

Central Queensland University

Leanne Dodd

The crime novel as trauma fiction

Abstract:

The subject matter of crime fiction makes this form of creative writing an ideal vehicle for representing trauma as a subset of trauma literature, however, the ongoing debate about the definition of 'literature' has meant that crime fiction has received little critical attention in this respect. Drawing on the latest research in the field of trauma literature, this paper presents the benefits of writing across the threshold of literary and genre fiction and investigates how trauma might be represented in a crime fiction novel so it performs similar functions as in trauma literature. The proposition emerging is that a number of the narrative strategies identified in contemporary trauma literature can be aligned to those used in crime fiction, allowing the creation of a crime novel with an authentic representation of trauma, while retaining the elements that make crime fiction popular. An initial framework for incorporating the narrative strategies of trauma literature into crime fiction will be proposed which will not only be informative for those writing and researching genre fiction, but also provide a foundation for further study into the value and power narrative has to evoke cathartic outcomes for a widespread genre fiction audience.

Biographical Note:

Leanne Dodd is a postgraduate student in the school of Education and the Arts at Central Queensland University, currently researching the representation of trauma in crime fiction. She holds a BCom with a minor in Communications and further Arts studies in English Literature. Under the pen name of Lea Scott, she has published three independent crime novels with developing themes of trauma and co-authored three short story anthologies with Brisbane writers' groups. She serves in an Executive Management Committee position with Queensland Writers Centre and is an appointed

mentor for emerging crime writers. She has appeared on writing seminar panels and facilitated workshops throughout Queensland, both independently and for Queensland Writers Centre, Sisters in Crime and University of Southern Queensland.

Keywords: Trauma theory, Trauma fiction, Representation of trauma, Crime fiction, Hybrid fiction

'Not only do we as humans, give meaning to our experience by "storying" our lives, but we are also empowered to "perform" our lives through knowledge of them' (Tomm qtd. in White and Epston 1990: xi).

Introduction

As the contemporary world is exposed to traumatic events in more graphic and perilous ways, the potential to be confronted by trauma grows in magnitude. The media bombards viewers with reports of crime and catastrophe, Hollywood turns major disasters and family dysfunction into entertainment and the prolific reach of social media brings more people face-to-face with uncensored atrocities. Trauma literature reflects this growing trend, developing in conjunction with a strong trauma recovery movement as evidenced by the increasing numbers of support groups for all manner of trauma survivors and development of therapeutic treatments using personal narrative as a tool to reshape memory and lives following traumatic events (White and Epston 1990).

Beginning in the 1980s and gaining momentum in the 1990s, literary critics have explored the relationship between trauma and literature. To understand 'trauma literature', it is useful to first discuss the term 'trauma'. Caruth defines trauma as 'an [event] experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive acts of the survivor' (1996: 4). Caruth's definition traces back to Freud's earliest concept of the 'latency' of trauma, first discussed in 1895 (Freud and Breuer 2000: 174). Trauma is not intrinsically about the traumatic event, which according to Caruth and Freud is not fully integrated by the survivor into consciousness, but refers to the symptoms caused by the event (Visser 2011: 271). Symptoms can vary from hyperarousal of the nervous system, intrusion of repetitive thoughts and memories to numbing responses such as addiction, self-harm and dissociation. Consequent behaviours ranging from withdrawal to outbursts can sever connections with other human beings (Herman 1992). While much of this earlier work focuses on interpersonal trauma, recent studies by Brandell and Ringel (2012) and Eaglestone et al (2014) take into consideration the political and social dimensions of trauma, highlighting the visibility of traumatic events such as terrorism, massacres and bullying

in modern life. Allowing readers to face experiences of trauma in the safe environment of the narrative offers a way of empowering them with knowledge to absorb the shock of trauma and to develop an awareness of the issues facing trauma survivors (Whitehead 2004).

