

# Criminal Readings: The Transformative and Instructive Power of Crime Fiction

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## Abstract

Crime fiction has dominated popular literature since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, stories of murder, chaos and mayhem have been traditionally deemed as mere entertainment. Despite this general belief, crime fiction offers a complex and very accurate portrayal of the society it is produced in, with each text becoming an exercise on reflection and morality. The aim of this paper is to explore how crime fiction, in the form of novels, offers the reading public more than just a story. Thanks to the formulaic nature of the genre, writers and readers alike are given a safe frame in which to develop stories that deal with the darkest side of human beings. During the process of reading, which is performative (Butler 1999), readers' identities merge with the detective's hence allowing for a transformative experience more often than not resulting in the cathartic restoration of the *status quo*.

The study of crime fiction as a tool of storytelling in contemporary society will be supported by the creation of a theoretical frame including the theories of the performativity of reading (Butler 1999), the writer-detective-reader identification (Mizejewski 2001 and 2004, Plain 2001), the influence of the fictional narratives in the readers' lives (Gooding and Gaus, 2004; Steinke 1997, 410–11; Steinke 2005, 28–30), and the social value of these stories derived from the millions of readings performed every day, also known as "value maximising theory" (Davies 2007) that result in the acquisition of knowledge through fiction (Curie 2010, Friend 2006, 2008, 2014, Davies 1996, 2007, and García-Carpintero 2016). The theoretical frame will be exemplified by contemporary novels in which the identification between the reader and the detective takes place thanks to the addressing of shared problematics. Since contemporary crime fiction has been dominated by women writers and women readers (Walton & Jones 1999), all the examples will be borrowed from mainstream writers whose work has changed the way women are represented in the genre. Among these names are Patricia Cornwell, Kathy Reichs and Tess Gerritsen.

**Keywords:** Crime fiction, reading, performance.

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## Introduction

Crime fiction is one of the most read and beloved popular genres in the last century. However, this type of texts has been widely criticised due to its supposed lack of artistic and moral values having been described as “simply a kind of vice” (Plain 2008, 4). This perception is rooted partly in the genre’s popularity and its ability to engage mass audiences while enjoying a consumer good status (Walton & Jones 1999). Despite these objections, crime fiction has become a genre on its own rights (Gebler 2004, 1) thanks to its popularity and the standardization of the genre through a set of rules and narrative structures perpetuated during a long period of time (Genette 1991, 31).

The aim of this paper is to examine how crime fiction conditions a very specific reading process that is performative through the specificity of these texts. Thanks to the presentation of the narration as a puzzle to be solved that stimulates the mind (Shaw [1984] 2014) and to the double articulation of the text as both the presentation and the resolution of a mystery at the same time, crime fiction offers readers a play based on a set of rules and narrative roles (Ball 1976). In the analysis of these roles, it will be extremely important to consider their static distribution according to gender, a strategy that has presented a lot of problems in the study of crime fiction. As a challenge to these static gender roles that have subjected female characters to the role of victims, the novels used as case studies for this paper all have in common a female protagonist.

The methodology will combine literary criticism and contemporary philosophy to create an interdisciplinary analysis of texts. The work of Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones (1999) will be of special interest as they conducted an innovative study about the perception of female-led crime fiction by female audiences. At the same time, the philosophical theories developed during the 1990’s (see Butler 1990, David 2012, Stacie 2008, García-Carpintero 2016, Gebler 2004, Mijewski 2004, Jocelyn 2005)– this being the time of more success for female-led crime fiction - created a new paradigm for literary and cultural analysis of US novels written in English during the last 30 years. Hence, it is of the utmost necessity to establish a link between the novels as cultural products and the reception of knowledge during the time these texts are being produced and consumed. Finally, the reading of performativity of crime fiction will be analysed from a contemporary point of view as an innovative way to produce and learn scientific knowledge.

In addition, crime fiction offers the opportunity to carry out a performative analysis thanks to the cementation of this literary genre over highly constructed and accepted narratives in contemporary society. Procedural crime fiction emerged after World War II and it quickly became a fixation in crime fiction (Knight 2004; Farré Vidal 2011). In other words, procedural crime fiction, as the name clearly indicates, is based on the

resolution of a crime through clues that are systematically revealed throughout the reading – or viewing – public in the same work. That is, all procedural works give the reader closure by the end of the novel or the episode, as this narrative structure has been extremely popular in TV productions such as *Law & Order* (1990-2010) and *CSI* (2000-2015). Due to its success, it is one of the most common narrative structures for contemporary crime fiction, with US productions being extremely fond of it.

