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Developing an appetite for food in crime fiction

Abstract:

Food has been receiving an increasing amount of scholarly attention, with researchers exploring every aspect of selection, preparation and consumption and, so too is the idea of food in fiction. In creating stories, from short-run paperbacks to prize-winning novels, writers utilise food to communicate the everyday and to explore more complex concepts such as the class system and cultural diversity. Food also has the capacity to add realism to fiction with many authors putting as much effort into conjuring the smell, taste and texture of food as they do in bringing their characters to life. This article is an investigation of how cookbooks and fictional works are reflections of each other in terms of creativity, function and structure: they tell us stories, provide education and have neat beginnings, middles and ends. In some instances the two forms are so closely entwined that a volume will concurrently share a narrative while providing instruction in the culinary arts. In particular, this article explores the recipes found within crime fiction, a genre that has a long history of focusing on food in a variety of contexts; from the theft of food in the novels of the nineteenth century to the more modern utilisation of various types of food to administer poison. Recent years have also seen some crime fiction writers proffer a central protagonist working within the food industry, drawing connections between the skills that are required for food preparation and those needed to catch a murderer.

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Keywords:

Food writing – Creative writing – Crime fiction – Food studies – Food tourism

Introduction

Food is receiving an increasing amount of scholarly attention, with researchers exploring ‘anything pertaining to food and eating, from how food is grown to when and how it is eaten, to who eats it and with whom, and the nutritional quality’ (Duran & MacDonald 2006: 234). Attention is also being given to food in popular culture (Risson & Brien 2012: 3) and food in popular fiction: including crime fiction. In creating stories, from short-run paperbacks to prize-winning novels, writers utilise food to communicate the everyday and to explore more complex ideas such as a character’s ambitions, background and social standing in addition to how food is emotional as well as physical nourishment. There are three ways a writer can deal with food. Firstly, food can be considered completely irrelevant. This approach is sometimes taken despite food being such a standard feature of storytelling that its absence, whether eating at home, at a famous restaurant or alongside a street vendor’s cart is obvious. Ignoring all types of sustenance is often seen in thrillers where saving the world does not allow heroes the luxury of stopping for a sandwich. Secondly, food can be used to add realism to a story, with many authors putting as much effort into conjuring the smell, taste and texture of food as they do into bringing their characters to life. In recent decades a third way has emerged with some writers placing such importance upon food in fiction that the line between the cookbook and the novel is blurred. The idea that cookery is more than instruction, that food is also able to tell a story, can be found in numerous types of fiction – from comedies to magical realist tales to romances. The vast majority of works, however, which distort the traditional definitions of cookbook and novel, are the result of the prolific efforts of women crime fiction writers.

Food in fiction

Food in fiction is often employed to help characters cope with grief; giving them the reassurance that only comes through the familiarity of the kitchen and the concentration required to fulfil routine tasks: to chop and dice, to mix, to sift and roll, to bake, broil, grill, steam and fry. Grief can come from the breakdown of a relationship as seen in Nora Ephron’s *Heartburn* (1983). An autobiography, that has been published as a piece of fiction, this novel is the first-person story of cookbook author, Rachel Samstat, a job description that irritates the narrator as she feels her works ‘aren’t merely cookbooks’. She is, however, grateful she was not described as ‘a distraught, rejected, pregnant cookbook author whose husband was in love with a giantess’ (1983/1996: 95). As the collapse of a marriage is described favourite recipes are shared. Grief can also result from loss of hope and recognition of what could have been. *Like water for chocolate* (1989), by Laura Esquivel, is the magical realist tale of Tita De La Garza who, as the youngest daughter, is forbidden to marry as she must take care of her mother, a woman who: ‘Unquestionably, when it came to dividing, dismantling, dismembering, desolating, detaching, dispossessing, destroying or dominating ... was a pro’ (1989/1993: 87). Tita’s life, much like Rachel’s life, lurches from one painful, unjust episode to the next; the only emotional stability she has comes from the kitchen.