The subject matter of crime fiction makes it an ideal vehicle for representing trauma as a subset of trauma literature, however, ongoing debates about the definition of 'literary' continue to separate 'valuable' works of literary fiction from popular genre fiction (Chalupsky 2010). Studying the narrative strategies employed in trauma literature, an emerging proposition is that several of them can be aligned with those used in crime fiction. These parallels may assist in the creation of a hybrid novel that can be situated within both genres allowing the benefits provided by trauma fiction to be disseminated to the larger audience which crime fiction attracts. Hybrid fiction must satisfy the criteria of both genres, so care must be taken to retain the elements that make crime fiction popular (Norman 2011: 40). This paper identifies such narrative strategies and outlines how they may be drawn upon to achieve these aims.

Trauma Fiction vs Crime Fiction

Trauma fiction has been defined succinctly by Vickroy as 'fictional narratives that help readers to access traumatic experience' (2002: 1). While Vickroy's definition is precise, Caruth proposes a paradoxical challenge - while trauma is relived literally in the nightmares, flashbacks and intrusive thoughts of its victims, the lack of its integration into the consciousness of the victim does not allow conscious recall and thereby *restricts* access to it (Caruth 1995). Herman complicates this further by asserting 'traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images' (1992: 38). How, then, can narrative mirror these seemingly inaccessible sensations and images to allow readers to construct meanings for trauma? As critics and writers continue to seek answers, Whitehead recognises 'novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms' (2004: 3). This suggests an opportunity for authors, including crime writers, to empower a large audience with knowledge of trauma by presenting how characters process traumatic experience. Many critics agree with Whitehead and expand Vickroy's definition beyond purely traumatic content, associating trauma fiction with a structural

and thematically fragmented form which simulates the temporal disruption caused by trauma (Collins 2011: 9).

Trauma literature functions to provide benefits for readers in two ways. For trauma survivors, it can assist with reconnection—to self, voice, memory, and the social community—connections which are lost through the effects of trauma (Goldsmith and Satterlee 54; Vickroy 1). For other readers, it can provide a safe space to confront their own fears bought about by a world saturated with trauma, and also engage them in empathetic connection with trauma survivors (Goldsmith and Satterlee 43). Critics suggest 'bearing witness' to trauma testimonies can serve to transform perceptions, remove stigmas and engender a cultural consciousness which may assist in combating the marginalisation which impedes recovery (Goldsmith and Satterlee; Herman; Horvitz; Vickroy). Vickroy sums this up when he says writers of trauma fiction:

expand their audiences' awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory and warn us that trauma reproduces itself if left unattended (2002: 3).

Drawing on trauma theory, a range of narrative strategies may be employed to achieve these benefits in trauma fiction, as identified by literary critics and scholars in the remainder of this paper. This research lays the groundwork for a new investigation into whether these strategies appear, in some form, in the crime fiction genre.

Crime fiction opens up a space in which to depict more authentic and safe representations of traumatic experience to a willing and receptive audience. Despite its potential for amoral content, crime fiction is inherently a moral genre addressing moral questions (Spring and King 2012: 205). A key feature of crime fiction's appeal is the predictable and comforting way in which the world is restored to order. While trauma and crime fiction has the capacity to re-traumatise or vicariously traumatise readers due to its traumatic content, Lucas claims that 'as readers [of crime fiction] we can trust in the extremes of exposure to trauma and anxiety because we know they will carry us safely through to resolution' (2010: 210).

In defining crime fiction, Spring emphasises its most distinguishing feature as having a crime at its core (2012: 172). Parallels can be drawn here with trauma fiction, as this allows an exploration of traumatic experience suffered by victim/s of the crime. A second feature, dependence on a strong plot, has proven more problematic for crime fiction in receiving literary consideration given 'literature' generally shows contempt for plot, linking it with 'lower' forms of genre fiction (Norman 2011: 43). Some crime writers, such as Miles Franklin Award winner Peter Temple, have overcome this objection by employing stylistic language (Knight 2010: 39), which has elevated their work above the popular form. The intent of this paper, however, is not to enter the debate surrounding the policing of genre boundaries, but to present the benefits of writing across the threshold of literary and genre fiction. By drawing on research in the field of trauma, it will map the narrative strategies of trauma fiction and suggest how these tools can operate in crime fiction to perform similar functions for its readers as trauma fiction.

