



Crime Fiction Writing - Lesson One

Setting, Character & Criminality

Dear Fellow Writer

Rob Parnell here. Welcome to this brand new course on writing crime fiction for publication.

I've been a fan of crime fiction for almost a decade now. When I became a full time writer, I knew I needed some form of escape - reading-wise - but escape that wasn't related to what I did during the day time. And, after being a lifelong horror fan - which taught me a lot about writing and what it is to be human, I felt I needed a change of reading material. I still wanted thrills and adventure, yes, but I also wanted to discard some of the more supernatural elements I'd been exploring in my fiction. I wanted to read other writer's fiction that felt more real somehow. Enter crime fiction.

The great thing about crime fiction is that it's almost primarily based in reality.

Indeed, *it needs to be real* in order to work effectively. This is because the crime writer needs to make his entire plot - and all its twists and turns - entirely *believable*.

If a crime novel is set in a fantasy universe, there's nothing to stop the crime writer inventing rules and inconsistencies on the spot - thereby leaving the reader stranded asking: how was I supposed to guess *that*?

You see, the crime reader ideally *participates* in the crime writer's novel. The crime reader's mind, in a perfect world, should be spinning: absorbing the clues, sifting the evidence and trying to unravel the mystery *as well as* enjoying the story.

In this respect crime fiction is unique. The crime novel is a joint activity - one *shared* by the writer and the reader. And without the *active participation of the reader*, the crime writer often writes in a vacuum.

A large part of this nebulous 'participation' is an implicit understanding between the author and the reader that the story they're about to read will not strain credibility.

The first part of this 'pact' starts with the *setting* of the story.

Setting

The good news is that there is no bad or wrong place to set a crime thriller. Anywhere you live or know well is fine. This is the main caveat: *it must be somewhere you know intimately*. Not somewhere you *used* to know - unless your setting and location in time is 'when you knew that place'.

I should be fair now and let you know I'm currently writing a crime thriller of my own. It's called *Purge* - and it's about a Detective Constable trying to rid the streets

of crime whilst purging his own personal demons. I will occasionally refer to it as a tool to help you with your own crime novel plan/template if I feel it's appropriate.

I used to live in London - about fifteen years ago. I thought for a short while that I should set *Purge* in London. After all I was there for over twenty years. There's not many streets in that glorious city that don't hold memories for me. You'd think that would make it an ideal setting for a novel, yes?

But a quick hike around Google Maps convinced me that I shouldn't use London. Some of the shops and restaurants I remember simply aren't there anymore. And while I may be able to convincingly write about the *atmosphere* of London - the sounds and the smells as well as what can be seen, I think using a city I left over a decade ago is probably not a good idea.

So, for better or worse, I've set my novel in Adelaide. For three main reasons:

1. I can actually visit the places that I feel any action might take place. This is what many writers do - from Dan Brown to Robert Ludlum. They call it research - and it's a great way of getting to know the little things that give your story veracity. Not just how things look but all the little details. Like how it feels to walk the streets, hear the sounds and pass the people. Little things like cracks in the pavement, a smudge on a window, the smell of restaurants and market places - all the things that Google Maps can't tell you - but which infuse your consciousness with a familiarity that can't be faked.

2. There are investigative procedures that are unique to every city - and when I'm stuck and not sure how something works, I need people on hand I can talk to, offices I can walk into and ask for advice. I need to get a feel for the actual places the cops

go to, for instance, when they visit the morgue or have meetings with forensics, as well as where they go to unwind after work. Combining my knowledge of the city and getting to know the type of people I'll be writing about, again, is something that can't be faked.

3. I like the idea of writing about a city that few people have actually heard of! Adelaide is famous, even in Australia, for being the place people ask: *where exactly is that?* We have a popular TV soap in Oz called *Neighbours* and the joke here is that whenever actors are written out of the series, they've apparently gone to Adelaide - code for *'they were never heard from again!'*

Adelaide is a lovely place - but many of the residents (there's over a million of us) prefer it that nobody knows it's great here - in case word gets out.

