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Mystery, Thriller, Hybrid? *The Riddle of the Sands* by Erskine Childers in a Transmedial Narratological Perspective

Abstract: This narratological study of Erskine Childers's *The Riddle of the Sands* aims to determine whether that early 20th-century crime novel is actually a mystery work, a thriller, or a hybrid. For the purposes of evaluating its generic intricacies and affiliation, a simple yet comprehensive transmedial taxonomy of crime works, directly inspired by Charles Derry's film-restricted one, will be proposed. In the course of the analysis, generic links to non-crime genres will also be taken into account. The article expands upon some practical considerations discussed in its author's doctoral thesis.¹

Keywords: mystery, thriller, hybrid, generic intricacies and affiliation, taxonomy of crime works

1. Introduction

In 1988, Charles Derry published *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*. That particular study of the thriller genre,² as indicated in its title, is exclusively concerned with cinematic works. Although the scholar adopts a medium-restricted approach, many of his theoretical considerations are, in truth, applicable to broadly-understood narratives, including literary ones. Most notably, in Derry's comprehensive model of the crime film (2002 [1988]: 64), the subgeneric division of the thriller is actually based on archetypal plotlines that can be traced back to, among others, the earliest British thriller novels from the late 19th and early

¹ See Urbanowicz (2023: 18–45, 100–112).

² The term “genre” is defined as a specific type of narrative that can appear in various media, such as films, novels, comic books, etc. See Frow (2015 [2006]: 1–5); see also Turco (1999: 9) and Neale (2004: 105).

20th centuries. It will be argued that, with minor revisions, the said model could function as a useful framework for the examination of plot conventions within crime narratives, be it cinematic or non-cinematic ones. This will be illustrated in relation to Erskine Childers's 1903 crime novel *The Riddle of the Sands*, whose generic links to the mystery genre and the thriller genre will be evaluated in a transmedial narratological perspective.

2. Crime Narratives: A Comprehensive Model

On grounds of its inherent universality and simplicity, Derry's taxonomy of crime films can be extended to crime narratives as such. Fundamentally, his suggestion is based on the observation that individual crime works utilise mystery and suspense in various proportions, oftentimes with a clear-cut preference of one device over the other. Mystery is plainly understood as a secret or, in a broader sense, an unsolved problem that intellectually stimulates both fictional characters and the readers/viewers, i.e., they try to find answers, typically through an amalgamation of logical thinking and guesswork. Suspense, in turn, entails emotional stimulation and specifically denotes "the prolonged state of heightened anticipation" (Insdorf 1994 [1978]: 40) experienced by the aforementioned parties once they have received important plot-related information that makes them feel excited/anxious/uncertain about the development of upcoming events. With regard to those phenomena, the scholar distinguishes two major genres: the mystery genre (mystery > suspense) and the thriller genre (mystery < suspense), along with a number of their respective subgenres determined by specific types of storylines in which one of the three stock characters (the criminal, the detective, or the victim) typically receives more attention than the remaining two.

In Figure 1, the relationship between the criminal, the detective, and the victim is symbolically represented in the form of a triangle. Mystery subgenres are located on the left and thriller subgenres on the right. Depending on the side, those placed at the base are characterised by a principal focus on the detective or the victim. Clearly, a strong professional detective figure is typical of mysteries, whereas a minimal or non-professional one of thrillers. Regardless, the closer to the peak a given subgenre appears, the more it is concentrated on the criminal.

The diagram constitutes a slightly modified version of Derry's comprehensive model of the crime film (2002 [1988]: 64), adjusted for the sake of referencing crime narratives *per se*. Hence, the gangster, bandit, and caper "films" have been replaced