Award-winning Australian literary novel, *Surrender*, presents a good model to explore the crossover of these strategies as it can be seen to contain elements of trauma and crime. As a result of childhood trauma, its protagonist, Anwell, develops a dissociative disorder which splits his personality into good and evil alter-egos, Gabriel and Finnegan. Constable McIlwraith attempts to solve crimes of arson and murder, carried out by Finnegan seeking revenge on those who have harmed Gabriel/Anwell (Hartnett 2005). Reviewer, Dianne Dempsey, has described *Surrender* as 'a psychological thriller and an astute depiction of the impact of suffering on a child's mind' (2005: Para 10).

Duality

A review of trauma and crime fiction indicates clear parallels in their dual narrative structures. Whitehead describes two contradictory narratives in trauma fiction: 'One is the traumatic event, which is registered rather than experienced. The other is a kind of memory of the event, which takes the form of a perpetual troping of it by the split or dissociated psyche' (2004: 161-2). The two aspects are distinguished as content (the event) and form (the response) with the ultimate goal being the integration of the two.

Malmgren refers to a similar duality in crime fiction. He contends the crime novel contains two narratives, the first the story of the crime (the event) or 'what really happened' and the second the story of the investigation (the response), a search into memory and the past for hidden truths (1997: 121). This shares a similar pairing of content and form as outlined by Whitehead. Malmgren emphasises:

The only plot-event that the two narratives [crime and solution] share is, of course, the crime itself.. A mystery is inevitably concerned with something over and done with, something in the past. A murder initiates the mystery novel, but the novel is at pains to reconstruct the events leading up to the murder (1997: 122).

This statement may be similarly applied to trauma fiction. The plot-event that the two trauma narratives (event and memory) share is the traumatic event. While the traumatic event initiates the trauma novel, the novel is at pains to re-memory that event to bring about recovery from the symptomatic response. In this way, the narrative structures of both genres can be seen to be aligned, which places crime fiction in a perfect starting position to be hybridised with the genre of trauma fiction.

Fragmentation

Several narrative strategies employed in trauma literature can be associated with the distortion of time, which works to mimic the effects of trauma. Vickroy reports 'writers have created a number of narrative strategies [in trauma texts] to represent a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory' (2002: 29).

Fragmentation of the narrative is a frequently used strategy, characterized by various critics as non-linear narrative, delayed narrative, textual gaps, interruptions, disjunction and fracturing (Felman and Laub; Rye; Ward; Whitehead; Visser). Fragmentation, which Goldsmith and Satterlee purport 'conveys the fragmented nature of traumatic memory' (2004: 52), is employed by Hartnett in her novel, *Surrender*. Time flows back and forth between Anwell's childhood and

the present where he lies in bed dying, at the age of twenty. Time is disjointed by a non-linear narrative; with these fractures only evident in the change in setting and the mention of Anwell's illness (Hartnett: 2005).

Writers of crime fiction similarly employ narrative strategies associated with the distortion of time. Todorov claims 'time is a critical design feature of the traditional detective narrative, leading us slowly backwards from effect to cause' (1977: 47). Porter agrees but additionally reflects on forward motion, a compelling feature in the narrative of the crime novel. He claims mystery is 'a genre committed to an act of recovery, moving forward in order to move back (1981: 29), which is analogous with the aim in trauma fiction to move forward beyond the symptoms by moving back to recover memory. The task of the detective in crime fiction is to restore order by making sense of fragmented and disjointed clues, and then work backward by connecting these clues while concurrently moving forward to solve the crime (Scaggs 2005: 72).

