

Seeking, Solving and Growth
in
The Angler's Catch

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Table of Contents

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
EXEGESIS	1
Introduction	1
1. The Genre.....	3
Brief historical overview of detective fiction.	3
The impact of TV: turning up the shock factor	5
What is the appeal of crime fiction?	6
Where my novel fits in.	9
2. Motivations and Intentions.....	11
Personal motivations	11
Literary intentions.....	12
Origins and Influences.....	14
3. Elements and Methodology	16
Plot	16
Setting and Characters.....	16
Voice and Tense	19
Research.....	20
Opportunities and Challenges.....	20
4. Reflections.....	22
What have I learnt from the MCW project?	22
To what extent have I achieved my goals or intentions?	22
Goals for Future Projects	22
References.	23
THESIS: The Angler’s Catch	26

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby acknowledge that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Geoff Martyn

ABSTRACT

“The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science.”

Albert Einstein.

For detectives, historians, crossword fanatics, quest-seekers and many many more, finding the solution to a puzzle or mystery is a thing most satisfying. Demystifying the mysterious, solving problems and meeting challenges are perhaps the most obvious driving forces behind the novel *The Angler’s Catch*, the thesis component of this submission.

Beyond that, the creative work endeavours to portray social issues and cultural-historical features of small town New Zealand in the early-mid 1970s.

A further aim was to explore the personalities of the central characters and to tell a Kiwi story of ordinary people trying their best and persevering and achieving extraordinary results. It is a tale of surmounting obstacles through collaboration and, in the case of the protagonist Amos, of facing up to and overcoming personal flaws along the way.

The Angler’s Catch then, is a story of seeking, of solving and of growth.

The exegesis, entitled *Seeking, Solving and Growth*, attempts to place *The Angler’s Catch* in context, by exploring the detective novel genre and by identifying the author’s motivations, intentions, and methodologies. It is suggested that the exegesis be read before the creative work, but this of course is left to the preference of the reader.

EXEGESIS

Introduction

The Angler's Catch is a detective novel set in 1973 - 74 in the small New Zealand town of Oamaru. The protagonist, Amos, is a bookseller who is drawn into the investigation of two murders with assistance from old friends (including a CIB detective) and his family. Historical events and social issues of the era provide a backdrop to the story and Amos's interests in fishing and cryptic crosswords contribute towards the solving of the crimes. In addition to finding the key to the mysteries, Amos also struggles with several personal issues and he endeavours to face up to these in the course of the narrative.

That crime fiction and related genres are popular is abundantly clear. According to a Harris Poll in the US in 2010, 48% of readers identified having read a crime, thriller or mystery novel in an average year (Washington, 2010), though in terms of sales, Romance Fiction leads the pack (Romance Writers of America, 2011).

In the UK at the same time, close to two-thirds of the most borrowed library books are crime novels or thrillers, including all of the top 10 titles (Dugdale, 2011). It is claimed of Agatha Christie that only Shakespeare and the Bible have outsold her (Makinen, 2010).

In this exegesis, I investigate the detective fiction genre, I evaluate my interaction with the genre with respect to the MCW project, I report on the outcomes, I reflect on the experience, and I consider the implications for my future writing projects... perhaps I should have been a detective.

Following this introductory passage, the exegesis is divided into four sections:

1. The Genre

This section is driven by two lines of questioning:

- Where did detective fiction come from? How has it developed and changed?

- What is its appeal? What are the reasons for its popularity? What purposes does it fulfil?

2. Motivations and Intentions

Here I examine my own motivations for undertaking the MCW and my intentions and goals in choosing to write a detective novel for the creative work.

3. Elements and Methodology

Key aspects are outlined regarding the elements and methodology of writing, and the processes employed.

4. Reflections

The concluding section reflects upon the outcomes of the project, exploring briefly my learnings and future plans and goals.

1. The Genre

Brief historical overview of detective fiction.

Origins

Very likely one could trace antecedents and forerunners of detective fiction back through the history of writing and storytelling, from early Arabic and Chinese detective stories to myths going back to Classical times and beyond. However, for the purposes of this discussion, *detective fiction* is referred to within the context of published novels, primarily of Western European origin, dating from the 19th century onwards.

Following crime stories of Scandinavian authors in the early 1800s (e.g. *The Rector of Veilbye* by Steen Steenson Blicher, 1829), detective fiction in the English-speaking world took its first steps in the form of Edgar Allan Poe's works of the 1840s, firstly the 1841 short story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (David, 2001).

Further key offerings in that century included:

- *The Notting Hill Mystery* (1862-3), whose author was long only known under the pseudonym Charles Felix, now identified as Charles Warren Adams (Collins, 2011).
- Two works by Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1859), described as the first great mystery novel, and *Moonstone* (1868), considered the first detective novel (David, 2001).
- *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, introducing to the world Sherlock Holmes, a name that remains synonymous with detective work to this day (Lycett, 2007).

