



Investigating the Canon: The Reader as Detective in Reworkings of *Madame Bovary* and *Jane Eyre*

ARTICLES –
COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

KATIE JONES 



ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, a trend towards adapting, rewriting, or otherwise engaging with the literary canon—especially the nineteenth-century novel—via the popular genre of crime fiction may be observed in both French and English. Taking as its main examples Jasper Fforde's 2001 novel *The Eyre Affair* and Philippe Doumenc's *Contre-enquête sur la mort d'Emma Bovary* (2009), this article considers what is special about crime-fiction engagements with the literary canon and how they differ from other types of adaptation, in particular in the use of the central detective figure as a proxy for the position of the reader. Crime fiction and its subgenres—here, the whodunit and hard-boiled thriller—is a transnational genre which readily adapts itself to local contexts. I argue that both Doumenc and Fforde adapt their chosen genres in order to explore the nature and purpose of their respective national canons. Following a detailed analysis of the role of the reader-detective in each text, the article goes on to demonstrate how both texts engage in theoretical debates on canonicity, including questions of authorial genius, aesthetic value, and the pleasure of reading. By emphasising the position of a skilled non-academic reader, familiar with the codes and conventions of both “high” literature and genre fiction, crime fiction reworkings offer a non-hierarchical approach to the literary canon, presented as part of a shared cultural property and, above all, a source of enjoyment. However, while they acknowledge aspects of literary theory and academic debate, their orientation towards a mass-market audience and the conventions of their genre may also lead them to side-step the overt political engagement of recent academic debates on the canon.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Katie Jones

University of St Andrews, GB
kej5@st-andrews.ac.uk

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jones, Katie 2023
Investigating the Canon:
The Reader as Detective
in Reworkings of *Madame
Bovary* and *Jane Eyre*. *Modern
Languages Open*, 2023(1):
1 pp. 1–17. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.274](https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.274)

In Philippe Doumenc's 2007 novel *Contre-enquête sur la mort d'Emma Bovary* detectives are sent from Rouen to investigate the suspicious death of Flaubert's heroine, which turns out to have been murder rather than the suicide the original author would have us believe. In Jasper Fforde's 2001 thriller *The Eyre Affair* Jane Eyre is kidnapped from Brontë's original manuscript. Literary detective Thursday Next succeeds in restoring her to the novel, but not without serious consequences for its ending. The literary canon has long been a rich source of material for adaptation, critical rewritings, and unauthorized sequels in both literature and film.¹ However, more recently, a trend towards such engagements with the canon via the popular genre of crime fiction may be observed in both French and English. This article will offer a detailed comparison of Doumenc's and Fforde's novels as case studies that exemplify key features of this trend. Both novels revisit the plot and characters of a canonical nineteenth-century novel; both do so via the conventions of a specific sub-genre of crime fiction; and, finally, both offer new approaches to the source material through their central detective figures. It is the presence of the detective within the rewritten version, as well as his or her process of interpretation of the original, that is particularly worthy of closer attention, distinguishing crime adaptations from other types of canonical reworking. This "investigation" of literature places in the foreground the activity of making sense of the text, thereby drawing attention to the process of reading and interpretation and challenging the perceived authority of the canonical original. In what follows I shall therefore consider the parallels between the role of detective and reader in crime-fiction versions of classic texts with two questions in mind: What does the crime genre contribute to an understanding of contemporary modes of reading? What attitudes do such texts convey toward the notion of canonicity and the role of national canons?²

Beginning with a brief survey of crime-fiction reworkings, sequels, and adaptations loosely inspired by prominent texts and authors since the late twentieth century, the first section of this essay situates my comparative analysis within the context of crime fiction as a transnational genre in which Anglo-American and French sub-genres have mutually influenced each other, developing new forms with which to address specifically national concerns. Subsequent sections then set out the basis for my investigation of the detective as a projection of the reader into the world of the source text, before analysing the way in which the detective-reader functions in each. In a concluding comparison, I discuss ways in which both texts engage and intersect with key issues in the contemporary understanding of canonicity. The detective-reader's investigations highlight elements of debates surrounding the canon from the 1970s to the present—in particular, notions of authorial genius, aesthetic value, and pleasure. However, as I shall suggest, despite the radical potential of the detective-reader to uncover literary crimes, these texts stop short of interrogating more problematic aspects of canon-formation, tending to avoid key questions of race and social class in particular in favour of a nostalgic revalorisation of national literary heritage.

CRIME FICTION AND THE CANON: FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL

Nineteenth-century literature has been a fruitful source for adaptation in various media, particularly film. Linda V. Troost identifies the nineteenth-century novel in English as "a staple of twentieth-century entertainment", attributing the production of film adaptations over several decades to both the cultural prestige of the source material and the convenience of its out-of-copyright availability (75). Similarly, Anne-Marie Baron notes that many students of French literature will first encounter texts from what she terms the "patrimoine littéraire classique" via their film versions, particularly in the case of nineteenth-century novels, which may be deemed unsuitable for school syllabi due to their length (11). Rather than simply replacing the need—or desire—to read the original text, film studies scholars have argued that film adaptation offers opportunities for critically revisiting the source text.³ In this article I identify a comparable

1 For a recent in-depth study of such adaptations of the French canon in particular in a range of genres see Griffiths and Watts. For analyses of various adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, see Rubik and Mettinger-Schartmann.

2 Although the status of both source texts within their respective national canons is by no means unproblematic, and there would be much to say about their reception both at the time of publication and in more recent literary criticism (see Lacapra on Flaubert, and Gilbert and Gubar on Brontë), a sustained engagement with the nineteenth-century source texts would be beyond the scope of this article. My focus in the following analysis will be primarily on the ways that these crime novels engage with them as canonical from a twenty-first-century perspective.

3 For example, Ginette Vincendeau (xx) notes the tendency in heritage film scholarship to defend the genre against accusations of conservatism by pointing out its tendency to challenge norms of gender and sexuality, notably by emphasising the role of women.

opportunity in transposing the nineteenth-century novel to popular literary genres, focusing here on crime fiction.⁴ Both film and literary adaptations can introduce the canonical novel to new audiences and offer new perspectives on the original for audiences already familiar with it. Both may either bolster the canonical status of particular texts as part of a recognised cultural heritage or invite audiences to critically re-evaluate politically problematic aspects of now-canonised works.⁵ However, literary retellings, to a greater extent than film adaptations, tend to pre-suppose a familiarity with the source text. The transposition to a popular genre in crime fiction implies a common readership for both “high” and popular literature. Via my case studies, I therefore want to make a case for the specificity of crime-fiction engagements with the canon, as opposed to other types of adaptation.

Attention to genre fiction in a comparative analysis also helps to highlight commonalities in the ways that contemporary readers engage with specifically national traditions on both sides of the Channel. In his article on transnational genres, Florian Mussgnug identifies a contemporary renewal of interest in genre as a critical concept in the arts and humanities. Arguing against the assumption that attention to genre necessarily implies “transhistorical sameness at the expense of geocultural diversity” (1), Mussgnug argues for an understanding of literary genres as inherently relational and dynamic, engaged in a constant process of transformation. While genres shape our expectations and help us to negotiate the literary work, they are themselves also redefined by each new articulation. According to Mussgnug, “attention to transnational genres [...] offers a way to mark cultural differences, relationality and the specific knowledge of nationally and locally embedded traditions”. He further notes that a renewed critical focus on genre in the field of world literature has “changed our view of what genre is and does, moving away from the notion of genre as a classification system [...] and towards a new idiom centred on affect, flux and creative invention” (2). In this dynamic approach to genre, generic constraints offer the opportunity for creative dialogue between past and present, and across national and linguistic boundaries. Building on this model, the following analysis considers two texts in which the conventions of a popular genre—crime fiction—are mobilised to engage not just with the history of their own genre but with their respective national canons.

