

BODIES AND BOOKS:

CRIME FICTION NOVELS AND THE HISTORY OF LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of Australia's first crime novel, Henry Savery's *Quintus Servinton* (1830), Australians have read crime fiction for entertainment, for the reassurance that wrongdoers will be punished and to test their deductive skills against those of their favourite sleuth. The novels, short stories and plays, within the crime fiction genre, that have been produced in Australia between Colonial times and the present day, also offer opportunities to investigate a particular place or a particular time. Indeed, many crime fiction writers have mastered the art of recreating settings in both rural and metropolitan landscapes. The details provided within these works ultimately reveal a murderer, yet they also outline the availability of certain products, bus and train timetables, the floor plans of local hotels or world-famous buildings and numerous other particulars; thus providing a rich, if surprising, source of material for the merely curious to the professional researcher. Similarly, crime fiction stories set within libraries present a history of the information services profession. This paper will demonstrate how crime fiction can provide an important supplement to more traditional historical sources, with a special focus on how the genre has documented some of the major changes within libraries over the last 75 years, since 1939.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to foreground this paper, on the treatment of crime fiction as historical resources (with particular attention paid to the history of libraries within crime fiction), with a very brief overview of the genre, focusing on Australia.

For Australia, crime fiction is an integral element of the national literary tradition. The first novel to be published in Australia was a crime novel: Henry Savery's *Quintus Servinton* (1830).¹ Since this time Australians have read crime fiction for entertainment, to experience people and places far removed from their own everyday worlds, to test their deductive skills against those of their favourite sleuth and, in the case of crime fiction series, to follow ongoing plots and immerse themselves in the lives of famous detectives.²

In the early days of the Australian Colony, everyone knew a crook. Thus, crime fiction also allowed those early colonists, living alongside convicts, to engage with Emile Durkheim's idea of the conscience collective.³ This idea – which I have argued for elsewhere – asserts that Durkheim's thesis of punishment, as a process allowing for the demonstration of group norms and the strengthening of moral boundaries, actually supports the reading and writing of crime fiction. Indeed, the crime fiction genre works to reiterate the dominant social view that wrongdoers must, either poetically or judicially, be punished. Furthermore, crime fiction allows us to experience the solving of many different crimes vicariously, fulfilling strong emotional and social needs to be agents of punishment. For those of us who do not directly contribute to the incarceration of criminals, reading crime fiction allows us to feel that we have participated in the penalising of a variety of perpetrators.⁴ An idea that remains relevant today. So, while some of us may carry handcuffs, many more of us secretly want to.

COLLECTING CRIME FICTION

The value of crime fiction, and by extension the value of collecting crime fiction works, has been a topic of much debate. A competition – enthusiastically fuelled by some and quickly dismissed by others – of 'Literary Artefacts' versus 'Popular Fiction' that has kept scholars and students of the written word busy for centuries.

R. Austin Freeman a prolific author well known for his numerous crime novels, including his Dr Thorndyke Mysteries, once noted that:

By the critic and the professedly literary person the detective story is apt to be dismissed contemptuously as outside the pale of literature, to be conceived of as a type of work produced by half-educated and wholly incompetent writers for consumption by office boys, factory girls and other persons devoid of culture and literary taste.⁵

Yet there were many more readers of this genre than office boys and factory girls could possibly account for. In fact, as early as the 1920s, Dorothy L. Sayers wrote:

It is impossible to keep track of all the detective-stories produced to-day. 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.⁶

And so, 'book upon book', was written and sold and incorporated into private collections and into libraries around the world, including the predecessor institutions of the State Library of New South Wales.

Compiled by the Reference Department of The Public Library of New South Wales, and published in 1903, was the *Subject-index of the books in the author catalogues for the years 1869-1895*.⁷ This multi-volume work details the collection of the Sydney Free Public Library, incorporating holdings of the former private Subscription Library taken over by the Government of New South Wales in 1869, as well as additions to this collection made up until 1895.

