

Creative Crime Writing and “Enacted Criticism”

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Abstract: This essay considers the creative writing PhD in relation to Golden Age crime writing as an intellectual ‘space’ that operationalizes a domain of practice drawing on both creative and critical domains. It explores how both creative and critical domains function together to create a third dimension that might be termed “enacted criticism”.

Keywords: creative writing, critical writing, PhD, detective fiction, pedagogy

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In *Murder for Pleasure*, Howard Haycraft paraphrases Somerset Maugham, who foresees a time “when the police novel will be studied in the colleges, when aspirants for doctoral degrees will shuttle the oceans and haunt the world’s great libraries to conduct personal research expeditions into the lives and sources of the masters of the art” (viii). By way of proving Maugham’s predictions correct, this essay offers a brief critical consideration of creative-critical interaction in academic Creative Writing: what I have elsewhere termed “enacted criticism” (Green 2021).

In the UK, Creative Writing PhDs require researchers to submit an extended critical reflection on the creative work they are submitting for examination. The relationship between these creative and critical domains function around peculiar tensions. Parker identifies “the potentially problematic formulation of a research question in ... practice-led higher research degrees” (185) and suggests that this risks a fundamental fragmentation of the academic project into “two separate enterprises: one practical and the other theoretical”. She goes on to argue that this requires a radical rethinking of “the problematics of the formulation of both research question and research answer” (186). In generating an effective answer to this conundrum, it helps to see the critical-creative “divide” as an academic (and unhelpful) dichotomy. Creative and critical domains, so far from necessitating division, actually offer profound opportunities for unified thinking, bringing together the “creative” nature of critical reading and analysis and the “critical” dimensions of writing creatively.

For this reason, I propose the idea of “enacted criticism”, which I take to be a significant (re-)framing of the relationship between criticism and creativity. This captures the spirit in which creative work is written both “within and against” critical notions of genre (Lasky 14).¹ To be particular, it is essential that creative writing is considered and understood in relation to “relevant theory, social and political contexts, and the processes of composition

and revision undertaken” (14). These ideas are what Lasky broadly identifies as a “poetics” of creative work.

The contexts and processes to which Lasky refers do not emerge in isolation from one another, but are perhaps best understood as symbiotic elements of one textual “event” shared by a writer and readers. This shared “event” may be differentiated in terms of outcome but creative-critical writing and creative-critical reading are interdependent processes in shaping potential meanings. This is perhaps especially true of the Golden Age detective novel, a genre that is so explicitly aware of its own “createdness” and that frequently foregrounds its own fictionality. Edwards observes how from early in the genre’s history it became an “in-joke for Detection Club members to reference each other in their books” (20). So we find Anthony Ruthven Gethryn, the series detective of Philip MacDonald, observing in the 1924 novel *The Rasp*: “I am Dupont , I am Lecoq, I’m Fortune, Holmes and Rouletabille” (424). In so doing, fictionality is embedded as a point of reference, and such reflexive intertextual references to other works of detective fiction or the idea of creating fiction itself are a defining feature of the genre. Golden Age crime writing’s recursively self-referential nature is a means by which writers can explore their own genre and the ways in which it creates meaning by spinning their own tales explicitly in relation to what has gone before. Such methods recall Effron’s work on narrative co-construction, bringing fictional detectives into a world of critically informed literary re-enactment that allows creative writing students of crime fiction (and readers) to engage in processes of “re-doing”, “re-making” and “re-knowing” the genre of Golden Age detective fiction (Brooks).

In this sense, their practice is also fundamentally interactive, bringing to mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophy of dialogism, using the language and other spaces of the text as vehicles between authors and their precursors (who “speak” through their own creative work): “every word is directed towards an answer and cannot escape the profound influence

of the answering word that it anticipates” (280). Such dialogic functions posit the necessity of a dialogic relationship between readers, authors, and the texts they share and in the processes of creative writing as students re-envision their relationship with writers of the past and with their readership, both of whom function as co-creators of textual meaning.

Creative work in crime writing, as in other genres, operates at what Gulddal & Rolls identify as the “critical-creative nexus” (1). Critical reflection on creative writing, according to Franks, therefore encourages a situation where the “development of creative practices and research methods are interwoven” (3). This reflects Guillaumier’s views of creative writing as “experimental space” (355), comprising both creative and critical-reflective dimensions as “[w]ithout observation and critical thought, no creative endeavour, process or project can be both successful and sustainable” (354).

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¹ It is interesting here to consider the liminal space Scholes suggests in *Textual Power* (24) between interpretation ("text upon text") and criticism ("text against text").