But I'd like to use the city and its uniqueness - its apparent normality beneath which pulses (according to writers like Salman Rushdie and Bill Bryson) a dark underside that spawns homicidal maniacs, biker warlords, mafia syndicates and corrupt lawyers and politicians aplenty.

I think using a place that you know intimately is an absolute must for your crime thriller. Don't listen to literary agents who say that your town is not well known enough - and that it may confuse the American market. It's not true for crime. Crime readers like the foreign-ness of the setting. It's all part of the genre.

Peter Robinson is a thriller writer who lives in Canada but his novels are set in the Yorkshire Dales in the UK. You might think this would be at the very least inconvenient for research. However what he does is set the stories in a time *when he*

was there - thereby using his memory of the place and not having to worry about *what is there now*.

Similarly, Sue Grafton uses a fictional town that resembles Santa Barbara. Many of her plots revolve around a private detective - and a police force - who doesn't have access to modern technology. Plus, the detective, *Kinsey Milhone*, never gets much older than 30. As a consequence, the *Alphabet Series* - as they're sometimes called - are all set in the early to mid eighties. Primarily this gets around lots of problems with setting and even plotting. Grafton can invent any features she wants in her fictional *Santa Teresa* - and get around having to absorb technology into her novels - in the same way as Peter Robinson does in his *Inspector Banks* stories.

HRF Keating, the English author and Times literary critic, set his *Inspector Ghote* crime series (all 26 novels) in Bombay - for reasons that are unclear. Most likely for the reasons I've outlined above. Because he knew his target audience would prefer *different* to ordinary. And in the case of the exception proving the rule, Keating had never actually been to India when he started writing his crime novels...

British author Michael Dibdin's *Aurelio Zen* crime novels (all eleven of them) were set in Venice, though he lived in Seattle for a long time. He did however teach in Italy for four years, where he picked enough of the feel of the place to write about it convincingly. Another British crime writer, Robert Wilson, sets his *Javier Falcon* novels in Seville, Spain. He currently lives in Portugal.

Kathy Reichs, herself an American anthropologist, sets her novels in Montreal, Canada - though the location of her *Tempe Brennan* stories was switched to Washington for the TV series, *Bones*.

Denis Lehane's brilliant crime novels (I'm a fan) are set in Boston - because that's where he lives. Coincidentally, Lehane (*Mystic River*, *Gone Baby Gone*, *Shutter Island*) is also a writing teacher, sometimes at Harvard. If you ever want to study great writing, I recommend analyzing Lehane's style - word by word, sentence by sentence if necessary - to learn how to write with economy, conviction and passion. His words are deliberately well chosen and effective without the slightest trace of affectation. He's a writing genius IMHO!

Another favorite author of mine, Stuart MacBride, is a Scottish author who has set his *DS Logan McRae* novels in Aberdeen. Interestingly, MacBride secured a publishing deal with a science fiction novel but the publishers encouraged him to write crime fiction because they thought it would sell better for him. It did. MacBride, who's since written six crime novels - all of them awesome - says he'd be less grumpy if he didn't have to get all the facts straight!

What's clear I think is that an original setting associated with your crime novel is fairly compulsory! And what defines original? Basically anywhere that you live!

Creating compelling crime fiction is about presenting a world that is complete and believable on its own terms. It's not about setting all your stories in New York, London, Paris and LA. That's for action adventure novelists. In crime, the *unfamiliar* is better. Because crime readers' penchant for wanting to investigate the 'new', also extends to their desire to 'know' another setting.

Get to Know Your Setting

Before you start plotting your crime novel, write down a quick list of locations you might imagine you will be using. The police buildings, their stations and offices, the authorities' buildings, the crime scenes, the cafes, the malls, the cinemas,

pubs and restaurants where the characters might meet, the areas in which the characters might live, work and play.