An examination of Australian fiction reveals much of interest. Looking at crime fiction titles there are, listed, works that remain popular today such as *The mystery of a hansom cab* (1886)⁸ and *Robbery under arms* (1888)⁹ as well as those that have disappeared, over the years, from numerous shelves, including *Thunderbolt: an Australian story* (1894).¹⁰ There are also titles that are of interest simply as a result of the laws of alphabetical order, for example: *Two convicts* is immediately followed by *Two lawyers* – not a sequel.

Most interesting, I believe, is the *number* of crime fiction works. Removing titles based in New Zealand and the Pacific reduced the list under the heading 'Australian' (modified to 'Australasian' from the second column) to 153 published works. Of which 33 titles, or an impressive 21.5 per cent, are crime fiction. In the context of the aggressive weeding of the 1870s, outlined in the 11th Library History Forum paper presented by Maggie Patton, this is incredible. Jane Austen was packaged up with numerous other volumes and despatched to the asylum; Fergus Hume made the cut.

This figure of 21.5 per cent, now over 110 years old, compares favourably to Stephen Knight's contemporary assessment that crime fiction titles account for one in every three new books, published in English, released each year.¹¹

Crime fiction, has been – and continues to be – criticised; but there was, and is, strong demand for this material: a demand libraries, have worked – very successfully – to meet. One of the important factors of this success is an increasing appreciation for the benefits of every type of reading.

Frank Tate's stirring introduction, to *The Munn-Pitt report* (1935),¹² reads more like a grand oration at a political rally than as an explanatory note for a report on a public service. In this essay the value of reading – *all reading* – is identified. Tate explains the belief that 'the greatest obstacle to human progress was ignorance. This could be combated by the cultivation of the habit of reading'¹³ and went on to clarify that books need to be selected, by libraries, for 'both study and for recreation.'¹⁴

Not everyone agreed – as has been noted in the work of Ellen Forsyth and Sherrey Quinn presented at the 11th Library History Forum – and, at the time *The Munn-Pitt report* was being researched, efforts were underway to restrict the reading of Australians through an increased control of imports.

A control aiming towards:

[T]he complete elimination of undesirable crime literature [... though] Books and magazines known as “thrillers,” which include detective and fiction stories, are not regarded seriously by the Customs authorities, and they will be permitted to enter Australia [...] as in the past.¹⁵

This returns us to the debates around not the value *of* reading but the value of *what* we read. Do we read to better ourselves, or do we read to better utilise our leisure time? I propose crime fiction allows us to do both.

If we accept that literary works teach us something new, while fiction works teach us about what we already know; then crime fiction has a strong claim to both types of production. Many literary devices were invented by crime fiction writers – Edgar Allan Poe, Ellery Queen and Agatha Christie – while, as already noted, crime fiction teaches us (or, perhaps more accurately, reassures us) that, as P.D. James expounds:

[N]ot by luck or divine intervention, but by human ingenuity, human intelligence and human courage. [Crime fiction] 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.¹⁶

Whatever the hold, which this genre has over readers, there is no doubt that libraries can capitalise on a love of the macabre.

LIBRARY PROGRAMMING

Crime fiction collections offer important segues into a range of public library activities. I highlight here a program run by Albury City’s LibraryMuseum.¹⁷

This event was designed and deployed as a fun, family activity to mark Law Week. LibraryMuseum staff, led by Michelle Head, collaborated with a local actor and secondary school forensic science students to develop a crime scene. This facilitated Murder in the Museum, with the students and actor all playing various characters – including dead bodies, museum workers, visitors to the museum and detectives. Various clues (and some obligatory red herrings) were laid out throughout the LibraryMuseum.

Engaging with the materials in the Legal Information Access Centre (LIAC) was an essential step in solving the murder.¹⁸

In consultation with the Local Law Week group and secondary schools the library ran this, very successful – and now award-winning – program, as a strategy to promote the Legal Toolkit and other important law resources available to the community.

LOCAL STUDIES

We usually think of crime fiction as, exactly that, a fictional tale of murder or murders. Yet

these works are often full of facts. This is seen in the details that are provided within these stories that ultimately reveal a murderer, but also outline the availability of certain products, bus and train timetables, the floor plans of local hotels or world-famous buildings and numerous other particulars; thus providing a rich, if surprising, source of material for the merely curious to the professional researcher, including those undertaking local studies projects.

