**Introduction:**

Crime fiction and cities have had a long, mutually beneficial relationship. Crime novels often read as social and geographic maps of a city’s streets. They’re recognised as giving us a sharp reading of the social change that surrounds us far more accurately and more quickly than other genres of fiction. Australian crime writer and academic Catherine Cole puts another spin on it when she wonders if cities are such popular settings for crime novels because fear seems most at home in cities (2004, p. 184) and it is fear that is one of the driving themes and dominant lures of crime fiction.

Of course, Australian writers are no different to writers from other cultures who are compelled to illuminate the unlit city streets. The city as the dominant setting for novel length Australian crime fiction is considered to have first emerged in 1886 with Fergus Hume’s *The Mystery of the Hansom Cab* (Knight 1997, p. 68). Previously, colonial crime fiction tended to include only a few scenes set in the capital city. These scenes presented the city as a distant centre of corruption or crisis which usually trickled outward to cause unrest or conflict in the rural or goldfield setting (Knight 1997, p. 68). The city functioned as an evil stranger, the city itself representing the values of corruption and crisis and acting as an incubator for these values. To put it in narratological terms, the city hosted or caused, the inciting event that set the plot in motion.

**First wave of crime novels:**

Melbourne was a natural urban setting for these first wave of crime novels, such as Hume’s, as it was the main city that serviced the surrounding goldfields. Stephen Knight states that Melbourne was ‘the first east coast stop on the long voyage out from Europe, and so the business capital of the country at this time’ (Knight 1997, p. 68). Fergus Hume in his *The Mystery of the Hansom Cab* does indeed present Melbourne as a business capital, but it is the business of hedonism. Hume’s city rings loud with the colourful language and bohemian vibrancy of Melbourne’s lanes and alleys, particularly those around Little Bourke Street. The inhabitants are typical urban types and could be seen as representations of elements of the city itself. Mother Guttersnipe, “deep in her little Bourke street bohemian fastness”, echoes a “Dickensian tradition of corruption and threat” and also acts as “a figure who connects the story to the city’s convict past” (Knight 1997, p. 70).

These representations of the city as urban bohemian overcrowded hubs of ‘wine, women, and song’ (Finch and McConville, p. 178) capture the movement of the city from colonial towns into sites of modern invention and early industrialism. With the goldfield wealth and new industry- lead riches came the institutions of civilisation – galleries, public libraries, universities, art schools (Finch and McConville, p. 174) and the Great Exhibition of 1880. The city grew into a space where culture was encouraged, produced and consumed for its own sake and through ongoing endowments. Accompanying this was an increased interactivity with the outside world: improved shipping and telegraph services, and large scale British immigration (Finch and McConville, p. 175).

Continuing the trend of that era’s crime fiction to represent the city as a den of sin or as a corrupting force, is Francis Adams. In his novel plaintively titled ‘Madeline Brown’s Murder: A Realistic and Sensationalist Novel’, published in 1887, Madeline is a temptress of the local theatre scene. Beautiful, enticing, dangerous, she is found dead in her boudoir with the scent of laudanum wafting through the room. She has succumb to the indulgent lifestyle and hedonistic allure of the shady backstreets and back bars, a lifestyle that the city both creates and reflects.
Adam’s work also suggests that the city can be a victim itself. The city can be hijacked and corrupted by the transient outsider who invests only passing dollars into the city and who does not stay long enough to either own a part of the city financially or emotionally, build a part of the city, or let themselves be integrated into the city. Not surprisingly, this theme of the city under threat is the dominant thematic motif in 80s Australian crime fiction, especially works authored by women (Cole, p. 193). I’ll come back to this later. But, returning to Francis Adams, the transient outsider is the businessman or as Adams describes him: “the grey clad American citizen soldier” (Adams 1887, p. 122). Stephen Knight (1997, p. 73) argues this image ‘conveys danger and political illegitimacy’ and interprets the grey clothing to invoke the confederate uniform (1997, p. 73). Business crimes are a stable of these early crime novels, including crooked dealings on the stock market in texts like ‘The Horden Mystery’ by Edmund Finn in 1889.

