

ANDREA HYNYNEN

# Queer Readings of Crime Fiction

The Importance of Genre

## ABSTRACT

This article circumscribes the main characteristics of existing queer crime fiction scholarship, and then explores the impact of literary genre in a queer reading of crime novels. An analysis of Arnaldur Indridason's novel *Betty* (2011), Brigitte Aubert's thriller *Une âme de trop* (2006), and Pierre Lemaitre's noir novels *Cadres noirs* (2010) and *Alex* (2013) demonstrates the extent to which genre conventions such as surprise and suspense can support or obstruct anti-normative representations of queer characters and phenomena. It is shown that the decoding of queer sexuality and gender is easily inscribed within a crime narrative but that this does not always entail a queer subversive perspective. The transgender figure placed at the centre of Aubert's novel invites little discussion of non-normative gender or sexuality because of how the plot is structured, whereas the lesbian narrator and main character in Indridason's story vehicles a strong critical message about heteronormative society and celebrates queer love. Open-endedness or ambiguous closures (Stewart 2014) are instrumental in expressing queerness in the crime genre, while they are also typical of certain kinds of non-queer socio-political crime novels. Lemaitre's both novels combine anti-capitalist social critique with a defence of marginalised social groups, including women, children, and the poor.

**Keywords:** crime fiction, genre, queer reading, social criticism

**THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES** the role of literary genre in queer readings, in particular queer readings of crime fiction. It gives an overview of existing queer crime fiction scholarship and examines the connections between sexual and gender issues and politics in a selection of contemporary

mainstream crime novels: *Une âme de trop* (2006) by Brigitte Aubert, *Betty* (2011) by Arnaldur Indridason, and the two novels, *Alex* (2013) and *Cadres noirs* (2010), by Pierre Lemaitre. My main research focus is the French crime fiction arena and original novels by French writers; however, one of the studied novels is a translation. I argue that genre is of outmost importance when it comes to queer readings of crime fiction because of a transnational genre tradition that, on one hand, seems to reinforce a reactionary social order by way of its solution and ultimate punishment of transgressors while, on the other hand, it demonstrates a predilection for transgressive (sexual) behaviour and (gender) identities. Indeed, these seemingly conflicting tendencies may even coincide in the same text.

### **Queer Readings**

Queer studies of literature build on the tradition of resisting reading developed in feminist literary studies and hence propose reading practices, which go against the interpretations offered to mainstream readers in accordance with dominant cultural values and beliefs (Fetterley 1978). Katri Kivilaakso et al. (2012, 9–10) nevertheless identify three distinctive features of queer readings that separate them from traditional feminist resisting readings. Firstly, sexuality and its connection to gender occupy a central place in queer analyses; in addition, queer readings tend to see the queer and the non-queer as interlinked and mutually interdependent rather than as each other's opposites; and thirdly, they argue, queer scholars generally think that the queer may be present in any literary text. Still, not all queer scholars agree with the last point mentioned and many queer readings centre on ostensibly queer texts, as will be shown below in my presentation of queer crime fiction studies.

Early queer readings of literature thus often set out to uncover queer elements of gender and sexuality in literary texts in order to subvert the heterosexual matrix by paying attention to cracks and fissures in their heteronormative surface (Rosenberg 2002). Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity presented in her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* from 1990, was a crucial factor in these readings. A queer reading is not about inserting something foreign into the text but rather

to discover things that are already there beneath the surface and bring them into the open (Doty 1993, 16). Accordingly, a considerable number of queer studies have focused on re-reading classic works from new perspectives that challenge canonical interpretations (Tomiche and Zoberman 2007, 18). This is particularly true of the French literary field, where a tendency to disregard or rebuke more popular forms of literature still lingers because of the widely shared assumption that popular literature lacks literary qualities and is unworthy of serious attention (Holmes and Looseley 2013). As a matter of fact, queer literary studies are still quite scant in France, and queer analyses of popular literature virtually non-existent. This is perhaps about to change, however, as the crime genre continuously gains respectability at the same time as queer scholarship on genre fiction develops in other places.

