CHAPTER 8
WORLD LITERATURE

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Crime fiction is arguably the most internationalised genre of popular literature; its basic conventions are recognisable across time, space and media, but also rich in local variations and cultural contexts. This confluence of transnational forms and local specificity makes crime fiction a preeminent vehicle for exploring the mobility of literary genres, cultural practices and social values across national borders. Crime fiction, therefore, is a pertinent example of world literature, a literary phenomenon, or a mode of reading, which has received increasing attention in twenty-first-century literary studies.

In this chapter, I shall discuss how a world literature approach may set askew the national horizon that has dominated crime fiction studies. Drawing on seminal critical studies by David Damrosch and Franco Moretti, I shall consider attempts to apply these perspectives to the study of crime fiction, including two notable publications with identical titles: Stewart King’s article “Crime fiction as world literature” (2014) and the essay collection Crime Fiction as World Literature (2017), edited by Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch and Theo D’haen. Finally, I shall discuss the Swedish writer Henning Mankell’s Den vita lejoninnan (1993) [The White Lioness, 1998] as an example of how a world literature perspective may help us read crime fiction across borders.

Though crime fiction has a long history of cross-cultural exchanges, most studies have been concerned with individual national traditions. Particularly in the US and UK, scholars have rarely engaged with crime fiction beyond the Anglophone world, focusing instead on an exclusive canon of “foundational” works from Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle’s “original” detective stories to Agatha Christie’s trademark British whodunit and Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler’s American hardboiled crime novels. While the dominant presence of Anglo-American crime fiction studies has tended to “universalise” crime fiction in English, studies of crime fiction from outside the English-speaking world have tended to construct their own national canons following the model of the Anglo-American “centre”. Traditionally, such studies have noted how foreign “originals” were first translated, then imitated by local writers until, finally, writers began to add nation-specific content, which then helped shape unique national traditions. A representative example is Kerstin Bergman’s recent history of Swedish crime fiction. Bergman notes that the first generation of Swedish crime writers in the early twentieth century often used Anglo-American pen names and took Sherlock Holmes as the model for their detectives. In the 1940s, Stieg Treter added local colour to the British whodunit in his Stockholm mysteries, before Mai Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö’s police novels in the 1960s and 1970s “invented” the socio-critical police procedural, which would take root in Sweden, across Scandinavia and beyond (2014: 14-15).

The foregrounding of national frameworks and literary scholarship’s preoccupation with literary evolution may go some way towards explaining the dynamics that have shaped crime fiction as a locally embedded genre with a global reach. However, such a perspective might also overlook more dialogic, unpredictable and border-crossing dynamics, which have become all the more evident in a contemporary transnational marketplace for crime fiction.

Broadening the canon of crime fiction to include a wider range of languages, locations and cultures is not only an issue of inclusivity. We ignore the wider world of crime fiction at the peril of missing a significant trait of the genre: its intrinsic transnational origins, modes of circulation and attachments. According to Andrew Pepper, “a focus just on the relationship
between English and American archetypes overlooks the extent to which the production and circulation of crime fiction has always been a transnational phenomenon” (2016: 7).

Recently, crime fiction scholarship has ventured out into the wider world, bringing the traditional American and European centres into closer proximity with other locations. In addition to offering discussions of works from central crime fiction traditions, Pepper and Schmid’s *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction: A World of Crime* (2016) demonstrates the global reach of the genre by making inroads into less well-known locations such as Mexico, Japan and Sweden. A broader selection of traditions allows this collection to explore how crime fiction presents multiple ways in which the central role of the state mediates between the local and the global, and how crime fiction as a genre presents diverse narrative strategies for engaging with the sociopolitical realities of unequal globalisation.

While much can be gained from attending to the global networks through which crime fiction is produced and circulated, generic attachments, intertextual references, linguistic expression, plot and the cultural content of crime narratives (settings, criminal behaviour, the experiences of detectives, etc.) have always crossed borders even when crime narratives appear most local. Doyle’s very “British” detective stories, to use an obvious example, took inspiration from traditions and writers from the United States to New Zealand. His stories have spread throughout the world via periodical presses, translations, international and locally produced TV and film adaptations. Sherlock Holmes’s Victorian London was itself intricately connected to faraway places, including those of the British Empire, where Doyle’s stories have since been translated, adapted and rewritten to reflect new local contexts. A world literature perspective would consider such transnational networks intrinsic to our understanding of Holmes’s literary world and its vast appeal to readers in multiple locations. The stories’ international circulation through translations is not only evidence of how different cultures receive and produce their own versions of the famous detective stories, but also of how such new transnational perspectives allow us to see aspects of the original Holmes stories that have previously been overlooked.

