**Event Title:** It’s a Crime! Genre Fiction’s Bad Rap (Sheet) in Academia's Mean Streets

**Event Description:** Crime fiction has often struggled to be taken seriously in literature classes and creative writing workshops, even as the students themselves are avid fans of suspense, thrillers, true crime podcasts, and more. Professors who teach crime fiction as literature (class, race, and social justice as thematic cores) or use it as models for aspiring writers (plotting, pacing, getting readers to turn the page) explore the genre’s strengths for academia and offer tips on bringing it into the classroom.

Thematically, crime fiction comments on systematic unfairness in society and sharply portrays the lives of people in traditionally marginalized communities, such as women, African Americans, Latinx, and LGBTQ. For aspiring writers, genre provides structural frameworks to work within (or against), and suspense fiction offers specific models for plotting, pacing, and more. This panel will explore those strengths and offer best practices for introducing this genre into the classroom.

**Event Category:** Pedagogy

**Event Organizer and Moderator:** Art Taylor is the Edgar Award-winning author of The Adventure of the Castle Thief and Other Expeditions and Indiscretions. His fiction has also won the Agatha, Anthony and Macavity Awards. He is an associate professor and assistant director of the creative writing program at George Mason University.

**Event Participants:**

Edwin Hill teaches creative writing and literature at Emerson College. He also served as the vice president and editorial director of Bedford/St. Martin's. He is the critically-acclaimed author of five novels and numerus short stories.

Richie Narvaez is the author of two novels and two short story collections. He teaches crime fiction writing at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan and received SUNY Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Adjunct Teaching in 2022.

David Heska Wanbli Weiden is author of the novel, *Winter Counts* (Ecco; S&S UK), winner of 12 awards and named a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, Indie Next Pick, and Book of the Month Club main selection. He is a MacDowell, Ucross, Ragdale, Sewanee, and Tin House Fellow. davidweiden.com

**Moderator’s Primary Questions**

In what courses have you drawn on or incorporated genre fiction into your reading and assignments?

- General creative writing and fiction writing courses
- Genre-specific courses such as “Writing Suspense” and “Writing Mystery & Crime Fiction”
• Literature courses, including “Women of Mystery,” “Sherlock,” “Spy Fiction,” and others
• Note that texts range from 19th-century detective fiction through Golden Age mysteries to modern crime fiction, including both whodunits and thrillers.

Where have you felt the genre fiction has been welcomed/respected by your department, your fellow faculty members, and/or your students—and where have you felt that genre fiction has (to borrow our session title) gotten a bad rap?
• Faculty response has ranged from surprise to support—the latter particularly related to student interest in the subject.
• Some faculty peers have seen genre fiction as inferior to literary fiction in terms of its depth and complexity—focused on plot but thin on character and theme.
• Creative writing faculty have on some occasions frowned on or even forbidden students to submit genre fiction to workshops.
• Students have also expressed interest in writing courses in other genres: fantasy, speculative fiction, or horror. In some cases, panelists have welcomed/integrated those genres into the crime/suspense courses.

How has teaching crime fiction in literature courses allowed students to explore various cultural and geographical contexts, contemporary local and/or world issues, or social issues?
• Historically distant texts offer windows into their eras—the values, concerns, and challenges of a historical moment—and allow students to consider whether the authors are, for example, reflecting those values, embracing them, or attempting to change them.
• Golden Age whodunits are great at illustrating class differences in action, the sleuths often Othered by the people they are trying to help.
• Modern stories tend to be more direct in discussing history and social issues, such as bigotry and sexism, leading to discussion about how to confront and expose those issues.

How have you handled the sometimes controversial natures of some crime fiction texts (e.g. triggering because of violence or social issues, or, with some of the classics, dated and potentially offensive references or exclusive points of view)?
• Trigger warnings are offered either generally (for the entire course) or on specific texts. “After all,” added one panelist, “we're discussing crime, one of the ugliest parts of human existence.”
• Controversial aspects of texts can spark discussion—about gender roles past and present (toxic masculinity, homophobia), about racism (overt or implicit), about political differences, and more.

What tips would you offer teachers—either lit teachers or creative writing teachers—who are interested in bringing genre fiction into their own classrooms?
• “When introducing genre fiction into the classroom, incorporate a discussion about what genre is, what expectations readers and writers bring to texts within a certain genre, and what attitudes or bias readers, professors, critics, etc. bring to specific genres.”
• “Pick something exciting—students raised on social media love thrilling elements and twists—and don’t be afraid to present a controversial text, as it opens up opportunities for conversation.”
“Recognize that for many students, some form of genre fiction was their first love as readers, and allow them to draw on that foundation as aspiring writers—whether writing in genre or not. Meet the students where their own interests lie, follow them, encourage them.”

### Additional Questions for Discussion

Note that some of these are follow-ups to the above, others interspersed between those questions.

- For creative writing courses: Have you taught workshops specifically in how to write genre fiction or only used genre fiction in a more literary workshop? What were your intentions/expectations in bringing genre fiction into the college classroom, and how have those intentions succeeded or those expectations been met?
  - What has student response been? Are students writing crime or suspense fiction?
  - We’re crime fiction writers. How about science fiction and fantasy? Horror? Romance? Or what other genres?
- For literature courses: How have you incorporated genre fiction into literature courses (full focus of course or folded into larger topic)? What benefits did you hope to gain with this focus, and what opportunities did genre fiction offer that more strictly “literary” fiction didn’t? What has student interest or response been?
- What aspects of the genre have you focused on in lit classes—what themes?
- How have you navigated discussions around the ethical and moral dimensions of crime fiction narratives or used crime fiction to explore complex moral dilemmas and societal values?
- What favorite texts (academic, novels, anthologies, or short stories) would you suggest that have worked well in the classroom or for professors to turn to outside of class? Any texts that have not worked well?
- How might the teaching of crime fiction continue to evolve in the future? Are there emerging trends or topics that should be explored in crime fiction pedagogy?
- Have you used crime fiction to connect with other disciplines (or other departments), such as psychology, sociology, law, or film?
- Do you incorporate other media in your teaching (e.g., film, TV, music)?
- Have digital technologies influenced the way you teach crime fiction?
- Have you incorporated digital tools or platforms in teaching crime fiction?
- Assessment and evaluation
  - What are effective methods for assessing students' understanding and engagement with crime fiction?
  - Are there unique challenges in evaluating creative projects or assignments in crime fiction courses?

### Resources

Bernthal, J.C., “‘There are Some Perversities that Cannot Stand’: Nostalgia, Homosexuality, and the Continuation Novel.” *Crime Fiction Studies* 2020 1:1, 114–129.


