

# Detecting Sherlock's Descendants



# Detecting Sherlock's Descendants:

*Private Detectives in British  
Post-Holmesian Detective  
Fiction*

By

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Detecting Sherlock's Descendants: Private Detectives in British  
Post-Holmesian Detective Fiction

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*For grandpa*



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Although Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional detective Sherlock Holmes is often considered one of the most confirmed bachelors of literary history, he nevertheless stands at the beginning of a long line of ancestors. Since Doyle's renowned protagonist did not have any children we know of, this may sound paradoxical at first, yet it makes sense if his paternity is not understood as biological but as literary fatherhood and heritage:

Sherlock Holmes, that confirmed bachelor famously immune to Cupid's darts, has had many children. Polyphiloprogenerative [sic!], he must be suspected of fathering a good proportion of the population of modern crime fiction [...]. And we can suppose that Holmeses yet unborn are already queuing up in some hyperfictional waiting room [...].<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Scottish writer, academic, and Sherlock Holmes connoisseur Douglas Kerr opens his 2017 article "Holmes into Challenger: The Dark Investigator" and, in doing so, acknowledges Holmes's significance for future generations of fictional investigators. The notion that Doyle's creation has influenced the development and shaped the representation of succeeding fictional detective figures ever since is seized on by other critics. In her study on the development of the detective novel from its 18<sup>th</sup>-century precursors up until the end of the Golden Age in the mid-1940s, Alma Murch appreciates Holmes's influence on his successors by explaining that he "is a focal point in the evolution of the detective hero" as he "became the ancestor of almost all the outstanding twentieth-century detective heroes in English fiction, who reflect one or more of the varied facets of his personality, widely though they differ from him, and from each other, in other respects."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Charles Rzepka indicates that, "[a]lmost without exception," every fictional investigator "carries the literary genetic markers

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<sup>1</sup> Kerr, "Holmes into Challenger," 167. The correct spelling should be "polyphiloprogenerative," meaning "extremely prolific."

<sup>2</sup> Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel*, 190.

of his or her detective forebears” in general and of Sherlock Holmes in particular.<sup>3</sup>

As people’s fascination with and interest in crime and punishment is a tale as old as time and still ongoing, it is no surprise that an enormous amount of research has been devoted to the history of the evolution of crime and detective writing over the years. Companions such as *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (1999) edited by Rosemary Herbert, *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003) edited by Martin Priestman, *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (2010) edited by Lee Horsley and Charles J. Rzepka, or *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2020) edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper present an overview of the history and development of crime fiction and its various subgenres and, in addition, list many examples of notable authors, texts, and detective characters. Articles and monographs focusing on crime and detective fiction include works like, for instance, G. K. Chesterton’s “A Defence of Detective Stories” (1901), Arthur B. Reeve’s “In Defense of the Detective Story” (1913), Carolyn Wells’s *The Technique of the Mystery Story* (1913), R. Austin Freeman’s “The Art of the Detective Story” (1924), Dorothy L. Sayers’s *The Omnibus of Crime* (1929), Howard Haycraft’s *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (1941), Julian Symons’s *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (1972), R. F. Stewart’s ... *And Always a Detective: Chapters on the History of Detective Fiction* (1980), Henry R. F. Keating’s *Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction* (1982), Bruce F. Murphy’s *The Encyclopedia of Murder and Mystery* (2001), John Scaggs’s *Crime Fiction* (2005), Stephen Knight’s *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (2010), Heather Worthington’s *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (2011), Peter Messent’s *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (2013), Martin Priestman’s *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present* (2013), and Martin Edwards’s *The Life of Crime: Detecting the History of Mysteries and their Creators* (2022).<sup>4</sup> Besides, the vital importance of Arthur Conan Doyle’s creation for the development of the genre—a fact that is now largely agreed upon by many scholars—is reflected in the numerous studies that have investigated all kinds of issues concerning the character and methodology of Sherlock Holmes as well as his popularity, longevity, and influence on succeeding generations of fictional investigators at a rather general level. Examples comprise early works such as Ronald A. Knox’s

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<sup>3</sup> Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 246.

<sup>4</sup> Please note that, due to the huge number of studies published over the years, it is, of course, not possible to mention every single work. The lists in this paragraph should thus be understood as a selection.

essay “Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes” (1911), which is usually regarded as one of the first critical works on Doyle’s famous detective, Gavin Brend’s *My Dear Holmes: A Study in Sherlock* (1951) and Michael and Mollie Hardwick’s *The Sherlock Holmes Companion* (1962), more recent studies as for instance Philip Weller’s *The Life and Times of Sherlock Holmes* (1992), Ransom Riggs’s *The Sherlock Holmes Handbook: The Methods and Mysteries of the World’s Greatest Detective* (2009), James F. O’Brien’s *The Scientific Sherlock Holmes: Cracking the Case with Science and Forensics* (2013), Zach Dundas’s *The Great Detective: The Amazing Rise and Immortal Life of Sherlock Holmes* (2015), Maria Fleischhack’s *Die Welt des Sherlock Holmes* (2015), *Who Is Sherlock? Essays on Identity in Modern Holmes Adaptations* (2016) edited by Lynnette Porter, Mattias Boström’s *From Holmes to Sherlock: The Story of the Men and Women Who Created an Icon* (2017, translated by Michael Gallagher), *Sherlock Holmes in Context* (2017) edited by Sam Naidu, *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes* (2019) edited by Janice M. Allan and Christopher Pittard, and David MacGregor’s two-volume work *Sherlock Holmes: The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2021 and 2022) as well as a large number of journal articles and essays published in collected volumes.<sup>5</sup>

However, although considerable attention has been paid to both the genre and Holmes as one of its most prominent forefathers, hardly any attempts have been made to examine the particulars of Sherlock’s legacy. It is thus one of the central aims of this book to discover in which specific respects his descendants are similar to Holmes and in what ways they differ from him. In doing so, I intend to conduct a comparative study on the evolution and longevity of fictional private detectives in post-Holmesian British detective fiction, as the title of my book suggests. Since the in-depth analyses of fictional detective figures from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century at hand are embedded in a chronological study of the genre of British detective fiction as such, this book is further concerned with contributing to genre history by illustrating both the development of the genre in general and that of its main character in particular, which complements existing research in this field.

