

Bloody Murder and the Erotics of Null-Pedagogy

review by Barry Westburg

How to Write Crime

Marele Day (ed)

Allen & Unwin 1996

RRP \$19.95 187pp

ISBN 1 86373 998 X

You are a new teacher of creative writing. Part of your job - as a sop to Mammon perhaps - will be to 'teach' some of the few remaining lucrative literary genres. Some of your students will want to know how to write Romance. They are easily accommodated or dispensed with. But many more will want to learn how to commit a crime novel.

If you are working at a university you will eventually discover the Library. There, in the funky Cimmerian recesses of the Stacks, where most students go to shoot up, you will discover dozens of crime-writing manuals canoodling each other on the shelves. There will not be enough time for all of them. So how to choose among them? Take my advice: Go for the ones written by the pro's - such as those by Patricia Highsmith (1983) and Sue Grafton (1993). Not to mention the classic musings of Raymond Chandler, which you already know about. As a self-styled pedagogue, I would not rule out the possibility that, one fine day, I will come to admire and even cherish a handbook written by a similar pedagogue who is an abject failure in the genre. Until then I will stick with the pro's.

What can these pro's do for me - and for you? If you want to know, get hold of *How to Write Crime*, edited by Marele Day. It has the powerful advantage of being just recently published. Though your post-Howard Library will not be able to afford a copy, it is available in good bookshops everywhere. Currency is vital in crime writing. Despite the hoary tradition behind crime-fiction, the genre must needs mirror the changing times, and to be ignorant of contemporary writing practice is as much a recipe for failure as ignorance of contemporary urban crime-soaked culture. You might as well take up tatting and scrimshaw.

Not only is this book contemporary, it is also Australian. It is thus not only of our Time, but of our Place.

How to Write Crime has a no-nonsense Handbookish title but that is rather misleading. This book is *au fond* a species of group confession: about how 'we' (a dozen well-published practitioners) actually do write 'our' crime. My pet theory is that Confession always has its built-in 'erotic' (or at least kinetic) element. It is a lubricious lifting of the veil, as it were. 'How I do it' is inherently more erotico-kinetic than 'how you ought to do it.' (Of course I could be dead wrong about this.) The confessional part of *How to Write Crime* is not all it offers, but it is more enlightening than any advice about how you (as wannabee author) ought actually to write crime, or you (the wannabee teacher) ought to be teaching crime-fiction. The meaty part of this book exposes the creative process at work inside twelve eminent antipodean apostles of crime-writing. (Well, one of them, Minette Walters is a Brit.)

Twelve Ways of Looking at a Blackguard

If one pro can write a good book about creative crime-writing, then imagine what a dozen dittoes can do. Here each writer seems to spill everything they know, even though, in business-like Handbook fashion, the whole process of writing about the foulness of crime is segmented and serialised amongst them. The segmentation required to satisfy the post-enlightenment rationale of the Handbook is, however, subverted by its own internal logic. This whole process of subliminal deconstruction of the Handbook mentality is perhaps foreshadowed by the obligatory façade of fairness and justice you encounter when you examine the Table of Contents: Six male and six female contributors. A perfect binary equilibrium - *nicht wahr*? Paradoxically this opening tidiness-strategy soon betrays its lurking, perverse opposite: the erotics of disorder. (Cf. Robert Herrick, 'Delight in Disorder'.) Disorder as spillage, trespass, violation - the very subject of crime fiction itself. For instance, it seems that none of these errant pro's can keep off the others' turf. Nor can any of them bring themselves to adumbrate their own genre's implicit rules of order. The consensus seems to be that the secret laws of 'the craft' are as soon mentioned as disregarded - or violated, abused, mocked. This unravelling of the Handbook mentality happens partly because none of these pro's can resist the urge to fictionalise and narrate, as story, their own process of creation. Stories about story-telling.

I'm not criticising this. Far from it. Reserve your suspicion for all that is not story.

