Copycat Crimes: Crime Fiction and the Marketplace of Anxieties
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Abstract: Crime fiction, which deliberately exploits anxiety in the reader, frequently does so by reflecting and magnifying society's fear du jour. This analysis of four contemporary novels explores the unique niche crime fiction holds in the production and interpretation of social issues.

Fear sells books, as anyone who scans fiction bestseller lists knows. Fear also sells claims about social problems. Appeals to anxiety are both persuasive and attention-getting. "The idea," according to critic James Kincaid, "is not to erase the anxiety but to excite it, since it's the anxiety itself that's doing so much for us" (168). Stories that unsettle us are compelling, whether in the form of fiction or on the front page. As the old newsroom slogan goes, "if it bleeds, it leads" – often leading us to conclusions we'd never entertain without appeals to fear.

Crime fiction, a genre that deliberately exploits anxiety in the reader, taps into topical social concerns using familiar formulas to produce suspenseful narratives. Our fascination with crime has deep cultural roots. It seemed fitting that Anthony Hopkins, an actor famous for his role in Silence of the Lambs, would a few years later be cast in a film version of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, a tragedy that features violent rape, dismemberment, and cannibalism. The Elizabethan stage often drew on historical and classical sources for its blood-drenched narratives, but pamphlets recounting grisly crimes were also popular at the time and sometimes became the basis for "murder plays." A homicide recounted in *Sundry Strange and Inhumaine Murthers, Lately Committed* (1591), for example, appears to have been a source for Thomas Dekker and Ben Jonson's 1599 tragedy, *Page of Plymouth* (Marshburn and Velie). Early novels such as *Moll Flanders* and the biographical sketches of rogues in *The Newgate Calendar* fed an eighteenth century appetite for criminal adventure. Today, crime fiction employs procedural, forensic, and social detail to imitate reality, while the true crime genre borrows narrative techniques from fiction to give its stories a satisfyingly dramatic shape.

According to Stephen Knight, crime fiction's popularity is drawn in part from its ability to reuse and reinvent familiar, even "compulsive" patters. Another attraction is the genre's "rapid responses to changing sociocultural concerns" (x). The interplay between crime fiction and other social texts can illuminate the ways claims-makers influence the formation of social issues. This analysis will examine the construction of four contemporary anxieties—urban violence, threats to the environment, child abuse, and serial homicide—through the lens of crime fiction. Novels by Richard Price, James W. Hall, Dennis Lehane, and Jess Walter make creative use of these fears, offering their readers new ways to read the news.

The Social Formation of Anxiety

Joel Best and Philip Jenkins have both written extensively on the function of anxiety in the definition of social problems. The process, according to Jenkins, "begins with an event or condition that represents a serious challenge to accepted values. Different activists try to link that issue with other conditions that they believe to be harmful or threatening, so that the original incident is used to support a moral or political lesson and the narrative is embroidered with appropriate cultural cross-references" (*Moral Panic* 9).

Various players compete to name and own social issues so they can repackage the claims as incentives to respond to the issues in a certain way (e.g. support a cause or reelect a legislator). To do this, stories are told that provide examples that typify the problem so the audience will identify with it. The domain of the problem may be extended to include more victims, making it a more significant problem, while using the "symbolic role" of victims to "mobilize consensus" (Best 141). Though effective, these rhetorical strategies often expand and distort the threat. Kincaid summarizes the process succinctly: "Doing away with demons is only one part of the job; the other is providing them" (74).

Claims-makers often use cultural resources, such as religion or folkloric motifs, to frame their issues. Mythic figures of heroes and folk devils can populate claims with easily recognizable and relatively unambiguous players (Jenkins, *Using Murder*). Melodramatic narrative is frequently used; it's easily recognized, provides clearly-defined villains and victims, and above all is entertaining, even when describing unpleasant social problems. "This was the central discovery of the early penny press," according to Best. "A good ax murder makes a great news story" (90).

