

Connectedness: Communities of Crime Fiction Readers

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Introduction

For as long as there have been libraries, librarians have played an integral role in connecting readers to writers. The result has been the construction of communities around the world, onsite and online, as people come together for reading experiences that provide education and enjoyment. This paper explores why crime fiction writers are particularly adept at facilitating high levels of connectedness; why creating a sense of community has become such an essential component of a crime writer's toolkit. The imagined worlds of crime fiction have negotiated a path from the pages of these stories to the common consciousness so that even those unfamiliar with the genre will easily recognise the country estate and the dark alleyway. Readers also recognise the victims, villains and vast array of amateur and professional sleuths that make their way through these tales of greed, lust, revenge and murder. Superimposed upon these physical settings, and the characters that occupy them, is a virtual setting, an imagined community where good triumphs over evil. Thus, crime fiction writers reduce the distance between the world that is lived in and the world that is imagined ensuring the genre does more than simply entertain; it generates important conversations around connectedness and the types of communities we want to build. This paper also examines, with a focus on the British and American crime fiction traditions, how librarians are able to assist in facilitating connections between crime fiction readers and writers as well as between readers and other readers.

Communities of Crime Fiction Readers

Librarians have always been crucial in matching readers to writers. Today, librarians, around the world, work to develop communities of readers both onsite and online, as people come together for the reading experience – as education, enjoyment, for feeling a connection with a particular writer or developing a connection with other readers. This paper argues that crime fiction writers, across a wide range of sub-genres, discussed in more detail below, are particularly adept at facilitating high levels of connectedness because creating a sense of community has become such an essential component of the toolkit for crime writers. For crime fiction to be realistic, and, by extension, readable, the plotlines must be grounded in the everyday. The motives for and the methods of murder can be as complex as the writer desires but the reader needs to be able to connect these thoughts and deeds with the world they occupy (or know of through other types of media). As Sarah Johnson writes: “The setting should be convincing, yes, and anachronisms are still things to be avoided [...] readers tend to be quite unforgiving of obvious mistakes” (2002). Crime fiction writers have, therefore, become very good at documenting rural and metropolitan landscapes in fine detail: from the availability of certain products, to bus and train timetables, to the floor plans of local hotels or world-famous buildings. These physical settings are, of course, populated by the familiar. Readers recognise, through personal experience or through evening news bulletins, the victim who was unfairly targeted or simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, the faithless lover, the jealous spouse, the spiteful supervisor and the disagreeable neighbour. We recognise, too, many of those men and women who make their way through these tales of greed, lust, revenge and murder to bring criminals to justice. We have seen it all before – the character flaws, the determination and the toughness, the loner and the team player, the sense of right and wrong and the desire to make the world a better place, one incarceration at a time.

It is the almost never-ending array of detectives that define crime fiction: not only is a

text identified as crime fiction through the occurrence of a crime and the detailing of the efforts of an amateur or a professional sleuth to solve that crime (Cole, 2004, p. 11); but through an expectation, on the part of the reader, that the writer will ensure that ultimately, through the detective, “the mystery will be fully explained” (Zunshine, 2006, p. 122). These resolutions are superimposed upon a variety of physical settings, and the characters that occupy them, in the form of a virtual setting, an imagined community where good consistently triumphs over evil. Thus, crime fiction writers reduce the distance between the world that is lived in and the world that is imagined ensuring the genre does more than provide entertainment; it generates important conversations around connectedness and the types of communities we want to build. Crime fiction, often dismissed as mere genre fiction rather than serious story telling, is, perhaps, our most important type of literature. It routinely examines what it means to be human, and how complex humans are: stories of murders, and the men and women who solve them, comment on what drives some people to take a life and what drives others to avenge that life which is lost. Moreover, “only the most literal of literary minds would dispute the claim that fictional characters help shape the way we think of ourselves, and hence help us articulate more clearly what it means to be human” (Galgut, 2002, p. 190). It is also important to remember that at the centre of every crime novel is a problem to be solved:

[N]ot by luck or divine intervention, but by human ingenuity, human intelligence and human courage. It confirms our hope that, despite some evidence to the contrary, we live in a beneficent and moral universe in which problems can be solved by rational means and peace and order restored from communal or personal disruption and chaos (James, 2009, p. 174).

