

‘Murder, Mystery and Mayhem – an introduction to crime fiction’

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Crime fiction is the most popular genre in the UK. The bestseller lists are dominated by it. In a quick sampling, I found on average three crime titles in the top ten lists of fiction sales in both hardback and paperback. In UK libraries, James Patterson has overtaken Jacqueline Wilson as the most borrowed author. Worldwide the best-selling fiction author of all time is Agatha Christie – this probably explains why when I tell people I write crime novels the most common response is, ‘oh, like Miss Marple’.

So what do you think of when you think of crime writing? Sherlock Holmes or Philip Marlowe? Images from television perhaps: the street cops in *The Wire* or *NYPD Blue*, Inspector Morse visiting the Oxford colleges in his jag, Columbo in his raincoat, Tony Soprano driving home, Jane Tennison in *Prime Suspect* having to be tougher than the men or *CSI* with their breathtaking science. Or maybe it’s the movies you’re more familiar with: classics like *The Big Sleep* or *Entertaining Mr Ripley*, *The Godfather* or *Get Shorty*.

For the purposes of today, I define crime fiction as novels about crime, the detectives who solve crime or the criminals who carry it out. We shall see this is not a narrow field: the genre stretches and re-defines itself, there are many cross-overs between crime and literary fiction, crime and horror, crime and romance, crime and thrillers.

I’m going to look at the creation of the crime genre and the main developments of the form and try to explain why it continues to be such a popular field.

The birth and growth of crime fiction is a transatlantic tale. Literary invention and novelty on both sides of the Atlantic, led to two different traditions but writers are readers first and there has always been much cross-fertilisation of the species.

The American writer Edgar Allan Poe published *The Murders in The Rue Morgue* in *Graham’s* magazine in 1841. Poe’s work was informed by the popular gothic novels of his day which featured melodramatic, supernatural goings on and many damsels in distress. Set in Paris, Poe’s short story features an eccentric, scholarly young man called Dupin who with his American friend attempts to solve the mystery of the murder of two women slain while in a locked room at the Rue Morgue. This tale is generally acknowledged to be the first detective story.

There were several literary devices in Poe’s work, in this and his other stories, that have continued to be staples for detective fiction: the brilliant detective and his companion-narrator, the locked-room mystery, the notion of the armchair detective, the emphasis on solving the crime, hiding clues in the most obvious of places, misleading trails left by the culprit, and the murderer being the suspect least likely to.

Writing to a friend Poe said that the theme of the story was, ‘*the exercise of ingenuity in detecting a murderer*’.¹

In England at the time weekly serialised stories known as penny dreadfuls or penny bloods were feeding an insatiable appetite for tales of mystery, mayhem, horror and murder. These cheap pamphlets were often based on lurid versions of true-crimes from *The Police Gazette*.

The first significant detective on the British side of the pond was Inspector Bucket, created by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House* serialised in 1852. This police officer is a patient and honest man, who doggedly pursues the truth. Dickens wrote a number of stories with a crime at their centre and as in all his work they display a passionate social commentary and fierce criticism of poverty and the class-bound nature of Victorian society. Dickens created a detailed and realistic portrayal of London and we shall see that a vividly realised setting is an element of much crime fiction.

Dickens' friend Wilkie Collins collaborated on stories and plays with him and went on to write *The Woman in White*, published in 1860 about a plot to defraud a young heiress, and eight years later, *The Moonstone*, about the search for a stolen diamond. These were published in the yellow-back format – an inexpensive pocket-sized design, small and portable and sold by the new bookshops opening up at railway stations throughout the land. While Dickens might have created the first English detective, Collins is credited with creating the first Detective Novel in the English language with *The Moonstone*. The book contains a number of features that, like those Poe had used, shaped the detective novel tradition: a large number of suspects, an isolated country house setting, bungling local coppers, talented amateur investigators and the crack professional officer from Scotland Yard.