Examples of the crime fiction genre, produced in Australia between Colonial times and the present day, offer many opportunities to investigate a particular place or a particular time. Certainly, many crime fiction writers have mastered the art of recreating settings in both rural and metropolitan landscapes. For example a private investigator who: ‘parked the car over near Mrs Macquarie’s Chair and walked through the Gardens’¹⁹ tells us that, at one point, parking near Sydney’s Central Business District for a trip into the library was a straightforward task.

A DETECTIVE AND A LIBRARIAN WALK INTO A BAR . . .

The relationship between the private investigator and the librarian is far more significant than the obvious interactions that are based on one profession simply asking the other for information.

I suggest the similarities between the two professions are clear. Both share: a determination to discover; can impartially appraise a suite of facts; are self-directed; resourceful; are highly skilled; have been noted to deal with awkward questions from the public; and, though often seen working in teams, both fields present very specialised personnel that work alone.

These shared traits were reflected in a set of library posters, featuring Detective Dan, from the 1960s. Dan looks like a very young Sherlock Holmes; instead of looking for clues he is looking for information in the library. What these posters overlook, however, is an overarching desire – for both detectives and librarians – to see the creation, or the restoration, of order.

In a recent reimagining of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories – the CBS series *Elementary* (2012-) – Ms Hudson, a ‘long-suffering woman,’²⁰ makes only a limited number of appearances and the traditional duties of landlady, often presented as housekeeper, are given a layer of gravitas. Hudson, an authority on Ancient Greek, sorts out Holmes’ library:

By subject matter, then by author. You start with the hard sciences on the north wall, and then you move clockwise around the room in descending order of academic rigour. That way, *Physics* by Aristotle is as far away from *You Can Learn Telepathy* by Morton Zuckerman as possible.²¹

Holmes is initially quite startled by the changes but quickly recognises a mind that wants order out of chaos: much like his own.

In another poster appearance Detective Dan is in an advertisement for libraries that can only be described as very disturbing. ‘For quickies Dan snoops in Special References’²²

the image presents Dan reading to a young girl who has been tied to a chair. The child looks frightened. This scene does, however, highlight that libraries are not always safe places and brings me to the bibliomystery.

THE BIBLIOMYSTERY

In W.H. Auden's famous essay *The guilty vicarage* (1948) he explores the idea of where a murder might take place, privileging country over town settings, advocating that: '[I]t should be the Great Good Place; for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of murder.'²³

This argument, of murder as being disruptive because of the act itself as well as where the act occurs, can be taken further. In Agatha Christie's *The body in the library* (1942) the horror of a body amongst books is made clear when Miss Marple comes to examine a girl who had been strangled in a private library:

The library was a room very typical of its owners. It was large and shabby and untidy. It had big sagging arm-chairs, and pipes and books and estate papers laid out on the big table. [...]. It spoke of long occupation and familiar use and of links with tradition.

And across the old bearskin hearthrug there was sprawled something new and crude and melodramatic.

The flamboyant figure of a girl.²⁴

Grant Burns, in *Librarians in fiction* (1998); has pursued this theme offering that:

If librarians serve as symbols of orderliness and the preservation of civilization, their frequent status as targets for fictional homicide may imply some thoughts about writers' and readers' desires to cast away the restraints of civilisation.²⁵

'What better way' Burns asks, to cast off such restraints, than 'to pummel a reference librarian with an encyclopaedia?'²⁶

There are certainly some fabulous, albeit frightening, ways to meet your end in a library:

- The rod from a card catalogue drawer was used in *Murder walks in marble halls* (1960), in *Dewey decimated* (1977) and again in *Miss Zukas and the library murders* (1994);
- The pages of Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) are, famously, laced with poison in *The name of the rose* (1984); and
- Though not set in a library, the danger of books is evident, in *Ghostwriter* (1999), where the murder weapons are an autographed copy of *The godfather* (1969) and

a copy of *Crime and punishment* (1866).

