

Literary Serial Killer Fiction: The Evolution of a Genre

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Abstract:

This study examines the dynamics of post-war American serial killer fiction as it relates to social and literary contexts. In the context of history and development, this study considers the impact and origins of particular works and how they have influenced the stylistic and thematic evolution of a particular subgenre I have called literary serial killer fiction. Emphasis is placed on select narratives that directly (or indirectly) transform, challenge and critique the genre conventions in which they are written. Of interest is the evolution of general serial killer fiction as a postmodern phenomenon, in terms of its popularity with the reading public, and in line with the growth of media interest in representations of serial killers. I draw on literary theory (in particular, 'new historicism') to demonstrate that the appeal and tropes of serial killer fiction reflect socio-political interests indicative of the era from where they were produced, and to show how the subgenre of literary serial killer fiction can be categorized using its own particular set of defining features.

I examine these aspects in detail in relation to the following selection of fictional serial-killer narratives: Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, James Ellroy's *Killer on the Road*, and Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. For brevity's sake, I have selected American narrative works that employ first-person narration and are transgressive in the way they focus on characters who defy convention and push boundaries, as do the narratives within larger genre traditions and protocols. In my view, these works are the purest examples of literary serial killer fiction in that they are characteristically unlike other examples that can easily be categorised under other literary genres.

The appeal and popularity of the genre, alongside the functional aspects of the trope, leads me to conclude that it is an ideal form to interact with popular cultural narratives, while also allowing subversive interplay between both real and fictional concerns. The appeal of the genre to those authors who usually write outside of it, particularly in regard to its transgressive and allegorical qualities, is also of particular interest to this study. Because of the hybrid nature of the genre and the ease with which the central trope of the fictional serial killer transcends genres, the resulting possibilities provide a transgressive outlet for authors who wish to test boundaries, in both a literary and an ontological sense, in regard to the commentary serial killer fiction allows on the state of contemporary American literature and society.

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literature older than prose, was in ancient times divided into narrative, dramatic, and lyric forms. genre fiction — noun Fictional works written with the intent of fitting into a specific literary genre (such as mystery, romance, or horror) with an existing audience ... Wiktionary. Genre studies — are a structuralist approach to literary theory, film theory, and other cultural theories. The fictional serial killer, with a motiveless, highly individualized modus operandi, is the latest manifestation of the multiple murderers and homicidal maniacs that haunt American literature and, particularly, visual media such as cinema and television. Simpson theorizes that the serial killer genre results from a combination of earlier genre depictions of multiple murderers, inherited Gothic storytelling conventions, and threatening folkloric figures reworked over the years into a contemporary mythology of violence. Faced with a blizzard of works of varying quality dealing with the serial killer, Simpson has ruled out the catalog approach in this study in favor of an in-d. Excerpt.