

# **Crime Fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Preservation and Subversion of Genre**

**By Kelsey Bricknell**

*'A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously.'*

Bakhtin 1984a: 106 (Gregoriou 2007, 124).

Crime fiction has 'dominated paperback publishing since the twentieth-century' (Gregoriou 2007, x) however its specific origin, as a genre, is a great source of debate amongst theorists. While some 'historians of detective literature' insist that crime novels have been around since the eighteenth century, others state that the genre was born in the nineteenth century with Edgar Allen Poe and the 'creation of the new police in London and Paris' (Gregoriou 2007, 36). Regardless of where the truth actually lies, this "origin" debate does confirm that crime fiction is a well established genre—one with a series of longstanding, internationally acknowledged conventions.

My novel is an adaptation of a current subgenre of crime fiction; twenty-first century novels that favour a contemporary-realist approach and border on crime-literary crossovers. In the following essay, I will discuss the crime genre in a broad sense, stating the themes and conventions that have made it the dominant genre it is. By highlighting the current debates and innovative authors of crime fiction, I will narrow my discussion of the genre to focus on the specific subgenre I have written into. The essay will conclude by stating how my use and subversion of genre conventions have strengthened my writing and reflect Bakhtin's theories of the 'uninterrupted continuity of genre' (Gregoriou 2007, 124).

## **1. Articulation**

### ***Landscape and Conventions***

Crime fiction is the 'literature of detection' and involves a complex narrative, driven by suspense and reconstruction; similar to feminine gothic traditions (Hancox 2011). The appeal of the genre stems from thematic relevance and stylistic choices—readers are guided through the prose by the denial of a 'surprise [until] the very end' (Gregoriou 2007, 140-141). In crime fiction, the setting is often secondary to action and motivation. In my own work, I often

use setting as a symbolic method of characterisation yet, although the crime fiction approach differs from mine, the genre does not compromise its characters. By adhering to a range of conventions, which are flexible to some extent, authors of crime fiction craft an engaging plot which ‘dramatises the role of “discourse” and “story” and the nature of their relation’ (Hancox 2011).

There is no ‘unitary meaning’ in the crime genre. Gregoriou (2007, 132) states that crime novels ‘have formed a family’ and can be regarded as variations of the same theme—a novel can be considered part of the crime genre even if it ‘lack[s] a great number of the typical relevant properties’. Critic and genre theorist, Swales and Wittgenstein (Gregoriou 2007, 132), argue that this lack of definition opens the genre to weak and repetitious plot-lines. Even Paul Auster, through his protagonist, Quinn (in *City of Glass*), ‘expresses...that most [crime novels] are poorly written, [and can’t] stand up to even the vaguest sort of examination’ (Gregoriou 2007, ix). Quinn, and Auster, continues to state that the stories in crime fiction relate to both the world and to each other—the weaknesses are redeemed by an ‘exploration of language’ and the use of form to examine a distinct social context’ (Gregoriou 2007, ix). Because of this, the themes in crime fiction reflect and change with the society the novels are written in, counteracting the plot’s frequent ‘ambiguity and contradictions’ (Hancox 2011).

Since the nineteenth century’s preoccupation with social class and themes of safe guarding property and position, crime fiction has progressed through the subgenres and themes of Noir; identity politics and counter culture; and the notion of questioning “the state we are in”, following the Thatcher and Regan regimes of the nineties. In contemporary crime fiction, themes are based around procedural and forensic crime. The subject of detection is typically a serial killer yet the self-reflective tone of nineties crime fiction is still present. Novelist Sara Paretsky states that because the genre is filled with ‘observations of potential menace and threat,’ there is an impulse for characters to ‘order what is chaotic into a familiar pattern of cause and consequence’ (Kinsman 1995, 22). The character-types who attempt to impose this sense of order and ‘justice in a world that has [none]’ (Gray 2004, 489) are specific to crime fiction and exist, in a relatively similar form, throughout all of the subgenres.

