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The Comfort of Crime

The Appeal of Formulaic Fiction during the Pandemic

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Abstract: 2020 was taxing, and one of the comforting ways of dealing with the uncertainty the COVID-19 pandemic has brought was reading. It seems hardly surprising that the British turned to crime fiction, which they not only avidly consume but also successfully produce. Moreover, 2020 marked the centenary of the publication of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, a novel that introduced Agatha Christie and her first detective, Hercule Poirot. The anniversary partly accounts for the resurgence of interest in classic detective fiction. Over the last one hundred years the genre has undergone various developments and diversifications, but this article offers a look back at its past. Acknowledging Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King's objections to defining crime fiction as formulaic (2020), it draws on John G. Cawelti's classic work on the mystery and detective story formulas (1976) to address the popularity of crime fiction during the pandemic. It contends that while the immense appeal of the crime genre stems from its adaptability, it is the oft-criticised basic mystery formula that offers the greatest comfort during such challenging times.

Keywords: crime fiction, formula, genre, pandemic, reading

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Dyskretny urok kryminałów

Pandemiczna pociecha z literackich schematów

Streszczenie: Rok 2020 nie należał do łatwych; jednym ze sposobów radzenia sobie z niepewnością pandemii COVID-19 było czytanie. Trudno się dziwić, że Brytyjczycy postawili w tym zakresie na kryminały, które nie tylko chętnie czytają, ale i z powodzeniem tworzą. Rok 2020 to również stulecie wydania *Tajemniczej historii w Styles* – powieści, którą debiutowała Agatha Christie i jej pierwszy detektyw, Herkules Poirot. Jubileusz ten tłumaczy po części ponowny wzrost zainteresowania klasyczną prozą detektywistyczną. W ciągu ostatniego stulecia gatunek ten przeszedł wiele zmian i uległ dużej dywersyfikacji, ale ten esej to spojrzenie na jego przeszłość. Uwzględniając obiekcje Jespera Gulddala i Stewarta Kinga wobec definiowania fikcji kryminalnych jako literatury schematycznej (2020), tekst czerpie z klasycznego dzieła Johna G. Caweltiego opisującego schematy fabularne opowieści kryminalnych i detektywistycznych (1976) i analizuje pandemiczną popularność kryminałów. O ile ogromna atrakcyjność tego gatunku wynika z łatwości jego dostosowania do nowych sytuacji, to największą pociechą w tych trudnych czasach daje właśnie tak często krytykowana schematyczność opowieści kryminalnych.

Słowa kluczowe: czytelnictwo, gatunek, kryminał, pandemia, schemat

In *A Very British Murder*, Lucy Worsley makes a seemingly contradictory observation that “for the last 200 years murder has been the topic to which readers turn for comfort and relaxation” (2014: 6). As the book’s subtitle explains, she tells [t]he curious story of how crime was turned into art, describing the processes that led to the establishment of crime fiction as a favourite national pastime. Representatives of the Golden Age of the genre, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, acknowledged the escapism detective fiction offers – the former described it as “complete relaxation, an escape from the realism of everyday life” (Worsley 2014: 228), and the latter called it a “literature of escape” (Chandler 1950). It seems hardly surprising that it was crime fiction that the British readers turned to during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the first lockdown, the media advised what to do while staying at home and what to read – classic as well as less-known crime novels were recommended, and Agatha Christie’s relaxing and escapist puzzles were not overlooked (Gore 2020; Hughes 2020). Crime, classics, and historical fiction, including historical crime, were among the most widely read genres, also elsewhere (Bunting 2020; Price 2020; The Reading Agency 2020; Wood 2020; McGuire 2021). The local libraries in the United Kingdom witnessed a six-fold increase in online membership and digital borrowing, with the most popular genre being crime thrillers, and the most requested book a female police detective mystery (Davies 2020). The June reopening of bookshops resulted in print book sales increasing by 31 per cent during the first week (compared with the same period the year before), and crime novels selling particularly well (Flood 2020a; Zahid 2020); general sales peaked two months later, with two crime titles leading the charts (Flood 2020b). For some, reading

crime fiction was a new but enjoyable experience, and the appeal of Golden Age murder mysteries was global:

At a certain point in lockdown I had to face facts. I only wanted one kind of book: the kind with predictable plots, ensemble casts and very specific narrative rules; the kind that begins in murder or ends in marriage. [...] The formal logic is just too strong: Heyer has to start with a butler announcing a visit from an unwieldy relative; Christie must finish with everyone in the same room as Poirot; it is compulsory for Sayers to cram in lots of thoughtful coffee-drinking and perusal of morning papers. These are the rules (Dewey 2020).

