1: Vor Ort: The Functions and Early Roots of German Regional Crime Fiction

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The idea that location would be important to the production and reception of crime fiction is not new. Since their earliest existence, Kriminalliteratur and Kriminalerzählungen have been bound to a certain necessity of place. In some ways, the concept is basic, especially if one considers that one of the very functions of the wider genre is to situate a particular crime in a particular place. This often requires a detective or some investigatory figure to examine the scene of the crime (the Tatort, an element so obviously important that it became the title of one of Germany’s most successful and long-lasting television series). The setting of a mystery or crime story is often one of its primary defining characteristics: Sherlock Holmes’s London, Agatha Christie’s enclosed manor houses and train compartments, Kurt Wallander’s Scania or Sweden more generally, V. I. Warshawski’s Chicago, Inspector Morse’s Oxford. The subject of this essay, crime fiction native to and reflective of particular regions in Germany, represents in a way a hyperextension of the importance of location, in which the various settings of these stories become their creation myths or existential foundations. This essay argues that German regional crime fiction is both a modern development and simultaneously a recollection of crime fiction’s journalistic and literary beginnings. I will demonstrate that regional crime fiction has connections to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Fallgeschichten (case stories) that fascinated a developing reading public and satisfied readers’ taste for sensational details with a more local flavor. In what follows, I maintain that reader interest has helped to define the genre, and I track the literary-historical beginnings of this literature.

This essay will demonstrate that the regional subset of the crime-fiction genre fits in with the genre’s modern genesis. By referring to modernity, I aim to situate these developments in reading behavior among the technological, social, and class-related changes taking place especially after the early nineteenth century. Emerging from the sensational interests of a burgeoning reading public, crime narratives serve, in the sense defined
above, an essentially modern function of investigation and enlightenment, a quest in which identity has been crucial. Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn argue that the solving of a crime, possibly the primary function of detective and crime fiction, leads ipso facto to the question of identity, which has gradually become more complex as the genre has evolved. Instead of focusing merely on establishing a criminal’s identity and motives, the works within this subgenre thematize greater problems in society in general, including questions of what “crime” actually is, how social issues relate to criminal events, and what conclusions one might draw about the ordered foundations of society. Eva Erdmann maintains that crime fiction has shifted away from its original task of focusing on a crime per se to that of showcasing a place, the setting, and the characters’ attachment to it (or lack thereof). Indeed, crime stories can also become “chroniclers for the settings of their plots,” presenting detailed examinations of these areas. The narratives, she writes, become more widely relevant and appealing (i.e., to people beyond those who might live in those particular localities) by employing certain motifs that engage the story’s location. Attempts to express an atmosphere can include “cultural stereotypes and clichés that are affirmatively used, ironically used or problematized.” Although Erdmann’s argument focuses on national characteristics, the observation can include the regional variety, some examples of which are discussed below. Moreover, this signals the importance of location for these stories, showing a characteristic also discussed below—namely that readers not from that region can explore someplace new and locals can live their own familiarity.

Discussing a topic that has wider popular appeal and a broad critical reach is not without its perils, since untold critics, theoreticians, and writers of all varieties have worked in and around the field of crime fiction for many decades, including the scholars in this volume. Before proceeding to what this essay will do, I must explain what it will not do. I will not endeavor here to advance a new definition of crime fiction, the crime story, the detective story, mysteries, or thrillers. Many critics have already and repeatedly argued about these concerns. Nonetheless, I would like to underscore characteristics of crime stories that are central to my examination.

While the portrayal of unknown settings could appeal to readers’ imaginations, realism is an essential element of crime fiction, regional crime fiction included. Some critics maintain that this approach leads to bloated texts, overburdened with details that are not universally appealing. In his oft-quoted *Murder for Pleasure*, Howard Haycraft opines, however, that

the less exotic the scenes, the better they will serve the essential interest of verisimilitude. [Writer G. K.] Chesterton remarked somewhere...
that the detective story is at its best when it “stays at home”—or words to that general effect. . . . Most successful are those backdrops known to the average reader, yet “touched up” by artful brushwork; for it is the “semblance of reality” which is desired, rather than reality itself.11

The approximation of reality that regional crime fiction employs is ideally situated in well-known or seemingly familiar surroundings, allowing for the reader’s identification with the narrative. The potential draw for readers who wish to find lifelike portrayals of scenery with which they are acquainted is understandable. Interestingly, the local connections and flavor have deeper genealogical roots that reach back to a perhaps more elevated purpose, as we will see: journalistic reportage. Before proceeding, however, some “geographic” boundaries must be drawn around the subgenre of regional crime fiction.