Literature is widely acknowledged as a form of art that “puts us in touch with human values and dilemmas” (Klages, 2006, p. 10). Crime fiction, particularly those texts that deal with murder, more actively than any other type of fiction articulates human values and dilemmas and so, in turn, puts us more in touch with our own communities and builds bridges to connect with other communities around the world.

Film and television adaptations of well-known crime novels, as well as crime stories that have been written especially for the large and small screens, serve to reinforce the imagined worlds of such works. Those who are unfamiliar with the genre will, for example, easily recognise the country estate as a result of the numerous adaptations of the works of British authors Agatha Christie (1890-1976) which detail the cases solved by Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple and of Caroline Graham (1931-) which followed the career of Chief Inspector Tom Barnaby and now follows the career of his cousin, Chief Inspector John Barnaby, in the *Midsomer Murders* mysteries. The dark manor houses, surrounded by neatly manicured gardens that encircle neat sets of suspects are hallmarks of the genre. So, too, are the city streets and dark alleyways recreated for celluloid from the pages of works by American authors Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961) in the multiple film versions of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) that appeared in 1931, 1936 and the definitive version released in 1941 while Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) also worked to establish the metropolis as a place where murders were committed and murderers hunted down in *The Big Sleep* (1939) the film version of which was first screened in 1946. There is, of course, a near constant supply of investigators, created for television: series that document life in a huge

variety of settings. These stories, played out on the small and large screens, generate communities of crime fiction fans – those who tune in from their homes to watch the next episode and those who gather in cinemas to view the latest release.

It is also important to note that there are communities of crime fiction readers more tangible than those described above; those who gather together in libraries or in private homes or, increasingly, in the numerous online settings now available, such as the settings provided by the New South Wales Readers' Advisory Working Group, discussed briefly in the program snapshot below, to talk about their favourite writer, a writer they have not engaged with before or a newly discovered sub-genre. In some instances such gatherings are so informal they are accidental. Indeed, this paper suggests that such a sense of community – and the desire to identify as a member of a community – contributes to the idea of the blockbuster novel. There is a connection made, however tenuous, when a reader identifies with another reader who has chosen to read the same text as themselves. Commuters on their way to their workplaces, or going home, will often see their fellow travellers reading the latest bestseller; the bestseller they too are reading. The same connection can be made in lunchrooms, in parks or any other public place. There will occasionally be an exchanged acknowledgement, a look or a nod. Sometimes strangers will strike up a conversation. Regardless, there is a sense of shared experience, of shared knowledge; that these people who we do not know are reading what we are reading and are, therefore, not so very different from us.

Program Snapshot: The New South Wales Readers' Advisory Working Group

The New South Wales Readers' Advisory Working Group is a collaborative effort between the State Library of New South Wales, located in Sydney, Australia, and public libraries across the State. The Working Group was formed in 2005 with the aim of connecting the right reading to the right reader and assisting readers to explore types of fiction and non-fiction that they may not have discovered without encouragement. These efforts to connect all contribute to fulfilling the Working Group's Mission Statement: "Promoting enjoyment of reading and our library collections" (NSWRAWG, 2012). One of the major activities of the Working Group is the Annual Symposium, the first of which was in 2008, which brings together specialist speakers on a particular genre and readers' advisory services librarians working in public libraries all over New South Wales. Each Symposium has focused on a single area of reading: Romance (2008); Non-Fiction (2009); Crime (2010); Fantasy (2011); and History (2012); while in 2013 the Symposium encouraged people to read their way Around the World.

