

# The Collins Crime Club: Detective Fiction and the Commercialisation of Print Culture in 1930s Britain

**Sophie Bolton**

## **Abstract**

The interwar years in Britain are regularly referred to by historians and literary commentators as the Golden Age of detective fiction (c.1920-1940). This article is going to focus on the Collins imprint, The Crime Club, established in 1930. It will assess the role of this imprint within the context of the Golden Age, with a focus on its role as a commercial publisher, drawing on theories surrounding class-based markets and the commercialisation of print culture. The focus of this article will be the marketing methods used by the Crime Club to promote their titles, such as newsletters and card games, and will take into consideration the arguments of 1930s literary critics. Ultimately this article aims to show that detective fiction had a significant role within the commercialisation of print culture during the 1930s and heavily relied upon the support of the middle-class readership in establishing its success.

## **Keywords**

Collins, The Crime Club, Golden Age, Detective fiction, commercialisation, Agatha Christie

## Introduction

The interwar years in Britain are commonly referred to by historians of print culture as the 'Golden Age of Detective Fiction'. This period was defined by 'whodunnit' murder stories that followed a standardised plot formula in which solving the mystery was possible for the fictional detective and the general reader. Notable authors from this period include Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Dorothy Sayers, Marjorie Allingham and Michael Innes (Bradford 2015, 19). During this period, in 1930, Collins publisher created the imprint the Crime Club. Already a successful publisher of crime and detective fiction, Collins decided to capitalise on this reputation and the popularity of book clubs, which were prolific during this period. The Crime Club produced newsletters in which they advertised their books and authors to subscribers, free of charge. They sold all of their titles at the price of seven shillings and sixpence and the books were produced in a uniform format, always featuring the publisher's hooded gunman logo and slogan 'the sign of a good detective novel' (Herbert 1999; *The Crime Club Newsletter* 1930, 1).

The creation of the Crime Club during the Golden Age is a prime example of how print culture was becoming more commercial. This article sets out to explore this, taking into consideration the commentary of literary critics and looking at the central role of the middle-class readership in enabling the commercialisation of literature in 1930s Britain. The advertising and marketing methods of the Crime Club will be studied to demonstrate the imprint's commercial focus and to illustrate how established class-based markets enabled them to tailor their marketing toward the middle-classes.

## Middle-Class Readership

To understand the role of detective fiction within the commercialisation of print culture, it is essential to recognise the role of its primary readership, the middle-classes. The middle-classes have been given significant attribution by historians towards the success of detective fiction. Central to this argument is that detective fiction provided an escape from the realities of post-war life (Rzepka 2005, 152). The works of Agatha Christie, for example,

were notably sanitised; despite murder being central to all of her novels, they did not feature gruesome imagery or depictions of violence (Scaggs 2005, 43). Additionally, as Bill Phillips has highlighted, authors of detective fiction strayed away from the discussion of issues such as social or political injustice (Phillips 2016, 3). Stephen Knight has emphasised that the social setting in detective novels was also exclusive to this period and appealed to the middle-class readership (Knight 2010, 86). The murders often took place in country houses or quaint villages, with little representation of the working-classes (Mandel 1984, 30). According to Jonathan Scaggs, this was not a reflection of contemporary life and detective novels were often written as if the First World War and economic depression had never happened (Scaggs, 2005, 48). It is unsurprising therefore that detective fiction appealed to the middle-class bourgeois during this period.

Other contributing factors towards the rise in detective fiction, as highlighted by Jonathan Symons, included an increase in leisure time for reading, rising income to spend on books in middle-class households and a boom in libraries (Symons 1972, 95-6). It is important to note that the growth in libraries had a significant impact on the working-class readership. 'Twopenny libraries', which loaned books for subscription, notably stocked an abundance of detective fiction. In fact, a 1940 survey into selection and reading tastes found that crime and mystery novels were the most popular genres amongst working class readers (Mass Observation Survey 1940, 30). Despite this, there was an assumption amongst publishers and literary critics that the working classes primarily read newspapers and short stories (Hilliard 2014, 201). Robert James, who has explored this in more detail, highlights how in reality middle- and working-class literary tastes had begun overlap, however attitudes towards class and leisure remained the same (James 2017, 93). Therefore when seeking to make a profit, the middle-class market was the obvious focus for commercial publishers such as the Crime Club.

