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# Identity and nostalgia in a globalised world: Investigating the international popularity of *Midsomer Murders*

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## Abstract

The fictional crime programme *Midsomer Murders* is one of the UK's most successful global television exports, yet scant previous research has probed the programme's global popularity. In this article I argue that much of the programme's international appeal is due to two characteristics: its evocation of the British crime fiction canon, and its nostalgia. Numerous scholars have examined rural nostalgia in British cultural life, but I argue that the global popularity of *Midsomer Murders* signals a new phenomenon: the emergence of nostalgia for Britain's rural past among the non-British. I employ Jonathan Simon's concept of 'wilful nostalgia' to analyse this new phenomenon and critically explore recent controversies about the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the case of *Midsomer Murders*.

## Keywords

crime drama, globalisation, *Midsomer Murders*, rural nostalgia, wilful nostalgia

## Introduction

An older woman in sensible clothes cycles past a thatched cottage, a village green, and a wooden sign which proclaims that this is the 'best kept village' in the county. A man in a car stops to greet the woman, saying: 'Hello, Miss Simpson. Have a very good afternoon'. The woman then cycles past the village post office where a second woman greets her, saying: 'Afternoon, Miss Simpson' (ITV, 1997).

So began the first episode of the crime drama *Midsomer Murders*, which premiered in the UK (on the network ITV) in 1997. At the time of writing, the programme remains in production (ITV, 2011) and entered its 14th series in 2011 (Street, 2011b). These opening seconds are emblematic of much of the series, as *Midsomer Murders* – which is set almost exclusively

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in English villages – is a programme that promotes a very specific portrayal of rural life. Cycling, village greens, independent village shops, and neighbours who greet each other using titles and surnames: all of these details are part of the image of England that is portrayed onscreen. Of course, since *Midsomer Murders* is a crime drama, violence and gore regularly intrude on this rural idyll. Indeed, in the past 13 years, the programme has featured more than 200 murders, as well as additional deaths by suicide and from natural causes (Street, 2011a). The programme was inspired by a series of crime novels by the British writer Caroline Graham, although there are now many times more television episodes than books (*BBC News*, 2010).

*Midsomer Murders* is a popular programme, both within the UK and overseas. In the UK, 13.5 million viewers watched the premiere episode in 1997, while episodes that aired between 2000 and 2003 were regularly watched by more than 9 million viewers; a recent set of episodes from early 2011 averaged 6 million viewers (BARB, 2011). Overseas, *Midsomer Murders* is one of the most successful British television exports of all time; by 2004, for example, it had been sold to 204 countries (Pact, 2005). As recently as August 2011, more than 1 million Dutch viewers tuned in to a new *Midsomer Murders* episode which aired on the network Nederland 1 (Reuters, 2011). In Norway, episodes are routinely watched by half a million viewers (Madsen, 2008), while in Germany the programme regularly attracts a 10.4 percent market share for viewers aged 14 to 49 (Hillgruber, 2011). The previous lead actor in *Midsomer Murders*, John Nettles, was said to be ‘celebrated as a rock star’ in Sweden for his portrayal of Detective Chief Inspector Barnaby, given the programme’s popularity in that country (Ljungqvist, 2010). While still in power, the former prime minister of Australia, John Howard, declared in a radio interview that his favourite television programme was *Midsomer Murders* (Australian Associated Press, 2006).

Outside the UK, media coverage of *Midsomer Murders* has typically emphasised the programme’s Englishness or Britishness.<sup>1</sup> For example, an article in a German newspaper about *Midsomer Murders* featured the subtitle ‘Very, very British’ and, although the article was written in German, this subtitle was in English (Hillgruber, 2011). An article in the Italian magazine *New Notizie* emphasised the programme’s setting in the ‘beautiful English countryside’ (*New Notizie*, 2011). A post on *Wirtualna Polska*, an influential web portal in Poland, praised the programme’s ‘subtle English humour’ (*Wirtualna Polska*, 2008). In Russia and Ukraine, the programme is broadcast under a title which translates as *Purely English Murder* (Bazalgette, 2011).

These examples illustrate the programme’s potency as an international symbol of ‘Englishness’. Yet, despite *Midsomer Murders’* global reach, scant previous research has examined the programme’s cultural significance *outside* the UK. McCaw (2005, 2009, 2011) has analysed the content of several episodes of *Midsomer Murders*, parsing the themes of identity and appreciation for the English rural landscape which pervade the programme’s narratives. In this article I aim to build upon McCaw’s work and specifically explore the programme’s international influence. I probe the following questions: Why is *Midsomer Murders* so popular around the world? What theoretical frameworks can offer insight into its global appeal? What are the implications of the programme’s popularity, particularly for notions of national identity in an increasingly globalised world?

