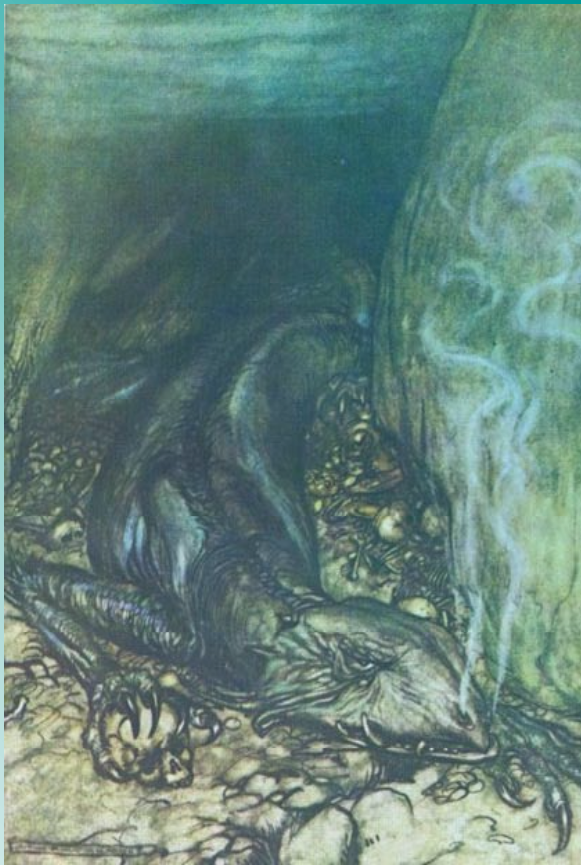


Humanities-Ebooks
Genre Fiction Monographs

Of Modern Dragons



and
other
essays
on
Genre
Fiction

John Lennard

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and other essays on Genre Fiction

John Lennard

Tirril: Humanities-Ebooks, 2007

A Note on the Author

John Lennard took a B.A. and D.Phil. at Oxford University, and an M.A. at Washington University in St Louis. He has taught for the Universities of London, Cambridge, and Notre Dame, for the Open University, and for Fairleigh Dickinson University on-line; he is now Professor of British & American Literature at the University of the West Indies—Mona. His publications include *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Clarendon Press, 1991), *The Poetry Handbook* (1996; 2/e, OUP, 2005), with Mary Luckhurst *The Drama Handbook* (OUP, 2002), and the Literature Insights *Hamlet*. He is General Editor of the Sightlines series, for which he has written on Reginald Hill, Walter Mosley, Octavia E. Butler, Ian McDonald, and Tamora Pierce.

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Foreword

As the first more-or-less explains, these essays are the product of trying to think professionally about more than 30 years of reading genre and series fictions. Neither my subjects nor the tones and movements of prose that have seemed right for them are always in the Academy's current *Manual of Lit. Crit.*, and as I imagine myself writing as much for fellow readers as for a narrower academic audience, I let them stand. That does not mean scholarship or rigour are disregarded, and footnotes appear informatively or discursively as they ought. It does mean, however, that (for example) details of fictions merely cited appear only in the Bibliography, and cultural events etc. are assumed as common territory between writer and reader. Alternatively, a  [Web-link](#) may be provided, for those who wish to use it. It also means that even with novels considered at length I have tried not to give away needless spoilers, that those who like the sound of one can read with full pleasure.

I long thought that essays on different genres (Crime, SF, Children's Lit., Romance) needed to be separate, or at least sectioned-off, but those gathered here coalesced as a sequence. The subjects have in common their serial forms and my extended attention, but range as widely as authors' interests. Reginald Hill and 'J. D. Robb' (in that identity) are primarily crime writers; Octavia Butler, Ian McDonald, & the dragonfolk are SF writers; and Tamora Pierce is a children's writer. Then again, I'm damned if 'Robb' isn't also an SF *and* a Romance writer; Pierce similarly mocks generic distinctions; and Hill, Butler, & McDonald are all absurdly denied proper recognition *precisely because* they embrace genre and write in series. So my essays are what they are, and if that is unconventional, so much the better.

This collection also launches Humanities-E-Books' *Genre Fiction Monographs*, and in some measure therefore serves as model and manifesto. The series is avowedly open to *any* relevant proposal, because we don't yet know what proper attention to genre fiction should look like, but my willingness here to move between genres, concentrate strongly on the experience of reading, and go where that has taken me, are certainly meant as markers of intent. Very many people spend a good deal of time and money as serial readers, and the absence of serious thinking about the practice is as odd as it is improper, so please think of this e-book, and the series it launches, as seeking to redress a gross imbalance.

John Lennard
Gordon Town, St Andrew, Jamaica
February 2007

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1. Of Serial Readers

Living with Genre Fiction

I read for pleasure, for information, and for a living. My work as a teacher and professor of literature requires me to read new poetry and fiction, and bookish surprises are an invigorating part of my life. Books are therefore given and bought in such numbers that even the worthiest inevitably pile up awaiting attention, but each year among those I read most promptly are a dozen or so hardback instalments of series fictions, revisiting established protagonists, locales, and supporting casts for a further round of adventures.

This serial reading is a habit of long standing. The genres involved have ranged over more than 30 years through thrillers, science fiction of many kinds, and Napoleonic naval novels to children's literature (where Harry Potter provides the most obvious current example of mass serial reading), but crime writing has come to dominate. For more than twenty years I have had an annual meeting with Robert B. Parker's Spenser, a Boston PI with entertaining friends and superior dialogue, who in that time (however formulaic he may sometimes be) has confronted contemporary evils while evolving emotionally in ways I find compelling. For nearly ten I have had biannual dates with J. D. Robb's Eve Dallas, a New York cop in the late 2050s who as a romance heroine in an unreal world ought in many ways to be negligible, but isn't, because her childhood abuse and continuing struggle to be healed of its consequence provide a ballast that allows Robb to make of her populist and otherwise critically sinful books a vehicle for serious thought. My current crime list also features Reginald Hill, James Lee Burke, Lawrence Sanders, John Harvey, Ian Rankin, Bill James, Peter Robinson, Walter Mosley, Michael Connelly, Nevada Barr, Deborah Crombie, and Stephen Booth—some (like Hill, Burke, & James) companions for a decade or more, others (like Crombie & Booth) pushing their way in. Newcomers may expand the list, but time is limited, and old friends sometimes have to make way, falling back with consecutive disappointments from automatic hardback to occasional paperback purchase.

I usually read (and re-read) these books fast. Daily schedules may preclude it, but I have read many literally 'at a sitting', which for a fiction of 80–100,000 words lasts three to six hours. In a positive sense most genre novels are 'page-turners', generating that intense involvement in a fictive world that is one great joy of

reading, but such reading is often (and not only by professional critics) supposed ‘shallow’, as opposed to a ‘deep’ mode associated with ‘literature’—hence the persistent characterisation of genre fiction as ‘airport’ or ‘railway’ books, fit for journeys, not studies, and discardable without loss. Even without the curious but characteristic British denigration of ‘genre fiction’ as intrinsically *déclassé*,¹ readers who prefer ‘literature’ often suppose from the speed of writing implicit in series publication that quality of the kind they seek and praise cannot possibly be found in such books, and in parallel suppose from the speed of reading implicit in page-turning that such rapid consumption cannot reward serious attention. Literature, that is, should have been agonised over by its authors, as by its readers, while the generic should take as little effort to write as is invested in reading it.