**Crime Fiction is World Literature in an Entangled World**

In his seminal article “Crime fiction as world literature”, Stewart King calls for a “denationalization” of crime fiction studies. I shall return to how King describes what such a perspective might entail, but first it must be noted that while world literature is a term with a long history – often associated with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the early nineteenth century – it re-entered critical debates around the turn of the millennium as a response to an already ongoing globalisation of literary scholarship and education as well as of the literary field itself. As a contemporary critical perspective on “literature from around the world”, however, world literature has not been accepted without contention. The debate largely hinges on whether a world literature perspective in practice offers an inclusive cosmopolitan approach to the study of literature, as a way to break down the exclusive canon of Western-European literature. To some, a global view of literature may result in an unfortunate homogenisation of a rich diversity of literatures from around the world. By appropriating distinct foreign-language literatures in selective anthologies and translations into “global English”, a world literature perspective may, against its cosmopolitan ideals, simply reproduce Anglo-American cultural hegemonies. In other words, the current debate around world literature reveals that a difference in opinion persists about what denationalisation entails in a deeply unequal and mostly “untranslated” world.

King shares concerns with cosmopolitan writers of the nineteenth century such as Goethe who insisted that a national perspective on literature is too narrow and urged his contemporaries to further the course of a universal world literature. The literary field today certainly is more
internationalised than it was at any time before the 1970s, when the publishing business, as Eva Hemmungs Wirtén (2009) explains, became dominated by multinational publishing conglomerates, international book fairs and a growing trade in translation rights. However, inequalities in access and dissemination still persist between global and regional publishing centres and their peripheries. Even the most successfully globalised genre fiction enters transnational circulation in a field where “almost 50 percent of all translations are made from English into various languages, but only 6 percent of all translations are into English” (Wirtén 2009: 400). World literature today, then, presents us with a less optimistic cosmopolitan vision of the future than Goethe envisioned. It is, perhaps, better perceived as an entangled economic, cultural, aesthetic and, therefore, methodological problem for literary scholarship rather than simply an intrinsic literary trait that somehow belongs to a universal canon of influential works.

A world literature approach necessarily considers such multiple entanglements in a transnational perspective. If we follow Damrosch’s basic definition of world literature as literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, then we should consider how these works circulate, and what economic or cultural obstacles they have to overcome (2003: 4). A world literature approach to crime fiction may productively consider the networks of the book trade and wider media market that propel the books to reach audiences beyond the culture of origin (Steiner 2014: 316). What, for instance, enabled Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy, written in a minor language, to become one of the most globally successful publishing phenomena in the first decades of the twenty-first century?

Several chapters in Crime Fiction as World Literature take the book trade as a starting point for exploring how crime narratives circulate outside their culture of origin. Karl Berglund proposes that Larsson’s success must be viewed in connection with the importance of book fairs, the rise of literary agents and their ability to sell Larsson’s appropriation of a globally familiar genre infused with exotic Swedish locations (2017: 84). On the latter point, Jean Anderson, Carolina Miranda and Barbara Pezzotti have argued that crime fiction trades in such “exotic environments”, which bring the genre “into close proximity to travel writing”, revealing a genuine interest in other cultures or, perhaps, a less cosmopolitan “desire for a kind of cultural Disneyland” (3).

The ability of contemporary crime writing to enter into transnational circulation might in some cases have less to do with the thrill of the investigation and more to do with desired local settings and cultural representations. The growing interest in crime fiction from around the world may, therefore, eventually lead away from a cosmopolitan world literature perspective to a consideration of crime fiction as nothing more than a pertinent example of “global literature”, propelled by market forces that capitalise on the exposure, management and exploitation of exotically different local expressions.

Such reflections on the obstacles and opportunities for the circulation of crime stories are in tune with King’s understanding of a world literature perspective, which entails “a shift from studying the production of crime fiction to its consumption. That is, a shift from writers to readers” (13) – with the caveat, I would add, that consumer behaviour in the global marketplace for crime fiction is intricately entangled with the conditions and modes of production that drive the book trade. According to King, a “world-literature approach could profitably study the reception of particular novels in different parts of the world” (16).

