

## Popular Fiction: Detective Novels and Thrillers from Holmes to Rebus

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Scottish writers have, at times, played a role in detective, adventure, and thriller writing that is out of proportion to the size of the nation. Though Scotland played no significant part in the twentieth-century's so-called 'Golden Age' of crime fiction, which was dominated by English and American authors, its writers were influential in establishing the genre in the late nineteenth century and can, in the early twenty-first century, count among themselves some of its most popular global practitioners. This chapter may not be able to offer a satisfactory explanation of why this is the case – unfortunately literary criticism is rarely as tidy as fictional detective work – but it will offer an account of the somewhat punctuated evolution of crime and thriller fiction in the Scottish context in the period that runs from Conan Doyle to so-called Tartan Noir.

Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson are Scottish writers who demand attention principally because of the impact their work had on a popular writing based on action and suspense, on psychological instability and the solving of puzzles. Conan Doyle's place in the history of detective fiction needs little elaboration. Though he took up a genre that had been established in the 1830s and 40s by Vidocq's *Mémoires*, the Newgate novels, and Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin stories, and which had been experimented with variously by Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and, most successfully, by Émile Gaboriau, Conan Doyle established in the popular mind the type of the detective story in its modern form. In his Sherlock Holmes stories for the *Strand Magazine* from 1891 and in novellas such as *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), *The Sign of Four* (1890), and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) Conan Doyle created a fiction that fed on the sensational elements of his predecessors' work, featuring luminescent hellhounds bounding out of moorland mist, diabolical

master criminals, and dark deeds in opium dens. But it kept that sensationalism tightly bound in satisfying plots that, through Holmes's reasoned application of observation, analysis, and deduction, reduced the seemingly uncanny to the reassuringly explicable. He didn't so much invent the form, for most of the elements that are associated with Sherlock Holmes pre-dated his creation - the use of a single detective figure to link disparate stories, his status as a 'consulting' amateur detective, the reliance on science and use of deduction, the personal eccentricity, the mastery of disguise, the use of a companion as an explicator and foil - but what Conan Doyle did was synthesise these elements by putting them in the control of a compelling, complex central character. The Holmes stories are primarily plot-driven, but their qualities of mystery and suspense are deepened by the fact that the detective figure is himself mysterious and contradictory. Holmes is a man who can at times seem self-absorbed to the point of autism and at others empathetic, he is a fundamentally rational being who loses himself in music and drugs, a model of punctilio and order who has deep connections with, and a dark understanding, of the criminal underworld. He solves crime at a satisfyingly intellectual, forensic level, but he also understands the human passions that provoke them, the 'dark desires of apparently respectable people' that drive tales such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.<sup>1</sup>

Stevenson's fiction comes to a similar point, but arrives there from a different starting place, drawing as he does on the popular tradition of historical romance founded by Walter Scott as well as the darker dualisms of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). The most obvious and celebrated example of this dualism in Stevenson's work comes in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), a novella that bears many of the hallmarks of the emerging genre of detective fiction, not least a murder, a locked room mystery, a closeted homosocial environment, and

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction since 1900 : Detection, Death, Diversity*, 2nd ed. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61.

a detective figure in the form of the lawyer Utterson. But *Jekyll and Hyde* is above all an exploration of an idea of divided identity that would manifest itself variously in the following few years in the psychology of Sigmund Freud, the anthropology of J. G. Frazer, and the fiction of Bram Stoker and Joseph Conrad: the notion of an underlying atavism, an ungovernable appetitive instinct that lurks within and threatens to overthrow even the most civilised and rational modern mind. The contrast between the deformed, stunted Mr Hyde and urbane Dr Jekyll is, as the reader ultimately finds out, not that between blackmailer and victim as Utterson first believes, but is rather the internal division of one person – an idea that Conan Doyle would draw directly on in the Sherlock Holmes story ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip’ (1891) in which the deformed beggar Hugh Boone is revealed to be in fact the man he is suspected of murdering, the thoroughly respectable Neville St. Clair. The articulation of this particular idea of division is new to Stevenson in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, but as a structural principle it is common to many of his more straightforward historical adventures and is what generates much of their intrigue and their speculative content on national issues. In *Kidnapped* (1886) Stevenson follows the example of Scott’s *Waverley* in using antipodal characters, David Balfour and Alan Breck, to embody the division between lowland and highland Scotland and to examine the terms on which reconciliation between the two can be effected in the wake of the failed Jacobite rebellions. In *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), also set in the immediate post-Jacobite period, the division is that between two brothers. Again, an issue of the divided nature of the Scottish character is projected onto a contrasting pair of characters who embody, in the younger brother Henry, the dull virtues of domestic responsibility and commitment to duty, and in the elder James, the attractive vices of fearlessness and impulsiveness.

