

# Popular fiction and white extremism: Neo-Nazi ideology and medievalist crime fiction

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## Abstract

Dystopian near-future fantasies of violent white revolution and genocide—most infamously, William L. Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* (1978)—are the most well-known and studied fictions by white extremists. They are, however, not the only genre through which the extreme far-right engage with popular culture. In this article, we explore how popular historical fictions can accommodate white extremist presence and propagandising. We analyse generic conventions in the medieval murder mystery *The Black Flame* (2001) by self-identified neo-Nazi Harold A. Covington (1953–2018), showing that the book shares trends and tropes with contemporary medievalisms, including in historical crime fiction and other popular genres and media. By focussing on these conventions, we seek common places in the popular that can, paradoxically, create space for the fringe extreme.

## KEYWORDS

historical fiction, medieval 20th century and contemporary, medievalism, race and ethnicity studies, racism, twentieth-century and contemporary literature

William L. Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* (1978), a near-future dystopian fantasy of violent white uprising and genocide, has been termed “the Bible of the far-right” and is associated with numerous acts of and attempts at violent terroristic mass murder (Berger, 2016). The book is, perhaps, the most infamous example of genre fiction by a white extremist. Scholars and anti-extremist practitioners typically focus on genre fictions like *The Turner Diaries*—near-futuristic “blueprints and fantasies” (Michael, 2010)—to explore the nature and function of far-Right extremist (FRE) fiction

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and how it might contribute to radicalisation (e.g. Berger, 2016; Cullick, 2002; Goehring & Dionisopoulos, 2013; Jackson, 2015; Kaplan, 2018; McAlear, 2009). This approach aligns with a broader concern with white FRE uses of popular culture spaces and forms (e.g. Kaufman & Sturtevant, 2020; King & Leonard, 2014; Schlegel, 2020).

But “blueprints and fantasies” are not the only fictions penned by extremists. Self-identified, prominent modern white FRE authors have also written and published texts in a range of popular literary genres, including gothic, crime, science fiction and historical fiction. In this article, we expand the scope of research into FRE uses of popular culture by examining the genre of popular historical fiction in particular to argue that the popular can, paradoxically, create space for the fringe extreme. Our argument that popular historical genres can be normalizing, even welcoming, environments for FRE fictions, focuses on *The Black Flame* (2001), a medievalist crime fiction by American white nationalist and neo-Nazi Howard A. Covington (1953–2018). We begin with an introduction to Covington and a contextual overview of FREs and medievalism, and historical fiction. We then explore Covington's use of medievalist crime fiction tropes and conventions to show that popular culture medievalisms—specifically but not exclusively in the genre of medievalist crime fiction—are accommodating to neo-Nazi ideologies and narratives.

## 1 | COVINGTON AND HIS NOVELS

Covington was a long-time member and sometime leader of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Party of America (NSPA). Neo-Nazis, as explained by the Southern Poverty Law Center, “share a hatred for Jews and a love for Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. While they also hate other minorities, gays and lesbians and even sometimes Christians, they perceive ‘the Jew’ as their cardinal enemy” (SPLC, 2020). Covington was also the founder of the white nationalist movement, The Northwest Front (Lenz, 2018). He “produced a concrete plan for a guerrilla campaign in the Pacific Northwest” of the USA and advocated widely for whites to move there in pursuit of that aim and a fantasized separatist ethnostate (Michael, 2013, p. 46).<sup>1</sup> Covington's ideas remained influential after his death, including on the violent international terrorist groups The Base and the Atomwaffen Division (Barnes, 2019; Wilson, 2020a, 2020b). During his lifetime, Covington was a prolific author of both fiction and non-fiction, including writing on numerous blogs. He self-published 11 novels, including gothic, crime and historical fictions, and a collection of supernatural short stories. The most well-known and widely circulated of his novels among FREs are the dystopian, near-future ‘Northwest Quintet’ (2003–11)—Covington's own “blueprint and fantasy” series.<sup>2</sup>

