

Get Shorter: Crime in Flash Fiction Get Shorter: el crimen en el microrrelato

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ABSTRACT

What happens to a crime narrative when it is shorter than 500 words? Although critics have studied the flash fiction genre for decades, crime flash fiction has not attracted the attention it deserves. This article explores some ideas from a comparative perspective, looking at selected crime flashes, both recent and further back in time, in English, French and Spanish, and identifies some common features, and also differences with longer crime narratives.

KEYWORDS: Flash Fiction, Crime Fiction, Comparative Literature.

RESUMEN

¿Qué ocurre a la literatura policiaca cuando tiene menos de 500 palabras? A pesar de que la crítica lleva ya décadas estudiando el género del microrrelato, las minificciones policiacas aún no han despertado el interés que merecen. El presente artículo expone algunas ideas desde un enfoque comparativo, analizando algunos ejemplos seleccionados de microrrelatos policiacos pertenecientes a épocas distintas, en inglés, francés y español, detectando por un lado los rasgos que tienen en común y por el otro las diferencias con respecto a la ficción de crimen más extensa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: microrrelato, literatura policiaca, literatura comparada.

Although critics have studied the flash fiction genre for decades, crime flash fiction has not attracted the attention it deserves¹ and it is worth exploring the characteristics of crime flashes in terms of style, plot and characterisation. I shall start by considering the common features of crime flashes and move on to discuss what elements they have in common with the crime novel and short story. I have selected flashes, both recent and further back in time, in English, French and Spanish, in order to identify some themes and features of crime flashes across languages and national borders.*

I shall use the terms “crime fiction” and “flash fiction” in their broader sense: crime fiction as fiction centred on a crime, and “flash fiction” as short narratives of less than one thousand words. I shall concentrate on the analysis of very short flashes – less than five hundred words – because longer crime flashes tend to follow the same pattern and to display the same features as the crime short story. It is only by looking at very short flashes that it is possible to identify what writers perceive to be the “core elements” of a crime narrative in terms of characters, plot and narrative voice. As few flashes describe other crimes, I shall focus on the most popular: murder.

Unfortunately, most crime flashes in anthologies, or in online magazines and blogs are extremely dull and repetitive, relying almost invariably on a lame “twist” (or occasionally more than one, depending on the length of the flash).² The typical flaw in unsatisfactory crime literature and films, a lack of internal logic, can also be found in most crime flashes despite the fact that, in theory, it should be easier for a writer to check for inconsistencies in a very brief text. Possibly, this is not an oversight on the part of authors, but points to the fact that non-professional writers – especially younger ones who often contribute to online magazines and printed anthologies – are more familiar with recent crime and horror films than with the work of crime writers. In fact, more and more films have been produced in the last fifteen years or so that are wholly built around a final twist, and the more outlandish the better. The final twist, the surprise element, has become an end in itself, and is no longer treated as the last piece of a carefully conceived puzzle. For this reason, the scope of this article is limited to flashes written by professional authors,³ bearing in mind that there are countless independent writers who post their crime flashes on the internet and submit them to online contests.

We can start with the observation that, although crime fiction is one of the best-selling genres in the world – and in 2018 became the most popular genre of fiction in

¹ Although some crime flashes are discussed in articles dealing with the work of individual authors, to the best of my knowledge, no academic articles have been devoted solely to crime flashes in English or French. Antonio Rivas in “El crimen y el microrrelato: exploraciones actuales de un motivo” (2012) and Yurena [González Herrera](#) in “El terror en la minificción” (2017) deal with crime flashes in Spanish.

* This paper is part of an ongoing research project into “Microrrelato – microficción- flash fiction: análisis del microracconto in un’ottica interlinguistica e interculturale” (“Microrrelato-microfiction-flash fiction: A Study of Flash Fiction Across Languages and Cultures” initiated at Lumsa University in 2015).

² See, e.g. the following recent anthologies and collections of crime flashes in English: *Kwik Krimes*, edited by Otto Penzler in 2013, *Flash and Bang: A Short Mystery Fiction Society Anthology*, edited by J. Alan Hartman in 2015, Barbara Fagan Speake’s collection *Shades of Crime Dark and Light: Collected Short Stories and Flash Fiction* published in 2016, *Blunt Flash Trauma: A Flash Fiction Crime Collection*, edited by Kris Murphy in 2017, *Tiny Crimes: Very Short Tales of Mystery and Murder* edited by Lincoln Michel and Nadxieli Nieto in 2018.