Definitions are important to some degree, as the focus of this essay is a particular subgenre, a smaller offshoot of the German Krimi branch of the world’s crime literature tree (to use Julian Symons’s metaphor): the Regionalkrimi.12 Lynn Marie Kutch writes that “regional crime fiction exhibits crime fiction’s traditional elements, but the plot’s perhaps disproportionate emphasis on the relationship between the protagonist and his [sic] surroundings reflects the thematic concentration on local place and its bearings on global identity, and by extension the problematic relationship between author and text.”13 Stefanie Rahnfeld of the Cologne-based Emons Verlag explains, “Ein echter Regionalkrimi . . . lässt sich nicht an einen anderen Ort verlagern” (emphasis added; A true regional crime story could not be relocated to another place).14 In other words, while we can grant that location is important for crime fiction in general, it becomes essential for regional crime fiction, not only for definitional reasons of the subgenre’s name, but rather for one of the main goals that the subgenre has: to evoke vividly the place in which the story occurs.

For the present analysis, an awareness of why we are reading is slightly more important than a circumscription of a genre definition (what we are reading). The former question is crucial and illuminating for an examination of mystery and detective fiction more generally, but also for regional crime fiction specifically. The genre and its subgenres rely on appeals to interested readers’ expectations of what they will encounter in the narrative. Even literary great Friedrich Schiller acknowledged this in his preface to the popular “Pitaval” collection of stories (discussed below), conceding that many people read awful stories that they should not, or works that do little to contribute to the readers’ moral edification.15 Indeed, one of the reasons the body of detective literature and mysteries is often placed under the rubric of “trivial literature” has to do with its effect on the reader: it gives the reading public what it wants or what it will buy.16
Crime fiction enjoys great popularity in the German public. The crime novel is second in popularity only to the classic fictional novel. As a trade secret, exact sales and publishing statistics are difficult to come by, but it would seem that, in the first few years of the twenty-first century, crime fiction has increased in popularity. Among the crime novels that Germans read, however, crime fiction from German-speaking lands has been decreasing in prevalence in recent years, losing out to English-language works that are then translated and sold in the German market. If the trend continues, as it is likely to do, the future of specifically German regional crime fiction is not completely clear. At the very least, it will become even more of a niche subject as stories that are written elsewhere (in the United States or the United Kingdom) overtake their popularity.

Contrary but related to the stories that situate a mystery or crime narrative in a metropolis or other urban setting, regional crime fiction can be characterized by its tendency to locate narratives in more rural, less-trafficked locations. One of the first regional crime novels in German, Jacques Berndorf’s *Eifel-Blues* (1989), and its subsequent stories place their protagonist in the region of Germany that gives the series its name, the Eifel, making the location arguably more important to the series than the investigator. Unlike the gritty city that may play a prominent locational role in a noir detective story, the Eifel is a sometimes romanticized, hilly area in western Germany that overlaps the states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Rheinland-Palatinat and counts vineyards among its most important agricultural features. Certainly, following the popularity of Berndorf’s Eifel stories, German regional crime fiction has expanded to include most, if not all, local regions in Germany. From Swabia and the Bavarian Allgäu in the south to the island of Sylt and the Baltic coast in the north, almost every region and subregion in Germany now has its own category of this literature. As Eckart Baier reported in the *Börsenblatt*, the weekly trade publication of German bookstores, “Egal, ob Bamberg oder Bielefeld, Eifel oder Herrgottswinkel: Kaum ein Flecken auf der Deutschlandkarte, an dem nicht geraubt, entführt oder betrogen wird—wenn auch nur zwischen zwei Buchdeckeln. Der Regionalkrimi boomt und hat sich mittlerweile als moderne Form der Heimatliteratur etabliert” (44; It doesn’t matter if it’s Bamberg or Bielefeld, the Eifel or Nowheresville: there’s hardly a fleck on a map of Germany where there isn’t stealing, kidnapping, or betraying—even if it’s just between the covers of a book. The regional crime story is booming and has established itself as a modern form of home literature). When regional festivals and local customs can play a role in a murder, the consequences of location become even more apparent. Local and real problems, like unemployment and urban planning, can lend the stories a vital element of credibility.

As in other genres and subgenres, there is a great deal of diversity in the form and kinds of narratives within German regional crime fiction.
Examples of novels include the aforementioned Eifel stories, Jürgen Reitemeier and Wolfram Tewes’s stories in and about Lippe, and Sibylle Baecker’s and Klaus Wanninger’s Swabian crime novels. Regional fiction has also thrived in shorter forms, with numerous short story collections, such as Gudrun Weitbrecht and Nessa Altura’s anthologies (also discussed below), giving more exposure to a wide range of authors and styles of writing. With respect to time period, these narratives also represent a remarkable variety, ranging from the Middle Ages to the present.22 If one expands the genre’s definition to include television and film, the rubric could encompass locally focused episodes of the long-running Tatort series, as well as the ZDF series Mörderischer Norden (Murderous North), which showcases murder mysteries on Germany’s Baltic coast.