Starting from an initial focus on sexual minorities and minority gender identities from various perspectives, queer theory and queer studies gradually evolved into a critical anti-normative analysis of various matters such as nationality, colour, religion, time, place, etcetera. Queer is today regularly equated with anti-normativity or resistance to the normative on a general level, as suggested by Annamarie Jagose (2015). For example, Mikko Carlson's (2012; 2014) work on textual queer space represents this expansion within queer literary studies as it combines explorations of queer space with queer sexuality and queer textual strategies (see also Stewart 2014, 168). In queer studies of a formulaic literary genre like crime fiction, the question of genre and narrative techniques becomes highly relevant because of possible narrative, thematic, and stylistic constraints imposed by a predetermined formula. Still, it would be a mistake to believe that all crime novels follow the same pattern, since crime fiction is one of the most rapidly expanding and heterogeneous types of literature today. Natacha Levet (2006) concludes in her extensive study of French noir novels of the 1990s that this particular crime fiction subgenre had by the turn of the century become so multifaceted and elusive, due to increased generic dissolution and hybridity, that its only persistent core characteristics appeared to be a realist style and a pessimist or troubled view of contemporary society. Even if it is

impossible to pinpoint characteristics appearing in every crime novel, I still think that there is a set of generic features which frequently occur in one form or the other in most crime novels though different writers clearly use them in different combinations and in very different ways; authors constantly balance between respecting genre traditions and transcending them.

Like most other queer scholars, Donald Hall (2003, 115) asserts that texts that are not overtly queer can be subjected to queer analysis, but at the same time he notes that some works seem to avidly invite queer readings in and of their themes and topics. According to Alexander Doty (1993, 16), various degrees of queerness have always existed in popular culture texts though this is more apparent in some texts than others. Doty's concern for the possibilities of expressing queerness in popular culture stems from the fact that popular culture is a commercial commodity aimed at entertaining and pleasing as large a portion of the general public as possible. Queer characters and queer behaviour may easily lose their transgressive edge as they become commodified, when they are not depicted as the monstrous other. It is certainly true that, for example, crime fiction has a long tradition of vilifying the sexually deviant and non-normative gender; sexual perversion frequently functions as an indicator of criminality further enhancing the villain's evilness. Nonetheless, several forms of popular literature pay close attention to issues that are highly relevant to queer studies. Paulina Palmer's claim that entertainment can indeed accommodate sexual politics is still perfectly valid (quoted in Stewart 2014, 98). For example, science fiction imagines alternative worlds and cultures, and poses questions about livable lives, often in ways that explore the relationship between the human and technology. Hence, the genre resonates with queer theory's interest in exposing the ways in which norms and normative regimes influence people's lives (Pearson et al. 2008, 6–8). Gothic fiction has “always been queer” with a keen interest in unorthodox matters like sexual deviance, arbitrary power, miscegenation, and apostasy even as it expresses conservative morality and acceptability on the surface (Hughes and Smith 2009, 1). Palmer (1999, 8) contends: “Gothic and queer share

a common emphasis on transgressive acts and subjectivities.” Likewise, crime fiction is often deemed to be particularly attuned to sexual and gender transgressions (Plain 2001, 6). I wish to add that much crime fiction contests the social order and its norms, in particular the *roman noir* mentioned above, which makes it an appropriate object of queer analysis.

### **Queer Readings of Crime Fiction**

Feminist and gender studies of crime fiction abound (see e.g. Klein 1988; Reddy 1988; Munt 1994; Walton and Jones 1999; Plain 2001; Mizejewski 2004; Desnain 2009), but queer studies in the genre are surprisingly rare. Lesbian crime fiction studies outnumber queer studies (see e.g. Betz 2006; 2012). Contrary to the aforementioned evolution in queer theory towards a wider and more heterogeneous scope than its initial emphasis on minority gender and sexual identities, queer studies of crime fiction are still much preoccupied with characterisation. Hence, they pay close attention to queer gender and sexual identities displayed by either the main investigator or secondary characters. The main reason for this is, undoubtedly, the genre’s preoccupation with identity. Phyllis Betz (2009, 22) writes that the “emphasis in the mystery novel, after all, centres on identity, of victim, witness, suspect, or perpetrator,” and therefore, it easily becomes “a vehicle for incorporating explorations of blending or crossing gender categories.” Similar arguments have been put forth for example by Jamie Bernthal (2016, 1) and Faye Stewart (2009; 2014, 174–5), who see a close connection between solving mysteries and decoding gender or sexuality.

A recurring feature of queer research in crime fiction is to study overtly queer texts, which means that these are written by writers identifying as queer or that they centre specifically on queer characters and communities. Crime novels classified and marketed as queer are quite often published by small publishing houses specialised in feminist and LGBTQ+ fiction and target a specific readership. This kind of queer approach is similar to that of work previously done on lesbian crime fiction (see chapter 5 in Munt 1994; Betz 2006). Stewart’s (2014) thorough in-depth study of German queer feminist crime fiction is a case in point.

