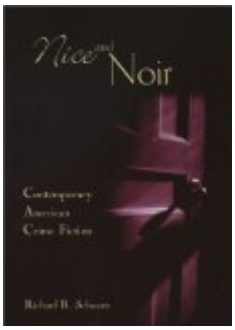
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard B. Schwartz. *Nice and Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. xi + 173 pp. $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1393-8.



Reviewed by Kathleen Fitzpatrick

Published on H-Amstdy (February, 2003)

As suggested by the recent publication of texts including Christopher Wilson's *Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth-Century America*, Carl Malmgren's *Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction*, and of course the subject of this review, Richard Schwartz's *Nice and Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction*, narratives of crime and detection have lately presented themselves as a ripe field for scholarly inquiry. Most such work has focused upon the connections between such so-called "genre" fiction and the U.S. literary tradition, drawing links between the gothic, the romance, and the rise of the detective; other work has interrogated the cultural conditions that produced the flourishing of crime narratives and the noir aesthetic during the first half of the twentieth century. To date, however, few such investigations have focused specifically upon the contemporary crime-fiction scene; into that breach leaps Schwartz's *Nice and Noir*.

Schwartz, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Missouri at Columbia, is the author of a wide-ranging group of books: *After the Death of Literature*, an attempt, inspired by the work of Samuel Johnson, to rescue literary study from what he considers to be the overly academic critical approaches spawned during the culture wars; *The Biggest City in America*, a memoir of his 1950s midwestern boyhood; and a series of four crime novels featuring detective Jack Grant. In *Nice and Noir*, Schwartz brings together the impulses that have driven each of these prior texts, producing a book that is both a Johnsonesque study of contemporary crime-genre fiction and an exploration of his own reading patterns and relationship to the genre.

Schwartz's goal in *Nice and Noir*, as he states in his introduction, is to trace the appearances of certain cultural and literary patterns through contemporary crime fiction, suggesting the current interests and anxieties revealed by these patterns. In his first chapter, "Frontiers and Borders," Schwartz focuses simultaneously on the historical continuities of the crime genre and on its historical specificity: on the one hand, he connects the hard-boiled narrative to the forms of tragedy and of the romance, with its interest in societal disrup-

tions and the quest for truth; on the other, he explores the peculiar American cultural formations that produced the crime narrative, among which he includes the experience of the frontier, the valorization of individualism, and the encounter with the "other," arguing in the end that:

"As a nation we imagine a society that is still marked by frontiers and borders. They serve a multiplicity of functions. They invite us, offering adventure. They help us form a conception of our society that both defines and delineates that society's history and serves to characterize its members. Individuals are measured by landforms and divided by imaginary borders. Such a society offers great promise, but in a context that has often proved violent (physically, socially, and economically). We cherish and lament these features simultaneously, and our ambivalence generates narratives rooted in these twin perceptions." (p. 146)

In this fashion, for Schwartz, crime fiction serves to explicate the dangers and pleasures of life in the contemporary United States. A study of such fiction should similarly explore those dangers and pleasures and the ways in which they construct and are constructed by the narratives in question.

In the central chapters of *Nice and Noir*, however, Schwartz turns his attentions to a number of the topoi of contemporary crime fiction--including the figures of the vigilante, the series hero, the mysterious "avenging angel," and the "buddy of color"--as well as the crucial vitality of settings and the importance of humor in noir fiction, the educative aspect of crime "procedurals," and the novels' literary attempts to transcend genre. In each chapter, Schwartz encounters numerous examples of the contemporary fiction that makes use of these motifs, describing in a loose, illustrative style the authors and texts that he considers central to the genre. In this wealth of description, however, interpretation and analysis get too easily left behind; Schwartz lists dozens of examples of the topoi he presents, but never fully explores the meanings of these topoi. He often suggests the cultural origins of such narrative figures--the vigilante's birth on the western frontier, for instance, or the development of the "buddy of color" in tales of the encounter with the "other"--without considering the ways that such figures are themselves constructions of other narratives. A pertinent example for most Americanists: Schwartz uses Frederick Turner's "frontier theory" in his opening chapter as a means of suggesting the historical specificity of the U.S. character that gives rise to the importance of crime fiction--raised in perpetual encounter with another culture; raised on the edge of lawlessness; raised in an ostensibly masculine environment--but does so innocently, without accounting for the critical readings of Turner produced by a generation of American Studies scholars or suggesting why Turner might nonetheless provide a peculiar insight into this genre.

Moreover, in describing the masculine milieu of action presented by the "wilderness," Schwartz indicates that "the struggle of such men against nature, Camille Paglia has argued, differentiates them from the fifty-two percent of humankind who, in their very physical makeup, embody the nature that men vainly attempt to control" (p. 14). The shocking failure of such a statement to reveal any self-consciousness about the stereotypes it employs in its association of the female, and particularly the female body, with the "natural" suggests a larger problem in *Nice and Noir*: Schwartz's tendency throughout the book is to present often surprising opinions and judgments without fully arguing for their pertinence or acknowledging their deep ideological roots. Schwartz claims, for instance, that the darkness of much crime fiction is a kind of deeper "realism" than seen in other kinds of fiction, but does so without considering the necessary ideological component of any vision of the "realistic," and without considering the work of critics such as George Gerbner who point to the ways that such

representations of the violence of crime in fact construct in their audiences a sense that such violence is "realistic."[1]

This, finally, suggests a further, perhaps more fundamental problem in *Nice and Noir*: while the book repeatedly crosses paths with a wide group of contemporary critical discourses, ranging from literary history to U.S. history, and encompassing many other aspects of U.S. culture besides, it does so without acknowledging or drawing upon those debates already in progress. The book is wholly without footnotes and has a brief essay suggesting "further reading" in lieu of a bibliography, making for a frustrating reading experience for a scholar who genuinely wishes to connect this reading of contemporary crime fiction with other possibly related cultural projects.

In the end, *Nice and Noir* provides a wide-ranging introduction to the many authors of contemporary crime narratives and to the similarities that run through their texts, but its lack of deep analysis and interpretation and its too-loose connections of those texts to the cultural circumstances prevents the book from breaking any significant critical ground in its approach to the field.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-amstdy

Citation: Kathleen Fitzpatrick. Review of Schwartz, Richard B. *Nice and Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction.* H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7225

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.