## British Crime Fiction and Drama

In 2005, a Norwegian newspaper proclaimed that *Midsomer Murders* was 'Britain's biggest television export since *Inspector Morse*' (Pedersen, 2005). This statement is relevant not only because it adds further weight to previous assertions about *Midsomer Murders*' global popularity, but also because of its claim that, prior to *Midsomer Murders*, 'Britain's biggest television export' was another detective programme: *Inspector Morse*. Like *Midsomer Murders*, *Inspector Morse* (ITV, 1987–2000) was inspired by a series of mystery novels and featured many 'classic' aspects of British life. For example, the title character drove a Jaguar, frequented traditional pubs, and lived in the classic university town of Oxford, although the programme was typically grittier than *Midsomer Murders*. The fact that *Inspector Morse* also achieved global popularity – indeed, like *Midsomer Murders*, this programme was sold to more than 200 countries (Hayward, 2009) – illustrates the appeal of the British crime genre.

The global popularity of British crime drama and fiction is not a recent phenomenon. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novels and stories achieved a wide readership in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (and, of course, remain popular today) (Wisser, 2000). Indeed, on a trip to the US in 1914, Arthur Conan Doyle was routinely described in the local media as 'the best-known living Englishman' (even though he was from Scotland) (Redmond, 1987: 15). Agatha Christie, the seminal English mystery writer active in the early-to-mid 20th century, is said to be the best-selling novelist of all time, with books translated into 103 languages (Young, 1998). Christie's oeuvre has inspired international adaptations as diverse as a 1920s German silent film (Sauer, 1929), a 1970s Bollywood film (Chopra, 1973) and a 2000s Japanese television cartoon (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, 2004–2005), indicating the long-standing cross-cultural appeal of the British crime genre.

*Midsomer Murders* is a more recent representative of this globally popular genre and the programme's creators, writers and directors have made great efforts to honour the conventions of classic British crime novels and films. Commentators have observed that the programme seems particularly inspired by Christie's Miss Marple novels, which were also set in chocolate-box English villages (McCaw, 2005). In an interview with a German newspaper, the former lead actor in *Midsomer Murders*, John Nettles, referred to the programme's links with Christie's work (Hillgruber, 2011).

International reviews and commentaries on *Midsomer Murders* have typically cited the programme's similarities with traditional British crime fiction/drama as a key reason for its popularity. In Denmark, for example, an executive at the television network that airs *Midsomer Murders* told a national newspaper that British crime stories are 'very popular among Danes' (quoted in Stenz, 2009). In the Czech Republic (Mandyse, 2010), cultural commentators have linked the series' popularity to more general cultural enthusiasm for British detective fiction. A 1998 commentary about *Midsomer Murders* published in a US newspaper noted that 'many of the most popular mystery series on American TV over the years have been British imports' (Huff, 1998). An Italian magazine article about *Midsomer Murders* enthused that the programme presented an 'atmosphere typical of Agatha Christie' (Luck, 2011). A Polish internet review made the same comparison, explaining that *Midsomer Murders* is among 'the most popular' British crime dramas 'and we know that the English are masters of such cinema' (Ciapara, 2009).

Therefore I would argue that one of the central reasons for *Midsomer Murders*' global popularity is its deliberate evocation of the British crime fiction/drama tradition. More specifically, the programme draws upon the conventions of the British 'Golden Age' crime fiction tradition, a tradition that included Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham, and reached its height between the 1920s and the 1950s (Rzepka, 2005). British Golden Age crime fiction is distinguished in part by its emphasis on restoring innocence (Shiloh, 2011). As the poet W.H. Auden (1948: 412) explained in a 1948 *New Yorker* article, Golden Age British crime novels allow readers to indulge in the fantasy 'of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence' after 'the guilty other has been expelled' by 'a genius from outside'. In other words, Golden Age crime fiction offers readers the cathartic release of knowing that evil has been expelled from the community, and that the community can now return to how it used to be. Such fiction can thus be seen as deeply conservative (Nyman, 2008).

This emphasis on restoring innocence is a key element in many *Midsomer Murders* plots. For example, McCaw (2005: 13) has noted that the tradition and tranquillity in the programme's fictional villages are often achieved 'by removing anyone whose *difference* poses a threat to the homogeneity of village life'. Once the murderer is revealed at the end of each *Midsomer Murders* episode, evil can be disposed of, and innocence and homogeneity can return to the fictional village. Of course, even in 'cosy' *Midsomer*-esque mysteries, the lines between good and evil are not always simplistically drawn. As Grella (1976: 41) has observed, in traditional British mysteries, the murder victim is not always sympathetic; indeed, 'pains are taken to make the victim worthy of his fate', which, conversely, offers some justification for the murderer's actions and complicates the story's moral landscape.

