

Ellen Burton Harrington, 'Nation, identity and the fascination with forensic science in Sherlock Holmes and *CSI*.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10:3 (2007): 365-82

Forensic crime fiction has emerged as a significant sub-genre in the last two decades, given impetus by the work of Patricia Cornwell, who published her first forensics-focussed novel in 1990. Nevertheless, academic discussions of imagined forensic science in fictional contexts have taken an historical view, most persuasively in Ronald R. Thomas's *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (1999). Harrington's article can be placed within the critical frameworks created by Thomas, and extended in some significant work on Cornwell's fiction by Rose Lucas (2004). Harrington bridges much of the twentieth century's interest in emerging sciences of identity-detection by placing in dialogue the crime fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle and the procedural forensic television franchise, *CSI*. In reading these very different fictions Harrington aims to investigate and elucidate the importance of (fictionalised) forensic science in discovering, determining and constructing individual and, by extension, national identities.

One of the key problems with the article, however, is its failure to attend to the existing critical scholarship, and thereby the various critical consensuses, on crime fiction as a genre of literary writing. For example, Harrington lacks a genre-consciousness in her reading of *CSI* as an example of the police procedural. Her claim that this genre's uniqueness (I would argue it is a sub-genre of crime fiction) is the enactment of a conservative ideology designed to restore order through organised detection, forgets that similar motivations can be seen at work in many examples of crime fiction, from Agatha Christie's Poirot novels to Chandler's Philip Marlowe series, all of which reclaim order from the chaos of crime by submitting 'clues' to rational analysis.

It is, though, in her reading of the role of science in the Sherlock Holmes stories that Harrington is most limited. Arguing that Holmes' scientific training, his investigations into 'trace evidence' (tobacco ash, the influence of trade on the human body), and his employment of a scientific rationalism in his criminal deductions, are all essential ingredients of Doyle's fiction is hardly unique. Indeed Thomas has done the finest work in this area, but many critics of the Holmes stories make the same claims as Harrington does here, and with greater attention to the impact of science on the construction of various identities (personal, national, and imperial).

More productively, Harrington offers a reading of *CSI* as a fictional narrative dealing with the role of forensic science within postmodernity; with the clash between the identity-securing forensic material (such as DNA) on the one hand, and the fragmentation and elusiveness of postmodern identity politics on the other. In a useful discussion of a single episode of *CSI*, focussed on gender re-alignment surgery, Harrington argues that forensic science reveals a privileging of the ever-more embodied scientific 'clue'. While gender surgery can indeed embody the male as female, DNA will reveal the falsity of this apparent embodiment of biological sex, although not, of course, the socialised gender of the individual under discussion. In this way, forensic science offers a truth that cannot be found by normalised vision while at the same time denying the truth of an individual's ideological identity.

In her concluding remarks Harrington applies this understanding of forensic science as the gaze that penetrates to the truth of identity to national politics. Making a case for the similarity between *CSI* and the Sherlock Holmes stories, Harrington argues that, like its predecessor, *CSI* promotes a comforting safety in science, a safety imbued by the belief that scientific knowledge can reveal the hidden dangers of society to its custodians, the scientists. Here, then, we have the scientist as hero (or heroic detective), a position that elides (as, unfortunately, does this article) the more complex representations of science and the scientist in both the late nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

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