The academic corollary of this speciousness includes a widespread Anglophone (especially British) prejudice, that while paid professors of literature are entitled (or even expected) to read some mass-market fictions ‘as a hobby’, and conversationally to grade the bestseller lists, they are not supposed to spill serious ink on the matter. W. H. Auden in his critical and poetic prime knew better (as poets often do), but the intensity and sacramental conservatism of his confessions about reading Golden-Age whodunits in ‘The Guilty Vicarage’ (1948) represent a very particular sensibility, and have obscured the nature and challenges of serial reading.² Auden’s comparison of Golden-Age whodunits with the great classical tragedies of pollution and ritual cleansing attracts critical citation precisely because it counters the imputation to crime writing (and reading) of unliterary shallowness, but it is clear that Auden’s critical response was *not* associated with deep and scholarly ponderings of one text, but rather with habitual and rapid reading that rejoiced in long series, narrative formulae, artful variations, and iterated structure.

In one sense the paradigm for most judgements of literary merit is a class system, leisured ‘literature’ being the nobility, and hasty generic scurriers through the market-place the proletariat or *petit bourgeoisie*—and class-privileges are always fiercely defended. In interesting parallel, European metaphors and etymologies point clearly to the literary (and political) use of validating *depth*: we get to the bottom of things and the heart of the matter, strive to be profound and deal with the basics and

¹ The real point often seems to be the reverse formulation, that ‘literature’ is somehow not ‘generic’. Thus Reginald Hill, despite his very varied output, is a ‘crime writer’ but the rather more limited Martin Amis, say, is a ‘novelist’ who can cleverly deploy crime topoi when he judges that right.

² In *The Dyer’s Hand and other essays* (1963; London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 146–58. Auden admits, for example, that he cannot re-read a whodunit, saying that he sometime started one only to realise “after a few pages” that he had read it already (p. 146).

fundamentals, so value comes with age and the overwritten surface. But US politicians and some critics instead ‘go the extra mile’, finding sincerity in extent, and the US mass-markets in newspaper features, genre paperbacks, and TV drama have been the great engines of serial writing and reading in the late century. Conversely, British critics in particular, beholden to literary snobbery reflecting class mores and blind to sincerity in instalments, have been uninterested in genre writing and the worlds of reading it generates. Yet it seems widely known, for example, often by people who have read none of them, that Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan write ‘literature’, while Ian Rankin and Peter Robinson do not; that attention to J. K. Rowling is (despite her extraordinary achievement in becoming the first authorial billionaire) at best a clever and well-executed jape; and that Salman Rushdie is intrinsically a more responsible and thoughtful writer than Reginald Hill.

Prizes are a prime arena for showing such prejudice. One of the more telling indicators of the true nature of the Booker Prize (founded in 1969) is that in nearly 40 years not one book usually regarded as ‘crime writing’ or ‘SF’ has been short- or even long-listed, let alone won.¹ During the decades since 1970 crime writing has undergone an astonishing efflorescence and (as the ever-growing crime sections of every highstreet bookshop demonstrate) been a mainstay of the fiction market. The intense absurdity of the British situation is limned in the fact that Dame P. D. James chaired the panel of Booker judges in 1987, but could never herself as a committed and serious crime writer have made even the shortlist, despite producing in *Innocent Blood* (1980) and *A Taste for Death* (1986) eligible novels that go far beyond any simple generic model, and were certainly among the most discussed and widely reviewed UK publications of their respective years. To say either ‘should’ have won the Booker Prize would be silly, but they were just as stupidly excluded from consideration on generic grounds, and continue to be vapidly supposed unfit for study or inappropriate to teach. As much might be said of SF, for despite its evident British strengths since the 1980s not one such book has troubled the Booker judges for even a moment. There may be fair questions about how genre fictions are best read, taught, and contextualised, but there are also false assumptions underlying this unhappy bias that must be foregone.

¹ Complete lists of winning and short-listed books from 1969, and long-lists from 2001, are available at <http://www.themanbookerprize.com/about/previous.php>. Arguably, only one acknowledged ‘genre fiction’ appears on any of them, Philip Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass*, long-listed in 2001. The fullest published analysis of the Booker is Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (1996).

Fast as many readings may be, crime writing is a time-consuming and expensive study to maintain seriously, and ever more so as the field remorselessly expands in all directions. Whatever my feelings about a given novel, series or freestanding, I don't discard it when I'm done but shelve it—my crime-library now runs to over 200 feet—so that particular series and a general sampling of the field accumulate. For series on my active list this also means periodic re-reading, rarely *in toto* (especially once they grow to 10 or more books) but in smaller runs—typically anticipating a new arrival by going back a few instalments to refresh my sense of people, places, and what was left unresolved. The chance to write an article, or a particularly good instalment, especially an unpredictable success or breakthrough, sends me back to the beginning even of the longest series, but any instalment may direct renewed attention to any precursor. Contrary to the 'airport book' paradigm, details and narrative textures are often at a premium, and to the serial reader with proper lengthwise bearings apparently casual fragments of dialogue or narration may catch most interesting light—first time round if you're good and lucky, but more probably with hindsight.

Some of what is intellectually and emotionally at stake here is suggested by the lack of any established vocabulary for the common readerly states and actions I am describing. Scholarship has begun to remember the serial publication of Augustan, Romantic, and Victorian novels, and Penguin editions of Dickens, for example, have always marked where the original weekly parts ended—but they were parts of a singular whole, and the divisions are often clearly signalled within the narrative by a cliff-hanging chapter-ending. While there is a proper connection with modern TV soap-opera and drama series, experience as a modern serial reader is different.

There are of course novels that actually end with a cliff-hanger (as the original version of *The Italian Job* famously and literally does on film), either leaving it tantalisingly at that or obliging readers to wait a year or so to know if (typically) *x* has survived. The vast majority of these, however, have single sequels or are first and second novels of trilogies (where publication of vols 2–3 may be deliberately delayed); none to my knowledge are true series fictions. The closest example is probably Patrick O'Brian's *The Thirteen-Gun Salute* (1989), *The Nutmeg of Consolation* (1991), *Clarissa Oakes* (1992), and *The Wine-Dark Sea* (1993), vols 13–16 of 20 chronicling naval service and political culture during the Napoleonic and Revolutionary Wars of 1793–1815, which send heroes Aubrey & Maturin on a single circumnavigation through four books. No formal ending for the first three is provided: one simply comes to the last page of the volume in hand, and (now) may

turn directly to the next for full continuation of the narrative. Anthony Powell's 12-volume *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951–75) is in some ways similar, as much a *roman fleuve* in equal parts as a series of individual novels, while crime writer 'Bill James' (A. J. Tucker)—a published critic of Powell¹—habitually leaves a great deal unresolved in closing each of his Harpur-&-Iles novels. He may or may not later supply some fragment of explanation, and his serial readers have by definition accepted this; only a (lazy) newcomer to his work could wait for the next instalment in expectation of any 'proper' continuation or resolution.

