

Karin Slaughter's Crime Novel *Blindsighted* as a Southern Forensic Thriller

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Abstract: The forensic thriller has emerged as a significant subgenre of crime fiction that depicts the work of medical examiners, coroners, forensic pathologists, and anthropologists who analyze scientific evidence. Forensic investigators do not engage directly in pursuing the criminal; instead, they interpret the physical evidence collected from the victim's body and the crime scene. The popularity of forensic fiction, film, and TV series has created the general assumption that criminalistics has become a routine police procedure. This article presents Karin Slaughter's novel *Blindsighted* as an example of a Southern forensic thriller. The American writer Karin Slaughter is the author of crime stories and thrillers set in the American South. Her *Grant County* series consists of six crime novels, beginning with *Blindsighted* (2002) and followed by *Kisscut*, *A Faint Cold Fear*, *Indelible*, *Faithless*, and *Beyond Reach*. The essay introduces the main qualities of a forensic thriller and highlights the novel's generic characteristics. Then, *Blindsighted* is analyzed within the paradigm of Southern regional literature, with its distinctive qualities and religious imagery.

Key words: crime fiction, forensic thriller, scientific evidence, American South

Powieść kryminalna Karin Slaughter *Zaślepienie* jako thriller medyczny z amerykańskiego Południa

Streszczenie: Thriller medyczny stanowi podgatunek kryminału przedstawiający pracę lekarzy sądowych, koronerów, patologów i antropologów, analizujących dowody naukowe. Śledczy sądowi nie włączają się bezpośrednio w ściganie przestępców, a jedynie badają dowody zebrane z ciał ofiar i miejsc zbrodni. Popularność powieści, filmów i seriali z gatunku thrillera medycznego wpłynęła na przekonanie o stosowaniu kryminalistyki w rutynowych procedurach policyjnych. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje powieść *Zaślepienie* (2002), autorstwa Karin Slaughter, jako przykład regionalnego thrillera medycznego. Pisarka amerykańska Karin Slaughter jest autorką kryminałów i thrillerów, których miejscem akcji jest amerykańskie Południe. Seria *Hrabstwo Grant* składa się z sześciu powieści: *Zaślepienie*, *Płytkie nacięcie*, *Zimny strach*, *Fatum*, *Niewierny*, *Przywilej skóry*. Artykuł przedstawia charakterystykę thrillera medycznego i podkreśla przynależność gatunkową powieści *Zaślepienie*. Następnie analizuje powieść w kontekście specyfiki literatury regionalnej amerykańskiego Południa.

Słowa kluczowe: kryminał, thriller medyczny, dowód naukowy, amerykańskie Południe

Introduction

Crime fiction contains multiple sub-genres, including cozy mystery, hard-boiled detective fiction, legal thriller, police procedural, medical thriller, forensic thriller, and other generic conventions. The dominant paradigm of the crime novel is the gradual explication of the crime, so the perpetrator is revealed before the narrative closure. The committed crime involves a dead victim, referred to by the word 'body' or 'corpse,' as stated by the crime fiction scholar Elena Avanzas Álvarez, "[...] there is no homicide without a corpse."¹ American traditional hard-boiled detective fiction, rooted in the 1940s and 1950s post-war anxieties, features the figure of a private eye who solves murder cases through his deductive skills. Contemporary crime fiction and film demonstrate a tendency to rely on forensic science to identify murderers. The procedure frequently depends on having a DNA sample from the crime scene and using a computer database to analyze it to find a match and establish the criminal's identity.² While male authors and protagonists have primarily dominated the genres of the hard-boiled detective novel and police procedural, forensic novels are mainly written by women and feature female sleuths taking on the roles of investigators. The themes of traditional noir narratives and forensic thrillers usually involve violence, revenge, sexual insecurity, and destructive brutality.³

This article analyses Karin Slaughter's crime novel *Blindsighted* (2002) as an example of a Southern forensic thriller. Firstly, the essay introduces the main qualities of the forensic subgenre of crime fiction and then highlights the novel's generic characteristics. Finally, the paper presents *Blindsighted* within the paradigm of Southern regional literature, exemplifying the distinctive qualities of the Deep South with its religious imagery. The analysis juxtaposes idyllic visions of the South with the outburst of violence when the brutal assaults disturb life in a small town.

