

Writing Historical Crime Fiction in the Modern Day

A Research Rationale

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‘Fiction begins with a spark in the writer’s mind, a vivid fragment of an idea, a character or an event that will eventually flare into a story.’¹ This statement from Amanda Boulter’s *Writing Fiction*² inspired me to write the opening chapters of a novel for my Extended Creative Project.

The idea first came to me during the Creative Writing module *Advanced Fictional Writing* (CW3214) in my third year at The University of Winchester. Having written the first chapter of *A Family Affair*³ for that module (see appendix), I found myself so engrossed in the word I had created that it was impossible for me not to continue with it. Seeing as I was so passionate about the story, it seemed only natural to use it for my ECP.

The storyline is as follows: It’s 1975 and DCI Alan Howard is investigating the mysterious disappearance of six-year-old Christopher Walters, who was snatched from the park whilst his mother’s back was turned. Together with DC Eddie Brookes, they follow the case within a tight-knit community and discover that the kidnapping might be a lot closer to home than previously expected.

I could not submit the first chapter of *A Family Affair* for my ECP, as it was previously accepted as my assignment for *Advanced Fictional Writing* in 2017. Instead, I have submitted chapters 2, 3 and 4 and hence the narrative doesn’t dive straight into the investigation but rather introduces the context of the period, the characters, and the relationships that are jeopardized throughout the plot.

¹ Amanda Boulter, *Writing Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.13.

² Amanda Boulter, *Writing Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³ Isabel Wyatt, *A Family Affair*, CW3002A, 2018.

Inspiration for the storyline hailed from Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*⁴, which follows the disappearance of protagonist Stephen Lewis's daughter and his subsequent psychological breakdown. Although the narrative was emotionally stimulating, I wanted to know more about the physical investigation of the crime, rather than the detailed mentality of a grieving father. This, according to Sue Grafton, is common. She claims that 'most writers are incurable readers'⁵, and although I was *reading* the book, it wasn't what I *wanted* to read. I am greatly interested in the history of policing and the strategy behind criminal investigation, therefore I wanted to use the case of a missing child as a plot device to explore how my characters would cope under the pressure of extreme distress. Evan Marshall believes that, as an author, you should 'write what you love to read'⁶ because you have a knowledge of the stories you want to tell, and know what will sell. He also claims that 'your passion as a reader will translate into passion as a writer,'⁷ so if one really wants to publish an authentic, well-loved book, it's best to go with what you know. *The Child in Time* is classified under the umbrella genre of 'speculative fiction', meaning it possesses supernatural or sometimes futuristic elements. Although it was this book that inspired the plotline for *A Family Affair*, I didn't want to replicate the genre. Instead, I decided to focus on the classic detective story.

⁴ Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Vintage, 1987).

⁵ Sue Grafton et al., *Writing Mysteries: a Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America*, ed. by Sue Grafton (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1996) p.17.

⁶ Evan Marshall, *Novel Writing: 16 Steps to Success* (London: A. & C. Black, 2000) p.3.

⁷ Evan Marshall, *Novel Writing: 16 Steps to Success* (London: A. & C. Black, 2000) p.3.

Throughout the writing process I read extensively within the crime genre. Being a die-hard mystery fan, I already owned a lot of my primary sources, however through studying other forms of genre, and advanced critical research, I widened my breadth of knowledge surrounding the traditional detective novel. The popularity of crime fiction was not my reason for writing in this style, but came as a positive reassurance. According to Robin W. Winks 'mystery and detective novels are the best-selling form of popular fiction today,'⁸ which gave me an established readership from the outset. Marshall believes that 'as a novelist you must know exactly what genre or sub-genre you're targeting,'⁹ and from this I grounded my work further by choosing a sub-category that best represented the narrative.

The contemporary crime novel is subjective to research; an author needs to investigate the formalities and regulations regarding modern policing in their given location to depict an accurate description of realistic law enforcement. It was the creative freedoms of the recent-past that fuelled my decision to pick a historical time period. A vintage setting allowed my storyline to become simplistic, without the struggle of modern-day implications such as, surveillance footage, DNA and computers.

Kathy Lynn Emerson claims 'historical mystery readers aren't going anywhere,'¹⁰ and this specific branch of the genre is growing in popularity. Therefore, from a publishing

⁸ Robin W. Winks, 'Preface', in *The Detective as Historian: History and Art in Historical Crime Fiction*, eds. Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr. (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000) p. ix.