In 1842 the first Detective Police Force had been established within the Metropolitan Force in London and from then on there was a vogue for the publication of pseudo memoirs of police officers, sensational fictional accounts of true crimes. Shilling Shockers launched in 1884 were the first paperbacks and over in the States the equivalent were the dime novels many of which featured sleuths with names like Deadwood Dick or Denver Doll: the Detective Queen on dangerous missions. It was clear that the reading public in both countries had an insatiable appetite for tales of crime and punishment.

One of the world's most famous detectives was also one of the first. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and his trusty friend Dr Watson, originally saw the light of day in 1887 and went on to be regularly published in *The Strand* magazine. Holmes was inspired by Doctor Joseph Bell, the professor of clinical surgery at Edinburgh University. As a medical student, Conan Doyle had worked for Dr Bell as his outpatient clerk at the city's Royal Infirmary. Conan Doyle was impressed by Dr Bell's amazing powers of observation and deduction and gave these qualities to his fictional creation. Sherlock Holmes was the first consulting detective. A pipe-smoking opium addict, a gentleman with fearsome intelligence. The vast majority of the stories are narrated by Watson. Conan Doyle helped turn crime fiction into a respectable literary genre. When Conan Doyle tried to kill off his creation there was an overwhelming outcry and after being offered a good deal of money, he returned to charting the sleuth's adventures for a further 20 years. Holmes was an iconic private detective who inspired many others.

The 1920s brought the Golden Age for British Crime Fiction, a movement dominated by four great women practitioners: Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh. And the greatest of these, as we have seen, was Christie. These country house murder stories, also known as classic whodunits or cosies, feature an isolated number of suspects, a closed circle, red herrings and a rural location. They are usually genteel murders among the privileged classes. Again gifted amateurs, sometimes assisted by the professional police from Scotland Yard, have much more ability to detect whodunit than the bumbling local constabulary. In 1920, Christie's first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was published, introducing Hercule Poirot, a rotund, brainy, fastidious Belgian sleuth. Ten years later Christie's Miss Jane Marple was launched into the unsuspecting archetypal English village of St Mary Mead. Kind, insightful with an avid interest in the affairs of the village and a piercing insight into human nature, Christie is said to have based the character on her grandma who she said: '*always appeared to be intimately acquainted with all the depths of human depravity*'.²

Classic whodunits encourage the reader to play sleuth too, trying to work out from the clues left which ones might be red herrings and which real leads and who is guilty and why. Issues of social justice or tensions in contemporary society are not to the fore, though many writers poked fun at current trends and foibles in their work. The murder has no great impact on anyone. We may be amused or disapproving at the antics of the assembled suspects but we do not fear for them or weep for them. We engage in the puzzle with the detective and finish the book satisfied that the normal order has been restored.

While the suspects were gathered in the drawing room waiting for the detective to show his or her erudition and explain his or her workings out something very different was emerging Stateside. In the late 1920's America faced the Great Depression amid the era of prohibition and was hungry for a fiction that better reflected the harsh economic times, and the social upheaval. The country house murder with its refined manners didn't fit the bill. Into the melee came the hard boiled novel.

A real life detective must bear some responsibility for the development of the genre. Alan Pinkerton, born in Glasgow, Scotland, fled to America in 1842 and after a spell in the police, set up the biggest detective agency in the world. With the slogan '*We Never Sleep*' and its logo of an open eye Pinkerton's gave birth to the term private eye. And to a race of heroes who dominated American crime fiction for the following century. Pinkerton hunted down such outlaws as Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid and also investigated corrupt officials. He published 18 books about the work of the agency. Pinkerton's agency would be responsible for the creation of the archetypal American detective, in fiction as in life, the private investigator.

In Baltimore in 1915 Samuel Dashiell Hammett applied to work for Pinkerton's detective agency. That employment led to two formidable creations; The Continental Op and Sam Spade. Hammett's real life experience as a private eye equipped him to write for the new pulp magazines (so called because of the cheap pulp paper they were made from). *The Black Mask* was the most influential of these. The Continental Op appeared first in 1923 in *Black Mask*. He is a nameless detective, and the steady accumulation of evidence leads him to his quarry. Sam Spade is the idealised, hard-boiled, cynical, cool detective. He's a dispassionate observer. The world of the

private eye is a lonely one, people are not to be trusted and the women are all vamps, vixens or victims. Hammett introduced a new type of American fiction. Spare, clipped, minimalist sentences, a use of the vernacular, laconic writing bristling with wisecracks and rooted in an urban location, which for Hammett was San Francisco.