Take time out to go to the places where you're setting your story. Step inside the office buildings, ask for a tour - especially inside the law enforcement offices. Take note of the layouts and where the different ranks sit and work. Ask about the investigation rooms, the incident rooms and the command centers. Ask how they involve other law enforcement agencies and departments, the DA, the sheriff's office, the coroner, the local doctors and hospitals.

Walk the streets your characters will walk. Take photos of everything. Go to the shops your characters may buy their groceries. Visit the areas where they live. Soak in the ambience of everywhere you go.

If your characters have children, visit the parks and places they might frequent.

All the while, think like your characters.

Don't just experience the streets and houses and buildings. Imagine how you'd feel if you were one of your characters. Imagine how a murder victim might feel when being stalked. Imagine how the killer would feel when tailing a potential victim. Get inside the heads of your characters. Imagine how they might feel at different times of the day. Night. Day. Evening. Morning.

Characters in a crime novel don't just exist inside your story. They interact with the location they live in. It effects their mood.

Real people buy snacks on the way home - from where? They get drunk and look for taxis in the middle of the night. From where do they get a cab? Your character may need to take a long drive to a crime scene. Drive there yourself. What's the traffic like? What's the weather like? What are the other motorists like? The pedestrians? What do they wear? How do they look?

Grab stuff along the way.

Bus timetables. Brochures for tourist spots. Menus from restaurants and takeaways. Anything and everything that can add detail to your fictional interpretation of the real world. At this stage, no detail is too small or irrelevant.

Try to see your own city, town or suburb with new eyes - a child's eyes, where everything is new and exciting. Make notes if you want to - though it's not compulsory. You can record your impressions later - or just store them up until you write your novel. Crime readers love detail. The more the better.

Whatever you do, NEVER think your own backyard is not interesting enough to use as a setting. It is - and it will be *fascinating* to your reader. Trust me. With crime fiction, that's how it works.

Characters

When it comes to character, many crime writers seem to have an eye for the quirky. It appears they deliberately manifest oddities in order to make characters more memorable. However, this is an illusion. Because, as a starting point, the most important aspect of any crime fiction character must be, I believe, their inherent *normality*.

Almost everyone regards themselves as normal. This is a good thing - for the writer. Because without the average reader's inbuilt radar about what normal people do, say, think and act, there would be no identification with character.

Now that's understood, let's start with the lead character - the protagonist.

Your Hero

The great thing about crime fiction characters is that don't have to be superheroes, James Bond types, handsome movie stars or even particularly pleasant to look at.

Fundamentally your hero is a blank slate to start with - but one that contains just one overriding character trait, more specifically an agenda: *justice*.

Your lead character must care deeply about righting wrongs, seeing criminals punished and mysteries solved. All else is candy floss compared to this *'need for justice'* character trait - which can even seem like a failing if you like. Because this trait is what separates your character from real life. In a sense, the need for justice often *isolates* your character from everyone else in the story, indeed, isolates them from the real world. Because it's the one trait we all aspire to have but could rarely live by ourselves.

True justice is an ideal - an impossibility. But the lead character of a crime novel must believe in justice at his or her core. It's what drives them.

Once you have that, you can then add a *person* into the mix. You can dress up this person in whatever way you like. Make them male or female, short or tall, fat or thin, scruffy or smart, a drunk or a Christian - or a Christian drunk. There are no limits - except that the resulting character must be *believable*.

Personality Indicators

This is how it's usually done in crime fiction:

- 1. The lead character is at a point of transition. Usually at the end of a relationship, or starting a new job or at the beginning of a new interest.*
- 2. The lead character is in a career juncture that allows them the freedom to act independently of - or at odds with - authority figures.*
- 3. The lead character has the resources and tools available that will allow him or her to pursue a criminal or unravel a mystery. This is why lead crime characters are almost always detectives, private detectives, FBI agents or coroners etc.*
- 4. Very often, the lead character will have some unresolved issue - either one that dates back to childhood or to a recent traumatic event. This issue will normally have a direct bearing on the story and will usually foreshadow a later confrontation or plot device.*

How does this work in practice. Okay, as an example:

Dan Messinger has just come out of a messy divorce when he's promoted to Captain of the Little Pine police department. A local lawyer's son is murdered and the DAs office is on Dan's case to solve the crime quickly. Dan's ex-partner recently drowned in an accident on Spartan Lake. The murdered kid's body is found at the lakeside motel...

