

The Mysteriously Murderous Manors of Crime Fiction: An Examination of Setting in *Knives Out*

Angelo Gonzalez, *Ball State University*



Crime fiction has many common tropes often associated with its setting, including large houses with wealthy families, isolated homes in vast expanses of forest, and technological deserts in which everyday things like cell phones are all but useless. These characteristics assist with the plot, and oftentimes are key contributors to the facts of the case. The manor in the 2019 film *Knives Out*, directed by Rian Johnson, displays these tropes outrightly, as it is in a large expanse of woods, and the family living in the house is built upon a family legacy of vast amounts of wealth. In many cases of crime fiction, the old manors come from old generations of money. Many characters throughout the film believe victim Harlan Thrombey to be from old money, although it is revealed later that this may not be a genuine portrayal of his rise into wealth, altering the perception of how his manor and ultimately his legacy is viewed. Unlike other crime fiction settings,

Knives Out utilizes technology in order to put together pieces of the crime, instead of eliminating its use, as is common in crime fiction settings. The setting of the film is as important a piece to a crime fiction narrative as any other plot devices, like characters or events. This essay seeks to examine the tropes utilized in the film, and how they worked in providing evidence towards the case of the murder of Harlan Thrombey. The film also plays with crime fiction tropes in terms of technology. The mansion has aspects that are both archaic, like the VHS tape security system, but also modern, in the use of social media throughout the film. This essay will also show how the film used inverse versions of crime fiction stereotypes to craft a crime narrative.

In the 2019 film *Knives Out*, directed by Rian Johnson, the setting plays a crucial role in the narrative. As Stephen D. Rogers writes, "Setting, the time and place of a story, is particularly important in the mystery genre. Not only do carefully chosen details enrich the tale, but they may also very well assist or impede the investigation, even after possibly being an accessory to the crime" (1). Set in a gothic manor in modern-day New England, the film follows the investigation into the death of crime novelist Harlan Thrombey. As one reviewer notes, "Johnson goes back to his roots with an updated homage to the Agatha Christie whodunnits he loved as a child, and to those 'cheekily self-aware' screen adaptations in which Peter Ustinov would lead an all-star cast through a labyrinthine murder mystery" (Jones 1). The mention of Peter Ustinov leading an all-star cast suggests that Johnson is incorporating the tradition of the grand ensemble cast, which has long been a staple of murder mystery films. The reference to a labyrinthine murder mystery highlights the film's intricate plot, which adds to the suspense and excitement of the story. In this way, Johnson's work can be seen as a nostalgic tribute to the mystery genre that shaped his formative years, imbued with a contemporary, humorous sensibility.

The film's setting, described as a "gothic pile," adds to the film's success. This isolated setting is a common trope in crime fiction, as it allows for a sense of mystery and isolation, making it easier for the crime to take place without interference. The manor itself is also a trope in crime fiction, as it is often associated with old money and a family legacy of wealth. In *Knives Out*, the Thrombey family is seen as having old money, although this is later revealed to be a façade. The setting not only serves as a backdrop for the crime, but also plays an active role in shaping the narrative and the perception of the characters. This essay seeks to examine the tropes of setting common to crime fiction utilized in the film and how they contribute to the narrative, aiding Rian Johnson in creating a nostalgic film that harkens back to the stories of Agatha Christie, but offers a unique vision of the future of crime film.

Background on Crime Fiction and Setting Tropes

Crime fiction has come to be recognized as a crucial element in the preservation of social order. Readers of crime fiction are given the opportunity to participate in the penalizing of perpetrators and to be active members in a moral framework that maintains order in society. The genre's focus on what it means to be human and the complex motivation behind crime also allows readers to engage with ideas of justice and punishment. The appeal factors of crime fiction, including story, setting, character, and language, draw readers to the genre and allow for a wide range of sub-genres to

exist. As the critic John Scaggs argues, "Crime has nevertheless been the foundation for an entire genre of fiction for over one hundred and fifty years" (23). For over a century, crime fiction has been drawing readers in with its focus on humanity, justice, and punishment.