Thus, formulaic fiction, which has often been derided, became appreciated. On the one hand, “[w]ith these books you know what you’re getting” (ibid.); on the other, “the kind that begins with murder” is so varied that everyone could have found something appealing to their particular tastes (The Dorset Book Detective 2020), and the nation’s proclivity for “a good murder” was satisfied.

Charlotte Beyer described the recent state of crime fiction as “A Surfeit of Riches” (2017), and its extent is illustrated for example by the following alphabetic list of the sub-genres of mystery fiction: academic, cozies, ethnic American, feminist and lesbian, forensic, historical, horror, juvenile and young-adult, parodies, police procedurals, science fiction, spy novels, thrillers, true-crime stories (Rollyson 2008). It is by no means complete, as the umbrella term easily accommodates Scandinavian or Nordic noir, domestic noir, or eco crime fiction, too. What is apparent is that the “richness” stems to a large extent from the blurriness of the boundaries of the genre(s):

The boundaries of the genre have become fuzzier than ever, stretching over a wide range of registers, themes and styles, from pulp fiction to highly literary novels with elements of crime, from cosy mysteries with a sense of closure to fragmented narratives focusing on racial tensions, gender conflicts or the morals of violence. While the very diversity of the genre is often obscured by marketing strategies of publishing houses where a clear identification of the genre is a vital selling point, such business tactics cannot deny that former classifications of crime writing as part of a ‘low’ or ‘popular’ literature have long been rendered invalid (Matzke [&] Mühleisen 2006: 2).

And yet, in a book on British novels published a mere year later, such distinction is clearly marked: “Established novelists at the high end of the cultural spectrum frequently experiment with crime writing but one has the impression that they intend not so much to re-vivify the subgenre as to make use of its hidebound conventions as a background to their superior talents; in short, they are slumming” (Bradford 2007: 107). Fortunately, crime fiction conferences no longer seem to be tainted with the scholars’ disclaimers about studying literature that is not spelled with a capital “L.”

Over the decades, crime fiction studies have undergone a few major paradigm shifts, and the latest include questioning the apparent closure detective fiction offers (Rolls 2020), a move from national to transnational contexts, or from generic to individualistic approach, i.e. focusing on particular texts rather than (sub)genres (Allan et al. 2020). Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King propose what may be basically called disposing of the labels:

it might be a more promising move to resist the definitional desire altogether and explore instead how the crime genre is *used* by various agents in the literary field. The uses of the genre are multifarious and include the marketing strategies of publishers, the creative processes of authors and the reception practices of readers (2020: 20; emphasis in original).

It is the usage of crime fiction by the last group that dictated the topic of this paper. Imogen Dewey voiced what numerous other readers experienced as well – that during the pandemic it was “predictable plots, ensemble casts and very specific narrative rules [...] that has been a very uncomplicated form of self-care” (Dewey 2020). There is no denying that traditional structure and familiar story worlds were deemed appealing (Keate 2020; *The Dorset Detective* 2020; Wood 2020). Referring to “older criticism” (Gulddal [&] King 2020: 13) to discuss generic features may initially seem a foolhardy attempt on my part, and yet, the (not altogether) unexpected readerly turn to generic conventions warrants some reflection on literary formula. While I agree with Gulddal and King that hybridity, mobility and internalization is what should be at the core of contemporary crime fiction studies and believe that the immense appeal of the genre stems from its adaptability to particular times and accurate depiction of societal changes, it is the so often criticised formulaic elements of detective fiction that seem to have offered the greatest comfort during recent challenging times.

