

Crime and violence: Those who do not flinch

More people are buying crime novels and thrillers than ever before; more women, especially. Let's not trouble ourselves today with listing the reasons why; let's think instead about what that means for writers. Many authors have been advised to twist their books with mystery; to turn to pain from pleasure; to tilt their ideas to the dark side. What the market wants, the market gets. And the market wants loss; it wants subversion; it wants unreliable narration and plots that throw you into reverse; it wants to see society cracked and broken and then try to mend it; it wants blood on the bathroom floor. Some writers have relished the opportunity to peer beneath the surfaces and to speculate on the worst that humanity can bring us; others flinch.

Of course all authors are different, just as all crime novels are different. (And, just for today, when I say 'crime', I mean any good fiction on the crime/thriller spectrum.) But there is a common impulse in those who refuse to flinch. I can spot a natural crime writer within a couple of minutes of conversation. Chat with the best of crime writers often goes like this: You realise at a certain point that you are speaking more than the crime writer is. The crime writer doesn't leap to reinforce your point. The crime writer can be charming and funny, but will tend to ask you why you say what you say before agreeing with you, and then probably won't agree with you. The crime writer is generally obsessed with the question why. The crime writer starts to work out how something was done before you have even started on why. The crime writer reflects on his or her own experience all the time, but probably won't share it with you. The crime writer watches the room. Watches you.

Crime writers - the good ones - do not flinch from:

Pain: Most of us are in hiding from pain. Pain has us up on our feet, running. Crime writers turn and face it; they let pain sit with them, they befriend it. Then they describe it, and defeat it in their prose.

Mystery: Many of us read and write in order to make the world visible, to know it, to explore it, to describe it; to pin it. Crime writers are on the hunt for what cannot be known, what cannot be seen, what wasn't to be expected. They are looking for the gaps - they write about the chasms we avoid. The crime writer offers us resolution; but sometimes without comfort. They might build a bridge over the chasm, but I'm not sure I'd walk on it.

Crime - meaning the specific acts which offend society; rule-breaking, law-cracking, non-compliance. Most of us perceive crime as dangerous; society is Something Understood - our consensus on what is right, on how to live. The crime writer is willing to face the consequences of crime: what happens when a person refuses to Understand Anything. One act of non-compliance can bring down a system. The crime writer asks: Why not burn it down? Now what?

Mental instability - many of us avert our eyes from this; find psychological struggle too frightening, untethering, unpredictable; worry that we might drag in chaos behind us. The crime writer knows that the potential for chaos lives in us all. The crime writer has accepted that life cannot be predicted, or controlled; people cannot be tethered forever.

Violence - we focus all our strength on protecting our bodies, our truths, our systems, our perception of right and of goodness, our minds. Crime writers have to be willing to wreak violence on everything we protect, in order to tell their stories. And then they can choose, whether or not to make it right again.

I'm grateful to authors of crime novels and thrillers for befriending pain, for finding the mystery, for facing crime and for looking insanity in the eye. Readers welcome the violence crime writers wreak on the things we love. When we read their novels, we can touch a deeper, messier reality; and then we can be comforted: it's ok, it's only fiction.

Only the crime writer knows better.

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