

## Murders on the Campus

### [Review<sup>1</sup> of *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel: A Study in Genre* by Elżbieta Perkowska-Gawlik (Peter Lang, 2021)]

In the introduction to her book-length study of a popular genre, Elżbieta Perkowska-Gawlik claims that reading detective fiction “about people of your own kind” is simply “irresistible,”<sup>2</sup> a fact that seems to at least partially explain the rising popularity of the kind of crime writing her study is devoted to. Subtitled *A Study in Genre*, it focuses on a very particular type of crime fiction – crime novels set in academia, where both the victims and the culprits are faculty, librarians, and possibly students at universities’ (usually literature) departments. The crimes committed invariably have something to do with the specific milieu in which they occur. Perkowska-Gawlik labels these novels as academic mysteries, a term she explains well and justifies throughout her study. She aims to “pinpoint and delineate characteristic generic features of the academic mystery novel.”<sup>3</sup> To achieve her goal, she approaches academic mysteries from several theoretical points of view, situating them within three different contexts. Divided into three main chapters, the book discusses academic mysteries as a part of the detective fiction tradition, as a form of the campus novel, and as meta-educational fiction.

The first chapter opens with an informed overview of classical detective fiction to set the framework for further discussion. Typically lacking explicit violence and extensive gore, most academic mystery novels, as Perkowska-Gawlik states, can be classified as the traditional cozy, echoing the formula of the classical whodunit popular in the Golden Age of crime fiction. Academic mystery also follows this kind of detective fiction in employing an amateur sleuth, usually an academic, and in presenting the crime as a puzzle often enveloped in “the intricately woven net of other conundrums, be it of a criminal, ethical or social nature.”<sup>4</sup> The author also draws attention to parallels between the detective novel and the novel of manners, especially in how characters are constructed and function in the narrative. Nevertheless, the first chapter’s core highlights the metafictional dimension of both classical detective fiction and academic mystery.

Perkowska-Gawlik thoroughly explains the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of metafiction before she moves on to the analysis of metafictional traces in Christine Poulson’s novel *Murder is Academic* (2002). Referring to Agatha Christie’s *The Body in the Library* as a form of pretext, she uncovers the rich and complex metafictional playfulness of Poulson’s literary debut. “Numerous references to other literary texts permeate” the novel *Murder is Academic*, and Perkowska-Gawlik persuasively shows how they operate in the narrative structure, concluding that “some bring to the surface the infamous ailment of both writers and academics known as writer’s block, others contribute to [...] the suspense, still others refer to plagiarism, emphasizing

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- 1 This review was supported by the Czech Science Foundation project GA 19-02634S “Place and Community in Contemporary Anglophone Crime Fiction.”
  - 2 Elżbieta Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel: A Study in Genre* (Peter Lang, 2021), 7.
  - 3 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 16.
  - 4 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 31.

a potentially criminal link between reading and writing.”<sup>5</sup> The analysis of *Murder is Academic* further serves as a springboard for a fresh take on the debate about the role of the detective story author and its reader and the parallels between writing/narrating, reading, interpreting, and detection, parallels which somewhat blur the otherwise clear dividing line between writer and reader. She then turns her attention to how academics feature as narrative characters. Employing James Phelan’s rhetorical model of literary characters, she analyzes Joanne Dobson’s *The Raven and the Nightingale* (1999), an academic mystery in which plagiarism and “an obsessive desire for academic recognition”<sup>6</sup> form essential themes and the role of a literary scholar as an amateur sleuth is again foregrounded. She concludes:

While the amateur detectives in cozy mysteries metafictionally evaluate the story of the crime [...] praising themselves for their ability to *read* and thus reconstruct the story of the crime, their counterparts in academic mysteries, in an equally metafictional manner, compare their investigative methods to those they know from other works of fiction or their own scholarly research.<sup>7</sup>