FREs and scholars alike have recognized the potential for Covington's books to reach and influence readers who would not engage with political manifestoes (Michael, 2013, p. 149; Michael, 2010, p. 166). Covington himself stated that, in all his novels, “there is a political and racial message somewhere” and promoted them through various online sites, suggesting that they would make good gifts for “that politically incorrect friend or significant other in your life” (Covington, 2008). The comment demonstrates Covington's aim to reinforce and extend the ideologies of readers who were at least sympathetic to white power causes. His two medievalist novels, *Rose of Honor* (2001) and *The Black Flame*, construct early fifteenth-century England as a “fascistic, feudal ethnostate” (Young, 2022, p. 51). The novels projected Covington's political fantasies for the future back into the European past so closely that the medievalist society and culture constructed in them are fundamentally those of the neo-Nazi Northwest American Republic ethnostate he imagined. They can and should be read as part of a broader communication and ideological conversion strategy. We argue that this aspect of his strategy was not merely allowed but enabled by the conventions of medievalist popular culture, specifically the subgenre of medievalist crime fiction.

## 2 | MEDIEVALISM, HISTORICAL FICTION AND RACISM

In this article, we focus on an example of popular historical fiction set in the European Middle Ages—white western medievalism is a transnational phenomenon, prominent in contemporary global popular culture. Modern popular

medievalisms conventionally represent the European Middle Ages as a violent masculinist (Kaufman, 2016), heterosexist (Gebhardt, 2015), and 'whites only' space (Thomas, 2019, p. 73; Young, 2019) substantially reflecting ongoing histories of academic research and teaching in medieval studies (e.g. Rambaran-Olm et al., 2020; Wade, 2020). Medievalisms are also sites of contestation of white hegemonic discourses and representation, including significant anti-racist work (Hsy, 2021; Vernon, 2018). 'Gritty' medievalism is especially common in historical fictions and fantasy, such as Ken Follet's *Pillars of the Earth* (1989), or George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1996-) and their adaptations (Elliott, 2015). Such re-imaginings of the medieval past—embedded in the broader ecosystem of the whiteness of popular culture—offer a particularly welcoming habitat to neo-Nazi ideologies, authorising the representation of acts of violent discrimination and abuse, especially of marginalized groups and peoples.

The assumption that whiteness is the dominant mode of medievalism is so strong in western popular media that casting an actor of colour in a medievalist fantasy can be met with significant backlash (Thomas, 2019, pp. 65–106). This habit of modern popular culture extends from centuries of racism, white supremacy and settler colonial politics that frame the European Middle Ages and its artefacts, as well as medievalism itself, as "white heritage" (Kim, 2020; Miyashiro, 2019). Medievalism and FREs, moreover, also have a long association. Nazism was deeply invested in medievalism (e.g. Diebold, 2019; Shichtman & Finke, 2014). Medievalism has also been taken up by neo-Nazis, such as the international vigilante organisation the Soldiers of Odin, partly because of the prominence of popular culture representations of the medieval (Castle & Parsons, 2019), and by the far- and alt-right around the globe (e.g. Blake, 2020; Elliott, 2017; Kao, 2020; Kølvråa, 2019; Whitaker, 2020; Wollenberg, 2014). Medievalism has also been associated with global acts of white terrorist mass-murder, such as in Oslo, Norway, and Christchurch, New Zealand. Modern white FRE medievalism, then, including Covington's medievalism, adheres to long-standing white western mainstream and FRE beliefs about, and practices and representations of the European Middle Ages.

Medievalist historical fictions, like historical fictions in general, are well recognised as having specifically political functions. Hayden White, for example, suggests that the historical novel was 'invented' in the nineteenth century "in order to deal with political issues" (White, 2005, p. 150), while Jerome de Groot argues that historical fiction writing has long engaged with both "substantiation [and] deconstruction, querying, or troubling of the foundational myths of history" (De Groot, 2010, p. 140). Twenty-first century scholarship on historical fiction has often focussed especially on the genre's capacity to trouble established historical narratives and mythologies in a politically progressive way, such as through queer and postcolonial interventions (e.g. Harris, 2017; Poon, 2008). Medievalist historical fictions are not exclusively the domain of whiteness: Jonathan Hsy, for example, has recently shown that Asian American and Black medievalisms develop narratives that also counter white hegemonic claims over the past (Hsy, 2021).