Fiction as a Source of Information

This "scrimmaging of meanings" (Wilson 14) among cultural texts, both factual and fictional, forms our understanding of crime and social order. Fiction helps readers make sense of the world, according to Catherine Ross. Basing her findings on over two hundred interviews with readers, she argues that pleasure reading is an underrated source of information. In spite of that, most academic libraries view the value of popular fiction (except to support genre-related courses) with indifference, if not disdain (Van Fleet, Crawford and Harris). Though since 1990 catalogers have begun adding subject headings to works of fiction, (Miller, Ranta) readers' use of fiction as a source of information is little appreciated. Victor Nell points out the criteria of "timeliness, proximity, scale, and importance" make for a good story, both in the newsroom and in novels. For that reason, fictional stories "mirror the issues of the time with no less accuracy than the daily newspaper" (51). News editors are remarkably consistent in choosing stories that are newsworthy; so are book publishers as they choose which stories are likely to appeal to audiences at a particular historical moment. "Crime waves" in popular fiction reflect and feed society's fear *du jour*.

Psychologists have examined the emotional and cognitive power of pleasure reading. Victor Nell argues the very fictiveness of fiction is part of its appeal: "We willingly enter the world of fiction because the skepticism to which our adult sophistication condemns us is wearying: we long for safe places – a love we can entirely trust, a truth we can entirely believe. Fiction meets that need precisely because we know it to be false, so that we can willingly suspend our reality-testing feedback processes" (56). However, there is evidence that, within our personal knowledge base,

this distinction is blurry. Richard Gerrig has conducted experiments that suggest readers don't distinguish information provided in fictional form from facts presented in other kinds of texts. The less readers know about the subject matter of the fictional work, the more likely they are to accept material in it as factual. He adds, "even when readers actively try to discredit fictional information, they may have called to mind other beliefs that will persevere after the fiction itself has been unaccepted" (237). In short, both cognitively and socially we don't shelve fiction separately from non-fiction.

Crime fiction is popular in part because it addresses our anxieties by taking us beyond the surface of things into its depths, attributing meaning and pattern to elements of the story, suggesting the mysteries of human behavior can be solved. "The surface," according to Warren Chernaik, "consists of a profusion of data. "But which of these particularities counts? Which bits of matter matter? When does a fact become a clue? . . . It is central to the logic and the charm of the genre that profusion must yield to textual coherence" (xiv). The blurring of narrative styles between true and fictional crime, in Christopher Wilson's analysis, involves us all in a sort of community policing in which our participation in multiple forms of discourse about crime reshapes our communal understanding of authority and aberrance.

Blurred Boundaries

It is unfashionable to believe fiction can cause harm (unlike television or film which still retains that distinctive power in debates over the effects of depictions of sex and violence). Yet criticisms of fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century were almost identical to those now leveled at television: popular novels were considered culturally deficient, addictive, and likely to promote passivity and moral dissipation. The distinction between "trashy" fiction and literary fiction continues to this day, but with rare exception this trash isn't considered toxic. Indeed, according to critic Jack Miles, fiction is more effective in depicting violence than any other expressive form, but does less harm than true crime because it doesn't exploit real people. Its lack of reference to factual reality is its strength: "Novelists represent the national imagination at its most powerful, and this country is dying from a lack of imagination about its own bloody behavior" (64). He declares fiction "a uniquely safe medium" for depictions of violence (62).

His argument rests on the claim that the majority of crime fiction is benign because it provides, at best, sleazy entertainment; but when serious writers tackle crime it ennobles us. It can do good, but cannot cause harm. Many citizens of Toronto disagreed when American Psycho, a controversial "literary" serial killer novel (one that Miles criticized as an artistic, rather than a moral, failure) was being filmed in that stunt-double of America's urban heart of darkness. A Canadian murderer, Paul Bernardo, had a copy of the novel at his bedside; though that information was ruled inadmissible at his trial, it was noted in press accounts. Attempts to hold purveyors of violent entertainment legally liable for the costs of death imitating art have met with failure (Rohde). Yet fiction plays a role in shaping our personal understanding of the world, and in the marketplace of anxieties the cultural signification of fictional crime mingles with the real thing, reflecting and influencing our perceptions of threat.

Mean Streets: The Construction of Urban Crime in *Freedomland*

In 1981, *Time* magazine ran a startling cover that depicted a deformed, malignant figure holding a snub-nosed revolver. It isn't quite human, in spite of recognizable features – an ear, a bandaged nose, a slack-jawed mouth full of teeth capped with metal. Most prominent are the eyes that peer out of a skull-like mask apparently composed of trash and scrap metal. "The Curse of Violent Crime" is the subject, a curse that seems to emanate from the same supernatural realm as the Mummy's. Guns don't kill people; monsters do.