It is tempting to put these two factors together and argue that there is something particular to the Scottish formation of Conan Doyle and Stevenson that is fundamental to their success as popular

writers of suspense and detection: that the condition of Scottishness – its confused political status as a stateless nation, its geographical and cultural splitting between highland and lowland, its religious divisions – lends itself to the sense of doubleness, the duplicity on which crime and thriller fiction feed. Such a reading is bolstered by G. Gregory Smith's much-cited and subsequently influential diagnosis, in his *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919), of a Caledonian Antisyzygy at work in Scottish writing that marks out the national literature as fundamentally bipolar, oscillating between extremes of piety and irreverence, civilised urbanity and savage rusticity.

But this is to ignore some of the most salient facts of Conan Doyle's and Stevenson's fiction. It is possible to see Scottish precedents in the work of both, but it is also possible to insist too hard on these and so ignore the wider British and international contexts within which their work might more fruitfully be seen. Conan Doyle suggested that Sherlock Holmes was based on the Edinburgh doctor Joseph Bell, and it is arguable that Holmes's empiricism comes directly out of the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment. Similarly, Dr Henry Jekyll might rightly be seen as a successor to the notorious Deacon Brodie, and the novella in which he appears be interpreted as a kind of mind map of an Edinburgh split between its teeming, corrupt Old Town and rational, civilised New Town. The fact is, however, that the metropolis of *Jekyll and Hyde* is not Edinburgh but London, and its characters are recognisably English. This suggests either that Stevenson saw some quality in the divided Scottish mind that had wider application for his British and international readers or that what he was describing was a fundamental condition of modernity which had its local expression in Scottish and English culture and so was equally applicable to both. This latter reading arguably squares better with Stevenson's wider interests as primarily an international writer and his authorship of works, among them *Treasure Island* (1883), *The Black Arrow* (1883), the *South Sea Tales* (1893), *St Ives* (1897), that range widely across temporal and national boundaries. His literary

antecedents, likewise, are international rather than peculiarly Scottish: his grounding in historical romance, for example, coming as much from Victor Hugo and the elder Dumas as it does from Walter Scott, whom he famously disparaged in his 'A Gossip on Romance' as 'a great romantic – an idle child'.<sup>2</sup>

Sherlock Holmes is similarly unmistakably, perhaps irredeemably, English and his sleuthing activities are based almost wholly in London and the South of England where Conan Doyle settled. Holmes's literary heritage is that mixture of American, English, and French writing that formed the foundation of crime fiction and which might be seen in the vector that runs from Vidocq through Lecocq to Sherlock. The occasional irruption of something more exotic and international comes not from North but from the East or, as in *A Study in Scarlet*, Mormon America (a theme perhaps picked up from the 'Story of the Destroying Angel' written by Stevenson with his American wife in *The Dynamiter*, 1885). By an interesting quirk, the Sherlock Holmes stories frequently alternated in the *Strand* magazine with a series that featured the Glasgow detective Dick Donovan – a figure who was rather more dogged and a little less inspirational than Holmes but, initially at least, his equal in popularity.<sup>3</sup> Donovan's creator was an Englishman, J. E. Preston Muddock who had only a limited acquaintance with Glasgow, having created Donovan during a four-year spell working for W & D C Thomson in Dundee. This sometimes shows in the rather hazy geography of the stories' plots and their indeterminate dialogue. In his story 'The Pearl Necklace', for example, Muddock displays his mastery of the Glaswegian vernacular by having one hardened Glasgow criminal mutter to another,

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *Memories and Portraits* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1919), 274.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Drurie (ed.), *Dick Donovan, the Glasgow Detective: J. E. Preston Muddock* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2003), xiii-xvi.