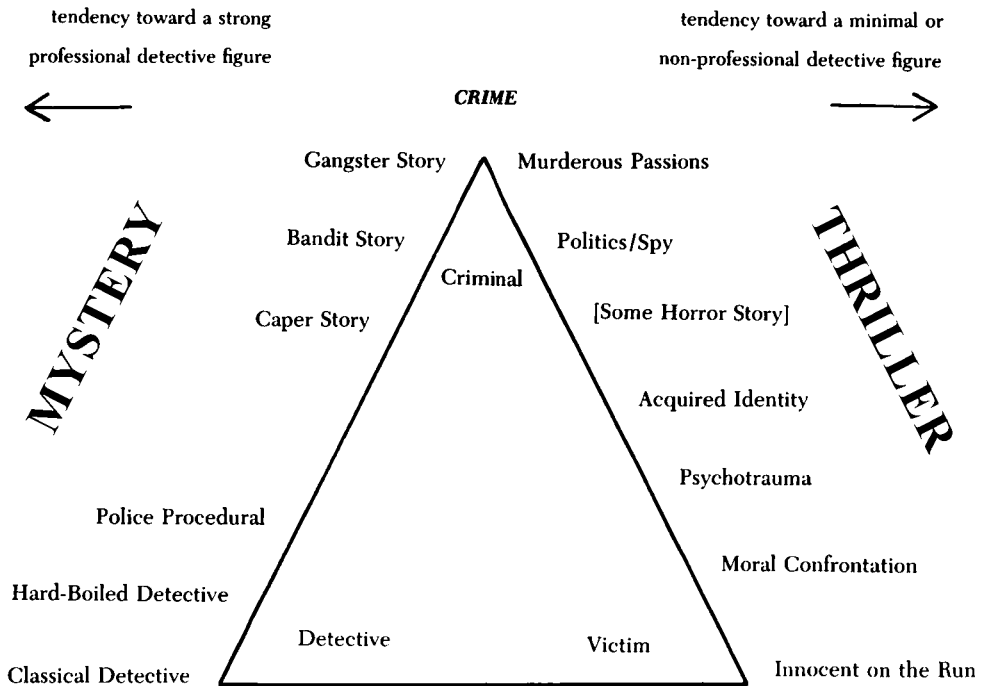


Figure 1. Crime Narratives – A Comprehensive Model

with “stories”. Aside from those changes, the spy thriller has been added. Derry omits it because, in his view, the diversity of roles performed by spies (particularly detectives, victims, and criminals) obscures the generic classification of spy films (2002 [1988]: 287–288). Actually, in the broader transmedial context of spy narratives, that opinion can be easily contradicted. It does not take into account the fact that all spies, even those who function as detectives or victims, breach the privacy/security of those spied on, and so commit some form of a legal and/or moral transgression. In *The Riddle of the Sands*, for example, the British traitor Dollmann, who spies for the Germans, is portrayed as a despicable criminal, whereas Carruthers and Davies, who spy on them in order to foil the upcoming invasion of England, are presented as heroic tricksters. Basically, the status of a spy is primarily linked to that of a criminal/transgressor, not that of a detective or victim. Furthermore, while working undercover, spies constantly run the risk of exposure, and thus espionage predominantly evokes suspense, not mystery. In terms of genre, this obviously moves spy narratives, including films, in the direction of thrillers, and so they are presented as such in the revised model.

All the crime subgenres featured in Figure 1, save for the afore-discussed spy thriller, have been meticulously delineated by Derry (2002 [1988]: 57–66). Hence, it is reasonable not to describe them in detail in this article, but rather proceed to the proper analysis of *The Riddle of the Sands*, whose generic affiliation and degree of hybridity will be assessed on the basis of specific narrative elements that to a greater or lesser extent tie the novel to particular crime (sub)genres. In other words, this work of fiction will be ascribed, through approximation, to either the mystery or the thriller genre with the stipulation that it also possesses a hybridic quality, i.e., it borrows themes and motives from various mystery and thriller subgenres as well as other, non-crime, genres (Duff 2000: xiv).³

3. *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903): Its Generic Affiliation and Hybridity

Since the publication of its first edition, *The Riddle of the Sands* has attracted (and still attracts) considerable academic attention.⁴ Notwithstanding, James Purdon points out that the scholarly interest generally revolves around the examination of historio-biographical parallels between the intra- and extratextual world, whereas the strictly literary features of Childers's work are rarely discussed (2012: 537–538). A similar observation has been made by Merric Burrow in his “non-mainstream” analysis of narrative functions within the novel (2016: 112). As for this article, it will also address those neglected issues, principally in the context of generic intricacies.