The Genre of Forensic Thriller

Forensic thriller has emerged as a significant subgenre of crime fiction that depicts the work of medical examiners, coroners, forensic pathologists, and anthropologists who analyze scientific evidence⁴. The term 'forensics'

¹ E. Avanzas Álvarez, *Forensic Science and Forensic Thrillers: A Feminist Perspective on the Re/Presentation of the Female Corpse*, "HARTS & Minds: The Journal of Humanities and Arts", Vol. 3, No.1 (Issue 8), 2016, p. 2.

² M. Evans, *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World*, London and New York: Continuum, 2009, p. 135.

³ T. Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, New York: Random House, 1981, p. 114.

⁴ M. Anušauskaite, *The Role of the Body in Forensic Crime Fiction*, "Acta Academiae Vilnensis", Vol. 80-81, 2016, p. 135-136.

appeared in the Victorian period in British medical books for police surgeons when murder cases required expertise in pathology⁵. The primary female characters take on the roles of forensic investigators, which disrupts the hard-boiled tradition of noir detective fiction. Medical examiners do not engage directly in pursuing the criminal; instead, they interpret the physical evidence collected from the victim's body and the crime scene⁶. The narratives include clinical, detailed descriptions of murder scenes, and significant parts of the action occur in a morgue. Forensic fiction accentuates the images of scientific evidence, such as organic bodily remnants and fingerprints, examined through forensic technologies, like DNA matching. Then, the physical evidence is documented in the pathologist's report, which is required for further legal procedures⁷.

The main proof of a crime is the cadaver, which occupies a central role in the crime fiction narrative. The corpse is exposed to the medical examiner's gaze during the autopsy and then transformed into material evidence. The cadaver triggers scientific reasoning, and a post-mortem examination can lead to the discovery of the cause of death and establishing the criminal's *modus operandi*. The forensic novel focuses on the detective's ability to interpret the physical clues in the body⁸. British novelist Sarah Dunant elaborates on the notion of the body in crime fiction and concludes, "the body has a life after death"⁹. Crime writer Mariusz Czubaj claims that the *modus operandi* concerns death, the process of dying, and the victim's depersonalization, making him/her just a body awaiting dissection on the pathologist's table¹⁰. The application of forensics involves a certain demystification, firstly, through science revealing the private aspects of the victim's body, and then, through the process of unmasking the criminal¹¹.

Forensic fiction is "principally a Western phenomenon,"¹² largely explored by popular culture and integrated into films and TV series. The prominent American authors of forensic thrillers include, among others, Patricia Cornwell, Jefferson Brass, Jeffrey Deaver, Kathy Reichs, Tess Ger-

⁵ M. Arntfield, *Gothic Forensics: Criminal Investigative Procedure in Victorian Horror and Mystery*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 4.

⁶ J. Chou, *Seeing Bones Speaking: The Female Gaze and the Posthuman Embodiment in Reichs's Forensic Crime Fiction*, "Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies", Vol. 38, No.1, 2012, p. 147.

⁷ S. Dauncey, *Crime, Forensics, and Modern Science*, [in:] *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. C. J. Rzepka and L. Horsley, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 164.

⁸ J. Palmer, *Tracing Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Forensic Detective Fiction*, "South Central Review", Vol. 18, No. 3/4, 2001, p. 54.

⁹ S. Dunant, *Body Language: A Study of Death and Gender in Crime Fiction*, [in:] *The Art of Detective Fiction*, ed. W. Chernaik, M. Swales and R. Vilain, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 13.

¹⁰ M. Czubaj, *Etnolog w Mieście Grzechu: Powieść kryminalna jako świadectwo antropologiczne*, Gdańsk: Oficynka, 2010, p. 306.

¹¹ Anušauskaite, *op. cit.*, 142.

¹² Dauncey, *op. cit.*, 165.

ritsen, and Jeff Lindsay. Patricia Cornwell is widely acknowledged to have pioneered¹³ the forensic thriller by creating the archetype of the genre. Her novel *Postmortem* (1990) begins a book series featuring Kay Scarpetta, the Chief Medical Examiner in Richmond, Virginia, who performs autopsies and uses her scientific knowledge to solve crimes. The first Scarpetta novels include exact descriptions of forensic techniques, but when the series develops, the procedures become more familiar to the reader and are not so detailed¹⁴. The next author who embraces forensic technologies in his writing is Jefferson Bass¹⁵, the creator of Dr. William M. Brockton, a forensic anthropologist in Tennessee. The series featuring Brockton starts with *Carved in Bone* (2006), and the action takes place at the Body Farm, a research facility that studies the decay of human bodies in various environments. Another acknowledged forensic fiction writer is Jeffrey Deaver, who created the character of paralyzed criminalist Lincoln Rhyme. The book series featuring Rhyme starts with *The Bone Collector* (1997), which in 1999 was adapted into a film by Phillip Noyce. The novel focuses on the technicalities of forensics and includes actual scientific procedures concerning analysis of material evidence. Due to his physical disability, Rhyme cannot be present at the crime scenes, so a female cop, Amelia Donaghy, embodies his gaze at the crime scenes¹⁶. The popularity of the novels and the feature movie inspired the TV series "Lincoln Rhyme: Hunt for the Bone Collector" (V. J. Boyd and Mark Bianculli, 2020).

