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Detective fiction and the critical-creative nexus

Abstract:

This article aims to put a theoretical frame around the concept of the critical-creative nexus as it manifests itself in detective fiction. It argues that critical and creative practices in the context of detective fiction, and by extension in popular literature in general, are deeply interconnected: the writing of detective fiction always involves a critical positioning in relation to established genre conventions, while, conversely, detective fiction criticism, and certainly its most important exempla, involves an element of the creative, stretching from imaginative readings to a complete critical rewriting of the individual story. The article concludes by suggesting that the concept of the critical-creative nexus results in a new understanding of detective fiction as an inherently *mobile* genre constantly in the process of reinventing itself.

Biographical notes:

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Detective fiction – Mobility – Literary Criticism

Introduction

The dichotomy of production and reception is one of the pillars of classic aesthetic theory, and one of its prevalent contemporary manifestations is the split between creative and critical practice. This conceptual distinction has its merits. Some people write books while others write about them; and although there are many exceptions, most individuals working in these general areas tend to spend their careers on either side without ever crossing the boundary. Yet, production and reception are inextricably linked, and the border between the creative and the critical can be hard to demarcate with any degree of precision, at least when looking beyond the pure forms sanctioned by the academy: writers constantly engage in acts of practical criticism while critics, even when insisting on objectivity and scholarly rigour, constantly tap into a creative ore as a means of innovating and lifting their work above the mundane and self-evident.

There is, of course, a discipline in which discussion of the critical-creative nexus appears almost tautological; indeed, academics working in the field of creative writing can hardly escape the tensions that arise at this juncture. Two Australian cases of the profitability of engaging with detective fiction's particular corralling of this nexus are worthy of mention here. Catherine Cole cut her teeth as a novelist writing crime. Her two Sydney-based Nicola Sharpe novels – *Dry Dock* (1999) and *Skin Deep* (2002) – gained a certain degree of critical praise for their engagement with feminist and political concerns; more importantly perhaps, in the framework of this special issue, they led Cole to her cross-over study of detective fiction seen through the lens of creative writing scholarship: *Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks* (2004). For her part, Sydney-based academic Françoise Grauby has brought to the discipline of French Studies in Australia a passion for literary analysis and critical theory. In 2004, with her novel *Un cheval piaffe en moi*, Grauby exported her passion for literature back into France in the form of a partially autobiographical novel about the salutary power of the creative imagination. Her subsequent engagement with the intersection of literary studies and creative writing (the latter of which is only now gaining traction as an academic discipline and discourse in France) has seen her produce a special issue of the *Australian Journal of French Studies* (2011) on the topic; it has also led her into detective fiction and, arguably, still further from her disciplinary home. Her analyses of Agatha Christie's character Ariadne Oliver, a hybrid writer-cum-sleuth who necessarily functions to highlight Poirot's own fictionality and Christie's creative practice, are a prime example of the benefits of transdisciplinary scholarship (see Grauby 2016). Cole and Grauby's fascination with the genre also attests to the key role played by detective fiction not only in harnessing the critical and the creative but also in commenting on it.

Arguably, the critical-creative nexus is particularly entrenched in in the context of detective fiction. (The term 'detective fiction' will be used throughout here for two reasons: first, the texts analysed tend to fit this more specific category, making the broader reach of the term 'crime fiction' unnecessary for our purposes; second, one of the key players in the development of a critical-creative crime fiction reading practice, Pierre Bayard, on whose work we shall draw and whose ideas we seek to develop, coins the term 'detective criticism' (2009: 57–69) to define his brand of hybrid public-academic scholarship. Since this approach addresses the specific narrative logics of

detective fiction, it is necessary to use this genre designation.) On the one hand, working in one of the very few literary genres that are commercially successful on a global scale (Knight 2015: 3), detective fiction writers are a comparatively privileged group and have less need than other writers for the recognition and associated benefits bestowed by the academy (Zlatnar Moe and Žigon 2015: 147). On the other hand, critics have little time for individual detective fiction writers, the critical predisposition to disregard the author being particularly strong in regards to a genre often seen as driven by anonymous rules and the standardising forces of the marketplace. The two groups sometimes come together around the view that detective fiction is a 'simple' genre, distinct from higher forms of literature and not in need of the same critical scrutiny. Yet, this strange agreement just reinforces the sense that no genuine and sustained dialogue is taking place.