Although many recent highly acclaimed examples of historical fiction challenge conservative historical narratives, the perceived socio-cultural and political failings of the genre have consistently been associated with its widespread popularity. According to this line of scholarship, the most popular iterations of the genre tend to reiterate the most conservative tropes. Frederic Jameson, for example, describes how, "Harlequin romances and the like," represent "images of hierarchical social relations and by-gone systems of privilege" that were "propitious to libidinal fantasies and wish-fulfillments", and were "formally adequate to gender as well as class needs (let alone racist ones)" (Jameson, 2015, p. 223). Jameson here condenses characteristics of the popular historical fiction that foreground its capacity to encompass extremist as well as mainstream political positions. Historical fiction is equally available to white FREs as a tool for identity- and myth-making as it is to authors of any other political position, while the popularity of historical fiction increases the likelihood of extremist works' broad reach.

While the role of historical fictions in historicizing race has been variously recognised (e.g. De Groot, 2016; Forter, 2018; Harris, 2017; Jameson, 2015), there has been no exploration, to date, of its recent authorship by white FREs. D. W. Griffith's film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* (1905), on which the film was based, are revisionist, nostalgic, pro-Southern historical fictions of the purported founding of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). They offer important insights into the significance of white FRE historical fictions in the early twentieth century. Both the novel and the film are forms of "propaganda as history"—texts that sought historical justifications for racist ideologies (Franklin, 1979). The film in particular has been recognised for decades as having a lasting "close

relationship” with the KKK (Simcovitch, 1972, p. 45): a “sharp spike in lynchings and race riots coinciding with its [the film’s] arrival in a county” took place during the roadshow after its release, alongside growth in KKK support in those counties during the 1920s. The same counties “continue to experience higher rates of hate crimes and hate groups” in the present (Ang, 2020). Both *The Birth of a Nation* and the novel that inspired it played a significant role in moving the KKK from a small fringe organisation to a powerful white extremist force in US society, highlighting the capacity of popular historical fictions to generate powerful political effects.

It is clear that historical fictions by self-identified white nationalists and neo-Nazis like Covington are typically set in places and periods commonly associated with white dominance, such as the American South before and during the Civil War, and the European Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> FRE alternate histories of victory by the South in the Civil War are common—although it is worth observing that this is also a common setting for authors who are not white FREs, such as Harry Turtledove’s *The Guns of the South* (1992).<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, engagement with popular genres and subgenres is a factor in the normalisation of FRE ideology. The ubiquity and power of whiteness in popular culture, including genre fictions and fandoms, has been variously demonstrated and challenged (e.g. Kamblé, 2014, pp. 131–56; Stanfill, 2018; Thomas, 2019; Young, 2016; Vera & Gordon, 2003). The conventional whiteness of popular culture, nonetheless, arguably makes such spaces open to exploitation by white FREs. Novels penned by well-known, self-identified neo-Nazis and other extremists are only a part of the broader ecosystem of white FRE interventions in popular culture; exploring their forms and functions is necessary in understanding the wider context in which they are made, transmitted, and consumed.

Medievalist crime fiction has been a significant subset of the broader historical fiction genre in the decades since the publication of Ellis Peters’ first Brother Cadfael novel, *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (1977). Much of the early scholarship on this trend focuses on the pedagogical capacity of historical fiction—that is, its ability to educate readers about the past, including the minutiae of daily social and cultural life, which are left out of many historical narratives. Such scholarship often draws attention to the academic credentials of prominent writers such as Peters and Candace Robb as a way of legitimising the value of their writing (Browne & Kreiser, 2000; Fichte, 2005). The “pre-procedural” is a common subgenre of historical crime fiction, arguably resulting from the success of Peters’ Cadfael series (Lee, 2013, p. 16). Kathleen Forni shows that a tranche of works featuring Geoffrey Chaucer are typically procedural, involving a detective who acts within the bounds of law and reinscribing the “existing social order” (Forni, 2013, p. 62). Jonathan Hsy argues for a “medieval noir” sensibility in medievalist Bruce Holsinger’s *A Burnable Book* (Hsy, 2014). For Hsy, the educative power of such fictions is not in the transmission of historical facts, but in their capacity to create “strategically estranging encounters with a distant past” (Hsy, 2016, p. 191). In the only book-length study of medievalist crime fiction to date, however, Anne McKendry finds a postmodern uncertainty principally generated by “allowing an essentially secular (post)modern literary detective to operate in a religious, premodern context” (McKendry, 2019, p. 13). There is, however, no postmodern uncertainty or estrangement in *The Black Flame*, but rather a clearly articulated vision of an imaginary white medieval past that holds the key to a fascist present and future.