Some forensic novels present forensic specialists exhibiting more active cooperation with other members of law enforcement. Many of these books have been particularly successful in their serial adaptations. One of the most recognizable characters of the genre is Temperance "Tempe" Brennan, created by Kathy Reichs. Her book series, starting with *Déjà Dead* (1997), depicts the female forensic anthropologist who advises on crime scenes in Quebec, Canada, and teaches in Charlotte, North Carolina. The character of Brennan inspired the TV series "Bones" (Hart Hanson, 2005-2017). "Bones" Brennan works at the Jeffersonian Institute (a fictionalized version of the Smithsonian Institute), where she helps the FBI solve murders by studying forensic evidence on the victims' bones. "Bones" does not copy the storylines of Reichs's novels, but both the books and the series the-

¹³ Avanzas Álvarez, *op. cit.*, 6; B. Head, *A Normal Pathology? Patricia Cornwell's Third-Person Novels*, [in:] *The Millennial Detective: Essays on Trends in Crime Fiction, Film and Television, 1990-2010*, ed. M. Efron, London: McFarland & Company, 2011, p. 36.

¹⁴ G. S. Close, *Female Corpses in Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Perspective*, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 205.

¹⁵ Jefferson Bass is a penname for two co-authors, professional writer Jon Jefferson and forensic anthropologist Dr. William Bass.

¹⁶ L. Steenberg, "A Natural Instinct for Forensics": *Trace Evidence and embodied Gazes in The Bone Collector*, [in:] *The Millennial Detective: Essays on Trends in Crime Fiction, Film and Television, 1990-2010*, ed. M. Efron, Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, 2011, p. 112.

matically focus on the evidence collected from human remains. The next example of novels successfully adapted into TV series is Tess Gerritsen's *Rizzoli & Isles*, beginning with *The Surgeon* (2001) and depicting the homicide detective Jane Rizzoli and the medical examiner Dr. Maura Isles. The novels inspired the TV series "Rizzoli & Isles" (Janet Tamaro, 2010-2016), featuring the titular protagonists who work for the Boston Police Department. The following exemplar of a forensic novel is Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), with the character of forensic analyst Dexter Morgan, working for the homicide division of Miami Police Department. The book's originality is derived from the complex personality of Dexter, who, apart from his regular job, appears to be a serial killer. Nonetheless, Dexter follows a moral code, allowing him to murder villains only. The novel demonstrates a change of convention as the narration focuses on the subjectivity of a detective who embodies the criminal himself. The book inspired the TV series "Dexter" (James Manos Jr., 2006-2013) and "Dexter: New Blood" (Clyde Phillips, 2021).

The procedures of applying forensics into police investigations and the justice system have reflections in the three "CSI" series¹⁷, which follow the investigations of forensic scientists cooperating with law enforcement agents. These shows emphasize the teamwork of a color-blind¹⁸ cast and perpetuate the approach that science is more reliable than humans, who are likely to lie. Additionally, the series have produced the so-called "CSI Effect," based on the notion that the powerful tools of forensic science are widely available. Hence, the public has higher expectations regarding the use of forensic evidence in criminal trials¹⁹. Cultural criminology scholar Ruth Penfold-Mounce attributes contemporary society with "an almost fanatical belief in the powers of forensic science to solve crimes and a morbid interest in human dissection"²⁰. TV series like *CSI* and *The Bone Collector* established the general assumption that criminalistics has become a routine police procedure²¹.

¹⁷ The three *CSI* series are: *CSI: Las Vegas* (A. E. Zuiker, 2000-2015), *CSI: NY* (A. E. Zuiker, A. Donahue, C. Mendelsohn, 2004-2006), and *CSI: Miami* (A. E. Zuiker, A. Donahue, C. Mendelsohn, 2002-2012).