Nevertheless, the restoration of innocence and peace is an essential element of British Golden Age crime writing (Auden, 1948) and the comfort it provides readers or viewers explains some of the genre's popularity. The comfort that results from watching an episode of *Midsomer Murders* prompted a columnist for the British newspaper *The Guardian* to remark, partly tongue-in-cheek: 'A nice sitdown in front of Middle Class Murders genuinely provides the kind of surge of wellbeing that usually comes from an expensive massage' (Raeside, 2011).

This emphasis on restoring innocence was one of the many aspects of Golden Age crime writing that the American crime writer Raymond Chandler (1988) criticised. Chandler's 1944 essay has since become the single most influential critique of Golden Age conventions (Turner, 2008: 110). Chandler argued that the Golden Age tradition of heavily contrived plots produced characters that were 'cardboard lovers and papier mâché villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility'. According to Chandler, the exaggerated personalities and motives of such characters decreased the realism and literary quality of many Golden Age novels. Such conventions could not be more different from the traditions of the hardboiled American school of crime writing to which Chandler and other notable authors such as Dashiell Hammett belonged. As Herzogenrath has explained, while Golden Age British crime writing traditionally focused on 'a logical riddle to be solved' by a detective who is an intelligent outsider (Herzogenrath, 1999: 20), in the hardboiled American school, the detective 'is no longer the representative of the logical mind in a positivistic world. The world he lives in is fragmented and corrupted' (Herzogenrath, 1999: 22).

This distinction between American and British schools of writing is complicated by the fact that Chandler – perhaps the foremost proponent of the American school – actually grew up in England

(Pittard, 2011). Additionally, Chandler's analysis has itself been criticised by scholars such as Joshi (1990: 100), who has observed that 'a "hard-boiled" story is just as unrealistic as any English drawing room murder mystery'. Nevertheless, Chandler's influential critique of British Golden Age fiction is important to consider here. Since *Midsomer Murders* pays homage to its Golden Age forebears, it is perhaps not surprising that the programme has received many of the same criticisms that Chandler originally hurled at Golden Age writing. The programme's fondness for characters with exaggerated personalities and, to use Chandler's phrase, 'papier mâché villains', prompted a critic for *The Guardian* to describe the programme as 'over-the-top' and claim that: '*Midsomer* dispenses with any normal conventions of reality – even TV reality – and every minute of the show is beyond farce' (Crace, 2011). A review in *The Telegraph* branded the show 'ridiculous' (Richards, 2011), while a writer for the *Daily Express* (Etherington, 2011) observed: 'It's a ridiculous premise – that in a bucolic, roses round the door, English village ... almost everyone is either a psychotic or has more to hide than an MP's expense account – and there's a higher body count than in the Bronx'.

## 'Intentional Pantomime'

Although these criticisms echo Chandler's arguments of more than 60 years ago, what distinguishes *Midsomer Murders* from much Golden Age fiction is the programme's acknowledgement of its own artificiality. For *Midsomer Murders* does not entirely buy in to the conventions of Golden Age crime writing – to a certain extent it actually parodies these conventions. This sense of parody has only served to heighten its popularity around the world.

One of the foremost staples of Golden Age fiction is the intrusion of violent murder into quiet English country life, and the ridiculousness of this juxtaposition is occasionally acknowledged in *Midsomer Murders*. For example, after a series of shocking deaths rock a tranquil village in the episode *The Fisher King* (ITV, 2004), Chief Inspector Barnaby's new partner asks: 'Is the body count always this high in Midsomer?' and Inspector Barnaby replies: 'It has been remarked on.' This 'wink' to the audience shows that the programme's writers and directors are aware that this essential element of Golden Age mysteries – the high body count in tranquil locations – is unbelievable and has raised eyebrows among critics and viewers, yet the programme still honours this Golden Age convention.

Similarly, a second Golden Age convention that Chandler (1988) criticised is the frequent reliance on overly complex methods of murder. In line with this convention, in the *Midsomer Murders* episode *Hidden Depths* (ITV, 2005), a character is pinned to the ground with croquet hoops and murdered when a catapult hurls extremely expensive wine bottles directly at him – a method of murder so inefficient and incredible that its unreality was fondly acknowledged by members of the *Midsomer Murders* cast (Barber, 2011b). This self-awareness and emphasis on parody distinguishes *Midsomer Murders* from Christie's novels, the more recent *Inspector Morse* programme, and other British mysteries which often uphold, but rarely mock, Golden Age conventions.

