

Urban Setting in Contemporary American Crime Fiction

Abstract: Although crime fiction is now a standard topic of scholarly discussions, still very little attention has been paid to the role of place and space in the genre. The article attempts to add in filling the gap by analyzing the changing representations of urban setting in contemporary American crime fiction. Briefly characterizing the traditional image of the city in American hardboiled crime fiction, the article then moves on to contrast it with the way urban setting functions in many recent crime novels. Referring to crime series by Sara Paretsky, Linda Barnes, Laura Lippman, S.J. Rozan and Les Roberts, it analyzes how a new image of the city is constructed in contemporary crime writing. The article also tries to show that although the contemporary heightened interest in the role of places and spaces in literary works has been mainly focused on classic works or the so-called high-brow texts, it can yield interesting results when aimed at popular genres, such as crime fiction.

Introduction

Crime fiction is a kind of genre literature centering on a crime and its investigation, and traditionally it could be characterized by its focus on the unexpected twists of plot, the mystery, the puzzle, or, in the words of Dagmar Mocná, on “the intellectual game” (Mocná 106). In a well-known 1931 essay on popular literature in general and crime fiction in particular, Karel Čapek, himself a fan of detective stories, assessed the early masters of the genre and claimed that in detective fiction objects and places exist only as traces and characters are nothing but sets of traces for the detection (Čapek 157). His observations were fitting for the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction in which the setting represented a mere background or a scene of crime. It provided a specific atmosphere enhancing the crime’s atrocity, added in creating a mood, or supplied the investigator with both significant and misleading clues. However, Čapek’s claim is no longer true because many contemporary crime novels create settings far richer and detailed than is necessary for the unfolding of the whodunit plot. It well documents the great potential of genre literature to evolve even within its generic formulas. It also shows that the so-called spatial turn made its impact in this popular genre as well.

Contemporary crime fiction uses its setting for many more purposes than just creating a stage, an atmosphere, and for providing clues. The setting can be designed to educate the reader in certain areas (this is often the case in ethnic crime fiction¹), bring up current problems (as for example in environmental crime fiction), deepen psychological aspects of individual characters, etc. In the critical discourse on crime fiction in the first decade of the twenty-first century, David Geherin in his study of the importance of place in crime fiction persuasively shows that setting, although an often-undervalued component of fiction, is in fact very important even in works where plot is the dominant element (Geherin 3). Famous crime fiction writer P.D. James confirms his claim in her discussion of the genre when she states: “the setting exerts a unifying and dominant influence on both the characters and the plot” (James 110). In fact, some crime fiction writers managed to convey such a vivid sense of place in which their protagonists operate that some locations have become “indelibly associated with fictional detectives – Sherlock Holmes and London, Jules Maigret and Paris, Philip Marlowe and Los Angeles” (Geherin 8).² The article analyzes how the sense of place is created in contemporary American crime fiction with urban setting in contrast to the typical rendering of the urban milieu in the hardboiled tradition.

The “mean streets” of urban jungle

The traditional setting of the American crime fiction is urban, or, even more precisely, metropolitan. The private eyes of the American hard-boiled school typically steered along the hot and dangerous streets of Los Angeles, and big cities became the staple setting of American crime fiction for almost half a century. John Scaggs, in his outline of the genre’s history, explains the urban setting as a result of the realism of the genre (especially of the police procedural) and as the legacy of the so-called Hard-Boiled School (Scaggs 88).

Leonard Lutwack in his groundbreaking *Role of Place in Literature* pointed out that places can be rendered in a variety of ways ranging from “geographical verisimilitude to symbolic reference” (Lutwack 18). Sometimes, a realistic description of a place can be infused with symbolic meaning at the same time. Traditionally, in the hardboiled fiction, the metropolis was depicted mainly as “dangerous, violent and squalid” (Willett 4) conforming to the common image of the city as a jungle.³ Rather than a site of the fulfilment of the American dream, many early crime fiction writers saw the city in the words of Woody Haut as “the epicenter of an all-consuming nightmare” (Haut 179). Ralph Willett adds that in the traditional hardboiled fiction “the dark side of the city was evoked (and) its spaces were racialized through the white detective who confronts ‘blackness’ in its various meanings while absorbing mythically romantic aspects such as poverty and marginalization” (Willett 12).