The character-types in crime fiction maintain a ‘tradition of honour-bound heroism’ (Gray 2004, 489) and commonly include a detective; a sidekick; a perpetrator; liminal

figures, often with psychoanalytical undertones; and a victim. Just as the themes mimic the societal views surrounding the narrative, so too does the psyche of the character types. Detectives can range from hardboiled and cynical, to genius loners; and perpetrators can be brilliant psychopaths, or just ordinary people caught up in extraordinary events. This freedom of authorial choice is emphasised through Gregoriou's (2007, 132) statement that, throughout crime novels, '...the detecting [can be] done by a police officer, a private detective, or someone else'. Ultimately, although the character-types are set, there are extensive opportunities for innovation within the restrictions of the genre.

## 2. Reflection

### *Debates and Innovation*

In an interview in 1986, mystery author P.D. James declared that 'detective stories help reassure us of the belief that the universe, underneath it all, is rational' (Kinsman 1995, 15). Pearson and Singer (1999) reiterate this idea by quoting scholar Franco Moretti, who stated that crime fiction 'resolves the deep anxiety of an expanding society'. In the late twentieth century these themes and concepts shifted to focus specifically on 'conspiracy, cruelty, and capital cities' (Knight 2011, 74). This change, first implemented by James Ellroy and Thomas Harris, challenges the reassuring qualities that James and Moretti refer to. A relatively bleak thematic outlook exists within the contemporary crime subgenre. Knight's observations suggest a harsh, urbanised society and, on the surface, it seems that twenty-first century crime fiction merely 'confirms the existing definitions of the world [without] resolving inner tensions' (Kinsman 1995, 16).

My novel reflects Knight's interpretation of twenty-first century society but it does so without such extreme, melodramatic commentary. Robert B. Parker suggests that, in contemporary crime fiction, 'the crime is [only] the *occasion* of the story, [and] the *subject*...is not the detection but the detective' (Smith 2010, 55). By regarding crime fiction as essentially character driven, Parker seconds what author and critic, Christopher Morley, says about the 'eternal popularity of Sherlock Holmes'—that readers return to the novel to visit their 'old friends at 221B Baker Street in London', not because of the plot or 'the detective's miraculous powers of deduction' (Smith 2010, 55). These two ideas, focusing on a more character-driven connection with the narrative, present a version of the crime genre which borders on a crime-literary crossover. Parker and Morley suggest that current versions

of the crime genre already favour a contemporary-realist approach similar to the style I usually write in. In keeping with the genre's traditions however, both plot and character are still considered as equally important.

A lot of debate surrounds the evolution of the crime genre, particularly relating to the nature of the detective. Andrew Pepper argues that the detective 'has always been a liminal, contrary figure, especially in hard-boiled and black detective fiction' (Pearson and Singer 2009, 2). Raymond Chandler is still one of the most influential authors of hard-boiled detective fiction and, although his detectives are not necessarily liminal, they are contrary. Smith (2010, 55) states that Chandler's detective Marlowe takes lead from Hemingway's Nick Adams; that Marlowe is a more complex, literary character whose 'tough-guy [exterior] persona contrasts with his sensitive, British educated, first-person narration.'

Chandler's work pertains more to the Noir subgenre, rather than the contemporary landscape I am writing into, but his detective's complexity is common amongst twenty-first century crime writers also. Gregoriou (2007, 3) supports Pepper's side of the detective-debate and uses Michael Connelly's use of 'social deviance' to do so. In his work, Connelly challenges preconceptions of 'normal and abnormal behaviour' and, through his protagonist (or detective) Harry Bosch, 'illustrates how such a distinction is not easy to make...in fact [he] questions whether the detective himself has turned into a serial killer' (Gregoriou 2007, 3).

Stephen Soitis opposes the views of Pepper and Gregoriou by suggesting that the detective's role is changing, which is, in his opinion, for the better (Pearson and Singer 1999, 2). Soitis states that detectives in contemporary crime fiction challenge the original 'Anglo-male' traditions and 'provide agency, visibility, or identity to marginalised communities' (Pearson and Singer 1999, 2). Paretsky's feminist approach, banning restrictions on the 'places where [her detective] cannot or "should not" go' (Kinsman 1995, 23), provides one example of a contemporary crime novelist challenging the conventional 'Anglo-male' traditions. In a similar vein, Davis (2006, 13-14) exemplifies James Melville's exploration of the Japanese culture—he is able to '...feed reader's hunger to be more than merely entertained' while bringing the marginalised voice of the East to Western reading communities. My novel attempts to increase the visibility of Brisbane's homeless community with a similar approach.