It is important to note librarians themselves, in addition to being detectives, are also often victims. ‘Librarians in fiction are, among other means of exit, shot, stabbed, strangled, beaten to death with books, rolled over by boulders, and hurled down library stairs.’²⁷

The bibliomystery also extends beyond the confines of the library with world-renowned anthologist, author and publisher Otto Penzler suggesting this type of crime fiction can be classified in this way:

If much of the action is set in a bookshop or a library, it is a bibliomystery, just as it is if a major character is a bookseller or librarian. A collector of rare books counts, and often a scholar or academic working with rare books, manuscripts, or the archives may be included.²⁸

Amidst complaints around an increasing number of sub-genres, or what Jacques Derrida politely termed a ‘taxonomic exuberance’²⁹, the world’s largest genre is hardly in need of more labels. Yet bibliomystery has been readily adopted with at least one bookstore dedicating an entire section to this type of crime story.³⁰

LIBRARY HISTORY IN CRIME FICTION

As crime fiction works, in general, offer a range of historical insights, crime fiction stories set within libraries present a history of the information services profession and have documented some of the major changes within libraries over the 75 years between the passing of the Library Act, 1939 and today.

Attitudes – including those relating to class, gender and race – come across very strongly. In Miles Franklin’s only crime novel *Bring the monkey* (1933) Ercildoun Carrington – a marvellously independent heroine and wrangler of the mischievous monkey, Percy, referred to in the book’s title – glares malevolently at a man who fulfils a triumvirate of perceived offences: he is Indian; he is a chauffeur; and he failed to give her the respect she felt she deserved. She recognises him as that: ‘imperial creature [who] had sniffed beside me in the Reading Room of the British Museum.’³¹

Race issues are prominent in older texts while class and gender can be frequently tracked through to contemporary examples. Indeed, gender has been an issue within libraries for many years.

A recent reviewer of the profession claimed that: ‘It is more important, in library country, to be well-informed than it is to be well-built.’³² Raymond Chandler had other ideas and when Philip Marlowe asks about an 1860 edition of *Ben Hur* a very knowledgeable woman looks up and says: ‘I see. You interest me. Rather vaguely.’³³ Smart, it seems, is sexy after all.

Geography also features prominently in the bibliomystery. In Matthew Reilly’s *Contest* (1996) – though not really a mystery; once those aliens start appearing we know exactly what is going on – but an important text because, while ostensibly set in ‘The New York State Library. One hundred years old, a silent sanctuary of history and knowledge’,³⁴

we all know that it is really set in the State Library of New South Wales. There is even a ‘park surrounding the State Library [...] a pretty one, flat and grassy’.³⁵

The physical spaces of libraries themselves are also, often, revealed in itemised detail. There are: ‘Endless rows of bookshelves – each one rising from floor to ceiling.’ There are also a myriad of atriums, information desks and, in some of the examples, the idea of the labyrinth,³⁶ offering gothic overtones.

Technological advances are also documented from a reference to the recent installation of a public phone booth³⁷ to brand-new Pentium III computers.³⁸ Changes in how we find information are also acknowledged as card catalogues are replaced by online search tools, physical resources replaced with digital ones.

OR HOW THINGS STAY THE SAME . . .

These books also tell us what does not change. From library signage asking people to be quiet, to the workplace conditions and practices described by Truman Garrett in his 1956 book *Murder – first edition*. For one librarian: ‘The morning passed rapidly in spite of my detestation of overdues. As we sat at one of the tables and wrote cards to delinquent borrowers.’³⁹ Another is depressed because she has been ‘relegated to the Children’s Department.’⁴⁰ And there are several complaints around remuneration including a reference to a short ‘rest period we had mornings and afternoons, an innovation thought up by the trustees in lieu of the salary raises so sorely needed by the underpaid staff.’⁴¹

