

Real Crime to Crime Fiction: An Aussie Ex-Cop Turned Crime Novelist *by A.B. Patterson*

I spent most of my detective years working in child abuse, and most of that setting up and then running the paedophile investigations team. After some years, we became a little too successful (yes, that is possible, believe it or not) and I found myself forcibly transferred out, off to the Vice Squad, and then the paedophile team was closed down. I served my last year and a half in vice, which was a fascinating look at a different side of society. Finally I left the Western

Australia Police Force thoroughly disillusioned with the politics and the corruption of the police hierarchy (a story for another day). I left Perth altogether, and moved to Sydney on the opposite side of the country.

Despite the sour taste and the truncated police career (I had planned on being a cop until I retired), those years investigating paedophilia were the best years of my professional life. Nasty, horrible work? Yes, but the job satisfaction was

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Mystery Down Under

unparalleled. And a set of memories scorched into my very being that define much of me as a writer. And as a human being.

One day I sat with a man and interviewed him about what he said had been done to him by a paedophile about 30 years earlier. He'd come forward after all that time because he'd seen the media publicity on the TV news about one of our child pornography busts. He said the man we'd arrested on the child porn charge was the man who had molested him. He then detailed an underground chamber with shiny walls and various "games" that he and other boys were subjected to in that dungeon. I'd seen a lot of bizarre and awful things already, but even I was sceptical, especially as basements were almost unheard of in Perth. But he did disclose being filmed on occasion. We'd seized a collection of 8mm film reels from the paedophile's house during the porn bust, and one of the young boys featured definitely looked like a childish version of the man I interviewed.

So, armed with another search warrant, back to the paedophile's house we went. Long story short, we found that underground chamber. Its trapdoor entrance had been disguised underneath a carpet tile, hence why we'd never seen it during the first search warrant. I flicked on a torch and went into the hole and down the ladder. The shiny walls the victim had described were metal sheeting, and the room had been dug in the 1960s as a fallout shelter. And then to put the icing on the evidence cake, we found certain items from the "games", exactly as described by the victim 30 years after the crimes. Despite the paedophile denying the accusations and going to trial, the jury convicted him, and off to the big house he went.

I relate this story because one of the principal motivating factors for my writing career is the desire to tell people what actually goes on out there in society. Sure, I write fiction, but it's fiction informed deeply by fact, as strange as the

truth may be. When you hear stories, such as the dungeon episode above, scepticism is normal. But reality can be entirely bizarre and, for some people, entirely terrible. Those stories, those damaged lives, deserve to be told, whether it is in the burgeoning true crime genre, or in fictionalized versions such as I create.

Since I left the police force, I've spent many years as a corruption investigator, so have added a whole new repertoire to my story idea reserves. And so my crime fiction writing is saturated with episodes based on what I've seen, and on people I've met. No shortage of colourful characters to design, many of them inherently dark and evil. And no lack of hypocrisy to lay bare, especially in the Establishment.

As for my reading (I average a book a week), I do read a lot of crime, especially of the hard-boiled and noir varieties. I firmly believe that to be a writer you must, simply must, read as much as you possibly can. Fortunately, I've always loved reading from a very young age. It was escapism to the point of sanctuary as a kid, and it remains a beautiful release now. And it adds so much to you as a writer: ideas, styles, language. I read other genres as well, and I have a special passion for dystopias. One day I will write one of them myself.

So, in keeping with my desire to tell stories about what happens out there, I am hard-core when it comes to realism. My writing style is gritty and explicit: I tell it how I see it, and how I have seen it. I pull no punches, and hence my writing is not for the faint-hearted or the highly sensitive. If you want your crime story warm and cosy with the vicar having afternoon tea with the lady of the manor, talking around the subject of the frightfully inconvenient murder on the estate last weekend, then there are plenty of authors who tell great yarns in that style. Perhaps stick to them, if that's your thing. If you venture into my worlds, you're going to need some fortitude, and the only clergy you'll encounter will likely be

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doing nefarious things with the altar boys.

And it's for precisely this reason that I always intended to self-publish my novels. I've never even approached a publishing house or an agent. Aside from the dismal prospects of getting a publishing contract in Australia, my over-riding priority was editorial control. There are passages in both my novels to date that would never, ever have made it past an editor's desk at any of the main publishing houses. And I'm not prepared to have my work censored, even if it is supposedly to make it commercially more palatable.

I'm striving for raw, unflinching realism in my work, as I think this is crucial to my desire to use crime fiction as a means of social commentary as well as storytelling. And as part of my desire for realism, I always make sure I do my research. As an ex-cop, I've obviously got a bit of an advantage in writing about police and crime aspects, but there are plenty of other parts of my stories that I need to do my background work on. When I read crime, the biggest downer for me is to get hit in the face with basic details that are patently wrong.

And it's surprising how often this occurs, even in the work of some very successful authors. A couple of stand-out examples: pulling out a .38 revolver and releasing the safety catch (one of the most common handguns and they don't have a safety catch), or a homicide squad in Australia headed up by a captain (that's an American police rank, never used in Australia). The authors could easily do a bit more research, and those editors at the publishing houses could be more careful. In my view, realism and accuracy are important in crime fiction.

My crime reading habits predominantly loiter in the hard-boiled and noir environs, with recent favourites including Eric Beetner, Alec Cizak, Preston Lang, Christa Faust, Nikki Dolson, Paul D. Brazill, and Steve Finbow.

However, I still enjoy a well-written police mystery/thriller. And I especially like those

written by other ex-cops. It's that genuine feel that comes with the real street experience, being able to feel yourself back on the job. Recent favourites in this group include Bruce Robert Coffin, Desmond P. Ryan, Ian Patrick, Clare Mackintosh, and Gregory James.

A couple of years ago I started a project, which I thought was going to be fairly small, to set up a page on my website called "Cops Writing Crime". It didn't stay small, and currently I have listed 170 authors who are (or were) ex-cops, serving cops (a few), and related professionals such as FBI agents and even some PIs. Whilst "The Squad", as I have named it, is dominated by Americans and British, there are eighteen different countries represented so far.

As for other, more established crime writers I love reading and am influenced by — Chandler and Hammett, of course, plus Ross Macdonald, James Crumley, Peter Corris, Ken Bruen, and Derek Raymond.

And in the last couple of years I have been avidly getting into reading the fine selection of anthology magazines coming out of the US with a range of hard-boiled, noir and pulp offerings. My current favourites are *Switchblade*, *Pulp Modern*, *Econoclash Review*, and *Broadswords and Blasters*. Aside from enjoying an array of great stories, I love the exposure to a plethora of authors I've never read, and this has led me to exploring the longer works of some of them, which has been a great reward.

So much reading to do, and even more writing. And then there's the evil reality of having to do paid work to keep a roof overhead and keep fed. But I'm chasing my dream, and chasing hard. I'm sure as hell not going to die wondering.

So, if you like the sound of gritty, explicit tales of crime and corruption, then feel free to try my work. Just have your bag of fortitude handy!

A. B. Patterson (Andrew Patterson) is the author of *Harry's World* and its sequel *Harry's Quest*. The next instalment is a work in progress. He has also had short