The crime fiction formula can depend on a unilateral (or unidirectional) relationship between an author and a reader. From one perspective, the author has control, creates a story according to an exact template, and transmits it to the naïve reader, who supposedly should know better than to read artless literature or who is being taken in by the opportunistic author’s desires for “easy” financial gain. From another perspective, it is the demanding and genre-addicted reader who drives the production of the text, somehow manipulating the author (and the publisher) in the narrative creation. Each of these views has valid elements. It is more productive, though, to try to explain the subgenre’s continued success with a bilateral model that acknowledges the roles of both the reader and the author. No one can doubt that detective and similar crime stories are written to follow a particular recipe. On the surface, one might be tempted to think that they are read for the thrill of uncovering the solution at the end of the mystery. That is certainly one component, and many mystery readers might assert as much. As Umberto Eco describes it, however, this genre presents the paradox that it is supposed to deliver something “unforeseen” or “sensational” (a mystery and its solution), but it is popular because it can be “taken for granted, familiar, expected.”23 Eco’s observation can extend to the nature of regional crime fiction. This subgenre’s success depends not on the potential to introduce or explore unfamiliar terrain, but rather on the interest, both the reader’s and the author’s, in functioning within severely limited boundaries.

Despite the presupposed nature of the subgenre, some critics posit that a kind of organic relationship exists between author and reader. Wolfgang Iser, a proponent of reader-response theory, understood there to be an interplay between a reader and the text (as separate from the author), as the reader uses her or his own experiences to develop an interpretation of the text.24 Literary theorist Hans Robert Jauß described a “horizon of expectations” that helps to define a text from the outset when a reader encounters it. As George N. Dove writes, referring to Jauß’s concept, “A book, although it may be new to a given reader, does not really
present itself as something absolutely new but predisposes its audience to a specific kind of reception; it awakens memories of that which was already read and so enters the reader’s horizon of expectations.”

Dove’s study deals specifically with detective fiction, but it could be applied more broadly to crime fiction and mysteries. He argues that reading this kind of fiction is different from reading most others, in that most readers are willing to operate within the accepted formulaic structure of these stories; in some ways, they know what to expect.

The relationship between the author or the text and reader is deepened by reliance on the repetitive conventions inherent in the subgenre of regional crime fiction. In part of his semiotic study of The Role of the Reader, Eco analyzes detective and popular fiction, arguing that an author of such texts will include numerous “redundant” narrative devices that remind the reader of the characters’ constitution and their roles in the stories. These can be plot elements as well as character traits. In English-language fiction, for example, one can think of Sherlock Holmes’s difficult personality or Hercule Poirot’s dandy fussiness. According to Eco, readers can “find an old friend in the character portrayed.” Indeed, for Eco, what brings readers back to these stories is their reliability; that is, the reader can count on knowing what to expect. “The attraction of the book . . . lies in the fact that, plopped in an easy chair or in the seat of a train compartment, the reader continuously recovers . . . what he [sic] already knows, what he wants to know again: that is why he has purchased the book.” Reader expectation, then, is dependent on what the author delivers and what the reader returns.

In beginning to explain the existence and popularity of regional crime fiction, one can place it on a historical timeline of the public’s interest in its surroundings. Both literate and nonliterate people are greatly interested in their immediate environment, as local happenings would likely be of greatest relevance to their daily lives. Just as former US Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill declared that “All politics is local,” one could argue that all crime is local, and that all crime has both local implications and local origins.

According to Peter Nusser’s analysis of the crime novel, the foundation of this genre must lie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for reasons of class and society. First, there had to be a social infrastructure, or some kind of law enforcement, for the identification and investigation of crime. Indeed, there needed to be categories of crime itself. Secondly, there had to be a group or class of people relatively safe and educated enough to read about it and to be concerned about its possible spread into their lives: primarily the bourgeoisie. For these and other reasons, the economic, educational, and civil developments of the eighteenth century are requisite for the kinds of fiction with which we now concern ourselves in this volume. Documenting some of these changes,
Nusser presents the argument that fears of an assault on nascent state authority helped to reinforce the interest in crime fiction: the people demanded a criminal justice system on which they could depend. The late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries witnessed a reform of criminal codes and the creation of criminal justice institutions, which aimed to protect the burgeoning civil society.