It is not only contemporary crime fiction that can fruitfully be viewed from the perspective of its impact on readers and writers around the world. With this perspective we can also study how classic texts have travelled, found readers and new meanings along existing routes of trade and empire. A pertinent example is offered by Damrosch, who explores Holmes’s global connections in the exiled Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu’s widely acclaimed “Holmes novel” The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes (1999). Damrosch argues for considering Norbu’s crime novel an example of Tibetan world literature by emphasising the author’s use of Doyle’s global
model of detective fiction as a frame, his creative use of linguistic and cultural hybridisation, and the novel’s indebtedness to local Tibetan history and religion. Norbu’s hybrid adaptation or rewriting of Doyle’s Holmes produces thereby a new, localised version imbued with an anti-imperialist and humanist purpose, which, Damrosch argues, is already encoded, but rarely seen by Western readers, in the “original” Holmes tales themselves (Damrosch 2017).

A world literature perspective, therefore, finds literary value in translated and transformed texts, traditionally held to be corrupted versions of original national literatures. This is a keystone in Damrosch’s understanding of world literature as literature that “gains in translation”, which points to the added and changing meanings gained when a work of literature travels beyond its country and language of origin (2003: 281).

Crime Fiction is World Literature That Gains by Generic Reproducibility
Franco Moretti is arguably the literary scholar who has presented the most obvious, but also controversial, method for the study of crime fiction as world literature. Usually associated with “distant reading” (considering large samples of literary works studied through selections of shared devices, as opposed to more traditional, detailed “close reading” of fewer texts), Moretti’s studies of how novels have spread over time and geographical space to form a “literary world system” place genre at the very centre of inquiry (2000: 57). Moretti’s mapping of how genre devices travel across national traditions is one way in which we may read crime fiction from a “denationalized” perspective. A “distant reading” method would allow us to consider a much wider sample of crime fictions from around the world, thereby providing us with “insights into the global reach of the genre” (King 2014: 10).

Paradoxically, the most significant aspect of crime fiction, which until relatively recently made it a marginalised form within literary studies, turns out to be its most suggestive asset if viewed from Moretti’s world literature perspective – that is, the reproducibility of conventional forms across languages and periods (King 2014: 15). In Moretti’s distant view of the diffusion of the modern novel, waves of foreign forms interfere with the rooted tree-like structures of national traditions, a process which adds new dimensions to the global form of the novel itself (2000: 67). When perceiving world literature from a more distant view on the scale of genre, Moretti holds, literary texts are “always a compromise between foreign form and local materials” (60). Viewing the history of crime fiction from this perspective could lead us to explore how, for instance, the hardboiled detective novel has evolved from Chandler’s mean streets of Los Angeles to Ian Rankin’s Edinburgh or Jo Nesbo’s Oslo, and how the “foreign form” of the hardboiled genre has interfered with the “local materials” of their different national settings and traditions.

In a similar vein, King has pointed out that crime fiction scholars could practise a world literature approach by analysing “the use of a particular literary device across time and place” (15). King suggests one could productively study the so-called “locked-room mystery”, which is what David Schmid has attempted. Schmid’s discussion of the diffusion of this spatial genre device begins with the locked room as it represents “the smallest functioning unit of space in the genre” (2012: 10). Schmid then proceeds to scale up the represented spaces from country houses and “mean streets” to end with neoliberal capitalism and global crimes encroaching on local lives in Mexican crime novels. This scaled-up model of how crime fiction genres have evolved, from the very local to the global, begs the question whether the genre is as capable of representing the mostly invisible violence of neoliberal globalisation as it has been able to frame solutions to the puzzle-crimes of the locked-room mystery.

Damrosch is to a lesser degree than Moretti interested in the evolution of formal aspects of literature or in mapping the spread of genres across borders. He holds that world literature essentially is a “mode of reading”, what he calls “a detached engagement with a world beyond our own”, one that helps us “appreciate the ways in which a literary work reaches out and away
from its point of origin” (2003: 297, 300). While Moretti sees world literature as presenting a “formal compromise” between foreign genres and local content, Damrosch insists on the codependence of the domestic and the foreign, the local and the global, as central to a world literature perspective: “works become world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture’s national tradition”, making a single work of world literature “the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures” (283). This perspective is applied in several of the contributions to Crime Fiction as World Literature. Here examples of crime fiction from around the world are considered “glocal”: Mexican narconovelas and a transnational detective novel such as Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ’s Nairobi Heat, for instance, are taken to exemplify how global forms and transnational crimes both penetrate and are transformed by local lives, traditions and communities: “[a]t once highly stylized and intensely localized”, the editors of the volume conclude, “crime fiction is a pre-eminently ‘glocal’ mode of literary creation and circulation” (4).