1910s to 1920s

Whereas Hume’s work explores a new city testing its bohemian limits, much of the highly urbanised crime fiction of the 1910s to 1920s is set in cities under deconstruction. The buildings that housed city bohemia are frequently disintegrating or being revealed to be as structurally shady as the activities that took place within. Painter Norman Lindsay’s crime short story ‘The Strip of Lining’ of 1912 takes place in Oxford Street, Sydney, an Oxford Street that is under what seems to be a futureless renovation – the pawnshop is the only building in that section of the street left standing (and only left standing due to a complication in the lease) but there’s no indication of when new buildings will take their place and what they will house. This ‘coming down’ of many of the buildings in the street is signalled to be part of the crime: ‘there was nobody there to see him, because the whole terrace is mostly pulled down and all he had to do was to walk round into Oxford Street’ (Gelder and Weaver, p.239).

The city in Lindsay’s work is a seedy patch of commerce ‘where pawnbrokers and punters congregate and the distinctions between legitimate business and criminality are blurred once more’ (Gelder and Weaver, p. 9). This city is full of vivid characters whose colloquialisms and rhythms of speech match their occupation and social standing. They are each vibrant representations of the different colours a city can take and the crime is solved due to the bookie protagonist’s mastery of numbers. In its cast of bookies, corrupt plain clothes policemen and petty thieves, Ken Gelder argues that we see ‘caricatures of emerging Australian social types, with their colloquial forms of speech and hard nosed-unsentimental approach to life. It might seem as if this story prefigures what is to come in Australian crime fiction in the way it folds together crime, business deals and corruption in the police force, all within the framework of a modern city (Gelder and Weaver, p. 8).

For the purpose of today’s paper, I’ll use the retro historical work of Kerry Greenwood as an entry point into representations of the city in the 1920s. Greenwood’s novels are obviously revisionist, particularly in their representations of the privileges granted to women (Chinese and other international lovers, an independent income, and a crack shot with a pistol) but do capture a distinctive side of Melbourne that is still visible today. Greenwood is working backwards, spotting the architectural ghosts of old Melbourne that surround us, then researching their role and personality, then unfurling a story and characters typical of those times through these settings like smoke from her character’s imported cigarettes. Bachelard’s writings about the relationship between space and our past seem especially apt here: ‘our past is situated elsewhere, and both time and place are impregnated with a sense of unreality. It is though we sojourned in a limbo of being’ (p. 58). Greenwood captures the bonhomie of the time in a city that will soon be drawn into war over far-away cities.

Set mainly in the inner city of Melbourne, the waterfront pubs, Spencer St Socialist bookstores, two up schools and glamorous aristocratic parties are all as stereotypical as her characters and viewed through a rosy bon vivants lens. But what’s interesting is that Greenwood’s character Phyrne Fisher does seem to represent every aspect of the city, as she’s as comfortable in those waterfront pubs and socialist bookstores as she is breaking the St Kilda Beach bathing laws in her imported Parisian legless swimwear.

In Death at Victoria Dock (1992), Phyrne Fisher tells her Eastern European anarchist lover:

‘I lived in the streets and starved when I had to, and this aristocratic layer is mere overlay on an impeccable working-class base. Get that clear, if you please, I am rich, and I enjoy money, but like Queen Elizabeth, cast me out into any part of my realm in my petticoat, and I would be what I am’ (p. 68).

Phyrne’s comments marks her as one of the most typical protagonist types in crime fiction. Her city is the modernist city akin to the ideal discussed in the work of Robert Park of the infamous Chicago school. He contends that the city produces previously unencountered individual types. These types ‘pass quickly and easily.
from one moral milieu to another, and encourages the fascinating but dangerous experiment of living at the same time in several different contiguous, but otherwise widely separated, worlds’ (1925, pp 40-41, cited in Gelder 2007, p. 29). This new individual must intermingle with many different types of people yet still remain segregated from others by social and cultural difference (Gelder 2007, p. 29).