Set over a dozen years before the outbreak of WWI, *The Riddle of the Sands* depicts the sensational trials and tribulations of two British sailors, Carruthers and Davies, who, by their own unaided efforts, thwart a German naval invasion of England. Together, they embark on a dangerous journey from the Schleswig fiords to the Frisian islands in cold Autumn on board of a cramped and shoddy lifeboat-made-yacht, the *Dulcibella*. The story premise is highly improbable, and yet it does resonate with the contemporary British fear of foreign infiltration and aggression (Panek 1981: 5–7; Woods 2008: 31).

³ For insightful discussions on the concept of generic hybridity see Kent (1986), Hassan (1987), Hutcheon (1988), Duff (2000), Gregson (2004), Auger (2011), Garzone/Ilie (2014).

⁴ Important studies include, i.a., Seed (1990), Hopkins (2001), Steer (2009), Hitchner (2010), Brayton (2017), Sandberg (2018), and Morrison (2020: 142–162). The circumstances behind the creation of the novel are outlined in Drummond (2017).

In any case, the incorporated theme of a “larger than life” challenge, deeply rooted in adventure fiction, is also commonly explored in thrillers. On a more general note, the convention shared by those two genres and adopted by the novel is the emergence of extraordinary circumstances that break the monotony of the protagonists’ everyday lives. Longing for an escape from mundane office work, Carruthers receives an unexpected letter invitation to duck shooting on the Baltic from an old and distant college friend, Davies. Intrigued by that odd occurrence, the former agrees to go on a sailing holiday, not knowing that the latter actually seeks assistance on a dangerous secret mission. In truth, the unlikely correspondent has also recently experienced a strange incident, albeit in this case one that has nearly cost him his life. In early September, Davies made the acquaintance of Dollmann, the owner of a large German yacht. Not long afterwards, on the way to Cuxhaven, the said *Medusa* nearly succeeded in wrecking the *Dulcibella*, deliberately piloted in bad weather onto a shoal. Reflecting upon the trap he barely escaped from, Davies has come to the conclusion that for some reason his presence near the Frisian coast was deemed unwelcome. On top of that, he correctly suspects that Dollmann, who first claimed to speak English very poorly and then fluently delivered his last navigation instructions in that language, is a British traitor implicated in international espionage. That supposition is further reinforced by Dollmann’s association with von Brüning, the German commander of the torpedo gunboat *Blitz*. Alarmed, Davies decides to conduct a private inspection of the matter. Being a stalwart patriot, he wishes to protect his motherland as well as ensure that it remains a political superpower. That specific desire directly links him to the stock English characters of the imperial romance, although, unlike many of them, he is not a coloniser. As for Carruthers, he decides to help his friend irrespective of the initial deception, thrilled – as in adventure fiction and thrillers – by the prospect of confronting the upcoming challenge.

The title of Childers’s work, *The Riddle of the Sands*, highlights its inherent connection to detective fiction, established primarily through the central motif of investigation. The titular riddle is, of course, the secret invasion plan. While observing the coastal waters of East Friesland, Carruthers and Davies accidentally discover that the Germans are not only interested in recovering gold bullion bars from a sunken French warship, but are also preparing an overseas attack. The novel overtly plays with the conventions of treasure hunt stories. Essentially, the salvage operation fulfils the role of a red-herring – it is meant to divert attention away from the hostile fleet manoeuvres. Leaving that aside, the protagonist duo are not merely detectives, but spy-detectives. As such, they risk their lives and well-being

in the endeavour of exploring enemy territory. Hence, the narrative focus is shifted from the mysterious aspects of solving the eponymous riddle to the suspenseful ones, evoked by the ever-present threat of exposure and capture. For that reason, it could be argued that the novel is, in fact, more closely tied to the spy thriller than to detective fiction.

The main characters' audacious quest, far-fetched in itself, is made all the more ridiculous by the fact that Dollmann's daughter, Clara, is Davies's love interest. He intends to rescue her from her vile father, of whose treason she remains utterly ignorant. According to Carruthers, that plan "impart[s] into [their] adventure a strain of crazy chivalry more suited to knights-errant of the Middle Ages" (Childers 1978 [1903]: 215). Naturally, while the motif of saving a morally innocent damsel-in-distress from a wicked villain can be traced back to the medieval romance, the early 20th-century setting is evocative of the Edwardian romance (Daly 1999: 37, 82–83; Saunders 2001: 187).