The quotes provided in the opening paragraph show that critics are well aware of how much Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes has influenced the portrayal of succeeding fictional investigators, including their personality, behaviour, and *modus operandi*. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, apart from acknowledging this fact, no study has focused on

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<sup>5</sup> Mattias Boström’s book was originally published in Swedish in 2013 under the title *Från Holmes till Sherlock*.

carrying out a comparative study that aims at discovering and displaying explicit examples of “family likeness” between Holmes and his descendants. Concerning previous research, there is a limited number of monographs that have briefly broached the subject by dedicating a chapter or subchapter of their comprehensive studies on various aspects of the genre to a basic and rather general typology-like discussion of the detective figure: Works such as Peter Nusser’s *Der Kriminalroman* (2009) or Heather Worthington’s *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (2011) may serve as examples here. Likewise, some of the companions listed above also include a chapter on the character of fictional investigators and their typical features. However, what all these examples lack is that they do *not* transfer the knowledge and results they have gained through the creation of a typology, or at least typology-like study, of the protagonist to a selection of sample texts and characters in order to investigate the extent to which detective figures from different periods of time not only adopt these characteristic features but also adapt them to the socio-cultural context and circumstances of their respective time.

By contrast, unlike most other examples of brief typological discussions, Charles Brownson’s *The Figure of the Detective* (2014) provides the reader with a much more comprehensive typological study of the fictional detective figure. In his work, Brownson concentrates primarily on the issue of what he refers to as cold versus warm knowledge, that is, logic and reason, on the one hand, and instinct and intuition, on the other. Focusing on this aspect, he, similar to the present book, also aims at showing the development of the genre and its main character over the last about 130 years; yet, whereas my study looks exclusively at the subgenre of classical British detective fiction, Brownson opts for a broader approach and takes into consideration other subgenres and varieties of crime fiction, such as thrillers and hard-boiled, noir, and spy fiction as well. Moreover, it is striking to notice that, apart from Charles Brownson, especially researchers engaging with feminist approaches to detective fiction appear to have been interested in conducting more detailed typological studies of fictional female investigators which they embed in a diachronic survey of the genre and its protagonist as such. Some prominent examples are Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig’s *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (1981), Kathleen G. Klein’s *The Woman Detective: Gender & Genre* (1988), and Frances A. DellaCava and Madeline H. Engel’s *Sleuths in Skirts: Analysis and Bibliography of Serialized Female Sleuths* (2002). DellaCava and Engel in particular come up with an elaborate design comprising a comprehensive list of categories to be taken into account in a comparative study of a large number of female fictional detective figures

from the U.S. Among German-speaking scholars, Brigitte Frizzoni, in her article “MordsFrauen: Detektivinnen und Täterinnen im ‘Frauenkrimi’ der 80er und 90er Jahre” (1999), draws up a concise typology of the prototypical female investigator in feminist detective fiction from German-speaking countries. Yet, in taking a feminist approach, these studies, similar to that of Charles Brownson, choose a different focus than I do.

It goes without saying that the differences in focus are also reflected in the corpus chosen for the respective purpose(s) of this study. As expounded above, the aim of this book is twofold: The first is to present an extensive overview of the development and main trends of British detective fiction in general and its protagonists in particular; the second objective is to identify characteristic features these fictional detective figures have “inherited” both from their predecessors and, most of all, from their progenitor Sherlock Holmes. Therefore, in line with the focus of this study, the present work only examines fictional investigators designed by British authors. Since it is one of my aims to reveal “family resemblances” between Sherlock Holmes and his successors, the in-depth analyses of exemplary characters include only fictional detective figures created after the first appearance of Arthur Conan Doyle’s protagonist in 1887. Moreover, this book concentrates on professional as well as amateur private investigators and hence deliberately neglects works starring any kind of police detective as main character. Last but not least, I consider only fictional investigators who have featured in at least two novels or one collection of short stories and who have thus played the lead in more than one case. As a rule, the discussions and analyses of the detective protagonists chosen for this study are based on the characters’ representation in the first volume of the novel series or, in case he or she only features in short stories, in all stories comprised in the first short story collection.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the long period of about 130 years from the creation of Sherlock Holmes to the present day that is to be covered in this study makes it impracticable to take into account every single detective novel or short story series written by a British author after 1887 and starring a professional or amateur private investigator. Consequently, for reasons of space as well as to keep this study within reasonable and manageable limits, only a select number of exemplary works can and will be discussed in more detail.

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<sup>6</sup> With regard to the short story collections, I decided to not merely concentrate on the very first story but the first collection as a whole for reasons of text length. I assumed that, concerning the number of pages and thus the space for character depictions available to the respective author, a novel-length text is roughly the equivalent of a collection of short stories.