In this article, we propose to complicate the ingrained notions of the relationship between critical and creative practice in the context of detective fiction. It is not our intention to further a dialogue between the two by promoting, and thus further entrenching, their difference; instead, we aim to highlight the ways in which these ostensibly opposed elements often presuppose each other or enter into partnerships that transcend the simple dichotomy of production and reception. The concept of the critical-creative nexus is intended to capture this poorly understood interdependency and shed light on the criticism of creative practice as well as the creativity of criticism. As we argue, a reflection on the critical-creative nexus ultimately leads to a new conception of detective fiction predicated on mobility rather than the stasis of genre rules and conventions.

Critical creativity: Agatha Christie

The detective fiction of Agatha Christie is instructive with regards to the first aspect, that is, the critical aspects of creative practice. Often reviled as formulaic, most recently with mathematical backing (Siddique 2015), Christie's work, while certainly not without stock elements, exhibits a powerful ludic and even experimental streak. This rarely acknowledged experimentalism is evident, among other places, in her incessant variation of the narratorial position in her novels; in her playful challenging of the detective's seemingly unshakeable authority (Gulddal 2016a); in her repeated baiting and disappointing of reader expectations; and, of course, in her interminable search for new ways of committing and detecting murder. These literary strategies amount to a continuous self-reflexive examination of the detective genre that manifests itself most clearly in one of the most constant elements of her writing, namely the explicit references to, debates around and personifications of detective fiction itself. Most obviously, the characters of Christie's novels refer with remarkable frequency to the fancifulness of detective novels, thereby producing a fiction of authenticity that immediately, and ironically, unravels as readers realise that these comments apply equally well to the novel they are in the process of reading.

The presence of detective fiction writers among the characters – most prominently Ariadne Oliver who appears in seven novels of the Poirot series (cf. Grauby 2016) – represents an expanded version of this favourite device. Christie's 1935 novel *Death in*

the Clouds, for example, includes among the cast of suspects an author of whodunit novels, Mr Clancy. This person is ecstatic when learning that the murder on his flight from Paris to Croydon was committed using an indigenous poison dart soaked with the poison of an exotic snake. For Mr Clancy, this murder is not only striking because it so clearly references detective fiction conventions (Clancy himself claims to have used the same idea twice before in his detective stories, and one might also think of the similar murder weapon in Doyle's *Sign of the Four* of 1890), but also, in the context of the novel itself, because it represents reality outdoing fiction. Determined not to be upstaged, Clancy sets to work writing a novel based on the events on the flight, which proposes a distinctly preposterous solution to the mystery. This turn of events has the effect of raising the floor for what may justifiably be considered realistic – the sheer outrageousness of Clancy's plot makes Christie's own outrageousness less noticeable. However, while ostensibly re-establishing the dichotomy of reality vs fiction, it also introduces a more subversive dimension. Via the Clancy subplot, Christie is engaging in parody and self-parody, gently mocking both the detective genre itself and her own contributions to it. Moreover, this storyline is overly metafictional and perfectly illustrates Pyrhönen's claim that detective fiction involves a running commentary on its own constructive principles (1994: 32).

Yet, the relationship between Mr Clancy and Hercule Poirot is also a manifestation within the novel of a surreptitious link between the creative and the critical. The two characters serve as representatives of two different principles of information processing: where Clancy approaches the information of the murder scene creatively, using it as the basis for literary fiction, Poirot analyses it rationally with a view to uncovering the truth. While anchored in different mental faculties, these endeavours converge around the shared search for a plot that transforms the heterogeneity of characters, events and objects into a convincing and meaningful whole. The interaction between Clancy and Poirot in *Death in the Clouds* is therefore not so much a matter of upholding neat distinctions between the imaginative and the rational, and between fiction and reality, but rather of subtly highlighting the convergence of these poles. In this sense, the proximity in Christie's novels of detectives and writers, points towards the critical-creative nexus as the foundation of detective fiction and further shows the author herself, who is stage-managing these exchanges, as someone who is capable of utilising this nexus as an instrument of literary innovation.

