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Learning all the tricks: critiquing crime fiction in a creative writing PhD

Abstract:

In the late 1920s Dorothy L. Sayers, despite her impressive contributions to the crime fiction genre, wrote of the idea that the genre would fall into a decline, that there ‘certainly does seem a possibility that the detective story will some time come to an end, simply because the public will have learnt all the tricks’ ([1928]1947: 108). This article takes this idea, of learning ‘all the tricks’, and applies it to the process of producing an artefact (a crime novel) and exegesis for a creative writing doctoral program. Specifically, this article looks at the notion of how the artefact and exegesis should work together, as two halves of a single whole. In addition, this article explores the idea of how the task of writing an historical crime fiction novel, and accompanying exegesis, can draw on both crime *fiction* and on crime fiction *criticism*. This base, of the creative and critical, can inform the production of a work that offers an aesthetic quality and an academically rigorous contribution to conversations around one of the world’s best-selling genres.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

In 1859 the writer William Burrows wrote, on the task of storytelling, that: ‘The writer’s object is simply to communicate what he knows – to tell a plain, “unvarnished tale” – not deficient in adventurous incident and the display of varied character’ (viii). This is sound advice. In the context of completing a PhD in creative writing, communicating what is known becomes a complex task as doctoral candidates begin the process of connecting their artistic efforts – often in forms with which they are very familiar – to a theoretically informed critical reflection, a form of writing that is new to many people, is often avoided and does not consistently spark enthusiasm. I have, over many years, heard great outlines for novels, scripts, short story collections and volumes of poetry being produced for a doctorate in creative writing; but no-one has yet cornered me over a cup of tea and said: ‘You must hear the outline for my critical reflection’.

For my own project the creative form was a novel titled ‘Blood on their Hands’, an historical crime novel set in Sydney during the Great Depression. This work was designed to present as a traditional piece of crime fiction and to also offer a series of reflections on the history of this genre in Australia. In particular, the piece looks at the changing representations of class, gender and some of the ethical questions attendant on the act of murder in Australian crime fiction produced between 1830 and 1980. The task I had set myself, though significant in scale and scope, was one I clearly understood. I would write a detective novel, a carefully crafted text conforming to the well-established conventions of a traditional piece of crime fiction. In contrast, the theoretically-informed critical reflection – more commonly referred to as the exegesis – was a type of written expression I knew *of* rather than knew *about*. Writing a theoretically-based piece to provide an academic anchor for my original creative work was a challenging step into unfamiliar terrain.

The ongoing discussion within *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* around the evolving form of the artefact and exegesis model for a PhD is evidence that many other PhD candidates are also uncertain about how to map this terrain. One thing, however, became clear to me over my journey. This is, that the artefact and exegesis model of PhD acts as an exciting example of the creative-critical nexus in action. Applying this model to an investigation of crime fiction is additionally apt as crime fiction has come to be recognised as a genre particularly suited to providing social critique (see, for example: Haut 1999; Moore 2006; Kelly 2012; Pezzotti 2014). In this way both the form and genre of the research combine to add further robustness to the creative-critical marriage inherent in the work. With this in mind, I begin my paper with an investigation into the nature of the exegesis and explore how its critical elements might best be shaped when the creative artefact is a crime novel, and then move to the broader question of how critical analysis of the crime fiction genre can function as a creative act.

The crime novel and the exegesis

So what is the exegesis? That’s a good question and like all good questions there is not a consensus on the answer (McKenzie 2007: 21).