Literary formula is “a structure of narrative and dramatic conventions employed in a great number of individual works”, but also a way “in which specific cultural themes and stereotypes become embodied in more universal story archetypes” (Cawelti 1976: 5, 6). Formulaic texts are treated by John G. Cawelti as “artistic and cultural phenomena of tremendous importance” (ibid.: 1), but their artistic qualities, referred to as first also in his book’s subtitle: *Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, have often been overshadowed by their more pop cultural aspects. While Gulddal and King appreciate examining “the crime text and its social and cultural context”, they note that the very “notion of literary formulas often leads to more reductionist forms of analysis that strip away the specificity of the individual crime story so as to foreground its formulaic core” (2020: 15). Their appeal to academics and critics to “move away from prescriptive generic concepts (e.g. detection) to an emphasis on individual, non-conforming and innovative features that make crime fiction more than just a reworking of pre-existing formulae” (ibid.: 3) is being heard, and most probably numerous readers comply with that as well. However, the pandemic has revived a longing for the known amidst the unknown: “Readers like a formula. [...] What shapes amazing crime writers is their ability to work within these parameters to construct an amazing piece of fiction”, declares a students’ journal (Keate 2020).

The other aspect associated with crime fiction and frequently voiced during the pandemic is the restoration of order, “that sense of resolution” (Price 2020; Wood 2020). In “Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction”, Carl Malmgren highlights this aspect of Cawelti’s work – “theoriz[ing] the relations between order and disorder and fiction and reality” (1997: 117):

Basic to Cawelti’s formulation is the assumption that reality is itself unruly, disorderly, formless. Mimetic elements are more lifelike in that they depict the chaos and contingency, the ‘grittiness’ of everyday life in the modern world. Formulaic elements are, by contrast, not true to life; they offer us the consolations and satisfactions of structure, pattern, harmony, form (1997: 117–118).

The formulaic elements of detective fiction are: 1) situation, i.e. an unsolved crime; 2) pattern of action, i.e. the investigation and solution; 3) characters and relationships – the victim, the criminal, the detective, and others who are endangered by the crime but cannot solve it; 4) setting, usually isolated (Cawelti 1976: 80–98). Their “untruthfulness” and (stereo)typicality is what has often been criticised, as will be exemplified in the later part of the paper, and yet, as the pandemic readership confirms, it is their predictability that explains their appeal.

The mystery narrative, in Cawelti’s words consisting of “the isolation of clues, the making of deductions from these clues, and the attempt to place the various clues in their rational place in a complete scheme of cause and effect”, is underlaid by the “moral fantasy that all problems have a clear and rational solution”, and there seems to be no better means of expressing “the illusion of rational control over the mysteries of life” than the classical detective formula (1976: 43, 137). It is the crime fiction’s “narrative drive towards closure which is central to its capacity to project disorder and then promote the restoration of order”, which, in turn, accounts for the genre’s popularity (Beyer 2017: 8). The “straightforward and ‘comforting’ endings” berated in recent crime fiction criticism (Allen et al. 2020; Rolls 2020) were welcome by readers (Wood 2020), and “cozies” – i.e. classic mysteries and whodunits – were preferred to thrillers or true crime narratives, which, according to Professor Michael Arntfield, gain greater readership during safer times (Burton 2020). Instead of facing the pandemic reality dominated by fear, uncertainty, and irrationality, it is tempting to escape into the world governed by simple, but not simplistic, rules and formulas (Keate 2020; *The Dorset Book Detective* 2020).

A formula for a genre is one thing, but a formula for a successful text within that genre is something else entirely. Even the same author may apply seemingly the same rules and create works belonging to the opposite ends of the quality spectrum, as Cawelti’s discussion of Agatha Christie’s novels demonstrates (1976: 111–119). Christie’s characters are said to be timeless (“100 Years of Agatha Christie Stories”), but it seems they represent different meanings of the word. While Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple’s appeal will probably last many more centuries, others represent unchanging types rather than believable characters, and Cawelti suggests Christie’s success stems from a cast of types:

the tyrannical aunt or mother, the weak but handsome young man, the girl with a past, the shallow but amorous servant girl, the high-toned but rather suspicious butler, the prim, straitlaced spinster, the Colonel Blimpish rich uncle and so on. While these characters are not exactly dazzling in their originality or deeply moving in their human complexity, they are superbly adapted to function as least likely persons, red herrings, and suspects who will eventually be cleared (Cawelti 1976: 118).