The Annual Symposium is an incredibly popular component of the Working Group's calendar and is supplemented by a range of online activities. Utilising the idea of community, the Working Group develops a year-long program that looks at a different genre each month. Through the Working Group's website (<http://readersadvisory.wetpaint.com>) different genres are explored through guest bloggers who have an expertise or an interest in a particular type of fiction or non-fiction and reading lists are constructed to assist librarians working in the field of readers' advisory services and members of the general public looking for more information on particular types of reading material. A key component of the Working Group's program is the Twitter Reading Group (<http://readwatchplay.wordpress.com>). On the last Tuesday of each calendar month members of the Working Group facilitate

a discussion around that month's theme. In April 2013, for example, the theme is Crime and the Twitter Reading Group will assist in connecting a wide range of readers of this genre using the hashtags #crimeread and #rwpchat. Thus, the sense of community is actualised through the online conversations that are generated around individual reading experiences. These interactions, therefore, serve to connect individual experiences to the experiences of a broader collective through social media. This re-imagining of the traditional book club facilitates the participation of readers who – due to caring responsibilities, disability, geography, work commitments or any other type of restriction – would not be able to attend a physical location at a pre-determined time to take part in the conversation.

A Taxonomy of Crime Fiction: Communities of Readers

This paper also examines, with a focus on the British and American crime fiction traditions, how librarians are able to assist in producing connections between crime fiction readers and writers as well as between readers and other readers. This is done through the outlining of different communities of crime fiction writers and readers, those that produce and consume, particular forms of crime fiction. For hundreds of years, crime fiction has generated a rich collection of short stories, novels and plays. Crime fiction is now the largest genre fiction has to offer and, as early as the 1920s, it was felt that:

It is impossible to keep track of all the detective-stories produced today. Book upon book, magazine upon magazine pour out from the Press, crammed with murders, thefts, arsons, frauds, conspiracies, problems, puzzles, mysteries, thrills, maniacs, crooks, poisoners, forgers, garroters, police, spies, secret-service men, detectives, until it seems that half the world must be engaged in setting riddles for the other half to solve (Sayers, 1947, p. 95).

The genre continues to be so popular with contemporary readers, that nearly one in every three new books written in English falls within the crime fiction category (Knight, 2010, p. xi). Such a large pool of material has generated the difficulty of definition, highlighted by Charles J. Rzepka who wrote “[d]etective fiction may seem like a tidy and well-defined topic, but it offers difficult problems of generic designation and narrative analysis” (2005, p. 1). Endeavours to overcome this challenge are visible in the wide variety of definitions attempting to confine the genre into a single, neat category. There are many arguments against attempting a process of splitting crime fiction into distinct groups, including a warning about placing a “straitjacket” on the genre (Scaggs, 2005, p. 2). Despite these warnings there is no escape from the fact that the vast majority of those who talk about, or write about, crime fiction have utilised crime fiction terminology and identified different sub-genres. Certainly the genre itself is partial to applying labels with many novels featuring covers that claim: ‘the new thriller’; ‘the latest detective story’; and ‘a great mystery’ among other boasts.

The taxonomy of crime fiction, below, is essentially a consolidation of commonly used crime fiction terminology which may already be familiar to many readers and a reduction of long and complex definitions, available in the numerous critical texts which discuss crime fiction, into short and straightforward descriptions. The chart (created as part of a Doctoral Thesis undertaken at Central Queensland University)

utilises three horizontal bands to highlight the three key eras of the genre's development: the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries in addition to deploying a series of boxes, each of which looks at one sub-genre or one community of crime fiction. The result is a chart that offers a new way to look at a rich and diverse genre in its historical context. Some texts will slot neatly into one of the boxes on display but there will always be instances where the lines are blurred. A police procedural may be written in the hardboiled style while a forensic procedural may also be violent crime. Some sub-genres could be split further with the thriller being classified more specifically as a legal thriller, political thriller or religious thriller. The purpose of reproducing this taxonomy here is to assist readers' advisory services librarians, and their clients, in navigating the vast terrain of crime fiction. In keeping with this paper's theme of communities of crime fiction readers, while also acknowledging ideas of doorways into reading (character, language, setting and story), this taxonomy can be read as a map: there are suburbs or villages where readers will feel most comfortable, most at home (eg: Whodunnit?); there are other places which readers may only wish to visit for a short time (eg: Police Procedural); while yet other places may only want to be travelled to with friends (eg: Violent Crime).