Raymond Chandler said of Hammett: *'he took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley... he wrote... for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. He put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street... Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with means at hand, not with handwrought dueling pistols, curare, and tropical fish.'*³

Dashiell Hammett himself remarked, in typically wise-cracking style: *'I've been as bad an influence on American literature as anyone else I can think of'*.⁴

At this time too, in 1933, Perry Mason, one of the world's most famous fictional lawyers was invented by Erle Stanley Gardner. Mason shared the attributes of Sam Spade, in particular the character's willingness to twist the law for principles of justice.

Chandler's first story appeared in *Black Mask* in 1933. His hero Philip Marlowe was a thinker rather than a fighter and an educated man who loved poetry, classical music and chess. He was also a loner, with a bottle of Scotch in his desk drawer but he had a moral point of view. Chandler's prose was pared down and fast-paced but he also developed the use of sharp and lyrical similes *'the minutes went by on tiptoe, with their fingers to their lips'*.⁵ Though cynical and tough talking, his hero has a conscience, a heart, he was a more romanticised version of Hammett's operatives.

Chandler's view of the private eye stems from the Romance tradition: the gumshoe is a modern knight searching for the holy grail of truth. Chandler wrote about crime fiction in essays and letters including *The Simple Art Of Murder*. Here's one of his most famous quotes: *'down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world...He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks -- that is, with a rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness.*

The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he

lives in. If there were enough like him, the world would be a very safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in.'⁶

And just as the hero was the common man so the villain was often powerful and rich. Like Hammett, and Dickens before him, Chandler wrote about the city, in his case Los Angeles. And that tradition of fully realised, evocatively imagined location remains a very strong element in much crime fiction today.

In the 1950s Mickey Spillane created Mike Hammer, a tough, ultra violent PI who acts as a vigilante. Slammed by critics, including Chandler, Spillane's novels sold in their millions, even though he himself described them as, '*the chewing gum of American literature*'.⁷

Ross Macdonald was one of the most renowned inheritors of the Hammett and Chandler mantle with his protagonist Lew Archer. His character was a champion of the underdog, and the social and psychological impact of crime is explored in the stories. Archer is the honourable everyman against corporate America, the authorities, the organisations and as ever, the rich.

These two schools: the suave, learned amateur detective in the English countryside and private eye for hire stalking America's mean streets were not rigid divisions though. For example American Nero Wolfe created by Rex Stout was a brilliant armchair detective, not leaving his room if at all possible, savouring cordon bleu meals, cultivating rare orchids and solving crime through inspired deduction.

In the process of cross fertilisation the mean streets were covered by British writers as well. But it's significant that the two most famous examples Peter Cheyney and James Hadley Chase both used American characters or American settings. Hadley Chase wrote the pulp classic *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. Cheyney's ruthless, gun toting, FBI agent Lemmy Caution exercised anything but. Irritated by criticism Cheyney remarked: '*so they say I can only write Yank gangster stories, eh? Good! I'll give 'em an Englishman better than Lemmy the Yank.*'⁸ This was his English tough guy PI Slim Callaghan. Both these authors were condemned for the violent and sexually explicit material of their books. In 1970, Ted Lewis's, *Jack's Return Home* was the first serious attempt to depict British gang life. Lewis was prosecuted under obscenity laws for the book which was filmed as *Get Carter*, starring Michael Caine, to much critical acclaim.