⁹ Evan Marshall, *Novel Writing: 16 Steps to Success* (London: A. & C. Black, 2000) p.4.

¹⁰ Kathy Lynn Emerson, *How to Write Killer Historical Mysteries*, (California: John Daniel & Company, 2008) p.170.

perspective, to adapt my novel to comply with this niche style would be a logical decision. Following this advice, I studied the critical theories surrounding historical crime as a strand of the classic detective story, and found that readers like a change in time period because ‘the crimes are less threatening...than are repetitive serial killings, accounts of wildings in Central Park, and corrupt police.’¹¹ This statement encompasses the themes of my work; the idea that kidnapping is prominent in the modern day but has since become more televised and documented in the past few decades. Margaret Atwood believes that ‘historical fiction is about human nature’¹² and, as my novel is centred around characterisation and personal relationships, I thought it appropriate to pursue a book perfect for that field.

Ray B. Browne believes that historical fiction writers focus on the ‘people and events that often are neglected in traditional history books.’¹³ This I disagree with, as many thriller writers centralise their storylines around big historic incidents. Tom Rob Smith wrote *Child 44*¹⁴ regarding the Stalinist Soviet Union, whilst Robert Harris’s *Fatherland*¹⁵, although

¹¹ Robin W. Winks, ‘Preface’, in *The Detective as Historian: History and Art in Historical Crime Fiction*, eds. Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr. (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000) p. ix.

¹² Margaret Atwood, ‘In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 5 (1998), 1503-1516 (p. 1516).

¹³ Ray B. Browne, ‘Introduction’, in *The Detective as Historian: History and Art in Historical Crime Fiction*, eds. Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr. (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000) p. 4.

¹⁴ Tom Rob Smith, *Child 44* (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2015).

¹⁵ Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (UK: Arrow, 1992).

telling an untold story, was written surrounding the events of the Second World War. It is evident that for a large proportion of historical crime writers, major earlier events are a catalyst for the plot. John Scaggs adheres to this theory, claiming that the setting of historical crime fiction is 'crucial to their success'¹⁶. Despite the popularity and accomplishment of both these books, I wanted to step away from this idea. To ensure my reader was emotionally impacted by the subject matter, I grounded my novel in a time period that was within living memory of most of the target market. To make my work unique, I strived to create a setting that I hadn't read about before, and hence began researching a presumed uneventful decade of the last century, the 1970s.

As the 1970s is within recollection of my parents' generation, I was able to gather information about the hierarchal structure, societal perceptions and general wellbeing of 'real people'¹⁷ at that time. The information I gathered influenced the family background of June Bradley, based on my grandmother, and also shaped the political opinions of the townspeople affected by Christopher's disappearance. It was this research that allowed me to investigate race relations of the time, resulting in characterising DC Lewthwaite and DS Milton as 'typical' of their generation. In accordance to the ideology surrounding Ancient Greek literature, they are classed as 'The Gossip'¹⁸ characters.

¹⁶ John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2010) p.125.

¹⁷ Nancy Kress, *Write Great Fiction: Characters, Emotion & Viewpoint* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2005) p.5.

¹⁸ Theophrastus, *The Characters of Theophrastus*, ed. Robert G. Ussher (London: Macmillan, 1960).

The decade is notorious for its cultural changes, sandwiched in between the end of the revolutionary 60s and the oncoming political disruption of the 80s. This is a contextual element that works well within the world I wanted to create; a sense of working-class comfortability. After researching its societal aspects, I moved on to study the perception of crime and punishment within the 1970s, through the aid of *True Detective Magazine*¹⁹. Due to a lack of scientific technology, CCTV and harmonious public relations, many missing person cases went cold or remain unsolved. This is a problem I wanted to highlight through my writing; how important issues were handled in the past and compare them to what we witness today. This is true of the other societal elements mentioned throughout the novel, such as racial vulgarity and female inequality. As the social, cultural and political observations of the 1970s are vital in the contextual understanding of my novel, then I believe my work adheres to John Scaggs earlier statement.

Originally the location of my novel was non-fictional. I set the plot in the old-factory town of Kingsthorpe, Northampton because this is where my mother grew up and, as I am basing a lot of the research on her memory, I thought it appropriate to adhere to the true location. I wanted the story to have a sense of realism, depicting the traditional working-class background of my characters. Once I started writing however, it became increasingly difficult to produce an accurate setting, as I am not living there myself. Following this issue, I investigated the work of Andrew Taylor who 'recreated the atmosphere of a fifties ... town'²⁰ by devising his own setting based on non-fictional places, such as Lydmouth which is 'more

¹⁹ Unknown author, "A Family Massacre," *True Detective Magazine*, January 1989, p.13.