rather unconvincingly, 'The blooming Sheeny (Jew) has got some of the swag.'<sup>4</sup> Donovan drew, as did Conan Doyle, on a tradition of indigenous popular Scottish crime writing that included the casebooks of two Edinburgh policemen, the real James McLevy (an Irishman whose memoirs were published in the 1850s and early 60s) and the fictional James McGovan (the creation of William Crawford Honeyman in the 1870s) but he wrote, like Conan Doyle, with an ear cocked to the London underworld and an eye on the British and the international market.<sup>5</sup> This strange conjunction meant that the two most popular fictional characters in the *Strand Magazine* in the early 1890s were an English detective created by a Scotsman and a Scottish detective (albeit one whose provenance seems a little confused) created by an Englishman – an early sign perhaps, of the tendency of the genre of crime fiction to defy easy categorisation according to national boundaries.

Apart from occasional series, such as that following the exploits of 'Bobby Gibson, Footballer-Detective' in the *People's Journal* in the years before the First World War, the detective novel was rarely visible in Scottish writing for a long time after Conan Doyle. The suspenseful historical romance tradition continued by Stevenson, as well as by Conan Doyle in *Micah Clarke* (1889) *The White Company* (1891), and *Sir Nigel* (1906), was kept alive in Neil Munro's fiction, particularly in his *The New Road* (1914) and by John Buchan in novels such as *John Burnet of Barns* (1898) and *Witch Wood* (1927) and would find its way into the popular novels of Nigel Tranter and Dorothy Dunnett. Sensational crime cropped up in novels such as McArthur and Long's *No Mean City* (1935) but the main legacy of the detective novel was to be seen in the spy fictions that came into vogue with the First

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<sup>4</sup> *Dick Donovan*, 54.

<sup>5</sup> See George Scott-Moncrieff, ed. *James McLevy: The Casebook of a Victorian Detective* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1975). and James McGovan, *The McGovan Casebook: Experiences of a Detective in Victorian Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2003).

World War. The outstanding British writer associated with this new genre was John Buchan, whose *Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) and *The Power House* (1916) launched the two principal figures, Richard Hannay and Edward Leithen, who would feature in several of the adventure books that Buchan would call his 'shockers'. Buchan was, like Conan Doyle and Stevenson before him and Alistair MacLean and Val McDermid after, a Scot by formation who found a home, a subject matter, and an audience outside the country. His shockers are interesting not just for their suspenseful narratives but for the tension that exists in them between an optimistic will to civilise and unify and the nagging fear of a persisting instinct that destabilises this will. In *The Power House* Leithen's comfortable idea of what he calls the 'goodwill of civilisation' is challenged by the wealthy anarchist Andrew Lumsden who tells him, 'You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilization from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass. A touch here, a push there, and you bring back the reign of Saturn.'<sup>6</sup>

In the Hannay novels the main unifying power against such saturnalias of barbarism, and in particular the barbarisms of continental Europe and Ireland, is that of Britishness and its associated Imperialism. Buchan conceives a British imperial identity that is notably wide-ranging and permissive. It refuses to discriminate within the white empire: Hannay is a South-African expatriate Scot and he and his Boer confederate Peter Pienaar enjoy a relationship of total equality with the Ulsterman MacGillivray, Englishman Sir Walter Bullivant, and, stretching the definition to its widest, the American Blenkiron. Class difference, likewise, causes little friction as, working class-Scots like Geordie Hamilton share common purpose with aristocrats such as Sandy Arbuthnot. It is, of course, a tendency of political thrillers to emphasise external difference where crime fiction explores internal conflict and contradiction, so it not surprising to find the wartime Hannay novels following this

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<sup>6</sup> John Buchan, *The Leithen Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), 29, 28.

pattern and defining a virtuous Britishness threatened by devious foreign shape-shifters such as Graf Otto von Schwabing in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Mr Standfast* (1919) and the denatured, sadistic Hilda Von Einem and Ulric Von Stumm – a brute with ‘a perverted taste for soft delicate things - in *Greenmantle* (1916).<sup>7</sup>