Raymond Chandler’s fiction managed to convey a strong sense of both intimidation and alienation connected with Los Angeles. He for example skillfully created scenes in which he juxtaposed Philip Marlowe alone against the backdrop of the busy city, usually somehow intruding into his private space suggesting that his PI can never be truly alone nor fully a part of the urban crowd, as these two examples from *The Big Sleep* illustrate: “There was a gusty wind blowing in at the windows and the soot from the oil burners of the hotel next door was down-drafted into the room and rolling across the top of the desk like tumbleweed drifting across a vacant lot” (Chandler 22); “The night air came drifting in with a kind of stale sweetness that still remembered automobile exhausts and the streets of the city. I reached for my drink and drank it slowly” (24). In fact, Willett considers this as one of the strongest assets of Chandler’s prose: “The projection of menace in ‘mean streets’ and its registration as threat by the drifting individual is one of Chandler’s particular successes” (Willett 21). The detective and the city have a peculiar love-hate relationship conveyed to the reader vividly through the first-person narrative. Silver Alain and Elizabeth Ward sum up Chandler’s approach: “Unlike Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, or even Dashiell Hammett, Chandler’s descriptions are never pure ‘objectivism’. Chandler is usually more interested in conveying the feel of a place to his reader than in merely relating its physical appearance” (Alain and Ward 2). Chandler’s renderings of the city also articulate “a modernist sense of urban anomie and moral disintegration” (Horsley 37).

This dark picture of urban milieu is not limited to the 1940s peak of the hardboiled crime fiction but continues well into the second half of the twentieth century with the city typically pictured as a barren, tormented place of alienation, isolation and danger where the lonely figure of the detective moves through the often-crowded streets. This picture was in accord with the findings of sociologists studying the mid-twentieth-century processes of urbanization: they emphasized the non-existence of a community in cities, where the alienated and isolated individual collides with an anonymous urban crowd, described by Burton Pike as “anti-community within the dissociated culture” (Pike 100). And likewise, in the prevalently realistic mode of the American crime fiction from up to the 1980s, the city was “a place of shadows, casual relationships and violence,” usually depicted “on the edge of a social, financial or environmental precipice” (Haut 180-1). The last one is well depicted for example in later novels of Ross Macdonald where the dirty polluted city is seen as a parallel to the moral decay of contemporary society.

City as Home

The bleak urban scene of crime fiction began to change in the 1980s when female writers entered the field in large numbers and brought with them narrative interest in the private lives of their protagonists. This “intrusion of the personal” (Bertens and D’haen 59) might in fact constitute a major contemporary development in crime fiction. Interestingly enough, this new trend also influences the ways the urban setting is approached. While an acute awareness of the dangers of urban life still naturally constitutes an important feature of the city as setting, the crime novels’ protagonists are no longer lonely outsiders in their urban milieu. They know where (and when) city streets can be mean, but they consider the city, above all, their home, a place where they are firmly rooted and socially connected. I believe this change in attitude is also in accord with the prevailing realism of the crime fiction genre because the city is the home of most of the American population (in fact of 83 per cent in 2020), therefore this new attitude may simply reflect the reality of urban dwellers – they have created strategies to make the city their home, to feel at home in the city.

The beginning of this change in the narrative attitude to urban setting can be detected in Sara Paretsky’s Chicago-based V.I. Warshawski series and can later be found for example in Linda Barnes’s Carlotta Carlyle series situated in Boston, Laura Lippman’s Tess Monaghan series set in Baltimore, in S.J. Rozan Lydia Chin & Bill Smith series set in New York’s Chinatown, or in Les Roberts’s Milan Jacovich series taking place in Cleveland, Ohio.