Investigations into the specific expectations of the exegesis were complicated at the outset of my project because, while there was some agreement on the purpose of the exegesis, there was no consensus on the final *product* that an exegesis should generate (McKenzie 2007: 21). Since setting out upon my own road towards a creative-critical PhD the work of numerous scholars – Tess Brady, Donna Lee Brien, Nigel Krauth, Jenn Webb and Paul Williams, to name only a few – have made significant contributions to this important discussion. Indeed, it has been asserted that the exegesis can be positioned as the well-established commentary or preface (Krauth 2002) or reflective journal (Krauth 2011). Such research into the exegesis, in a variety of forms, created a space in which scholars could ask more important questions than ‘*What is an exegesis?*’ and ‘*Why do I have to do one?*’ thus allowing more to be achieved with the exegesis form (Krauth 2011). More recently, arguments have been made for the fictively playful opportunities that the exegesis can offer with ‘myriad possibilities of the form of the exegesis, [able to be] dictated by the nature of the artefact itself’ (Williams 2016). Furthermore, Williams suggests that ‘supervisors should guide candidates in the fictive art of the exegesis, to help them accept that uncertainty is necessary, and that they do not need to fall back on the formulations of discourses not equipped to complement the creative artefact’ (2016: online).

Overall, the purpose of the exegesis is generally perceived as being twofold. First, the submission of a critical analysis and discussion of some type, presenting the results of a detailed investigation into a particular aspect of writing, alongside a creative work ‘goes some way toward dispelling the cloud of doubt hovering over creative writing in the academy’ (McKenzie 2007: 24). Second, an exegesis acknowledges that a doctoral program is a form of apprenticeship that allows developing writers to research their craft and take advantage of the opportunities only a research higher degree can provide (Harper 2003: 16). Moreover, the exegesis allows research higher degree candidates to refine their research practice in a way that a program facilitating an exclusively creative outcome could not. In this way the development of creative practices and research methods are interwoven, producing not a two-volume product but rather a single piece of work in which each part – the creative and the critical – *reflects* and *reinforces* the other.

Facilitating ‘opportunities for exciting innovation and invention’ (Brien 2004) as, for example, biography, memoir, contemporary fiction, historical fiction, poetry, screenplays and more, the exegesis also creates ‘considerable space for uncertainty’ (Brien 2004). This uncertainty surrounds the various elements of the exegesis, such as the structure and style of the document and how the document relates to the creative work. It is this relationship which is vital for the overall success of a creative thesis, that is, how well the two elements complement, rather than compete with, each other – to reflect and reinforce the other – because traditionally the ‘exegesis is not a critique of the [creative] work, but sits alongside it’ (Arnold 2005: 41). The novel and exegesis are bound by a literary marriage that supports Pierre Macherey’s observation that: ‘In short, a book never arrives unaccompanied: it is a figure against a background of other formations, depending on them rather than contrasting with them’ ([1966]2006: 61). This mode of writing – the two forms that intertwine: complementing, not competing; depending on, not contrasting with – also affords

opportunities to explain elements of the thesis of particular importance to both the poetics of the creative work and the creative practice that underpins the writing process.

An example from my own critical exegesis shows how I was able to provide some background on particularly important passages in my novel. One of these passages details how a greyhound, referred to throughout the bulk of the story as simply ‘the dog’, hears gunfire and, knowing his mistress is in danger, runs towards her:

A young greyhound who had been purchased for £600 had, only a few months before, set a new record of 28.52 seconds over 500 yards at The Laurels in Wimbledon. Had Catharine’s dog been on a track and not on Macquarie Street, hundreds of punters would have held their breaths while they watched him smash the record of Future Cutlet, as the dog easily reached his top speed of almost forty miles-per-hour (Franks 2011: 415).

In the exegesis I explain I undertook research to find out which dog held the world track speed record in 1932 (a task that was not as easy as it sounds). These details (BGRB 2008) were then given to a mathematician to convert into a speed that could be presented as miles-per-hour: 3 weeks of work for 1 paragraph of 72 words. There are many who would regard this effort as a waste of time. I could have written ‘the dog ran very fast’ and conveyed the same information. Yet, I wanted to emphasise the dog’s speed because it is symbolic of his adoration of his mistress, Catharine, and his determination to protect her at any cost. In my novel all of the main characters experience the emotions associated with love and loyalty: the only one who does not have any difficulty expressing their feelings, however, is the dog. This is one of several examples of detailed research that served to reinforce and develop themes within the text and to position the creative within the critical. This particular example also offers insight into how I was working towards the dual goal of artefact and exegesis, the dog offering a metaphor for the speeds at which it sometimes felt that I was learning, researching, writing and producing.