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### The Crime Club's Marketing and Titles

The creation of the Crime Club was undoubtedly a profit-making initiative from Collins. The ingenuity for this is evident from the following commentary by Arnold Bennett, author and weekly reviewer for the *Evening Standard*, in 1930:

I doubt if detective novels will decrease. Certainly I can perceive no diminution in the output of detective fiction. Rather the contrary. The latest sign of the vigour of detective fiction is the birth of an organisation entitled the Crime Club. (Bennett, A., *The Evening Standard* 1930 as cited in *The Crime Club Bulletin* 1930)

The primary format of the Crime Club's marketing was modelled on that of the popular book clubs, such as the Times Book Club. They published advertisements in newspapers inviting the public to join the club, free of charge. Subscribers would receive a newsletter featuring recommended titles selected by an 'expert' panel and they were encouraged to purchase or borrow the book from their local bookshop or library for the full price (Herbert 1999; *The Crime Club Bulletin* 1930, 2). The price of the titles at seven shillings and sixpence suggests that the middle-classes were the intended consumer. Publishers such as the Left Book Club and Penguin famously reduced the price of their titles to appeal to a more working-class readership (Plock 2018, 135; Thacker 2019, 8). Unlike the book clubs, the Crime Club did not offer any discounts and all the books they recommend were their own titles. To further spread awareness of the imprint, all publications by Collins included a postcard advertising the Crime Club subscription. This was a trait adopted by other publishers, such as Gollancz's Left Book Club who, according to Martin Edwards, was inspired by Collins (Edwards 2015, 310). Other ways in which they tried to persuade consumers included featuring articles written by the authors themselves and positive reviews from prominent newspapers (*The Crime Club Bulletin* 1930, 6).

The Crime Club's advertising that mirrored the popular book clubs came under criticism. Q.D. Leavis, an outspoken critic of detective fiction, argued that as a result of book clubs the reading public were failing to 'exercise any critical reading' (Leavis, as cited in Davis 2019, 95). Virginia Woolf felt similarly; she condemned readers for having to be told

what to read and expressed how this could threaten the art of literature (Plock 2019, 135). The popularity of the Crime Club and detective fiction during the Golden Age suggests that middle-class readers were not influenced by literary critique, however. Collins' focus on detective fiction and their marketing efforts suggest that they were not concerned with their cultural output and were primarily focused upon profit-making titles.

The Crime Club increasingly became known for its bank of successful crime authors. Agatha Christie, who published with the club since its conception, was their most well-known. However other notable authors included Ngaio Marsh, Elizabeth Ferrars, Robert Barnard, Freeman Wills Crofts and Edgar Wallace, who the club dubbed the 'Prime Minister of Thrillerdom' (*The Crime Club News* 1931, 10). Collins' saw the opportunity to capitalise further on their authors popularity, creating merchandise such as card games that featured popular characters such as Christie's Hercule Poirot. This epitomises the commercial drive behind the Crime Club.



**Figure 1:** Peter Cheyney's Crime Club Card Game. Second issue released 1939. Source:

<https://www.wopc.co.uk/uk/pepys/crime-club> (Accessed April 14th 2020)

Central to the Crime Club's marketing was the perception that the middle-class readership was their primary market. Christopher Hilliard has argued that there was a trend in interwar print culture in which book clubs made a conceded effort to refine class-based markets (Hilliard 2014, 219-220). This can be applied to the Crime Club, who through their publications and marketing appealed to middle-class audiences. What the middle-class reader desired from a novel was summarised by reviewer Harold Nicholson. Writing for the *Daily Express* in 1931, Nicholson stated that a detective novel 'should puzzle without disconcerting' and 'interest without preoccupying the mind' (*The Crime Club News* 1931, 5). This idea of providing entertainment without being troublesome is seen consistently throughout the Club's newsletter. For example, in a bid to draw in subscribers, they stated how their titles could provide 'exhilarating thrills...as good as a holiday...right in your favourite armchair...as regular as the clock' (*The Crime Club Bulletin* 1930, 7). By comparing reading a Crime Club novel to a holiday the publisher was emphasising the idea that detective fiction was something to be enjoyed during leisure time, which was a middle-class luxury. Additionally, for a class that notably found change disconcerting, the notion of reading in your favourite armchair being regular and unchanging could have provided comfort.

Crime Club titles were largely written by middle-class authors and class stereotypes were abundant within their novels. For example, Stephen Knight has highlighted that what drew consumers to Christie's novels was their shared bourgeois ideology (2010, 108). Collin's reliance upon this cohort was not misguided; Rzepka has argued that it was this audience that led to the dominance of the genre during the Golden Age (2005, 154). However, this displeased critics. Publisher Geoffrey Faber expressed his dismay that even the educated middle-classes, who have the money to spend on 'decent books', are no longer supportive of the 'English literature of the great ages' (Faber, as cited in Davis 2019, 104).

