

Sophie Lavoie

Stephen Wilkinson. *Detective Fiction in Cuban Society and Culture*. Peter Lang. Bern, 2006. 315 pages. ISBN 3-03910-698-8.

Wilkinson's long-awaited study of detective fiction in Cuba will be celebrated by scholars who have been wondering just when his academic work would be available to the larger public. Wilkinson's volume follows logically in the path of larger works on the genre such as Amalia Simpson's *Detective Fiction in Latin America* (1990). Although Simpson's text covered Cuba as one of the main centres of detective fiction writing (with the River Plate, Mexico and Brazil), it was more of a survey that sought to establish both a historical background and the nature of the genre in Latin America. Wilkinson's study thus allows scholars to delve into a more detailed account of the production in Cuba, and especially of Leonardo Padura Fuentes, a writer whose detective series was nascent in the years preceding the publication of Simpson's monograph.

Wilkinson's tome opens with an introduction titled "Why study detective fiction?" The popularity of the genre in recent years would normally render futile such a question. Detective fiction has long shed its restrictive popular fiction profile, and although the change has been more gradual in Latin America, it has been subjected to academic scrutiny since the 1970s. However, the author answers this question in a concise exposé that leads into the Cuba-specific context of Wilkinson's study.

Chapter 1 presents an informed justification for examining literary production as a reflection of a historical period. Wilkinson plainly states how important the role of writers and literary critics are in examining the Cuban revolutionary process and justifies the validity of studies such as his since they "tease out significances that will inform our broader understanding of the Cuban revolutionary process" (p. 27).

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the formation of ideology in the Cuban state. Various theories on the development of Cuban nationalism are presented -including Robin Blackburn and Antoni Kapcia's opposing theories, and ending logically with a Foucauldian approach which places importance on the individual.

Chapter 4 details the presence of the detective genre from 1915-1959, the period following Cuban independence from Spain and the politically volatile situation that characterized the period. Although briefly, Wilkinson establishes the basis for what he terms a tradition that would later develop into the post-revolutionary detective genre. This is perhaps the most indispensable interval in Cuban detective narrative's production and Wilkinson's contribution is commendable. It is at this juncture that he questions the findings of Amalia Simpson and others, claiming the inexistence of the detective genre in Cuba prior to 1971. Wilkinson asserts that the presence of the genre in radio and film, starting as early as 1917.

It is not coincidental that Wilkinson should take the time to investigate these

illustrations of early detective narratives, given that the novels of Leonardo Padura Fuentes would further shed light on two important marginalized groups more than 50 years later. Firstly, the Afro-Cuban theme particularly marked the beginnings of the detective narratives in Cuba. The re-examination of early independence from Spain and the African presence is largely due to the work done since 1959; Wilkinson makes reference to research done by Enrique Sosa Rodríguez and Lydia Cabrera regarding the early twentieth-century narratives about the free slaves (ñáñigos). A second theme of the detective narrative is present in the widely popular asian-influenced Chan Li Po radio series created by Felix B. Caignet. Chan Li Po was based on a Chinese character, underwent a 7-year cycle on various Cuban radio stations and led to the production of the first distinctly Cuban feature film.

Along with the brief mention about the existence of magazines such as *Detective mundial* and the mysterious Fantomas (Wilkinson acquiesces to its existence despite never having been able to consult it), the author also mentions the presence of detective fiction in other more mainstream publications of the time, such as *Bohemia magazine* in which both Lino Novás Calvo and Gerardo de Valle were published. The case of Lino Novás Calvo is raised by Wilkinson, as an author not studied until the 1990s because of his emigration of a few years after the revolution and his own disregard for his own short stories from that time. However, because of the development of the detective genre after the revolution, Wilkinson establishes the importance of these stories to the distinctly Cuban genre -the transposition of American themes to the Cuban setting is a pioneering measure. Wilkinson also mentions the author Leonel López Nussa who wrote under the pseudonym of Red Bloy and published two novels in Mexico in the 1950s.