Already in the eighteenth century, creators and publishers of “sensational” literature began to cultivate a public interest in local “true crime,” tapping into readers’ curiosity and local concern. Likely the first incarnation of this was François Gayot de Pitaval’s (1673–1743) stories, which presented accounts of actual criminal cases. These texts, documenting crimes in early modern France, offered descriptions of real cases that served as inspirational material for some writers who incorporated events and characters from these texts into their own work. Pitaval, originally a theology student and eventually an attorney, studied old court files and used his own court experience to deliver remarkable cases, and published his first of twenty-two volumes in 1734 as Causes célèbres et intéressantes, avec les jugements qui les ont décidées (Famous and Interesting Cases with their Deciding Judgments), focusing on cases involving aristocratic as well as bourgeois individuals. Pitaval’s texts were reworked and translated in various editions, including a nine-volume German version published in Leipzig between 1747 and 1768. In 1792, Friedrich Schiller wrote the aforementioned preface for one German translation, in which he recommends the text for readers interested in issues of criminal justice as well as the nature of humanity.

In the mid-nineteenth century, in 1842, Der neue Pitaval (The New Pitaval) appeared, edited and rewritten by Julius Eduard Hitzig and Wilhelm Häring in its first edition. Hitzig and Häring made important changes in their presentation of new material, in that they changed Pitaval’s original style in order to focus on the sensational and to build suspense. Both the original and the later reworked New Pitaval stories consciously grounded their events by means of a journalistic listing of the location, time, and manner of the crime as well as the customary revelation of the guilty party. We can connect these stories based on their subject matter and, more importantly, their nature as realistic, straightforwardly situated tales. We can be certain, though, that Hitzig and Häring aimed to make these stories more widely available to a readership that extended beyond the educated expert in order to include the educated layperson.

After 1850, these kinds of stories saw wider circulation in German Familienzeitschriften (family periodicals). In publications like Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd (Conversations around the Hearth), Das Familienblatt (The Family Journal), Daheim (At Home), and Die Gartenlaube (The Arbor), numerous authors delivered serial narratives,
spread over weeks or even an entire year.\textsuperscript{37} The omnipresence of criminal stories in these publications further testifies to the important role that crime, whether a mere awareness or an actual fear of it, played in Germany at that time, especially after the revolutions of 1848–49.\textsuperscript{38} Some of these stories present specific details about their setting; others allude to distant locales. Still others tantalize the reader by following the German convention of abbreviating proper names, as when businessman B. loses something of importance on the train between stations R. and K. in the story “Auf der Eisenbahn” (On the Train).

An issue of the \textit{Münsterberger Wochenblatt} (Münsterberg Weekly) from 1839, for instance, gives evidence of the smattering of local flavors that these publications could offer. The opening pages of this first issue of the year saw the beginning of a captivating serial story, “Der Staatsgefangene und seine Tochter” (The State Prisoner and his Daughter), a melodramatic moral tale, along with notices from local citizens of houses for sale, grain prices, and, interestingly, a police blotter or \textit{Chronik}, which offered statistics about the year that had just passed.\textsuperscript{39} We learn that nine people had met unfortunate deaths, including the detail of their locations, by, for example, being run over, falling from a barn, or burning to death after clothing caught fire.\textsuperscript{40} Also noted were suicides, dog bites with and without the presence of rabies, and the appearance of smallpox and hoof-and-mouth disease. Part of the popularity of these stories must have relied on the alienation effect created by their combinations of familiar surroundings and unfamiliar happenings.\textsuperscript{41} The \textit{Berliner Gerichts-Zeitung} (Berlin Court Newspaper) provides another example of a story in which a man enters a local establishment and orders schnapps, only to receive a glass of acid instead and be put in “Lebensgefahr” (mortal danger).\textsuperscript{42}

These kinds of matter-of-fact, sometimes transcript-like depictions testify to a public interest in realistic narratives—an interest which is in line with literary developments of the mid- to late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{43} In regional crime fiction, we see a modern adaptation and intensification of this verisimilitude. Regional crime fiction’s oft-maligned tendency to ground its narratives in local minutiae is a recent continuation of this style that established itself in the eighteenth century. Moving into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, attitudes toward crime changed and one wanted assurance that crime, local or otherwise, would stay where it should be, beyond middle-class existence. As Symons explains, those “who have a stake in the permanence of the existing social system” sympathized with law enforcement officers, to the extent that the latter existed, as part of a desire to maintain what was locally good and remove what was locally bad.\textsuperscript{44}

