

As this book collection attests, the thriller is a wide-ranging category. As this chapter will show (and summarize), the sub-genre of the crime thriller has a large corpus and different national traditions, and, consequently, it does not have a singular literary or national history. Crime thriller narratives can be found across many mediums, including literature, television, graphic novels, and film. Added to this, there are many sub-genres of the thriller that incorporate narratives of crime/s. These are: legal thrillers (and the earlier police procedural), spy thrillers, futuristic thrillers, psychological thrillers, political thrillers, racing thrillers, heist thrillers, cyberpunk thrillers, the ‘troubling’ thriller, and the faction thriller, among others (Scaggs 108). Martin Priestman groups these versions of the crime thriller into the noir thriller and the anti-conspiracy thriller (34).¹ In fact, there is a continual revision and evolution of the crime thriller over time.

To begin: what does it mean exactly to ‘thrill’? Typically, a thriller is connected with a visceral response and frisson. A ‘thrill’ is connected to emotion: it can incite excitement, be suspenseful, salacious, and sensational. It can also be pleasurable, chilling, and terrifying or invoke anxiety, ambiguity, and fear. For these reasons, the crime thriller is closely connected to and has a crossover with the psychological thriller.

So, how can the popular sub-genre of the crime thriller be defined? This chapter will consider the definitions of the ‘crime novel/thriller’ and ‘detective fiction.’ Indeed, each of these terms are broad and encompass many sub-genres in each. There are ongoing debates surrounding such classifications and critics do not always agree or see the thriller as a separate sub-genre of crime fiction. In fact, genre boundaries are not rigidly fixed and often cross over one another, sharing common features: David Glover has identified how the thriller has often been subsumed under the

umbrella terms of ‘crime,’ ‘detective,’ ‘mystery,’ ‘suspense,’ and ‘horror’ (73). Tzvetan Todorov sees the thriller (the *Série noire*) as distinct from the whodunnit and the suspense novel; he writes that: “in other words, its constitutive character is in its themes ... it is around these few constants that the thriller is constituted: violence, generally sordid crime, [and] the amorality of the characters” (162). As Glover, Todorov, and others have indicated, there are many differences between these terms.

Julian Symons has defined the crime novel as distinct from the classic detective story. To summarize Symons, its characteristics are: it does not often have a detective (and when there is one, he or she plays a secondary role); it is based on the psychology of characters or “an intolerable situation that must end in violence;” the setting is often central to the setting and atmosphere of the story (and is inextricably bound up with the nature of the crime itself); “the social perspective of the story is often radical, and questions some aspect of society, law, or justice,” and “[t]he lives of characters are shown continuing after the crime, and often their subsequent behaviour is important to the story’s effect” (193). The crime and the criminal are central to the crime thriller. The term ‘crime novel’ has been used interchangeably with the ‘thriller’ or the ‘crime thriller’ (such as Lee Horsley and John Scaggs, respectively). This chapter will follow this terminology.

While detective fiction differs from the crime novel, elements from each can be found in the other. The key in detective fiction is the investigation. Traditionally, the Golden Age of crime fiction (generally considered to be between the two World Wars)² famously set rules for the detective story, such as Ronald Knox’s ‘Ten Commandments of Detection’ (or ‘Decalogue,’ 1928). Knox’s commandments stipulated that detective fiction should have no supernatural occurrences, that the crime must happen early on in the narrative, the detective must not commit the crime, and no accident or correct intuition must enable the detective to solve the case. ‘S. S. Van Dine’ (Willard Huntington Wright) has written ‘Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories’ (1928), stating that:

The detective story is a kind of intellectual game. It is more—it is a sporting event. And for the writing of detective stories there are very definite laws—unwritten, perhaps, but nonetheless binding; and every respectable and self-respecting concocter of literary mysteries lives up to them. Herewith, then, is a sort of credo, based partly on the practice of all the great writers of detective stories, and partly on the promptings of the honest author's inner conscience. (Wright)

Ultimately, the crime is solved, the criminal is removed, and along with this narrative closure, order and safety are restored.

