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The Crime Fiction Handbook offers fascinating insights into the appeal of crime fiction while revealing how the genre both entertains and provides a mirror to the most pressing social issues of the day.

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The Crime Fiction Handbook

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Some of the material in this book is based on earlier work. My section on “The Police Novel,” in particular, is a re-working of the essay with that same name in Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley’s *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). I have also drawn on my other previous publications in the field, but – in all cases – considerably updated and revised them. These include the introduction to my own edited book, *Criminal Proceedings* (Pluto, 1997); two essays on Patricia Cornwell, one in Warren Chernaik et al. (eds.), *The Art of Detective Fiction* (Macmillan, 2000) and the other in *Clues: A Journal of Detection* (Winter 2000); an essay on Thomas Harris that first appeared in Philip Sutton (ed.), *Betwixt-and-Between: Essays in*
Liminal Geography (The Gateway Press, 2002) but that has been published several times since in updated forms; and two pieces on Cornwell and Harris in Michael D. Sharp’s edited collection, Popular Contemporary Writers (Marshall Cavendish, 2006).

I could not have asked for a better copy-editor than Hazel Harris as we worked to prepare the book for publication. I recognize all the hard work she put into this task, and appreciate it greatly. Again, my thanks.

I dedicate this book to the memory of Phil Melling, who died of cancer just as I was completing it. He was a very good friend from our university days onward, a fine academic (and much more), and a man of many passions. I will miss him greatly.
Introductory Note

In this book, I refer to crime fiction across the U. S. and European spectrum. But I recognize my limitations. This is not a handbook of global crime fiction and, even within Europe and the Americas, I leave many traditions (Canadian, French, Italian, South American, Spanish, and others) unexamined. My own teaching experience is mainly in the field of U. S. crime fiction, and I rely on this area for a good many of my examples. I am relatively happy to do so because of both the importance and the popularity of that writing. I write in the belief that what I say here will be useful to those interested in authors and countries that either I do not mention or to whom/which I give short shrift. The critical approaches I take will, I hope, transfer across – to some degree at least – to that other material, though I recognize the importance of cultural and historical context; the impossibility, too, of giving blanket rules for the reading of all instances of the genre. My chronological reach in this study is also limited. I am well aware of a fuller history than that I give, which can be traced in the work of such critics as Stephen Knight and Charles J. Rzepka. But I focus here on the best-known examples of the genre, particularly in a twentieth- and twenty-first-century context but with some attention to its nineteenth-century pre-history. My decision to start with Edgar Allan Poe and Sherlock Holmes follows that logic. I thought long and hard about the fourteen texts on which I focus in Part 3 of this book but fully recognize the arbitrary nature of my choices. There are many other texts that cried out for the same kind of attention. Those I have chosen, however, do allow me to refer back to the earlier parts of the book, exemplifying a good number of the different approaches I lay out there. Crime fiction is one of those
areas that either fosters compulsive readers or deters those who find the
genre shallow and of little or no interest. While I recognize that is it the
former who will have the most interest in this book, I am hoping that some
of the latter may read it too, and even alter their opinion of the genre as a
result. Its enormous present-day popularity is a measure of its cultural
importance and influence.
Part 1

Introduction
. . . [W]ith an expression of interest, [Sherlock Holmes] laid down his cigarette, and, carrying the cane to the window, he looked over it again with a convex lens.

“Interesting, though elementary,” said he as he returned to his favourite corner of the settee. “There are certainly one or two indications upon the stick. It gives us the basis for several deductions.”

Doyle (2003: 6)

This short passage from Conan Doyle’s The Hound of the Baskervilles (1902) immediately inspires sparks of recognition for many readers. We assume almost without question that Holmes is talking here to his slightly obtuse companion and chronicler, Dr. Watson. And we automatically recall the phrase “Elementary, my dear Watson” – in fact absent from the original written texts but present in their film versions – that traditionally accompanies Holmes’ detections and explanations and has passed as a commonplace saying into the (English) language. We recognize Holmes’ “deductions,” too, as the sign of his genius: the logical and analytic skills that enable him to coolly link cause to effect; that “marvellous faculty” (Doyle 2001: 12) that enables him, for instance, to trace the history of a watch and give detailed characteristics of its former owner, even despite its recent cleaning, in the opening chapter (“The Science of Deduction”) of The Sign of Four (1890). The “convex lens” is, of course, part of what has become in consequent representations a magnifying glass, one of Holmes’ most valued tools and the very icon of detective fiction – as instantly recognizable in his case as the deerstalker hat that has come to be synonymous with his
professional attire and role. The cigarette, too, hints at a certain leisure-class loucheness, or bohemianism as Watson calls it, confirmed elsewhere by Holmes’ use of morphine and cocaine – drugs he praises as “transcendently stimulating and clarifying to the mind” (Doyle 2001: 6).