Analepsis (or flashback) is a device used in crime fiction to reveal clues about events from the past. This can resonate with the fragmentation seen in trauma fiction if these transitions from the present to the past are presented out of chronological order. A further device used in crime fiction is the 'cliffhanger', where writers leave a scene hanging at a precarious moment then move on to another scene. This intensifies the reader's desire to continue until they return to the cliffhanger scene, creating the requisite suspense that enhances to the crime novel's appeal (Spring and King 2012: 109). The textual gap between the cliffhanger and the resolution of that scene can be seen to echo the approach used by writers of trauma fiction to mimic temporal gaps in memory. If attention is given to creating textual gaps at a critical point where memory is likely to fail a trauma survivor, then alignment of the strategy between trauma and crime fiction may be achieved and crime fiction writers will have a tool to mimic the effects of trauma.

Repetition

It has been established that trauma is experienced as repetitive intrusions of memory. Whitehead advocates 'one of the key literary strategies in trauma fiction is the device of repetition, which can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot.' (2004: 86). Many critics have observed how repetition mimics the effects of trauma through the use of devices such as analepsis, mirroring,

recurring motifs and intertextuality (Hartman; Russell; Vickroy; Whitehead). In *Surrender*, Anwell locks his retarded brother, Vernon, in an old refrigerator to keep him quiet to avoid the wrath of their abusive mother, leading to his accidental suffocation. Anwell is repeatedly unmoored by flashbacks of Vernon, which serves to haunt him throughout the novel (Hartnett: 2005).

The formulaic model of the crime novel presents readers with a form of repetition where stories exploring similar kinds of traumatic experience can be graphically told yet contained within the form of the genre. Repetition is a way of desensitizing readers when forced to confront the incomprehensible subject matter of crime novels, which allows them to assimilate the nature of trauma gradually (Lucas 2004: 207). This aligns with the aims of trauma fiction to provide a safe space for readers to witness trauma and confront their fears. Lucas likens this to the 'rhythmic rocking of a distressed child' (207). She argues 'within the framework of formulaic narratives [of crime fiction] of violence, bodies, traumatized societies, and an epistemology of crime-solving, they may also implicitly identify and repeat certain anxieties and their antidotes' (209). Critics indicate this form of repetition uses devices such as mirroring, recurring motifs and intertextuality (Chalupsky; Lucas; Lloyd), similar to trauma fiction. These devices could be turned to further use to mimic the repetitive intrusions of memory suffered by characters that have experienced trauma due to the crime within the novel.

Whitehead additionally speaks of how circular narrative can be used to conceal the traumatic event in trauma fiction by creating 'the "central silence"...around which the remainder of the narrative "orbits" ' (2004: 137) revealing only the trauma's effects through the use of repetition.

Marcus describes a similar strategy in the crime novel where the investigator can be 'belied by the circularity of the plot' where 'the narrative disrupts chronology, repeatedly reverting to events that subsequently turn out to be imaginings or speculations' (2009: 256). Clues and red herrings (false clues planted by the author) are stock devices used in crime fiction. Spring and King advise 'the writer's job is to make clues available, but at the same time to distract the reader by dragging an enticing alternate scent across the story' (2012: 214). Planting red herrings repeatedly draws the reader into an alternate storyline obscuring the crime, creating a circular narrative that reflects that described by Whitehead, which could be used in crime fiction to conceal a traumatic event.

Language

The role of language in trauma fiction is to evoke rather than represent horror and violence. Language is used in an attempt to distance readers from violence by juxtaposing it with the aesthetic using 'romantic, mythical language' (Russell 2009: 119). The use of stylised violence is a means to separate violence from its context, allowing readers a window through which to view trauma while providing them with a filtered space in which to process their emotional response. This concept is taken up by Collins who considers readers 'need to find beauty in the text, as a redemptive alternative to the violence' (2001: 13). *Surrender* brims with poetic imagery from its first line: 'I am dying: it's a beautiful word. Like the long slow sigh of a cello: dying' (Hartnett 2005: 1). This stylistic language distances us from the horror of Anwell's imminent death and continues to be used throughout the novel to separate us from gruesome events.