¹⁸ The 'color-blind' perception changes the fixed binary opposition of a black-and-white society. Sociology professor A. Doane defines color-blind racial ideology as "a worldview grounded in the claim that race no longer "matters" as an obstacle to success in a "postracial" United States". A. Doane, *Beyond Color-blindness: (Re)Theorizing Racial Ideology*, "Sociological Perspectives", Vol. 60, No. 5, 2017, p. 975.

¹⁹ S. A. Cole and G. Porter, *The CSI effect*, [in:] *The Routledge International Handbook of Forensic Intelligence and Criminology*, ed. Q. Rossy, D. Décary-Héty, O. Delémont, and M. Mulone, Routledge, 2017 (8 December), p. 116; D. R. Baskin and I. B. Sommers, *Crime-Show-Viewing Habits and Public Attitudes Toward Forensic Evidence: The "CSI Effect" Revisited*, "The Justice System Journal", Vol. 31, No. 1, 2010, p. 108.

²⁰ R. Penfold-Mounce, *Corpses, Popular Culture and Forensic Science: Public Obsession with Death*, "Mortality", Vol. 21, No. 1, 2016, p. 4.

²¹ Steenberg, *op. cit.*, 112.

***Blindsighted* as a Forensic Thriller**

The American writer Karin Slaughter, a Georgian native, is the author of crime stories and thrillers set in the American South. Her *Grant County* series is made up of six crime novels, beginning with *Blindsighted* and followed by *Kisscut*, *A Faint Cold Fear*, *Indelible*, *Faithless*, and *Beyond Reach* (also known as *Skin Privilege*). Slaughter has also penned a twelve-book series, *Will Trend*, and other novels: *Cop Town*, *Pretty Girls*, *The Good Daughter*, *Pieces of Her*, and *False Witness*.²² The main protagonists of the *Grant County* series include forensic pathologist Sara Linton, her ex-husband, Chief of Police Jeffrey Tolliver, and a young detective, Lena Adams. The setting is mainly the small fictional town of Heartsdale in the fictional Grant County, located in Georgia.

Blindsighted features two criminals: a sexual assailant, Jack Wright, and the town's pharmacist, Jeremy 'Jeb' McGuire, who turns out to be a murderer. While the portrayal of Sara Linton draws on forensic convention, the heavy-drinking character of police detective Lena Adams is modeled on hard-boiled tradition. Both women share traumatic pasts with experiences of violence and sexual assault. In the case of Sara, the rape resulted in her infertility. Lena, in turn, had a violent partner who repeatedly abused her. *Blindsighted* depicts female investigators for whom solving sex-related crimes becomes a devastating experience. The narrative is constructed around a mystery rooted in events in the past. Hence, the detectives must understand the criminal's past to discover his identity. Another criminal, Jack Wright, keeps reminding Sara about the sexual assault he committed against her by sending her postcards with the typed words: "Why hast thou forsaken me?"(6). This constant repetition of traumatic events prevents Sara from letting go of the past; thus, past trauma endures in the present.

Blindsighted exemplifies the features of a forensic thriller. Death is a recurring theme in the novel; it begins the crime story and the investigation. The killings demonstrate seriality; the perpetrator is not an outsider but a town resident obsessed with avenging a relative. Traditionally, children are not part of a detective's entourage, either in the traditional noir form or forensic thriller. This feature applies to the primary female protagonist, Doctor Sara Linton, who participates in the investigation as the town's forensic pathologist, so, in a way, performing the function of a private eye. However, her childlessness does not result from her personal choice but a medical condition directly resulting from past trauma. Following generic changes in the crime fiction formula that took place in the 1990s²³, the nar-

²² Information about Karin Slaughter and the books she authors comes from her website: <https://www.karinslaughter.com/bio-1> Accessed 13 October, 2021.

²³ 1990s crime fiction incorporated technological advances as a tool for criminal activity and police investigation. The evolution of the forensic thriller is linked to the appearance of new forms of investigation.

rative focuses on more than just the investigation. It also provides details of the detective's life to create greater realism. Moreover, this new realism includes naturalistic descriptions of sadistic violence and autopsies²⁴. The presence of forensics in the novel is a direct reference to Gothic literature, which shows interest in the medical treatment of the human body.

