

Karen Ferreira-Meyers  
University of Swaziland

**Plochocki (Maria), *Body, Letter and Voice. Constructing Knowledge in Detective Fiction*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010, 213 p. ISBN:978-3-631-56383-0**

In this 29th Volume of the Peter Lang Series *Literary and Cultural Theory*, entitled *Body, Letter and Voice*, Maria Plochocki sets out to critically approach the detective genre in order to try and further legitimize it in light of what David Trotter wrote in *Theory and Detective Fiction* about detective fiction, namely that it "has become the most frequently and the most intensively theorized of all popular genres" (1991: 66). She does so by focusing on three major aspects: in the "Non Habeas Corpus" chapter (p. 21-75), the author analyses selected detective novels of Edgar Allan Poe, Ruth Rendell, Dashiell Hammett and Colin Dexter in view of the presence or not of a dead body in their literary works; in the next chapter, published under the name of "Colin Dexter's Indebtedness to Epistolary Fiction" (p.79-134), Plochocki continues her quest of the epistemological value of detective fiction and, in the last chapter, "Epistemology through Heteroglossia: Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse Novels", Bakhtin's theory is applied to postmodern crime novels.

In her introduction (p.7-20), the author gives a concise overview of some of the contemporary issues of the often dismissed genre. Seen as not "serious" enough, the detective genre has had to prove its literary validity since its inception. "[C]redited with a certain equalizing or democratizing ability" (p.9), crime fiction has, traditionally, centred around death, detection, victim, body and deciphering of the mystery. Looking at selected Colin Dexter novels such as *The Wench is Dead*, *The Way Through the Woods*, *Last Seen Wearing*, *Secret of Annexe 3*, *Last Bus to Woodstock*, *The Daughters of Cain* and *The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn*, Plochocki uses the three key words of her title, body, letter and voice, to guide her analysis of the pursuit of knowledge. The author traces knowledge construction, linked to value and significance, of society's cultural codes from the presence or absence of a dead body, the clues that can be deduced from epistolary fiction incrustated in some detective stories in which, often, multiple voices, taking the reader from the individual to the collective, are at play through the Bakhtinian concept of *carnival*.

Plochocki has succeeded in her attempt to counterbalance the remaining reluctance toward and dismissal of the detective fiction genre by literary critics. She offers a new approach to the intertwining of scientific and moral issues and advances at stake in postmodern crime novels. The pursuit and reconsideration of knowledge which borrows heavily from semiotics is still at the centerstage of the detective novel, but, while in the traditional stories, through an identification with the detective, the reader could look forward to a comprehensive, logically deducible solution, this situation has significantly changed in the postmodern, metaphysical detective story (the term is borrowed from Merival and Sweeney, 1999: 1): "[t]he

detective's apparent inability to decipher the mystery (except solipstistically, in terms of himself, his perceptions, and his mistaken assumptions) inevitably casts doubt on the reader's similar attempt to make sense of the text" (*ibid.* p.2). In short, the newer crime stories such as the Inspector Morse series raise profound questions about "narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge" (p.15).

The only negative aspect of her study, apart from some minor typographical errors, is the repetitive nature of the author's write-up (e.g. pages 145, 148 and 200 in which large paragraphs repeat already clearly expressed ideas).

While theoretical underpinnings brought to the fore by Tzvetan Todorov (1977), Brian McHale (1987), David Trotter (1991), J.K. van Dover (1994), Malmgren (1997), Patricia Merivale and Susan E. Sweeney (1999) have certainly done their part in characterizing and valorizing detective fiction, further practical examples of studies of the genre such as Plochocki's analysis of Dexter's crime novels are always welcome.