This 'How-To' book opens with a general overview in the hasty-pudding prose of academic Stephen Knight (pecked out on a laptop in an airliner?) which, in discussing conventions and trends in the genre, usefully differentiates Australian reader-preferences, in respect to crime detection methods, from the preferences of overseas readers. Australians prefer crime with 'zero detection' as opposed to Americans who prefer detection, but with a private dick in charge rather than a cop force doing the job, or the Brits, who like amateur sleuths, but still want crime to get

snuffed out through a decent methodology. Knight also flags trends, like the irresistible rise of the female sleuth in contemporary crime fiction. (Now all we need is for someone to quantify the apparent increase in female Perpetrators.)

Subsequent chapters propose to deal in serial fashion with each step in the realisation of crime fiction, from raw idea right up to reader-response. I shall keep comments on these individual chapters brutally minimal, since my own story of reading this book will differ from yours. Oddly, for a person who hates research, I found the chapters on research to be especially interesting. But equally curiously, though, I found no reference here (and extremely scanty reference elsewhere amongst these dozen working writers) of the Internet. The dear old Internet ought to be seen as an indispensable resource for any writer - especially the crime writer. You can download court proceedings and autopsy reports and pictures of stiff and all manner of things. You can find out what kind of bullets a retired LA policeman self-loads in his garage. And if something is not there, you can ask! Somebody will fill you in and it can all remain anonymous. I once wanted to know what was written on a particular famous dead person's tombstone and somebody over in Massachusetts went out there and wrote it all down for me.

The best thing about the research portion of this handbook is the absorbing Kerry Greenwood story about how she turned fact into fiction. I intend to read the resulting novel right away.

Greenwood's chapter, like the others, has an appended short list of exercises for beginning writers. These can easily be appropriated for the classroom. Recently, faced with a seminar of cynical, street-wise postgrads, I borrowed some of these exercises. They were a hit. They really worked.

The other writers are irrepressibly writerly, as well, when it's their turn. Nigel Krauth irreverently turns his commission into another story: a suspenseful, action-filled belletristic account of how he came to write his chapter on suspense. And so on. Gary Disher writes about plotting and structuring, and seems to come down in favour of planning everything with exceeding care, only to conclude by citing heterogeneous voices of other equally successful writers who boast that they don't give a damn about planning. If we don't plan the plot structure, I don't know what else there is to plan, unless it is how to invest the proceeds of the book sales later on.

Minette Walters' mandate was (presumably) to stick to 'characterisation', but she blithely poaches on J.R. Carroll's next chapter on 'dialogue'. Nevertheless, I'm relieved she acknowledges the principle that some characters will be obliged to talk to other ones, and that there is a deal to be said for doing it realistically. But - hey - that's only a reminder. I was much more interested in hearing how such a marvellous writer actually works and, as well, in following the sub-plot involving her own admiration for the other writers who do their jobs using entirely different means. I'm also glad that, when he gets his turn, J.R. Carroll sends us on to Elmore Leonard for dialogue. Since Leonard lifts his dialogue (or so he says) from Hemingway, and Hemingway lifts his (or so he says) from Mark Twain, we have a body of evidence confirming that writers can teach us about writing mainly by citing other writers. Not an altogether comforting notion, in its implications for the professional educators amongst us.

There are other good things in this hearteningly auto-deconstructive Handbook, but I conclude with two items, two hard-line dicta from the experts. This stellar paragraph is from Robert Wallace's fine chapter on 'beginnings and endings (and the bits in between)':

Recently the differing limitations of first and third-person narratives have been overcome by writers breaking the rules, changing from first to third person, chapter by chapter, shifting from past to present tense, to enable more evidence to be presented.

Mark it and strike it. Postmodernism still reigns in an era of Dirty Realism. All order is infinitely violable by the (erotic?) flow of experiential disorder.

Or, fast-forwarding to Debra Adelaide's chapter on 'the words on the page', why not batten on a metaphor posing as a rule: 'Adjectives are the cockroaches of fiction'.

Worth the price of admission. I feel like, well, a better writer already. I even feel like a better teacher already.

Barry Westburg is a short story writer who lectures in writing and American literature at the English Department of the University of Adelaide

TEXT

Vol 1 No 2 OCTOBER 1997

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au