After having read some 150 novels and short story collections that met the above criteria and were therefore shortlisted as possible candidates for an in-depth analysis, I was faced with the great challenge of reducing this large number of texts to a final corpus of 26 works and their main characters.<sup>7</sup> Despite all the care taken, the selection of texts does neither claim to be completely comprehensive nor to be fully objective since a certain degree of arbitrariness and subjectivity cannot be avoided after all. However, I tried to keep this level as low as possible. The final corpus of works and their fictional detective figures is thus based on the following selection criteria: The texts and characters chosen are evenly distributed over the time span considered in this book with at least one example from every decade between the 1890s and 2020s. In doing so, I am able to draw up a comparative study on the evolution and longevity of the fictional investigator in particular and to provide an extensive overview of the development of the genre in general. The corpus includes male and female main characters in roughly equal shares and comprises detective figures working on their own as well as detective duos and teams. Furthermore, I intentionally left out some of the more well-known examples, for instance G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple, or Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, because they have already been discussed time and again in countless monographs and essays. Instead, when I had to choose between two more or less equivalent examples, I decided in favour of the lesser-known text and character. In case a writer has authored more than one detective series and thus created more than one fictional detective protagonist, which is not at all uncommon, I added only one of the respective writers' fictional investigators to the selection of texts so that no author will be discussed twice or more. The texts and characters that did not make it into the corpus are mentioned as further examples in the introductory parts to the chapters of analysis in order to provide a more comprehensive overview of the general development of the genre and its leading character. In some instances, I decided to give an example from American crime and detective fiction, either because there were no suitable British equivalents or because they made a significant contribution to the development of the genre and are therefore worth mentioning.

In order to achieve the aims presented above, this study is divided into three broad parts. The first part consists of chapter 2 and lays the necessary theoretical basis for the extensive overview of the development of the genre as well as the character analysis striven for in this book by providing some definitions and key concepts that are of central importance for the

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, I had to leave out some older texts in my pre-selection because no edition was available to me.

understanding of the subject matter. Therefore, chapter 2.1 takes a closer look at some aspects of genre theory and pays special attention to problems and challenges that arise when trying to define literary genres and categorize literary texts into groups. In this context, approaches such as Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances play a major role. Wittgenstein suggests in his theory that the members of a family, in this case the texts attributed to a literary genre, do not have to be identical in every single respect; instead, they only need to display at least one of the many features typical of the respective genre. Moreover, this chapter also discusses the differences between crime fiction and detective fiction—a distinction that is important since the focus of this book is exclusively on the development of detective fiction—and briefly touches upon other subgenres and hybrid forms. Chapter 2.2 provides an overview of basic characteristics of the protagonist of detective fiction, that is, the fictional detective figure. After briefly exploring the literary origins of this character, this section defines and distinguishes different types of investigators—official police detectives, amateur private detectives, and professional private detectives—and highlights fundamental similarities as well as differences between these types. Finally, chapter 2.3 is devoted to issues of character analysis and theoretical approaches to the underlying concept of literary characters. Concerning character analysis, this study briefly outlines different ways and methods that authors use to present a literary figure before expounding which specific aspects and features of a fictional character are usually taken into account in a character portrayal and analysis both in literary studies in general and by scholars doing research on detective fiction and the fictional detective figure in particular. Regarding this, I first and foremost rely on the studies published by Frances A. DellaCava and Madeline H. Engel in 2002 and Peter Nusser in 2009. In relation to my book, these concepts are of the utmost significance as they form the foundation for the following analysis of selected exemplary characters and guided me in determining the categories and features to be examined in more detail. With respect to the underlying concept of characters, this chapter scrutinizes various theories and parameters that have been established in order to classify literary figures. In this respect, the most prominent model is probably still E. M. Forster's distinction between flat and round characters. The fact that quite a few critics—I take a more detailed look at David Fishelov, Matias Martínez and Michael Scheffel, Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan, Manfred Pfister, Christian N. Wenger, Baruch Hochman, and Jens Eder—have developed an expanded and/or modified version of Forster's basic concept, on the one hand, shows that there is both the desire and the necessity to analyse and categorize literary characters, but

that, on the other hand, it also depends very much on the purpose and scope of the respective study which model is the most appropriate one. Bearing in mind the objective of the present book, chapter 2.3 also considers how these concepts of literary characters have been applied to fictional detective figures over the years and, based on these findings, tries to establish a “prototype” of this character and thus set the framework and create a point of reference for the analysis of the representation and development of literary investigators.

The second part of this book comprises chapter 3 and deals with the origins of crime and detective fiction—an endeavour that is actually more complicated than it sounds because both literary genres and periods usually neither begin nor end on a specific date or year.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, taking a closer look at the evolution of these two categories of crime writing is indispensable for the following analysis and the overall aim of this study since the development of the genre can only be displayed as well as understood in full if one is aware of its prehistory.<sup>9</sup> To begin with, chapter 3.1 depicts early forms of crime writing and fiction, starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and covering a period up until the late 1830s. This particular section illustrates the significance of non- or semi-fictional texts, such as the numerous accounts of crimes and legal cases collected and published in anthologies like the *Newgate Calendars* or François Gayot de Pitaval’s *Causes célèbres et intéressantes, avec les jugemens qui les ont décidées* between the 1720s and 1740s, the role of early novels, for example by Daniel Defoe and William Godwin, the impact of the Age of Enlightenment, the era of Romanticism, or Gothic literature, the importance of fictional memoirs and pseudo-autobiographies read with pleasure in both England and France, the emergence of the so-called Newgate novels, and the formation of the first official police forces in Britain. Chapter 3.2 continues the history of the development of detective fiction and also explores in more detail how the fictional investigator takes shape between the 1840s and 1880s. In order to achieve this aim, the chapter takes a closer look at the creation of Edgar Allan Poe’s Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin and discusses what Poe’s creation has contributed to the growth of the genre and its

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<sup>8</sup> It may be argued that there are exceptions, for example when a concrete event such as a revolution ushers in a new era, but normally the emergence of literary genres or the beginning of a new epoch are prolonged processes, even in the case of concrete events that herald the start of a new era.