³ An outstanding exception is “Bedtime Story”, a flash by Jeffrey Whitmore who has apparently written only one impeccable crime flash which has been reprinted in several flash fiction anthologies since it first appeared in *The World’s Shortest Stories* in 1995. For an analysis of “Bedtime Story”, see Cristiana Pugliese “The Reader as Co-Author: Reading and Writing *Bedtime Story* by Jeffrey Whitmore” (2017).

the UK - crime flashes make up only a small part of flash fiction as a whole. Only rarely do flash fiction writers or crime fiction writers choose to write a crime flash. Alexis Ravelo is a case in point. The author (who has not been translated into English) has published twelve crime novels and one collection of flashes, but only a few belong to the crime genre.⁴ One of the most famous crime writers, Ian Rankin, has published twenty-five novels, two collections of short stories and several novellas, but he has only written two flashes, one for *Ox-Tales: Earth: Original Stories from Remarkable Writers*, a collection edited by the British charity Oxfam in 2009, and one for *The Guardian* in 2012.

Although crime fiction as a genre relies strongly on traces, ellipses, gaps in the information to create suspense, these “gaps” are not only important, but inevitable and unavoidable in crime flashes. In a successful flash, the reader must infer whole worlds from a few words only. Every word – literally - “counts” and none of them should be redundant or out of place. For this reason, it is very difficult to write a successful crime flash. However, brilliant crime flashes appeared in different countries and languages long before the words “flash fiction”, “microrrelato” or “microfiction” were used to describe very short narratives.

Félix Fénéon can be considered a precursor of the crime flash genre. He was a French anarchist and intellectual close to the Symbolist movement, who published brief items of news in the Parisian newspaper *Le Matin* between 1905 and 1906. They appeared in a section entitled “Nouvelles en trois lignes” (News in Three Lines) and reveal a subtle use of irony. Here is one example, in which the humour stems from the narrator’s final comment:

In Oyonnax, Mademoiselle Cottet, 18, threw acid on Monsieur
Besnard, 25. Love, naturally.⁵

In this other example, the dark humour is to be found in the careful choice and arrangement of words:

Scheid, from Dunkirk, shot three times at his
wife. Missing her every time, he aimed instead at
his mother-in-law, and succeeded.

Dark humour seems to appeal to writers of crime flashes. Here is the untitled flash which Ian Rankin wrote for *The Guardian* in 2012:

I opened the door to our flat and you were standing there, cleaver raised. Somehow you'd found out about the photos. My jaw hit the floor.

Rankin’s flash relies on the literalisation of metaphor, a rhetorical device used by many authors of flashes.⁶ The Argentinian writer and critic David Lagmanovich plays with the literal meaning of the title of his flash “Fin de la discusión” (End of the Argument) (2010):

⁴ See, Javier Rivero Grandoso’s “El microrrelato no viste de negro: presencia y ausencia de elementos del género criminal en *Algunos Textículos*, de Alexis Ravelo” (2017).

⁵ All translations into English are mine.

⁶ See, for instance, Aviva Garribba, “Algo más sobre el título de los microrrelatos de José María Merino” (2016).

All right, have the last word and go. But you won't be talking again: I'll make sure of that.

Unlike the authors examined so far, who deal with murders committed under specific circumstances, Jorge Luis Borges describes the act of assassination by friends and relatives as a “universal plot” that repeats itself throughout history in his flash “La trama” (The Plot), published in 1960⁷. He plays with the polysemy of the Spanish word “trama” which, like the English “plot”, means “story”, but also “conspiracy”. More recently, Luisa Valenzuela in her artfully written “Palabras parcas” (Few Fateful Phrases), published in 2008, uses the word “parcas” both in the sense of “few” and “Fates”, with reference to the three Parcae of Greek mythology.

