



## *Under British Eyes: The Complex Fortune of Italian Crime Fiction*

(Mirna Cicioni & Nicoletta Di Ciolla (eds), *Differences, Deceits and Desires. Murder and Mayhem in Italian Crime Fiction*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008, 228 p., ISBN 978-0-87413-051-5)

by Nicoletta Vallorani

At the beginning of an essay devoted to Fruttero & Lucentini's *La donna della domenica*, Franco Manai self-assuredly states that "The Italian cultural establishment of today accepts that the distinction between low and high culture is blurred. In the seventies, however literary production was seen as a pyramid, with lyric poetry at the top, quality novels a little lower and, at the lowest level, all the more or less literary genres that were accessible to the wider public, genres which were ipso facto *Trivialliteratur*". Though probably a bit optimistic and rooted in a transitory condition of the Italian market and in equally impermanent tastes shown by the readers, this statement is somehow shared by the authors of the essays in this volume and it collates different works on very different authors, all gathered under the label of Italian crime fiction. The collection results from a conference held at the Monash University Prato Centre in the summer 2004, and it seems to stem from the fertile ground of a very deep and articulated discussion. The starting point and then the condition triggering the debate, though not openly stated but clearly implied, is the obvious fortune of Italian crime fiction and noir in very recent times. The genre has also fuelled the debate on literature and pushed groups of writers to gather to show their loyalties and debate on the kind of crime fiction towards which they are oriented. The Gruppo 13 – mentioned and analyzed in this volume by Angela Barwig – was probably the first and the most famous one, and it included writers such as Machiavelli – an inspiring model for all of us – and Lucarelli – the first to become very popular and to deploy his storytelling talent also on the television screen. La Scuola dei duri, obviously not mentioned in Barwig's essay (who decides to focus on Bologna,) was the corresponding association in Milan, founded by the glamorous and very witty Andrea G. Pinkets, and including P. Colaprico, S. Di Marino, Andrea Carlo Cappi and many others. In Milan associations, creative writing groups, reading groups mostly gathered around La Sherlockiana, the bookshop run by



Tecla Dozio and animated by Carlo Oliva<sup>1</sup>, that was the foyer where many novelists and crime writers met<sup>2</sup>. All of that happened in the 90s, but there is reason to believe that this vitality was a late result of the relevance given in 1979 to a novel in particular: *La donna della domenica* (1979), by Fruttero e Lucentini. As Manai points out in his essay on the matter, the novel was not published – as one might have expected – in Giallo Mondadori, but appeared in hard cover and among mainstream literature. This determined a different consideration both on the part of the reading public and by critics. Manai is perfectly right in stressing the double nature of the novel, that develops around a murder triggering the usual mechanism of investigation, identification of suspects, red herrings and final revelation. Nevertheless the novel also exhibits a literary care and sophistication that had been very unusual in Italian crime fiction before. In so doing, *La donna della domenica* opens the way to a new consideration of the genre – namely crime and noir fiction – in the context of Italian contemporary fiction. As Eco maintains and Cicioni and DiCiolla repeat, “It is usually accepted, however, that as a genre, crime fiction belongs to geographic and cultural areas different from Italy, and that French and the Anglo-American works provided the models upon which Italian authors initially constructed their stories” (1). *Differences, Deceits and Desires* have a doubtless merit: it succeeds in identifying an Italian tradition in this field, adopting flexible critical tools to rebuild the hidden horizon of Italian crime fiction. In their introduction, Cicioni and Di Ciolla point out the “embryonic forms” of this genre in Italy as early as in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, spotting some authors (F.Mastriani, C.Arrighi, E.De Marchi, C.Invernizio) that anticipate the foundation of Libri Gialli in 1929 and the sharp focus given to the psychological aspect of crime by such authors as Valardo, De Angelis and D’Errico. And it is true that, right from the beginning, special attention has been given to books that, while highlighting the pervasive presence of crime in everyday life, remoulded the traditional formulaic structure to make it suitable to a kind of narrative that would later go under the lucky label of noir. After the censorship and then closure imposed in 1941, Gialli Mondadori re-appeared in a new shape and was soon soaked with the urge to tackle, through the genre, social issues that were cogent in postwar Italian reality. Gadda, Sciascia, Scerbanenco, Veraldi actually anticipated a kind of narrative able to leave behind the standard formulae of the genre to acquire a degree of literary elaboration and stylistic sophistication never known before.

When the Italian noir developed, as an offshoot of the “giallo”, it became quite clear that this subgenre, more sharply focussed on the underlying chaos of human existence, was to become the main reference for the newest generation of Italian crime writers, apparently more successful than the previous one probably because easier to

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<sup>1</sup> *Storia sociale del giallo*.

<sup>2</sup> Tecla Dozio also edited the book series “Impronte,” which was published by Todaro editore and was not specifically linked to Gruppo 13 and la scuola dei duri. It simply collected writers and friends gravitating around la Sherlockiana. In the years following its foundation, the Gruppo 13 published several anthologies (including *Delitti sotto l'albero*, *Capodanno nero* and *Epifania di sangue*)



