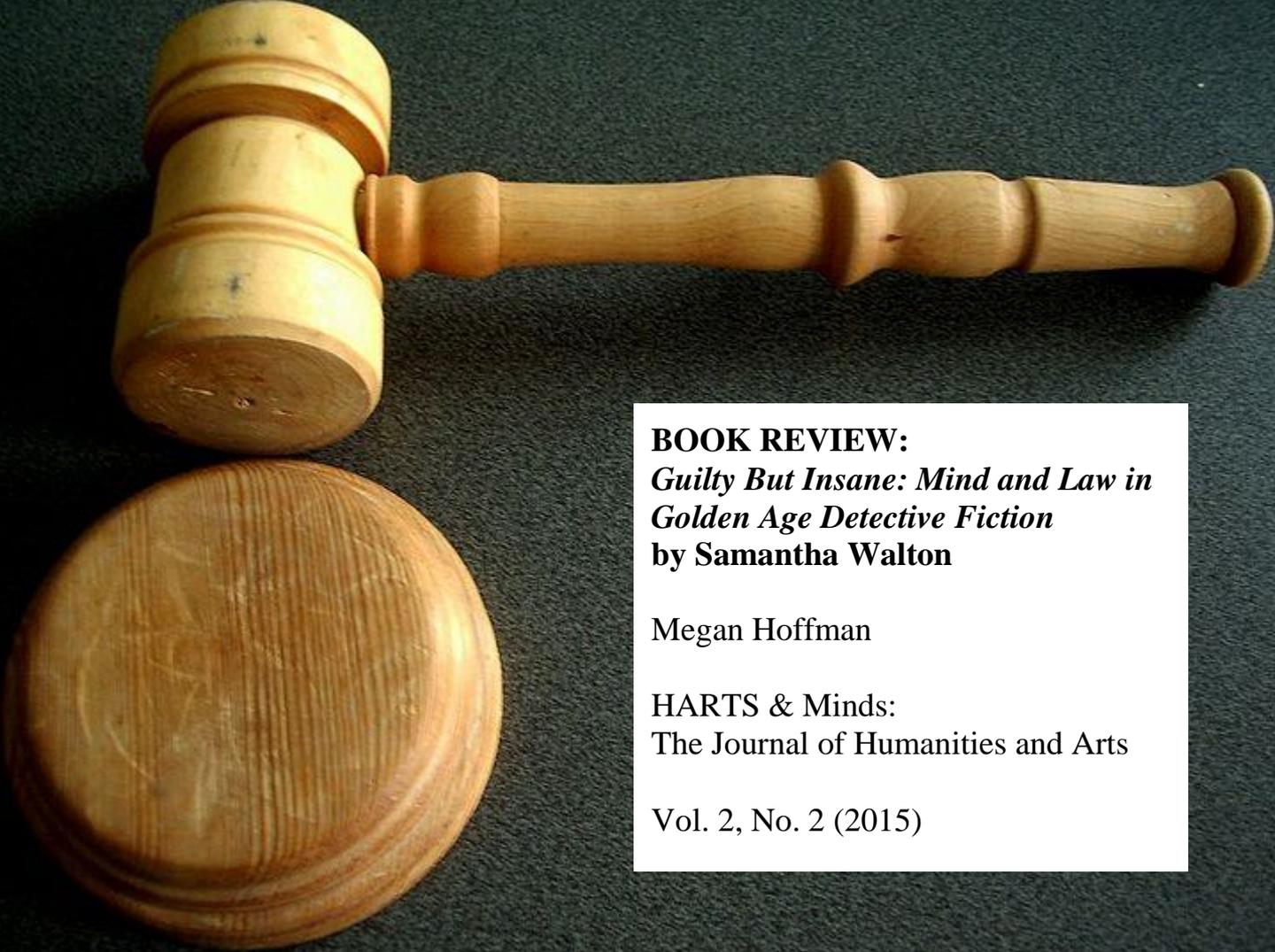


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by Samantha Walton

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HARTS & Minds:  
The Journal of Humanities and Arts

Vol. 2, No. 2 (2015)

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***Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction***

by **Samantha Walton** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). 320 pp.