Crime fiction is in any case a transnational genre *par excellence*, in which a proliferation of sub-genres across national and linguistic boundaries have both responded to specifically local conditions and mutually influenced each other. The short stories of Edgar Allan Poe are conventionally cited as the origin of the “clue–puzzle mystery” both in the Anglophone tradition and in France,⁶ while the *roman noir* in France from the 1940s is recognised as a response to the American “hard-boiled” thriller of the Depression era, but grounded in the context of the German occupation of France during World War II (Platten 116). As Kemp notes, “strong echoes of the original *romans noirs* can still be seen today in crime fiction of all nationalities” (13), thus underlining their continuing contribution to a recognisable global genre in a process of constant renewal, albeit one that frequently expresses or reveals specifically national concerns. One such concern, of interest here, is the relative status of the literary canon and the crime novel: crime writers working in both French and English have recently begun to engage with this relationship, allowing for fruitful comparison. However, the literary landscape in which they do so is rather different, with the boundaries between genre fiction and the literary mainstream tending to be more clearly defined in the French publishing context.⁷

4 Although my focus in this article is on the specificities of crime fiction in particular, it is worth noting the many reworkings of nineteenth-century novels in other popular genres, including chick lit, erotica, and horror. The most extensive academic research on this subject has to date been carried out in the field of Jane Austen studies. See, for example, Fullerton, pp. 162–73 for a survey of genre-fiction adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*.

5 For example, Patricia Rozema’s 1999 film adaptation of *Mansfield Park* includes slavery as a major plot point, echoing postcolonial readings of Austen’s novel. The most obvious literary example is Jean Rhys’s retelling of *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Rochester’s Creole first wife in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

6 Simon Kemp specifically names Gaboriau, Leblanc, and Leroux as Poe’s immediate successors in France, and Collins and Doyle in Britain (11).

7 It is particularly interesting to compare French and English examples of crime-fiction adaptations, as the contexts in which the relationship between crime and literary fiction are being articulated are rather different. In the French literary-theoretical context, Todorov specifically cites crime as the ultimate example of genre fiction to show what is not to be considered as literature (Todorov, 10). By contrast, P. D. James’s claim that Jane Austen’s *Emma* is a key example of a detective story is not widely considered to be controversial (James, *Talking*, 13). Thus, although I will argue that Fforde’s vision of reader engagement is more radical than Doumenc’s, the blending of genres and rewriting of *Madame Bovary* as a detective novel is interesting in itself within the field of French literature, and the connection with a comparable trend in English literature is noteworthy.

The novels by Doumenc and Fforde that I have selected as my case studies exemplify a larger trend, on both sides of the Channel, of engagement with the national canon via the conventions of crime fiction, in which rewritings of and sequels to nineteenth-century novels predominate.⁸ Other notable recent crime versions of nineteenth-century classics include P. D. James's *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011), a straight sequel that borrows Jane Austen's characters from *Pride and Prejudice* for a murder mystery taking place shortly after Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy, and Lynne Shepherd's *Murder at Mansfield Park* (2010), which takes liberties with the plot of the source text itself, reversing the personalities and fortunes of the female characters such that Mary Crawford becomes the virtuous heroine while Fanny Price is an obnoxious heiress who ends up murdered in a ditch. The premises of these texts already suggest a particular attitude towards the canon, which emphasises readerly pleasure: in the case of Shepherd, it is worth noting that this conceit can work only because readers of Austen, who feel they have some stake in her novels' characters and plots, tend to dislike Fanny and enjoy the reversal. Indeed, as Lionel Trilling famously remarked in his 1934 essay on Austen's novel, "[n]obody ... has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*" (11).

Further examples of recent engagements with canonical works and authors from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries may be identified in a range of crime sub-genres. Stephanie Barron's *Jane Austen Mysteries* (1996–2016) and Frédéric Lenormand's *Voltaire mène l'enquête* [*Voltaire investigates*] (2013–17) feature canonical writers in the role of detective in historical whodunits, while Matthew Pearl's historical thrillers centre their plots around fictional situations involving real-world authors and manuscripts. Estelle Monbrun's campus-based whodunits are set in the present day, but explicitly engage with twentieth-century canonical authors, notably Marcel Proust in *Meurtre chez Tante Léonie* [*Murder at Aunt Léonie's House*] (1994), the Proustian theme signalled in the title.⁹ What these examples have in common is their explicit positioning as works of genre fiction: Shepherd's and James's novels are published in mainstream imprints but their titles adhere to the conventions of the whodunit genre, overtly linking crime and the canon, while other examples appear with specialist crime-fiction publishers. The titles of these books and series usually include references to their crime genre ("Mysteries", "Meurtre", and so on), as well as alluding specifically to the name of an author, a canonical work, or a well-known reference. The works thus emphasise their literary credentials at the same time as their genre-fiction status.

In this context, my chosen case studies may be taken as representative of the current trend in several ways. Both Doumenc and Fforde are published by mainstream publishing houses, rather than in specialist crime imprints, and explicitly signal their engagement with the canon via their novels' titles, both of which evoke the title of their respective source text. However, both titles also take conventional crime-fiction forms and indicate the sub-genre to which they belong: *Contre-enquête sur la mort d'Emma Bovary* refers to the traditional whodunit's central crime of murder, as well as its police procedural dimension in the use of "contre-enquête";¹⁰ *The Eyre Affair* suggests a ludic engagement with the hard-boiled thriller via its punning echo of a typical pulp fiction title. Both novels also directly engage the plot of their source text,¹¹ placing them at the centre of the trend I identify above. They offer fruitful possibilities for examining how twenty-first-century authors construct the idea of the canon and how they interrogate it via their focus on a central detective figure.

Doumenc's detective-protagonist is Remi, one of two policemen sent to investigate the suspected murder of Emma Bovary, the wife of a provincial medical officer.¹² *Contre-enquête* transforms *Madame Bovary* into a whodunit, with the village of Yonville and the novel's original characters taking the place of the restricted setting and limited cast of characters associated

8 Although some of the examples I cite in this survey are by American writers and originally published in the U.S., they explicitly engage with the canon of English literature.

9 The "tante Léonie" of Monbrun's title is an allusion—easily recognisable to a reader familiar with Proust—to the narrator's aunt in Proust's *À la recherche de temps perdu* (1913–27), in whose house the narrator spends part of his childhood, a location based on Proust's real-life family home in Villiers-Combray, where Monbrun's murder mystery is set.

10 "Contre-enquête" is a common French term for a police investigation; in this context it also implies the reopening of a case one might have considered closed, thus also referring to the novel's rereading of *Madame Bovary*.

11 Fforde's detective protagonist Next's own personal trajectory echoes that of Jane (see Berninger and Thomas for a detailed discussion of this). However, my focus in this article will be on the novel's representation of interventions in the plot of *Jane Eyre* itself, and of Brontë's reception, rather than other intertextual echoes.

12 As Remi is not given a surname in the text, I shall refer to him by his first name throughout this analysis.

with the genre. Beginning with the death that concludes chapter eight of the last part of Flaubert's novel, Doumenc's narrative follows the police investigation, including an autopsy, eyewitness accounts, and Remi's discovery of clues in order to arrive at the "truth" of what happened to Emma. In this diegetic universe, Doumenc also includes Flaubert himself as a minor character seen on the outskirts of this reimagined narrative, collecting material for his own novel. *Contre-enquête* thus explicitly sets itself up as a competing version of the same series of events, arriving at a different conclusion to Flaubert's novel due to its use of different investigative methods, determined by the conventions of its genre.

The conceit of Doumenc's novel is that both his version and Flaubert's are based on the same *real* story, such that they become competing versions of an implied truth that can be discovered by piecing together clues. In Fforde's literary thriller, by contrast, the text itself becomes the scene of a crime. Set in an alternative reality in which certain readers can transport themselves into the pages of a novel and interact with the characters, *The Eyre Affair* follows literary detective Thursday Next's attempt to solve the kidnapping of Jane Eyre from the first edition of Charlotte Brontë's novel, and to reinstate Jane as the first-person narrator of her own story. Rather than the more deterministic approach of the puzzle novel, *The Eyre Affair* is a pastiche of a "hard-boiled" thriller. It is narrated in the first person by Next, who, despite her official status as a police officer, is also a rule-breaker with a troubled past as important to the novel as the crimes investigated. A further level of ambiguity is added by Fforde's use of the fantastic mode: the novel is set in a speculative version of Swindon in 1985, where technologies such as time travel have been developed, but airships are still used in preference to planes. The Crimean War is entering its 131st year, and Wales is a socialist republic. In keeping with the broader political scope of the hard-boiled genre, the kidnap-extortion plot of *The Eyre Affair* is complicated by political corruption and the machinations of the sinister Goliath Corporation. Goliath intend to exploit the movement between fiction and reality in order to produce imaginary weapons of mass destruction within a literary text, which can then be transported to and marketed in the real world. The relationship between literary representation and reality is very differently framed in Fforde's and Doumenc's novels. However, both draw attention via their detective figures to the potential for interactions between the literary text and the real world: the reader-detective can shed new light on the literary text, and literature can have a transformative effect upon reality.