Although Stewart's book is one of the most extensive queer studies of crime fiction published to date, I am inclined to agree with Bernthal's (2016) assessment that an exclusive,

focus on "queer detective novels," which means mostly narratives set in LGBTQ+ communities, undermines the radical potential in her [Stewart's] understanding of detective narratives as "hermeneutical code[s]" which can be used to critique identity norms. (Bernthal 2016, 8)

Like Bernthal, I find that studying queerness in mainstream texts alongside explicitly queer texts is likely to widen the scope and relevance of queer theory for crime fiction scholarship, which is why the texts discussed in this article are mainstream crime novels.

Both feminist and queer studies frequently emphasise the role of closure (or lack of it) in the crime genre, since "the main plot issue is to move the search to a successful conclusion," as Betz (2009, 24) puts it. Crime fiction, especially traditional "whodunnits" and detective fiction, has often been perceived as a reactionary and conformist form of literature because of its teleological structure that leads to a final resolution, which means capturing and removing the transgressive element (i.e. the criminal) that has momentarily disturbed the social order. The resolution thus entails re-establishing order and returning to the status quo (see e.g. Klein 1988). Gill Plain (2001, 6), however, strongly advocates acknowledging non-normative and subversive elements found in the texts prior to the closure. One should not let the closure and its possible conformist conclusions erase the subversive potential of the narrative, because transgressions and disruptions tend to appear in the body of the text. Stewart (2014) emphasises the importance of paying attention to both narrative structure and other elements of queer vagueness and fluidity in crime fiction:

In fact, my project, in which *queer* designates both a subject and an approach – a textual positionality and a readerly strategy – necessitates this very versatility. Its focus is the manifold intersections among these

notions of *queer* and recent variations on the theme of the crime genre. These include the queerly gendered and sexualized characters crime stories introduce; the interpretative work the characters do in their efforts to solve crime and to read and categorize one another; the reader's own attempts to make sense of these representations; the ways in which narratives challenge the conventions of crime and detective fiction; and the forms and functions of suggestion, ambiguity and openness in the novels. (Stewart 2014, 11)

Stewart (2014, 11) adds that her study “examines how genre fiction’s queer figures and gestures trouble social norms and explore the implications of these disruptions,” thereby linking queer characters and queer behaviours to possible expressions of social criticism or a political stance.

Open-endedness and lack of a definitive closure constitute queer elements that are characteristic of crime fiction. It is worth pointing out here that many mainstream non-queer crime novels eschew reassuring final resolutions; the absence of a satisfactory closure is a longstanding feature of socio-critical crime fiction, as this implies that criminality cannot be overcome in a corrupt society, or that crime and corruption are systemic instead of isolated actions committed by individuals. Two of the novels studied in this article present ambivalent endings in that a central criminal figure escapes punishment while another character is put in prison for a crime he or she has not committed (see below). What Stewart commendably demonstrates is that queer characters can be linked to a political agenda, and that queering identities and queering generic tropes interrelate. She has further analysed another central genre trope: the clue. She introduces the concept of “lavender herrings” to designate queer red herrings, in other words false clues that are queer. The function of the lavender herring is to induce a misreading of sexuality (or gender), which is a common device of queer crime (Stewart 2009). As I will show below, red herrings related to gender and sexuality frequently appear in mainstream crime fiction, where they sometimes, but certainly not always, challenge heteronormativity.

Bernthal's (2016) recently published queer study of Agatha Christie suggests different ways of developing queer analyses of crime fiction in particular with regards to its political commitment. For example, he explores the queer potential of Christie's wildly presumed conservatism and juxtaposes her detective novels with contemporary television series adapted from them. Following his cue, I will in the following section take a closer look at a few 21<sup>st</sup> century crime novels in order to examine possible connections between a political stance and renegotiations of gender and sexuality. Various strands of crime fiction deploy social commentary and critique targeted at established institutions, norms and values, for example social realism has become an international trademark of Scandinavian crime fiction, whereas in France, this phenomenon is associated primarily with the *noir* and *néo-polar* (also known as *polar*) subgenres. However, existing scholarship focused on politics and social critique manifest in the two later categories rarely mentions gender or sexuality. Instead scholars, critics, and authors tend to centre their examination of politics or social criticism in the French crime genre on the left-right political spectrum and the economic system: political corruption, critique of authorities and state institutions, and anti-capitalism are common themes. In addition, the development of specific aesthetic features (e.g. vocabulary and language register, narrative rhythm, plot structure, focalisation and points of view) is often recognised (see Desnain 2015).

