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## **CONFERENCE REVIEW**

*Captivating Criminality:  
Crime, Transgressions and Concealment*

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Image of Corsham Court  
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## CONFERENCE REVIEW

### *Captivating Criminality 2: Traditions and Transgressions.*

25<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> June 2015.

Corsham Court, Bath Spa University.

*Elena Avanzas Álvarez*

The *Captivating Criminality 2 - Crime Fiction, Traditions and Transgression* conference was held at Corsham Court, from the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 27<sup>th</sup> of June of 2015. The venue could not have been more appropriate, for it would be difficult to imagine a more atmospheric location for a crime conference than a mansion in the English countryside. Luckily, there were no murders in the dining room with a candlestick, but there were many excellent and inspiring papers.

The event was organised by Dr. Fiona Peters from Bath Spa University, with the support of the English Department. Their hard work deserves a special mention, as does the work of volunteering students, led by PhD candidate Annabel Wynne, for making all of us feel at home, and welcomed at the conference. Although the village where the event was held is quite remote – yet now widely famous for being one of the locations for the TV show *Poldark* – the travelling was worthwhile as the conference epitomised the interdisciplinary and diverse nature of current crime studies.

As a crime fiction scholar, it is often difficult to meet fellow academics and writers working directly in your field, however, *Captivating Criminality* is now in its second year, and offered an outstanding set of international speakers from all over the world, as well as some of Great Britain's most beloved crime fiction writers. The keynote speakers were all renowned and respected figures, including author Paul Johnston, Professor Mary Evans, and author Stav Sherez, all of whom provided the audience with their own view on crime fiction; a literary genre that still appears to be stigmatised as non-literary, a point which initiated much debate and discussion.

The conference ran for only three days; however the quantity and diversity of papers turned these three days into an event that inspired and encouraged all participants to continue their research in the field. Indeed, *Captivating Criminality 2* proved that the crime narratives that flood our lives – in any form, from TV shows to novels, to the selection of news published – have a complex influence on our lives. In order to address this diversity, the conference papers were all organised thematically, with two parallel sessions at a time, offering the audience a great deal of choice. However, both the quality and the quantity of the papers made it very difficult not to feel that we were missing something, regardless of which panel we attended.

The conference opened with papers focused on the origins of crime and transgression as we know it now. Isabell Grosse, from the Department for British Studies at the University of Leipzig, delivered quite an outstanding – and perfectly postmodern – paper on Gilbert Adair's work. Where there is crime, there is tradition, but also transgression, and Grosse focused on the complex yet invisible relationship between reader and writer and how Adair manipulated it to deconstruct crime fiction as a form.

During the conference, a secondary theme of femininity emerged, as quite a few speakers decided to either focus on women writers, or to pay special attention to women's representation in crime fiction. Dr. Merja Makinen, from Middlesex University, took us through a 're/presentation' of Agatha Christie as a professional writer. Dr. Makinen demonstrated how the 'queen of British crime fiction' actually took full control of her works and her professional life, despite the tendency to misrepresent Christie's professional and economic persona as that of her female protagonist, Miss Jane Marple. Consequently, the last two panels of day three featured openly feminist papers, with Dr. Rachel Smilie from the University of Aberdeen, and PhD candidate Mareike Dolata from the University of Jena, opening new doors for young,

feminist academics with their re-readings of early twentieth-century detective fiction from a feminist perspective.

Another key issue which was openly addressed by keynote speaker Paul Johnston in his amusing yet thought-provoking interventions was the much broader question: what is crime fiction? What makes a novel fall into the category of “crime fiction” and why? Dr. Eva M. Pérez from the University of Balearic Islands challenged the assumption of traditional, formulaic crime fiction by presenting a paper on Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*. Although the novel is not broadly considered crime fiction, Dr. Pérez deconstructed the child narrator to give us a glimpse into the mutability and polysemy of crime in contemporary crime fiction.

Following the impossibility of locating and fixating postmodern crime fiction came Hector Duarte Jr.’s paper on the graphic novels *Scalped*, by Jason Aaron and R.M Guerra. With this series, the authors are taking one of crime fiction’s traditional uses – criticizing and deconstructing society – and, using a new format, making it available for a broader yet liminal audience. Duarte, along with the passionate interventions from the audience, pointed out that the setting of the novel in a Native American reservation produces one of the most complex criticisms of American neo-colonialism to date.

With reference to unusual combinations, Dr. Lucy Andrew presented a paper on the rise of the supernatural in detective series for young readers. This paper shed some light on one of the most successful, yet underrated, literary genres in the past decade: Young Adult fiction [YA], which tries to build a bridge between children’s literature and adult literature. Andrew explored how the blending of different traditions in contemporary YA fiction has contributed to the concealment of a more traditional form in favour of a hybrid; a complex detective to whom the act of not-knowing is more important than the actual revelation.

Continuing with the focus on concealment, it was Nathan Ashman, from the University of Surrey, and Antoine Dechêne, from the Université de Liège, who deserve a special mention. Both PhD candidates deconstructed meta-crime fiction, and attempted to demonstrate how the story is no longer driven by a literary form or even language, concluding that there is a deeper side to even the most plot-driven detective fiction.

However, not all papers had a strictly literary theme. Ella Simpson, PhD researcher and part-time lecturer at Bath Spa University, presented the audience with a subversive, interdisciplinary, and inspiring paper on the blurry boundaries between narratives, reality, fact, and fiction. Simpson’s paper highlighted the need to recognize the offender’s voice, and how it has been concealed under pseudo-scientific theories that tend to pathologise criminal behaviour, in an effort to ostracise crime

In conclusion, the *Captivating Criminality 2* conference was an incredible event, which allowed delegates the chance to hear research from a variety of perspectives and to meet others working in this field. The venue, the speakers, and the organisers have created a landmark in international crime fiction studies, which is part of the Captivating Criminality Network (<http://www.captivatingcriminalitynetwork.net/>). Apart from the inspiration and professional support that emerges from meetings like this one, the conferences – which will continue to be held annually – have created a space to address and discuss pioneering work in crime fiction in the most tolerant of environments. One can only await *Captivating Criminality 3* as a continuation of this solidarity.

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### Biography

**Elena Avanzas Álvarez** is a first-year PhD Candidate at the University of Oviedo, Spain. She has been researching crime fiction with a gender perspective for the last three years and is currently writing her thesis on women's representation in 21st-century crime fiction. Her research about Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, Scandinavian crime fiction, and women's issues has been published in journals, and her MA thesis about performativity and discourse analysis on the television show *Rizzoli & Isles* won the First Gender and Diversity Award in 2014. She is also the founder of Books & Reviews ([booksandreviews.wordpress.com](http://booksandreviews.wordpress.com)), a blog focused on Crime Fiction and Women's Studies.