circumscribe. Such novelists as Lucarelli, Garlaschelli, Rigosi, Salvatori, Fois, Comastri Montanari, De Cataldo, Verasani and many others seem to share a common ground – the ability to combine psychological insight and the interest for very spiky political issues. Even so, the galaxy of contemporary Italian crime writers is quite articulated and difficult to circumscribe. And quite sensibly Cicioni and Di Ciolla devote Part One of their volume to a number of authors that, though not primarily engaged in crime fiction, decide to use the genre's tradition and formulae because they prove suitable to the kind of story they want to tell. So, in chapter/case 1, Wilson focuses on *La testa perduta di Damasceno Montero* (1997). Tabucchi, the author of the novel, is not strictly considered a crime fiction writer; but at the same time, the novel's exploitation of the formulae of crime fiction is undeniable. Tabucchi uses "the conventional plot of the murder mystery to produce a double narrative, a narrative that, in recounting the murder investigation, also gradually unveils the narrative recounting the crime". The same kind of approach is adopted by Hope in tackling Tornatore's *Una pura formalità*. Starting on the assumption that "Authors have to strike a balance between respecting a series of established narrative expectations and ensuring that their work is sufficiently innovative to push the genre's boundaries into uncharted territory", Marai develops a close, very effective analysis of the film by Tornatore, perfectly outlining the pits and falls in which you may stumble when, though not familiar with the formulae of the genre and the expectations of the public, you decide to take the challenge of writing/filming a crime narrative. If "the detective genre is characterized by schemes and formats that induce a pleasurable sensation of familiarity for readers", Hope is perfectly right: though apparently posited as a detective narrative, *Una pura formalità* fails to comply with some basic genre conventions, often requiring an excessive deductive 'leap' from viewers. This actually alienated spectators, who were actually unable "to develop the familiarity with characters that is a prerequisite for engaging with most narratives and, particularly, with crime fiction narratives". Obviously enough, the position taken in this case by Hope is supported by Eco's critical assumptions on familiarity and sharing as the most relevant features marking the relationship between author and reader in genre, and crime fiction in particular. Eco's very successful experience is mentioned as a good example of the relevance of traditional formulae in writing a very good, stylistically refined and empathically effective giallo. In Chapter/case 3, Stauder shows the many, obvious references that may be found in *Il nome della rosa* (1980), at same time pointing out the skills Eco deploys in unraveling his perfect awareness of the formulae of crime fiction and his scholarly ability to combine them with an equally deep knowledge of mainstream literature. Though in a different perspective, the same goes for Camilleri and his fake villain Commissario Montalbano. According to Eckart, Camilleri's literary skills may easily be compared to Pirandello's and Sciascia's. The three of them by the way, "were all born in the same province, within twenty kilometers of each other".



Eckart also adds another obvious debt, declared by Camilleri himself: Gadda as the novelist making it possible to think of linguistic experimentation as a possible feature of crime fiction. Sciascia is of course another very relevant reference. Though included in the sectin devoted to "Regional specificity", this author is doubtlessly posited as one of the most relevant models and paradigms for Italian crime writers. In analyzing his last novel, *Il Cavaliere e la morte*, Morrison maintains, as Mark Chu suggested elsewhere, that there is continuity between this last work and *Il giorno della civetta*: major features recur, the structure of the plot tends to be the same, the basic issues do not change. Even so, there also appears what Morrison defines "one radical shift in outlook", which simply is the mark left by time and history on the years between the first novel and the last.

In its survey through unknown territories, *Differences, Deceits and Desires* also includes a section on feminist, lesbian and queer Italian crime fiction. Though I'm not sure there is enough material, in terms of published books, to justify all of these labels, I found it very useful to introduce them in order to give visibility to authors, novels and issues that are normally ignored in the Italian context. Maraini, Cagnoni, La Spina, Garlaschelli, Ferrante, Salvatori, Comastri Montanari, Vinci: all these names are mentioned and variously analysed in Cicioni's and Luciano's essays, the first one comparing Maraini's *Voci* with the very unfaithful filmic adaptation that Giraldi drew from it; and the second one concerns basically Fiorella Cagnoni, but also develops a discourse on Italian women writing crime fiction and noir. While pointing out that "Within the English-language literary tradition, 'lesbian crime fiction' is a subgenre of 'women's crime fiction' that has been developing since the mid-1980s and which is usually discussed in terms of the way its texts question or subvert established gender and genre conventions", she also maintains that "Within the tradition of the Italian *giallo*, as yet there is nothing identifiable as an Italian 'lesbian crime subgenre', or a 'feminist' crime subgenre. Women writers, although represented in Italian crime fiction since its very beginning".

Finally Di Ciolla focuses on Gianni Farinetti's novels, adopting a very specific critical perspective and pursuing, as usual, a very tight line of reasoning to show how, in contemporary Italian crime fiction, the historical models of Anglo-american origin are remoulded in the light of some original and very Italian items: "Amongst them, the ability to address sensitive issues and to provide a dispassionate and critical reflection on society's past and present state, something that non-genre fiction finds difficult to do, is perhaps the most significant, allowing the crime genre to perform the role traditionally assigned to investigative journalism". Farinetti in particular (but also Maraini, Ammanniti, Garlaschelli, Mazzucco) tends to focus his attention on familiar bonds in order to unveil highly problematic relationships inside the family itself, that is often given as a "microcosm where the unbound power of affective ties can supersede even the most basic principles of democratic coexistence".



Two more chapters/cases conclude the volume, slightly diverging from the main line of reasoning and providing two samples of foreign gaze on the Italian setting as crime scene. Scagg's approaches to Michael Dibdin and his zen's novels and Horsely focus on Mr Ripley and Hannibal Lecter open a new window for further debate, presumably to be articulated, maybe, in the tradition of crime fiction, in Volume II of the same series.

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Nicoletta Vallorani  
Università degli Studi di Milano  
[nicoletta.vallorani@unimi.it](mailto:nicoletta.vallorani@unimi.it)