

# Theory from practice: A subjective academic narrative of crime fiction addiction

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In this paper I consider elements of my reading crime fiction/detective novels, and I also consider if I can learn more about such fiction by applying critical theories so as to provide new and interesting ideas about them. In doing so I practise what I call a 'subjective academic narrative': a personal scholarly story that brings together the researcher and the story of that research in a way that extends traditional notions of scholarship. This enables me both to show how news ways of thinking about discourse within the academy are creatively enriching to knowledge practices and also to contextualise research alongside the researcher. This paper is about myself as a crime fiction reader confessing to and exploring my addiction and placing it within scholarly discourse. In doing so, I reveal my own subjective academic narrative. I'm an obsessive reader who always has to have print narratives before my eyes. I really don't care what the genre is, but I do like to select books by length: the longer the better. I admit I'm also an addict for reading crime fiction: does that mean I'm sublimating my deepest desires to kill? This paper explores the self as data as a contribution to qualitative scholarly methodology.*

## **Introduction**

In writing about my addiction to reading crime fiction, I am also confronting how I can make this personal narrative an academic text. This is the basis of the subjective academic narrative for me as this scholarly discourse includes the personal and/as the theoretical. bell hooks says that '...merging critical thinking in everyday life with knowledge learned in books and through study has been the union of theory and practice that has informed my intellectual cultural work' (2006:3). hooks found this made particularly difficult when confronted by academic expectations of what is true scholarship. Nevertheless, she persisted as she wanted to write in a way that brought together her academic and intellectual insights and also made them accessible to a non-academic audience (2006:3). The introduction of self into scholarly writing occurred naturally to ethnographers who were engaged in field work: it became evident that it was impossible to divorce the self from the context of the scholarly undertaking in dealing with both primary and secondary materials. Despite not wishing to employ auto ethnographic methodologies arising from this realisation (Ellis &Bochner 2000), Kay Inckles (2005) states that her fieldwork has led her to place herself into the scholarly narratives and

representations she produces. This has: ‘...re-enforced my scepticism of concepts such as objectivity, rationality, and “the truth” (228). Moreover, it has led her to question the ethics and even validity of divorcing self in/from the scholarly narrative: ‘...it is apparent that the location and perspective of the researcher is both inseparable from, and integral to, the knowledge produced’ (2005:233).

It is this bringing together of the personal and the intellectual that underpins the subjective academic narrative. So in this paper I am ranging over a few of the crime detection books I’ve read over many decades and introducing theoretical prisms through which to view them for critical analyses that are cultural and scholarly as well as specifics about the novels and genre.

### **Why crime fiction?**

Crime fiction offers me many opportunities as a reader. The most obvious is the capacity to transport myself into a puzzle that works within the text towards a solution. There are, however, many other joys to be found in this broad genre. Relationships with the pivotal detective(s) become close as many reveal themselves through first-person narration or are revealed not only through authorial narration but also through description, dialogue, interactions and ruminations often revealing self-doubt. Also, of course, many such central characters participate in series and the reader meets them frequently bringing themselves to different and difficult situations in both their work and selves. The actual locations of the crimes and the day’s circle of the characters also become important to the reader from gritty inner suburban to the Orient Express. This is explicated by Donna Leon’s long series set in Venice where the location itself provides a main protagonist both through its settings and the inner musings it brings forth in/via its main human character, Commissario Brunetti, about the social stratification he experiences as a policeman and as a lower-class Venetian married into the aristocracy. He shows his belief that ‘...anyone who was not born in Venice was equally foreign’ whether born in Italy or no (2014:29).

Perhaps one of the only genres to have spawned many bookshops dedicated solely to it, crime fiction crosses interesting boundaries for many readers. It encourages, for example, readers who like a narrative, those who like a first person narrator/detective, those who look for violence and resolution, for sexual titillation and those who want to solve a puzzle. It is appreciated for multiple reasons: for example, readers of Agatha Christie appreciate the personalities and characters of Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, but are also enchanted by the character descriptions that involve a very fine eye for personalities that isn’t confined to those two detectives. Poirot, of course, is quite singular as Hastings describes him:

‘an extraordinary little man! Height five feet four inches, egg-shaped head carried a little to one side, eyes that shone green when he was excited, stiff military moustache, air of dignity immense! He was neat and dandified in appearance. For neatness of any kind he had a passion. To see an ornament set crookedly, or a speck of dust, or a slight disarray in one’s attire, was torture to the little man until he could ease his feelings by remedying the matter. ‘Order’ and ‘method’ were his gods. He had a certain disdain for tangible evidence, such as footprints and cigarette ash, and would maintain that, taken by themselves, they would never enable a detective to solve a problem. Then he would tap his egg-shaped head with absurd complacency, and remark with great satisfaction: ‘the true work, it is done from *within*. The little grey cells-remember always the little grey cells *monami*’(1969:15).

