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**Murder, they cooked:
the role of food in crime fiction**

ABSTRACT

The idea of analysing the role food plays in fiction is not new. Writers, across a range of genres, have utilised food to generate realism within their works and to communicate a variety of complex concepts – such as love, grief and social standing – for centuries. For these writers, food is predominantly used to signal ‘good’, as it courts, soothes and conveys messages of privilege and wealth. For crime fiction writers, food can represent all these things and more, moreover, in this context, food can also be ‘bad’ since culinary items as innocuous as chocolate, marmalade and omelettes are laced with poison, allowing some characters to dispose of others. Such murders see victims as participants in their own demise, as it is natural for them to think of food as ‘good’ and not realise that food is ‘bad’ until it is too late. This makes poison a particularly devious way to commit murder because, unlike guns, knives or the ubiquitous blunt instruments, there is no obvious danger. This paper examines poison’s complex and symbiotic relationship with the culinary, and some of the different ways poison – and especially poisoned food – has been utilised by crime fiction writers. This paper will also explore poisoning Murder, She Wrote (1984-1996), as well as explore food and beverage more broadly, within this long-running television production.

KEYWORDS

crime fiction
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INTRODUCTION

The idea of analysing the role food plays in fiction is not new. Writers, across a range of genres, have long utilised food to generate realism within their works and to communicate a variety of complex concepts, such as love, grief and social standing. For these writers, food is predominantly used to signal ‘good’, as it courts (such as chocolate), soothes (a cup of tea, ice-cream or, perhaps, more chocolate) and conveys messages of privilege and wealth (from luxurious cheeses and exotic fruits to expensive cuts of meat, fine wines and gourmet ingredients). For crime fiction writers, food can represent all of these things and much more, and moreover, in this context, food can also be ‘bad’ since innocuous culinary items are laced with poison, allowing some characters to neatly dispose of others. Such murders see victims as participants in their own demise, as it is natural for these unsuspecting targets to think of these foods as ‘good’ and not realise they are ‘bad’ (if they ever do) until it is too late. This makes poison a particularly devious way to commit murder because, unlike guns, knives or the ubiquitous blunt instruments, there is usually no obvious danger. This paper examines poison’s complex and symbiotic relationship with the culinary, and some of the different ways poisons – and especially poisoned foods – have been utilised by crime fiction writers.

POISON

The word ‘poison’ came into Middle English from the Latin for ‘drink’ via the Old French for ‘potion’, linking the idea of foods and drinks with the act of causing harm from its inception. Causing sickness, other incapacity or death to someone by poisoning them is older than written history (Brien 2012) yet, every day, many of us unknowingly, and even knowingly, ingest foodstuffs that are, or have the potential to be, poisons. Much preventative health discourse, for instance, mobilises narratives of poisoning, with items such as sugar, fast food and alcohol regularly imaged in this way. Alcohol is actually quite a potent poison, and when someone drinks too much, they can suffer from what is known as ‘alcoholic poisoning’ (Macinnis 2005: 45). On the other hand, food poisoning, sometimes referred to as foodborne illness, is the name for the range of illnesses caused by unknowingly consuming food or drink contaminated by various types of bacteria (NSW Food Authority). Such ailments

affect some 5.4 million Australians each year. Many of these foodborne illnesses are unpleasant but quickly recovered from; however, some of the more serious incidents of these illnesses result in death and national news coverage: one example being the outbreak of listeria poisoning in Australia in early 2013. In this case, the bacteria carried in soft cheese resulted in three deaths, one woman losing her unborn child and many more becoming seriously ill (Wells 2013).

Poison is a popular choice as a weapon within crime fiction, yet murdering someone by inducing alcoholic or food poisoning is, however, rarely utilised by crime writers. Orchestrating deaths based upon the application of bacteria or alcohol are, unlike other drug overdoses, difficult to execute and such narratives may test the patience of an experienced crime fiction reader. The adding of well-known poisons to food by crime writers is much more common and, traditionally, much more effective.

CLASSIC POISONS FOR CRIME WRITERS

Of all the well-known poisons perhaps one of the best known is arsenic. Arsenic is the unscientific but popular name for *arsenic trioxide*. It is one of the most pervasive poisons in real life and in crime fiction – not only virtually undetectable and deadly, but a compound that is all around us which sees us all regularly ingesting tiny amounts of this naturally-occurring but, in sufficient quantity, lethal substance (Hall 2002). The symptoms of arsenical poisoning include severe gastric distress, burning oesophageal pain, the vomiting of blood, watery diarrhoea and a drop in blood pressure. Victims will also present as cold and clammy to the touch, experience convulsions and often fall into coma. These symptoms can appear as soon as thirty minutes after ingestion of a fatal amount of arsenic with death occurring within a few hours or up to 24 hours after being poisoned (Stevens and Bannon 2007: 23).

