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Beatrix Hesse. *The English Crime Play in the Twentieth Century.* Crime Files. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, vi + 290 pp., 1 illustr., \$ 69.99.

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In a 2014 episode of *Toast of London*, a highly successful Channel 4 sitcom, protagonist Steven Toast, a dim-witted London-based actor, joins the cast of legendary stage-play *The Moose Trap*, which is, of course, modelled on Agatha Christie's successful West End whodunit, *The Mousetrap*. When Toast accidentally spoils the play's ending during an interview, the play soon finds itself without an audience, which leads to some of the geriatric cast members literally dying on stage.

Toast's ill-fated foray into the world of the crime-play concisely summarises several prejudices that surround the genre: that it is essentially a relic of the Golden Age of detective fiction, that it breeds artistic mediocrity, and that once you take away its denouement, there is not much left to attract an audience (or, for that matter, an interested reader). It is to the great credit of Beatrix Hesse's meticulous study of the English crime play in the 20th century that it subjects this "thoroughly secularized genre" (2) to an in-depth analysis and refutes several of these prejudices in the process. The book consists of three major parts, the last of which (195–237) is dedicated to two case studies on how classic detective fiction is adapted for the stage – a section that highlights, amongst other things, Agatha Christie's well-documented battle with her detective, Hercule Poirot (whom she removed from several stage adaptations of her own novels).

However, the real 'meat' lies in the first two sections, which amount to three quarters of the whole book: While the first part (19–93) sketches the history of the genre, starting with the final days of Victorian melodrama, the second one (95–193) presents a poetics of the genre and contains chapters on individual aspects as diverse as the crime play's typical stage sets, character configurations, the role of violence, and various subgenres. Such an approach runs the risk of producing redundancies, as the author inevitably has to trod over the same ground twice in a few cases, but these occasions are quite rare (they include, for example, two descriptive accounts of the identical murder scene in a play by Anthony Shaffer [cf. 79 and 159]) and they neither hurt Hesse's argument nor do they in any way diminish her impressive work. The study takes in more than 200 full-length plays, and dedicates equal attention to canonical (or at least well-known) authors like Agatha Christie, Edgar Wallace, and Joe Orton, as well as lesser-known or somewhat forgotten playwrights like R. C. Sherriff and Lesley Storm.

The first part lays down a narrative of the genre's coming-of-age and overall development, outlining in detail how the crime play emancipated itself from Victorian melodrama and established itself as the legitimate heir to the comedy of manners during the 1930s, before it gave rise to new forms of presenting crime on stage, especially after the abolishment of theatre censorship in Britain in 1968. This section of the book is arguably the more compelling one to read, aptly demonstrating the author's skill to look beyond well-known country-house mysteries and crime farces of the *Arsenic and Old Lace* variety. Hesse also excels at revealing various layers of social subtexts in the crime play, which has so often been denigrated as "a minor derivative form" (15): The author convincingly shows that the post-war crime play bears the imprint of social reform as much as any play by Harold Pinter or John Osborne, and her nuanced take on the self-referential, postmodern comedy thriller (a subgenre for which Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth* proved ground-breaking) and its considerable skepticism towards the kind of positivistic optimism which tends to be associated with traditional detective fiction (78) amounts to a very compelling argument.

While the second part of the book may not lend itself as naturally to being read in one sitting, it is no less commendable, for it serves as a comprehensive reference guide and will prove fruitful not only for academics reading up on the genre. Hesse ponders individual examples, making a good job of boiling the plays down to key information without resorting to lengthy, tiring plot synopses, and she never loses sight of the bigger picture. Although some aspects of the genre's various media transformations are, occasionally, a bit under-theorised (Hesse's thoughts on the mechanisms of suspense, for instance, resort to Alfred Hitchcock's apodictic, yet hopelessly outdated and somewhat arbitrary thoughts on the matter [cf. 207–208]), there are many insightful observations to be found here, many of which will make her readers curious to check out the plays for themselves: that, unlike in the detective novel, the figure of the detective frequently plays second fiddle to the murderer on stage, that the stage apparatus frequently depends upon typical props like keys and letters, and that the gallery of culprits reveals a surprising "abundance of doctors" (146). In assessing her detailed findings, Hesse does not shy away from quantification, frequently giving us quite detailed percentages (for example when it comes to the frequency of the crime play's various subgenres [189–192]). The encyclopaedic qualities of the book are supplemented by the index, though the latter's suitability as a reference guide is a little diminished by the fact that it lists primary texts under the names of their authors. This will not be particularly helpful if you want to read up on well-known crime plays but do not know the names of their authors: Nearly everyone has heard of *Wait Until Dark* or *Dial 'M' for Murder*, but few will know that both were written by Frederick Knott.

The only chapter which falls somewhat short of the overall excellent quality of the book is the four-page coda, which seems a little too determined to prove just how indebted the contemporary literary scene is to the crime play tradition, making a bit too much of intertextual links such as the topical overlap between Patrick Hamilton's frequently revived play *Gas Light* and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise (239).

Given the sheer substance of her book and the quality on display, however, this is a truly minor quibble: Beatrix Hesse's book is an important contribution to the existing scholarship on crime literature and a very well-written and thorough work that will prove valuable for years to come.