The 'Golden Age'

The period of the 1920s and 1930s gave rise to the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction, largely based in the UK and epitomised by the four 'Queens of Crime' (Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Dorothy L Sayers and Margery Allingham). In general, Golden Age stories revolved around a detective (often amateur), who would investigate a crime, uncover clues and eventually reveal 'whodunit'. The plots typically involved complex twists, false leads and sometimes apparently impossible situations – e.g. the locked-room mystery (Kismaric & Heiferman, 1998).

In the US at about the same time, a variant stream developed – focusing on the ‘hardboiled’ Private Eye investigators of authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. In contrast to the British whodunits, which were often played out in bucolic village settings, the hardboiled detectives typically worked on the mean streets of large cities, mixing with the corrupt underbelly of US society (Kismaric & Heiferman).

Post Golden Age Developments

Since the Golden Age, detective fiction has spawned many variations and multiple sub-genres. Some focus on Police Detectives, some emphasize the role of technology (both in the crime and in its solution), while others focus on particular minority groups or diverse cultures. Kelleghan (2001) outlines the range thus:

Detectives and spies, amateurs and private eyes are becoming increasingly diverse in personality traits and backgrounds. The female detective, once rare, is a thriving species, and she is joined by American Indians, Asian Americans, Latinos, homosexuals, and those with physical disabilities... this diversity represents more than a marketing gimmick; it has contributed pleasing dimensions of characterization not found in early mysteries. The term detective fiction may define a special sort of book, but no longer does it dictate its content or characters (p. xvi).

As can be seen in the above, the diversification of styles and sub-genres reflects major social and cultural elements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries: gender bias and feminism; homosexuality; ethnicity; and disability. Here we see the genre moving and adapting with the times. As Cawelti (1999) observes:

The detective story manifests a new regionalism, a new internationalism and a new historicism... I have yet to read a Neolithic detective story, but I am sure that, as I write, a Cro-Magnon investigator is hunting for clues in some aspiring mystery writer’s prehistoric marshes (p. 45).

Of course, Golden Age authors were capable of moving with the times too. Snell (2010) points out that, “[Agatha] Christie’s post-1945 novels were very revealing about social changes as late as the 1960’s, indicating attitudes and responses that she would not have envisaged in 1930” (p. 24).

Cup of tea with your murder?

In the latter part of the 20th century, possibly as a reaction against increasingly graphic and extreme depictions of crime in the media, some writers began to return to the general ethos of the Golden Age whodunit. These novels, generally avoiding sex, violence and profanity, have come to be known as ‘Cosy Mysteries’. Kelleghan identifies distinguishing features of the *English* cosy: “an amateur detective whose weapon is wit” and villains who are “mere opponents to be outwitted in a mental game whose stakes may be life and death but are never terrifying.” (Kelleghan, 2001, p. xiii).

Crime on TV: turning up the shock factor

Television has had a very significant impact on crime fiction, with crime, police and detective shows (both fictional and the more recent ‘reality TV’ types) being hugely popular. Due to high demand, there is a need to keep reinventing the genre, to keep it fresh.

The constant dilemma for the crime writer is how to make the genre new, to take the old conventions and formulae and inject them with energy and innovation... it is the emerging writer’s job to make crime writing relevant to today. (John Dale, 2007, p. 126-7).

One of the primary means of doing this, in printed form and in film and on TV, seems to have been by increasing the shock factor.

Late in the twentieth century, when such things could be presented, grotesqueries such as child molestation and incest became crimes ranking almost equal to murder – always the crime of choice – in the literature. (Kelleghan, 2001, p. xiii).

To keep ‘fresh’ it seems, some writers take the approach that one must shock the reader. And to keep on shocking, one must always outdo what has come before – a phenomenon popularly known as *the law of diminishing returns*. In my planning for this novel, I rejected the need to be swept away in this apparent landslide of gratuitous violence and escalating atrocity.

As a result, I faced a dilemma in my choice of genre and style for the MCW project. On the one hand, loving a good whodunit; on the other, rejecting the blood and guts for

its own sake approach. So I chose a time period (1970s) that seemed to me to be a little more innocent than the present day – nostalgia on my part perhaps.

A popular trend in television broadcasting, particularly of British crime and detective fiction, has been the adaptation of novels from earlier periods – often those of Golden Age authors. In a market-driven industry, this kind of nostalgic production has been very successful. As McCaw (2011) explains, “economic necessity made the adaptation of detective fictions particularly attractive, for (as with literary ‘classics’) they brought with them a large constituency of readers” (p. 2).

What is the appeal of crime fiction?

