Crafting Crime

in association with Fiction Feedback

with Martin Edwards

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Module #4

Where Are You Taking Us?

Geographical and Historical Settings

Your decisions about when and where to set your novel will have a major impact on the way you write it. This is true in a variety of ways, not all of them obvious. Yes, an unfamiliar or exotic setting may tempt readers who know nothing about your work to take a look at your book, but if you treat your description of place as a glorified travelogue it's unlikely to satisfy either you or them. It's also a waste of an opportunity to give your story life and strength.

When making your choices about where and when to locate your book, it's better not to think of setting as an optional extra, mere interesting 'background', but rather as integral to your story. It can, for instance, suggest or reinforce your central themes.

Contrast

You can taste the distinctive flavour of a Californian spring in the opening lines of Raymond Chandler's *The Little Sister*, narrated by private eye Philip Marlowe. The last two sentences of the second paragraph are: 'The call-houses that specialise in sixteen-year old virgins are doing a land-office business. And in Beverly Hills the jacaranda trees are beginning to bloom.'

The brilliant yet relatively brief description on the first page of that novel achieves a great deal. The juxtaposition of images – brothels and trees in bloom – captures the duality of the society in which Marlowe moves, its corruption juxtaposed with its beauty. Because he is astute enough to see both, we learn something about the sardonic, perceptive man in whose company we're about to spend time. Indirectly, the description of place gives us confidence in his ability to solve a crime. It also gives us an intriguing, if disturbing foretaste of what lies ahead in a story about the dark side of life in Hollywood.

New Orleans is perceived through the eyes of cop Dave Robicheaux in the novels of James Lee Burke. The series presents a lush and lyrical picture of the city and southern Louisiana while again making skilful use of contrast to strengthen our experience as readers and make it more affecting. Robicheaux shows us the 'scrolled antebellum homes' of the Garden Quarter but also the visible signs of decay which are mirrored by the moral degeneration of some of the characters.

There's an equally compelling use of contrast in an utterly different type of story, Conan Doyle's 'The Copper Beeches'. Holmes and Watson travel by train to Hampshire. Watson articulates his love of the English countryside, but Holmes takes a very different view:

> 'Good heavens!' I cried. 'Who would associate crime with these dear old homesteads?'
>
> 'They always fill me with a certain horror. It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.'
>
> 'You horrify me!'
>
> 'But the reason is very obvious. The pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish. There is no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours, and then the whole machinery of justice is ever so close that a word of complaint can set it going, and there is but a step between the crime and the dock. But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser.'

Holmes's forebodings are duly vindicated by what happens in the story.

In terms of setting, the Holmes stories are usually associated with Conan Doyle's atmospheric evocation of foggy London streets, where the mist complements the mysterious and macabre crimes that are brought to Sherlock's door at 221b Baker Street. This passage shows his insight into human nature, and it remains suggestive. An apparently idyllic setting in a green and pleasant land may make an admirable setting for your crime novel, with nefarious activities taking place within a tightly knit community.

Setting anchors the reader in a particular time and place. The best crime writers make equally powerful use of wild landscapes and labyrinthine city streets. Often the backgrounds are characterised in a way that reinforces the themes and style of their fiction. Oxford, in the Inspector Morse novels and TV series (with its various spin-offs), is an ideally intellectual setting for the cerebral mysteries that Morse tackles.

Edinburgh, home patch of Ian Rankin's DI John Rebus, is an equally attractive and historic location, but Rankin treats it very differently, exploiting the city's tradition of duality and darkness: Edinburgh was where the body-snatchers Burke and Hare worked, and the home of Robert Louis Stevenson, creator of Jekyll and Hyde. In Rebus's first case, *Knots and Crosses*, Rankin built on this notion to devise a sinister alter ego for his detective in a story about a serial killer. The next book in the series, *Hide and Seek*, even punned on the name 'Hyde' in its title. It took years, and more than a dozen novels, for the excellence of Rankin's work to be recognised across the world, but his thoughtful and intelligent use of Edinburgh in the Rebus novels was destined to become a key component of his success.

Setting and weather

Years before Hurricane Katrina brought destruction to New Orleans, James Lee Burke's visceral prose gives us a sense of the fragility of the environment as well as the threat of devastating weather. The effect of weather, especially on rural landscapes, is another powerful tool in your armoury as a crime writer. In Jane Harper's *The Dry*, the oppressive heat in the Australian outback helps to ratchet up the tension throughout the story, which begins with blowflies feasting on human remains.