Grief is, however, most commonly associated with death. The task of selecting, preparing and presenting meals in novels dealing with the bereaved is both functional and symbolic: life must go on for those left behind but it goes on in a very different way. Thus, novels that use food to deal with loss are particularly important because they can ‘make non-cooks believe they can cook, and for frequent cooks, affirm what they already know: that cooking heals’ (Baltazar 2012). In *The kitchen daughter* (2011), by Jael McHenry, Ginny Selvaggio is struggling to cope with the death of her parents, killed in a car crash, and the friends and relations who crowd her home after the funeral. Retreating to the safety and security of the kitchen is an automatic and logical reaction (5). In *Angelina’s bachelors* (2011), by Brian O’Reilly, Angelina D’Angelo believes ‘cooking was not just about food. It was about character’ (2). By the end of the first chapter the young woman’s husband is dead, having suffered a massive heart attack, and she is in the kitchen looking for solace, and survival, in cookery (59). Not all deaths, however, are the result of motor vehicle accidents or natural causes, some are due to much more deliberate acts. Those acts that are based on the more common motives to commit murder: such as greed, lust or revenge.

Crime fiction and cookery

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 such as chocolate, marmalade and sweet omelettes, to administer poison (Berkeley 1929; Christie 1953; Sayers 1930). The latter vehicle for arsenic receiving much attention in Harriet Vane’s trial in Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Strong poison* (1930). 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—and a very good rule it is, and I advise you all to treat omelettes in the same way and never to allow them to stand, or they will get tough. Four eggs were brought to the table in their shells, and Mr Urquhart broke them one by one into a bowl, adding sugar from a sifter ... [he then] cooked the omelette in a chafing dish, filled it with hot jam (1930/2003: 14).

Even before, what Timothy Taylor describes as the ‘pre-foodie era’, the crime fiction genre was ‘littered with corpses whose last breaths smelled oddly sweet, or bitter, or of almonds’ (Taylor 2010). Not all murderers are so subtle. In Roald Dahl’s short story *Lamb to the slaughter* (1953) Mary Maloney murders her policeman husband, clubbing him over the head with a frozen leg of lamb. The meat is roasting nicely when her husband’s colleagues arrive to investigate his death, the lamb is offered and consumed: the murder weapon neatly disposed of.

Recent years have seen more and more crime fiction writers present a central protagonist working within the food industry. It is interesting to note that most of the characters within these culinary-based crime novels, and the writers who create them, are women. The idea of food preparation, a task once firmly entrenched in the domestic sphere, has been taken into the workforce by women for women. The protagonists in these novels are, predominantly, professional people: women who own

their own business; are fiercely independent; engage in a range of meaningful relationships; are intelligent and resourceful as well as very successful – both at their chosen culinary career and at catching killers. Of particular importance, this phenomenon of culinary crime novels draws connections between the skills required for food preparation and those needed to catch a murderer. Working with cooks or crooks, or both, requires planning and people skills in addition to creative thinking, dedication, reliability, stamina and a certain willingness to take risks. The connection between the crime and culinary worlds are clearly expressed in Joanne Fluke's *Fudge cupcake murder* (2004). In this novel, the story of Sheriff Grant's murder, Beatrice Koester brings Hannah Swensen a contribution for *The Lake Eden cookbook*. The cupcake recipe, created by Beatrice's recently deceased mother-in-law Alma, includes an instruction to: 'add one-half cup secret ingredient' (17). Hannah immediately deploys the techniques that she will use to catch Sheriff Grant's killer to try and identify the 'secret ingredient':

Hannah turned to Beatrice. 'Did you ever taste the cupcakes?'

'Yes, and they were wonderful! Alma made them for Ted every year on his birthday, but she wouldn't let me watch her.'

'What did they taste like? Describe them' ... 'Can you describe the frosting' ... 'Think back to the cupcakes. Was there any kind of hidden or subtle flavour that you can remember?' ... 'Was the cupcake smooth? Or did it have chunks of things inside?' (17-18)