Stylistically and structurally, James's terminal irresolutions are products of fragmentation, alienation, and dandified irony, not devices to keep readers waiting in suspense. In general, even series writers with a high degree of complex continuity between instalments, like James and Reginald Hill, show no interest in ending individual books with anything that might seriously be thought a 'cliff-hanger'. It seems as much a commercial as a craft-based distinction: cliff-hanging works well but intensely, and is best kept to a fixed duration, but a good series of genre fictions may be written and read over 30 or more years. Its pleasures are subtler than the agonies and rampant marketing of not knowing for six months if J. R. Ewing survived the shots that felled him, who among President Bartlet's staff had taken a bullet, or whatever the hook might be. If a print-series character has truly seized the public mind, some looming possibility may become a prolonged issue in conversation: the putative death of Harry Potter in J. K. Rowling's final volume is a current example, and may prove the most traumatic fictional death since Dickens hardened himself against Little Nell in 1841—but it also shows how rare this phenomenon is in print compared to the annual series finales of TV dramas like *Dallas* and *The West Wing*.

Just how a writer manages the commercially requisite balance between the episodic, satisfactorily concluding within the volume, and the ongoing drive of a series in exploring the continuing lives of people and place, is a primary interest of serial reading. The proliferation of series in crime fiction is probably explained principally by the ease with which successive, intrinsically distinct criminal cases map onto a book-by-book structure, providing consecutive volumes with individual casts and plots whereby all necessary page-turning tensions may be generated, while allowing the personal, emotional, and usually family life of the protagonist to flow through all and yet (if an author wishes) provide terminal irresolutions or dissonance to haunt any neatness of episodic closure. There is a close equivalent that serial

¹ See James Tucker, *The Novels of Anthony Powell* (1976).

fictioneers of the Georgian Royal Navy learned from C. S. Forester's Hornblower novels (which in 1936–9 & 1945–66 occasioned mass serial reading)—that a one-voyage-per-volume formula does very nicely, while too much jumping-about inhibits sales. Dudley Pope's *Ramage* (18 novels, 1965–89), Alexander Kent's *Bolitho* (26 novels since 1968), C. Northcote Parkinson's *Delancey* (6 novels, 1973–82), and Richard Woodman's *Drinkwater* (14 novels, 1981–98) have all sailed on that basis, while the most important current Georgian fighting hero, Bernard Cornwell's *Sharpe* (22 novels since 1981), develops a military variant of the formula, one major battle or campaign per volume.¹ O'Brian's departure from it in four of his 'Aubriiad' volumes is thus odd even by its own lights: they may be brilliant (devotees differ on the merit of those volumes); they are exceptions.

What matters to the serial reader is that with deferred expectations of returning with avowed interest to a given world and people, but without tensed expectation and irresolution, one is released to consider differently the emotions and behaviours of protagonists whose lives one is choosing to share. If a series is discovered when already complete there is a marvellous moment when the endless craving for new fiction is sated in anticipation, but not the experience of reading a life as one's own is lived, *in extenso*, and so inevitably muddled up with, in, and over other reading and experience. Crime writing in particular dwells closer to daily news than most fiction, and the reaction of a familiar protagonist to a real event, incorporated mimetically into a known fictional world but first experienced by author and reader in their own lives, is like the reactions both of a friend and of a respected public figure—testimony to ponder, a prod to recall one's own reactions. Series characters may thus become, perhaps more widely than canonical literary figures, referents and agents of conversation, symbols of known values and probable reaction, while also being, in the few days before and after reading a new chapter in their lives, powerfully open within imagination. How will they grow, cope or fail to cope, or be diminished in this instalment? and the next?—for which one is, in the nature of the beast, always waiting, save only in those few hours while a new book is first read.

A profound challenge to a protagonist, such as displacement from a usual setting to some alien ground, typically arouses as much anxiety and condemnation among devotees as it does pleasure at an unfamiliar prospect, but few serial readers of crime want the stereotypically formulaic repetition to which Agatha Christie came close, and Barbara Cartland closer. Demand for variation, pressure of some kind to think and cope anew, informs reception of successive instalments—for serial readers,

¹ These Napoleonic series are not (save for Forester & O'Brian) listed in the bibliography.

strung over time with their protagonists, will like their protagonists' creators face such pressures themselves. In this at least the relationship of reader to protagonist is one of identification—the protagonist as fantasy avatar, an idea informing conversational dismissal of 'escapist fictions' in (supposed) opposition to a 'literature' that bears down on fantasy. Crime writing, though, is interestingly awkward for such talkers, for (if they bother with it at all) they must defuse its evident topicality, and accept that the practices of reading and living (not to mention writing) have more complex modes than escape or fantasy, not even but especially in series fictions. Readers may gawp, tut at alarmist headlines and tabloid salacities, or like their sex scenes nicely anatomical, but when public concerns over crime and security express themselves over decades in extensive, often highly discriminating reading of crime novels, one has to do with a mode of engagement, not of escape.

Series writers, in particular, ask readers to lend a good deal of themselves to a character, not only by intellectually organising facts and impressions, but by sharing over decades in emotions and difficulties. One part of the payoff may surely be some form of vicarious satisfaction in particular aspects or actions, but there is more, and readers do not so lend for free, or without condition. Even in the post-war thrillers of Alistair Maclean, Hammond Innes, and Desmond Bagley, close cousins of the true series and more obviously escapist than much contemporary crime writing, there are unbreakable readerly contracts—most importantly, that while convenience and (if properly flagged) new technologies are allowed, absurdity, impossibility, and *dei ex machinae* are not; just as stated facts must indeed be facts, as incorrigible for the protagonist as for the readers imagining themselves in that same situation. What happens depends on the quality of the facts from which the author has constructed the difficulty, and it is a basic strength of the contemporary crime novel that its facts are as often social, moral, economic, journalistic, or political as forensic and topographical. A series may in this way become part, not of any escapist or prurient satisfaction, but precisely of ongoing thought about structural or otherwise recurrent social problems—so much so that some contemporary crime writing is probably the most overtly *engagé* genre of English prose fiction there is. Conversely, new fiction dubbed as 'literature' is far too often self-protectively uninterested in anything resembling political or practical engagement with quotidian contemporary concerns.

My own serial reading suggests the best series writers respond positively to the sense of a stringent contract with their (paying) readers, often through conscious engagement with it and with shared current events. Reginald Hill, particularly, has

persistently experimented with series-novel form while keeping the beadiest of eyes of the doings of the Thatcher, Major, and Blair governments, trusting in the basic affection he and his readers share for detectives Dalziel & Pascoe to give him sufficient rope. Knowledge (through advance publicity) that the next instalment will face us with a case involving child abuse, serial killing, animal rights, or (as now, awaiting *The Death of Dalziel*) either a series *Götterdämmerung* or a terrible tease, becomes an intriguing proposition. Novel by novel Hill delivers fictional essays on matters that are often on my mind when his fictions are certainly not; meaning that when they are, as I lend pleasurable sense to Dalziel's tragicomic *force majeure* and Pascoe's flattering literariness, I also bring to bear, novel by novel, not innocent consumption of fantasy but informed questing for intelligent observation or analysis—and find it. In retrospect, my literary and civil judgements of individual novels (repeatedly re-read in their growing series context) naturally become more critical, but identification of specific failure is informative. Hill has, for example, had recurrent difficulty with serial killers—a difficulty I share in a general way, having lived through the days of the Yorkshire Ripper in 1978–81, and read ever since of other such days elsewhere—and this difficulty is intriguing, because it offers a context to consider one of the great themes of the late century.