"A *Time* cover is journalism" according to the magazine's art editor (Luce). This cover graphically makes the claim that crime is a significant and growing social problem. Inside, the problem is typified with thumbnail photos of crime victims identified as "custodian," "dentist," "secretary" – in other words innocents, like us, subject to random and meaningless violence. "All U.S. cities are in danger of becoming unlivable," an associate editor states, going on to expand the domain of the problem with an emotional double-whammy: "For a parent, the fear for your children is never very far from your mind" (Meyers). This cover story announced a neo-conservative era in which crime became a preoccupying fear for Americans, a symptom of moral decay arising out of the rotting urban core.

Down those mean streets American crime fiction writers have gone for decades. According to John Cawelti, "The setting of the hard-boiled detective story resembles nothing so much as a world born out of a curious marriage between the muckraking of Lincoln Steffens and the lyrical sterility and sordidness of T.S. Eliot's 'Waste Land'" (154). F.R. Jameson has said Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles is "a kind of microcosm and forecast of the country as a whole: a new centerless city, in which the various classes have lost touch with each other" (127). Chandler himself made a famous claim for the detective's unique role in exposing a sordid reality.

> The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing . . . it is the world you live in. (59)

The heroic detective traverses this dangerous cityscape in search of answers, armed with enough attitude and honor to confront (if not vanquish) corruption and moral decay.

Not long after the *Time* cover story ran, Lawrence Block published *Eight Million Ways to Die*, in which private investigator Matt Scudder is hired by a pimp to find out who is murdering hookers. New York is portrayed as a city so close to social meltdown even criminals want order restored. Even at those moments when the city seems pleasant, a darker potential lurks. During a walk in Central Park the narrator sees kids on roller skates and joggers and wonders how to reconcile that "wholesome innocent energy" with what he reads in the papers. "The two worlds overlap," the PI muses. "Some of these riders would be robbed of their bicycles. Some of these strolling

lovers would return home to burglarized apartments. Some of these laughing kids would pull holdups, and shoot or stab, and some would be held up or shot or stabbed, and a person could give himself a headache trying to make sense of it" (42).

The title, drawn from an angry speech made by an NYPD detective, revises a popular culture depiction of the city. "'There are eight million stories in the naked city,' he intoned. "You remember that program? Used to be on television some years back . . . You know what you got in this city, this fucked-up toilet of a naked fucking city? You know what you got? You got eight million ways to die" (114). The reality of crime and the perception of danger are so confused that at one point in the story Scudder is about to unload his gun into a threatening car full of young men and stops himself just in time. "These weren't professional hitmen dispatched to kill me. They were just a bunch of kids" (220-1). Lurking danger can turn out to be innocence warped by fear.

Richard Price's dystopian urban novel *Freedomland* (1998) is set in that no-man's-land between fear and what causes it, between perception and reality, as a detective and a journalist try to coax the truth out of woman who has reported her car stolen with her four-year-old son sleeping in the backseat. The woman is white; the carjacker she describes is black. Both the cop and the reporter sense immediately something is off in the woman's story, but the race angle of the purported crime throws the community into crisis mode. The suspense in the novel isn't over finding the missing child or in uncovering who is guilty, it's whether the distraught and incoherent woman can be persuaded to explain what actually happened to her son before the city goes up in flames. The crime allegedly took place in Martyr's Park, a seedy DMZ between the impoverished black community of Dempsey and the blue-collar white city of Gannon, as Brenda Martin tried to take a shortcut home. When Detective Lorenzo Council takes her back to the park to ask her how it happened, she says "I can't tell" (91). It's not so much that she can't recall what happened as a statement of her own inability to narrate what actually occurred.

One of the most unsettling things about *Freedomland* is that it refuses to provide the reassurance we expect from police procedurals. The police investigation at the core of the book seems haphazard, poorly coordinated, reactive, without the CSI-style technological wizardry or teamwork that suggests the professionals will get to the bottom of things. When a police artist creates a sketch of the suspect based on Brenda's description, Lorenzo is hopeful; he's certain he's seen the man before. The artist holds it up beside his own face: it's a self-portrait. Brenda has simply described the nearest black man. As Lorenzo interrogates Brenda, her stubborn anguish remains impenetrable. She continually tunes him out by pulling on headphones and escaping into music.