THE READER AS DETECTIVE

Both Fforde's and Doumenc's texts thus take up the gauntlet thrown down by literary theorists who treat detection as a mode of reading. Indeed, they can be seen to engage directly with works of literary criticism aimed at non-academic audiences. For example, Pierre Bayard's 1998 study *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* reinvestigates Agatha Christie's influential mystery with a different result, but he notes that such reinvestigation need not be limited to crime novels: "Who has ever wondered [...] about the strange fatal epidemics that strike the heroes of La Fontaine's fables? Are we so certain that the *dame aux camélias* died a natural death? Is it unthinkable that Madame Bovary might have been murdered?" (Bayard ix). This last question is precisely the one taken up by Doumenc in his *Contre-enquête*, attributing to Flaubert the novel's epigraphic claim that "naturellement ma pauvre Bovary s'est empoisonnée elle-même" and that "[t]ous ceux qui prétendront le contraire n'ont rien compris à son personnage!" [But naturally my poor Bovary poisoned herself; anyone claiming the contrary has understood nothing of her character] in order to contest it (Doumenc 7).¹³ In the Anglophone context, the Victorianist John Sutherland has carried out some of the best-known popular literary "investigations" of the nineteenth-century canon in his literary puzzle books, starting with *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* in 1996. Sutherland's essays, which apply real-world questions to the fictional worlds they discuss, have much in common with Fforde's novel. Indeed, explicit references may be found in *The Eyre Affair* to the questions Sutherland tackles, specifically the source of Sir Thomas's wealth in *Mansfield Park* (Sutherland 1–9; Fforde 152) and the incongruity of Rochester's psychic communication with Jane at the end of *Jane Eyre* (Sutherland 59–65; Fforde 346), suggesting a familiarity with Sutherland's work.

This irreverent approach to the source text also suggests a non-hierarchical mode of engagement with classic texts that may appear to an academic audience as a direct engagement with

13 Doumenc attributes this statement to Flaubert in an undated letter to George Sand; however, it does not appear in their published correspondence.

reader-response theories, or with larger literary-critical traditions dating back to the mid-twentieth century, in which the biography and intentions of the author were de-emphasised in favour of the text's aesthetic effects. However, the specificity of crime-fiction rewritings, prequel, reworking or parody, and their emergence over the last thirty years, as opposed to other types of sequel, invite further consideration. In what follows, I shall suggest that the figure of the detective offers a key to what is special about the texts I analyse, because his or her mode of "investigation" offers a way to question the perceived authority of canonical texts that is tied to real-world interests not usually emphasised by academic literary criticism. In particular, despite a long academic tradition in which intentionality has not been considered a serious category for literary criticism, the author's intention still informs the way in which many readers engage with literary texts.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Sutherland points out in his introduction to *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?*, the majority of readers are also likely to be interested in practical questions, in spite of their awareness of the characters' fictional status:

There are tens of thousands of readers of this (and similar) series and the mass of such readers do not, I suspect, worry about Deconstruction, New Historicism, or the distinction between extradiegesis and intradiegesis. But they do wonder, in their close-reading way, whether Becky killed Jos ..., what Heathcliff does in the three years that see him leave Wuthering Heights a stable-boy and return a gentleman, and what Paul Emanuel does in his three years' sojourn in Guadeloupe The questions which have provoked this book are, I maintain, good questions. (Sutherland ix-x)

In Doumenc's and Fforde's novels, as I shall demonstrate below, the figure of the detective may be seen as a kind of proxy for the type of reader Sutherland refers to, capable both of appreciating the work of literature and—simultaneously—of paying close attention to detail and asking the type of common-sense questions less likely to concern literary critics. Doumenc's Remi and Fforde's Next piece together the clues provided in the narratives and—in different ways—"complete" the work of literature in a manner reminiscent of Wolfgang Iser's model of the reading process, filling in the gaps left in the narrative to produce a coherent whole.

Such striving for coherence is also, of course, a key feature of the classic whodunit structure, in which much of the pleasure of reading stems from the attempt to be cleverer than the author (or detective) and find the solution before it is revealed. In his study, Bayard analyses the structure of Christie's narrative to show how crucial information is omitted from the sequence of events that is later reconstructed. While the reader of the whodunit tries to fill in the "gaps" in the narrative as for any other text, it is in the interests of the genre that the range of possible coherent narratives—that is, the ways in which the gaps may be filled—remain as broad as possible until the *dénouement*. In effect, this means that nothing may be narrated too soon that contradicts any of the possible solutions, but it also gives rise to a different kind of "gap", which Bayard describes as a concealed form of lying by omission. He extends this concept to all literature, claiming that not only is it "part and parcel of the detective genre, which is structurally inclined to delay the communication of the truth as long as possible", but also that "we may [...] wonder if this doesn't occur in any narrative, which can never claim to tell *everything*. The [...] lie by omission [...] breaks the limited boundaries of literary works wide open" (Bayard 40). Among Bayard's examples of "lying by omission" in Christie's text, the most notorious is the commission of the murder itself, which occurs in the gap between the following two sentences: "It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone" (Christie 41). A narrative that appears seamless and not in need of completion by the reader may thus actually conceal any number of additional events, a concept both Doumenc and Fforde exploit in their adaptations.

CONTRE-ENQUÊTE SUR LA MORT D'EMMA BOVARY: READING BETWEEN THE LINES

The starting point for the murder investigation in Doumenc's *Contre-enquête* is seemingly just such an omission by Flaubert. According to the testimony of Larivière, one of two doctors summoned to Emma's deathbed, Emma's last words, strikingly absent from Flaubert's version,

14 See Wimsatt and Beardsley for an early articulation of this theoretical tradition.

were “*assassinée, pas suicidée*” [murder, not suicide].¹⁵ This testimony leads to the two detectives being sent from Rouen to Yonville to establish the cause of death and find the killer. Doumenc provides a crime, a limited set of suspects in the form of the inhabitants of Flaubert’s Yonville, and a series of clues to decode, all ingredients of the typical whodunit. In Remi, the younger of the two investigators, he also presents an intradiegetic proxy for the reader. This is signalled from the outset, when we learn that, for the provincial society of Normandy in 1846, Remi is an outsider: “les Normands faisaient reproche à Remi d’être un “Horsain”, quelqu’un qui n’est pas d’ici” [the Normans held it against Remi that he was an “horsain”, someone who is not from here] (Doumenc 20). Doumenc thus suggests an equivalence between his detective figure and the reader of *Contre-enquête*, who also observes the events in Yonville society from the outside. Furthermore, despite this explicit positioning of Remi as external to the society depicted, he is given an implausible level of prior knowledge both of the setting and of certain characters in the text. Not only has Remi already been to the obscure town of Yonville, but he also went to school with Charles Bovary and with Flaubert, and remembers well the awkwardness of young Charles’s first day, narrated in the first-person plural at the start of *Madame Bovary*. This is information that the other characters lack, but which Remi has in common with an informed reader of *Contre-enquête*, one who has already read Flaubert’s novel and thus shares Remi’s familiarity with the locales as well as the circumstances of Charles’s childhood and first marriage.

Remi’s relationship with commissaire Delévoys, his jaded superior, is also noteworthy. About halfway through the narrative, when Delévoys is recalled to Rouen due to political machinations behind the scenes, Remi loses his mentor and is left to piece together the clues on his own. Delévoys’s parting instructions suggest a more knowing attitude than Remi’s to the political forces that shape the narrative:

[D]ans l’attente de nouvelles instructions qui ne pourront venir que de moi, tu ne bouges plus, tu restes l’arme au pied, tu ne fais aucune découverte, tu arrêtes la mule, est-ce compris ? Chaque jour de départ de la diligence tu m’enverras un rapport cacheté dont, avant de l’expédier, tu t’assureras soigneusement qu’il ne présente aucun intérêt. (84)

[While you’re waiting for new orders—which can only come from me—don’t move, stay prepared, don’t make any discoveries, just dig your heels in, understood? Every day the mail leaves, send me a sealed report, and before you send it, make very sure that it contains nothing whatsoever of any interest.]