Now we are in the 2000s, should conversation turn to serial killers (when yet another has made the news) we have words and ideas to offer one another. Knowledge of many cases is commonplace, and the FBI's distinction of 'organised' and 'disorganised' types, with other analyses developed by their special behavioural units and programmes at Quantico, are as disseminated in popular culture as any comparable scientific paradigm. Some understanding of the supposed role of childhood abuse in making a serial killer is also common (if often tangled with emotional responses to reported paedophilia), and may recognise an implicitly Freudian mechanism, though none is needed for the perception that a recurrent need to kill is probably linked somehow to the constant renewal of human sexual desire. Bizarre and horrifying as the Sutcliffes, Bundies, and Dahmers may be, the interested or concerned can now easily find reasonably thoughtful analytical paradigms that offer rational explanations for an observed behaviour—a recurrent need to kill strangers, selected on the basis of broad somatypical resemblance to one another and a model from the killer's childhood whom s/he repeatedly re-embodies and slays. And so many of these strange people have been revealed in the last thirty or so years that we can no longer comfortably think them inhuman or otherwise

deny their bloody place among our ranks.

In my carefully correct “s/he”, acknowledging that women too may be serial killers, lies a whole other story. Only after the 1992 convictions in Florida of Aileen Wuornos did the FBI’s ingrained assumption that serial killing was an exclusively male phenomenon give way, obligating them to re-examine all open cases in which a putative female suspect had been automatically ruled out. In retrospect the FBI look foolishly sexist, and made a costly mistake whose price may well have been more than money and justice can measure. More strikingly, they were also well behind the novelists, notably David Lindley, whose *Mercy* (1990) plausibly applied the paradigmatic psychology of serial killing to a woman and turns precisely on the unwillingness of investigative authorities to consider a female suspect. But retrospect equally shows that our present advanced understanding has made indecent haste to forget how recent it is, and how shallow its foundations.

For me, as for many Britons (Jack-the-Ripperiana and ‘Midnight Rambler’ notwithstanding), the idea of serial killing became real only in 1978–81 with experience of the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’. The killer is now known to be Peter Sutcliffe, but then, as the awfulness and fear grew through months of waiting helplessly for the body-count yet again to rise, ‘he’ was unimaginable; the infernal among us, or conversely, as Blake Morrison later put it in *The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper*:

... Ripper’s not a psychopath
but any man in pants.
All you blokes would kill like ’im
given half a chance.¹

It was not just the epistemology of unknown identity, for almost every crime offers that; it was ontology—never mind whodunit, *what*-dunit? How could tried and tested motivations for murder *and* the whole investigators’ triad of ‘means, motive, opportunity’ be rendered seemingly worse than useless by a human murderer? With each tabloid splash and twist of events—a false Geordie-growling confession someone sent in; new victims; the Elland Road crowds who chanted ‘Ripper Twelve, Police Nil’ at Leeds FC games—pub and workplace conversations returned again and again to what or who and dear God why. But throughout that whole

¹ The poem was published in the *London Review of Books* in 1985, and collected in Morrison’s *The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper and other poems* (London: Chatto, 1987); I quote from p. 30. See also Gordon Burn, ‘...somebody’s husband, somebody’s son.’: *The Story of Peter Sutcliffe* (1985).

dismal time I don't recall hearing much common sense, let alone any uncommon, and my dominant memory is of endless, febrile and fearful threats of what should be done when 'they' caught 'him'.

Only after Sutcliffe's arrest, trial, conviction, and injury in prison¹—that is, in 1985–6—did anything that made helpful sense begin to emerge, some from journalism (Morrison is also a newspaperman), some from US psycho-social and law-enforcement understandings, much with Gordon Burn's study of Sutcliffe; but progress was slow. Even if connections were made with, say, Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) or Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), understandings were stymied, because (for example) both films, each based in substantial part on grave-robber and serial killer Ed Gein (arrested in Wisconsin in 1957 and suspected of 15+ murders), necessarily play on the geographical isolation of the murderer's den as a metaphor for psychic isolation and as a means of rendering their extreme plots at once more plausible and safely distant from the screening cinema. But the problem was precisely that Sutcliffe (as elsewhere Bundy) had been among us, hideously blending in to troll 'our' streets. The queasy politeness of Anthony Perkins as Norman Bates came closest (and *Psycho* was a mainstream hit, which *Chainsaw Massacre* for all its cult success has never been), but his mad eyes and desert motel were disabling departures from Sutcliffe's Yorkshire reality. Nor, in the 1980s, was it easy to get through the fictions to the Gein case, and if one did there was then much less literature on it, nor of course any friendly, well-publicised FBI website to satisfy public enquiries.

What intervenes between then and now is not only (from 1991) the Web, and a great burgeoning in public interest, such that a serial-killer plot is now Hollywood cliché, but *the* book on serial killing—not a breakthrough psychological or criminological essay, but a crime novel and rapidly an award-winning film, Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988, filmed 1990). As most now know, infamous anti-hero Dr Hannibal 'the cannibal' Lecter had been created in *Red Dragon* (1981, filmed as *Manhunter* 1986), and there is in these two novels an object lesson, for their plots, structures, and imports are closely identical. After this staggered pair, Harris provided in a third Lecter novel, *Hannibal* (1999, filmed 2001), a sequel to *Silence of the Lambs*, and in a fourth, *Hannibal Rising* (2006), a prequel, making a 'Lecter series' that is one of the slowest and oddest on record.

The lesson of *Manhunter* and *The Silence of the Lambs* arises because their

¹ He was 'bottled' in the face by a fellow inmate for repeated tearing the page with a picture of a woman's breasts out of a communal tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Star*.

similarity in plot is so close as to suggest careful, studied tweaks to a formula as tautly calculated as one in chemistry or physics. In both an FBI investigator is stymied and endangered by an active serial killer, and seeks help from imprisoned serial killer and über-psychiatrist Lecter. Drawn into a Faustian bargain by a need to engage with and reward Lecter, the investigator feeds him psychically with personal data in return for insights into the present prey, who is eventually caught and so stopped from killing. The active serial killers offer complex models of psychic and other disturbance which readers, like the investigators lead by Lecter, come to ‘understand’—but that induced illusion is slyly offset against Lecter, to whom no Freudian or FBI paradigms seem to have the slightest application. The only substantive differences are that (i) the rôle of active investigating detective, in *Red Dragon* given to weary expert male Will Douglas, is in *The Silence of the Lambs* given to fresh but haunted trainee female Clarice Starling; and (ii) in *Red Dragon* Lecter stays in prison, while in *The Silence of the Lambs* he stages an escape.

In one sense Harris’s repeated plot-strategy is amusingly clear in Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* (1990, filmed 1993), where everything (including their own presumptions) primed readers to expect an enormously terrifying but singular *Tyrannosaurus rex*, only for the main threat to prove (with satisfying shock) the smaller and smarter velociraptors, who also pose a far greater threat of escaping the park and eating pretty much anything they fancy. This narrative coup has serious bearing on a common misconception of carnivorous dinosaurs as solo monsters like *T. rex* rather than intelligent, co-operative hunters like velociraptors, sufficiently so that one could reasonably argue the film, despite fantastical premises and absurd action, successfully communicated to an enormous public a significant revision in scientific understanding. In a similar way, Harris has twice played off public preference for a serial killer assumed to be knowable, serving up the pathologies of Francis Dolarhyde and Jame Gumb (the latter yet again based on Ed Gein) in juicy helpings to fuel the illusion that in understanding these men sufficiently to catch them one somehow understands their breed. And tsk-t-t-t, there is Lecter looking out of the shadows with a forkful of human sweetbreads in one hand, asking if we’re sure we understand him now. The velociraptors can easily seem kinder.

