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BOOKS
BLOG



It's no crime to be funny

Crime fiction used to entertain us with double acts such as Holmes and Watson – but when and why did it lose its sense of humour?



The mystery of crime fiction's lost funny bone ... Sherlock Holmes and Watson

It's all because of excessive masturbation.

A couple of years ago I was launching my novel *Driving Big Davie* at Belfast's No Alibis mystery bookstore, and planning to do what I normally do: read the first chapter, no set-up required, no plot needing explained. But when it came to it I couldn't: it was all about masturbation, and I knew my mother-in-law would be sitting in the front row. Purely to fill the gap, I hurriedly threw together a short story actually set in the shop, and featuring a very fictional version of the owner cracking *The Case of Mrs Geary's Leather Trousers*. It went down so well I knew I was on to something, and relatively quickly I turned it into *Mystery Man*, the first in a series of novels that seem to have struck a chord. The Richard and Judy Book Club jumped on it, and the BBC bagged the rights.

But humour in crime fiction is nowadays a rare bird. I was struck by something my friend, thriller writer John Connolly – 7m sales and counting – said at a writing workshop, that comic crime fiction, with rare exceptions, is never going to sell and will forever be frozen out of the major prizes. The Last Laugh Award that my latest book – *The Day of the Jack Russell* – has picked up is a fantastic honour, but to put it in perspective, it was announced at Bristol's international convention on crime fiction at the same time as those other biggies, the e-Dunnit Award for best ebook first published in the UK and The Sounds of Crime Award for best abridged and unabridged audiobooks. All three were vastly overshadowed by the concurrent announcement of this year's Crime Writers' Association Dagger awards shortlist, which is not noticeably troubled by anything likely to put a smile on your face. John Connolly has a point.

You could argue that crime is crime, and shouldn't be funny – but didn't it start out with a good and smart sense of humour? Holmes and Watson were a double act, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and Dorothy L Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey always played it for subtle laughs, and on the other side of the pond when "hardboiled" or "noir" fiction kicked in with Chandler and Hammett in the 20s and 30s, the one-liners flew faster than the bullets.

However, as the most successful of all popular fiction genres, crime fiction rapidly descended into formula, with thousands of not very subtle variations of little old ladies investigating cosy murder mysteries or tough talking PI's with a cool line in sardonic put-downs flooding the market. They not only became cliched, but even worse, the subject of parody from which they have never really recovered. Once Woody Allen sent up Bogie in *Play it Again*, Sam and Steve Martin weighed in with *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, there was really nowhere else to go.

Crime fiction was forced to reinvent itself, almost literally, in a new skin, and in doing so it caused not only a seismic shift in public taste, but also in how it was sold. Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* and Patricia Cornwell's *Postmortem* became super sellers 20 years ago – laughs were out, torture porn was in – and their influence is still apparent in bookshops and supermarkets up and down the country; they and their successors actually form the bedrock of publishing in this country today. Pile 'em high, sell 'em cheap.

Pulp fiction had always been about writing for money, and writing to formula, but the rewards have never been greater – there are a lot of multi-millionaire crime authors running around – but that success comes with a requirement to essentially write the same novel with minor tweaks not only every year, but sometimes twice or three times a year. The writing has become stale and predictable, but shows absolutely no sign of wearing out its audience.

Which means, bizarrely, that if you want to find something new and challenging, comic crime fiction is now the place to go. British authors like Robert Lewis, Charlie Williams, Malcolm Pryce, Chris Ewan, Declan Burke and Len Tyler are at the vanguard of a new wave of young writers kicking against the cliches and producing ambitious, challenging, genre-bending works. They may not yet be hogging the bestseller lists but at least they're adding some wit and balls to a moribund genre. What they'd all probably say, if I could be bothered asking them, is that people who read their books love them, it's getting them to pick them up in the first place that is the difficulty.

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