Priestman highlights the difference between the crime thriller and detective story, between emotion versus reason: “the crime thriller emphasizes present danger rather than reflecting on, or investigating, past action and that to create this danger in the present the protagonist of the crime thriller must be threatened, or believe him/herself to be threatened, by powerful external forces in some form” (43). The crime thriller also differs from the rationality of the classic detective story in its narrative form and structure: the crime thriller utilizes a cliff-hanger technique, building on the action (comparable to a modern-day soap opera); this is why these types of texts are commonly referred to as ‘page turners.’

This description reinforces the popularity and longevity of the crime thriller; it signifies the public's need to consume these texts, to literally turn their pages. Indeed, Jerry Palmer has indicated that “[t]hrillers are a commercial product, made to be marketed” (69). It is due to this commercial nature, thrilling content, and the attendant class distinction between higher, ‘intelligent’ literature and ‘lower,’ popular fiction that has paradoxically led the crime thriller to also have long-standing critical, often negative responses. These include Margaret Oliphant's famous commentaries on sensation fiction in the mid-nineteenth century and Dorothy L. Sayers' discussions. For example, in an essay in 1929, Sayers was disparaging of the thriller, saying that “nothing is explained,” and that this went against “that quiet enjoyment of the logical which we look for in our detective reading.” Here, Sayers aligns the thriller with ‘the uncritical,’ compared to “the modern educated public” (59–73).

The origins and lineage of the crime thriller are important. It is debatable how far back you can trace this and where exactly to draw the line. For example, a case could be made for William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594) as a proto-crime thriller: the tragedy includes rape, violence, and murder and culminates with two sons being killed, cooked in a pie, and fed to their own mother. Initially, the sub-genre of the crime thriller was not fully formed and was a blend of the picaresque, the *Newgate Calendars*, the Gothic, and sensation fiction.

The *Newgate Calendar* takes its name from the famous Newgate prison in London. These were originally broadsheets of *Accounts of the Ordinary at Newgate*, sold at public executions in the eighteenth century. Stephen Knight terms these as 'parables of shocking aberration' (*Crime Fiction* 4). The sale and consumption of the (often sensationalized) details of criminals, their crimes, trials, and their deaths attests to their thrilling nature, spectacle, and popularity. These tales were then collected in book form; Knight has written that *The Newgate Calendar* (1773) was the first major collection of crime without detectives.

This focus on criminals continued in the eighteenth century. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) included sensational and thrilling elements, indicated by the novel's full title, 'The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, Etc. Who was born in Newgate, and during a life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last, grew Rich, liv'd Honest, and died a Penitent.' Henry Fielding's tale of the 'thief taker general', Jonathan Wild, in *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild, the Great* (1743) points to the later crime thrillers with their 'heroic' figures. The Newgate novel sub-genre (1820–1850) again picks up this picaresque notion, with novels that focused on the criminal protagonist. These could be based on real offenders and include titles, such as Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830) and *Eugene Aram* (1832); William Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834) and

Jack Sheppard (1839); and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844).

The Gothic inheritance of the crime thriller is also significant. In Britain (1750–1820), the tropes of the Gothic body of writing included secrets, the supernatural, vulnerable, and imprisoned heroines, male villains, ghostly *Doppelgängers*/doublings, foreign mansions and castles, and exotic landscapes. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine's* 'Tales of Terror' were popular, as was the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann and also the Schauerroman ('shudder novel') in Germany in the late eighteenth century, specifically the 1780s and 1790s. Famous British Gothic texts are Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1792), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *The Italian* (1797). The Gothic was reworked in the nineteenth century, with novels, such as Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800); Jane Austen's parody, *Northanger Abbey* (1818); and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Indeed, Shelley's 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein* makes clear the intended bodily response of the reader: 'to make the reader dread to look around, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart' (7–8).