At this point it is crucial to note that the novel attempts to draw the readers' attention away from the evident implausibility of its plot. This is done in a thriller-esque pretentious fashion through the use of specific "distractors". One of them is the act of engaging the readers emotionally in the noble heroic enterprise, which, to that end, is deliberately overblown to a matter of national security. Initially, Carruthers and Davies aim at unmasking a British traitor. In pursuit of that goal, they accidentally discover a German naval invasion plan that poses a major threat to their homeland. The sudden revelation of an additional, even greater, danger is clearly meant to augment the suspense evoked by the first one.

Another distractor manifests itself in the form of a "manipulative" narrative frame. The first-person narrator of the Preface and Epilogue, allegedly Childers himself, claims to have met Carruthers and Davies, in truth, fictional characters:

It was arranged that I should edit the book; that 'Carruthers' should give me his diary and recount to me in fuller detail and from his own point of view all the phases of the 'quest', as they used to call it; that Mr 'Davies' should meet me with his charts and maps and do the same; and that the whole story should be written, as from the mouth of the former, with its humours and errors, its light and its dark side, just as it happened; with the following few limitations. The year it belongs to is disguised; the names of persons are throughout fictitious; and, at my instance, certain slight liberties have been taken to conceal the identity of the English characters.

Remember, also that these persons are living now in the midst of us, and if you find one topic touched on with a light and hesitating pen, do not blame the Editor, who, whether they are known or not, would rather say too little than say a word that might savour of impertinence (Childers 1978 [1903]: 18–19).

To magnify the feigned impression of credibility, the “Childers-Editor” even goes so far as to express concern for the supposedly anonymised yet actually non-existent real-world individuals. Furthermore, he announces that the “authentic” story will not be narrated by him, but instead by someone “more familiar with it”, hence “more reliable” – Carruthers. Generally, the practice of enticing the readers to adopt the protagonist’s personal and subjective perspective as well as sympathise with his or her feelings and emotions is characteristic of both adventure fiction and thrillers.

On the subject of discretion, it is vital to note that Dollmann’s suicide by the end of the novel resolves, in a delicate way, the “politically incorrect” issue of treason. Before switching sides, the defector used to be a British navy lieutenant, and so his death by drowning does not merely save him from legal prosecution, but most importantly spares the Admiralty the humiliating experience of trying his case. Fundamentally, this antagonist closely resembles those featured in thrillers of acquired identity. Much like them, he is an impostor, and it is precisely the fact that he pretends to be someone else – in this instance, a non-Brit – that results in his ultimate capture and downfall.

Aside from danger-related themes, *The Riddle of the Sands* also features humorous ones. The two main characters’ amusing relationship, in particular, generically ties the novel to the comedy of mismatches. Carruthers, a dandyish and sardonic civil servant from the British Foreign Office, is oftentimes bewildered by Davies, a laid-back eccentric sailor. To illustrate that confusion, it is sufficient to recall their initial meeting in the novel. First, Davies explains that the rigging screws he has specifically asked Carruthers to buy (and have been obtained with considerable trouble) are, in truth, not necessary for “the holiday”. Then, it turns out that the former has no additional crew that could bring the latter’s luggage to the yacht, and so the two friends inconveniently carry it all by themselves. Finally, the *Dulcibella* is revealed to be a tiny, incommensurate boat. The hatchway is too small for the narrator’s portmanteau to pass through. Vexed, he unpacks it on deck, below which, even more to his annoyance, the saloon is haphazardly strewn with gear and the sleeping cabin has a leak over one of the two hard sheetless bunks. In stark contrast to Carruthers, Davies is not even a bit irritated by all that discomfort. Their radically different reactions are clearly meant to evoke a comical effect. This is further magnified by that last one’s impetuous habit of removing “excess” load from the *Dulcibella* in order to make her lighter.