You see how we've incorporated the above four personality indicators into a credible crime scenario?

You try one.

Here's another:

DCI Hackam has just taken up philumeny - that's collecting old matchbox covers. Engrossed in his new hobby, he's called out to a murder scene where the forensics team leader objects to him toying with evidence. He can't help himself. The murder victim looks uncannily like his younger sister - who died when she was seventeen. Beside the body is a matchbook he hasn't seen before...

You get the idea.

Once you've grasped that you need a strong sense of justice and the above four personality indicators you can now move on to invent your character:

1. Gender
2. Name
3. Age
4. Occupation
5. Description
6. Character Traits

Simply invent your own details using the above six headings as starting points.

Character Traits

Only after you have your basic normal seeming character do you then add the quirky stuff. You need to do it this way round because quirky on its own is not interesting or compelling. It's normal PLUS quirky that is what works.

Sherlock Holmes is an opium addict. *Hercule Poirot* is a fastidious dresser. *Miss Marple* is an old busybody. *Alex Cross* has an obsessive need to protect his family. *Kinsey Milhone* is a confirmed spinster. *Tempe Brennan* is an alcoholic - as are many detectives in the crime genre. *Kaye Scarpetta* can't have children. *Kenzie* hates his father. *DS Logan MacRae* has an accidental reputation for being a hero, even though inside he's scared shitless...

Fictional detectives tend to carry around their quirk like a badge of office. Not only does their quirk make them instantly recognizable, it acts as an outward manifestation of their uniqueness - often their genius.

It's an accepted convention that we recognize genius through the eyes of a normal person. That is, we see a person with a seemingly odd relationship with the world and, if we know that person to be extremely proficient at their job or calling, we instantly know they are a genius. In other words, without their individual 'quirk' we might regard them as perfectly normal. In a nutshell, like US.

And this is how to make your reader want to identify with your lead character.

1. *Ensure they have an obsessive need for justice*
2. *Make them look like normal and rational human beings*
3. *Then add a quirk or two to denote their genius*

Easy!

The Antagonist

Every crime is perpetrated by a criminal - or criminals. Hopefully not all writers are criminals, so we don't know what it feels like to engage in career criminality. So how exactly does a writer know how to make a criminal believable?

Simple. Read more.

There are lots of books about criminals, psychopaths especially - even though real serial killers are extremely rare. The author Colin Wilson has written many books about the criminal mind. Reading crime fiction is just as good. Many writers have been there before you and their portrayal of bad guys can only help you build your own.

The curious thing about real criminals is just how bland and ordinary they seem - even psychopaths. But this makes sense - because it's their apparent normalcy that allows them to pass unnoticed into situations they can exploit either through planning or accidental opportunity.

Again, it's realizing that normality is the key that unlocks the criminal mind that allows writers to create convincing bad guys - and gals.

At the heart of a crime fiction antagonist is a pure emotion. It might be greed or revenge or just an urge to exert harm. But it's the emotion that's there first - an instantly recognizable manifestation of evil - whatever that means to you.

Remember that in crime fiction you don't always have to have some kind of Hollywood style criminal mastermind. A confused kid who accidentally shoots a woman he steals from. Or an accountant who defrauds a company. A small time drug dealer who sells speed to children. These are all perfectly acceptable criminals for the detective to uncover.

True, many crime stories start small and end up tracing corruption back to the authorities. It's almost a cliché these days. But mainly because it's believable - not because it's absolutely necessary to a good story.

So how do we go about creating credible criminals?

