Just the Facts, Ma'am: How Crime Fiction Re-Invents Reality

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As a librarian – and lately, as a writer – I'm interested in the ways that research undergirds creative work and what kinds of information readers learn from the fiction they read. A few months ago, I interviewed several mystery writers and asked readers on DorothyL, the longest-running mystery discussion list on the Internet, why research in mysteries is important to them. Basically, both readers and writers told me two things: little mistakes can mean big trouble, and less is always more.

First, those little mistakes. There is a kind of integrity writers strive for when they invent a fictional world. The word "integrity," of course, has two meanings: honesty and wholeness. The one is necessary for the other. If a reader comes across something in a mystery that is factually wrong, it pokes a hole in the illusion that the book is trying to create. Here are some of the things readers told me about mistakes:

- "Research is absolutely essential if the work is to have presence. When writers make an error which significant numbers of readers will find elementary, s/he risks alienating the readership."
- "If gross inaccuracies appear, the spell is broken."
- On historical mysteries: "I know enough about history to be dangerous … I always find it disconcerting and something that really pulls me out of a story if an historical fact is incorrect.
- Mystery writers often get basics about firearms wrong—and apparently New York editors are not as likely as the average American to recognize those mistakes, because finding them is a common sport. Michael Bane, a writer who also conducts firearms workshops for writers, points out that about half of American households have guns in them. He says, "mystery fiction (fiction of any sort, I suppose) requires that the reader place a level of trust in the author. When the reader finds something--a fact, an emotion, whatever--that is false or doesn't ring true, that trust vanishes in an instant. The question becomes, 'If

they author doesn't know *that*, what *else* doesn't he or she know?'"

Canadian author Michelle Spring told me, "novelists need to know how things work—how bodies are handled, how missing persons are traced. Research supplies the facts, the background data, that enables a writer to create a fictional world. Readers have a right not to be shaken out of their involvement with the novel by something that is blatantly inaccurate."

And Danuta Reah, a British novelist, agreed: "I owe it to the people who read my books to be accurate. It may be something small … but it needs to be right. If it isn't right, the book isn't right, and the whole fictional world collapses."

At the same time, it's important to readers that the research itself doesn't take center stage. One reader contrasted two historical novelists who both wrote about the early suffragist movement. One "has been carefully researched, but never comes alive because the action halts for little history lessons." In contrast, the other writer "has immersed herself so well in her period … that the reader forgets this is an historical novel. The research has produced a complete fictional universe." She also cited the novels of Andrew Taylor set in post-war Britain. "The research is so impeccable that we quickly forget that this is, at least technically, an historical novel … post-war Britain becomes a land we 'remember'."

Another reader told me "The ideal background becomes part of the foreground. Tony Hillerman is an excellent example of that. We learn convincing details of the Navajo life and location almost without effort, since they're frequently elements that drive the plot."

Writer Michelle Spring also points out that for writers, research can generate ideas. "Most of the research I do never appears in my books. It is speculative . . . . the spur to invention. Research stirs you up. It gets your imagination going." At one point, Spring spent weeks tracking down the life story of Daisy Hopkins, a nineteenth-century teenager who may have been a part-time prostitute in Cambridge. Though all that work didn't end up in her mystery, *Nights in White Satin*—the historical figure gets no more than a passing reference in the novel—that pursuit provided ideas and the emotional thrust for a twentieth-century mystery. "Without Daisy," she told me, "the book might never have been written."

The writers I spoke to tended to use a combination of fieldwork and research using libraries and the Internet to get the job done. They travel to the places they want to write about, they talk to

specialists about their work, they read widely, and they check their facts. But there's also an emotional involvement with a story that comes through research that's harder to pin down.

James Hall's *Hard Aground* started with a visual cue. He came across a nineteenth-century photo of a meandering stream shaded by mossy oaks—the Miami River, though it looked nothing like the modern-day version. Intrigued, he spoke with the city archaeologist, who invited him to an archaeological dig along the banks of the old river. The stories he told Hall about the city's past became the inspiration for a story that evokes in double exposure both modern day Miami and the city of the past on which it rests—and gave him a parallel plotline concerning the passions and greed that drove development in both eras.