The novel's use of forensics combines scientific details of patients' injuries and the medical treatment they received. The narration applies to Sara Linton's patients from the period of her medical internship, "from a kid who had swallowed a pack of razor blades to a teenage girl who had been given a clothes hanger abortion." (10). The particularly emotional description refers to the case of Jeb's sister, who becomes Sara's patient after aborting a baby, "She was in shock, her pupils blown, her body warm to the touch. Her temperature was called out, one hundred three. Her blood pressure was through the roof. She was bleeding profusely from between her legs." (365). After this naturalistic depiction, the narrative outlines Sara's activities during treatment. This dramatic case from the doctor's internship is the vital moment that triggers the murders of innocent girls. The serial killer from the canon of crime fiction typically murders for "non-rational motives" that complicate discovery of his or her identity.²⁵ The character of a cannibalistic serial killer illustrates this case: Dr. Hannibal Lecter, who features in Thomas Harris' novels *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of Lambs* (1988). The murderer from *Blindsight* is Jeb, who wants to punish Sara for not saving his sister while serving her medical internship in Atlanta. In his insane plan for revenge upon Sara, Jeb fatally injures other girls. Sara repeatedly gets an opportunity to save the victims, who are close to death. The retribution for his sister's death is the killer's irrational motive to commit the crimes in the present.

Forensic descriptions apply to the crime scenes, explicitly suggesting the victims have been terrorized and tortured. The killing of Sibyl Adams creates an extremely bloody crime scene when she is found stabbed in a toilet at the local diner. The wounds of the second victim, Julia Matthews, suggest crucifixion, "Both palms were punctured through the center. Sara glanced down at the woman's feet, noting that they, too, had been punctured in the same way." (183). The perpetrator demonstrates extreme cruelty and makes his victims swallow the deadly drug belladonna, which adds to their suffering and causes hallucinations. Although the hallucinations typically concern an element of generic Gothic traditions featuring ghosts, they create the impression of macabre in the narrative. Descriptions of the third victim's torture feature brutal naturalism. The serial killer creates a sense of confinement by imprisoning Lena in the attic of his house in the

²⁴ H. Bertens and T. D'haen, *Contemporary American Crime Fiction*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p. 59.

²⁵ D. Schmid, *The Locus of Disruption: Serial Murder and Generic Conventions in Detective Fiction*, [in:] *The Art of Detective Fiction*, edited by W. Chernaik, M. Swales and R. Vilain, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 75.

remote, rural American South, the American Gothic version of the old, isolated castle common in the European Gothic tradition. The perpetrator crucifies Lena by nailing her palms and legs to a wooden cross on the floor, and then he rapes her and cuts her throat. "Blood trickled down the back of her throat in a steady stream, causing her to cough occasionally." (380). The macabre realism of naturalistic descriptions is a characteristic of Southern Gothic. However, terror in the novel stems not from the Gothic qualities of the setting but rather from the helplessness of the victim, exposed to a perverted and dysfunctional character.

The depicted crimes against women feature a combination of near-death and sexual violence, characteristics resembling the Gothic preoccupation with pain and pleasure.²⁶ Jeb McGuire repeatedly commits acts of brutality that take the form of experimentation with pain and leave the helpless victims with physical and emotional scars. The murders preceded by sexual assaults are not committed with guns because the perpetrator intends not to kill the victims quickly but to deliberately prolong the process of their suffering and dying. The tortures are transformed into extremely bloody murder scenes, creating distinct Gothic imagery. The callous crimes committed in the novel by the insane criminal, masquerading as a respected pharmacist, demonstrate his paradoxical nature. The irrationality of the motives behind the ruthless killings highlights the element of terror, a characteristic of the Southern narrative.

***Blindsighted* as a Southern Narrative**

Contrary to the traditional hard-boiled detective fiction, which exhibits mainly metropolitan settings, the landscape of the modern criminal story has gradually shifted away from the urban environment toward provincial geography²⁷. The exemplary cases are Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (2006), set in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri; Ron Rash's *The World Made Straight* (2006), exploring the landscape of North Carolina; and Bonnie Jo Campbell's short story collection *American Salvage* (2009) depicting the struggle for survival in rural Michigan. Cultural historian Linden Peach associates rural criminality with 'theatricality' because criminals are like performers masquerading in the countryside²⁸. The historian David Bell²⁹

²⁶ Gothic horror transgresses the boundaries of pain and pleasure. It explores the sadistic pleasure gained from inflicting pain.

²⁷ Bertens and D'haen, op. cit., 67.

²⁸ L. Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction: Criminal Deceptions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 21.