Such a death would be a warning against the use of arsenic for most people but until the effects of this poison were realised, many medicines contained small amounts of this substance. Arsenic was also prescribed throughout the nineteenth century for illnesses as disparate as syphilis and malaria, with regular small doses believed to improve breathing when climbing. The popular *Fowler's Solution*, available from 1786 for over a hundred and fifty years, contained one per cent potassium arsenate, was an over-the-counter cure-all for ailments including arthritis, cancer, deafness, eczema, measles, skin problems, varicose veins and ulcers. Women

in the nineteenth century also believed a dose of arsenic whitened the skin (Brinton and Napheys 1870: 240) and it was also used to colour sweets. Arsenic is still used medicinally to treat advanced cases of *trypanosomiasis* ('African sleeping sickness') and in fighting a rare type of leukaemia (Brown 1998: 8).

Cyanide is another classic poison. More toxic than arsenic, cyanide can be swallowed, inhaled or absorbed through the skin. Death by cyanide is often referred to as 'chemical asphyxia' as this poison prevents the body's red blood cells from absorbing oxygen. A lethal dose can take as little as fifteen minutes to kill (Stevens and Bannon 2007: 25), although this briefness is often exaggerated in films when a person, usually a spy, suicides by biting into a cyanide capsule, collapses and dies almost immediately.

Strychnine is another classic poison, again more toxic than arsenic, commonly added to food in crime fiction. Strychnine increases the secretion of gastric juices and heightens sensory awareness and these qualities mean that a medicine containing strychnine, *nux vomica*, was prescribed in the nineteenth century as an antidote for narcotic overdose and as a stimulant in treating shock. Solutions of strychnine of various strengths were also commonly used as so-called 'nerve tonics' to increase appetite, improve muscle tone and stimulate a weak bladder (McGarry and McGarry 1999). Strychnine poisoning is a traumatic, if often quick, death, as this toxin attacks the central nervous system generating exaggerated reflex effects. This results in all the muscles contracting at the same time and the victim dies from asphyxiation or from sheer exhaustion from the convulsions (Stevens and Bannon 2007: 29). Fascinatingly, when taken in the correct amounts, strychnine and arsenic can act as antidotes to each other.

Thallium, though not as toxic as cyanide or strychnine, is still a very dangerous poison. Thallium attacks the cells of the body and lethal doses result in abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. If victims survive the initial stages, then the weeks following ingestion will see hair loss, pain in the hands and feet as well as the appearance of discoloured, horizontal lines on the fingernails (Stevens and Bannon 2007: 246).

Those familiar with true crime will, no doubt, be familiar with the spate of thallium poisonings in Australia in the 1950s; sometimes referred to as a 'Thallium Craze' with mostly male victims poisoned by close female family members (Scrine

2002). With rats in plague proportions in post-war Sydney, the government lifted previous restrictions on thallium, only to reconsider this when a number of poisoning cases attracted what can only be described as hysterical media attention (Sanders 1995). As the symptoms of thallium poisoning do not appear for some days after the initial dose, and as these effects (in common with those of many other poisons) resemble the symptoms of dangerous conditions like gastric influenza, stroke, cerebral haemorrhage and pneumonia, many victims may have been poisoned without attracting any attention. Thallium was banned as a rodenticide in Australia in the mid-1960s (to the relief of men everywhere) though still has commercial and medicinal applications.

Poison requires both premeditation and access to a poisonous substance, thus the poison of choice changes with developments in technology. These classic poisons were often found in household and garden products or obtained at apothecaries. Arsenic appeared in numerous novels and short stories from Dashiell Hammett's short story *Fly Paper* (1929) and Rex Stout's novella *Poison à la Carte* (1960) as well as more contemporary works such as Kerry Greenwood's historical novel *Cocaine Blues* (1989). Cyanide was utilised by Agatha Christie to commit murder in *And Then There Were None* (1939) and *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945) as well as to facilitate suicide in *The Secret Adversary* (1922). Arthur Conan Doyle deployed strychnine poisoning in *The Sign of Four* (1890). Crime fiction works involving thallium poisoning include Ngaio Marsh's *Final Curtain* (1947) and Agatha Christie's *The Pale Horse* (1961). Today, crime fiction features increasingly complex scenarios and while the poisons readily found in rodenticides or weed killers are still deployed these classic poisons now compete with more modern compounds.