Easy. The same process as before:

1. *Start with the emotion - define it*
2. *Dress up the emotion as a normal looking person*
3. *Develop a quirk that is distinctive*

Of course the curious thing about a quirk on a criminal is that, far from being endearing, it usually becomes sinister. And often the more normal looking the quirk is, the more sinister it becomes. I'm reminded of *Ernst Blofeld*, head of *SPECTRE* in James Bond. He's ugly and bald, has a gammy eye and holds a kitten he likes to stroke. Which is more sinister? *The cat stroking thing!*

In many crime novels the antagonist doesn't make an appearance until quite late on in the story. Or rather, when the antagonist first appeared in the story, the detective wasn't aware that's who they were! This fact will help you understand why criminals must, at first, appear to be normal.

Indeed it's an oft used trick by crime writers to make everyone BUT the antagonist look and act suspicious to the reader. This effectively diverts the reader's attention away from the outcome of the mystery...

I'm getting ahead of myself here. More on this aspect of *plotting* the crime thriller in a later module. But just for now let me tell you what Agatha Christie said about plotting a crime thriller. (I mention this here in case you're going to jump in and start plotting your crime novel now!) She said: "*First identify who your most obvious killer is, then do everything in your power in the writing to make sure that person seems the **least likely** to have committed the crime.*"

There you have it - sage advice from the master.

Other Supporting Characters

Back to characters.

Many of your supporting characters will depend upon your plot: who your detective meets and interacts with during the investigation; family, friends and other people like bartenders, shop clerks, officials, prostitutes, bosses, whatever.

The golden rule is believable. This means you must consciously steer away from cliché. Not all drug dealers are black with tattoos and not all policemen eat donuts. Not all politicians are smooth and vain and not all old ladies are sweet.

When I was outlining my own crime novel, *Purge*, I found it useful to give all the supporting characters full names. That helped me to visualize them as real people. In fact, I gave a couple of characters names of people I knew - as types - so that it would remind me what kind of people they were. I changed them later.

I noticed too that I had many more male characters in my story than seemed natural. I had around fifteen major characters with 'speaking roles' as it were. I deliberately went through and changed the genders of some of the characters so that was a more balanced ratio of males to females. Just doing this was actually quite inspiring because it made me question whether the motivations for some of the male characters would fit inside a female. If so, good. If not, I fixed it.

I recommend you do the same.

As you go through your character list, try to visualize the people in your story. See them as real. What are they wearing? What do their faces look like? What do their voices sound like? Are they helpful, sweet and nice or angry, resentful and snide? Make them all different in your mind.

There's little point in making characters too 'samey' in crime novels, especially prime suspects. Readers like to be able to tell them apart - and visualize them too. It's best not to add quirks to minor supporting characters - doing so makes them seem more memorable. Unless that's what you want of course! It's just important to bear in mind that with so many characters, you don't want to make minor characters seem more interesting than your hero!

If you can't make your supporting characters too physically different, give them easily remembered characteristics that define them. The same clothes or a distinctive feature the detective remembers etc - this will help the reader navigate their way around all the different people.

For this reason you also need to ensure that the names of the characters aren't too similar either. Make sure you don't have two major characters whose names start with the same letter or sound. It will just confuse the reader - and you don't want that.

The Hero's Side Kick

Ever since the crime novel began there has been a sidekick that works closely alongside the detective. This is not of course because the hero can't work things out for his or herself. It is merely a literary device that enables the characters to vocalize their investigation, dialog being more satisfying to read than oceans of exposition.

It's important to remember that it is not the purpose of the sidekick to have anything to do with solving the crime - or indeed of being at all resourceful in his or her own right. The sidekick's purpose is to be an observer or to be a sounding board for the hero and is only sometimes a useful plot device - and not much more. The moment you follow the sidekick's fortunes in the text, you risk losing sympathy for your protagonist.

For these reasons your sidekick can be colorful and quirky in a physical sense but not 'dynamic' in the story sense. The sidekick can never be the hero. He or she may be amusing or clumsy or energetic and beautiful but they are not the subject of the hero's journey.