²⁹ D. Bell, *Anti-Idyll: Rural Horror, [in:] Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalization and Rurality*, ed. P. Cloke and J. Little, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 91.

emphasizes that the division of the environment into the city and the countryside caused the development of specific images concerning both spaces. Hence, rurality has been attributed to tranquility and idealization. Contrary to the European version of the rural idyll, associated with picturesque terrain, the American equivalent concerns a small town surrounded by wilderness, frequently placed in the frontier area of the 'Old' West or the American South. The regional America in crime fiction does not present the qualities of the pastoral ideal; instead, the region can quickly be transformed into a site of brutality. The romantic images of rurality have been juxtaposed with the social backwardness of community members as the "idyllic" society is, in fact, repressive. The crime fiction depicts tight-knit communities that have retained cultural distinctiveness through isolation in remote regions. Even in those isolated places there appears the character of a noble person guarding law enforcement duties in the style of a sheriff from the Western genre.

The regional forensic thriller is particularly flourishing in the American South, where the antebellum tensions have had a lasting impact on contemporary life. Historically, the region is defined by its dramatic past heritage, and by juxtaposing the past and the present, the Southerners create a connection between generations. Literary critic and writer Dani Cavallaro articulates a complex dialogue between the past and the present as a characteristic of the Gothic tradition, stressing that events in the past have consequences in the present³⁰. Gothic Studies scholar Fred Botting calls this tendency "the disturbing return of past upon present"³¹. The Southern forensic thriller relies on the stereotypical portrayal of the region, exploring the themes of racism, irrationality, decay, violence, religious fanaticism, and sexual deviance. These characteristics contradict the image of the USA as a land of democracy and equality. Hence, the genre is founded on a paradox dwelling on the discrepancy between the Gothic formula and the canon of typical American values. The Southern Gothic contrasts pastoral visions of the South with historical repressions of slavery and racism. The Post-antebellum landscape of the South provides a distinctively American flavor to the Gothic stories. Ruined mansions and decaying plantations substitute for the castles from the European traditions³². The iconography of entrapment and imprisonment is linked with female oppression, inextricably connected with racial violence.

The narrative of *Blindsighted* accentuates the Southern qualities, starting with how the Southerners perceive themselves and how Americans from other regions view them. The Georgian way of driving differs from the rest of America because the locals do not respect speed limits and tend

³⁰ D. Cavallaro, *Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear*, London and New York: Continuum, 2002, p. 48.

³¹ F. Botting, *Gothic*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 1.

³² A. Smith, *Gothic Literature*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 3.

to see the road signs "as little more than a suggestion for tourists on their way to and from Florida. [...] Driving through the South was Darwinism at its best." (26). The simple issue of driving a car makes Southerners stand out as the nation's 'other'³³. This exemplar is part of the more extensive collective representation, which places the region at the national periphery. The novel indicates that apart from the identification with the South and the particular state, the protagonists emphasize the individual position of Georgia in the Deep South³⁴, "A typical prayer among southern states was 'Thank God for Alabama,' meaning, thank God we're not as bad off as they are." (108-109).

The cultural distinctiveness of the South applies to culinary preferences and rituals. Food and its etiquette appear in the novel when Sara accepts an invitation from the pharmacist, Jeremy 'Jeb' McGuire, for a picnic at the docks. Although their meeting is scheduled for an outdoor place of consumption, it does not exclude the proper etiquette. Instead, Jeb makes meticulous preparations regarding the dishes and the proper way of service, which does not involve either paper plates or plastic cutlery. "He opened the picnic basket and took out silverware and napkins. He had also had the foresight to bring plates and glasses." (168). Unaware of the precarious nature of the invitation, Sara does not realize that the meal is supposed to be her last supper before she dies. The seemingly peaceful environment becomes a dramatic scene when a doctor tries to save her life. Jeb's position as a familiar and respected pharmacist in Heartsdale is a masquerade hiding a serial killer. According to Linden Peach, a masquerade is an essential element in serial criminality.³⁵

The Southern setting not only signifies the location but also imposes a geographical limitation upon the protagonists. The novel's characters always stay in Heartsdale and occasionally travel to Atlanta. However, the purpose of those trips is professional, e.g., Jeffrey sometimes visits the city while conducting police investigations. Doctor Sara Linton profoundly identifies with her hometown, the state, and the South. The only time in her life when Sara leaves Heartsdale is for medical studies, but she still resides within the state of Georgia. Sara's alma mater, Emory University in Atlanta, has a good reputation. However, she also chose that place to study medicine because of her identification with the South: "Emory had always been a dream of hers. Real medicine took place there, and Sara could not imagine herself living anywhere else but the South" (90). The protagonists move between the rural and urban spaces by car, but their mobility is

³³ T. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ The Deep South combines Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. The region is frequently perceived as the nation's 'other,' with its characteristic folklore and juxtaposition of contrasting and paradoxical elements.

