

H-France Forum

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Andrea Goulet. *Legacies of the Rue Morgue: Science, Space, and Crime Fiction in France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 295 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-8122-4779-4.

Response by Andrea Goulet, University of Pennsylvania

The image of “birthing a book” has never seemed to me particularly apt. For one thing, it takes most people far more than nine months to incubate a manuscript—and once the book is out, an author is more likely to set it aside with relief than to pull it in closer for lifelong intimacy. Still, there are some things that writing a book and becoming a parent do have in common: the experience helps us appreciate the work put in by others before us; and we cannot help but feel humble gratification when someone takes the time to get to know the fruit of our own labors. I certainly feel immensely grateful for the care, insight, and generosity with which Margaret Attack, Göran Blix, Aaron Freundsuh, and David Pike have reviewed my book, *Legacies of the Rue Morgue*. And I especially thank Rachel Mesch, the forum’s editor, for having chosen this foursome of scholars whose work spans such a wide range of subjects and approaches. Indeed, I am delighted to find that what made the interdisciplinary topic of my book at times so challenging—its open-endedness—has also made it possible for these authors whose work I admire to find points of contact and resonance with their own areas of research, from the archeological imagination of “high” Romanticism (Blix) to the sensational “low” crime culture of the 19th century (Freundsuh), and from the transnational, cross-media representations of the modern urban underworld (Pike) to the historical links between World War II and the contemporary *noir* (Attack).

I would like to begin my response by reflecting on a question raised, explicitly or implicitly, by all four of the reviewers: is crime fiction essentially a conservative genre? From Dorothy Sayers’s theory of the detective novel as medium for social catharsis[1] to D. A. Miller’s reminder that crime-based narratives can themselves reinforce the disciplinary function of the polis[2], studies of the mystery genre have often emphasized a structural return to order—or its opposite, as when Jacques Dubois identifies the reformist utopianism of certain writers like Leroux, Simenon, and Japrisot, whom he sees as breaking with the crime genre’s dominant repressive ideology of bourgeois democratic capitalism.[3] (Attack provides an alternate thread of secondary criticism—by Kracauer, Nizan, and Mandel—that similarly engages with the topic of bourgeois social conservation.) My book contributes to the discussion by exploring the abiding tensions in crime fiction between violent disorder and rational elucidation, especially through the prisms of science and space—as when, for example, I build upon Uri Eisenzweig’s discernment of the detective novel’s fundamental occultation of the “socio-historical dimension” through the trope of the “locked room” or *chambre close*.[4] In some cases, I argue that attention to the ideologies underlying scientific discourse can reveal fine distinctions within a spectrum of political, historical, and social conservatism; for example, Gaston Leroux’s use of paleontology in *Le Parfum de la dame en noir* (1908) reflects an anti-historical fear of the past’s reach into the present,

while Maurice Leblanc's "La Contesse de Cagliostro" (1924) supports archival historicism through a contrary fear of temporal stasis.

But more generally (and in part because the topic has been well covered by my predecessors), Freundshuh is right to note that my book "subtly shift focus away from the question of crime fiction's fundamentally conservative roots." Indeed, I am glad to see the reviewers identify my book's broader attempt to foreground the "non-normative" (Attack), counter-rational, disruptive and disintegrative forces that pull the genre away from its rationalizing, even policing, function. To some extent, this is due to the widening of my lens beyond the classic *roman policier* to include sensationalistic *feuilletons*, metaphysical anti-*policiers*, and cyberpunk sci-fi crime fictions. But it is also, as Blix notes, a philosophical stance that highlights the moments of "push back" against Cartesian rationality by resituating crime fiction within "the messy contingency" of the empirical world. Blix asks whether that (historically shifting) emphasis on messiness matters if, in the end, the fictional investigator still retains the aim of "explaining, mastering, and exorcizing crime." In his deconstruction of those two distinct paradigms of detection, Blix actually draws near to a point I made in my first book: namely, that from its start, the detective novel encodes what Foucault called the modern "empirico-transcendental doublet."^[5] In *Legacies of the Rue Morgue*, I have tried to move beyond that nineteenth-century double bind and to consider ways in which new spatial thought of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries opens up territories in which, as Blix puts it nicely, "ostensible mastery unravel[s] as an uncontainable violence spills across temporal, geographical, and psychic borders." This is not to say, of course, that the question of the genre's conservatism is done being debated or has lost relevancy. It continues to crop up in terms of specific authors (are Stieg Larsson's progressive politics undercut by the spectacularization of misogynistic violence in his *Millenium* series?) or sub-genres: in a 2015 *Guardian* piece, Val McDermid proposes that today's *romans noir* lean to the left in their overt criticism of the status quo, while thrillers tend toward conservative reactions against the threats to world order. ^[6] But this last distinction, between *noir* and thriller, is an old one, and I am as curious as are my reviewers to discover how newer socio-political forms (are we living the far horizon of neo-liberalism?) will foster novel "permutations" (Freundshuh) and affect "the afterlife of popular genres" (Pike).