As Delévoys’s warning implies, the murderer will be revealed as a character with connections and influence. Delévoys’s departure can thus be read as a withdrawal of narratorial guidance; Delévoys shares the narrator’s knowledge of the broader context and likely outcome, but the reader is left to uncover the truth alongside the *ingénu* Remi.

Remi’s role throughout the text mirrors that of a reader, as he searches for clues and attempts to fit them together: “Remi ne put s’empêcher de noter un certain nombre de détails comme si, malgré leur absence certaine de signification, ils pouvaient constituer autant d’indices” [Remi could not prevent himself from noting several details as though, in spite of their certain lack of meaning, they might constitute so many clues] (39–40). His thoughts and comments throughout often echo the likely responses of the reader. For example, after an implausible false confession extorted by Homais from the latter’s hapless assistant Justin, Remi responds that, “j’ai du mal à croire à cette histoire” [I’m having difficulty believing this story] (109). But perhaps the most explicit example of Remi’s readerly activity is in his reaction to Homais’s admission that the latter had had an affair with Emma:

Remi s’assit et réfléchit. Aux éléments qu’il avait déjà recueillis il suffisait de juxtaposer la culpabilité d’Homais, et le fameux après-midi qui avait précédé la mort d’Emma pouvait être à nouveau reconstitué de façon cohérente : toutes les possibilités de trouver l’argent ayant été épuisées, la dernière solution est d’essayer de faire chanter Homais. Sortant de chez Rodolphe où elle a fait chou blanc, elle se rend chez Homais (traces sur la neige). Elle le menace de dévoiler publiquement leur liaison s’il ne lui donne pas ou ne signe pas immédiatement un billet pour les trois mille francs.

15 Doumenc, 15; italics in original. All translations from Doumenc are mine.

Mais l'oiseau est coriace. Que le scandale éclate, sa réputation et celle de sa pharmacie sont perdues. Emma semble devenir folle, comment la faire taire ? Il la frappe (contusions retrouvées sur le corps). Puis, sous un prétexte quelconque comme celui de lui administrer un calmant, il lui fait absorber l'arsenic (les trente grammes du flacon qu'il remplacera ensuite par du sucre). (131)

[Remi sat and thought. He just needed to juxtapose Homais's guilt with the elements he had already assembled, and the notorious afternoon leading up to Emma's death could once again be reconstituted in a coherent way: with all other possible sources of money exhausted, the only solution left is to try to blackmail Homais. After leaving Rodolphe, having drawn a blank, she visits Homais (prints in the snow). She threatens to make public their affair if he won't give her—or sign over immediately—the three thousand francs.

But the victim is stubborn. If a scandal breaks out, his reputation and that of his pharmacy will be destroyed. Emma seems to be going mad; how can he shut her up? He hits her (bruises found on the body). Then, under some pretext or other, such as giving her a sedative, he administers the arsenic (the thirty grams from the flask, which he later replaces with sugar.)]

Although the account cited above is not the ultimate solution to the mystery, this example of Remi piecing together textual clues does very closely resemble the reading process as described by Iser: as we read, we adjust our previous assumptions in the light of new information, always in search of an overall coherence in the narrative. Here, Remi in his role as detective-reader, attempts to “reconstitu[er]” the narrative elements he has already gathered “de façon cohérente”: footsteps, bruises, and missing arsenic.

Whereas in Iser's model, however, the reader tries to “organise the data offered us by the text [and] fit them together in the way we think the author *meant them to be fitted*” (Iser 293; *emphasis added*), Doumenc's text invites us, along with Remi, to fit Flaubert's data together in ways he *did not* necessarily intend, in a process more in line with Bayard's approach, inserting new events and characters it claims Flaubert—wilfully or ignorantly—omitted.¹⁶ However, the “mensonge par omission” (lie by omission) of Emma's accusation of murder turns out to have been simply made up, and, as such, provides a clue to the identity of the real murderer, Larivière, who invents her last words to throw the investigators off the scent. In his original testimony, Larivière implies that Canivet was present when the words were supposedly spoken. Later, it emerges that he had temporarily left the room, an unmentioned absence that really does constitute an example of what Bayard calls *mensonge par omission*.

Of course, it is Doumenc here who really merits the accusation of mendacity; Flaubert can be forgiven for getting the story “wrong”, since in *Contre-enquête* he is himself reduced to the status of a character in the narrative, seen on the outskirts of Remi's investigation performing his own research for his future novel. The author Flaubert, like the reader, thus becomes a detective, albeit in this case a less successful one, who relies on the testimony of the wrong witnesses and does not have access to the decisive clues. Flaubert first appears early in the narrative as an exaggerated character, his dramatic appearance out of place in the mediocrity of Yonville, glimpsed only on the outskirts of Doumenc's narrative. Delévoise, in his role of authority figure and mentor for Remi, warns his protégé against associating with the would-be novelist, dismissing his literary aspirations and methods: “il veut écrire des romans, cette idée! Que fait-il ici, est-il à la recherche d'un sujet? Un goujon, la gueule toujours ouverte pour gober ce qui passe à portée et le régurgiter à sa manière. Du monde à éviter!” [he wants to write novels, of all things! What's he doing here, looking for a subject? A gudgeon, mouth wide open to swallow whatever he can get and regurgitate it in his own way. Someone to be avoided!] (47). Flaubert's authorial status is undermined in two ways here: first, he is relegated to the same narrative level as Remi, who recognises him from school: he is placed on the outside

¹⁶ Iser here offers a nod towards the question of intentionality by suggesting that the reader seeks to reconstruct the author's meaning. However, it does not necessarily matter for his argument whether the reader can really do so or not (“the way we *think* the author meant”). Doumenc's approach also suggests that readers can both want to know what the author meant and enjoy creating subversive new meanings at the same time. Intentionality thus becomes just one possible way of approaching the text.

of the investigation with no privileged access to the inner lives of the characters. Second, Delévoys description of the Flaubert as a gullible fish, ready to swallow anything, is later echoed in Doumenc's afterword, which claims that Flaubert took his account from unreliable sources rather than consulting the "real" witnesses, such as Remi (187). In Doumenc's fictional world, therefore, not only is Flaubert stripped of authorial privilege, but his account of events in *Madame Bovary* is also simply wrong.

Doumenc's thematisation of Flaubert within his rewriting of *Madame Bovary* plays with the conventions of both crime fiction and the nineteenth-century novel to unsettle notions of truth and the relationship between reality and fiction. While Flaubert's novel was partially inspired by the *fait divers* concerning of Delphine Delamare's suicide, Doumenc goes further than simply acknowledging this real-world source of inspiration by including Flaubert in a fictional world in which Yonville and all of its inhabitants really exist, rather than serving inventions in Flaubert's text. Intertextual allusions, recognisable to the informed reader, such as the biscuit-box in which Rodolphe keeps his love letters (68), now become real-world details that both Remi and Flaubert have gleaned from the testimony of witnesses. Furthermore, in the afterword, entitled "Flaubert a-t-il menti?" [Did Flaubert lie?], Doumenc makes a claim to the "truth" of his own version via a pastiche of a nineteenth-century literary convention, writing that "[v]ers la fin de sa vie [Remi] en fit une relation complète à l'un de ses amis qui la transmet à un autre; et ainsi son témoignage put être conservé." [Towards the end of his life Remi told the whole story to one of his friends who passed it on to another; in this way his account was preserved] (184). The whole of Doumenc's novel is thus presented as an eyewitness account, albeit one told at third-hand.

However, in spite of the comic demotion of Flaubert to a gullible onlooker and claims that Remi's powers of detection are superior, Doumenc's afterword serves to rehabilitate Flaubert's novel on explicitly aesthetic grounds. Emphasising Remi's dual role as fictional detective and proxy-reader of Flaubert, Doumenc concludes the afterword by claiming that Remi himself eventually read *Madame Bovary* and, despite its inaccuracies, admitted that "certaines pages en étaient belles" [some of its pages were beautiful] (186). By contrast with the whodunit's investigation, which takes a corpse as its starting point in keeping with the norms of its genre, the literary imagination of Flaubert allows him to recreate the character of Emma as a living woman, in what Doumenc's narrator calls "un mélange inextricable et cependant superbement ordonné de grandeur, de misère, de sincérité déçue, de mensonges, de réalité triste et de tristes rêves" [an inextricable but superbly ordered mixture of grandeur, misery, disappointed sincerity, lies, sad reality and sad dreams] (186). The humanity of characters such as Emma thus renders prosaic questions of means, motive, and opportunity. According to Doumenc, "[ils] n'auront pas besoin de la triste complicité des assassins de Yonville pour mourir!" [the unfortunate collusion of the murderers of Yonville is not needed for them to die] (187). Doumenc thus ends by rehabilitating a particular version of literary "truth" tending towards the universal, rather than a narrow focus on factual accuracy, or finding the correct solution to the puzzle in the whodunit.