Miss Marple was quite the opposite in appearance and her little grey cells were activated by what she observed and learnt from what went on in her village of St Mary Mead. According to Inspector Neele:

‘She was upright, of unimpeachable rectitude and she had, like most old ladies, time on her hands and an old maid’s nose for gossip. She’d get things out of servants and out of the women of the Fotesque family perhaps, that he and his policemen would never get. Talk, conjecture, reminiscences, repetitions of things said and done, out of it all she would pick the salient facts’(1969:250).

Neele's opinion is right as far as it goes, but we dedicated Christie readers know that there is much more to Miss Marple than that. She has an intuitive ability to make connections work from her knowledge of human nature forged in her deceptively quiet village of St Mary Mead. She also has the interesting aspect of a woman who conforms to her social and gender status but has very real abilities far beyond them that have remained undeveloped due to her gender and class. Miss Marple's character is able to be further understood through a critical feminist theory prism. Such a discovery would show the ways in which she is almost ridiculed by the patriarchy of the police force, the ageist nature of denying women of a certain age a social reality, the stereotypical nature of descriptions of such 'knitting' women, and the struggle that women have to make themselves heard and taken seriously at this (and any) age.

Feminist theories provide a critical prism through which to view the metanarratives of cultures and the 'givens' of representation both today and in the past. There is no single feminist theory. The multiple ways of viewing the world that feminism(S) call for are all concerned with the well-being of women and children and the oppressed of all genders. The majority of feminism(S) come from the middle-class eurowestern world. This is evident when we consider the declaration made by the many (mistaken) third wavers that the present era is one of post-feminism as so much has been achieved. Broadly, there have been waves of feminism: the first wave was the call for political representation in the late 1890's to the early 1900s in the 'advanced' western world; the second was again in the eurowestern world in the 1960s when women sought to leave 'the women's room' and have the same opportunities as men; the third is the post-feminist position that all is well and equality has been achieved. The fourth is yet to come but I predict a realisation that the battle is far from over.

Certainly feminist theories have much still to offer even in critiquing the eurowestern world: they are certainly apposite in looking at the position of, for example, ageing women, Indigenous women, women of colour, women in non-democratic societies and women in Islamic fundamentalist cultures as well as women held in domestic tyranny everywhere.

The construction of women's reality is historically and contemporaneously one of oppression. Historically, it may be overt as in the 'first wave' where often privileged white western women sought the equivalence of voting and the 'second wave' where often privileged white western women sought to leave 'the women's room'. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is more covert as often privileged white western women claim a generational difference that enables a new understanding of what it is to be woman. 'Third wave' feminism argues that the advantages gained by the first and second wave have so altered the cultural construction that the rigid ideals and practices of earlier feminisms are no longer relevant.

Watching Miss Marple at work, however, we still see and relate to the ways in which she is constrained by her gender and has to act strongly to overcome prejudice through her determination that is seemingly 'ditzzy' but shows a very sharp mind that computes facts and often confounds the restrictions placed upon her.

Phryne Fisher also challenges the proscribed view of how women should behave. Set in the Jazz era of the 1920's, the Miss Fisher series stars the pivotal detective character Miss Fisher who refuses to be categorised as the culturally desirable 'good woman' and revels in her sexuality that is often quite predatory. She exemplifies the modern woman who refuses to conform to the reported stricture of Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter for her wedding night: 'Lie still and think of England'!

### **Western cultural metanarratives**

Readers and collectors of Australian crime fiction will inevitably refer to the (boring?) *Mystery of the Hansom Cab*. However, I will focus on the remarkable production for the times of an Indigenous Australian as the main protagonist in Arthur Upfield's stories about murders in the Australian outback. Of course in the TV adaptation he was replaced by a white Australian who referred to an Indigenous mystic! This abuse of an

Indigenous character is unacceptable, but even the character described in the books is an Indigenous man who is contained in the non-Indigenous world of the dominant white culture. "Bony" or Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte was first seen as an offsider in *'The Barrakee Mystery'* in 1929. Described then as a 'half-caste', this very interesting character utilises his 2 very different heritages and cultural backgrounds to become a star detective in many crime fiction novels until the final publication of *'Madman's Bend'* in 1963. An unfinished novel, *'The Lake Frome Monster'* was published in 1966 and is for me too unsatisfactory a melange finished by others to be considered as Upfield's own work.

Today, such a work can be critically analysed through the lens of postcolonial theory that endeavours to recognise (and perhaps bring back some elements of) cultures destroyed or diminished by the dominant colonisers. Postcolonial theory acts by building an understanding of the ways in which European preconceptions that debase cultural practices of the colonised can be combated. In doing so, it works against the normalising effect of a dominant Euroamerican contemporary culture, and hence supports greater equality for the colonised people within the ex-colony. It provides a critical prism that builds upon the Declaration on the Granting of Independence To Colonial Countries and People, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1960, that states in part: *'Convinced that the continued existence of colonialism impeded the social, cultural and economic development of dependent peoples and mitigates against the United Nations ideal of universal peace [The General Assembly] declares that: All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.'*

As postcolonial theory identifies how views of the colonised countries have been constructed by the western imperialists, it offers us new ways to critically evaluate the Upfield series.