<sup>9</sup> As detective fiction is often considered a subgenre of crime fiction, the history and development of the two is closely intertwined. For this reason, this part of my study also takes into account early forms of crime writing and fiction that contributed to the emergence of detective fiction in the first place.

protagonist. However, despite the importance of Poe's works, this section does not at all ignore the many other influences that have had an impact on detective fiction and the figure of the detective in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: the popularity of fictionalized police casebooks and recollections, the rise of the sensation novel with the publication of works by, among others, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins as well as the significance of non-British writers such as the French author Émile Gaboriau and the American novelist Anna Katharine Green.

The third part of my study focuses on the examination of the selected sample texts and characters in chronological order and is subdivided into six chapters, each dealing with a particular period. All of these chapters follow a parallel structure: The first subchapter gives an overview of the main developments of the genre and also discusses some of the social, historical, and literary-historical factors and conditions that shaped the works and detective characters of the respective time span. The following subchapters then provide detailed analyses of the fictional investigators selected for this purpose. Apart from closely examining the characters themselves, these sections also aim to illustrate to what degree and in which respects the respective detective protagonists differ from their colleagues from previous periods.

Thus, chapter 4 begins by considering the external circumstances that contributed to and furthered the "birth" of Arthur Conan Doyle's famous fictional investigator Sherlock Holmes before conducting an in-depth analysis of the representation of Holmes in the first novella *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). In this analysis, I closely inspect various aspects of the great detective's character, social life, and methods of investigation. In view of the following chapters of analysis as well as the overall objective of the present book to detect Sherlock Holmes's descendants, the detailed character study of Doyle's great detective is of major importance as it represents a point of reference for all the subsequent fictional detective figures to be examined.

Building on these foundations, chapter 5 explores the development of British detective fiction and its protagonists in the immediate aftermath of the Sherlock Holmes stories, that is between the 1890s and the First World War. Taking into consideration the situation after Arthur Conan Doyle had his protagonist die in the depths of the Reichenbach Falls in the short story "The Final Problem" (1893), the first section of this chapter takes a closer look at how other authors of the time attempted to fill the void left by Holmes's "death." Indeed, Doyle's contemporaries created a large number of potential successors who were by no means mere copies of their literary forefather. On the contrary, as the in-depth analyses of fictional detective

figures by Arthur Morrison, Catherine Louisa Pirkis, George R. Sims, R. Austin Freeman, and Ernest Bramah show, most of Sherlock's immediate descendants differ, sometimes more, sometimes less, from their predecessor and represent themselves as a mixed bag of characters.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the Golden Age of British detective fiction, a term that refers, by and large, to the years between World Wars I and II. To start with, the first subchapter expounds the major formal and content-related developments of the genre in this highly productive era of detective writing, for instance the emergence of the detective novel, which replaced the short stories that had been predominant until then, the emphasis on plot, or the game-like nature of the texts, which culminated in the establishment of concrete rules for writing detective fiction. In this regard, particular attention is also paid to how these modifications and innovations affected the portrayal of the fictional detective figure in order to find out in which respects the Golden Age protagonists differ from their predecessors. Based on these findings and the close examination of protagonists created by Agatha Christie, Philip MacDonald, Patricia Wentworth, Gladys Mitchell, Nicholas Blake, and Edmund Crispin, this chapter further explores the question of how "golden" the Golden Age really was.

Next, chapter 7 looks at the situation of detective fiction in post-war Britain up until the 1970s. As in almost all areas of life, the Second World War and its aftermath also left their marks on detective fiction and affected the development of the genre in a decisive way. These changes, including the demand for more realism in the portrayal of the fictional investigators and their work, the growing influence of American hard-boiled detective novels on the classical British form, or the rise of tough and independent female protagonists in the wake of the second wave of feminism, are discussed in the first section of this chapter. The following subchapters then show how these innovations were implemented in practice using exemplary texts and characters written and invented by Macdonald Hastings, Dick Francis, P. D. James, and Antonia Fraser. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates that the classical British detective novel was by no means a discontinued model but continued to exist despite the profound changes after World War II.

Chapter 8 concludes the overview of developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by examining the evolution of the genre in the 1980s and 1990s and thus about one hundred years after Arthur Conan Doyle "gave birth" to his famous great detective Sherlock Holmes. To begin with, this section discusses typical features of British detective fiction from these decades, which includes both already familiar and new elements. Thus, apart from taking into consideration the focus on depth of character and realism, the

adaptation of characteristics borrowed from the American hard-boiled novel, and the challenging of traditional gender roles, the first subchapter pays particular attention to questions of diversity. Indeed, aspects such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and professional diversity loom large in detective stories of this period. This great variety is also reflected in the detailed analyses of the selected novels and their detective protagonists created by Dan Kavanagh, Ann Cleeves, Val McDermid, Mike Phillips, Martin Edwards, and Cath Staincliffe.

With chapter 9, this book enters the new millennium and takes a closer look at the most recent developments of the genre. Owing to the fact that this section is concerned with current trends in British detective fiction and thus with a period of time that has not yet come to an end, the first part of this chapter is based to a considerable extent on personal observations and reflections since, naturally, scholarly research on ongoing developments is not that advanced (yet). Tendencies which can be discerned after the turn of the millennium and which may be regarded as genre-shaping and -defining for this era in the future are the realistic depiction of the detective character, including the challenge of making the involvement of amateurs in solving criminal cases seem credible or at least possible, the steadily growing number of female protagonists placing special emphasis on the changing role(s) of women in society and discussing topics such as motherhood and the compatibility of family and career, the rise of the so-called “cosy crimes” or “cosy mysteries,” the increasing importance of regionalism in crime and detective fiction, and the emergence of amateur detective teams. These issues are further explored in the detailed analysis of texts and fictional investigators created by John Baker, Anthea Fraser, Simon Beckett, Julie Wassmer, and Richard Osman.