### **Genre Conventions As an Obstacle to Queering in Aubert's *Une âme de trop***

As mentioned, authors can exploit readers' uncertainty or ignorance surrounding a character's identity to create surprise or suspense in their crime narratives, for example by manipulating the reader's expectations or assumptions about gender or sexuality. Brigitte Aubert does this very cleverly in her 2006 novel *Une âme de trop* [*One Soul Too Many*], where Elvira, a neurotic nurse in her forties, is convinced that she is being stalked and that her life is threatened. As nobody believes her, she is left alone to cope with escalating fears and anxiety, in which the reader takes part.



Elvira's tormentor is a misogynistic male serial killer, whose violent intentions to hurt and destroy women are communicated directly to the reader alongside Elvira's fearful panicking. What the reader discovers only in the end, because of a cleverly constructed narrative with frequent shifts in point of view, is that the male killer and his intended female victim are one and the same. This killer is a traumatised male-to-female transsexual with a split personality, who rejects his female persona, and therefore, wants to obliterate it and every woman who reminds him of it. The male and female personas are supposedly neighbours who know each other but they never meet, and they are presented to the reader as two separate individuals throughout the narrative up until the moment when a terrified Elvira dies at the hand of her stalker. The novel then ends with a surprise as the police find Elvira dead in her apartment and discover that she has been murdered by her other half.

I will not go into the matter of how gender and sexual minorities have been depicted in the crime genre in more detail here, even though Aubert's portrayal of a criminal, psychopathologic transsexual, a well-known figure in the genre, certainly invites that topic as it seems to reinforce the conventional association between cross-dressing or transgenderism and mental illness resulting in crime. Instead, I mention *Une âme de trop* as an example of how different narrative techniques can be used in crime fiction to divulge or withhold information concerning a character's identity in order to enhance suspense or create a surprise. In this novel, the reader's decoding of gender and sexuality is strictly conditioned by what the narrator tells us and how that information is framed. The plot structure prevents a profound discussion of transgender phenomena since that would ruin the final surprise, which is a central generic feature in crime fiction. Here, genre conventions and the expression of anti-normative queerness clash. While it can hardly be argued that *Une âme de trop* conveys a subversive or anti-straight image of transgender, the novel does hint at the disastrous effects of not accepting non-normative gender or sexual identities. It also provides a telling example of the ways in which interpretations of literary texts often rely upon heteronormative assumptions; the reader is less likely to guess that

Elvira and her killer are one and the same when they are portrayed as a woman and a man. Another novel by the same author, *Transfixions* (1998), is far more subversive in its depiction of queer and transgender characters (Hynynen 2013). Stewart (2014, 98) suggests, following Plain (2001) and other feminist scholars, that depicting queer or transgender characters can be seen as “a political gesture in and of itself.” Still, this thriller type crime novel does not engage with larger social or political questions, its emphasis lies on triggering a specific kind of emotions in the reader, mostly fear and then surprise. Psychological thrillers like this one generally tend to focus more on internal motivations for crime and violence than on possible external causes and effects (Stewart 2014, 58), although the generalisation does not apply to all books in the genre.

### **Decoding Lesbianism in Indridason’s *Betty***

The novel *Betty* (2003), written by the Icelandic writer Arnaldur Indridason, offers another example of crime writers using red herrings to trick readers concerning characters’ gender and sexual identity. Indridason’s famous Detective Erlendur-series and most of his other crime novels have been translated into English and other languages, but *Betty* is an early standalone that is not (yet) available in English. My discussion is based on the French version, published in 2011. I am aware that my interpretation of the translated text might possibly be different from an analysis of the original because of grammatical and linguistic differences between the two languages (see below), but I consider this novel to be such an interesting example of how clues about gender and sexuality can work that I choose to overlook that.