Gothic Fiction and the Mystery

In the 18th century the mystery story increased in popularity alongside gothic fiction, which is sometimes referred to as horror or paranormal fiction. These early tales, of which Horace Walpole's (1717-1797) gothic *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and William Godwin's (1756-1836) celebrated mystery *Caleb Williams* (1794) are the first known true examples are very different from modern crime novels. They do, however, offer some insights into how crime fiction has grown into the genre it is today as they provide early sketches of the characters and stories which would become outlines for later writers to flesh out into the complex personalities and plots that became common in the 20th century.

The Newgate Calendar and the Newgate Novel

The *Newgate Calendar*, or *The Malefactors' Bloody Register*, was a publication that emerged in the mid-18th century and provided accounts of the crimes and the trials of celebrated criminals of the day (Pykett, 2006, p. 20). The *Calendar* was "sold in unprecedented numbers" (Grovier, 2008, p. xvi) showing that a fascination with crime is not a recent phenomenon. As well as buying the *Calendar*, people paid entry fees to watch trials (Emsley et al, 2010) and enormous crowds of up to 100,000 gathered on hanging days (Gatrell, 1996, p. 57). Some of those who attended executions would purchase an expensive seat from pew operators who made a living out of "the carnival atmosphere created by hangings" (Grovier, 2008, p. xvi). In a world before cinema, television and the Internet people sought out the stories of criminals, as well as their executions, as entertainment with Sarah Redmond noting "the similarity between the scaffold and the theatre" (2007, p. 8). From the *Newgate Calendar* came the Newgate novel, the authors of which took their leading characters and plot lines from the *Calendar*. This sub-genre remains popular today, as shown by the ever increasing market for the accounts of actual crimes, described by Jean Murley as a "juggernaut in publishing" (2008, p. 44) which: entertains; informs; and serves as a "scale model of modern society" (Seltzer, 2008, p. 11). A comparatively recent phenomenon, the first major example of a true crime text is Truman Capote's (1924-1984) *In Cold Blood* (1965). This sub-genre reveals a public interest in historical murderers and contemporary killers with dozens of volumes available about men as diverse as Jack