*Midsomer Murders'* over-the-top characters and other unrealistic elements have long been noted by commentators. 'Since when has *Midsomer Murders* reflected real English life?' asked a commentator for the British newspaper *The Telegraph* (Pettie, 2011). The actor Barry Jackson, who played the pathologist on *Midsomer Murders* until 2011, told the British newspaper the *Daily Mail* that the programme 'evoked a kind of Agatha Christie world that probably never existed'

(quoted in Barber, 2011b), a statement that not only reflects the occasional unreality of the programme, but also links the programme with the Golden Age tradition.

How do *Midsomer Murders*' overseas viewers interpret the programme's over-the-top characters and unrealistic elements? Bazalgette (2011) tackled this question in the British magazine *Prospect*, writing:

This is how the world now sees us: a country of picturesque Tudor villages behind whose twitching curtains respectable-looking matrons and gin-tipping colonels are poisoning and strangling the hell out of their neighbours before bicycling off to Evensong. The series can be seen as a richly comic creation and perfect seasonal fare. It is an entirely intentional pantomime.

But much of the rest of the world is in on the joke as well, similarly recognising the programme's emphasis on parody and viewing the characters and plots as pantomimic rather than realistic. Indeed, John Nettles acknowledged that although he had received letters 'from viewers in Eastern Europe who think this is really how we live over here', the majority of overseas viewers seemed to view the programme as humorous and exaggerated (*Sunday Star Times*, 2008). International media coverage of the programme has often mentioned its lack of realism, and, like much of the British coverage, has delighted in the programme's send-up of Golden Age crime conventions. For example, one writer for a New Zealand newspaper observed:

The show is splendidly ridiculous. We are expected to believe that the English countryside has a higher murder rate than a crack-infested Detroit ghetto, whereas in reality, your greatest danger in the leafy lanes of the Home Counties is probably being run down by some toff's Range Rover as they rush off to a polo game. (*Sunday Star Times*, 2008)

A Polish reviewer expressed similar gleeful scepticism at the idea that 'a corpse [falls] as often as English rain' in the English villages of *Midsomer Murders* and Agatha Christie's novels (Ciapara, 2009). In Germany, an article in one of Berlin's most popular daily newspapers noted the public's enthusiasm for the programme's 'darkly humorous murder cases' (Hillgruber, 2011). A Swedish review admitted that 'each character' in *Midsomer Murders* is 'a kind of caricature', although the programme was still one of Sweden's 'enjoyable summer traditions' (Clarén, 2007).

Such statements suggest that many overseas viewers interpret *Midsomer Murders* the way British viewers typically do – that is, as a gently humorous and unrealistic programme, rather than a fictionalised documentary. These statements echo the assertions of Davidson (2011) who, in a commentary for the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, observed: 'No doubt there are American and Japanese fans of *Midsomer Murders* who naïvely imagine Britain as a land of tea shops and village fêtes and cricket matches, where nothing has changed in a hundred years. But let's credit people with a little intelligence, shall we?'

Indeed, it seems that the pantomimic nature of the programme – which many international viewers recognise – is a central element of the programme's overseas success. By revelling in its exaggerations and occasional implausibility, *Midsomer Murders* circumvents Chandler's (1988) criticisms about the 'cardboard lovers and papier mâché villains' of Golden Age crime fiction. By poking fun at the genre's flaws, *Midsomer Murders* delivers a delicate – and globally popular – balance between humour and the macabre.

## Rural Nostalgia

The programme's evocation – and gentle parody – of the conventions of Golden Age British crime fiction is not the only reason for its global appeal. A second key explanation is its portrayal of the English countryside as a rural idyll. The thatched cottages and village greens described at the beginning of this article are not just present in the first episode; they pervade each narrative, and the programme can sometimes feel like a tourism video promoting rural England. As McCaw (2005: 13) has observed, at the heart of *Midsomer Murders* is 'the pastoral myth of English village life'.

Critics around the world have routinely cited the programme's beautiful rural setting as one of the key elements of its popularity. For example, an American review (from a newspaper based in Colorado) enthused about the 'bucolic English county' setting of the programme (Saunders, 1998), sentiments that were echoed in a Danish article about the programme (Stenz, 2009). In its promotional material for a new series, the Norwegian television network TV2 emphasised *Midsomer Murders*' setting in the 'rural British countryside' (Dankertsen, 2008).