Such a theoretical lens can also be applied to another series that features a large African woman from Botswana in print and on TV. Despite the Precious Ramotswa being the pivotal detective character in the Number 1 series, we all know that the writer is an establishment Englishman and if we didn't know it, we would suspect that the attitudes and ideas arise from a colonial prejudice that patronises the 'natives', particularly the 'big black mama' and the funny garage 'boy'. The novels depend upon stereotypical representations of Africans and Africa. The ABC site says:

*'The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency celebrates Botswana, "the finest place on God's Earth," as surely as a woman's intuition. Precious Ramotswa (Grammy-winning singer Jill Scott) ,after her father dies, sells his cows and opens an agency, because she "wants to do good." So, the "traditionally built woman" (in the words of Alexander McCall Smith, who wrote nine books about her) leases the old Gabarone post office, hires hyper-efficient secretary Grace Makutsi (Anika Noni Rose, Dreamgirls), and gets down to business. With sassy hairdresser BK (Desmond Dube Hotel Rwanda) and smitten mechanic JLB Matekoni (Lucian Msamati) cheering her on, Mma Ramotswa becomes a combination detective/feminist icon, sharing "endless cups of red bush tea" with her clients, encouraging women to take charge of their lives, and tackling tricky cases involving missing persons, duplicitous daddies, dangerous dentists, and unfaithful spouses (MI-5's David Oyelowo plays one of them). Produced for the BBC/HBO and filmed in Africa, the first season eschews gunplay and profanity for a fresh take on the small-town mystery series. Like Agatha Christie's Marple, but with fewer dead bodies, Mama Ramotswa depends more on her wits.'*

This series explicates western cultural metanarratives that dominate many genres usually without being noticed by either European or eurowestern writer or the reader and completely unknown in the storyline or to the protagonists. Although I enjoy this book series (and the TV series arising from it) trying to 'read' this text through the prism of post colonialism is very unsettling. I wonder how African men and women in Botswana 'read' it: is it a jolly jape or a more sinister representation of racial derision?

Postcolonial theorists offer us alternative ways to look at non euroamerican worlds and stereotypes. For example, Gayatri Spivak is a cultural theorist who alerts us to the importance of cultural stories. She involves us in considering how the multiple signs of our culture can be contradictory, both coming from and forming stories. Her work confronts us with a deeper understanding of how our identities are made up of significant 'normal' social practices and of how such cultural metanarratives shapes our lives, including the part that ideologies, accepted as 'norms' play in our cultural formation and hence personal selves. She relates this to postcolonial effects upon her life experiences as an Indian woman now living and working in the USA.

Spivak alerts us to the challenges of grappling with '*...the elaborate signifying systems of advanced capitalist society – the immense network of significations, from advertising hoarding to magazine, to television – the circulation of signs in which the subject is constantly figured and refigured.*' (p.xi in *Other Worlds.*). As she discusses the difficulties in being both a 'difficult female' and a 'difficult native' she alerts us to the potentially racist nature of tone, gesture, style, and subtext. Her work in postcolonial theory alerts us to the silence of the other of Europe and the subaltern voice that exists as a repressed sign in crime fiction as elsewhere.

As crime fiction offers possibilities to readers, it also involves us in social criticism, but that is almost always delineated within a western or euroamerican social and cultural context. Too often the villains come from a less dominant culture, often from some struggling part of the declining Russian Empire as we understand it even in this post-Stalinist times or most especially today post 9/11, from the Middle East. I recognise as I write this paper that I almost always choose crime fiction set in Great Britain or Australia and/or featuring detectives from these places. Although I read everything that I can get my hands on, I don't go willingly to American based materials. Perhaps Spivak's term 'euroamerican' is too all-encompassing of dominant cultures when there are many differences in crime activities and detective personalities, in the descriptions of violence and the interest in off-the-wall psychotic events. It may be that the pace is too different or that the main protagonists are not so flawed and human or are not so attractive to my own cultural background and immersion.

Indeed (and this may well explain crime fiction too), Umberto Eco asserts that we need to invent an enemy: 'having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So when there is no enemy, we have to invent one' (2012:3).

My distaste for much American contemporary crime fiction is clarified when I refer to best-selling author Tami Hoag's 'Secrets to the Grave'. Fortunately I bought this for only \$5 as a remainder at my university bookshop. I regretted even this cheap purchase. The main protagonist has to cope with a dentist who is a multiple murderer. Barely has she won though her abduction etcetc than she is attacked by a mad 11 year old boy and threatened by a closet gay music teacher. All this in a very small town: don't shift there. Lurching from unrealistic plot devices to even more unrealistic ones, this exemplifies the worst aspects of crime fiction and almost cured my addiction to it!