On the basis of these analyses, I aim at demonstrating the literary polyphiloprogenitiveness of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes. Even though my findings cannot and do not claim to be fully comprehensive and complete due to the sheer abundance of texts and fictional detective figures, I hope that they will nevertheless contribute their mite to the exploration of Sherlock Holmes’s descendants as well as of the development of British detective fiction from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## CHAPTER 2

# THEORETICAL BACKGROUND, CONCEPTS, AND DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this study, it is important to, first of all, define some terms and concepts fundamental to the understanding of the subject matter and the following analysis. Therefore, in this chapter, I will give an overview of and introduction to the most important terms and concepts as well as define the way these will be applied in the present study. The first subchapter will take a brief look at genre matters by discussing the problems arising with the definition of literary genres in general and by trying to define the categories of crime and detective fiction in particular. The second part of this chapter will provide a short overview of the different types of fictional detective figures, namely official police detectives, amateur private detectives, as well as professional private detectives. Last but not least, the third subchapter will deal with the aspects of character analysis and the concept of the characters, i.e., the question whether characters are individualized or types, complex or one-dimensional, dynamic or static, etc. First, I will take a look at methods and aspects of character analysis, that is, ways of describing and analysing literary characters. Second, with regard to the underlying concept of the characters, I will briefly discuss different theoretical models before examining more closely how this concept is implemented in the particular case of detective fiction and the fictional detective figure. In addition, I will try to compile a list of characteristics which the fictional investigator, according to a number of (early) critics and writers, was supposed to exhibit and which were considered to be inherent in a “proper” detective protagonist.

### 2.1 Genre

#### *Genre Theory*

Despite being one of the most commonly used concepts in literary studies, the definition of the literary category “genre” is far from being clear and

straightforward.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, in very simple terms, literary genres are “categories of literary texts based on similarities of form, content, or function” and/or “a group or class of works that meet a given set of expectations.”<sup>2</sup> The characteristics shared by these texts are called genre conventions.<sup>3</sup> Yet, this definition, as simple and plausible as it may seem at first sight, also poses some serious difficulties. First of all, literary genres are artificial, man-made constructs and, thus, to some degree arbitrary classifications.<sup>4</sup> Second, there is no consistency in the use of terminology and there are varying definitions so that a clear and unambiguous classification is usually not possible.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the idea of a clear-cut distinction between single genres is utopian in the first place as it is not unusual that the conventions of one genre overlap with those of another one or that one text displays features that can be assigned to more than a single genre.<sup>6</sup> These difficulties become particularly apparent in hybrid (sub-) genres, which in principle draw on the conventions of several genres and combine them to create a new form. Third, genres are socio-cultural categories, meaning they are no stand-alone entities which exist in a vacuum but have to be considered in relation to certain aspects such as, for instance, the historical context or the background of the critic or theorist; this suggests that genres can never be regarded as completely objective and indisputable concepts.<sup>7</sup> Last but not least, owing to the fact that literary genres are closely related to socio-cultural, -historical, and -political aspects and movements, it is only natural that they develop and adjust to new conditions and

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<sup>1</sup> On literary genres and genre theory as well as on problems and criticism of literary genres and genre theory, see for instance Frow, *Genre*; Gymnich, Neumann, and Nünning, eds., *Gattungstheorie und Gattungsgeschichte*; Hernadi, *Beyond Genre*; Müller-Dyes, “Gattungsfragen”; Nünning, “Kanonisierung, Periodisierung und der Konstruktcharakter von Literaturgeschichten,” especially 10–13; Voßkamp, “Gattungen”; Zymner, ed., *Handbuch Gattungstheorie*.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, “Genre,” online; Dove, *The Reader and the Detective Story*, 71.

<sup>3</sup> Neumann and Nünning, “Einleitung,” 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ascari, “Counterhistories and Prehistories,” 22; Bonheim, *Literary Systematics*, 38f; Fricke, “Aspekte der literaturwissenschaftlichen Gattungsbestimmung,” 7.

<sup>5</sup> Neumann and Nünning, “Einleitung,” 3; Suerbaum, “Text, Gattung, Intertextualität,” 85. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* (130), confirms these problems of terminology and its usage and also adds that the idea of “a single authoritative set of terms” is both impracticable and undesirable since it would put too many restrictions on the otherwise open and variable system of genres. Instead, due to “[t]he overlapping and mutability of genres” Fowler supports the use of “an ‘imprecise’ terminology.”

<sup>6</sup> Suerbaum, “Text, Gattung, Intertextualität,” 85.

<sup>7</sup> Humann, “Hybridisation,” 57; Müller-Adams, “Genderforschung,” 30; Voßkamp, “Gattungen,” 265.

situations and “[t]he *evolution* of the genres themselves is a necessary response to a changing world.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, defining elements of a particular genre may vary depending on the time period in which it is considered.<sup>9</sup> These difficulties imply that, consequently, literary genres call for a more differentiated approach.