A world literature perspective on genre, according to Wai Chee Dimock (2006), may be the tool literary scholars need in order to rethink their analytical object, their field, beyond the traditional divisions of “discrete” national literatures. For Dimock, genres are always “in transit”, where likeness is determined by open-ended kinships rather than based on direct lines of ancestry (2006: 86). In this view she departs from Moretti’s more evolutionary centre-to-periphery conjectures on the geographic spread of genres, as she emphasises the reversibility of influences and suggests a more contingent basis on which to explore generic likeness across history and cultures. An example of how to read crime fiction as a glocal genre in transit between different local settings is Pepper’s study of how the genre has been used over three centuries in different locations: “to assimilate complex, ambivalent critiques of state power, and society as it is organized under capitalism, into narratives which imaginatively weigh up the competing and overlapping claims of the individual, morality, community, justice, and the law” (2016: 5). The aim of Pepper’s world literature approach is to “draw attention to the multiple influences and constituent parts and indeed elasticity of the form, something that encourages variety and allows writers to inflect their narratives in different ways and in relation to different political ends and different historical contexts” (5).

While asking us to track how books and genres move across the globe and take residence in diverse locations, a world literature perspective on crime fiction also asks us to compare the multiple ways that crime fiction imagines and theorises entangled locations and worlds; for instance, how the genre is both informed by and takes part in shaping cultural and social perspectives on questions of justice and the law, race, gender and class. To this end, King suggests that a world literature perspective could productively investigate how crime novels provide their readers with “windows” through which diverse societies might be observed (14). We could, for instance, ask how crime novels from different countries and traditions “give local expression to such global phenomena as human trafficking, human rights, upheavals in gender, class, or political relations, and globalization itself” (Nilsson et al. 2017: 5).

Crime fiction can enter world literature by processes very different from the transnational circulation of stories through translation or generic reproducibility by simply, as Damrosch suggests, “bringing the world directly into the text itself” (2018: 107). This occurs most explicitly when writers send their characters abroad or when works are set abroad, whereby narratives will inevitably engage “in a process of cultural translation, representing foreign customs for the writer’s home audience” (108). Crime writers have sent their detectives abroad and explored multiple locations throughout the genre’s history; by the twenty-first century, crime fiction covers the globe and fictional detectives track border-crossing crimes sometimes across continents.

**Henning Mankell’s Wallander Series as World Literature**
The Swedish writer Henning Mankell has not only been central to the international success of Scandinavian crime fiction, offering readers “windows” through which to see his native Sweden, but has also contributed to the “worlding” of the genre by sending his Swedish detective abroad. His series featuring the melancholic police inspector Kurt Wallander has been translated into more than forty languages and has been remade for the screen in both Swedish and British adaptations. Beginning with Mörderare utan ansikte (1991; Faceless Killers, 1997) the series is mostly set in the small Swedish town of Ystad on the Baltic coast, where Wallander is, on the one hand, the police novel’s generic representative of the state and, on the other, someone who finds himself out of place and out of time in this role. Far from a cosmopolitan, Wallander is a troubled nostalgic, increasingly anxious about a rot eating away at his ideal, socially harmonious Swedish welfare state: a corrosion variously connected, in his assessment, to an increase in violence, rampant racism, a general lack of solidarity and social conflicts arising from the arrival of foreigners in Sweden. Mankell’s Wallander novels are, therefore, an obvious case for consideration within a world literature perspective as they are locally anchored, reproduce an international genre, have been widely translated and even found new life in TV adaptations outside of Sweden – the latter of which is particularly interesting from an intermedial world literature perspective. Set in Sweden using mostly British actors, the BBC production featuring Kenneth Branagh as Wallander employs set design and locations beset with nostalgic longing for an exotic 1950s Golden-Age Sweden, reflecting both contemporary British imagologies and Wallander’s own nostalgia, while the darker Swedish adaptations foreground his melancholic demeanour. Mankell’s Swedish police novel, therefore, exemplifies Damrosch’s notion of world literature as “a literary work [that] manifests differently abroad than it does at home” (2003: 6), and is another example of contemporary “glocal” crime fiction.