### 3 | THE BLACK FLAME: ENGLAND AS NEO-NAZI ETHNOSTATE

*The Black Flame* conforms, in many respects, to conventions of the modern medieval crime fiction genre, blending the *noir* with procedural subgenres. Its knightly protagonist, Sir Thomas Clave, is tasked by Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, with investigating the brutal murder of novice monk and bastard son of Henry V, Arthur Fitzroy, near the town of Burnstow in Norfolk. He uncovers a corrupt monastery and nunnery, and a demonic conspiracy by the Black Flame society to overthrow not only the government of the infant Henry VI, but the entire feudal system and divine order. Clave is a first-person narrator whose worldview, like that of Earl Turner in *The Turner Diaries*, goes unchallenged in the novel. Clave devotes himself to preserving the rigid heterosexist, white, patriarchal authoritarian social order that he understands the feudal system to represent.

Clave, who is loyal to the memory of his former master—the recently dead King Henry V of England is in Beaufort's immediate service as an "intelligencer and executioner" (Covington, 2001, pp. 5–6). He largely conforms to conventions of the medievalist knightly detective, similar to those of the hard-boiled loner, such as Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe (McKendry, 2015, pp. 169–70). Like the modern hard-boiled detective, these invariably white men "frequently deploy violence," such that "the literary detective's methodological process of evidence gathering and intellectual reasoning is abandoned in favour of a [...] risky test of arms" (McKendry, 2019, p. 234). Characters like Clave embody the violent, white masculinity characteristic of much popular medievalism.

Violence is typically depicted as a normal part of life in the Middle Ages in both murder mystery and other historical fictions. Clave, however, stands out as unusually violent even in the brutal world he occupies. His mere presence engenders fear, even in the midst of a French city occupied by the English army: "a shudder ran through the bystanders, and the milling servants and officials and courtiers of England's new regency moved aside" (Covington, 2001, p. 6). He even describes himself as a "cruel and violent man" (Covington, 2001, p.199). Clave has something of the morally bankrupt *noir* detective, but (by his own assessment) puts these characteristics to positive use in service of the English state. Clave recalls how Henry V, when he ascended the throne, asserted royal, state power to commit violence: "I must also take upon myself the responsibility of dealing death, sometimes within the law and sometimes outside it" (Covington, 2001, p. 29). Henry V asks Clave to be his spy, torturer and executioner (Covington, 2001, pp. 28–29). Clave accepts, declaring that death and torture "run in my blood [...] I think it best for all concerned that I am made use of by the state rather than left to my own devices" (Covington, 2001, p. 29). The exchange embeds a fascistic belief in the state's right to commit extrajudicial violence in the novel. Individual violence is historicized and naturalized in the medievalist feudal order, and—most powerfully—legitimized when it serves state interests. Clave holds no official position in the legal system of medieval England but his commission, first from Henry V and then from Bishop Beaufort, places him firmly within that system as Covington imagines it: a fascistic extrusion of the will of the king and his elite.

One key nuancing of convention in *The Black Flame* is the nature and scope of the corruption Clave confronts. Where typical hard-boiled knight-detectives "combat the corruption embedded in feudal hierarchies" (McKendry, 2015, p. 171), Clave does not see the feudal system itself as corrupt, but rather as the proper social order; structurally, then, the novel has more in common with the procedural than *noir*. Corruption certainly exists in Clave's world, but it extends only to individuals, rather than to the feudal system itself. Clave describes the dead king's brothers, John, Duke of Bedford, as "a rigidly moral man who always considered me [Clave] a necessary evil at best and an embarrassment at worst," and, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, as "idle. Inconstant, niggardly and filled with a vaulting ambition that he had neither the ability nor the application properly to satisfy" (Covington, 2001, p. 6). Gloucester has a manor near Burnstow and is entangled in the plots of the Black Flame society, but is not responsible for his nephew's death. Bedford, Clave's master Beaufort, and other minor members of the martial nobility, are not corrupt, but, rather, rightful elite leaders who uphold "the tattered remains of the chivalric ideal" (Covington, 2001, p. 7). Like their now dead king, Henry V, they pragmatically recognise the 'need' for torture and occasional murder to maintain social order. They are constructed as the rightful, governing elite in an authoritarian society which the novel positions as both natural and divinely ordained.

