

Against the Grain

Volume 27 | Issue 3

Article 23

2015

Collecting to the Core--American Crime Fiction

Anne Doherty

CHOICE/ACRL, adoherty@ala-choice.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Doherty, Anne (2015) "Collecting to the Core--American Crime Fiction," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 3, Article 23.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7094>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Collecting to the Core — American Crime Fiction

by **Dr. Michael Adams** (Librarian, Mina Rees Library, City University of New York Graduate Center; American Literature Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <madams@gc.cuny.edu>

Column Editor: **Anne Doherty** (*Resources for College Libraries* Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL) <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

It is not news to students of American literature that crime fiction, like science fiction, has slowly risen from the popular fiction ghetto to be recognized as worthy of serious study. Numerous colleges and universities offer regular courses in crime fiction. Many others offer such courses as special topics and within the umbrella of popular culture. For example, the **University of California at Los Angeles** has courses in American popular literature and detective fiction, and the **Ohio State University** has a minor in popular culture studies. Some crime writers have even made their way into the canon. The **University of South Carolina** offered a course last spring in modern American literature that, in addition to **James Baldwin**, **Vladimir Nabokov**, and **Sylvia Plath**, included **Raymond Chandler** and **Patricia Highsmith**.

There is a growing number of critical works to support this interest, especially since much of American crime fiction emphasizes urban culture and differences of class, race, and gender. American crime fiction can be appreciated for its social and political context, as well as for its aesthetics, as more novels and short stories are written by women, African Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and gay and lesbian writers. The protagonists of crime fiction, whether police or criminals, often see themselves as outsiders, and when they are not white men, this outsider status is only intensified.

Critical studies of American crime fiction were slow to develop, but a few early books remain valuable. **Howard Haycraft's** *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* traces the history and development of detective fiction in the United States, England, and the Continent.¹ **Haycraft** shows how nineteenth-century mysteries grew out of similar literature in the marketplace and how **Edgar Allan Poe's** mystery stories established the pattern for much of the crime fiction that followed. He makes a strong case for why American crime fiction began to surpass that created by British writers beginning in the 1920s. There is also a bibliographic essay concerning the earliest critical writings about crime fiction, many of which might have been

difficult to track down without **Haycraft's** trailblazing research.

Despite its title, *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, a collection of original essays edited by novelist **David Madden**, goes beyond **Dashiell Hammett**, **Raymond Chandler**, and **Horace McCoy** to their heirs, such as **John D. MacDonald** and **Jim Thompson**.² The impressive, then and now, contributors include **Joyce Carol Oates** on **James M. Cain**, **R. V. Cassill** on **Thompson's** *The Killer inside Me*, and **Irving Malin** on the metaphysical in **Hammett's** *The Maltese Falcon*. In addition to tracing the development of hard-boiled fiction, these lively essays, especially **Oates's**, look at how these writers evaluate American values and how some, **Chandler** particularly, are better stylists than many more obviously literary figures.

John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* is considered groundbreaking for its serious treatment of popular fiction.³ **Cawelti** includes chapters on the formula of the classical detective story, with particular attention to **Poe**, and the hard-boiled detective story, with emphasis on **Hammett**, **Chandler**, and **Mickey Spillane**. He sees hard-boiled fiction as a departure from the classical detective story, in that protagonists behave as both investigators and judges. Such characters come to believe that their moral visions, however cloudy, are superior to those of society. While many scholars dismiss the notoriously ham-fisted **Spillane**, **Cawelti** sees similarities between the moral certainty of the writer's **Mike Hammer** character and the didactic temperance novels of the nineteenth century. He argues that **Spillane's** popularity derives not just from his use of sex and violence but also from a mythical simplicity akin to folktale. **Cawelti** elaborates upon many of these points in his later essay collection *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture*.⁴

More recently, there have been a growing number of critical studies of American crime fiction by and about women and minorities. In *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, **Kathleen Gregory Klein** offers a chronological treatment of her subject from 1864 to 1987.⁵ She places the development of crime fiction by and about women in context with considerable statistics and commentary about the changing roles of women in society in both the United States and Great Britain. **Klein** departs from many such studies by including female detectives created by male writers, who often emphasized their sexual allure at the expense of their detecting skills. Female detective protagonists did not, for the most part, begin to be well written until the 1970s. **Klein** details how the formulas of crime fiction initially made it resistant to feminism. She argues that the characters created by such

writers as **Marcia Muller** must compromise between their ideologies and their careers. **Sara Paretsky** tries to escape this trap by using crimes and villains associated with institutions or systems excluding or oppressing women.

