



The fascination with crime

Crime fiction versus crime reality

Roger Bolton:

Well, for many of us crime is a source of fear, but also one of fascination. We buy millions of crime novels every year, and yet glibly moan at the ever rising crime figures. So what goes through the head of crime novelists, who are they trying to attract? Let's find out from our first insert.

John Connolly:

My name is John Connolly. I'm based in Dublin, and I write novels set in the United States. I had always been interested in writing, and I had always been interested in crime fiction, I suppose, that was what I read as a reader. I think crime fiction is reassuring for us. Crime fiction's quite conservative, because in the end it usually gives us a kind of reassuring answer. What it says to us is look, if somebody acts out of the right motivation, whether, because they believe that people shouldn't suffer injustice, because they believe that somebody should stand up for the rights of the innocent. Evil can be thwarted, and we don't always get those solutions in real life. There's also that element of a vicarious thrill from crime fiction. We read something which frightens us and which disturbs us, but in the end, because we have that kind of resolution, we get a kind of cathartic thing out of it.

The strange thing is that the most crime fiction readers are female, and they read, I think a slightly different type of crime fiction on occasion from men. This fascination with the human body that's emerged in about the last ten or fifteen years, the idea, that the interest in forensics, and forensic anthropology and pathology. A lot of that has been created by women. You're looking at writers like Patricia Cornwell, like Kathy Reichs. And it seems to me that women are far less squeamish about those things than male readers, and male authors, male authors tend not to approach those things in quite the same way. I don't think people make the same associations between crime fiction and the crime they read about in the newspapers. The crime you read about in the newspapers tends to be quite dull and mundane, it's very unpleasant, but it tends to be quite petty nasty crime. The crime in crime fiction is slightly different, and I think it deals with slightly larger themes. Like you don't read a crime novel necessarily to find out about the specifics of murder or manslaughter, or in some of the more sexually violent novels - rape. I think what you look at is to see those themes dealt with in a larger form. How do you respond to evil in society? You know, how do you respond to the fact that there are individuals that society can't seem to cope with and who seem to be intent upon hurting others?

Paul Johnston:

I'm Paul Johnston. I've written a series of five novels, which are set in 2020s' Edinburgh, which are a kind of Orwellian take, actually on the present day. Issues of crime, of drugs, of political corruption, and the idea really was to move the action forward into the future, as a way of extrapolating from the present day situation and perhaps getting the reader to look at things on a slightly different angle from normal.

I do find myself engaged by ideas initially and then, you know, sort of take it from there. You know, the basic idea of the initial book 'Body Politic' was the idea of there apparently being no crime in a society, their rigid status got rid of crime, and then, suddenly there is crime and they're not really capable of handling it. You know, very much the opposite from this society that we live in where there's too much crime.

I think there's a basic human need for narrative, you know, the sort of beginning middle and end aspects of our lives, which if you look at everyone's sort of daily life, that tends to be the

case, and when you don't have that, you feel kind of very disjointed or whatever, and I think that crime novels are kind of, in many ways are narratives par excellence, because they require, you know, dramatic beginnings and a development of plot and then a sort of convincing ending. And I think that's partly why crime novels are so popular, because people get more of a kind of narrative buzz out of them, and the sort of pace and excitement does seem to fulfil a basic human need. I mean, that's a sort of slightly broader view than just crime fiction, but I think it does apply.

I don't think there's a, necessarily a great link between real life crime and crime fiction. I mean, my books wouldn't see themselves as being based on that. There's a distinction actually. I mean, I think in many ways, I have done a lot of criminological research actually, and it's only fed into the books in a very abstruse way. I think it's a very different thing crime fiction from crime reality.

Roger Bolton:

Louise Westmarland, crime novels, why do you think most of us do enjoy them? Is there something dangerous here, voyeuristic, getting excited by what, serial killers? Something strange is going on?

Dr Louise Westmarland:

I think a lot of people lead lives that don't ever become involved in crime, lives that are never actually touched by crime, and yet, they have the feeling that crime is all around us and that crime is very, very common. But in reality, people are very rarely involved in any crime, either as a victim, or as a perpetrator. So one of the things I think that crime fiction does, it makes people feel that they are involved in this. In other words, they can read about the normalisation of things, such as murders and robbery, and so, it's a useful way of playing out those fears. It's a useful way of thinking that, it could happen to me, but it isn't going to happen to me, and this is what it would be like if it did. I think also, if we just move onto crime programmes, such as *The Bill*, and the more popular programmes like that, they're a quick fix to crime. They nearly always have an outcome that's a good outcome. The police nearly always catch the person, or at least in some way there's a sort of a moral ending whereby all is right with the world again.

Roger Bolton:

Which is clearly untrue, the majority of crimes are unsolved and, yes often the wrong people get convicted and other things. Some of that, but why does it satisfy a need for us to believe, that in the end, good is rewarded, evil is punished, and therefore we can go to sleep you know happy?

Dr Louise Westmarland:

I suppose. I mean it's a bit like *Crimewatch*, isn't it, where at the end they always say, oh, sleep well, this isn't really going to happen to you.

Roger Bolton:

We've done our best to terrify you, now go to sleep, yes.

Dr Louise Westmarland:

And I suppose people get a thrill from that. But also we enjoy the resolution of the puzzle, I suppose. I suppose that's the thing with murder mysteries.

Roger Bolton:

But the, but does our obsession with crime, in novels, in the cinema, in television, mean that we're well informed about the reality of crime?

Dr Louise Westmarland:

I suppose in some cases we are. I mean, at least we know the roles of people in certain jobs, if we're actually confronted with crime. But I think in terms of the actual extent and the types of crime that are committed, as you say, most people wouldn't know that child abductions for instance, haven't increased in the last thirty years, and yet, if we were simply looking at the

television news and the newspapers, we would think that it was a terrific problem that was growing every year and was getting much worse.