Paradoxically, such stereotypical elements enrich the experience of the formula, allowing a proficient genre reader predict certain events, but still it is the detective whose task it is to surprise not just the characters, but the reader as well, with their deduction. They should not, however, surprise them with their principles – as one of the apparently “inflexible” elements, the detective, even if flawed as a person, is supposed to be “morally superior to the lawbreakers” (Bradford 2007: 101).

The puzzle, and thus the plot, matters more than particular persons, which P. D. James lists one of the most prevailing criticisms of the Golden Age fiction, along with its class-based right-wing morality or presenting crime as entertainment (2010: 132–134). Contemporary mainstream crime fiction has been described as

tied to self-limiting conventions similar to those that inform the medieval morality play or the kind of Victorian novel which promulgated the ethical norms of the period. Characters and circumstances can be made believable only to the extent that they do not fail in their predetermined functions as indices to abstract codes of behaviour. Realism – in its broadest definition as the ability to explore and represent without comment any form of human circumstance, inclination or activity – is therefore severely constrained (Bradford 2007: 101–102).

While characters should fit into one of the prescribed categories, the realism objection seems unwarranted. Crime fiction is praised for its engagement in depicting societal problems, and even for its effectiveness in not only addressing, but also exposing contemporary concerns (Horsley 2005: 158). However, from the perspective of the present discussion, a more interesting disparagement is that of the centeredness and orderliness, of the detective fiction world.

According to Carl Malmgren, Sam Spade, Dashiell Hammet's hardboiled private detective, could never come to Styles, the setting of the first Agatha Christie novel, precisely because the world of classic detective fiction is so distinct and distanced from the real one. It is "orderly, stable, resistant to change, and relatively free from contingency" (1997: 119), and "neither wars nor the dissolution of governments and societies interrupt that long weekend in the country house which is often, with more or less unconscious symbolism, cut off by a failure of communication from the outside world" (Ross Macdonald qtd. in Malmgren 1997: 119). The implication of passivity and stagnancy of the setting indicates that the mean yet dynamic streets of hardboiled fiction enhance the authenticity of the narrative. However, it is the isolated static setting that seems to offer a more alluring promise of escape from the uncertainties of the world around.

Apart from place, time also matters, and another feature of detective fiction that seems to have been relevant for its comforting effect in lockdown reading is its relation to the past. Thomas Leitch observes that the Golden Age puzzle mysteries are characterised by a nostalgic approach: "In the sublimely English world of village life, [...] [murders] are generally greeted by a wave of instant nostalgia among the characters for the immediate past, the past of last week when no one in the village's charmed circle could remember any act of violence" (2020: 163).

The contrast between the pandemic present and the recent past was startling, and this only intensified the longer the lockdown continued. The initial charm of having a couple of weeks to catch up with domestic chores, piles of "to be read" books, or indulge in hobbies that had been postponed was quickly replaced by the realisation that lockdown is not a mere time off, but an event with serious economic consequences whose extent cannot be predicted. Pre-pandemic travels, parties, and eventually all everyday activities started to be perceived with a nostalgic touch, and for many people stories in which apparently anti-nostalgic characters are capable of restoring the proper order became appealing enough.

Leitch remarks that it is not just the past that is fetishized in this kind of writing – the detective story itself is as well, and he describes it as "a nostalgic fetish enshrined

in anthologies [...], reprint lines [...], whodunit movie pastiches [...], and the cycle of period adaptations of formerly contemporary detective stories” (2020: 169). The Golden Age fiction also seems tinged with fetishization, and Agatha Christie’s status as the Queen of Crime is widely recognised.