For Eric Mayer and Mary Reed, who write a historical series set in Byzantium, "deriving the plot from research tends to anchor the story more firmly in the historical period." As an example, a historical document they used mentioned a murder at the church of St. Sophia. There's not much more than a few sentences in the document, but it inspired a plot twist for one of their novels. I also once interviewed Elmore Leonard's researcher, Gregg Sutter, who told me something similar. When he's doing background a book for Leonard, he goes to locations, takes photos and video, interviews the kinds of people who might become characters in the book to pick up on slang and speech patterns, and often turns up something unexpected that becomes a springboard for ideas. He's particularly proud of the fact that he clipped a photo from a newspaper once, of a female US Marshall with a shotgun propped on her hip. When he showed it to his boss, it was the germ of a character who became Karen Sisco in *Out of Sight.*

Danuta Reah, who is a linguist by training, told me "research for a fiction book is very different from research for an academic book, or at least it is for me. I use libraries a lot in both fields, but when I'm researching fiction, I'm often looking for the fictional world." Michelle Spring, who used to teach Sociology at Cambridge University says something similar: "The things that fascinate me as a writer are similar to the issues that captured my attention as an academic: questions about the relations between men and women … how privilege or under-privilege shapes people's lives; the uses and abuses of power … the treatment is of course not at all the same. What's similar, I hope, is a tolerance; in both my academic writing and my novels, I feel strongly that my place is not to dictate how readers should feel about an issue but to explore possibilities . . . The crime genre allows me to explore contentious and controversial subjects without having to take sides."

She told me about how she got the ideas for two of her books. One was personal: *Every*

Breath You Take, has two central themes "what it's like to be stalked, and the effects of sexual harassment—both came from my own experience. As they are both deeply unpleasant experiences, it was a great relief to use them as a basis for a story. I suppose you could say that it helped to get them off my chest." But *Standing in the Shadows* came from troubling events reported in the news. "After the killing in England in 1993 of a toddler by two ten-year old boys, and then the much-publicized spate of school killings in the States, I felt very stirred up about the issues surrounding child violence. The fact that very young children could commit brutal murders was brought home forcefully by these cases, and the reaction of some people to the murders—the sheer hatred and vindictiveness of adults towards the young killers of Jamie Bulger—also fascinated me. So I started research for the novel, looking at why children commit murder, and how we as a society react to it." To do this, among other things she interviewed a forensic psychiatrist about juvenile killers she'd met and visited a high security juvenile facility. "In the course of researching and writing the novel I came to a kind of understanding about these issues that made me feel more at peace. So I guess I'd say with fiction, writing about difficult issues is one way of dealing with them."

Certainly that is the case for readers, too. Though none of us want crime to touch our lives, we turn to crime fiction to see how people, pushed to their limits, might respond to events. Ultimately, many writers in the mystery genre are trying to invent an alternative reality that somehow parallels our own and in that mirror-reflection tells us something about ourselves. Crime becomes the catalyst for analyzing the choices people make, the social consequences of those choices, and the ways that incidents that may only make for five column inches in the newspaper ultimately play out in human terms.

Loren Estleman addresses the ways crime fiction tackles real issues in his novel, *A Smile on the Face of the Tiger*, in which a fictional writer of 1950s pulp paperbacks used a Detroit race riot as inspiration for a story. Amos Walker, a detective investigating the author's disappearance, finds a box of materials from his background research: some standard histories of the city, a non-fiction account, and an official report on the riot produced by a university professor. Walker muses over the contrast in these texts, and what they convey.

In flat pedantic language, the educator managed to make the deaths of thirty-five people —twenty-nine of them Negroes—over a thirty-six-hour period sound as dull as the annual mean rainfall in British Hondouras. Without footnotes or statistics, Booth [the pulp fiction

> *author] had managed to do far more … The picture was seared into my memory as if the ghost of Francisco Goya had been summoned forth to paint it in scarlet and indigo; as if I had witnessed the act that had inspired it.*

Crime fiction often deals with social issues at an almost metaphysical level—what is the nature of good and evil? How do social institutions work for or against the common good? Can an individual respond ethically and effectively to a world full of injustice? These questions are not academic, but are engaged by characters struggling with crisis in a world that looks very much like our own. George Pelecanos sets his novels in a Washington, DC that few visitors ever see, unless they miss a turning and get lost, yet his portrayal of urban neglect, racism, poverty, and the dignity of people living their lives with honor under difficult circumstances speaks more eloquently to a much wider audience than the most deeply researched sociological study. Barbara Neely, an African-American author, shows us a part of Boston that isn't on the tour, but we get to know it and its residents and their perspectives more clearly by hearing her character Blanche White talk to us than any ethnographer could achieve through recording observations in the field. There is a curious alchemy at work that takes a writer's passions, personal experiences, and their research and transforms it into an authentic experience, even though that authenticity is conveyed through a work of imagination.