Crime flashes, especially very short ones, cannot follow the structure of the classic crime story: crime, investigation and resolution. The investigation into the murder, which is fundamental in crime fiction, has little or no place in short flashes, nor has the resolution. That is why flashes are almost invariably centred on the crime itself, particularly on the events immediately preceding or leading to the murder or, less often, following it. In fact, crime flashes invariably start in media res and have open endings as there is hardly any time for closure, resolution, or the re-establishment of the social order.

Suspense, a key element of crime fiction, is created by accumulation of details, some of them significant, some others red herrings. Such details, which make the narrative longer and the plot more complex, have no place in very short flashes. Hence, writers of flashes often create suspense not by accumulation, but by alluding to an ominous event that will happen when the narrative ends, and which the reader must imagine. This is the case with the well-known British author S. J. Watson's untitled flash (2012) which reads:

She thanks me for the drink, but says we're not suited. I'm a little "intense". So what? I followed her home. She hasn't seen anything yet.

Characterisation and character development also need space, and brevity only allows for a few suggestive traits and a limited number of protagonists. Writers of crime flashes often rely on stereotypical characters who do not need any introduction because they are immediately recognizable to the reader. A popular choice is the hitman, who appears, for example, in Max Aub's untitled flash “I killed him because they gave me twenty pesos to do it” (1957), Malcolm Mackay's “How to Kill a Man well” (2016), in Luis Mateo Díez's “El sicario” (The Hitman) (1993) or in “Usted no sabe con quién está hablando” (You Don't Know Who You're Talking To) published by Spanish novelist, poet and critic José María Merino in 2005:

Of course, I know. I've been following you. I know where you live, what time your driver picks you up, what restaurants you go to, where you meet up, behind your business partners' backs, with the people who want to take over the firm. Just like I know that you often walk through these black alleyways to meet your lover. Now in this dark place, when I approached you and spoke to you in a confident, insolent tone, you showed your

⁷ The author had written a detective short story, “*El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*”, (The Garden of the Forking Paths), in 1941.

fear with that trite and aggressive response. Of course, I know who I'm talking to: I'm talking to the man I'm going to kill.

As there is limited space for the development of characters, most writers of flashes rely on first-person narrators or direct speech, so that readers can form their own opinion of the protagonists by accessing their thoughts and/or listening to their voices. Usually, the first-person narrator is the character readers seem to find most puzzling and fascinating: the murderer. But he or she is also, very often, an unreliable narrator and the distance between the reader and the narrator contributes to dramatic irony. In fact, while first-person narrators establish an intimate relationship with their reader, the realisation that they are highly unreliable is shocking and amusing. This is the case with the protagonists of Max Aub's "exemplary murders". Although he was an influential and prolific intellectual, novelist, playwright and scriptwriter who published over a hundred works, only two have been translated into English. In 1957 he brought out *Crímenes ejemplares* (Exemplary Murders), a collection of untitled "confessions" of murderers. For example, a schoolteacher who states:

I am a school teacher. For ten years I've been a teacher at the Primary School of Tenancingo. A lot of children sat at the desks of my school. I believe I am a good teacher. Or, at least, I believed so, until Panchito Contreras turned up. He didn't pay any attention to me and he didn't learn anything – because he didn't want to. No punishment had any effect, whether moral or corporal. He just stared at me with insolence. I begged him, I hit him. Nothing worked. The other children began to make fun of me. I lost all my authority, my sleep, my appetite... Until, one day, I couldn't take it anymore, and – to set an example – I hanged him from the tree in the playground.

The title of the book is another example of polysemy in that "exemplary" means "a good example", but also "appropriate" when referring to a punishment. The unrepentant supporter of a local football club, for example, has this to say about his crime:

The goal was practically scored! All he had to do was kick the ball, the goalie was out of position...And he shot over the bar! And it would've been the winning goal! We would've put those Nopalera bastards in their place. If the kick I gave him sent him to the other world, then there I hope he'll learn to shoot as God intended.

Unlike Aub's protagonists, most murderers in flashes do not seem to have a motive, no matter how twisted. Motives are not explained – whether by the murderers themselves or by an omniscient narrator. In some flashes, the character of the psychopath does not even remember having killed his family or friends (e.g. Luis Mateo Díez's "Invitados", *The Guests*, 1993) or having broken into a house and murdered the people he found there (Régis Jauffret's "Diner entre amis", *Dinner with Friends*, 2007).⁸ This is more in line with the relatively recent trend in popular horror cinema referred to previously, rather than with crime fiction, in which the motive is crucial to the solution of the crime and/or the uncovering of the identity of the criminal.