One of the main reasons is found in the fact that procedurals offer the public a sense of security and reassurance as they show a predictable development of the investigation and a final resolution of the crime that often culminates with the restoration of the status quo where evil is punished: The detective can finally rest, the victim gets justice, and the criminal is put behind bars or somehow punished. These stories gain their strength from the almost obsessive repetition of a narrative structure where the detective faces the disruption of social order. His success – and later on, her success as more female detectives became leading characters – is based on the principle of serialisation with a leading character that often gives the name to the series and acts as a link between different stories. See the Harry Hole series by Jo Nesbo (1997 [2012]) or the Temperance Brennan series written by Kathy Reichs ([1997] 2011). Each new novel in the series challenges the leading character with another mystery and offers them the opportunity to develop both professionally and personally while they establish a relationship with the audience that is very specific to this type of novels (Walton and Jones 1999; Knight 2004). Several studies show that readers of procedural novels are more faithful to both the main character and the author of the series than those who read standalone novels (Corrigan 2009; Walton and Jones 1999). This alliance also extends to the procedural TV, especially in the forensic cycle (Coonan *et al* 2013; Jenner). In a review of Cornwell's latest novel in 2009, journalist Corrigan noted the importance of this fandom:

Cornwell's fans won't give a hoot about what I (or any other reviewer) say about this silly novel. Cornwell long ago ascended into the ranks of The Untouchables: Like Robert B. Parker, Dick Francis and Clive Cussler — to name a few other mystery and suspense writers whose tattered tents are pitched on that literary Mount Olympus — she can write no book so bad that it won't instantly appear on the bestseller list. (Corrigan 2009)

Indeed, this type of narration became extremely successful during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their influence has reached well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with many of the literary series surviving for over 30 years not only as successful products in the complicated editorial market but as best-sellers with a faithful public that could be labelled fandom due to its unconditional support for these texts. Hence, repetition and one of the most loyal fandoms in popular culture make of procedural crime fiction the perfect

narrative experiment to explore reading performativity and the reading process as their cultural relevance spans several decades and, as a consequence, shows a development as well as a maturity characteristic of respected and beloved cultural products.

### 1. Reading Performative

Procedural crime narratives lend themselves to a performativity analysis such as the enunciated by Butler, as well as a transgression according to Deleuze: "In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality" ([1968] 1995, 3). The US philosopher defines "the stylized repetition of acts through time" (Butler [1990] 1999, 179) as the basis for a cultural construction of gender identities that, in this case, can also be applied to the construction of a literary genre. That is, procedurals can be understood from a performative point of view as an extreme repetition of a series of norms and cultural images that define a product (Mizejweski 2001). Though it is true that the set of repetitions that rule gender identity and literary genders are different, they reach the same conclusion: the foundation of a cultural production based on mythic origins that are understood as immovable even though they are really a social construction and, therefore, artificial.

The reading of procedural crime fiction entails a double performativity process. On the one hand, and following Butler's theory, this process includes the construction of gender identities in the narratives, which we will not deal with in this paper. On the other hand, it includes the construction of a narrative adjusted to a series of rules that are understood as fixed and characteristic of a thing we call "crime fiction". The most common way audiences enter this narrative is through the detective's eyes and perception, and first-person narratives have been widely used, especially in the 1990s, to reinforce the readers' alliance to the detective. Not only that, but this special vision makes of the crime novel a role play (Avanzas Álvarez 2016) in which the reader and the detective become a unity.

Hence, the reading process becomes a reflection on the cultural situation that characterised the historical moment in which the novel was created, as well as the moment in which it is being read. A clear example of the introduction of societal problematics typical of a time period can be Golden Age crime fiction, such as Agatha Christie's which can be perceived by modern audiences as extremely dated, especially in what gender roles is concerned. A more recent example can be found in the discrimination that doctor Kay Scarpetta suffers in *Postmortem*, the first novel in the series by Patricia Cornwell. New to the job, and a divorced and middle-aged woman, Scarpetta is perceived by her male colleagues – especially those from the police – as not good enough. Not only is she a foreigner to the Virginia Police

Department and Coroner's Office, but she is also a woman. As Chief Medical Examiner, she is actually in charge of the crime scene, and all police actions depend on her ruling of the scene. She is extremely aware of her uniqueness, and Cornwell openly makes her main character reflect on the gender gap in scientific posts such as Scarpetta's: "There were few women chief medical examiners in the country" (Cornwell [1990] 2011, 69).