At the other end of the temperature scale, the cold climate of Scandinavia contributes to powerful crime novels, often collectively described as Scandi-noir. This term suggests the absence of daylight for part of the year, as well as the melancholy nature of life in bleak and wintry surroundings. The physical darkness, the white snow, the dense forests, all contribute to the mood of stories in which individuals are driven to acts of desperation.

Statistically, murders in Scandinavia are uncommon, but a skilled writer can persuade readers that in such an environment anything is possible. In Henning Mankell's *Sidetracked*, the landscape provides a shocking and unforgettably vivid scene. Inspector Wallander is called out by a farmer who has seen a woman behaving strangely. When he arrives, everywhere he looks, Wallander sees yellow rape fields. The woman's dark hair stands out vividly against the crop and as the detective watches, she pours petrol over her body and sets herself alight.

Setting-specific stories

If you live in, or are very familiar with, a location that is unfamiliar to many crime readers and hasn't been traversed extensively in other mystery novels, you may have a head start. For instance, Michael Stanley (pen-name for the writing duo Michael Sears and Stan Trollip) have lived in southern Africa for many years, and have an insider's understanding of the landscapes and the social concerns prevalent in that part of the world. Their books make effective use of location-related story ideas such as blood diamonds, the legacy of the war in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, the plight of the Bushman people and murders for reasons connected with black magic.

Nowhere is ordinary

You don't need to live in an exotic location or set your novel in an out-of-the-way spot in order to convey a compelling sense of place. Good authors bring their imagination to bear on the physical environment of their fiction, whatever its nature.

If you live in an ordinary British market town or village, for instance, sheer familiarity may cause you to under-estimate its potential fascination for readers. Think again. Even in a relatively small county such as Derbyshire, the difference between, say, the old mining villages and a town such as Ashbourne or Bakewell is striking, not to mention the differences between the city of Derby and the landscape of Dovedale. You can carve a successful sequence of interesting books around locations such as these. Stephen Booth has demonstrated the potential of a Derbyshire setting in his long series featuring the cops Cooper and Fry. So have writers such as Roz Watkins, Alex Walters and Sarah Ward, who told me that she chose a rural Derbyshire for her books not simply because she was familiar with it but also because she can use 'the wild Peak District landscape, full of industrial revolution landmarks and natural dangers, to raise tension and provide a location-specific backdrop to the crimes'.

Setting as a starting point

In her essay 'Is there arsenic still for tea?' P.D. James explained that nearly all her novels had their origins in a part of England and 'a moment of intense response to its spirit and atmosphere'. One evening, on Dunwich beach in East Anglia, she pictured in her imagination a small dinghy drifting on the tide and bearing a neatly dressed corpse with his hands severed at the wrists. This striking image sparked the idea for her third book, *Unnatural Causes*, as well as supplying its memorable opening scene.

Another visit to her beloved East Anglian coast gave her the premise for *Devices and Desires*. She stood on a deserted stretch of shingle, looking out at the North Sea, and thought that what she was seeing might not

have changed in one thousand years. Then she shifted her gaze and saw the ominous bulk of the Sizewell nuclear power station looming over the coastline. Again, the power of the contrast proved inspirational. The book evokes the wildness of the remote and windswept headland of Larksoken, while focusing on the people who work at the power station, as well as its purpose and implications.

Larksoken is fictional, but that doesn't diminish the impact of the story, because it is so firmly rooted in James's deep understanding of the area. Fictionalising a location in this way has other advantages. It means that you are not trapped by the precise constraints of topography and it also enables you to have crimes committed in imaginary places.

To choose a real village or easily identifiable location as a place where murder is done risks – among other things – upsetting and alienating those who live there. Even when writing about a large city like London, it often makes sense to invent the precise crime scene. Use your knowledge of the place to ensure that your imagination produces a credible fictional location.

Human geography

Ann Cleeves is one of contemporary crime fiction's most successful exponents of the traditional mystery. Much of her success stems from the compelling settings she chooses for her books. She argues persuasively in *Howdunit* that human geography – the way that what happens in people's lives is intimately connected with where they live – provides a model for the way crime writers work.

As she says, place offers writers much more than a picturesque or interesting backdrop for their mysteries: 'It can explain the motive of the killer and the back story of the detective, the relationships between suspects and witnesses. It fixes the characters in our readers' minds and helps writers to consider them as…rounded beings, with a credible history; they become solid, rooted in the landscape, whether the landscape is real or fictitious, rural or urban.' Of her books set in Shetland, she says: 'I love the contrast between the open landscape…and hidden secrets. The Shetland books are all about secrets and the kind of psychological archaeology that digs into the past to explain family rivalries and tensions.'