It should be noted that Carruthers, being the retrospective narrator, frequently imbues his account of the adventure with suspenseful foreshadowing, typical

of thrillers. For example, he momentarily reveals that upon issuing a letter request for a prolonged leave from work he was “unaware of the gravity of the step [he] was taking” (Childers 1978 [1903]: 114). Basically, he signals to the readers that, within the timeline of the story, that correspondence will be of great importance to future events. Indeed, it is. In an official reply from his superior, Carruthers is denied an extended vacation. This eventually buttresses his and Davies’s cover as non-spying tourists. On a different occasion, the narrator confesses that “[t]he decisive incidents of [their] cruise were now fast approaching” (Childers 1978 [1903]: 156). By doing so, he discloses the importance and proximity of the (at that point unspecified) inn conversation with Commander von Brüning. Later, after relating its course in detail, Carruthers announces that “[it] had been a puzzling interview, but the greatest puzzle was still to come” (Childers 1978 [1903]: 174). That last comment presages von Brüning’s ominous declaration of his police duty and, on a greater scale, the two protagonists’ ultimate discovery of the German invasion plan.

Carruthers also tends to reflect upon his early fear of sailing on the *Dulcibella*, one which he has gradually overcome. He often describes that anxiety in a suspenseful manner. In the following passage, he emphasises the “unsettling nature” of certain sounds through the use of onomatopoeias:

Every loose article in the boat became audibly restless. Cans clinked, cupboards rattled, lockers uttered hollow groans [...]. The mast whined dolorously at every heel, and the centre-board hiccupped and choked [...]. The deck and mast were conductors which magnified every sound and made the tap-tap of every rope’s end resemble the blows of a hammer, and the slapping of the halyards against the mast the rattle of a Maxim gun. The whole tumult beat time to a rhythmical chorus which became maddening (Childers 1978 [1903]: 137).

Obviously, the narrator only subjectively perceives the sounds as menacing. Still, the “maddening rhythmical chorus” creates the impression of foreboding readily associated with thrillers.

In the course of the plot, Carruthers undergoes a major internal change. The peevish dandy gradually becomes a courageous adventurer and protector of his homeland. Simultaneously, he experiences a transition into a full-fledged adult. Much like the protagonists in Victorian schoolboy stories, he plainly matures in response to the difficulties he confronts.

By the end of the aforementioned inn meeting, von Brüning discreetly asks Carruthers to dissuade Davies from rekindling the “friendly” acquaintance with

Dollmann. The Commander disparagingly describes the man the protagonists are looking for as “a queer fellow, of eccentric habits” (Childers 1978 [1903]: 175). All this, combined with the German’s subsequent veiled threats, convinces the main characters that there exists some form of a major conspiracy. In order to unearth it, they resort to spying, intrinsically tied to suspense and, by extension, spy thrillers.

One vital remark is that *The Riddle of the Sands* romanticises espionage, portraying it as sensationally spectacular at the expense of belittling its realistically mundane aspects. Hence, Carruthers and Davies are able to accomplish incredible feats, such as the following one. They manage to pursue the *Medusa* in a dinghy, covering a distance of over 10 miles from Norderney to Memmert while navigating through dense fog with the help of a compass and charts. It is precisely the extreme difficulty of that daring endeavour that makes it highly improbable. The protagonists possess superhuman stamina and, by a stroke of luck, are not detected by their adversaries thanks to the poor visibility.

On the island, Carruthers encounters a gathering of German plotters and spies on them in a rather ridiculous way. Peering through a window of a tin building, he positions himself exactly behind Dollmann so as to use him as a physical buffer against exposure. Though silly, this method of stealing information does evoke suspense. For the sake of maintaining his own safety, the narrator carefully observes his dangerous surroundings and promptly reacts to the abruptly changing circumstances. Among others, he crouches from time to time in order not to be spotted by the people moving inside as well as relocates whenever someone is about to go outside.

Upon hearing that he and Davies are about to receive an invitation to an evening meal at Dollmann’s place, Carruthers rushes back to his companion and urges him to return together to Norderney as quickly as possible to create the false impression that they have not strayed far from it. Hence, in a somewhat comical fashion, the main characters switch from a hectic chase to a hectic escape, both implausibly executed over long distances on a single day. That sudden shift, despite its humour, is thrillingly suspenseful since the protagonists know that they will be outsped by the antagonists on the comeback journey. The two friends arrive late, but still in time to disrupt the surreptitious enemy inspection of the *Dulcibella*.