²⁰ Janet Laurence, *Writing Crime Fiction: Making Crime Pay* (Abergele: Studymates Limited, 2007) p. 39.

or less where Monmouth is'²¹. Inspired by this method of rebranded realism, I changed the location to the fictional town of Kingsdene, based on my original non-fictional setting. To make the region realistic I began to research impoverished areas of England and replicate their details in my story. This influenced the writing surrounding financial well-being in Kingsdene; how there is a high unemployment rate and a struggling economy. The physical layout of the town, such as location of pubs, schools and housing estates was based on the photographs my mother has of her hometown, all taken throughout the 1970s.

This decision allowed me greater creativity as I was able to construct the setting around the plot, rather than the other way around. Strategically placing the pub next to the crime scene enables the mystery to make logical sense when the 'whodunit'²² is cracked. Therefore relocating my idea permitted a greater sense of originality, allowing myself as an author to format my plot in whatever way deemed appropriate or coherent in my mind.

Heather Worthington believes that crime fiction emphasises 'the anxieties, the morals and values of the contemporary society'²³, which is a philosophy in line with my novel's theme of family. The maternal nature of Peggy Walters is amplified through the disappearance of her son, and the desperation she exudes throughout the investigation. The reader becomes emotionally invested in her as a character because of her vulnerability. I purposely designed Peggy as a young, single mother who has an unstable relationship with her own family, so

²¹ Janet Laurence, *Writing Crime Fiction: Making Crime Pay* (Abergele: Studymates Limited, 2007) p. 39.

²² Michelle Spring and Laurie R. King, *Crime and Thriller Writing: A Writer's and Artist's Companion*, ed. Carole Angier and Sally Cline (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) p. 50.

²³ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p. ix.

that the reader would feel empathetic towards her. Though she may not live under the same circumstances as the reader, as a real person with flaws and imperfections she is deemed a relatable character. This then allows for the reader to feel involved in the story and be affected by Christopher's disappearance. Scott Mariani claims that, in a thriller 'what makes the plot evolve is your developing relationship with your main characters,'²⁴ so by slowly feeding the reader information that changes Peggy's characterisation, making her more suspect, I can keep the audience guessing and therefore turning the pages.

H. R. F Keating states that 'characterisation can be based on certain niches in society,'²⁵. I initially subscribed to this assertion, aiming to design DCI Howard in regards to the cultural influences of the time. I focused mainly on his personality, with the plan to characterise him as a bachelor, based on *Life on Mars*²⁶ character Gene Hunt. It is presumed that Howard would be a misogynist, living as a man of power in an illiberal society, but I wanted to challenge this perception and avoid obeying clichés. Therefore I altered his characterisation and made him unique for his time, as is obvious through the confrontation of his colleague's casual racism.

Although Howard is the crime-solving protagonist, I wanted my novel to be realistic and create a character with depth, integrity and flaws. Keating says, 'the more heroic you make your hero the more you will need moments of human weakness to make it easy for readers to

²⁴ Scott Mariani, *How to Write a Thriller* (Oxford: How To Books, 2007) p.59.

²⁵ H.R.F Keating, *Writing Crime Fiction* (London: A.&C. Black, 1994) p.8.

²⁶ *Life On Mars*, BBC (2006).

have the sympathetic identification,'²⁷ and this I implemented throughout. It was regarded in an early-stage workshop that Howard seemed determined to solve Christopher's kidnapping as soon as possible, and though this may read as someone simply dedicated to their job, I wrote it to foreshadow future revelations. In later chapters, Peggy discovers that Howard had a daughter who too went missing, hence his emotional attachment to the case. At first Howard feels like a cold, brash character with whom many cannot relate, but once his faults have been identified, then the reader will feel a sense of empathy towards him. This adheres to Janet Lawrence's ideology, who believes that 'As well as the main plot, the crime novel needs one or more sub-plots.'²⁸

The aforementioned subplots are what keeps my novel from being a one-strand story. The character of 'the detective' tends to be complex and have secrets that not even the reader knows about, until the narrative develops. One subplot explores Howard's divorce and missing daughter but the details are only revealed in chapter 20, following a dialogical flashback to his past. The reader will also learn about Peggy Walters unexpected history with obsession and the stalking of her husband. The first stray away from the main storyline comes in chapter 4 when we learn of DC Brookes' girlfriend and how the implications of his interracial love-life may influence his job. It's through these details that I was able to create a more diverse and thought-provoking storyline. Therefore, by enhancing Howard's character, developing his emotions and revealing his secrets later on in the novel, a reader is more likely to be ardently invested throughout.