Fitting with this nostalgic landscape, the series' original main character, Chief Inspector Tom Barnaby, is also portrayed as an eminently 'traditional', upstanding man. John Nettles, who portrayed Barnaby, described his character as 'an ordinary, straightforward bloke, a typical example of Middle England, pebbledash decency with a family car, thin watch and shiny shoes' (quoted in Barber, 2011a). Nettles told another interviewer: 'I've never thought of Barnaby as a super sleuth, he's the most ordinary plod in the world. That's the point of him. He's not possessed of wonderful powers' (quoted in Wylie, 2006). Like the programme's bucolic landscape, the main character's 'ordinariness' can be deeply comforting to viewers. Even international commentators have noted Barnaby's soothingly conventional personality, with an article in a Swedish newspaper, following Nettles' words, describing the character as 'Mr Ordinary' (Lindell, 2006). Barnaby's staid, upstanding nature means that he does not present a threat to the existing social order; his conventionality mirrors the programme's traditional rural setting.

Of course, Barnaby is often forced to confront unconventional situations and the worst aspects of human nature as violent murders routinely occur within *Midsomer's* tranquil rural landscape. Indeed, Marsh and Melville (2010: 9) have argued that 'part of the programme's attraction' is the surprising contrast between 'the peaceful and picturesque facade' of *Midsomer's* villages and the 'vices and intrigues' that exist beneath that facade. This juxtaposition between the beauty of the landscape and the ugliness of the crimes has also been noted by Polish (Ciapara, 2009) and Italian (*New Notizie*, 2011) commentators in their descriptions of the programme's idyllic setting.

As with the programme's evocation of British Golden Age crime writing, the programme's portrayal of rural life also contains unrealistic components. Perhaps the most unrealistic feature of the English countryside portrayed on the programme is the weather. Rain, biting cold, mud – none of these are shown as frequently on the programme as they occur in real English country life. It is thus not surprising to learn that, according to one fan website, when it is too muddy, the actors typically wear wellington boots and are only filmed from the waist up; when it is freezing cold, the actors sometimes suck ice cubes so their breath will not be visible onscreen (Street, 2006). As the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) has written, the series is a 'country life fantasy directed at people who do not live in the country, showing a world that does not exist' (Stothard, 2011).



The producers of many television programmes rely on appealing landscapes to attract viewers – this is not unique. What is unique, however, is the rural nostalgia that *Midsomer Murders* landscapes evoke.<sup>2</sup> The rural villages and other settings seem designed to make viewers long for what Berberich (2006: 207) has described as ‘an older, more tranquil England, an England of times gone by’. As Pettie (2011) has argued: ‘*Midsomer* brings to life – and gently mocks – an idea of England and Englishness that probably hasn’t existed in this country for decades, but which lives on in the popular imagination, especially overseas.’

This phenomenon – nostalgia for a rural English past – has long interested cultural historians. As early as 1964, for example, in their landmark examination of the English landscape, Lowenthal and Prince noted that ‘rural nostalgia’ was present in many English cities and suburbs, as evidenced by the ‘rustic’ elements (such as the flower patches and wooden benches and fences) in urban and suburban locations (Lowenthal and Prince, 1964: 320). Kramnick (1972) asserted that this rural nostalgia is not a new phenomenon but emerged centuries ago, while Mandler (1997: 160) probed how, in the late 19th century in Britain, ‘a small, articulate but not necessarily influential *avant-garde*’ began to promote ‘a swooning nostalgia for the rural past’. A similar ‘deep vein of rural nostalgia’ is present in much of the art that was produced in the early 20th century, according to Bradbury (1971: 46), and rural England constituted ‘almost *the* essential alternative myth for the era’ before the Second World War. Berberich (2006) has also observed that much of the most popular literature of the Great War – such as Siegfried Sassoon’s 1928 [1974] *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* – fondly recalls a pre-war rural idyll (Berberich, 2006). Of course, nostalgia is a complex idea that, at various points in time, has emerged in different forms and appealed for various reasons. In the British context, rural nostalgia is appealing because, as Brodie (2005: 9.1) has described, it evokes the ‘stable traditional social values which had united people in the past’. These values, and this sense of community, are longed for by many in the contemporary world.

Reverence for the rural British landscape thus has a long history. What is groundbreaking about the reverence one encounters in *Midsomer Murders*, however, is its *globalisation*. Kramnick (1972), Mandler (1997) and Berberich (2006) only examined rural nostalgia within Britain itself. Yet the global popularity of *Midsomer Murders* indicates that nostalgia for an idyllic English landscape has spread beyond Britain’s borders. Now Poles (Ciapara, 2009), Italians (*New Notizie*, 2011), Danes (Stenz, 2009), Americans (Saunders, 1998), Norwegians (Dankertsen, 2008) and others all routinely express delight at the rural English landscape displayed in *Midsomer Murders*.