Detective fiction has a long history and, in its modern form, is usually traced to a handful of stories by Edgar Allan Poe: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842–1843), and “The Purloined Letter” (1845). All three feature Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, the French detective whose deductive intelligence provides the model for Conan Doyle’s protagonist. But it is Doyle’s creation of Sherlock Holmes that first gave detective fiction its enormous popular currency and began to make it such a resonant part of our cultural consciousness. Following, in one way or another, in his footsteps are writers such as Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Georges Simenon, Patricia Highsmith, Henning Mankell, and Stieg Larsson (to name a significant few) – with Larsson being the first writer to sell over a million copies of his books in Amazon’s Kindle electronic bookstore. This type of sales figure, and the popularity (and often quality) of the various film and television spin-offs that have followed on the heels of the publication of such authors’ books, signifies the massive cultural appetite for, and importance of, crime fiction (the larger generic category to which detective fiction belongs) in the Western world from the late nineteenth century to the present.

The question immediately raised is why crime fiction should have had such a massive impact and be so popular? And why, for instance, should we “enjoy” such best-selling novels as Thomas Harris’ *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), with its scenes that include Hannibal Lecter’s savage removal of a policeman’s face (he uses it to mask his own as he escapes imprisonment) and references to his cannibalism and shocking violence – his biting off (or so the implication is), for instance, of the tongue of a nurse who gets too close to him? In the punning relationship between Lecter’s name and the French word for “reader” (*lecteur*), as well as in Lecter’s own distinctive mix of refined sensitivity and predatory blood-letting, Harris may be suggesting that the line that divides the apparently “civilized” audience that consumes his books from its (normally firmly repressed) primal and savage instincts and tastes is thinner and more permeable than we think.

But there are other explanations available, too, for such readerly interest in crime and its often bloody and violently macabre manifestations – some of which complement the one just given, others quite different. Critic David Stewart (1997) writes about non-fiction crime writing in a much earlier period, examining the reportage of urban crime in mid-nineteenth-century
America. But his focus on urban life and a rapidly expanding capitalist economy offers a helpful prompt for thinking about crime fiction too, and the nature of its appeal, both in the nineteenth century and later. Stewart sees the “relish” (681) with which the crime literature of that period was consumed in terms of an ambivalence about criminality and its relation to the dominant social order. The popular appeal of such writing, he suggest, lies in the way it “eroticized urban experience” (684) – that is, provided a necessary and thrilling release from the disciplinary procedures of capitalism, the “laws and behavioral practices” (689) sustaining an increasingly regimented social order. The “exhilaration” (688) associated with criminal danger and the darker underbelly of life in the city consequently stood as a direct and exciting contrast to a daily experience “that was, for the vast majority of city-dwellers, constraining, confining, and mind-numbingly dull” (684).

But Stewart also argues that crime writing engaged quite opposite emotions too, feeding on a popular fear of crime and the threat to the reader’s own security contained in such “narratives of violation” (682). Thus, to modify one of his remarks, “[g]ore defacing [urban and textual] space [is] still gore, and potentially the reader’s own.” Fears of “real urban danger” (697), then, inhabit these texts alongside the other emotions they trigger: the reader’s desire for transgressive excitement balanced by her or his need for security and safety. In identifying such ambivalences, Stewart offers, perhaps, a larger lesson: that the appeal of (usually) violent crime – in both non-fiction and fiction – has a multitude of (sometimes common but often contradictory) causes. In the second part of this book, in which I offer a brief overview of the politics of crime fiction and of some of its main forms and key concerns, I extend this argument to indicate the wide range of reasons for the popularity of this type of fiction, and the complexity of their mix.

