Contemporary British Women Crime Writers: Breaking the Mould?

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Unlike in other European countries, female writers have long held an important place in British crime writing. From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell and PD James, they have led the way from novels of detection to psychological thrillers. The Edinburgh Book Festival, in August 2006, provided an opportunity to confirm that they still do and to ask a few questions of Val McDermid, Louise Welsh and Joolz Denby whom I interviewed at that time.

Joolz Denby's *Stone Baby* (2000) won The Crime Writers' Association Debut Dagger It was followed by *Corazon* in 2001 and *Billie Morgan* in 2004 (short listed for the 2005 Orange Prize and the CWA 2005 "Dagger In The Library" Award). Her latest novel, *Borrowed Light,* tracks the devastating effects of the arrival of a beautiful but morally and emotionally void young woman (whom she describes as a typical psychopath) in a quiet Cornish village.

McDermid already has a long career in crime writing: her first book, *Report for Murder* was published in 1987, introducing Lindsay Gordon, a lesbian journalist who then appeared in 5 more novels. The Scottish writer publishes two other series. One features private detective Kate Brannigan, the other follows psychologist Tony Hill and Detective Chief Inspector Carol Jordan and has recently received the consecration of a TV series. Her latest book, *The Grave Tattoo*, is one of a number of 'stand alone' novels which pepper her bibliography.

Louise Welsh has published three crime novels, the first of which, *The Cutting Room* (2002) won the Saltire Scottish Book of the Year and the British Crime Dagger Award. It was followed by *Tamburlaine Must Die,* a narrative centring on the historical and literary figure of Christopher Marlowe and by *The Bullet Trick*, published this year.

Those writers, the praise and prizes they have received, as well as their comments in conversation during the Festival, point to a number of obvious conclusions: first that women are still extremely well represented in British Crime Writing, but far more importantly perhaps, that the notion of genre, particularly when it comes to crime, is extremely fluid and that the distinction between crime literature and so called 'high' literature is far from clear.

A number of features are far more prominent in their writing than those commonly associated with crime fiction, such as the use of tension, an interest in history and psychology as well as an elegant prose style. The 'why' rather than the 'who' or 'how' of the crime is what holds the attention of the reader and the authors themselves state that they are more interested in creating credible, three-dimensional characters, delving into the mysteries of human nature and the workings of society, than in the nuts and bolts of old-fashioned detection.

Joolz Denby makes it very plain that, despite her first novel having been nominated for a crime fiction prize on the strength of a 3000-word proposal, she is, in fact, not a crime writer. She points out that, if there are indeed murders in her novels, there is no police procedural, no detective and no investigation, none of the markers which are usually required of a crime novel. Her books, she states, are about people and the choices they make, about the social and political milieu of the characters. In this sense, she feels closer to French crime writers than to the British tradition, which she perceives as suffering from the rigidity of class structure: it is, she says, about middle-class characters who solve crimes committed by criminals who are almost systematically all working class.

McDermid offers a slightly more modulated view. She argues that 'British crime writers are beginning to feel more kinship with European writers, partly because we can now read them. I'm glad that publishers are translating more and more European fiction, but also because in social and historical terms we're far closer to Germany or Scandinavia or France, than we are of the American model and being able to read European writers in translation has made us realise that. The crime novel has become the novel where politics in general can be explored. Although in Britain we do that perhaps in a less direct way than French writers, for example. We Brits are never direct about those things!' But she is also critical of the limitations of the traditional detection genre: 'In the traditional British novel, you had recurrent characters but nothing ever had an impact on them, whereas a lot of contemporary authors are very aware of the notion that you take your wounds forward with you, which is why the series novel has become much more interesting to write than 30 years ago.'

Welsh is also cautious in her definition: 'I am happy to be called a crime writer; there are crimes at the centre of all my books; there are the conventions of the American Hard Boiled in them, although I didn't initially sit down thinking I was writing a crime book. But I am less happy about the way it is discussed sometime, which is less about the work and more about genre. Is it crime work? Is it literary work?'

Yet, she too insists that there is a political dimension to her work: '*Tamburlaine must die* is also about the way we treat incomers in this country, which is not well. The fact that it takes place in a different era does not negate the comment that is being made about the British attitude to asylum seekers.'

So which of the conventions of crime writing do they use? Denby and McDermid agree on the importance of story-telling in their narrative and of the cathartic power of closure: 'The story needs a beginning, a middle and an end', insists McDermid. 'Crime writing is a form that still demands some sort of resolution, driving toward some kind of closure. Literary fiction in Britain in the 80s and 90s lost touch with the idea of narrative and people who wanted to tell stories no longer found a natural home there. Having tried my hand at literary fiction, I realise that what I wanted to do most was to tell stories, write the trials and tribulations of characters and the crime novel was at a point where it could accommodate this idea of character development.'