But there is also the threat from within. This is only hinted at in the early Hannay books, but it becomes an important factor in what is perhaps the most interesting novel in the series, *The Three Hostages* (1924), in which Hannay comes close to understanding the darker implications of the Unconscious of Freudian psychoanalysis. The theme is introduced by the novel’s Dr Greenslade, and is expressed in his belief that the ‘barriers between the conscious and the subconscious’ that have always ‘been pretty stiff in the average man’ have broken down. ‘The result is confusion’, he tells Hannay, ‘you can’t any longer take the clear psychology of most civilized human beings for granted. Something is welling up from primeval depths to muddy it.’<sup>8</sup> This impacts not only on crime itself, but on the way it is must be conceived: ‘you can hardly take anything for granted and if you want detective stories that are not childish fantasy, you’ll have to invent a new kind’.<sup>9</sup> *The Three Hostages* doesn’t quite mark such a departure in fictional form, but it does offer a shift in Buchan’s thinking – perhaps occasioned by the war and by his role in directing propaganda at the Ministry of Information – in which his characteristic focus on regulation and restraint moves from the physical to the psychological. In thrillers like *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *Greenmantle*, and *Mr Standfast* control is exerted by force, by means of bodily constraint and imprisonment, or physical deception, through disguise and subterfuge. In the post-war novels this sense of control is challenged from within, from the sense

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<sup>7</sup> Buchan, *Greenmantle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 79.

<sup>8</sup> Buchan, *The Three Hostages* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1926), 22-3.

<sup>9</sup> *The Three Hostages*, 20-21.



that there lurk disruptive forces deep in the personality that may be unleashed by a range of stimuli: in *The Three Hostages* by hypnotism, in *The Dancing Floor* (1926) and *Witch Wood* by atavistic ritual, and in *The Courts of the Morning* (1929) by drugs.

In Buchan's thriller fiction, then, the good man (for it is generally a man) is usually defined in his relation to a set of principles that largely align with the values of the British imperium – although the occasional good American and even good German do turn up from time to time. The villains who generate the novels' suspense are those like Andrew Lumley who threaten that British self from the outside by way of an anarchic internationalism or those like Dominick Medina in *The Three Hostages* who attempt to rot it from the inside by laying bare its hypocrisies and repressions. Both villains can pass as English gentlemen, and so can understand from the inside, so to speak, how vulnerable its values are to attack from without and within and direct their sinister campaigns accordingly. But what is never in question is that Scotland might be a source of that threat. Scottishness is not a condition of separation and internal division in Buchan's thrillers but a principle of integrity and a warrant of united effort.

The sense in which Scottish particularity is effaced by adventure fiction is reinforced in the work of Alistair MacLean, one of the most successful British authors of the third quarter of the twentieth century with sales of over 150 million copies of some twenty-six novels.<sup>10</sup> MacLean's personal journey took him from a Gaelic-speaking childhood near Inverness to tax exile in Switzerland, but apart from *When Eight Bells Toll* (1966) set in the Western Isles, his fiction concerns itself largely with wartime and Cold War adventure to which his Scottishness is incidental. Occasionally a Scot

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<sup>10</sup> Brian Docherty, "Grace under Pressure: Reading Alistair Maclean," in *Twentieth-Century Suspense: The Thriller Comes of Age*, ed. Clive Bloom (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990), 203.

turns up in his work, such as the Clydeside engineer Casey Brown in *The Guns of Navarone* (1957), but this is only to augment multi-national casts of men, like Buchan's homosocial groups, engaged in saving the free world from political and criminal intrigue. Membership of these groups is more dependent on qualities of masculinity than nationality. The novels are well-paced but formulaic, relying for their jeopardy, consistently from his first novel *HMS Ulysses* (1955), on simple treachery rather than the internal conflicts of individual characters, and for their lower-level tension by an undercurrent of mistrust on the part of NCO characters for their socially-superior but morally-suspect officers.

The period in which MacLean was writing went unmarked by any significant Scottish crime writing. The only partial exception came in the form of two short novels by Muriel Spark that, rather characteristically turned the genre on its head. *The Driver's Seat* (1970) has its victim, the enigmatic Lise, plot her own death at the hands of an unwilling murderer – turning the book from a potential whodunnit into what Lise herself alludes to as a 'whydunnit in q-sharp major'.<sup>11</sup> *Not to Disturb* (1971), meanwhile, twists a scenario reminiscent of a locked-room country house murder mystery into a farcical comedy of below-stairs attitudes, as the servants of Baron and Baroness Klopstock plan the ways they will cash in on the murders they anticipate are about to happen in the library.

