TEACHING FORUM: TEACHING CRIME FICTION AFTER BLM

The Novel and Not the Police

Theodore Martin

Abstract. The author describes his attempt to design and teach a crime fiction class relevant to our era of racial criminalization and mass incarceration. The resulting class sought to de-center the detective novel and de-emphasize genre coverage, and instead invited students to explore the more varied ways that novels have responded to American ideologies of crime and criminal justice.

What are we teaching students when we teach a class on crime fiction? What I have always loved about teaching the genre is its interpretive plenitude. The crime novel is a genre about scientific rationality, and about the liberal social contract, and about the construction of masculinity, and about the activity of reading itself. As a pedagogical object, crime fiction contains multitudes.

What *don't* we teach when we teach crime fiction? The very phrase *crime fiction* usually means detective fiction, and most accounts of the genre tend to center the detective, the police, and a narrative form defined, in one way or another, by the restoration of law and order. (Think of W. H. Auden's famous definition of the detective plot: "innocence is restored," 446.) And yet, when I look back on my own crime fiction classes, I realize that the one thing I didn't talk much about, in courses devoted to a genre defined first and foremost by its depictions of amateur and professional policing, was the police. That is a particularly

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egregious oversight today, when there is no getting around the fact that American novels about policing and detection are hopelessly entangled with the rise of an unprecedentedly punitive criminal justice system, one that over the past 60 years has sought to manage the ever-widening gulfs of American inequality with the tools of militarized policing and mass incarceration.

I do not think this ideological entanglement means we should stop teaching crime fiction. I do think it means we have the opportunity to start teaching it differently. We might, for instance, begin to present the genre to students as one that comprises not just the stories of those whose job it is to search for criminals (the detective, the cop) but also the stories of those who are pursued and targeted by the criminal justice system. Put simply: what would it look like to make crime fiction classes less about detectives and police officers, and more about the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of *being policed*?

In fall 2021, I took a stab at exploring some of these ideas in a course called Crime and Fiction. Previously I'd taught a more conventional survey of detective fiction (Edgar Allan Poe, Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Chester Himes, Walter Mosley) as a lower-division course intended to introduce students to the basics of the genre. By contrast, when I designed Crime and Fiction as an upper-division seminar, I decided to set aside the issue of genre coverage, and really the entire idea of genre altogether. Of course, this felt a bit risky; I knew from those previous classes that my students—even senior English majors—would not be coming to this class with much, if any, prior knowledge about the genre of the crime novel. But I thought the risk might pay off if it could get the students thinking about a different kind of question: not *what is a crime novel*, but *what are some of the ways that novels have responded to American ideas and ideologies of crime?* This guiding question didn't assume any literary-historical expertise from the students. Instead, it invited them to draw on the range of things they've already read, watched, and experienced—including, as many students discussed throughout the quarter, growing up in over-policed neighborhoods and being subject to harassment by police themselves—as a starting point for investigating how myths of criminality are both constructed and contested by popular fiction.

What counts as crime? Who is given the privilege of being presumed innocent? And who is automatically assumed to be a criminal? The course had students explore these questions through several different lenses, including gender, race, and protest. The final unit of the course, "Crime, Race, and Rebellion," asked students to think about the twinned histories of policing race and policing protest through an unlikely trio of readings: selections from Saidiya Hartman's brilliant work of archival re-creation, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*; the introduction to Elizabeth Hinton's important revisionist history of the 1960s urban rebellions, *America on Fire*; and John A. Williams's excellent but overlooked 1969 thriller about police violence and Black revolution, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*. Despite radical dissimilarities of form and genre, all three of these texts are about how we tell the difference between a criminal act and a political one, and about how the adjudication of that difference is unavoidably informed by differences of race, class, and gender. By asking students to confront the wildly different forms a story about crime may take, I wanted to get them thinking about how we decide what actually counts as crime fiction in the first place. And by using Hartman's and Hinton's nonfiction texts to introduce Williams's potboiler, I hoped to give students a vivid example of how the crime novel itself became, at key moments in its history, an important cultural relay-point between popular reading habits and the material histories of racial criminalization and incarceration.

In simplest terms, what literary works like Hartman's, Hinton's, and Williams's do is what I think today's crime fiction classes ought to be doing: make the concept of crime an open, unsettled, and often unsettling question for students. As Hartman pointedly asks in *Wayward Lives*, "How had living become a crime?" (89). A question like this draws our attention to the fundamental injustice of what we call the justice system; it highlights how the most basic forms of living, working, surviving, and resisting are transformed into crimes—by vagrancy laws, vice laws, and riot suppression—and turned into fresh targets for the police. In a very real sense, this process of criminalization (what we might also call the social construction of crime and of the category *criminal*) is the unspoken subject of every crime novel. The main thing I am trying to do in my crime fiction classes these days is highlight the writers who have been willing to speak about it.

Keywords: crime; crime fiction; detective fiction; policing; race; rebellion

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