In the novel, the police department's reticence to accept Scarpetta's authority is embodied by her partner Dan Marino, a middle-aged, overweight, detective with a passion for fast food and chain-smoking. He is the embodiment of conservative crime fiction and, furthermore, of the prejudices that still haunted the genre when it came to women who went beyond the victim role in 1990. Scarpetta is aware of Marino's perception of her, but she does not let him take a toll on her professional activity: As the following quote reflects: "Marino wasn't keen on the idea. Ever since I was appointed Chief Medical Examiner for the Commonwealth of Virginia less than two years ago, he'd been difficult. I wasn't sure if he didn't like women, or if he just didn't like me (Cornwell [1990] 2011: 6). Furthermore, she challenges gender stereotypes and sexism with self-confidence and a blind faith in equality: "It had never occurred to me that I was something less than a human because I wasn't a man" (Cornwell [1990] 2011, 67). By stating the obvious about her personal and professional skills, Scarpetta is making trying to take her body out of the narrative.

## 2. Beyond the Page: Fiction and Reality

Highlighting the instructional and ethical grounding of storytelling, Kay Scarpetta's is just one of the many examples of how procedural crime fiction is historically and socially situated and can create a dialogue between old and new ways of representation. But, more importantly, these stories can easily convey historical and cultural struggles to the reader in a way that is not threatening or patronizing. Walton & Jones (1999) carried out a study with a female-only group of crime fiction readers. They were asked whether they identified as feminists and whether they enjoyed female-led crime fiction. The results were overwhelming: even though most readers did not openly identify as feminists, they enjoyed female-led narratives where the main character was an independent woman who fought for her right to equality. Many of the readers even went as far as to declare that they were not looking for an agenda, and they just wanted to enjoy the story. However, a close examination of the leading female characters in the novels, it can be said that they enjoyed pointing out to a feminist agenda, with some of the narrative lines openly portraying the protagonist's struggle with sexism as it is the case with Kay Scarpetta (quoted above) and detective Pete Marino.

Furthermore, the assimilation of ideas through the procedural form and the first-person narrative that has characterised many of these works is only

possible when the public identifies with the character who is carrying out the narration. Very often this type of narration also helps the protagonist and narrator to deliver internal monologues to the reading public about their inner lives, their feelings, and their professional and personal frustrations. Cornwell cleverly uses this technique to convey Scarpetta's attitude upon her arrival at the series' first crime scene, where she finds a young woman who has been raped and murdered surrounded by a team of male police officers and scientific experts. Being the other woman in the room, Scarpetta reflects on the vulnerability of the victim and the gender nature of the predatory gaze that has imbued the detecting process:

The dead are defenceless, and the violation of this woman, like the others, had only begun. I knew it would end until Lori Petersen was turned inside out, every inch of her photographed, and all of it on display for experts, the police, attorneys, judges and the members of the jury to see. There would be thoughts, remarks about her physical attributes or lack of them. There would be sophomoric jokes and cynical asides as the victim, not the killer, went on trial, every aspect of her personality and the way she lived, scrutinized, judged and, in some instances, degraded. (Cornwell 1990, 10)

As Anglo- European society developed, so did crime fiction, and it is not a coincidence that the 1990s saw the explosion of forensic science both in real life and in fiction. *Postmortem* (1990) by Patricia Cornwell is widely credited as the first forensic novel and it has inspired many other writers – many of them with a scientific background – to create this combination of procedural crime fiction aided by forensic science that would reach its climax in 2000 with the TV show *CSI*. Moreover, one of the most successful and iconic series of novels is the Temperance Brennan novels written by Kathy Reichs, and later on, adapted to TV as the successful show *Bones* (2005-2017). The success of the series relies on two strong points: One is Reich's real-life experience as one of the 82 accredited forensic anthropologists by The US Board of Forensic Anthropologist (Farré-Vidal 2011). Her expertise helped to make Dr Brennan a believable scientist, but also a reliable source of scientific information. The second point to consider is the strength of Brennan as a character that comes from the aforementioned scientific reliability; that is, from the time of her appearance as the leading character in more than 10 novels, and later on, as the leading character in a TV show.

