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Edited by Catherine Ross Nickerson

Excerpt

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## I

CATHERINE ROSS NICKERSON

## Introduction: The satisfactions of murder

When coroners and medical examiners decide that the corpse before them is the victim of homicide, they announce their findings with a ringing locution: “by a person or persons unknown.” And while the identity of the killer may truly be a cipher in the real world, within the confines of a detective novel, the perpetrator is known to us. He or she is hiding in plain sight among the array of characters in the book. What we do not know is who it is, which other characters are involved, why they did what they did, and how they pulled it off. Resolving all these questions – questions whose answers are somewhere in the text – becomes, for readers, a mental itch that we cannot scratch. We just *have* to know the answers. Looking for clues in a detective story is like searching for a mislaid housekey; we soon become more fixated on the fact that we cannot find it than on the necessity of the thing itself. When the author of a detective story hooks us in this way, our inflamed curiosity drives us to read with fierce attention and all due speed.

The enormous popularity of mystery and crime writing can be attributed largely to the way it structures our reading experience. There is a serious problem (a dead body, a missing child, stolen money) and there is a serious and talented person who takes up its investigation. We readers can be participants in the puzzle-solving, or we can be mere observers, but in any case we know that there will be a solution to the mystery by the end. (Certain postmodern texts play with these expectations, as Susan Elizabeth Sweeney’s chapter in this volume points out.) A mystery story makes a very clear pact with its reader: “*If you will endure confusion, obfuscation and false leads, I will reveal all in the end. Read me, and you will be enlightened.*”

So important is this pact that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, several different writers wrote essays outlining the regulations of “fair play” for authors of detective fiction. In one of the most famous, “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories,” S.S. Van Dine laid down laws such as, “if the reader, after learning of the explanation for the crime, should reread the book, he [should] see that the solution had, in a sense, been staring him in

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the face – that all the clues really pointed to the culprit” (rule fifteen). Most of the rules express concern for the reader, especially for wasting a reader’s time. Van Dine insists that “no lesser crime than murder will suffice. Three hundred pages is far too much bother for a crime other than murder” (rule seven) and that the death must “never turn out to be an accident or a suicide. To end an odyssey of sleuthing with such an anti-climax is to hoodwink the trusting and kind-hearted reader” (rule eighteen).<sup>1</sup> Disdain for the whole enterprise of detective fiction bubbles up through his witty lines. Dorothy Sayers likewise belittled the genre, famously asserting that detective fiction could never attain “the loftiest levels of literary achievement” since it was merely “literature of escape” and not “literature of expression.”<sup>2</sup>

Sayers’s assertion was just as famously rebutted by Raymond Chandler in his essay “The Simple Art of Murder.” Usually appreciated as a manifesto of the hard-boiled school and a tribute to Dashiell Hammett, the essay also makes the case that good detective fiction can be as rich and significant as any kind of writing. In the hands of a “realist in murder” a detective story *is* a literature of expression, giving “an effect of movement, intrigue, cross-purposes, and the gradual elucidation of character.” It is also a literature of social critique, one that exposes “a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making.” Chandler instructs: “It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the most often quoted passages from “The Simple Art of Murder” is this: “Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare, and tropical fish.” Scholars like those in this volume might thank Chandler for doing something similar: giving us reasons, and “the reasons for the reasons,” to take detective fiction seriously.<sup>4</sup> It is only fairly recently that the multiple genres of crime writing have been taken up as subjects of academic study; before that, they were entirely in the hands of connoisseurs and collectors, with their endless taxonomies, lists and value judgments. What Chandler opened up was a new way of looking at crime narratives, or rather looking *through* them, as lenses on the culture and history of the United States.

The collection of essays assembled here gives a sense of the long trajectory of crime writing in America, from Sara Crosby’s essay on the earliest forms, the execution sermon and the penny press, to Eddy Von Mueller’s study of the police procedural and its proliferation on television. The advent of the fictional detective is described in Stephen Rachman’s essay on Edgar Allan Poe, and essays by myself, Sean McCann, Margaret Kinsman, and Maureen

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T. Reddy trace the development of the detective from the early work of women writers, to the ascendancy of the hard-boiled style, to the increasing diversity of writers over the course of the twentieth century. Andrew Pepper delineates the mutual influences of roman noir and hard-boiled fiction, and Ilana Nash examines the place of crime writing in the youth culture of the early and middle twentieth century. David Seed surveys the spy novel from its origins to the present day, Fred L. Gardaphe outlines the development of a literature and a mythology about the mafia, and Laura Browder traces the origins and history of the true crime book. Finally, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney examines the influence of the mystery story on the shapes and subjects of postmodern fiction.

