

Blood and body parts

Violence in crime fiction

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Writing is a business; no surprises there. During the past few decades the world's major publishing houses have been taken over by huge multinationals whose interests extend far beyond the world of books. Based in Germany, Bertelsmann AG counts six divisions, including Random House, the world's largest trade book publisher. Random House, in case you didn't get the memo, publishes Anchor Books, Ballantine Press, Bantam, Chatto and Windus, Dell Publishing, Doubleday, Knopf, Seal Books, and Vintage Press, to name only a few. Its largest competitor is the Hachette Book Group. Based in France, it counts among its imprints Little, Brown, Grand Central Publishing, Headline, Hodder, Penguin, and Warner Books. It also distributes such global players as Orion Books. Between them, it is no exaggeration to say that these two megagroups control 90% of the books published in English, world-wide.

With interests that extend far beyond the book trade, and staffed by managers with little or no experience in publishing, these corporate behemoths are dominated by accountants, on the basis of the much-vaunted Bottom Line. Some years ago a well-known and award-winning British crime writer with a global following was dropped by her publisher because a computer program indicated that her sales had fallen off by two percent. That's right: *two percent*.

And she was just one of *two hundred* authors "released" (jettisoned would be a more apt description) by the same publisher, at the same time!

Aware that they have only a passing grasp of the world of readers and writers, many publishers and acquisition editors at multinationals have fallen back on comfortable formulas for ensuring (or so they think) best-sellers. One need only think of the spate of conspiracy thrillers that appeared in the wake of *The Da Vinci Code*, or the plethora of zombie and other supernatural potboilers currently making their way to bookstore shelves across the nation. All too keenly aware of this dynamic, many authors hop on the corporate bandwagon, hoping for a free ride.

Amongst crime fiction writers, one of the more disturbing trends has been the growth of suspense thrillers featuring torturers, child abductors, and serial killers. Understandably, given their subjects, the language is explicit, the action graphic. Blood and body parts: a convenient fit with the current interest in forensics-driven crime novels.

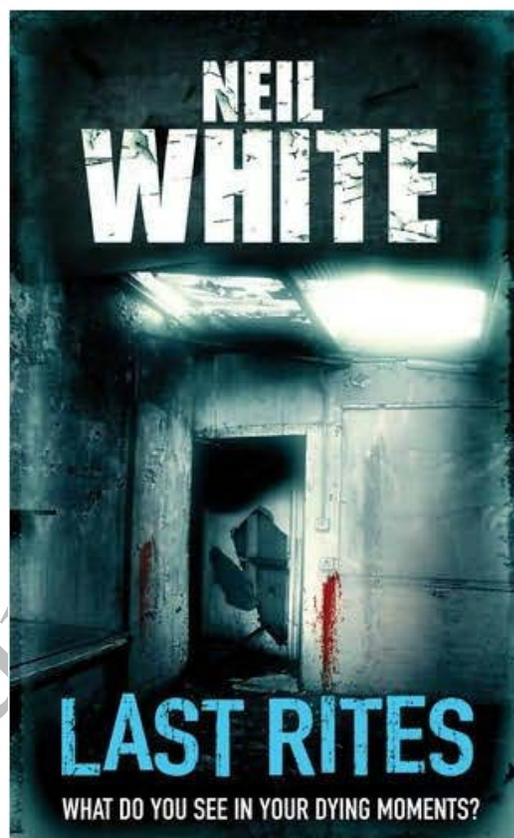
But to someone surveying the genre, it sometimes seems like an arms race, with the next author striving to outdo other writers by featuring more gore, more blood, more—and more prolonged—suffering. So the question arises, when is enough, well, *enough*?

Of course, such trends are not new. One need only think of the graphic fictional accounts—rooted, indeed, in fact—of Edwardian London’s Jack the Ripper. The genre was given a big push in 1991 with the publication—also regrettably grounded in fact—of Thomas Harris’s *Silence of the Lambs*, the story of a serial killer who consumed his victims. And just when many readers thought it couldn’t get worse, in 2000 British novelist Mo Hayder published her debut novel *Birdman*, the account of a serial killer whose trademark is to cut open his victim’s chest whilst alive, insert a live songbird, and sew the victim back up. Adding sexual sadism and necrophilia to the mix it became a bestseller, and it wasn’t long before *Birdman* was followed by a spate of similar works, each more intense than those that came before.

I mention this because recently I received a review copy of a debut novel by Neil White, titled *Last Rites*. Mr. White is a Senior Crown Prosecutor in England, and his professional experience informs his story. This particular effort is about a family of psychopaths who have a penchant for rigging the bodies of tortured pets with explosives designed to detonate when their owners attempt to rescue them. The story culminates when they abduct a woman and insert explosives in her vagina, then set her ablaze. And they do so because in their own sick, twisted minds, it makes some sort of perverse sense.

Depravity, sexual sadism, horror and repulsion; this is the iconography of shock writers. But as one critic has noted, “The trouble with shock is that it has rapidly diminishing returns. There are few taboos left to us today... *Birdman* is...a sickeningly baroque novel: the gothic masquerading as

realism; a certain wild and pornographic imagination pegged into place by the medical jargon and the stock sentimentality of the central characters.” (Nicci Gerrard, *The Observer*, January 23, 2000)



Opponents may argue that I’m simply being squeamish. After all, the cloistered, cozy world of Agatha Christie has well and truly passed us by, if it ever existed. It hardly reflects today’s reality. Moreover, just think of all the writings of unquestioned literary merit and wide public appeal that have a dark side at their very core, works from Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* to chilling tales by Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling.

So am I advocating that readers only be exposed to a gentle read, sanitized and cleansed of every reference that might somehow offend the sensibilities of the most delicate of readers? Not a bit.

Like it or not, we live in an age of violence. No more so than many other times, of course, but due to the immediacy of media, from television to YouTube, we are constantly exposed to a barrage of abusive and profane language, and actions ranging from simple rudeness to savage assaults, to wanton cruelty. So there is clearly a place for explicit violence, language, and sexuality in crime fiction, *provided it is handled well, and serves a larger purpose*. In spite of their explicit violence, it is possible for suspense thrillers to have some redeeming feature, often providing an insightful look at a profoundly damaged mind or a telling social commentary. The novels of Ian Rankin, Minette Walters, and Denise Mina are all cases in point.

In creating a fictional story for readers, the author has the power, and thus the responsibility, to consider the impact of their words. The rampant proliferation of graphic and gratuitous violence in novels desensitizes readers to such acts, diluting our sense of outrage when, in real life, such acts occur. The invention of the written word is one of the defining achievements of the human species, capable of creating immense joy, both when it is written and when it is read. But to marry fear with disgust, simply in the name of profit, is to chip away at that which makes us human. I cannot believe that Mr. White either derived pleasure from the act of writing this tale, or expected his readers to do so from reading it; and those whose sole motivation is success in the marketplace are rightly known as pimps and panderers.

The irony is that Neil White is clearly a talented writer, whose experiences could have been mined to create an entertaining and insightful book. He didn't have to fall back on cheap literary

devices. At over five hundred pages, the book could have—and should have—been made shorter. Sometimes less is more.

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