I return, though, to the violent and bloody episodes in Harris’ novel and the pre-history to them implied in Stewart’s essay. For Stewart also identifies in his ante-bellum subject matter another crucial, and related, tension – the way in which the qualities of rational control and logical explanation that crime reportage then, and (as I draw my own analogies) crime fiction now, associates with law-bringers – be they detectives or police – are undermined and contrasted with the descriptions of the spilling of blood, of sexual abuse, and of physical suffering that excessively inhabit many examples of such writing. He identifies a curious connective logic to this relationship as he looks at one particular newspaper story, “Horrible and Mysterious Murder in Broadway,” published in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper on August 2, 1856. Focusing on the detailed description of the corpse in this case, “the victim of bodily opening and exposure,” which
extends right down to the exact measurements of the deep razor slashes made on it, Stewart asks:

What, if any, of the information [the descriptions of bodily disfiguration] is in fact evidence? . . . And more disturbing: Why is it important to differentiate among drops, clots, and pools [of blood]? What is the depth of a razor slash evidence of? . . . Prurient excess would seem to undermine the strict task of productive looking. More to the point, productive looking seems to lead all too irresistibly to prurient excess. (695)

How, then, are we to understand these – in Stewart’s words – “nonproductive desires associated with violence” (694) and the attraction, but also the abhorrence, of readers to them? Why is so much textual time spent giving those excessively bloody details that are irrelevant to the scientific business of detection? Do such excesses again signify (for the reader) some psychological compensation for a “behavioural regime” (696) that restricts human behavior, in terms of day-to-day social practice, into its most productive channels?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and any explanation of the popularity of crime writing – and of crime fiction in particular – will be complicated, multi-faceted, and sometimes paradoxical, and will take in various types of historical, sociological, and psychological circumstance. My intention in this book is to indicate some of the elements responsible for such a popularity, but in the knowledge that there is no simple or straightforward key to be found. Stewart’s focus on New York in the 1850s and the conditions and pressures of its everyday life is, though, suggestive in indicating the importance to crime writing both of the rise of the city and of the living and working conditions of those situated within a fast-modernizing Western capitalist system. This is not, however, to say that all such writing must be urban-based (for that is patently wrong) nor that a modernized Western economy is a necessary condition for its production. But it is to suggest that city life – its institutional structures, its economic life, and its policing – are vital factors in the development and importance of the genre.

Crime fiction writer Austin S. Camacho (2008) points out on the “Criminal Minds at Work” website (run by a group of crime novelists) that the present enormous popularity of the crime fiction genre is a relatively recent phenomenon: “Did you know,” he asks,

that crime novels account for somewhere between 20 and 25 percent of the fiction sold around the world? At least what’s published in English. It makes you wonder why books about murder and other evils that men do are so popular . . . . The popularity of crime fiction is a fairly recent phenomenon.
20 or 30 years ago, you didn’t see crime novels on the bestseller list. Today they regularly account for half of it. But what accounts for this love of mystery fiction?

We are reminded here that the appeal of popular fictional genres changes in response to particular historical circumstances. This is true both of novels and films, with – in that latter case – Hollywood centrally involved in such a process. Thus, the western, for example, was at the peak of its popularity from the late 1940s to the early 1960s – a period in which the belief that it had been white America’s historical destiny to spread westward across the continent, with a continued mission (both home and abroad) to defend and protect liberty, family, and democracy against whatever outside threat might appear, still (mostly) retained its currency. In turn, horror fiction, and particularly film, saw a period of ascendency in the 1970s and 1980s, a period when the promise of American society was undermined by a whole series of cultural and political tensions, and when the sanctity and importance of the family (taken for granted in the western), its patriarchal assumptions, and its role in maintaining the status quo were subject to searing critique. Clearly the relationship between social and political realities on a transnational (as well as purely North American) scale and the changing popularity of generic tastes in fiction and film is a complex business and, in considerable part, beyond the scope of this book. The present popularity of crime fiction cannot, however, be divorced from such factors.

If I were to start to identify some of the reasons for such an upsurge, I would point to a whole range of factors concerning our (as readers) contemporary sense of identity and social agency; our understanding of gender, both masculinity and femininity, and the roles we attribute to each; our fears and vulnerabilities as far as our physical bodies are concerned; our larger sense of the social networks that position us, and the relationship accordingly played out between individual autonomy and the power of the state; our attitudes to lawlessness and the law, and the relationships of both to the greater social compact and our awareness of the tensions and injustices that exist there; and our anxieties about the power of officialdom and its supervisory authority. What I basically suggest here is that crime fiction confronts the problems of the everyday world in which we live as directly as any form of writing can. It allows its readers – though sometimes indirectly and obliquely – to engage with their deepest social concerns, their most fundamental anxieties about themselves and their surrounding world. This engagement, though, can vary in intensity, and vary too in any explicit recognition by the reader of its presence.
At its most basic level, crime fiction works as a highly accessible fictional form and one that functions best in the grip it holds on its reader in terms of basic narrative structure. Who is the criminal and how will he or she get caught? Will the victim – where a living victim is involved – escape the criminal’s clutches? How will the detective or police team solve the mystery established in the text? For many readers any further social or cultural resonance a text may have will remain below their conscious radar and unexplored – and none the worse for that. As a critic, however, my intention is to explore those further levels, (hopefully) to assist those who read this book to see something more of the cultural value and importance of the genre.
Part 2