Critical creativity: Ed McBain

While these critical-creative aspects of Christie's detective fiction reveal a will to experiment not entirely dissimilar to the desire of her modernist contemporaries to invent new forms of writing, Christie's experiments arguably stay within the bounds of the whodunit format. A different type of critical-creative practice goes one step further and challenges the fundamental assumptions and generic templates on which detective fiction was traditionally based. It would be misguided to associate this destructive take on the genre only with postmodern anti-detective fiction in the style of Jorge Luis Borges or Paul Auster. In fact, it is much more prevalent than that and arguably represents nothing more than the fullest expression of the critical component inherent

in all detective fiction that aims for more than simply rehashing established formulae.

A case in point is the American pioneer of the police procedural Ed McBain. The author of more than 100 novels, many forming part of his bestselling 87th Precinct series, McBain is not highly regarded among literary scholars; while his decades-long efforts to create the fictional, New York-inspired city of Isola and his contributions to the police novel receive some recognition, the alleged simplicity of his plots, his characters and his writing style draw more commentary. Yet, McBain's unadorned writing belies the stakes involved especially in his early works, and perhaps particularly in the 1956 debut*, Cop Hater*. This novel introduces a feature that was to become the hallmark of the police novel, namely the strong claim it makes to being absolutely realistic. This claim is announced explicitly in the form of a note in the front matter assuring readers that while people and places are fictitious, "the police routine is based on established investigatory technique" (McBain 1956). In the novel itself the claim to realism is supported by an array of literary techniques ranging from the police officers' professional jargon to detailed discussions of forensic methods, often supplemented by pretend facsimiles of police files, maps, fingerprint cards or autopsy reports.

However, far from being simply a matter of references to actual police work, the fiction of realism in *Cop Hater* is also, and perhaps above all, a product of the novel's ongoing critical dialogue with the tradition of detective fiction. With the aim of achieving maximum accuracy in the depiction of crime-fighting, this novel launches an all-out attack against the conventions and readerly expectations on which detective fiction had been based since the mid-nineteenth century. In the first instance, the cult of the solitary detective who solves the puzzle by means of his superior mental abilities is abandoned in favour of a group of police officers, none of whom stands out as superhumanly astute. More importantly, *Cop Hater* destabilises the central ontological assumption of classic detective fiction, that is, the sequential interconnectedness of criminal acts, clues, investigative practices and solutions. In this novel, as often in McBain's early work, police procedures are seen as time-consuming busywork that hardly ever leads anywhere, least of all to an arrest. Even the forensic examinations that take up such a large part of the book consistently fail to produce useful information. Instead, the mystery of a serial killer targeting police officers is solved, not merely by accident, but by incompetence. The investigation at an impasse, one of the police officers, Steve Carella, carelessly discusses the case and his own private affairs with an unscrupulous journalist, thereby inadvertently setting a trap for the murderer. Characteristically, the arrest takes places in the private rather than professional realm and involves the killer seeking out the police rather than vice versa. These genre-defying manoeuvres on the part of McBain are clearly important in terms of presenting the novel as particularly realistic. However, they are also a source of genre reinvention. It is precisely the literary criticism at the heart of creative practice that enables the author, under the cover of simplicity, to reinvent the detective genre, although almost at the cost of destroying it (Gulddal 2016b: 34).

As these examples show, Christie and McBain, although their writings appear diametrically opposed, have in common a genre-critical impulse that crucially informs their creative work: they represent the adaptive and transformative extremes on a spectrum of detective fiction self-criticism. Importantly, this self-reflexive dimension

cannot be described adequately using the familiar concepts of metafiction and intertextuality. While certainly involving a degree of literary self-consciousness, it lacks one of the defining features of the metaliterary text, namely its ironical foregrounding of its own fictionality and artifice. Further, it does not depend on links to other texts, identifiable or not, but draws instead on an abstract concept of genre in a bid for strategic genre reinvention. The criticism presented by Christie and McBain shows how literary innovation is associated with engaging critically with past writers – an idea that broadens and lends substance to the popular notion of practice-led research. This dynamic relationship between the critical and the creative is perhaps particularly prominent in detective fiction as a genre encumbered by the heavy weight of convention. It serves to lessen this weight by purposefully suspending and reworking the rules of the game.