She recommends writers who set books in places they don't know intimately to research their chosen location as carefully as they would research, let's say, police procedure or forensic science relevant to the story. Talking to people who live there and know the place inside out makes a big difference: 'It's impossible to write with any authenticity if you don't understand a region's anxieties and preoccupations.'

Unfamiliar places

This last piece of advice applies with particular force if you decide to set a novel in a country that you don't know well. Michael Ridpath has written a book about his experiences as a British author of a series set in Iceland, *Writing in Ice*. He'd begun his career by following the principle of 'write what you know', moving from a career in the City to writing high-octane financial thrillers. When he was ready for a change, he took the bold decision to write a series set somewhere he'd only visited once: Iceland.

His research was extensive and ranged from absorbing himself in the nation's literature (including its crime fiction) to talking to the local police and familiarising himself with Icelandic colloquialisms that he could introduce into his story to give it a realistic flavour. Michael is also a strong advocate of writing down the fruits of one's research quickly, before you forget. Little nuggets of credible detail make a disproportionate difference to the pleasure and satisfaction readers derive from the experience of reading a book. The care and attention he devoted to making sure he understood the country and its people meant that, even though he was an outsider, he was still writing about what he knew.

Deborah Crombie is an American author whose long series about the British cops Duncan Kincaid and Gemma Jones has earned much praise, as well as appearances on the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller lists. Having spent an afternoon with her on one of her research trips in north west England, I asked her how she manages to get the details right.

> As an American writing British mysteries, I'm at an obvious disadvantage as far as access to my settings. This I try to counter with zeal and a lot of research, feet on the ground as much as possible. I normally spend about a month of every year in the UK, I take notes and loads of photos, study maps, and make full use of local resources (i.e. talking to people down the pub). Then I put it all together in the context of the story, and I think it helps that I don't take any of the setting details for granted. (And I make full use of Google Maps!) I would add that writers should pay attention to all the senses when creating their settings. I just picked up a book set in London in 1939. There is no sense of geography – and what there is makes no sense – but what really bothered me is that there is no description of smells or sounds. No taxi horns, no buses rumbling, etc. And when the characters walk into Harrods, nothing! No roses, no perfumes, no starchy scent of fabrics... And the writer is American. Ouch.

Capturing a sense of place

When I wrote my first series, set in Liverpool, I found it easy to capture the flavour of a city where I spent every working day. When I came to write a series set in the Lake District, I found the challenge of capturing a sense of that wonderful and very diverse area was greater. The rural landscape is fundamental to the appeal of the Lake District; it shapes the experiences of people who live there and has a distinct and memorable flavour of its own.

My difficulty was this. I don't have a particularly visual mind or a good visual memory. An hour after I've left a place, I have difficulty remembering its precise appearance. I can remember many other kinds of details, but I'm much less observant than I'd like to be. It's a shortcoming that I'm acutely conscious of. It means that I don't have a natural flair for writing passages of description.

I knew that I had to remedy this disadvantage somehow in order to make sure that the Lake District Mysteries had a compelling sense of place. The answer was to engage in intensive research, not just looking round particular areas, but trying to get an intimate sense of them and talking to local people. The internet and Google Earth are helpful, but there's no substitute for being there.

I take detailed notes, although I only use a fraction of the mass of information that I collect. When I was researching one novel, I needed to know what Coniston was like on a wet and wintry day. So one February, when the weather forecast was dreadful, I dragged my long-suffering family up there for a weekend that featured endless downpours. It didn't make me popular with my young children, but it was worth it. The scenes I wrote had a touch of reality about them.

The test, of course, is whether my descriptions pass muster with people who know the Lake District well. One of the great pleasures of my career has been the sheer number of people, including many natives of Cumbria, who have told me that the books are immersive, bringing the landscape to life. This kind of reaction makes all the hard work worthwhile.

The pleasures of research

This is a good moment to talk more generally about research. The fact is that, even if you have an encyclopaedic knowledge about an enormous range of topics, it's likely that you will need to undertake some research to ensure that you capture that all-important note of authenticity.

To take an example, I wrote my first book, *All the Lonely People*, about a solicitor, Harry Devlin, who was a partner in a law firm in Liverpool. Since I was at the time a solicitor in a Liverpool law firm, I was 'writing what I knew'. But only up to a point. Harry handled crime and divorce work, which I never touched. For my first novel, I had to conduct research with the help of colleagues to learn more about the detail of how criminal lawyers work. For a later book, *Eve of Destruction*, I needed to consult a specialist in matrimonial law to fill the gaps in my understanding.