THE EYRE AFFAIR: LITERATURE AS CRIME SCENE

Like *Contre-enquête*, Fforde's 2001 novel makes space for competing versions of literary texts, calling into question the validity of any definitive version while nonetheless confirming the importance of the original work. As noted above, Fforde takes a more playful approach to genre conventions than does Doumenc, incorporating elements of speculative fiction, horror, and comedy into his pastiche of the hard-boiled thriller. Originating in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s, the hard-boiled novel tended to feature a tough male detective, was aimed primarily at a working-class readership,¹⁷ and was often highly misogynistic. Part of the humour in Fforde's version thus rests on the juxtaposition of this "tough" American genre with a deliberately mediocre portrayal of 1980s British culture: *The Eyre Affair* is set in unexciting locations such as Swindon and Merthyr Tydfil, rather than the mean streets of a Depression-era American city. However, the novel's main genre is still readily identifiable. Fforde's detective is female and is employed by the official forces of law and order, rather than being a private eye, but she otherwise corresponds to the role of the hard-boiled detective: she is a maverick, more

17 See Smith for an account of hard-boiled novels' working-class readership.

concerned with her own code of honour than following the rules; and she is tough—a veteran of the ongoing Crimean war—but vulnerable, having lost her brother in combat.¹⁸

Fforde's blending of various types of genre fiction, alongside multiple intertextual references to the canon of English literature,¹⁹ implies a target readership able to recognise and negotiate between the codes of “high” and “popular” literature, and to enjoy the juxtaposition. This approach to reading and its pleasures is also echoed in the thematic content of the novel. Crucially for the following analysis, Fforde's is an alternate reality in which literature is the most popular form of entertainment, eclipsing film, television, and even religion in the fanatical devotion it inspires. This background is established early in the narrative through, for example, Baconians going door-to-door, in the style of Jehovah's Witnesses, trying to persuade members of the public that Francis Bacon was the *real* author of Shakespeare's plays. In another scene emphasising the popularity of “classic” literature, kids in a run-down tenement swap literary bubble-gum cards:

I reached the seventh floor, where a couple of young Henry Fielding fanatics were busy swapping bubble-gum cards.

“I'll swap you one Sophia for an Amelia.”

“Piss off!” replied his friend indignantly. “If you want Sophia you're going to have to give me an Allworthy plus a Tom Jones *as well as* the Amelia!”

His friend, realising the rarity of a Sophia, reluctantly agreed. The deal was done and they ran off downstairs to look for hub-caps. (Fforde 33)

Here, the notion of “young Henry Fielding fanatics” is comical, but the humour relies on a dual nostalgia on the part of Fforde's twenty-first-century reader, both for 1960s bubble-gum cards and for a possibly non-existent past era in which children might have valued books to the same extent as the sports teams and television programmes they depicted. The conceit of classic literature as popular culture may be seen as a riposte to models of the canon that present literature as the preserve of an informed elite, or [Arnold Bennett's](#) “passionate few”. Indeed, the door-to-door Baconians seem to respond directly to Bennett's question: “[d]o you suppose that if the fame of Shakespeare depended on the man in the street it would survive a fortnight?” (19).

In a world where literature inspires this level of passion, it is also a lucrative field for criminal activity, hence the need for “Literary Detectives” confronting forgeries, manuscript theft, and gang warfare between Surrealists and “Renaissancites”. The protagonist Next is particularly well qualified for the role of literary investigator because she is also an exceptionally talented *reader*. In a flashback early in the novel we learn that, as a child, she managed to enter the manuscript of *Jane Eyre* while on a guided tour of Haworth House, and, by distracting Rochester's horse and causing it to stumble, added nuance to the scene of his first encounter with Jane (66–8). This is, then, a world in which the power of imagination can literally transport readers into the book, though, unlike Next, most ordinary readers cannot achieve this alone. The main intrigue of the novel is thus set in motion by Next's uncle's invention of the “Prose Portal”. The machine, powered by bookworms, can open a door into a book, allowing readers to spend time immersed in their favourite fictional landscapes. However, the Portal is stolen by Next's nemesis, supernatural villain Acheron Hades, who exploits the public passion for literature by kidnapping Jane from the original manuscript of Brontë's novel. Unless his ransom is paid, the first-person narrative will end prematurely on the night of the fire set by Bertha Rochester, and all subsequent pages, in all subsequent editions, will remain blank.

Using the Prose Portal, Next does ultimately succeed in returning Jane to the manuscript, re-entering the narrative at the point just after the kidnapping occurred and allowing her to continue her narrative towards its original ending, in which—in the version of *Jane Eyre* available in Fforde's universe—she departs with her cousin St John Rivers to become a missionary. However, Next also has to track down Hades, who has taken refuge in the manuscript, hiding

¹⁸ See [Scaggs, 55–84](#) for an account of the origins and features of “hard-boiled” mode of crime fiction as a specifically American sub-genre.

¹⁹ Examples of such references in just the first few chapters include Dickens (11), Austen (12), Swift (12), and Shakespeare (15).

within the gaps in the narrative, out of sight of the first-person narrator. Fforde's depiction of *Jane Eyre* seen from the inside offers a parody of literary criticism, revealing the inner workings of the text as a kind of film-set façade. In the manuscript that Next enters, only the part visible to the reader must be fully fleshed out. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, Jane as the narrator must remain fully immersed in the fictional world in order to narrate her experiences in the first person, while all the other characters are free to do as they like as long as Jane is not present. They are also entirely aware of the structure of the plot and their role in it. For example, when Next asks Mrs Fairfax if Mr Rochester is at home, she is told that “[a]fter the fire Mr Rochester goes away for a week. That’s how it happens” (323). Irrespective of the recent kidnap of Jane and the need to protect her from the villainous Hades, in the parallel world *inside* the book, the logic of the plot reigns supreme.

Aided by the other characters, especially Rochester, who can do as he likes when not actually participating in the narrative, Next defeats Hades, but remains trapped in the manuscript. She has arranged for her colleagues to reopen the Prose Portal when they read the agreed code word, but has forgotten that *Jane Eyre* is narrated in the first person. Next’s collaborator Rochester must therefore say the words in Jane’s presence for them to appear on the page. In the interests of self-preservation, Next now sacrifices authorial intention: she must divert Jane from her original decision to leave with St John Rivers and bring her back to Rochester, as she explains:

I made it back to Ferndean and Rochester just before Jane did. I met Rochester in the dining room and told him the news; how I had found her at the Rivers’ house, gone to her window and barked: “Jane, Jane, Jane!” in a hoarse whisper the way that Rochester did. It wasn’t a good impersonation but it did the trick. I saw Jane start to fluster and pack almost immediately. (346)

The novel within Fforde’s novel now, of course, matches the one we know in the real world. Next’s intervention here also targets an aspect of Brontë’s novel that has attracted criticism from actual readers: the psychic communication between Jane and Rochester seen here from Next’s perspective. Fforde again appears indebted to Sutherland, according to whom “Rochester’s astral communication with the heroine at the end of *Jane Eyre* [...] is the most un-Brontëan thing in Charlotte Brontë’s mature fiction” (59). While Sutherland’s critique rests on his research into Brontë’s belief in the science of mesmerism, however, Fforde’s version is simpler: if the episode is un-Brontëan, it is because it has been invented by Next.