Contemporaneous with the increase in social and civil preoccupation with questions of crime and criminal justice was a dramatic growth
of journalism. Daily newspapers, weeklies, and periodicals proliferated in Europe and North America. The German *Berliner Gerichts-Zeitung*, established in 1853, for example, notes in its first issue that the public has “ein unverkennbares Interesse, zu erfahren, einmal, welche Wege das immer studirter auftretende Verbrechen einschlägt; sodann, welche Mittel von Richter und Recht, von Gesetzgebung und Verwaltung aufgewendet werden, um dasselbe kenntlich zu machen, um es einzuschränken und seine traurigen Wirkungen und Einflüsse so viel als möglich zu neutralisirend einen unverkennbaren Interesse, zu erfahren, einmal, welche Wege das immer studirter auftretende Verbrechen einschlägt; sodann, welche Mittel von Richter und Recht, von Gesetzgebung und Verwaltung aufgewendet werden, um dasselbe kenntlich zu machen, um es einzuschränken und seine traurigen Wirkungen und Einflüsse so viel als möglich zu neutralisieren (an unmistakable interest in learning, first of all, which forms the ever-more-capable crime may take; then, which means of legislation and administration the judges and the law might use to make the same [the crime] recognizable, to limit it, as much as possible, to neutralize its sad effects and influences). These “effects and influences” play out in the pages of each issue of the newspaper, describing local, regional, and national circumstances. In the same first issue, the reader learns of a court session of September 27:

Ein großes Interesse bot die heutige Sitzung . . . dar, weil sie uns die nicht unbedeutende Zahl von 11 Personen auf der Anklagebank vorführte, die beschuldigt sind, wiederholte Diebstähle zur Nachtzeit und in Gemeinschaft verübt, oder als Helfer an den Vorteilen dieser Diebstähle Theil genommen zu haben. Dieser Fall mahnt um so mehr das Publikum zur Vorsicht, als die Diebe in 10 Fällen die Schaufenster, welche jetzt in der Regel durch hölzerne Rouleaux geschlossen werden, mit überraschender Gewandtheit erbrochen haben.

[Today’s session was of great interest, because it presented us with the not insignificant number of eleven persons in the defendants’ chairs, who are charged with repeated thefts together and at night or with having received stolen goods from these thefts. This case exhorts us all the more to caution, as the thieves in ten cases broke open the shop windows, which are usually covered with wooden blinds, with surprising dexterity.]

These reports relay an image of a Berlin and its surroundings that, first, are in want of journalistic coverage for the good of the public according to the newspaper’s editors, and, second, are witnessing increases in crime or developments in types of crime that now spread across class boundaries. Moving out of Berlin, we can see accounts in the *Heidelberger Zeitung* (Heidelberg Newspaper), for example, of the always-sensational topic of alleged infanticide:

Ein sonst sehr gut beleumundetes, erst 20 Jahre altes, hübsches Mädchen, Rosine Stößer von Bruchhausen, Amtsgericht Ettlingen, stand heute vor den Schranken des Gerichts unter der Anklage, ihr neugebornes Kind vorsätzlich getödtet zu haben. Während die

[An otherwise well-regarded pretty girl, Rosine Stößer of Bruchhausen, jurisdiction of Ettlingen, stood today before the bench, having been accused of premeditatedly killing her newborn child. While the accused had denied as much in the preliminary inquiry, today she made the rueful confession that on the afternoon of the 6th of February this year in the Ettlingen forest, she killed her child by shoving a wad of moss and grass in its mouth and then hurriedly burying it and placing a large branch over it. While today’s case could arguably summon forth a feeling of compassion, the ducal prosecutor Haas in his justification for the charges called attention to the shocking increase in the crime of infanticide over the past few years, as in the Middle Rhein District alone during the past half-year there have been six cases.]

The account goes on to describe some of the young woman’s familial circumstances before eventually describing the dramatic in camera consideration by the judges and the eventual sentence.

These reports serve a number of purposes, depending on one’s perspective and position in the reading public. Some of these periodicals and their stories catered to overlapping audiences: on the one hand, to those well-versed in the ways of the criminal justice system of the time and, on the other hand, to the lay public, fascinated by a need to know about legal and criminal developments in the region or around the corner. The editorial stance in the prospectus at the start of the first issue of the Berliner Gerichts-Zeitung points to another goal of these accounts—namely, the altruistic and enlightening perspective of serving a public good, delivering details of law and order to members of the public, who wish to know who their fellow citizens are, with whom they are jostling about in a growing, bustling city.49 Finally, these reports can fan the flames of sensationalism, sometimes imitating the melodramatic serial stories that graced their pages.

Regional crime fiction provides the reader with an addictive combination of the normal and the abnormal, the probable and improbable,
the realistic and fantastic. Such a mixture helps to explain the subgenre’s steady increase in appeal. It helps to deliver to readers a new insight into or view of their surroundings. Like the journalistic accounts of crime, the reader is treated to perpetrators’ traits and moral failings, the details of the crime (including location and method), and the social means used to uncover and punish the criminal acts. Just like the aforementioned serial characters that elicit identification in readers’ recognition, regional details similarly facilitate readers’ entrance into the fictional crime narratives. I will provide two different examples from the subgenre, each from a different form but located in the same region: first, from Klaus Wanninger’s novel Schwaben-Ehre (Swabian Honor, 2009) and, second, from Gudrun Weitbrecht’s collection Mörderisches Ländle (Murderous Swabia, 2008), specifically Gunter Gerlach’s short story “Keine Tränen” (No Tears). Both the novels and the short stories use the strategy of appealing directly to readers’ regional ideas in their titles. They also offer favorable examples of crime literature that resembles its forebears.