If you're in any doubt about this, try plotting the story first without a sidekick, then insert one to help vocalize the drama for the reader. The story should work just as well.

Criminality

There's a definite trend in modern crime fiction. That is, how to outdo the grossness of the crimes. This particular aspect of crime fiction is probably reader led. The more gruesome the crime on the back cover, the more compelling the mystery, the more likely the reader is to buy the book. That's the reasoning.

Serial killers with a flair for the theatrical are pretty much a literary invention. Real psychopaths are decidedly more grubby individuals. And killers that like to taunt their investigators are an even rarer breed.

Having said that I've noticed that critics in particular (who become very important to your sales later on) are infinitely impressed by how low a writer can go when it comes to depravity and violence. Especially if you can mix in a little gallows humor and dark cynicism. The more gritty apparently, the more real you seem.

On TV and film we tend not to see real crime scenes. It's still illegal to show a real dead body on the screen. Did you know that? But in fiction we see it all, and worse. Torture, violence, sickening depravity and despair, all in the name of art.

It is indeed a feat of imagination to come up with worse crimes and scenarios than the next author but alas, this too is part of the genre.

So where do you get ideas for your next chilling murder?

I subscribe to police magazines - many of which casually report on horrendous crimes perpetrated by perverse individuals - and interview the police officers to get their reactions. All very useful research material. If you can't find any internal police magazines, call your local station and ask if you can have their old copies.

There are a plethora of true crime books and magazines, many of which glamorize the more inventive criminal exploits. Most crime writers regularly read these kinds of books for research and ideas.

Newspapers of course carry all the details of current crimes - many of which, around here in Adelaide, are disturbingly similar but no less disgusting. Violent stabbings are a weekly occurrence in one street in Adelaide. And, bizarrely, people are always trying to run each other with their cars...

You can buy biographies of many famous killers, many of which are written with scholarly aplomb - and, if you've got a strong stomach, can be very entertaining.

Many fine authors have cut their literary teeth on true crime - Truman Capote, Ann Rule, Joseph Wambaugh, Ludovic Kennedy etc - and you can learn much from their writing styles.

Originality

You need to be aware of your own genre. What's happening now, what has happened in the past and what will likely be happening in the future.

It used to be that you could happily explore the same ground as other crime writers. But increasingly this is no longer the case. Publishers and readers want new - and different - and often more graphic. This is why more and more novels that feature the gruesome realities of crime detection are becoming available - and are often written by former police officers, pathologists, FBI profilers and the like. To compete, we 'normal' writers have to outshine the experts!

How to 'cliché-proof' your story

Whenever you think of an idea, you need to do what Hollywood calls 'develop' it. That is, to think of all the *other* ways you could say the same thing - only more surprisingly. Development is a way of looking at your work objectively. For any one idea, you need to ask yourself:

1. Has this idea / theme / premise been explored before?

Where, in what book, and by whom? What was their conclusion? What effect did that have on readers - if any?

2. Have I explored this theme before?

Are you going over old ground that you've written about before? Are you challenging your pre-conceptions? What is your theme and premise? Is it different from your last book project?

3. What makes this novel / idea different?

When you think of an idea, run with it, see all its implications, turn it on its head and see it from all angles. Can you do something different with it? Is it a cliché? Can you turn it around so that it's not? Will your new idea surprise a reader? If not, go further and think of an idea that will.

4. Will anyone care?

Finally, you need to ask yourself honestly, does your novel have heart? Is there something about the story that will inspire a loyal following in your readers? Are the characters interesting, compelling, likeable?

Also, have you said anything that's relevant to society? If not, why not? Have you suggested any solutions to society's ills? In other words, don't just think about the characters, the story or the mystery. Go further and try to find the humanity and deeper significance you're trying to illustrate in your story. After all, after the books have been read, you're surely trying to show that your own vision may create a better world.

Okay, that's it for the time being. Next time we look at researching your crime story.

I hope this first module has helped you. The second module will arrive shortly.

Keep Writing!



Rob Parnell

Writing Crime Fiction