

Crime Fiction and Railways – Murder in Four Countries

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The History of Railways and Crime Fiction

Railways and crime fiction have an overlapping history: The first modern detective story was Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", published in 1841, and the first public railway was the Stockton and Darlington Railway in north-east England, which opened in 1825 (Haraguchi 2016:14; Nusser 2009:84; Kubota 1995:20). There is no clear consensus on the first crime story as well as the first railway, but E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Mademoiselle de Scuderi" (German original: "Das Fräulein von Scuderi") in 1819 may also be considered as the first crime fiction; and while the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, opened in 1830, was not the first public railway, it was the first railway using only locomotives and no horses, and thus may also be regarded as the first railway as we see them today. Crime fiction and railways are both new inventions of the first half of the 19th century: crime stories due to the establishment of criminal law and a modern police force (Nusser 2009:70), and railways were developed as a modern mode of transportation during the industrial revolution (Kubota 1995:19).

The Classic: "Murder on the Orient Express"

The 'Orient Express' was a luxurious international train running between Istanbul and Paris, and Agatha Christie chose it as the setting for her crime story "Murder on the Orient Express", published in 1934 (Haraguchi 2016:100). The train gets stuck in heavy snow en route

through Yugoslavia, and soon afterwards a passenger is killed. Private detective Hercule Poirot, one of the passengers, realizes that the murderer must still be on the train as there was no chance to flee due to the heavy snow. He then discovers that twelve other passengers travelling in the same wagon were all involved in the crime. “Murder on the Orient Express” is one of the best known crime novels and uses two common elements of crime fiction, a closed circle of suspects and a locked room. The suspects are the passengers, the locked room is the railway coach.

In the following section I want to take a look at four recently published crime stories that are set in four countries (Germany, Norway, England, Japan) and are related to railways, followed by an appendix about Japanese ‘travel mystery’ crime fiction.

Germany: “Mord im Moorexpress”

This novel, written by Christa Picard in German (no translation available), is about the ‘Moorexpress’ (literally ‘moor express’), a heritage railway in northern Germany, east of Bremen. One evening in December 2015, the last ‘Moorexpress’ train of the day pulls into the sidings of Osterholz-Scharmbeck station. All passengers have gotten off, except for one man who seems to be sleeping. When the conductor attempts to wake him up, he notices that he was dead of a gunshot wound. Soon the local police arrive, and inspector Peter Köster starts the investigation. It takes some time to identify the victim, who is from the Ukraine. It is clear that the murderer must be one of the passengers, as the man was shot on the train, so Köster starts to locate all of them. He is finally able to establish a connection between the victim and a local farmer’s family going back to the Second World War.

“Mord im Moorexpress” is a typical locked room mystery, where the train is the locked room, with a closed circle of suspects, although with a variation: the room was locked when the crime was committed (the victim

was shot when the train was in motion), but the suspects were able to leave the train after the murder, thus the room was opened before the investigation started. The story contains a lot of information on local history and can therefore be classified as a 'Regionalkrimi' (regional crime fiction), a typical feature of recent German crime stories (Frackman 2014). Such regional crime fiction is very popular in a specific region, but rarely outside of it, which may explain the lack of a translation.

Norway: "1222"

This novel, written by Anne Holt and translated into English, is about train 601 from Oslo to Bergen in Norway and is set in February 2007. The story starts when this train derails near Finse in a heavy snowstorm. All passengers are evacuated to a nearby hotel, which is located at an altitude of 1222 metres above sea level. They are safe, but due to the snowstorm they are trapped in the hotel and cannot leave, nor can anyone come to rescue them. Before long, one of the passengers is shot dead just outside the hotel, and when a panic breaks out after this murder is made public, another passenger dies from a heart attack. Shortly afterwards, a man is stabbed to death by an icicle. Former police inspector Hanne Wilhelmsen, who was a passenger on the train, starts an investigation, but as there were 269 people on the train, the number of suspects is very large. The plot is further complicated due to the secret last carriage of the train – nobody seems to know who was on board.

A train stuck in heavy snow: "1222" is certainly a homage to Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Orient Express" as well as a classic locked room mystery. The variation this time is that the locked room is not a train, but a hotel, and that the circle of suspects is very large making it impossible for Hanne Wilhelmsen to interview all passengers as Hercule Poirot has done on the 'Orient Express'.

England: “The Railway Man”

This novel, written by John Dean, is set in the fictional city of Hafton in northern England in the summer of 2017. Hafton is a city with a long railway history, and the story starts with the opening of the new railway museum. Detective chief inspector John Blizzard, whose father was a train driver and whose grandfather was a worker in a locomotive shed, is the secretary of the Hafton Railway Appreciation Society, which was the driving force behind the foundation of the museum and the restoration of its ‘Silver Flyer’ steam locomotive. During the opening ceremony of the museum a man is found dead in a disused railway signal box in the former railway yard next to the museum. This victim was a former railway worker turned into a gangster. The next victim is a boxing coach, also a former railway worker, with connections to Hafton’s underworld. In the meantime, a burglar falls to his death from the roof of the railway museum. Blizzard must find the murderer and investigates former railway men, many of whom are his friends.

