Gathering Evidence: Crime Fiction as Social Commentary Questions

Description

To know a society, you must first understand its crimes. Crime fiction in its various forms, from thriller to noir to historical, endeavors to understand society through the exploration of criminality and our criminal justice system. Four accomplished authors discuss how they employ genre storytelling to expose truths about troubling aspects of American culture, past and present, to raise awareness of social problems, generational trauma, and victims’ stories.

Plan

Introduction: I’ll explain the panel's theme and then ask each panel member to offer background on 1) what type of crime fiction he/she writes (how you define it) and 2) what social issues your fiction explores.

Questions:

Why do you think crime fiction often takes up social issues? Why is crime fiction a compelling genre through which to explore social issues? How do different subgenres of crime fiction address these issues differently?

In each of our novels, traumatic events play a role in shaping the narrative. Do you think there’s a link between the exploration of trauma, social issues, and the endeavor of the type of crime fiction we write?

Every crime novel tells two stories—the crime of the past and the crime of the present. Their intersection—what seems to have happened and what has actually happened—converges in the novel's climatic moments. How is this a helpful structure for exploring crimes connected to social issues?

I write historical novels, so part of my aim as a writer is to explore how the homophobic and racial strictures of a time (the 1950s) shape my characters’ experiences; in each of your novels, I noticed the way that the environment, economic or social hierarchy, or ability challenges your characters. How do these limitations shape your story?

Our genre has a long history of using dead bodies as devices. The victim’s loss of life and the impact on the victim’s loved ones were deemphasized or outright neglected. This is changing. How do see your works in conversation with this issue? How do we ensure victim’s voices are heard, not just the crime-solver’s or villain’s?
In many of our novels, race and racism emerge as concerns. How does a crime story where racism enters the story differ from other types of storytelling? Also, why do you think discussing race in crime stories is important?

Likewise, misogyny and homophobia emerge as a topic in many of our novels. Again, how is the genre unique in its treatment of these issues—or is it unique?

Academia has had a long history of viewing crime/mystery fiction as low-brow. That's changing. Why do you think that academics have been skeptical of the genre in the past? And why do you think it's changing?

To wrap up the conversation: 1) recommend a contemporary crime author addressing social issues in an exciting way 2) share one or two resources for aspiring crime writers in the audience (this will give us a chance to mention MWA, etc.)
## Crime Fiction Communities and Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mystery Writers of America</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mystery Writers of America</strong> is the premier organization for mystery writers, professionals allied to the crime-writing field, aspiring crime writers, and those who are devoted to the genre. MWA is dedicated to promoting higher regard for crime writing and recognition and respect for those who write within the genre. We provide scholarships for writers, sponsor MWA Literacy programs, sponsor symposia and conferences, present the Edgar® Awards, and conduct other activities to further a better appreciation and higher regard for crime writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sisters in Crime</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sisters in Crime</strong> is the premier crime writing association focused on equity and inclusion in our community and in publishing. Founded in 1986 to represent and advocate for women crime writers, we celebrate and honor this history with our name while we continue to work for all who share our commitment to and love for a vibrant, inclusive community. Our 4,500+ members enjoy access to tools to help them learn, grow, improve, thrive, reinvent if necessary. They also gain a community of supportive fellow writers and readers, both peers to share the peaks and valleys of writing, and mentors to model the way forward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Crime Writers of Color</strong> (CWoC)**</td>
<td><strong>Crime Writers of Color</strong> (CWoC) is an association of authors seeking to present a strong and united voice for members who self-identify as crime/mystery writers from traditionally underrepresented racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. CWoC has no bylaws or elected officers and is not a nonprofit or any other form of legal entity, but an ad hoc and informal group. It was founded by award winning authors Walter Mosley, Gigi Pandian, and Kellye Garrett in June of 2018.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Queer Crime Writers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Queer Crime Writers</strong> was founded in 2019 to promote community and collaboration among authors of crime fiction who identify as LGBTQIA+ and celebrate the long history of queer writers in the genre. Queer Crime Writers wants the mainstream crime fiction reading, writing, publishing, and retail book community to value our written work and treat it as having equal status and commercial viability as straight, cis-gendered crime fiction authors. We do this by: strengthening our bond as a queer crime writing community; serving as a liaison to established crime fiction organizations, including publishers, conferences, and other professional organizations; educating the broader community about the history and legacy of LGBTQIA+ crime fiction.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[https://mysterywriters.org](https://mysterywriters.org)
[https://www.sistersincrime.org/](https://www.sistersincrime.org/)
[https://www.crimewritersofcolor.com](https://www.crimewritersofcolor.com)
[https://www.queercrimewriters.com/](https://www.queercrimewriters.com/)