

CRIME THRILLER – AN EVER ALLURING GENRE

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Abstract

The paper looks into various aspects and the reasons why crime thriller genre continues to charm the readers across the globe. Though 'genre' began as an absolute classification system of literary texts, it has now become all the more fluid and accommodating with new definitions and conventions have emerged over time. Definitions apart, thriller continues to mesmerize and the readers are loving it more than ever before.

Key Words: genre, thriller, romance

Storytellers have always employed suspense and adventure to thrill and captivate their audiences. Homer's epic Greek poem *The Odyssey*, for example, features monsters, tragic plot twists, and narrow escapes as the hero, Odysseus, struggles to return to his home. It is one of the oldest stories in the Western world and is regarded as an early prototype of the thriller genre. The advent of print media, followed by the new storytelling technologies of the 20th century, allowed for a wide diversification of subjects, formats, and genres in fiction. Among the popular narrative forms arising from this media expansion was the thriller genre. We take a brief look at what exactly is the definition of the thriller genre.

Simply speaking, a thriller is a novel, play, or movie with an exciting plot, typically involving crime or espionage. Daniel Chandler, famous British semiotician, says:

“Conventional definitions tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts which are regarded as belonging to them.” [1]

According to David Morrell, a Canadian-American novelist and co-president of International Thriller Writers Organization “It applies to a variety of types: the legal thriller, the spy thriller, the action-adventure thriller, the medical thriller, the police thriller, the romantic thriller, the historical thriller, the political thriller, the religious thriller, the high-tech thriller, etc. New types are constantly being invented. What gives them their common ground is the intensity of the emotions they create, particularly those of apprehension and exhilaration, of excitement and breathlessness. By definition, if thrillers do not thrill, they aren't doing their job. Sometimes, they build rhythmically to a rousing climax.” [2]

Crime fiction centers its plot on the perpetration of a crime. There are two main subgenres of crime fiction: detective fiction and true crime. True crime focuses its story on the crime scene and the criminal mind. Lurid crime scenes, graphic violence, con games, organized crime, and the criminal underworld are all familiar elements in true crime fiction. Detective fiction, on the other hand, involves “detection” of a crime. Detective fiction can be a subgenre of both mystery and crime fiction, depending on the type of characters doing the sleuthing, and the story's emphasis on the

“mystery” vs. the “crime”. Sub-genres of detective fiction include hard-boiled, noir, and police procedurals.

There is often overlapping of the three genres with thrillers are constantly linked with mystery and suspense. They are, however, slightly different from each other. Of course, there is an element of thrill in each of these genres but mystery and suspense deal usually with ‘whodunit’ kind of crimes where the protagonist (detective, amateur sleuth etc.) tries to find out clues and the readers get to know the culprit as they go along in the story. [3]

The Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson is considered a pioneer of the thriller genre, releasing his highly successful novels *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped* in the 1880s. In the decades that followed, writers such as John Buchan, Bram Stoker, and Agatha Christie crafted thrillers in the spy, horror, and mystery traditions, respectively. The unquestioned master of the thriller on film was director Alfred Hitchcock, whose name was synonymous with the thriller genre for most of the 20th century. Hitchcock expertly added elements of comedy, paranoia, or horror in classics such as *North by Northwest*, *Vertigo*, and *Psycho*.

Why does crime thriller remain hugely popular genre?

Unlike the Shakespearean tragedies wherein the protagonist hails from an elite (or a royal) family and is a towering personality in his state or country, the hero in a crime thriller is essentially a common ordinary man, a guy next door who is pitted against villains determined to destroy him, his country, or the stability of the free world. The fact that everyone can relate to this guy in some way or the other makes this genre highly popular.

While the range of human emotions and experiences can be explored in virtually any genre, there's something about crime novels that makes them compelling. Crime novels are so popular and gripping because the events they describe could actually occur. With some variation, the experiences they describe could happen to any of us. The chance you'll come across a ghost, be transported to another planet, or have some paranormal experience is really quite remote. The events in Sci-fi fiction don't seem to be within the realm of possibility.

However, you could very well be the victim of some criminal's violent intentions, or end up being the target of extortion or threats. Any of us could unintentionally run afoul of the law, or become embroiled in some criminal conspiracy while unaware of the snake pit into which we've fallen. These events can actually happen. In other words, crime novels tap into the prospect of the *possible* which makes them even more compelling and frightening. These things could actually occur. Fear or the possibility of evil drives the popularity of these novels.

