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Joss, M. (2013) *From whodunnits to literary fiction: The charting of an author's transition from crime writer to literary novelist*. PhD Thesis. Oxford Brookes University.

**From whodunnits to literary fiction:
The charting of an author's transition
from crime writer to literary novelist**

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
of Oxford Brookes University for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy on the basis of published work

October 2013

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Acknowledgements

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Simon Kövesi, who has been so generous with his time, immense knowledge, expertise and insight, and whose constant encouragement has been empowering. My sincere thanks are due also to Dr Daniel Lea who as my director of studies gave valuable, expert guidance at critical points. I would also like to thank my research tutor Dr Nicole Pohl, English subject librarian Joanne Cooksey, and the Headington Library staff. I am grateful also to Jill Organ and Charmian Hearne for their patient and cheerful administrative help.

I wish to thank many of my family and friends for their loving support and forbearance during the period of this study, in particular Frank Delaney for his abundant faith and wise counsel, and Hannah Joss for her unfailing humour and optimism.

Abstract

The study examines the nature and functioning of genre in the commercial marketplace and the negotiations concerning genre labelling that a contemporary writer must undertake in relation to publishers' decisions, reader expectations and critical responses. Part One assesses and theorises some problems of genre by means of an exploration of the terms 'crime fiction' and 'literary fiction'. Focusing on the perceived conventions and boundaries of the two genres and some important sub-genres, it explores the extent to which such perceptions not only reinforce the notion of a divide between novels labelled as 'crime' and novels labelled as 'literary', but also perpetuate a debate about the ranking of texts on a ladder of literary merit. Part Two is a self-reflective critical appraisal of my eight novels, written over the fifteen-year period between 1998 and 2013, which underwent this process of commercial classification in both Britain and America, the main English language markets in which they were published. It offers a literary analysis of the novels in the context of their critical reception and in the light of my growing perception of the limitations of crime genre conventions on my choices as a writer and, incrementally, my attempts to outdistance those limitations. Part Three consists of conclusions: these concern the influence of a reader's knowledge of genre on the reading experience as well as on reader expectations, the influence of a writer's reputation for one kind of fiction on any aspiration to be recognised as having written another, and the tension, in the lived experience of a fiction writer, between the theoretical fluidity of genre boundaries and their rigidity in practice.

Part 1

GENRE IN THE MARKETPLACE

Historically, literary texts have been categorised in different genres. Genres can be defined by affinities of form and structure (poem, sonnet, novel), subject matter and theme (crime, science fiction, pastoral), mood and treatment (comedy, tragedy, elegy) or function (masque, ballad, ode). The interaction of these affinities, and the rules governing the criteria that distinguish one genre from another, are not pre- or proscriptive but descriptive and inclusive.¹ Genre boundaries are neither fixed nor constant but abstract and evolving; rather than being rigid limitations, they operate as sets of loosely established conventions. They are open borders across which the writers of literary works may and do range, borrowing from, modifying, reformulating and developing texts, and ultimately reworking genre categorisations, whether wholly, partially or not at all conscious of their role in a dynamic literary and cultural practice.

But while the instability and fluidity of these boundaries is the *sine qua non* of post-structuralist genre theory studies within academia, a more rule-bound labelling of texts operates as an integral component in the functioning of the commercial book industry. At the level of mercantile pragmatism, categorisation by genre (the options perpetually vivified by the coining of new, ever more particularised sub-genres: ‘chick lit’, ‘hen lit’, ‘mommy lit’) is the daily currency of agents, publishers, booksellers and readers in which the identifications, descriptions, expectations, and both literary and commercial judgments of books are discussed, constructed and managed. As Jenny Geras, Editorial Director at Pan Macmillan, observes:

¹ Martin Montgomery, Alan Durant, Nigel Fabb, Tom Furniss and Sara Mills, *Ways of Reading*, 3rd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) pp. 41-52; *Modern Genre Theory*, Longman Critical Readers, ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000); Jacques Derrida, trans. by Avital Ronell, ‘The Law of Genre’, *Critical Inquiry: On Narrative*, 7.1 (1980), 55-81.

What publishers know very well [...] is that book jackets are decisions made by publishers. We decide what a book looks like and this is a complicated decision, influenced by [...] what we think will position the book most clearly in the marketplace, and how best to signal quickly to both retailers and readers what kind of book it is. The downside of this labelling process is that a whole range of completely different books get lumped together and confused.²

Notwithstanding the degree of taxonomic wrangling, compromise and even crassness acknowledged here as inevitable in this procedure, the notion of genre is a working principle that underpins the elementary question - what kind of book is being published? - from whose answer flows every ancillary decision of a publishing strategy from editing, book format and design to marketing and promotion. As Geras makes clear, that elementary question is neither posed to, nor answered by, the writer of the book. The list of industry personnel given above (agents, publishers, booksellers and readers) omits those who originate the texts that become books – the writers – because writers are not essential participants in this conversation or these processes. Regardless of any contractual obligation stipulating, for example, a ‘novel of psychological suspense’ or ‘spy thriller’ (and whether or not, in either the writer’s or publishers’ estimation, the resulting text fulfils the contract), the kind of book a writer has written is not the writer’s prerogative to assert. Jane Friedman, editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, makes this point more forcefully than Geras: ‘When working with a traditional publisher, you [the writer] have to give up a lot of power and control. The publisher gets to decide the cover, the title, the design, the format, the price, etc.’³

That most writers are largely excluded and silent – virtually non-existent – in the decision-making that determines the publishing strategies for

² Jenny Geras, ‘The only problem with ‘chick-lit’ is the name’, *Guardian*, Tuesday 14 February 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/feb/14/chick-lit-problem-name>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Geras*.

³ Jane Friedman, ‘Writing, reading and publishing in the digital age’, *Start here: How to Get Your Book Published*, (2012) <<http://janefriedman.com/2012/01/28start-here-how-to-get-your-book-published>> [accessed 6 October 2013].

their books is a matter of commercial expediency; to this may be added a degree of protectionism towards the workings of a range of ‘professionalisms’ within the publishing industry, as explored by *New York Times* columnist Martin Arnold:

It's an old worry of writers [...] that their publishers don't tell them everything there is to know about the publishing of their work. Are these authors simply paranoid, unhinged by the monastic nature of the creative process? [...] Writers' complaints [...] start with the general principle, as one best-selling nonfiction author said, that “publishers try to keep writers out of the publishing process -- they don't even want you to see covers - and they decide before the book is published whether it's going to be successful or not.”

Writers are correct that publishers hide information, although publishers all say they are up front and try to tell writers and their agents everything. Except, perhaps, maybe, not quite everything [...] One publisher, who is known for having excellent relations with his writers, said that his rule is ‘never give advertising budgets to agents or writers.’⁴

Arnold’s rhetorical question about some writers being ‘simply paranoid, unhinged by the monastic nature of the creative process’ appeals to the vestiges of a Romantic view of the creative artist, one of whose modern mythic forms is the figure of the solitary writer, free but also isolated, and too innocent or high-minded for the cupidity of the marketplace. While Arnold’s allusion is ironic, such a view of writers is invoked obliquely but routinely to explain their supposed distance from the ‘business’ of publishing. The maintenance of the

⁴ Martin Arnold, ‘Why the Writer is Last to Know’ Arts, *New York Times*, 25 July 2002 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/25/books/making-books-why-the-writer-is-last-to-know.html>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Arnold NYT*.

idea of this distance confers, as a consequence, considerable power not only upon publishers but also upon those, such as literary agent Ed Victor (here interviewed in 2004), who act as intermediaries across the (arguably) constructed distance: ‘The modern agent is required to be both best friend and fearsome advocate. “I am the one who kicks ass; they [writers] don’t, because they’re adorable,” he says.’⁵ Whether by the ‘best friend and advocate’ acting as a shield, or by a commercial publisher’s set of professionalisms superseding the writer’s, the writer, however ‘adorable’, concedes authority once her text is in the hands of its publisher.

Whatever the origin of such assumptions about a writer’s semi-detached attitude to the publishing of her work, it remains the case that for all but a very few, commercially powerful writers whose ‘star treatment includes learning the precise advertising, promotion and marketing plans [a]nd certainly the money spent’ (Arnold NYT), any discussion with a writer about the publishing strategy for her work is conducted not as an obligation but as a courtesy extended by a publisher, and on its terms. Those terms are, invariably, to foster a harmonious working relationship with the writer, not to encourage debate. However, as a writer’s active involvement with the promotion of her book is, increasingly, a contractual requirement, her compliance with the chosen strategy - that is, with the publisher’s choice of whichever marketable genre her text will be manipulated to fit - becomes a *de facto* obligation rather than a courtesy she may reciprocate. But while she may not publicly withhold acceptance of the classification of her book, her private concurrence with it may be another matter.

The published work under consideration in this critical appraisal comprises eight novels, written over the fifteen-year period between 1998 and 2013, which underwent this process of commercial classification in both Britain and America, the main English language markets in which they were published. The body of work begins with a series of three crime novels (*Funeral Music*, 1998; *Fearful Symmetry*, 1999; *Fruitful Bodies*, 2001) which, albeit somewhat sardonically, observe most of the conventions of detective

⁵ Tim Dowling, ‘Special Agent’, G2, *Guardian*, 1 March 2004, (p.6) <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/mar/01/fiction.news>> [accessed 6 October 2013].

fiction.⁶ It develops as five subsequent stand-alone novels (*Half Broken Things*, 2003; *Puccini's Ghosts*, 2005; *The Night Following*, 2009; *Among the Missing*, 2011; *Our Picnics in the Sun*, 2013), none of which features an unsolved murder or other forensic mystery, nor a detective, nor a process of detection, nor a denouement involving the unmasking of a perpetrator.⁷ Rather, they experiment with realism, narrative voice and structure; they explore themes such as damage and reparation, guilt and atonement, desire and its fulfilment, and they do so through storylines that neither deliver the comfort of faith in a restorative moral order governed by social institutions, government or religion, nor depend for their final effect on a regretful sense of the deficit of such a moral order. Arguably, these novels address a range of modernist themes and aspire to a technical reach more recognisable as the preserve of literary, rather than of crime fiction, yet all were published as crime fiction or 'novels of psychological suspense'.

The critical appraisal will examine this body of work in the light of my growing perception of the limitations of crime genre conventions on my choices as a writer and, incrementally, my attempts to outdistance those limitations both in my writing and in public perceptions of it. In so doing I will explore the boundaries between two genres – 'crime' and 'literary' – and examine the extent to which in practice they may be, as crime writers such as Ian Rankin and Val McDermid assert, unstable, fragile and permeable.⁸

⁶ Morag Joss, *Funeral Music* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), USA mass market paperback edn (New York: Dell/Random House, 2005); *Fearful Symmetry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), UK paperback edn (London: New English Library/Hodder & Stoughton, 2000); *Fruitful Bodies* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000), UK paperback edn (London: New English Library/Hodder & Stoughton, 2001). Further references will be given in the text using the short forms *Funeral Music*, *Fearful Symmetry* and *Fruitful Bodies*.

⁷ Morag Joss, *Half Broken Things* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), UK paperback edn (London: New English Library/Hodder & Stoughton, 2004); *Puccini's Ghosts* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2005); *The Night Following* (New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2008), USA trade paperback edn (New York: Bantam Dell/Random House, 2009); *Among the Missing* (New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2011); *Our Picnics in the Sun* (New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2013), uncorrected proof edn (New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2013). Further references will be given in the text using the short forms *Half Broken Things*, *Night Following*, *Missing* and *Picnics*.

⁸ Alison Flood, 'Could Miles Franklin turn the Booker prize to crime?' *Guardian*, 25 June 2010 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/25/miles-franklin-booker-prize-crime>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Flood*.

CRIME AND LITERARY FICTION – WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

The charting of a transition from crime fiction to literary fiction must begin with an attempt to clarify, and contra-distinguish, the terms ‘crime fiction’ and ‘literary fiction’. Because the published work in this submission is a body of fiction published in the commercial sphere, and this critical appraisal will consider responses to the work which come from outside the academic world, the sources cited in the following discussion of definitions include not only scholarly criticism but also popular writing, journalism and essays by professional reviewers, authors and readers.

‘Crime fiction’ is a widely used literary categorisation with easily recognisable sub-genres such as detective or mystery fiction, thriller, *roman noir* and police procedural. It signifies a body of work that spans more than two centuries, and many continents. But Martin Priestman observes, in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, that it was not until the 1960s that crime fiction came under academic scrutiny; hitherto, classifications of literature as either ‘high’ or ‘low’ had tended to presume some kinds of text (literary) and dismissed others (genre, including crime) as worthy of study.⁹

The term ‘literary fiction’, similarly an umbrella term, became current at an unascertained point in the 1960s. Whether or not it was coined in reaction to this development, its effect has been to place around an amorphous body of work a literary *cordon sanitaire* which not only separates it from the genre fiction forms that increasingly engage the interest of scholars and critics, but also implies superiority to them. If the study of ‘literature’ is now to embrace prose fiction in all its manifestations including the ‘cheap’, ‘low’ and ‘pulp’ forms of mass appeal and popularity, then by appropriation of the derivative adjective ‘literary’, the previous notion of ‘high’ is encrypted and sustained, in both academic and commercial spheres, to differentiate a particular kind of literature; all literature may be literature, but some is more literary than others. Nevertheless, the criteria that qualify some work as

⁹ *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 1-3.

literary fiction and disqualify any other (including crime fiction) remain vague beyond generalised claims to ‘seriousness’; the term is not definitive, but exclusive and hierarchical. And although the view that literary fiction is ‘just another genre’ has gained some ground and the instability of the barriers between genres is widely supposed, the perception persists of a ladder of literary merit on which crime fiction occupies a lower rung than literary fiction, despite eloquent protests for equal ranking (Flood).

Outside academia, journalistic debates about crime versus literary fiction smoke quietly, periodically flare and subside, and remain inconclusive. Attempts at definitions of either one are often epigrammatic if not ludic, invariably subjective, and behind many lies a combative, implied criticism of the other. Andrew Taylor quotes H R F Keating’s belief that ‘Crime fiction is fiction that puts the reader first, not its writer’ and Taylor himself writes, ‘crime fiction is literature in its shirt sleeves, stripped of pretensions’, the inference being that literary fiction is where pretensions are to be found.¹⁰ He stresses crime fiction’s ‘elasticity’ in its range of subject matter and theme, and in its literary ambitions and achievements, but claims that its job is to be accessible and entertaining, an imperative to which he considers literary fiction does not aspire. ‘[M]any readers have become disillusioned with the intellectual excesses of the modern literary novel and have turned with a sigh of relief to crime’ he asserts, but his failure to explain what he means by ‘intellectual excesses’ betrays an expectation that anyone reading his article, as well as the ‘many readers’ ostensibly disillusioned with them, already understands and shares his perception.

In a similar vein but wearing instead the colours of literary fiction, Terence Rafferty writes:

In a horror story or a mystery novel, the flow is all toward narrative resolution, and is — or should be — swift and fierce. Literary fiction, by its nature, allows itself to

¹⁰ Andrew Taylor, ‘The Strange Appeal of Crime Fiction’, *Shots* (2002) <http://www.shotsmag.co.uk/feature_view.aspx?FEATURE_ID=120> [accessed 6 October 2013].

dawdle, to linger on stray beauties even at the risk of losing its way.¹¹

The tone here, whimsical if not absolutely foppish, is as presumptive of a shared, quasi-Wildean aestheticism as Taylor's is of a shared, inverted intellectual snobbery; both are addressing readerships from which they expect agreement.

In 2012 a more robust debate took place in a public correspondence between Arthur Krystal, writing in the *New Yorker*, and Lev Grossman, literary critic of *Time* magazine.¹² It began with Krystal's *New Yorker* piece, in which he described part of the 'guilty pleasure' of reading crime fiction as 'the knowledge that we could be reading something better.' Although Krystal's article went on to acknowledge that the distinctions between literary fiction and 'guilty pleasures' are no longer clear, Grossman retorted that such literary hierarchies are outdated, that genre writers are revitalising literary fiction by invading its boundaries and that they could – and do - teach many literary writers most of what they know about plot:

Blue chip literary writers – finding that after years of deprivation under the modernist regime their stores of plot devices are sadly depleted – have been frantically borrowing from genre fiction, which is where plot has been safely stockpiled for all these decades.

¹¹ Terence Rafferty, 'Reluctant Seer', *New York Times Book Review*, 4 Feb 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/books/review/Rafferty-t.html?_r=0> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Rafferty Seer*.

¹² Arthur Krystal, 'Easy Writers: Guilty Pleasures Without Guilt', A Critic at Large, *New Yorker*, 28 May 2012, pp. 81-84. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Krystal Guilty Pleasures*; Lev Grossman, 'Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle: Genre Fiction is Disruptive Technology', *Time*, 23 May 2012 <<http://entertainment.time.com/2012/05/23/genre-fiction-is-disruptive-technology/#ixzz2EfJAiGls>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Grossman*; Arthur Krystal, 'It's Genre. Not That There's Anything Wrong With It!' Page Turner, *New Yorker* online, 24 October 2012 <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/10/its-genre-fiction-not-that-theres-anything-wrong-with-it.html#ixzz2EfIUpvvN>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Krystal Genre*.

Krystal responded in his follow-up piece with an insistence that literary fiction is still distinguishable from genre fiction on the grounds of its superior literary merit:

Genre, served straight up, has its limitations, and there's no reason to pretend otherwise. Indeed, it's these very limitations that attract us. When we open a mystery, we expect certain themes to be addressed and we enjoy intelligent variations on these themes. But one of the things we don't expect is excellence in writing.

But he also states 'A good mystery or thriller isn't set off from an accomplished literary novel by plotting, but by the writer's sensibility, his purpose in writing.' (Krystal Genre).

WHAT IS CRIME FICTION?

Early academic studies of crime fiction were concerned almost exclusively and self-referentially with detective fiction of the interwar 'Golden Age', until Julian Symons' *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* argued for a widening of the purview to take into account several emergent or established sub-genres of crime fiction – psychological suspense, spy thriller, hard-boiled – which were developing from and alongside the classic detective novel.¹³

Later critics have responded to this multiple propagation of offshoots from detective fiction rootstock in contrasting ways. John Scaggs deems the

¹³ Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, [1972] 3rd rev. edn (New York: Warner Books, 1993) pp. 3-5.

genre now too diverse for any fundamental definition.¹⁴ He and Lee Horsley share an essentially historical approach, tracing developments in the genre over time rather than seeking to define it, and concur in their aversion to its concomitant risk, the creation of a spurious, simplistic order of literary succession whereby each sub-genre inherits features from one preceding it and spawns another.¹⁵ Nor must sub-genre categorisations be considered fixed or distinct; many texts mix and borrow elements across flexible and dynamic sub-genre boundaries.

Other critics' continuing attempts at a definition founder on the scope and scale of the body of work. Heather Worthington, while acknowledging the attempt as ludic, offers 'a narrative that features a crime'.¹⁶ But this would have to include several novels published and acclaimed specifically as literary fiction. Examples abound: Andrew Greig's *When They Lay Bare*, a 'mystery' novel of detection, revenge and murder, John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*, a novel in monologue form by a man convicted for kidnap and murder, and Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, whose action moves with thriller-like tension towards a cataclysmic, graphically described murder.¹⁷

A contrasting approach to the problem of a definition is to circumscribe the criteria for inclusion in (or exclusion from) the genre. But this simultaneously creates, perversely and almost arbitrarily, both a template for the 'classical' in crime fiction and a catalogue of exceptions which rather than prove the rule, reveal that a straitened definition, with its appended canon of notable misfits, demonstrably does not work as a definition. P D James considers crime fiction's distinguishing characteristic to be one of morality; the British detective novel of the Golden Age is the successor to the morality play,

¹⁴ John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, New Critical Idiom, series ed. John Dukakis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁵ Lee Horsley, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. 6-10. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Horsley*.

¹⁶ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) pp. xi-xxv.

¹⁷ Andrew Greig, *When They Lay Bare* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); John Banville, *The Book of Evidence* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1989); Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1981). Further references will be given in the text using the short form *McEwan Strangers*.

its protagonist the embodiment of justice.¹⁸ But discussing crime fiction from Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938) onwards, she observes only that its moral compass, particularly that of the hardboiled sub-genre, is 'less fixed'.

WHAT IS LITERARY FICTION?

Laura Marcus assumes the term 'literary fiction' to apply to certain late twentieth century and contemporary modernist and post-modernist novels.¹⁹ Without defining the term further, she focuses on the relationship between detective fiction and the postmodern, literary, 'anti-detective' novels of Umberto Eco, Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon, perceiving essentially structural similarities in those writers' appropriation of the classic detective novel's epistemological quest as a narrative motor, notwithstanding that their postmodern treatment of the quest – foiling the assumption that human ratiocination renders the arbitrary intelligible or meaningful - dooms the quest to failure.

Stefano Tani views 'any good contemporary fiction' as essentially 'an anti-detective fiction', an extravagant claim, amounting to synonymy between 'good contemporary' and 'literary' and postmodern.²⁰ He goes farther than Marcus, identifying a symbiotic relationship between the traditional detective novel and the anti-detective novel's postmodernist subversion of its moral, metaphysical and ontological certainties as well its literary rules. But the anti-detective novel's genesis as a subversion of the classic detective novel does not amount to symbiosis. While its effectiveness depends on a reader's familiarity with the classic detective novel, there is no evidence that writers of commercial

¹⁸ P D James, 'The Moral Dimension of the Crime Novel', *British Council Arts, Literature Matters*, (Spring 2006) <<http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-literature-matters-crime-james-2.htm>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *James*.

¹⁹ Laura Marcus, 'Detection and Literary Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 245-276.

²⁰ Stefano Tani, 'The Dismemberment of the Detective', *Diogenes*, 30:120 (December 1982), pp. 22-41. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Tani*.

detective fiction look to the anti-detective novel for developmental reformulations or re-workings of narrative. Rather, the relationship may be seen as dependent, on the anti-detective novel's side, and oppositional; the anti-detective novel cannot be termed a postmodernist text unless it *fails* to satisfy the terms of a traditional detective novel, within whose closed structure all elements of the narration contribute to the triumph of reason and the re-establishment of order.

CROSSING GENRES

John Banville, who also writes crime fiction under the pseudonym Benjamin Black, is an interesting contributor to the question of the two genres' relative literary merit. His pronouncements on his own dual writing personae introduce another variable, a development of Krystal's contention that literary fiction's 'excellence in writing' is more 'difficult' but correspondingly more rewarding for its reader (Krystal Genre). Banville discusses the difficulty, and the contrasting relative ease, not of reading but of writing:

If I'm Benjamin Black, I can write up to two and a half thousand words a day. As John Banville, if I write two hundred words a day I am very, very happy [...] I worked one Friday for six hours straight, and I ended up with one sentence [...] But I was [...] working in that strange, deep level of concentration.

[...] I really didn't think it would be so easy to write mainstream [crime] fiction [...] It's so bloody easy.

[...] I sat down at nine o'clock on a Monday morning, and by lunchtime I had written more than fifteen hundred words. It was a scandal! I thought, John Banville, you slut. But then I remembered it was Black,

not Banville, who was writing.’²¹

But Banville/Black is quick to uncouple any connection of speed and ease in writing from the notion of lesser literary quality. Of Georges Simenon’s *romans durs* he writes: ‘[T]hey are extraordinary, masterpieces of twentieth-century [...] existentialist literature. Better than Sartre, even better than Camus. ...[L]ook what you can do with a small vocabulary and a lean, straightforward style.’ (McKeon).

And perhaps with a diplomatic nod in the direction of his Benjamin Black readership, as well as towards the loose alliance of crime writers vociferous in defence of the equality of their work with ‘high’ literature, he states:

High art can happen in any medium. [...] For Black, character matters, plot matters, dialogue matters to a much greater degree than they do in my Banville books. One can, with skill and perseverance, give a sense of life’s richness and complexity in *noir* fiction. [...] I know there are readers who consider Black a better writer, certainly a better novelist, than Banville, and perhaps they’re right. (McKeon)

There are other writers who, like Banville, write in both (and sometimes several) genres, often under pseudonyms. The poet Cecil Day-Lewis wrote not just across genres but across forms, publishing successful detective fiction in the 1930s and 1940s as Nicholas Blake, and Julian Barnes has written detective fiction openly disguised as Dan Kavanagh. The use of the pseudonym seems to promote an understanding that not only are such writers switching between one independent writing persona and another, but also that the writing done by each persona is distinct, produced for different purposes (usually financial), in accordance with different literary criteria, and

²¹ Belinda McKeon, ‘John Banville, The Art of Fiction No. 200’, *Paris Review*, 188 (Spring 2009) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5907/the-art-of-fiction-no-200-john-banville>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *McKeon*.

to satisfy different readerships. But when a writer with an established reputation for literary fiction publishes crime fiction under the same name, critics are quick to identify the genre output as ‘genre-bending’ or ‘genre-defying’. Notable examples are Jonathan Lethem and Kate Atkinson.

Lethem’s work is characterized by an almost collage-like intertextuality, traceable to a promiscuous array of influences that include not only literary but also the popular cultural texts of comic books, radio, film, television and music. He juggles with genres, mixing literary narratives with the tropes and devices of pulp fiction, in particular the hardboiled detective novel, the western, and science fiction. In *Motherless Brooklyn* Lethem instates, amid overt allusions to and borrowings from various detective fictions, a protagonist with Tourette’s Syndrome, Lionel Essrog.²² Essrog is both a new incarnation of the alienated, dogged detective figure, and the embodiment of an ostensibly modernist, extended metaphor for the individual in contemporary American society. At both levels he faces the task of constructing and expressing meaning in an unstable world. Language is worse than unreliable, it is treacherous; word play is both trite and sinister; speech not only eludes his control but also betrays him:

‘Apocamouse,” I mumbled, language spilling out of me unrestrained. ‘Unplan-a-canal. Unpluggaphone.’

‘I said get in there, Squeaky.’ Had he caught my mouse reference, even with his impaired hearing? But then, who wouldn’t be squeaky to him? He was so big he only had to shrug to loom. I took a step backward. I had Tourette’s, he had threats. ‘Go,’ he said again.

It was the last thing I wanted to do and I did it.

The minute I stepped down into the darkness he swung the gun at my head. (Lethem *Brooklyn*, p. 204)

²² Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004). Further references will be given in the text in the shortened form *Lethem Brooklyn*.

Whether *Motherless Brooklyn* is a conscious pastiche of, or an original addition to, the hardboiled detective tradition, or whether it is a contribution to the relatively new category of postmodern, (or post-postmodern) ‘anti-detective’ novel will be discussed below. What is pertinent to the question of its and Lethem’s other novels’ genre classification is that, by virtue of Lethem’s acknowledgement of genre influences and his mixing of their elements, and his perceived philosophical and intellectual reach, *Motherless Brooklyn* is considered predominantly to be a work of literary, not crime fiction.

Kate Atkinson’s series of four novels featuring her detective Jackson Brodie obeys all the conventions of crime fiction, yet it is claimed that ‘[t]he Jackson Brodie books are not truly crime novels [...] Rather, [Atkinson] is the most games-playing of writers, playing with literary genre conventions, eroding their boundaries and entertainingly subverting them.’²³ However, Atkinson’s ‘games’ – her self-declared ‘playing around’ and her interest in creating characters that are ‘rounded and interesting’²⁴ – are not manifested in the Brodie novels by any development of crime fiction’s plot or structural conventions, nor by any significant independence from crime fiction’s stock-in-trade ‘lone detective’ figure. Bizarrely, or perhaps ingeniously, she claims that by not subverting crime fiction’s stock elements, she is actually subverting them:

But I quite like the irony in that. There's a knowingness there, because you're saying it's not really formulaic, whereas in fact it is. You've got your lone detective [Brodie] who is [...] a maverick, who is divorced, who has trouble with women but is still very much macho. And that's very much a stock figure [...] I mean, he's not

²³ Jules Smith, ‘Critical Perspective: Kate Atkinson’, *British Council Literature* (n.d.) <<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/kate-atkinson>> [accessed 6 October 2013].

²⁴ ‘Interview: Kate Atkinson, Author’, *Scotsman*, 4 August 2010 (updated 13 August 2010) <<http://www.scotsman.com/news/interview-kate-atkinson-author-1-821075>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Atkinson*.

completely a stock figure, because he has a lot of mental energy and a lot preying on his mind. (Atkinson)

Atkinson's claim presumes that she, as an acknowledged literary fiction writer, is free, even expected, to subvert genre conventions, but declines to do so. However sophistic a stratagem this might be to pre-empt the expectations of the genre-savvy reading public, it remains the case that Atkinson is credited with re-writing the genre boundaries:

The great advantage of crime was that it offered an overarching framework [...] Add her ability to write from inside her characters' minds [...] and something intriguing happened. Her books became a refreshingly new, and entirely enjoyable, kind of novel. (Atkinson)

In effect, Lethem's creative 'mongrelisation', his dexterous re-workings of narrative conventions and his aspirations to literary seriousness, seem to have severed his novel from its genre genealogy and placed it, in the manner of a perhaps involuntary adoption, in another genre family, the one deemed to be the proper home of experimentation and originality. Atkinson's concentration on character, within narratives that otherwise follow the traditional and even hackneyed rules of detective fiction, has likewise influenced critical receptions of her work. The character-based fiction of writers from Patricia Highsmith to Barbara Vine is viewed as genre whereas Atkinson, from the ranks of literary fiction, has with her 'contribution' of the Brodie novels ostensibly bestowed upon crime fiction a 'literary' dimension that it hitherto had lacked. Grossman identifies and condemns the absurdity inherent in this tendency:

And to say that such books "transcend" the genres they're in is bollocks, of the most bollocky kind. As soon as a novel becomes moving or important or great, critics try to surgically extract it from its genre, lest our carefully

constructed hierarchies collapse in the presence of such a taxonomical anomaly. (Grossman)

The important point Grossman makes here concerns hierarchy; apparently, to develop the concepts, conventions and possibilities of genre in a crime novel (or even just to be perceived to have done so) is, *ipso facto*, to relocate and, implicitly, to elevate it.

A FRESH DISTINCTION – WORLD VIEW, MORAL COMPASS AND SENSIBILITY

As the above discussion demonstrates, there is no clear consensus on what constitutes crime fiction or literary fiction, nor what differentiates the two. This may be the inevitable consequence of other, underlying and restless debates concerning genre as a concept, a construct and a function of multi-faceted cultural life.

What makes a crime novel a crime novel, then, is not a matter of subject matter or theme. Nineteenth-century novels whose narratives centre on themes of criminal detection, the disclosure of secrets and the unravelling of mysteries are recognised as the progenitors of the traditional detective novel, but are nowadays regarded as ‘classic’ and/or literary texts, not genre fiction. Several twentieth-century literary novels such as A S Byatt’s *Possession*²⁵ and Ian McEwan’s *The Comfort of Strangers* (McEwan *Strangers*) rely upon detection and criminal themes, and escalate with thriller-like tension and suspense, yet are not labelled, read or reviewed as crime fiction. The recurring themes, structures and formulae of traditional detective fiction are deployed and then modified, parodied or otherwise subverted in the postmodern, anti-detective novel, which is not only *not* published as crime fiction, but

²⁵ A S Byatt, *Possession* (London: Vintage, 1991).

‘transforms a mass-media genre into a sophisticated expression of avant-garde sensibility’ (Tani, p. 24).

A common over-simplification is that genre fiction relies on fast-paced plot while the ‘action’ in literary fiction revolves around multi-layered, psychological nuance and intellectual complexity. But alongside the plot-reliant-yet-literary novels of Byatt and McEwan can be placed the character-reliant-yet-crime novels of, among others, Patricia Highsmith and Erin Kelly. The presence and prominence *per se* of plot, Lev Grossman observes, is in any case less significant than how writers exploit its potential, not just for narrative drive but also for ‘fine nuance and even intellectual power.’ Genre writers often write more complex and compelling plots than literary writers, he asserts, and claims also that, in the hands of writers such as Raymond Chandler and Philip Pullman, plot is more than a technical or structural component of fiction but a tool of no less power in creating emotion than the ‘thick, worked prose’ of the literary novel or ‘the dense, difficult texts like the ones the modernists wrote’. Not only are genre writers superior practitioners of the art (or craft) of plot, but plot, Grossman argues, can create ‘emotion and ideas’ that are ‘huge and dramatic but also complex and subtle and intimate’ (Grossman).

By bringing the notion of ‘thick, worked prose’ into the question, Grossman addresses another front – literary merit - on which the argument wages to differentiate, and rank, crime and literary fiction. This is the most meretricious area of the debate, invoking the most eloquent epithets to describe what individual commentators mean, essentially, by ‘well-written’. These range from ‘stray beauties’ (Rafferty Seer) and ‘baroque cathedrals, filled with elaborate passages and sometimes overwhelming to the casual tourist’ (McKeon) to ‘new literary sheriff in town, able to bend time, jump universes, solve crime, fight zombies’ (Krystal Genre). There remains, perhaps, just enough space in this arena for an analyst to observe that, as of any argument between articulate advocates, they would say that, wouldn’t they? That is to say, entertainment value aside, expressions of conviction founded on emotion and taste rather than analysis are counterproductive to a consensus on even the terms of the debate; since there is no precision about what is understood by ‘literary merit’, inevitably there can be no fruitful discussion on what kind of writing does or does not deserve to be accorded it.

The scrutiny of texts in the light of the criteria of subject matter, theme, structure, tone or literary quality does not, therefore, yield a definitive schema for the clarification of, or contradistinction between, works of crime and literary fiction.

But a commonality can be traced from the nineteenth-century ancestors of crime fiction, through Arthur Conan Doyle, to the Golden Age of Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham and others, and beyond. It is a commonality referred to obliquely by P D James in her discussion of the moral compass of the detective novel (James), and inferred by Krystal's notion of 'sensibility' (Krystal Genre).

The storyworlds of novels in this extensive spectrum of authors and periods share the presumption of a pre-existent moral framework. Whether its tenets originate in theistic, societal or judicial precepts or in supposedly innate 'human' virtues, an immanent and normative moral order is implicitly operative in and crucial to the effectiveness of these fictions. The plot and structural template of thousands of formulaic detective novels – the unmasking of a murderer and the projected infliction of punishment – can be seen as a reassuring, stratified reformulation of the Victorian novel's moral *status quo*, predicated on the *a priori* existence of good and evil and the ultimate triumph of good.

The hardboiled sub-genre of crime fiction brought new dimensions and complexities to the figure of the detective and some compromises to the moral positioning of their narratives. A newly conceptualised hero emerged in fresh manifestations to inhabit an evolving fictional frontier: the urban, lawless, mean streets of 1920s and 1930s America as depicted by, to begin with, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Hammett's Sam Spade and Chandler's Philip Marlowe were among the first, and are the most enduring, of the tough guy, PI heroes, a type Chandler describes thus:

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid [...] He is the hero [...] He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to

use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor.²⁶

The above begs the question, whose 'honor'? Chandler is clear about the moral direction, as well as the stylistic, social and cultural relevance of the radically revised genre fiction that he intends will supplant the decorous, falsely reassuring Golden Age crime fiction. With a reformer's zeal he identifies the pursuit of realism in detective fiction as a moral as well as a literary rebirth:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities [...] where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing [...] It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in. (Chandler)

Whatever political perspective about his society that he here presents as fact, Chandler the 'realist in murder' eschews the aristocratic, lofty amateurism of Lord Peter Wimsey and Albert Campion. Although a loner, Chandler's 'man of honor' is a professional detective, not above the hazardous and corrupt world but both of and in it. He is not detached from danger, but in his quest to protect and detect goes forward to meet it, self-consciously tough and unequivocal in his disgust for the sordid criminal circles he investigates.

It has been observed that in this respect the hardboiled PI resembles the knight errant (Horsley, p. 82). The pertinence of that idea here is that the knight/hero's moral compass bearings lie in earlier, Victorian and Golden Age fiction. His state of mind, and most importantly his moral position in relation to the novel's events, is either conveyed directly, by internal focalization (Chandler's autodiegetic narrator Marlowe) or inferred, by external focalization (Hammett's Sam Spade). But in whatever terms of discourse, a reader's understanding of the hardboiled novel's moral landscape as immanent is essential to its events being narratable; without that understanding, neither its protagonist's motivation, its plot nor its resolution can achieve significance or be satisfactorily realised.

In this respect, Chandler's rhetoric of derision on the shortcomings of

²⁶ Raymond Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder: An Essay', in *The Simple Art of Murder*, re-issue edn (London: Vintage, 1988). Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Chandler*.

the Golden Age novel overstates how radically the new, hardboiled crime fiction departs from it. The hardboiled sub-genre was a significant innovation but not quite revolutionary; in its assumption of an inherent moral order (even if under constant threat of breakdown) that drives a plot towards its restoration (even if imperfect), the hardboiled novel serves no less as a diegetic paradigm for a moral conservatism, developed from the nineteenth century novel, as does the Golden Age novel that Chandler disparages as ‘too contrived, and too little aware of what goes on in the world’ (Chandler).

From Chandler and Hammett onwards the hardboiling continued, with an intensified, unrelentingly gritty, urban realism and the foregrounding of social and political – particularly race- and gender-related – issues. Detective protagonists became less Marlowe-like, their integrity in danger of complicity or assimilation with the surrounding forces of corruption, their heroism sullied by a compromising tally of character defects including, typically, disastrous relationships with authority, drink, lovers and offspring and, often, a tendency to extreme violence. Themes and their treatment became darker; the world-weary protagonist would engineer some partial, localised acts of restitution but he would be powerless against the greater, intractable ills of society – the poverty and deprivation created by rapacious commerce and indifferent politicians - that were the root causes of alienation and transgression. Systemic cynicism and injustice would prevent the true righting of society’s wrongs.

Dennis Lehane’s detective Patrick Kenzie is archetypal of the modern hardboiled protagonist. In the opening, anachronistic monologue of *A Drink Before the War*, the first of six Kenzie and Gennaro novels, Kenzie enumerates the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, Detroit and Atlanta, and continues:

And people killed last summer. None of them innocent. I know. I was one of them. I stared down the slim barrel of a gun, looked into eyes rabid with fear and hatred, and saw my reflection. Pulled the trigger to make it go away.²⁷

Lehane treads a fine line between archetype and cliché; staring down the barrel of a gun is hardly a fresh description of Kenzie’s experience. The plot unfolds

²⁷ Dennis Lehane, *A Drink Before the War* (London: Bantam Books, 1995) p. 13. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Lehane War*.

to an unsurprising denouement in which Kenzie kills, in cold blood, the irredeemably evil Socia. But after a later exchange of moral philosophizing with his partner Gennaro, he pleads mitigation because Socia ‘deserved it’ while others, equally culpable but protected by privilege and ‘civilisation’, go unpunished:

And people like Socia could slip through for a while [...] They’d kill and maim and make the lives of everyone around them ugly and bleak, but sooner or later, they usually ended up like Socia himself – brain leaking out under an expressway [...] At that moment, I truly hated the world and everyone in it [...]

LA burns, and so many cities smolder, waiting for the hose that will flood gasoline over the coals, and we listen to politicians who fuel our hate and our narrow views [...] while they sit in their beachfront properties and listen to the surf so they won’t have to hear the screams of the drowning.

(Lehane *War*, pp. 322-323)

Kenzie assuages his conscience by exonerating his action as a response to the relativism and inadequacy of the moral climate in which he operates. Instability and corruption create a moral vacuum that he is entitled - perhaps obliged - to fill, as judge, jury and executioner, according to his own, barely articulate statute:

I felt tired – horrendously tired – of all the death and petty hate and ignorance and complete and utter carelessness [...] Tired of spite and senselessness and Marion Socia and his offhand cruelty [...] I was more exhausted by the Socias and the Paulsons [...] of this world, the ghosts of all their victims whispering a growling wind of pleas into my ear to make someone accountable. To end it.

[...]

He said, ‘Kenzie, is this all of it or not?’

‘Yeah, Socia,’ I said, this is all of it.’ I raised

the gun and shot him in the chest.’ (Lehane *War*, pp. 306-307)

The shooting of Socia is a deliberate act of restitution and thereby above ‘senselessness’; if cruel, it is not ‘offhand’. A moral order, here Kenzie’s own, is as central to the sensibility, as well as to workings of character and plot, of *A Drink Before the War* as it is in the Marlowe and Spade texts, and in its antecedents of the Golden Age and earlier. The storyworld of *A Drink Before the War*, and other hardboiled novels, is not without ethical norms, even absolutes (a monster such as Socia always ‘deserves’ to die, and will) for all that many moral truths are hidden and their codes compromised. It is their inefficacy that appals Kenzie, and the rest of the Round Table of hardboiled protagonists, and that propels them into action. That the moral order does not prevail absolutely is a source of grief and regret, but disillusionment does not descend into nihilism; rather, its apparent absence underpins a conservative yearning for an imagined past which is mourned nostalgically, in an agnostic manner akin to Julian Barnes’ ‘I don’t believe in God, but I miss Him.’²⁸ And, crucially, Kenzie does not give up. He remains a hero, albeit tainted; he may not have overcome ‘the Socias and the Paulsons, the Rolands and the Mulkerns of this world’ but he will overcome his pessimism sufficiently to fight another day. Lehane manipulates his protagonist’s personal struggle within an unstable, inferred but always present moral framework that owes more to nineteenth-century and earlier texts than to the atheistic, self-consciously inward-looking focus of modernism, or to a postmodern, uninterpretable landscape of fragmentation and alienation.

Judged by this criterion, and taking Lehane’s text as archetypal, modern hardboiled crime fiction reflects and upholds a set of narrative traditions and societal norms that were disrupted and substantively discarded by the modernist novel’s counteractive preoccupations with the expression of highly internalised, personal and psychological experiences of reality.

Texts such as Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn* and Atkinson’s Brodie novels are in this respect as derivative and non-experimental as any other crime fiction texts; they do not re-negotiate the implicit contract with a reader that the

²⁸ Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened of* (London: Vintage, 2009) p.1.

protagonist will inhabit a fictive world in which good and evil exist, and can be differentiated both by him/her and a reader, and that, albeit with some regrettable deviations, evil deeds will be avenged and a degree of moral order restored.

Part 2

THE AUTHOR AS HER OWN CRITIC

In the following part of the critical appraisal I will discuss texts that I have written. It is important to acknowledge that there is in this undertaking an inherent tension. The 'I' who 'will discuss texts' can be neither separable from nor wholly synonymous with the 'I' who 'ha[s] written' them. The tension resides in the anomaly that the critical appraisal author 'I' is distinct from the novelist author 'I' by virtue of time and function – the present critic as opposed to the past creator of the texts – but the two are of course a single self, indivisible in terms of relationship to the texts; the 'I' criticising the texts is, while engaged in the task of criticism, still the 'I' who wrote them. While awareness of this tension must serve as a first corrective to any tendency to conflate the two forms of 'I', it remains unavoidable that the (once intellectually respectable) temptation for a critic to suppose or infer an author's intention is, in this instance, a great deal more than a temptation, the author's mind being not just an open resource to the critic, but one she cannot close. The author 'I' cannot 'un-know' the experience of conceiving, imagining and writing the texts while the critic 'I' is analysing what has been written. This being the case, especial care will be taken to analyse and discuss the texts at a readerly (in the non-Barthesian sense) and impartial distance, but with no loss of scrutiny. It will still be necessary to discuss the published work with reference to some of the internal and invisible mental processes of writing fictive texts, and where this occurs it will be indicated which 'I' is commenting. Nevertheless, the primary focus throughout will be on the texts themselves.

THREE WHODUNNITS

The Sara Selkirk novels, *Funeral Music*, *Fearful Symmetry* and *Fruitful Bodies*, are ‘three nicely developed, if unexceptional’ detective novels.²⁹ They are set in elegant, prosperous Bath, a setting distant in all senses from Chandler’s mean streets, and the narratives’ protagonist is amateur detective and world-class cellist, Sara Selkirk, who moves in a privileged circle of mainly middle class professionals and fellow artists.

As a Scottish ‘exile’ Selkirk perceives her historically and literarily well-trodden beat with something of an outsider’s vantage point; wandering along Milsom Street where Catherine Morland’s friend Isabella in *Northanger Abbey* ‘saw the prettiest hat you can imagine, in a shop window’,³⁰ Sara meets her friend Sue ‘contentedly window-shopping at the lingerie shop with the eighty quid knickers’. Then, together,

They [...] made their way into the Circus where [...] the lights from several basement kitchens were already warming the area walls and casting a gleam on the glossy leaves of camellias and bay trees in tubs [...] Sara breathed in and smelled prosperity, speculating that a few of the Men Who Cook would be busy [...] presiding over their copper pans on their bottle-green ranges. Not so much ‘the smell of steaks in passageways’, more the smell of grilled goats’ cheeses with a jus of rowanberries sprinkled with toasted pine kernels on rocket leaves with a raspberry and chive vinaigrette, she thought.

(*Funeral Music*, p. 23)

Selkirk’s viewpoint is only gently sardonic, and this tone, together with features such as the avoidance of forensic detail, the closed circle of suspects

²⁹Ed Siegel, ‘Discover Morag Joss in Among the Missing’ *Newsday*, 16 June 2011 <<http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/books/discover-morag-joss-in-among-the-missing-1.2962474>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Siegel Newsday*.

³⁰Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, reprint edn (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1993) p. 21.

and the comic minor characters identifies *Funeral Music* as a ‘cozy’, a sub-genre of detective fiction usually disparaged by hardboiled aficionados. There are, nonetheless, traces of deviation from the conventions, particularly in the novel’s ending which is both inconclusive and sombre in tone. The motivation for the first murder turns out to be based on an error of interpretation – the victim was not, after all, in possession of compromising information for which he ‘had to die’ – which constructs a layer of irony and further pointlessness to the loss of life. An unnamed Senegalese fugitive figure has woven in and out of the narrative from the beginning (almost like an escapee from a different novel), affecting events without impinging on the consciousness of the murder investigators. He commits the second murder in self-defence, and escapes. The novel concludes with an accidental fire and a third dead body, which may be that of the Senegalese man or another character Paul who, having disappeared, had been discovered to be guilty of the first murder. The novel concludes:

Because his clothes, his belongings and the seat he had been trapped in had smelted into his soft body, all that remained after his fierce and unofficed cremation were his bones, sunken under a solidified ooze of molten vinyl and tacky with human tar. With the tenderness of archaeologists the fire crew had chipped his skeleton out intact from the encrusted fusion of wet clinker [and] tied a number round the black twig of a toe bone [...]

At the end of September he was removed to a room at the end of a corridor in the basement where it was quiet, where the human traffic of relatives, undertakers, pathologists and police had all but ceased. There, the only noise was the faint hum of the refrigeration system that kept the room in perpetual winter, and there, wrapped in frosty white paper, he was placed in vacant drawer alongside other, seldom-opened drawers, in which lay the bodies of other unclaimed and unmourned people. (*Funeral Music*, p. 338)

The closing lines of the epilogue above are from an omniscient narrator’s point

of view, not Selkirk's. If the dead man is Paul, there is a re-balancing of a moral if not judicial order, in line with the conventions of cozy and hardboiled crime fiction alike; Paul has paid with his own life for the life he took. If it is the Senegalese man, his unlucky life is over, his victimhood and suffering unacknowledged by an indifferent world; this is an unsatisfactory ending in traditional detective fiction terms. The reader who decides whose body it is may also, *ipso facto*, be deciding what kind of novel s/he has read.

The following Selkirk novel, *Fearful Symmetry*, is similarly obedient to many genre conventions but also diverges from them in its less than redemptive conclusion, in which the emotional devastation of the bereaved and the invisibility of grief dictate a darker endnote. These aspects drive the novel's action to a conclusion beyond the solving of the crime. Adele's murder has devastated the introspective Phil, and months after the case is closed he commits suicide; his body is found early on New Year's Day in a rose garden in winter, now a sullied Eden.

'Phil loved and lost,' [Andrew] said.

'He lost, all right.'

Nor could it by any reckoning be better, Sara thought, that the tormented Phil had become a frozen, drug-filled corpse in the rose bushes, than that he never should have loved at all. [...] She realised suddenly that she was standing now in the very spot where Phil had stood [...] that warm September evening, watching Adele as she sat softly singing [...] His beautiful Adele. He must have felt something like contentment then, Sara thought, to be young on a golden evening, loving and watchful, keeping his beloved safe in her perfect garden before the world burst in and spoiled it all.

(*Fearful Symmetry*, p. 339)

The novel ends with no explanation for the world's despoliation of innocence. There is no protest or appeal to a moral order, as if none exists.

An additional element in *Fearful Symmetry*, to which no allusion is made but which is present for a reader inclined to ponder untied plot strings, is

the undetected transgressor, a character who commits a dishonourable (but possibly not unlawful) act that sets in train the events that lead to another character's committing murder. Affable Jim is never apprehended as the opportunistic seducer of vulnerable Adele, whose consequent sexual knowingness plays a significant part in her murderer's motivation. Untroubled either by censure or his own conscience, Jim goes unpunished, his transgression unrevealed. This raises a conundrum concerning moral, as opposed to judicial culpability; the initial wrongdoing attracts no disapprobation while the murder, this being a crime novel, must steal the show.

The final Selkirk novel, *Fruitful Bodies*, reverts to the cozy's popular murder method of poisoning and upholds its reliance on arcane clues, convoluted reasoning and preposterous flashes of insight for its plot resolution. Despite some characters' intractable alcoholism and depression, the semi-comical setting of a spurious clinic catering for wealthy hypochondriacs obviates any serious examination of their afflictions.

'Mrs Bunny Fernandez,' she said. She leaned across the table and offered with the hand a close-up of her heavily made-up cheeks and a smiling top row of tea-coloured teeth [...]

'James Ballantyne,' he said.

Warwick leaned towards James. 'Bunny's a big fan,' he said. 'Comes every year. Three weeks of organic food, rest, art therapy, swears by it, don't you, Bunny?'

'Detoxification. Every August,' she assented graciously [...] 'I'm seventy-nine, you know.'

She certainly did not look that. James had put her closer to ninety.

'Warwick Jones,' the face above the cravat was saying.

[...]

'Warwick's liver is a battlefield,' Bunny said, importantly. (*Fruitful Bodies*, p. 105)

Neither Bunny nor Warwick survives, and their deaths (as their lives) border on the cartoonish; Bunny succumbs to the poison and Warwick is found strangled with his cravat in the art studio. But a juxtaposing, more contemplative treatment of violent death is evident elsewhere:

Yuko Matano placed the lilies on the floor by the door to the Ladies and stood quietly with her head bowed for several moments. Andrew waited behind her, appalled at her dignity [...] There could be no comfort in Mrs Takahashi's meeting her end here [...] She had died in a dirty corridor [...] and there was nothing in that fact that could elevate it to the status of a place of pilgrimage. Only the love of a sister inspired to leave lilies could do that.

(Fruitful Bodies, p. 262)

But such instances do not alter the overall sense of levity. Predicated on the notion that human folly is a more potent agent of catastrophe than malicious intent or 'evil', the plot turns on characters' selfish or innocent mistakes, misinterpretations and psychological frailties. It is another undetected wrongdoer, pianist Alex Cooper – the counterpart of Jim in *Fearful Symmetry* - whose mistake sets the murderer on his murderous path, but her role in initiating events is never acknowledged or censured. It would be too great a leap of critical perception to detect from these features alone an impatience with genre limitations on the part of the author, but the tone of *jeu d'esprit* is interpretable as an invitation to view the text as, essentially, a trivial fiction that bears no relation to reality and displays no ambition towards realism.

Fruitful Bodies was written in fulfilment of a contract to produce a third Selkirk novel, and was completed some time after I had begun to feel like a confused misfit in the ranks of crime writers. Frequent favourable comparisons of the Selkirk series with the work of P D James and Ruth Rendell added to my sense of misplacement.³¹ Having read neither author closely (and only one

³¹ 'peers like PD James and Ruth Rendell are going to have to make room for [Morag Joss]. Each book in Joss' modern, edgy departure from the traditional British cozy is more enjoyable

novel by Rendell) I did not know their work well enough to emulate either, even had I aspired to. The realisation that I was insufficiently interested in or knowledgeable about crime fiction – it was not just James’ and Rendell’s work of which I was ignorant – added to my reluctance to write more of it. Despite my scant knowledge of the genre conventions, I had chosen to write detective fiction for the very reason that it was formulaic; the genre expectations, as I understood them, supplied a narrative framework and direction which I lacked the courage or ingenuity to devise independently. Also, by writing genre I felt I was pre-empting any accusation of pretensions towards literary seriousness or any presumption of considering myself a ‘real’ writer. Nonetheless, I had felt increasingly frustrated by what I perceived as the artificiality of detective fiction and the limitations of genre, in particular the predictability of a novel’s ending in the reassuring restoration of a moral order; I did not wish to write escapist fiction which tied up most, if not all, plot strands in accordance with a worldview that I believed delusional.

Unsurprisingly, Ian Rankin does not share the view that crime fiction is escapist. He claims that crime writing has within its scope the potential for just as complex and subtle an enquiry into ‘why the heart has reasons that reason cannot know’ (Krystal Genre) as any literary novel: ‘Crime writers have always explored not only our deepest natures but the nature of society itself.’³²

But his assertion aggrandizes the reach of most crime fiction. A crime novel dealing with murder on the mean streets may graphically depict human beings’ ‘deepest natures’ (if by that phrase Rankin means human beings’ capacity for vice), but it cannot explore them unless Rankin believes that it is in ‘the nature of society itself’ that the majority of murders are mysterious and pre-meditated, and are committed by people whose ‘deepest natures’ also harbour explicable motives for the act and who are almost always apprehended. A crime novel cannot succeed as a crime novel unless it focuses not on such explorations but on the act of murder, by means of a plot that

than its predecessor.’ Leslie McGill, ‘Two Series Make Their Bows’, *Kansas City Star*, 31 July 2005.

³² Ian Rankin, ‘Ten of the Greatest Literary Crime Novels’, *Daily Mail*, 27 March 2010 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-1260343/IAN-RANKIN-Ten-greatest-literary-crime-novels.html>> [accessed 6 October 2013].

renders it dramatic, meaningful, mysterious but decipherable by a process of ratiocination, and punishable to a degree commensurate with an expectation that the guilty receive their just deserts within received moral parameters. Those requirements *per se* demand considerable concessions to the scope of any exploration of, never mind conclusions about, 'our deepest natures' or 'the nature of society itself'.

The experience of writing the Selkirk novels and having them published had fuelled my determination, if barely sufficient confidence, to try to write the kind of novel that was not so constrained, and that might engage, move and provoke in some of the ways that I found myself affected, as a reader, by the work of writers I admired: Alice Munro, Raymond Carver, William Trevor, Carol Shields. *Half Broken Things* was conceived in my mind, then, as 'a novel', not 'a crime novel'.

HALF BROKEN THINGS

Structurally, *Half Broken Things* is more complex than any of the Selkirk series. There are no conventional chapter divisions; the text is arranged in eight sections titled from 'January' through to 'August', and there are two narrative voices. 'January' begins with a first person narrative in the form of an open letter written by the main protagonist, Jean. Headed 'Walden Manor – August', it forms a prolepsis with a reach of eight months and of eleven days' extent:

But so much has happened since January, and I started it.
Things began to happen, things I must have brought about
somehow [...] So I feel I must explain, late in the day
though it is [...]

I find that there are words there after all. Now that I
need them, my words have come crowding back, perhaps

because I have a limited time in which to get them all down
(today is the 20th, so only eleven more days).

(Half Broken Things, p. 2)

Throughout, the text alternates between further sections of Jean's long letter, which recounts her version of events between January and August and also frames the story of her earlier life, and another, third person, omniscient narrator narrative that unfolds chronologically and favours, varyingly, the points of view of the other main characters, Michael and Steph. It is, nevertheless, Jean's tone of regretful self-justification for the many transgressions she is explaining that pervades the novel:

[i]t was the three of us together, Michael, Steph and me,
and then the baby, and its seeming so clear what was
important. [...] the way this place allowed each of us to
stop struggling in our various ways, how it seemed to give
us strength, how it seemed right to care for it so much [...]

We came to it late, you see, we came late to the idea
of belonging in a place and belonging to other people [...]
it was us being here, the family we made, that was the
point. If you think that sounds like an attempt to justify
what's happened, you'd be quite right.

(Half Broken Things, pp. 18-19)

'What's happened' is a series of crimes and acts of wrongdoing. They range from failure to pay fines, theft and shoplifting to fraud, and culminate in murder. While all contribute to the action, the narrative is, until the murder, less about the crimes themselves than the circumstances that made them, in the protagonists' eyes, necessary, or, as one reviewer put it: 'The carefully calibrated manner in which the author allows events to unfold creates an ominous and pervasive tension ... Joss manages to make each increasingly

appalling occurrence appear frighteningly justifiable given the circumstances.’³³

The murder that occurs towards the end (on page 240 of 295 pages) is not treated in crime fiction terms. The plot does not, indeed cannot veer off in the direction of its investigation, as the murder takes place in full view, so to speak, of a reader. After the event, the narrative focuses in on the killer:

Michael turned his face up to the sky and saw merely a flat, blurred blue through his stinging eyes. Nor, as the minutes passed, could he hear much, save his own bitter sobbing and the slap of water as the waves made by Gordon Brookes’ thrashing arms smacked and subsided against the pool walls [...] He sank on to the ground at the side and lay stretched out shaking and weeping, until he had to turn his head and vomit [...]

Was it outrageous or miraculous, he wondered, that it could look so much the same when everything had changed? [...] Was it possible, that you could just lift a corner of this pretty world that Gordon Brookes was no longer a part of, push him out and drop the corner back in place, and go on as before?

(Half Broken Things, pp. 240-241)

The emphasis is placed on Michael’s grasp of the enormity of the act; the death increases a sense of jeopardy not because a reader asks ‘whodunnit?’ but because Michael’s sense of guilt and the consequent risk of his psychological disintegration threaten, by extension and implication, to destroy the *faux* family life that he, Jean and Steph have constructed. Seen through Jean’s eyes, the killing was ‘necessary’ although unpremeditated. Moral disgust, as much as fear of detection, motivates the clinically planned removal of the body from Walden Manor:

³³ Joni Rendon, ‘Half Broken Things’, *Bookreporter*, 22 January 2011 <<http://www.bookreporter.com/reviews/half-broken-things>> [accessed 6 October 2013].

In fact I would go as far as to say that [...] the killing of that man was attended by nothing but regret. Even what we did next was carried out only because we had to, and it was done with respect, even with something like tenderness [...] He couldn't stay here, at Walden. [...] Not just for the obvious reason that he might be found but because he would somehow dirty our surroundings [...] We had to put far from us the ugly, terrible thing that Michael had been forced to do.

(Half Broken Things, pp. 259-260)

The quotation above demonstrates that a reader's engagement with *Half Broken Things* is contrived by a degree of manipulation of his/her sympathies, sufficient to sanction the fragile logic of Jean's explanations and thereby sustain interest in her narrative, if not faith in her sanity. But that manipulation requires of a reader more than to allow, in George Eliot's terms, an enlargement of his/her sympathies;³⁴ it requires a reader's complicity in a distortion, amounting to an abrogation, of the normative moral order. The protagonists' human needs and desires cannot be understood as overriding, nor accepted as emotional and moral imperatives, and nor can the novel's narrative momentum be sustained, unless a reader consents to a skewing of ethical norms that will permit him/her to hope that the protagonists' moral reasoning and consequent conduct (outrageous and repellent by 'normal' standards) will prevail in preserving the idyll upon which their survival depends. The novel's rising tension lies less in the incompatibility of two opposing moral forces - the private moral order of the protagonists' closed world and the public moral order of the 'real' world beyond it - than in the perpetual incongruence inherent in the moral relativism of a reader's desire to condone the protagonists' criminal behaviour and his/her obligation to condemn it.

This aspect of the novel was acknowledged by critic Barry Forshaw as reaching beyond the scope of crime fiction: 'The level of insight into the

³⁴ 'If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally.' George Eliot, letter to Charles Bray, 5 July 1859. Charles Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1954-78), ii, 86.

hidden recesses of the human mind is as assured here as in any “literary” novel, and such masters of this kind of narrative (in the non-crime field) as William Trevor are both evoked and matched in achievement.’³⁵ However, the novel’s UK publishers, anxious to maintain the readership generated by the Sara Selkirk series, had determined that it was a crime fiction title, a decision based on marketing rather than editorial or literary criteria. In line with that strategy, the novel was entered for the Crime Writers Association Awards. Its winning the 2003 Silver Dagger did little to support the conviction I then held that it was not a crime novel. On the strength of that award, the novel was also published in the USA, where several critics described it as a work of ‘psychological suspense’ with similarities to the work of Ruth Rendell. Frequent parallels were drawn with the work of Minette Walters, another author whom I had hardly read.³⁶ Other critics, however, placed the novel in the ‘literary’ fold.³⁷

The principal proposition on which the novel stood or fell as either an engaging work of fiction or a preposterously improbable tale - namely, that a reader’s revulsion for the protagonists’ criminal behaviour would be tempered and possibly overcome by his/her sympathy for them – did not convince everyone. Although professional critics were unanimous in judging the novel’s re-positioning of moral boundaries to be one of its chief distinctions, among reader reviewers there were a few vehement objectors.³⁸ This range of

³⁵ Barry Forshaw, ‘Half Broken Things’, *Amazon review* <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Half-Broken-Things-Morag-Joss/dp/product-description/0340820497>> [accessed 6 October 2013].

³⁶ ‘A suspense story of such psychological subtlety and complexity it might have been written by Ruth Rendell or Minette Walters.’ *New York Times Book Review*; ‘Joss is another ... heir to the Ruth Rendell/Minette Walters/P D James crown.’ *Chicago Tribune*. Quoted in unnumbered front pages of *Half Broken Things* (New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2005).

³⁷ ‘An extraordinary book ... dark, painful, thought-provoking, disturbing ... Joss’ masterful [sic] narrative delivers a provocative examination of good and evil, the nature of love...’ *Booklist* (starred review); ‘A splendid, haunting novel... Joss’ writing stays with a reader like a coat of oil.’ *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Quoted in unnumbered front pages of *Half Broken Things* (New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2005).

³⁸ ‘This book was unbelievably depressing and it just kept getting worse -- Progressing to macabre and sickening. There are 8 of us in our book club ... and everyone felt the same. We hated it!’ Deb ‘Addicted to Books’ * reader review, 7 April 2009 *Amazon.com*; ‘I disliked the characters so much that I had to take a break half way through the book because I could not stand to be around them.’ Karen Ballentine *** review, 10 April 2013 *Amazon.com* <http://www.amazon.com/Half-Broken-Things-Morag-Joss/product-reviews/0385339402/ref=cm_cr_pr_fltrmsg?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Amazon.com HBT*.

responses is perhaps illustrative of the novel's resistance to categorisation; it is unlikely that a work of unambiguous genre fiction would elicit such polarized views. Nor, were the novel a straightforward work of crime fiction, would it have inspired a review that, for understandable reasons, transgressed the first of John Updike's rules for reviewing,³⁹ based as it was on disappointed or confused expectations: 'It was an enjoyable book ... but I would not classify it as a thriller or a crime mystery. It was just a combination of three sad people...' (Amazon.com HBT).

THE NIGHT FOLLOWING

The Night Following developed some technical devices deployed in *Half Broken Things*, most obviously the use of multiple narrative voices. Of the three, the dominant one is a first person narrative from the point of view of the main protagonist, an unnamed woman (hereafter referred to as UW) who kills a cyclist in a hit-and-run accident. She presents herself as an unself-conscious Ancient Mariner figure, vagrant, possibly deranged and anxious to be heard, and she proves to be a significantly more unreliable narrator even than Jean in *Half Broken Things*. Like Jean's, her narrative forms a protracted, implicit appeal to a reader to make a sufficient shift in moral and psychological perspective to allow that UW's reasoning, and the actions to which it gives rise, are not merely understandable and inevitable but also, perhaps, pardonable. Again, the assumed moral order of a stable, sane world provides no firm foundation or reference point from which a reader may form a judgment of, or even a reaction to the characters and events in the novel. However, *The Night Following* attempts, in addition, a macrostructural level of narrative that begets a more ambitious thematic and technical reach; this takes

³⁹ 'do not blame [the author] for not achieving what he did not attempt.' John Updike, *Picked-Up Pieces* (New York: Knopf, 1975) p. xvii. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Updike First Rule*.

the novel – and a reader – into ‘territory totally un beholden to genre conventions’, according to critic Ed Siegel.⁴⁰

Within the frame of a plot generated by the death of the cyclist Ruth, the novel explores some fundamentals of story and the recording of human experience; in doing so, it breaks some of the rules of realist fiction. As well as UW’s narrative, the text includes the first fourteen chapters of a derivative ‘northern saga’ genre novel written by Ruth (the rest of the novel was burned by UW), and a series of letters written, as bereavement therapy, to the deceased Ruth by her husband Arthur. The uncanny link between UW’s account of her past life (which begins in 1962 when she was six years old) and the surviving portion of Ruth’s novel (which ends abruptly in 1956 with the birth of a baby who, a reader may surmise, can only be UW) are, in terms of fictive realism, impossible; the connection remains physically inexplicable, and is left unexplained except in the more oblique terms of UW’s narrative as she talks about the human compulsion to construct and reconstruct identity and meaning through story (as every character in the novel attempts, in varying ways, to do). She expresses the psychological catastrophe of a trauma so great that it severs a person’s narrative lifeline:

Where do I pick up the story of a life that should be over,
but isn’t? If events have halted a life’s narrative as utterly
as death itself, how do I go on as if I believed in mere
continuation, never mind solace and amends?

(Night Following, pp. 4-5)

UW does go on; to conceal her shame she adopts a strange nocturnal life, and as an act of penance, and by unsolicited and secret proxy, ‘becomes’ Ruth. She

⁴⁰ ‘Morag Joss has been compared with the high priestesses of British crime fiction: P.D. James, Ruth Rendell, and Minette Walters. “The Night Following”, her latest and perhaps her best, not only travels the same elegantly dark path of those writers, but tears into territory totally un beholden to genre conventions.’ Ed Siegel, ‘The dark side of drabness of the English countryside’, *Boston Globe*, 21 June 2008
<http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2008/06/21/the_dark_side_of_drabness_of_the_english_countryside/> [accessed 16 September 2013].

eventually brings Arthur back to the place where he and Ruth met and fell in love. Towards the end of novel UW justifies her course of action:

I ended my life in the taking of Ruth's, and in search of
expiation I took her life again. What could I do but enter
her story, and with the stealth and self-effacement of a
ghost take it to its rightful ending here, with him, on a
shining hillside she could not herself get back to?

(Night Following, p. 346)

But she concludes that stories, too, are unknowable and unreliable, part of an unknowable, unreliable world that can be only fleetingly and imperfectly understood. In articulating this she evinces the novel's principal theme of blindness (and its many degrees and manifestations, literal and otherwise), which informs the text metaphorically as well as in terms of plot and character development, relationship and motivation:

How a story begins is not why it begins, and how and why it
ends is no more fathomable [...] Perhaps there are no reasons
but only things that happen, attached to nothing, events that
loom out of the dark and leave sometimes a series of blurry
afterimages [...] what it will please us later to call our stories
[...] imprinted on our blindness.

[...] And so it is that light passes over what I can't see
as well as over this world of dark and changing surfaces,
cloud shadows go on scudding over the wavering and inexact
shapes of all the unended stories, casting angles and colours
and all interpretations out of true.

[...] I may lament all I like the lack of it, but there is no
natural law in this world that can take such fragmentary and
capricious refractions and make of them anything explicable
and whole.

(Night Following, pp. 346–347)

This meditative, melancholic tone and the modernist overview of UW's reflections at the end of the novel do not invoke any of the conventions of crime fiction in language, plot or sensibility. Throughout, the rising jeopardy faced by the protagonists is more psychological than physical, and the novel's conclusion, with Arthur's peaceful death from natural causes and UW's subsequent wandering, dislocated life, lacks the drama of a psychological thriller or suspense novel. Both the death, and UW's continuing existence ('mere continuation') as a kind of moral exile and narrative parasite, are a fitting resolution of the novel's macrostructural story, but may be considered anti-climactic in genre terms.

These features and omissions are, in the author-I's view, consonant with the aims of the novel as conceived, rather than evidence of its failure as a fully realised genre text. Critics, recognising the novel's delinquency from the expected parameters of crime fiction narratives and embracing its experimentation as a success, nevertheless differed in their opinions as to whether the novel did or not belong in its presumed literary category.

[...] a haunting journey that should burnish the reputation of Joss as one of Britain's most original crafters of psychological suspense [...]

[...] Joss begins her psychological vivisection where other suspense novelists leave off. The results are extraordinary [...]

[...] this is a book which, to my mind, does not really fit within the boundaries of the crime novel [...] a highly original story with tension, suspense and mystery [but] not about a murder or its consequences, rather a study in [...] disintegrating mental states.⁴¹

⁴¹ 'The Night Following: starred review', *Kirkus*, 15 January 2008 <<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/morag-joss/the-night-following/>> [accessed 6 October 2013]; 'The Night Following: starred review', *Publishers Weekly*, 28 January 2008 <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-385-34118-9>> [accessed 6 October 2013]; Martin Edwards, 'The Night Following', *Tangled Web UK Review*, 8 February 2010

These three examples illustrate a spectrum of views which, in order of quotation, may be crudely paraphrased thus: (1) This is a genre text of high quality. (2) This is a genre text that takes the genre into new territory. (3) This is not a genre text.

No such equivocation had affected the decision of Random House USA to publish *The Night Following* as a crime novel in the 'psychological suspense' sub-genre category. Its inclusion among the six finalists (from a longlist of over six hundred) for the USA's most prestigious crime fiction award, the Edgar Award for Best Novel, was, for the publisher, a vindication of that decision. However, some reader reviews suggest that this market positioning, as with *Half Broken Things*, created expectations concomitant with genre fiction which the novel did not fulfil. Particular attention was paid to the unredemptive and ambiguous ending.⁴² While it may be broadly acknowledged 'how uncertain those [crime genre] boundaries are' (Edwards), it seems that a reader does not necessarily welcome that uncertainty.

AMONG THE MISSING

Writing as the author-I, I observe that, uniquely among the novels in the submitted body of work, the origins of *Among the Missing* lie in a response to a single event, the collapse of the I-35W Bridge over the Mississippi in

<<http://www.twbooks.co.uk/reviews/medwards/methenighhb08.html>> [accessed 6 October 2013]. Further references will be given in the text using the short form *Edwards*.

⁴² 'Another book that ends with a question mark and I feel like I've missed something.' Aetuck, ** review, 23 July 2008 *Goodreads.com*; '...ended in a totally unsatisfying way.' Moira, ** review, 14 November 2008 *Goodreads.com*; '...it is as haunting a book as you could ever read... There are lots of loose ends at the end of the story. This isn't necessarily a bad thing.' Tom Carrico, ***** review, 3 May 2009 *Goodreads.com*; 'I'm still trying to decide if the ending is happy or sad.' Sherry, **** review, 15 January 2011 *Goodreads.com*; '...left me with a kind of 'so what?' feeling at the end. This book was a big disappointment after a very promising start.' Catherine, *** review, 11 June 2011 *Goodreads.com*; 'This book was nominated for an Edgar Award for Best Novel. I'm not sure why it qualifies as a mystery though.' Billpilgrim, **** review, 29 August 2011 *Goodreads.com*
<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1929332.The_Night_Following#other_reviews> [accessed 6 October 2013].

Minnesota, on 1 August 2007.⁴³ The breaking news coverage in America, which I witnessed over the days following the accident, dwelled on the difficulty of ascertaining the exact number of fatalities; it was feared that not all the vehicles and bodies would be recovered from the river. This prompted a train of thought that connected that possibility with the idea, possibly a modern myth, that whenever such an accident occurs, someone uses it as an opportunity to disappear. It posits that a person will suddenly absent himself (or, more rarely, herself), creating the belief that he has been killed in the incident. He will establish a new identity elsewhere, preferring to be thought dead than to address whatever made his first life so unsatisfactory. I intended the novel as an interrogation of this act of disappearance; was it courageous, cowardly, or somehow both? I wanted also to consider the cruelty, or otherwise, of the decision; was the disappearing one's state of mind akin to that of a suicide, unable to conceive that his loss would matter, or was it that of a strategist, calculating that survival in the new life required indifference towards the grief he would cause? Was it actually possible, emotionally and psychologically, to sever oneself from one life and identity and construct another? The circumstance of the collapsed bridge also brought together some preoccupations that had figured in *The Night Following* and *Half Broken Things*: the arbitrary nature of accidents and the vulnerability of human lives in an unreliable world, and the role of personal narrative in the creation and maintenance of selfhood and kinship.

Among the Missing is constructed of three intertwining storylines 'soaked in darkness', that together examine '[w]here ... the wounded turn when torn from their families'. The three main characters' responses to the forces of a morally neutral and hazardous world inform a plot in which '[s]ome retreat inward, where their emotional injuries fester and destroy. Others seek comfort in strangers, where the potential for healing exists — but so does that for harm.'⁴⁴

⁴³ 'I-35W Mississippi River Bridge', *Wikipedia* (2013) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I-35W_Mississippi_River_bridge> [accessed 10 October 2013].

⁴⁴ Jay Strafford, 'Fiction review: Mysteries', *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 26 June 2011 <www.timesdispatch.com/entertainment-life/fiction-review-mysteries/article_48add2d2-d79d-5fd3-bc9e-50a5355b0773.html> [accessed 6 October 2013].

The main protagonist, who calls herself Annabel, faces a critical decision about her pregnancy; she can keep the baby and lose her husband, or abort the baby and remain married. Initially, she cannot confront the crisis, even physically: '[i]f with every thought and breath I reduced the baby inside me to less than baby, to merelessness, to nothing, perhaps I could will it not to be.' (*Among the Missing*, p. 25). But rather than letting her anguish propel her into action, she abstracts her dilemma:

Events must reach forward to meet their consequences,
consequences must throw backward in time bridges linking
themselves to causes; where else is the meaning of all the
things that happen in the world to come from, if not from
connection with what happened before and what will happen
next?

(*Missing*, p. 26)

Striving to convince herself that sense can be made of her predicament, Annabel has moved her thinking from the solipsistic to a quasi-philosophical foray into causation; however inarticulately, she expresses a sense of insignificance and ontological bewilderment that fits more neatly with the preoccupations of literary, rather than crime fiction.

These cogitations notwithstanding, the novel is constructed to build in tension and lead with thriller-like unpredictability to a dramatic finale. The three narrative voices – two first person narratives of, respectively, Annabel and Silva, and a third person narrative from Ron's point of view – have alternated throughout, but at this point in the action Ron is effectively banished from their makeshift home and family unit and his narrative falls silent. The final act, beginning without demarcation in the text some thirty pages from the end, is signalled in both first person narratives by a shift from past to present tense. A first person narrator is always, of course, a witness to and probably a participant in a novel's action. But in the present tense, the narrative cannot convey the background reassurance, inherent in a past tense account, that the narrator survived events (and lived to tell the tale). The effect of present tense is to abolish the future; its use limits perception to the present

moment and thereby heightens suspense. Silva's malevolence towards Annabel intensifies:

Out here in the fading light, her face is blotchy. She's shivering and sweating and trying very hard not to cry again. [...] Of course it's cruel [...]

(Missing, pp. 239 – 240)

Simultaneously, the onset of Annabel's labour increases the jeopardy and fear:

I am in pain – worse than I ever imagined – and so I try to concentrate [...] on what I must do to get away from here. [...] Though it terrifies me, I will first have to cross the broken stones and slippery rocks in the dark.

(Missing, p. 245)

The action escalates; a perilous night journey downriver in a flimsy rowing boat and a traumatic unattended birth on the riverbank lead to a last ditch rescue of the abducted newborn baby. The setting for the denouement is a rock in the river where migrant geese land and feed but which is submerged at high tide. Both the rock and the birds have figured earlier in the novel as a cipher for the protagonists' feelings:

[...] though [the geese] were lovely with the sun on their wings, and they landed so beautifully on the black rock in the river, hooting that low, rounded noise over and over like a thousand wheezy old organs in a fairground, so funny and also so sad a sound it was, like home, and sweet and faraway.

(Missing, p. 41)

Silva and I stood for a while on the jetty, watching the frill of the boat's wake disappear and the geese slide back in pairs onto the silver-smooth water around the black rock.

(Missing, p. 136)

Here, both Silva's and Annabel's first person narratives use the rock and geese as metaphors for, respectively, a sense of homesick rootlessness and a sense of developing closeness and kinship. The treatment of the rock at the end of the novel is in stark contrast, and reveals the novel's hybridisation of literary and genre elements. The ruminative, lyrical symbolization of the rock plays no further role; instead, it is now a dramatic device for a thriller-ish, life or death struggle, witnessed by Annabel:

Ron is standing on the rock, and he has got Silva on her feet somehow and is holding on to her. [...] I glance back at the bare rock. A wave washes over it. Ron and Silva have gone. With the next wave, the rock will vanish under the tide.

(*Missing*, p. 255)

The disappearance of Ron and Silva is abrupt and inconclusive; they are not mentioned again. Ambiguity also surrounds Annabel's fate. She is haemorrhaging blood, but alive to hear her baby's crying; a reader is free to speculate whether or not she survives, as it were, beyond the final sentence. The ending may be ungainly and unfinished in thriller or genre terms, but it is consistent with the novel's sensibility and scope as a literary text; as a closing echo of the sudden collapse of the bridge that opened the novel, the ending is the final realisation of one of its principal themes, the frailty of human agency against arbitrary and accidental forces in an unstable world.

Critics were divided on the question of the novel's genre. Maureen Corrigan described it as a 'magnificent psychological thriller'.⁴⁵ By contrast, Ed Siegel wrote:

Morag Joss would be the best crime writer you've never heard of - except she isn't really a crime writer. [...] Now, with *Among the Missing*, Joss' writing is so shapely and

⁴⁵ Maureen Corrigan, 'Book review: Among the Missing', *Washington Post*, 10 July 2011 <http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-07-10/entertainment/35238011_1_annabel-bridge-collapse-trailer> [accessed 6 October 2013].

her plotting so meticulously developed that you sense the presence of such literary luminaries as William Trevor and Alice Munro as much as Rendell and James. Influences aside, the world she creates is her own, a fully sufficient artistic landscape [...] *Among the Missing* is further proof that Morag Joss should be included in any discussion of our best writers - in any genre.

(Siegel Newsday)

Alma Books, the novel's UK publisher, disagreed with both critics. It decided that the novel was a literary love story, requiring a change of title to *Across the Bridge* and a jacket design radically different from the USA cover. Together, the jackets illustrate vividly Geras' claim that publishers 'decide what a book looks like and this is a complicated decision' (Geras).⁴⁶

The UK publication strategy for the novel did not clarify its categorisation for *Scotsman* critic Fiona Atherton:

Across the Bridge is not a crime novel, but Joss's roots in thriller writing are evident, and her skills are considerable. The problem is that it's so hard to determine what it actually is [...] As a thriller, it delivers tension and suspense in bucket-loads, but there is rather too much emphasis on the emotional yearnings of the characters to make it feel quite like a thriller.⁴⁷

Atherton considers genre boundaries to be clear and rigid enough to determine what kind of novel *Across the Bridge* is *not*. She then judges it in terms of its failure to be the thriller that she (on the debatable grounds of my 'roots in thriller writing') was expecting. Atherton's expectations also reveal that, in this instance, a perceived association of the author's name with a particular genre

⁴⁶ See Appendix.

⁴⁷ Fiona Atherton, 'Book review: *Across the Bridge* by Morag Joss', *Scotsman*, 5 November 2011 <<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/book-review-across-the-bridge-by-morag-joss-1-1948699>> [accessed 6 October 2013].

overrode all other variables such as the book title, jacket design and jacket copy, in forming preconceptions – in this case, immovable ones - of the novel.

OUR PICNICS IN THE SUN

At the time of writing, October 2013, the USA publication of *Our Picnics in the Sun* is scheduled for November 2013. This discussion is therefore limited to the text; it cannot consider details of the publishing strategy or critical responses to the novel.

Structurally, the novel is the most complex of the published works submitted. Three narratives intertwine, as in earlier novels, and again the main protagonist (Deborah) is a first person narrator. The point of view of her husband Howard, a stroke victim with little speech, is narrated in the third person. A third narrative develops the possibilities of epistolary narration, first explored in Arthur's one-way correspondence to Ruth in *The Night Following*, in exchanges of emails between Deborah and her son Adam. These three narratives observe chronological order (notwithstanding the characters' forays into past memories) as they relate a course of events that begins with Howard's stroke in May 2008. Interspersed with these three narratives is a fourth narrative that observes a reversed chronological order; this is a third person account, from Adam's point of view, of four of his birthdays, beginning with his twenty-eighth and continuing backwards at seven-yearly intervals to his seventh. Specific plot demands dictate the form and structure; the last account, relating the day of Adam's actual birth seven years earlier, is narrated in the first person by Deborah and reveals a secret that casts light on her mental vulnerability and her relationships with her husband and son.

The fourth narrative's revelation also offers clues about a fourth character, Theo, who is the catalyst and pivot of the novel's action. Theo, who eerily resembles the absent Adam, is elusive and mercurial, and is seen only through Deborah's eyes. More than one reading is possible: Theo may exist,

or he may be an embodiment of Deborah's desperate longing for a companion, or he may be a 'real ghost'. (Deborah is named for Deborah Kerr who played the governess in *The Innocents*, a film based on Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw*, whose plot turns on the same ambiguity.⁴⁸) A reader is left to decide.

The setting of the novel's ending on a snowy hillside is reminiscent of the dark hill where *The Night Following* concludes with UW in limbo, drawn by the ghosts of her past but still hankering to rejoin the living. There is, however, some resolution for Deborah and Howard:

Whether or not Howard and I are now trapped or freed, out of our long habit of love for each other, inarticulate and disappointed as it may be, is born a love for both our sons that's infinite and equal.

(*Picnics*, p. 317)

The restoration of their love has brought a kind of serenity (and a glimpse of lucidity, if a reader takes the view that Deborah has been, hitherto, insane). They may survive or not; again, at the novel's close, a reader is left to decide:

If I were able now to find the breath, to shout out once would bring Adam running toward us and set in train all the hurry and bustle of rescue and explanations, the return to Stoneyridge. Or the sound might pinch the surface of the air, disturbing it for a moment, and then vanish into the quiet of the snow as if there were no one here at all, not a soul to return an answering cry or even hear the echo of my voice across the moor.

(*Picnics*, p. 317)

It can be anticipated that this inconclusive ending may disappoint a reader expecting a resolution not only of Deborah and Howard's predicament but also of the novel's many unanswered questions. It may also confound attempts to

⁴⁸ *The Innocents*, dir. By Jack Clayton (Twentieth Century Fox, 1961) [on DVD]; Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (USA: Dover Thrift Editions, 1991).

discern the novel in relation to the boundaries and conventions of any one genre; the layers of interpretation can accommodate its being read as a love story, or a ghost story, in addition to predictable perceptions of it as a novel of psychological suspense or a work of literary fiction. The novel's resistance to genre categorisation may be deemed a strength, a weakness or an irrelevance, depending on a critic's attitude to genre *vis-à-vis* the calibrations of a text. But whether *Our Picnics in the Sun* will be reviewed as a genre novel whose deviations from genre expectations are shortcomings, or a novel that exposes the shortcomings of too-rigid genre definitions, its critical reception may be as pertinent to a study of the effects of genre labelling as it is to a study of the published work.

Part 3

CONCLUSIONS

Commercially, genre categories are used as a means of identifying, positioning and trading books, practices which are dominated by the operational imperatives of the marketing function within publishing. Every new book must be placed in a genre category; a decision must be made about the kind of book it resembles before it can be made recognisable as a similar book and marketed to a specific readership. Writers, publishers, critics and readers all recognise that categorisation is at best a practical means of communicating with and building readerships, and negotiating a complex, copious marketplace. At worst, it misrepresents some books, is inimical to the unique and experimental, hardens preconceptions and confuses critics and readers.

Both academic and media critics acknowledge that genre definitions are wide and evolving and that the boundaries between genres are unstable and permeable. But the ostensible flexibility of genre boundaries does not curb a reader's (and some professional critics') reliance on them as the dominant identifier of the kind of reading experience s/he is going to have. If a text deviates from genre formulae, a reader may disparage what is unexpected or original in the text simply for transgressing the norms; whatever the actual reading experience, it has not been the one a reader 'ought' to have had. This reliance on genre definitions, and such responses to texts that do not reliably observe them, perhaps reflect a reader's belief that a gratifying reading experience should reside in the fulfilment of expectations rather than in the embrace of the unfamiliar.

But a reader's understanding of genre operates as something more than a shorthand for choosing books. It mediates his/her experience of the text. To argue this, it is necessary to begin with a challenge to Coleridge's often repeated 'willing suspension of disbelief' as the necessary condition for a

reader's approach and reaction to a text. A reader, according to the 'suspension of disbelief' theory, temporarily divests himself of his knowledge of the real world's limitations when he engages with a work of poetry or fiction; he suspends disbelief of the fictive world so that he may surrender his imagination to it, and accept and react to what happens in it as if it were true and real. Thus, it is accepted that in one novel a man may turn overnight into a giant insect, in another that a dapper Belgian detective may expose a murderer in a drawing room full of suspects.

But if it were *disbelief* that a reader were suspending, a narrative would have to satisfy only one test of credibility; its mix of elements would have to be believable only in the terms of that narrative's storyworld, in the text as experienced by a reader who, his disbelief suspended, was making no reality checks. If a novel's storyworld were so constructed that it could be inhabited by both a man who has become a giant insect *and* a dapper Belgian detective, then it would be feasible and credible, in that novel, for a giant insect to be exposed as the murderer.

However, a reader does not 'suspend disbelief' in order to engage with a novel, because he has no need to; a reader embarks on the reading of a novel with an understanding, inculcated from childhood, of what stories are. He is not in danger of believing a novel to be true, or of confusing it with reality. So what occurs when he reads is, more accurately, a suspension of belief. Because he knows a novel to be a story, a reader suspends any belief that the events in a novel are real or true. Rather than divesting himself of knowledge (that the story is a story) on entering a storyworld (suspending disbelief of a text's unreality), a reader brings knowledge (that the story is a story) with him into a storyworld (he suspends belief of its reality). And the knowledge he brings is not just of the nature of story itself, but of different kinds of story; he knows, through all his interactions with books, that fictive worlds differ. This is knowledge of genre and, in relation to any text, it affects profoundly a reader's level of receptivity to what he finds there. The novel in the foregoing example would fail as a detective novel because the storyworld of a Hercule Poirot mystery cannot include a giant insect as a murderer, no matter what may be in the text. The identical text read as a literary novel need not so fail,

because a reader brings to it his/her knowledge that a literary novel's storyworld could admit such a possibility.

A writer's reputation for writing one kind of fiction can frustrate the development of her reputation for writing another. Broadly observed, the reputation first secured will inform opinions of whatever writing follows, however great the contrasts in the writing may be. A writer with a publication history in literary fiction who then produces crime fiction is likely to be credited with having written more literary fiction. The new fiction, whether it observes or subverts crime fiction conventions, may be considered genre-defying and original.

A writer with a publication history in crime fiction who then produces literary fiction is likely to be credited with having written more crime fiction. The new fiction, in its abandonment of genre conventions and its preoccupations with non-crime themes, may attract a varied critical reception: it may be deemed to have triumphed as crime fiction, either by being the apotheosis of the genre or by extending the scope of the genre. It may be considered to have failed as genre fiction. Relatively rarely, the new fiction may be seen as evidence of a writer's transition from crime writer to literary novelist.

(body of text - word count: 15,167)

Appendix

One text, two editions:

Jacket design for USA edition 2010 (Delacorte/Random House)

Jacket design for UK edition 2011 (Alma Books)

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