The reporter, Jesse Haus, is just as anxious to get Brenda's story, and the media's methods seem more energetic than those of the police. Others are equally eager to fill in the blanks of Brenda's silence. White cops swarm over the projects, shaking down the community in a massive sweep. Black activists use the presence of cameras as an opportunity to showcase their causes. A group of women who have made a mission of finding lost children get involved, using their media savvy to organize the campaign. "You got to keep it hot," their leader tells Lorenzo, "you got to keep it in the news, you got to keep coming up with fresh stuff – a slipper, a brother-in-law, a jawbone. I swear, half the shit we come up with? We just make it up – new witnesses, new evidence – just to

get it back in the news" (360).

They take Brenda on a grueling search of an abandoned mental hospital. Like so much of Dempsey, the facility is a failed social experiment, a former showcase turned into "a surly and abusive little corner of hell" (350). After a newspaper exposé, the hospital was shut down, the grounds left to nature. It is here, after being led through a children's dormitory, hearing the baby-like cries of half-starved cats, that Brenda breaks down and finally tells what happened. Her child drank a bottle of medicine when she stepped outside to speak with her boyfriend. Feeling responsible and unable to face what happened, the mother recycled an image of urban crime that would fit people's expectations in order to distance herself from the unbearable reality. She tells Lorenzo she thought nobody would be hurt by her lie; it was just another crime story among a multitude about the community. She miscalculated the power of racial conflict to draw cameras and attention to a corner of New Jersey that is normally forgotten. Fear distracts us from the true causes of crime as we focus on monstrous, if mythical, others.

The title of the novel comes from an abandoned American history theme park Lorenzo takes Brenda to, hoping to shake her story out of her. Freedomtown (named after Freedomland, a genuine theme park built in the Bronx in 1960) is a decayed, forgotten wasteland scattered with odd remnants of fake historical artifacts – a civil war canon, a piece of Jean Lafitte's pirate ship, a wooden shingle with the word "information" painted on it. Like the abandoned hospital, the neglected park named for martyrs of the civil rights movement, and the decrepit public housing project itself, Dempsey is not a city full of threat, but a trash heap of broken promises and neglect. *Freedomland* unflinchingly shows us the world we live in – and the lies we tell ourselves to feel safer.

The Ends of Nature: *Bones of Coral* and the Gothic Imagination

Professional beach bum Travis McGee rarely goes to the city, but he makes a trip to New York in John D. MacDonald's *Nightmare in Pink* (1964) where he finds the effects of development he deplores in Florida is nearing a crisis. (He's qualified to make these quasi-scientific observations; in the introduction to the book, Carl Hiaasen correctly calls McGee a "poet-naturalist," xi). When a man in a hurry shoves McGee into another pedestrian they both turn and "snarl" at him, leading him to one of his philosophical reflections that is, typically, framed around images of nature in an increasingly unnatural world.

> New York is where it's going to begin, I think. You can see it coming. The insect experts have learned how it works with locusts. Until locust population reaches a certain density, they all act like any grasshoppers. When a critical point is reached, they turn savage and swarm and try to eat the world. One day soon two strangers will bump into each other at high noon in the middle of New York. But this time they won't snarl and go on. They will stop and stare and then leap at each others' throats in a dreadful silence. The infection will spread outward from that point. Old ladies will crack skulls with their deadly handbags. Cars will plunge down the crowded sidewalks. Drivers will be torn out of their cars and stomped. It will spread to all the huge cities of the world, and by dawn of the next day there will be a horrid silence of sprawled bodies and tumbled vehicles, gutted buildings and a few wisps of smoke. And through that silence will prowl a few, a very few of the most powerful ones, ragged and

bloody, slowly tracking each other down. (33)

McGee's rhetoric in this passage (and in others scattered throughout the series) anticipates Paul Erlich's 1968 bestseller *The Population Bomb*, a jeremiad about the dangers of overpopulation. The analysis is in the tradition of what Killingsworth and Palmer call "millennial ecology" – a framing of the anxiety we feel (or wish others to feel) about the degradation of the environmental as an approaching apocalypse. This end-game does something paradoxical: it depicts the final stage of human "progress" as a return, of sorts, to nature – one red in tooth and claw, savage, chaotic, and violent. Development will collapse into its opposite. "Growth" is really decay.