Kent Carroll asserts: 'Food and mysteries just go together' (Carroll in Calta 1993). One of the many websites dedicated to crime fiction *Stop, you're killing me!* lists, at the time of writing, almost 100 culinary-based crime fiction series: indicating that there is certainly sufficient evidence to support Carroll's claim. Such works do more than merely superimpose the theme of food upon the genre of crime fiction. These novels integrate both forms of narrative through the featuring of an eclectic array of bakers, caterers, chefs, confectioners, providores and numerous bar owners, coffee shop and tea shop owners, cooking school owners, food and wine writers, hoteliers and restaurateurs. Of the numerous works available that focus on food there are many series that go beyond featuring food and beverages to reinforce character traits or supplement a plotline: there are, today, many examples of these novels that present recipes as well as the solving of crimes. The overlap of the language of the crime writer and the food writer is obvious, as a cursory examination of the titles of these works reveals, titles that include: *Finger lickin' dead* (Adams 2011) and *Hickory smoked homicide* (Adams 2011); *Death by darjeeling* (Childs 2001) and *Blood orange brewing* (Childs 2006); *On what grounds* (Coyle 2003) and *Roast mortem* (Coyle 2010); *Town in a blueberry jam* (Haywood 2010) and *Town in a lobster stew* (Haywood 2011); and *Eggsecutive orders* (Hyzy 2010) and *Affairs of steak* (Hyzy 2012). Some of these culinary crime writers extend the food and beverage theme to cover the four-footed companions of their amateur detectives, such as: the bloodhound Pommies Frites in Michael Bond's books featuring Aristide Pamplemousse, a gourmet restaurant guide inspector in Paris; and the cat Java in Cleo Coyle's books featuring Clare Cosi, a barista in New York.

The vast majority of offerings within the sub-genre that has been labelled 'Crime and

Dine' (Collins 2012) are from, as well as set in, the United States. A significant contribution to this increasingly popular formula is, however, from the one of Australia's most popular authors: Kerry Greenwood. Food features within her famous Phryne Fisher series with recipes included in *A question of death* (2007). Recipes also form part of a food-themed collection of short crime stories, written with Jenny Pausacker, *Recipes for crime* (1995). 2004 saw the first publication of *Earthly delights* and the introduction of Corinna Chapman. This series follows the adventures of a woman who gave up a career as an accountant to open her own bakery, in Melbourne, and investigate the odd murder. Recipes can be found at the end of each book while the *Corinna Chapman recipe book* (nd), with instructions for baking bread, muffins and tea cakes as well as preparing main courses including risotto, goulash and Chicken with Pineapple 1971 Style, can be downloaded from the publisher's website.

Generating a work of fiction and a collection of recipes, for a single volume, can be challenging and has resulted in the development of several different ways to approach the task. Some authors integrate detailed recipes into their stories through description and dialogue, an excellent example of this approach can be found in the Coffeehouse Mystery series by Cleo Coyle. In *On what grounds* (2003) the central protagonist, Clare Cosi, is being questioned by police, her answers are interrupted by a flashback scene and instructions on how to make Greek coffee:

Making Greek coffee was a simple, straightforward process really –

Three ounces of water and one very heaped teaspoon of dark roast coffee per serving. (I used half Italian roast, and half Maracaibo – a lovely Venezuelan coffee, named after the country's major port; rich in flavour, with delicate wine overtones.)

Water and finely ground beans both go into the *ibrik* together. The water is then brought to a boil over medium heat.

The *ibrik* has no lid. It's tall and tapered toward the top to keep the mixture from boiling over and has a lip to allow the coffee to be poured without grounds following.

The two police officers watched me work (37).

Breaking up the action in this way – particularly within crime fiction, a genre with a philosophy built on generating tension and increasing the pace of the plot – is an unusual but ultimately successful style of writing. Inquiry and instruction are comfortable bedfellows; as the characters work out whodunnit the readers learn both about murder and one of the world's most popular beverages, highlighting how cookbooks and novels both serve to entertain and teach.

Many authors will save their recipes, serving them up at the end of a story. This can be seen in Julie Hyzy's White House Chef Mystery novels, the cover of each volume in the series boasts: 'Includes Recipes for a Complete Presidential Menu!' These menus, with detailed ingredients lists, instructions for cooking and options for serving, are segregated from the stories and appear at the end of each work. A similar approach can be seen in Riley Adams' Memphis BBQ Mystery series, Jacklyn Brady's A Piece of Cake Mystery series, Laura Childs' Tea Shop Mystery series and B. B. Haywood's Candy Holliday Murder Mystery series. Yet other writers will deploy a hybrid approach such as the one seen in Claudia Bishop's Hemlock Falls Mystery series. These novels, which include *A taste for murder* (2004), *Toast mortem*

(2010) and *Dread on arrival* (2012) utilise recipes to introduce each chapter. A common characteristic of all these works is that, much like the White House Chef Mystery novels, the inclusion of recipes within the text – integrated into the narrative, segregated at the end of the novel or deployed as chapter dividers – is proudly advertised on the front cover, and in many instances also the spine, of each book.

