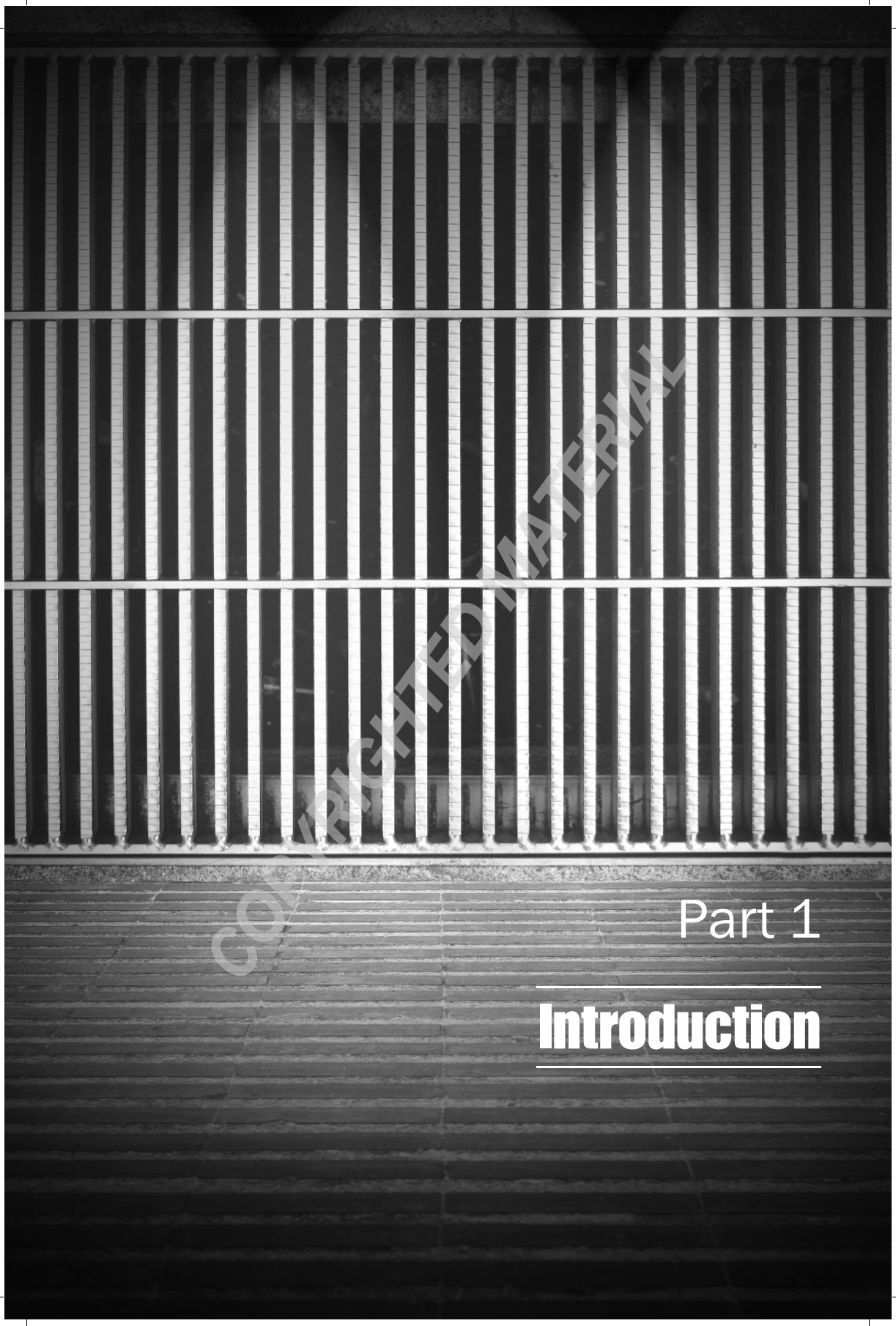

Part 1

Introduction

> *. . . [W]ith an expression of interest, [Sherlock Holmes] laid down his cigarette, and, carrying the cane to the window, he looked over it again with a convex lens.*
>
> *"Interesting, though elementary," said he as he returned to his favourite corner of the settee. "There are certainly one or two indications upon the stick. It gives us the basis for several deductions."*
>
> Doyle (2003: 6)

This short passage from Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) immediately inspires sparks of recognition for many readers. We assume almost without question that Holmes is talking here to his slightly obtuse companion and chronicler, Dr. Watson. And we automatically recall the phrase "Elementary, my dear Watson" – in fact absent from the original written texts but present in their film versions – that traditionally accompanies Holmes' detections and explanations and has passed as a commonplace saying into the (English) language. We recognize Holmes' "deductions," too, as the sign of his genius: the logical and analytic skills that enable him to coolly link cause to effect; that "marvellous faculty" (Doyle 2001: 12) that enables him, for instance, to trace the history of a watch and give detailed characteristics of its former owner, even despite its recent cleaning, in the opening chapter ("The Science of Deduction") of *The Sign of Four* (1890). The "convex lens" is, of course, part of what has become in consequent representations a magnifying glass, one of Holmes' most valued tools and the very icon of detective fiction – as instantly recognizable in his case as the deerstalker hat that has come to be synonymous with his

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professional attire and role. The cigarette, too, hints at a certain leisure-class loucheness, or bohemianism as Watson calls it, confirmed elsewhere by Holmes' use of morphine and cocaine – drugs he praises as "transcendently stimulating and clarifying to the mind" (Doyle 2001: 6).