Klaus Wanninger has written a popular and long-lasting series of regional crime novels set in southwest Germany, primarily in and around Stuttgart. Although his productivity expands beyond this, between 2000 and 2011 Wanninger wrote fifteen novels with permutations of the title above, among them Schwaben-Rache (Swabian Wrath, 2000), Schwaben-Herbst (Swabian Autumn, 2007), and Schwaben-Liebe (Swabian Love, 2011). His novels in this series, which are arguably the most prominent of the Schwaben-Krimis, have sold over half a million copies according to the publisher’s website and feature two investigators from the Landeskriminalamt (state police) in Stuttgart, a male-female team: Steffen Braig and Katrin Neundorf. 

Schwaben-Ehre begins with the discovery of a corpse in the men’s room at the Stuttgart Liederhalle, a locally respected venue for conferences and cultural performances in the Swabian area, the so-called Ländle (8). Wanninger proceeds in a series of sentences, consisting of extended modifiers of extended modifiers, to give the subgenre’s customary background on the crime scene’s broader location, either for the benefit of non-Swabian readers or to strengthen the narrative’s local or regional bona fides: “Der mitten im Zentrum Stuttgarts gelegene Komplex war in den fünfziger Jahren des vergangenen Jahrhunderts als weltweit gelobte Meisterleistung der Architektenkoryphäen Rolf Gutbrod und Adolf Abel anstelle des 1864 erbauten und 1944 durch Bombenangriffe zerstörten Vorgängergebäudes als deutlich von expressionistischen Strukturen geprägtes Konzerthaus errichtet und 1991 durch einen vom Gutbrod-Schüler Henning kreierten Neubau ergänzt worden” (8; The complex, situated right in the center of Stuttgart, was built in the 1950s, a concert hall clearly influenced by expressionist structures, and praised worldwide as a masterpiece by architectural luminaries Rolf Gutbrod and Adolf Abel,
is on the site of the preceding building—which was built in 1864 and destroyed by bombs in 1944—and was expanded with an addition by Henning, a pupil of Gutbrod).

In a brief textual interlude before the investigation continues, the reader goes on another geographic trip as Braig thinks of the long, pleasant weekend just past, listing people and places that really exist in this part of Germany. He remembers going to a concert by his most-loved folk rock band, the real Wendrsonn, at the Staufer School Center in Waiblingen. The lead singer, Biggi Binder, performed his favorite song and drove away his work-related stress. The next day, Braig went to a classical organ concert at the Stiftskirche in the town of Backnang (9). In addition to the surroundings, the narrative includes elements of daily life in this environment with which readers from across Germany could potentially be acquainted but which local initiates or experts might be especially keen to see.

Shortly after his own arrival at the crime scene, Braig is irritated by the early appearance of a new prosecutor, who is quick to make observations about the crime and apparently does not operate in the usual manner. The prosecutor, Söderhofer, a transplant to Swabia who speaks with a Bavarian accent, nonetheless takes ownership and proves his affiliation with the region: “Und das ausgerechnet in unserer Liederhalle!” (13; And in our Liederhalle of all places!). Söderhofer’s accent is complemented by the introduction of another character common to crime stories: the surly forensic scientist. After arriving at the crime scene, Helmut Rössle furth er contributes to the geographic flavor as he barks in Swabian dialect not easily conveyed in translation: “Alle Idioten von Sindelfinge, der Sparrefantel scho wieder. Ihr hent mir hoffentlich nix agrüht” (13; All idiots from Sindelfingen, the crotchety one again. Hopefully you all haven’t touched anything). Further, Rössle provides dialectal comic relief after Söderhofer’s departure: “Zum Glück sind mir den überkandidelte Großkotz los. Dem hent se net nur oi Mol ins Hirn gschisse” (24; Luckily we’re rid of that over-the-top bigshot. He’s got less than shit for brains). Thus far, the novel’s narrative has inserted itself into the life of the reader, all the more so if the reader is familiar with or aware of these places. These strategies continue throughout this and Wanninger’s other novels, facilitating immediate recognition for locals and supporting vivid imagination for nonlocals.