At the darkest end of the hard-boiled street were the writers of noir. These were stories of violence and despair at every turn. Significant American writers include Cornell Woolrich and Jim Thompson and their English equivalents Derek Raymond and later Mark Timlin. Commentator Paul Duncan, writing in *Noir Fiction Dark Highways*, defines it thus: '*Noir fiction is not a kind of macho hard-boiled fiction where Tough Guys pass moral judgements on an immoral society. Noir is about the weak-minded, the losers, the bottom-feeders, the obsessives, the compulsives and the psychopaths. Noir is not about the people standing on the edge of the abyss looking in, but the people in it, forever writhing, aware of the pain, aware of the future pain to come.*'⁹

Not a whole lot of laughs there then and rest assured any humour you do find is very bitter and very black.

Jim Thompson wrote about the criminal, the amoral and often the criminally insane. He worked with film director Stanley Kubrick who says of Thompson's novel *The Killer Inside Me* (1952): 'it is the most chilling and believable first person story of a criminally warped mind I have ever encountered'.¹⁰

Here's an excerpt: 'I've loafed streets sometimes, leaned against a store front with my hat pushed back and one boot hooked back around the other - hell, you've probably seen me if you've ever been out this way - I've stood like that, looking nice and friendly and stupid, like I wouldn't piss if my pants were on fire. And all the time I'm laughing myself sick inside. Just watching the people.'¹¹

This work overlaps with the fiction that, rather than focus on the detective, tells the criminal's story. Back in 1929 American writer WR Burnett published *Little Caesar* which depicted the rise and fall of a Chicago mobster. The viewpoint of the story was mostly that of the gangster.

Authors were increasingly straying to the other side of the tracks exploring the minds of criminals and Robert Bloch with *The Scarf* about a psychopathic stalker killing one victim after another was perhaps the first of the serial killer thrillers which are still popular today. In 1959 Bloch wrote *Psycho* another psychological thriller told from the killer's point of view and made by Hitchcock into a groundbreaking movie.

Throughout the forties and fifties while the USA continued its love affair with the private investigator, in Britain the fashion had swung back to police stories and many novels featured police inspectors as their heroes.

In America in the 1950s the rise of teenagers and the tension of changing moral values created a strain of writing about young people and crime, known as Juvies. Evan Hunter's *The Blackboard Jungle* was one example.

But Evan Hunter received equal, if not greater, recognition for his series of novels written under the name Ed McBain, the 87th precinct novels. In an unnamed city, widely believed to be New York, McBain charts the daily work of a group of detectives. These are ensemble pieces and feature, very realistically, the techniques used for fighting crime and apprehending wrongdoers. McBain's realism extends to including charge-sheets and other documentation within the novels. This type of book has become known as the police procedural and many authors continue to write this type of story today.

In the aftermath of the sixties and through the seventies and eighties, connected to the movement for women's equality, there was a new wave of development in writers re-inventing the private eye tradition to give voice to female heroes on both sides of the pond.

First in the UK with P.D. James's *Cordelia Gray* in 1972 and then in the USA in the early eighties with Sarah Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Marcia Muller and in Britain with Liza Cody and Val McDermid. A decade later, in the world of fictional policing,

Lynda La Plante created the woman detective Jane Tennison battling sexism in the force as well as her own personal demons.

Black and other minority writers emerged too, though there had been some earlier examples like Chester Himes. In the new wave came Walter Mosley in America with his Easy Rawlins series, an investigator for the black community in the divided America of the post war years, Ice Berg Slim, a recovering addict and pimp with his bleak tales chronicling criminal life in the ghettos or Tony Hillerman with his Navajo Indian cops Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee. In the UK, examples include Jamaican born Victor Headley who wrote *Yardie* and Mike Phillips whose protagonist is a black journalist.

Gay writers emerged too, in America first with Barbara Wilson, Mary Wings and Joseph Hansen then the UK, where authors including Stella Duffy, Val McDermid, Nicholas Blincoe and Manda Scott were winning awards.

So what of the current scene?

In the modern field there are a whole range of categories but those we have examined are still well represented: classic whodunits continue to exercise appeal penned by writers like Caroline Graham of the Midsummer Murders stories, Robert Barnard and Simon Brett.