The Politics, Main Forms, and Key Concerns of Crime Fiction
The door was invented by the bourgeoisie to protect the individual; now it becomes a threat; one is advised never to turn the key. . . . This is the totalitarian aspiration towards a transparent society: “My dear fellow,” says Holmes to Watson, “if we could fly out that great window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on . . . ” (“Case of Identity”). Holmes exists because Peter Pan does not: it is not yet possible to fly through keyholes.

Franco Moretti, “Clues” (1983: 136)

There are many ways of approaching crime fiction. Here, I focus on an issue of central importance to the way crime fiction works and the cultural issues it engages. While I refer to a number of critics working in the field (and to the work of Franco Moretti in particular), my intention is not to weigh down my argument with too much theoretical matter, nor to give a comprehensive overview of the critical writing on this subject. I rather highlight ways of thinking about the politics of crime fiction that I have found useful, in the hope that this will start to open up the area in productive ways for others, too. I return in more detail to some of the topics raised in this chapter as the book continues.

Franco Moretti’s chapter “Clues” in his book Signs Taken for Wonders (1983) provides a good starting point for thinking about crime fiction and its social and political implications. For one of the most productive ways of thinking about the genre is its relationship to the dominant social system: to the hierarchies, norms, and assumptions of the particular area, country, and historical period it represents, and to the power and authority of the state.
that ultimately upholds that system. To say this is immediately to recognize here a certain slippage. For, on the one hand I am referring to the internalization of a general set of social norms and values that condition day-to-day lives in any given culture: its generally accepted rights and wrongs, its patterns of social organization, and the relationships between the individual, the family, and the larger community. On the other, any allusion to the power of the state is a reminder of the coercive powers – the police, the secret service, the justice system, and law – used by a dominant ruling class to discipline the larger social group and to keep anti-social and/or anti-establishment tendencies in check. To recognize this move between accepted social norms and the machinery of the law, and the varying and often tricky nature of that relationship, is crucial to an understanding of all that now follows.

I see crime fiction as a genre that can be used for conservative ends, to protect and sustain the dominant social order, but that can also (often, paradoxically, at one and the same time) work in a more radical and challenging way. I agree with Catherine Nickerson (1997) that crime fiction is a genre that can release “explosive cultural material” (756); that it is:

deeply enmeshed with most of the thornier problems of the Victorian, modern, and postmodern eras, including gender roles and privileges, racial prejudice and the formation of racial consciousness, the significance and morality of wealth and capital, and the conflicting demands of privacy and social control.

I would, accordingly, echo her words – that the genre “represent[s] in a generally realistic style the most anxiety-producing issues and narratives of a culture” (744–745).

There may be tendency at this point to say, so what? Isn’t this, after all, what we expect from any novel to a lesser or greater extent? This may be true, but what makes the crime fiction genre so distinctive is its direct relationship to the law, and to the fracturing of the social system that it supports and protects. The crucial business of detective fiction (specifically) consists of the solving of crime and the restoration of normality and the rule of law: so, accordingly, Dennis Porter argues that “[i]n a detective story . . . the law itself is never put on trial” (1981: 122). As I later show, this statement is not always true. But, where it is the case, how then does the form release its “explosive cultural materials,” and can such a release be any more than temporary and provisional before the final containment of the disruptive forces that have been released? There are no hard-and-fast answers to these questions, but it is in the putting and exploring of them that the fascination and the power of crime fiction can be most clearly seen.
Franco Moretti has been praised by John Sutherland (2006: n.p.) for tak[ing] English studies by the scruff of the neck, refusing to observe the distinctions between high and low literature, between academic and common-reader approaches. He can talk (at machine-gun speed) about Sherlock Holmes and Joyce’s Ulysses in the same breath.