It is not until the surprisingly late date of 1977 that Scottish literature got, in the publication of William McIlvanney's *Laidlaw*, its first truly modern detective. *Laidlaw* is particularly modern for the understanding he brings that the detective's primary job is not to separate out the lawless in order to isolate, stigmatise, and punish them for their transgressions, but rather to understand the complex workings of personality and environment that might make a criminal of anyone: as he puts it, 'we

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<sup>11</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 101.

share in everyone else or forgo ourselves'.<sup>12</sup> Laidlaw tells his children frightening stories but then defuses the terror by showing how even potentially terrifying situations can have banal explanations. This is to educate them, as he tells his son, that 'there *are* no monsters', and that instead 'there's only people'.<sup>13</sup> This sense of criminality, and even murder, as activities which are not so much the product of savagery, or a denial of the human, as unfortunate but fundamental consequences of what it is actually to be human is what drives Laidlaw. His habit of submerging himself in the city in order to solve his cases may be seen partly as an affectation and partly a simple trope of the detective genre, reminiscent perhaps of Sherlock Holmes's forays into the underworld or his going native on the moor and inhabiting its mystery in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but it is also a statement of his empathy for and his refusal to place himself above the criminals and the victims of their crimes.

*Laidlaw* is a novel that operates through a series of binarisms that are familiar to the fiction of the west of Scotland - male versus female, individual versus family, Catholic versus Protestant, heterosexual versus homosexual, urban versus rural, housing scheme versus tenement - as well as that most pertinent of dualisms in detective fiction, that of the law and the outlaw. But once he has set up these binarisms McIlvanney attempts throughout the three novels that feature Laidlaw to dissolve rather than exploit them. In *Laidlaw*, for example, the father of the victim, for whom we might normally expect to feel sympathy is a criminal and a domestic abuser while the murderer is essentially an innocent pushed to a terrible act of violence by the discrimination he faces as a Catholic and a homosexual. McIlvanney reinforces this blending through skilful use of form. The narratives of *Laidlaw* and *The Papers of Tony Veitch* are noticeably unstable: they refuse to focus on

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<sup>12</sup> William McIlvanney, *The Papers of Tony Veitch* (London: Coronet, 1984), 18.

<sup>13</sup> William McIlvanney, *Laidlaw* (London: Coronet, 1979), 66.

and privilege one character alone and instead construct a shifting perspective by means of short, punchy chapters that allow us to see contrasting events focalised through different characters. This can have sometimes surprising effects, as when in *Laidlaw* we see the murderer at bay, Tommy Bryson, through the eyes of his lover Harry Rayburn and gain a very strong sense not only of Tommy's fear and vulnerability but also of the depth and tenderness of Harry's love for him. There is a good deal of homophobic banter traded between the novel's characters, but scenes such as this, taken alongside Laidlaw's own more understanding and humane attitudes towards so-called deviance, allow for a balanced and complex, but noticeably sympathetic treatment of what was, at the time, an issue that tended either to be ignored or subjected to casual prejudice and contempt.

Another formal device that reinforces sympathy is the use of a second-person address in the opening lines of *Laidlaw*:

Running was a strange thing. The sound was your feet slapping the pavement. The light of passing cars batted your eyeballs. Your arms came up unevenly in front of you, reaching from nowhere, separate from you and from each other.<sup>14</sup>

In using this apparently casual idiom, McIlvanney places the reader, almost without realising it, into an empathetic relationship with the murderer. By this act of interpellation, hailing the reader and inviting him or her to imagine themselves into the panicking body of the criminal, McIlvanney signals one of the novel's main concerns – the potential interchangeability of the guilty and the innocent. His readers are, by implication, encouraged to think of themselves as like his characters, in the possibility they hold of unleashing 'this moment of ravaging viciousness whose spores were in each

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<sup>14</sup> *Laidlaw*, 5.

of them'.<sup>15</sup> In denying the fleeing body agency and coherence and turning it instead into a blur of impersonal, instinctual flight the narration is introducing a second issue that will be explored insistently throughout the Laidlaw novels - the question of whether we can ever properly be said to be the authors of our own actions. This question is one that hangs over Laidlaw and colours his approach to crime, leading him to interpret murder as a social as much as a personal act. It is, he tells Harkness, hypocrisy to believe that 'bad things can happen somehow of their own accord, in isolation. Without having roots in the rest of us'.<sup>16</sup> It also prompts him to a philosophy in which the individual is not so much the author of events as a subject created and defined by them. Laidlaw posits this in his own idiosyncratic reformulation of the Existentialist proposition that existence precedes essence: 'you don't know who you are until you happen'.<sup>17</sup>