²⁷ H.R.F Keating, *Writing Crime Fiction* (London: A.&C. Black, 1994) p.9.

²⁸ Janet Laurence, *Writing Crime Fiction: Making Crime Pay* (Abergele: Studymates Limited, 2007) p. 15.

In *Writing Crime Fiction*²⁹, Janet Laurence suggests that ‘the main drawback to the first person narrator...is that everything is seen through their eyes’³⁰, and this is something that I struggled with. I enjoy writing in diary form, and at first had the idea of narrating the entire plot through journal entries from Howard on his progression throughout the case. This, however, became increasingly difficult when I wanted to set up the crime. I couldn’t find an appropriate method of conveying the given circumstances, i.e Christopher’s kidnapping, to the reader without simply reciting the facts, which felt like I was telling the audience rather than showing. From this I decided on a third-person narrator who could have an all-seeing perspective, and follow whichever character is most prominent per chapter. After all, Boulter believes that ‘third-person narration is...perhaps the most conventional way of telling a story.’³¹

After I made this decision, I noticed that I was writing my omniscient narrator with a hint of personalisation and sarcasm, as read in the line ‘awaiting the arrival of his seemingly useless, but rather intelligent colleague’³². Following a workshop with my ECP tutor I decided to omit this quality from my writing because it brought too much life to a voice that doesn’t have a character behind it. Boulter states that an ‘external narrator simply reports the character’s

²⁹ Janet Laurence, *Writing Crime Fiction: Making Crime Pay* (Abergele: Studymates Limited, 2007).

³⁰ Janet Laurence, *Writing Crime Fiction: Making Crime Pay* (Abergele: Studymates Limited, 2007) p. 99.

³¹ Amanda Boulter, *Writing Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.152.

³² Isabel Wyatt, *A Family Affair: Draft 4*, CW3002A, 2018 (p.19).

actions and speech, without understanding their motivations or world-view'³³ meaning my act of depersonalising the narrative voice subscribes to this ideology and allows for no opinion or biased perspective, which is how the traditional detective story is told.

According to *The Writers' Workshop*³⁴, there are three ways to get your book published: the traditional, the self and the digitalized.

'The traditional publishing route'³⁵ involves getting in contact with a literary agent, as the major publishing houses only accept submissions from these contacts. This path may seem most reliable, however it does come at a price as most literary agents take 15% commission when sold to a publisher. Following this, the royalties of the book sales need to be calculated, therefore if a manuscript isn't a best-seller there is no guarantee that the author will make more money through this method over the other publishing options available to an amateur writer.

Another option would be to digitally publish. *The Writers' Workshop* claim that 'the huge advantage of the e-reading revolution from an author's point of view is that anyone can do

³³ Amanda Boulter, *Writing Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.153.

³⁴ *The Writers' Workshop* (2005) <http://www.writersworkshop.co.uk> [Accessed 8th February 2018].

³⁵ *The Writers' Workshop* (2005) 'How to Publish a Book' <http://www.writersworkshop.co.uk> [Accessed 8th February 2018].

it.³⁶ *Amazon.com*³⁷ do not charge an author to upload their work onto the site, giving the writer access to a worldwide audience and allowing anyone to essentially publish their work for free. Without an agent, however, there is less chance of achieving high sales, as a digital novel will be 1 in 5,000,000 e-books posted online. There are both benefits and problems when considering this method of publishing, and although the process is up-and-coming, what with 1/3 of the market being digitalised, it does not always lead to success as an amateur's novel can quite easily slip under the radar.

The final opportunity is to self-publish one's work. This is the chance to publish independently and have a physical copy of the book. This method has a seemingly lower-profile nowadays, and though Virginia Woolf was successful, it is not the greatest strategy if a writer is looking for a branded name or money.

