

## *Introduction*

### *Narratives of Crime in Interwar Britain*

It is . . . the business of the detective tale to provide us first of all with something that is not in the least like a death and follow it up with something that does not remotely resemble life.<sup>1</sup>

He had done his duty. By a lucky series of circumstances he had been guided to the solution of the mystery – but he felt no elation, no triumph, no satisfaction. Murder was all right in books and plays, but in real life it was a sorrowful, suffering business.

Never again did he want to find himself caught up in the sordid realities of a murder case. He felt utterly dispirited.<sup>2</sup>

When we think about the literature of crime in the interwar period, we think of detective fiction, a type of writing that has often been seen as a way of confronting dark emotions and hidden anxieties at arm's length. A conventional view, which evolved at the time and has to some extent persisted, is that classic detective fiction represents crime, particularly murder, in an antiseptic and unsensational way, and provides an element of ratiocinative exercise which tempers its escapism and grants it greater intellectual respectability than other kinds of crime writing and indeed other kinds of popular fiction. My focus in this study is on what, if anything, interwar detective fiction might have been trying to escape *from* and whether this escape was or could ever be successful. I will bring to light some of the varied non-fictional accounts of crime from this period, and also examine novels that refuse to comply with the 'rules' of detective fiction but which are centrally concerned with crime and criminality, often reworking in fictional form cases that would have been familiar to contemporary readers.

My contention throughout this book is that it behoves us to examine these contemporaneous narratives about, and ways of understanding,

crime because detective fiction was not hermetically sealed from a broader, pervasive field of representations of criminality. E. V. Knox identifies a lack of realism as the stock-in-trade of detective novels, their ‘business’; he mocks their conventions while admitting that he finds them an ‘anodyne’.<sup>3</sup> But a more complex view of crime can sometimes be glimpsed in the interstices of detective novels themselves. The *London Times*’s review of *The Hound of Death*’s

*‘[t]he novel is a very good page-turner’* has often been quoted. As Shani D’Cruze has argued of interwar Britain, ‘Crime, thriller, murder or mystery stories, both fictional and factual, were widely produced and marketed in a range of narrative styles, some highly populist, some rather more literary . . . There were . . . certain overlaps in the narrative strategies of different kinds of crime stories, and part of the reading pleasures involved depended on the frisson when genres touched sides.’<sup>4</sup> This frisson, though, as the Reverend Dodd’s comment indicates, could provoke anxiety rather than being pleasurable.

Explicit and implicit references to either historical or more recent criminal cases within novels indicate authors’ recognition that, although detective fiction was increasingly perceived as a discrete and codified form, its readers could hardly avoid being exposed to other crime narratives that were in circulation. George Orwell makes this point in his often-quoted 1946 essay ‘Decline of the English Murder’, when he describes an imaginary interwar reader, cosy by the fire, being drawn to accounts of famous murders, those ‘whose story is known in . . . general outline to almost

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everyone and which have been made into novels and rehashed over and over again by the Sunday papers’.<sup>5</sup> This is a type of context, a shared canon of ‘classic’ crimes, that is less readily available to present-day readers of interwar fiction; similarly, forays by novelists including Dorothy L. Sayers into factual crime writing are not now widely known but, like the ongoing debates about the nature of detective fiction during this period, can enrich our understanding of interwar crime culture. Orwell dates the ‘great period in murder’ to ‘between roughly 1850 and 1925’,<sup>6</sup> and Victorian and Edwardian crimes and their representations are important reference points for post-First World War writers. Crime is not just of interest as a topic in itself but as a means of exposing, and, potentially, critiquing both historical and contemporary sociocultural attitudes.