Detective fiction has a long history and, in its modern form, is usually traced to a handful of stories by Edgar Allan Poe: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842–1843), and "The Purloined Letter" (1845). All three feature Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, the French detective whose deductive intelligence provides the model for Conan Doyle's protagonist. But it is Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes that first gave detective fiction its enormous popular currency and began to make it such a resonant part of our cultural consciousness. Following, in one way or another, in his footsteps are writers such as Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Georges Simenon, Patricia Highsmith, Henning Mankell, and Stieg Larsson (to name a significant few) – with Larsson being the first writer to sell over a million copies of his books in Amazon's Kindle electronic bookstore. This type of sales figure, and the popularity (and often quality) of the various film and television spin-offs that have followed on the heels of the publication of such authors' books, signifies the massive cultural appetite for, and importance of, crime fiction (the larger generic category to which detective fiction belongs) in the Western world from the late nineteenth century to the present.

The question immediately raised is why crime fiction should have had such a massive impact and be so popular? And why, for instance, should we "enjoy" such best-selling novels as Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), with its scenes that include Hannibal Lecter's savage removal of a policeman's face (he uses it to mask his own as he escapes imprisonment) and references to his cannibalism and shocking violence – his biting off (or so the implication is), for instance, of the tongue of a nurse who gets too close to him? In the punning relationship between Lecter's name and the French word for "reader" (*lecteur*), as well as in Lecter's own distinctive mix of refined sensitivity and predatory blood-letting, Harris may be suggesting that the line that divides the apparently "civilized" audience that consumes his books from its (normally firmly repressed) primal and savage instincts and tastes is thinner and more permeable than we think.

But there are other explanations available, too, for such readerly interest in crime and its often bloody and violently macabre manifestations – some of which complement the one just given, others quite different. Critic David Stewart (1997) writes about non-fiction crime writing in a much earlier period, examining the reportage of urban crime in mid-nineteenth-century

America. But his focus on urban life and a rapidly expanding capitalist economy offers a helpful prompt for thinking about crime fiction too, and the nature of its appeal, both in the nineteenth century and later. Stewart sees the "relish" (681) with which the crime literature of that period was consumed in terms of an ambivalence about criminality and its relation to the dominant social order. The popular appeal of such writing, he suggest, lies in the way it "eroticized urban experience" (684) – that is, provided a necessary and thrilling release from the disciplinary procedures of capitalism, the "laws and behavioral practices" (689) sustaining an increasingly regimented social order. The "exhilaration" (688) associated with criminal danger and the darker underbelly of life in the city consequently stood as a direct and exciting contrast to a daily experience "that was, for the vast majority of city-dwellers, constraining, confining, and mind-numbingly dull" (684).

But Stewart also argues that crime writing engaged quite opposite emotions too, feeding on a popular *fear* of crime and the threat to the reader's own security contained in such "narratives of violation" (682). Thus, to modify one of his remarks, "[g]ore defacing [urban and textual] space [is] still gore, and potentially the reader's own." Fears of "real urban danger" (697), then, inhabit these texts alongside the other emotions they trigger: the reader's desire for transgressive excitement balanced by her or his need for security and safety. In identifying such ambivalences, Stewart offers, perhaps, a larger lesson: that the appeal of (usually) violent crime – in both non-fiction and fiction – has a multitude of (sometimes common but often contradictory) causes. In the second part of this book, in which I offer a brief overview of the politics of crime fiction and of some of its main forms and key concerns, I extend this argument to indicate the wide range of reasons for the popularity of this type of fiction, and the complexity of their mix.