Literary theories indicate that the reader has control over understanding the text as the 'author as god is dead' (Barthes): nevertheless, the author does bear some responsibilities in producing the text.

### **The pivotal main character**

Sherlock Holmes was probably the first major detective character who could apply his mind (and hence the readers' minds) to clues and ideas in solving crime. His brother Mycroft sat in his Whitehall office and acted like a human computer about knowledge and information and thus often helped Sherlock with arcane information. He is described to Watson by Sherlock as being a greater thinker than he about detective

puzzles, but unwilling to gather evidence or to do anything demanding action. Reading any Holmes fiction makes the reader enter into a world that demands attention to detail and that admits that the main protagonist has faults as well as his intriguing ability to think things through. It also introduces the offside who is really a bit dumb: perhaps the epitome of the ideal reader? For me as a young reader of crime fiction, Holmes was intriguing and much preferred to the Father Brown stories which were perhaps too close to the authority of the Catholic Church as I knew it in the 1950s. What I really liked about both of them was the thick book that collected their stories and that I could absorb myself in over many hours.

I met another Catholic priest detective quite late in my reading life, and have never seen the TV series of Brother Cadfael's 12<sup>th</sup> century detective adventures when I bought a run of them at a local second hand bookstore. Although thin books, my hunger was satisfied as I had several to read one after the other. The workings of the monastic life and the social stratification of the times were intriguing as they encompassed the murders and placed them within a historical context I knew something of from my history studies and readings. Here such cold hard facts were presented with an immediacy and urgency that the storyteller evokes by setting lively characters within historical research and producing an imaginative narrative that involves the creation of a reality as King Stephen and the Empress Maud 'tore England between them, and yet life must go on, faith must go on, the stubborn defiance of fortune must go on in the husbandry of the year, season after season, plough and harrow and seed, tillage and harvest. Here in the cloister and the church, the sowing and tillage and harvest of souls, 'Brother Cadfael had no fear for mankind, whatever became of mere men' (1995:11).

Today there are many female crime writers and protagonists, and they are involved themselves in the tragic choices that so many of the women characters (mainly victims) make in all of the crime fiction I've read and remembered. They have very human failings and personalities that invite the reader to see them on the Asperger's scale, like many of the male detectives. This evokes a sympathy from the readers that is supportive to their flawed humanity, enabling us to relate to the detectives as real people rather than superhumans or Mycroft-like computer brains. Like many such characters, Tommy Linley, for example, struggles to allow love to enter his heart and is punished for such intransigence through the tragic killing of his wife and unborn child, as well as his endless commitment to working the treadmill of detection.

A significant element of the storyline of detective fiction is the capacity to develop characters that the reader can accept, whether this be the detective, the victim or the killer. Agatha Christie is an expert at this: even though her work is dated in many respects, this capacity makes her still readable and follows from her novels on to the TV series.

A character such as the Venetian detective Commissario Brunetti leads us to relate to him and his own feelings of inadequacy in the face of the strict layers of class in Venice. Having married above his class, he has certain human failings and anxieties that bring him to the reader as a flawed human to whom they can relate: 'he would go and talk to his father in law, another man he had come to trust, though it was a trust that never failed to make him uneasy. He sometimes thought of Count Orazio Falier as Orazio the oracle, for he was certain that the myriad connections the Count had spent a lifetime forming could lead to the answer to any question' (2009:49).

This characterisation of the lost-self of a detective who finds meaning through detecting is quite a leitmotif of crime fiction and I relate to it in my selection and reading. Because the pivotal figure is flawed, readers can relate to situations that they will almost certainly never find themselves in and to people whom they will almost certainly never meet. I have an impassioned relationship to this pivotal flawed but both human and detached detective in crime fiction.

Such a character does not necessarily transcend the colonising function of literature itself that can be seen even in crime fiction: perhaps most singularly there? The victims, the detectives, the crimes themselves are

embedded in a certain ideology that is within definite cultural metanarratives. In his discussions of the idea and practice of culture, Terry Eagleton, academic, literary and cultural critic and Marxist theorist says of the very word 'culture' that it is replete with tension between the lived, the natural and the socially imposed. (Eagleton 2006). He proposes that the 'word 'culture', which is supposed to designate a kind of society, is in fact' a normative way of imagining that society' (2006:25). Rather than existing as some type of natural being, it provides us with a dominant yet an unrecognised template of how we are involved in a way of life so as to enable us to believe that we exist at all. It is: 'the taken-for-granted beliefs and predilections which must be dimly present for us to be able to act at all' (2006:28). It is basic to scholarly research that to take knowledge forward we must also identify and critique that which we take for granted. Although language may be seen to be set, it is a way of sharing a cultural viewpoint. Yet language itself is explorative and its assertions of meaning are open to question: it is flawed, but it provides a shared cultural view that is the best that we can do to share meaning. Thus language provides assertions of meaning that construct a social 'given' or 'norm' and that moreover acts to construct the individual as well the culture. Critical evaluations of meaning show it to be interpretive rather than fixed or stable. In critiquing such cultural 'givens', we can identify how language creates meanings that provides 'facts' as a cultural invention necessary to the maintenance of social orderliness and order. As Gayatri Spivak says, 'meaning/knowledge intersects power.' (2002:215)