In addition to its exploration of crime and its consequences, crime fiction also offers readers the opportunity to participate in the penalizing of perpetrators and to be active members in a moral framework that maintains social order. The ending of a crime fiction story offers the possibility of restoration and a return to innocence, making the genre particularly appealing to readers who "suffer from a sense of sin" (Auden 411). Despite the fact that many readers know of the genre's "tricks," crime fiction continues to be popular and relevant because it allows readers to engage with important moral and societal issues. Despite its popularity, the genre of crime fiction is not without its pitfalls, as it can be seen as perpetuating harmful stereotypes and supporting the status quo. However, its ability to experiment and critique social issues makes it an important genre in world literature. The setting of the film ties into the framework Auden sets up, as it allows the audiences to connect the scenery to the events that take place within the film.

Application of Tropes in *Knives Out*

The opening scene of *Knives Out* takes place on the third floor of the Thrombey Estate, in the master bedroom suite, which is empty and unslept in. This sets a somber tone and immediately creates a sense of unease, as it is not typical for the master of the house not to have slept in his own bedroom, and it was known he was there the night before. The setting is further emphasized when Fran, the housekeeper, heads out onto the landing and up an even narrower half-flight of stairs, which leads to a single door, creating a feeling of claustrophobia and a sense of foreboding as Fran ascends to the top of the house in search of her boss. She arrives at the top of the stairs and knocks, not waiting long before entering what will soon be a highly investigated crime scene. The cramped attic study where Harlan Thrombey's body is discovered is described as having every shelf crammed with curios, adding to the sense of clutter and disarray. The fact that the murder takes place in such a wealthy and extravagant setting also emphasizes the power dynamics at play in the story. The manor's status as a symbol of old wealth and power adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, as the motivations of the characters are informed by their association with this world of privilege and prestige. The manor's implied history and elegant design serve as the backdrop for the unfolding events, and its central role in the narrative underscores the importance of setting in the creation of a successful crime story. In this opening scene, *Knives Out*

demonstrates how the careful selection of setting can play a crucial role in the success of a modern homage to classic crime fiction.



Figure 1. Film capture the outside of the Thrombey Estate. 2019, *Knives Out*.

The next scene after the opening credits is in direct contrast to the glamor and extravagance of the manor seen before. Instead, the audience is put in the bedroom of a 20-year-old woman living in a small, cramped apartment with her family. The differences between the Thrombey manor and Marta Cabrera's housing project could not be starker. Marta's apartment is plain, modern, and cramped, in sharp contrast to the opulent, spacious mansion in which Harlan met his untimely demise. Her family's kitchen is humble, with her sister Alice watching CSI on an iPad at the kitchen table and her mother concerned for Marta's well-being while preparing for the day. The contrast between the two settings emphasizes the class divide at the heart of the film's narrative, and highlights the unique challenges faced by Marta Cabrera as she navigates a world that is both alien and hostile to her.

One of the key tropes of crime fiction is the isolated manor, often belonging to a wealthy family with a dark past. In *Knives Out*, the Thrombey family's expansive manor in a secluded forest is a fitting setting for a crime fiction novel, as it provides the necessary seclusion and secrecy for the crime to take place. As Cathy Cole writes, "the settings of crime fiction are often associated with power and money, the places of

privilege and authority that are closed to most people” (116). The use of such exclusive settings in crime fiction highlights the idea that crime and wrongdoing are often associated with positions of power and wealth. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the Thrombey manor is only accessible to those within the family or those who have been invited, like Marta. This exclusivity emphasizes the gap between the wealthy and the poor in society, as everyday people are shut out from these places of privilege and authority. This idea is also reflected in the parallels between the trick window and Marta’s own use of trickery to protect herself and her family, highlighting the need to be careful and use wits to stay ahead of those in positions of authority.