Laidlaw is noticeably compassionate towards many of the criminals that come into his orbit. While he is quick to condemn some, especially those whose violence is unfocused or dishonourable or who have, like Matt Mason, betrayed the obligations they owe to their class, he is willing to stretch out a sympathetic understanding to the many caught in the flux of circumstances through which, according to a kind of chaos theory, small ordinary impulses transform into criminal acts out of all proportion to their causes. 'It was', Laidlaw muses in *Strange Loyalties*, 'the crime beyond the crime that had always fascinated me, the sanctified network of legally entrenched social injustice towards which the crime I was investigating feebly gestured.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Laidlaw*, 214.

<sup>16</sup> *Laidlaw*, 186.

<sup>17</sup> *Laidlaw*, 165.

<sup>18</sup> William McIlvanney, *Strange Loyalties* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 7.

McIlvanney can't really be credited as the progenitor of the astonishing amount of Scottish crime fiction that has been written since the appearance of *Laidlaw*, even though writers like Ian Rankin have paid generous tribute to his influence. He is not, as journalists sometimes assert, the godfather of Tartan Noir, though he shares with the writers who have come after him a basic concern with the rootedness of Scottish crime in a long and unhappy history of economic inequality, sexual discrimination and religious and class prejudice. And this is principally because of his distrust of the detective genre itself, his reluctance to reduce the Laidlaw novels to a repeatable formula. Laidlaw is, like most fictional detectives, a fully paid up member of the awkward squad, and one rather gets the impression that his creator feels he can really only honour that awkwardness in his character - that sense that the best defence against the modern world's criminality, mendacity, and corporate bullshit lies in a recalcitrant individualism - by refusing to make him just another reproducible commodity in fiction's marketplace.

This is a concern that is shared by a number of the Scottish detective and thriller writers who have followed McIlvanney, even though some have been more content to write in a serial format. Frederic Lindsay first came to popular notice in 1984 with his political thriller *Brond* and has subsequently created a series of novels, beginning with *Kissing Judas* (1997) that follow the troubled development of his Lothian and Borders policeman D. I. Jim Meldrum. Like *Brond* these are dark pieces of fiction that engage the reader's morbid curiosity rather than sense of suspense, and in emphasis are more philosophical than procedural. They are literate, introspective, and often rather oblique in their actions: tending to establish location without descriptive passages and relying on a shifting free indirect voice that destabilises the authority of the narrative. Lindsay's fictions appear to have the intention to disturb rather than oblige, which does not make them particularly popular, but gives them the feel of serious, thoughtful literature. A similarly spiky, though less tortured, idiosyncrasy

can be seen in Frank Kuppner's writing about crime in *A Very Quiet Street* (1989) and *Something Very Like Murder* (1994). In these books, which follow, rather digressively, the trials of the Glasgow criminals Oscar Slater and Bertie Willox, Kuppner wilfully resists literary categories, and even consistency in tone, blending fact and fiction, apparently autobiographical speculation and historical recovery. He is perhaps not in the same league as W. G. Sebald, but Kuppner shares Sebald's eccentric, unresting curiosity about the manner in which his autobiographical narrator's life and personal experiences intersect with a national history chequered by crime and violence.

McIlvanney, Lindsay, and Kuppner in their various ways use form to mimic the intractable nature of their subject matter, suggesting that individual acts of crime have roots so interwoven in a culture and a place that they can have no discernible beginning or end. Solving and understanding are two different things, and they are more concerned with the latter, knottier task. In doing this they stand outside the mainstream of a more market-friendly Tartan Noir which has often proved itself a little keener on appearing to solve its crimes or exploit them for sensational effect, and rather less willing to deal at anything more than a superficial level with ramifying, complex social and political issues that might clot its narrative flow and impair its orchestration of suspense. It is perhaps harsh to put into this category a series like Quintin Jardine's *Bob Skinner* books which, more so than his *Oz* (and now *Primavera*) *Blackstone* novels, are largely located in a recognisable and largely realistically-portrayed modern Scotland and have often captured a strong flavour of Edinburgh crime and, sometimes, Scottish politics. But the demands of writing twenty Skinner novels in seventeen years are such that a number of often rather predictable Scottish themes and settings and even some rather unlikely ones (The Edinburgh Book Festival in *Fatal Last Words*, 2009) appear to be mined more for their opportunity to generate a sensational plot than to say anything pressing about the criminal mind, and Jardine seems rather too prone to granting his own and his characters' wishes:

the villain is hit by a bolt of lightning in *Skinner's Round* (1995), Hibernian FC win the league in *Aftershock* (2008) and the often rather smug Skinner is elevated to Chief Constable in *A Rush of Blood* (2010).

The use of criminal violence as a form of entertainment, and its solving as a form of wish fulfilment, is also strongly present in the equally prolific Christopher Brookmyre. Brookmyre mixes an often brilliantly sardonic offbeat humour with scenes of graphic violence, seen to great effect in the series of gruesome comic thrillers beginning with *Quite Ugly One Morning* (1996) that feature investigative journalist Jack Parlabane. Brookmyre's novels take great delight in undermining the expected modes of Scottish criminal and investigative behaviour, as witnessed in *The Sacred Art of Stealing* (2002) which features a gang of international art thieves who stage bank robberies in the form of Dadaist happenings and an investigating policewoman, D. I. Angelique de Xavia, a Catholic Asian who supports Rangers Football Club. His novels' politics, such as they are, are of the irreverent, self-righteous left and though his style is sophisticated and smart – often being compared to that of Elmore Leonard and Carl Hiaasen – his books sometimes suffer from the charmless sense of invulnerability that comes from always being in the right. They might be thought to challenge their readers, and perhaps do achieve this with their careless violence, but there is perhaps little in their casual cynicism to really shake the world-view of a generation acculturated to contemporary horror films and video games. In this Brookmyre might perhaps have taken account of some of the nuance and ambiguity found in Iain Banks, whose *Complicity* (1993) is often seen as a precursor to his work. *Complicity* is, to state it bluntly, a cautionary tale about the need to be careful of what you wish for. Its story follows twin narratives: one is that of a sanctimonious, left-leaning, and deplorably louche investigative journalist, Cameron Colley, written in the first person; the other, that of a mysterious murderer, written (as in the opening of *Laidlaw*, though to very different effect) in the second. The



sense of complicity promised in the novel's title is manifested when it becomes apparent that the murders are enactments of some of Colley's less temperate and responsible journalistic opinions and are being performed on his behalf, so to speak, out of a twisted sense of gratitude, and even love. This ultimately prompts Colley to rethink his manner of living and ought, presumably, to encourage the book's readers to a similar reevaluation – though there remains, perhaps, a nagging suspicion that in allowing ourselves to be titillated by the novel's graphic portrayals of sex and violence we have ourselves been complicit in its trivialising of such serious issues by treating them as subjects for recreational entertainment.

Val McDermid rarely shows such scruples in her work, which offers in place of ambiguity a series of absorbing, intricately-engineered plots that have made her a major international bestseller. She resists the Tartan Noir tag, mainly because she writes only infrequently about Scotland in her three major crime series that feature Manchester private detective Kate Brannigan, Scottish lesbian journalist Lindsay Gordon, and the Bradfield-based pair of psychological profiler Tony Hill and policewoman Carol Jordan. Her novels certainly deal with serious issues, particularly in relation to gender and sexual identity, and can at times involve subtle characterisations of individual vulnerability: for example, in the portrayal of Tony Hill's sexual dysfunction in *The Mermaids Singing* (1995). This is leavened in the Brannigan and Gordon books with a dark humour, but in the Hill and Jordan books the emphasis is on the blacker, more sustained criminal deviation expressed in serial killing. McIlvanney's Laidlaw's doesn't believe in monsters and scorns those who do, like his competitor Milligan, for lacking perspective: 'Faced with the enormity, they lose their nerve, and where they see a man, they make a monster.'<sup>19</sup> McDermid's approach is quite different: her fiction does believe in monsters and Tony Hill labours under 'no illusions about the extremes of evil that

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<sup>19</sup> McIlvanney, *Laidlaw*, 134.