The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction, by **Stephen Soitos**, is not a comprehensive look at this topic but a consideration of how certain motifs developed from the early twentieth century through the 1970s, concentrating on works by six writers.⁶ **Soitos** makes a convincing case that **Pauline Hopkins**, **J. E. Bruce**, **Rudolph Fisher**, **Chester Himes**, **Ishmael Reed**, and **Clarence Major** combined classical and hard-boiled detective traditions with African American folk culture and vernaculars to examine race, class, and gender within established conventions. **Soitos** sees crime fiction as a dynamic device for implementing cultural worldviews. He considers the importance of the **Harlem Renaissance** to the creation of these works and demonstrates what the writers learned from **Arthur Conan Doyle** and **Agatha Christie**. **Soitos's** study is useful for showing how crime fiction is created out of various cultural strands and how it can be used for social criticism.

Themes explored by **Klein** and **Soitos** have also been examined in several studies aimed at looking at women, minorities, and crime fiction within a larger context. One of the most comprehensive studies is **Stephen Knight's** *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity*.⁷ **Knight** disputes the general assumption that **Hammett** and **Chandler** invented a new form of crime fiction, since violence is prominent in the dime novels of the nineteenth century, tough dialogue is notable in **Jack Boyle's** Boston Blackie stories (first collected in 1919), and a tone of world-weariness appears earlier in the works of **Mary Roberts Rinehart** and **S. S. Van Dine**. **Knight's** acute observations include how fictional detectives rarely actually detect, solving crimes by instincts instead, concerned more about fulfilling their personal ethics than righting wrongs. For him the rise of the police procedural in the 1960s and 1970s made it easier for writers to address matters of class, race, and gender. **Knight** praises the contributions of critically neglected early women crime writers, such as **Leigh Brackett** and **Dorothy B. Hughes**. He sees the development of tough female characters by the likes of **Muller**, **Paretsky**, and **Sue Grafton** as the major renovation of the genre in the last decades of the twentieth century. In analyzing the works of African American writers, **Knight** finds interesting parallels in the ways society's corruption is treated by both **Walter Mosley** and **James Ellroy**. **Knight** often finds thematic and stylistic connections others have ignored.

continued on page 47

Connecting People, Ideas, and Information

Visit us at the ALA Annual Conference in San Francisco, **BOOTH #2106**

CHOICE
CURRENT REVIEWS FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES
Visit www.choice360.org

**ALA ANNUAL
2015 SPECIAL!**
25% off first year of
Choice Reviews Online
for new subscribers.
Reference code:
CONF15.

Collecting to the Core from page 46

Another in-depth study is *Contemporary American Crime Fiction*, by **Johannes Bertens**, who teaches at **Utrecht University**, and **Theo d'Haen** of **Leiden University**.⁸ Their uniquely European perspective on American crime fiction of the 1990s, most of whose practitioners continue to flourish, concentrates on how writers reimagined established conventions and further evaluates the quality of fiction. In praising the power, innovation, and irreverence of female crime writers, **Bertens** and **d'Haen** find that their protagonists are more concerned with the personal than the political while still signifying the evolving status of women in the crime world. **Robert B. Parker's** Spenser and **Lawrence Sanders's** Matt Scudder are compared, with the latter found more interesting because the character is more flawed and fluid. Likewise, they find **Nevada Barr's** Anna Pigeon appealing for her insecurity and vulnerability balanced with independence. **Bertens** and **d'Haen** are particularly perceptive in explaining how **Ellroy** finds that crime writing is the only way to describe contemporary America. They praise writers such as **Ken Tanaka**, **Michael Nava**, and **John Morgan Wilson** for their treatment of characters marginalized by society. One of the best sections is their analysis of **Robert Skinner's** *Skin Deep*, *Blood Red*, which looks at the novelist's use of the hard-boiled tradition to examine racial issues.

