



# Defective Inspectors

*Crime-Fiction Pastiche in Late  
Twentieth-Century French Literature*

Simon Kemp



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CRIME FICTION PASTICHE IN  
LATE-TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRENCH LITERATURE

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SIMON KEMP



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Simon Kemp  
Oxford, March 2006

## ABBREVIATIONS



Translations in the text, from these and other works, are my own unless otherwise stated.

### Texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet

- G      *Les Gommages* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1953)  
MRV   *La Maison de rendez-vous* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965)  
PRNY *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970)  
STO   *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1978)  
MQR   *Le Miroir qui revient* (*Romanesques*, I) (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984)  
AOE   *Angélique, ou l'enchantement* (*Romanesques*, II) (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1987)  
DJC   *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (*Romanesques*, III) (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1994)

### Texts by Michel Butor

- ET      *L'Emploi du temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1956)

### Texts by Georges Perec

- D      *La Disparition* (Paris: Denoël, 1969)  
W      *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (Paris: Denoël, 1975)  
VME   *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Paris: Hachette, 1978)

### Texts by Jean Echenoz

- MG      *Le Méridien de Greenwich* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979)  
C      *Cherokee* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983)  
L      *Lac* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1989)  
GB      *Les Grandes Blondes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1995)  
JMV   *Je m'en vais* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1999)

## INTRODUCTION



Since the time of Émile Gaboriau, whose *L’Affaire Lerouge* was serialized in 1863, crime fiction has been immensely important to French literary and cultural production. From the clue-puzzle mysteries of Gaston Leroux and Maurice Leblanc in the early twentieth century, to the more psychology-based investigations of Georges Simenon and the growth of American-influenced *romans noirs* in the 1930s and 40s, to the violent, radical *néo-polar* in the later decades of the century, the detective story has remained at the heart of French popular fiction, accompanied by a sustained interest among French film-makers both mainstream and avant-garde. While this study is not an examination of the genre, crime fiction is central to its area of interest. In the pages that follow, I shall be examining how elements of crime fiction are taken by four literary novelists of the late twentieth century and employed within their own work to quite different effect from that of the conventional form. The writers are Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Georges Perec, and Jean Echenoz. None of these novelists uses crime fiction in every novel he writes, and among those novels that do draw on the genre, crime is often not the sole topic of the book. All four writers, however, have taken inspiration from the crime fiction and film of France and of wider Western culture, from Edgar Allan Poe to Jean-Patrick Manchette and from Jules Dassin to Alfred Hitchcock, and have made extensive use of the genre as a central feature of their writing. I shall be investigating those aspects of crime fiction, whether theme, structure, language, or worldview, that are appropriated by each of the four writers, to discover how their use and meaning change with the shift from the genre proper to the form of writing which this study will refer to as *pastiche*.<sup>1</sup>

The period on which I focus stretches from the publication of Robbe-Grillet’s *Les Gommes* in 1953 to that of Echenoz’s *Je m’en vais* in 1999. It is a cultural timespan to which the label of *postmodernism* has often been attached, particularly with reference to literary pastiche and often with negative connotations. Fredric Jameson in particular has been influential in his pessimistic view of late-twentieth-century literature, citing Robbe-Grillet and Perec directly in his judgment, and strongly criticizing literary techniques reminiscent of Butor’s and Echenoz’s work.<sup>2</sup> The debate as to the nature of postmodernism is a weary one, which I do not intend to rehash; however, the specific charges laid against writers in the corpus and against late-twentieth-century pastiche in general are worth investigation. The line of argument that this study takes will imply a more positive value judgment of pastiche than Jameson advances, and at the same time will seek to resist the compartmentalization implicit in the label *postmodernist*. Rather than situating the texts as part of a hazily delineated cultural movement, defined principally in terms of its contrasts to the art and literature of the previous half-century, I shall be taking a broader view. I aim to trace longer