The two principal differences between *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* are related, for it is Lecter’s sexual dynamic with Starling as a woman that allows him to leverage his escape by playing her off against Senator Martin. A central male–female rather than male–male pairing activated a distinct set of models, and

Harris made sublime use of Lecter as a Svengalian beast to Starling's beauty,¹ but also freed that beast, and in *Hannibal* drew a necessary conclusion by bringing Lecter and Starling together and reversing the serial killer's preference for death over sex. Clarice, that is, can finally catch Hannibal only in the romantic sense, and in doing so controls his murderous and gluttonous desires by evacuating them as lust. The set-up for the ending, too much of a spoiler to be revealed, proved so disturbing to most readers that *Hannibal* has never had the same attention as *The Silence of the Lambs*, and the film-makers burked it altogether, offering two alternative, infinitely clichéd and pointless endings of their own. Quite a few people do recall, mostly from the film, that Lecter's originary trauma turned out to have been a childhood experience of wartime cannibalism in the Ukraine, but the point of Harris's (and Lecter's) continuing analysis of serial killing has not been absorbed.

That is, I think, genuinely a shame, for the transformation in public knowledge and understanding that *The Silence of the Lambs* achieved is remarkable, though it did not, of course, have to work alone. By 1989 many fictions had confronted the problem; *Red Dragon* itself had been on shelves for eight years, and *Manhunter* on screens for three. But by putting an erotic relationship at the centre of investigation, and an act of fabrication at the heart of the crime/s—Jame Gumb tailoring himself a woman-skin (as Gein did) to remake himself as he wishes—*The Silence of the Lambs* made the theorised dynamics of sex and death patent to all. The idea of self-development is just as central in *Red Dragon*, but however memorable Dolarhyde's obsession with William Blake's painting *The Woman Clothed With The Sun, Moon And Stars And The Great Red Dragon* (which he eventually *eats*, for Heaven's sake), it did not carry the charge *The Silence of the Lambs* delivered with Jame Gumb's breeding of Death's-Head Moths. The explicit imagery of insect metamorphoses (cocooned pupae, voracious caterpillars, and what entomology happily calls imágines²) interpreted the iteration of serial killing as (for the killer) a process of *becoming*. In parallel, Gumb's desperately insane tailoring fused the detestability of merciless and insensible killing with the logic and pitiable desires of his hellish life. And where in *Red Dragon* erotics came only incidentally from Dolarhyde's kindness to blind Reba McClane, in *The Silence of the Lambs* they come centrally from Starling and Lecter, leaving Catherine Martin's naked ordeal as a captive of Gumb's free to be seen as the murderous, wholly self-serving exercise in power that it is. This more than anything enabled director Jonathan Demme to show on screen

¹ See Harriet Hawkins, 'Thank you, Dr Lecter', in *The Modern Review* (Autumn 1991), pp. 30–1.

² A plural of 'imago', the fully adult insect.

Harris's understanding that for serial killers control and murder are not adjuncts of sex, but substitutes for it.

There is a more polysyllabic Freudian version of this working theory, involving the erotic and thanatic (or sex and death) drives and the powerful notion that the primary emotional effect of childhood abuse is to arrest particular aspects of mental growth, leaving a stunted set of pathways within the maturing adult. *The Silence of the Lambs* made the populist case, and Harris's work has ever since been rehashed and formulaised by Hollywood and TV networks, one cause of the relative failure of *Hannibal*. Lecter and Starling, however, are something else. In the narrowest possible view (and leaving *Hannibal Rising* out of account), their dance of dynamics enacts the investigative inversion of what remains our primary psychopathological model of serial killing. In any wider view, they became to the 1990s what Holmes and Watson were to the 1890s, odd-couple heroes on the criminal frontier, with that added modern frisson of sexuality and (for the interested) the full expression at decade's end in *Hannibal* of what could justly be called a fucking cure for evil.

Back in (Mid-)Yorks., where Reginald Hill was living and working, the obligation of a crime novelist to deal with the kinds of crime that happen in his own town was proving awkward.¹ The archetypal Yorkshire riding and modern administrative county that Hill had since 1970 created around Dalziel & Pascoe hosted action that was fundamentally *comedic*—as series rather have to be, granted the survival of their protagonists—but also increasingly *comic*. There were, for example, finely timed conversations, sly allusions, and rich Wodehousian or Rabelaisian metaphors for Dalziel's gargantuanism and the matching ugliness of his highly efficient CID organiser, DS Wield. With these structural and modal qualities, Mid-Yorks. was throughout the 1970s a superbly flexible setting for five Dalziel-&-Pascoe novels, *ab initio* accommodating tragic farce in *A Clubbable Woman* (1970), and by *A Pinch of Snuff* (1978) able intelligently to manage the peculiarly vile reality of snuff movies amid a more basic local porn industry. Hill is sometimes thought too cosy a crime writer, and certainly plays (often brilliantly) on the Golden-Age legacy, but in *Mayhem Parva* (as Colin Watson dubbed the eternal cosy-crime village²) there could never have been a place for snuff movies, nor the mindset their

¹ A different summary of some of this argument appears in my long essay on Hill for the Scribner's *British Writers Supplements* series. See also 'Of Yorkshire and Purgatory' in this e-book.

² See *Snobbery with Violence: Crime Stories and Their Audience* (1971). 'Parva' means 'small' or 'lesser', and there is implicitly a nearby *Mayhem Magna*.

consumption implies. Whatever southern shire Mayhem Parva may be in, Mid-Yorks. was by 1978 a very different county.

From 1978–81, however, still teaching in Doncaster, Hill lived the intense local and national bewilderment of the Ripper years. If he and Yorkshire were in that acid reality, so was Mid-Yorks., and *A Killing Kindness* (1980) tried honourably to raise its body-count. Without giving away either the plot or a blazing narrative coup with a clue, Hill's problem was that killing many people and serial killing are not the same, legally, psychologically, or literarily. If deaths become truly excessive, as in Dashiell Hammett's notorious *Red Harvest* (1929), readers may suspect a pathology at work, probably the author's, but the whole point about serial killing (manifest in talk of the Ripper) was the sheer incomprehensibility of iterative murder-mutilation. Even such ideas as *lustmord*, familiar to cinema buffs since Fritz Lang's superlative *M* (1931), didn't seem to leave one any the wiser in 1978, and if Hill was clueless, so must Dalziel & Pascoe be. But having set about depopulating Mid-Yorks. with a serial strangler who dominates local and national journalism, just as Sutcliffe did in Yorkshire reality, Hill needed his coppers to catch someone and couldn't wait on the real police. He had to invent, and not knowing himself what made such a killer tick went with what he knew. The result is a satisfying and highly literary multiple murderer, but not the serial killer whom the plot began by supposing at work; nor in 1980 could Hill risk any recuperative satire of mistaken hysteria, for the Ripper was still ripping and hysterics all too real.

That Hill finished the novel at all is commendable; that composition and publication came *before* Sutcliffe was caught is sharply germane, and in so far as *A Killing Kindness* attempted in fiction to confront a reality the Ripper imposed on Yorkshire, it failed. Though an admirable attempt, measured against the following year's best serial-killer novel, *Red Dragon*, Hill's analysis fell short—hardly surprisingly, given the proliferation of US serial killers and Harris's knowledge of Quantico, but illuminating a previously invisible limit to Mid-Yorks..