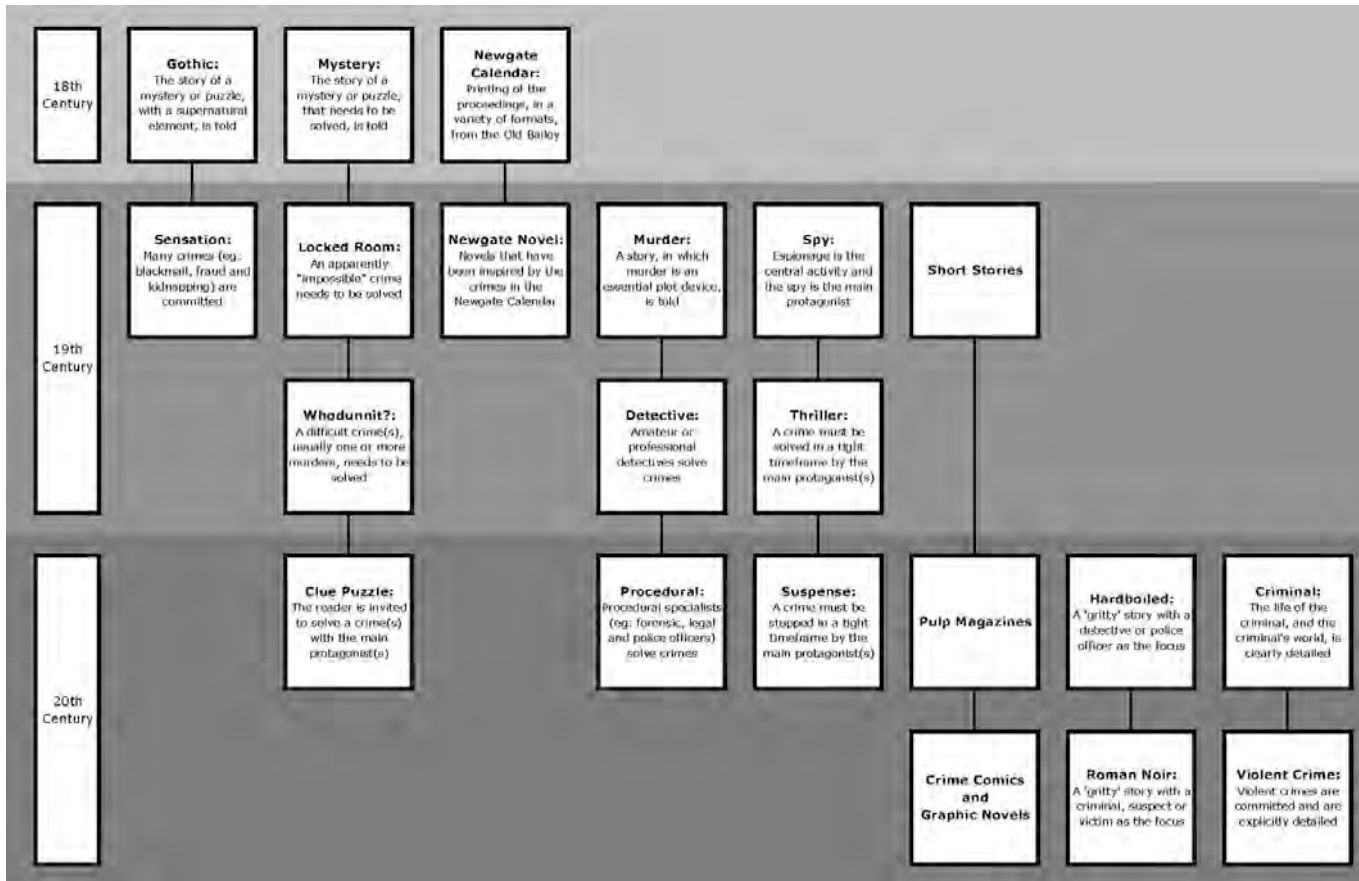
the Ripper who terrorised Victorian London and Ted Bundy who has become “the poster boy for serial murder” (Rule, 2000, p. 541).

Sensation Fiction

Sensation fiction, first seen in the 19th century, is rarely found in book form today, although it is frequently seen in modern media such as the daytime television serial. This sub-genre, which has an important place in crime fiction’s history, first gained prominence with works from British authors including: *The Woman in White* (1859) by Wilkie Collins (1824-1889); *East Lynne* (1861) by Ellen Wood (1814-1887); and *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1837-1915). Sensation novels, with their complicated plot lines of “bigamy, adultery, seduction, fraud, forgery, blackmail, kidnapping and, sometimes, murder” (Pykett, 2006, p. 33) were very popular, especially with women (Wynne, 2001, p. 5). This sub-genre appeals to many readers who read for story and is particularly useful in understanding the importance of crime fiction because it demonstrates how the genre has the capacity to tap into the social fears of the day. Today, violent death, the key incident in many modern crime novels, generates great fear in our society. For the first readers of sensation novels it was fraud and forgery and those crimes, threatening personal reputations and the class system, which generated “cultural anxieties” (Pykett, 2006, p. 19).

The Locked Room and the Whodunnit?

The sub-genre known as the locked room deals with crimes that are apparently impossible to solve, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). The whodunnit? focuses on crimes that are very difficult to solve, such as Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone* (1868). The term whodunnit? is often used to describe a clue puzzle yet there is a clear distinction between the two terms. A whodunnit? is a story, one usually famous for its main character, where the crime is designed to be solved by the central protagonist, leaving the reader impressed with the crime solver’s outstanding deductive abilities. In contrast a clue puzzle, discussed in more detail below, is set up as a form of competition between the lead character and the consumer of crime fiction, as the crime is designed to be solved by both the fictional detective and the reader.