Nearly every character in “The Railway Man” has a connection to railways, so that a title “Railway Men” would also be appropriate. There is no locked room, which is different from the other novels discussed here, and there is no train running (except for the ‘Silver Flyer’ inside the museum). All suspects are former railway workers, so there is circle of suspects as in the other novels, however as there is no locked room it is not immediately clear how many suspects there are. At the end of the book there is a list of characters, which helps the reader to keep track of the investigations.

Japan: “Bullet Train”

This novel, written by Kotaro Isaka and translated from Japanese, is set on the ‘Hayate’ shinkansen running from Tokyo to Morioka on an undisclosed day sometime between 2002 and 2010. A variety of characters

board the train at Tokyo station: In car number 7 is Yuichi Kimura, a former gangster intent on killing a teenager called Prince who injured his son. In car number 3 are Lemon and Tangerine, two thugs hired by crime boss Yoshio Minegishi as well as Minegishi's son. Lemon and Tangerine have rescued the son from a kidnapping and are bringing him, and a suitcase of money, back to Morioka. Nanao, who calls himself the world's unluckiest assassin, is roaming through the train trying to find the suitcase with the money. When the train arrives in Ueno station just a few minutes after leaving Tokyo, the first person is already dead, and before reaching Omiya, a second person is killed. By the time the train arrives in Morioka, four more gangsters have boarded the train and three more people are dead, leading to a showdown at Morioka station.

“Bullet Train” is a thriller and not a detective story as the novels reviewed above. While there is a happy ending for some of the characters, many of them end up dead or injured, and nobody is brought to justice as there is no detective. The train is a locked room preventing the people from getting off (actually Nanao tries to get off at several stations, but he is always obstructed), although new characters get on the shinkansen at intermediate stations. The whole novel is set on the ‘Hayate’ shinkansen, except for the last two chapters, making it a true railway story similar to the “Murder on the Orient Express”.

Travel Mystery: “The Nanki Murder Route”

“Bullet Train” is Japanese crime fiction on a train, but the so-called ‘travel mystery’ or ‘railway mystery’ books are a lot more common in Japan (Haraguchi 2016:66). These are novels where the timetable of trains plays a key role in solving the murder. While the victims were murdered on the shinkansen in “Bullet Train”, in most other railway mystery stories they are killed outside of the trains, and perpetrators, victims and detectives are frequent passengers on trains. The best-known

stories are those featuring chief inspector Totsugawa from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police (Wittkamp 2002:78).

A typical example of a Japanese travel mystery is “The Nanki Murder Route”. A man is murdered in a hotel in front of Wakayama station, and chief inspector Totsugawa and inspector Kamei travel from Tokyo to Wakayama because the victim has a connection to Tokyo. Totsugawa and Kamei find a suspect, but he has an alibi. He boarded a train which left Ōji at 13:14 and arrived in Wakayama at 16:05, with the conductor confirming both the boarding and arrival time as he remembers the suspect causing trouble at both stations. As the murder in the Wakayama hotel happened at a quarter past three, his alibi is airtight. However, Totsugawa and Kamei figure out that, while the suspect did indeed board the train leaving Ōji at 13:14, he got off that train at Takada, five stations from Ōji, at 13:29, and backtracked to Ōji with a train leaving Takada at 13:35, arriving at Ōji at 13:50. He then left Ōji at 13:52 and went to Wakayama via Tennōji using a rapid train, arriving at Wakayama at 15:09. He then had time to kill the victim and leave Wakayama station by a train bound for Ōji at 15:25, getting off en route and getting onto the same train he left at Takada, arriving at Wakayama at 16:05. Totsugawa can prove that he took the route via Tennōji thus having enough time to commit the murder.

The breaking of this alibi might seem overly complicated to readers not familiar with train schedules, but for those who know the geography or have travelled on these routes it may be more intuitive and entertaining to read. However, for readers unfamiliar with the trains and the location of the stations it may be less comprehensible. That may be the reason why these travel mystery stories are popular in Japan but are not translated into English. These plots rely on punctual trains, but as trains in Japan normally run on time, there is no problem using the timetable as the basis for a crime story (Haraguchi 2016:210).

Conclusion

Railways and crime fiction, which were both invented in the first half of the 19th century, have interacted for a long time. The first crime fiction with a railway-related theme was probably Charles Dicken’s “The Signal-Man” from 1866 (Haraguchi 2016:75), soon followed by many more. The classic locked room mystery goes well with railways as trains form a closed space, making it an ideal location for a whodunit plot with a limited number of suspects. “Murder on the Orient Express”, “Mord im Moorexpress” and “1222” are such ‘whodunit’ detective stories. However, there are also novels as “The Railway Man”, where railway men are suspects and victims, and the story is set around railway infrastructure without having a locked room. “Bullet Train” uses the locked room theme, but as a thriller. The novels discussed here show the variety that crime fiction has, giving authors the freedom to constantly develop new plots, in these cases all revolving around railways.

Crime Novels

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