I use Moretti’s written, not his spoken, work here but one of the reasons I do so is because of that same (refreshing) breakdown of literary categories, one that is at the heart of my own critical enterprise too. This does not mean, however, that Moretti is particularly easy to read and understand. An Italian Marxist by origin, he looks to position crime fiction in its socio-political and historical context. And, in “Clues,” he focuses primarily on Sherlock Holmes to show how we can read this master detective as a defender of the status quo, “interested only in perpetuating the existing order” (140). “Detective fiction,” Moretti writes, “is a hymn to culture’s coercive abilities” (143). As this last sentence indicates, his argument may focus on a particular type of crime fiction (he directly mentions Agatha Christie as well as Holmes) but claims a wider application. And he provides (to my mind) a good starting point from which we can move to consider the genre’s more radical possibilities – its ideological tensions, its ability to challenge established conventions and norms and to ask questions about the larger condition of the society, its values and systems of authority.

Moretti calls Sherlock Holmes “the great doctor of the late Victorians, who convinces them that society is still a great organism: a unitary and knowable body.” Holmes’ “science,” he continues, “is none other than the ideology of this organism” (145). The authoritative knowledge of this doctoring figure, then, comes about due to the “unproblematic” (144) nature of the relationship between [this] “science” and the larger social order – unproblematic (in Moretti’s eyes) because of Holmes’ total (“ideological”) commitment to that order and to the status quo. Holmes, then, is the controlling figure who, whatever his personal eccentricities, represents established values and can (relatively) easily and clearly solve any crime or “mystery” (145) he faces, because of its exceptional or aberrant quality – its existence as a highly visible sign of discord and disturbance in an otherwise settled and holistic social world.

The assumption underlying the detective stories featuring Holmes and Christie’s Hercule Poirot – and, by extension, many other detective protagonists – is that the social body, representing the existing, and desired, good, is always the “innocent” victim (144) of the individual criminal act. And innocence and guilt here are measured, crucially, in terms of the contrast
between stereotypical normality (all who live under the umbrella of the dominant value system) and individualism (the sign of danger and of difference, of the failure to conform). Thus, “[i]nnocence is conformity; individuality, guilt. . . . Detective fiction . . . exists expressly to dispel the doubt that guilt might be impersonal, and therefore collective and social” (135).

Society, in such a view, is never guilty. “Because the crime is presented in the form of a mystery [and focusing on the interaction between the criminal and the victim], society is absolved from the start: the solution of the mystery proves its innocence” (145). The two quotes I have just used may sound puzzling, but this is a product of Moretti’s rather epigrammatic style. In fact, what he is saying is quite simple: I explain, accordingly, as I go on. Social science has long seen the functioning of society as a complex business, with an “infinity of causal factors [conditioning] the occurrence of [any one] individual ‘event’” (sociologist Max Weber, qtd. in Moretti 1983: 144). Detective fiction, rather, “aims to keep the relationship between science and society unproblematic” (144), to reduce complexity to simplicity. The criminal and the crime he or she commits become, within the framework of genre, as Moretti portrays it, the only relevant cause of social upset. There is little interest in what may cause criminality, nor in the energies released in a fast-modernizing social world that might affect that world’s (“organic”) unity and settled hierarchies – and that in reality make any type of full and proper social control problematic, even “impossible” (143). So, for instance:

Money is always the motive of crime in detective fiction, yet the genre is wholly silent about production: that unequal exchange between labour-power and wages which is the true source of social wealth. . . . The indignation about what is rotten and immoral in the economy must concentrate on . . . phenomena [such as] . . . thefts, con-jobs, frauds, false pretences, and so on. . . . As for the factory – it is innocent, and thus free to carry on. (139)

The rightness, justice, and value of the everyday social world – the world of stereotype, conformity, fitting-in, de-individualization – is taken for granted here. The possibility that there may exist exactly in that world a site for enquiry into warping injustice, and even forms of violence, is occluded by the genre’s focus on the wholly exceptional individual act. So, Moretti asks us to think about Agatha Christie’s *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (published in 1921 but written in 1916), claiming that in the detective novel anything “repeatable and obvious” cannot, of its very nature, “be criminal” or worth investigating. So, accordingly, “Agatha Christie’s first book is set at the same time as the massacres of the Great War, yet the only murder of interest occurs on the second floor of Styles Court” (135). Flaws
and failures in the Western (capitalist) socio-political order are ignored, in other words, in favor of single individual acts that threaten the status quo and, most especially, the lives, money, and property of the privileged classes.

