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Writing a self-reflexive crime novel using real life and fictional adaptations

Abstract:

This paper looks at how crime fiction authors borrow not only from real life but from the crime fiction canon and literature when creating new works. Drawing on academic research and other novelists' methods, it discusses self-reflexivity, self-consciousness, intertextuality, embedded text and mis en abyme within the crime fiction genre and how these features relate to 'theft'/appropriation; specifically theft from 'literary' fiction, post-modern narrative structures and metaphysical detective novels. As a hybrid paper that includes creative extracts, it also examines the author's use of these tools, and therefore appropriation, to write a PhD novel, 'My Killer Secret'.

Biographical note:

Phillipa (PD) Martin is the author of five crime fiction novels featuring Aussie FBI profiler Sophie Anderson — *Body Count*, *The Murderers' Club*, *Fan Mai*l, *The Killing Hands* and *Kiss of Death*. These novels met with international acclaim and were published in fourteen countries. In 2011, Phillipa moved into ebooks, publishing book six in her Sophie series (a novella), a crime thriller called *Hell's Fury*, a number of short stories, two true-crime pieces and two novels for children (under the pseudonym Pippa Dee). She's currently in the second year of her PhD at the University of Adelaide, examining the concept of literary crime.

Keywords:

Crime fiction – reflexivity – intertextuality – literary – canon – detective fiction

Introduction

Many academics have written extensively on the crime genre and its history (e.g. Black; Connelly; Danytė; Horsley; Marcus; Merivale; Newton; and Young), tracing its roots and analysing many of its historically significant authors such as Edgar Allen Poe, Raymond Chandler, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Patricia Highsmith, Agatha Christie and Dashiell Hammett—to name only a few. Articles and books have explored many facets of the crime novel and all its sub-genres, from the criminal-centred crime fiction to detective fiction. Some of these articles and books also explore features of crime fiction that could be classified as 'theft'—whether it be drawing on real-life cases (true crime) to create works of fiction or paying homage to past crime fiction to create a level of self-reflexivity within the novel and the genre. This paper explores the use of non-fiction, self-reflexivity, self-consciousness, intertextuality, embedded text and mis en abyme in crime fiction and proposes using these tools is an example of appropriation from 'literary' fiction, post-modern narrative structures and the metaphysical detective novel. As a hybrid paper that includes creative extracts from a PhD novel, research elements will be illustrated with creative excerpts.

Theft from real life

Crime authors have a long history of appropriation from real-life cases, from true crime. On the history of crime fiction, Joel Black said: 'Long before its modern beginnings in pulp fiction, the genre evolved out of a rich tradition of *criminal nonfiction* that flourished in Europe and America …' (Black 78, emphasis added). In this sense, crime fiction was borne in reality, borrowing/stealing or perhaps paying homage to real-life crimes, criminals and victims. Black talks about this fictionalising process, saying it '… led to the rise of the nineteenth-century detective novel when authors like Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins drew on details of the much publicised Road Hill murder investigation of 1860' (Black 79). This shows a clear trajectory of crime, originating from the appropriation of criminal cases.

Many authors (across all genres) borrow from real life to some extent to create their novels. In the crime fiction context, Thomas Harris's *The Silence of The Lambs* (1988) was inspired by the killer Ed Bain, who was captured in 1957. In his home, police found furniture and clothing made out of women's body parts and skin. *Room* (2010) by Emma Donoghue was inspired by the real-life case of Josef Fritzl who kept his daughter locked up in a dungeon in Austria—she'd given birth to seven children during her twenty-four-year imprisonment. One of crime's most celebrated female authors, Agatha Christie, also borrowed from criminal cases with *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) inspired, in part, by the kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh's son in 1932. Many contemporary authors also draw on real and personal experiences when creating their novels. In her 2014 paper 'Talking to the Dead—the Voice of the Victim in Crime Fiction', Joanne Reardon Lloyd explores the motivation for writing crime as part of a need for real-life closure for its authors. 'Closure in crime fiction can come from something that the writer is attempting to explore from their own personal perspective and typically this is something that has happened in their own lives.' (Lloyd 101). She then goes on to give examples: 'The American crime writer, James Ellroy, began writing crime novels following the murder of his mother in 1958 … he started writing crime fiction as a way of searching for answers that real life investigation failed to provide …' (Lloyd 101). And: 'More recently, in 1997, the Manchester crime writer Mark Billingham was held hostage and robbed at gunpoint in a hotel room and has adopted the perspective of the victim as the emotional background for his work ever since.' (Lloyd 101). These examples provide clear evidence of crime writers drawing on true crime and real life, and thus are examples of appropriation from the world around them.

In the case of my PhD novel, 'My Killer Secret', I also adapt from true crime. In 1993 toddler James Bulger went missing and was later found dead. The case was shocking and horrific, magnified significantly by the discovery that the perpetrators were two ten-year-old boys. 'My Killer Secret' sets up the fictional back story of two eleven-year-old boys who murdered a two-year-old boy. At eighteen they are released from jail/juvenile detention, given new identities, and relocated via witness protection. The novel focuses on one of the boys who, at twenty-eight, is married, reformed, and burdened with unrepentant guilt. In this way the seed of my novel is based on a real case, and is a good example of appropriation. Like many authors I'm using the events around me to create a fictional world. As Linda Hutcheon made clear while referring to film, '... it is a paraphrase or translation of a *particular* other text, a particular interpretation of history. The seeming simplicity of the familiar label, 'based on a true story,' is a ruse: in reality, such historical adaptations are as complex as historiography itself.' (Hutcheon 2006: 18). In crime novels, even if the authors have used real-life adaptations as the seed for their stories, they rarely include 'based on a true story', often because the relationship to the factual case is tenuous. However, this borrowing from real life and personal experiences, the grounding of fictional work from non-fictional sources, demonstrates one way in which crime fiction is reflexive of the world around us, and demonstrates 'theft'.

Self-reflexivity, mis en abyme, self-consciousness and theft

In general, much of the crime canon incorporates a self-reflexive approach and thus could be seen to be 'stealing' from itself, from the genre and its history. Marcus says: '… earlier writers such as Poe and Conan Doyle deployed not only many of the tropes but also the strategies of self-reflexivity which we now identify with post-modernist narrative.' (Marcus 2003: 252-253). This hallmark of the post-modernist approach is often more commonly attributed to literary fiction. Kremer labels 'self-reflexivity and exploration of their own nature and status as fiction' as 'vital concerns of post-modern novels' (Kremer 57). Kremer goes on to examine in detail the works of author Philip Roth and specifically the self-reflexivity within his Nathan Zukerman novels. These novels contain many direct parallels between Roth's fictional novelist, Nathan Zukerman, and Roth himself. A crime fiction example that explores a similar theme of a narrative within a narrative is Julio Cortazar's 'Continuity of Parks' (1967), which Sweeney describes as: '… a dazzling little story in which an armchair detective reads a detective story about a pair of assassins creeping up to a house in which their victim sits, reading, in an armchair' (Sweeney 7). Both are examples of mise-en-abyme, a frame story or mirroring effect that adds to the story's sense of self-reflexivity. Certainly it can be argued that all novels have their place in literary history and borrow from what has come before them, and in this way take part in theft. 'A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre … A genre lives in the present, but always remembers it past, its beginning' (Bakhtin in Gregoriou 124). In this way, crime novels can incorporate subtle and not so subtle ‘nods’ to the past to its ‘beginning’ as Bakhtin would say. Thus, many contemporary crime novels use appropriation to pay homage to what has come before.

As a practice-led research, my PhD novel includes many elements that draw on my main exegetical argument, that some contemporary crime fiction novels have many ‘literary’ characteristics and can therefore be viewed as examples of literary crime fiction. Part of this examines the sense of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity (within literature) that has been cited as a mark of the ‘literary’. Overlaying this with crime is an interesting comment from Marcus in reference to Michael Innes (pseudonym Jim Stewart), Oxford English don and detective fiction novelist: ‘Such self-referentiality is characteristic of academic writers of detective fiction who are both consciously crossing over literary borders (the high and the popular) and at the same time intent on showing that detective fiction can claim literary status’ (Marcus 2003: 263). Marcus also examines Paul Auster’s New York trilogy and talks about the embedded stories within the trilogy (Marcus 2003: 261) and the ‘network of references … to American writers for whom ‘hieroglyphics’ have been central’ (Marcus 2003: 260). These are two examples of crime authors playing with ‘literary’ elements that can be construed as examples of appropriation from the literary world and authors before them.

Feeding my exegetical research into my creative component, my novel contains a sense of self-consciousness, expressed partly through the inclusion of a narrator who addresses the reader directly and who references the fictional world of the novel, thus also creating a sense of mis en abyme. In fact, the novel opens with:

> Let me tell you a story. A story about David Story. Actually, it’s *the* story. The David Story, story. (You see what I did there, right?) You may wonder why it’s my story to tell. Well, you see I *own* David Story. His ass is mine. Has been for a long time now. No escaping it (1).

This opening and the choice of my main character’s surname, ‘Story’, engages a level of self-consciousness. In this way, I’ve appropriated some of the characteristics of literary fiction and post-modernist narrative. In addition, I have set up a fictional town called Hammett (named, of course, after the great literary detective fiction pioneer Dashiell Hammett). Gregoriou writes that: ‘… many writers, including Raymond Chandler, have drawn their characters’ names from literature and the visual arts …’ (Gregoriou 156). Another example would be Michael Connelly’s Harry Bosch—a darker protagonist named after a Dutch painter who painted demonic scenes (Gregoriou 160). In my case, I’m naming a town rather than a character, but still drawing on literature and art to provide a level of self-referentiality within the story, an element of theft.

My narrator also provides commentary on the characters within the story. We’re introduced to both David Story and his wife by the narrator and the narrator often breaks his own prose with insights into the characters.

> Walter Bright. Agent Walter Bright. Walt, I like to call him. Good man. Believe me, I’ve tried to find some dirt, some rotting excrement clinging to the man. But he’s a beeping saint. Clean as a whistle as they say, as you’d say. You’d think, after all these years some of the darkness would have seeped under his skin, into his soul. To rot the flesh, the heart, the mind. But no. The man’s a damn island. Freaking freak show. Lord, forgive me for I have sinned … no, not Walt. He’s never sinned.

These sections provide a level of self-reflexivity within the story itself, as the narrator comments on the events and the characters as they unfold. The combination of this self-reflexivity and self-consciousness are good examples of 'theft' from the literary world.

The crime genre has a long history of being self-conscious and self-reflexive. While this could be argued to be inherent in all literature, all art—as Gregoriou says: 'Since often the work of art is perceived against the background of and through associations with other works of art, its form is also determined by its relation to the forms that existed before it' (Gregoriou 131). In this way, perhaps theft in art is inherent.

The use of riddles as theft and intertextuality

Probably my greatest homage to the proposed 'origin' of crime fiction, and the greatest instance of theft in my creative piece, comes in the form of riddles. In *Genre*, John Frow refers to detective fiction as being born from the riddle (Frow 31). This, of course, refers more to the classic whodunit where the riddle is literally 'who's the killer?' and the author takes the reader on the journey, the quest for the answer, for truth and resolution. Of the riddle, Frow says: 'The presence of two possible answers, one obvious and wrong, and one that is correct but not obvious, is a feature of many riddles' (Frow 33). Certainly this game of cat and mouse is something most crime authors play with their readers (and perhaps their protagonists, who are usually leading the charge to find the answer). We often see many more than two possible 'answers' in a crime fiction novel, in the form of multiple suspects. Hopefully when the reader discovers who the perpetrator is, and therefore answers the inherent riddle, the answer is 'correct but not obvious'.

Riddles are a strong feature of the creative component of my PhD, and mark two instances of 'theft' within my creative—one a direct use of existing riddles and the other using riddles within the narrative to pay homage to crime fiction's purported origins. The 'direct' theft occurs at the start of each chapter, with the inclusion of an existing riddle. For example, at the start of the novel the reader is presented with this riddle:

> I make you weak at the worst of all times.
> I keep you safe, I keep you fine.
> I make your hands sweat, and your heart grow cold,
> I visit the weak, but seldom the bold.

The answer: Fear. This riddle sets the tone of the novel and one of its many themes: fear. In this way I'm using 'theft' to set the tone of the work. Each chapter features a riddle at the start. Some are longer, some shorter. Some easier to 'solve', some harder. I've also chosen riddles that sound like they have a possible darker meaning or *are* actually darker. For example: 'Walk on the living, they don't even mumble. Walk on the dead, they mutter and grumble.' In the context of a crime novel, where a young boy has gone missing, the reader will most likely assume we're talking about people—murder is the domain of the crime novel. However, the answer to this riddle is actually much less sinister: leaves. Some riddles have a more direct link to the themes of my novel and the broader crime fiction genre. Like this one: 'I cut through evil like a double-edged sword, and chaos flees at my approach. Balance I single-handedly upraise, through battles fought with heart and mind, instead of with my gaze.' The answer: justice, a strong theme for most crime novels and the crime canon. I've also used riddles that can have two or more meanings, and these multiple interpretations further increase the novel's intertextuality. As an example: 'Each morning I appear to lie at your feet. All day I will follow, no matter how fast you run, yet I nearly perish in the midday sun.' This riddle is perhaps one that many people have heard before, or they can more easily discover the answer: your shadow. With the crime fiction overlay, this can take on a darker meaning, a dual meaning, as many crime novels deal with the shadows, crime that's going in the darkened alleys, the shadowland of the criminal underworld. In the context of my novel it has the double (triple) meaning of thinking about the protagonist, David, and his co-offender from the past, and a sense that one or both of them are lurking in the shadows. All of the riddles at the start of each chapter provide a good example of theft within my PhD novel.

Considering the second instance of riddles, I embed riddles in one of the narrators' prose, to form direct clues to the identity of that narrator. While these riddles are not direct 'theft' they do 'steal' (pay homage to) the idea of a crime novel as borne from the riddle. The novel opens with this 'mystery' narrator. He's a more omniscient-style voice and prepares the reader to 'meet' the main protagonist, David Story.

> Before I show you David, I need to give you one more thing. A clue of sorts, because you're undoubtedly wondering who I am.
>
> I'm handsome. That's all I'm saying. The handsomest mother-beeper you ever did see.

As the novel progresses, I build on these clues, these riddles, providing a reminder of the past clues until at some point the cumulative effect will provide the final answer to the riddle, giving resolution to one narrative stream within the novel, to one mystery the reader needs to solve. The clues are interspersed every ten or so pages and often directly address the reader: 'Your clue. Want your clue? I'm a chameleon (just like David). A handsome, mother-beeper, time-travelling chameleon.'

This narrator is narcissistic, 'bad to the bone', yet also able to take a more omnipresent view, at times providing a level of socio-political critique. Using a novel as a tool for social commentary is a feature of many crime novels and can also be seen as one of the characteristics of 'the literary'. Hence, by including socio-political critique I'm 'stealing' from both the crime fiction canon and 'the literary'.

> The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. I'm a bit like HIM … I give and take away. Well, mostly I just take away. Like most of the bloodsuckers. They're all around us, you know. It's not just me anymore. No, there was a time when I was alone in the darkness. The ruler. The commander, I like to think. But not now … now I'm small-fry compared to the evil permeating this world. Your world. Can you look anywhere without seeing evil? I think not. Murderers, rapists, women-bashers, abusive parents, corporate greed, people who pillage the Earth and her environment, the churches overrun with pedophiles. Not that they're solely found in the church. No, sirree. I can feel their evil seeping through all layers of society, leaving children damaged or giving birth to those who will repeat the cycle … once abused, now the abuser. That's how it works, right? The world tearing itself part, pulling itself down into the depths of depravity from the inside out.
>
> Take a breath … me, not you. Anyways, you should fear all this beeping crap. Yep, it's coming to get you. Me? Well, I'm happy the world is going this way. Good and evil blurring

> in the middle of the spectrum, evil winning, taking over. Suits me fine. I'm an evil-worshipper. Yup, that's me. I'm a mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all, evil-worshipping tease (58-59).

At page 106 this narrator is still using riddles as clues, trying to reveal his identity, to tease the reader.

> Do you know who I am? Do you? Have you guessed? Want another clue? I can't go giving it away for all the dumb beeps out there. Know what I mean? Don't make me say it. Okay, another clue. Sure, why not. Power. I'm powerful. All powerful. I'm a mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all chameleon, evil-worshipping tease … who likes the gray and is as powerful as all beep.

Thinking about riddles and their relationship to theft, Frow talks about the use of riddles as an intertextual force in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. 'The prophetic riddles in Macbeth have an intertextual force: that is they refer to the genres of prophecy and riddle …' (Frow 40). He goes on to explain intertextuality 'What I mean by this is the range of processes by which a text invokes another, but also the way texts are constituted as such by their relationships with other texts. No text is unique; we could not recognise it if it were' (Frow 48). Thus intertextuality is an example of 'a text [that] invokes another', and can be seen as a 'theft' or paying homage to other writers and other forms of literature.

Embedded text and sidekicks

It is also interesting to examine the way crime fiction 'steals' in terms of embedded text and sidekicks. Sweeney talks about crime fiction being self-conscious within the story but also within the genre. She refers to the embedded texts in detective fiction and says: 'the detective story reflects reading itself' (Sweeney 7) and: 'Early detective stories express this relationship at the diegetic level in the interaction between the all-knowing detective and his narrating sidekick, who personifies the ideal reader of the text …' (Sweeney 8). This is an element we see in many detective fiction novels, showing them as accolades to what most academics cite as the 'first' detective fiction of Edgar Allan Poe's, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' and personified in the famous works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. In fact, Sweeney goes on to say 'At the diegetic level, then, the "Watson" necessitates the participation of the reader (who identifies with the narrator's attempts to match wits with the detective), and anticipates her response.' In this way, any crime fiction novel with a main investigator and a sidekick (usually a partner in the modern police procedural) is paying homage to (stealing from) the earliest detective fictions, borrowing from their use of the sidekick as a surrogate for the reader. It could be argued that my mysterious narrator is a sidekick of sorts, as he takes the readers' hands and guides them through the story of David. In this way, my PhD novel uses theft in terms of replicating this sidekick structure.

Finally, during the creative component of my PhD I also reference the bible—another example of embedded text and 'theft', through quoting the bible or referring to bible stories as archetypal narration. Again from the mystery narrator's prose:

> Ever heard of Adam and Eve? The Garden of Eden and that pesky serpent that lead poor little old Eve astray? Sure you have. Know it well. I know it well, too. Remember, I'm a time-

> travelling handsome mother-beeper, so yeah. I know Eve. Knew Eve. Present tense or past tense. Guess it depends on your perspective of time. One continuum always present, always happening. Non-linear. That'll give you your present tense. But if you believe time follows a linear path, for everyone, then perhaps I should be using past tense when talking about Eve. The Eve. Anyway, Adam and Eve, and the serpent. Guess I'm like that serpent. I am that serpent. I like to lead people astray—women and men. Or maybe more to the point I like it once they're on the broken path. Yes, sirree, give me some sinning any day.

These examples of embedded text can also be read as characteristics of what Sweeney and Merivale refer to as 'metaphysical detective novels'. In 1967, Merivale coined the term 'metaphysical' detective stories to describe some of the detective fiction that challenges the classic structure of a mystery novel. As she says: 'The "metaphysical" detective story uses the structure and method of the detective story, but the interest is displaced; rather than focusing on questions of the solution and resolution, the reader is redirected to questions of identity and pattern' (in Connelly, xvii). Both embedded text and mis en abyme are listed as characteristics of metaphysical detective novels (Merivale and Sweeney in Connelly xix) and using these techniques in a contemporary crime novel are good examples of 'theft' within the canon—borrowing from the metaphysical detective novel.

Conclusion

Crime fiction has a history of borrowing from real-life crimes and many authors continue to pay homage to true crime by using it as inspiration for their work. These are clearcut instances of 'theft' within the crime fiction canon. Some crime fiction novels also draw on characteristics from the literary world, post-modern narratives and the metaphysical detective story. In this way, crime fiction that uses self-reflexivity, embedded text, intertextuality, self-consciousness and mis en abyme can be seen to 'steal' from literary works, post-modern narratives and metaphysical detective stories. In the case of the PhD novel examined in this paper, all of these techniques are employed to create a more literary-styled crime fiction novel. The use of riddles also create another layer of 'theft' with direct theft of existing riddles and indirect theft in the form of riddles within the narrative to pay homage to Frow's assertion that the crime novel is born from the riddle (Frow 31).

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