Figure 2. Film capture of Marta Cabrera’s family in their kitchen. 2019, *Knives Out*.

In a setting framing scene from *Knives Out*, Lieutenant Elliott expresses his frustration with the case, stating that it’s an open-and-shut case of suicide and that he expected something more interesting from the great Benoit Blanc as they take a stroll outside, revealing the exterior of the mansion they are working with. While walking, Blanc picks up an old baseball lying in the grass and asks about the method of death, noting the dramatic nature of a throat slit for a suicide. This exchange highlights the tension between the expectation of a straightforward resolution and the possibility of a more complex mystery, often sought after by Detective Blanc. This tension is mirrored in the film’s setting, which is described as a “giant Clue board” by Lt. Elliot.



Figure 3. Film capture Marta Cabrera and Harlan Thrombey in his office. 2019, *Knives Out*.

This comparison to the classic board game serves to reinforce the idea that the Thrombey manor is a labyrinthine mystery waiting to be solved. Additionally, the varied elements and tropes common in crime media add to the tension of the film and reinforce the significance of the setting, which serves as more than just a physical location, but as a character that affects the events of the story. By utilizing timeless cinematography and comparisons to classic crime media, *Knives Out* effectively creates a sense of mystery and unease, inviting the audience to join Blanc and Marta in solving the puzzle of Harlan's death.

Another common trope of crime fiction is the lack of technology in the setting. In *Knives Out*, detectives use a variety of devices, including cell phones and VHS tapes, to gather evidence and piece together the events leading up to the murder. This use of technology adds a twist to the traditional crime narrative, setting it apart from other works in the genre. The film also utilizes technology in a unique way in comparison to other crime fiction narratives. Rather than eliminating technology, as is often done in order to create a sense of isolation, the characters in *Knives Out* use technology to uncover clues and piece together the crime. For example, the manor has a VHS tape

security system, which is an old and outdated technology, but the characters also use their cell phones to keep tabs on other members of the family to uncover secrets about them. In a key scene of *Knives Out*, the conversation between Ransom and Marta at a restaurant is interrupted by the ringing of Marta's phone. Meg's phone call to Marta, in which she pretends to be alone on the phone while the rest of the family listens in, demonstrates her utilizing a manipulation tactic, something Meg, a friend of Marta, would not normally do. However, due to the additional familial pressures and the threat of their way of life, she gives in and begins playing the game with the rest of her family.



Figure 4. Film capture of Meg Thrombey on the phone with Marta. 2019, *Knives Out*.

The sprawling estate of the Thrombey family, with its ornate furnishings and expensive artwork, gives off the impression of a family steeped in generational wealth and prestige. The reveal of Harlan Thrombey's family home being bought in the '80s and their generational wealth being a lie, as unveiled by Blanc in one of the final scenes, serves as a critical turning point in the perception the audience has of the Thrombey family. This revelation discredits the family's presumed prestige, shattering the illusion of their wealth and power. It reveals the deceitful and corrupt nature of those in positions of authority, subverting the audience's expectations and reinforcing the notion that crime media often employs the settings of power and

wealth to question morality. As all the Thrombeys become increasingly antagonistic in a last-ditch effort to save the fortune they feel entitled to, Marta remains the only character to sympathize with, representing the working-class background that is often overshadowed by those of the elite. Overall, the scene and the revelation of the family home's history highlight the underlying theme of *Knives Out*, which is that even those with wealth who are enabled by the power wealth gives can be motivated by their greed and desire for more.



Figure 5. Film capture of Benoit Blanc sitting on a throne of knives. 2019, *Knives Out*.