Often crime flashes play with and attempt to overturn the conventions and the stereotypical characters of crime fiction, for instance, by poking fun at the figure of the detective. In classic crime fiction, the detective embodies justice and – at the end of the

⁸ On Régis Jauffret's flashes, see e.g. Anna Isabella Squarzina, "Microfictions de Régis Jauffret: apothéose et perversions d'un genre" (2017).

narrative, he or she re-establishes the social order, whether completely (as is the case with “classic” detective stories), or only in part (as is often the case in more recent crime fiction). It is not uncommon for crime flashes to reverse the role of the police or private detective and reveal, in a final twist (contrary to one of the “golden rules” of good crime fiction set out by S.S. Van Dine in 1928)⁹, that he is actually the murderer or an accomplice, as with David Lagmanovich’s “Novela policial” (Detective Story) (2010).

The police detective who appears in Régis Jauffret’s flash “Gamine Concassée” (Little Girl Crushed), published in 2007, is the exact opposite of the superior character described by W. H. Auden in 1948, “the detective, must be either the official representative of the ethical or the exceptional individual who is himself in a state of grace”. In Jauffret’s flash, the police detective, who speaks in the first person, is called to investigate the death of a little girl of four who has been thrown into a lift shaft and crushed by the lift. But the more he talks, the more the reader understands that, far from being a representative of the ethical, he is utterly immoral and therefore unable to deliver justice. He feels no compassion for the bereaved parents, who live in a poor area of town - which he calls “a shithole of a district” - and certainly no pity for the victim. His “investigation” is not aimed at finding her murderer, but at justifying the crime on the basis of the supposedly reprehensible character and behaviour of the little girl who, he says, “certainly, was no saint”. He lists one by one all the crimes that he believes she must have committed, and the list becomes increasingly outrageous: “she must have exasperated a neighbour”, “she must have had enemies”, “she was a liar”, “she was spreading gossip about the sexual habits of her neighbours”. It is quite possible “she scratched the other children with her dirty nails giving them diseases” and so “it’s understandable their mothers had a grudge against her”. Probably “she was selling herself” and “one of her clients must have followed her home and killed her”. He says: “maybe she was so ashamed of what she was doing that she killed herself, but – no - her kind is too attached to money. I’m sure that if I searched her room, I’d find plenty of euros stashed under her bed”. He concludes by telling her parents that they “should be ashamed of having brought to the world such a whore”.

Crime flashes and crime short stories share some significant common features: characterisation is limited, they rely on traces and ellipses and on a final twist, they start in media res and have an open ending with no real closure or resolution. They are “fragments” of longer narratives the reader must piece together. But extreme brevity seems to limit writers of flash fiction in their choice of characters and situations, narrative voice and tone. With very few exceptions, they use unreliable first-person narrators who serve both the purpose of establishing an immediate “personal” relationship with the reader, and that of creating suspense because the reader does not know what to expect from the protagonist. The discrepancies and incongruities in the narratives related by unreliable narrators seem to encourage writers to use humour, mostly dark humour, more appropriate to murder. Humour, which is not a distinctive feature of crime fiction, is a distinctive feature of crime flashes, which almost invariably end with a humorous twist. It is as if writers feel that the “full” horror of murder cannot be conveyed successfully in just a few lines but must be explored in longer forms such

⁹ The fourth rule enumerated by the American crime writer S. S. Van Dine (pseudonym for Willard Huntington Wright) in his well-known essay “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories” published in 1928, states that “the detective himself, or one of the official investigators, should never turn out to be the culprit. This is bald trickery, on a par with offering some one a bright penny for a five-dollar gold piece. It’s false pretences” (Van Dine 190).

as the short story or the novel. Perhaps there are relatively few successful crime flashes, because professional crime writers and professional flash fiction writers do not find the crime flash genre sufficiently flexible. They may feel that the brevity of the genre does not provide a satisfactory “body” for the murders they have in mind.

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