Murder Stories

Murder stories, as the sub-genre name suggests, tell stories where murders take place but the efforts of a clearly identified amateur or professional detective, police officer or forensic officer are notably absent. These tales do not focus on solving a crime, yet it is a crime – usually murder, which is critical to the text. For example, in *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens (1812-1870) the maidservant Molly is forced to face trial for murder and so gives up her daughter Estella. Miss Havisham takes on the young Estella, which is an important part of the plot because this relocation, and the subsequent way in which the child is raised, constructs Estella's interactions with Pip, the novel's central protagonist. Although the story of the murder does not dominate the text, without it *Great Expectations* would lack some of the complexities generated by this type of criminal act.

Detective Stories

Detective stories provide the timeless format, familiar to so many readers today as they follow the exploits of amateur and professional detectives. Readers who want to read for character will find a wealth of options within this sub-genre: from cerebral sleuths who solve crimes in their living room over a cup of tea to weapon wielding heroes who track down villains on foot in darkened alleyways. The detective story also crosses into other sub-genres. For example, Agatha Christie's (1890-1976) Miss Marple stories are also clue puzzles and Dashiell Hammett's (1894-1961) stories, about an Operative for the Continental Detective Agency, are also hardboiled.

Spy Stories

Authors from America and Britain have also worked to create a very popular sub-genre of crime fiction: the spy story (Seed, 2006, pp. 115-31). Spy stories are tales of espionage and are excellent suggestions for readers looking for character or setting. The first true spy novel titled, rather predictably, *The Spy* was written by American author James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) in 1821. This sub-genre, which explores various nations' "international standing, cultural values, governmental system, and so on" (Seed, 2006, p. 131), reached maturity with the efforts of Britain's Ian Fleming (1908-1964) and the creation of James Bond, "Her Majesty's most ruthless and suave secret agent" (Bond and Sheedy, 2007, p. 74), who made his first fictional appearance in *Casino Royale* in 1953.

The Thriller and the Suspense

Another sub-genre is the thriller where a crime must be solved in a tight timeframe. These stories aim to "carry the reader along by using pace and surprise to outweigh any inherent improbabilities of plot" (Glover, 2006, p. 137). The term thriller can be split into a wide variety of forms including: action; conspiracy; science fiction; legal; military; paranormal; political; psychological; and religious. The suspense story is very similar to the thriller in that a crime must be prevented in a tight timeframe such as John Buchan's (1875-1940) *The 39 Steps* (1915) in which the hero, Richard Hannay, must prevent important military secrets from being taken out of England by German spies.

The Clue Puzzle

The clue puzzle, often referred to as cozy or traditional crime fiction, is synonymous with the crime fiction that was produced between World War I and World War II. This period is often considered to be the genre's Golden Age. This era was one in

which murder became the central crime, displacing crimes such as fraud and forgery, and detection moved from an intuitional approach to a rational one (Knight, 2006, pp. 77-78). This era also witnessed the “rapid displacement of the short story as the primary venue of detection in favour of the short, one-volume novel” (Rzepka, 2005, p. 154). The clue puzzle offers wonderful characters, exotic and traditional settings as well as great plots. This sub-genre also provides bridges into other genres, most notably: comical; historical; romantic; and paranormal. With over two billion books in print, Agatha Christie is the great icon of the clue puzzle. Agatha Christie’s first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was first published in 1920 and the woman who would become a “crucial figure” of the genre (Knight, 2006, p. 81) went on to write approximately 70 novels in addition to generating a large collection of novellas, short stories and plays. One of Agatha Christie’s compatriots, Dorothy L. Sayers, is another name closely identified with the Golden Age having introduced her most famous character, Lord Peter Wimsey, in *Whose Body?* (1923).

The Procedural

Like the thriller, there are numerous forms for the procedural, a type of crime fiction very popular with readers wanting to read for character and story, which feature procedural specialists such as: forensic scientists; legal practitioners; and police officers solving crimes. The forensic procedural became popular during the late 20th century and focuses on scientific specialists solving crimes, such as: Patricia Cornwell’s (1956-) Dr Kay Scarpetta who first appeared in 1990 in *Postmortem*; or Kathy Reichs’ (1950-) series, which started in 1997 with *Déjà Dead*, featuring Dr Temperance (Tempe) Brennan. Legal procedurals, or courtroom dramas, focus on the efforts of legal practitioners with John Grisham (1955-) delivering some of the more famous examples of this sub-genre since his first novel, *A Time to Kill* (1989). The police procedural focuses on police officers solving crimes with some of the more notable examples including: the novels by P.D. James (1920-) which document the career of Commander Adam Dalgliesh, the policeman and poet, who first appeared in *Cover Her Face* (1962); while Ed McBain, a pseudonym of Evan Hunter (1926-2005), wrote novels which, between 1956 and 2005, followed the cases of the police officers from the 87th Precinct in New York City.