Creative criticism

If creative practice in the context of detective fiction is able to accommodate a critical element, which can be more or less pronounced, there is also a creative dimension to detective fiction criticism – even if it does not always come to the forefront. In a sense, this is nothing new. While literary criticism should never simply be a matter of projecting one's subjectivity or intellectual inclinations onto the text, critical work involves an element of creativity in the form of novel ways of framing, unpacking or recasting the text; in fact, all criticism that aims higher than simply to redescribe its object engages in reconfigurative work of this type. However, critical creativity is arguably more necessary than anywhere else in the context of detective fiction. In its traditional forms, which remain prevalent, detective fiction is a genre characterised by the fact that it provides its own prescriptive self-interpretation, often made explicit in the form of the detective's revelatory monologue on the last pages. This final reckoning, however, is itself part of the semantic game that detective fiction stages and should not necessarily be taken as authoritative; in fact, it often blinds the critic to the tricks and devices employed in the course of the narrative. A creative mind set, irreverent with regards to foregone conclusions, is therefore needed in order to break the detective's stranglehold on meaning.

Aiming to render the text accessible to interpretation, this kind of critical creativity initially manifests itself in a destructive mode that exposes the contradictions, improbabilities or outright absurdities of the detective plot. John Sutherland is an eminent representative of this type of criticism. Across a trilogy of essay collections, later published in an omnibus edition as *The Literary Detective*, Sutherland has cultivated a reading style inspired by detective work in the close attention it pays to textual evidence and the inconsistencies it produces. Drawing on the probing potential of the essay genre, he uses these inconsistencies to reveal new layers of meaning and elucidate the constructive dynamics of, mainly, the nineteenth-century novel. A number of essays are devoted to significant contributors to the detective genre such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and, especially, Arthur Conan Doyle. In his essay on Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, for example, Sutherland highlights some of the many problems of this novel's canine-focused plot, yet he also uses these issues to account

for Doyle's writing process, which involved covering up plot gaps as he became aware of them (2000: 452–55). While Sutherland himself avoids theorising these gaps, his studies of detective fiction shows how authors in this genre constantly struggle to keep their plots as logical and transparent as their detectives imagine them.

Judging from the name alone, French literary theorist Pierre Bayard's 'detective criticism' (2009) appears closely related to Sutherland's approach as a 'literary detective'. However, although the two critics share an interest in plot inconsistencies and no doubt would agree on the point that detective fiction authors cannot entirely contain their plots, Bayard, drawing on psychoanalytical theory as well as a pervasive influence from the literary experiments of the OuLiPo group, takes the idea of a detective-style reading practice several steps further than Sutherland. In a trilogy of monographs devoted, respectively, to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Bayard argues that the solution to the murder mystery in each of these works is in fact a miscarriage of justice. Initially his method is to uncover the flaws of the allegedly authoritative solution. Far from being a mere hole-picking exercise, however, his investigations, which aim to be 'more rigorous than even the detectives in literature and the writers who create them' (Bayard 2009: 57), are based on detailed close analysis and manage to harness an impressive amount of textual evidence against the official explanations. The analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is particularly detailed, and the many logical problems uncovered by Bayard cast serious doubt on Poirot's identification of Dr Sheppard, the novel's own narrator, as the killer of Roger Ackroyd. Most damagingly, Poirot's account requires that Dr Sheppard design a timer-operated dictaphone in his sparse free time on the afternoon of the murder (Bayard 2000b: 61–62).