Last year marked the centenary of the publication of her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which introduced her as a writer and Hercule Poirot as a detective. Both quickly became immensely famous, to the extent that he is perceived as one of the greatest amateur sleuths in detective fiction, and she is considered the most successful writer of the classical detective formula, “the very embodiment of the rules and techniques that are now synonymous with the genre, especially in its ‘cosy’, whodunit form” (Rolls 2020: 178), in which she offered both the “intellectual play and witty escapism” (Cawelti 1976: 119, 137). Celebrations for the Christie centenary were planned in advance, and consisted in part of a reading challenge hashtagged #readchristie2020, with categories including stories that, for example, changed Christie’s life, were inspired by her reading or her work, et cetera (“Read Christie 2020”). Still, as James Pritchard – the CEO of Agatha Christie Ltd. – admits, it was during the lockdown that her readers became particularly engaged (Price 2020). Christie knew puzzles and their “tonic values” (Worsley 2014: 228), and encouraging wide audiences to (re)read texts that begin with a disruption of the equilibrium and end with the restoration of balance was a prescription many must have found ideal during the months of lockdown. P.D. James stated that Christie’s stories “provided entertainment, suspense and temporary relief from the anxieties and traumas of life both in peace and war for millions throughout the world and this is an achievement which merits our gratitude and respect” (2010: 89; Price 2020). Had she lived and written it now, James would surely have added a pandemic to the list.

2020 marked P. D. James’s centenary, too – that of her birth. Similarly to the Agatha Christie anniversary, the celebrations were planned for the whole year, including sharing archive contents hashtagged #PDJames100 (Williams 2020). Her “serial” detective, Adam Dalgliesh, is a professional working for Scotland Yard as well as a poet. Although she is labelled as one of the two British “New Wave” Queens of Crime – the other being Ruth Rendell (Horsley 2005: 253), her position and centenary were overshadowed by Christie’s. Still, it is her words that serve as a perfect summary of the importance of detective fiction:

it is particularly popular in times of unrest, anxiety and uncertainty, when society can be faced with problems which no money, political theories or good intentions seem able to solve or alleviate. And here in the detective story we have a problem at the heart of the novel, and one which is solved, not by luck or divine intervention, but by human ingenuity, human intelligence and human courage. It confirms our hope that, despite some evidence to the contrary, we live in a beneficent and moral universe in which problems can be solved by rational means and peace and order restored from communal or personal disruption and chaos (James 2010: 141).

Crime fiction was a source of comfort after the 2008 recession (Wood 2020) and the duality of crime and detective fiction as a means of discussing contemporary societal issues and also of escaping from them explains why the genre has been so welcome yet again. (Re) Visiting an English village whose peace is disturbed by a murder or other crime only to witness order being restored is comforting. Static as that world may be, it allows for a hope that some balance in our world will be restored as well, and thus provides an escape from the uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic.

A comfort book is like comfort food. Reflecting on 2020, “compulsive pandemic readers” compare formulaic reading to certain types of food – salted peanuts (Dewey 2020) and a takeaway pizza accompanied by wine (Nolan 2021); they are sometimes craved but cannot constitute a healthy diet. Formulaic fiction has served its purpose, but it is time to move on:

I read dozens of thrillers in one particularly stressful week, completing the back catalogues of some fairly prolific authors, and could not have told you much about them by the following morning. [...] I just wanted to be calmed, to feel passive and sated and safe, and sometimes I did. My reading, no matter how superficial and rapid and lacking in reflection, was a method of coping and I don't regret it (ibid.).

Writing half a century after the peak of the popularity of classic detective fiction, John Caldwell noted its outdatedness:

to a period inclined to be distrustful of rationality and ambiguously suspicious of the value of social authority, the classical formula's emphasis on deduction and the detective's role as protector of the social order seem to embody a quaintly antiquated view of the world, a fantasy that is almost too far-fetched to be believed in, even for a moment.” (1976: 137).

The 2020 data on pandemic reading – library lending and bookshop buying – and readers' experiences demonstrate that there are moments when such a fantasy is needed and the escapist allure of formulaic fiction is extremely appealing. For many, the anxiety caused by self-isolation was alleviated by entering the world dissimilar to our own: instead of constant fear connected with the unknown virus, readers could experience the consolation stemming from clues that would lead to the solution; rather than listening to disorientated country leaders, they would follow the detective who, even if initially not in control of the situation, would bring order and closure. With time, the enjoyment of the simple rules governing formulaic fiction was accompanied by the acceptance of the simple rules of distance and disinfection; moreover, since it seems that the spread of coronavirus may be managed by vaccination, scientific and medical authority may be re-established. While the pre-Covid past is still being idealised, and the post-Covid future is still unforeseeable, crime fiction continues offering comfort. 2021 is the centenary of the birth of Patricia Highsmith – an opportunity for new adaptations and new critical readings of her works.

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