### 3. Synthesis

#### *Moving forward; My Novel*

Australians have always been major consumers of crime fiction and although ‘they have also generated a [substantial] authorship’, initial international recognition was limited. Before the combined efforts of World War II, Australian crime fiction spoke mostly to the continent’s convict history (for example, Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life*). Overseas success did increase after the war, however sales relied primarily on the author’s prior establishment as a ‘general novelists’, as was the case with Jon Cleary (Knight 2011, 71-72). In the twentieth century, Australian crime fiction began to acknowledge urbanisation, challenge the international perception of Australia as a place of ‘grand threatening outback’ and move away from patronising stereotypes of native characters (Knight 2011, 71-72). This increased the struggle to break the ‘tyranny of distance’ and enter the international market—authors, like John Updike, who did achieve sales did so by ‘condensing the international patterns of crime fiction [into the framework of] the world-attractive bush myth’ (Knight 2011, 71-72).

Australian crime fiction now has an established following and there is a lot more freedom surrounding the genre. Peter Temple exemplifies these innovative options by ‘meshing Australian anti-authoritarianism and landscape-linked writing with the interrogative approaches [similar to] that of James Ellroy’ (Knight 2011, 73-74). Temple writes with literary sensibilities, similar to those suggested by Parker and Morley. Like Kate Atkinson, he generally weaves two plotlines together while layering his protagonists (the detective) with international bonds (family heritage) and implied pasts. These detective characters are then partnered with interdisciplinary friends and co-workers (Temple’s versions of the side-kick), to ensure that the protagonists are never completely isolated, even though they may appear sensitive and distant. The depth of Temple’s plot and characterisation are what sets his work apart from others in the genre. In my own work, I often struggle with maintaining the balance of these elements so in my crime novel I have drawn inspiration from these techniques.

My novel subverts the conventional character-types of crime fiction by employing two protagonists of equal importance—the detective and the side-kick. Porter (Gregoriou 2007, 140) argues that ‘the pleasure of [crime fiction] depends both on being familiar with the structure of the whole and on not knowing the specific outcome’. By crafting a narrative

with two protagonists, I have run the risk of alienating strict fans of the genre, however Porter (Gregoriou 2007, 141) also states that there is an ‘indefinite number of decorative variables’ available to authors. These variables are commonly exhibited in the work of Patricia Cornwell and Kathy Reichs and neither of them has suffered a depleted readership as a result.

The thematic motivation behind my crime novel adheres to the constraints of twenty-first century crime fiction by developing a surface narrative of forensic crime. I have layered this narrative with an additional theme which forces my characters, and readers, to ‘examine themselves and the world they live in’ (Hancox 2011). By giving a voice to the side-kick, and making her a co-protagonist, I have taken advantage of the side-kick’s role in assisting the ‘process of knowledge in the narrative’ (Hancox 2011). It is through her that I present my attempts to question the voiceless existence of the homeless in contemporary society. In this way, I am reflecting the work of Walter Mosley and Sara Paretsky who ‘[use] standard detective conventions to critique mainstream attitudes towards...class’ (Gray 2004, 489) and ‘turn tradition upside down’ (Kinsman 1995, 22).

Although my novel conforms to more recent, crime-literary crossover novels, it also shares some commonalities with the Noir-prose of Chandler. Patterson (2002, 62) observes that Chandler’s work ‘is less about detection than hard-boiledness. His triumph was to mint a language that slums and soars at once.’ My novel doesn’t favour the hard-boiled language of similes and one-liners coined by Chandler but it does focus on the internalised voice of the sidekick.

I have been mindful not to lose sight of the plot of my crime novel and have aimed to keep action and motivation at the forefront of my character’s inner-voice. Although this is an unfamiliar stylistic consideration for me, I have found that it adds a layer of depth to my work. Through the fast-paced requirements of the crime genre, I have been able to develop a more focused narrative; one that has a purpose and a clear comment, rather than the vague, symbolic works I usually produce. I have also managed to subvert certain “fixed” conventions, following Bakhtin’s genre theory and allowing my novel to ‘live in the present [of the crime genre], but [remembering] its past’ (Gregoriou 2007, 124).

### Reference List

Davis, J. Madison. 2006. "Interpreting the East to the West." *World Literature Today* 80 (6): 13-15. Accessed August 25, 2011.