Some readers of crime fiction laud those authors who write with a polished style, while others have little interest in the literary value of the work – for the latter, crime fiction is entertainment, pure and simple. Numerous other reasons for the compelling nature of the genre have been proposed. Knight (1980) suggests that crime fiction:

- provides a substitute for religious patterns of certainty
- reflects psychic anxieties of writers and readers
- is driven by the social attitudes and pressures of the modern environment

Similar themes can be found in Kelleghan’s (2001) *100 Masters of Mystery and Detective Fiction*:

The field of mystery fiction is conservative: it presents a situation of judicial, moral and even theological imbalance, and rights wrongs to restore a balance that will satisfy the reader. Yet it is also progressive: it evolves to meet the fears and anxieties of the day. (p. xiii).

Much of the appeal may boil down to escapism or, to use a more generous term, *diversion*. With reference to later 20th century British detective television, McCaw (2010) concludes that the most popular examples, “offer their viewers a diversion away from a troubling present and towards an idealized form of society that exemplifies a ‘best’ of Englishness.” Yet, despite the rapid and international growth of forensic investigation shows such as *Prime Suspect* and *CSI*, “it is clear that the appetite in the United Kingdom for the more orthodox detective fiction format, minus the intricacies of forensic science, is still ravenous” (p. 125, 129).

No doubt there are more explanations for the popularity of crime fiction. Below are three - *Quest, Good vs. Evil, and Puzzles* – which resonate most closely with my own preferences within the genre:

The Quest

One explanation for the mystery novel's popularity in so many different cultures is that "mystery novels are contemporary manifestations of mythological quest stories found in all cultures." (Badal, 2005, p. 59). So although mystery and crime fiction may change with the times on the surface, at a deeper level it still fulfils the functions it always has. Badal further asserts that: "Detective novels are popular precisely because they are not modern. They do not try to be experimental or to follow academic trends." (p. 61-2).

I do not entirely agree with Badal here. It seems to me that some authors, especially more contemporary ones, do experiment and stretch the boundaries. A novel that springs to mind is *Rocking Horse Road* by NZ author Carl Nixon. The story is voiced in first person plural and the whodunit aspect is *not* resolved at the end of the book. These are both unusual features for a classic detective novel (which of course, it is not, though it is an example of contemporary crime fiction).

Lehman (2000) similarly connects quest for truth, and the victory of good over evil, to the earliest traditions of storytelling:

The narrative line proceeds in gradual stages from mystification to revelation, a teleological progression towards the truth. The good survive and prosper. The evil are isolated and carted off. We are promised a happy ending, or something that resembles one. In these and other ways, the genre would seem to conform to the most ancient storytelling traditions (p. 23).

Morality and Good triumphing over Evil

Whether consciously planned or not, many authors have moral issues as major themes. This sense of good triumphing over evil and justice being served provides another explanation for the popularity of detective fiction.

According to Knight (1980), Agatha Christie in her later works "extricates herself with some vigour and animus from psychological interpretations of behaviour, preferring a simple right and wrong, good and evil model of human action" (p. 125). Knight also likens this aspect of her novels to folk-tales or children's stories.

It may seem strange at first inspection, that stories about ‘good’ should be clothed in crime stories. After all, crime represents to some extent, the acting out of ‘evil’. In his examination of the connection between the moralism of Kantian philosophy and the “ostensible rampant immorality” of the detective story (especially the hard-boiled US types), Robert Zaslavsky (1983) contends that the detective story’s “ostensible immorality is the cloak for a stern moralism – that indeed stern moralism and rampant immorality imply and require each other” (p. 54).

In other words, to fully explore the nature of ‘Good’ we must fully explore the nature of ‘Evil’ – the one cannot exist without the other. Detective fiction is ideally placed to demonstrate this complementary symbiotic relationship – the Yin and the Yang.

The fact that crime fiction had its origins in the wake of the industrial revolution and in the setting of rapidly growing cities of Europe and America is significant too. The early detective, in the mould of Sherlock Holmes, is often a hero come to restore justice and right in an increasingly ‘evil’ world.

Similarly, in the years following the ‘war to end all wars’, Golden Age crime fiction sought to “redeem the world from death, war and chaos” in the words of Susan Rowland. She concludes that it did so by:

Developing a flexible self-referential form, and by embodying the mythical hero in a new relation between masculine and feminine structures of consciousness. It succeeded in generating a potent “classical” form for desire and its grail quest for a better world (Rowland, 2010, p. 127).

Puzzles, Mysteries and Conundrums

It seems to me, and to others, that humanity has an innate need to solve problems and puzzles.