The American Gothic also deals with dangerous landscapes, but these are distinctly American with American concerns. Important figures are Charles Brockden Brown, with his novels *Wieland: or, The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798); *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799); *Edgar Huntly; or The Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799); and James Fenimore Cooper's 'Leatherstocking Tales,' featuring frontiersman Natty Bumppo and including *The Pioneers, or, The Sources of the Susquehanna* (1823); *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826); *The Prairie: A Tale* (1827); *The Pathfinder; or, The Inland Sea* (1840); and *The Deerslayer; or The First Warpath* (1841). Robert E. Spiller has coined Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* as the first American detective novel (1). Of course, to this list should be added Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), with his celebrated tales of ratiocination, featuring the French detective,

C. Auguste Dupin: ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (*Graham’s Magazine*, 1841), ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ (*Snowden’s Lady’s Companion*, 1842–3), ‘The Gold Bug’, ‘Thou Art the Man’ and ‘The Purloined Letter’ (*The Gift*, 1845). The locked-room mystery utilized by Poe is revisited in later crime thrillers, such as those written by Sax Rohmer and Edgar Wallace.

Sensation fiction of the 1860s and 1870s provided further thrills and crime content for the reading public. The rise in literacy and cheap production of these tales meant that crime thrillers were accessible to all: the British ‘penny dreadfuls’ and dime novels in the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States attest to this. Edmund Pearson defines this cheap criminography (dime novels) as ‘tales of dread suspense’ dealing in ‘violent action; in sudden death and its terrors’ (13–14). Equally, the serialization of sensation fiction in weekly or monthly magazines and periodicals left the reader wanting more. As the name suggests, sensation fiction’s purpose was to shock, to produce bodily sensations. Often, it featured deviant women and crime within the domestic arena. In 1863, Henry Mansel described the sensation novel as:

a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among the people we are in the habit of meeting [....] The man who shook our hand with a hearty English grasp half an hour ago – the woman whose beauty and grace were the charm of last night [...]—how exciting to think that under these pleasing outsides may be concealed some demon in human shape (495–496).

While there was a wealth of writers contributing to this sub-genre—such as Wilkie Collins, Ellen Price (Mrs. Henry Wood), Charles Reade, and Ouida—Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) is one of the best-known exponents of sensation fiction, as is her oeuvre more generally. Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1860) has been described by John Scraggs as helping the twentieth-century thriller develop, with ‘its sensational, and often shockingly frank, depictions of sex and violent death’ (107). In America, Louisa

May Alcott's pseudonymously and anonymously written, lesser-known 'thrilling' novelettes, written between 1863 and 1869, also contributed to the crime thriller. There is also an Australian tradition that is not often discussed in critical accounts. Stephen Knight has identified sub genres of Australian crime fiction that came into being in the nineteenth-century, including 'Squatter Thrillers.' Knight writes that:

If convicts and diggers are two central elements in the development of Australian crime fiction, there is a third point to the triangle, namely the squatters—those who owned the land that was at first worked by convicts and later dug for gold. Squatter fictions that deal with crime tended to be in novel rather than short story or fugitive novella form, and often run to several volumes. Both the characters and the form are substantial (*Continent* 38).³

Authors in this form include Charles Rowcroft's *Tales of the Colonies, or The Adventures of an Emigrant* (1843) and *The Bushranger of Van Diemen's Land* (1846), Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859), George Walstab's *Looking Back* (1864), Ellen Davitt's *Force and Fraud* (1865), William Howitt's *Tallangetta: The Squatter's Home* (1857), A. H. Lambton's *From Prison to Power* (1893), and Mary Gaunt's *Deadman's* (1898). Knight also identifies a psycho thriller: Mary Fortune's story, 'Werrimut: A Tale' (1866).

It is in the twentieth century that the crime thriller begins to take a defined shape, drawing from its previous iterations. Erskine Childers' popular novels are significant, with *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) championed as a founding text of the thriller genre. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) are also important. The espionage central to these novels is seen later in Ian Fleming's popular James Bond novels and short story collections and in John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963). Marty Roth has commented that the threat of the enemy is what distinguishes the thriller from the adventure story (226).