In *Betty*, an anonymous first person narrator tells a story of passionate but destructive love for a seductive woman named Betty. This unfortunate love has brought this character to prison, falsely condemned for the murder of Betty’s husband. The narrator’s name is not revealed and the narrative concentrates on describing the first impression made by Betty’s striking appearance and her subsequent actions. The narrator’s own identity and physical appearance are hidden behind expressly chosen neutral and elusive expressions that do not reveal this charac-

ter's gender. Because of the narrator's lengthy descriptions of feelings and desires for Bettý in combination with the fact that this unnamed character gets entangled in a love triangle with Bettý and Bettý's husband, a reader with a heteronormative worldview is easily convinced that the narrator is male. Halfway through the novel it is then suddenly revealed in a discussion between the prison psychologist and the narrator that the latter is a lesbian woman. Grammatical gender plays a crucial role in the straight-washing false clues presented in the first half of the novel: the absence of grammatical markers of femininity inevitably lead French-speaking readers to believe that the first person narrator and main character is male, not female. Since most adjectives and many verb forms take a feminine form if the subject is female, it requires excellent linguistic skills to achieve this, and it might not work in the same way in another language. As the story continues to unfold, we discover that Bettý has seduced not only the narrator but also her husband's male partner in a carefully laid plan to get rid of her husband and blame the narrator, and that she has a long history of similar manipulative schemes in the past.

Indridason's novel is not political in the sense that it would engage with current political or social matters beyond the sexual politics that affect the personal realm of individual characters. Still, *Bettý* makes an astute statement about heteronormativity in society and its tragic consequences for individual persons. The main character and narrator's traumatic relationship to her homophobic mother is an essential factor in her vulnerability, which makes it easy for Bettý to lure her into the trap (Indridason 2011, 130–1). The reasons why Bettý can manipulate people to get what she wants and escape punishment are, on one hand, her seductive charm and heterosexual cover (she is married) and, on the other, her excellence at picking out vulnerable, closeted lesbians that at first are unable to resist her and then continue to succumb to her ideas because they fear their family's disapproval or social stigmatisation. The main character's lesbianism is a factor in her sentencing, whereas Bettý's assumed heterosexuality helps her to escape justice. The novel offers no reassuring final punishment of the main villain, who takes advantage

of the general public's homophobia, but it brings attention to readers' heteronormative assumptions, which enable the surprise inserted in the plot structure. The readers' surprise at discovering, in the middle of the novel, that the first person narrator and main character is a lesbian necessitates that they have assumed that a narrator seduced by Betty is a man and continued to interpret the narrator's words and behaviour from this heteronormative perspective. Generic plot devices, gender and sexual transgressions, and a strong socio-critical message come together in a fascinating but tragic tale about love, deceit, and death. It is still worth noting that *Betty* is not simply a novel about queer victimism; the narrator's desire for Betty and their shared intimate moments are described in celebratory positive terms and even after being innocently convicted the main character continues to cherish her delicious memories of those moments.

### **Politics, Queer Gender, and Sexuality in Lemaitre's *Cadres noir* and *Alex***

Gender and politics are central issues in Pierre Lemaitre's highly acclaimed crime fiction, which deploys queer identities and queer generic tropes. Lemaitre is currently one of the most prominent French crime writers on both a national and international scale. His *noir* novels are critical of corrupt, institutionalised authorities and authoritarian figures – in politics, in the military, in finance, in the workplace, etcetera. The two novels discussed here take an explicit stand against contemporary neoliberal society and combine a political position that is anti-capitalism with the defence of subordinated groups like women, children, the poor, and the marginalised.

Andrew Pepper (2016, 228) describes Lemaitre as a radical crime writer with leftist tendencies. Pepper highlights the critique of capitalism put forth in *Alex* (2013 [2011]) through the figure of the eponymous central character, a murderous young woman who was sexually abused by her half-brother in her childhood and is now acting out a carefully prepared revenge on him and other abusers. Capitalism is introduced in the matter by the fact that the brother also used to rent her to ac-

quaintances and business associates, in exchange for economic or other favours. These early transactions in which Alex is commodified into her brother's property are the first steps on the brother's path towards his present occupation as sales director (Lemaitre 2013, 281). The novel thus shows us capitalist ideology penetrating all aspects of contemporary life including family relations. The same idea is even more pronounced in the *Cadres noirs* [*Dark Managers*] novel (2010), which expresses a severe critique of neoliberalism invading workplaces and business life, from where it inevitably spills over into the personal sphere. *Cadres noirs* is about Alain Delambre, a fifty seven-year-old ex-manager who has been unemployed for four years. His growing desperation at not finding a proper job culminates in an unfair and grossly humiliating incident, which pushes him over the edge. By then he is prepared to do anything to secure a well-paid position in an international company when the opportunity arises, even if it means deceiving and inadvertently destroying his family. Through its depiction of an armed hostage situation being imposed as a recruitment test, the novel denounces the ruthlessness of corporate business life, where managers are expected to commit decisions affecting thousands of lives without hesitation, while employees are pitted against one another to ensure that unified resistance to precarious working conditions is avoided.