The ‘golden age’ of detective fiction that stretched roughly from the 1920s until the 1940s has often been regarded as producing crime narratives that offer reassurance rather than inspiring doubt about social structures. Examining literature from a sociohistorical perspective is not a new critical approach, but Samantha Walton’s *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* employs such a means to suggest new lines of enquiry that not only reveal unexplored potential for deviance, but also convincingly locate golden age detective fiction within a larger modernist movement. Walton’s book places golden age crime fiction in the context of the psychiatric and psychological discourses that influenced the medical, legal and popular understandings of mental illness and criminal responsibility in the first half of the twentieth century. In her introduction, Walton ‘makes the case that [golden age detective novels] only reveal their considerable depth and subtlety when they are interpreted in their historic contexts’.<sup>1</sup> Other critics, such as Merja Makinen in relation to gender in *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (2006), have made similar arguments about the potential significance of reading golden age crime fiction within its historical and cultural contexts, but Walton’s book presents the intriguing possibility that examining golden age novels alongside theories of the mind not only reveals ‘the ways in which golden age detective fiction responded to contemporary discourses of mental illness, and [...] participated in the scientific and medical discussions of its day’, but also uncovers the previously under-examined relationship between depictions of fragmented identity and selfhood that connects golden age detective fiction to ‘high’ modernist literature.<sup>2</sup>

*Guilty But Insane* begins with two introductions – the first, a traditional introduction that situates Walton’s text within the context of other criticism on golden age detective fiction, makes a compelling case for the innovation of Walton’s approach. In addition, this introduction provides a brief overview of the themes discussed in the rest of the text, most significantly the influences of popular understanding of theories such as psychoanalysis, as well as true crime narratives in the popular press and legal debates about the culpability of mentally ill criminals, on golden age detective fiction. The book’s second introduction delineates the ‘theories of mind’ that dominated understandings of mental illness and criminality during the time when golden age crime fiction was being produced. Walton’s overview dispels the myth that psychoanalysis was the only significant theory of the mind that would have been considered at the time, presenting a history of the development of psychological theories throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how these related to developing theories of criminality.

The book’s first chapter, ‘Psychological Detection’, explores how understandings of mental illness and criminal culpability influenced criminal investigations in golden age detective fiction. The chapter uses the depictions of mental illness in three novels – Michael Innes’s *Death at the President’s Lodging* (1936), Miles Franklin’s *Bring the Monkey* (1933) and Gladys Mitchell’s *St Peter’s Finger* (1938) – in order to examine the detective’s use of psychological knowledge as a means of solving crimes and to enquire whether the inclusion of irrationality in the form of insanity destabilises the detective story’s traditional requirement of a rational, cohesive solution. Walton suggests that in these instances, ‘Psychology raises a new moral dilemma, as it becomes necessary to question whether the detective is merely a

diagnostician of motivation or has, in exercising psychological expertise, turned the criminal from prey to patient'.<sup>3</sup> This conclusion provides a neat segue into the book's second chapter, in which Walton looks at the influence of contemporary legal debates surrounding the culpability of mentally ill people. Unfortunately, Chapter Two, as well as Chapters Four and Five, incorporate a minor structural issue that slightly distracts from the excellence of the book's content. In these chapters, the historical and textual analysis are connected by a small 'case studies' section that gives a disjointed feel to the separation between the two sections. The information and analysis included under these 'case studies' headings undoubtedly adds to the chapters' cohesiveness, but a more natural flow could have been preserved had these been located under a regular section heading. Walton's textual examples in the book's second chapter are Christianna Brand's *Green for Danger* (1945) and, again, Mitchell's *St Peter's Finger*. Both of these novels feature complex depictions of mentally ill killers - a neurotic, obsessive child in *St Peter's Finger* and a grief-stricken nurse in *Green for Danger* - and both killers are spared formal legal punishment. Walton argues that depictions such as these 'demonstrate the complexities of responsibility and highlight the shortcomings of contemporary legal definitions of madness'.<sup>4</sup> Chapter Three, 'Born Criminals', builds upon the previous chapter's inquiry into legal definitions of criminal responsibility, examining golden age crime fiction's treatment of the question of whether criminality, or at least moral deficiency, can be innate. Walton uses Agatha Christie's *Crooked House* (1949), in which the killer is revealed to be a child whose moral deficiency is shown to be hereditary, and Mitchell's *When Last I Died* (1941), as contrasting examples which depict delinquent children in a more sympathetic and humane light as victims of abuse and disadvantaged social circumstances, while greedy and manipulative adults are shown to be the real danger.

