

No escape

Peter Kalu

Black British crime fiction has been in intensive care for a long time. Various authors have come running with resus paddles and tried to jolt it back into life, but the body stubbornly resists revival. This survey will delve into some possible whys. It will dig up and dissect the long dead crime fiction body of the past, then mop up and microscopically examine the blood on the operating floor. It will nod to some promising texts and finally give brief pointers to the chance for a sustained revival and how that might occur.

Obeying the rule of crime fiction that a dead body should be produced as early as possible, may I present the dead body: Britain's first black crime fiction writer (who would run a bandage-trailing mile from such a description) was the white-passing M. P. Shiel. He was quasi-famous in his time (1865-1947) for the 100% heroin-laced Gothic-meets-Sherlock Holmes madman-hero stories of the super-intelligent, super-racist, aristocratic amateur detective Prince Zaleski. Scary? You bet. M. P. Shiel would have had Edgar Allen Poe hiding behind the sofa. Yes, let me bludgeon you with it: the very first black crime fiction author was an out-and-out racist and so committed to the idea of a white super-race that he wrote macabre short story after short story extolling it. Some things are best left dead.

Let us back-pedal a little into theory. The biological concept of race is now 'sunk without trace' according to British-Ghanaian-American philosopher,

Anthony Appiah. But race retains its momentum as a way of socially classifying, despite its scientific bankruptcy. And with huge effects. Black = Crime has been a go-to racial stereotype beloved of politicians, happy to deploy demonising, criminalising language to assist at the ballot box. From the 'war on drugs' to 'rivers of blood' to 'hostile environment'. No wonder many black writers are, as Mike Phillips puts it, 'wary of the genre'. For those who enter, there's no escape. In *Representations* (1997) Stuart Hall suggests artists in general cannot escape racist stereotypes – these are embedded in language and suffused through the signs and codes of society, from property advertising (white is clean: buildings surrounded by lots of white people even if in a totally black area) to washroom design (automatic taps that only trigger for white hands) to programming (Artificial Intelligence 'suspicious activity' algorithms drawn from the prejudices of white programmers). Unable to escape stereotypes, or 'the dominant regime of representation', Hall argues, we can only negotiate. And in crime fiction that negotiation is acute.

In *Out of the Woodpile* (1991), the African-American academic, Frankie Bailey, created a taxonomy of stereotypes in the US crime fiction genre that included the hypersexualised, violent young buck, the child-like Sambo, the Mammie and the Tragic Mulatto. To these, we can add the more recent Muslim Terrorist, and more. Stuart Hall, however, finds a number of ways in which artists negotiate these reductive stereotypes. I will apply his insights here to examples from the British black and brown crime fiction genre.

One: Supercharging the stereotype.

This entails making a positive out of a negative, in the same way that the 'Black is beautiful' slogan reclaimed 'Black' and made it a foundation of black pride. In crime, it means taking the stereotype and, instead of fighting

it, turning up the dial – a strategy that explains the success of the Blaxploitation films. If we are forced to be criminals, then we will be the most stylish, violent and don't-give-a-fuck uber-criminals ever known! Within British crime fiction, Victor Headley's *Yardie* series, Donald Gorgon's *Cop Killer*, Karline Smith's *Full Crew* and Saima Mir's *The Khan* all hit this note. Novels using this technique are often bestselling, and also generally shunned by the literary establishment. They uniformly feature working-class protagonists acting out of desperate circumstances. They are written mostly in a 'tell it like it is' journalistic style, including detailed location descriptions, accurate street names and the occasional op-ed or Dickensian-style commentary on how the protagonist's troubles and excesses have been caused by a combination of deprivation and racism.

