



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Research Proposal

Crime Fiction and the Law of Fraud

Donya Tavakol

Research Advisor: Professor Simon Stern

Date: April 15th, 2026

Abstract

Towards the end of the 19th century and beyond, protections against fraudsters - people who manipulated individuals to gain money - were rapidly changing, leading to immense changes in the legal world. From these rampant real-life cases and alterations to the law, came a horde of inspired crime fiction short stories being published by authors. This project will focus on short stories published between 1880-1920 that feature fraud as their primary focus. Only stories that involve the fraud occurring through an individual rather than an object (i.e. a scheming con artist rather than a counterfeit painting) will be considered. The details of these stories will be summarized and cross-referenced with one another, with developments in the law, and with historical fraud cases. I intend to qualitatively analyze sources from legal databases, historical newspapers, and a range of 10 to 15 short stories. By referencing real-life cases alongside developments in the law, this project aims to see if, and to what extent, crime fiction authors were influenced by the real world regarding their depictions of fraud. This research will provide critical context for the development of fraud depictions in 19th and 20th century crime fictions.

Introduction

As someone with a deep passion for the fields of English and History, along with the desire for a legal career, I felt that this project was very well-suited for me. As I had prior research experience analyzing English texts and historical events, I was intrigued by the idea of combining the two disciplines. I was also interested in the opportunity to explore new topics - as my experiences with legal theory and knowledge of crime fiction stories were limited.

My main goals through this research are to understand the development of how fraud is depicted in late 19th and early 20th century crime fictions. By characterizing the legal history through real-life cases and alterations to the law, I am able to better analyze the short stories. I can discover whether or not the events of the real world had any impact on the fraudsters these authors developed - and if so, how this impact presented itself. I especially want to explore the connections within the real world and these fictions through a wide range of short stories from differing authors - as this has not been extensively researched. Overall, I aim to combine my literary and historical research skills towards understand the influence of legal history on fraud-related crime fictions.

Research Objectives & Questions

Primary Objectives

- Determine how fraud is depicted in these works of fiction
 - *What is the plot? What does the fraudster want? Why or how do they commit the fraud? Do they have similar motivations or plot devices? Does this change as the years go on?*
- Find and analyze prominent cases of fraud from this period
 - *Do the ‘types’ of fraud committed change over time? How significant were these cases (e.g. was the case a front page headline)? Are details of these cases similar to fraud in the stories?*
- Explore new, changing, or amended laws relating to fraud
 - *How do these laws change over the scope, and does this impact their depiction in the stories? Are there similarities between the fraud cases, laws, and stories? How legally accurate are the stories?*

Secondary Objective

- Provide resources for those studying crime fiction
 - *The website and research paper formatting will make this knowledge more accessible, with a very clear analysis of the research in a less “academic” format*

Background

Research in this subject has primarily focused on contrasting the real-world and fictional fraud depictions in the works of a singular author. There is not extensive literature on analyzing these contrasts by looking at a wide range of authors, and particularly by using a very detailed legal lens. Additionally, much of the literature regarding fraud depictions focuses on earlier 19th century or later 20th century crime fictions (i.e. the works of Agatha Christie) - leaving a gap in the 1880 to 1920 time period. In order to fully contextualize and understand the progression of fraud depictions, I will explore research prior to the scope - through sources such as Janine Hatter’s “Forging a New Path: Fraud and White-Collar Crime in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s 1870s Fiction”. I will also consult introductory historical and literary theory articles related to the time period, such as James Taylor’s “White collar crime and the law in nineteenth century Britain”. Through consultation of these articles, I am able to obtain a more nuanced understanding of fraud depictions and legal situations in this time period - bettering my approach to the research.

Methodology

My research will primarily feature the qualitative literary, legal, and historical analysis of various texts. I will spend the month of May researching online databases and finalizing my short story choices. I will read introductory articles on legal theory, and one database that I plan to use for my story choices is the “Birth of the Modern Detective Story” dataset, co-led by Professor Adam Hammond, and Professor Simon Stern. I will find examples of prominent fraud cases and relevant laws through sources such as JSTOR and HeinOnline. This will allow me to obtain a greater understanding of short story fraud depictions from 1880-1920.

During the research period from June to July, I will read 10 to 15 stories, and take notes on their plots and depictions of fraud. I will find further cases of fraud and the ‘changing’ of relevant laws through sources such as the HeinOnline database and the British Newspaper Archives. I will conduct further research on laws pertaining to fraud and how they were changed, then comparing them with the story summaries. If necessary, I will also research fiction prior to the scope to better understand the progression of fraud depictions over time.

I will then compile all of this research in a research paper and website. I will create a website showcasing plot summaries, details of the fraud depiction, and cross-analysis with real cases. These different mediums will cause this information to be easily and internationally accessible.

Training/ Certifications Needed

While no specific certifications/training will be necessary for this project, I will be meeting with my research advisor Professor Simon Stern prior to the research period, in order to further discuss my plans.

Research Location

As this project does not require travel, I will be residing in Toronto, Canada for the duration of the research period.

Research Ethics Board

This project does not require REB approval.

Timeline

Pre-Research Period - May 2026

- Finalize all 10 to 15 short stories to be analyzed during the research period
- Begin finding prominent fraud cases and changes in legal protections

Weeks 1 & 2 - June 14th to June 27th

- Read and summarize plot details (with specific focus on the fraudster) for all stories
- Continue finding prominent fraud cases and create a ‘timeline’ organizer for changes in the law of fraud over time

Weeks 3 & 4 - June 28th to July 11th

- Create detailed notes on similarities within the stories, the law, and real cases
- Contrast the differences between how fraudsters are depicted in each story - emphasizing changes in plot structure over time
- Could possibly begin a preliminary draft of the paper

Week 5 - July 12th to July 18th

- Cross-reference the changing of legal protections and the presence of real cases against the progression of fraud depictions over time - citing any trends
- Begin the writing of the final paper

Week 6 - July 19th to July 24th

- Continue cross-referencing work
- Draft and write the entire paper
- If time, begin work on website to showcase the research

Post-Research Period - August 2026

- Finalize mandatory research deliverables
- Create the website to showcase the research

Resources & Support Needed

As aforementioned, I will be making use of online databases such as the “Birth of the Modern Detective Story Dataset” and HeinOnline. I will also be utilizing historical sources including both the British National, and Newspaper, Archives.

Professor Stern will be providing me with support in terms of training with legal and literary databases, introducing me to readings that detail how to combine legal history with literary theory, and offering general advice as the research progresses.

Potential Impact

This research will help bridge a gap between crime fiction studies prior to 1880 and after 1920 - as this particular period has not been as extensively researched. By combining the analysis of short stories and historical fraud cases through a legal lens, this interdisciplinary project can be a terrific resource. While work has been done on individual authors, there has not been prominent exploration into numerous authors with very specific cross-reference analysis to the legal world. Additionally, many of these crime fiction stories were published in the US, UK, Australia, and Ireland - making this a relatively global analysis of crime fiction. Additionally, this work can prompt researchers who wish to explore crime fiction stories and/or legal history through a non-Western perspective - such as Middle Eastern or African crime fictions - to pursue their projects through a comparative lens. This research will provide a critical and invaluable context for the development of fraud depictions in 19th and 20th century crime fictions.

Budget

My budget is submitted alongside this document as an Excel document on Folio.