A more elaborate definition should thus take into consideration and include the following aspects: First, genres are open systems which are constantly changing and developing.<sup>10</sup> This definition also pays attention to the fact that literary genres “can and do intermingle, hybridize, and combine” and so justifies the idea of regarding them as a continuum of manifestations and not as clearly separable entities.<sup>11</sup> To be still able to subsume these various continua of manifestations under a particular generic term, some critics suggest applying Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblances,” in which he argues that, in order to belong to one category or family, the members do not have to be absolutely identical but merely have to exhibit at least one of the various characteristic features.<sup>12</sup> One of these critics, Alastair Fowler, states that each genre and “subgenre has too much variety too elusively and mutably distributed for definition to be feasible”; thus, since a conclusive definition is practically impossible, it is much more reasonable to “specify features that are often present and felt to be characteristic, but not features that are always present.”<sup>13</sup> Following from this argument, as Fowler further emphasizes, a genre’s “individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single

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<sup>8</sup> Gregoriou, *Deviance in Contemporary Crime Fiction*, 124, original emphasis. In putting it straight, Dove, *The Reader and the Detective Story* (93), states that “[n]o genre [...] can remain permanently static.”

<sup>9</sup> Gregoriou, *Deviance in Contemporary Crime Fiction*, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Neumann and Nünning, “Einleitung,” 4; Suerbaum, “Text, Gattung, Intertextualität,” 96; Wenzel, “Gattungsgeschichte,” 231.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, “Genre,” online. See also Neumann and Nünning, “Einleitung,” 3.

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 32e. Wittgenstein explains: “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.” Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblance traces back to Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart (1753–1828), see his “Essay First: On the Beautiful,” 256–72. For a detailed discussion of Wittgenstein’s concept and its application to modern-day genre theory, see also Fishelov, “Genre Theory and Family Resemblance—Revisited.”

<sup>13</sup> Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 40. However, Fowler suggests that Wittgenstein’s theory *also* needs some refinement in order to completely fit the requirements of literary genres (42).

feature shared in common by all.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Heather Dubrow makes use of family imagery to describe the status of literary genres by explaining that “[g]enres resemble human personalities [...] in their complex relationships with those around them” and by pointing out that “[t]hey are [...] shaped both by learning from and by rebelling against their literary parents, those earlier forms from which they develop.”<sup>15</sup> So, it can be summarized that the application of the principle of family resemblances offers the possibility of coping with and doing justice to the great variety of genres and texts, their variability and hybridization.<sup>16</sup> Second, in order to properly understand, interpret, and analyse literary genres, it is necessary to take into consideration external factors, such as the historical, cultural, and social background and functions, that affect and shape a genre.<sup>17</sup> Finally, it has to be pointed out that all these defining criteria must in no case be understood “as rules that must be followed, but as guideline and opportunities”; this also includes that “[t]hey may be played with and played off of, adapted, rearranged, selectively applied, inverted, parodied, or otherwise put to use.”<sup>18</sup> After having taken into consideration all these aspects, I would thus argue that, indeed, a more complex and elaborate but also open approach to the definition of genres is necessary. Further, I would assert that it is more than difficult—if not impossible—to come up with a complete but concise definition fulfilling the requirements in one or even two sentences, as the preceding discussion has shown. The above outline should thus be understood as a suggestion for what a more elaborate and differentiated working definition could look like.

Even though a brief and succinct definition of literary genres is virtually impossible and even though a categorization of literary works is more complex than it might seem, this sort of grouping of literary texts into genres is still useful for the academic study of literature. For authors as well as for critics and readers, literary genres serve as a means of orientation; they provide a framework, are helpful to put the respective piece of writing into a larger context and, by doing so, also raise certain expectations.<sup>19</sup> David Fishelov even claims that genres are, first and foremost, “institutionalized channels of creativity, mediating and connecting [...] between author and audience,” whereas their descriptive and classificatory function is only of

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<sup>14</sup> Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Dubrow, *Genre*, 117.

<sup>16</sup> Wenzel, “Gattungstheorie und Gattungspoetik,” 234f.

<sup>17</sup> Cohen, “Genre,” online; Wenzel, “Gattung, literarische,” 230.

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, “Genre,” online.

<sup>19</sup> Culler, *Literary Theory*, 72; Fishelov, “The Birth of a Genre,” 54; Suerbaum, “Text, Gattung, Intertextualität,” 84.

secondary importance.<sup>20</sup> All in all, it can be concluded that even though genres are to some degree arbitrary and ambiguous constructs, it is nonetheless, up to a certain degree, useful to make some sort of categorization in order to provide a general overview as well as to serve as a means of reference and orientation for both writers and reader. Yet, at the same time, both parties have to keep in mind that genres are never absolute but flexible guidelines.

### *Crime Fiction and Crime Novels and Stories*

Based on the general understanding of literary genres provided in the discussion on genre theory above and bearing in mind the problems that usually arise during the process of defining a particular genre, the following paragraphs will identify characteristic elements of crime fiction in order to distinguish it from related (sub-) genres. Regarding the difficulties that come along with the attempt to establish a clear definition of crime fiction, Julian Symons explains: “That a line should be drawn is a matter of common sense, but its precise placing is a matter of individual taste.”<sup>21</sup> The observation that crime fiction is actually “something notoriously hard to embrace in any one definition” does not simplify matters—quite the reverse.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is not at all surprising that there exist differing and even contradictory definitions and an inconsistent use of terminology.<sup>23</sup> This is due to the fact that, firstly, the genre of crime fiction is comparatively young and evolved from various earlier forms leaving their marks on it, and, secondly, that it is rather open to hybridization and amalgamation with other genres.<sup>24</sup> The assumption that “[c]rime and detective fiction [and other

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<sup>20</sup> Fishelov, “The Birth of a Genre,” 54.

