The commonly accepted definition of crime fiction is a work in which crime is central to the plot. The roots of crime fiction are traceable to the earliest human narratives, including the Greek and Roman myths and the biblical tale of Cain and Abel. Sensational accounts of real-life crimes and criminals in gallows confessions, broadsides, and pamphlets also contributed to the development of crime fiction. Historically, crime fiction has evolved parallel to political and criminal justice systems.

Many authors have explored the nature of crime and punishment in literary works. For example, Susan Glaspell, playwright, novelist, and actress, was inspired by a real-life murder trial she covered as a journalist. In her 1916 play, "Trifles" and in a 1917 short story, "A Jury of Her Peers," Glaspell offered a feminist critique of gender relations in a domestic setting.

However, as a genre, crime fiction has "literary formulas" that distinguish these works from other genres such as romance and adventure. Within the genre, subgenres such as traditional/classic, PI, and police procedural novels have plots, characters, and settings that are recognizable to readers. As a genre, crime fiction has both provided source material for theater, radio, films, television and, now, social media, and, been influenced by these media.

One of the enduring questions about crime fiction is why readers enjoy sitting down with a book that is often about murder, sometimes graphically depicted. Critic and writer Edmund Wilson described detective fiction as an addiction to which readers succumb. However, he saw reading mysteries as a minor vice that "ranks somewhere between crossword puzzles and smoking." He heard claims by readers about "well-written mysteries" as "like the reasons that the alcoholic can always produce for a drink".

When academics attempt to understand and interpret the texts of crime fiction, they draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives (see discussion under Research). In recent decades, mystery reviewers, writers, and readers have used social media, particularly websites and blogs, to share their own perspectives. One question of interest is the influence such non-academic discussion of crime fiction has on the perceptions of readers and on writers engaged in the process of creation.

Currently, both publishers and authors are dealing with the challenges and opportunities of a changing marketplace. Self-publishing (now known as "independent publishing") has allowed writers to bypass traditional publishing. At the same time, the lack of diversity in the publishing industry has drawn increasing scrutiny.

Keywords: classic detective fiction, crime fiction, diversity in publishing, hardboiled fiction, police procedurals, criticism

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