Some of the most seemingly realistic locales are totally works of imagination. The Buckingham neighborhood in Dennis Lehane's *Mystic River* is entirely his invention. Its truth is based on Lehane's upbringing in Dorchester, the descriptive touches he uses, on the genuineness of his characters and their motivations, and his evocative prose. Dempsey, New Jersey, the setting of Richard Price's *Clockers*, *Freedomland*, and *Samaritan*—is so real my son once tried to find it on a map. Ed McBain's procedurals set in the city of Isola, which is essentially New York turned ninety degrees sideways, focus on cops who never seem to age in a city that doesn't exist, but are nevertheless obsessively authentic in procedural detail. I just came across an interview in which he explains why he invented Isola: "I wanted to do a series that depicted New York policemen realistically—with wives and lovers and head colds and bills to meet. I spent two or three months researching the cops but when I sat down to write about them, I discovered that I knew nothing. I would be on the phone constantly—Well, how do you do this. I finally made the decision to change New York to a mythical city.

And of course, there's Kindle County, where Scott Turow's lawyers wage their courtroom battles. It's quite obviously Cook County, Illinois with the names slightly changed. In *Reversible Errors* he offers this snapshot:

> *Sulfur lights glowed down here twenty-four hours a day, and over the years, the homeless had made this their chief refuge. The wilted cartons and soiled, spring-shot mattresses where they slept were piled into the recesses between the concrete buttresses supporting River Drive. Rain dribbled down between the seams in the street overhead, while grimy men in ragged clothes loitered between the roadside pillars . . .*

This is recognizably Lower Wacker Drive in Chicago, despite the name change. In the same way, anyone who reads the newspaper will recognize the issue that ignites the story—are the errors that might be made when a man is sentenced to death reversible? Turow, a practicing attorney, served on the Commission on Capital Punishment formed by Illinois Governor George Ryan, and that experience provided a spark of inspiration for his novel. The commission concluded "no system, given human nature and frailties, could ever be devised or constructed that would work perfectly and guarantee absolutely that no innocent person is ever again sentenced to death" (207); it led to Governor Ryan commuting the sentences of those on Illinois' death row as his final act in office. Turow's novel is less conclusive, but as dramatic, and will give many readers a clearer understanding of the frailties of the system in all its complexity.

My mystery, *On Edge,* was inspired by an idle thought I had when driving through a small town on highway 169 that had been the site of an inconclusive investigation into bizarre accusations of child molestation in the mid-1980s. Though in retrospect, the accusations appear to have been almost entirely groundless, the small community was riven by distrust, suspicion, and fear, exacerbated by the way the investigation was handled and by the international media attention it generated.

The Jordan case was only the second of several hundred similar cases that swept the country in the mid-eighties, the first being the notorious McMartin Preschool case—which hit the news about three weeks before Jordan. This was the most expensive prosecution in US history and lasted seven years. The Jordan case vanished from the news quite abruptly. It started when a man was accused of molesting a couple of twelve-year-old girls. Encouraged by a zealous prosecutor to name names, he obliged and eventually signed a 113-page confession that implicated a great many other residents of the town in peculiar Satanic rituals. Eventually 25 people were arrested. The first trial quickly ended in acquittal. Before the next trial started, the prosecutor abruptly

dropped all charges, while leaving behind the implication that unspeakable evil was going unpunished. In 1992 an FBI specialist in crimes against children examined the records of over 300 of these cases and found not one case of satanic ritual abuse could be substantiated.

Driving up 169 that day, I was thinking about that case, wondering just how that shared trauma had affected the community—and found myself wondering "how would they respond if they thought it was happening again?"

For me, the book started with a question, as do most research projects. I used the medium of crime fiction to explore how we respond to crime, what role our fascination with criminal behavior plays in feeding our anxieties, whether our need for meaning makes us see patterns where there are none. Though I could have studied these issues in an academic mode, I chose instead to use fiction.

Though I'm a librarian, I did almost no research about the criminal case that inspired the book, or the hundreds of others like it, until after I completed a draft of the novel. I wanted my imagination to lay the emotional boundaries first—and while I wanted a sense of authenticity, I worried about being seduced into exploiting real-life details from what must have been a horrible experience for those involved. There's a difference between exploring an issue and exploiting it. Though it's not uncommon for crime stories to be "ripped from the headlines," this book is largely about what happens to people *behind* the headlines, those whose lives are distorted by a criminal investigation gone out of control, whose traumas are taken up by the media in a way that reflects and feeds public anxiety but distorts the truth. Though I was striving for a kind of truth in the novel, I didn't want it to mimic media accounts that had, for the most part, got it wrong.

