
With Detecting Canada: Essays on Canadian Crime Fiction, Television, and Film, editors Jeannette Sloniowski and Marilyn Rose have brought together an impressive array of rigorous academic essays that prove both the diversity and usefulness of the Canadian detective genre. The editors have done a marvelous job of assembling the essays, which seamlessly flow from concerns of formula and genre to theories of the postcolonial, to indigenuity, gender roles, the “Mountie myth” and the Americanization of Canadian identity (a concept that is questioned at length and through numerous lenses). The essays address concerns as broad in scope as nationalism, cultural imperialism, and the question of Canadian identity. A number of them focus on specific concerns of local regionalisms and their impact on pluralism and competing definitions of Canadian-ness. In “Televising Toronto in the 1960s: Wojecik and the Urban Crime Drama,” for example, Sarah A. Matheson’s examination of the television program Wojecik explores representations of the social fabric of Toronto’s neighbourhoods in transition in the 1960s. This emphasis on Canadian national identity as it is manifest in regionalisms is a primary concern of Lindsay Steenberg and Yvonne Tasker in “North of Quality? ‘Quality’ Television and the Suburban Crimeworld of Durham County,” their unpacking of the uncanny suburban (crime) space created in the television series Durham County.

The breadth of the book is impressive as it makes a case for the serious work that Canadian crime writing does by presenting a nuanced approach to the scholarly inquiry of Canadian crime fiction through an intersectional lens. The first of its kind, this survey of Canadian crime writing in English proves that the themes of interest to Canadian writers in the genre (social justice, race relations, gender dynamics, the North) will also interest scholars across the humanities. The methods employed and textual evidence collected by the authors, place the anthology firmly within the field of Canadian literature, as well as film and media studies at large. In addition to broadening understanding of detective fiction, this anthology will be of interest and useful to both novices and those already versed in the field of Canadian crime fiction and Canadian literature. Margaret Atwood, in her seminal work Survival (1972), argues that Canadian identity and fiction continue to be preoccupied with victim narratives. These internal and external sites of victimhood have always been central to Canadian fiction and meanings generated around national and personal identity. A hostile landscape, the legacy of settler colonialism, and unflinching allegiance to “an idealized national community” (p. 85), are hallmark Canadian themes. The contributors to this anthology all deftly weave these central preoccupations through their critical approaches to Canadian crime writing in fiction, television, and film platforms.

Sloniowski and Rose have succeeded in their stated goal of filling an obvious gap in serious cultural criticism of Canadian crime fiction by producing the first scholarly book-length study of Canadian crime writing. As the editors note in the introduction,
Canadian practitioners of the genre are prolific, and detective fiction is the “most published form of popular narrative” (p. xi) worldwide, with Canadian writers increasingly taking up rarified positions in the international canon of crime fiction. Sloniowsk and Rose credit the advent of the digital archive with allowing unprecedented access to historical detective texts, which they believe will spur a continuing expansion of the field. The anthology is positioned as media and communication studies as well as literary criticism, and includes an impressive wealth of textual evidence relating to historical and contemporary crime fiction and television series. While not explicitly stated, the sheer array of concerns that are identified as being central to the study of contemporary Canadian crime fiction proves that an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) lens is being applied to the field. One of the most significant contributions this anthology makes is the attention it draws to those writers “writing back” (disturbing colonial, national, and cultural myths) through postcolonial frameworks and privileging identities that have been historically marginalized. The scholars collected here prove that Canadian crime writers are bending and playing with a genre that is often dismissed as being inherently conservative, as it hinges on a restoration of social order. This anthology will hopefully reinvigorate engagement with this massively popular genre through the contributors’ myriad perspectives, including postcolonial, gender, and queer studies as well as critical race and class studies. This interdisciplinary anthology highlights the rich material the genre offers, while demonstrating why it is relevant for ongoing theoretical and historical study.