In his study of the rise of English and the teaching of English and English Literature, Eagleton shows us the ways in which it contributed through colonisation to the rise of a dominant ideology (1983). He identifies that cultural ideologies are an unspoken that are difficult for us to identify much less critique. Yet such identification and critical analysis is central to the production further insights that add to knowledge.

Kerry Greenwood's 'Murder and Mendelssohn' is Phryne Fisher's 20<sup>th</sup> mystery, so she has clearly succeeded in developing a character who is able to capture readers' imagination and, perhaps more importantly, provide a commercial success for Allen & Unwin, her prestigious publisher. It follows the tried and true of the irrepressible rebellious Phryne who comes from society's top drawer (after some faltering). It clarifies her sexual interests as broad and accepting and has sufficient description to be titillating without relying upon sexual detail (perverse or otherwise) to keep the reader alert and amused. In applying some neo-marxist analysis, we can clearly see how social cachet enables Phryne to perform, how she utilises the lower class to support and even to save her skin, the importance of having plenty of money and also of being able to identify social restrictions and to act against cultural metanarratives for personal satisfactions. Phryne is also able to seduce and to practice a sexuality unusual for its open-ness in the times but titillating for a contemporary audience: 'Phryne was beginning to undress. She was beautiful, he thought, watching her sit down gracefully on her bed to remove her stockings, then standing to slide off her evening gown, the camisole and lace-trimmed French knickers' (Leon 2013:230)

### **Bloodletting: Forensic and brutal**

How plausible is crime fiction writing? Should it be? Need it be? The development in this century of great violence and very forensic dissections (literally) and attitudes is rebarbative to me.

There are more violent and forensic crime fiction novels today as exemplified in *Death Wore White* by Jim Kelly. I find these difficult and, although I'm an obsessive reader and seldom refuse to finish a book, something like *The Final Days* by Alex Chance pushed me to the limit of acceptance of really stupid plotlines and characterisation relying on violence in both actions and descriptions more than anything else.

Such violence becomes viewed as a norm within certain crime fiction works. As such, it begins to become accepted as habitual within the crime fiction readership. For Bordieu this 'habitus' is embodied in all that we do: our every gesture, walk, talk, interaction and so on (Bordieu 1977:85-7). An 'habitus' then, is not a

consciously determined and understood action, but one that calls for no critical reflection and requires no thought for us to enact. Consequently, such embodied habitus cannot be easily recognised, challenged nor changed. Bordieu states that our unconscious cultural habits of being are much more influential upon our conscious view of the world than we can know. We are both formed and informed by such influential habits of being that can be described as cultural metanarratives. A significant aspect of the application of the critical prisms of scholarly theories is to identify and then to act against these highly influential cultural metanarratives.

In what ways does such a realisation enable us to understand the crime fiction novel's intent and impact more clearly and even responsibly? It certainly influences my critical responses to know that such elements within a crime fiction novel could influence my acceptance of violence as embedded in and perhaps realistic within my environment. Yet every crime fiction novel (set mostly in the advanced western countries of England and America and within Europe) would leave strangely managed murders enacted for extremely complicated reasons by the most unlikely people scattered throughout the countryside. As almost all murders are squalid domestic punishments for women or acts of violence through drugs and criminal actions, the murders that we read about so avidly are not in any way typical. They appeal for some reasons other than the enactment of reality or the suppression of homicidal desires.

### **The literary**

I am refusing to enter into the debate about what is crime/detective fiction. Instead I am choosing from my own obsessive reading over several decades. *The Busman's Honeymoon* by Dorothy Sayers includes romance between Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane finally resolved. This combination of romance and crime has followed the 2 main protagonists and continues to do so as their own relationship flourishes. Sayers' series is also quite literary in its language and the setting of Vane in a University women's college. In this context, I say literary because there is so much more to the plot, characterisation, dialogue and writing in general than the pivotal detective figure and the crime puzzle to be solved.