In a parody of reader-response theories, then, the narrative of *Jane Eyre* has been constructed as a front, behind which any number of alternative characters and events might be lurking. Reading is depicted here as a process of immersion, which leads to potentially radical interaction between reader and text. However, despite the liberating possibilities of reader intervention, Hades’s kidnap-ransom plot can work only because a large number of people *care* about the sanctity of the literary work. As Next’s colleagues wait with a copy of *Jane Eyre* for the code word to appear, “nearly eighty million people worldwide” (345) follow the reappearing story at the same time. Once Jane has been restored to the point at which she left the first edition, all subsequent editions update themselves in real time as her narration resumes. In Fforde’s parallel universe, the original text of *Jane Eyre* had ended with Jane building a new life with her cousin St John Rivers in India, rather than returning to marry Rochester. Furthermore, it is only due to the final showdown between Next and Hades that Thornfield Hall is burned to the ground, adding drama to the plot and bringing the novel closer to the one that Fforde’s real-world readers recognise. The Brontë Federation are therefore furious with Next: her intervention is an act of vandalism in which not only is the author’s original intention disrespected but Rochester’s mansion has also been destroyed.

However, the reactions to Next’s modification of the text are more complex than a simple opposition of authorial intention and unauthorised meddling. Throughout *The Eyre Affair*, Fforde’s characters repeatedly critique Brontë’s novel, viewing it as a flawed masterpiece let down by an ending—the departure with Rivers—they see as disappointing. As Next herself argues: “it is a crap ending. Why, when all was going so well, does the ending just cop out on the reader? Even the *Jane Eyre* purists agree that it would have been far better for them to have tied the knot” (270). Next’s accidental intervention gives readers in her world what they want, at the expense of the author’s intention. By contrast with the Brontë Federation, the splinter group “Brontë for the People”, representing ordinary readers, is delighted with the new happy ending, their

chairman explaining that “Charlotte didn’t leave the book to [The Brontë Federation]” (361).²⁰ In this articulation, both “Charlotte” and the novel itself are seen as part of a cultural heritage belonging to the readers, in which the author’s voice and the reader’s judgement are equally important. Here, Fforde’s novel reaches a similar conclusion to Doumenc’, albeit via a different route. Doumenc demotes Flaubert to the same narrative level as his reader–detective Remi, but ultimately reinstates the primacy of the source text in his intradiegetic *postface* that cites the aesthetic qualities of Flaubert’s style. Fforde’s characters are here far more directly concerned with intentionality, with both sides framing their view in terms of claims about what Brontë might have wanted. Nonetheless, in Fforde’s vision it is the uniqueness of Brontë’s authorial voice that wins out, as he also privileges aesthetic effect over thematic content. As *Next*’s new ending takes shape, one expert exclaims “it’s pure Charlotte Brontë but it *definitely* wasn’t there before!” (345). The idea of authorial intention is thus introduced by Fforde, but limited to the knowable aspect of thematic content rather than any intended aesthetic effects. Both Fforde and Doumenc ultimately suggest that the *real* value of the author’s voice is not reducible to what is on the page.

Like *Contre-enquête*, then, the *Eyre Affair* undermines the position of the author of the original work, calling into question the existence of Shakespeare and taking liberties with Brontë’s plot. However, like Doumenc, Fforde also acknowledges the centrality of the author’s voice to the continued success of the work, emphasising to a greater extent the status of canonical literature as part of a national literary heritage. In *Next*, he also provides a detective character whose position parallels that of the reader, using her first-person narrative to share privileged insider knowledge but also emphasising her status as a well-informed and talented reader of the classics. In addition to the superior reading skills displayed by *Next*, though—with which Fforde’s own readers might wish to identify—the conclusion of Fforde’s novel also privileges the responses of non-expert readers, who are by no means unskilled, but value the text primarily for the pleasure they find in reading it.

INVESTIGATING THE CANON

I have shown here how these two authors use sub-genres of crime fiction to explore contemporary modes of rereading canonical texts, using proxy-readers represented by their central detective figures. In both cases, the act of reading and that of detecting are presented as similar: readers and detectives both interpret clues in an attempt to make sense of the plot. Both texts also negotiate between an irreverent approach to novels they construct as classics—taking liberties with the plots and characters, suggesting new ways of reading the source material, and undermining the author him- or herself—and revalorising their canonical status. In this last respect my case studies are typical of the trend they exemplify. Although the mode of “investigation” initially seems likely to produce a critical reevaluation, these—and other—crime adaptations tend to end by reinscribing what they present as the enduring importance of the work under adaptation, even where a lingering ambivalence may remain. This final section will argue that the popularity since the 1990s of crime-fiction adaptations of canonical works coincides with a shift in academic debates surrounding the canon and its functions, in ways that shed light on popular reading practices. However, it will also suggest that the crime genre may be better placed to reflect some positions within the broader academic debate than others: notably, my case-study texts hint at questions of race, social class, and political capital, but do not spotlight these issues.

Writing in *The Comparatist* in 2000, Wendell V. Harris identifies the early 1990s, which saw the publication of several key theoretical works, as a “high point” in the canon debate, which continued throughout that decade and beyond (Harris, “Aligning” 9). As Frank Kermode notes in his 2001 Tanner lecture on the role of “Pleasure” in canon formation, this discussion of canonicity may be divided into two broad phases. Whereas debate prior to the 1960s had focused on which individual works and authors merited inclusion in the canon, and on which precise aesthetic grounds, he argues that, from the 1960s onwards, the focus turned to demystification of the power structures inherent in the notion of canonicity itself (Kermode,

²⁰ Fforde’s representation of tensions within fictional author societies here, particularly relating to traditional conceptions of the author’s intention pitted against attempts at perceived modernisation of the work, proved to be astonishingly prescient. In 2018, when model and actress Lily Cole was appointed to the position of “creative partner” by the Brontë Society, Nick Holland resigned from the Society, notably claiming that Emily Brontë would not have approved of the appointment. See Cain, 2018.

Pleasure 15). Harris follows Jan Gorak in dating this shift in the debate slightly later, to the late 1970s, with the publication of several key feminist texts (Harris, “Aligning” 9), while the so-called Stanford “culture wars” of the 1980s provided a further pivotal moment in this debate, with student activists calling into question the validity of an unrepresentative syllabus to stand for the whole of “Western Civilization” (see *Guillory 31–3*).

However, in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation (1993)*, John Guillory points out the difficulties of a liberal position that seeks to open up the canon in order to make it “representative”, and argues that questions of judgment, inclusion and exclusion are the wrong ones. Because canonisation can only occur in the institutional context of the school or the university, Guillory argues, it is more pertinent for a political critique of canon-formation to understand its institutional functions and the ways in which educational institutions perpetuate the existing social order by controlling access to cultural capital they deem valuable. He describes the canon as an ‘imaginary totality of works’ to which “no one” can have full access, since works cited as canonical change according to the time and context.²¹ He concludes that the distinction between “canonical” and “noncanonical” relates less to aesthetic judgements about particular works than to the institutional mechanism by which status is conferred on literary works by their inclusion in a syllabus (*Guillory, 30*).

By contrast with Guillory’s attempt to de-emphasise aesthetic judgements, Harold Bloom’s intervention into this debate with *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages (1994)* offers a self-consciously nostalgic defence of the elite nature of the canon: defining canonical authors as those who are “authoritative in our culture” (1), he cites “sublimity”, “greatness”, and “aesthetic supremacy” (2, 3, 3) as key criteria. Rejecting both a right-wing position that sought to “preserve [the canon] for its supposed (and nonexistent) moral values” (4) and a liberal rejection of the canon on social grounds, Bloom seeks to reinstate the place of the aesthetic in canon-formation. He insists in particular on the individual nature of the aesthetic experience, defending the notion of the canon as the preserve of an elite few but reframing it in terms of “the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written” rather than “a list of books for required study” (17).

Writing from a more overtly inclusive position, Kermode makes the notion of change central to his account of canonicity in his 2001 lectures, in which he updates some of his ideas from *The Classic (1975)*. Returning to the question of what makes a work canonical, he identifies pleasure, change, and chance as key factors in the survival of the individual work, but also in the purpose of the canon itself. By doing so, he is able to reinstate aesthetic concerns into the canonisation of individual works, but more generously, in terms of the aesthetic pleasure such works continue to offer their readers. According to Kermode, canonical literature is “clearly not so on account of its collusion with the discourses of power”, but rather:

we make lists, canons, of what we decide is valuable, and these, in the interests of [...] humanity, we may press on other people, our successors. Some of the reasons we give for doing so may be false or self-serving, or at any rate fallible. But the cause is a good one. And pleasure is at the heart of it. (*Kermode, Pleasure 31*)

Furthermore, noting that “[t]he text changes as the reader changes” (46), Kermode argues that both the composition of the canon and our responses to it change over time, thereby renewing the pleasure to be found in literary works by bringing them into dialogue both with later works and with our own modernity.