*Cadres noirs* underscores the interrelatedness of the personal and the public; as Delambre gradually descends towards an abyss of despair because of his lost professional status and precarious financial situation, the relationship to his wife deteriorates along with his sexual desires and performance. Their formerly fulfilled sex-life turns stale, not only because of their disagreements, but also because Delambre experiences a loss of masculinity alongside his loss of human dignity. In *Alex*, Alex' brother treats her exactly like he treats the products of the company he later works for. This novel also attacks reigning hierarchies in social institutions like the family and the school system when the main investigator commandant Verhœven angrily confronts Alex' mother and her former teacher about their knowledge and negligence of the abuse afflicted on Alex. Both women ignored the girl's pleas for help;

the mother out of concern for her son, the more important of her two children, and the teacher because she considers children's talk to be insignificant.

Lemaitre's novels are not explicitly queer but contain several examples of unordinary or non-normative sexuality and gender in addition to Delambre's sexual dysfunction. The queer desires of Alex' despicable half-brother, who defies the police by flaunting his past actions in commandant Verhœven's face with hints and veiled admissions that are too vague to be used as evidence, include incest and sexual violence. The abuse borders on paedophilia, because of the seven year age difference between brother and sister. The brother eagerly speaks of himself as a father figure for Alex, someone providing her necessary love and discipline:

I was very fond of Alex. Awfully fond. Enormously fond. She was an adorable little girl, you can't imagine. A little skinny, and her face was a little plain, but she was delicious. And sweet. [...] You said it yourself, I was her daddy. (Lemaitre 2013, 290)

Alex herself is incapable of a normal or any kind of satisfying sex-life since her genital organs have been destroyed by one of the abusers brought to her by her brother; in a fit of rage he poured acid on her and almost killed her. I do not mean to suggest that intercourse, penetration or genitalia are necessary for satisfactory sex or sexual pleasure, however Alex' physical and psychological ordeal was so gruesome that such experiences became impossible. Instead she uses her charm to seduce men and kill them, with great success. Until Alex' physical condition is disclosed towards the end of the novel, her predatory sexual behaviour that is juxtaposed with sincere regrets at being refused the ability to ever have a fulfilling, intimate heterosexual relationship causes confusion, since there is no shortage of interested men. The reader is invited to decode her queer gender and sexuality but the clues are intentionally left too vague to offer any definite answer. Alex and her half-brother represent but two examples of non-normative sexuality associated with

criminals in Lemaitre's fiction, which contains many other secondary characters whose future or present cruelty or maliciousness are signalled with deviant sexual behaviour.

However, not all forms of unordinary gender or sexuality are destructive or demonised in these novels. On the contrary, few characters have stable heterosexual relationships that the reader knows of. Lemaitre's main investigator Verhœven is only 140 cm tall. This condition affects his sense of masculinity and his love life, as he does not expect to meet a woman who would want him. When this happens against all odds, he loses them: first his wife gets murdered, and when he finds a new lover after several lonely years it turns out that she is not who she has claimed to be and that their relationship is a set-up. Verhœven's most frequent sexual situation is thus abstinence. Verhœven's colleague LeGuen has a habit of getting married and divorced, usually with the same woman. All these relationships are heterosexual, but they nevertheless challenge the traditional idea of monogamous heterosexual relationships lasting a lifetime and point to the great variety of gender and sexual expression that should be allowed to exist.

In addition to various representations of non-normative sexuality and gender, the plot structure in Lemaitre's *Alex* novel queers the crime genre tradition in several ways. Alex is first presented in the role of the victim as she is kidnapped and left in a wooden cage to die. The police try to rescue her only to discover that the poor woman is guilty of murder and that she has fled, which means that the rescue mission transforms into a hunt. The border between the traditional roles of victim and perpetrator that characterise crime fiction gets blurred, since Alex switches back and forth between the roles of a victim of kidnapping, assault, and sexual abuse, and that of a ruthless killer. In the end, she escapes justice by killing herself and successfully frames her brother for her death: the police know he is innocent but still support his conviction in retaliation for his past actions against Alex, which were discovered only after her suicide. The ending does bring closure in the sense that Alex' brother is punished for his crimes, but he is still innocently condemned for murder whereas Alex never got punished for her hideous crimes. Furthermore,