Crime fiction and food tourism

Some readers believe food is such an important aspect of fiction, they seek out meals from the pages of their favourite novels in bars, cafés and restaurants around the world, contributing to the burgeoning food tourism market. In Shannon McKenna Schmidt's and Joni Rendon's work *Novel destinations* (2009) there is an entire section, 'Eat Your Words: literary places to sip and sup', dedicated to beverages and food. The listing includes details for John's Grill, in San Francisco, which still has on the menu Sam Spade's Lamb Chops, served with baked potato and sliced tomatoes (193), a meal enjoyed by author Dashiell Hammett and subsequently consumed by his well-known private detective in *The Maltese falcon* (1930) and the Café de la Paix, in Paris, frequented by Ian Fleming's James Bond because 'the food was good enough and it amused him to watch the people' (197). Those wanting to follow in the footsteps of writers can go to Harry's Bar, in Venice, where the likes of Marcel Proust, Sinclair Lewis, Somerset Maugham, Ernest Hemingway and Truman Capote – author of what is widely considered to be the first great true crime work *In cold blood* (1966) – have all enjoyed a drink (195). *Novel destinations* also provides a guide to Agatha Christie's Torquay and information on a range of sites associated with Edgar Allan Poe, the man who re-imagined crime fiction in the nineteenth century and set the scene for the genre to become one of the world's most popular.

A number of eateries have developed their own literary themes such as the Peacocks Tearooms, in Cambridgeshire, England, which blends its own teas based on the creations of Arthur Conan Doyle including the Sherlock Holmes (Earl Grey with Lapsang Souchong) and the Doctor Watson (Keemun and Darjeeling with Lapsang Souchong) (Peacocks 2012), while Miss Marple's Tea Room, in Australia's Dandenong Ranges, offers eating and drinking experiences in a space that is simultaneously a dining room and a gallery dedicated to one of Agatha Christie's most famous protagonists (Miss Marple's 2012). Such a trend is not exclusively Western, the Radisson Hotel in St Petersburg, Russia offers 'traditional and modern Russian cuisine, and features a book-format menu – patrons may select dishes while reading interesting stories' (Radisson 2012). These efforts to connect eating and reading include an à la carte menu dedicated to Fyodor Dostoevsky and his classic work, on ethics and murder, *Crime and punishment* (1866) (Metamorfos 2012).

There is also a range of cookbooks that make it possible to transform fictional food into edible experiences in the comfort of one's own kitchen. One such example is *The book lover's cookbook* (2003) by Shaunda Kennedy Wenger and Janet Kay Jensen, a work containing over three hundred pages of: Breakfasts; Main & Side Dishes; Soups; Salads; Appetizers, Breads & Other Finger Foods; Desserts; and Cookies & Other Sweets based on the pages of children's books, literary classics, popular fiction, plays,

poetry and proverbs. Recipes include a Veal Piccata (54) based on a meal that appears in John Grisham's *The firm* (1991) and a Law-Abiding Saltimbocca (56) inspired by Richard North Patterson's *Dark lady* (1999). Other examples of such cookbooks include Jean Evans' *The crime lover's cookbook* (2007), which features short stories in between pages of recipes. There is also Estérelle Payany's *Recipe for murder* (2010) a stunningly illustrated volume that presents detailed instructions for Pigs in a Blanket (44–7) based on the Big Bad Wolf's appearance in *The three little pigs* and Roast Beef with Truffled Mashed Potatoes (124–27), which acknowledges Patrick Bateman's fondness for fine dining in Bret Easton Ellis' *American psycho* (1991).

Conclusion

Cookbooks and fictional works are reflections of each other in terms of creativity, function and structure as they both: tell us stories; provide education; and, have neat beginnings, middles and ends. In some instances the two forms are so closely entwined that a volume will concurrently communicate a narrative while providing instruction in the gastronomic arts. Such stories simultaneously capitalise on traditional gender roles while challenging the idea that cookery is an activity that is only undertaken by women in the home while the language of food forms a scaffold for crime and dine writers to tell their tales. These works that connect cookery and crime, be they novels or cookbooks, or manifestations of the two genres in a single volume, or guides to finding food inspired by crime fiction, all share one common ingredient: they make us hungry for more.

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