Subsequent chapters are dedicated to the genre's existence and evolution under the Cuban revolution. In Chapter 5, Wilkinson relies largely on work by Leonardo Padura Fuentes and Armando Cristóbal Pérez (1972) for their own studies on the genre, to establish the uncertain beginnings of the detective genre which they place a full ten years after the establishment of the Castro government. In this chapter, Wilkinson illustrates the theoretical discussion of the various sub-genres present and each of their (dis)advantages and tolerability under this system. Chapter 6 discusses what Wilkinson considers to be the representative novels for the period from 1971-1991, namely those of Armando Cristóbal Pérez, Luis Rogelio Noguerras, formerly-Uruguayan turned Cuban Daniel Chavarría (originally from Uruguay) and Berta Recio Tenorio (one of the rare women who ventured into the genre and the only one mentioned in the study). Wilkinson shows how these novels comply with the diktats imposed -implicitly or explicitly- by the political situation (since the works are mostly stereotypical and didactic in their themes and characterization). The variety of themes encountered by Wilkinson allows the author to show the introduction of the genre to the changes brought about by the end of the twentieth century.

The difficult historical period of the 1990s is the main theme of Chapter 7, and outlines the impact of the fall of the USSR and subsequent Special Period upon the themes developed in detective novels of that period. More than 150 pages into his study, Wilkinson unnecessarily divides this chapter into three subheadings -"Cuba 1989-1999," "The detective novel as a chronicle of social malaise" and "Padura Fuentes and the new crime genre"-, perhaps to remind readers of the contents of

his theoretical chapters and their renewed meaning to the first sections of this chapter. As for the third part, Wilkinson compares Padura Fuentes' developments to the extensive changes Dashiell Hammett had brought to the genre in the 1920s with his "hard-boiled" genre in which "the detective is not wholly preoccupied with solving the crime; there are many questions raised as to the wider social and political malaise" (p. 186). It is with this thesis in mind that Wilkinson goes on to examine the series by Padura Fuentes.

Chapter 8 concerns itself with *Pasado Perfecto*, the first of the *Four Seasons* tetralogy and its establishment of Mario Conde as an existentialist superman for Cuban society. *Máscaras*' examination of the theme of homosexuality is the topic of Chapter 9, where Wilkinson chooses to compare the treatment in the novel with that of the prize-winning movie *Fresa y Chocolate* screenplay written by Senel Paz and produced in 1993. In Chapter 10, Wilkinson investigates the last two novels, *Vientos de cuaresma* and *Paisaje de otoño* especially with respect to the postmodernity present in the texts and chooses to expose acutely some of the rich intertextuality they offer. Like the preceding chapters, these final chapters are well written and thorough in their analysis.

Alas, in his concluding chapter, Wilkinson chooses to sum up his exposé in a table style, perhaps not doing justice to the extensive amount of work provided by his study. However, the effort of synthesis is greatly appreciated, and most certainly helped the author in forming his conclusions. Given the often-daunting task of doing research in contemporary Cuba, the lack of information in certain citations is largely forgivable (such as p. 98 where a fact is cited as having the vague "ICAIC Cinemateca archive, calle 23, Havana" as a source). Nevertheless, Wilkinson's substantial (18-page) bibliography is as invaluable an asset as his study for those interested in detective fiction in Cuba. Although Padura Fuentes' tetralogy has produced extensive academic interest in recent years, the continuing of the Mario Conde series (with 2005's *La neblina del ayer*) would surely be more than relevant to Wilkinson's analysis. In addition, with the only recent translation and publication of Padura Fuentes' series into English, Wilkinson's handiwork makes the otherwise inaccessible novels available to the English-language public. I am thinking especially of academics from the USA who would otherwise have only limited access to most of the Cuban sources cited by Wilkinson. For these reasons, and in light of the quality of *Detective Fiction in Cuban Society and Culture*, Stephen Wilkinson has positioned himself highly on the still (brief) list of specialists on Cuba's detective fiction.