The cognitive study conducted by *Coonan et al* (2016) showed that the way these products are presented to the audience has a direct impact on how they perceive the characters and their discourse. The study focused on *Bones* and the transmission of scientific knowledge. Even though traditionally speaking, scientific knowledge has appeared in media products as part of documentaries, the forensic cycle has changed the way in which we perceive and consume science. Furthermore, our preference for this kind of scientific TV shows relies heavily on the public's identification and our acceptance of

characters like Brennan. This concept is key in long-term exposure to serialised content, as it relies on “feelings of affinity, friendship, similarity, and liking of media characters or imitation of a character by audience members” (Cohen 2001, 249). To these regards, the case of Brennan has been widely studied as she is not a likeable or exemplary character in the traditional way, and she seems to be influenced by the traditional detective in the hard-boiled tradition. The Brennan in the books is a recovered alcoholic separated from her long-time husband and is barely in contact with her young adult daughter. On the contrary, the Brennan from the TV show is blunt and narcissistic and lacks social skills, which have been reinforced the idea held by audiences that she is in the autistic spectrum, a hypothesis that has been never been confirmed nor denied. But, despite these unlikable traces, Brennan is one of the most beloved characters in contemporary crime fiction. The public’s sympathies have been gained, once again, by the first-person narration, but more importantly, through the continuous exposition to Brennan.

The methodology of the study, it exposed two groups of people to a single *Bones* episode. One of the groups was formed by people who were regular viewers of the show. The second group consisted of people who had never seen the show. To make the study more interesting, the experiment was carried out on US people and the *Bones* episode showed Brennan examining the supposed remains of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy “JFK”. The results showed that those viewers who were familiar with Brennan and her methods were more permissive towards her challenging of social rules and her inability to adapt to certain social situations than those who had never seen the show. The consequences of this permission went beyond their liking of the character and were extended to her scientific discourse. That is, people who were familiar with Brennan trusted the science used by the character more than those who were not familiar with her. Hence, the study proved Dudo *et al’s* theory about the correlation between exposure to science TV shows and the audience’s perception of it (2011). Coonan *et al’s* study also concluded that scientific knowledge is more easily transmitted when audiences are familiar with the person who is talking about science, even if that person is a fictional character. Not only that, but the show’s ideology, that is, positivism and pro-science, is also more easily accepted by regular viewers than by occasional ones.

As we have seen, the fact that the cultural products that audiences are consuming are fictional does not have negative consequences on how these stories are perceived and indeed, it is the mixing of facts and fictional narratives which allows an appropriation of science by the audience (Dhingra 2003). Several studies show that fiction has the power to transmit real and useful knowledge (Curie 2010; Friend 2006, 2008, 2014; Davies 1996, 2007; and García-Carpintero 2016) which can have an impact on the readers’ and viewers’ real life. It does not matter that forensic anthropology was an

unknown discipline for mass audiences before Kathy Reichs' Brennan became popular. Audiences were presented with this professional path which they immediately not only accepted but came to admire. The so-called "CSI effect" refers to the thousands of productions inspired by the success of *CSI* at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but this term is also used to talk about the waves of students who enrolled in Medicine seeking a forensic path, or in Criminology, many of them inspired by the TV shows they grew up enjoying. In an article for Star Tribune in 2013, Paul Levy interviewed several forensic doctors who were surprised at the rise of students in this path, which had traditionally been stigmatized due to its proximity to crime, violence, and death: "Local medical examiners say they've seen a dramatic rise in the number of students asking about a life examining the dead" (2013).