Slavoj Žižek has suggested that the significance of Mankell’s police procedural is that it is a “perfect illustration of the fate of the detective novel in the era of global capitalism” (2003: 24). The Wallander series illustrates how the crime novel’s setting has become bounded by “the specific locale, a particular provincial environment” as a “dialectical counterpart” to the globalised world, where, Žižek concludes, “a detective story can take place almost anywhere” (2003: 24). However, what makes Mankell’s police procedural a good example of crime fiction as world literature, is not merely its rootedness in a “provincial environment”; it is, perhaps more importantly, the always present and uneasy attachments of himself and his affluent Sweden to global Others and elsewhere, as suggested by the fact that several of the novels’ brief prologues are set in the “Global South” (the mostly low-income and often politically marginalised regions of Latin America, Asia and Africa) before the action moves to Ystad. Rather than suggesting that the senseless violence and the general denigration of morals in the Swedish welfare state are caused by outside forces, Mankell employs Swedish and foreign localities as windows into disparate locations that, as Žižek suggests, “stand for different aspects of the same constellation”. There might be echoes of each locality in its opposite, yet “the effect is an insistence on the irreparable split in the global constellation” (2003: 24). To Žižek, Mankell’s most important insight is that the two worlds will necessarily remain separated, no translation is possible between the two in an age of globalised capitalism. Therefore, Žižek does not care much for those Wallander novels where Mankell has sent his detective out of Ystad and where the plot is divided more equally between home and abroad.

However, it is precisely in The White Lioness, set partly in South Africa, that we may see how this Swedish crime novel can be read as world literature. It is a crime novel that circulates outside of its national tradition, engages with (unequal) international exchange, and presents a spatial structure of cultural interferences. Through its form and narrative, The White Lioness offers windows into other worlds that also reflect back on the detective’s Swedish home, a home that has already from the first novel, in Wallander’s mind, become a foreign country
itself. With *The White Lioness*, Wallander becomes, in the words of Michael Tapper, “a small time cop in a drama of world politics” (171), as he hunts and is being hunted by a former KGB agent. Together with a local black South African, the Russian mercenary is working for a racist, secretive Boer society and has been tasked with assassinating the recently freed Nelson Mandela. By setting geographical nodes off against each other (the fall of the Soviet Union, Sweden’s post-welfare state and post-apartheid South Africa) Mankell uses the transnational police procedural to explore changing and competing notions of race, justice and sociopolitical change. Set partly in the globally exposed early years of post-apartheid South Africa, the novel’s dramatisation of competing worldviews specific to such other “worlds” inevitably affect even the “small”, local world of a brilliant but also notoriously flawed, at times bigoted, Swedish cop.

It is ultimately Wallander’s personal flaws and his inability to comprehend the global scale and ideological undercurrents driving the changes he is witnessing from his peripheral perspective that allow him to become “transformatively entangled with Others”, as Andrew Nestingen has suggested (2008: 252). Rather than confirming an inevitably split and “untranslatable” world order, at least part of Wallander’s global popularity and his influence on South African crime writers such as Deon Meyer, relates to his very human solidarity – a solidarity not devoid of ambiguities but one that “challenges one’s own worldview and rational categories” (252). Meyer, whose first crime novel was published in Afrikaans (the language of the apartheid oppressors) in 1994, became part of a surge in crime fiction published in post-apartheid South Africa. Reminiscent of Mankell’s ambiguous detective, Meyer has used crime fiction and the thriller to investigate South Africa as a postcolonial contact zone, where the borders between guilt and innocence, perpetrators and victims, are fraught and blurry. For instance, his thriller *Heart of the Hunter* (2003), also written in Afrikaans, whose hero is a black anti-apartheid former KGB assassin, inserts a compromised hero into an unfolding border-crossing narrative about the complex history and ongoing political tribulations and transformations of his country.

When Mankell in the early 1990s uses his crime novel to explore the vulnerable political transition of post-apartheid South Africa, the narrative becomes one of entanglements between a global story about the dark forces that seek to maintain authoritarian and racist regimes around the world and a Swedish story about a country still traumatised by the assassination of the Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986. Palme being a famously outspoken anti-apartheid advocate, conspiracies have circulated in Sweden about the involvement of vengeful supporters of apartheid in his murder – a still unsolved case that has haunted and tainted the Swedish police and provided material for countless Swedish crime novels.

In *The White Lioness*, Mankell offers a localised Swedish window through which to view unfolding historical events on a different continent – local events that were, of course, thoroughly entangled with Sweden’s own recent past and a wider world of geopolitics. Ultimately, a world literature perspective on Mankell’s Wallander series and border-crossing crime fiction in general demonstrates the extent to which the transnational crime genre provides a literary form to contain the vast scale of a globalising world as it is saturating and affecting the small scale of localised human experience and even the worlds of “small time” detectives. Necessarily, the worlding of Mankell’s crime novel will translate differently into various host countries and may give rise to adaptations, genre mutations and new localised ways in which to imagine the possibility for dialogue, solidarity and cosmopolitan visions across multiple borders.

**Bibliography**