Part of the popularity of thrillers comes from not only what their stories are about, but also how they are told. One can always associate 'thriller' with a certain pace. Non-stop action, plot twists, settings that are both vibrant and exotic, and an intense pace that never lets up until the nail-biting climax make thriller highly exciting.[4]

All the vices - greed, lust, avarice, revenge, cowardice - run rampant in crime and thriller novels. Yet, it's vicarious, so the tension, anxiety and outright fear occur to someone else -- not to us. We can live it through a character's experiences, not own. That makes it tolerable -- even enjoyable. We can pull back from the tension or horror anytime we want, unlike romance which, despite having 'emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending', leaves the reader with a heavy heart and a lump-in-your-throat feeling and the reader takes time to get out of it.

Then there is cultural side to genre formulas. John G. Cawelti, a pioneer in the study of literary genre, states "However, we will often find important differences in the formula as it moves from one culture or from one period to another. For example, the gunfighter Western of the 1950's is importantly different from the cowboy romances of Owen Wister and Zane Grey, just as the American spy stories of Donald Hamilton differ from the British secret agent adventures of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene..." He goes on saying "Formulas, however, are much more specific: Westerns must have a certain kind of setting, a particular cast of characters and follow a limited number of lines of action. A Western that does not take place in the West, near the frontiers, at a point in history when social order and anarchy are in tension, and that does not involve some form of pursuit, is simply not a Western." [5] So is the case with *romance*. The idea of love in the east, for instance, is quite different from that in the western world. There is this 'virgin romance' in

many parts of Asia which, on the other hand, may not be exciting and alluring for the European or American readers at all. It is quite a rare idea in popular romance fiction.

“What, though, of the sexually unawakened hero? Is there a “type” for the male virgin in popular romance? At first glance, this figure is perhaps a rarity, both in fiction and in scholarship. Many current studies of the popular romance hero, for example, focus on the “alpha male” hero, a figure who tends to be as sexually experienced as he is powerful, masterful, and—at least as the novel begins—emotionally reserved.” [6] Even in the UK, where romance/erotica novels made a roaring business in 2012, people preferred to buy the books online as they were shy and embarrassed to go and buy the books from the stores. [7]

Emotions and sentiments involved with *romance* genre may vary from culture to culture. Love or falling in love is natural and a basic instinct. Two young people can fall in love anywhere in the world but the circumstances that follow, for instance, are completely different in the Indian subcontinent where girls are usually brought up with a patriarchal mindset. Thriller, however, cuts across regions, religions and cultures.

Of course, there is this page-turning, heart-racing element of suspense. Will this brilliant and bold bad guy (who we admire, despite his crimes) really get away, or be brought to justice? (Think of *The Day of the Jackal* by Frederick Forsyth). Will this flawed detective prevail, despite his or her shortcomings? Will a thriller novel's protagonist survive the horrendous experiences described in the book? [8]

Many characters in thriller fiction are larger-than-life. We are mesmerized by these characters on two levels. For one thing we wish we were as funny, as brave, and as strong as the heroes in the novels we read. We want to be like this beautiful heroine. We want to be the witty, mysterious lover. We want to be the brave detective who saves the world, who protects the family, who kills the villain. But we also relate to these characters because somewhere inside we believe we really are funny, brave and strong. Or, we would have been, if we'd been put to the test as the hero was. We put ourselves into the hero's skin as we read. We experience what he experiences, and we come to believe we are just as good and just as brave. (Jack Reacher in any Lee Child novel, for instance). These characters draw the reader inexorably into their spheres. The reader is "there"

amidst the danger, pulse-pounding exploits, or the nerve-racking chase to a rocket-driven conclusion.

Because thrillers have so many diverse possibilities, there is something for everyone -- and especially for readers who love action. There are always at least two or three thrillers -- if not more -- on the best seller list every week. Among UK's top hundred bestselling books of all time, 'The Da Vinci Code' ranks first. It is a crime/thriller/adventure novel. Publishers in India, too, have experienced a rise in the sale of thriller novels. Jason Burke, a journalist associated with The Guardian (UK), in his report published in October last year, says:

"Some thrillers sell more than 100,000 copies, a huge number in a country where, despite its size, relatively few books are bought. They combine swift-moving plots that stretch that bounds of credibility, some violence, very simple language and occasional sex scenes that are explicit by conservative local standards. Enough are now being published for a series of sub-genres to emerge: set in the worlds of crime, banking, journalism, politics and, of course, war." [8]

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