However, although Kermode’s emphasis on “we” and acknowledgement of the fallibility of “our” judgement may seem more inclusive than Bloom’s model of the elite individual reader, it still assumes a broad consensus in which minority voices—or those from outside a narrowly defined national or “Western” context—risk going unheard. While framing the canon as a dynamic and changing entity that responds to new modes of reading, this model thus de-emphasises the connection between the canon and power relations within and between societies. More recently, in her 2013 study *What is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon*, Ankhi Mukherjee revisits classic work on canonicity by, in part, Bloom, Kermode,

²¹ Harris, too, rejects the notion of an identifiable monolithic “Canon”, arguing in his 1991 article that “there [...] are only selections with purposes” (119); these canons may overlap or compete with each other, but they do not form a coherent or unchanging whole.

and Guillory, arguing that “the canon, and the dominant modalities in which it is received, afford a site of historical emergence through which contemporary English and Anglophone literature and literary criticism can fruitfully rethink their cultural identity and politics” (5).²² Considering the postcolonial revisiting of canonical texts in particular, she argues for a model of “modern classics” produced by a “dynamic and variable conversation” between past and present, and points out a tendency in literary criticism to “shore up the idea of literary value against mobile configurations of knowledge, technology, and expertise” (9). Her account thus engages with canonical works of the past, which appear not as (Western) models to be emulated but rather in terms of what resonance they may have for a worldwide readership today.

In this context, the investigations into canonical novels undertaken by Doumenc, Fforde, and their reader–detectives may be seen to reflect some of the key ideas in the canon debate, particularly as it was articulated throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Crucially, though, they do so in ways that echo some of the more nostalgic tendencies in this debate. In both their form and thematic content they engage in particular with the tension between a desire to undermine the authority of the canonical work and the perceived elitism of the canon, on the one hand, and the impossibility of avoiding questions of literary and aesthetic value, on the other. Crime-fiction rewritings of canonical works also raise the question of the function and purpose of the canon, doing so from an explicitly non-institutional context, in the form of a popular genre whose mass-cultural status means it is not itself canonical. These works thus pose a challenge to the notion of the canon as a matter for an intellectual or academic elite, accessible, as Bloom puts it, only to “the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers” (17). While relying on their readers’ knowledge of a shared cultural heritage, however, they also tend to evade the question of a cultural capital to which access is controlled, by positioning their source texts as already having popular appeal.²³ Fforde’s novel both highlights the exceptional talents of his reader–detective Thursday Next and emphasises the popular appeal of its source text *Jane Eyre* as well as the engagement of ordinary readers. Similarly, by placing his detective Remi on an equal footing with *both* the real reader of his own text *and* with Gustave Flaubert, Doumenc’s *Contre-enquête* suggests that all readers are potentially capable of the type of individualized response valued by Bloom and Kermode.

Placing a proxy reader figure alongside the author in his adaptation of *Madame Bovary* also allows Doumenc to playfully undermine the authority of the canonical author, blurring boundaries between the literary work and the real-world context in which it is produced and read. In addition to challenging the authority of the canon in his engagement with *Jane Eyre*, Fforde calls into question the notion of the writer’s authority in real-world engagements with his own readers, whom he encourages to submit corrections to his published works via his website. Other readers are then invited to implement online “upgrades” by physically annotating their copies with the latest version, in a parody of computing terminology that invites us to apply the interactivity of the web to the act of reading. For both Doumenc and Fforde, then, readers are active participants in the production of the literary text, and their interpretations of and responses to canonical works matter.

Authors’ choice of source texts for adaptation is also worth noting here: writers of crime-fiction adaptations almost all work with texts that are now widely considered to be canonical, both in the academy and in popular understanding. In the case of *Madame Bovary*, despite its ambiguous status on publication and its censorship in 1856–7,²⁴ Andrew Watts notes that it is now viewed by French critics as “a symbol of their country’s cultural prestige” (80), with the result that modern adaptations in literature and film often struggle to be credited with artistic merit in their own right. Similarly, despite its popularity, the contemporary critical reception of *Jane Eyre* was mixed.²⁵ However, by the late twentieth century the novel’s canonical status was established enough for it to become a key battleground in feminist and postcolonial challenges

22 While Mukherjee’s focus is on literatures written in English, her larger claims are equally relevant to French and Francophone contexts.

23 In common with the majority of other crime-fiction reworkings of canonical literature or authors, Fforde’s and Doumenc’s choice of nineteenth-century novels is comparable to the popular genre of heritage cinema throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

24 See Lacapra for an in-depth analysis of the *Madame Bovary* trial.

25 See Gilbert and Gubar, 336–8 for an account of some of the novel’s contemporary reception.

to the canon.²⁶ Indeed, Erin O'Connor notes that “[a]s a familiar, favorite book, a novel everybody always already knows, *Jane Eyre* is the perfect point of reference for nineteenth-century literary representations of empire” (237). Although less interested in questions of empire, Fforde makes a similar point in explaining his choice of *Jane Eyre*: “it is a very familiar piece of work—I think most people have a good idea that it is a romantic Victorian novel even if they haven’t actually read it” (Fforde, *Grand Central*). This is partly why the adaptations I have discussed (like others, such as the various crime versions of Austen’s novels) work as well as they do: their target audience of a reasonably literate reading public is likely to be familiar with the titles, characters, and plots of the adapted novels. The emphasis on the active role of the reader–detective thus appeals to readers’ sense of ownership of the texts, which can be experienced as part of their respective national cultures. Furthermore, this type of rewriting also draws attention to the fact that the readers of canonical texts and genre fiction are likely to be the same in many cases. In order for these texts to succeed, they must mobilise their reader’s prior knowledge of both the conventions of crime fiction and the canonical works being adapted.

As Watts points out, the adaptation of a canonical work invites us to refresh our reading of the source text, to “compare source and adaptation, and to enhance the pleasure of the reading experience” (84). Via the mode of investigation, these adaptations also invite their readers to re-evaluate what makes them canonical, albeit within a limited set of parameters. Although, as I have noted, they avoid engaging directly with postcolonial approaches that call into question their source texts’ role in building national canons, both of my case-study texts hint at oppressive power structures within the societies they depict, drawing attention to internal political hierarchies. They thereby echo aspects of the theoretical critique of power structures inherent in the process of canon-formation and interrogation of the criteria for establishing literary greatness. For Doumenc, the solution to the murder of Emma Bovary is connected to—and covered up by—the interests of a powerful elite. In Fforde, the motivation for the crimes turns out to be the interest of a global corporation in mass-producing and selling fictional weapons for the ongoing Crimean War. However, although both texts position their investigations within broader political contexts, both focus to a greater extent on questions of literary quality. Fforde in particular alludes to a model of canonisation based on the inclusion or exclusion of specific authors and works, in a debate between the villain, Hades, and Next’s Uncle Mycroft, who has thwarted Hades’ attempt to destroy *Martin Chuzzlewit* (233–4). Having initially targeted Chuzzlewit due to his hatred of “the smug little shit” during his O-level English—a nod to the role of institutions in canon-formation—Hades now threatens to target an alternative: “A book which unlike Chuzzlewit has genuine literary merits” (233). In particular, he threatens Austen and Trollope (234).

Fforde here questions the notion of literary greatness, but nonetheless presents the debate as one worth having. His novel also tends to reinstate *Jane Eyre* as a great work, worthy of continued attention and adaptation. Doumenc, too, ultimately reaffirms the enduring power of Flaubert’s novel, despite the liberties he takes with its plot and characters. In his playful *postface*, in which he accuses Flaubert of “lying” about the real circumstances of Emma’s death and of failing to do justice to the “real” personalities of his characters, he concludes that Flaubert’s position as novelist allows him scope to create a more universal kind of truth than is available to the detective: “[un pauvre flic] n’a droit qu’à la stricte vérité des faits, alors que le romancier, lui, peut à loisir inventer, rêver,—et mentir!” [a mere cop is only allowed the strict truth of events, while the novelist can choose to invent, dream—and lie!] (186). This reinstatement of the canonical source text at the end of both of these crime fiction rewritings point to a tension between the subversive power of “investigation” and the inherently conservative tendencies of the crime genre.

