

**Jeannette Sloniowski and Marilyn Rose**

## **The Crime Fiction Canada Project**

How did this project begin? You might say that it was simple good luck - provided that it is assumed that collecting titles for never-finished, never-ending "webliographies" is a piece of good luck! The two of us, Jeannette Sloniowski and Marilyn Rose, are professors in Canada's one and only Graduate Program in Popular Culture at Brock University, and we are both long time readers of detective fiction of all kinds. When Brock's Graduate Program in Popular Culture (the only one in Canada) was created in 2000, we decided to teach a course together on Crime, Mystery and Detective Fiction, Film and Television that would combine both of our scholarly interests. As members of the English Department (Marilyn), and the Communications, Popular Culture and Film Department (Jeannette), we sat down to design a course that would look at Detective Fiction in its various forms, from print to film and television, and beyond (anyone for hypertext?).

Just as we had begun to plan the course a letter arrived at Brock from notable Toronto literary historian, David Skene-Melvin, asking if our library would like to have his very large collection of books about Crime, Mystery and Detective Fiction. He had discovered our announcement of our new Graduate Program on Brock University's webpages, and was pleased to have located a site where his collection might be kept together and put to good use. Delighted by our good fortune and by a very co-operative university library, which has agreed to work towards the creation of a comprehensive collection of Canadian detective fiction, we eagerly agreed to accept the books.

Our view has always been that "popular fiction" should not be considered a lesser breed than more "literary" kinds of writing just because it is popular with everyone - professors included. In proposing the course we had argued that there was much of value to be learned from popular writers. Popular culture has not always been well regarded in Universities where "the great books" are the norm, and popular literature is infrequently taught.

So, we taught the course, and we enjoyed it. We did find that our students had problems doing research on the books and films that they decided to write about since the traditional databases used by the university seemed not to list much of what has been published about detective fiction, or film, or television. A further problem seemed to be that almost nothing had been written about Canadian Detective Fiction, and in fact, it was often difficult to come by comprehensive lists of Canadian authors who write Detective Fiction. We found this very odd since of all of the popular forms in Canada, detective fiction, like popular music, thrives, unlike Canadian television and film which struggle to find an audience. In a recent article in the Globe and Mail, Rebecca Caldwell notes that Canadian detective fiction has experienced a 40% growth in 2004 alone, and that Canadians seem to eagerly await new novels from favorites like Howard Engel, Eric Wright, Peter Robinson, Gail Bowen and Barbara Fradkin, among others. Clearly the genre is growing in both popularity and respect.

It was clear to us that we were in a good position to remedy some of the problems that our students were encountering and *crimefictioncanada* came into being. It has taken us five years to get where we are with our on-line bibliography (webliography?), and it has involved a great deal of labour by many hands. However, it seems to us that using the internet gives us an advantage over published bibliographies in that we can update at any time and our lists will not go out of date unless we run out of energy. Also, access is free to all comers, academic and otherwise.

Building and maintaining a website has also offered amazing educational opportunities for our students and other researchers. We have supported our project by hiring undergraduates and teaching them how to research detective fiction, film and TV. Our university has supported us with small grants to hire researchers and computer science students to construct our website; and most recently the government of Ontario has given us funds to hire three hardworking assistants to help us in the final stages of our journey to becoming "live" on the web: Sandra Dee, Web Designer, Sheila Naylor, Researcher and Janice McNabb, Bibliographic Assistant.

Our database, <http://www.brocku.ca/crimefictioncanada/>, consists of eight large lists searchable by author, title and keyword: Canadian Crime Fiction (novels and short stories), Canadian Secondary sources (articles about Canadian Crime Fiction), General Secondary Sources (articles about crime fiction in English throughout the world - the largest list), Secondary Sources on Crime in Film (including film noir), Secondary Sources on Crime on TV (cop shows mostly), Literary Detection (authors usually not considered writers of popular fiction) and Dissertations (Master's and Ph.D theses on crime fiction, film and TV). In all, there are over 15,000 entries on these lists, and they are still growing.

A great deal of work went into the making of *crimefictioncanada*, not only in collecting the data but determining whether a novel, for example, is in fact a detective novel and was, in fact, written by a Canadian. We had lengthy debates about what to include and what not to include on all of the lists, and we know that some of our choices will be controversial. We also know that there are still some errors on the database, despite repeated editorial forays and endless checking of these huge lists, item by item. We are still working at refining the keyword search function - which is a tricky matter since it requires not only the reading but the interpretation of thousands of articles.

We are happy to announce that we will be joined in the near future by another researcher, Dr. Philippa Gates from Wilfrid Laurier University's Film Studies Program. Dr. Gates will be making a contribution to the Crime Fiction Canada website as part of her new three-year research project funded by SSHRC. Her project is an examination of the Classical Hollywood detective film, specifically the popular but under-examined 'B' detective series of the 1930s and 1940s in terms of the representation of American ideals of law and order, gender, race, heroism, and national identity. These series were a group of films starring the same detective hero - from Sherlock Holmes to Philo Vance - and usually the same star - from Basil Rathbone to William Powell. The majority of Hollywood studios had at least one successful detective, for example Bulldog Drummond at Paramount, The Saint at RKO, and The Lone Wolf at Columbia.

Concurrent with this critical study will be a secondary project-to produce an extensive annotated filmography of detective films and bibliography of the historical and critical material regarding them as an addition to the existing Crime Fiction Canada site. Classical Hollywood films and detective films in general continue to be of fascination, and interest to, scholars and the wider public and the Crime Fiction Canada site offers the ideal forum in which to share this research with academics and fans of the genre alike.

It is our intention to keep the lists up and running for the foreseeable future. We want the project to grow and develop into a state of the art resource for researchers in our fields, and we are very pleased that Philippa will be joining us and adding to the sites resources. We may, at some point, look at publishing a print (or more likely) a DVD version of the database. But for now, we will stay on-line and available to students and aficionados of the genre the world over. We are pleased with the crimefictioncanada project - but eager to make it better, with the help of our "users," so please feel free to contact us with corrections or suggestions.

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