Puzzles and mysteries are intrinsically intertwined in human life... they appeal to people for the very same reason – they generate a feeling of suspense that calls out for relief... Unraveling the solution to a mystery story or to a puzzle seems to produce a kind of “mental catharsis”, since people typically feel a sense of relief from suspense when they find the answer to the mystery or puzzle. For some truly mysterious reason, human beings seem to need this kind of catharsis on a regular basis... (Marcel Danesi, 2002, p. 2).

With regard to the puzzle and mystery of a detective story, we want to be invited to solve the case alongside the detective. As Charles Rzepka (2010) puts it:

The puzzle-element... is difficult to dismiss, even in works by notoriously tough, “realistic” writers like Hammett and Chandler. Not that the reader ever really expects to solve the case before the detective explains it all, any more than most of us expect to solve the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle. (p. 3).

Where my novel fits in.

I call it a ‘historical cosy’. Though not entirely comfortable with the term cosy, I believe *The Angler’s Catch* contains many of the cosy’s characteristics as outlined in the *historical overview* section above. As the novel was written for my mother, the intention was for it to appeal to the predominantly female readership of this subgenre. Badal (2005) notes that 80% of fiction readers in the US are women. “Thus, a majority of mystery novels that are successful feature women protagonists or strong female characters working equally with the male protagonist. The male protagonist (if there is one) must be appealing to women” (p. 71).

Though I had not read Badal’s comments at the time of beginning *The Angler’s Catch*, my choice of a ‘likeable’ protagonist (Amos) and two strong female characters (Zoe and Dorothy) certainly fits with his above statement.

Science, History and the Detective Novel

The influence of science and a scientific approach to solving the mystery of a crime is not hard to see, from the ratiocination of Sherlock Holmes to the forensic analysis of the present day. Though the nature of influence has changed along with advances in science, the influence is still strong, no matter how ‘close to the surface’ the science is. As Goldsmith (2010) demonstrates in her doctoral thesis, “... a wealth of science functions within detective fiction at a far deeper level. It informs the worldview or paradigm within which and against which the plot is played out” (p. 2). In her conclusion, Goldsmith points to the “increasing significance of the detective fiction genre in providing a response to the problems and issues of modernity” (p. 245).

There is also a significant connection with history. Historians and detectives have similar goals and methods: both seek the truth by looking at the past.

The detective seeks a solution to a mystery or mysteries. The solution is arrived at through the careful questioning of witnesses: in short, through a process of retracing, recovering the past. The detective is bound by an obligation beyond that to any human individual: an obligation to Truth (O’Gorman, 1999, p. 20).

This rings a bell with me, having (amateur) interests in history and anthropology. This perhaps explains why I appreciate *Foyle’s War* (a TV detective series set in the UK during WWII) and enjoy the TV adaptations of Golden Age detective novels, but have less interest in series set in the 21st century.

The Old and the New

In a discussion on the connection of crime fiction with the ‘big city’, Most (2006) makes an interesting observation about the detective story: “In the crimes it salaciously describes we sense all the fascinated dread of modernity – and in the conclusions it almost never fails to supply, the sour nostalgia for a pre-modern security.” (p.71).

The Angler’s Catch is clearly not set in a big city, but the two underlined phrases (my emphasis) do connect with my choice of time and place for this project – small town New Zealand in the early 1970s. Dread of modernity (in the sense of the problems of the modern world) and nostalgia for ‘simpler’ times may well have been at the back of my mind, particularly given the intention to write a book that my mother would relate to and enjoy. Objectively viewed, it is debatable whether the 1970s were ‘simpler’ or not. I suspect that this may be more a case of the naïve perspective of a young boy (myself) remembered from a rose-tinted historical distance.

Most also observes that “Nostalgia is no less intrinsic a characteristic of modernity than the drive to innovation: the two impulses are not only inseparable but at the same time both mutually reinforcing and mutually undermining” (p. 72) - Yin and Yang again.

2. Motivations and Intentions

In this section I address three questions:

- Personal motivations: - why did I want to write this novel?
- Literary intentions: - what sort of reading experience was I trying to achieve?
- Origins and influences: - what influenced me in my choice of genre?

Personal motivations

Skill Development

In 2008, I decided the time was right and set about writing my first novel – an adventure story for young adult readership. Living in a small town in the South Island for the year, I had a lot of time available for writing and completed drafts of three novels. Reflecting on these first efforts, I thought that I had handled plot and action well enough, but had little idea about development of character and holding the reader’s attention. I realised that I needed to spend much more time developing the *craft* of writing.

A key goal, in my writing for this project, has been to concentrate on aspects other than just plot; e.g. to focus on the emotional and psychological ‘life’ of the characters. *The Angler’s Catch* is intended as a detective novel in which the solving of the crime drives the plot but *does not dictate the heart of the story*.