I return, though, to the violent and bloody episodes in Harris' novel and the pre-history to them implied in Stewart's essay. For Stewart also identifies in his ante-bellum subject matter another crucial, and related, tension – the way in which the qualities of rational control and logical explanation that crime reportage then, and (as I draw my own analogies) crime fiction now, associates with law-bringers – be they detectives or police – are undermined and contrasted with the descriptions of the spilling of blood, of sexual abuse, and of physical suffering that excessively inhabit many examples of such writing. He identifies a curious connective logic to this relationship as he looks at one particular newspaper story, "Horrible and Mysterious Murder in Broadway," published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on August 2, 1856. Focusing on the detailed description of the corpse in this case, "the victim of bodily opening and exposure," which

extends right down to the exact measurements of the deep razor slashes made on it, Stewart asks:

> What, if any, of the information [the descriptions of bodily disfiguration] is in fact evidence? . . . And more disturbing: Why is it important to differentiate among drops, clots, and pools [of blood]? What is the depth of a razor slash evidence of? . . . Prurient excess would seem to undermine the strict task of productive looking. More to the point, productive looking seems to lead all too irresistibly to prurient excess. (695)

How, then, are we to understand these – in Stewart's words – "nonproductive desires associated with violence" (694) and the attraction, but also the abhorrence, of readers to them? Why is so much textual time spent giving those excessively bloody details that are irrelevant to the scientific business of detection? Do such excesses again signify (for the reader) some psychological compensation for a "behavioural regime" (696) that restricts human behavior, in terms of day-to-day social practice, into its most productive channels?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and any explanation of the popularity of crime writing – and of crime fiction in particular – will be complicated, multi-faceted, and sometimes paradoxical, and will take in various types of historical, sociological, and psychological circumstance. My intention in this book is to indicate some of the elements responsible for such a popularity, but in the knowledge that there is no simple or straightforward key to be found. Stewart's focus on New York in the 1850s and the conditions and pressures of its everyday life is, though, suggestive in indicating the importance to crime writing both of the rise of the city and of the living and working conditions of those situated within a fast-modernizing Western capitalist system. This is not, however, to say that all such writing must be urban-based (for that is patently wrong) nor that a modernized Western economy is a necessary condition for its production. But it is to suggest that city life – its institutional structures, its economic life, and its policing – are vital factors in the development and importance of the genre.

Crime fiction writer Austin S. Camacho (2008) points out on the "Criminal Minds at Work" website (run by a group of crime novelists) that the present enormous popularity of the crime fiction genre is a relatively recent phenomenon: "Did you know," he asks,

> that crime novels account for somewhere between 20 and 25 percent of the fiction sold around the world? At least what's published in English. It makes you wonder why books about murder and other evils that men do are so popular . . . . The popularity of crime fiction is a fairly recent phenomenon.

> 20 or 30 years ago, you didn't see crime novels on the bestseller list. Today they regularly account for half of it. But what accounts for this love of mystery fiction?

We are reminded here that the appeal of popular fictional genres changes in response to particular historical circumstances. This is true both of novels and films, with – in that latter case – Hollywood centrally involved in such a process. Thus, the western, for example, was at the peak of its popularity from the late 1940s to the early 1960s – a period in which the belief that it had been white America's historical destiny to spread westward across the continent, with a continued mission (both home and abroad) to defend and protect liberty, family, and democracy against whatever outside threat might appear, still (mostly) retained its currency. In turn, horror fiction, and particularly film, saw a period of ascendancy in the 1970s and 1980s, a period when the promise of American society was undermined by a whole series of cultural and political tensions, and when the sanctity and importance of the family (taken for granted in the western), its patriarchal assumptions, and its role in maintaining the status quo were subject to searing critique. Clearly the relationship between social and political realities on a transnational (as well as purely North American) scale and the changing popularity of generic tastes in fiction and film is a complex business and, in considerable part, beyond the scope of this book. The present popularity of crime fiction cannot, however, be divorced from such factors.

If I were to start to identify some of the reasons for such an upsurge, I would point to a whole range of factors concerning our (as readers) contemporary sense of identity and social agency; our understanding of gender, both masculinity and femininity, and the roles we attribute to each; our fears and vulnerabilities as far as our physical bodies are concerned; our larger sense of the social networks that position us, and the relationship accordingly played out between individual autonomy and the power of the state; our attitudes to lawlessness and the law, and the relationships of both to the greater social compact and our awareness of the tensions and injustices that exist there; and our anxieties about the power of officialdom and its supervisory authority. What I basically suggest here is that crime fiction confronts the problems of the everyday world in which we live as directly as any form of writing can. It allows its readers – though sometimes indirectly and obliquely – to engage with their deepest social concerns, their most fundamental anxieties about themselves and their surrounding world. This engagement, though, can vary in intensity, and vary too in any explicit recognition by the reader of its presence.

At its most basic level, crime fiction works as a highly accessible fictional form and one that functions best in the grip it holds on its reader in terms of basic narrative structure. Who is the criminal and how will he or she get caught? Will the victim – where a living victim is involved – escape the criminal's clutches? How will the detective or police team solve the mystery established in the text? For many readers any further social or cultural resonance a text may have will remain below their conscious radar and unexplored – and none the worse for that. As a critic, however, my intention is to explore those further levels, (hopefully) to assist those who read this book to see something more of the cultural value and importance of the genre.