Such themes are recurring and have been unpacked recently by Australian author Narelle M. Harris in *The opposite of life* (2007). This is the story of Lissa Wilson: librarian; twenty-first century geek girl; and vampire hunter. Set in Melbourne, the heroine is ‘a fully qualified librarian, fresh out of uni, in fact, but no-one is hiring right now’⁴² and so she works three days a week at the local public library. Wilson laments the lack of staff, complains about customers and children, asserting: ‘Some of them were idiots, it’s true and the kids drive me nuts the way they bashed books about.’⁴³ Wilson also notes that she enjoys ‘shelving the returned books. [...]. Most people find it dull and foist it on the library clerks whenever they can, but I like the feeling of restoring order.’⁴⁴ Sherlock Holmes would be pleased.

An excellent text for exploring both change and tradition within libraries is Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Gaudy night* (1935). Condemned by crime fiction critic Julian Symons as a ‘women’s novel’⁴⁵ the book is celebrated by noted historian Lucy Worsley as ‘a serious exploration of whether it was possible, in the 1930s, for women to combine work and marriage.’⁴⁶

Sayers manages a small defence of crime fiction, when Harriett Vane’s former tutor, Miss Lydgate, commends her ‘for keeping up a scholarly standard of English, even in mystery fiction.’⁴⁷ Libraries take centre stage for some of the novel including much being made about the need for new, larger libraries⁴⁸ and the comfort that comes from the unchanging ‘delicate silhouette’ of the roof of the Bodleian Library.⁴⁹

Though I must report librarians themselves do not fare so well in this work. For example Miss Gubbins ‘is a very conscientious person,’ we are told, ‘but she has rather an unfortunate knack of making any subject sound dull. It’s a great pity, because she is

exceptionally sound and dependable. However, that doesn't greatly matter in her present appointment; she holds a librarianship somewhere.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, for every savvy librarian within fiction there is a stereotype, a string of pearls, a widow and a cat.

Mysteries that reference libraries are not confined to looking at quiet places of reflection and study. Tough guys need libraries too. In *The big sleep* (1939) the man on the case 'drove down to the Hollywood public library and did a little superficial research.'⁵¹ While in *The dying trade* (1980) Cliff Hardy states that his 'first stop was the Public Library.'⁵² More recently a library plays out a critical clue in Barry Maitland's *Crucifixion Creek* (2014).⁵³

CONCLUSION

Otto Penzler has written that:

There are countless books in which a librarian, author, editor, publisher of books or magazines, scholar, or a bookseller becomes involved in a mystery but whose profession has no more to do with solving the case than if they were actuaries or farmers.⁵⁴

I argue that the overlap between the detective and the librarian cannot be underestimated and that a librarian within a crime fiction novel could never be substituted easily for someone from another profession. It would be like swapping out the detective. For the restoration of order is central to both the plot of the crime fiction novel and the role descriptions of the detective and the librarian.

Many crime novels support this claim while the bibliomystery provides insights into how libraries and librarians have changed, or not, over the 75 years since the introduction of the Library Act, 1939. It makes sense that as libraries are for the people, and crime fiction is very much a genre for and of the people, that the two subjects should intertwine so easily. The mind that appreciates the written work is one particularly adept at solving puzzles; even A.S. Byatt has quipped that 'literary critics make natural detectives.'⁵⁵

It does need to be remembered though that murder is a very serious business. To Captain Patrick O'Toole, of *Murder – first edition* (1956), 'murder was murder whether it occurred in the slums of Northrup or in the genteel atmosphere of the city's cultural institutions.'⁵⁶ But, as Arthur Gask wrote in *The red paste murders* (1923): 'Crime may indeed repel (sic) – but it fascinates, always.'⁵⁷ And we shall find crime fiction in libraries, always.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was presented at the 11th Library History Forum held at the State Library of New South Wales on the 18th and 19th November 2014. The author is grateful for the assistance of: Ellen Forsyth, Michelle Head, Maggie Patton and Richard Neville for their encouragement and support as well as to the organisers of the 11th Library History Forum: Dr David Jones and Anne Doherty with Edwina Duffy.

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- ³⁶ Ibid., pp. 10, 57, 61 and 74.
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- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 556.
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