



VIOLENCE WITH A CLEAN CONSCIENCE

Crime fiction and the enjoyment of violence

Why bother to give any thought to crime fiction? After all, it is trivial at best, junk at worst - so runs a common estimation. It attracts attention most frequently when a panic about violent crime focuses attention on the question of the possible effects of a constant diet of television violence. Indeed the recent appalling case of baby James Bulger soon gave rise to governmental condemnation of such TV 'entertainment'. As anyone knows who has tried to investigate the equation 'violence on the screen = violence on the streets', the difficulty of a clear-cut analysis is equalled only by the volume of the writing devoted to it.

If TV violence does cause violent behaviour, it can only be because those so affected get pleasure from the stories in question: 'effects' of mass media fiction are necessarily filtered through pleasure. What does the pleasure derive from? Analysis of these texts suggests there are several answers.

Heroes...

Crime fiction involves the activities of a hero. This is a word that is difficult to say with a straight face nowadays, but the emotion of admiration, or the sense of wish-fulfilment that is experienced when watching a character do something difficult and exciting - like winning a fight or catching a criminal - is exactly the kind of feeling that was traditionally associated with heroes in a less self-conscious age. A large percentage of crime fiction involves violence being meted out by the character we most approve of, and whose morality is presented in the story as being beyond doubt - James Bond, for instance (although the film versions of these stories are probably too camped up to arouse anything as red-blooded as excitement). Indeed, it has often been suggested, and even experimentally 'proved', that we are most likely to be made more aggressive by watching films where we approve of the violence being portrayed. In any event it seems certain that one of the main sources of pleasure in crime fiction is empathy for or identification with the hero, and such pleasure probably includes the possibility of enjoying violence with a clean conscience.

Another source of pleasure is no doubt

the solution of a mystery. Much crime fiction presents us with a case to be solved, and we enjoy watching Inspector Morse or Miss Marple-like figures break the enigma. Even if there is no mystery, there is someone to be caught or a conflict to be resolved, and the story is the narrating of that resolution. This pattern of story-telling is so widespread and so closely related to the structure of all narrative that it seems likely that it is the source of fictional pleasure in its own right. It need not necessarily involve violence, although commonly the crime that gives rise to the story is a violent one - the Inspector Morses of this world do not stoop to investigating petty theft. Perhaps the resolution of a mystery is just a version of the restoration of order in general, of which the simplest version would be the 'And they all lived happily ever after' of fairy tales, which provides us with a sense that the world has been set to rights again.

When the hero uses violence to achieve such a resolution we are confronted with a double pleasure: the self-assertion of the hero, with whom we identify or empathise, leads to the restoration of order, a newly sanitised world, and we can have a doubly clean conscience.

... And villains

So far I have spoken of crime fiction which is written so to speak from the point of view of law and order: stories where a crime is committed and the detective hero - or someone similar - catches this person and the moral balance of the world is thereby restored. But much crime fiction is not written from the point of view of the criminal, who seeks to assert himself (or more rarely herself) by illegal means, and often violent ones. Here the relationship between pleasure and morality is obviously more equivocal, for even if justice is done in the sense that the criminal is punished in the end - as in the classic gangster films - nonetheless this may be more than outweighed by our enjoyment of the sheer exuberant energy with which he pursues his purposes and which may lead us to overlook questions of morality.

Crime and violence are potentially exciting, regardless of the morality of the actions involved, because they involve a high degree of self-commitment. Crime - at least in modern societies - is



always a challenge to the legitimacy of a supposedly universal social and moral order. Crime therefore represents one of the frontiers of society: to step into crime involves stepping beyond the bounds of a particular moral universe. Of course it is true that in the real world different sections of the population evaluate participation in different criminal activities in a variety of ways; but the most widely accepted morality of our societies, the one that is backed by the force of institutions such as the education system, the criminal law, and the informal judgement system of 'respectability', indeed asserts just this. In a real sense, the commission of crime sets one beyond a particular boundary, at least until others are convinced that reform is sincere and permanent. As a result, crime is among other things always potentially exciting: stepping across the moral boundary is inherently risky and involves a certain level of self-commitment.