While there is a great deal of information here about the history of each sub-genre, there is also attention to the way crime fiction documents the social structures and manners of any moment. Crime fiction is famous for its specialized slang and patois; McCann, Pepper, Reddy and Sweeney examine what that language might actually be expressing, as does Mueller in his discussion of “copspeak.” We can learn much about the dress and domestic duties of women in the late nineteenth century from the women writers in my essay, but what is ultimately more interesting is what their work reveals about a gap that opened between generations of women during the transition from the Victorian era to the Modern. Crosby shows the link between the rise of a literature about sinners and changing aspirations for national identity.

When we study detective fiction, we can think broadly and deeply about American history and culture. When we are looking at stories about deviants in conflict with the agents of law and order, we are looking straight into the workings of society. The villains and heroes of popular literature are very instructive; they tell us about what we fear and who we would conjure up to contain what threatens us. They reveal our racial and religious prejudices and our gender biases. The literary figure of the detective, for example, developed in response to the emergence of actual detectives in the middle of the nineteenth century, a period shaped by the tumultuous forces of urbanization, social stratification, geographical mobility and changing gender roles. And fictional detectives have continued to develop in response to the needs of their audience, from the erudite consultant to the police we see in early American detective stories to the morally ambiguous hard-boiled private eyes of the middle of the twentieth century to the industrious and unstoppable feminist detectives of the last three decades. Cold War spy thrillers arose, in part, out of misgivings that perhaps the “American century” was not going as well as it might. Gangsters of the early film era expressed a fear of social anomie, while the mafia stories that arose in the 1960s have served as a discourse on our fear of powerful conspiracies and entrenched subcultures, an America dis-united.

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Crime fiction also allows us to look straight into the workings of narrative itself. Because mystery stories in general and detective fiction in particular are about gathering up the necessary clues and weaving them into a coherent narrative, they are interesting to consult on questions of narrative authority. All narratives claim to be presenting events as they happened in the past; detective fiction simply raises the stakes for authors, characters and readers. The story that the detective reconstructs and presents has to be wholly convincing and beautifully shaped. American crime fiction has long appealed to “highbrow” writers from many nations and writing traditions; they find the tropes of mystery, conspiracy, fragmentation and investigation to be well matched to the interrogation of received wisdom and surface truths that is at the heart of the modern and postmodern modes. Crime narrative can also be a place to examine the ethics of storytelling, especially in the true crime subgenre.

It is evident from the intellectual energy displayed in the following chapters that these scholars find the study of crime writing to be exciting and richly rewarding. It is my hope that the work presented here will inspire others to explore the satisfactions of the field.

## NOTES

A generous grant from the Woodruff Research Fund of Emory College made possible the dedicated editorial assistance of Kira Walsh and Haipeng Zhou. Megan Friddle was also a tireless assistant in the editing process; all three went far above and beyond the call of duty, and I am deeply grateful to them.

1. S. S. Van Dine [pseud. for Willard Huntington Wright], “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories,” *American Magazine*, 106 (September, 1928): 129–31. See also Carolyn Wells’s textbook, *The Technique of the Mystery Story* (Springfield, MA: Home Correspondence School, 1913).
2. Quoted in Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder” (1944; repr. in *The Simple Art of Murder*, New York: Ballantine, 1972), p. 13.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 20.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 5.

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## 2

SARA CROSBY

## Early American crime writing

In 1851, Herman Melville confessed to possessing a criminal democratic philosophy. He worried, however, that his chosen interlocutor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, might not appreciate this subversive formulation and instead cleave to an “aristocracy of the brain.” “So,” he wrote Hawthorne, “when you see or hear of my ruthless democracy on all sides, you may possibly feel a touch of a shrink, or something of that sort.” Melville presumed that Hawthorne’s “shrink” would stem not merely from intellectual or class prejudice but from a *moral* repugnance, admitting, “It is but nature to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington.”<sup>1</sup>