In Australia, Knight has recognized the tourist crime thriller, which depicts the country as a coterminous spectacle and threat. Knight has written that “the Australian thriller exhibits strongly the double action of receiving from the strange sight both the pleasant and the disturbing meaning of the word ‘thrill’” (*Continent* 158). Arthur Upfield is a central writer in this form, with his Australian aboriginal detective, Napoleon Bonaparte. Titles include *Murder Down Under* (1943), *No Footprints in the Bush* (1944), and *Death of a Swagman* (1945). Earlier, in 1933, Miles Franklin’s feminist crime pastiche, *Bring the Monkey*, has been described by Marjorie Barnard as “a satire of a satire of a satire, a thriller to end all thrillers” (106).

In Britain, Sax Rohmer’s many Dr. Fu-Manchu crime thrillers, beginning with *The Insidious Fu Manchu* (1913), display colonial attitudes towards the ‘yellow peril’ from the East. The concerns of class and race in the British thriller are again seen with H. C. McNeile’s Bulldog Drummond books with his gentleman protagonist. Again, in Britain, Edgar Wallace (titled the ‘King of Thrillers’) considerably contributed to the sub-genre, with his novels *The Four Just Men* (1905), *Sanders of the River* (1911), *The Man at the Carlton* (1931) and *The Daffodil Mystery* (1920), among others.

Across the Atlantic, the American hard-boiled crime thriller (which overlaps with the noir thriller) was central to the shaping of what was to come in the sub genre. Dime novels, already mentioned, were published in titles as the *New York Detective Library* (1882–1899) and *Secret Service* (1899–1912). The American popular pulp magazines, such as the *Black Mask* in the 1920s, focused on detection and moved away from adventure stories and Westerns with the change of editorship to Joseph Shaw. *Black Mask* authors included Raoul Whitfield, Dashiell Hammett, McCoy, and Carroll John Daly. Shaw described his approach to hard-boiled crime fiction:

The formula or pattern emphasizes character and the problems inherent in human behaviour over crime solution. In other words, in this new pattern, character conflict is the main theme; the ensuing crime, or its threat, is incidental. . . . Such distinctive treatment comprises a hard, brittle style (2).

This style and the contents of such narratives are inextricably linked to the socio-economic context in which they were written: the Depression Era. Indeed, W. R. Burnett's influential early gangster story, *Little Caesar* (1929), was published in the year of the Wall Street Crash. Raymond Chandler—whose hard-boiled novels include *The Big Sleep* (1939), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) and *The Long Goodbye* (1954)—has described this corrupt and violent world:

It was the smell of fear which these stories managed to generate. Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine-gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than the night (7).

A key shift is personified in the hard-boiled private eye; as Lee Horsley states, there is an “involvement of the protagonist in menacing events (in contrast to the detachment of the traditional detective)” (8). Gary Hoppenstand has also written that the hard-boiled detective is “an emblem of personal honor, a knight operating within a social structure of civic corruption, decadence and dishonesty” (119). These narratives incorporated lower-class (main) characters and also has a (male) working-class readership, as discussed by Sean McCann. This male dominance is often depicted as misogynistic in these crime thrillers and racism also abounds.

Sexuality, violence, and the hard-boiled thriller are central to William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) and James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Double Indemnity* (1936). The former Cain novel is original, as it is retrospectively narrated from the criminal's perspective. This conflation of sex and violence is evident on the second page of the text when Frank describes Cora: “Then I saw her. [...] she had a sulky look to her, and her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her” (*The Postman* 2). Richard Bradbury has indicated how the Depression Era setting and history is connected with suspense: “[t]he urge for financial

gain, for access to the means of acquiring material fulfillment, is welded to the urge for sexual fulfillment” (90).