## ‘Wilful Nostalgia’

How can we make sense of this strange development? Can reverence for something that is not part of your personal, national or cultural background be considered ‘nostalgia’? Nostalgia is typically understood as a longing for the past, or for elements of the past, that are part of one’s personal or shared cultural history (Boym, 2001). Thus, the enjoyment of, and the longing for, traditional English villages and landscapes that *Midsomer Murders*’ global fans might feel cannot be considered classic rural nostalgia of the type studied by Kramnick (1972), Mandler (1997) and Berberich (2006). Many global fans have no personal or cultural connections to England.

Jonathan Simon (1995), however, has used the phrase ‘wilful nostalgia’ to refer to a nostalgia for a past that one has only glimpsed in films and other cultural products, but not actually experienced first-hand (or even second-hand via the stories of one’s ancestors).<sup>3</sup> According to Simon,

wilful nostalgia explains why correctional boot camps – military-style civilian prison programmes – became so popular in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Simon observed that many US politicians and citizens who supported correctional boot camps had never been to military boot camp. Yet, by the end of the 20th century, the image of boot camps had become so prominent in films and other cultural products that even those Americans with no direct experience of boot camps felt nostalgia for this model of punishment and redemption. As Fiddler (2007: 203) has written, the boot camp model can be seen as ‘a memory, perhaps both personal and collective, that has been filtered through numerous depictions in film and television’. Interestingly, as O’Malley (1999: 179) has observed, boot camps of the type adopted in many American correctional systems ‘no longer exist in the military’, so such correctional boot camps have ‘no reference to anything functionally meaningful in contemporary society’. The lingering popularity of these programmes, therefore, indicates the power of wilful nostalgia and the role of the media in fomenting wilful nostalgia in the contemporary world.

The concept of wilful nostalgia can help explain the fondness for rural English life that many of *Midsomer Murders*’ global fans feel. Although Simon employed this concept to elucidate the popularity of a correctional programme within one country, his idea that films and other cultural products can make individuals nostalgic for societies and values to which they have no direct connection is germane. Another illustration of this concept can be found in the work of Beynon and Dunkerley (2000: 15) which briefly posits that the global popularity of line dancing is based on a ‘nostalgic reinterpretation of the “old American West”’. Line dancing and dressing up in ‘traditional’ cowboy and cowgirl attire is popular among many people around the world who have no connections to the 19th-century US. The image of the American West that these line dancers pay homage to through their dancing is an image that has been advanced in numerous films, novels and other cultural products. This media-generated image of the American West is, of course, only partially accurate; for example, it typically does not feature the material privations and the massacres of indigenous people that pervaded the real 19th-century American frontier. Yet, following Simon’s (1995) argument, global enthusiasm for line dancing can be seen as a form of wilful nostalgia, as dancers are indulging in a nostalgic cultural past they have only seen in films and other media.

One can explain much of the global popularity of *Midsomer Murders* in the same way. Like the American West, the image of the traditional English village has long been exported around the world through various media. Agatha Christie’s bestselling novels, certain episodes of *Inspector Morse*, and similar cultural products mean that, globally, ‘traditional rural England’ is a salient cultural meme, almost as well known as the American West. Like the world’s line dancing enthusiasts, global fans of *Midsomer Murders* express enthusiasm for the programme’s portrayal of a rural English ‘past’ (see, e.g., Dankertsen, 2008; Saunders, 1998; Stenz, 2009). Many of these fans have no experience of, or connection to, this past. They have only glimpsed this past in other media portrayals, so their enthusiasm and nostalgia for *Midsomer*’s landscape is media-generated. Their nostalgia is thus wilful nostalgia. Yet, in contrast to Simon’s (1995) analysis of boot camps, which focuses on the development of wilful nostalgia within a single country, *Midsomer Murders*’ worldwide popularity illustrates that wilful nostalgia can be international. In our globalised world – where media images are routinely transmitted across borders – the globalisation of wilful nostalgia is an important, but not illogical, development.

## Implications and Controversies

The global reach of *Midsomer Murders* and wilful nostalgia add further layers of complexity to a recent British controversy about the programme's content. The controversy concerned remarks made by Brian True-May, the co-creator and producer of *Midsomer Murders*, during an interview with the *Radio Times* in March 2011 (Glanfield, 2011). On the lack of ethnic diversity among the programme's cast (as almost all the characters featured on past episodes have been white), True-May said:

We just don't have ... ethnic minorities involved. Because it wouldn't be the English village with them. It just wouldn't work ... We're the sort-of last bastion of Englishness and I want to keep it that way. (Glanfield, 2011; McDermott, 2011)

Then, in response to a follow-up prompt by the interviewer, he continued:

I'm trying to make something that appeals to a certain audience, which seems to succeed. And I don't want to change it. (Glanfield, 2011; McDermott, 2011)

Soon after the interview was made public, a spokesperson for the production company behind *Midsomer Murders* announced that the company was 'shocked and appalled' by what True-May had said, and that he had been suspended (quoted in *BBC News*, 2011a). True-May was later reinstated (*BBC News*, 2011b), but the network announced that he would step down from *Midsomer Murders* at the end of the 14th series in 2011 to, in the words of one report, 'pursue other projects' (Hutchison, 2011).