As a Dedication

From very early on, *The Angler’s Catch* was intended as *a book that my mother would read*, and would (hopefully) enjoy. In this sense, it is a gift, a ‘thank-you’ for everything that she and my father gave me while I was growing up. One thing that my mother gave me was a love of books and reading and, in particular, a love of mysteries and whodunit novels. An abiding memory is of my mother, whenever the demands of raising five boys allowed, happily ensconced in the latest Agatha Christie or Ngaio Marsh novel. It was infectious – I started reading them too.

This determined to a large extent, the genre and the style of the project. For the book to meet her tastes, it needed to be a whodunit. The style and the characters would best be in keeping with those of the Golden Age whodunits. The time, early to mid-1970s, is a time that I recall her reading such novels.

With reference to Agatha Christie, Knight (1980) observes that her form “ratified conservatism... and the ability of very ordinary powers to cope with the disorder such people faced, in the world and in themselves” (p. 133). These aspects too, speak to the choice of a whodunit as the framework for this project.

When I began planning the book at the end of 2010, my mother’s eyesight had deteriorated to the point that she could no longer read, and so I envisaged that I would end up reading the finished book aloud to her. In August 2011, she passed away - the first draft of the novel was 90% complete. I will now not be able to read it to her, but I hope that she would have enjoyed it.

The Angler’s Catch is dedicated to her.

Literary intentions

For the reader, my intention is that *The Angler’s Catch* will deliver puzzle + heart + realism, i.e.

- a. The satisfaction of a classic whodunit mystery
- b. A story with heart, showing the growth in Amos’s and other characters
- c. A realistic window on life in small-town New Zealand society in the early 1970’s

Stieg Larsson, as one of the most successful and popular current writers in a crime fiction genre, makes an interesting observation with regard to the interplay between plot and character and society.

“I know what kind of things I myself have been irritated by in detective stories. They are often about one or two persons, but they don’t describe anything in the society outside” (Cited at: <http://www.postmodernmystery.com/quotes.html>, accessed 2 Oct 2011)

The Importance of Character

Although the society described in the novels of his Millennium series is at times an extremely dark and negative one, Larsson’s characters are rich and developed in full, to the extent that the solution of the mystery is but one of the engaging aspects for the reader. For example, in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the growth of the character Lisbeth Salander was for me one of the most compelling aspects.

For many contemporary authors of detective fiction, the development of character is now of prime importance. This in a genre where plot has often been considered to be king. The characters, though fictional constructs, should be given life and appear as realistically as possible. Otherwise characters come across as placeholders – like the letters x, y and z in an algebraic formula.

Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, alludes to a situation where detective fiction may become too formulaic or too focussed on plot and the puzzle aspects, to the detriment of the character development and of creating an emotionally rewarding reading experience.

The murderers were as artificial as their victims, serving as only clues in a puzzle... Instead of decorating the story with clues and red herrings, the author would be forced to come to grips with his characters and his subject, and his characters would have a chance to become people in a book instead of just figments of their author's imagination (Cited at:

<http://www.postmodernmystery.com/quotes.html>, accessed 2 Oct 2011)

Detectives' characters can also be made to change over time to suit the nature of the author's intentions. In *Vintage Murder*, a Ngaio Marsh novel set in New Zealand, Marsh incorporates her "responses as a returned expatriate, sympathy for the Maoris, and dislike of defensive and self-limiting colonial attitudes" (Acheson, 1985, p. 165). As if to facilitate this more serious backdrop, Inspector Alleyn drops his "former flippancy" and becomes more "serious and thoughtful".

The Importance of Social Issues

A feature of looking backwards, at social issues of earlier time periods, is that it facilitates the presentation of a more objective account – we are less fettered by the prejudices and taboos of the time. Writing about English Detective Fiction and World War Two, Elizabeth Willis notes a number of effects of the war on authors: their lead characters grow "more serious and sensible" and the war gives an "edge to [interpersonal] conflicts" (Willis, 1983, p. 16).

Willis also comments that for novels written during the wartime years, while general commentary and criticism was admissible, some topics were taboo – conscientious objection and draft-dodging for example (p. 20). By comparison, in the *Bad Blood* episode of Foyle's War (written 60 year after the war), Horowitz includes a conscientious objector as a key component of the story.

For Golden Age authors in the inter-war years (1920s – 1930s), certain socio-cultural issues are either omitted or played down. According to Snell (2010), “many subjects are underplayed in inter-war village detective fiction. One finds little on labour unrest, or the slump, though unemployment receives passing mention.” Also neglected, are politics, farm dereliction, tariff issues and rural diversification. The rural exodus is seen as ‘the servant problem’ and even the rise of fascism is of scant interest. In spite of all this however, “detective fiction inevitably conveys a very strong sense of its period, containing much of wider social significance” (p. 49-50).