Claims made with the rhetoric of millennial ecology appeal to a peculiarly American sense of doom and destiny. In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson expanded the domain of concerns about nuclear annihilation to embrace pesticide poisoning. She typifies the problem by describing a little town that is sickened by an "evil spell," but it isn't witchcraft after all – the town has simply poisoned itself with pesticides. This crisis is culturally cross-referenced to utopian and apocalyptic texts by suggesting the arrogance of science will bring on an ecological Armageddon. She offers a way out, a road less taken that is more in tune with nature. It's that quiet back road that leads to Slip F-18, Bahia Mar – and beyond, across the water to James W. Hall's Florida Keys.

Hall's thrillers are set in MacDonald's Florida – a natural Eden threatened by development. His heroes are, like Travis McGee, men who live off the grid, close to the water and the rhythms of the sea, who bring to their collisions with modern life a Quixotic sense of archaic nobility. Though the strongest argument for environmental issues is found in Hall's poetic descriptions of the natural world and the simple life, his plots often hinge on ecological issues – exotic animal smuggling in *Gone Wild*, the dangers of farming non-native fish in *Mean High Tide*, the history of developers' greed in the shaping of modern Miami in *Hard Aground*. But it is in *Bones of Coral* that threats to nature provide the most cinematic thrills.

Inspired by news reports of an unusually high incidence of Multiple Sclerosis in Key West and by an obscure government report that suggested a link with clandestine chemical warfare tests conducted there in the 1950s, the inventive plot of Bones of Coral (1991) situates environmental threat at a high-tech garbage incinerator where an ex-military entrepreneur disposes of toxic waste, failed military experiments, and inconvenient enemies. Though the story carries echoes of *The Tempest* (one of the villains is a Caliban-like "thing of darkness" who grew up in a mental hospital and taught himself to read using pornography; there is a Prospero-like professor who has renounced his work on chemical weapons, literally drowning his discovery in a hidden tidal pool) these literary references don't intrude on the entertaining romp. In *Bones of Coral,* Hall turns the tables on millennial ecology, finding in our fears the material for an exciting thriller. In doing so, he taps into an older tradition, that of the Gothic attitude toward nature and science – that which is not natural is monstrous, a chilling spectacle of horror. The Gothic acts, in Tracy Johnson's words, as "an index of social change, bringing to light the fears that inevitably accompany shifting cultural paradigms" (60); In Hall's hands, Gothic effects in a formulaic thriller make fun of our fears.

The opening line of the novel prepares us for this as fiction and reality trade places: "Cassie Raintree was dying of brain cancer every afternoon at two-thirty." The role of a dying heroine on a

soap opera is played by an actress being written out of the soap because she has been diagnosed with MS. She and her long-lost love do their homework and discover the connection between the government's chemical testing and the disease. "It's all there in the public record. Anybody could find it in a half-decent library" (321). And, in fact, they learn a scientist has done the analysis, but the genre he's writing in limits his conclusions. "It's really pretty dry. Full of statistics, graphs, charts. I read it all, studied it all afternoon, and every chart, every statistic points to this bacterium, the spraying, as the trigger for MS . . . But when [the article's author] gets to his summation, he says 'inconclusive,' 'needs further review,' 'strong indications, but no definite link' . . . There're cancer clusters all over this end of the end of the island. Don't tell me this is inconclusive" (323-25).

Impatient with the research, the two act on their convictions. The story concludes with a slam-bang Hollywood ending, in which the hero must rescue his girl, who is being fed on a conveyor belt into an incinerator. Ecological disaster is staged as a Perils of Pauline cliffhanger. Hall turns newspaper headlines into the stuff our nightmares are made on. In this entertainment, if not elsewhere, we are able to confront an environmental crisis without relying on the ambiguous probabilities of science.

Cycles of Violence: *Mystic River* and the Reproduction of Child Abuse

Children are gold in the marketplace of anxieties. Threats to children have made for compelling melodramatic narratives since the Brothers Grimm collected folk tales. The surprise is that the familiar name for the problem is so new. Coined in 1962 in an article in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, the phrase child abuse nudged the concept from a social problem into the realm of medicine (Hacking). Doctors, wanting to publicize the harm done to children by their parents, were careful to frame this issue in terms that would be acceptable to the general public. By making child abuse a disease, it became treatable.