the serial killer triumphs in the sense that the police only catch up with her when she is already dead of her own accord, and Verhøeven agrees to carry out the final act of her revenge by charging the brother for her murder although he knows that the evidence is planted. The ending is queerly ambiguous in numerous ways.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The novels studied in this article present different examples of how non-normative gender and sexuality are represented in crime fiction and how crime narratives invite readers to decode characters' gender and sexual identities with clues and red herrings. It is apparent that the traditional exploitation of deviant sexuality or queer gender in the crime genre to signal out criminals still holds sway, but in my readings of these novels, I have tried to highlight other, more reaffirming uses of queer gender and sexuality in the genre. The analyses clearly show how important it is to consider generic tropes and narrative devices when reading crime fiction from a queer perspective. Furthermore, specific subgenres of crime fiction impose different generic conventions. For example, the individual focus of thrillers with a final surprise such as *Une âme de trop* is less likely to accommodate queer socio-political commentary, than open-ended and extremely versatile *romans noirs*, here represented by *Cadres noirs* and *Alex*. Still, as Indridason's novel *Betty* demonstrates, a crime narrative concentrating on personal relationships and relying heavily upon the element of sudden surprise, may very well express strong anti-normative social commentary. The crime fiction genre is extremely flexible and allows for all kinds of narratives that renegotiate gender and sexuality, but it can also do the contrary even as it represents queer characters.

I mentioned earlier that queer crime fiction scholarship is underdeveloped, especially when compared with the numerous studies that adopt a feminist or gender perspective. One might then ask what separates an anti-normative queer analysis from other readings paying attention to gender, sexuality or politics in crime novels. It is important not to overlook the fact that many gender scholars are inspired by queer theory in their work without them using the label or exposing this theoretical



influence in their title or the text. Plain (2001) is well versed in Butler's theory of performative gender, a key figure in early queer theory, although queer is not at the heart of her study of gender and the body in the crime genre. Mentioning the word queer in the title of a study does not, however, necessarily entail a detailed analysis of queer. For example, Betz' (2012) article about Megan Abbott's novel *Queenpin* uses the word queer once in its title and then focuses on a female character's sexuality, desire, and lesbian identity, albeit referring to Butler's theory of gender performativity. On the other hand, Betz' (2009) article on transgender characters in detective fiction contains a discussion of queerness. These few examples demonstrate that gender studies, gay or lesbian studies, and queer studies of crime fiction often overlap. As could perhaps be expected given the elusive and changing nature of queer theory and queer scholarship, there is no definite answer to the question of how queer readings of crime fictions differ from gender or feminist studies in the genre. What is clear, however, is that there is a need for more queer readings of crime novels that shed light on the intricate relations between crime, truth, justice, gender, sexuality, and politics.

**ANDREA HYNYNEN** holds a PhD degree (2010) in French language and literature from the Åbo Akademi University, and she is a docent of French literature at University of Turku. Her research interests are gender and queer studies of French literature. In her PhD, she explored representations of non-normative gender and sexuality in Marguerite Yourcenar's historical novels using classical queer theory. More recently, she has specialised in contemporary French crime fiction, looking at gender, feminism, sexuality, and social critique in works by Pierre Lemaitre, Dominique Sylvain, Olivier Truc, Maud Tabachnik, and Fred Vargas among others. She is also a founding member of the Finnish Crime Fiction Studies Network.