Private eyes are still thriving particularly in America. In some cases the private eye is an ex-cop, a maverick now acting alone but with contacts that can help in the tracking of fugitives from the law. Noir is still screaming in the shadows, Irish writer Ken Bruen chronicles sickness and corruption and tragedy in modern Ireland with his damaged, alcoholic anti-hero Jack Taylor. In between the private eye and the police procedural come those stories of police officers who work alone or with a sidekick, think of Dexter's Morse or Adam Dalgleish by PD James, these are men who follow closely in the tradition of the brilliant armchair detective – their astute insight will solve the unsolvable, they are not team players. One could argue that Rankin's Rebus fits this pattern – he is rarely where he should be and always breaking the rules.

The police procedural has become a firm favourite and Reginald Hill's Dalziel and Pascoe series with its cast of characters is an excellent example. As are offshoots of the profession. Medical sleuths have been used before – Doctor Watson was one but they came into their own with the development of forensic science and the growth of areas like forensic pathology as we see with Kay Scarpetta from Patricia Cornwell, and the forensic anthropologist, the bone doctor Tempe Brennan created by Kathy Reichs. Then there's the psychological profilers like Jonathan Kellerman's Alex Delaware or Val McDermid's Tony Hill.

Britain has a particularly strong trend in the field of psychological or suspense thrillers. Minette Walters and Ruth Rendell writing as Barbara Vine are two best-selling authors delivering these stories where ordinary people are caught up in terrifying situations. The stories may, but need not, involve detectives like the police officer or journalist but the victims, close relatives or villains will also be sharing their innermost thoughts with the reader. Our interest is less in the whodunit than in the

whydunnit. Motivation and characterisation take pride of place and the knowledge that something dreadful lurks in the ensuing chapters keeps us hooked.

The legal thriller, whose most famous practitioner is John Grisham, has spawned dozens of others. Comedy and heist thrillers from Elmore Leonard's tales of shysters and conmen to Carl Hiaasen's escapades in steamy Florida or Janet Evanovich's hilarious series about unlucky in love Stephanie Plum are a popular sub-genre.

In addition there are ecclesiastical sleuths, journalists, sporting sleuths, think of Dick Francis and his horse racing thrillers, academic detectives. There are even those based on cats or cooks who solve crime.

Pick any period in history and you'll be able to find a detective: twelfth century and Ellis Peters Brother Cadfael; Ancient Rome there's Lindsey Davies and Falco; Victorian – Alanna Knight and her Inspector Faro. Contemporary British crime writers are now mining the recent past with Andrew Taylor and Laura Wilson setting their work in the nineteen forties, fifties and sixties.

Pick any city in the US or the UK and we find a detective or crime story set there. The genre is popular throughout Europe, especially in Italy, Germany and Scandinavia. Location continues to inspire crime writers and just as Chandler attempted to capture the essence of LA in the nineteen forties so newer writers in their turn take us to swamps of Louisiana or the drowning of New Orleans as with James Lee Burke, to the backstreets of Glasgow in Denise Mina's works, or the Shetland Isles in the recent quartet by Ann Cleeves, Henning Mankell's novels explore the geographical and social landscape of Sweden, Stephen Booth's coppers police the remote hillside villages of The Peak District and Donna Leon's Commisario Brunetti works the canals of Venice.

You'll have to tell me if there is a contemporary Portuguese school – we haven't got them in translation in the UK yet.

So why is the genre still so popular? I think the reason it was popular in the past holds true today.

Readers always say that a crime novel guarantees a good story. In the post-modern world when traditional narrative was discarded by some writers it remained at the core of the crime novel. There is logic and a satisfying format which leaves the reader understanding what happened. Either whodunit or how or why or perhaps all of those. We no longer expect all the ends to be tied up and in the case of noir fiction we may not see justice or anything like resolution even. But in many novels the story satisfies in a way real life never can. Author Jonathan Kellerman describes asking a retired police officer why he read crime fiction when he'd spent all his life working in law enforcement, the cop replied: *'we get the bad guys 60, 70% of the time, you get them a 100% of the time'*.¹² And the great English detective writer PD James says: *'what the detective story is about is not murder but the restoration of order'*.¹³