There is also a surprising dénouement in *A Killing Kindness* that should not be revealed but can be described as supernatural vengeance compensating for a failure of human justice. Hill is a long-standing master of the ghost-story—try the dazzling *There are No Ghosts in the Soviet Union and other stories* (1987) or *The Stranger House* (2005)—and had in 1980 just daringly juggled the explosively antithetical genres of crime and ghost fiction¹ in 'Pascoe's Ghost' and 'Dalziel's Ghost', both

¹ The second of Mgr Ronald Knox's famous 'Decalogue' of detective-story commandments (in his introduction to *Best Detective Stories of the Year 1928*) forbids "All supernatural or preternatural

collected in *Pascoe's Ghost and other Brief Chronicles of Crime* (1979). But in Sutcliffe's shadow the villain's escape in *A Killing Kindness* from human but not paranormal justice looks like an authorial fantasy responding to the unknown Ripper's continuing freedom, and in its closing juxtaposition of incongruent genres a wry acknowledgement of the larger failure I outline.

British graphic novelist Alan Moore, who also lived through the Sutcliffe years (though not in Yorkshire), channelled his experience into a *Jack the Ripper* tale, *From Hell* (1991–8, filmed 2001), and in the film-version Jack memorably says in November 1888, after butchering Mary Jane Kelley, "I have given birth to the twentieth century".¹ This Jack has a complex, Masonic theory as well as insane delusions of grandeur and duty backing his claim, but neither is needed to understand it. Never before that London autumn had the British public had to confront the phenomenon of serial killing, and while Jack's lesson had faded in Britain before Sutcliffe refurbished it 90 years on, his infamy lived at all levels of culture. The most serious accounts of literary and social modernity do not ignore the thread that runs from those Whitechapel dismemberments of fellow humans to the pulverised flesh of the WW1 trenches, Munich *lustmord* in the 1920s, and even Auschwitz, nor the tide Jack emblematises that has seen over a century the alienated killer-of-strangers evolve into a commonplace of plots and prisons alike.²

Serial killers are accommodated in fiction as they are apprehended in reality, through a new kind of mass-scale police work. Almost every major serial-killer novel (including *From Hell*, Lindley's *Mercy*, the Lecter series, and David Peace's nightmarish *Red Riding Quartet*, based on Sutcliffe³) is at least in part a detailed police procedural strongly rooted in a real and predominantly urban geography. But Mid-Yorks., though verisimilar and well-populated, is importantly *unreal*, an archetype not a mimesis, which is perhaps why it could accommodate supernatural

agencies [...] as a matter of course". Given my argument 'Of Purgatory and Yorkshire', it is interesting that one of the few other writers to manage a supernatural touch is Sayers, in *Busman's Honeymoon* (Epithalamion, part 3).

¹ In the novel he says "It is beginning, Netley. Only just beginning. For better or worse, the twentieth century. I have delivered it." : Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell, *From Hell, being a melodrama in sixteen parts* (Paddington, Aus.: Eddie Campbell Comics, 1999), ch. 10, p. 33, top central panel.

² For the best recent fictions deploying the same awareness see Rennie Airth, *River of Darkness* (1999), in which an Inspector with trench traumata of his own must hunt a serial killer of families whose pathology stems from wartime experience; Faye Kellerman, *Straight into Darkness* (2005), confronting the confluence of serial killing with the NSDAP in Munich in 1929; and Pavel Kohout, *Hvězdná hodina vrahů* (1995, as *The Widow Killer*, 1998), set in occupied Prague during WW2.

³ David Peace, *Nineteen Seventy Four* (1999), *Nineteen Seventy Seven* (2000), *Nineteen Eighty* (2001), and *Nineteen Eighty Three* (2002).

revenge but did not possess a sufficiently massive, unseen ‘real’ population to sustain the practice or capture of a killer like Sutcliffe. For Hill to make plots live and work in Mid-Yorks. he must find or make connections to acquire meaning and accumulate clarity, but a serial killer does neither, and in one sense Sutcliffe escaped Hill’s Mid-Yorks. Force in 1979–80 just as he escaped the Yorkshire police and everyone else until 1981.

In its serial nature, however, the proper context of *A Killing Kindness* has grown with its movement from ‘new D.-&-P # 6’ to ‘# 6 of 20’, and the problem and interest have triangulated nicely. Hill’s immediate response in D.-&-P # 7, the magnificent *Deadheads* (1983), was to rework the problem in a form Mid-Yorks. could accommodate whole. Patrick Aldermann, a charming, soft-spoken man whose wife knows Ellie Pascoe, finds life a bed of roses because all who stand in his way (grandmother, rival, boss ...) fall victim to unfortunate and invariably fatal accidents. Aldermann may have killed half-a-dozen human beings without breaking sweat, or quite possibly no-one; in the end, as at the beginning, irresolution rules. In the clear self-interest and asexuality of his supposed murders there is no trace of the core problem with Sutcliffe’s kind of killing, but severe contrast of Aldermann’s pleasant courtesy with the ruthless inhumanity of his putative deeds confronts readers constantly with an uncomfortable problem—and as it lines us up with the detectives’ problem (being *in its own terms* both epistemological—how may we know?—and ontological—if we are right, what is he?), it can adequately stand for the problem Sutcliffe posed in reality. The crucial structural difference is that with a suspect always in open view the problem isn’t ‘Who is serial killing?’, but ‘Is this man Aldermann a (‘serial’) killer?’, and the definition of serial killing is thereby included throughout in the problems to be considered, rather than being (as in Yorkshire reality and *A Killing Kindness*) predetermined by a string of butchered or strangled corpses and a media moniker. Lacking a safely anonymous monster to name and vilify, the national media are also excluded from *Deadheads*, giving Dalziel and especially Pascoe (drawn in personally through Ellie) much more space to ponder the problem and the nature of its irresolution.

Even for a novelist of manners as skilled and witty as Hill such space might spell danger. Unless devotees of the cosy and complacent, modern serial readers of crime are likely to prefer something at least slightly hard-boiled, and can have damagingly little tolerance for extended conversation,¹ particularly when it takes a philosophical

¹ Hardened and vulgarised as commercial rule-of-thumb, this becomes the story that Jonathan Demme had trouble financing *Silence of the Lambs* because prospective producers balked at the

turn. Dorothy L. Sayers, for example, who in *Gaudy Night* (1935) and *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) bought the crime novel of manners to something very like perfection, is far less honoured than she should be, in large part because her tremendous conversations—whether a set-piece at an Oxford high table or literary by-play with a local copper—go not only unappreciated in our action-packed world but often to shallow damnation as dull and snobbish wordage. And if a good deal more generous with dead bodies (albeit mostly in retrospect), Hill was, like Sayers in *Gaudy Night*, attempting a novel low on obvious villainy and high on the daily business of living with a stubbornly inchoate problem. Although he denies conscious influence, it is thus notable that *Deadheads* also adopted in very striking form a practice on which Sayers depended in *Gaudy Night & Busman's Honeymoon*, and that might be called 'structural epigraphy'.