Melville should have been nervous. His equation between the thief and the founder promoted a version of America and its literature that many writers in Hawthorne’s circle found deeply objectionable. While Melville suggested that a truly “ruthless” America would embrace egalitarianism through sympathy with the criminal, authors, such as Hawthorne’s favorite literary critic, Edwin Whipple, attacked popular crime writing precisely because it promoted this leveling identification. He lambasted what he called the “Romance of Rascality” for teaching “the fact that a man excites moral reprobation is his claim upon our sympathy” and that “the old gentlemen of ’76 . . . fought for an equality in evil as well as good.”<sup>2</sup>

The following essay sketches a brief history of this “equality in evil.” It tracks popular American crime writing from seventeenth-century execution sermons through eighteenth-century novels and then concludes with the courtroom journalism that electrified the antebellum era. In short, it examines how debates over sympathy for the criminal structured these texts and, ultimately, shaped Melville’s “ruthless” American literature.

## City of saints

In seventeenth-century England, rogues, fiends and “penitent thieves” or “murderers” appeared in criminal biographies with titles such as *The Witty*

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*Rogue Arraigned, Condemned, & Executed: Or, the History of That Incomparable Thief Richard Hannam, and Natures Cruell Step-Dames: Or, Matchless Monsters of the Female Sex and A Full and True Account of the Penitence of John Marketman, during His Imprisonment in Chelmsford Gaol for Murthering His Wife.*<sup>3</sup> Instead of such “accounts” and “histories,” however, seventeenth-century New England popularized the “execution sermon.” These sermons accompanied judicial executions and were usually delivered during the week or hours preceding the solemn event – often with the condemned in the audience. Formally, they did not differ from other Puritan sermons. Using the basic three-part sermon structure, they began with a scriptural extract or “text,” then continued with a “doctrine” section explicating that text, and concluded with a lengthy “application” transforming the doctrine into practical behavioral prescriptions. Yet, execution sermons drew notably larger audiences than most other lectures, with many auditors traveling long distances to hear them. In one illustrative instance, the thousands who gathered to hear a sermon delivered by Increase Mather had to flee the meetinghouse when their weight threatened to collapse the gallery. (Mather and his audience immediately reconvened in a sturdier church.)

Encouraged by this popular response, New England’s most respected ministers strove to reach even larger audiences by rushing their orations into print. Increase Mather, for example, published his 1675 *The Wicked Man’s Portion* so “that it might thus be exposed to the view of the world.”<sup>4</sup> Between 1674 and 1825, when the first and last execution sermons appeared, New England printers produced a substantial corpus of such pamphlets – at least 75 distinct sermons distributed in varying combinations with other texts. Furthermore, these sermons often spawned multiple editions and became perennial bestsellers, consumed for years after the unfortunate malefactors that occasioned them had dissolved in the grave.<sup>5</sup>

This consistent and widespread popularity made the printed execution sermon a powerful jeremiad for ministers hoping to enforce the dictum of Massachusetts’ first governor, John Winthrop, who had designated New England “a city upon a hill,” a community of saints set apart by God to act as a beacon of true religion to a faltering and fallen world.<sup>6</sup> (This principle ultimately translated into an ideology of US exceptionalism, typified by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s call in “The Young American” (1844) for a moral nation to rejuvenate and reform the world.) During the 1670s, when the first execution sermons appeared, however, many colony leaders feared that the younger generation’s commitment to this “city” was flagging. Therefore, execution sermons typically focused on youthful sins – disobeying parents, hanging out with the wrong crowd and committing sexual “uncleanness” – as the precipitating factors in a sinner’s fall into criminality. For instance, the very first

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execution sermon, Samuel Danforth's *The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into* (1674), was provoked by a teenage boy caught *in flagrante* with a mare. Subsequent discourses written for less explicitly sexual crimes, such as murder and infanticide, also insistently linked youthful disobedience and illicit sexuality with capital crime. In a sermon on the infanticides – such as Elizabeth Emerson and an unnamed African-American woman, for example – Cotton Mather acknowledges that there “may be *Old Hypocrites*” that practice “uncleanness . . . [b]ut it is the Young people that are this way most Extravagant.” He continues emphatically, “If all the *Young People*, that have many ways, *Polluted themselves, from their Youth up*, were turned out of our Assemblies we should have Thin Assemblies Left!”<sup>7</sup>