True-May's remarks prompted much discussion and criticism in the British media (Sherwin, 2011). A reporter from *The Independent* questioned the insinuation that English villages aren't home to ethnic minorities and observed that one of the villages where *Midsomer Murders* has been filmed is, in reality, more ethnically diverse than is portrayed on the programme (Peck, 2011). A columnist for *The Guardian* made the similar point that 'according to the 2001 census, 47,000 non-white people lived in "sparse" and "less sparse" English villages' (Muir, 2011), while a representative from the Runnymede Trust, a think-tank that promotes racial equality, warned in *The Telegraph* that 'implying that ethnic minority people can never be English feeds into the English Defence League's racialised vision of England' (Khan, 2011).

Although much of the media coverage of True-May's remarks was critical, not all reactions were entirely condemning. For example, the novelist Anthony Horowitz, another co-creator of *Midsomer Murders*, said: 'Brian True-May's comments were inappropriate and should not have been made, but in our over-sensitive society there is this silly reaction to anything we say that involves ethnicity or religion. There is no racist attitude at work here' (quoted in Singh, 2011). Meanwhile, the title of an opinion piece in the *Daily Mail* called the reaction to the remarks 'madness and a case of political correctness that would be risible if it wasn't so sinister' (Letts, 2011).

Long before True-May's remarks, *Midsomer Murders'* lack of ethnic (as well as economic) diversity had been noted by other commentators. For example, in his analysis of the first episode of *Midsomer Murders*, *The Killings at Badger's Drift*, McCaw (2005: 15) observed that the programme's characters had a 'predominant white middle-upper class social orientation'. What was unprecedented about the debate over True-May's remarks, however, was its global reach. The

story of True-May's comments and the resulting controversy was reported in Hungary (Kisvárosi gyilkosságok, 2011), Sweden (Kvarnkullen, 2011), Australia (ABC News, 2011), China (Agence France-Presse, 2011), and Canada (Toronto Sun, 2011).

The international reaction to this controversy again illustrates *Midsomer Murders'* influence over global perceptions of British life. As an example of the globalisation of wilful nostalgia it is perhaps not surprising that debates about the *content* of that nostalgia have become globalised as well. In the 21st century, discussions about a nation's identity – such as the debate about 'Englishness' that followed True-May's comments – are no longer limited to that particular nation.

## Final Thoughts

This article argues that the global popularity of *Midsomer Murders* is due in large part to the programme's evocation (and deliberate parody) of British Golden Age crime writing conventions, as well as nostalgia for the rural English landscape. The programme's international appeal shows that nostalgia for English rural life has become a global phenomenon. This globalised nostalgia is based not on remembered experience but on portrayals of English life in novels, films and television programmes – in other words, it is an example of the 'willful nostalgia' (Simon, 1995) that is a distinctive feature of contemporary life. *Midsomer Murders* is thus a fascinating case study of how globalisation can affect conceptions of national identity.

The relationship between national identity and globalisation has received significant attention (see, e.g., Halavais, 2000; Hargreaves, 2002; le Pere and Lambrechts, 1999; Smith, 1995; Urry, 1999). Some scholars have even explored the role of various kinds of nostalgia in fostering national identity (see, e.g., Featherstone, 1995; Jameson, 1989; Robertson, 1992). Berberich (2006), for example, has suggested that nostalgia has been fundamental in fostering English national identity. As Berberich (2006: 207) has asserted: 'Nostalgia and Englishness – Englishness and Nostalgia: these two topics nowadays seem interrelated. Englishness inevitably appears tinged with nostalgia and consistently evokes pictures of an older, more tranquil England.' To support these assertions, Berberich has traced the origins of such nostalgia in the 19th and 20th centuries, arguing that 'Much literature and art, the country's official tourism policy, the media and journalism uphold a notion of England that has its foundation in myth' (Berberich, 2006: 222).

These assertions are germane to this discussion since – as described above – the 'Englishness' or 'Britishness' of *Midsomer Murders* is repeatedly emphasised in international media coverage. The role of nostalgia in the international 'production' of British identity is a theme that Burton (2003) has also explored. Specifically, Burton has examined 'the American commercial appetite for British history' (Burton, 2003: 360), observing that 'for many Americans Britain on TV looks consistently like history: like the past at work in the present' (p. 361). In other words, according to Burton, nostalgia plays a particularly important role in the international popularity of British cultural products. Future researchers could explore whether British cultural products – and English cultural products specifically – are especially likely to draw upon wilful nostalgia, given Britain's long history and powerful imperial past.