Part of the success of the CSI effect in attracting younger generations to scientific paths such as forensics relies on the unique opportunity that these TV shows offered to mass audiences to access not only very specific knowledge, but spaces that had been traditionally restricted to the elite or which had been stigmatised due to their proximity to death. One of the best examples comes from Reich's debut *Déjà Dead* (1997), in which Dr Brennan accurately describes what happens to a corpse once it enters the morgue as well as the different spaces it is kept in:

The dead come first to the morgue. There, they are logged in and stored in refrigerated compartments until assigned to an LML pathologist. Jurisdiction is coded by floor color. The morgue opens directly onto the autopsy rooms, the red floor of each morgue bay stopping abruptly at the autopsy room threshold. The morgue is run by the coroner, the LML controls the operatories. Red floor: coroner. Gray floor: LML (Reichs [1997] 2011, 234)

Although this is part of Brennan's everyday life, it is a foreign process for non-specialists, and the simple mention of "morgue" would have been enough to deter many from learning more. However, the success of these series and TV shows has helped to make death-related spaces habitable by non-experts, therefore giving the opportunity to many younger generations to become familiar with forensics.

Furthermore, the fact that many of the detectives and scientists of this period were women has been described as one of the contributing reasons to more women enrolling in science degrees than ever before (Steinke 1999). Characters like Scarpetta and Brennan can function as role models, and their professionalism, their authority, and their position at the centre of the story have redefined what women in science look like beyond totemic and dated representations like the classical portrayal of Marie Curie. Hence, fiction transmits knowledge, but it can also create new paths and serve as professional inspiration for people who would not have discovered paths in any other way (Knight 2004, 720–21; Allen 2005, 347; Gooding and Gaus 2004; Steinke 1997, 410–11; Steinke 2005, 28–30).



Expanding on the idea of role model, it can be claimed that the reading of serialised procedurals not only conveys a different reading of performativity but shows that this reading has an impact on how fictional discourses can be redefined and assimilated by readers and viewers of TV shows.

### **Conclusion**

Crime narratives have become one of the most popular and beloved types of stories in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even though our love for crime fiction has been present since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the emergence of Western capitalism and new forms of production after WWII that crime fiction in the form of procedurals became a mainstream product consumed by mass audiences.

This form of production and consumption has created a performative way to read. Readers have become followers or fans of certain authors and main characters whose stories they follow with almost a blind faith, much to the chagrin of certain literary critics. This never seen before connection between the reader and the main character is deeply influenced by these novels' characteristic first-person narrative as well as by their procedural form, that offers both a challenging of the status quo as well as a resolution in the same volume hence giving a sense of security and reinforcing a fixed structure. Furthermore, these novels strength rely on leading characters who become household names and whose lives are interwoven with the audiences. Scarpetta's struggles as a Chief Medical Examiner may have not been shared by many other female medical examiners - as she herself points out there were not many - but the reticence of her male colleagues to accept her authority was probably familiar to many working women from the 1990s.

To sum up, it is only through this personal connection, by which many fictional characters become a continuity in readers' lives sometimes outlasting many real-life relationships, that these characters show an influence over the readers (Avanzas Álvarez 2018). Though this could be said of any serialized content, it has been especially relevant in forensic procedural products because their success has been tied to a medical and technological revolution in crime-solving (Jenner 2016). Therefore, the consumption of forensic procedurals has given mass audiences access to scientific knowledge in a way that had never been seen before. Science then was not confined to a laboratory or part of documentaries, but became central to 21<sup>st</sup> century entertainment, and though the reliability of certain scientific techniques portrayed in these series is dubious, the readers' and viewers' exposure to scientific discourses has had a positive effect on society. In this line, one of the most remarkable effects has been the dissemination of medicine and criminology, which has brought as a consequence the redefining of professions in which crime, violence and death are present. The fact that

many of the leading characters in these series are women has also contributed to the promotion of women in science by presenting young women with role models in various disciplines that have been traditionally considered male.

Hence, we can conclude that procedural crime fiction enforces a reading of performativity that deeply affects the readers' minds and actions in their real world in a subtle form that combines entertainment and education in a way that had not ever seen before. This influence relies on the principles of serialisation and identification by which audiences establish a unique and very personal connection with the main characters in the series. Therefore, they approach the conflicts in the fictional narratives under the influence and sympathy of said characters. This does not only affect the personal timelines affecting the characters' private lives, but it has a direct connection to the scientific knowledge presented in the series and TV shows here analysed.

As concluding thoughts, we would like to highlight that these series have broken the barrier between knowledge and leisure/entertainment products by presenting real-life and useful knowledge to audiences as a consumer good. Thus, the success of series and TV shows such as *CSI* and *Bones* backs up the idea that science is no longer a scary and boring subject, but part of everyday life, culture, and more importantly, fun.

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