

## Philosophy in Review



# Rafe McGregor, "A Criminology of Narrative Fiction."

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[See table of contents](#)

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**Rafe McGregor.** *A Criminology of Narrative Fiction*. Bristol University Press 2021. 176 pp. \$85.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781529208054); \$36.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781529208061).

*A Criminology of Narrative Fiction* is a short book written by Rafe McGregor, a senior lecturer at Edge Hill University. The book examines how stories are and can be used within criminology. McGregor's book is a refreshing take on the use of fiction within criminology. There are eight chapters, each illustrating what narrative criminology is, how it can be used in practice, and where McGregor's own theory fits with current knowledge. Ultimately, at the heart of the book is the argument that there is value to be found in using fictional narratives for research, and this value can be applied to criminology.

McGregor is not the first to suggest the use of fiction within the social sciences. Throughout his work, McGregor references some of the well-known authors in the field. For those familiar with narrative criminology, the name Presser should stand out as, arguably, the leading scholar in this field. In chapter 2, McGregor clarifies that whilst his theory of narrative criminology shares some similarities to Presser's work, they are inherently different. Presser's research is uncompromisingly concerned with that of nonfictional narratives, regardless of their truth content, whereas McGregor is solely concerned with fictional narratives. Secondly, McGregor's 'conception of narrative is representational where Presser's is constitutive' (33). Finally, a key element of Presser's narrative criminology is her focus on morality, something McGregor does not classify as relevant.

In addition to this, McGregor marks his place in the world of criminology by stating that his theory, like Presser's narrative criminology, sits on the precipice of cultural criminology. Typically, cultural criminology concerns itself with the production and reception of representations. However, it cannot 'provide knowledge of the reality represented (or misrepresented) by those representations' (39). This is where *A Criminology of Narrative Fiction* is situated, with McGregor's preoccupation with the aetiological value of fiction—that is, the 'extent to which it provides knowledge of the causes of crime or social harm' (149).

McGregor's theory emerges from narrative criminology rather than being situated within it (33). What this means is that McGregor applies the concept of narrative criminology to the world of fiction. In doing so, he modifies the theory. This allows McGregor to explore aspects of criminology that have been largely ignored and underrepresented in criminology, such as the use of fiction as a source of data. Adapting the theory in this way removes McGregor's constraints and allows him to focus on other aspects of stories that are important, such as their content.

Throughout the book, McGregor uses several different examples of fictional narratives to highlight how these sources can be used as data to help us understand crime and social harm. On the one hand, it is very interesting to read about these narratives and how they are constructed and, ultimately, what the results are. For example, McGregor uses *Beverly Hills Cop* as an example of how intersectionality can affect victims. Nevertheless, if read in the wrong way, these examples could be viewed as slightly reductionist as they do not fully explore the devices used in these fictional narratives, such as lighting, speech, sounds, background sets, to name a few. All of these are used to create an atmosphere for the intended audience, encouraging them to feel and experience the fictional narrative in a certain way.

McGregor's book goes a very long way in trying to convince readers that not only does fiction have a place in criminological understanding, but that its place cannot and must not be reduced to a simple 'tool,' but rather a medium to exploit understanding and embedded knowledge. Arguably,

there is some crucial evidence missing from this book, which could further support McGregor's argument of the inclusion of fiction in criminological research. For example, there is a wealth of research suggesting that the more hidden the subject of a fictional narrative, such as areas of the criminal justice system, the more likely people are to believe it. This is not something that is well known, and the addition of such facts would help rally support for both McGregor's theory and his insistence on using fiction in criminology.

As mentioned previously, McGregor is an advocate for the aetiological value of fiction. However, it would have been helpful to see more of a discussion on the implications for this in research. Why is it important to study how fictional devices provide the public with knowledge of the causes of crime or social harm? Through studying this, what can we hope to achieve? To seasoned researchers, the answer may be obvious, but for newer academics, not so much.

Overall, this book is a fascinating read to anyone interested in using fiction in criminology. McGregor's inclusion of fiction into his framework of narrative criminology provides an opening for other scholars who wish to use fiction in their research. The book is thought-provoking and will cause readers, especially those who do not value fiction, to rethink their opinions. There are some sections of the book that could be fleshed out further and explored more, but perhaps this is something to be included in another book by McGregor. One that I—and others interested in narrative criminology—should eagerly await.

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