

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Paul French, *Midnight in Peking* (Vintage, 2011)

Midnight in Peking on 8 January 1937 heralded the celebrations for the Russian Christmas. Rickshaw pullers waited for fares outside the Grand Hôtel de Pékin, while its occupants enjoyed dancing, gossip and champagne. Dark, freezing fog slid through the narrow alleyways near the Forbidden City. And nineteen-year-old Pamela Werner, the daughter of the former British Consul, was killed.

Paul French's book of creative non-fiction is subtitled 'how the murder of a young Englishwoman haunted the last days of old China.' His work is as much about 1930s Peking as it is about the police investigation into the murder of Pamela Werner; the crime story drives the narrative while the social history of the period and place provide the context and rich background material. Pamela Werner's mutilated body was found in open ground at the base of Fox Tower on the Tartar Wall, the southern boundary of the city. The girl had crossed over from the European 'Legation Quarter', the walled sanctuary for wealthy foreigners, to Chinese Peking, a place of 'narrow, crowded *hutong* or alleyways', poor lodging-houses and opium dens. Her death was the product of both the place where she was born and the time in which she lived.

Paul French vividly recreates the life of a city existing on the brink of war. He has written about China before now – his books include *Through the Looking-glass: China's Foreign Journalists from the Opium Wars to Mao* (2009) and a biography of Shanghai journalist and adventurer, Carl Crow (2006). He has also published analysis and commentary on China in international newspapers and magazines. *Midnight in Peking* is a new project for him, a movement from traditional non-fiction to the story-telling techniques of creative non-fiction.

The change is a successful one. French has a crime fiction writer's command of narrative drive – the book draws on the techniques of 1930s *crime noir* – and the novelist's gift for capturing setting and character with just the right detail. This is his description of Peking in June 1937, six months before the Japanese invasion:

People ducked involuntarily at the sound of doors banging, a rickshaw tyre blowing out, a taxi backfiring. The sudden sharp screech of ungreased wheels of trolleybuses on Morrison Street sent shudders through people, where before it had gone barely noticed. What had once just been the frenetic cacophony of Peking life now rang alarm bells in the city's subconscious. Were they here? Had they finally come? At times the tension of waiting seemed worse than the inevitable attack; at times it seemed it would never happen. (183)

Passages of writing like this kept me reading *Midnight in Peking*. French precisely evokes the atmosphere of *both* sides of the city: the privileged Legation Quarter and the dingy 'Badlands'. He draws clear pictures of Pamela Werner's sheltered life behind the walls of the European quarter: taking tiffin with family friends, riding her bicycle to the French skating rink, sitting down to dinner with her elderly, bookish father. Then the reader is plunged into the dark, frightening heart of the city:

The Badlands had no street lights but major haunts like the White Palace dance hall had light bulbs strung up outside, while red lanterns advertising bars and restaurants

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glowed along the *hutong*. Rickshaw pullers walked up and down in the cold, looking for fares. While this was technically Chinese Peking, foreigners were in the majority: a mix of criminal elements, dopers, drinkers and whore-mongers ... The dive-bars were open to anyone who fancied their chances. Here peroxide-blond White Russians past their prime raised their sketched-on eyebrows and offered 'business' to the semi-comatose, the paralytic, the close to broke. (125)

The Peking Badlands are 'White Russian territory, not a place where prim and proper English girls ventured unaccompanied' (127): yet Pamela Werner is murdered here, and her mutilated body is dumped at the nearby Fox Tower. These 'crime story' aspects of *Midnight in Peking* draw the reader into the book, and French paces his revelations and deductions as skilfully as any writer of fictional *crime noir*.

While he was doing research in the archives and newspapers of Shanghai, Hong Kong and London, Paul French came across

my real breakthrough, my 'eureka moment' ... I was looking through a box of jumbled up and unnumbered documents from the British Embassy in China in the 1940s when I found a 150 page or so long document sent to the Foreign Office by ETC Werner, Pamela's father. These documents were the detailed notes of a private investigation he had conducted after the Japanese occupation of Peking until he was himself interned by the Japanese along with all other Allied foreigners after Pearl Harbor. It was a fascinating document with a lot of new evidence.¹

I won't say any more for fear of spoiling other readers' experience of *Midnight in Peking* – just that French's skilful use of this material provides a plausible explanation of Pamela Werner's unsolved murder seventy-five years after the event. It makes mesmerising reading.

'True crime' seems to be a genre that lends itself particularly well to the techniques of creative non-fiction, perhaps because it is so inherently dramatic, a natural source for the visual and story-telling elements of this kind of writing. French cites a debt to James Fox's *White Mischief* (1982) and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1995), both highly successful books that make use of literary techniques to paint a compelling and unforgettable picture of a real crime. I was also reminded of the Truman Capote classic, *In Cold Blood*; more recently Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher, or The Murder at Road Hill House* (2009) deservedly won the prestigious Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-fiction. All of these writers lay emphasis on the accuracy of their research (the non-fiction) as well as highlighting the literary (creative) techniques.

On his website, Paul French comments

I was thinking of books that had used literary devices to both tell dramatic true stories in ways that really convey the mood and sensibilities of the time and bring real characters to life better than might be possible in straight non-fiction ... In *Midnight in Peking* no characters' actions or words are invented, no locations are made up, the timeline is real and only what is known for sure is included – there are no

¹ Paul French. *Midnight in Peking* (website). <<http://www.midnightinpeking.com/>> 16/11/2011

suppositions, perhaps or maybes. That's why I insisted on footnoting the book so that if readers felt I had strayed from the actual events into fiction they could refer to the notes and see the original source of the characters' words, actions or motivations.²

He then enhances these facts with literary techniques: a strong narrative, an evocative setting, a convincing portrayal of his protagonists. French's book embodies the best ideas of creative non-fiction: a true story told in a way that makes it far more vivid and compelling than the straightforward reportage of traditional non-fiction. I can't recommend *Midnight in Peking* highly enough: sometimes truth *is* stranger than fiction.

Jennifer Osborn

² French.