The aims of the Black Flame society, ranged against the feudal order, clearly demonstrate Covington's neo-Nazi ideology; the cult embodies everything that neo-Nazis hate. A member tells Clave, under torture:

we would create a new order in the world, where all money and property would be held in common and nothing would be forbidden, no pleasure would be a sin, and all men and women would be equal in rank and station. No king, no laws, no authority. A world where all men and women might love one another openly as they will, even if they be of the same sex (Covington, 2001, p. 281).

In this scene, the socialist, feminist, and queer aims of the Black Flame are literally demonised. The same tortured cultist tells Clave: "if men and women were ever to be truly free and equal, then God and his laws that decreed

otherwise must be overthrown” by demonic “Dark Ones”, whose power could be grown and harnessed by the sacrifice of babies (Covington, 2001, pp. 281–82).<sup>5</sup> Demons are real in the world of *The Black Flame*, not mere rumour and superstition; the reader sees them and their power directly. This is uncommon in the rationalist world of medievalist murder mystery, but far from unique to medievalist popular fictions: David Gilman's *Shadow of the Hawk* (2021), which appears in the Amazon Top 10 list for ‘medieval historical fiction’ at the time of writing, is another example. The end of *The Black Flame* links the ‘demons’ of the medieval past to those of the modern present. Beaufort thanks Clave for “the saving of civilisation from this demonic,” to which Clave responds: “it will rise again, or try to” (Covington, 2001, p. 349). The comment suggests that the novel recounts just one of many battles in a war lasting centuries, a favoured trope of extremist rhetoric that seeks to elevate any instance of racist violence to mythic status (Bennett Furlow & Goodall, 2011).

The phrase “New World Order” invokes a right-wing conspiracy theory to which Covington subscribed. The theory posits that “a tyrannical, socialist ‘one-world’ conspiracy has already taken over most of the planet and schemes to eliminate the last bastion of freedom, the United States” (ADL, n.d.). It has very strong anti-Semitic connotations: “the Jewish elite represents an omnipotent force with almost supernatural powers, intent on the destruction of independent nations and the creation of a secular, Jewish-controlled, “New World Order” (Byford, 2011, p. 95). This aligns closely with the with the aims of the *Black Flame*, a society first described in the novel as “so secret that we do not even know its object for certain [...] our spies can pick up only whisperings of some brave New World Order that is to come” (Covington, 2001, p. 19). Whatever his immediate inspiration, Covington associates feminism, queer rights, and socialism with demon worship and child sacrifice, and links them explicitly to a widely circulated anti-Semitic conspiracy theory, making his ideological position very clear. In 2003, it was perhaps reasonably easy to dismiss *The Black Flame* as a “cheesy occult novel” (Hicks, 2003), but the increasing association of evangelical Christianity and the far-right in Trumpian America and the rise of QAnon theories of governmental paedophilia makes the convoluted plot in the *Black Flame* more intelligible as a conspiracy.

While homosexual characters are not unknown in medieval crime fiction, they are not a genre conventional ‘type’ like the corrupt sheriff or the knightly detective, medievalist fictions more generally, typical representations “re-inscribe heteronormative values of masculinity and gender roles” (Gebhardt, 2015, p. 197). Clave himself makes what might be construed, in the ‘authentic’ medievalist world of the book, as sympathetic comments about male homosexuality: “I do not condemn true sodomites, for God has afflicted them as surely as any leper” (Covington, 2001, p. 90). The association with a deadly disease in Clave's comment is not accidental, however, and all the “true sodomites” who appear in the novel are paedophilic *Black Flame* cultists either slain directly by Clave or brutally executed for their crimes. Clave's vague expression of pity belies the deep, structural, violent homophobia of the novel. This structural homophobia is reinforced through the character of John, Clave's servant, who “had been a sodomite himself since [...] being almost murdered in a hideous way by the only woman he ever loved,” Clave's part-demon sister Margaret (Covington, 2001, p. 89). At the end of the novel, John kills Margaret, a key player in the *Black Flame*, and announces that he will “go to a whorehouse as soon as they open for business [...] I can have a woman again now” (Covington, 2001, p. 346). John's temporary homosexuality is as indicative of misogyny as it is of homophobia; a powerful woman with sexual agency emasculates him and must be violently killed for him to regain his heterosexual masculinity. The narrative consistently demonises and violently destroys characters associated with feminism and queerness, or rehabilitates and cures them of same-sex desire, laying a patina of acceptability over the strong narrative representation of neo-Nazi fantasy.