## REFERENCES

- Aubert, Brigitte. 2006. *Une âme de trop*. Paris: Seuil.
- Bernthal, Jamie C. 2016. *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Betz, Phyllis M. 2006. *Lesbian Detective Fiction: Woman As Author, Subject, and Reader*. Jefferson: McFarland.
- . 2009. “Re-Covered Bodies: The Detective Novel and Transgendered Characters.” *Clues* 27.2:21–32.
- . 2012. “‘I’m Your Girl’: Queering Gender Affiliation in Megan Abbots *Queenpin*.” *Clues* 30.1:76–87.
- Carlson, Mikko. 2012. “Självb biografiskt berättande, ‘gemenskap’ och möjligheten av ett textuellt queert rum.” In *Queera läsningar*, edited by Katri Kivilaakso, Ann-Sofie Lönngren and Rita Paqvalén, 278–305. Årsta: Rosenlarv.
- . 2014. *Paikantuneita haluja: Seksuaalisuus ja tila Christer Kihlmanin tuotannossa*. Jyväskylä: Nykykulttuurin tutkimuskeskus.
- Desnain, Véronique. 2009. “Gender and Genre: Women in French Crime Writing.” In *French Crime Fiction*, edited by Claire Gorrara, 86–106. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- . 2015. “Style et idéologie dans le roman noir.” *Itinéraires LTC* 1. doi: 10.4000/itineraires.2685.
- Doty, Alexander. 1993. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fetterley, Judith. 1978. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hall, Donald E. 2003. *Queer Theories*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holmes, Diana, and David Loseley, eds. 2013. *Imagining the Popular in Contemporary French Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Horsley, Lee. 2009. *The Noir Thriller*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hughes, William, and Andrew Smith, eds. 2009. *Queering the Gothic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hynynen, Andrea. 2013. “Le roman policier et les trans: Une comparaison de *Mygale* par Thierry Jonquet et *Transfixions* par Brigitte Aubert.” *Les Cahiers de la transidentité* 3: *Corps trans/Corps queer*, 115–25.
- Indridason, Arnaldur. 2011. *Betty*. Translated by Patrick Guelpa. Paris: Points.
- Jagose, Annamarie. 2015. “The Trouble with Antinormativity.” *Differences* 26.1:26–47.
- Kivilaakso, Katri, Ann-Sofie Lönngren, and Rita Paqvalén, eds. 2012. *Queera läsningar*. Årsta: Rosenlarv.
- Klein, Kathleen G. 1988. *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- Lemaitre, Pierre. 2010. *Cadres noirs*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- . 2013. *Alex* [2011]. Translated by Franck Wynne. London: MacLehose.
- Levet, Natacha. 2006. “Le genre, entre pratique textuelle et pratique sociale: Le cas du roman noir français (1990–2000).” PhD diss., University of Limoges. <http://epublications.unilim.fr/theses/2006/levet-natacha/html/index-frames.html>.
- Mizejewski, Linda. 2004. *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Munt, Sally. 1994. *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel*. London: Routledge.
- Palmer, Paulina. 1999. *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions*. London: Cassell.
- Pearson, Wendy Gay, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon, eds. 2008. *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Pepper, Andrew. 2016. *Unwilling Executioner: Crime Fiction and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plain, Gill. 2001. *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Reddy, Maureen T. 1988. *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel*. New York: Continuum.
- Rosenberg, Tiina. 2002. *Queerfeministisk agenda*. Stockholm: Atlas.
- Stewart, Faye. 2009. “Of Herrings Red and Lavender: Reading Crime and Identity in Queer Detective Fiction.” *Clues* 27.2:33–44.
- . 2014. *German Feminist Queer Crime Fiction: Politics, Justice and Desire*. Jefferson: MacFarland.
- Tomiche, Anne, and Pierre Zoberman, eds. 2007. *Littérature et identités sexuelles*. Paris: Champ Social.
- Walton, Priscilla L, and Manina Jones. 1999. *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln beskriver huvuddragen i queer kriminallitteraturforskning och undersöker hur litterär genre påverkar queer läsning av kriminallitteratur. En analys av Arnaldur Indridasons roman *Betty* (2011), Brigitte Auberts thriller *Une âme de trop* (2006) och Pierre Lemaitres romaner *Cadres noirs* (2010) och *Alex* (2013) visar hur mycket genrekonventioner såsom överraskning och spänning kan förstärka eller förhindra anti-normativa framställningar av queera personer och fenomen. Det visas att ett avkodande av queer sexualitet och genus lätt kan skrivas in i en kriminalberättelse, men att detta inte alltid medför ett queert, subversivt perspektiv. Transpersonen i centrum av Auberts roman stimulerar knappast till någon diskussion

om icke-normativt genus eller sexualitet på grund av handlingens utformning, medan däremot den lesbiska berättaren och huvudpersonen i Indridasons roman förmedlar ett starkt kritiskt budskap om det heteronormativa samhället och även hyllar queer kärlek. Öppna eller mångtydiga slut (Stewart 2014) medverkar till att uttrycka queerhet inom kriminallitteraturen, samtidigt som sådana slut också är typiska för vissa typer av sociopolitiska kriminalromaner. Lemaitres båda romaner kombinerar anti-kapitalistisk samhällskritik med försvar för marginaliserade sociala grupper, som bland andra kvinnor, barn och de fattiga.