I am currently reading *'The truth about the Harry Quebert Affair'* (2014. Maclehouse Press Quercus.London) by Joel Decker that I would describe as literary crime fiction. Why? Well it was shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt and won the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Academie Francaise and the Prix Goncourt des Lyceens, but I didn't find that out until the very last page. For me, it's literary crime fiction because it doesn't fit any usual interpretation of the crime fiction genre and it has many elements of the literary novel. Nevertheless, it is concerned with murder and resolution and also, quite interesting, with facing the blank page for a writer that somehow acts as a shadow metaphor for the way the writer survives attacks. The sometimes clunky parallel storyline is relieved by the dynamism of the anxious working-out of the classic question 'who dunnit?' The pivotal detective in this book is the writer Marcus Goldman. He writes about his friend and mentor and the loss of his own writer's block. This book about a 35 year old murder mystery is 'killed' by the early pages being stolen and sent to national newspapers where they provide front page fodder (359). He is castigated by the town for writing about them: for stealing their stories for profit and fame. The book has several puzzles in it: not all to do directly with the crime. However, it is the question of 'who dunnit' that builds the tension in the novel. Even by page 555 we don't know the answer (or at least I don't), and neither does Goldman: 'There's something we're missing here. Something I haven't understood yet...there's a piece of the puzzle missing, I know, but I can't think what it could be'. Actually I had worked a lot of it out before the denouement, so it wasn't the puzzle alone that had kept me reading, and the pivotal character hadn't appealed to me any more than the other rather dreary characters. I kept reading because it was a satisfyingly long book of 615 pages and I wanted to prove my guesses right!



I wondered if looking at this novel through the lens of Baroque Theory would enhance my understanding and enact belle hooks's idea that as academics we have a responsibility to bring our arcane scholarly knowledge and ideas into the everyday culture of our non-academic lives. Representation and interpretation of human behaviours is a basic element of creative practice in the novel and in the crime novel, this takes a particular turn. A critical theory of representation calling itself 'Baroque' immediately alerts the scholar to the widening of perspectives enabled by its non-linear dimensions of understanding.

The original Baroque period played with ideas and illusions and this theory suggests that knowledge itself may be seen as having multiple pathways and possibilities not based on the traditional Enlightenment model of the search for certainty. Developing the multiple methods encouraged by the baroque within scholarship leads scholars to an understanding that: 'the analysis of appearances could shift from the natural world to the social, to comprehend culture and its political ramifications. The edge was blurred between knowing and doing, between epistemology and ontology' (Mohr. 2012:55). As I have argued before, there is no definitive knowledge model, and blurring of certainties can be seen in scholarship as productive rather than needing correction.

The baroque enables us to move into the liminal or introductory space between knowing and understanding that knowledge is always uncertain. Playing with givens, as in the metaphor of the baroque trompe l'oeil does not aim merely to present everything as a deceptive illusion, but rather to show that there are possibilities beyond the given and obvious. Jacques Derrida's (1978) description of 'ex-centric' knowledge is applicable here. Maggie MacLure describes the liminal space of the baroque as:

'A baroque method would resist clarity, mastery and the single point of view, be radically uncertain about scale, boundaries and coherence, and favour movement and tension over structure and composure. It would open up strange spaces for difference, wonder and otherness to emerge' (2006:729).

Such a critical theory provides us with a prism through which to understand and analyse humanities scholarship in a way that 'allows an approach to interpretation that does not seek a binary distinction between the one truth and the many falsehoods, but which explores the foundations of our illusions' (Mohr 2012:61).

Scholarship is able to devote itself to both recognise and to develop new ways of knowing, perhaps by opening up 'strange spaces' for scholarly discussion though 'a productively irritating method' (MacLure 2006:729). Much of traditional scholarship aims to reach a conclusion or recommendation but new understandings can come about through applying the baroque theory and methodology to enable scholars to tolerate ambiguity.

### **Structure: Clues and coincidences**

In *'The truth about the Harry Quebert Affair'* there are multiple occurrences of murder and death, including burning down Goldman's house...but fortunately, and perhaps too coincidentally, not his laptop. A mother dies at her daughter's hand and is resurrected as/in her daughter: but the situation is not investigated in the order it should be. Clues are coincidentally not followed up: it's very annoying!

Crime fiction abounds with coincidences and clues: solving them before they are revealed is central to reading in this genre. It's about beating the author, the storyline, the pivotal detective character and anyone else to understand 'who dunnit?'. I like to find the sometimes clunky insertions that reveal how the writer is constructing the story so that it can lead to a revelation. The series about the asperger girl who kicked the hornet's nest was extremely sophisticated in structure and such storyline constructions were not evident to me.