Her guide to navigating the city echoes this when she tells a friend:

‘Stand up man, don’t look so furtive. If you look like a victim, people will treat you like a victim. Look like you have a place to go and you can breeze through most things. Don’t look anyone in the eye.’ (p. 155)

The idea of the individual slipping between segregation and integration was later challenged by post Chicago School sociologist John Irwin, who argued that interaction between city dwellers was minimal and that this produced a population of strangers with impersonal relationships who regarded each other with suspicion (1977, p. 18, cited in Gelder 2007, p. 44). But Phryne Fisher’s Melbourne is clearly Park’s vision rather than Irwin’s, as strangers are merely lovers as yet unloved and personalities not yet personal.

1930s and 1940s

Across the waters in the United States the hard-boiled genre was beginning its interrogation of the city, but Australia’s English heritage meant that there was little interest in private eye or the hard boiled style (Knight 1997, p.134) And, as Stephen Knight argues, the private eye style did not Australianise well. Nor did the city feature in a distinctive way in the predominantly Christie style works of the 30s to 50s nor in the touristic outback thrillers of Arthur Upfield, one of the most popular authors of that time.

Hard boiled style and the city of the private eye began to develop in world war two as British shipping to Australia grew less frequent and American imports began to take its place (Knight 1997, p. 133). This is the era of the infamous Carter Brown but the market for the work was still small, and these works inhabited what Knight calls ‘outer cultural space’ (p. 133). In this sub-genre, the city is the typical setting (Scaggs 2005, p. 50). It is not merely a place, but a character (Day 1993, p. 129). And a guilty one at that, featuring ‘webs of conspiracy and corruption – sometimes it’s as if the whole city is responsible for the crime’ (Day 1993, p. 130). Hard boiled fiction in its origin era was an exploration of the city as a sites of mass immigration, racial conflict, gang wars, rapid industrialization, random violence and poverty. Against this backdrop, the city became a metaphor for the hard drinking, money-chasing and morally unstable detective that moved through its streets. The hard-boiled detective’s city is “a wasteland devastated by drugs, violence, pollution, garbage, and decaying infrastructure” (Scaggs 2005, p. 70). For the writer, it offers a slate upon which to evaluate and critique both the political and the person; it is a ‘dais which may debate conflicting responses to social change’ (Day 1993, p. 126).

The hard-boiled voice of the thirties and forties found a new audience in the 1980s with Peter Corris, when the ‘familiarity of a well-savourd city seemed almost revolutionary in the 80s’. (Knight 1997, p. 167). The 1980s was a time of financial boom and it was the city that became a symbol of this, particularly Sydney. The city lures the unsuspecting with its beauty and glamour, but is ugly and predatory beneath the surface. The city is ‘an empire built on a spurious foundation, decked in tinsel and beguiled by its own illusory promise’ (Scaggs 2005, p. 71). Its deceptive nature is often worn openly. Marele Day, whom I consider to be the Australian writer most talented at interrogating the relationship between theme and city settings, wrote in her debut novel *The Life and Times of Harry Lavender* (1988) ‘in Sydney money buys status and is the greatest equaliser. Respectable businessmen rub shoulders with bookies, judges, and high ranking police officers. Commissioners are seen in night clubs with well-known crime figures, and I don’t mean statistics, crime figures who are themselves “respectable businessmen”’ (p. 69).

This deception is often imbued with gender. Prolific American crime writer Ed McBain refers to the city as a fickle but cold woman: ‘The bitch city is something different on Saturday night, sophisticated in black, scented and powered, but somehow not as unassailable, shiveringly beautiful in a haze of blinking lights’ (McBain 1984, cited in Day 1993, p. 128).

1980s

Marele Day, writing in 1988, deliberately continues in this tradition by portraying the city as a corrupt but powerful female enigma with decay at her heart: ‘She’d been a very sickly child, poxy and plague ridden. But
she’s grown strong, like a mushroom on a dung heap. Like an exotic mushroom had sprung out of the ground like a spider flower. But in the centre was a dark foetid substance that smelled exactly like human excrement’ (1988, p. 47).