Jewish characters are common in medieval crime fiction—even, “surprisingly so”, as McKendry puts it, in those set in England after Edward I's expulsion orders of 1290 (Medieval Crime Fiction, p. 168). Edward I's 1290 expulsion orders and pogroms are often celebrated by neo-Nazis as models for action. In many medievalist crime fictions, however, “Jewish characters are inevitably described in positive terms, and, while they are always suspected of the crimes, they are never the culprits” (McKendry, 2019, p. 168). McKendry suggests that by “adhering to this [conventional] narrative so consistently, medieval crime fiction authors engage with the challenges of depicting premodern constructions of race in today's post-Holocaust era” (2019, p. 168). *The Black Flame*, however, resists this approach in

its representation of a Jewish character. The novel includes “a German Jew named Baruch of Frankfort, a surgeon who is highly skilled” who enters the story because Clave's wife, Robin, is pregnant with a baby believed to be lying breach and has had a previous difficult birth (Covington, 2001, p. 44). No London doctor or midwife is willing to attempt to help her; Baruch will do so “only to put her out of her agony quickly and try to save the child” (Covington, 2001, p. 45), even though Clave promises to kill him if she dies. Baruch's only condition is that Clave pay a vast sum of gold to his brother, a German moneylender. This suggests that he values gold over his own life, invoking long-held anti-Semitic stereotypes about greed. Covington, then, does not invoke the genre's conventional representation of Jewish characters as ‘misunderstood’; Baruch is never, for example, suspected of being a Black Flame member, but he is associated with demonic forces through his recognition of the sound of a demon attempting to enter the world (Covington, 2001, p. 310). There is also no mention, in *The Black Flame*, of the 1290 expulsion orders or of Baruch's technically illegal presence in fifteenth-century England. Covington here resists conventional representations Jewish characters found in much medievalist crime fiction, which gesture to but usually refuse to replicate the very real anti-Semitism of the European Middle Ages—which Covington elsewhere praised. We might then read Covington's rejection of this generic convention as a symptom of the anti-Semitism that so profoundly shaped his worldview.

#### 4 | FERTILE GROUND FOR NEO-NAZIS

In contemporary terrorism scholarship, extremist politics are identified by belief in violence as a legitimate, even preferred, method of political action (Ravndal & Bjørge, 2018, p. 6). In Covington's imagined fascist feudal England, where the social order is in need of protection (as opposed to contemporary liberal democracy in his view), the same embrace of political violence is defensive. In *The Black Flame*, Covington creates an idealised neo-Nazi past without the postmodern irony and uncertainties about authenticity that often mark medievalist crime fiction. His vision of early fifteenth-century England as a rigidly hierarchical society ordained by God and preserved through violence is as much a fantasy of his ideal future as it is of the medieval past. Considering *The Black Flame* as historical fiction, in light of the ways in which both literary and popular forms of that genre are commonly positioned in scholarship, reveals the extremism at the heart of the novel but also, paradoxically, its mainstream positioning. Medievalist crime fiction is often, as Forni observes of the Chaucerian subgenre, “conservative”, featuring a detective who “works to preserve the status quo” despite recognising the “depravity” of elites (2013, p. 61). The “social tensions” Forni notices in Chaucerian detective fiction are equally present in *The Black Flame* in its demonic spectre of equality and queerness, although these are more violently suppressed than is conventional. Although Clave is a *noir*-type figure, his semi-official position as a servant of first King Henry V and then members of the Council of Regents sees him operate in defence of the state and its institutions in ways that align with the conventions of the pre-procedural, with its typically conservative politics. That Clave employs *noir*-type violence in defence of the status quo—rather than pursuit of justice in a society that is, by his own estimation, hopelessly corrupt—highlights the extremist ideology of the novel.

The fact that Covington devoted his life to the white supremacist movement makes the ideological content of *The Black Flame* unsurprising. What is significant, however, is how easily *The Black Flame* can be read as merely a lurid example of the genre, with *no* strong ideological position beyond its partially masked homophobia—which is in-keeping with ‘authentic’ popular medievalisms. Clave, the embodiment of white, heteropatriarchal fascist violence, is enough like the hard-boiled-type knights of mainstream medieval *noir* crime novels to pass as one of them. The novel's rigid adherence to white male heterosexist patriarchy as a social order, and its upholding of feudal power, sit comfortably with medieval procedural crime fiction, and medievalist historical fiction more broadly. In *The Black Flame*, Covington narrativized his ideology, and both naturalized and normalized it by inserting it into a representation of the past constructed through historical fiction, specifically medievalist crime fiction, conventions. Those conventions suited his ideological needs, as did the habitual world of popular culture medievalisms to which they belong. *The Black Flame*'s manipulation of popular conventions is not indicative of any particular skill at masking neo-Nazi ideologies on the author's part, but, rather, shows how the genre of medievalist crime fiction itself accommodates them.

This is, we suggest, far more significant and troubling than the existence of a scattering of overtly white supremacist novels amid the vast mass of popular medievalist historical fictions.

In the twenty-first century, historical fiction is commonly understood in ways that reflect the ideas of Sir Walter Scott as he originally articulated them in the preface to *Ivanhoe*. For Scott, fiction allowed a kind of access to the past that 'history' did not because it could provide "a more full detail of passions and feelings", and constructed an authentic whole when it reflects the past in a "general" pattern if not the "minute detail" (Scott, 1819, xxxviii). Modern authors of historical fiction conduct detailed research but ultimately prioritise the needs of the narrative (Polack, 2006). This position resonates with the influential theories of Georg Lukacs and their re-iteration in current scholarship on the genre: "the historical novel therefore has to *demonstrate* by *artistic* means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such-and-such a way" (Lukács, quoted in De Groot, 2010, p. 26). Both positions might be summarised as asserting that historical fiction can reveal a kind of authentic truth about a period that 'history' fails to achieve. But unlike, most historical fictions, including many medievalist crime fictions, *The Black Flame* does not contain an 'Author's Note' detailing Covington's research and claiming fidelity to it while simultaneously asserting the primacy of Story. It does not need one to authenticate its particular vision of the past because that vision has already been authorised by the conventions of the subgenre, genre, and by the habits of popular culture medievalism.

And yet the habits that make medievalist popular culture fertile ground for FREs can be changed. The European Middle Ages have been a site of contestation over racial myth-making since at least the nineteenth century (Hsy, 2021; Vernon, 2018). As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas argues, contemporary popular culture, including medievalist popular culture, is also a site of contestation of and resistance to the centring of white experience and imagination with the potential to emancipate the imagination and "make our world anew" (Thomas, 2019, p. 169). The once enslaved abolitionist campaigner Frederick Douglass took up Scott's construction of "black Douglass" to "trouble the fictive bonds with medieval Europe to which white Americans laid claim" and instead offer his own escape from slavery "as a more suitable echo to parts of medieval Scottish mythology and history" (Vernon, 2018, p. 47). Taika Waititi's *Thor: Ragnarok* (2019) is a powerful example of a medievalist "multiracial and postcolonial counternarrative" to white racial medievalisms in popular culture and far-right discourse (Kim, 2019). The European Middle Ages have been constructed—made 'white'—in certain powerful ways in twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular culture, but medievalism itself is not the natural or necessary preserve of whiteness. Recognition and analysis of white FRE uses of the Middle Ages means that such constructions can be dismantled, and popular associations of whiteness with the European past prised apart.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this article, we cite secondary reporting on white extremist views to avoid driving traffic to extremist websites, some of which are banned or blocked under various national laws and/or institutional protocols. We have avoided direct quotations, except where necessary for the analysis. All Covington's views are attested in multiple sources, including his own writing.

- <sup>2</sup> The books are summarised by (Michael, 2014, pp. 32–34)
- <sup>3</sup> We have made an ethical decision not to promote such works by listing titles or authors beyond what is essential for the analysis in this article. Our choice of a case study methodology also reflects this commitment to limiting dissemination.
- <sup>4</sup> Alternate histories, moreover, typically struggle to meaningfully disrupt colonialist and imperialist narratives, even when their authors seek to do so, and can reinscribed white racial logics as a result (Young, 2016, pp. 124–129).
- <sup>5</sup> It is reasonably likely the inspiration for society was the Church of Satan, established in 1966, an atheistic organisation that sees Satan not as an evil demonic force but as a “a symbol of pride, liberty and individualism” (Church of Satan, n.d). In the centrally anti-Semitic worldview of neo-Nazism, such an organisation would be understood as a puppet for a Jewish cabal imposing a ‘New World Order’.

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