Denby, in turn, states that 'the power of the shape of the narrative is crucial, as is a closure that provides catharsis. The linear narrative is the most archaic form and you mess with it at your peril.'

Welsh, however, offers a different view: 'Readers are very sophisticated and tying up loose ends is no longer necessarily satisfying for them. They know life isn't like that. My books tend toward more Chekhovian endings; life goes on.'

She does, however, find some conventions, or rather their opposites, useful (a gay character in *The Cutting Room*, for example, that is not the killer, the victim or the conduit to the killing, unlike in most crime books). 'One of the few things I would consciously think about is some of the boundaries of crime writing, the idea that it is a journey, it's about a lonely person trying to find, if not justice, at least a way of being. But of course that is not confined to crime writing. Marginal characters also do, I suppose, draw on a convention of crime writing.'

All of them, however, agree on one thing: being women gives them a different approach to the genre. 'Many of my protagonists are women', says Denby. 'For many male writers, female characters are just the author's pin-ups, which may appeal to a male reader but is very irritating for a female one. I write realistic women, women who are stretched to breaking point by the demands made on them.'

Welsh also feels that one of the obvious conventions of crime fiction is the way the female body is presented and objectified, an aspect which she finds disturbing. This issue is at the very heart of *The Cutting Room*, despite the fact that the narrative is not presented from a female perspective.

Mc Dermid agrees that 'When women write about women, even dead women, they don't write about cardboard cut-outs. They give them an identity; they give them a place in the novel.' She adds 'We approach the form in a different way In general, men write plots that are more linear, but women, because of the way they are brought up to use less direct means for getting what they want, write more convoluted plots.' Furthermore, 'If there is a theme in my work, it is the gap between justice and the law. A lot of women feel that the law doesn't deal well with their interests. They don't feel the law protects them.' In crime writing they find 'a process of sublimation and catharsis'.

As far as their influences are concerned therefore, the British tradition does not feature largely, or necessarily, the crime tradition. Denby is clear that she finds most English crime fiction quite boring and prefers American novelists. She cites James Lee Burke as one of her favourite writers but insists, once again, that it is the quality of the writing, rather than the genre he writes in, that sparks her interest. She is conscious that her work as a poet, more than anything else, influences the melancholy and intensity of her prose.

McDermid cites Robert Louis Stevenson rather than Agatha Christie (for which she does admit a certain fondness nonetheless), as well as Sara Paretsky. 'I'd read Chandler and Hammett, of course, but the biggest influence when I started writing crime was Paretsky. The urban setting and the strong independent female protagonist, the politics made me feel that those were the kind of books I want to write. However the template had to be altered to fit my experience of the world and British society to allow me to write about the social and political things that mattered to me.'

Conversely, Welsh believes that the greatest impact made by female writers of the 60s, 70s and 80s is that authors of her generation no longer feel obliged to write from a female perspective. Indeed all her main protagonists are male.

Ultimately, a certain affinity with a quality of writing, rather than with a place in a particular genre or gender empathy, seems to be what shaped those writers' style. Reading Welsh's first novel, one is struck by her use of quotations as chapter headings. Keats, Verlaine, Blake, Rimbaud and Rosetti, among others, set the tone. But the author claims no agenda about redefining crime writing or attempting to break barriers. She was, she says, reading those authors at the time of

writing and simply wanted to share her love of those texts.

So are those authors, whether or not they consider themselves crime writers, willingly or unwittingly, changing our expectations of the genre?

McDermid seems to think so: 'Because of the social expectations of women and of the expectations of the genre, anybody who writes a contemporary female protagonist is by definition transgressive. When I started I started writing Lindsay Gordon, who is a lesbian; it had never been done. Just by doing what we're doing, we are regarded as breaking the rules or going beyond what we're supposed to be doing, which is great. It's tremendous fun. Young Scottish male writers, such as Allan Guthrie are also doing this, although often we don't do it consciously. In *Wire in the Blood* I break a number of rules but it just seemed to me that this was the way the story worked best. It's not a deliberate act of 'wickedness', it just serves the story.'

Perhaps the only coherent conclusion we can draw from those writers' approach to their work is that the debates around genre or 'high' and 'low' literature are fairly fruitless. Ultimately, there is only good or bad literature, and in this respect at least, British women are definitely holding their own.