As a second step, however, Bayard supplements this 'negative' approach, which aims to disprove the detective's chosen explanation, with a 'positive' approach, which aims to identify the *true* murderer. This is the point where detective fiction becomes fully creative: illustrating Bayard's idea of an 'ameliorative criticism' (2000a), it blurs the line between reception and production by turning the critic into a re-writer of incomplete or unsatisfying literary texts. As a general critical principle, this idea may not have much to recommend it. However, in the context of detective fiction it is arguably sanctioned to some degree by the position in which this genre, particularly in its classic forms, places the reader. Presented with an unfolding mystery, detective fiction readers are encouraged to undertake their own investigations and to try to solve the puzzle before the detective hero; yet, in the end, the detective upstages them by putting forward a solution that, if the various sleights of hand played by the author were successful, had never even crossed their minds. It is not clear why readers, having been activated in this way, should simply submit in the end to the authority of the protagonist; nor is it evident why readers who have been diligently trained in the hermeneutics of suspicion should suddenly accept that the state of mystery has been replaced by one of total comprehension. W.H. Auden speaks in this regard of the 'lingering doubt' (1937: 122) that the reader of detective fiction sometimes experiences when reaching the end of the book. Bayard draws the radical consequence of this readerly doubt, which is part of the phenomenology of reading detective fiction. His detective criticism therefore

targets, not just a dismantling of the authorised solution, but a critical-creative retrofitting of the detective stories with more satisfying endings. In the case of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for example, Bayard suggests that the crime could more plausibly have been committed by the only character who has escaped suspicion: Dr Sheppard's sister, Caroline.

The creativity of criticism also manifests itself in less extreme forms and comes to the forefront when critics abandon the assumption that detective fiction is a genre that somehow does not warrant close scrutiny. Unfortunately, while there are many important exceptions, this does not happen often enough. The dominant text-based modes of detective fiction scholarship still appear to be the paraphrase, which privileges extensive rather than intensive reading, and the taxonomy, which analyses individual detective stories with reference to an (implied) table of subgenres and genre conventions. The contextual approaches that supplement these modes are crucial in terms of appreciating the historical situatedness of the genre – see, for example, Boltanski (2014) – yet they do little to dispel the sense that 'distant reading' (Moretti 2013) was always the norm in detective fiction studies. A creative-critical practice depends, conversely, on a detailed analysis of the text itself. It takes a leaf out of Sutherland and Bayard's book by resisting the authority of the detective hero and particularly rejects the critical overemphasis on the ending as the climactic manifestation of this authority; it also brackets received ideas of genre and genre rules which, while often true in a general sense, cloud the perception of the individuality of a given detective story. Its aim is not simply to generate new and interesting meanings, but rather to release detective fiction from critical and conceptual bindings that make it less diverse, less complex and less intellectually exciting than it really is.

Detective fiction on the move

As the examples above have shown, a relationship of interdependence exists between the critical and the creative in the context of detective fiction. Creative practice, when it sets itself higher aims than simply to replicate established formulae, is also an act of practical criticism, and this critical dimension is essential in terms of genre rejuvenation. Critical practice, on the other hand, needs an admixture of creativity, not only to challenge the genre's authoritative self-interpretations, but also to counter the prevalent taxonomical forms of criticism with a more detailed approach that acknowledges the textual complexity of detective fiction. The cross-fertilisation indicated by the concept of the critical-creative nexus ensures that detective fiction does not as a whole, although perhaps in some of its individual manifestations, live up to its stereotype as a poorly written, narratively simple genre that forever recycles its most successful patterns.

Ultimately, the concept of the critical-creative nexus paves the way for a very different view of detective fiction, which may not accurately describe all individual cases, but at least has the merit of recognising the genuinely literary complexity of the genre. If traditional scholarship has regarded detective fiction as *settled*, both in the sense of being static and in the sense of having no need for systematic analysis and interpretation, this view instead casts the genre as *mobile* in the sense of being in flux

both at the level of the individual text and at level of genre. While a dominant conception of the genre emphasises its conformity, this other view focuses instead on its irreverence – the fact that its rules are broken as often as respected, and that its conventions are not established once and for all, but are constantly being renegotiated. The source of this mobility is the un-settling interfacing of critical and creative practice.

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