[http://web.ebscohost.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/ehost/resultsadvanced?sid=ecf99b02-d5b5-455f-afcb-8c687eac1336%40sessionmgr114&vid=2&hid=127&bquery=\(interpreting+the+east+to+the+west\)&bdata=JmRiPWFmaCZ0eXBIPTEmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl](http://web.ebscohost.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/ehost/resultsadvanced?sid=ecf99b02-d5b5-455f-afcb-8c687eac1336%40sessionmgr114&vid=2&hid=127&bquery=(interpreting+the+east+to+the+west)&bdata=JmRiPWFmaCZ0eXBIPTEmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl)

Gray, W. Russel. 2004. "Hard-boiled Black Easy: Genre Convention on A Red Death." *African American Review* 38 (3): 489-498. Accessed August 25, 2011.

<http://gateway.library.qut.edu.au/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/209819041?accountid=13380>

Gregoriou, Christiana. 2007. *Deviance in Contemporary Crime Fiction*. Edited by Clive Bloom. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Accessed August 25, 2011.

<http://www.palgraveconnect.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/pc/doifinder/10.1057/9780230207219>

Hancox, Donna. 2011. "KWB302 novel and genre: Week 3 lecture notes." Accessed August 17, 2011.

[http://blackboard.qut.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab\\_tab\\_group\\_id=2\\_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D75875\\_1%26url%3D](http://blackboard.qut.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_tab_group_id=2_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D75875_1%26url%3D)

Hancox, Donna. 2011. "KWB302 novel and genre: Week 4 lecture notes." Accessed August 21, 2011.

[http://blackboard.qut.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab\\_tab\\_group\\_id=2\\_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D75875\\_1%26url%3D](http://blackboard.qut.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_tab_group_id=2_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D75875_1%26url%3D)

Kinsman, Margaret. 1995. "A Question of Visibility: Paretsky and Chicago." In *Women Times Three: Writers, Detectives, Readers*, edited by Kathleen Gregory Klein, 15-28. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Knight, Stephen. 2011. "Peter Temple: Australian Crime Fiction on the World Stage" *Clues; A Journal of Detection*, edited by Margaret Kinsman, 29 (1): 71-81. London: McFarland and Company, Inc. Accessed August 16, 2011.

[http://blackboard.qut.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab\\_tab\\_group\\_id=2\\_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D\\_75875\\_1%26url%3D](http://blackboard.qut.edu.au/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_tab_group_id=2_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D_75875_1%26url%3D)

Patterson, Troy. 2002. "Noir Town." *Entertainment Weekly* (664): 62. Accessed August 26, 2011.

<http://web.ebscohost.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/ehost/detail?vid=&hid=111&sid=81c7ab1c-8bd5-4309-91d4-c041ffc5f20f%40sessionmgr110&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbG12ZQ%3%3d#db=ulh&AN=7187258>

Pearson, Nels and Marc Singer. 2009. *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transitional World*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Group. Accessed August 25, 2011.

<http://site.ebrary.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/lib/qut/docDetail.action?docID=10343263>

Smith, Mason. 2010. "Hemingway's Nick Adams and the creation of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe." *Clues; A Journal of Detection*, edited by Margaret Kindman, 28 (2): 55-60. London: McFarland and Company, Inc. Accessed August 25, 2011.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/749333308?accountid=13380>

## **Bibliography**

Atkinson, Kate. 2010. *Started Early, Took My Dog*. London: Doubleday.

Chandler, Raymond. 1992. *The Big Sleep*. New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard Edition.

Docherty, Brian. 1988. *American Crime Fiction; Studies in Genre*. London: Macmillan Press.

Garner, Tally. "Rosamund Lupton; Afterwards." Last modified August 23, 2011.

<http://www.rosamundlupton.com/books/afterwards/>

Lindemann, Mary. 2008. "Eighteenth-Century True-Crime, Legal Histories, and the Literary Imagination." *Daphnis* 37 (1/2): 131-152. Accessed August 25, 2011.

<http://search.proquest.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/docview/195472652/fulltextPDF?accountid=13380>

Snooks et al. ed. 2008. *Style Manual*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Australia: John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd.

Temple, Peter. 2005. *The Broken Shore*. Melbourne: Text Publishing Company.