How is this sense of a place domesticated, or this presentation of city as home achieved? Our first example is by Sara Paretsky. Beginning in 1982, she has published crime novels with a female private investigator V.I. Warshawski. The series is considered groundbreaking in several aspects – in its employment of a female PI, in being set not in a coastal metropolis but in a midwestern city, and in focusing on so-called white-collar crimes (for example insurance frauds) and their impact on common citizens. The importance of Paretsky’s fiction probably cannot be overestimated. S.J. Rozan, herself a successful crime fiction writer, sums up Paretsky’s fiction: “V.I. Warshawski, Sara Paretsky’s Chicago-based private investigator, is that classic American invention, the hardboiled private eye. The fact that she’s also a woman has, to her creator’s disbelief, changed the face of crime fiction” (Rozan, “Sara Paretsky” 1). However, from our point of view, the series is also original in its presentation of the urban setting by offering a female point of view.

Most reviewers⁴ agree that in Paretsky’s work, Chicago becomes alive and a character in its own right. The protagonist’s ability of keen observation of her city is introduced in the opening lines of the series in the investigator’s description of a night drive along Lake Michigan in July in which she notes the quality of the air, the colors of the lights reflected on the lake’s surface, the residues of barbecue dinners in the park, the heaviness of traffic, etc. Stating that “the city (was) moving restlessly, trying to breathe” (Paretsky, *Indemnity Only* 1), she speaks of Chicago as much as of herself. The intimate connection between the city and the protagonist is manifested throughout the series often and Paretsky’s fiction thus confirms Hana Wirth-Nesher’s observation that “in modern urban novel, cityscape is inseparable from self” (Wirth-Nesher 21).

Similarly, the protagonist of Linda Barnes’s series feels connected to her city. Published since 1997, Barnes’s Carlotta Carlyle series is set in Boston, and it also features a female professional investigator, all the more familiar with the cityscape as she is a former cab driver. Here is an example of how her emotional bond to the city is mediated: when Carlotta drives towards the Boston University Bridge the road suddenly offers “a spectacular view of Boston’s church steeples, brownstones, and skyscrapers” and Carlotta admits: “It still gives me goosebumps after all these years” (Barnes 45). To her, the city possesses a special charm underlined with the silver band of the Charles River. Despite operating as a PI and therefore having experienced the city’s dark underbelly, she has created a strong emotional bond with her urban milieu. Her experience as a taxi driver makes her all the more familiar with Boston’s urban

geography, of which she is a keen and detailed observer. One observation in particular serves as a symbol of the detective's job: the importance of the right perspective. Carlotta observes that downtown Boston is a jumble, but she has found a precise spot where the John Hancock and Prudential towers guard the bay in which the view of the skyline seems to crystallize. Similarly, the traces and facts assembled in an investigation seem jumbled for a long time until the right perspective is found from which everything falls into place and the case is solved. Remapping the city through the mental movements of the investigation is paralleled to uncovering crime.

Another series, in which the city is depicted as a protagonist's home rather than a menacing alienating milieu, is Laura Lippman's Tess Monaghan series. Published between the years 1997 and 2015, the series is placed in Baltimore and in featuring a former journalist, now an amateur sleuth, it continues in the trend of female private investigators. In the series, the city is also presented as the protagonist's beloved home. In the opening of the first novel *Baltimore Blues*, the intimate connection between the protagonist and her city is foregrounded: the city echoes the mood of Tess. Unemployed and running out of resources, Tess is depressed and frustrated, and the city seen from the vantage point of her rowing boat also looks "dirty and discouraged" (Lippman 4). The parallel between the city and the protagonist is further emphasized: "Neither Tess nor her hometown were having a good year" (4). In the case of Tess, this is explained as a result of her year-long unemployment, while in the case of the city, the unprecedented murder rate it was experiencing is to blame. Although the mayor has nicknamed Baltimore the City That Reads, in facing its rising violent crime rate head on Tess ponders different epithets, such as the City That Bleeds or the City That Grieves. Still, when she comes up with the sobriquet the City One Leaves, she admits that she could never flee her hometown any more than she could surface from "the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay with an anchor around her neck" (4). To document her strong bond with the city both as a place and as a historical site, she almost instinctively begins to hum "The Star-Spangled Banner" as she is rowing towards Fort McHenry, the birthplace of the US national anthem (3). Therefore, although Tess does not romanticize her hometown, she has a strong bond with it.

