the crime fiction genre. One of which was "There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse, the better" (Van Dine in Haycraft 1993, p. 190). This refers to victims merely as corpses, suggesting that the more lifeless and irrelevant the victim is, the better for the story.

However, these rules are not representative of the entire genre. In fact, some novels did not follow this rule even during the Golden Age. An example of this is Five Little Pigs, a book where

carefully examining the personality and relationships of a victim was necessary to solve the murder. In this book, Hercule Poirot, the brilliant Belgian detective, investigates a 16-year-old murder case. With little forensic evidence and no way to observe the crime scene, he relies on interviews with family members to understand the character of the victim and the events leading up to his death, Amyas Crale. Through the study of his personality and the construction of the day's events, he is able to discover the likely motive behind the murder and identify the suspect. Due to the nature of the crime, the victim was a recurring focus throughout the book.

Despite such books existing, the majority of books by the same author, such as The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and The Murder on the Links, have the victim dead before the book starts or appear shortly before being killed. Their death and lack of focus on the victims themselves throughout the books do not evoke sympathy for the victims in the slightest, leading to readers forgetting that the victims of crimes are real people and not just names. According to the Tatler, "Romanticising crime and criminals while sidelining victims can risk normalising them" ("How Is Hollywood Glorifying") Even a sociology professor, Jooyoung Lee, says that being exposed to the extreme examples of crime, which are often featured in crime literature, can result in people not being bothered when "lesser forms" of violence happen in real life. ("How Does True Crime Affect").

Despite this, victim sidelining is not representative of the entire genre (Research Online) and was much more common during the Golden Age. Currently, there are many books that shift the focus from the perpetrator to the victim, such as None Shall Sleep, where the main characters are an escaped victim of a serial killer and the son of a serial killer's victim.

Now that it has been established that the ignorance of victims is featured in some but not all crime fiction, another issue with victim portrayal exists. There is a lack of nuance in victim characterisation. According to "A Typology of Victim Characterisation in Television Crime Dramas", the victims were divided into only three categories: 'innocent', 'unlikable but not culpable', and 'manipulative'. This restrictive framework reduces victims to simplistic archetypes, depriving them of individuality and complexity. It has a similar effect to simply sidelining the victims, as their overused characterizations make it difficult for readers to engage with them as fully realised people.

Part II: The Criminal

Building on the previous section, which spoke of ignoring and sidelining victims and shifting the focus to criminals, this section will now highlight the flaws in the portrayal of criminals in crime fiction, specifically the lack of nuance in character, and certain characterisations can potentially cause their romanticisation.

As touched on before, according to the chapter, "Criminals", from the "Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction", common criminal archetypes are the "monster", the "vampire" and the "spoilt child". The monster refers to fictional offenders who commit their wrongdoings because their criminal behaviour is what they were inclined to from birth, meaning that their choices come from their inherent nature. The 'vampire' archetype depicts criminals as products of past trauma, implying their behaviour stems from upbringing and childhood experiences. (Gregoriou) An example of this archetype is Hannibal Lecter, from The Silence of the Lambs, who is a serial killer because of his horrific childhood, where he witnessed his sister being murdered and cannibalised. (Harris) Finally, the spoiled child partakes in criminal activity, not because of nature or nurture, but simply because they enjoy and indulge in it. (Gregoriou)

Arsene Lupin, a well-known figure in crime fiction literature, plays the role of both a detective and a gentleman thief in his books. This is different from the aforementioned archetypes, but poses a different issue apart from the lack of nuance. There is a lack of acknowledgement that he is a criminal, as stealing is a crime. The issue is that his charming and respectful character overshadows the fact that he is a wrongdoer. His crimes are presented as "not only as legitimate but as worthy in some way of our approval" (Gulddal). His debonair airs lead readers to forget his cruelness under pressure. In The Hollow Needle, he derives pleasure from taunting his young adversary, Isidore Beautrelet. His methods can be extremely unjust; however, the narrator is almost always sympathetic towards him. (Gulddal) The gentleman thief is also a personality type of fictional criminals that romanticises them, as readers may be inclined to feel sympathetic, instead of disgusted, because of the contrast between their actions and personality.