And these books give us memorable characters that we are thrilled by, care about or are frightened of. Readers turn again and again to series characters and the very best have an emotional complexity that we recognise. John Harvey writes police

procedurals and shows great tenderness in depicting his flawed heroes, he says: *'If it's not in the books, then they become something that's simply hard and harsh and violent and quite unrelenting. That's neither the kind of book that I would like to read, nor that I would like to write. It's people's feelings that interest me.'*¹⁴

Accessibility is a factor – both in cost and availability. From the penny dreads and yellow-jackets to the dime novels and the first paperbacks, crime has always been an inexpensive habit. Nowadays it remains so, available in mass market paperbacks and through free library lending. But it is also accessible in terms of its style and content. A good crime novel is not difficult to read or understand.

The books, like all reading, take us somewhere new; they take us to fresh locations. Listen to this: *'It was the colours that had caught her attention. Often the colours on the islands were subtle: olive green, mud brown, sea grey and all softened by mist. In the full sunlight of early morning, this picture was stark and vibrant. The harsh white of the snow in the sunshine. Three shapes, silhouetted. Ravens. In her painting they would be angular shapes, cubist almost. Birds roughly carved from hard black wood. And then that splash of colour. Red, reflecting the scarlet ball of the sun. Her concentration was so fierce, and everything seemed unreal, surrounded by the reflected light which made her head swim, that she walked right up to the sight before realizing exactly what she was seeing. Until then everything was just form and colour. Then the vivid red turned into a scarf. The grey coat and the white flesh merged into the background of the snow, which wasn't so clean here. The ravens were pecking at a girl's face. One of the eyes had disappeared.'* *Raven Black*, by Ann Cleeves.¹⁵

There is also the question of extremes, where there is crime, usually murder then the stakes are high, we are looking at ordinary people, in horrifying circumstances, it sets the pulse racing. Ian Rankin in an introduction to a new *Rough Guide to Crime Fiction* by Barry Forshaw notes: *'People are interested in crime fiction because they are fascinated by the margins of the world, those places where society's rules break down.'*¹⁶

Modern crime novels are less pure puzzle and more social drama; they are interested in the human factor and the roots of crime. As with Dickens in the 1850s and Chandler in the 1940s the crime novel allows writers to observe and comment upon the world in which they find themselves. It enables writers to explore and ask questions about the social set up. Ian Rankin says: *'I continue to find the crime novel the perfect vehicle for a discussion of contemporary issues in the most unflinching terms.'*¹⁷

In recent crime fiction I have read about issues as diverse as illegal immigration, male rape, organised child abuse, medical malpractice, environmental crime, gang culture, the drugs trade, stalking, domestic violence, child abduction, human trafficking, infertility treatment, alcoholism and mental illness. And I've written about a fair few of them too.

Minette Walters, who excels in writing psychological thrillers, says: *'I write about and explore the different forms of prejudice in society. This has led me to use real*

*social issues as a backdrop to some of the stories – e.g. the Stephen Lawrence murder in The Shape of Snakes and, more recently, the war in Iraq in Disordered Minds.*¹⁸

The genre continually re-invents itself with new writers bringing new voices and in recent years several writers of literary fiction have turned to crime, among them Booker winner John Banville writing as Benjamin Black and Whitbread prize winner Kate Atkinson who writes a brilliant series of crime novels featuring a chaotic copper called Jackson Brodie.