Being an author in a ‘popular’ genre does not preclude ‘serious’ commentary on society, even in the case of Golden Age authors. Ngaio Marsh, according to Acheson (1985), was “a writer of popular fiction who took the opportunity in her books of saying not only what she liked about New Zealand, but of satirizing what she perceived to be its shortcomings...” (p. 173).

The addition of more emotional, psychological, socio-historical layers than I may previously have attempted has made the writing of this novel a challenging project. I am not alone in finding this perhaps. Anthony Horowitz, creator and writer of ‘Foyle’s War’, describes the writing of episodes for the series:

"Murder mysteries are themselves hard to write but then you must add in history, sociology and a moral dilemma to the plot."

(Cited at: <http://www.foyleswar.com/people/crew/horowitz.htm>, accessed 2 Oct 2011)

Origins and Influences

As mentioned earlier in this exegesis, the primary influences on my writing for this novel have been the Golden Age detective and whodunit authors, e.g. Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler. Their stories I have read in original printed form and/or watched via the medium of television adaptations.

Other TV series that have had an impact are primarily purpose-written TV dramas, particularly those made in the UK.

While following the exploits of the likes of Inspectors Morse, Barnaby, Frost and Gently, one series which remains strong in my memory is “Foyle’s War”, created by

Anthony Horowitz. Aspects of Foyle's War that have influenced me in writing The Angler's Catch are:

- Setting the story in a time when life seemed (to me) more 'simple'
- Examining social issues that may have been taboo at the time
- Focussing more on the lead characters' emotional and psychological lives, with a view to illustrate their growth and healing

3. Elements and Methodology

Plot

“In crime fiction with few exceptions plot is more important than in literary fiction. Crime fiction tells a story, and that is its great and lasting appeal.”

(Dale, 2007, p. 126)

Following my intention, described in an earlier section of this exegesis, to focus more on character, psychology and emotion in this book, I began planning and writing for this project with a different approach. My aim was to move away from having ‘a plot in search of a story’ and to instead begin with a ‘story in search of a plot.’

So I began with the protagonist, Amos. I asked myself: what was his story? What relationships did he have? What wounds and needs for growth did he have?

The plot I sketched out only in outline – I had some idea of a murder and how it was done, but left even the identity of the killer open.

Setting and Characters.

With this bare thumbnail of plot, I shifted focus to the main characters and the setting. I decided to follow the advice “write what you know”, and set the story in Oamaru in the mid-1970s – my home town and the time of my own teenage years.

City, Town and Country

In terms of setting and location, Golden Age detective novels tended to one of two camps:

1. country or small village (usually British) or confined space
2. big city / urban underbelly (usually American hard-boiled authors)

The town of Oamaru is neither. In many respects it is closer to the small village, with strong connections to the surrounding farming community, but it also has echoes of the social issues of the big city.

One feature of country or village life is that anonymity is difficult, if not impossible. Snell (2010) cites Golden Age author Dorothy L. Sayers, “in a country place, where everybody knows everybody, it is impossible to keep one’s movements altogether secret” (p. 22). Snell comments that villagers are shown to be incredibly observant, very nosy, and possessing extraordinary recall of items and fleeting occurrences.

In *The Angler's Catch*, village-like elements are shown in the opening scene, where Amos tries to avoid being seen by the town gossip, in the under-resourced police force, and in the fact that Smith's reputation precedes him. Elements closer to the city side of life include the presence of migrant Tongan families (to work in blue collar jobs), and the industrial dispute at the harbour.

Technology

Placing the novel in the 1970s made it easier to match technology with the style. Though more advanced than 1920s - 30s, technology was much less advanced in 1973/4 than the present day. If this was to be a book that my mother would like, it was important that technology should not loom too large.

As identified by Bean (2005) "the format of the cozy, for example, does not seem to lend itself to an evaluation of the sleuth's use of technology to gather information... the police procedural, on the other hand, depicts autopsies, lab work, crime scene analysis, evidence collection / preservation / examination, investigative methods, perpetrator and victim profiling, and computer analysis." (p. 27).

In *The Angler's Catch*, I let the police and the experts deal with these factors, if appropriate.

Character

The characters of Amos and his mother Dorothy took initial shape from recollections of members of my own family. Both characters soon took on their own divergent personalities and have become completely fictional individuals with lives of their own. Amos, and his mother, to a lesser extent, are the detectives – amateurs. They also receive assistance from professionals in their respective fields - DI Greenwell and Dr Zoe O'Malley.

The decision to cast the primary detectives as amateurs was a conscious one, echoing British detective fiction of the Golden Age. Although my characters solve the crimes as a team, I have room here to discuss only Amos.