Contemporary American Crime Fiction stands out in its openness to all approaches to crime fiction and its refusal to try to squeeze writers into preconceived categories.

Criticism of American crime fiction has attracted some excellent writing that eschews the jargon of much academic discourse. One work especially accessible for undergraduates, in addition to being insightful and comprehensive, is **Lee Horsley's** *The Noir Thriller*.⁹ **Horsley**, an American who has spent her entire career in England, deals with films and British writers but concentrates on American crime fiction. **Horsley's** analysis constantly situates the fiction under discussion within a larger social and cultural framework. She links the dark underbelly of American life exposed in noir thrillers with the modernist pessimism associated with such works as **T. S. Eliot's** *The Waste Land*. Crime fiction is distinctive for depicting alienated characters and their struggles to deal with an often hostile environment. **Horsley's** comprehensiveness is displayed by her attention to early minor writers such as **Benjamin Appel**, **Paul Cain**, and **Carroll John Daly**, who usually appear only as names in lists in other critical works. She is also good at explaining why **Cain**, **McCoy**, and many others were first more appreciated by European readers. **Horsley** argues that the small-town milieu in much crime fiction from the 1940s and 1950s makes it easy for writers to explore social, racial, and gender prejudices

continued on page 48

Endnotes

1. **Haycraft, Howard**. *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1941.*
2. **Madden, David**, ed. *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968.*
3. **Cawelti, John G.** *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976.*
4. **Cawelti, John G.** *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.*
5. **Klein, Kathleen Gregory**. *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988.*
6. **Soitos, Stephen**. *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.*
7. **Knight, Stephen**. *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.*
8. **Bertens, Johannes**, and **Theo d'Haen**. *Contemporary American Crime Fiction*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.*
9. **Horsley, Lee**. *The Noir Thriller*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.*
10. **Rzepka, Charles**, and **Lee Horsley**. *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2010.*

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: **Debbie Vaughn** (Adjunct Instructor, Clemson University) <vaughn.deborah@gmail.com>

Column Editor's Note: To quote Peter Parker's Uncle Ben from Spiderman fame, "with great power comes great responsibility." The same philosophy can be extended to the library world: with great information comes great responsibility. E-Resources Specialist and new MM reviewer **Michelle Polchow** examines an ALA publication that covers numerous topics pertaining to legal and licensing issues. If licensing is of interest to you, you also might consider attending the following sessions at the **ALA Annual Conference** in San Francisco:

Challenges with Managing Streaming Media and other Digital Content for Academic Libraries Preconference Institute (Friday, June 26, 8:30 – 4:00)

To the MOOC and Beyond! Adventures in Online Learning, Copyright and Massive Open Online Courses (Sunday, June 28, 3:00 – 4:00)

OITP-Copyright Litigation: The Year in Review (and What's Coming Next) (Monday, June 29, 10:30 – 11:30)

Media Streaming Showcase: Can We Talk? (Monday, June 29, 1:00 – 2:30)

These sessions are sure to provide valuable information to inform and enhance your professional library practice.

In other news, I am sad to be writing my last MM column introduction but excited to be handing the MM reins to **Regina Gong**, Manager of Technical Services and Systems at **Lansing Community College Library**. I cherish my affiliation with **ATG**; through **ATG** and the **Charleston Conference**, I have expanded my sphere of awareness of issues in not only acquisitions, publishing, and vendor relations, but also public services, professional development, and more. I hope to continue to contribute, but my latest family addition makes time on the computer more and more sparse! **Regina** has outstanding plans for this book review column; beginning with the September issue, it will be bigger and better than ever before.

Many thanks to reviewer **Michelle Polchow**, new column editor **Regina Gong**, and all of the past MM reviewers who have contributed their time, effort, and opinions to the library and information conversation through their submissions. Happy conferencing and happy reading, everyone! — **DV**

Lipinski, Thomas A. *The Librarian's Legal Companion for Licensing Information Resources and Services*. Chicago: ALA, 2013.