Turning for the last part of this morning to my own work: my starting point for taking to crime was when an editor read a novella I'd written and pointed out that rather than continue to write science fiction I should consider crime. Taking her advice, I perused the library shelves and discovered the new wave of women private eyes, those created by Liza Cody, Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller and Val McDermid. These were independent women pursuing truth and justice for their clients. I wanted to do my own version of that sort of story: they were exiting, they were contemporary, they described a world I recognised from a stance I appreciated. I took Manchester where I lived as my backdrop and invented Sal Kilkenny a character much like my alter ego. Into the mix I wanted to add my own ingredient: Sal would be a single parent, this was at a time when single parents were blamed for many of the not inconsiderable woes of the country. I was a new parent myself, though not single, and wanted to explore the issue of working and raising a family, to see how Sal would juggle her sleuthing and her childcare. But in order for her to be able to work at all she needed some measure of support so she shares a house with a man, also a single parent, and his little boy grows up with Sal's daughter. Sal's clients come to her for answers, for help. Sal works alone, she is not beholden to any authority or part of any hierarchy. She shares her feelings about the cases she covers and the world she inhabits with the reader. The books are in the first person and create a confidential, intimate tone. The series has proved to be a great success and I've just completed the eighth novel.

Several years on and wanting to write something different, where I could use several points of view, I wrote a novel with a woman Detective Chief Inspector at the helm. Janine Lewis works with a team in Manchester investigating murders. Every story starts with the discovery of a body. In the books the story is shared between several third person narratives: that of the police investigators and those of a small group of characters close to or involved in or affected by the murder. The book was adapted for television before it was published and, in the course of the adaptation, Janine acquired a messy domestic life, with a cheating husband, three kids and a baby on the way. The show, *Blue Murder*, has been transmitted in many countries world wide and we are waiting to hear whether a sixth series will be commissioned.

To finish I would like to read you a little from the latest Sal Kilkenny book *Missing* and give you a flavour of a contemporary British private eye as she meets her new client.

Chapter One

People disappear every day. Most of them choose to. Have you ever been tempted? Slip on a coat, pick up your bag and walk, or drive, or run. Turn your back on home, family, friends, work.

Why do people do it? Because they can? Because staying feels harder than leaving? Because they are angry or desolate or simply, deeply, mind-numbingly bored with the life they have? Because their heart is breaking and their mind fragmenting? And the grass is greener, the flowers smell sweeter. And if they stay they might be truly lost.

Back in June, the same week that I'd just found one person, two more went missing. None of them related. The only connection was me; Sal Kilkenny, my job; private investigator. And finding people seemed to be the flavour of the month.

I was about to ring Bob Swithinbank, to tell him I'd traced the birthmother who had relinquished him for adoption some thirty years ago, when the doorbell rang. I climbed upstairs from the basement office that I rent and opened the front door to my new client. 'You found it all right?'

'No problem.'

'Come in. We're downstairs.'

Trisha Marlowe was a striking looking woman in her mid-thirties. She had straight, glossy, black hair cut short, the fringe spiky. A style that looked easy but probably needed daily attention with the mousse and the GHD straighteners. Her milky brown skin and deep brown eyes indicated mixed-race ancestry. I later learnt she was Anglo-Indian. She wore high quality casual clothes: black moleskin jeans, a cream fitted jacket and suede boots. I caught a scent of her perfume: light, grassy, not too overpowering.

A small sofa and easy chair were a recent addition to my office furniture. I tended to make snap judgements with new clients as to where to sit with them. Some seemed suited to the formality of desk and chairs, others to the more relaxed option. Without any cue from me, Trisha Marlowe picked the sofa.

'The reason I'm here,' she began, 'is that Janet, my friend, has gone missing. I'm worried about her. She's got children you see, and she'd never leave them.'

'Has she been gone long?'

'Nearly a week. Mark, that's her husband, he's been to the police, reported it but there doesn't seem to be very much they can do.'

Leaving home isn't a crime. The police would have added her details to the missing from home files but they wouldn't do more than that. Not unless there were suspicions of foul play linked to her disappearance.

'She's not done anything like this before?'

'No.'

'Anything difficult going on? Trouble in the marriage, depression, a new relationship?'

Trisha frowned and shook her head. 'No, I mean, I know things were a bit rocky between her and Mark – they've had some bad luck recently. He lost his job and I think things have been tricky financially but nothing really serious. And anything else, anyone else – she'd have told me. We're really close.'

'How old are the children?'

'Five and eight. I'm their godmother. We don't know what to tell them.' She pressed her lips together, a sudden need to rein in her emotions. I sensed she was close to tears and waited.