Romanticising criminals extends beyond fiction and is also seen in the cases of real offenders, who have committed horrendous crimes. Representing criminals, specifically killers, as complex characters works well for storytelling, but risks romanticising their actions, as the focus has shifted from their brutal crime to their personal struggles. This also disregards the extreme impact on the victim and their family. This representation has also resulted in people sending letters to serial killers, such as Ted Bundy, to express their admiration. This can encourage copycat behaviour amongst vulnerable, younger audiences. In fact, "over 75% of true crime enthusiasts consider serial killers to be 'celebrities,' indicating a tendency to idolise them instead of focusing on victims." ("Dark Obsession")

A lack of nuance in criminal characterisation is not the only issue present in crime fiction literature. Their portrayal is also problematic, as narratives usually examine how criminals are formed because of bad families. The issue with this lies in the fact that mother-blaming is much more common than father-blaming, due to misogynistic ideologies that convey the message that mothers are the creators of their children's characters, making them responsible for the actions of their offspring (Gregoriou). Additionally, the correlation between mental illness and criminality, where the illness is the explanation or justification behind the crime, stigmatises mental health and implies "all individuals with mental health issues are prone to criminal violence" (Gregoriou). For example, the portrayal of psychosis in Shutter Island can stigmatise the mental illness (Friedman).

Part III: The System

The criminal justice system plays a central role in crime fiction. However, there are issues and inaccuracies in the way it is represented. The issues that will be touched upon in this section are the portrayal of criminal profiling as completely accurate, the inaccuracy of the number of investigators involved in solving a case, as well as the absence of delays and biases typically present in real investigations. Of these concerns, the representation of criminal profiling as an entirely accurate science warrants particular attention and will be discussed in greater depth.

It is common for the investigators in crime fiction novels to employ criminal profiling, a technique that involves examining the information available from a crime and deducing the likely traits of the unknown offender (Greiwe). All of the traits determined from this process make up the criminal's 'profile', which primarily consists of physical traits (ex., age, sex, etc.), cognitive processes (ex., planning behind and motive of the crime), social situation (ex., level of education, marital status, etc.), and behaviour towards the victim (Greiwe).

In reality, most police find the technique useful, with 88% viewing it as a valuable tool and 59% believing that profilers employ techniques grounded in sound science. (Greiwe, "Criminal Profiling: Belief and Use"). Despite the positive response from the police, scholarly literature is bringing attention

to the fact that there is little evidence for the validity of criminal profiling. Continuing the usage of CP when there is no certainty of it working can be detrimental to the investigation of a crime. It could result in misled police investigations, where plenty of time, effort, and resources can be wasted. There are also chances of wrongful convictions of innocents, distorting the general population's view of the justice system. (Greiwe).

A reason for the strong belief in criminal profiling without much supporting evidence might be its portrayal in crime-related media, including crime fiction literature. As discussed before, crime-related media is one of the few exposures to crime for the general population, so its representation in said media shapes their understanding of crime. Some authors argue that it is even more so in the case of criminal profiling, as its depiction in the media has raised public awareness of its existence. (*PsycNET Database*, 1998).

Criminal profiling has been a recurring theme in crime-related media since the 1990s. (*PsycNET Database*, 2015) But before that, it was represented in crime fiction literature, where extremely popular fictional detectives such as Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes extensively used this technique in their novels. In almost all books in the Poirot franchise, he speaks of using his 'grey cells' to solve the case and tries to deduce the character of the criminal to narrow down the list of suspects. Sherlock Holmes, on the other hand, is known to recognise minute details that allow him to deduce the occupation, social status, and even habits of suspects. ("Sherlock Holmes Effect") He demonstrates this ability in the novel A Study in Scarlet, where he pieces together Dr. Watson's background within minutes of his arrival. Criminal profiling is still featured in more modern literature. For example, the book series, The Naturals, features two teenagers who are natural 'profilers' and recruited by the FBI to solve cold cases. This slowly shifts into solving active cases, where the use of profiling and other techniques eventually leads to the success of the investigation.

A common theme in fictional crime-related media is that the representation of criminal profiling is often sensationalised and dramatised for the effect of entertainment. (Greiwe) In the show Criminal Minds, criminal profiling has a success rate of 88% in apprehending the criminal and never mistakenly suspects innocent citizens. (*PsycNET Database*, 2015) Regular exposure to crime-related media and literature, where criminal profiling has extreme success rates, causes consumers of this content to internalise this incorrect information. This internalisation leads to the common positive perception of criminal profiling despite the lack of evidence for its validity (Greiwe).

According to Clare Mackintosh, former police inspector and crime fiction novelist, a homicide investigation can have 30-40 people working on it, all performing specific roles ranging from forensic analysis to interviewing witnesses. The collaboration between all of these people working on different aspects of the investigation is crucial to solving a crime. However, in the majority of crime fiction literature, an individual or a small group of people solves the crime. (Mackintosh) For example, the novel, Good Girl, Bad Blood, features two teenagers solving a missing person case, as the police have ignored it. It sidelines the role of the police in investigating crime. Only a niche subgenre of crime fiction called police procedurals focuses on accurately conveying the process of solving a crime in the real world. (Evans) Trying to include 30 different investigators in a novel would be difficult and unsatisfactory for the reader. Instead, the author can partially incorporate the truth by occasionally mentioning groups of investigators that have also contributed to the investigation.