Two opening chapters, devoted to the history and theory of Canadian crime writing respectively, productively contextualize the diverse essays that follow. They helpfully set up broad theoretical strokes that create a through line in the book, namely by localizing the global, which is a commonality throughout the work of authors referenced in the anthology. Beryl Langer, in the opening chapter “Coca-Colonialists Write Back: Localizing the Global in Canadian Crime Fiction,” posits that the acts of reading and writing Canadian crime fiction can be seen as a “counter-hegemonic strategy” (p. 3) within the globalized marketplace. Our proximity to America—and tendency to write the nation through articulating our differences from it—is a prominent theme in Canadian crime writing that is often rendered through sites of social disturbance being represented as external (criminal) threats posed by American infiltration of Canadian borders. Both Brian Johnson and Manina Jones deconstruct the police procedural form to illuminate the ways in which Canadian crime writers interrogate both mainstream notions of the crime genre and Canadian national identity through a postcolonial lens.

In “Canadian Psycho: Genre, Nation, and Colonial Violence in Michael Slade’s Gothic RCMP Procedurals,” Johnson argues that Michael Slade, in his Gothic RCMP procedurals, presents the reader with a counter history, “a countermyth of haunted nationhood that parodies both indigenization and northern racialism, two of settler-invader nationalism’s oldest and most persistent strategies of legitimization” (p. 66). Johnson, through a nuanced argument, suggests that by mobilizing Gothic tropes, Slade highlights the ways in which the procedural can be employed to render colonial violence visible, while ultimately shoring up postcolonial nationalism through the
work of relieving guilt (p. 79). Jones, turning to Giles Blunt’s *The Delicate Storm* in “Northern Procedures: Policing the Nation in Giles Blunt’s *The Delicate Storm*,” argues that deep anxieties around conservative American politics transgressing Canada’s permeable border supersede English/French tensions in the northern setting of the novel. Here the police procedural, set in Algonquin Bay, neutralizes a history of conflicts between the French and English by subsuming them within a “homogenized model of social harmony” (p. 85). It draws Canadian borders by representing the threat of Americanization through a criminal external body (literally and figuratively), as an American is found dead in the Canadian wilderness. Jones suggests that an internal conflict that could threaten the idea of the imagined community is eclipsed by the threat of Americanization.

The major highlight of the anthology is that the essays address the current crime writers that are playing with the genre—its tropes, forms, and aesthetics—in order to “write back.” Two exemplars of this strategy can be found in Jennifer Andrews and Priscilla L. Walton’s examination of “writing back,” demonstrated by the emerging field of Aboriginal crime writing, and Pamela Bedore’s sharp and nuanced look at the politics of and around feminist discourse in Gail Bowen’s Joanne Killbourne series. In “Revisioning the Dick: Reading Thomas King’s Thumps Dreadful Water Mysteries,” Andrews and Walton reveal the ways in which Thomas King turns traditional understandings of the genre—in popular culture and academic postcolonial theory—upside down by placing Aboriginal characters at the centre of the narrative and neither avoiding nor playing into Aboriginal stereotypes. Andrews and Walton apply Foucault’s notion of “reverse discourse” to the detective writing of Thomas King. This important chapter offers a way to conceptualize Aboriginal crime writing as “writing back” not only to the United States but to Canada as well. The authors convincingly demonstrate the ways King plays with the detective plot in the Dreadfulwater novels in order to tackle serious issues around indigeniety in the North. In Bedore’s “A Colder Kind of Gender Politics: Intersections of Feminism and Detection in Gail Bowen’s Joanne Kilbourn Series,” the epistemological concerns of detection and feminism intertwine in what she describes as Gail Bowen’s “female detective economy” (p. 165). The detective plot is manipulated in the series, argues Bedore, in order to interrogate both capitalist patriarchy and the “patriarchal feminism” of the post-feminist age. The essay is rich and opens the door for more scholarly engagement with the intersection of “gender politics and detection” (p. 174).

*Detecting Canada* breathes new life into the body of work that comprises Canadian crime writing. It is the first book-length treatment of the field but surely will not be the last. As is evidenced by this anthology, Canadian crime writing offers rich material for inquiry from a variety of scholarly perspectives. This is essential reading for those interested in the uses and possible application of Canadian crime writing in fiction, television, and film. Editors Jeannette Sloniowski and Marilyn Rose have set the bar high and the future of academic treatment of the subject promises to be bright if this book is any indication of work to come.

**References**

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