The meanings of child abuse changed as the rhetorical capital of the concept changed hands. Because of its emotional charge, stories about the problem rarely jive with its epidemiology. Stranger abductions prompt national news coverage and numerous thrillers, but in reality over ninety percent of homicide victims under the age of five are killed by their parents, relatives, or close family friends (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics). Even though the numbers of children who suffer from physical abuse and neglect are far greater than those who are sexually assaulted, by the 1980s concerns about abuse focused almost exclusively on sexual abuse. Fears surrounding cults, stranger abductions, incest, pornography, occult practices, and the influence of youth culture on morality all folded themselves into a generalized hysteria focused on children. In the mid-1980s these concerns, fuelled by the popular use of therapy to recover memories of abuse, led to hundreds of investigations into conspiracies in which Satanists allegedly abused children at daycare centers (Fister). The backlash that followed ridiculed the Satanic Field Theory of evil, but sexual abuse of children remains such a heated topic that publishing research on the topic that questions claims can still lead to legislative condemnation. As Rind, Bauserman, and Tromovich point out, agenda-setters have a stake in believing children are endangered; they don't want to be reassured.

Crime fiction naturally picks up on this source of anxiety. Andrew Vachss, for example, routinely

exploits children in his novels – in the name of publicizing the issue of child exploitation. In a subtler vein, Dennis Lehane has touched on threats to children in several of his novels, with *Gone Baby, Gone* offering some particularly disturbing visions of abuse. In *Mystic River* (2001), a sophisticated novel of psychological suspense, an episode of childhood sexual abuse becomes a life-defining moment for three friends. Dave, the victimized boy, grows up tortured by memories and urges he tries to suppress. He thinks of himself as The Boy Who Escaped from Wolves and at moments of stress "his brain tended to split into two halves, as if cleaved by a carving knife" (237). Inside him lurks a demonic inner child. "Usually the boy lived only in Dave's dream world, feral and darting past stands of thick trees, giving up glimpses of himself only in flashes. And as long as he stayed in the forest of Dave's dreams, he was harmless" (238) But power of this inner monster is growing.

When one of his boyhood friend's daughters is brutally murdered, Dave falls under suspicion. As more than one character remarks, those who have been abused are likely to become abusers. Though this notion is a conflation of two invalid theories – that gay men recruit boys through seduction, and that people who experience violence as children will inflict it on their offspring – it is an error that carries enormous social weight because it has the Gothic logic of folklore. When watching a vampire movie, Dave recognizes himself. He tries to explain it to his wife: "it's like I was saying about the vampires, Celeste. It's the same thing . . . It doesn't come out. Once it's in you, it stays" (319). Later, as he fights the urge to pick up a child prostitute, he thinks, "The Boy Who'd Escaped from Wolves and Grown Up had become a Wolf himself" (323). Though Dave commits murder – killing a child abuser, a sort of suicide-by-proxy – he is not responsible for the girl's death. She was murdered by a different species of monster, a teenager with no conscience, another stock figure of the modern Gothic.

In his next novel, *Shutter Island*, Lehane deliberately mimicked the over-the-top drama of 1950s Grade B horror movies, claiming they had more truth in them than more "realistic" movies of the time. Though some critics expresses surprise in his departure from gritty realism, *Mystic River* plays on Grade B pop psychology in much the same way. The folkloric roots of Dave's motivation, however sociologically inaccurate, draw on our deepest fears about violence, sexuality, and identity.

Making Monsters: *Over Tumbled Graves* and the Construction of Serial Killers

The serial killer is the most fictional of our fears. Like child abuse, it's a newly-named category. "Serial killer" entered the language around 1980 even though popular accounts of these kinds of crimes have enthralled readers since at least the early nineteenth century. In the early eighties, in an effort to recoup police powers curtailed after the excesses of COINTELPRO were exposed, the Department of Justice released astonishing statistics that indicated serial murder had jumped from less than one percent of homicides to as much as twenty-five percent. Though they later retracted those numbers – they had simply added up all murders for which the police did not know the circumstance at the time they reported them – those numbers still circulate. Certainly, if a census were taken of fictional crime victims, serial homicide would be a leading cause of death.

Popular understanding of serial killers and the profilers who stalk them was shaped by the

deliberate way law enforcement engaged the media in making claims about the problem. The Silence of the Lambs drew on true crime accounts by law enforcement officials that popularized the image of the profiler and raised the profile of serial murder. That fictional mirror-image achieved a strange authenticity; at least two television documentaries about profilers used clips from the film version to show how profilers work. Incorrect assertions that serial murders are committed exclusively by white males made the threat more acceptable to feminists, minorities leery of the expansion of law enforcement powers, and critics of the death penalty (which had been ruled unconstitutional because it was discriminatory). The perpetrator was identified as a monstrous other while the domain of potential victims expanded to include all of us.