Gunter Gerlach’s short story “Keine Tränen” takes a slightly different approach to ingratiating itself with readers. This story is one in the collection Mörderisches Ländle (2008), which, like Gudrun Weitbrecht’s preceding anthology Tödliche Kehrwoche (Deadly Cleaning Week, 2007) and the following Tod unterm Tannenbaum (Death under the Christmas Tree, 2012), presents entertaining and short crime stories that usually have tongue firmly planted in cheek. That the second and third collections were published attests to the success of the first.
In its appeal to readers’ knowledge about the region, Gerlach’s short story resembles Wanninger’s novel. Unlike Wanninger, however, Gerlach does not entice the reader with renditions of Swabian idiom; instead, he situates the action of the story at a popular festivity that might be similarly familiar to the reader—the annual Esslingen Zwiebelfest (Onion Festival). Every summer since 1986, area residents, known as Zwiebeln (Onions) or Zwieblinger, along with tourists, gather to taste culinary specialties from local restaurants. According to legend, Esslingen residents are known as “Onions” because a market woman spotted the devil in disguise when he asked her for an apple, and instead gave him an onion. This shocked the devil and prompted him to name Esslingen residents “Onions.” This act of biting into a whole onion also features in Gerlach’s story and unites with the humorous title.

In the story, Hannes plans to murder his acquaintance Ulrich when they find themselves in a quarrel over a woman, Brigitte. Hannes, whose eyes do not have functioning tear ducts, proposes a contest in which they both bite into a whole onion; the first to cry loses Brigitte. Hannes has brought two onions with him: one poisoned, one not. Ulrich, a bodybuilding outsider who lives in Stuttgart and only works in Esslingen, enters into the bet, ordering himself and Hannes a regional specialty: Maultaschen (large Swabian ravioli). The story does not end as Hannes might have intended, but he is still able to whisper to Ulrich’s corpse, “Sichst du... Keine Tränen” (13; You see? No tears).

In these regional crime stories, location takes on a role that moves beyond basic plot and the delivery of mundane contextual details. In definite ways, the reader becomes a part of the narrative’s locality as either a new initiate or an experienced local. When discussing criminal or mystery stories, we must consider the extent to which the reader or viewer is familiar with the material presented by the author and what the goal of the author and narrative might be. This degree of readers’ familiarity contributes to the plausibility or novelty of the narrative. What reality does not allow—especially in locales like small Esslingen or parts of Swabia (to continue with the aforementioned examples)—we are able to do in crime-fiction narratives, as Edgar Marsch observes. Wherever the story takes us, the reader gains impressions that are alluringly ordinary and exotic.

As we have seen, the subgenre is not universally well-received. The local insight can lead to narratives that are groaning under the weight of details that could be easily found in a travel guide. By contrast, they can include subtle allusions to their environment that may not distract from the broader goal of the larger genre of the crime story. Such a variety attests to the likely on-going vitality of the subgenre, as readers find that different styles meet different needs. Berndorf’s Eifel stories reach a public that may not overlap with Gerlach’s or Wanninger’s. It is a truism that readers will receive a narrative and find things in it dependent
upon their own personality and style. Nonetheless, this bilateral relationship between reader and author could contribute to the categorization of regional crime fiction (and nonregional versions) as trivial literature.

Although regional crime fiction has suffered from poor critical reception, the connections we can draw between it and its journalistic and early literary beginnings remain intriguing. Just like the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century case histories discussed above, regional crime fiction attests to a reading public’s curiosity about its environment, the social and legal issues it faces, and the ways in which the extraordinary can enter one’s daily life.

Notes
1 Earlier versions of parts of this essay were presented in a related talk at the 2012 meeting of the Northeast Modern Language Association. I would like to thank Shuo Liu and the Centre for Student Involvement and Careers at the University of British Columbia; James Kelly, librarian at the University of Massachusetts Amherst; Mary Luebbe, librarian at the University of British Columbia; Corinna Norrick-Rühl, research associate at the Institute for Book Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz; and Hermann Staub of the Archiv und Bibliothek des Börsenvereins des Deutschen Buchhandels at the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek for invaluable research assistance in preparing this essay.

2 Kriminalliteratur refers to the early collections of these stories (sometimes called Criminalliteratur or Criminalgeschichten). See, for example, Julius Eduard Hitzig and William Häring, Der neue Pitaval: Eine Sammlung der interessantesten Criminalgeschichten aller Länder und Völker (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1986).

3 For an extensive investigation of this German television cultural phenomenon, see Sascha Gerhards’s essay in this volume.

4 In their chapters in this volume, Faye Stewart and Angelika Baier in particular interestingly connect this identity-forming or -revealing function of crime fiction to sex, gender, and sexuality.


6 Eva Erdmann, “Nationality International: Detective Fiction in the Late Twentieth Century,” in Investigating Identities, ed. Krajenbrink and Quinn, 12.