POISON AND THE GOLDEN AGE

One of Christie's most famous creations, Hercule Poirot, a great detector of poisons, also made much of his knowledge of food to indicate his class, exotic foreignness and intelligence. Indeed, food (poisoned or not) does all this – and more – in crime fiction: it helps to establish time of death and provides clues to the crime; while scenes involving cookery or the consumption of meals can add to the suspense of a story, facilitate characters meeting each other or provide the setting for a major plot point. Indeed, crime fiction is a genre with a long history of focusing on food; from

the theft of food in the novels of the nineteenth century to the utilisation of many different types of food to administer poison – this trend was firmly established during the genre’s Golden Age (the period that coincided with the years between World Wars I and II) when many writers turned to poison to produce foul play. Anthony Berkley used nitrobenzene injected into chocolates in *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* (1929). Agatha Christie, as already noted, deployed poison in a number of her works including *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953), where something as innocent as marmalade is made lethal by the adding of poison.

One of the most famous food vehicles for delivering poison is the sweet omelette of Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Strong Poison* (1930). In the trial of Harriet Vane, to the great distress of Lord Peter Wimsey who believes Ms Vane to be innocent of murder, the judge, in summing up the case, states to the members of the jury: ‘The final course was a sweet omelette, which was made at the table in a chafing-dish by Philip Boyes himself. Both Mr Urquhart and his cousin were very particular about eating an omelette the moment it came from the pan’ (1930/2003: 14). This novel has a gendered twist, as it is a male who is revealed as the murderer, deploying the poison that is typically regarded as a female weapon.

MURDER, SHE WROTE

Murder, She Wrote, starring Angela Lansbury as the indefatigable Jessica – or J.B. – Fletcher, remains one of the most popular amateur detective television series of all time. A total of twelve consecutive seasons resulted in the production of 264 episodes revolving around the mature-age sleuth from Cabot Cove, Maine, who, from a career as an English high school teacher, became a bestselling mystery novelist and amateur detective. Mrs Fletcher is certainly one of the busiest sleuths on record. Across the twelve seasons of the series, of which eight saw the show rate within the top ten television programs in the United States those years, she solved 286 murders (Edmonton Journal 1996).

In between this extraordinary number of corpses, there are many attempts to normalise Fletcher and her environment: her regular interactions with family and friends, the routine comings and goings of life in a small fishing village, and cookery. There are numerous other culinary references within the episodes of *Murder, She Wrote*. Many of these take place in eateries that range from the local diners in Cabot

Cove to up-market restaurants in the major cities in the region such as Boston and New York City. There are also numerous meals represented at clubs and hotels as Fletcher travels across the country and around the world on her book promotion tours or to visit a seemingly never-ending supply of relatives. Food is also, much as it is in the real world, used to celebrate and commemorate special occasions including fundraisers and birthdays, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Cookery in the series is also firmly connected to the domestic sphere with Sherriff Amos Tupper, portrayed by Tom Bosley (1927-2010), and Dr Seth Hazlitt, portrayed by William Windom (1923-2012), both very fond of Fletcher's cooking. Her pies are irresistible. Indeed, Mrs Fletcher's cooking is so delicious that in the episode *Deadly Lady* (1984), a hobo happily undertakes some repairs to her house in exchange for her home-cooked meals.

FOOD AND BEVERAGE (AND POISON) IN *MURDER, SHE WROTE*

As a series focusing on the art of homicide, *Murder, She Wrote* also played with the idea of cookery and killing, and the utilisation of various cooking implements to commit murder, alongside using food as a vehicle for poison.

Many characters across the episodes of the television series – and the subsequent series of adapted and original novels – are connected to cookery through employment. There are numerous waiters, waitresses and chefs as well as owners of clubs, hotels, restaurants and food manufacturing companies. This is in addition to the administrative and professional staff connected to the food industry and one food writer. Food preparation is also central to some episodes, as when a man is left dead in a kitchen's meat locker in *Just Another Fish Story* (1988) as part of a case involving food theft, and a woman is found murdered in a garden having been stabbed with a meat thermometer in *Something Borrowed, Something Blue* (1989). Miriam Harwood, having an affair with local butcher Tim Mulligan, also meets her end with a food preparation implement when she is bludgeoned to death with a frying pan in *The Sins of Cabot Cove* (1989).

