

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* edited by Nels Pearson and Marc Singer (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009)**

[T]o trope the actual experiences of those bereft of statehood or collective agency as we totalize concepts like liminality, migrancy, and hybridity in theories of globalization is to augment ‘the discrepancy between historical experiences of migration and aestheticized theories of “migrancy”’ and create ‘a fraught alliance between the allegedly transgressive manoeuvres of postmodern travelling theory and the putatively oppositional politics of postcolonial practice’. (10)

If you’re into 70-word sentences such as the one above, this book is for you! Someone who *wouldn’t* have appreciated this sentence (taken from the Introduction) is Rudolf Flesch. Flesch’s Reading Ease test measures the readability of text on a scale from 0 to 100. A score of 100 suggests that text is very easy to read, and a score of 65 or above is considered Plain English. The lower the score, the less readable the text. Running the above 70-word sentence through Flesch’s Reading Ease test produced a readability score of 0.0. So why should we as readers be subjected to such verbal boogeymen? And is the word ‘deterritorialization’ necessary? Ever?

Perhaps the answers to these compelling questions lie in the history of detective fiction. For a long time, detective fiction (and I use the term loosely, as is the wont with such a lexical shape-shifter) was looked down upon as literature’s plebeian neighbour. Part of the reason for this was its appeal to populist readership through action and Plain English. Over time, detective/crime fiction has been extracted from the bottom of the dung heap, but perhaps insecurity about being smelly remains. Some who write about crime fiction are so determined to be taken seriously by gourmands of long, meaningless sentences that they do all they can to replicate the style of writing (sadly) often associated with writing about literature.

The good news is that the chapters subsequent to the obscure, jargon-dense Introduction are generally an improvement. The first chapter is Emily Davis’s excellent and insightful chapter on Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*. Davis points out Ondaatje’s challenges to our Western notions of truth and justice: ‘To simply deploy Western ideologies of truth and justice is to betray the complexities of local histories’ (28). Davis’s chapter is a more fitting introduction to *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World (DFPTW)*. The premise of the book (which emerges by implication rather than explication) is that the scope of detective fiction is broad and expansive enough to accommodate socio-political analysis of transnational situations and locations. The eleven chapters span such diverse regions as Sri Lanka, India, the French Caribbean, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States. It is wonderful to have in one volume writing on the detective fiction of places, cultures and subcultures (e.g. Korean-American) which may not have been given much attention previously. Although Australian detective fiction and its idiosyncrasies are not explored in this book, it is pleasing to see that important Australian theorists Stephen Knight and Helen Tiffin are referred to, along with other significant and

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eminently sensible (crime) writing theorists such as John G. Cawelti, P.D. James and Raymond Chandler.

The downside of writing about texts that are generally not well known in the West is that it can be quite abstract to read analyses of unfamiliar texts. We are often left to speculate about the content of the books referred to and the accuracy of the analysts' interpretations. Of course, this is not a problem unique to this book, and is common to much academic analysis of literature. In the best-case scenarios, we as readers are inspired to seek and read the books being discussed. However, not all of the chapters in *Detective Fiction* achieve this result, and even where they do, the problem of putting the cart before the horse remains unresolved.

DFPTW successfully shows how resilient the detective fiction genre is at tackling many complicated mysteries, even those beyond traditional definitions of crime. Maureen Lauder's chapter on postcolonial epistemologies refers to Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* as a book which seeks to 'imagine what might come after the transnational. What would a world without barriers look like?' (54). Claire Chambers's chapter on Vikram Chandra and postcolonial noir discusses the metaphysical detective novel, in which the detective grapples with the spiritual mysteries of the universe. Chandra says in relation to his own novel, *Sacred Games*, that God's existence is insinuated as 'the controlling yet shadowy "consciousness" that is assumed to stand behind' the novel (42). Jason Herbeck's interesting and different chapter on detective narrative typology discusses Gérard Genette's concept of *peritext* in relation to French-Caribbean literature. Herbeck writes that in Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse*, even such traditionally neutral and independent book conventions as the epigraphs, dedication, and table of contents all provide clues for the reader as detective for how to interpret and approach the mystery of the novel. Herbeck also refers to 'a growing list of French-Caribbean literary works that, in questioning (neo)colonial patterns and practices, propose investigations largely void of crime stories' (78). This complicates the definition of crime fiction even further and stretches the term 'detective fiction' to near breaking point.

DFPTW provides a good illustration of how detective fiction has evolved and adapted to a changing postcolonial world, and the book contains many insightful chapters. Yet the Introduction and indeed many other chapters are obscure and inaccessible and ape the more unfortunate models of writing about literary fiction. This faux evolution is analogous to claiming that as men can be soldiers and kill each other, allowing women to become soldiers and kill each other is progress.

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