Despite the acknowledged importance of the exegesis – even the most preliminary review of the outlines for various doctoral programs reveals an almost universal emphasis on creative and critical writing practices, with an exegesis to accompany the artefact ‘accepted as a necessary justification’ (Williams 2016: 1) – there are no nationally agreed standards, checklists or templates for students and their supervisors to use in developing the exegesis (though there are now ways in which non-traditional research outputs can be quantified, as outlined by the Australian Research Council and the Excellence in Research for Australia framework [Williams 2016: 1]). Even the size of the exegesis varies dramatically between creative writing programs, with Australian institutions offering research higher degrees in creative writing requiring between 20,000 and 50,000 words of the total thesis to be dedicated to the critical component (Carey et al. 2008). This level of uncertainty concerning the exegesis has generated numerous problems for students of writing. The most significant problem is connecting the creative and critical components, which sees some students ‘push thoughts of the exegesis aside and then in the second or third year of study it becomes an afterthought’ (Kroll 2004) while others choose to write the exegesis first (Brien

2004). Both of these writing approaches are in contrast to the advice I received from my supervisor, and followed, about the need to work on the exegesis and the original creative work concurrently as both written works were, essentially, telling a single story. Jen Webb, in her work on practice-led research, emphasises how the starting point for such projects 'is usually an idea' (2008) and how this type of research is often concerned with 'how humans construct the world through ideas, images, narratives and philosophies' (2008). Webb goes on to present a research model of: research for practice; research into practice; and research through practice, reflecting and adjusting after each phase (2008), which supports both the creative and critical components of a creative-critical PhD at the same time.

One survey of students who had recently completed a research higher degree in creative writing revealed two extreme views in relation to the exegetical component. At one end of the continuum the exegesis was considered to be a 'completely intrinsic part of the total project' while at the other end of the scale the exegesis was felt to be a 'waste of time' and an unnecessary hurdle to qualify for a degree (Brien 2004). These attitudes reflect Josie Arnold's belief that the relationship between creative production and academic research are, together, accepted as knowledge, 'yet the academic element is too often regarded as a legitimising component' (2005: 38).

When producing my own exegesis, surveying these views did not provide a solid shape for my specific understanding of the exegesis and dictate what I was required to produce, but they did help to clarify one important aspect of my thesis: I did not want to be in a position where I would one day reflect on my experiences as a doctoral candidate and declare that approximately 30% of my efforts were a 'waste of time'. In addition to my concerns about what type of exegesis I would produce, I was also concerned that every word dedicated to the theoretical component was one less word allocated to the original creative work. This was particularly important for a crime novel and in producing a contribution to a genre that is often more about action rather than reflection. Though, of course, many famous crime fiction authors have produced critiques of the genre (most notably Raymond Chandler with *The Simple Art of Murder* [1950]). In addition, writing 'I' statements also made me feel uncomfortable (they still do), generating an unease that the exegesis would dissolve into a self-indulgent piece focussing on me and not my scholarship. There was also the issue of ensuring the exegesis was a reflection on the original creative work and not an extension of it because there is a risk, for the novelist, that 'the exegesis may become part of the fiction' (Perry 1999: 115).

These concerns were mitigated by an increasing amount of positivity, within my cohort at University and at relevant gatherings such as the annual conferences of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, toward the concept of the exegesis, and the idea that 'good theoretical writing should embody ideas *and* strive for style' (Bleakley 2000: 12). This statement reassured me that I could produce a document that was reliable, readable and would enhance my original creative work. To do so, I utilised a structure broken up into a series of sections: articulate the inspiration for the original creative work; detail how my novel can be clearly located within the genre in which I was working (crime fiction); present the results of my chief areas of investigation (the changing representations of class, gender and the ethical questions

attendant on the act of murder in Australian crime fiction); and outline the writing processes I adopted to produce my novel. This breakdown allowed me to focus my effort on understanding the purpose of the exegesis within the context of a research higher degree. In particular, it allowed me to work towards not only the specific requirements of my university but also the broader ‘expectations of the academy’ (Arnold 2005: 37). In this way, I learnt to write in a particular way, for a particular audience without compromising creative aspirations. This produced a result that generated a liminal space between the creative and the critical with an exegesis, a commentary that is occasionally playful and one which offers a detailed history of the genre and situates the creative work within this historical narrative. Moreover, the creative-critical nexus is apparent though the multiple doorways of each component – artefact and exegesis – that open up to reveal insights into the other.

The result is an original creative work, which can be easily identified as a detective novel and positioned on the timeline of the development of the crime fiction genre, and a theoretically informed critical reflection that makes a contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the crime fiction genre. Together, these two elements form a thesis which Jeri Kroll would describe as a ‘hybrid creature with a claw firmly embedded in two bodies – the arts and academia’ (2004).

A case for the critical investigation of crime fiction

By the critic and the professedly literary person the detective story is apt to be dismissed contemptuously as outside the pale of literature, to be conceived of as a type of work produced by half-educated and wholly incompetent writers for consumption by office boys, factory girls, and other persons devoid of culture and literary taste (Freeman [1924]1947: 7).

One of the contemporaries of R. Austin Freeman, Edmund Wilson, wrote: ‘reading detective stories is simply a kind of vice that, for silliness and minor harmfulness, ranks somewhere between crossword puzzles and smoking’ ([1944]1947: 395). The words of Freeman and Wilson, put down on paper in the early twentieth century, are as relevant now as they were when they were first written. At the beginning of the twenty-first century Cathy Cole observed: ‘crime novels are housed in their own section in many bookshops, separated from literary novels much as you’d keep a child with measles away from the rest of the class’ (2004: 116). More recently, the awarding of Australia’s most prestigious prize for literature, The Miles Franklin Literary Award, to Peter Temple for his crime novel *Truth* (2009) sparked a cutting comment from John Sutherland. The former chairman of the judges for the Commonwealth of Nations’s most famous, as well as richest, literary award, suggested submitting a crime novel for the Booker Prize would be: ‘like putting a donkey into the Grand National’ (2010).

Demonstrating the creative-critical nexus, these views of crime fiction are foregrounded in my novel when Catharine Darling, in conversation with her brother, James Longfoot who in public is an English Lecturer at The University of Sydney while in private is a writer of romantic and sensation novels, says: ‘Unless, of course, publishing entertaining fiction is part of your plan to make academic study more

relevant' (Franks 2011: 98).

In addition to the literary scholars who have spoken out against popular fiction, some of the greatest names within crime fiction have themselves castigated the crime fiction genre. Arthur Conan Doyle killed Sherlock Holmes in *The Final Problem* in 1894 because he declared, in a letter to his mother, that the character took: 'his mind from better things' (Doyle in Lellenberg et al. [1891]2008: 300). Holmes was only revived because of public demand, the fiscal incentive that came with being offered 'an unprecedented 100 pounds per thousand words' (Lycett 2007: 282) and a growing irritation with his imitators including Australian writers Guy Boothby and E.W. Hornung (Lycett 2007: 283). Dorothy L. Sayers, despite her work to legitimise crime fiction, also wrote that there 'certainly does seem a possibility that the detective story will some time come to an end, simply because the public will have learnt all the tricks' ([1928]1947: 108), the comment from which this article takes its title.

These observations document a long-standing divide between highbrow and lowbrow writing and reinforce the view that, until the mid-twentieth century, 'popular fiction was either ignored in academia or treated with contempt, a snobbishness that infected left-wing and right-wing scholars' (Bloom 2008: 13). Pierre Bourdieu's work on the debates of high and low culture – in the context of this paper presenting as "Big L" Literature and "little f" fiction – focuses on consumption. High cultural production is 'autonomous', that is, it is 'indifferent to the buying market and reading/viewing public, often openly contemptuous of the market-place and the demand for profit'. In contrast, low culture is 'heteronomous' in that it is 'open to mass audiences and necessarily caught up in the logic of the marketplace, which means it remains *conscious* of its viewers/readers, and is determined to please them' (qtd. in Gelder 2004: 13, emphasis original). Importantly, as noted by Ken Gelder, there is no requirement for one form to take a stand in opposition to the other, it just needs to be noted that 'Literature deploys a set of logics and practices that are different in kind to those deployed in the field of popular fiction' (2004: 11–12). Rather than existing in the language of art, such texts draw upon the language of 'industry' (Gelder 2004: 13) and so there are two distinctly different forms of production and texts must fall into at least one of these categories (very rarely into both) (Gelder 2004: 11). In the words of Roland Barthes, 'labour replaces genius as a value' (qtd. in Marx 2005: 31).

Crime fiction is still not consistently considered worthy of the same level of attention as literature deemed to be of a higher quality but some of the barriers, discussed briefly below, which segregate high and low literature are slowly being dismantled and many crime fiction works now co-exist with what is often regarded as the more serious fiction found on the lists of established literary canons (Freier 2004: 190). One of the most significant barriers to the academic investigation of crime fiction is the sheer quantity of crime fiction that is produced. As already identified, crime fiction is the largest genre fiction has to offer with a third of all new titles released each year qualifying as crime fiction (Knight 2010: xi). (Interestingly, true crime also sells in significant numbers, see, for example: Murley 2008.) In fact, with regards to crime fiction, as early as the 1920s, it was felt that:

It is impossible to keep track of all the detective-stories produced to-day. Book upon

book, magazine upon magazine pour out from the Press, crammed with murders, thefts, arsons, frauds, conspiracies, problems, puzzles, mysteries, thrills, maniacs, crooks, poisoners, forgers, garroters, police, spies, secret-service men, detectives, until it seems that half the world must be engaged in setting riddles for the other half to solve (Sayers [1928]1947: 95).

In addition to the new crime fiction works published each year, there are numerous re-entries into the crime fiction market, with some of the genre's most iconic titles, such as works by Arthur Conan Doyle and Dorothy L. Sayers, continuously in print since their first publication (Redmond 2009: 316; Kenney 1991: 19). All of these factors have combined to send a message that crime fiction is not very valuable because it is so easily available. This has led to one of the major challenges, which contributors to the study of crime fiction now face, and that is the sheer volume of the 'twentieth century's most successful fictional formula' (Plain 2008: 3).

As crime fiction flooded the publishing market, it was 'not long before newer novelists (and their backlists) dominated the fiction market to the neglect of classics ... "cheap" became a synonym for "nasty" and "popular" for "mass-produced"' (Bloom, 2008: 80). The method of production, for this vast amount of material, is usually dependent upon cheap paper and soft covers: volumes, which are not destined, like quality hard covers or leather-clad books, to be handed down to the next generation. This is, however, slowly starting to change and quality limited edition crime fiction volumes are available from the Folio Society while Everyman's Library continues to publish quality hard covers with dust jackets. Some mainstream publishers are also contributing to this trend with Harper Collins reprinting, in hard cover, some of Agatha Christie's works that are facsimiles of the first editions and Pan Macmillan recently reprinting, also in hard cover, Matthew Reilly's works with matching glossy-black dust jackets. It is interesting to note that this is occurring against the background of the phenomenon of online publishing.

Many cover designs have also contributed to a poor appraisal of the crime fiction genre. A completely naked woman on the cover of a classic text, such as the beautiful black and white photograph on the 2004 paperback edition of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), is art. An almost naked woman on a crime fiction title, however, is not widely considered as art because sex is so openly utilised to sell crime fiction, and other types of popular fiction, 'with erotically suggestive and scantily clad "dames" on their gaudy covers' (Bloom 2008: 86). Yet, these covers have attracted serious academic attention in Australia, and around the world, as they are seen to represent an 'enduring publishing heritage' (Johnson-Woods 2004: 16).

Between the covers of crime novels, the textual content also draws criticism. Indeed, 'good specimens of the art are much rarer than good serious novels' (Chandler [1950]1988: 2). Certainly the amount of crime fiction published increases the likelihood of the reading public being presented with works that are not as slick as some of crime fiction's more celebrated titles and may suffer from writing 'that is crude and slovenly' (Symons [1992]1993: 16). The way in which crime fiction is executed is unquestioningly open to criticism but no fault can be found with the basic structure of the crime novel because, though writers take pride in their convoluted

plots, the basic storyline for the crime story is one which ‘has an advantage over every other kind of novel. It possesses [though is not necessarily presented to the reader in this way] an Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle, and end’ (Sayers [1928]1947: 101).

One of the more spurious accusations cast at crime fiction by its critics is that murder stories ‘might provide a real-life murderer with an idea or even a pattern for his crime’ (James 2009: 165). This is not a logical argument, however, given that crime fiction ‘hardly provides a reliable model since the murderer is always found out’ (James 2009: 165). Furthermore, ‘literary fiction allows us to experience social situations vicariously, thus allowing for personal consideration of response and action’ (Mar and Oatley 2008: 183). This potentially mitigates thoughts of needing to murder a disagreeable neighbour, a spiteful supervisor or an unfaithful spouse because crime fiction allows us ‘to experiment in a controlled and safe manner, with intentions, emotions, and emotion-evoking situations that would be impossible and often highly undesirable in the real world’ (Mar and Oatley 2008: 183). Essentially, crime fiction provides us with numerous opportunities to experience the planning, and the praxis, of murder: all without the inconvenience of being caught, arrested, tried and then sent to prison. This is an important function of the genre for readers as well as writers, with Sue Grafton, well-known crime writer of the Kinsey Millhone series, explaining how thoughts of poisoning her ex-husband were channelled into creative practice rather than criminal activity (Hawkes 1990).

The most significant barrier to the academic acceptability of crime fiction is, as Clive Bloom has identified, the snobbishness that is routinely directed to popular fiction (2008: 13). This snobbishness is not limited to comments directed at crime fiction but can also be seen within the genre itself as devotees of some sub-genres direct criticism at the devotees of other sub-genres. The most notable feud is between the hardboiled stories of the post-war years and the clue puzzles of the Golden Age with proponents of the former declaring that the latter produced detective stories which were dominated by snobbery and which featured an overall lack of social concern (Skrebels 2006: 6). Crime fiction writer and critic, P.D. James, notes that while such allegations may be valid, the writers of the Golden Age were producing fiction for a period ‘in which social divisions were clearly understood and generally accepted since they seemed an immutable part of the natural order’ (2009: 167). The portrayal of such divisions, however, was not the exclusive domain of crime writers and the literary treatment of the lower classes was not always oppressive. As James correctly points out, ‘In general, the butler didn’t do it’ (2009: 169).

Such snobbishness is even found within sub-genres. The rivalry between fans of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler can be intense. I made the mistake of mentioning Chandler’s name to my tour guide while on a Hammett Walking Tour in San Francisco and was told: ‘Chandler wasn’t tough. Hammett was tough, he led the life, he worked for Pinkerton’s. The closest Chandler got to real crime was a night in the slammer for a drink driving charge. Hammett was the first hardboiled man’ (D Herron, personal communication, December 3, 2006). I thought of mentioning that Carroll John Daly was the writer who actually pioneered the hardboiled tradition but nobody likes a pushy tourist.

The academics who explore crime fiction are often drawn to the major developments of the genre that have occurred in Britain and America, creating a situation where Australian contributions are not ignored but are often neglected. It is worthwhile to note some of the specifically Australian focused research in the area of crime fiction has taken the form of author biographies. These biographies include Lucy Sussex's *The Fortunes of Mary Fortune* (1989) and *Blockbuster: Fergus Hume & The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (2015) and Nicola Bowes' *Criminal Nation: the crime fiction of Mary Helena Fortune* (2008) as well as biographies of Arthur Upfield including Jessica Hawke's *Follow My Dust!: a biography of Arthur Upfield* (1957) and Travis Lindsey's *Arthur William Upfield: a biography* (2005). This, too, is starting to change. As I began my own doctorate there were several, significant, recently completed or in-progress creative writing research higher degrees looking at crime fiction more broadly. These works include Wendy Laing's 'Severance Packages: A Crime Paranormal Novel and Exegesis' (2004), Caroline Simpson's 'Lesbian Detective Fiction: The Outsider Within' (2008) and Carolyn Beasley's 'The Fingerprint Thief: A Crime Novel and Exegesis' (2009). Today, many more research higher degree candidates are engaging with the crime fiction genre with, at the time of writing, a simple search in Trove for 'crime fiction' and 'thesis' producing over 150 results of relevant works at masters and doctorate levels.

Some of the more detailed works available which document the different aspects of crime fiction and the genre's international development include Julian Symons' revised edition of *Bloody Murder* (1992), Cathy Cole's *Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks* (2004) and Charles J. Rzepka's *Detective Fiction* (2005) as well as significant edited volumes such as the *Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003) edited by Martin Priestman and the *Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* (2010) edited by Catherine Ross Nickerson. Stand-alone volumes such as these and many others have been supplemented over recent years by substantial series that investigate the genre, including the Palgrave Macmillan Crime Files Series and the Intellect Protagonist Series which explores the various protagonists of crime fiction, volumes to date include *Antihero* (2015) edited by Fiona Peters and Rebecca Stewart, *Detective* (2015) edited by Barry Forshaw and *Private Investigator* (2016) edited by Alistair Rolls and myself. These works reference some examples of Australian texts but do not focus exclusively upon them. The most complete picture of the history of Australian crime fiction remains Stephen Knight's classic work *Continent of Mystery: A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction* (1997). Importantly for crime fiction writers, these works look at the craft of writing crime fiction in addition to offering histories of changes within the genre and the machinery of publishing such vast quantities of material.

These critical full-length texts are complemented by 'thousands of carefully argued, well-researched, elegantly written studies of the crime genre available and awaiting further comment' (Priestman [2003] 2006: 1). The writers of many of these efforts to engage academically with crime fiction are yet to be more broadly recognised as serious researchers in the field of crime fiction are still faced with an overall lack of scholarly interest (though this is starting to change: the formation of the 'Detective Fiction on the Move Strategic Network' at the University of Newcastle, Australia is

evidence of this). This general lack of interest, which has been highlighted by Stephen Knight, can be seen in the fact that crime fiction does not enjoy the same level of academic activity, such as conferences dedicated to the form, which other literary genres regularly enjoy (2004: x). Interest in crime fiction is increasing though and there are more and more opportunities to present papers on the genre, which are being facilitated through the conferences conducted by various popular culture associations. Another area of academic activity, the scholarly peer-reviewed journal, has also failed to generate widespread and long-lasting support for this genre. The international journal *Clues: a journal of detection* is published biannually but does not focus exclusively on the crime fiction novel, instead extending its coverage to film and television as well as non-fiction, while the Australian journal, *Mean Streets: a quarterly journal of crime, mystery and detection*, only managed 17 issues between 1990 and 1996. Again, this is starting to change with the recent establishment, in 2015, of *The Australian Journal of Crime Fiction* an online, open-access journal dedicated to unpacking various aspects of the crime fiction genre.

It is also important, for academic writers of crime fiction, to call upon crime fiction criticism generated by crime fiction writers. There is a stunning corpus of crime-focused literature where the nexus between the creative and the critical is most pronounced, for the writing of both creative and critical pieces of crime-based texts. Many of the most important names to have contributed to the genre of crime fiction have offered crime fiction criticism. These names include G.K. Chesterton, who wrote *A Defence of Detective Stories* (1901); Dorothy L. Sayers, who presented numerous well-crafted essays including *An Introduction to the Omnibus of Crime* (1928-29); James M. Cain, whose *Author's Preface to Double Indemnity* (1945) remains crucial to discussions of noir; Raymond Chandler, whose well-known *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950) continues to be read, examined and cited today; and the prolific Ellery Queen who critiqued, edited and generated crime fiction, including *In the Queen's Parlour and Other Leaves from the Editors' Notebook* (1957). These are just some of the writers who have written crime fiction and commentaries on the art of contributing to one of the world's best-selling genres. The combined contributions of these men and women present a 'how to' guide to crime fiction, offering budding writers, almost in list form, all the tricks to success.

Laura Marcus suggests that the barriers to a broader acceptance of crime fiction, discussed briefly above, are being pulled down by the genre itself which, when analysed, works to 'secure and to trouble literary borders and boundaries, including the distinction between high and low literature and the divide between modernist and post-modernist fiction' ([2003]2006: 245–246). It should also be noted that crime fiction also provides a wealth of material for those studying disciplines other than literature, such as semiotics, as highlighted by Roland Barthes when he asked: 'Who would not be touched by a text whose declared "subject" is death?' ([1985]1986: 86).

Crime fiction also deserves academic investigation because 'only the most literal of literary minds would dispute the claim that fictional characters help shape the way we think of ourselves, and hence help us articulate more clearly what it means to be human' (Galgut 2002: 190). Crime fiction focuses on what it means to be human, and how complex humans are, because stories of murders, and the men and women who

solve them, comment on what drives some people to take a life and what drives others to avenge that life which is lost.

It is also important to remember that at the centre of virtually all crime novels is a problem that is solved:

Not by luck or divine intervention, but by human ingenuity, human intelligence and human courage. It confirms our hope that, despite some evidence to the contrary, we live in a beneficent and moral universe in which problems can be solved by rational means and peace and order restored from communal or personal disruption and chaos (James 2009: 174).

Literature ‘puts us in touch with human values and dilemmas’ (Klages 2006: 10). A crime fiction text may be printed on cheap paper and feature a gaudy cover but the pages within can document and discuss the entire continuum of human activity and emotion. Crime fiction, particularly those texts that deal with murder, more actively than any other type of fiction articulates human values and dilemmas.

Conclusion

When selecting to undertake a creative-critical PhD, I set out to write a detective novel, a carefully crafted text conforming to the well-established conventions of a traditional piece of crime fiction and which had a beginning, middle and end. As this was to be an historical crime novel set during the Great Depression, the work to ensure that real events, people and places were presented as accurately as possible would also need to conform to the facts found in a number of academic disciplines, including: economics, history, political science and sociology. The resulting story demonstrated an ability to structure a crime-driven plot, present a setting, create various characters and utilise language effectively. A story that, having drawn on some of ‘the tricks’ of the crime-writing trade, could be placed on a shelf in a book store or at a library.

The idea of the creative-critical nexus reinforces the value of the exegesis – regardless of the form it takes – and, in the case of artefacts of crime fiction, assists in swelling the body of work that discusses, elucidates and critiques one of the world’s best-selling genres. The importance of critical texts about crime fiction cannot be underestimated. There is far more to the crime fiction corpus than merely ‘whodunit?’; in addition to the most obvious line of inquiry within a crime story – the search for, and identification of, the guilty party – are myriad investigations for the reader, ranging from excursions into the craft of writing to exploring how crime fiction reflects the world in which we live. For practitioners, be they research higher degree candidates or well-established bestselling novelists, the opportunities to critique, through fiction, serious social issues as well as the crime fiction formula are limited only by our own creativity.

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