Related to this issue is the question of whether nostalgia plays a similar role *within* different parts of Britain. Do Scottish and Welsh cultural products emphasise nostalgia in the same way that English cultural products do? Although overseas commentators often use the terms 'British' and 'English' interchangeably when describing *Midsomer Murders*, the programme is set in England

and promotes nostalgia for rural England. *Monarch of the Glen* (BBC, 2000–2005), a gently nostalgic Scottish television programme, also achieved significant overseas popularity and was sold to more than 20 countries (BBC Press Office, 2002). This example illustrates that rural and wilful nostalgia may also play a key role in the popularity of some Scottish cultural products. Although an investigation of the role of nostalgia in Scottish and Welsh cultural products exceeds the scope of this article, the issue of whether nostalgia plays a similar role in the cultural products of different regions of Britain could be explored more thoroughly by other scholars.

Of course, it is important to remember that global media flows are not unidirectional. The UK not only exports cultural products, but imports them as well – for example, the landmark American crime drama *The Wire* (Home Box Office, 2002–2008) was screened on BBC2, with the fifth season averaging about 600,000 viewers per episode (Jukes, 2009). These relatively high ratings indicate that foreign cultural products can achieve great popularity within the UK; indeed, a gritty British drama about gangs was labelled ‘the British version of *The Wire*’ in the *Independent*, illustrating how imports can affect domestic interpretations of British programmes (Lee, 2011). In recent years, Scandinavian crime novels and television programmes have also become popular in the UK. *Wallander* (BBC, 2008–), an English-language television drama adapted from a series of Swedish crime novels, is a particularly interesting case. The first two series of this British production were filmed on location in Sweden and starred an actor originally from Northern Ireland (Kenneth Branagh, who won a BAFTA for his performance) (McLean, 2010). *Wallander* has since aired in at least 14 other countries, including Sweden (Watkins, 2009). This example highlights the multidirectional nature of cultural influence, as a British adaptation of Swedish source material was shown in Sweden and elsewhere.

Another interesting area and possible direction for future research would be to investigate the role of independent commercial media in fostering global perceptions of a nation. Most previous research has focused on the role of state-funded television in promoting national identity (see, e.g., Mankekar, 1999; Van den Bulck, 2001). Yet *Midsomer Murders* is not produced by the BBC, the state-funded television network in the UK; instead it is produced by an independent commercial broadcasting network, ITV (2011). The role of such independent commercial broadcasters in fostering national identity (both domestically and internationally) is an issue which merits further attention.

Ultimately, the global popularity of *Midsomer Murders* raises significant questions about the role of nostalgia in fostering national identity, and the extent to which such nostalgia is drawn upon to create and market cultural products. Interestingly, in 2011, South Oxfordshire District Council – which represents some of the villages where *Midsomer Murders* is filmed – announced that it had created two trails for tourists to follow which would take them past key landmarks from the programme. As the Council announced in a press release:

*Midsomer Murders* draws visitors to South Oxfordshire who want to walk in the footsteps of the characters, drink in the same pubs and explore the gorgeous locations seen on screen. For many overseas viewers *Midsomer* represents England at its green and pleasant best – a place of character buildings, village greens and parish churches. (South Oxfordshire District Council, 2011)

In other words, *Midsomer Murders*’ overseas popularity has affected how a region of Britain markets itself to tourists and presents itself to the world. International enthusiasm for this

programme thus not only responds to, but actually influences, the presentation of British identity in the global cultural marketplace – a further indication that the global popularity of *Midsomer Murders* is a highly revealing phenomenon.

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## Notes

1. The issue of national identity labels and, within England, the choice between using the label 'English' or 'British' is complex and has attracted the attention of numerous scholars (see, e.g., Fenton, 2007; Langlands, 1999; McCrone, 2002; Samuel, 1989). However, as Kumar (2003) has observed, observers from outside the UK often use the terms 'English' and 'British' interchangeably when referring solely to England – an observation that explains why both labels appear in international media coverage.
2. Following Holak and Havlena (1998: 218), nostalgia is defined here as 'a positively valenced complex feeling, emotion, or mood produced by reflection on things (objects, persons, experiences, ideas) associated with the past'.
3. Roland Robertson (1992: 148) used this same term, 'wilful nostalgia', to describe a very different phenomenon: the reactions of many countries to the globalising trends of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Specifically, according to Robertson, many countries responded to the increasing interconnectedness and openness of the world in this period by promoting their unique national pasts and 'lost Golden Ages' of their cultural histories. Robertson's explicitly political definition of this term is at odds with the socio-cultural definition advanced by Simon (1995).

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