Indeed, despite its adaptability as a transnational genre, crime fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and its subgenres is also a conservative format, built on restricted settings, an insistence on a discoverable “truth”, and a restoration of social order at the end of the narrative. The closed world of Doumenc’s whodunit emphasises an inward-looking approach to de-hierarchising France’s literary heritage from the perspective of French readers. Fforde’s hard-

26 The best-known feminist rereading of *Jane Eyre* is that carried out by Gilbert and Gubar (336–71). Key postcolonial approaches include Spivak’s 1985 essay (see also David’s and O’Connor’s responses to it) and Sharpe’s analysis in *Allegories of Empire*, in which she argues that Brontë’s text negotiates gender roles and questions of female agency by distinguishing between Jane as an *English* woman and (metaphorical) figures of West Indian and Oriental women.

boiled pastiche is more self-consciously narrow in its concern with the canon of English literature, with its inclusion of prosaic British locations and cultural references producing a comic effect at odds with the American genre. Fforde also points towards an international readership through the inclusion of Japanese tourists, presented as careful readers who, like Thursday, are able to visit the interior of the literary text (324–5). But even this engagement with an international literary context tends not to participate in debates about the imperialist assumptions underpinning a canon constructed as national. Rather, literary heritage is presented as a marketable and exportable commodity. In this light, the nostalgic ending of both novels is reminiscent of debates about 1980s and 1990s heritage cinema, which has been considered “aesthetically and ideologically [conservative], promoting an idealistic view of the past, and turning its back on contemporary issues” (Vincendeau, xix). According to Vincendeau, the “problem” of heritage cinema is that its “concern [...] is to depict the past, but by celebrating rather than investigating it” (xviii). Doumenc’s and Fforde’s crime novels set out to investigate the canon, but end by also celebrating it, in a restoration of the status quo that is entirely in line with the conventions of their genre.

Ultimately, both novels do offer a subversive and potentially egalitarian approach to the canon through their use of the detective as a proxy for the non-academic reader, who presents a challenge to the notion of literature as a kind of cultural capital accessible only to an educated elite. Via their use of sub-genres of crime fiction, both also blur the boundaries between “high” and popular literature, emphasising readerly participation in the creation of the literary work. However, despite the inclusive potential of a detective–reader to bridge the gap between academic and popular modes of reading, the construction of the detective as “ideal” reader still tends—as do both Bloom and Kermode, albeit from ideologically different positions—to emphasise the individuality of the literary–aesthetic experience. As a result, the readerly perspective that is emphasised in both novels remains a relatively privileged one. Remi may be just starting out in his career, but his “reading” of *Madame Bovary* is informed, as I have noted above, by prior knowledge of the characters, the settings, and the social codes of the time. Meanwhile, although Next’s status as a female detective may unsettle the notorious misogyny of the hard-boiled genre, her status as a well-read and talented reader of English literature, working for a national literary police force, offers limited scope for addressing the concerns about race and colonial violence central to other recent rereadings of *Jane Eyre*. In both cases, the ideal reader is one who is embedded within a national tradition, and is more interested in preserving that tradition than challenging it.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Katie Jones  orcid.org/0000-0001-6495-9518
University of St Andrews, GB

REFERENCES

- Baron, Anne-Marie. *Romans français du 19e siècle à l'écran: Problèmes de l'adaptation*. Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2008.
- Bayard, Pierre. *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? The Murderer Who Eluded Hercule Poirot and Deceived Agatha Christie*. Translated by Carol Cosman, Fourth Estate, 2000.
- Bennett, Arnold. *Literary Taste: How to Form it*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1912.
- Berninger, Mark, and Katrin Thomas. “A Parallelquel of a Classic Text and Reification of the Fictional—the Playful Parody of *Jane Eyre* in Jasper Fforde’s *The Eyre Affair*.” *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*, edited by Margarete Rubik, and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann, Rodopi, 2007, pp. 181–96. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204477_013
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Cain, Sian. “Lily Cole responds to Brontë Society row as member who quit is branded a snob.” *The Guardian*, 4 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/04/lily-cole-bronte-society-resignation-nick-holland>. Accessed 19 April 2019.
- Christie, Agatha. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Fontana/Collins, 1957.
- David, Deirdre. “She Who Must Be Obeyed: A Response to Erin O’Connor.” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, Autumn 2003, pp. 106–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/VIC.2003.46.1.106>
- Doumenc, Philippe. *Contre-enquête sur la mort d'Emma Bovary*. Actes Sud, 2007.
- Fforde, Jasper. *The Eyre Affair*. Hodder and Stoughton, 2001.
- . *Grand Central*, <http://www.jasperfforde.com/upgrade/upgrade.html>. Accessed 7 May 2019.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Lettres de Gustave Flaubert à George Sand*, edited by Guy de Maupassant, Charpentier, 1884.

- Fullerton, Susannah. *Happily Ever After: Celebrating Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice*. Frances Lincoln, 2013.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979.
- Griffiths, Kate, and Andrew Watts. *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France: Literature in Film, Theatre, Television, Radio and Print*. University of Wales Press, 2013.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. University of Chicago Press, 1993. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226310015.001.0001>
- Harris, Wendell V. "Canonicity." *PMLA*, vol. 106, no. 1, January 1991, pp. 110–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/462827>
- . "Aligning Curricular Canons with Academic Programs." *The Comparatist*, vol. 24, May 2000, pp. 9–29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2000.0024>
- Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1972, pp. 279–99. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/468316>
- James, P. D. *Talking about Detective Fiction*. Bodleian Library, 2009.
- . *Death Comes to Pemberley*. Faber & Faber, 2011.
- Kemp, Simon. *Defective Inspectors: Crime Fiction Pastiche in Late-Twentieth-Century French Literature*. Legenda, 2006.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Classic*. Faber, 1975.
- . *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon*, edited and introduced by Robert Alter, Oxford University Press, 2004.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Madame Bovary On Trial*. Cornell University Press, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501720017>
- Mukherjee, Ankhi. *What is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon*. Stanford University Press, 2013. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9780804785211.001.0001>
- Mussnug, Florian. "Planetary Figurations: Intensive Genre in World Literature." *Modern Languages Open*, vol. 1, no. 22, 2018, pp. 1–12. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.204>. Accessed 10 July 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.204>
- O'Connor, Erin. "Preface for a Post-Postcolonial Criticism." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2003, pp. 217–46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/VIC.2003.45.2.217>
- Platten, David. "Into the Woods: The Contemporary Roman Noir as Modern Fairy Tale." *Yale French Studies*, 108, 2005, pp. 116–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/4149302>
- Rubik, Margarete, and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann, editors. *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*. Rodopi, 2007. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204477>
- Scaggs, John. *Crime Fiction*. Routledge, 2005. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203598535>
- Sharpe, Jenny. "Excerpts from *Allegories of Empire*." *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: A Casebook*, edited by Elise B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 79–103.
- Shepherd, Lynn. *Murder at Mansfield Park*. St Martin's Griffin, 2010.
- Smith, Erin. *Hard Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*. Temple University Press, 2000.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, Autumn 1985, pp. 243–61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/448328>
- Sutherland, John. *Is Heathcliff a Murderer? Puzzles in 19th-Century Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *Poétique de la prose (choix), suivi de Nouvelles recherches sur le récit*. Seuil, 1978.
- Trilling, Lionel. "In Mansfield Park." *Encounter*, September 1954, pp. 9–19.
- Troost, Linda V. "The Nineteenth-Century Novel on Film: Jane Austen." *Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, edited by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 75–89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521849624.006>
- Vincendeau, Ginette. Introduction. *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*, edited by Vincendeau, British Film Institute, 2001, pp. xi–xxxi.
- Watts, Andrew. "Fragmented Fictions: Time, Textual Memory and the (Re)Writing of *Madame Bovary*." *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France: Literature in Film, Theatre, Television, Radio and Print*, edited by Kate Griffiths, and Andrew Watts, University of Wales Press, 2013, pp. 80–113.
- Wimsatt, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, July–September 1946, pp. 468–88.

Jones
Modern Languages Open
 DOI: 10.3828/mlo.
 v0i0.274

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jones, Katie 2023 Investigating the Canon: The Reader as Detective in Reworkings of *Madame Bovary* and *Jane Eyre*. *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 1 pp. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.274>

Published: 30 January 2023

COPYRIGHT:

© 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Modern Languages Open is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Liverpool University Press.