For a writer, a little learning certainly can be a dangerous thing. It's so easy to assume you know something, when in fact you're mistaken. P.D. James used to tell a good story about writing a scene in a novel where someone drove a motorcycle backwards. Readers duly pointed out to her that this cannot be done. She knew nothing about motorbikes but made an assumption. When someone subsequently told her that her assumption was justified in the case of a particular motorbike, she used to joke that this was the model she'd had in mind all along.

Readers will be quick to point out your errors if they aren't picked up in the editorial process – and you can't assume that they will be. Hence the vital need to do your homework. Of course, there are limits to how far you need to go in the quest for understanding. I didn't need to undertake a criminal trial or a divorce case myself.

Later, when writing *The Cipher Garden*, I had a scene about a skydive, a subject on which I was profoundly ignorant. A helpful expert gave me plenty of valuable tips. When he offered to take me up in the air to do some skydiving of my own, however, I declined with thanks. This was partly due to cowardice, partly because I already had as much detail as I needed.

The ideal mindset is to look on research not as a chore or as a necessary evil, but as a wonderful opportunity to take a glimpse into unfamiliar worlds. I've visited some fascinating places when researching my books, and met scores of helpful and interesting people – not just police officers and forensic scientists, but many in other walks of life.

The real challenge, once you've invested that time on research, is to have the courage to eliminate everything – however intriguing – that doesn't add to the story. Readers don't want to plough through paragraphs of irrelevant factual material. You've invested the time and effort in research with a view to earning a very particular kind of dividend – authenticity. You don't have to prove you've done your homework by thrusting it on to the page. You prove it by using as much or as little of your research as you need to make your story come alive, to make your fiction seem believable.

Do you have to do all your research before you start work on the novel? Certainly not. There's a real danger that research becomes seductive and that the urge to keep finding things out delays the all-important process of writing. Similarly, when you are in the middle of writing your book, you may realise that you need to conduct more research. It's often a good idea to press on with the writing and undertake the research later, perhaps once you have completed a first draft, rather than interrupting the creative flow.

This, certainly, accords with the views of Australia's Michael Robotham, whose many awards include two CWA Gold Daggers for best novel of the year.

> "I don't plot my books in advance, which means there is limit to how much I can research a story, but the former journalist in me is never far away. Ultimately, my books are researched carefully and set in real places. I make sure I can turn right in a particular street and that train runs at that particular time. So much so, that I've had lawyers recommend that I change certain details in books because I've put two dead bodies in the front of a house that is identifiable and owned by someone, which they may not appreciate.

> At the same time, I think too many first-time writers spend too much time researching their stories and not enough time writing. They fall in love with this research, wanting to shoehorn every new exciting detail into their stories, often changing the plot to make them fit, and finishing up with a dog's breakfast. For this reason, my advice is to do just enough research to make sure your story can hold water. That there are no major flaws in the plot, etc... Then I think they should write that sucker. Get it down. When that solid first draft is finished, then you go and do the detailed research, checking street names and spellings, etc...

Going back in time

Historical crime fiction offers innumerable possibilities. Just as most places in the world have featured in some crime novel or other, so have most periods in history. But there is always room for a fresh look at a particular period or place.

There is also the chance to write a range of different types of crime novel. Many history-mysteries have been whodunits, but the form is flexible, and you might prefer to try something different, such as psychological suspense.

One key advantage of writing a novel set in the past is that you will not be constrained by the technological advances that have revolutionised detective work, ranging from DNA fingerprinting, CCTV and mobile phone surveillance to the ready availability of a wealth of information on the internet in general and social media in particular. Writers of contemporary mysteries often struggle to deal with the practical implications of these developments. As a result, there are far too many stories (and TV scripts) in which not only do detectives risk confronting a murder suspect without back-up, but do so in circumstances where – usually for no good reason – their mobile phone doesn't work. Similarly, the passwords protecting sensitive information stored on computer are routinely broken in the most simplistic way.

Dodging these difficulties has obvious appeal, but the historical mystery presents challenges of its own. The reader needs not only to be interested in the premise of the story, but needs to be persuaded to suspend disbelief as regards your presentation of it. The aim is to write a historical crime novel with genuine conviction, and that isn't straightforward.

Period and place

You can learn a good deal from one of the first novelists to write a successful series of historical mysteries: Edith Pargeter, better known under the pen-name Ellis Peters. The success of her Brother Cadfael Chronicles was due to her command of both geographical *and* historical setting.