Day even directly compares the city of Sydney to a character named Sally Villos in her novel *The Life and Times of Harry Lavender*: ‘The city was highly strung, a girl like Sally, a beautiful, made-up face, a sophisticated child, cool and crying and laughing all in the same breath, a liar, a tease. A girl craning her neck to see her reflection in the mirror or glass buildings. The nerves run riot by the jagging edge of jackhammers’ (Day 1988, p. 110).

One could argue that the feminising of the city reflects the need for the hard-boiled detective to control and possess. ‘This confirms the hard-boiled male detective’s worst fear – the capacity of the bitch to engulf him, to swallow him up,’ explains Day (1993, p. 131). The city is an ‘other’ that resists the hard-boiled detective’s constant attempts at knowing and mapping.

We can return here to the ideas of Robert Park and John Irwin that I discussed in relation to Kerry Greenwood’s work. The ideas of both Park and Irwin seem to sum up the experience of the alienated protagonist in much crime fiction and certainly characterizes Marele Day’s protagonist Claudia Valentine. The sleuth must be able to slip into many diverse worlds yet he or she never belongs to them. He or she merely visits, never infiltrates. He must be aware of the various populations and undercurrents that flow through the city, yet he must keep an analytical distance from all. In a sense he is Baudelaire’s flâneur who spectates, rather than participates, in the culture of those around him (Gelder 2007, p. 19).

Georg Simmel’s concept of the stranger seems to present just such a type, uniting Park and Irwin’s differences. Simmel describes an individual who ‘is neither too close nor too far’ (Ritzer 1996, p. 165). Simmel writes: ‘Distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near’ (1950, p. 402). Distance allows the stranger to possess greater objectivity in relationships and in their reading of the city and also makes city dwellers feel he is a safe confidant (Ritzer 1996, p. 165). In the large and dangerous city through which Marele Day’s characters move, acting as the stranger is a means of survival and a way of conducting business that is particular to her city.

1990s

Whereas much of the 80s crime fiction portrayed the city as a dangerous and unsettled space, Peter Temple’s Melbourne-based Jack Irish series of the 1990s presents a city that is loved and adored for its predictability. The protagonist, Jack, moves through his favourite haunts and their surrounding streets with confidence, feeling that the city accommodates him as much as he accommodates it. He has an emotional connection with the city. ‘Outside a cold rain was falling on the city. I didn’t need to go out to know that. I could feel it in my heart’ (2007, p. 20). As a criminal lawyer he comes in contact with the seedier side of life and as gambler with an addiction to horse racing, he is the seedier side of life. He not only knows the secret hand signal for buying heroin on the street, he has it flicked at him often enough to prove that although he’s not a user, he is seen as belonging to the seediest of streets. Jack hangs with henchmen, works for crime kings, and can still seem respectable when he stands before a magistrate in his occupation as lawyer.

The notion that the city accommodates him as much as he accommodates it touches on ideas raised in the field of human geography, particularly the argument that we have a two way interaction with the space around us. According to John Wiley, this space becomes a site of ‘mutual embeddedness and interconnectivity of self, body, knowledge and land’ (Wylie 2007, p. 1). This struck a chord with me, as I felt it suggested that people moving within a scene make up the scene. It’s kind of like Locard’s theory of transference in forensic science that claims when two objects interact, they leave traces of each other on each other. When we move through a landscape, we leave a part of ourselves behind. As a lawyer, Jack can stop construction barons engaged in dodgy deals and preserve the city he so loves, but he can also free the vandals and hedge burners that could alter his city beyond repair.

Conclusion:

The history of Australian cities are now so well recorded in crime fiction, that many of us have come to know the history of each city by its crimes: real, imagined and appropriated. Crime writer and academic, Catherine Cole, suggests that ‘each new crime narrative adds a new layer to the place in which the action is set, the text
becoming a type of archaeological dig’ (2004, p.184). What the next layer in the story of crime and the city will be depends on the changes our cities undergo.

References:


