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GUEST ESSAY

Stepping Into Raymond Chandler's Shoes Showed Me the Power of Fiction

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By Denise Mina
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"The Second Murderer" is the first Philip Marlowe book written by a woman. Me.

Marlowe is, of course, the most famous creation of Raymond Chandler, perhaps the most famous of American crime novelists. Reading Chandler was always a guilty pleasure of mine, his vision of 1930s Los Angeles unfolding vividly for me all the way in cold and rainy Glasgow. On the one hand, there is his glorious writing, his blue-collar heroes and the occasional profound observations about the human experience. But there's also his liberal use of racial slurs, his portrayal of people of color and homosexuals as grotesque caricatures and the fact that his work is suffused with misogyny. It takes a strong stomach to read a story in which a woman needs a slap to calm her down.

Crime fiction was, and is, anti-feminist. That's why I chose to write it in the first place.

Traditionally, women never had agency in crime fiction, and when I started out I wanted to try to shift the dial, casting in with a movement that already counted such lights as Sara Paretsky, Marcia Talley, Mary Wings and Val McDermid. The way I saw it, crime fiction was the new social novel, wrapped in a genre that already seemed to be reaching a wide audience of largely female readers.

The knock on commercial fiction is that it's often written so quickly that it tends to simply mirror, for good or ill, the social mores of the time that produced it. Chandler may have been a misogynist, but he definitely lived in misogynist times, and his fiction reflects that. When values change or views become more enlightened, these kind of books tend to age poorly. Sometimes this aging-out happens quite suddenly: How tired the endless copaganda procedurals seem now; how tone-deaf the books that end with the police justifiably shooting a suspect to death. The tsunami of books featuring women with faulty memories cannot be read in the same way since the #MeToo movement or in the context of changing attitudes about sexual violence and child abuse. Overnight, yesterday's resilient trope seems hopelessly offensive, even dangerous.

Yet this same ability to mirror a moment, which potentially imperils a book's longevity, also confers a great advantage to a commercial writer: the chance to change the way we speak collectively about a moment and become a powerful driver of social change. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe may not be read much now, but through the 19th century it was outsold only by the Bible. "What Is to Be Done?," a 1863 novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, arguably had a bigger impact on the worldview of Vladimir Lenin than did Marx's "Capital." Imagined realities can be just as revolutionary as any written manifesto — and much more accessible and fun to read. For a writer, that's an incredible opportunity.

When my first book, "Garnethill," came out in 1998 (it had provisionally been titled "The Garnethill Guerrilla" after the Guerrilla Girls, the feminist artist-activist group), I was often asked about having a female protagonist — wasn't I worried people would mistake me for a feminist? In response, I simply adjusted the straps of my dungarees and said no, because I actually was a feminist, the scary type, the ones who spoiled everyone's fun.

In the '80s and '90s, genre potboilers that dehumanized dead sex workers were commonplace and the queer characters existed only to die. The women in these novels, however brutalized, were solely and perpetually on the prowl for a boyfriend.

Attempting to invert those conventions was not a Puritan impulse: I know noir has to stay cheap and fast and lurid. Noir relies on its low art status to speak to its wide audience. The central mechanism of noir fiction is to create a justice deficit that needs to be redressed. Shock and violence disarm the readers and heighten their indignation — that way, they are not being preached at but invited to engage. Whereas whodunits and cozy crime are puzzles, solved with a drip feed of clues, noir depends upon the reader's sense of fairness. There is no better form to explore social injustice and, sometimes, nudge the dial of change a little bit.

When I published my 15th book two decades after my first one, I was asked if having a female protagonist wasn't so commonplace as to have become "a bit of a cliché." That's wonderful. I consider that progress.

Writing a novel linked to a literary estate, like this Philip Marlowe book, struck me as a fascinating new creative exercise. First of all: Is it fanfic? Is it cosplay? How far can the estate novel stray from the original? I was excited to find out.

Surrounded by maps and books and printouts of shabbily framed screen shots, I transported myself from cold and rainy Glasgow to a late September heat wave in 1939 in Chandler's Los Angeles. I tried to retain his wonderful, playful language but update his values. My Marlowe novel features something few Chandler novels ever did: women with inner lives and ambitions that go beyond getting a boyfriend. In my version of Chandler's 1930s Los Angeles, there's a rich Hispanic community and a vibrant gay subculture. That's my prerogative.

Some might accuse me of shoehorning my politics into a canonical series — but the work is already politicized, no shoehorn required. As the literary theorist Stanley Fish argued, there is no such thing as point-of-viewlessness. In all cultures, through all time, the status quo is profoundly political. It simply masquerades as neutral.

And Fish's famous reader-response theory posits that the reader is not a passive recipient of a literary work but a collaborator in that work, reading it through the prism of personal experience. In effect, each reader, with each reading, creates a new work. Each generation of readers brings a different sensibility to the text. So I will bring my politics to the writing of the book just as readers will bring theirs to the reading of it.

In 2006, I was also the first woman to write in the "Hellblazer" series for Vertigo Comics, and I was surprised at the rancor I received over the idea of a woman writing comics. How dare I try to fiddle with a beloved character!

Looking back, though, these protesters were partly right: I can see now that my voice *did* change the character of John Constantine. I'm no gender essentialist and I don't believe in an inherently female sensibility, but writers can't keep their own worldview out of their work — nor should they try.

I expect some people will have the same objections about a woman writing Raymond Chandler. To the angry anti-wokers and the leave-things-aloners, I can only say: You've arrived too late. The revolution is underway. The barbarians are not at the gate. We are in the citadel.

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