9 Peter Nusser, for example, differentiates between Verbrechensliteratur (literature of crime) and Kriminalliteratur (crime fiction). The former attempts a literary explanation for the roots of crime, the mindset of the criminals, and the nature of punishment (1). He offers the examples of Oedipus Rex and Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment. Crime fiction, on the other hand, spends more time providing an exposition of how the crime is discovered, investigated, and eventually how the
mystery is solved. British crime writer and critic Julian Symons remarked, “rigid classifications simply don’t work in practice” (3). He continued, however, to write that “Of course this is not to say that there are no distinctions to be made. . . . The tree is sensational literature, and these are among its fruits” (4). See Julian Symons, Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel (New York: Mysterious Press, 1992).

10 One of the most common critiques of regional crime fiction is what some, like Ulrich Baron, see as the tendency to emulate—or replace—travel guides. Ulrich Baron, “Markt & Totschlag: Regio regiert (nicht),” CULTurMAG (May 21, 2011) http://culturmag.de/crimemag/markt-und-totschlag-regio-regiert-nicht. Another complaint is that this subgenre’s entire creation and subsequent boom are all ploys by publishers to cash in on the same customers who would otherwise buy locally focused coffeetable picture books or other regional memorabilia. Eckhart Baier, “Mord in der Heimat,” Börsenblatt no. 27 (July 5, 2007): 44–46. The defining characteristic of this subgenre, then, is certainly not universally appealing. For example, Rutger Booß of Grafit-Verlag, publisher of one of the first series of regional crime fiction, echoes widespread criticism of many crime and detective stories in general when he says that, with these regional stories, any small press can make their way into the market without respect for the quality of the books produced (qtd. in Baier 45).


12 See Anita McChesney’s chapter in this volume for a discussion of the Austrian regional crime novel.


14 Qtd. in Baier, “Mord in der Heimat,” 45.


16 Michael Dunker, Beeinflussung und Steuerung des Lesers in der englischsprachigen Detektiv- und Kriminalliteratur: eine vergleichende Untersuchung zur Beziehung Autor-Text-Leser in Werken von Doyle, Christie und Highsmith (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 11. Attempts at explanations of crime fiction’s popularity are multiple and diverse; Julian Symons divides them into two main categories, the psychological and the social (Symons, Bloody Murder, 5, 13).


18 Almuth Heuner has observed the disparity between incoming translations into German and outgoing translations of German into other languages (especially English). She does not offer a satisfactory explanation for the deficit, noting only (and surprisingly) that “German mysteries are different. . . . There is more realism, probably because Germany is not a homogeneous country [sic].” Heuner,

19 The question remains why German crime fiction, despite its large quantity within the German-speaking countries, has not experienced the same kind of boom that, for example, Scandinavian crime literature and its film and television adaptations have. This engages questions unfortunately too large to be addressed here in detail, like external perspectives on German fiction, the translatability of the German language and its literature, and the latter translatability particularly with respect to German regional attributes and regional humor. There is wide circulation among the German-speaking countries, but language seems to be one of the barriers to further transmission of the German-speaking area’s large number of mysteries and crime stories. See Heuner (previous note), who also mentions the translation issue.

20 For a discussion of this, see Melanie Wigbers, *Krimi-Orte im Wandel: Gestaltung und Funktionen der Handlungsschauplätze in Kriminalerzählungen von der Romantik bis in die Gegenwart* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), 12.


22 For different time periods, see, for example, Gudrun Weitbrecht, ed., *Henker, Huren, Mordgesellen: historische Schwabenmorde* (Mannheim: Wellhöfer, 2009).


27 Eco, *Role*, 118.

28 Eco, *Role*, 119.


30 Nusser, *Kriminalroman*, 70.

31 Examples include the Prussian *Kriminalkommissare* after 1822 and Berlin’s *Kriminalpolizei*, the so-called “Department IV,” in 1830. What followed was the gradual professionalization of police officers and detectives, a process I will not describe here. See Nusser, *Kriminalroman*, 71.


33 Other similar texts and collections include August Gottfried Meißner’s *Skizzen* (1778–96, Sketches) and Paul Anselm Ritter von Feuerbach’s *Aktenmäßige

34 Marsch, Kriminalerzählung, 123–24.
35 Hans-Otto Hügel, Untersuchungsrichter, Diebßänger, Detektive: Theorie und Geschichte der deutschen Detektiverzählung im 19. Jahrhundert (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1978), 84. There is debate about whether the earlier stories could have led directly or eventually to “detective stories” because of, for example, their preemptive disclosure of the murderer or thief. See Hügel, Untersuchungsrichter; Diebßänger; Detektive; Marsch, Kriminalerzählung.

36 Julius Eduard Hitzig and Wilhelm Häring, eds., Der neue Pitaval: Eine Sammlung der interessantesten Kriminalgeschichten (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1986), 9–10.
38 Hügel, Die Leiche auf der Eisenbahn, 201; Nusser, Der Kriminalroman, 70.
42 Symons, Bloody, 10–11.
49 Berliner Gerichts-Zeitung, 1.
53 Marsch, Kriminalerzählung, 40.