While this harangue certainly spits fire and brimstone, it also demonstrates one of the more unusual and influential conventions of the execution sermon: sympathy for the condemned. At a time when most popular English genres labeled malefactors as “cruel monsters” or heroic “rogues” beyond ordinary human experience, execution sermons typically humanized their objects. Calvinist theology taught that because of Adam's fall all human beings shared an innate depravity, which only the grace of God kept in check. Ministers thus warned their listeners not to “exult” over the criminal; for he or she had only taken one more short step down the “slippery slope” than they had – an exemplum of their own possible future if God removed His restraining grace. Mather thus reminds his listeners and readers that, while they have not literally committed murder yet, many of them have moved toward it and “*Polluted themselves*” just as the condemned infanticides had.

Despite the execution sermon's reliance upon shared sinfulness, this identification with criminals was nevertheless not exactly the egalitarian connection that Melville felt with thieves, but rather was intended to reaffirm theocratic hierarchy. For instance, Benjamin Colman's sermon for another infanticide, entitled *The Divine Compassions Declar'd and Magnified* (1715), claims that he must open her “Wounds”; for “[t]he greatest Compassion and *Tenderness* to thee at present is, to *awaken in thee . . . a sense of the Terrors of God, and of His Wrath impending over thee*, unless you find Grace from Him.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, “Compassion” should help inspire fear of the authority “impending” over her. Ministers such as Colman often spent months wielding this particular brand of compassion in long pastoral visits with particularly infamous criminals, whom they encouraged to admit their own depravity and their judges' righteousness. Only after the criminals' submission did ministers exert their tender rhetorical efforts on behalf of these repenting “monuments of grace.” On the other hand, those who did not submit themselves to ministerial guidance and affirm sacred and temporal authority – rebellious pirates, Irish crypto-Catholic infanticides, etc. – could



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still be tagged with alienating labels such as “Cockatrice” or at least “Tragical Spectacle.”<sup>9</sup>

Much of the execution sermon’s energy was thus devoted to walking a line between (1) a sympathy that reinforced the proper moral authorities and reintegrated the community and (2) a sympathy that threatened to encourage rebellion and induce centrifugal disorder. For instance, a century and a half before Melville deconstructed the moral distinction between criminal and saint, Cotton Mather’s 1693 *Warnings from the Dead* attacked that mistaken, leveling form of sympathy as the source of crime. He blamed the condemned malefactors’ transgressions on “their Observing, *That there is one Event unto all*. Many a man is too *Pore-blind* to see any Difference between *Good* and *Bad* men in the World.” In other words, instead of obeying God and his “*Good*” surrogates – parents and ministers – criminals embarked upon their slide into crime by equating sinners and saints. This lack of discrimination between people translated into an inability to make proper moral choices. Foreshadowing nineteenth-century arguments over poisonous popular literature, Mather added: “He Drinks all that he sees before him, and he never ponders, *Is there no poison in it?*” Mather thus positioned his execution sermon as an instrument to correct this mistake and restore the social and moral discrimination necessary to maintain theocracy and a city of the elect.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately for New England’s ministers, their audiences increasingly displayed the same lack of discrimination that set the criminal at odds with authority, as New Englanders began to join their English brethren in a preference for more secular forms of crime writing. In the seventeenth century, New England’s isolation had allowed its theocracy to exert an iron-clad hold on local printers, who could not print the “trash” that characterized the secular crime literature of England. New Englanders could thus only feed their desire for crime writing by turning to ministerial pamphlets. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, the crown reasserted direct political control over the colony, and the burgeoning population grew more secular and socially diverse. This process of “Anglicization” eventually released printers from religious censorship, enabling them to compose cheap gallows literature: one-page “broadside” that claimed to be authentic autobiographies, final words and confessions, melancholy ballads, and eventually lengthier criminal histories – genres which characterized England’s popular street literature.

Puritan ministers, however, did not relinquish their hold on popular crime writing without a fight. As the Enlightenment sped onward, public attention turned to historical and environmental explanations for social phenomena. Ministers responded by adding documentary supplements to their published



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sermons that, with the exception of the conversion narrative, were often indistinguishable from secular accounts. But the ministers' authority was wedded to the universalizing narrative of sin and punishment or redemption, and this attempt to play to public taste only channeled attention toward individual historical details, further undermining sacred explanations.