The second and longest chapter discusses academic mystery fiction in the context of the campus novel (or academic fiction) because there is an “undeniable connection”<sup>8</sup> between the two in their deep interest in academia. Delineating the genre of academic fiction, the chapter further introduces the concept of intertextuality as first coined by Julia Kristeva and elaborated by Gérard Genette, and Foucault’s characteristics of heterotopias as useful means for understanding the presentation of the specific environment of academia in both the campus novel and academic mystery novels. Edith Skom’s *The Mark Twain Murders* (1989), Amanda Cross’s *Death is a Tenured Position* (1981), and Gail Bowen’s *Burying Angel* (2000) are scrutinized both as crime fiction and as novels reflecting broader socio-economic situation as well as the problematic and often unequal position of female academics. By selecting novels set in different decades, the analysis also brings interesting comparisons of how the position of female scholars changed over time. To Perkowska-Gawlik, this again shows the academic mystery’s connection to the novel of manners and its ability to reflect contemporary historical and sociological context. In this respect, her analyses are valuable as crime fiction’s socio-economic aspects are still under-researched.<sup>9</sup> Because “the instances of inequity and inequality in academia reported by female scholars” are caused by people and, therefore, can be altered by people, Perkowska-Gawlik concludes that “academic mystery novels which pinpoint the problems faced by women academics may be considered a voice drawing attention to the differences experienced by male and female scholars in their university career paths.”<sup>10</sup>

The book’s last chapter is devoted to the educational dimension inherent in academic mystery. Explaining the notions of andragogy and engaged pedagogy, Perkowska-Gawlik analyzes the educational potential in Norman N. Holland’s *Death in a Delphi Seminar* (1995), Catherine Shaw’s *The Three-Body Problem* (2004), and Marshal Jevons’s *The Fatal Equilibrium* (1985). These

5 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 51.

6 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 77.

7 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 97. The emphasis in the original.

8 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 104.

9 Julie H. Kim, ed., *Class and Culture in Crime Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 4.

10 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 191.

novels address new tertiary teaching methods, the history of mathematics, and microeconomics, respectively, behind the whodunnit “scaffolding.”<sup>11</sup> Her analysis confirms Michael O’Hear and Richard Ramsey’s assertion that crime fiction indeed has a didactic potential: “Detective stories [are] fundamentally suitable for didactic purposes. Their protagonists are after all students bent on learning the truth, and the genre has indeed been used to enlighten.”<sup>12</sup>

Perkowska-Gawlik rightly states that academic mysteries as a subgenre of crime fiction can introduce their readers (namely university students) to a variety of problems specific to academia, such as “gender inequalities in academia typically perceived as a highly feminized workplace,” to “implicit deprecation of teaching resulting from the overvaluation of publishing, preferably in high impact journals,” or to “far-reaching and catastrophic consequences of plagiarism.”<sup>13</sup>

The conclusion of her book thus provides a well-grounded justification for the inclusion of academic mysteries into university (not only) literature course syllabi. She also proves how rich and complex material individual mysteries provide, both for literary interpretations and as generally thought-provoking sources.

Elżbieta Perkowska-Gawlik’s book *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel: A Study in Genre* is a valuable contribution to the recently flourishing academic debate on the popular genre of crime fiction. Deeply informed by various critical theories and methodologies, it shows how a variety of critical approaches can be utilized in viewing crime novels situated in academia and how they can enhance understanding of both the individual texts and the academic mystery as a crime fiction subgenre. The book will undoubtedly be appreciated by scholars interested in crime fiction and any literary scholar whose workplace is academia. Although extensively theoretical, it will be equally attractive to literature students and instrumental to them because it demonstrates how critical discourse can be applied not only to the so-called canonical works of literature but to popular mysteries as well, with profound and inspiring results.

Šárka Bubíková  
University of Pardubice

11 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 246.

12 Michael O’Hear, and Richard Ramsey, “The Detective as Teacher: Didacticism in Detective Fiction,” *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 21, no. 2 (2000): 95.

13 Perkowska-Gawlik, *The Contemporary Academic Mystery Novel*, 246.



