

BOOK REVIEW

The Place It Was Done: Location and Community in Contemporary American and British Crime Fiction

Šárka Bubíková and Olga Roebuck, Jefferson: McFarland, 2023, pp. 185

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, discussions of space and place have gradually taken centre stage in humanities and social sciences. Fuelled by the writings of French thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau, scholars across various disciplines have embraced this spatial turn. Discussions of space and place continue to feature prominently in literary studies today. Literary scholars draw on knowledge and theories from geography, physics, sociology, or cultural studies to get a better understanding of the significance of space, location, mapping, and mobility in literary texts, and of the interconnection of fictional locations and movements with those in the real world. *The Place It Was Done: Location and Community in Contemporary American and British Crime Fiction* by Šárka Bubíková and Olga Roebuck represents a noteworthy contribution to this debate.

Bubíková and Roebuck are literary scholars and lecturers at the University of Pardubice. While Bubíková is an expert on American literature, Roebuck specialises in British fiction. In *The Place It Was Done* they combine their expertise to produce a volume that analyses and contrasts the various roles place plays in contemporary crime fiction written on both sides of the Atlantic. Crime fiction scholars agree that setting is one of the central elements of any detective novel. In *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* John G. Cawelti lists setting as one of the three essential elements of the detective formula. However, Bubíková and Roebuck understand place in crime fiction as more than mere setting against which the plot unfolds. Instead, they argue that in contemporary crime fiction place is depicted as a complex environment, interesting in its own right, and not simply as a backdrop to action or a repository of clues. Moreover, they see depictions of place as crucial to the continuing success of the genre, claiming that place and community represent “key dynamic elements contributing to the ‘propagation and flexibility’ of crime fiction” (p. 5). Thirdly, the two authors emphasise that place always entails a combination of physical and social elements, and in their analysis, they pay attention to the relationships between locations and the characters or communities that inhabit them. Finally, throughout the book the authors highlight that the potential of descriptions of particular localities to provide verisimilitude lends itself perfectly to the tendency towards realism in contemporary crime fiction.

In the introduction to the volume, Bubíková and Roebuck briefly sketch out these theses, however, as they do not wish “to burden [their] readers with theoretical discussions” (p. 6), this section of the book is brief, and the two authors move right on to the three analytical chapters. Each of these deals with one of three possible settings for crime novels: the city, the country, and the wilderness. The first chapter is the most extensive, reflecting the predominance of urban settings within the genre. This chapter is symmetrically divided into two parts: the first discusses urban environments in works by British authors, while the second is devoted to their American counterparts. The chapter offers analyses of novels by multiple authors including Robert Galbraith, Ian Rankin, or Sara Paretsky, and touches on issues of boundaries, difference, class (in the British section) and race (in the American section),

mobility, history, and memory. The second, much slimmer chapter, discusses rural settings as employed by contemporary crime writers, highlighting that while some of these authors build upon the pastoral tradition, which depicts the country as a site of moral innocence and authentic community, others reject this vision, offering a more sober portrayal of the country as a place that must contend with many of the same global problems that plague the contemporary city. The third chapter is arguably the most interesting of the three, as wilderness as a setting of crime fiction is often overlooked in theoretical discussions, with many critics solely focusing on the urban/rural dichotomy. Bubíková and Roebuck do a good job of highlighting the significance of wilderness as a setting in both American and British crime fiction, while also problematising the concept of wilderness itself by exposing its Eurocentric bias as well as its socially constructed character. They also note the environmental focus of most contemporary crime fiction set in the wilderness, which presents a contrast to traditional depictions in which wilderness is rendered as an abstract symbolic entity rather than a physical place.

The Place It Was Done is an immensely readable, informative book. Its two authors analyse an eclectic mix of crime novels and manage to find striking parallels but also significant differences between them, testifying to the variety present within the genre today. The individual sections of the book offer well-thought-out discussions of a wide range of topics from the dominance of realism in the genre to the environmentalist tendency in some of the novels. However, the breadth of the debate in the book naturally detracts from the depth. The volume is constructed as a survey of the various trends and tendencies within the genre rather than as a detailed analysis. What I also found lacking were transitional sections between individual chapters: the chapters often ended rather abruptly, and the different points raised throughout were not tied together. Similarly, there was no concluding chapter at the end of the book that would combine all the various findings into a unified message.

Overall, however, I found the book to be an inspiring read. It offered a comprehensive overview of the diverse functions place can play in contemporary detective fiction. As such it might serve as an excellent starting point from which to embark on the study of the role of place in literature. Therefore, *The Place It Was Done* might prove a great resource not only for literary scholars, but also for students who wish to acquire a deeper understanding of the crime fiction genre.

References

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