'I'm really worried.' She tapped her knuckles under her chin, her hand moving to some rhythm of anxiety. She described how they had contacted local hospitals, to make sure that Janet hadn't been involved in an accident, and that other

friends and relatives had been alerted. 'No one's seen her or heard from her,' she said.

'Did she take anything with her? Passport, bags, jewellery?'

'No. Mark says her handbag's gone but that's all. We're not sure what she was wearing ...' she faltered. 'You know what men are like – clothes.' She gave a small smile.

'And when did she go?'

'Thursday.'

Today was Wednesday, six nights away from her family, from her children.

I asked Trisha to tell me everything she could about that day. She explained that Janet was between jobs. She was a supply teacher and had been doing several weeks cover at a primary school in Stockport, a neighbouring town. The teacher she was replacing had returned from sick leave. Although money was tight for the family, Janet was glad to finish there. The school had been in a poor area and the children were very demanding. Many of them had special needs but the school hadn't been able to provide the extra staffing and resources the children required. Consequently, much of Janet's time was spent trying to exert discipline and retain control.

Trisha had spoken to Janet on the Wednesday night. Janet planned to spend Thursday pottering about and catching up on household chores. Mark was going to a job interview in Liverpool. He left early to avoid the rush hour. Janet walked the children to school. At four o'clock, the school secretary rang the house. No one had come to collect Isobel and Jacob. When there was no reply, the secretary rang the mobile numbers they had on file. Janet's was switched off, but Mark answered his. He was en route back to Manchester. He apologised for the apparent mix-up and drove straight to school. He was there forty minutes later.

When there was still no sign of Janet by six o'clock, Mark began to feel uneasy. At seven, he rang Trisha. Then he tried other friends and family. At ten o'clock, he spoke to the police for the first time.

'Can you try and find her?' Trisha asked me.

'Yes. It could take time though, and I have had cases where I've not been able to trace someone. Some people – they just stay missing. It's incredibly difficult for the family, for everybody, but it does happen.'

'But a mother—' she protested.

'It happens.'

I fetched a contract from my files and asked her to read it.

'There will probably be a lot of waiting around,' I told her. 'Information tends to come in fits and starts. When I've done the equivalent of two days work, we can review things. You can decide whether to carry on. The fees can soon mount up.'

'That's not a problem,' she waved her hands in dismissal. 'It's the least I can do. I feel so ... useless. There's Mark and the children—' she shook her head.

'I'd like to start by talking to him.'

Trisha promised to arrange a time for the following day and gave me all the details I needed.

Once she'd left, I made myself a coffee and opened a file on Janet Florin. The name made me smile. Coins from the olden days. Was a florin the one with a wren on? I'd a few old pennies at home, Maddie liked to use them to play shop, the large copper discs, dark with age, almost filled her palm. Florin. Did having a particular name make any difference to a person? If your surname was Flowers or Peace did life run that bit smoother? Did the Bleakleys and the Paines tread a harder path?

When I'd finished my coffee, I took a moment to think through my next call. Then I dialled the number.

'Bob, it's Sal Kilkenny, I have some news. Are you sitting down?' I kept my voice light but it was a serious suggestion.

'Oh, God. Have you found her?' Bob Swithinbank's voice was high with emotion. I pictured him gripping the phone: a big man swathed in black leathers, with a balding head and a thin, brown ponytail, a beer belly and far too many facial piercings.

'Yes. We've got an address. It's actually in Manchester and Sandra is still living there according to the Electoral Records. I've sent the letter there.'

Acting as an intermediary, I had written a carefully worded letter which didn't say anything too obvious but would alert Sandra to the fact that Bob was hoping for some sort of contact. It referred to the month and year when she had him and the place and said that someone who had known her briefly then was hoping for news. I'd left my details and number for her to ring and wrote that I was hoping she would be in touch when she had taken some time to think things over.

'Oh, thank god.' His voice broke and then there were huffing and snuffling sounds.

And I sat there gripping the phone, and blinking back tears. Some days, work is like that. Telling people what they're longing to hear. And I love it.

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