Chapter Four, "'The Concealed Enemy of the Self': Deviance and Dissociation', begins with an examination of the ways in which the many cases of war neurosis following the First World War resulted in increasingly nuanced understandings of trauma's effect on the mind. This heightened awareness influenced medical and legal discussions of criminal responsibility when the accused was suffering from a temporary state such as insane automatism, fugue or an epileptic fit. Walton selects Christie's *The ABC Murders* (1936), Margery Allingham's *Police at the Funeral* (1931), and Brand's *Heads You Lose* (1941); all texts that depict characters who have committed, or are suspected of having committed, crimes while in a dissociative state, to examine the division between conscious and unconscious self that represents the unsettling fragmentation of identity that is a recurring theme in golden age crime fiction as well as in modernist literature. Walton further connects crime fiction and modernist literature in Chapter Five, 'Irrational Detection', which explores depictions of detective figures who obtain knowledge not by the rational thought processes traditionally demanded by the genre, but by 'emotional, subjective, spontaneous, and [...] irrational' means.<sup>5</sup> Through readings of Dorothy Sayers's *Whose Body?* (1923) and Allingham's *Traitor's Purse* (1941), Walton argues that these novels 'raise questions about the reliability of the detective, putting the figure on a level with his psychologically fallible suspects and with the more contemplative, inward-looking subjects of contemporary modernist fiction'.<sup>6</sup> Using contemporary understandings of psychological and psychiatric discourses as a means of tracing the influence of modernist strategies upon golden age detective fiction is an effective approach, not only in linking the two seemingly opposing types of literature and destabilising the detective fiction genre's reputation for rationalism and reassuring conclusions, but also by demonstrating the extent to which theories of the mind influenced the wider culture.

*Guilty But Insane* ends, appropriately, with a ‘Dénouement’ in which Walton maintains that though the great variety of both golden age crime novels and theories of the mind make it impossible to draw simple conclusions about their influence upon each other, her project is, rather, to examine the novels as ‘literary texts which challenge, subvert, toy with, and test the prevailing values and prejudices of their cultural moment, with implications for our own’.<sup>7</sup> These implications, mentioned vaguely several times throughout the text, presumably refer at least in part to the effect of legislation such as the Coroners and Justice Act of 2009, which widened long-standing legal definitions of diminished responsibility and influenced recent legal decisions, such as *R v Brennan* (2014), involving diminished responsibility when mental illness is a contributory factor. Although this particular point is not expanded upon, Walton’s book has already done more than enough to justify its place within crime fiction criticism, and to make a case that further explorations of the genre through the use of similar sociohistorical means are needed.

Overall, *Guilty But Insane* is an impressive first monograph and an ambitious and innovative re-conceptualisation of golden age crime fiction through the lens of theories of the mind. Walton’s sensitive readings and connections between representations of criminality and detection in golden age novels and the psychological discourses that shaped discussions of these subjects in legal, medical and, subsequently, popular thought, enable her to accomplish her stated goal of ‘offer[ing] a timely and challenging discussion of the relationship between popular literature, psychology, and the ways in which fiction has contributed to our understanding of the working of our minds and what it means to be human’.<sup>8</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Samantha Walton. *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Walton, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Walton, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> Walton, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Walton, p. 228.

<sup>6</sup> Walton, p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> Walton, p. 278.

<sup>8</sup> Walton, p. 3.

### Bibliography

Walton, Samantha, *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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### Biography

**Megan Hoffman** obtained a PhD in English Literature from the University of St Andrews in 2013. Her first monograph, provisionally titled *Women Writing Women: Gender and Representation in British ‘Golden Age’ Crime Fiction*, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016. Her research interests include crime fiction, gender studies and popular culture.