<sup>21</sup> Symons, *Bloody Murder*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Keating, “Introduction,” 7. Similarly, Humann, “Hybridisation” (58), describes crime fiction as a very “elastic literary form,” Gulddal, King, and Rolls, “Introduction” (1), confirm that “crime fiction, far from being static and staid, must be seen as a genre constantly violating its own boundaries,” and Matzke and Mühleisen, “Postcolonial Postmortems” (2), observe: “The boundaries of the genre have become fuzzier than ever, stretching over a wide range of registers, themes and styles, from pulp fiction to highly literary novels with elements of crime, from cosy mysteries with a sense of closure to fragmented narratives focusing on racial tensions, gender conflicts or the morals of violence.”

<sup>23</sup> On inconsistencies in terminology, see Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Kniesche, *Einführung in den Kriminalroman*, 8. Gulddal and King, “Genre” (16), argue that crime fiction is a genre “in flux where mutation, contamination and innovation take precedence over the purity of canonical fiction” and thus have to be treated as such in literary discussions. Consequently, they suggest “[a] mobile

related (sub-) genres] have always displayed strong tendencies toward both fission and fusion” and are therefore sometimes hard to grasp and difficult to distinguish from each other further underlines this idea.<sup>25</sup> As a result, varying terms, such as crime fiction/novel/story, detective fiction, mystery story, thriller, murder fiction, whodunnit, hard-boiled, and police procedural are used; some of these terms are applied synonymously by one group of critics but not by another, whereas others employ the same term for different subgenres or varieties.

To begin with, the simplest and most straightforward definition of crime fiction would be to interpret it as a fictional account dealing with crime.<sup>26</sup> Yet, some critics have objected that this very broad definition makes matters rather more difficult than easier since it would then, for instance, also include Biblical texts and ancient Greek works as well as English Renaissance plays—all of them often containing a considerable amount of crime.<sup>27</sup> Crime as well as people’s fascination with crime, and the representation of crime in writing or even oral traditions are presumably as old as time. However, these early writings cannot yet be defined as belonging to the genre of crime or even detective fiction since they lack some of the constitutive generic conventions.<sup>28</sup> So, for instance, although these writings may contain figures that participate in the investigation and detection of a crime, the solution to the mystery is often found by mere

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account of genre” in order to underline “the experimental and transgressive aspects of crime fiction” as well as “the dynamism of the genre in a constant tension between the affirmation and negation of genre norms” (17).

<sup>25</sup> Rzepka, “Introduction,” 6f.

<sup>26</sup> Gulddal and King, “Genre” (18), point out that “the question that is often raised – what is crime fiction? – should perhaps be reframed as, what is Western crime fiction?” This distinction may indeed be useful when dealing with crime fiction in general; yet, since my study concentrates on British crime and especially detective fiction, this terminological specification is not necessary in the present work.

<sup>27</sup> For scholars objecting to this broad definition, see for instance Rzepka, “Introduction,” 1; Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, xi. In contrast, the most prominent advocate of this idea of a broad understanding of the genre is Dorothy L. Sayers, who, in “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” argues that stories of the Old Testament and ancient Greek writings could be referred to as detective stories. Another proponent of this idea is Ascari, “Counterhistories and Prehistories” (28), who mentions William Shakespeare’s “*Hamlet* (c. 1600) as an early manifestation of detective fiction” and its protagonist “as a proto-detective.”

<sup>28</sup> On further aspects of this discussion, see also Becker and Buchloh, *Der Detektivroman*, 7f; Kawan, “Holmes, Marlowe, Bond & Co.,” 661; Kniesche, *Einführung in den Kriminalroman*, 51; Krieg, *Auf Spurensuche*, 11; Reilly, “History of Crime and Mystery Writing,” 211; Suerbaum, *Krimi*, 30.

accident since it is not of prime interest.<sup>29</sup> This is often closely related to the fact that these narrations concentrate much more on the adventure aspect than on the aspect of investigation and detection.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the crimes committed in these writings are mainly “sins or transgressions against a suprahuman order,” which, as a result, considerably changes the meaning of the story.<sup>31</sup> Reginald Hill sums up this discussion by stating:

Crime has featured in literature since Cain and Abel but this does not mean there has to be a literature of crime and still less crime fiction in the contemporary sense. This is a relatively recent phenomenon and could not begin to exist till society had made a significant lurch in the direction of the modern, which is to say when it started to be scientific rather than superstitious, bourgeois rather than aristocratic, urban rather than pastoral, and capitalist rather than Christian. Such a direction was becoming clear early in the eighteenth century [...].<sup>32</sup>

Hill points out that, in order to classify a text as crime fiction, it needs more than the mere presence of a crime as such.<sup>33</sup> This inevitably raises the question of what a text needs to be perceived as a work of crime fiction. Herbert Rauter, for example, suggests that it might be more reasonable to understand crime not merely in the truest sense of the word but also in the sense of criminology in order to narrow down the field and to more clearly define its boundaries—as far as this is possible.<sup>34</sup> In the present study, I will take into account Rauter’s approach and understand the term “crime fiction” as a generic term for a number of subgenres, among them detective fiction, that concentrate on crime and criminology.<sup>35</sup> This understanding implies that the mere appearance of crime, such as in Biblical texts, ancient Greek works, or English Renaissance plays, is not sufficient; much more, crime and criminology have to be the “*raison d’être*” for texts to be assigned to this genre.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, as the term “fiction” suggests, the texts attributed to

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<sup>29</sup> Hügel, “Detektiv,” 153.

<sup>30</sup> Sussex, *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, 11f.

<sup>32</sup> Hill, “A Pre-History,” 20.

<sup>33</sup> Other critics, such as for example Kniesche, *Einführung in den Kriminalroman* (7), share Hill’s opinion.

<sup>34</sup> Rauter, “Zum englischen und amerikanischen Detektivroman,” 230.