³⁵ Peach, *op. cit.*, 153.

restricted within the state borders, producing a sense of entrapment within Georgia. The motif of setting boundaries and entrapping the characters in a remote place is typical for Gothic.

The Southerners identify with their region broadly and their community in particular. Individuals relocating to the South do not automatically become community members; they require a deeper sense of rootedness in the area. The novel explicitly indicates that living in Heartsdale differs from being born there. Despite coming from the Southern state of Alabama and working for Grant County for ten years, the Chief of Police, Jeffrey Tolliver, still feels like an outsider in the town (108-109). The Southern sense of community is emphasized when the detective, Lena Adams, investigates the death of her sister, Sibyl. She talks to Sibyl's assistant, Richard Carter, at The Grant Institute of Technology and asks him about unusual occurrences. Richard replies: "We're a small community here. Somebody acting strange would stick out." (133). It seems that the community members immediately notice outsiders and tend to blame them for wrongdoings rather than acknowledging that the criminal might be one of the town's own natives.

The Southerners value their family as much as their rootedness and community. The sense of familiar heritage is illustrated by the marriage of Sara's parents, which was "the pedestal upon which Sara placed all her ideas about relationships and love." (301). The happy family provides a sense of relative permanence, guaranteeing stability in the protagonist's life. The kinship in the narrative does not apply to distant relatives whom people travel to visit on Thanksgiving Day but to close family members sharing the same space of the American South. After experiencing a sexual assault, Sara Linton is not alone but surrounded by family members who offer consolation. The presence of kinship in forensic fiction challenges the hard-boiled tradition of the lonely detective.

A large swathe of the American South is commonly named the Bible Belt³⁶ to emphasize that conservative Christianity plays a vital role in Southern society. This area is also associated with higher average church attendance than other American regions. *Blindsighted* demonstrates the issue of religiosity appearing during a police interrogation. When Detective Lena Adams investigates the background of the prime suspect, she asks, "He's a religious guy?" (137), suggesting that religiousness is a quality that matters. The description of the victim, Julia Matthews, also includes religious aspects: "she's always talking about being in the choir and being a good Christian" (137). It is evident that religion is noticed even in a post-mortem report.

The narrative features characters acting as protectors of Christian morality, religious fanaticism, and hypocrisy. Jack Wright, responsible for the sexual assault on Sara Linton, expresses his supposed Christianity by

³⁶ The term 'Bible Belt' denotes the following states: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Arkansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.

decorating his house with multiple religious motifs. Slaughter's narration is particularly descriptive about his living room: "Edging the top of the living room walls like a decorative border were all kinds of crucifixes." (305-306). The house interior contains Christian symbolism, and even Wright's car explicitly indicates its owner's religiosity with a decal placed on its bumper: "GOD IS MY COPILOT" (309). The religious manifestations of the sexual abuser contrast with the social ills of the pervert. The novel's complex relations between religion and violence interconnect the values of the Bible Belt with a Gothic trope of sexual terror.

The main perpetrator, the pharmacist Jeremy 'Jeb' McGuire, also has some religious background. His father was a Baptist preacher and "a firm believer in the power of the Lord to heal what ails you" (364). In his fanaticism, Jeb justifies the crimes he committed with the words: "We're all God's children." He is rather selective about finding life guidance in the text of the Bible and explains that "it's open to interpretation. God gives us signs, opportunities, and we either follow them or we don't" (370). Jeb's reasoning may be explained by the theory of literary scholar Maurizio Ascari, who associates the theme of retribution in crime fiction with the power of divine justice³⁷. Nonetheless, the perpetrator's motivation for serial killings is grotesque, suggesting his moral evil.

The Southern community reflects racial and class divisions, namely a black-white binary and repressive attitudes about gender roles. This aspect is illustrated with the character of police officer Frank Wallace, who has a peculiar way of viewing women. Despite exemplifying Southern chivalry, "the kind of man who opened doors for women and took his hat off indoors," he contradicts female professionalism, "He was not the kind of guy who would let his female partner lead an interrogation, let alone take point on a house raid." (27). The narrative overtly suggests that black residents quickly find themselves among the suspects. Chief of Police Jeffrey Tolliver is much younger than his colleague Wallace. Tolliver is hugely disappointed by the overt racism among the police officers in his unit when they immediately typify "Frank's colored man" as a suspect in the homicide investigation. Interrogation by the police puts the person of African ancestry in a dangerous situation as his neighbors send him a warning note saying: "Watch your back, nigger." (151).