Amos

Amos's character is intended to be very average, very ordinary. He is a middle-aged man whose personality is largely a product of his environment. His emotional life is hobbled, a reflection of the Kiwi bloke stereotype of the mid 20th century. He has difficulty expressing emotion and believes public display of feelings to be a sign of

weakness. He has great difficulty in relationships with women and deals with difficulties by retreating and/or by resorting to alcohol. But he has a strong sense of responsibility to his daughter and is resolute in his loyalty to his friends.

Although Golden Age authors were an influence in this project, I felt strongly that my protagonists were not to be reiterations of Hercules Poirot, Miss Marple or Inspector Alleyn. I was not familiar with Dorothy L. Sayers' protagonist, Lord Peter Wimsey, but the development of his character is of interest. Brunsdale (2010) comments that "Lord Peter Wimsey began in the 1920s as a comic Woosterish figure, but through the 1930s, [Sayers] developed him into a 'true successor of Roland and Lancelot,' using the conventions her readers expected then" (p. 614).

Amos's character is not intended to be comic (though there is a slight British pompousness to him) but he is intended as a hero-conqueror: conqueror, along with his 'assistants', of the puzzles surrounding the crime and, more significantly for Amos, conqueror of himself and his personal flaws.

The two main flaws he wrestles with are *the drink* (excess of) and *the women* (difficulties with). These two issues are connected, as is their resolution. This of course, like most plot ideas, has been thought of before. One example, again from Dorothy Sayers, is described by Brunsdale (2010), "Sayers brought the love-problem into line with the detective-problem so that the same key should unlock both at once... [the detective] is healed of his flaws by accepting equality between lovers" (p. 622). In context of Sayers' novels, Wimsey at last meets and marries Harriet, and in symbiotic union the two become whole.

This 'problem with women' theme in detective fiction goes back at least as far as Sherlock Holmes. Trotter (1991) points out that, for all Holmes's genius at decipherment and scientific analysis:

...there are parts of the world he cannot make sense of, and must consequently ignore or suppress. The overt project of the Sherlock Holmes stories may be 'total explicitness', but they also include women whose sexuality has a 'dark and magical' quality 'beyond the reach of scientific knowledge' (pp. 67-68).

Referring to American hard-boiled detective fiction, Rawson (2009) connects Joseph Campbell's notion of 'katabasis' with the protagonists of novelists such as Chandler, Hammett and Spillane (p. 291). In terms of the Hero's Quest, katabasis (descent into the underworld) must be followed by anabasis (return home). The typical hard-boiled

detective, a deeply flawed individual, undertakes the impossible task “to restore social order as a means of healing the fragmentation of the self.” This wounded, incomplete hero however never achieves anabasis. He has a psyche that can never be healed (p. 293-295), perhaps Frodo’s irreparable wound in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is another example of this.

In contrast, Amos is intended as a character that descends into his own internal underworld and then must heal himself by his own actions.

Voice and Tense

The decision to have the solving of the crimes a *team* effort was possibly influenced by the desire to present an authentic egalitarian Kiwi flavour. This in turn, influenced my choice of voice – a mix of 3rd person limited and 3rd person objective. Amos, being the main character, has the bulk of the 3rd person limited scenes, though there are occasional glimpses of this elsewhere: e.g. Takahashi on the raft and arriving at the beach.

Maria Plochocki (2005), commenting on the use of heteroglossia (the presence of multiple voices in the novel), maintains that heteroglossia is “a vehicle for revealing and showing the omnipresence and multi-sourcedness of knowledge...[and] serves to decenter authority and knowledge-gathering from the detective, in whom such expertise has traditionally been centered, and place it elsewhere, often in multiple locations” (p. i).

In *The Angler’s Catch*, the use of multiple voices fits well. Knowledge (and problem-solving) derives from Amos, Greenwell, Dorothy, Zoe, the teenagers and Mary. It is a more egalitarian affair than many detective novels.

I elected to use past tense for the bulk of the narrative and switch to present only for flash-back scenes (to give them emphasis). This seemed to suit the genre. If I had been writing a more action-oriented novel, perhaps following the exploits of a police detective or private investigator, I might well have chosen to write in first person and perhaps in present tense.

Research

Although I grew up in the town of Oamaru and was a teenager at the time period in which *The Angler's Catch* is set, I knew that I would have to carry out a substantial amount of research if I was to fulfil my intention of providing a realistic, historically accurate window into society of that time.