Hardboiled and Roman Noir

As British authors defined and then refined many crime fiction sub-genres, across the Atlantic two of the most significant developments in America were the emergence of the hardboiled and the roman noir sub-genres. These two sub-genres are so similar they are very often confused. Both feature powerful language and memorable characters. Hardboiled focuses on the detective or the police officer as they operate in environments dominated by greed, murder, tough men and beautiful women. This sub-genre has produced some of crime fiction’s most iconic characters such as Dashiell Hammett’s (1894-1961) Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler’s (1888-1959) Philip Marlowe. As hardboiled stories focus on the detective or the police officer roman noir tales focus on the criminal, suspect or victim such as Walter Huff, who manages to be all three in James M. Cain’s (1892-1977) *Double Indemnity* which first appeared, in serial form, in 1936. Noir stories are also much darker than hardboiled ones, as Otto Penzler observed: “[N]oir is about losers. The characters in these existential, nihilistic tales are doomed” (2010). The hardboiled and roman noir sub-genres are interesting because, unlike the suspense novel that complements the thriller novel: hardboiled and roman noir have inspired stories in *reaction* to this style of

work rather than in *sympathy* with it. For example, these sub-genres, with their focus on white masculinity, have helped to inspire feminist crime fiction.

Criminal Stories and Violent Crime

Works within the criminal sub-genre are presented from the criminal's point of view, allowing readers to engage with characters working on the wrong side of the law in addition to exploring some unfamiliar settings, such as the men and the environments that feature in Mario Puzo's (1920-1999) *The Godfather* (1969). The sub-genre of violent crime explicitly details how crimes are committed with authors including James Ellroy (1948-) who writes with a "preoccupation with serial murder and sexual mutilation" (Glover, 2006, p. 148) and Thomas Harris (1940-) who "unleashed Dr Hannibal Lecter upon an unsuspecting public" (Glover, 2006, p. 135) in *Red Dragon* (1981).

Conclusion

The taxonomy, or map, above provides a brief overview of crime fiction, those texts that demonstrate the occurrence of a crime and which detail the efforts of an amateur or a professional sleuth to solve that crime (Cole, 2004, p. 11). This classification system is not meant to constrict the genre or the people reading it. It is designed to acknowledge different types of crime fiction and to provide readers' advisory services staff with a useful visual aid for understanding, and navigating, the largest genre fiction has to offer. Some novels can easily, and exclusively, be identified with a specific sub-genre, or community of crime fiction, but the shades of grey of the chart acknowledge that the scale and scope of crime fiction makes it a difficult genre to define. This difficulty lies, in part, in the genre's incredible diversity yet it is this diversity that has made crime fiction so very popular for hundreds of years – with no sign that this popularity is waning. Part of crime fiction's appeal can be attributed to the fact that no other genre has the capacity to so easily slip across borders into other genres or provide so many opportunities for readers wanting to be a member of an onsite, online or, less tangible, community while simultaneously reading for character, language, setting or story. Moreover, the hallmarks of the genre – such as the detectives who rely on instinct, logic and tenacity and the seemingly infinite number of country estates and dark alleyways where such detectives operate – are some of the most recognisable devices within story telling. When work first started on constructing this taxonomy it was incredibly frustrating that a black and white world could not be created, one where all of the short stories and all of the novels within crime fiction could be forced into clearly defined categories. Now that there has been time to reflect on the process of drawing up this chart, it is, perhaps, quite fitting that there are so many shades of grey and that the genre itself should be crime fiction's greatest unsolved case; a map of crime fiction communities – creators and consumers – that continue to change and grow.

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