In the interwar period (and indeed beyond), the varied discourses about crime that are the subject of this study continued to express the kinds of concerns that V. A. C. Gatrell identifies in his discussion of the impact of developments in social organisation and the criminal law in the early nineteenth century: 'Crime was becoming a vehicle for articulating mounting anxieties about issues which really had nothing to do with crime at all: social change and the stability of social hierarchy.'<sup>8</sup> Adrian Bingham has shown that reports of court proceedings were one of the few ways in which the interwar public could find out what happened in other people's marriages, and the glimpses they were offered, often in 'evasive and euphemistic styles', were for the most part of relationships gone wrong.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Lucy Bland sees concerns about female emancipation, exemplified by the figure of the flapper, being expressed in newspaper reporting of trials in the early 1920s: 'In making the private world of domesticity, sexual relationships, and marriage shockingly public, ... accounts [of trials] generated ... public debate.'<sup>10</sup>

(4)

The central aspect of private life addressed in this material is marriage, and the ways in which relations between men and women are addressed (or avoided) in narratives of crime are important for this study. The majority of authors under discussion here are women, and they take varied stances towards gender issues and marriage; they are certainly not always progressive in their views, and not always sympathetic towards other women, be they victims or criminals. My focus on women writers reflects the prominence of female authors in both factual and fictional crime writing during this period. A number of explanations have been offered for the rise of the so-called 'Queens of Crime'.<sup>11</sup> John Cawelti suggests that the relatively low status of detective fiction as a literary form meant that it was 'more open to

women than was "serious" literature'.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, however, as Anthea Trodd has noted, detective fiction, unlike romantic fiction, 'was addressed to a mixed audience with a strong upmarket segment, conferring an unusual kind of status and authority on those who practised it'. In Trodd's view, it was also 'a flexible form which could be revised to accommodate women's perspectives and interests' while retaining its appeal to both female and male readers.<sup>13</sup> As Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple observe, women 'who, in real life, are less often criminals than victims, are clearly drawn to a genre dealing with transgression of the law'.<sup>14</sup> As I will show, a similar argument can be made about popular factual crime writing.

Other aspects of the wider sociocultural context are also relevant. The interwar years saw not only legal changes that affected women's place as citizens but also new kinds of involvement in the legal process for women. Female police patrols were first seen on Britain's streets during the First World War; by 1940, the Metropolitan Police employed 282 female officers.<sup>15</sup> Following the passage of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, women could be called for jury service (although only if they were property owners);<sup>16</sup> Virginia B. Morris notes that the

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observer at other trials.<sup>17</sup> Female magistrates could also be appointed from 1919,<sup>18</sup> and the first women were called to the Bar in 1922, but the law remained a male-dominated profession.<sup>19</sup> This could further explain why crime writing proved attractive to female authors; it was a means of engaging with a field in which women had otherwise limited opportunities to participate.

[...11]

Detective novels tend not to recount the trial of the individual whom the investigator identifies as the guilty party because the watertightness of the investigation itself acts as a substitute for the depiction of the judicial process. An account of the trial would simply reiterate the findings of the investigation that has formed the body of the narrative. Thus the detective figure is a substitute for both the police and the legal system; in Robin Woods's view, the detective 'avenges crime, without state or community ever having to take responsibility for judicial homicide', thus acting as a 'link between criminal and society while holding them apart'.<sup>38</sup> For Woods, this is a means of protecting readers from the knowledge that criminals may indeed be people like them, living in their communities. As Woods acknowledges, however, in some instances the questioning of the verdict of the courts can be the impetus for the plot, reinforcing the importance of the investigative narrative over the judicial. Sayers's *Strong Poison* and Allingham's *Flowers for the Judge* (1936) both feature investigations that are spurred on by what are believed, and eventually proved, to be wrongful accusations, with imminent court proceedings providing a deadline by which the real culprit must be found. In these examples, detective fiction could be seen as offering a space where the potential fallibility of the judicial process, and indeed the police, is exposed and, simultaneously, compensated for. Accounts of real cases, by comparison, more frequently describe court proceedings in some detail, so that both the investigation and the construction and presentation of the case by lawyers

are subject to scrutiny. The action of detective fiction tends to remain within the private sphere; it is the trial and accounts given of it in newspapers that bring the accused into public view.

Jonathan Grossman notes that once capital punishment, previously carried out in public, went behind closed doors in 1868, the trial, now

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the last occasion on which the accused appeared publicly, took on a new importance: 'As punishment moved out of sight, the long-standing public process of the courtroom trial, itself freshly amplified as a mode of retelling narratives, came to occupy a newly central place both in the process of state justice and in a marketplace that turned the materials of state justice into print products.'<sup>39</sup> Although, as Lizzie Seal points out, 'the audience [for capital punishment] was no longer physically present . . . this did not mean it had disappeared. Rather, it had transformed'.<sup>40</sup> A much larger audience could read about trials, and indeed executions, than could ever have attended either. Changes in the conduct of trials, and particularly the role of lawyers, from the 1830s onwards meant that trials began to last for days rather than hours, though late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trials still seem remarkably speedy by present-day standards, with two or three days being a not uncommon length even for a murder case.