Meanwhile, and despite, or perhaps because of, the fundamental transnationalism of the (post)modern age that my book aims in part to explore, even non-fictional narratives about murder continue to fall along the fault-lines of private versus public, domestic versus foreign, crime versus war. For example, both judicial and political discourses on the June 2016 attack in Orlando's Pulse nightclub sought to ascertain whether the shooter was motivated by internationalist ISIS ideology or "homegrown" homophobia. The opposition may well be reductive, but it has shaped many attempts to make sense of brutal assault on innocent life. In the case of fictional narratives about murder, that opposition found its most tyrannical form in S. S. Van Dine's formal exclusion of "war politics"—terrorism, political motivation, and national interest—from the pure detective story genre. Such definitional boundary-making is what first led me in *Legacies of the Rue Morgue* to ask (and to answer in the negative) whether crime fiction, especially in France, had ever in fact succeeded in divorcing itself from the turbulence of political revolutions—a move that Blix sees as a forensic exposure of a return of the political repressed in the genre. I am not sure that it is my book's primary aim or contribution, though I have found the Jamesonian model of narrative's political unconscious highly useful. In any case, I acknowledge that there may be some nimbler psychoanalytical terms than "repression" to be applied to the investigative work of both fictional

detective and literary critic—terms like screening and disavowal (Rolls, 8) or “resistance” in the Lacanian/Zizekian sense (Rushing, 9). But I have sought in *Legacies* to track textual and meta-textual moments when the very pull between domestic crime and national violence imprints itself onto the narrative space—as when, for example, Adolphe Belot begins his 1866 *Le Drame de la rue de la Paix* by grumbling that the political events of 1848 had distracted from “des catastrophes privées” like the one he will recount, only to end the novel by allowing the domestic drama to spill out of the bourgeois salon and into the streets of insurrection.

The larger question raised by such spatialized readings is the one posed by at least two of my reviewers: does it make sense to analyze crime fiction as a separate or privileged sphere? Pike wonders “how unique or non-unique” these spatial imaginaries are to detective fiction; and Blix asks “to what extent (and how and why) the topography of crime fiction might differ from the larger literary map of the period.” In considering these questions, I feel compelled to confess that in writing this book I wanted, in a way, to have my cake and eat it too. On the one hand, I base many readings—as well as some choices of both corpus and *problématiques*—on the self-definitional context of the generic tradition. On the other hand, I work to emphasize the extreme porousness of the genre, by including for example Elie Berthet’s prehistoric fictions in my study of “archaeologies” of criminal violence. A skeptical reaction to such generic open-endedness would be to propose that once we move beyond the classic *roman policier*, the very notion of “crime fiction” collapses as a meaningful category. But a more productive approach, based on the potential for applicability or at least relevance, would entail what my reviewers have already begun to do: to consider how the terms and tensions—or even “misplaced ideas” (Pike, citing Schwarz)—that arise from the analysis of the crime genre’s shifting boundaries might relate to the study both of canonical literature (Blix mentions Balzac, Hugo, and Flaubert) and other popular genres like science fiction, television serials, or Bollywood musicals (Pike). What would that look like, they ask? I am not sure, but I do know that the kinds of dialogue facilitated by H-France forums are what allow for unanticipated connections across literary and extra-literary fields. In answer, for example, to Blix’s question of whether a study of the subterranean motif beyond the confines of crime fiction might illuminate “a broader constellation of social practices,” one might invoke Pike’s magisterial trilogy on the symbolics of the urban underground across nations, eras, technologies, and media.[10] There, in addition to the associations of the *bas-fonds* that connect my work to that of a cultural historian like Dominique Kalifa, we find a dynamic investigation of mythic visions pulled between the poles of antiseptic utopian promise and archaic conceptions of pestilent hell. My hope for further connections between *Legacies of the Rue Morgue* and the work of other scholars is based on my agreement with the H-France reviewers that we benefit from moving beyond the definitional confines (as porous as they are) of the crime fiction genre. The study of representations of violence constitutes a labyrinth filled with alternative itineraries (Atack), a “venerable tree” of rhizomatic branchings (Pike). And there can no more be a final word on the topic than there could ever be a true *chambre close*.

NOTES

[1] Dorothy Sayers, *The Omnibus of Crime* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Press, 1929).

[2] D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

- [3] Jacques Dubois, *Le roman policier ou la modernité* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006).
- [4] Uri Eisenzweig, *Le récit impossible: Forme et sens du roman policier* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1986).
- [5] Goulet, Andrea. *Optiques: The Science of the Eye and the Birth of Modern French Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006)
- [6] Val McDermid, “Why crime fiction is leftwing and thrillers are right wing,” *The Guardian Books Blog* (1 April 2015): <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/apr/01/why-crime-fiction-is-leftwing-and-thrillers-are-rightwing>.
- [7] Van Dine, S. S. “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories” (1928): <http://gaslight.mtroyal.ab.ca/vandine.htm>
- [8] Alistair Rolls, *Paris and the Fetish: Primal Crime Scenes*, series “Chiasma” 33 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014).
- [9] Robert A. Rushing, *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture* (New York: Other Press, 2007).
- [10] David Pike, *Passage Through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); *Subterranean Cities: The World Beneath Paris and London, 1800-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); *Metropolis on the Styx: The Underworlds of Modern Urban Culture, 1800-2001* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

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