From the examples above it may seem that the new image of the urban setting in crime fiction comes exclusively from female writers and their female protagonists. One could easily argue that this image stems simply from the inclusion of the network of family and friends, which is a focus more typical for female writers. However, the function of the city as home is not gender specific. A great example is the crime fiction series by Les Roberts. The series began in 1988 and it features second-generation Slovenian American Milan Jacovich, a Cleveland private investigator specializing in industrial security. Unlike the traditional PI of the hardboiled fiction, who as Bertens and D'haen emphasize "never articulates deep feelings" (Bertens and D'haen 212), Milan is pictured as a caring father, openly confessing his love for his sons and resenting the fact that after his divorce he is no longer present in their lives daily. He is equally vocal about his relationship to his hometown.

Similarly to the protagonists of Paresky's, Barnes's, and Lippman's series, Milan loves his city too and he is at home there spatially as well as socially. Driving in his home neighborhood, the familiar houses and local establishments wrap around him "like a reassuring cocoon" (Roberts, *Deep Shaker* 224). A keen and alert observer of the city, Milan provides insights into Cleveland's geography and social life. For him, Cleveland simply is "a pretty good place to live if you don't mind the weather" (*Pepper Pike* 35). Situated strategically on both the Cuyahoga River and the banks of Lake Erie, the city has a reputation as a transportation hub and a manufacturing, blue-collar epicenter of the Midwest. And although in many instances, the descriptions underline it, the prevailing image of Cleveland as a Rust Belt city is what Roberts tries to contradict in his rendering of the rich cultural and artistic life to be found there.

Les Roberts's Slovenian protagonist's affectionate portrayal of Cleveland as a multifaceted city that has grown out of the resourcefulness and perseverance of the generations of immigrants who sought out their American dreams there resembles the trope of the city as a bazaar as characterized by Peter Langer in his typology of urban imagery. Viewed as a bazaar, the city is a place "of astonishing richness" of activity, diversity and opportunities, fostering "the development of unique combinations of social affiliations and lifestyles" (Langer 100). Indeed, such an unequivocally positive literary presentation of city, especially in crime fiction, is rather rare.

The last example of the new representation of urban setting comes from the crime writing of S.J. Rozan. Published since 1994, Rozan's series is unique because the volumes alternate between two narrative voices of her PI pair – Bill Smith and Chinese American Lydia Chin. Creating a pair of collaborating private investigators allows for even greater degree of realism as the physically toughest parts of investigations are done by Bill while the search for clues in New York's Chinatown is mainly up to Lydia. In addition, it gives the writer an opportunity to present the lore of Chinatown and the culture and habits of Chinese Americans, as a reviewer summed up:

Through Chin, Rozan offers a realistic look at a community largely misunderstood by its urban neighbors, and a resourceful, courageous, and independent character, albeit one hectored by her mother, who disapproves of her chosen profession. While the cynical Smith is a more familiar type, both the lyricism of his narrative voice and the complexity of the plots his creator throws him into, place him in a class all his own" (Picker 52).

Although Rozan is not part of the Chinese American community, she is credited with depicting it authentically.⁵ Both Rozan's characters have a strong bond to their urban environment. Lydia is deeply rooted in Chinatown and Bill, not immune to its exotic charms either, considers New York more pragmatically as a place of opportunity and, for him personally, welcomed anonymity. The combination of Lydia's neighborhood's picturesqueness and the many options available in the metropolis seem to echo both the trope of the city as bazaar and the image of New York Ralph Willett considers typical – i.e., "one of determined theatricality modified by pragmatic business sense" (Willett 49). Here is a vivid description of New York's Chinatown, linking the place to a theater stage:

A bright sunny day in Chinatown brings everybody out, even in the cold. People wove through the packed streets like dancers (...) Their music came from the words they spoke: the Cantonese and English I understand, the Mandarin and Fukienese and Spanish and Korean that I don't. The percussion was their footsteps slapping and tapping the pavement in syncopated rhythm. Their costumes were marvelous: bright ski parkas, patterned scarves and mittens, plaid coats, black leather and brown leather and puffy white fur sweeping by one another in intricate, fast-moving choreography. The set was good, too. Crimson New Year's banners with glittering gold letters snapped in the wind (Rozan, *China Trade* 83).

The profound sense of place in the selected crime fiction series is heightened by employment of all senses in the descriptions of the city. Taking Paretsky's series as an illustrative example, one notices how V.I. Warshawski not only sees the city, but smells it: "a pungent mix of chemicals" burning "eyes and sinuses" (Paretsky, *Blood Shot* 2) in the industrial parts of South Chicago; hears it: such as "the clanking, shattering noise" (Paretsky, *Deadlock*, no pagination) of the conveyor belts in the Port of Chicago, and feels it when she walks downtown or swims in the Lake Michigan. Similar examples can be found in all

the series discussed. In Rozan's series, the smells in particular become an important element in the depiction of New York's Chinatown – attention is paid to the scents of various teas Lydia likes to drink as well as to spices used in Chinese cuisine.

Significantly for the crime fiction genre, the correspondence between the protagonist, the setting and the plot is also emphasized by introducing physical perceptions of discomfort as a foreshadowing of crime. So for instance in the opening of *Killing Orders*, Warshawski shivers in the cold January wind, her stomach tightening with anxiety due to both the unpleasant memories connected to a particular urban spot and to a crime gradually surfacing. Even in *Hardball*, which begins on a sunny day in September, while driving from a prison visit back to her office Warshawski notes how knotted her shoulders are, how “tension builds in the calmest muscles” (3). Although a beautiful evening is emerging, the setting sun is still painfully shining in her eyes. The physical discomfort is again foreshadowing an impending crime as well as the protagonist's initial blindness in investigating it.

City has been American crime fiction's most typical setting. The hardboiled tradition presented a bleak picture of the urban milieu – the city was imagined as a jungle, as an alienating, corrupt and dangerous place where the private eye felt isolated and disconnected from the anonymous crowd. However, this image began to change in the 1980s and more recent crime fiction, although carrying on in the hardboiled trend of featuring resourceful, independent and tough PIs, depicts the city in a far more positive way: as colorful, bustling with life in all its diversity, rich in opportunities, and as such resembling the trope of the bazaar defined by Langer. Newly, the city is depicted as (often deeply beloved) home of the detectives where they enjoy a network of family, friends, and favorite local establishments (be them pubs, bars, coffee houses, bookstores). The image of the city as home implies therefore not only an intimate acquaintance with its urban geography, but also the individual's rootedness within its social background. It is also in accord with the prevailing realism of the genre because it reflects the strategies of how urban people carve a home out of the complex spaces of the city.

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Notes

- (1) For more on the sub-genre, see for ex. Bubíková, Šárka. “Zločin v různých odstínech (pleti): Podoby a kořeny současné americké etnické detektivky.” *Litikon: Časopis pre výskum literatúry* vol. 4, no. 1, 2019, pp. 29-37.
- (2) Interestingly enough, a clearly defined setting is important even in the pulp magazine era, as Jozef Pecina points out, when the “rather formulaic and repetitive” sensational crime tales (such as published in the *Spicy Detective Stories*) could be distinguished often only by their individual settings (Pecina 54).
- (3) For a detailed discussion see Peter Langer's “Sociology – Four Images of Organized Diversity: Bazaar, Jungle, Organism, and Machine.”
- (4) Several examples can be found in Kinsman's *Sara Paretsky*, 53-5.
- (5) For example, Leonard Picker, reviewer for the *Publisher's Weekly*, states: “Rozan feels validated by the overwhelmingly positive reactions she's gotten from the Chinese-American community, as well as from readers in Japan, where there aren't a lot of strong independent female Asian protagonists for Asian women to identify with, and where her work landed her the Maltese Falcon Award” (Picker 52).

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