trajectories of literary development, which extend beyond what is conventionally associated with postmodernism, and to connect the work of the pasticheurs with philosophical and narratological ideas that have a wider cultural relevance. In this way I hope to show late-twentieth-century crime fiction pastiche as more complex and heterogeneous than postmodernist categorization allows for; instead, I conceive it as a changing form within the developing continuum of modern French literature, dealing with questions of narrative, epistemology, and representation that are among literature's most fundamental concerns.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, the first of the four writers, has to date published eleven novels, along with four 'ciné-romans', three volumes of 'romanesque' autobiography, and many essays and shorter pieces, as well as directing or scripting ten films. The majority of these works feature crime in some respect, particularly through the sadistic fantasies of rape and murder that become increasingly prevalent through the first thirty years of Robbe-Grillet's writing career. Many of these criminal themes are linked explicitly to the murder mysteries and *noir* thrillers of genre fiction, and further connections are to be found in Robbe-Grillet's treatment of perception, his experiments in narrative structure, and his dealings with the concepts of truth and reason. The most important texts in this respect, and those on which this book will principally focus, are *Les Gommages* and *Le Voleur* from Robbe-Grillet's early work, and *La Maison de rendez-vous*, *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* of his 'nouveaux nouveaux romans' of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the study will look in detail at only one novel by Robbe-Grillet's fellow *nouveau romancier* Michel Butor, namely, *L'Emploi du temps*.<sup>4</sup> Although this is Butor's only work to engage significantly with crime fiction, it holds the most sustained exploration of the form out of all the texts in the corpus (rivalled only by Perec's unfinished '53 jours'). It has also had an important impact on related literary theory: its discussion of the detective story inspired Tzvetan Todorov's 'Typologie du roman policier', and the incorporation of the crime novel *Le Meurtre de Bleston* into the diegesis was a major influence on Lucien Dällenbach's ideas on the *mise en abyme*.<sup>5</sup> Like that of Butor, Perec's varied œuvre contains much that is outside the scope of this study, with only one novel, '53 jours', maintaining an exclusive focus on crime fiction. Unlike Butor, however, Perec revisits crime fiction pastiche throughout his writing, and it is a theme of greater or lesser importance in many of his novels, including *La Disparition*, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, and *La Vie mode d'emploi*.<sup>6</sup> Perec's interest in the representation of visual perception also has interesting parallels with the conventions of crime fiction, as well as with Robbe-Grillet's approach to the same topic. Lastly, of the nine novels published by Echenoz to date, only three (*Nous trois*, *Un an*, and *Au piano*) are unrelated to crime fiction, and even these maintain links to other popular genres. The remaining six (*Le Méridien de Greenwich*, *Cherokee*, *L'Équipée malaise*, *Lac*, *Les Grandes Blondes*, and *Je m'en vais*) have the closest and most ambiguous relationship of our corpus with regard to the genre proper.<sup>7</sup> Their subtle subversions of crime fiction convention from within recognizably genre-based narratives make a strong contrast with the radical deconstructions and theoretical analysis of the form undertaken by the *nouveaux romanciers*. Echenoz's respect for the *néo-polar*, and for the work of Jean-Patrick Manchette in particular, underlies a new style and attitude in his pastiche,

when compared to his precursors. The overlapping careers of the four writers map out the second half of the twentieth century, taking in two of the most innovative movements in post-war French literature in the *nouveau roman* and Oulipo (of which Perec was a member), complemented in Echenoz by one of the most significant figures among the current generation of French writers.<sup>8</sup>