This historicizing impulse played into the hands of a group that would dominate the eighteenth century's discourse of crime: novelists. Execution sermons had connected ordinary Americans and criminals by a vibrating chord of sympathy, but when ministerial influence declined, theological narratives largely ceded control of this connection to imaginative writing. The "wrong" kind of sympathy increasingly prevailed, and novels egged it on – or at least reopened the question of how bad it really was to sympathize with the "bad."

## Sympathy for the devil

After the decline of the ministerial hegemony, American crime writing experienced a renaissance of the rogue. Eighteenth-century audiences devoured autobiographies of rakes, thieves and confidence men, such as Stephen Burroughs and Levi Ames, or of righteous rebels wronged by unrighteous legal authority, such as Whiting Sweeting. Americans who enjoyed these narratives returned to an old English tradition of class resistance mediated by vicarious pleasure in the adventures of outlaws, which allowed the lower orders to mock their betters and let off steam but did not radically alter forms of power. In other words, the rogue played with social order. This play seemed more attractive to English than American novelists, however, and, while rather benign picaros featured in important early texts like Royall Tyler's *Algerine Captive* (1797) or Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792–1805), the early republic's most significant novelists were mesmerized by another criminal type: the fiend.

Although critics generally sort America's first novels into sentimental or gothic categories, authors such as William Hill Brown, Susanna Rowson, Hannah Webster Foster and Charles Brockden Brown crossed these standard literary boundaries to construct "true crime" narratives focused on actual rapes, seductions and bloody mass murders.<sup>11</sup> These novelists found crime writing irresistible because they aspired to be "moral painters" inculcating virtue in the new nation.<sup>12</sup> They found the fiend even more irresistible because the virtue these novelists aspired to teach depended upon sympathy as its first principle, and the fiend threatened that foundation. Unlike the rogue, the fiend did not play with social order but destroyed it – ripping apart affective bonds by slaughtering friends, lovers and family. The fiend's radical evil

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defied explanation, and by inhabiting a sphere beyond human understanding it also passed beyond the reach of human sympathy.

Influenced by the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, scholars have generally explained this American obsession with fiends as part of a larger cultural transition from a sympathetic seventeenth-century model of the criminal to an alienating eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paradigm, which cast the criminal as radically other and mysterious.<sup>13</sup> But this movement did not go unopposed, and the early republic's "true crime" novels sought to protect a liberal moral system by worrying the fiend into palatable forms that could fit within a framework of sympathy, such as the misunderstood victim or the mentally ill "lunatic." Their efforts at revision centered on two fiends in particular: the infanticide and the familicide.

Close to fifty years before these novelists started writing, colonial society had begun redefining the woman who killed her infant as a victim rather than a fiendish "unnaturall mother." In the 1730s, New England juries suddenly began refusing to convict women suspected of infanticide. This abrupt move departed from the seventeenth century's draconian legislation, which had used the infanticide to enforce patriarchal authority over women and the sexually undisciplined lower orders. English statute law had defined infanticide as a crime that only "lewd women," that is, unmarried and "unclean" women, could commit, and further linked it to witchcraft by making it the only other capital offense that assumed the defendant's guilt. Not surprisingly, the percentage of alleged infanticides convicted and executed in England and its colonies far exceeded the percentages condemned for other forms of homicide. The New England public's actions better than reversed this disproportion.<sup>14</sup>

New England's ministers reacted to this shift with trepidation. The infanticide's connection to youthful and lower-class crimes of disobedience had made this criminal a favored and effective subject for the execution sermon's jeremiad. Although modern scholars have connected the dramatic turnaround in the conviction rates of accused infanticides to various social movements, ministers thought they knew the source of the trouble: sympathy – and not the right kind of sympathy for the "Good" but the wrong kind of sympathy for the "Bad." In the seventeenth century, divines such as Cotton Mather had to work against their congregation's initial antipathy for the "unclean" woman in order to enforce a chastising identification. By 1738, however, the Reverend Eliphalet Adams harangued his audience about their overly enthusiastic empathy with the convicted infanticide, Katherine Garret, and begged them not to forcibly "stay" her execution. He fretted that criminals' "moving Expressions," "affecting Language" and embodied emotion ("They faint, They swoon away . . .") had tempted legal officials and the general public to "neglect justice." That justice, he argued, now required