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These considerations apply with increased force where violence, and especially murder, is concerned. The person who commits murder has taken one of the few virtually irrevocable steps beyond the boundaries of our moral universe and has therefore enacted a self-commitment of the highest order. The

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RETURN OF THE CRIME COMIC

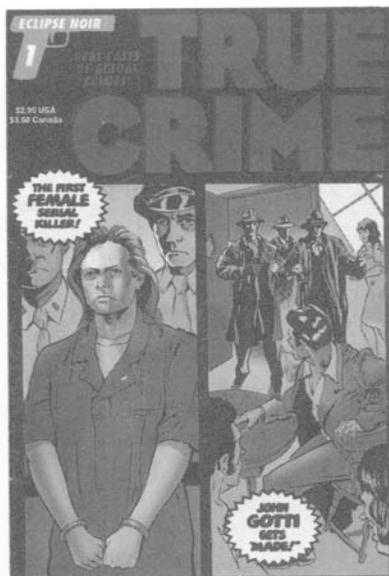
Crime comics: successors to the penny dreadful

Like the dinosaur, Crime comics were once mighty. Unlike the dinosaur they're staging a comeback. A new title - 'True Crime Stories' - has recently appeared on the comic-book shelves, a far cry from its illustrious predecessor - 'Crime does not Pay' (June 1942).

'Crime does not Pay' saw publication due to the waning popularity of super-heroes and was an instant winner due to its violent, bloody and sexy stories. It featured photos and stories based on true crime events. Advertisements within its pages made it obvious the comic was aimed at a dual audience of adults and children - 'Get Crime does not Pay! Show it to dad, He'll love it!' At the height of its popularity in 1944 it boasted a massive 2 million readership.

Unfortunately, by 1948 this success spawned a plethora of cheap, shoddily created comics all with a focus on crime. Titles such as 'Crime Detective Comics', 'Criminals on the Run', 'Crime Smasher' and 'Law-Crime', to name just a few, made it seem that the emphasis was the triumph of Law and Order over criminals, but others contended that this was wrong, that in fact crime comics glorified criminals and encouraged criminal behaviour. Chief among the dissenters was an American psychiatrist called Frederick Wertham.

Concerned about the adverse affects on children reading about the violence and sex found in post-war comic books, Wertham wrote perhaps the most influential book of the time on this subject: - 'Seduction of the Innocent'



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(1954). He believed that comics 'overstimulated children's fantasy in the direction of violence and cheap sexiness.'

Wertham further charged that comics undermined morals, glorified violence and 'were sexually aggressive in an abnormal way' and concluded that comic book reading 'was a distinct influencing factor in the case of every single delinquent or disturbed child we studied.'

The press took note and eventually certain crime magazines were banned in America. 'Standards of Evaluation' of what was objectionable in comics were created by newsdealers and civic officials across the country; police departments made threats of legal action against newsstands; and citizen's committees were set up to rate and control comics. At the height of this moral panic comic burnings

were instituted nationwide.

In 1954 The Comics Code Authority was established by a coalition of comic book publishers to regulate the content of comics. Its strict standards sanitised, homogenised and essentially juvenilised comic strips. Comics that did not reach the standard could not carry the seal of the code and therefore found that magazine distributors refused to carry them. Some publishers went broke and the increasing access to television further hit comic sales. The ISTD during this period were actively involved in petitioning Parliament to have comics banned because of their influence on the young.

Comics never fully recovered from this attack even though the well-intentioned Wertham never satisfactorily proved that 'trash' crime comics were the direct causal link to crimes of violence, and even to mental illness and 'purse snatching' as was alleged at the time.

Crime comics slowly faded away. Now in the 1990s they seem set to make a return.

One opponent of Wertham stated that 'Juvenile delinquency is the product of pent-up frustrations, stored up resentments and bottled up fears. It is not the product of cartoons or captions.' The debate continues in much the same terms today.

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Note: Comics and videos for Mr Pilcher's and Mr Sweeney's articles were supplied by Comic Showcase, 76 Upper Neal Street, London WC2. 071 240 3664.

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level of potential excitement is increased by so much. To choose to act violently is to choose a course of action from which there is no turning back in the sense that if we accept to escalate any confrontation to the level at which it takes the form of physical force, there is no instance of judgement which lies beyond it and to which we can refer the discord in question in an attempt to return to a status quo ante: to step down under these circumstances is always to admit defeat. In this sense we can say that violence is the ultima ratio of our society, the 'reason'

which obtains when all other forms of reason fail.

If this argument is right, then we are likely to enjoy depictions of violence regardless of questions of morality. If we can enjoy it with a clean conscience, as we can when the hero is on the side of the angels, then such texts are commonly regarded as 'good clean fun', and were traditionally thought to inspire qualities of leadership, decisiveness and moral courage - think of all the Victorian boys' literature, and Buchan and Bulldog Drummond between the wars. But it seems to me that enjoying all the craziness of gangster stories, like many of

Elmore Leonard's novels and the films made from them, is not very different where the presentation of violence is concerned: it is the indication of personal commitment that leads us to feel excitement at violent confrontation, and the issue of morality and legality is distinctly secondary. One conclusion that may be drawn from this is that we should discourage texts which portray violence in an immoral way; but in truth the enjoyment of violence with with a clean conscience - because the hero is justified - may be far more insidious.

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