Although the writers chosen are intended to be representative of the literature of their period, I make no claim that the four writers together constitute an exhaustive account of the subject. A certain amount of potential breadth must be sacrificed in order to achieve sufficient depth in the analysis of the corpus. First, the fifty-year span of the study's focus excludes earlier examples of crime fiction pastiche, such as Raymond Queneau's 1942 novel *Pierrot mon ami*.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, the concentration on the novel rules out some interesting pastiche of the cinema and theatre, such as Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960) and Godard's *Bande à part* (1964) in the *nouvelle vague*, François Ozon's *Huit femmes* (2001) and *Swimming pool* (2003) in more recent cinema, or, in the theatre, Eugène Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, like crime fiction itself, pastiche of the genre is a cosmopolitan art form, with notable texts being produced in many literatures other than French and disseminated between cultures through translation. A by-no-means comprehensive list of foreign crime-fiction pastiche comprises, in North America, Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, in South America, Jorge Luis Borges's 'Death and the Compass' and 'The Garden of Forking Paths', in Europe, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*, and Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Pledge*, and in Asia, Haruki Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*, Kobo Abe's *The Box Man*, and Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, in limiting its focus to the four writers selected, the study also excludes French contemporaries of the four pasticheurs who have also worked with crime fiction themes in their novels. There are, for instance, Julia Kristeva's three Santa Barbara novels, which slip in and out of crime fiction discourse as they use the detective story form to explore hatred and violence from a psychoanalytic perspective; there is Robert Pinget's *L'Inquisiteur*, consisting entirely of questions and evasive answers in an interrogation over an unspecified crime; there are Pascal Lainé's 'comédies policières' in which Miss Marple's nephew investigates improbable crimes in light-hearted Agatha Christie spoofs; and there is the *Hortense* trilogy by Perec's fellow Oulipian Jacques Roubaud, which make riotous nonsense of the logic of the clue-puzzle mystery, with a narrator, author, and 'reader' who squabble over the telling of the story, and characters who are quite aware that they are in a detective novel.<sup>12</sup> More sustained engagement with crime fiction is to be found in the work of Patrick Modiano and Daniel Pennac. In novels like *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* and *Quartier perdu*, Modiano makes the detective story an investigation into identity and memory, where a crime writer or a detective turns the techniques of his trade to a study of his own hidden self and buried past. The inconclusiveness of Modiano's novels, which are all in some sense failed investigations, expresses a pessimistic view of identity as transient and irrecoverable.<sup>13</sup> Pennac's exuberant *Malaussène* novels are close enough to the crime genre proper to have begun life in Gallimard's Série Noire, changing to the Collection Blanche only with the third, Médicis-winning volume, *La Petite Marchande de prose*.<sup>14</sup> His work connects not only to crime fiction, but also

to fantasy, children's literature, and oral narrative traditions. The novels play games with the structural conventions of the genre which frequently take the story to the limits of the probable and the possible, and heighten the surreal atmosphere through the parodic retelling of events as memoirs, stage plays, and bedtime stories within the diegesis. The thematic structure of the study which follows, dealing simultaneously with four writers and around twenty texts, means that, unfortunately, limits must be set if I am not to abuse the reader's patience and risk confusion among the various comparisons and contrasts. It is for this reason that the above writers are reluctantly consigned to the footnotes.

My opening chapter sets out the field of inquiry with an examination of genre, crime fiction, and pastiche. A discussion of theories of genre leads into a typology of the various subgenres of crime fiction that have inspired the pasticheurs through their language, structure, and outlook. This is followed by a discussion of the nature of pastiche as it has variously been figured, and its relationship to other forms of metafiction, such as parody. These considerations are then used to introduce the four pasticheurs in terms of the relationship of their texts to the crime genre, looking at the imitative and transformative reflections of genre *topoi* in their writing, as well as the recursive reflection of the *mise en abyme*. The five chapters that follow then build on this foundation, each taking a specific feature of the crime fiction text and examining how it is used in the pastiche. Chapter 2, 'Connecting', looks from a narratological perspective at the connective systems of crime fiction, and sees how the functioning of chronology, causality and the Barthesian hermeneutic code is handled by the pastiche. The third chapter, 'Completing', remains with the large-scale structures of narrative to examine the process of closure: how closure in the detective story forms a special case, and the consequences of its subversion or refusal in the pastiche. Chapter 4, 'Evidence', moves on from narratology to explore the text's fine detail. The chapter looks at questions of visual perception and the representation of the physical world, and considers how the minutiae of language and style construct a genre-specific reality in the crime fiction text, which the pastiche both develops from and reacts against. The last two chapters, 'Reason' and 'Truth', draw out the philosophical implications of the structural and stylistic findings of the previous chapters in order to discover the epistemological outlook of the pastiche, and of the genre it uses as a foil. The 'Reason' chapter contrasts the detective story's confident system of reasoning, and the tractable reality upon which it operates, with the failures and confusions represented in the pastiche, where mind, text, and world all refuse to conform to the rules of logic. The 'Truth' chapter looks at the revelation of truth at the end of the murder mystery, and compares the more pessimistic attitude towards the possibility of definitive knowledge in the pastiche to the epistemologies of poststructuralism. As each of these five areas of study — connection, closure, perception, reason, and truth — progressively clarifies the relationship between crime fiction and its pastiche, the central argument emerges of pastiche as a form of deconstruction. Abandoning the binary opposition of discourses that formed traditional parody, pastiche works its subversion, celebration, and analysis from an ambiguous position that refuses to align itself with or entirely oppose the genre model, existing both inside and outside its chosen form.