This nevertheless meant that, compared with previous practice, there was 'space for courtroom drama and individualized narratives to develop'.<sup>41</sup> The actual trial might not have lasted longer than a few days, but it would be preceded by an inquest that had the power to name the person believed to be the guilty party, and by the defendant's appearance at the magistrates' court, both of which would help provide 'ready-made and daily text for the voracious, growing industry of newspapers'.<sup>42</sup> Newspapers were limited in

<sup>3</sup> Evoc, 'Fiction', 400.

<sup>4</sup> Janice MacDonald, 'Parody and Detective Fiction' in Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (eds.), *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 61–72 (p. 69).

<sup>5</sup> Shani D'Cruze, 'Intimacy, Professionalism and Domestic Homicide in Interwar Britain: The Case of Buck Ruxton', *Women's History Review*, 16.5 (2007), 701–22 (714).

<sup>6</sup> George Orwell, 'Decline of the English Murder' (1946) in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume 4: In Front of your Nose 1945–1950* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), pp. 98–101 (p. 98).

<sup>7</sup> Orwell, 'Decline', p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Crime, Authority and the Policeman-State' in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950 Volume 3: Social Agencies and Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 243–310 (p. 249).

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers?: Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918–1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 141. My focus is on the depiction of murder trials; as Lucy Bland shows, press reporting of divorce cases was enough of an anxiety to prompt the Judicial Proceedings (Regulation of Reports) Act (1926), which 'prohibited the publication of detailed press reporting of divorce cases'. *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 2. Frederick Bywaters, who was having an affair with Edith

<sup>11</sup> This term 'Queens of Crime', which usually encompasses Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh, with Josephine Tey also sometimes included, was a relatively late coinage, seeming to have first been popularised by Maurice Richardson, in detective fiction reviews that he wrote for the *Observer*. He described the now little-known Josephine Bell as 'queen of crime' in a 1939 review ('The Crime Ration', 22 October 1939, 6), and the following year, praised 'the Queen of Crime's scheming ingenuity' in a review of Christie's *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe*. 'The Crime Ration', 10 November 1940, 5. This quotation was picked up by Christie's publisher, William Collins, who began to describe her in this fashion on the dust-jackets of her novels. By 1948, a profile in the *Observer* (possibly also written by Richardson) felt warranted to describe Christie as 'the acknowledged queen of crime-fiction the world over'. 'Profile: Agatha Christie', 3 October 1948, 3.

<sup>12</sup> John Cawelti, 'Canonization, Modern Literature, and the Detective Story' in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, pp. 6–15 (p. 6).

<sup>13</sup> Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900–1945* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple, 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction' in Helen Carr (ed.), *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (London: Pandora, 1989), pp. 39–57 (p. 51).

<sup>15</sup> Clive Emsley, *The Great British Bobby: A History of British Policing from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quercus, 2009), p. 245.

<sup>16</sup> The writer Mary Butts was an early female juror, and was involved in a trial which raised the question of, as *The Times's* headline had it, 'Women Jurors in Unpleasant Cases'. William Nelson had accused James Moir (a former heavyweight boxing champion known professionally as 'the Gunner') of slander, after Moir accused Nelson of 'an act of indecency' with his (Moir's) son. The judge gave the female jurors the option of being released, explaining, 'The question at issue in this case involves relations between two men. It will involve sexual points of the gravest indelicacy – questions which even men would hesitate to discuss among themselves.' One of the three female jurors took the opportunity to leave, but the other two, including Butts, decided to stay. *The Times* reported, '[O]ne of them remarked: "We think that if we are called at all we ought to sit whatever the case is".' 'Women Jurors in Unpleasant Cases', *The Times*, 4 November 1922, 4. The court found in Nelson's favour. See Nathalie Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from a Life* (London: McPherson, 1998), pp. 123–4.

<sup>18</sup> Robin Woods, "'His appearance is against him": The Emergence of the Detective' in Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (eds.), *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1990), pp. 15–24 (p. 19).