Two: broadening the regime

The second response is what Hall calls 'broadening the regime of representation'. This involves the creation of characters who are positioned to be the antithesis of the stereotype. It is one of the most popular strategies among black writers. Mike Phillips does not feature the criminal activities of black populations in any significant way in his Sam Dean crime series. Instead, Phillips makes the black lead protagonist an investigator – someone commissioned to investigate criminality, not someone steeped in it. Nicola Williams can be understood to adopt this strategy, too, in her legal thriller *Without Prejudice* (1997) which features the upstanding black female barrister, Lee Mitchell, as does Sunny Singh with her war photographer protagonist, Sam, in *Hotel Arcadia* (2015). Social mobility is an aspect of many of these 'broadening' narratives. Whereas working-class protagonists show a deep knowledge of and an intense attachment to locale, the middle-class journalist or investigating lawyer moves about from location to location, from working-class backdrop to middle-class, with an implicit or overt commentary on difference. Legal thrillers are on the rise

here in the UK, probably as a result of so many more black and brown lawyers turning their hand to crime fiction or making themselves available for black writers doing research. In this category is Kia Abdullah's acclaimed legal thriller *Truth Be Told* (2020); Yvonne Edwards' *The Mother* (2016) is impressive for its deep understanding of courtroom procedure and the underlying emotions for those who attend a trial.

A further noticeable example of this 'broadening' strategy is when the main protagonist is turned into a police officer: a shift from robber to cop. This is the case in Jacob Ross's riveting Caribbean island detective Digger of *The Bone Readers* (2016) and *Black Rain Falling* (2020), Vijay Medtia's taciturn Mumbai cop in the Deputy Commissioner Shaktawat series, Nii Parkes' young forensic pathologist Kayo in *Tail of the Bluebird* (2009) and Vaseem Khan's female detective Persis Wadia in *Midnight at Malabar House* (2020). It's worth noting the sheer number of novels in this strand which are set outside the UK, as if setting a novel in the UK were an insufferable hairshirt for those wanting to write characters who escape the reductive stereotypes.

Three: the counter-narrative

A close reading of Courttia Newland's *The Scholar* (1997) and *Snakeskin* (2002), of Karline Smith's novels *Moss Side Massive* (1994) and *Full Crew* (2002), or of Dreda Say Mitchell's *Killer Tune* (2007) suggests a further strategy – that of using a counter-narrative to contest the stereotypical reduction of the dominant narrative. In *Killer Tune*, the narrative and counter-narrative are sometimes set in close opposition. So, when Lord Tribulation flicks through the newspaper he reads of himself being described in reductive, outlaw terms, 'catching words like "defective", "dangerous" and "destructive".' Countering this narrative from the press, the reader is shown throughout the novel the depth of Lord Tribulation's

cultured musicology and alerted also to the fact that 'he had never broken the law in his life'. Newland's *The Scholar* follows the lives of criminals and those hovering on the edge of delinquency. However, Newland gives them, as he states in *In for the Kill* [2019] 'complexity' – including by painting detailed psychological portraits of his characters that provide a sustained focus on the characters' intimate feelings, ambitions and fears. Karline Smith takes similar pains to give a convincing and complex internal life to those of her characters who 'exceed the law'.¹ The strategy adopted by Mitchell, Newland and Smith suggests an ongoing dialectic in which stereotypical representation is answered by counter-narrative.

Four: subverting the stereotype from within

Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr. Fox* (2011), with its meta-fictive addressing of the genre's negative tropes, may be considered to fit most closely the subverting strategy, albeit Oyeyemi's focus is on the stereotypical positioning of women rather than black people. Diran Adebayo's *My Once Upon A Time* (2000) and Biyi Bandele's *The Street* (1999), with their literary knowingness and broad range of highly individualized, non-delinquent characters, employ aspects of both the 'broadening' and the 'subversion from within' strategies. To these may be added the short stories of Peter Kalu, in the biting satire of *Getting Home (The Proofreader's Sigh)* (2015) and the playfulness around the genre's conventions of *The Adventures of Maud Mellington Part 1: Dirty Laundry* [1988].

Five: Entryism, a.k.a. Trotsky's 'French Turn'

This is the strategy of working within a genre and, at first, merely replicating the genre's 'white' conventions and so making no mention of the effects of a racialised society on characters, nor even featuring any significant black

¹ Priestman *Crime Fiction* (2013), p. 1.

or brown characters in the fiction produced. The approach has a fine and reputable tradition. The revered Malorie Blackman has spoken of how she got a foothold in the Children & Young Adult market by deliberately not describing her characters as black.² So, too, Patrice Lawrence has said, 'Until my thirties, I always wrote white characters.' In the crime genre, Dreda Say Mitchell's *Geezer Girls* (2009) and Imran Mahmood's *I Know What I Saw* (2021) walk somewhere along this line. The hardcover of Mahmood's excellently crafted *I Know What I Saw*, for instance, features a large photograph of the author on its back flap. Yet the narrative is silent on race; the white male narrator has no thoughts on the matter, neither exhibiting any racism, nor noticing it anywhere. Not everyone turns: the problem with the 'French Turn' or entryist strategy is that some find the 'replication' environment so congenial they abandon all plans of turning! Patrice Lawrence has since gone on to write *Orangeboy* (2016) featuring a young male black protagonist and situated full square in the counter-narrative strand. Blackman went on to write the spectacular *Noughts and Crosses* series speculating on racial role reversals.