Hill had used linked novel-and chapter-epigraphs before in both series and non-series work. *An Advancement of Learning* (1971, D.-&-P # 2) takes them with great profit from its eponymous work by Bacon, and *An April Shroud* (1975, # 4) has very funny (if un-Keatsian) chapter-titles, but *Deadheads* went a long step further. As the title suggests, roses (whose fading blooms must be lopped to encourage new ones) and their breeding are central to the plot, and novel-epigraphs from Defoe and Swinburne ("*I shall never be friends again with roses.*") are backed by glittering part-epigraphs from canonical luminaries including Pope ("*Or, quick effluvia darting through the brain, / Die of a rose in aromatic pain.*") and Lewis Carroll ("*'It's my opinion you never think at all,' the Rose said in a rather severe tone.*"). What really punches, though, are the unified chapter-titles and -epigraphs, the names and (parenthetically) the catalogue descriptions of well-bred roses:

YESTERDAY

(Floribunda. Multitudinous tiny lilac-pink flowers with an olde-worlde fairy-tale air.)

RIPPLES

(Floribunda. Free-flowering, lilac-mauve blooms, rippled petals, abundant foliage, susceptible to mildew in the fall.)¹

first, eight-and-a-half minute conversation between Lecter & Starling. Because they cannot move, 'action', it seems, must unacceptably stop.

¹ Reginald Hill, *Deadheads* (London: Collins, 1983), pp. 33, 52 ; previous quotations, pp. [5], [7], [147].

A rich sense of the possible applications to each small unit of narrative, and hence (with plainly consistent epigraphs) of unity in all, is balanced by the resistance of quotations that are stubbornly themselves, and import their own worlds to jostle for an enriching place in Hill's unfolding scheme.

In just that manner Sayers gave to the chapters of *Gaudy Night* epigraphs revealing a depth and breadth of Renaissance scholarship, raiding the Bodleian Library's Jacobethan collections for a chorus of antique English voices who (with the stone force and undergraduate populations of the 'Dreaming Spires') crucially help to make real, by grounding them in articulate history, the landed and ideological inheritances of both her aristocratic sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey, and simultaneously of his rural-Bloomsbury middle-class *objet d'amour*, Harriet Vane. Miss Vane, like Miss Sayers, had the chance to learn of such Renaissance authors while reading English at Oxford as a very early female student, and the resonating, memorable epigraphs (in that Elizabethan prose that is at once sonorous and tack-sharp in its unfamiliar patterns of thought) do far more than decorate the narrative. As each is highly individual, summary is hard, but beyond summoning a range of very real and opinionated minds whose judgements sit uncomfortably amid the daily shocks and compromises of modernity, they also (because known to Peter and Harriet) mediate in the romance plot—and it was a large part of Sayers's genius to force that mediation (though that is another story¹). Hill's rose-catalogue quotations seem very different, and sometimes reek ("an olde-worlde ... air") of exactly that debased modernity that Sayers's epigraphs rebuke, but they do very much the same kind of job in mediating between the strands of Hill's plot, and through their sustained focus on the titular metaphor keep the novel, for all its conversations, grippingly taut.

After two novels wrestling with their horrors Hill reasonably backed away from serial killers, who are, after all and despite everything, fortunately rare in every county. In January 1981 Sutcliffe had finally been caught, so urgency receded, and if the arrest in London in February 1983 of Dennis Nilsen (who admitted 15 murders of young *men* and was later convicted of six) fixed the phenomenon much more widely in British reality, it also made for a still more complex problem than Sutcliffe had posed. Thereafter Yorkshire politics stumbled into the bitter violence of the Miners' Strike of 1984–5 and its long aftermath, about which Hill (who had been thinking of the mining communities Mid-Yorks. must have when the Strike began) would produce his best work to date in *Under World* (1988, # 10). And after all that,

¹ See 'Of Purgatory and Yorkshire'.

once Mrs Thatcher had fallen in 1990 there came the long and unlovely pseudo-transition to Blairism, a recurrent motif in Hill's work throughout the 1990s–2000s.

Yet further responses to Sutcliffe's butcheries were neither burked nor forgotten, but rather displaced into a notable new motif in Hill's non-series writing. Settings in the 1914–18 trenches inform several stories and a remarkable novel, *No Man's Land* (1985), based on tales of an international band of deserters living in a shell-bastardised wilderness behind British lines near the Somme. Of particular concern is the official British butchery of their own private soldiers and NCOs for cowardice, insubordination, and suchlike military offences with which Other Ranks were charged, so *No Man's Land* crackles with injustice. The same indignant rage is evident in an irruption of this material into *The Wood Beyond* (1996, # 14), when Pascoe discovers his great-grandfather (also Peter) to have been so executed, after a travesty of a court martial. A case simultaneously takes him to a once-stately home where some relentless Yorkshire rain and a *cordon sanitaire* created by the pharmaceuticals firm now controversially using it for vivisection have made of a woodland garden a sucking mire bad enough to summon the murderous bogs and shell-craters of Passchendaele that the older Pascoe knew. Fascinatingly, Mid-Yorks. has no problem absorbing this fragment of the European front lines, for in its creation the county's own native flora and fauna have alike been anonymously dismembered, and remain in memory to haunt and curse the scene. *Under World* had gifted Mid-Yorks. with a Hell, and *Pictures of Perfection* (1994, # 13) had in marvellous fashion managed a spree killer of sorts, but this discovery of the older Pascoe's antique loyalty, service, and casual betrayal to official murder after surviving a futile slaughterhouse in battle abruptly extended verisimilar historical depth, and created space for a different order of experience.

The Wood Beyond thus gave advance notice of Hill's formal return as a crime writer to the unhappy matter of serial killing, in the diptych of *Dialogues of the Dead* (2002, # 17) and *Death's Jest-Book* (2003, # 18). But comedy will out, and they are perhaps the strangest of all his books, defying analysis except at very considerable length. This is partly because they deploy a great deal of material deriving from canonical subluminaries George Lyttelton (1709–73) and Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803–49), who respectively supply the novels' titles, and partly by introducing a blindingly whimsical means whereby an ill, troubled, and wretchedly *sympathetic* serial killer selects victims. A flavour of events is offered by the full title of the first novel, *Dialogues of the Dead : or Paronomania! ~~an aged worm for wept royals a warm doge for top lawyers~~ a word game for two players*, and the

ethical challenge of a serial-killer comedy is confronted throughout the diptych, sometimes straying perilously close to open disrespect for victims. More than 20 years after Sutcliffe's capture and permanent imprisonment, with far greater public awareness and considerably less tender Yorkshire sensibilities, there was a sufficiently clear need for debunking obsession with serial killing to allow satire, congenial to Hill, while a larger, more visible population (generated by various devices, including a bustling workplace setting) allowed a greater anonymity of successive victims, lessening any *frisson* at brisk narrative disrespect for their lives. Perhaps the only obvious weakness one might identify is that the psychopathology of the killer, logical in its own terms and appealing purely as a puzzle, is not in persuasive relation to the likes of Dolarhyde and Gumb, nor yet Sutcliffe and Nilsen. If anyone, Lecter might be summoned, for sheer idiosyncrasy of motive and politeness of speech, but, truth to tell, Hill's double narrative has more to do with older ideas of death and revenance as they inform modern ideas of predation than with particular problems Peter Sutcliffe once posed a place where Hill then lived.