There is an obvious Marxist thrust to this analysis (the “innocent” factory), and also a Foucaultian one. (Fuller discussion of Foucault will wait until my chapter on “Vision, Supervision, and the City.”) All I need to say in terms of the latter here is that Moretti associates Sherlock Holmes, even despite his unofficial status, with the notion of the policing and the supervision of society (my emphasis). A major issue at stake is that of privacy – directly related to the already-mentioned subject of individualism. Liberal ideology believes in the right and benefit of a certain individual “‘freedom from’ . . . the interference of society” (136). This assumption is challenged and reversed (so Moretti argues) in detective fiction, where the locked door – a favored traditional motif in the genre – no longer signifies that protective barrier behind which the citizen can exercise this freedom and his or her individual difference. Rather, the genre “treats every element of individual behavior that desires secrecy as an offence” (135–136). Such secrecy is seen as a threat to the controlling authority of the doctoring state and its representatives – an evasion of conformity and full social belonging (Moretti argues that Holmes’ own individualism is suppressed in the service of his detective work). Such secrecy, too, is posited as the unwelcome opponent of society’s need for transparency and the benefits of that supervisory authority that the detective represents. This is why, in the introductory quote to this chapter, Moretti alludes to Holmes as a Peter Pan figure, able to keep a controlling eye on the whole panorama of urban space and seemingly able even to peer into locked private rooms. This, too, is why he describes detective fiction as that hymn to a culture’s “coercive abilities,” and the detective himself as “the figure of the state in the guise of ‘night watchman,’” whose limited role lies in “assuring respect for laws” (154–155).

I have spent some time on Moretti because he offers the type of sociological perspective on crime fiction rarely encountered elsewhere, and one that is powerful and provocative in its implications. Moretti also discusses the narrative structure of the type of detective fictions on which he focuses, seeing this structure as confirming the conservative nature of the form. I use Agatha Christie’s *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* to provide my own textual example as prelude and bolster to Moretti’s more abstract arguments. The murder of Mrs. Inglethorp, the crime that drives Christie’s novel, occurs early on – in chapter three – of the novel. The rest of the book is dedicated to the investigation and solution of this mystery. In essence, then, the whole unfolding textual process focuses around, and takes us back to, this early narrative point as Poirot works out who committed this crime and why, and
explores the time before, and leading up to, the murder to uncover the sequence of events that caused it. Ultimately, his detective work restores the social order as it existed before that crime occurred, with everything once more in its former proper place—though, of course, with victim and criminal now removed. In fact, not only does Poirot do this, he also manages to repair certain fissures previously affecting this “orderly and hierarchical world,” returning “the Inglethorp fortune to its rightful owners, [and] . . . restor[ing] conjugal happiness to the marriage of John and Mary Cavendish” (Malgrem 2010: 154–155).

There is, to put this another way, little interest in character development here. What we have instead—and this takes us back to my earlier point—is a world of stereotypes: a cast of “innocent” characters marked out as such by their social and cultural conformity. These stereotypes, for Moretti, only “come alive” (137), take on visibility and importance, when the crime that ruptures the smooth pattern of this social world is committed. The whole thrust of the detective novel, then, is “to restore an earlier state of things” (Freud, qtd. in Moretti: 137), to “[r]einstate a previous situation, return to the beginning”—in Christie’s case to a relatively unchanging, privileged, and upper-class English country-house existence. The movement of the narrative of detection is regressive, “from crime to prelude” (Moretti 1983: 137). There is no growth to this story: “In detective fiction, as in law, history assumes importance only as violation and as such, must be ultimately repressed. . . . [T]he ideal is for nothing to happen” (138–139).

Moretti’s description of the way in which Doyle’s and Christie’s detective fiction supports and endorses the status quo, and how the backward-looking structure of the genre endorses this political and social vision, is generally convincing. It makes one of the strongest cases for the reactionary nature of the form, and stands as one pole in any exploration of the way the genre works. But Moretti ignores hard-boiled crime fiction in his essay. And, in the conventional critical view, it is here that the other pole to his way of seeing detective fiction is to be found—where anxieties about the existing social order are much more apparent, and where such anxieties are reflected, too, in its different narrative structure. I show how this argument works before then suggesting that, if the opposition constructed here between two types of crime writing—one at the conservative end of the spectrum, the other challenging the social status quo—contains a general truth, we should be wary of simplification, of falling into an overly reductive way of thinking. To categorize in this way does not do full justice to what is a much more complicated and diverse generic panorama.

I return at this point to Nickerson’s comment on the genre’s ability to express “explosive cultural material.” Holmes may be seen as protecting the