Due to the ever-growing nature of the industry, I will go down the traditional route and approach a publisher via a literary agent. Mariani suggests identifying 'the publishers or agents for whom your work would be most suited',³⁸ therefore I have researched publishing houses that specialise in crime and thriller novels. There is a huge list of publishers who solely publish and edit crime, such as Abili, Brash Books, Fahrenheit Press, Felony & Mayhem, and many more. These agents already have a dedicated audience of genre specific

³⁶ *The Writers' Workshop* (2005) 'How to Publish a Book' <http://www.writersworkshop.co.uk> [Accessed 8th February 2018].

³⁷ *Amazon* (1996-2018) 'Take Control with Self Publishing' www.amazon.com/gp/seller-account/mm-summary-page.html?ie=UTF8&ld=AZFooterSelfPublish&topic=200260520 [Accessed 8th February 2018].

³⁸ Scott Mariani, *How to Write a Thriller* (Oxford: How To Books, 2007) p.149.

readers, so my novel would have guaranteed reception. As an amateur, I will contact Endeavour Press³⁹ who are currently accepting submissions from new and established authors. According to their website they are looking for at least 25,000 words, ranging in styles of fiction, such as: 'Crime, Thriller, Historical Fiction, Romance, Women's Fiction...' ⁴⁰. As I am a female author, writing a historical crime novel I think that my work would adhere very much to their guidelines and they would be an appropriate choice to publish my work.

A niche market that I have researched is that of women-only publishers. *Virago*⁴¹ was a company founded in 1973 to publish solely female authors and was 'the first mass-market publisher for 52 per cent of the population – women.' ⁴² They created a platform for women in a business that is still dominated by men, and their main aim is to: 'explore the untold stories of their (women's) lives and histories'. ⁴³ It's from this statement that I believe my work would be suitable for their publishing team, as my novel investigates how Peggy Walter's life will be affected, both mentally and physically, by the disappearance of her son.

³⁹ Endeavour Press (Unknown) <http://www.endeavourpress.com> [Accessed February 8th 2018].

⁴⁰ Endeavour Press (Unknown) 'Submissions' www.endeavourpress.com/submissions/ [Accessed February 8th 2018].

⁴¹ Virago (2012) www.virago.co.uk [Accessed February 8th 2018].

⁴² Virago (2012) 'About Virago' www.virago.co.uk/about/ [Accessed February 8th 2018].

⁴³ Virago (2012) 'About Virago' www.virago.co.uk/about/ [Accessed February 8th 2018].

I have also researched literary festivals such as ‘Theakston Old Peculiar Crime Writing Festival’⁴⁴, and I also have connections with some of the promoters of ‘CrimeFest’⁴⁵, however one event I’m thoroughly interested in is called ‘Killer Women’⁴⁶. It is ‘an author collective of 21 female crime-writers, who work together to put on exciting, innovative crime fiction events around the country,’⁴⁷. I have since subscribed to their newsletter and intend to attend the ‘women in crime’ talks that they host throughout the year to boost my knowledge of the genre, the market, and perhaps create some contacts in the field.

Throughout this project I decided to keep an eye on the forums and websites that discuss and advertise opportunities for upcoming writers. This method proved fruitful as I came across an advert for a new crime writing competition on *The Bookseller*⁴⁸ webpage. The competition, known as ‘Deviant Minds’ is being run by Atlantic Books⁴⁹ and calls for the first 10,000 words of an unpublished thriller or crime novel. The top prize is the chance to be represented

⁴⁴ *Harrogate International Festivals* (2018) ‘Theakston Old Peculiar Crime Writing Festival’
www.harrogateinternationalfestivals.com/crime-writing-festival/ [Accessed February 8th 2018].

⁴⁵ *Crime Fest* (2018) www.crimefest.com [Accessed February 8th 2018].

⁴⁶ *Killer Women* (Unknown) www.killerwomen.org [Accessed February 8th 2018].

⁴⁷ *Killer Women* (Unknown) ‘The KW Story’ www.killerwomen.org/about/the-kw-story/ [Accessed February 8th 2018].

⁴⁸ *The Bookseller* (2018) <https://www.thebookseller.com> [Accessed February 26th 2018].

⁴⁹ *Atlantic Books* (2018) <https://atlantic-books.co.uk> [Accessed February 26th 2018].

by A.M Heath, ‘one of the most renowned literary agents in the UK’⁵⁰, as well as the promise of digital publication. I intend to submit an entry of my first four chapters from *A Family Affair* in the hope of securing representation that will allow me to kick-start my career as a writer.

⁵⁰ *Atlantic Books* (2018) ‘Deviant Minds’ <https://atlantic-books.co.uk/deviant-minds/> [Accessed February 26th 2018].