The invitation to accompany a profiler and "enter the mind of a killer" is tantalizing. Philip Jenkins believes profilers in crime fiction personify the triumph of rationality; through the work of a profiler, "order is imposed on an otherwise inexplicable world." If profilers failed in fiction as often as they do in fact, it would "subvert the discourse of rationality on which the fiction depends" (*Using Murder* 109). That subversion is exactly what Jess Walter performs in *Over Tumbled Graves*.

Set in Spokane, Washington, *Over Tumbled Graves* (2001) opens with a botched police operation. Caroline Mabry, posing as a mother in a drug sting, accidentally flips a doll into the river. In the ensuing chaos the drug dealer is pushed off a bridge into the torrent and Maybry has to choose between pursuing his assailant or attempting a rescue. She fails at both, but as they search for the dealer's body they find a murdered hooker. As more prostitutes are killed in a similar way, and the case catches the attention of the media, the FBI offers a profiler. Eventually two dueling profilers are attached to the case. When Mabry looks up books written by one of them, she's amazed at what she finds.

> She had set out to investigate a murder and had stumbled across a genre; this thing infecting her city was a thriving industry. Alive, a woman like Jacqueline [one of the victims] was worth a couple hundred bucks a day until her looks ran out or she died of AIDS or hepatitis or was shot by an angry john. But if this monster got hold of her, she could be worth a chapter in one of these books, perhaps even a composite character for the miniseries. (152)

Mabry's partner Dupree is frustrated by the turn the investigation has taken. He has his own theories of crime, such as the theory of yard relativity. "You could tell a criminal by the amount of yardwork he did . . . the basic theory being that criminals didn't have patience for yardwork. That's what crime is, he believed—a lack of patience" (303). But the case is taken over by a younger, more educated cop guided by the help of the profilers and Dupree angrily demotes himself back to patrol. Unlike the police in Price's *Freedomland*, the young cop runs an investigation that is systematic, organized, and in control. The investigators come up with a suspect –one who fits the profile. Mabry realizes the profile describes just about every man she's ever met. "Maybe there were no monsters," she thinks, unable to follow the experts into the mind of a killer. "If she couldn't imagine the violent fantasy, what could she imagine? The victim. The fear. And what good were those?" (177)

In the end, the profile is wrong, they've gone after the wrong suspect, and the crime turns out to be motivated not by sexual gratification but by economics. The owner of a security firm has been

paid by a developer to rid the neighborhood of prostitutes. He deliberately constructs the crime as the work of a serial killer, having read enough true crime books to make it authentic, and he takes pride in his work, eager to confirm with the famous profilers that some aspects of his ritual are unique. Though his motivation is rational, as he "enters the mind of a serial killer" he takes on the desires of the fictional monster he's trying to replicate, a disturbing shift that implicates the reader as a voyeur. Maybe the only monsters are the ones we conjure up to lead us again and again into a darkness we relish. We don't want evil explained; that would spoil our fun.

Coherent Form for Social Anxiety

Though crime fiction uses social anxiety for dramatic material, subgenres employ different strategies for framing it. Hall and Lehane borrow from the gothic tradition, putting it to work in contemporary settings within the conventions of the thriller and the novel of psychological suspense. Price and Walter contrast the media construction of crime to the more chaotic reality experienced in police investigations to critique the easy answers we give ourselves. Uncertainty and instability in both form and themes characterize the diversity of contemporary crime fiction, according to Stephen Knight. We can no longer assume that in a fictional framework wrongs will be righted, that order will be restored. Instead, the representation of violence and social injustice in crime fiction today "provides a coherent form of contemporary anxiety" (199). It gives our deepest fears narrative form—but doesn't necessarily provide simple solutions that resolve our anxiety. Jenkins has pointed out, "[f]or all the science and quantification used to substantiate a new problem, its true momentum will be located in its appeal to deep-rooted anxieties that respond poorly to rational inquiry, still less rebuttal" (*Using Murder* 229). He suggests that the formation of social problems can be understood through its treatment in popular culture, where our fears are given dramatic form. Since crime fiction deliberately draws us into an exploration of that which frightens us and frames our inchoate anxieties in textual coherence, it may indeed be just the place to conduct such an examination.

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