Six: Accommodationism

In Abir Mukherjee's *Smoke and Ashes* (2018) from the Captain Sam Wyndham series, a white protagonist struggles with a Sherlock Holmes-esque heroin addiction in 1920s Calcutta. It is a cosy Raj fiction, written in the spirit of Agatha Christie. Both of Vaseem Khan's India-set Baby Ganesh Agency and Malabar House crime series also deploy the genre's Golden Age whodunnit structures, using nods to both Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle to soften the oblique vista offered of brutal British colonialism at work. The success of such fiction (and it sells in the millions) calls to mind Salman Rushdie's comment: 'the popularity of Raj fictions put one in mind

² See Commonword National Black Writers Conference 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LY9fYJ2_FIU&t=1770s at 29:55

of the phantom twitchings of an amputated limb.' It remains true that the generally snuffed-out Indian versions of colonial history remain so in many texts – the many ghastly depredations the population suffered at the hands of the British being most often 'noises off' in relation to the central narrative. No Chief Inspector tinkering at the historical edges of a cosy fiction can fully explore such grim history. As Audre Lorde put it, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.

Conclusion

Which brings us to a wider problem of the crime fiction genre. According to several commentators, the investigator (whether private or public) strand of crime fiction presents particular ideological challenges to black writers. Peter Messent in *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (2012) has outlined how the suggestion embedded in the sub-genre that one individual (the investigator) can find a solution to a crime, and by metonymic implication that all society's problems may be solved by individual acts, is a problematic that may stymie black writers. Commenting on the crime fiction of African-American writer, Chester Himes, Messent suggests that, faced with the larger social injustice, detective work in Himes' last completed novel, *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969), is 'rendered pointless and irrelevant in the novel's ending'. The 'resolution by individual superman' formula has also been queried by Ernest Mandel in *Delightful Murder* (1984). Andrew Pepper, too, in his chapter on black crime fiction in *The Contemporary American Crime Novel* (2000) notes the difficulty that black writers face negotiating 'the basic premise of the genre: that individual solutions to larger social problems can be achieved'. It appears that, from this conundrum, too, there is... no escape.

Rather than end on such a bleak note, 'you must go on', as Samuel Beckett in *The Unnamable* (1953) put it. Books inspire. They speculate on possible

new worlds and cause shifts of consciousness and understanding. What does the future hold? Plenty. Charles Rzepka reminds us of the crime genre's tendency to 'fission and fusion' and John Scaggs notes the genre's 'flexibility and porosity'. My own impression is that the genre needs to funk things up more, both stylistically and thematically; that realism needs to be dethroned and other styles allowed to hybridise the genre. For a visual exploration of possible crime fiction futures, see the photo-essay. 'We murder to dissect,' said William Wordsworth. For now, I down my scalpel and mop the blood.

Peter Kalu

Peter Kalu is a Manchester-based short story writer, novelist, storyteller, playwright and poet. His short stories range in style from the realist to the surreal to the carnivalesque and can be found in various anthologies including *Closure* (Peepal Tree), *A Country To Call Home* (Unbound) and *Seaside Special* (Bluemoose). His poetry has been widely published, performed and displayed within the UK. As a storyteller, he has told tales in Nigeria, France, Lebanon and Pakistan. Prizes he has won include a BBC Playwrights Award, the Liverpool Kodak Film Pitch Award, The Voice/Jamaica Information Service Marcus Garvey Scholarship Award and Contact/BBC Dangerous Comedy Prize.

In other lives Kalu has been a law student, a software engineer, a commercial text translator (French to English), a glass collector at the Shoulder of Mutton public house, Leeds, a probation service volunteer and a freelance carol singer. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of

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A recording of this essay can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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