In other instances, food provides a central plot point, as when a character who misses a meal can be a clue that something is wrong, as seen in *Murder by Appointment Only* (1986). Likewise, food can provide an alibi, resulting in a search for a pizza deliveryman in *The Taxman Cometh* (1991). The act of cookery itself can

also set the scene for crime as seen in *Proof in the Pudding* (1994), an episode that revolves around restaurants, celebrity chefs and their cooking shows, which sees one victim stabbed and another shot. In *Family Doctor* (1991), Dr Hazlitt's choice of dining venue, The Clams and Claws Restaurant, results in his being kidnapped and forced to provide emergency surgery on a mobster who has been shot. Cookery is also central to *Lone Witness* (1993), an episode that sees Fletcher hosting her friend Susan Wells while she writes a cookbook.

A variety of poisons are also utilised across the many years of this long-running series. In *Keep the Home Fries Burning* (1986), set in Cabot Cove, Bo Dixon's Diner is suddenly in competition with the newly refurbished Joshua Peabody Inn. This competition is complicated by a spate of food poisonings that leaves several diners ill and one dead. Domestic settings are also vulnerable to the poisons that are deployed in commercial environments as when a pickled herring, part of a picnic, is poisoned and kills Geoffrey Constable in *It Runs in the Family* (1987). In *Who Threw the Barbital in Mrs Fletcher's Chowder?* (1988). When Sheriff Tupper's brother-in-law, Elmo Banner, dies at Fletcher's dinner table, a victim of barbitol poisoning, the amateur detective is determined to find the killer to establish her innocence and clear her reputation in the kitchen. A generic rat poison featuring in an attempted murder in *Night of the Tarantula* (1989); strychnine is the, more successful, poison of choice in *Ballad for a Blue Lady* (1990); while arsenic appears in *Tainted Lady* (1991). A poisoned apple threatens Jessica Fletcher herself in *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall* (1989). In a clever plot twist, poison – originally believed to have been hidden in an appetiser at a grand dinner party – is found to be in the painted design on a piece of dinnerware; the paint dissolves upon contact with food in *A Death in Hong Kong* (1993). In another plot twist, Fletcher feels she may have unwittingly inspired murder shortly after she refers students in one of her creative writing classes to a guide to poisons in *Double Jeopardy* (1993).

CONCLUSION

Food is essential to crime fiction in many ways – just think of all those characters who do not eat enough (Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes did eat but often erratically) or the others who eat far too much (such as Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe) – but it also has a very special use: the genre is one that is 'littered with corpses whose last

breaths smelled oddly sweet, or bitter, or of almonds' (Taylor 2010). Classic poisons such as arsenic, cyanide, strychnine and thallium have all assisted writers in ensuring the timely end of one, or more, of their victims. A variety of other poisons have also been utilised from household to industrial poisons and from toxic plants to poisonous creatures such as snakes or spiders: although such beasts must be relied upon to cooperate in the task at hand and often expose the murderer to as much risk as the intended victim.

Poison was certainly a weapon of choice in the Golden Age of detective fiction, an era where obvious violence was avoided, and the vile and often violent symptoms of such deaths could be glossed over or avoided altogether. Poison can, however, also allow for enhanced realism within fiction, as many toxins are readily available and easily applied. This, combined with the fact that poison does not require the physical strength necessary to overcome a victim, the strong stomach needed to shoot or to stab, (and, indeed, the murderer often does not even have to inconvenience themselves by being in the same room as the victim when they take the poison, or suffer and die from it) allows poison to be the murder weapon of any man or woman. Moreover, poison can also offer a puzzle within a puzzle – expanding upon the traditional idea of 'whodunit?' by also asking 'what was it done with?' Due to these reasons, poison has maintained its strong position within the crime fiction genre – as evidenced in the many poisonings that occurred in the more modern *Murder, She Wrote* television episodes and accompanying books.

Food is often considered a force for 'good' in fiction, yet in crime fiction food can also be profoundly negative: poisoned food is particularly sinister because the victim is, unwittingly, a participant in his or her own demise. For this reason, as well as those already cited, poison will continue to bleed across the pages of crime fiction: bringing victims to early and painful ends.

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