Every detective fiction writer considers how to utilise structural elements such as time shifts, tricks, interruptions, interpellations and linearity or otherwise in the planning and production of their text. An

interesting example of this is *'Waiting for Wednesday'*, a Frieda Klein novel by Nicci French (Penguin 2014). I usually steer clear of co-written novels of any genre, and this one showed me why. These best-selling novelists are Nicci Gerrard and Sean French. Together they have sold over 8 million books and this book is the 3<sup>rd</sup> in their Frieda Klein series. It jumps around. The plot need not be linear for me, but I do like some consistency. I began to think that they wrote a section each and then fitted it together. The result was, for me, quite unsatisfying as several leads and ideas are related to the series rather than this specific incident. On the other hand, Mary Stewart satisfies. Her *'Nine Coaches Waiting'* develops a storyline that is satisfyingly building plot point upon plot point. The first-person narration of the main character is charmingly unpsychologised, unlike poor Frieda, herself a psychotherapist and does she need it! From an earlier period, Stewart's work is still very readable and I re-read my favourites quite often. Indeed, one book has fallen apart and has had to be consigned to the rubbish! Stewart's sense of story and character is absorbing as in, for example, *'Wildfire at Midnight'* that has a kind of madness that involves mountain worship. Terrific!

Novels that are one-off give readers a chance to reach a satisfactory denouement because we're not identifying with a serial detective. We are not seeking to find the truth about who wants to kill the child Comte Phillipe in *'Nine Coaches Waiting'*, we are seeking to find him safe and to realise the romantic ending: 'He turned suddenly towards me and pulled me to him, not gently. What we said is only for ourselves to remember. We talked for a long time' *Sigh*. Series novels challenge the notion that we are reading to gain insights into the truth about human behaviours of murderous intent as they rely upon the readers becoming engaged and involved with the main protagonist who is inevitably the flawed detective. The truth itself is represented as something that we participate in as recognising the weaknesses not only of the criminal but of the one searching after truth so as to solve the case: to put it away.

Truth is a slippery ideal to try to catch and encapsulate. What kind of truth can we find in detective fiction when both we and the text arise from within the debilitating bounds of cultural metanarratives as received and basically unrecognised and unchallenged received notions? Jacques Lyotard in his challenge to what he describes as 'tyranny' describes the dominance of the received notion as a '...terror which imposes stasis on knowledge and makes intellectuals the tools of the state.' (Benjamin, A. (ed) 1989). For Lyotard such received notions are a dominant narrative that can be fruitfully disrupted if scholars pay attention to the 'little narrative' (1984) of individual experiences.

### **TV adaptations**

Of course crime fictions novels have been supported and extended by TV in particular and film to some extent. I'll concentrate upon the former here as I am also a dedicated TV murder watcher. Some of these TV series have long series that have fantastic production values of historical situations, others are gritty and contemporary. The Hercule Poirot series exemplifies the high production values of the 1930s with emphasis on art deco houses and apartments, wonderful clothing and cars, international travel, particularly to Egypt, and large crowd scenes. The Phryne Fisher series also has very high production values. The scene setting in the mansion home compared with back lanes and the waterfront permits the introduction of many different contemporary characters, cars, trains, situations and dialogues from the extremely wealthy to the dedicated crooks, deserted children and helpful wharfies. On the other hand, the Inspector Morse, George Gently and Inspector Lynley series seem to be on a much tighter budget and as they are able to be set in places that are inexpensive to shoot, they have an everyday realism for the watcher.

Jean Baudrillard sees the real as being replaced by the simulacra, the pretence: 'It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reproduction, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself...' (1983:2). The simulacra means that 'truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to

exist' (1983:3) and it is the politically and culturally powerful who have formed a dominant class that have seized 'mastery of the process of signification' (1981:3).

Can crime fiction detective series be innocent of this charge? Surely it's impossible for them to reside outside the cultural metanarrative that's enacted on TV where profit is everything. It may be possible that it is a sign of suppression rather than oppression: that it replaces the dark spaces in the human heart that desire to damage others for our own needs of power or to overcome our own felt weaknesses. Yet I, along I believe with almost all viewers, relate to the detective rather than to the criminal. When Lynley falters in his pursuit of himself through solving dreadful murders, I wish him the power to go on. Even his mistake of being born with a silver spoon is forgivable as is his unconscious upper class social dominance in any situation because we know he is flawed in his relations with women. The series enables us to follow his inner life developments and setbacks as well as what is apparently the main storyline on the screen.

### **The subjective academic narrative.**

I invented the term 'the subjective academic narrative' to describe what I perceive as a truth about the privileged world of scholarly discourse: it is personal, arises from the scholar's cultural immersion and is scholarly in its processes. It builds upon my interest in theory and practice within the academy and within textuality and discourse. It follows what Jane Gallop proposes as a feminist theory recognising the scholarly status of the personal anecdote. She proposes that this calls for developing knowledge in a way that seeks to be open rather than definitive (Gallop 2002: 164). This term participates in the critical activities that Jane Gallop proposes in her concept of 'anecdotal theory'. She describes this as a feminist activity that, by opposing Enlightenment certainties, enables non-patriarchal ways of thinking and doing academic work that also oppose patriarchal givens. Anecdotal theory: aims to 'tie theorizing to lived experience...anecdotal theory must be...the juncture where theory finds itself compelled -against its will, against its projects- to think where it has been forced to think' (Gallop 2002:15).