The American South is known for its gun culture, manifested by massive support for firearms used by private citizens³⁸. Crime fiction writers

³⁷ M. Ascari, *A Counter – History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 63.

³⁸ Studies show that gun-carrying for men is strongly connected to the cultural conceptions of masculinity. Many white working-class men in the USA do not feel as economically successful in their communities as they think they should be. For some of those men, the gun has become a symbol through which they try to regain a nostalgic sense of masculinity. Additionally, some white male gun-carriers are motivated by race-based fears of crime.

use representations of guns to discuss issues of protection and survival. Weapons are instruments of violence and symbols of power. The trope of guns in Southern Gothic fiction expresses a fear of the outsider³⁹. The motif of the weapon is not excluded from the narrative, and its function is to create an atmosphere of danger and anxiety about a potential outburst of violence. The widespread gun ownership among Southerners, who shoot even during family arguments, affects the routine of police work, “Not a week went by when he wasn’t called out to investigate at least one homicide, usually a product of Birmingham’s extreme poverty: drug transactions gone wrong, domestic disputes where guns were too readily available.” (16). The novel emphasizes that the weapon in the South is just an essential piece of household equipment when Jeffrey finds a gun in Jack Wright’s house in Atlanta, “In a neighborhood like this one, only an idiot would go to sleep without a gun handy.” (306). However, when the local pediatrician Sara Linton purchases a gun, it alerts the local community about the potential danger in the seemingly tranquil environment. Guns are supposedly needed for their owners to protect themselves, so the novel’s protagonists seem to live in a state of constant alert, terrorized by the high probability of violent death, which creates another aspect of the Southern sublime.

Conclusion

Blindsighted exhibits the characteristics of crime fiction, such as the centrality of the criminal act, the concept of mystery, and the search for clues. Contrary to the traditional hard-boiled genre, which almost never features female sleuths, the forensic novel depicts police officer Jeffrey Tolliver supported by two women: detective Lena Adams and pathologist Sara Linton. The naturalistic descriptiveness of the crime scenes combined with forensic science makes the novel exemplify the forensic thriller genre. Nevertheless, the case is solved not solely by forensics but thanks to the collaboration of the pathologist and the detectives who rely on both aspects of criminal investigation: forensic science and scrupulous police inquiry.

The palimpsest of the South haunts the narrative. The novel’s protagonists inhabit the American spaces, but the state borders restrict them, producing a sense of entrapment within the region of the South. The frontier

M. Wenner Moyer, *Do Money, Social Status Woes Fuel the U.S. Gun Culture*, “Scientific American”, 13 December, 2017. Accessed 24 November, 2023. Available on <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-money-social-status-woes-fuel-the-u-s-gun-culture/>

D. Yamane, *The Sociology of U.S. gun culture*, “Sociology Compass”, No 11, 2017, 1-10.

³⁹ G. Page, *Sharp Objects as Southern Gothic for the Twenty-First Century: A Novel Analysis*, “Medium”, 22 January, 2023. Accessed 22 November, 2023. <https://medium.com/@graeme-page/sharp-objects-as-southern-gothic-for-the-twenty-first-century-analysis-3a189b847dbb>.

does not denote vast lands but rather a boundary restricting the protagonists' mobility. This isolation and constraint on mobility have two dimensions. The first one concerns the physical entrapment of a victim by the perpetrator. The second perspective involves regional rootedness and the voluntary acceptance of borders that characters do not cross to pursue the American Dream. Although driving is essential for their daily routines, the car does not emphasize typical American mobility but rather the necessary means of transportation between rural and urban environments. The car does not take the protagonist to other parts of the USA but instead allows them to return home to the South.

Blindsighted demonstrates a certain degree of Gothic sensibility. The South is depicted as a peripheral territory with unique cultural anxieties characterized by terror and mental disintegration. Terror is derived from the menace created by the series of sexual assaults and brutal killings. The aesthetic naturalism of the torture scenes reported by the forensic pathologist translates into the notion of the sublime. The 'uncanny' of the novel is demonstrated by the juxtaposition of the killer's social standing with the attempt to justify his serial criminality. Terror is intensified by a ghastly combination of death interlocked with sex.

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