At the shared supper Carruthers, emboldened by his recent exploits, recklessly engages himself in a game of brinkmanship with Dollmann and von Brüning, as well as their accomplices, Böhme and Grimm. To extract information, the heroic Brit publicly “deduces” that the first two have recently rendezvoused at Memmert. He accuses the commander of trying to hide that pre-planned appointment from him

earlier at the inn. Fully aware of the fact that the *Dulcibella* has been searched and the current meeting is *de facto* a questioning, Carruthers also reveals that he “suspects” all that. In the ensuing confusion at the table, the narrator receives an official invitation to Memmert, which he nonetheless declines on grounds of having been summoned back to England. As proof, he presents his job correspondence, which ultimately enables him to disguise his allegations as mere jokes. This situation fits very well within the overall sensationalism of *The Riddle of the Sands*. Throughout the novel, the main characters frequently expose themselves to grave danger only to be spectacularly relieved from it after a period of suspense. Obviously, this firmly ties Childers’s work to the thriller genre. On top of that, the network of influential evil-doers parallels those typically featured in innocent-on-the-run thrillers.

Due to an adverse set of circumstances, Carruthers spends much of his voyage to London in the unwanted company of Böhme. Still, as they part ways, the former travels back to Friesland with the intention of helping Davies kidnap Dollmann. Prior to that last one’s capture, the narrator accomplishes his most extraordinary feat within the story. In Bensersiel, he stealthily boards and sabotages a tug piloted by Grimm which also holds von Brüning and Böhme as passengers. Carruthers chooses a tiny boat overboard for a hiding spot. Reflecting on his search for it, he offers the following comment: “The conventional stowaway hides in the hold, but there was only a stokehold here, occupied moreover; nor was there an empty apple-barrel, such as Jim of *Treasure Island* found so useful” (Childers 1978 [1903]: 299). As previously indicated, the novel plays with the conventions of treasure hunt stories. In place of a salvage operation, the protagonist discovers German naval manoeuvres under the direct supervision of Kaiser Wilhelm II. In response to that revelation, Carruthers musters the courage to leave his hideout. Taking advantage of the dark night as well as Grimm’s temporary absence on the main deck, the narrator steals his oilskin and, dressed as him, fools the substitute sailor at the helm into passing it over. The impostor, readily associated with those from thrillers of acquired identity, deliberately runs the tug aground. Amidst the resulting panic, he flees in a small boat which, in a comedic fashion, the confused Kaiser personally helps him release from its davits. Having temporarily immobilised the Germans, Carruthers promptly returns to Davies. Subsequently, with Dollmann and Clara on the *Dulcibella*, the protagonist duo set sail for England. In the end, the traitor does not reach that destination, but the rest safely do and the enemy invasion is successfully thwarted.

Closing the analysis of *The Riddle of the Sands*, it is crucial to note that this work of fiction is conspicuously cartographic, i.e., it features maps and charts.

While narrating the story, Carruthers frequently asks the readers to study them, typically in relation to the specific routes taken by him and Davies. Actually, Childers himself was a sailor who voyaged, among others, near the Frisian coast. The fact that he projected some of his travel experiences onto the main characters adds a layer of realism to the plot of his book. Furthermore, the *Dulcibella*, named after the author's sister, is modelled on his own yacht, *Vixen* (Harding 2007 [2004]: 131–132; Seed 1990: 30). Most importantly, the novel is interspersed with sailing technicalities and jargon that generically link it to nautical fiction.

4. Conclusions

Considering mystery and suspense, *The Riddle of the Sands* exploits the former to a far lesser extent than the latter. Hence, within the framework of the proposed transmedial crime genre taxonomy, heavily inspired by Derry's film-restricted one, the novel falls under the category of a thriller – more specifically, a spy thriller. Like all generic classifications, this one is, of course, an approximation. Childers's work possesses a hybridic quality – it incorporates themes and structural elements from various crime and non-crime genres. The book is intrinsically tied to other thriller subgenres (particularly the thriller of acquired identity and the innocent-on-the-run thriller), adventure fiction (among others, the imperial romance and treasure hunt stories), comedies (chiefly the comedy of mismatches), Victorian schoolboy stories, Edwardian romance fiction, nautical fiction, and detective fiction. A superficial link to the medieval romance has also been identified.

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