Later, feminist appropriations of the form challenge previous masculine ideologies, such as Sara Paretsky’s private detective (V. I. Warshawski) series, beginning with *Indemnity Only* (1982). Other variants of the sub-genre include the neo-*noir* novels of James Ellroy, specifically his ‘L. A. Quartet’ novels: *The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L. A. Confidential* (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992). The comic crime thriller has also appeared, with the city of Los Angeles transposed to Wales. Malcolm Pryce’s Aberystwyth *Noir* (Louie Knight mystery) series, beginning with *Aberystwyth Mon Amour* (2001), self-consciously employs pastiche and satire. Knight also discusses the contemporary Australian sub-genre of the private-eye thriller: “the increasing number of these novels and stories—especially in Sydney—have developed from the impact of American private eye novels in recent decades. These have been part of the self-conscious development of Eastern Australia as part of the Pacific rim” (*Continent* 57). Peter Corris—called ‘the godfather of Australian crime writing’—is a main player in this form (some of Corris’ titles include *The Dying Trade* [1980], *The Marvellous Boy* [1981], *The Empty Beach* [1983]).

This violence inherent in these narratives is developed—and heightened—with psycho crime thrillers. Psycho thrillers include psychopathology, crime, detectives and, often, serial killers. As this article will show, the serial killer figure (or figures) are prevalent in contemporary crime thrillers. Examples include Margaret Millar’s *Wall of Eyes* (1943) and Patricia Highsmith’s debut, *Strangers on a Train* (1949; adapted by Alfred Hitchcock in 1951), and her Tom Ripley novels, starting with *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1956). Knight has stated that the Ripley novels can be read as “a conscious rejection of the simplistic Christie-esque notion that murderers were essentially evil” (*Crime Fiction* 150). Jim Thompson’s popular novel, *The Killer Inside Me* (1952; film adaptation 2010) again emphasizes violence and the workings of those who “started the game with a crooked cue” (248).

Robert Bloch's well-known crime thriller, *Psycho* (1959), is primarily told through the eyes of Norman Bates, owner of the motel. Bates commits murders under the identity of his mother; this duality and doubling again harks back to the earlier Gothic beginnings of the sub genre. Alfred Hitchcock's film adaptation, *Psycho* (1960), and the recent television series adaptation/prequel, *Bates Motel*, attests to its enduring popularity and also the public's interest in such narratives. Bloch also wrote other psycho thrillers: *American Gothic* (1974), *Psycho II* (1982), *Night of the Ripper* (1984), and *Psycho House* (1990).

The seminal psycho thrillers of Thomas Harris again present the famous cannibal psychiatrist and serial killer, Doctor Hannibal Lecter. *Red Dragon* (1981) introduces Lecter and also the central criminal, Francis Dolarhyde, who murders families. Philip Simpson, writing on *Red Dragon*, states that "[w]hile other authors over the years had written tales of characters who commit multiple murders for reasons rooted in their trauma-ridden pasts, Harris in *Red Dragon* merged the forms of the police procedural, detective fiction, and psycho thriller to produce a hybrid that both terrified readers and appealed to their intellects" (195). The bestseller, *The Silence of the Lambs*, presents a suspenseful interaction and mind play between FBI student Clarice Starling and Lecter (1988). Early on, the novel states that "Clarice Starling was excited, depleted, running on her will. Some of the things Lecter had said about her were true, and some only clanged on the truth" (30). This novel was later followed by *Hannibal* (1999) and *Hannibal Rising* (2006). Again, the 2013 television series, *Hannibal*, demonstrates the longevity of these texts.

Moving forward in time, the crime thriller in contemporary times is truly transnational and diverse. The historical crime thriller is self-referential in both its incorporation and questioning of the past. Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* (1994) is a prime example: it is a thriller with a serial killer and is set in the nineteenth century. Italian Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980; English 1983), is an historical murder thriller set in a fourteenth-century medieval monastery. Other main texts include the works of James Ellroy, such