It would be nice to report Hill's triumphant return as a serial writer to a fence he found he had balked, but neither serial writing nor serial reading can often work thus, for both writers and readers move on. With Clarice Starling we have all found ways enough to make those lambs keep schtumm, or pass them by; and the British serial killers caught since Sutcliffe, Nilsen and the Gloucester tag-team of Fred & Rosemary West, were unknown before a 'house of horror' was dug up, so there has never again been the kind of pressure Sutcliffe exerted to understand a serial killer at work. After the West case in 1994–5 Hill might have opted for the retrospective scenario, as Peter Robinson brilliantly did in *Aftermath* (2001), and still might—but the percentages are falling and the subjects to which he has, stunningly, turned his archetypal county down the years command their own abiding respect.

In another way Hill has in any case done the diviner thing, for the complex oddity of his return to serial killing in the diptych shows a Lecter smile, velociraptor intelligence pushing aside all the rapidly formulaised sub-generic conventions of explanatory abuse and abducted torture with a renewed search and fresh questions. Not being God, even in Mid-Yorks. and despite creating Dalziel, Hill cannot grant understanding of the moral nullity represented by Sutcliffe's infamous remark to his brother, "I were just cleaning up streets, our kid. Just cleaning up the streets", nor better knowledge of the Sutcliffes still among us.¹ But he can and does provide rich

¹ Sutcliffe is quoted in Burn, "... *somebody's husband* ...", p. 355, and thence as one of Morrison's epigraphs to *The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper*.

ways of living with and thinking about our knowledge of their existence.

Just how civil an experience reading Hill is should not be underestimated. Very few novelists can hope to impose corrections of general understanding within their lifetime, and in measuring him against the extraordinary (and far less literary) work Harris achieved with *The Silence of the Lambs* aesthetic comparison is unfairly disabled. Hill's particular gifts as a novelist do not well suit the territories of serial killing, and he knows as well as any the deep shadow Harris casts, yet he managed in his mid-sixties a lengthy double work that for all its whimsies bites any number of bullets. Perhaps his best single novel, *On Beulah Height* (1998, # 15), also tackled the problem with equally stern (but not grim) determination in making an uncaught but inactive serial killer part of the backstory to a search for a missing child that turns astonishingly on Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* and becomes a requiem for all lost children. All in all, in keeping with his plainly civil and civic practice throughout his (writing) life, Hill has kept his and readers' noses to the grindstone, cheerfully insisting on attention, thought, and good humour while we notice what as citizens we must. One of his heroes is Dickens, for crusading journalism alongside and within the novels as well as that stylistic genius that Ruskin diagnosed:

Allowing for his manner of telling them, the things he tells us are always true [...] But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions.¹

The same is true of Hill, substituting *Under World* or *On Beulah Height* for *Hard Times*, and if Dickens saw the worst of Victorian exploitation and indifference, Hill has had his own neo-Victorianism to beard in its latter-day dens. Just as Dickens did (and Addison or Steele, come to that), Hill understands what he does as both joyful privilege and ethical arena, and just as for all those literary luminaries, that means for him *serial* writing and engagement with readers.

As a new generation have very audibly been discovering through the arts of J. K. Rowling, serial reading can sometimes be a white-knuckle ride. The mistake made by those exasperated with Potteriana and prone to dismiss attempts at analysis as intrinsically risible, is to think that it is merely Harry himself, or the pleasing details

¹ John Ruskin, *Unto this Last* (1862), XVII, 31.

and inventiveness of the plots, that are being supposed important. What actually matters, of course, and the reason Rowling is of entirely serious critical and scholarly interest, is that her series—and it could only be what it is as a series, in and over time—has become a vehicle for its readers’ thinking. The argument is complete in every publication-day image of an eight-year-old at 1 a.m. happily lost to the world in a Rowling tome much fatter than his or her head, and the sustenance of children’s mass attention as they and the series have grown has seen her pull together a very substantial cohort as the Potter generation. The first novel appeared in 1997 and was filmed in 2001; the seventh and last will be published in 2007; the sixth film is scheduled for release in 2008, and the seventh will presumably follow in 2009, so the *primary* span will be a long decade 1997–2009; and the six novels to date have sold more than 300 million copies, many of which have been re/read by multiple readers. Put another way, most ‘First World’ and many other children born since 1983 (i.e. those under 14 when *Philosopher’s Stone* came out) either already or soon will have experience as serial readers, and when talking heads celebrate the gift of reading Rowling has given so many children, her serial qualities should not be thought sugar for the medicine, nor a merely commercial phenomenon, but an intrinsic feature of what she has wrought. Her model clearly lies in old school stories, probably via the Mallory Towers series by Enid Blyton, and she takes from them with boarding-school conventions the critical one-school-year-per-novel form—without which Harry could never have developed as he has.

Moreover, Rowling evidently understands an ethics in her profession of series fiction for children.¹ Media discussions have oddly avoided the matter, even with the word *Half-Blood* in her sixth title, but the fundamental concerns of Rowling’s world with racism have been plain since Malfoy, Crabb, and Goyle first snarled ‘Filthy mudblood!’ at a magically talented child of one or more untalented ‘muggle’ parents. Way back in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* Dumbledore’s collectable Chocolate-Frog-card, described during Harry’s first train-journey to Hogwarts and later crucially recalled for its information about Nicolas Flamel, says directly that Dumbledore’s greatest achievement was his “defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945”.² Grindelwald would anglicise as ‘Grendelwood’, a name that potentially means something quite other, but Germanic form in conjunction with the

¹ For a range of more and less persuasive views see Lana A. Whited, ed., *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon* (2002; rev, 2004), and John Granger, ed., *Who Killed Albus Dumbledore: What Really Happened in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince? Six expert Harry Potter detectives examine the evidence* (2006).

² J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 77.

date 1945 leaves no possible doubt that association with Nazism (and perhaps Hitler's paranormal interests) is deliberate, and the issue thereby invoked can only be ideologies of race. Quite what form Rowling's massively extended parable about racism and growing up will take in completion with *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* remains to be seen (though Rowling has now made it clear that two more characters will die), but the qualities she has shown so far, including resistance to tremendous pressure from publishers and the mass-media, relaxed control over the fundamental faithfulness of the film-scripts, and the clear novel-by-novel escalation of action into more adult territory, give real confidence. Being of Rowling's generation I see in her the legacies of Rock against Racism, Two-Tone music, and the great cause of anti-*Apartheid*, but anyone acknowledging the reading-life of a nation as a sphere of civil action must also acknowledge the ethics of her writing practice—and so potentially at least of the serial reading practices it induces, merchandised Potter pencil-cases or no.

Not every reader is a serial reader, but many are, and with good reason. Much, alas, as Sutcliffe forced a nation to understand the meaning of waiting and increments, so Rowling as a commanding serial writer at patient work has forcibly reminded us that the running narratives we devour in the broadcast media originated in print, and have pleasures to offer that no airwave or celluloid can capture. They can be experienced only by living with books through time, and the charge of escapism so often levelled at genre fiction is almost as often pure foolishness or bad irony. The work of Harris is enough to bring anyone up short, and the far more literary Hill has been deprived through what must now be the great bulk of his writing life of the plaudits and national admiration he merits both as a fine and as an outstandingly civil novelist. His (and my) comfort must be that what the critics have steadfastly ignored legions of readers have not, and the home Hill has found at HarperCollins (whose Crime List has been superb under editor Julia Wisdom) has enabled continuous development in craft and art to his present age of 70, and there is every reason to hope well beyond. By the time literary criticism catches up with him I imagine I shall be long gone myself, so I'm happy to enjoy the real thing first-hand, in the world of serial living where responsibilities come with the job.

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