

Study guidance for students considering English Literature at A Level

In this diverse and exciting course, the first genre that we study is crime. Set out below are some ideas about how you can prepare for A level study (but also get stuck into some brilliant books and TV drama / podcasts).

Get reading

Read one novel by each of the authors below to give you a sense of the scope of crime fiction:

Arthur Conan Doyle (e.g. A study in Scarlett / The Hound of the Baskervilles)

Agatha Christie (e.g. Death on The Nile / Murder on the Orient Express)

Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler (e.g. Maltese Falcon / The Big Sleep)

Something by a more modern crime writer (Val McDermid / Ian Rankin / Patricia Cornwall / Stieg Larrson)

Watch some TV

Check out one or more of the following crime series (available on various different platforms but hopefully you can find one that you have access to). Warning – we have included only 15 rated series but they do include some pretty grim subjects. Have a read about them before you embark on watching just so you know what you are letting yourself in for!

Inspector Morse / The Killing / The Bridge / Wallander / Broadchurch / Unforgotten

Listen to some of the following podcasts:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/books+crime> (in these interviews, authors talk about their own books and some more general thoughts about Crime Fiction – a brilliant way to get a really wide sense of the genre and find out which books you might be interested in reading).

Make some notes about typical features of crime

Use the wider reading guides to make notes on:

- a. Character types (detectives/sidekicks/victims/criminals/etc.)
- b. Key developments in the convention of the genre (Newgate novels/Golden Age/Clue Puzzle/Hard Boiled/Police Procedural/etc.) and how they relate to the context in which they were produced.
- c. Gender representation
- d. Anything else that you find interesting in the wider reading guides: 'Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction' and/or 'Cambridge Textbook – Aspects of Crime' and/or 'Cambridge Textbook - The History of Crime' and/or 'The Rough Guide to Crime Fiction'

Get thinking:

Have a read through some typical conventions of crime writing (see next page). How far do the crime books / series that you have looked at fit these conventions? How far do they move away from them?

Elements of Crime Writing:

- the type of the crime text itself, whether it is detective fiction, a post-modern novel, a revenge tragedy, an account of a life lost to crime
- the settings that are created as backdrops for criminal action and for the pursuit of the perpetrators of crime: both places and times will be significant here
- the nature of the crimes and the criminals, the criminals' motives and actions
- the inclusion of violence, murder, theft, betrayal
- the detection of the criminal and the investigation that leads to his or her capture or punishment
- how far there is a moral purpose and restoration of order
- guilt and remorse, confession and the desire for forgiveness
- the creation of the criminal and their nemesis, the typical detective hero
- the sense that there will be a resolution and the criminal will be punished
- the victims of crime and the inclusion of suffering
- the central motifs of love, money, danger and death
- punishment, justice, retribution, injustice, accusation, the legal system, criminal trials and courtroom dramas, imprisonment, death
- the structural patterning of the text as it moves through a series of crises to some sense of order
- the specific focus on plotting
- the way that language is used in the world that is created; there may be use of a criminal register, legal register, police register
- the way that crime writing is used to comment on society, particularly the representation of society at particular historical periods
- ultimately, how crime stories affect audiences and readers, creating suspense, repugnance, excitement and relief.