## Notes to the Introduction

1. The etymology and conflicting definitions of this term will be discussed in Chapter 2.
2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Jameson's theories will also be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.
3. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Les Gommages* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1953); *Le Voyeur* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1955); *La Maison de rendez-vous* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965); *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970); *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1978).
4. Michel Butor, *L'Emploi du temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1956).
5. Tzvetan Todorov, 'Typologie du roman policier', in *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), pp. 55–65; Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, all page references to Éditions du Seuil publications refer to the Poétique collection.
6. Georges Perec, *La Disparition* (Paris: Denoël, 1969); *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (Paris: Denoël, 1975); *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Paris: Hachette, 1978); '53 jours' (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).
7. Jean Echenoz, *Le Méridien de Greenwich* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979); *Cherokee* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983); *L'Équipée malaise* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986); *Lac* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1989); *Les Grandes Blondes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1995); *Je m'en vais* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1999).
8. The term *nouveau roman*, coined by the hostile critic Émile Henriot and taken up notably by Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jean Ricardou, refers to a number of experimental writers published by Éditions de Minuit from the mid-twentieth century onwards who were interested in narrative form, self-consciously theoretical in their approach, and critical of the conventions of realist representation. Notable *nouveaux romanciers* include Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon. Oulipo (or 'OuLiPo'), the 'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle', was, and to some extent remains, an international circle of writers interested in the creative potential of self-imposed rules. These rules, linguistic or mathematical in nature, set up a constrained environment against which the writer's virtuosity can flourish. Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, Georges Perec, and Jacques Roubaud are perhaps the best-known Oulipians.
9. Raymond Queneau, *Pierrot mon ami* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).
10. Eugène Ionesco, *Tueur sans gages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).
11. Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy: City of Glass, Ghosts, The Locked Room* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987); Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1941) and 'Death and the Compass' (1951), in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, trans. by Donald A. Yates and others, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 106–17, 44–54; Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (1980), trans. by William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983); Kazuo Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Pledge* (1958), trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (London: Cape, 1959); Haruki Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), trans. by Alfred Birnbaum (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1990); Kobo Abe, *The Box Man*, trans. by E. Dale Saunders (New York: North Point Press, 1974); Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* (1998), trans. by Erdağ M. Göknar (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).
12. Julia Kristeva, *Le Vieil Homme et les loups* (Paris: Fayard, 1991); *Possessions* (Paris: Fayard, 1996); *Meurtre à Byzance* (Paris: Fayard, 2004); Robert Pinget, *L'Inquisiteur* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1962); Pascal Lainé, *Trois petits meurtres ... et puis s'en va* ([Paris]: Ramsay, 1985); *Plutôt deux fois qu'une* ([Paris]: Ramsay, 1985); *Monsieur, vous oubliez votre cadavre* ([Paris]: Ramsay, 1986); *L'Assassin est une légende* ([Paris]: Ramsay, 1987); *Les Petites Égarées* (Paris: Ramsay/Denoël, 1988); Jacques Roubaud, *La Belle Hortense* ([Paris]: Ramsay, 1985); *L'Enlèvement d'Hortense* ([Paris]: Ramsay, 1987); *L'Exil d'Hortense* (Paris: Seghers, 1990).
13. Patrick Modiano, *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978); *Quartier perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
14. Daniel Pennac, *Au bonheur des ogres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985); *La Fée carabine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987); *La Petite Marchande de prose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); *Monsieur Malaussène* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995); *Des chrétiens et des Maures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); *Aux fruits de la passion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).



## CHAPTER 1



# Reflecting

Bien qu'il s'endormît régulièrement avant le film au cinéma, il sut tout de suite que c'était un cadavre. [Despite the fact that, in the cinema, he would regularly doze off before the film started, he knew straight away that it was a corpse.]

SÉBASTIEN JAPRISOT, *Compartiment tueurs*

Crime fiction pastiche reflects the genre proper, but it is a reflection in no ordinary mirror. In the pastiche texts we find murders and investigations, detectives and suspects, just as in the conventional detective story, but these familiar themes and tropes are diverted from their original purpose and exploited, sometimes disconcertingly, for the pasticheurs' own ends. To open our own investigation into the form, we need first of all to understand what kind of reflection we are dealing with. What exactly is the pastiche reflecting? And how faithfully, or with what distortions, does it do so? In answering these two questions, this chapter aims to offer a substantial overview of what crime fiction pastiche is, and how it relates to the crime genre proper, in order to provide a base for the more specific investigations into theme and structure in the chapters that follow. To begin with, let us broach the subject of genre fiction.