<sup>35</sup> See also Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (xi), who proposes the term “criminography” as an alternative. Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (3f), applies the term “crime fiction” “as the label for the genre as a whole, as well as for the large sub-genre of ‘detective-less’, generally transgressor-centred crime novels” discussed in the following paragraph.

<sup>36</sup> Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, xi, original emphasis.

the genre of crime fiction should be fictional or, at least, semi-fictional.<sup>37</sup> As a collective term that comprises fictional as well as non-fictional texts, the term “crime writing” may be a more appropriate choice.<sup>38</sup>

More recently, critics have also come up with another category, the crime novel or crime story, which is usually regarded as another subgenre of crime fiction.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to detective fiction, which deals with the detection and clearance of a crime or mystery by an investigator, crime novels and stories focus on the story of the crime, the criminals, and their motivation for having committed an offence against the law.<sup>40</sup> In the aftermath of the Second World War and still affected by its atrocities, many writers tended to turn away from the analytical search for tangible evidence and logical explanations—the illusion of rationality and justice had been shattered during the horrors of war; instead, they paid attention to the human and social dimensions of crime, and thus in particular to the character and characterization of the criminal, which is one of the main characteristics of the crime novel or story.<sup>41</sup> Following this understanding, also early texts dealing with crime that were produced before the detective figure made its appearance on the literary stage might be classified as crime novels or stories as they focus on criminals and their misdeeds.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to this, some scholars, such as Helmut Heißenbüttel, argue that it is both unnecessary and impossible to make a proper distinction between, on the one hand, crime novels and stories and, on the other hand, detective fiction since there are too many similarities and overlaps between the two

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<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (xi), also includes non-fictional texts in her definition of “crime fiction” or “criminography.”

<sup>38</sup> On the use and usefulness of the term “crime writing,” see Rzepka, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>39</sup> Symons, *Bloody Murder* (173–75), argues that the crime novel emerged from the detective story and compares the main characteristics of the two forms to support his line of argumentation.

<sup>40</sup> Alewyn, “Anatomie des Detektivromans,” 364; Hilfer, *The Crime Novel*; Rauter, “Zum englischen und amerikanischen Detektivroman,” 230; Knight, *Crime Fiction since 1800*, 221; Symons, “Crime Novel,” 102. Rauter mentions, for instance, *Crime and Punishment* (1866) by Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) as one of the most well-known crime novels. Based on this distinction between crime novels and stories and detective fiction, Gerber, “Verbrechensdichtung und Kriminalroman” (75f), argues that some of Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories featuring Sherlock Holmes do actually not fulfil any of the characteristics that, according to Alewyn in “Ursprung des Detektivromans,” define a detective story. As a consequence, Gerber continues his argumentation, these stories could be regarded and read as crime stories as well.

<sup>41</sup> Aird, “Characterization,” 61; Symons, “Crime Novel,” 102.

<sup>42</sup> For more information on early crime stories, see also chapter 3.1.

categories so that a clear and unambiguous differentiation is impossible.<sup>43</sup> However, by taking into consideration and adopting the understanding of the terms “crime novel” and “crime story” discussed above, I disagree with Heißenbüttel’s idea. Based on the discussion of genres and genre theory in the previous subsection and owing to the circumstance that genres and subgenres are never clear-cut categories but may very well share common features, I would speak out in favour of a distinction between detective fiction and crime novel and stories. Especially the fact that crime novels or stories highlight the criminal, whereas detective fiction focuses on the detective figure as main character emphasizes that the differences outweigh the similarities.

The above debate has shown that, as with the definition of the main category of “crime fiction,” there are also difficulties regarding the determination and designation of its various subgenres. The most commonly accepted subdivision in the English tradition of crime fiction is that into three main subgenres, namely detective fiction, thriller, and hard-boiled fiction.<sup>44</sup> It may be justifiable to regard forms such as the police procedural as detective fiction.<sup>45</sup> But what about other variants usually attributed to the generic term of crime fiction such as the above-mentioned crime novels and stories? If they were regarded as a subgenre of crime fiction, as they are by some critics, should they not join the ranks of detective fiction, thriller, and hard-boiled? In trying to take into account these questions, Peter B. Messent suggests an alternative division into subgenres and distinguishes between detective fiction, hard-boiled, police procedurals, and what he calls “transgressor narratives.”<sup>46</sup> By the use of this broadly defined term, Messent is able to subsume several forms of writing under one category and in this manner also assigns the crime novel a place in this complex genre system.

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<sup>43</sup> Heißenbüttel, “Spielregeln des Kriminalromans,” 113.

<sup>44</sup> Kniesche, *Einführung in den Kriminalroman*, 12f; Nünning, “Britische und amerikanische Kriminalromane,” 6–11. For more information on the thriller, see for instance Bloom and Reilly, “Thriller,” 460–61; Bradford, *Crime Fiction*, 105–12; Brownson, *The Figure of the Detective*, 119–27; Glover, “The Thriller,” 135–53; Palmer, “The Thriller,” 61–64; Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 105–21. For further details on the hard-boiled, see for example Brownson, *The Figure of the Detective*, 96–112; Burns, “Hard-Boiled Fiction,” 199–201; Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 66–111; Messent, *The Crime Fiction Handbook*, 34–40; Pepper, “The ‘Hard-Boiled’ Genre,” 140–51; Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 55–84.

<sup>45</sup> For more information on the police novel or procedural, see for instance Messent, *The Crime Fiction Handbook*, 41–50; Messent, “The Police Novel,” 175–86; Reilly, “Police Procedural,” 342–43; Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 85–104.

<sup>46</sup> Messent, *The Crime Fiction Handbook*, 27–59.