As I mentioned in the last module, the first Cadfael novel was meant to be a one-off. Peters had a passion for history, and had published historical novels under her own name. Born and bred in Shropshire, she had an enduring love of her home county and its main town, the historic centre of Shrewsbury, which lies close to the border between England and Wales. She came up with an idea for a detective who was a medieval monk, based in Shrewsbury: Brother Cadfael. Again, she made the most of geographical contrast: between the bustling streets of the town centre and the cloistered quiet of Shrewsbury Abbey, and between England and the English and their neighbours in Wales. The books give an impression of the turbulence of the times that complements the mysterious elements of the storylines.

By weaving actual historical events seamlessly into her fictional narratives, Peters conjured up a sense of the period that was as authentic as the sense of place. The plots for the stories mostly came from historical chronicles, while her portrayal of the community of monks benefited from an emphasis on the changing seasons, the weather and the religious sequence of the year.

One of the joys of historical fiction is that of connecting the past with the present, and focusing not merely on everything that was very different in days gone by, but also on what remains familiar: the vagaries of human nature. The paradox of the history-mystery is that so much has changed over time, yet the way people behave remains recognisable.

Historical research

Peters' accomplished blending of story ingredients illustrates the value of taking a holistic approach to writing a mystery set in the past. Your research will need to enable you to convey what the environment you've created looks and sounds and smells like. The task is not as straightforward as researching a location. It's impossible to travel back in time.

Research, especially in the form of intensive reading, is therefore crucial. You need to look at as many sources from your chosen period as possible. Immerse yourself in the world they describe. Beware, though. Imogen Robertson warns in *Howdunit* about the dangers of 'info dump': succumbing to the temptation to share with your readers all the material you've uncovered in excruciating detail. To avoid it, she favours staying in character – in other words, exercising the novelist's imagination. Aim to get as clear and as full an understanding of the material and social worlds inhabited by the people of the story as you can.

Reading novels that were actually written during the period in which you're writing is one way to get a contemporary flavour, although if you go back earlier than the eighteenth century this avenue isn't open to you.

Dialogue is important in any crime novel, but it presents special challenges in historical mysteries (other than those set in relatively recent times) because as L.C. Tyler says in *Howdunit*: 'complete accuracy…is rarely possible and almost never desirable'. Changes in language mean that it would hardly be feasible to understand Cadfael if Peters had tried to reproduce the way that monks of that period used to talk. The same is true of Lindsey Davis's Roman detective Falco, and many others.

Tyler describes his seventeenth century novels as being written 'in three slightly different registers'. His protagonist narrates in a style close to modern English; dialogue contains more words and phrases from the period in question; and written documents which feature in the story are, in relative terms, authentic. In other words, there is inevitably an element of compromise. As usual, the key to success lies in persuading your readers to believe in the people and events of the story. Most of them will allow you some licence, as long as you don't take so many liberties that they cease to buy in to your version of a long-gone world.

It's important to remember that you're writing fiction and not history. While now it's the done thing to write novels with maximum authenticity and to get your history as accurate as you can, if you have a small detail that is important to your story yet contradicts historical knowledge, don't agonise over it. If it is important, include it. Just be prepared for well-informed readers to point it out!

Real-life historical characters as detectives

There is a vogue for turning historical figures from real life into series detectives. In *Howdunit*, Peter Lovesey provides an entertaining analysis of this phenomenon, pointing out that individuals as diverse as Beatrix Potter, Groucho Marx, Aristotle, Elvis Presley, Leonardo da Vinci and Mozart have been deployed as fictional sleuths. Talented contemporary authors such as Nicola Upson and Andrew Wilson have even written successful series featuring crime writers of the past as detectives – Josephine Tey and Agatha Christie respectively.

This may seem to be a backwater of crime writing, but a number of talented authors, including Lovesey himself, have dipped their toes in it. If you're thinking of doing so, Lovesey stresses the importance of respecting your chosen character: 'The voice, pacing, settings, action and dialogue must be in keeping.' As he says, the key question is: 'do you really want to try?'

Exercise: *Place*

A common exercise is to use setting to influence the writing, so for instance write a passage about something bad happening in a place that's bleak or sinister. Do this, but then write the same scene in a setting that's usually viewed in a positive way, on a sunny beach, for instance, or in a children's playground, or in the beer garden of a country pub by a river. You'll find it exercises your imagination while paying dividends in originality. It might open up opportunities.

Exercise: *Time*

If you've decided you'd like to set your crime novel in a particular period, write down your top three reasons for doing so.
Now look back at them. Ideally at least one reason will be because something you know about that period gives you good opportunities for writing the kind of crime story you have in mind – whether it's a mystery, a spy story, political thriller, suspense or something else.