978-1-55570-610-4. 760 pages. \$134.00.

Reviewed by **Michelle Polchow** (Collection Development E-Resource Specialist, George Mason University) <mpolchow@gmu.edu>

The Librarian's Legal Companion for Licensing Information Resources and Services is part of the Neal-Shuman series ***The Legal Advisor for Librarians, Educators, and Information Professionals***. This deep dive into a highly specialized field of practice will prove invaluable to a wide spectrum of readers, ranging from students of Library and Information Science to the most seasoned of negotiators. Although author **Tomas A. Lipinski** warns this book is "not for the faint of heart," the excellent organization of this complex topic reflects his aptitude for teaching, along with

his credentials as Professor at the School of Library and Information Science, **Indiana University-Purdue University**, Indianapolis, JD, LL.M, PhD. The illuminating tome tackles not only the legal context of acquisitions, but situates associated entangling issues such as archiving licensed resources, termination rights, interlibrary loan, fair use, risk management, and the important role of library advocate within the negotiation process.

Whether the book is used as a course textbook, foundational material for a

seminar or reading for professional improvement; the table of contents subdivides the topic into manageable units of learning. The hefty glossary is suggested as an alternative starting point for the novice. Beginning with an environmental scan of modern librarianship to set the stage, relevant copyright law and concepts of contract law follow, and the grand finale admirably tackles the range and nature of resources and services now licensed by libraries. At the intersection of copyright and contract law, **Lipinski** provides a thorough discussion which encompasses the most perplexing issues of music, media, open source, creative commons, on down to the nuances between shrink-wrap, click-wrap and browse-wrap licenses. Although the book as a whole could prove overwhelming, the exhaustive detail, both in the table of contents and the comprehensive subject index, offer discovery aids which transform this into an easy-to-use handbook permitting bite-size learning opportunities. At the end of every chapter are concise summary points and extensive end notes. Case studies, check-lists and key-clause evaluation tools round out a full licensing toolkit.

Although the book does not advocate for a model license, nor does it offer consortial negotiation strategies to leverage strength in numbers, the author develops the discussion beyond mere issues of acquisition. The reader is assured that any effort to deepen understanding of copyright and contract law will provide a payoff in the form of greater ease with these multifaceted matters. A key point made is negotiation is an interactive opportunity for librarians to develop licenses that reach beyond basic access, and can forge increased impact when all issues are fully grasped. Greater understanding of key license clauses, both their inclusion and omission, can lead to a more law-compliant information resources and services environment. And towards

that goal, the library is posed for the unique role in risk management for its associated institution. Overall, this well constructed and thorough book fills a critical hole in the library and information science literature. 📖



Collecting to the Core from page 47

and the smug morality of midcentury America, as **Highsmith** and **Thompson** turn murder into a form of social criticism. **Horsley** is perceptive in demonstrating how femmes fatales of this period are stronger characters than their film noir counterparts, especially in the fiction of **Cornell Woolrich** and **David Goodis**, who also offers a white liberal perspective on racial issues. **Horsley** shows how the noir thriller

adapts to social change, adding consumerism as a target by the 1980s, and how in feminist crime fiction protagonists create their identities by solving crimes. **The Noir Thriller** is remarkable in crime fiction criticism for the breadth and depth of **Horsley's** analyses. She seems to have read more and thought more deeply about her subject than any other scholar.

Horsley also co-edited, with **Charles J. Rzepka**, an excellent collection of essays about American and British crime fiction and films. **A Companion to Crime Fiction** includes scholarly essays on such topics as literary theory

and crime fiction, feminist crime fiction, and postmodern and metaphysical detection, as well as essays on individual figures from **Poe** to **Mosley**.¹⁰ Two of the most interesting contributions are "Crime Fiction and the Literary Canon," by **Joel Black**, and "Historical Crime and Detection," by **Ray B. Browne**. Such essays supplement and update the material in the earlier studies above. Alongside the fiction itself, the works of criticism discussed here should be considered essential to all collections at academic institutions where crime fiction or popular American literature is taught. 📖