Language used in crime fiction can be seen to be allied with its sub-genre. While the thriller is about pace, there are times when the reader needs a breather from the fast-paced action and poetic imagery can be used for this purpose, so long as it does not jolt the reader out of the story. Largely though, Spring and King explain:

A thriller tends to have stripped-down prose, particularly as the action accelerates, with short sentences and paragraphs, sharp verbs, crisp dialogue. A country-house mystery, on the other hand, may be permitted a more leisurely approach, with long descriptions and meandering conversations (2012: 174).

This claim suggests hybridised crime and trauma fiction might be more successful if situated within the mystery sub-genre so its language style could be more closely aligned with the aesthetic language of trauma fiction.

Place

Place as a motif is used in trauma fiction to give readers a position from which to gain access to the traumatic event (Baer 2000: 48) and repeatedly return to it. Whitehead asserts 'all efforts to confront and remember the past must be preceded by a consideration of the perspective from which we, as belated witnesses, view the event (2004: 48). Given the shocking nature of traumatic experience, this narrative motif is likely to be constructed through the use of grim and threatening imagery. Hartnett depicts a bleak picture of the inward-looking small town that confines Anwell in *Surrender*, along with grim descriptions of the scorched landscape after Finnegan's arson attacks (2005).

Lloyd observes 'crime fiction is typically depicted through landscapes... which are grim, threatening places, hiding darkness the detective... must penetrate in order to survive' (2014: 105). In this way, place can also be perceived to work as a motif in crime fiction. Lloyd describes how we see Chandler's noir detective Philip Marlowe 'constantly descending into the belly of LA's dark cityscape at the same time he descends into the figurative depths of his own self' (2014: 105). In the crime novel, the use of place as a repetitive, threatening motif can serve a dual purpose, also being employed as a place from which to witness the traumatic event occurring in the novel, thereby bringing the role of place in both genres into alignment.

Resolution

In terms of delivering benefits, endings which release emotional tension can act as a healing and transformative, also referred to as 'cathartic', experience for the reader. Whitehead endorses a neat resolution for trauma fiction writers, citing author Pat Barker's *Another World*, where the ghosts of the past are exorcised. She refers to 'our need for a past that is neatly packaged and easily resolved' (2004: 19) where order is restored, the healing process is complete and the victim becomes a survivor.

Crime fiction is primarily concerned with predictable and comforting endings in which the world is also restored to order. Lucas suggests the retelling of formulaic crime stories is a way for readers to incrementally adjust to violence and trauma. She describes how crime writer Patricia Cornwell 'both repeatedly exposes the underbelly and strives to recontain, to recover it' which

generates the resolution crime readers find pleasure in - a 'paradox of free fall and security' (2004: 210). Harris observes that crime writers' chief method for achieving resolution is to bring about endings where perpetrators are punished, citing author Margie Orford who considers crime fiction 'a fairy tale genre in many ways' (2013: 126). The formulaic structure of the crime novel therefore has the potential to bring about the cathartic endings that Whitehead describes.

Conclusion

A number of narrative strategies have been identified within trauma fiction which may be aligned with the strategies used by writers of crime fiction. This article has sought to demonstrate that, with a backdrop of trauma theory, it is possible to create a hybrid novel which crosses the threshold of literary and genre fiction by retaining the popular appeal of crime fiction but additionally providing the benefits of trauma fiction to a larger audience than foreseen. The advancement of new and innovative ways to navigate the nexus between trauma and crime fiction has the potential to meet the demands of an audience looking for more authentic representation of traumatic experience and thereby assist crime writers to achieve similar ambitions as trauma fiction. It is anticipated this contribution will not only be informative for those writing and researching genre fiction, but also provide a foundation for further study into the value and power narrative has to evoke cathartic outcomes for genre fiction audiences.

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