human beings were capable of.<sup>20</sup> McDermid takes this assumption and builds on its foundation an elaborate, sophisticated mechanism for keeping the reader carefully under the control of her words. It is, like much good crime fiction, a form of hypnotism – not unlike that practised by Buchan's Dominick Medina – that employs its rhythms to suspend rational judgement and unlock the transgressive imagination. And then like all successful hypnotism, it clicks its fingers with the solving of the crime and returns us safely back to our lives. It is, in that sense at least, a worthy, if much more sophisticated, successor to the tradition of Conan Doyle and Stevenson. But, like the work of these predecessors, it tells us very little that is particular to Scotland, and returns us to what seems to be a fundamental incompatibility between the idea of a serious national literature which aims to illuminate the unique conditions of a particular people in a particular place, and an international genre that is concerned with entertaining a wider audience according to a limiting narrative of transgression and correction.

Two contemporary writers who have addressed these issues and have perhaps achieved the most success in synthesising them are Denise Mina and Ian Rankin. In her Maureen O'Donnell trilogy, *Garnethill* (1998), *Exile* (2000), and *Resolution* (2001), and the Paddy Meehan novels that begin with *The Field of Blood* (2005) Mina successfully balances the suspense narrative characteristic of McDermid and the debunking, plot-suspicious demotic of McIlvanney. Mina's O'Donnell is reluctant to think of crime as unspeakable monstrosity because she has lived much of her life in a forced intimacy with abuse and speaks as its victim. The trilogy is not without its monsters - principally and perhaps tellingly the hospital psychologist Angus Farrell – and is not without an element of righteous vengeance and wish fulfilment towards its close, but it is characterised for the most part by the ironising down-to-earth attitudes of Maureen and the community of vulnerable but articulate people

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<sup>20</sup> Val McDermid, *The Last Temptation* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 483.

with which she surrounds herself. Her status as a former psychiatric patient makes her suspicious of authority, and it is her awareness of the necessity of resisting totalising narratives and the categorising of others that makes her both a sympathetic and, in her own way, authoritative and strong central character.

Ian Rankin's Detective Inspector John Rebus is undoubtedly the most commercially-successful Scottish literary detective there has been. He has earned this status largely because of Rankin's skill in constructing compelling and, as the series developed over twenty years, increasingly complex plots that tied a strongly-realised sense of place to a cast of largely credible characters led by the often refractory Rebus. There are ways in which the series, completed with the publication of *Exit Music* in 2007, appears a little too formulaic. Rebus's much-vaunted complexity seems to some readers of serious literary fiction to be a little gestural, to lack the real sense of psychological instability and vulnerability of Mina and Lindsay or the existential depth of McIlvanney. There is a sense, often in the early fiction, that the targets of Rebus's indignation are the soft ones of a somewhat conventional and unreflexive leftism: the professional classes, lawyers, businessmen, the men in suits who constitute a rather underdeveloped authority against which Rebus huffs and puffs. There are times, too, where a weakness for song titles and bad puns undermines the attempts to create a smart, streetwise style - the menu of the Heartbreak Café in *The Black Book* (1993), with its 'Blue Suede Choux' and 'Jailhouse Roquefort' springs to mind here, or the same novel's awful pun on the 'silence of the lums', or the neologised 'woolly suits' and 'biscuit tins' of *Black and Blue* (1997). But sitting alongside that there is a writing that is persuasively local in its reference and tone, that paints for both its Scottish and international readers a convincing picture of contemporary Edinburgh at a number of levels and which responds to and develops the literary tradition out of which it comes. This tradition is perhaps intrusively apparent in the first two Rebus books, *Knots and*

*Crosses* (1987) and *Hide and Seek* (1991) which employ Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* as an intertext, but becomes more fully integrated as the series develops. Rankin began the Rebus books with the intention of writing 'something that was on the surface a crime novel that was going to sell loads of copies, but which would be accepted by my peers in academia as being serious Scottish fiction'.<sup>21</sup> In the eyes of many readers he has successfully resolved this seemingly intractable problem, and has provided a series of books that sit comfortably in what had for a long time seemed the mutually incompatible categories of serious Scottish literature and popular crime.

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<sup>21</sup> Gill Plain, *Ian Rankin's Black and Blue: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2002), 11.