As I wrote, I discovered factual questions that needed answering—for example, whether Chicago police officers typically load their weapons with hollow point or fully jacketed bullets. I would set the book aside to read about issues that surfaced, such as how detectives might inadvertently coax a false confession out of a suspect or about the reliability of child witnesses—but I didn't read about actual ritual abuse cases until I had finished the first round. The research I did after the fact—poring over news accounts of investigations and trials in the 1980s, reading secondary analyses of the issue, studying official documents—suggested ways I could tweak a scene or rethink a bit of dialogue, but its major role was to confirm my hunches. While I didn't want to model the story too closely on any real event, I wanted it to be as authentic as possible.

Why is this so important? Because readers learn from fiction. They know what they're reading is "just a story," but nevertheless they pick up beliefs, attitudes, and information from the

fiction they read. One reader told me "I love reading mysteries, but the ones I enjoy the most are the ones that teach me something." Another said, "I love to learn from them, and to be entertained by them. The best writers are able to do both painlessly and seamlessly, so that I end up knowing new facts without having to study them or sit through a lecture."

There is something compelling about this form of knowledge. Think of how influential the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was. Though there were all kinds of tracts published about the evils of slavery, it was this fictional depiction that really spoke to the public imagination. This imposes a certain responsibility on the writer. It's tempting to play off public anxiety, to pick on particular fears—say, of sadistic serial killers, or of threats to children—and exploit them for a thrilling piece of entertainment, but it distorts the readers' perceptions of what's really going on in the world. *The DaVinci Code* is enormously popular for providing a thrill ride through history, punctuated by cliffhangers every three pages or so. Though it seems chock full of facts, the way in which they are put together feeds our desire to make sense of things, even at the expense of truth. An essay in the *New York Times Book Review* entitled "The DaVinci Con" concludes, "the only thing more powerful than a worldwide conspiracy, it seems, is our desire to believe in one." It's that strong urge to make sense of things that led people to believe in satanic ritual abuse.

It's important for crime fiction not only to get the details right, but to convey a broader meaning with some sense of integrity. Like it or not, we do absorb ideas and beliefs from the fiction we read. An ambitious study conducted in Canada by Catherine Sheldrick Ross involved interviewing nearly two hundred readers. It found that although they aren't engaged in research when they read popular fiction, they often found information that helped them in their lives and sometimes provided models for living, something Ross related to a "circular relationship between reader and text." She goes on to say "It is clear that readers play a crucial role in enlarging the meaning of the text by reading it in the context of their own lives. Through their act of making sense of texts and applying them to their lives, readers creatively rewrite texts and turn them into a powerful source of consolation or warning, confirmation of identity or support for change."

Serious crime fiction takes itself seriously. In a recent interview, Dennis Lehane said "the crime novel is where the social novel went. If you want to write about the underbelly of America, if you want to write about the second America that nobody wants to look at, you turn to the crime novel." To some extent, this is an old claim, first made in 1944 by Raymond Chandler. In the course of trashing "golden age" British conventions of the puzzle-mystery set in the English country home, he argues that Dashiel Hammett pulled off something much finer. He was trying to write realistic mystery fiction. "I doubt that Hammett had any deliberate artistic aims whatever;

he was trying to make a living by writing something he had firsthand information about. He made some of it up; all writers do; but it had a basis in fact; it was made up out of real things . . . Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse . . . 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 . . . It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in." He rather spoils the gravity of his message by wrapping up with a classically romantic view of the detective hero: "down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. He is the hero; he is everything . . . If there were enough like him, the world would be a safe place to live, without becoming too dull to be worth living in. Such is my faith."

This is where crime fiction departs from the reality it approximates. We want our stories to make more sense than the world does. We want to read about crime, but we want our fictional detectives to have a much better clear rate than any police department can manage. Critic Catherine Nickerson has said, "The world of the detective novel is a place of untimely death, cruelty, suspicion, and betrayal. If detective fiction is a literature of escape, why would anyone want to be transported to such anxious locales?" She answers it this way: "While detective fiction deals with explosive cultural material, that sense of mastery reinforced by the assurance of solution, calms the recreational reader of the genre . . . the conventions and formulas for which detective fiction is so famous . . . [allow] us to draw close to the flame of our culture's evils without actually getting burned."

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