It was not only the marketing efforts of the Crime Club that lead to the criticism surrounding commercialisation but also the standardised style of writing that was seen across all Crime Club publications. Detective fiction as a whole had become increasingly

homogenous throughout the Golden Age as a result of author's commitment to the 'fair play rule'. The notion behind this was that the reader should be able to solve the crime themselves, with access to the same information as the fictional detective (Scaggs 2005, 27). This was something that the Crime Club used to promote their titles. For example, when advertising G.D.H. and M. Cole's novel *Burglar in Bucks*, the Club commented: 'the facts are all there – it is up to the reader to pit his own wits against the organised brain of Scotland Yard' (*Crime Club Bulletin* 1930, 2). This also explains Collin's use of the catch-line 'for detective connoisseurs', promoting the idea that the reader has the ability to solve the crime too.

Publishers were criticised by their contemporaries for publishing novels that they thought the public wanted purely for commercial gain, which publisher Stanley Unwin argued was a 'dull road to follow' (Unwin, 1926, 43). Faber argued that as a result of standardisation the public had become 'more and more sheeplike' (Faber, as cited in Davis 2019, 104). While he recognised that a publisher did need to take into consideration what the public wanted to read, he argued that there needed to be a balance between low, middle, and highbrow literature. He argued that many commercial publishers were starting to write exclusively 'for the herd', and while this often resulted in successful titles, as seen with the Crime Club, he felt what followed was the life being 'squeezed out of English literature' (Faber, as cited in Davis 2019, 104, 105). It is clear from the Crime Club's titles, marketing tools and language that they had no intention to publish what was considered highbrow and their aim was to market towards the customer base that was the most profitable; they were a purely commercial publisher.

### **The Success of the Crime Club**

The book-club style newsletter was a success for Collins, with the club boasting over 25,000 members less than two years after it began (*The Crime Club Postcard* 1932). While the direct impact of their marketing efforts cannot be measured, the Crime Club titles and many of their authors were extremely successful (Herbert 1999). In 1939 John Strachey, the man

who coined the phrase ‘The Golden Age of Detective Fiction’, praised many of the Crime Club authors. Freeman Wills Crofts and Agatha Christie, according to Strachey, were the ‘old masters’ of the detective fiction. He applauded the genre as a whole, stating that he has ‘little doubt that some of these detective novels are far better jobs, on any account, than are nine tenths of the more pretentious and ambitious high-brow novels’ (Strachey 1939, 13).

Many notable authors decided to switch publisher to the Crime Club, including Cecil Street in 1931 (A.K.A. Miles Burton and John Rhode) and Ngaio Marsh in 1934 (Herbert 1999). This suggests that the commercial success of a publisher was appealing to authors. It added a value to their titles, perhaps as a result of their prolific marketing campaigns or reputation as being the ‘sign of a good crime book’ (*The Crime Club Newsletter* 1930, 1). The novels received mostly positive reviews in the mainstream, middle-class newspapers. *The Times* frequently featured Collins’ titles on their recommended list and praised the writing. In 1934 an article stated that for a detective novel addict to not be familiar with Inspector French, Freeman Wills Crofts fictional detective, would be ‘unthinkable’ (*The Times* 1935, 22). In 1938 the newspaper praised the ‘woman writers of today’ who ‘certainly occupy a proud position’, naming Crime Club authors Christie and Marsh as prime examples (*The Times* 1938, 8). It is evident from this that Crime Club authors had gained a reputation amongst mainstream reviewers for their talent. Therefore, despite the lack of appreciation expressed by literary critics and the commercial approach of Collins, the literature produced was not widely viewed to be of a low quality.

## Conclusion

The Crime Club fits neatly within the current historiography of publishing and is just one example of how detective fiction significantly contributed towards the commercialisation of print culture Britain during the interwar years.

There is no doubt that the creation of the Crime Club during the middle of detective fiction’s ‘Golden Age’ was purely for commercial purposes. The Club identified their middle-class market and utilised the popularity of book clubs to market themselves in this fashion.

Their approach was customer and commerce focused; they produced light detective fiction that did not cause discomfort and tailored their marketing towards the lifestyles of their readers. They continually maintained throughout their advertising that detective fiction was entertaining and engaging, drawing on themes familiar to their middle-class readers. Despite constant literary criticism for the detective fiction genre, it is evident through the creation of branded merchandise such as card games that their cultural influence as a publisher was not a concern of theirs. The Crime Club demonstrates therefore how publishing during the interwar years, particularly that of detective fiction, was becoming increasingly customer-driven as a result of middle-classes demand and the likeliness of commercial success.

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