Fredric Jameson defines genres as 'essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact'.<sup>1</sup> He likens genre conventions to the various gestural and linguistic signals which ensure that everyday speech acts are received in the manner intended by the speaker; they alert the receiver to the nature of the communication and prescribe an appropriate response. It is a form of contract to which genre authors bind themselves by raising such expectations in their readers. Certain characters imply certain relationships and milieux, certain premises imply certain thematic developments, certain actions set up certain causal chains of reactions, which may lead to particular denouements. In this way the elements of generic fiction combine to form an internally consistent network, and the law-abiding text is subsumed into the genre, by which process the terms of the contract are themselves reinforced.

What are these textual elements from which genres are constructed? Opposing theoretical approaches to the question are offered by Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss in key texts of formalism and structuralism respectively. Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* breaks the tales down into significant actions or 'narrative functions' which can be subsumed into thirty-one basic types. For Propp, these functions are both universal and fundamental to folktales; although not all functions occur in every tale, those that do always happen in the same order, with the consequence that '*all fairy tales*

are of one type in regard to their structure'.<sup>2</sup> Lévi-Strauss's essay 'La Structure et la forme' criticizes Propp for the diachronic nature of his system, which produces a parallel narrative of functions alongside the narrative it analyses, and interprets it in terms not dissimilar to those of the actual text.<sup>3</sup> His own alternative, synchronic methodology is based on sets of oppositions that structure the text, such as male versus female, or high versus low. Lévi-Strauss suggests that by this method Propp's chronological succession could be absorbed into an atemporal, invariable matrix of narrative structure, thus offering a more purely metalinguistic discourse through which to discuss the text.

Although neither Lévi-Strauss nor Propp makes reference to contemporary popular fiction, the ritualized and formulaic nature of the material they study has certain similarities to the modern genre. Alongside articles by Barthes, Genette, and Todorov in the *Communications* issue that first crystallized structuralist narratology, Umberto Eco contributed a study of Ian Fleming's James Bond thrillers which demonstrates the parallels. In 'James Bond: une combinatoire narrative', Eco argues first that Fleming's novels are built around the permutations of fourteen fixed oppositions, such as 'Bond-le Méchant' or 'Perversion-Candeur' [Bond-the Villain; Perversity-Innocence].<sup>4</sup> He then offers an alternative analysis in terms of the nine narrative 'coups', or moves, into which the novels may, with possible inversions, omissions, and repetitions, be divided, such as 'La Femme joue et se présente à Bond' [The Woman joins the game and introduces herself to Bond] or 'Le Méchant torture Bond (avec ou sans la Femme)' [The Villain tortures Bond (with or without the Woman)].<sup>5</sup> Eco mentions neither Propp nor Lévi-Strauss with regard to his methods, but the similarities are obvious. Of course, the complex plotting and moral ambiguity of, say, a John Le Carré novel would pose difficulties for the formalist and structuralist systems, but the simple narrative line, the themes of quest and conflict, and the Manichean worldview of the basic thriller form have much in common with the folktale. The architecture of other popular subgenres, such as the classic detective story on the model of Doyle and Gaboriau, obviously comprises very different elements from these, but here too similar analyses might be envisaged to draw out the thematic oppositions (thought-action, reason-passion, etc.) and narrative 'moves' ('evidence examined', 'suspects interrogated', etc.) proper to the form in question. Such a procedure would still not allow us to say that 'all classic detective stories are of one type in regard to their structure', however, since the boundaries between subgenres are determined by the structural criteria used to draw them up; the analysis may give rise to the corpus of texts as much as the corpus inspires the analysis. Nevertheless, the close fit between crime fiction and Lévi-Strauss's and Propp's methods leaves exposed two important aspects of the genre: the *similarity* between texts, which allows such generalizing approaches, and the *formulaic structure*, which makes it possible to isolate the same self-contained thematic or narrative components from a number of different texts across the genre.

According to Todorov, the similarity of genre texts may be ascribed to the different value judgment placed upon them by readers, as compared to literary fiction. The latter resists typologies owing to the importance placed upon innovation in the text and the transgression of previous literary boundaries or categories. For the genre text, however, there is virtue in conformity: