

The making of a New Zealand issues-based crime story: animal rights

By Michael C. Morris

Identity

Freddy here, or maybe Gaz. Or you can call me Daniel if you like. To be honest, I get confused about who I am. I've been living a lie so long, I'm finding it hard to recognise the truth. These are some of the themes of *Under cover activist* in fact; identity, honesty and deception.

In this scenario, I just finished an assignment infiltrating a gang. I was on stress leave, when my boss, Jim, called me about another assignment, this time keeping a watch on an animal rights group.

We thought it would be easy. It wasn't. There was more physical danger than I expected, both to me and my targets, but there was also the emotional roller-coaster. I had to reconcile myself with the people I'd betrayed, and then elicit their help in exposing a vicious underworld of crime and cruelty, combined with an indifferent and avaricious overworld. It taught me about my own life in the shadows, and I had an important decision to make.

Michael:

What decision was that, Freddy ... er, Daniel?

Daniel:

Whether I should continue living a lie. It was chipping away at my sense of self-worth. My life was rather similar to that of Dan Pistone, an FBI agent who infiltrated the Mafia¹. The Mafia, as anyone who has read Mario Puzo's 1969 novel *The Godfather* knows, are bad news. Not totally amoral, they certainly feel strongly about family ties, but they don't have any respect at all for the life or well-being of anyone outside the family.

¹ Pistone 1988

Anyway, Dan Pistone lived among his Mafia targets for several years. He walked like them, talked like them, and became a trusted confidante. Then he busted them, and successfully. They received long prison sentences, a number of law abiding citizens slept better in their beds, and our man was a hero.

But here's the thing. He didn't feel like a hero. He felt like a first class Judas. As he said in an interview, these people, low life scum though they were, had become his friends. Makes you think, doesn't it? Perhaps you will understand now how I felt when I broke down and bawled my eyes out after betraying my lover and her father. As I mention in my story,

When I was finally dismissed from the witness stand, I vanished into a toilet cubicle and wept. There was nobody around to comfort me. Nobody was even supposed to know I existed. It may appear strange to most people, but Lena, Norm, and the other violent drug-crazed members of the Rabid Dog gang had become my friends.²

The Rabid Dog gang (a thinly disguised reference to the Mongrel Mob), are nowhere near as psychopathic as the Italian-American Mafia. Members of some Maori gangs, notably Black Power, have even attempted to mould themselves into a group with the social function of being a voice for disaffected Maori youth.³ Norm the gang leader certainly showed his soft side in his care for abandoned kittens. This not only leads nicely into the animal rights theme, but it shows just how much keener my sense of betrayal would be. I was even able to fall in love with one of my targets.

Michael:

I'll say more about the animal rights theme later. Getting back to Dan Pistone. He was certainly one source for my ideas. Another was New Zealand's very own spy, the less heroic police informant, Rob Gilchrist. I first met Rob in 2003 during an animal rights conference. I didn't particularly like him. He had an overbearing personality that was in stark contrast to the other activists. At that time, before animal rights had become respectable, most activists had anarchist tendencies and had a deep antipathy to being

² *Undercover Activist*, ch.1.

³ Gilbert (2010).

told what to do, or bossing others around.

Nevertheless, Rob seemed to be well-respected among the leadership of the Wellington movement, so I never suspected him of being anything other than what he pretended to be. Later, I learned that he had been reporting activist activity on various animal, environmental and unionist groups to his police minders, and to private investigation company Thomson and Clark (Snodgrass and Williams in my story). This had been going on since 1998.

Rob Gilchrist was exposed publicly by investigative journalist Nicky Hager in 2008⁴. In many ways Rob resembled his alter-ego Gilbert Ryan.

Daniel:

The one my boss describes as ‘a gung-ho sleazeball with a fetish for 16 year old girls?’⁵

Michael:

That’s the one. He allegedly sent compromising photos of some of those girls to his police minders. More seriously, Rob became friends with activists, and even had a sexual relationship with one of them, in order to extract information.

Fellow activist Valerie Morse and Rob’s ex-partner Rochelle Rees both describes the sense of betrayal they felt after discovering that someone they thought was a friend was spying for the state⁶. It was Rob’s former partner who was instrumental in exposing his former dealings to Nicky Hagar⁷.

Daniel:

Yeah, I guess all the targets felt betrayed. But what about the spies? How did they feel?

Michael:

I’m coming to that. New Zealand is not the only place where police have spied on environmental or animal rights activists. Mark Kennedy was an undercover police officer in the United Kingdom who infiltrated the environmental movement for seven years. He had to work hard to gain their trust. He attended events with the activists,

⁴Hager (2008).

⁵ *Undercover Activist* ch.1.

⁶ Rees and Morse (2015).

⁷ Ibid.

stood on the front line of demonstrations with them, drank with them, and slept with two of them. Kennedy's girlfriend describes feeling 'violated' when Kennedy was outed, and other activists expressed their outrage. It's something the activists found hard to forgive⁸.

It was equally hard for Kennedy to forgive himself⁹, something else he had in common with Danny Pistone. In this regard, Daniel, your guilt and sense of betrayal is not unusual.

The nature of undercover work means there's a paucity of academic literature on the stresses of the job. Some studies, based on interviews with present and former under cover officers in the United States however confirm the personal experiences of Danny Pistone and Mark Kennedy. Officers identify with the targets they are investigating and report a sense of guilt when they betray the trust of these targets¹⁰.

Daniel:

I never knew that. Not something that Jim or his bosses would want to share with me – assuming they even knew. In my case at least, I was able to some extent to reconcile the guilt I felt at betraying his gang member friends by an appeal to the greater good.

Michael:

Yes, that's a crucial part of the book as far as your character development is concerned. Lets have a look at it, shall we?

"I'm sorry I busted you, Norm," I [Daniel] said. "You're right, we were mates. I don't know whether this will make you feel better, but after I testified against you in the courtroom I burst into tears."

I matched Norm's stare and continued. "But I had to arrest you, and I would do it again. You were peddling some pretty toxic shit, including to children. You couldn't be allowed to keep doing it. Surely even you can see that, now you're off the drugs."¹¹

⁸ Hattenstone (2011).

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Pogrebin and Poole (1993), Kowalczyk and Sharps (2017).

¹¹ *Undercover activist*, ch. 22.

The two academic articles I cited above¹² highlight other stresses involved with being undercover. Many of these are common to any jobs that have an element of danger, but some of these are unique to undercover work. One of these is difficulties in maintaining a personal life and making friends¹³, something you allude to.

The other is the requirement to be always playing a role. One officer refers specifically to having to immerse himself in the same ‘method acting’ approach that you describe¹⁴. Officers invariably start to take on the traits of the characters they are playing, and find difficulty readjusting when they’re no longer playing a part.

Daniel:

Very true. I tried to convey this sense of living a lie by experimenting with the point of view. I describe my experiences as an undercover police officer in the first person. I infiltrate the animal rights group and introduce myself as Freddy (my cover name). Freddy is an active member of the group, and he takes part in discussions. Other members of the group become comfortable with Freddy being there, and he with them. At the same time, my cop persona, Daniel, is observing the behaviour of all group members, Freddy included.

I’m split. Daniel’s thoughts and commentary are provided in the first person, and Freddy is described in third person, just like the others.

Michael:

Getting back to Mark Kennedy’s experiences, he describes the way the police cast him off after he had been ‘outed’, refusing to provide him with any other employment, on the grounds that he had been out of the loop for the past 7 years.¹⁵ An academic thesis, this time from interviews in Australia, reports similar difficulties undercover officers have in readjusting to normal police work¹⁶.

Daniel:

I can relate to that. Jim seemed to see me the same way. As a tool in his overall

12 Op cit., note 11.

13 Pogrebin and Poole (1993).

14 Ibid.

15 Hattenstone (2011).

16 French (2003). Also Pogrebin and Poole (1993).

schemes. Even when he offered to send me to counselling, it was in the same way that a lumberjack would take an axe to be sharpened.

Michael:

Yes, I did try to convey Jim's toughness. Nevertheless, like Norm the gang leader, he had his softer side. You and Jim built up a friendship based on mutual respect, which led to him asking you to dinner at his house.

One of my colleagues reading my draft thought this scene was unrealistic; another thought it moving. But based on my reading, it does appear as if such a break down of professional boundaries is quite exceptional. After making friends with you, Jim ensured that you could get a regular job in the police when the time came for you to come out from undercover. A better treatment from your employer than that experienced by many real operatives.

Daniel:

I certainly appreciated Jim's care for me, though I was also disappointed at the time. Adrenaline junkies like my colleague Sue and I would find adjusting to regular life to be difficult. At the end of my assignment, I had a choice. I could take on above ground police work, or I could continue undercover, this time for an animal rights group. The first choice would mean readjustment to rule-bound police culture, but the second would not be sufficiently challenging. The choice I made, and how I coped with this, will be explored in the planned sequel.

Issues based fiction

Michael:

Under cover activist has a number of tropes common to crime fiction. These have been covered well elsewhere¹⁷ so no need to elaborate. But just to list a few of the genre cliches in my story; these include the loner detective, the detective with an addiction problem, the clever detective, and the unarmed combat expert.

¹⁷ Eg. James (2009); Spring et al. (2015).

Daniel:

I'm certainly a loner; in fact that is probably what attracts readers to people like me. The police are a hierarchical organisation, with officers expected to regularly report to seniors, toe the corporate line and file screeds of paperwork. Readers delve into crime fiction for escape, not to be reminded of their boss, so an undercover police officer like me with the full power of the state behind him, but not restricted by messy regulations¹⁸, makes a perfect protagonist.

Michael:

Undercover activist can be seen at one level as a fairly typical escapist crime/thriller novel. What makes it unique are the issues it explores. *Undercover activist* is more than just a trope-riddled crime thriller; more even than a character-driven crime thriller. It's an issues based novel.

The issue in question is animal rights and animal liberation. The idea was to write a creative piece, in order to captivate the type of readers who wouldn't watch a documentary or read a more serious work. In doing so, I hoped to gain more converts to the cause. Issues based fiction has a long pedigree in literature.

Daniel:

I'll let you explain the literary history stuff. My taste in reading is more prosaic. I'm one of those sad cases who thinks James Patterson is a writer.

Michael:

Okay, I'll get onto popular writers later. If 'real' literature is your thing, then Charles Dickens's novels are well known examples of polemics pointing out the plight of the poor.

The slavery abolition movement in the 19th century also had its literary allies, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). John Steinbeck wrote a number of novels showcasing workers rights during the Soviet era when the West was frightened of communism, the most famous being *The grapes of wrath* (1939).

One recent (2018) New Zealand novel that highlighted the issue of gay rights

¹⁸ Pogrebin and Poole (1993).

was *Tane's War* by Brendaniel Weir, an alumnus of the AUT creative writing course.

Daniel:

My taste is more for crime fiction. As I said in your narrative I like to pick apart their plot points. I can see some of what you describe as 'issues-based' themes in these. Workers' rights feature in *Red Herring* (2015), a historical crime thriller set during the 1951 New Zealand waterfront strike (or lockout, depending whose side you're on).

Michael:

Good example. Jonathon Cullinane, the author of *Red Herring* is a postie and a staunch unionist. He intended his novel to be an advocacy piece¹⁹.

I could also mention the environmental movement, another issue that has become relevant in popular literature. The environmental movement is relatively new, and can be traced back to the 1940s with Aldo Leopold's land ethic. This held that ecosystems had moral worth, and needed to be taken into account when it came to making decisions that could affect them. As Leopold states:

*A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise*²⁰.

Leopold's 'land ethic' continues to have a profound impact on environmental policies and attitudes²¹. The ideas of the environment having intrinsic value is part of New Zealand government policy²². We can see this policy in action in the present emphasis the Department of Conservation is placing on extermination of invasive predators²³.

Environmentalism came into prominence as a social and political movement in the 60s and 70s²⁴, helped by controversial exposes such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*²⁵. In New Zealand it was triggered by the Save Manapouri campaign in the 70s.

¹⁹ Personal communication, March 2018.

²⁰ Leopold (1949).

²¹ Cupp (1997).

²² Department of Conservation (2000).

²³ Morris (2018).

²⁴ McGill (1997).

²⁵ Carson (1962).

Before that time, the prevailing belief in New Zealand was that economic and social progress is more important than the environment²⁶.

Daniel:

Yeah, I get the picture. I'm a keen reader of the so-called 'Eco-thriller'²⁷. It follows a similar structure to the traditional thriller; the race against time to foil some dastardly plot. In this case however, it's the endangered whale who is tied to the ticking bomb, not the shapely heroine.

Michael:

A useful metaphor. Mandy Hager is one New Zealand author who writes in this genre. Her first eco-thriller novel, *Run for the Trees* (1999) is about evil multinationals plotting to 'selectively log'²⁸ pristine Westland rain forest, and the actions of an environmental group in saving them. The plot is loosely based on a genuine conspiracy at the time, where the government was colluding with public relations operatives to manufacture consent for logging Westland forests. It was Mandy's brother Nicky²⁹ who described this genuine fight for the trees (the same one who 'outed' Rob Gilchrist).

Mandy Hager writes for young adults, and her 2015 book *Singing Home the Whale*³⁰ continues the eco-thriller theme. It's a more mature book than *Run for the trees*, and a more exciting read. It has a literal whale in danger from both greedy capitalists and bureaucratic jobsworths, and Mandy does an excellent job of giving the whale a voice. I wanted to keep turning the pages; the sign of a good thriller.

Daniel:

Another one is kiwi author Des Hunt. His target audience is somewhat younger than Mandy's, so even I find it a bit light. Though I'm sure they're good ripping yarns for young teens.

26 Pawson and Brooking (2002).

27 As described by 'Good reads'. www.goodreads.com

28 I use this term in the way it is defined by the woodman in the New Zealand *Bogor* comic strip. When asked how one would selectively log a forest, Bogor replies, 'first you select a forest, then you log it'.

29 Nicky Hager and Burton (1999).

30

Mandy Hager (2015)

Michael:

Its a good point. New Zealand eco-thrillers appear to be written for children or young adults. I'm not aware of any eco-thriller writers for adults in New Zealand, and there doesn't seem to be any highbrow literature either, which tells you something about how seriously it is taken here. The same can't be said for other parts of the world.

In the United States, Ernest Callenbach wrote the science-fiction utopian novel *Ecotopia* at the birth of the environmental movement in 1975. An interesting read for those wanting to know about the history of the movement, but not a thriller.

Daniel:

And then there's British author Ben Elton. He wrote adult novels in the eco-thriller mould in the 80s and 90s. His books are edge-of-the-seat page turners, with all the heroes, villains and turncoats one would expect in the genre.

Michael:

The site Goodreads lists 12 contemporary novels in the eco-thriller genre. The disaster movie *The day after tomorrow* (2004), about the consequences of global climate change, also shows the emerging popularity of environmental issues as a serious topic.

Animal rights issue based fiction

Michael:

The animal rights movement has an even more recent pedigree than the environmental movement. It can possibly be dated from the 60s, when an expose of factory farming caused some stir³¹, but this quietened down when the government wrote a few placatory reports and commissioned an enquiry – as they do.

The catalyst for a wider grass roots movement was Peter Singer's book *Animal liberation* in the 70s. Singer wrote a second edition of his book in the 90s, where he points out the progress that has been made with animal rights, and especially with the spread of veganism³². Very few academic books or articles on the plight of animals had been written at the time of the first edition in 1975. Between this year and the

31 Harrison (1964).

32 Singer (1975, 1990).

publication of the second edition there was such a proliferation of books, articles, and specialised academic journals, that Singer announced confidently that the philosophical case had been won.

Daniel:

It must have been around this time that the Animal Liberation Front became active in the UK, firebombing labs, torching trucks etc. Jim warned me about them. Part of the reason the Commissioner distrusted animal rights.

Michael:

Yes, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) were particularly active in the 90s when the battle spread from the philosophical academies to influencing the hearts and minds of the public³³.

In 2017, when *Undercover activist* is set, the ALF are redundant. During this century, the internet and social media has made it so much easier to get the message out there. Animal rights is becoming so increasingly accepted that vegan restaurants are not able to keep up with demand, and in some European countries up to 8% of the population identify as vegetarian or vegan.³⁴ The tools have changed, but the keyboard and the digital camera are still mightier than the bomb. Which is why this book will be timely.

Daniel:

There's certainly no shortage of documentaries on animal rights. Jim told me to watch *Earthlings* to get into the mood for my cover. It was awful. And I say this as someone who watches mobsters sell addictive drugs to children.

It's a gut-wrenching tale of exploitation. Ninety minutes of torture-porn showing dolphins butchered in Japan while school girls walked by chatting, elephants stabbed with bull hooks in American circuses, geese in France force fed with a huge tube rammed down their gullet and grain being pushed into them like icing from a cake. I still get nightmares thinking about it.

³³ Keith Mann's (2008) autobiography provides an interesting first hand account of ALF activity in the 1990s.

³⁴ Voiceless (2018).

Michael:

Earthlings was made in 2005. But would you believe there are even more disturbing films out there now?

Just last month I attended a screening of the 2018 film *Dominion* named after Matthew Scully's philosophical work on the same theme³⁵. Scully is a conservative Christian. His book is unique in that it explores the reasons why animal exploitation is unacceptable, from this viewpoint. The title comes from the first chapter of Genesis, where God gives humans 'Dominion' over animals. Scully's argument, in keeping with modern Christian interpretations on the role of animals³⁶, is that 'Dominion' needs to be seen in terms of stewardship rather than exploitation.

The documentary with the same name is not a philosophical or theological treatise. It's a gruesome, hard-hitting expose of animal exploitation, using hidden cameras in slaughterhouses and other places of abuse. Unlike *Earthlings*, which largely features American footage, *Dominion* is shot in Australia; far closer to home.

For those with less taste for gore there are gentler documentaries on the rights of animals. Paul Watson's Sea Shepherd crew have been blocking Japanese whalers since 1987, and the Animal Planet cable television have been filming this from 2008 as part of their series *Whale Wars*. *The Cove* was a 2009 documentary about dolphin slaughter at Taiji in Japan, and the cover up by the authorities.

There are documentaries on the health and environmental benefits of a plant based diet³⁷, and these are used by animal activists, even though they are not directly related to animal exploitation.

Most fictional films are for younger viewers, usually from the animals' point of view³⁸. One recent (2017) film for adults is *Carnage*, a humorous utopian vision made in a 'mockumentary' style. Another offering from the same year is the Netflix film *Okja*, with a child hero, but probably too much graphic violence for children, perpetuated towards both humans and non-humans. *Okja* uses ALF raids to provide excellent material for cops and robbers, good guys versus bad guys drama, not to mention suitably subtle moral dilemmas.

35 Scully (2002).

36 Eg by Linzey (1994).

37 Eg *Forks over knives* (2011), *Cowspiracy* (2014), *What the health* (2017).

38 Eg *Babe* (1995), *Chicken run* (2000).

Daniel:

So it seems the film and documentary industries are catching on to the potential of animal liberation as a theme. What about written fiction?

Michael:

Written fiction less so. Among adult fiction writers, John Coetzee is one author who has an interest in animal rights. His 1999 novel *Disgrace*³⁹ features an animal sanctuary and the growing realisation from the otherwise selfish protagonist that at least some animals should be accorded dignity, but it is not a major theme.

Coetzee's later book *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) is more in-your-face with its animal right polemic, but it reads more like a philosophical treatise with a thin veneer of character and plot wrapped around it, than a genuine novel.

The prize winning Korean novel *The Vegetarian* (2007) portrays the prejudice encountered by those who choose not to eat meat in contemporary Korean society. However the vegetarian in the novel is less motivated by animal concerns and more with a kind of repugnance, so it's more about intolerance of human lifestyles than animal issues.

I have found two books with an animal rights theme that could be described as similar to *Undercover Activist*. One is Linda Hansen's *Bad Oil and the Animals* (2016), a New Zealand young adult novel about the harm caused by the importation of palm oil. It's not exactly a page turner, but it does have all the young adult thriller tropes; a budding romance, young activists saving the planet from evil magnates, and learning about as much about themselves as the issues in the process.

Bad Oil has ecological themes, but what differentiates it from other eco-thrillers is the concern that the heroes of the story (and through them the author) show for animals as individuals, not just as species. Dirty dairying is one of the culprits.

Another issues-based animal rights novel, set in the United States, is Ingrid Newkirk's 2000 publication *Free the Animals*, about a police officer who becomes an activist. This describes ALF raids and involves some dramatic animal rescues.

Daniel:

So to continue my metaphor, in these books, it's the cow or dog, not the whale or the

³⁹ Coetzee (1999)

shapely female, who is strapped to the ticking time bomb.

Michael:

That's right. So there are a few fiction works that portray the issue of animal rights and their supporters in a good light, but it appears as if *Undercover Activist* breaks new ground in being an issues-based adult book in the crime/thriller genre, set in New Zealand. This genre requires a new name, similar to eco-thriller.

Influences on *Undercover activist*

Michael:

My main motivator for writing this book is the horrendous animal suffering that takes place world wide, every second of every day. As suggested by one of my peer reviewers, I start off my novel with an in-your-face quote on animal abuse. I used one of my own academic works and got my co-author's permission⁴⁰, to avoid copyright issues if the thesis is later published. In this exegesis, I can quote a similar and even more strongly worded polemic by a well known author:

"Aren't humans amazing? They kill wildlife - birds, deer, all kinds of cats, coyotes, beavers, groundhogs, mice and foxes by the million in order to protect their domestic animals and their feed. Then they kill domestic animals by the billion and eat them. This in turn kills people by the million, because eating all those animals leads to degenerative - and fatal - health conditions like heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, and cancer. So then humans spend billions of dollars torturing and killing millions more animals to look for cures for these diseases. Elsewhere, millions of other human beings are being killed by hunger and malnutrition because food they could eat is being used to fatten domestic animals."⁴¹

According to figures from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), approximately 60 billion land animals are killed every year. The bulk of these are killed or consumed

⁴⁰ Morris and Beaston (2011).

⁴¹ Coates and Fox (1989).

by people from Western or South American nations, including New Zealand⁴². To put that number into context, if humans killed each other at the same rate, our species would be extinct in 42 days.

This figure doesn't include fish. There are no reliable figures available for numbers of fish killed, since the FAO only provide weight and not numbers. One estimate from the NGO Fish Count however, based on average sizes of different fish species, is between 1 and 1.3 trillion per year⁴³. A kill rate that would wipe out humans in 2-3 days.

Over 90% of land animals consumed by the 'developed' world are poultry⁴⁴. These are genetic freaks; bred to be so top heavy their legs collapse under the weight of their bodies, and their hearts cannot stand the strain⁴⁵. Professor John Webster has described production of chickens as:

*in both magnitude and severity, the single most severe, systematic example of man's inhumanity to another sentient animal*⁴⁶.

Daniel:

Yes, I can see that suffering at that scale needs every voice that can be spared to condemn it. I consider myself an intelligent guy, and certainly no shrinking violet – can't be in my job. Like so many people I was totally ignorant of the scale of the issue. But what good do you think that getting my story out there would do?

Michael:

Good question. Since the time of Dickens, issues based fiction has had an effect on social reform. In the environmental field, Upton Sinclair's fictional novel *The Jungle* (1904) about unsafe food and worker safety practices in the meat industry spearheaded greater accountability in food manufacturing, though the author was disappointed that

42 Numbers of different types of land animals killed and consumed in the major animal producing countries are listed in the Voiceless Animal Cruelty Index (Voiceless 2018), which I did most of the research for.

43 Mood and Brooke (2010).

44 Op cit., note 43.

45 Morris (2009).

46 Webster (1995).

worker safety was largely forgotten⁴⁷.

The positive effects of fiction on readers' empathy and understanding of others has been confirmed experimentally in recent psychological studies⁴⁸. One study⁴⁹ found that only 'literary' fiction had this effect on improving empathy, presumably because of its in-depth analysis of character. It remains to be seen whether *Undercover activist* could be described as 'literary' rather than 'popular' fiction. I'm hoping that your adventures among the criminal elements of the vivisection industry will help bring in societal changes in the way we treat animals.

Undercover activist is partly based on recent historical events in the animal rights movement. I mentioned the police spy Rob Gilchrist earlier. Law student Somali Young was another spy, this time employed by Thompson and Clark private investigators to report back on the Wellington animal rights movement⁵⁰. I remember Somali driving a group of activists to a factory-farming protest in Foxton in a fairly new BMW, and I wondered where she got the funds for such a flash car.

The terrible betrayal in the novel of a vulnerable woman is based on a real sting operation in New York in 1988. A mentally unstable activist, Fran Trutt, was approached by agents of US Surgical who pretended to befriend her in order to get her to plant a pipe-bomb near the parking place of US Surgical chairman Leon Hirsch. Fran was caught and charged with attempted murder. The sting operation would have been successful if one of the agents working for US Surgical had not started boasting about his role in the affair. In the end, the attempted murder charge was dropped, Fran spent thirty-two months in jail for a lesser charge, and US Surgical staff remained unpunished⁵¹.

The New Zealand voice

Michael:

It's said that New Zealand fiction reflects its colonial history. It is characterised by its

47 Piott (1997).

48 Summarised by Oatley et al. (2018).

49 Kidd and Costano (2013).

50 Goldman (2008).

51 Rudacelle (2000).

themes of rugged individuals surviving in a hostile land⁵².

Stories of lone wolf ‘Aussie battlers’ can also be found in some Australian literature, such as the fictional and mythological accounts of folk hero Ned Kelly. Lone rangers make up the entire plot in one particular genre that gives them the name – the American Western.

The heroes of these American, Australian and New Zealand stories have a shared history; outcasts from Europe (and the American East in the Western), making a new life in a hostile new world.

Where New Zealand literature differs from its American counterparts however is in the political backdrop. The pioneer figures in New Zealand novels are often about struggles of ordinary workers against the establishment, a theme that reflects our egalitarian past.

Jonathan Cullinane’s thriller *Red Herring*, mentioned earlier, is an example of this type of novel. The influences of this novel can be traced back to a number of ‘issues based’ fiction works on the struggle of the working man, in the style of John Steinbeck. John A. Lee’s *Children of the Poor* (1934), John Mulgan’s *Man alone* (1939), C.K. Stead’s *Smith’s Dream* (1971), Maurice Shadbolt’s *Strangers and Journeys* (1972), and Kevin Ireland’s *Blowing my top* (1996) all have themes of class struggle, set against the political backdrop of their times.

There are similar left wing themes in *Undercover activist*. Animal rights generally is seen as a continuation of the class struggle where the marginalised non-humans are even more oppressed than the workers. Trades Hall, scene of struggles between unions and establishment, is a motif for the entire six weeks of action described in the book.

Daniel:

Yes, I can see how stories coming from the English speaking ‘Neo-Europes’, ie Australia, the United States and New Zealand, with their pioneering spirit, would differ from the mother country. We can also see that in the different style of mystery thrillers; the ‘cosy’ English mysteries, and the ‘hard boiled’ American thriller⁵³. My friend and one time lover Sylvia, the undercover FBI agent, explained this difference in police

52 Ministry for Culture and Heritage (2018).

53 James (2009); Spring and King (2012).

culture.

It took me a while to know you were undercover,” said Sylvia. “But you remember me telling you how the police have a certain way of talking. Part of the culture, something we learn in police college. New Zealand and the United States are different in a lot of ways, but in others we have a shared history. The dispossessed of Europe, with the grit and determination to make good in a new world.

I nodded. I could see what she meant. Our police culture reflects this. Less polished than your London bobby or your French gendarme, more matey and tougher.⁵⁴

Michael:

Exactly. The Western is a quintessential American story, and one of the most popular authors in this genre is Zane Grey, who also had a New Zealand connection. Zane visited New Zealand and established a fishing base in the Bay of Islands for big game fish. He expanded his repertoire from tales of macho cowboys to tales of macho big game fishing⁵⁵. He gained some popularity among New Zealanders who enjoy killing things, which again shows the commonality between the two pioneer cultures.

Barry Crump’s book *Wild pork and watercress* (1986), lately adapted to film as *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016), is a similar rugged tale of wild New Zealand men (and women) killing wild animals.

Daniel:

The American detective, hero of the ‘hard boiled’ sub-genre, is like me. A Lone Ranger in a hostile world, though we generally confine our killing to bad guys. This is in contrast with the genteel British and European detectives, such as Poirot, Alleyn, and Morse. Americans may find it hard to understand our more left wing ideas, and certainly our attitude to gun control would appear to be from another planet, but on the whole, there is no reason why crime thrillers featuring a rough part Maori loner such as

⁵⁴ *Undercover Activist*, ch 17.

⁵⁵ Grey (1926). I have loosely placed this under ‘non-fiction’ in the references, but given the penchant for fishers to exaggerate, perhaps it should be included under his fictional narratives.

myself, wouldn't sell in the United States.

Michael:

That's what I was hoping. The Kiwi loner like Daniel, who displays his courage and rugged individualism not by killing wildlife like Zane Grey or a Barry Crump character, but by turning his back on the senseless slaughter that is ubiquitous in New Zealand and American society, could become a new type of folk hero. Whether Daniel will become as popular a household name as Jack Reacher, Clint Eastwood or Ned Kelly, remains to be seen.

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