Perhaps the richest and most valuable sources of information were the newspapers of the era. I visited the Oamaru Museum archive and spent many hours delving through well-preserved issues of the Oamaru Mail and Otago Daily Times from the early months of 1974. This provided information on:

- Sporting events – the Commonwealth Games; Cricket Tests with Australia
- Politics – The Labour Government; Norman Kirk; Robert Muldoon
- Hot Issues – nuclear testing at Mururoa; the Manapouri hydro dam dispute; Vietnam War; Pacific Island overstayers
- Economics – Oil crisis; petrol rationing; alternative energy sources
- Aspects of day-to-day living – what was on TV; what cars people were selling/buying; the price of milk

Film and TV clips, from the NZ Film Archive: e.g. a documentary series on the Dawn Raids of 1974/5, outlining the experiences of Pacific Island overstayers and the efforts of the NZ Police to catch them. Though the novel predates these raids, the documentary provided great background information on the Pacific peoples in New Zealand – their lives and their reasons for being in the country. As a middle-class white teenager, I knew very little of this, except that there were Tongan immigrants in Oamaru working in blue-collar jobs.

Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities

“There are two powerful engines driving crime narratives – the pursuit of an agent and the discovery of truth.” (Malmgren, 2010, p.152).

Oddly enough, choosing a genre in which the plot was driven by these ‘two powerful engines’ allowed me to relax about this aspect of planning and writing. In most detective fiction, the climax of the plot is the point at which the detective solves the puzzle and reveals all – the identity of Malmgren’s agent (perpetrator) and the truth (how, why, when etc.).

I was determined that the route to this point should not be formulaic or too predictable, but there was no argument as to the end point – the solution of the mystery. I believe this left me freer to allow the characters’ stories to find their own trajectories. Certainly this was the case for Amos – for example, I had no idea at the outset that he was going to have a drinking problem, but I knew that he was going to be a character who would have to redeem himself through his own actions.

Challenges

Two of these were also related to plot – *where to start* and *getting into action quickly*. I have written at least four different openings to the novel. The early versions had one of two faults:

- Too much backstory about the protagonist, thus delaying the crime for too long
- Focussing too much on minor characters rather than the protagonist

Initially I thought that the novel would commence with the murder, but for some reason this did not fit. Instead, the opening chapter begins to establish Amos’s character and to reveal his flaws. Ultimately, I knew that the novel was more about Amos than it was about the murders or the murderer.

Closure of the novel presented a challenge too. According to Segal (2010): “the detective story... is generally recognised as a paradigm case of strong closure” (p. 153). Segal elaborates, quoting Susan E Sweeney “Nothing is more definitive, complete and single-minded than the ending of a detective story. It is less a resolution than an erasure” (p. 143).

Typically in detective novels, after the climax, the detective meets with those concerned and in one long scene, explains all. This is especially the case for Golden Age novels. Although not particularly a fan of this approach, I decided in the end that it suited the style. In future projects, I would love to experiment with alternative closure methods.

Sweeney’s description of the resolution being like an ‘erasure’ is more extreme than I wanted to achieve in *The Angler’s Catch*. I wanted the story to have an after-glow, to have a life beyond the solution of the crimes. Later in the same paper, Segal (2010) discusses Sternberg’s 3 master types of narrative interest: *suspense, curiosity and surprise* (p. 158-160). I wanted the reader to feel some of this curiosity about what would happen to Amos in the future. This provides one area of possible review for the ending of the novel – i.e. have I closed off too strongly or too finally?

4. Reflections

What have I learnt from the MCW project?

In researching for this exegesis, I have learned much about the origins of the detective novel and about the possible reasons for its continued appeal and success. Given my intentions to write a novel that would deliver puzzle + heart + realism, I believe that the choice of this genre was an appropriate one – that it provides a suitable ‘vehicle’ to carry these intentions.

To what extent have I achieved my goals or intentions?

I am reasonably happy with the puzzle/plot aspect of the novel. I have certainly endeavoured to develop characters fully, particularly that of Amos, to give the heart, and to inject subjects, issues and features of the socio-historical setting (to give the realism). The extent to which the ‘heart’ and ‘realism’ aspects have succeeded ultimately will be measured in responses from readers.

From my own perspective, I am not sure that these two aspects are as fully developed as they might have been. Or perhaps I am being too hard on myself here. Perhaps a novel aiming to combine puzzle, heart and realism will not go into such depth in each aspect as would a novel dedicated to one of these.

In terms of being a book that my mother would have read and enjoyed, I believe I have succeeded there. But of course there is no way of confirming this now.

Goals for Future Projects

I have greatly enjoyed this first foray into the detective fiction genre and aim to further explore Amos and the team in future projects. There is potential, I believe. I could also see him on the TV.

There are two aspects of my earlier writing that have not surfaced much in *The Angler’s Catch*: action and humour. I will be giving some thought as to whether I would try to inject more of these into future books. However, a novel with a lot more action might be better presented in a police procedural style.

Similarly, inclusion of a lot more humour would push the writing into a comedic style – a different project again. Inspector Clouseau and Dirk Gently would be out of place in a future Amos Jackson story but perhaps the whimsy and dry wit of a Jonathan Creek or Lieutenant Columbo would be right at home.

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