Crime Scenes – The Importance of Place in Australian Crime Fiction

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Abstract

Place is vital in crime fiction, and almost functions as a main character. English crime writer Reginald Hill said at the 2004 Adelaide Writer’s Festival that “In a sense, location is character.” Australian crime fiction has approached this issue of place in various ways, all of which inescapably reflect Australia’s unique geography and psychology. The earliest Australian crime novels, such as Henry Savery’s Quintus Servus and Marcus Clarke’s For the Term of His Natural Life incorporate the Australian outback as a setting for the plots of crime novels. A twentieth century writer such as Arthur Upfield also exploited the natural mystery of the Australian bush for his Boney series of books. Later Australian writers have tended to focus more on harsh city settings, in the American hard-boiled tradition. Peter Corris was an early pioneer of this style in Australia, with many of his gritty detective books placed in the ‘mean streets’ of Sydney. Nowadays, much successful Australian crime writing is set in Melbourne. However, there are notable exceptions to this pattern. A writer such as Gary Disher has set some of his crime novels in the South Australian outback. (Disher’s Pay Dirt is set largely in the small farming town called Belcowie.) A writer such as Peter Temple often makes his detective Jack Irish journey symbolically from the city to the country — or another place. Also, Stephen Knight observed that “In fact a number of Australian crime stories have no setting at all, and this appears internationally unique.” Knight calls this concept “The Australian zero setting”. Adelaide writer Paul McGuire never even used Australia as a setting in his thrillers. In this paper, I will examine how all of the writers mentioned (and others) have used place to create their dark, disturbing crime scenes. I will show that although they have incorporated place differently, they have all done it in a way that is interweaved with Australian geographical realities.