Theory itself leads too often to a complex an academic metadiscourse that Gallop reveals as an act of power that elevates some as it disempowers others. hooks agrees: 'I am constantly amazed at how difficult it is to cross borders in this white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society' (2006:6). She sees that it can privilege knowledge so that such a border crossing is reliant upon social privilege: material, educational and cultural advantage that enables some individuals. Mary Midgely concurs, seeing at least part of the problem as inappropriately applying Enlightenment ways that she describes as 'imperialistic ideologies' that validate some ways of knowing over others (2004:21). Certainly, reading against the givens within a written or cultural text opens up new possibilities through the suspension of certainties as we accept the text as a tissue or net in which gaps may lead to scholars to explorations that are as valuable as the apparently dominant threads. Helene Cixous also challenges the authority of the dominant text in describing writing itself as '...the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of social and cultural structures' (Cixous, 1991: 319-320). This opens up the text to many possible readings: there is no 'one way'.

Today, ideas about textuality and discourse have moved from literary studies into other areas of the social sciences. In particular, they propose that all elements of culture are constructed, are narratives, and are able to be read against as well as written by 'the author as god'. This means that the reader has become a central figure in bringing the text to life, and does not act as merely the inactive receptor of the dictate from author (itative). In challenging the authority of writing, and hence cultural constructs, it is clear that a dispersal of certainties is central to all types of inscriptions. Hence I practice what I have nominated as the critical construction of the 'subjective academic narrative' that bridges the gap between the individual, the academy and the personal and learned story that is being told.

The subjective academic narrative may probably best described as providing scholars with a space of chaos rather than of organisation. For Kathryn Hayle this means that what she describes as 'orderly disorder' is the breeding ground of ideas; it comes before the urge for replication and proof and is more effective as a means of scholarship, and it involves an open-ness to uncertainties: 'The essential change is to SEE CHAOS AS THAT WHICH MAKES ORDER POSSIBLE. Life arises not in spite of but because of dissipative processes that are rich in entropy, production. Chaos is the womb of life, not its tomb.' (Hayles 1991: 100. Her emphasis). Montuori (2010) discusses how creativity and imagination are a central aspect of 'postnormal times'. In such times creativity, non-conformance and non-compliance becomes central rather than unusual, no longer a 'puzzling phenomenon' (Montuori 2010:2), but opening up creativity that can 'permeate every dimension of life' in 'the new participatory culture' (Montuori 2010:15). In scholarship this involves a recognition of the subjectivity of the academic narrative. Inkle says that: '...it is apparent that the location and perspective of the researcher is both inseparable from, and integral to, the knowledge produced' (2005:233). She sees her research as self-reflexive, and that very 'reflexivity acts as both an ethical and empirical tool' in revealing the subjectivity of the researcher, preventing premature closure, and recognising the multiple ways the researcher herself is implicated in scholarship production.

Such narrativity built upon the centrality of the scholar is not implicated in producing material to support a given formulated research argument or question: it leads to a type of fictional truth where the story and storyteller seek to express knowledge. If the story is not the scholar's story, then to whom does it belong?

### **Conclusion: Satanic, escapist or essentially harmless?**

Two issues have been considered in this paper: one about research as narratives of self and one about crime fiction. About each I may consider: are they satanic, escapist or essentially harmless?

In considering the first issue I ask myself: Does a research narrative with strong elements of fictionalisation or personalisation act to enhance scholarship? 'Using stories to represent research can also resist premature closure on understanding, conveying complexity and ambiguity and making space for alternative interpretations (Gray 2004:45). Inkle, in describing her chosen methodology of ethnographic fiction (2010) calls these 'messy texts' that occur 'outside of clearly defined research parameters' (2005:235); others may see them as more challenging to scholarship itself. Clearly I do not hold the latter view.

In considering the second issue I ask myself: Is crime fiction reading essentially about preventing real violence? Is it a way that we vent our deepest and darkest desires? Is it an outlet that prevents multiple (weird and complex) murders as enacted in Midsomer? Does Glasgow become less gritty and London a safer place because of the number of crime fiction novels sited there? Does Hammett make America safe in his time and is this continued because of the multiple crime fiction novels, criminals with psychotic tendencies, mafia links, middle eastern terrorists (etc) and pivotal detectives who thrive there in detective crime fiction?

Michel Kundera says that 'the novel does what the novel does', whilst others declare it dead but print books are replaced in their millions by Kindle readers and the murder mystery marches on.

We are drawn towards the singular cultural influence of one language that may lead us to one dominant way of thinking and discoursing on knowledge. Jean Baudrillard contends that we live in a contemporary culture that is entirely a simulacra. The mediated experiences, the signs, the advertisements, the architecture, indeed all the relentless images around us, contribute to the 'real' or 'true' no longer being available. Perhaps it's just as well that crime fiction abounds as simulcra!

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