As Joel Goldman writes, “A setting with a heartbeat represents the difference between good and great crime fiction; and allows readers to develop a true attachment to protagonists and, yes, a deep-seated fear and loathing of the villain” (1). The manor in *Knives Out* acts as a symbol of the family's wealth and power, as well as the conflicts and tensions that arise among the family members as they navigate the investigation into Harlan's death. It is not just a static backdrop for the action, but a living, breathing presence that influences and is influenced by the characters. By using the manor as a character, Rian Johnson creates a more immersive and engaging story, deepening the reader's connection to the characters and the environment that they are in, and further, how that environment influences their behaviors and actions throughout the film.

Overall, the setting of *Knives Out* plays a crucial role in the narrative, adding to the film's success as a crime fiction story. As David Geherin argues, "[W]hen a writer uses location as more than backdrop by weaving it into the very fabric of the novel, affecting every other element of the work, the reader gets far more than local color" (1). When the setting becomes more than just a physical location, but rather a character affecting every other element of the work, the reader gains a deeper understanding of the story. This results in a richer and immersive experience for the reader, as they can fully grasp the impact of the location on the events of the story. By weaving the setting into the narrative in this way, the writer can create a more nuanced and impactful story. The same can be applied to films of the crime fiction genre, as is the case with *Knives Out*. The isolated manor and the use of technology subvert common tropes in the genre, making for a unique and engaging narrative. The setting of the film is an important part of the narrative, as it allows for the development of attachment to the characters, as well as adding to the foreboding undertones. Rian Johnson utilizes the tropes of crime fiction in order to create a piece of media that makes the setting into a delightful character for the viewers to enjoy, instead of just leaving it as scenery. Even as the audience believes they know exactly what happened to Harlan from the beginning, there is a sense that there is another layer of the story still waiting to be told. The use and subversion of common crime fiction tropes in the setting of the film make it a standout in the genre and add to the tensions during the rising action.

According to writer Donald Cawelti, the evolution of the classical detective genre has been to give "increasing importance to the intricacy of the puzzle surrounding the crime and less prominence to the detective's initiative in the investigation" (84). This runs in accordance with Benoit Blanc's more passive investigative method in the film, where the emphasis is set on the mystery of the crime itself, with the backdrop giving important context along the way. Films must focus more on the complexity of the plot, so utilizing a classic setting formula, as done in *Knives Out*, aids in allowing for the plots to become odd and whimsical, and therefore original in nature. This film serves as a prime example of how the setting can be used to enhance the genre and create a standout piece of media. The future of crime films may rely on including more nostalgic tropes from crime media in order to create the mix of nostalgia and real-world narratives that contemporary audiences crave, just as *Knives Out* has displayed.

Works Cited

- Auden, W.H. "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, From an Addict." Harper's Magazine, harpers.org/archive/1948/05/the-guilty-vicarage/.
- Cawelti, J.G. "Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture." *University of Chicago Press*, 1976.
- Cole, Cathy. "Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks: An Interrogation of Crime Fiction." *Fremantle*, 2004.
- Franks, R. "A Taste for Murder: The Curious Case of Crime Fiction". *M/C Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1, Mar. 2014, doi.org/10.5204/mcj.770.
- Geherin, David. "Scene of the Crime: The Importance of Place in Crime and Detective Fiction" *Cambridge Scholars Publishing*, 2008.
- Goldman, Joel. "You Set Me Up: Importance of Setting in Crime Fiction." *PML Media*, 6 June 2013, joelgoldman.com/you-set-me-up-importance-of-setting-in-crime-fiction/.
- Huang, Chi-Chieh. "Knives Out (2019) and the Classical Detective Formula." *Diggit Magazine*, 10 Dec. 2022, www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/knives-out-2019-and-classical-detective-formula
- Johnson, Rian. *Knives Out*. *Lionsgate*, 2019.
- Rogers, Stephen D. "The Scene of the Crime: Choosing Your Setting." *Writing World*, 2002, www.writing-world.com/mystery/setting.shtml.
- Scaggs, John. "Crime Fiction Theory." *SlideShare*, 23 Apr. 2016, www.slideshare.net/tirsinacristina/crime-fiction-theory.