There are many delays in the complex criminal justice system. These biases often hinder the investigation, slowing down its progress. In crime fiction, however, these delays often do not exist. Usually, authors try to quicken the processes to keep up with the fast pace of the book. According to Clare, she has quickened forensic results in her novel because her "plot demanded it" (Mackintosh).

Moreover, according to Jim Grey, a district attorney, most of the pieces of equipment that are used in crime fiction media do exist, but are not commonly seen in a crime lab, let alone all of the equipment in one crime lab. (Crime Scene Investigation).

Quick results in the fictional criminal justice system can lead people to believe that quick results are common in the real world, too, which is not the case. Jason Schultz of the Santa Cruz Sentinel wrote an article, which states that "cases may take months and even years before any verdict can be reached." (Crime Scene Investigation). Such portrayals of the criminal justice system can lead to audiences having unrealistic expectations about "how quickly justice should be served, potentially fueling frustration and dissatisfaction when real cases do not unfold as quickly" (Kumar).

Conclusion

This research set out to explore the representation of crime and criminal investigation in crime fiction literature, and in doing so, both validated and refuted initial assumptions. Before looking at the validity of claims made in the introduction, there are a few limitations of this study that must be discussed. There are multiple other issues that are present in regards to the crime literature portrayal, but are not discussed in detail in the paper. These include the oversimplified crime motivations that ignore the complex blend of backgrounds, social circumstances, and psychological factors that contribute to criminals' behaviour, inaccurate representations of mental illness, such as psychosis, and the lack of focus on the emotional toll on investigators who are regularly involved in disturbing crimes. The lack of insight into these inaccurate portrayals could cause the paper to be viewed as incomplete.

The first claim made was that the victim, an integral part of any crime in real life, was marginalised in crime fiction novels. After analysis of several novels from different time periods, it was confirmed that victim sidelining is not representative of the entire genre, and each book has a varying degree of focus on the victim. The issue of victims was instead the lack of nuance in their characterisation and character development. Most novels use limited character tropes for their victims (Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn). Moreover, there are many novels that do focus on victims, but as plot devices, not people. Exploring their experience or trauma could reverse the desensitisation to crime caused by prolonged exposure to crime media and literature ("How Is Hollywood Glorifying", "How Does True Crime Affect").

The second claim made was that the depiction of the justice system is often inaccurate in many aspects. Unlike the last one, this assumption was confirmed to be true. It was found that the root cause of all of these inaccuracies was the pacing of the narrative. The compression of legal and forensic processes that take months, and even years in reality, to merely days and hours in novels sustains the momentum of the plot. The presence of a lone detective or a small group of investigators, when it is often dozens of people collaborating to find the criminal, gives readers a small number of people to remember and root for. The overrepresentation of advanced forensic technologies, often depicted as being available within a single crime lab, further distances fictional novels from reality. Finally, the reliability and certainty of criminal profiling techniques in these narratives give the false notion of the complete accuracy of criminal profiling, when there is little empirical evidence supporting the practice. ("Criminal Profiling: Belief and Use", *PsycNET Database*, 1998).

The final claim is on the lack of nuance in criminal characterisation and the potential of crime fiction literature to romanticise criminals. As outlined in the source "The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction," offenders frequently fall under character tropes such as the "monster" (innately driven to crime), the "vampire" (shaped by trauma or dysfunctional childhood), or the "spoilt child" (acting out of pleasure

or indulgence) (Gregoriou). These archetypes leave little room for complexity or ambiguity in the character of criminals. Some portrayals, however, can be more problematic, where they tend to romanticise or excuse criminal behaviour. These kinds of offenders are usually charming and sophisticated, which often causes the reader to understand their actions or even admire them despite ethical transgressions. This phenomenon goes beyond the literature to the real world, as seen by the idolization of real-life killers such as Ted Bundy, through fan correspondence and widespread media fascination. Such representations can also encourage copycat behaviour, particularly among impressionable audiences.

The significance of this research is considerable. For many, crime fiction literature and media are the bulk, if not all, of their exposure and understanding of crime, justice, and victimhood. Inaccurately portraying the workings of the criminal justice system or the nature of criminals and victims distorts their perception of crime as a whole. This distortion has problematic effects, including disappointment with the justice system due to unrealistic expectations, becoming more sympathetic to criminals at the expense of victims, and even in extreme cases, the idolization of criminals and the desensitisation to crime. Therefore, authors, publishers, and readers of the crime fiction genre must work towards representations that are not only compelling but also accurate and informed.

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