



- Creative Writing PhD by Published Works -

A Critical Review of Four Novels

HITMAN

THE FIXER

BAPTISM

SACRIFICE

by

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DECLARATION

The work presented in this submission, which includes this critical review and accompanying four novels, is unique. To the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously written or published by another person, except where due acknowledgement has been made.

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ABSTRACT

In this critical review I will explore the aims and influences; themes, characterisation, genre and plot summaries; research impact, publication histories and critical reception of my four novels: *Hitman*, *The Fixer*, *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*. In addition, I will provide a commentary on the processes and methodology I employed in the writing of the four novels as well as a critical reflection on them.

Published between 2000 and 2013, my books represent a body of work that is rooted within the British crime thriller genre. However, in the nature of the novels' construction and target readerships, they also represent two distinct literary styles. The first two novels, *Hitman* and *The Fixer*, published in 2000 and 2001 respectively are satirical thrillers in which I experiment with genre with the intention of unsettling and confounding readers' expectations while at the same time, testing the boundaries of what the crime fiction genre can sustain. In these two novels, I draw on a range of influences and traditions in literature, film and popular culture.

The second two novels, *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, published in 2012 and 2013 are more closely aligned to the accepted conventions of the thriller genre but are no less ambitious in their intention to explore new forms of plotting and characterisation. In their writing, I was influenced more by contemporary geo-politics, particularly surveillance, intelligence, cyber-warfare and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 than I was by literature and film. The latter two books continue a theme of experimentation I began in the first two, combining disparate influences to create original fiction.

Further reflection will be made on the part that these novels have played, and continue to play, within my ongoing body of work as a novelist, screenwriter and Creative Writing academic.

SUMMARY OF PUBLICATIONS

HITMAN

Published in the UK and commonwealth by Hodder & Stoughton (Flame), 2000. Also published in Russia, Bulgaria & United States. Reissued as an ebook in 2013 by Mulholland Books.

THE FIXER

Published in the UK and commonwealth by Hodder & Stoughton (Flame), 2001. Also published in United States. Reissued as an ebook in 2013 by Mulholland Books.

BAPTISM

Published in the UK and commonwealth by Quercus Books, 2012. Also published in Holland, Germany, United States and as an ebook and audiobook.

SACRIFICE

Published in the UK and commonwealth by Quercus, 2013. Also published in Germany and as an ebook and audiobook.

INTRODUCTION

When writing each of the four novels that are the subject of this critical review, my primary intention was to create stories that would engage with a broad readership via the books' mainstream commercial publishers. In so doing, I also wanted to explore new and unusual territory within the crime thriller genre. The manuscript for *Hitman* was sold in 1999 via my literary agent of the time as part of a two book contract to Hodder & Stoughton for their Flame imprint. Flame was established by Hodder & Stoughton as a publisher of novels written by younger writers in their twenties or thirties and aimed at a similarly aged demographic. Although it was subsequently published in the United States and translation rights sold in Russia and Bulgaria, the book was intended for the British market (and Australia, New Zealand and South Africa).

When I started to write *Hitman*, I did not have a specific intention to work within the crime thriller genre. However, by creating a character who breaks the law continually and pursues a hapless investigation into his own peculiar predicament, I was writing a crime thriller novel although I did not realise it at the time. For commercial reasons, the book's genre became more important after publication when Hodder & Stoughton marketed the book to a crime thriller readership.

I had begun to write *Hitman* in the mid-1990s and its influences lay elsewhere from what one might term the police procedural or detective story. With their picaresque tales of transgression and perception modification, William Burroughs, Hunter S. Thompson and Charles Bukowski were more of an influence than the writers of contemporary crime thrillers. Further influences on the writing of *Hitman* came from a contemporary post-modern crime scene. The American television series,

Twin Peaks (1990-1991), which mixed a variety of genres including crime, horror, soap opera, fantasy and science fiction, was instrumental in demonstrating to many writers, myself included, how conventions from a number of forms could be appropriated to intriguing effect. The first three films written and directed by Quentin Tarantino: *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jackie Brown* (1997) helped me to see the potential of creating a violent, culturally aware story peopled by grotesque characters drawn from the darker side of society who speak in ironic and often comedic dialogue.

These influences from literature, television and film made me realise the creative opportunities of appropriating and subverting genre conventions in order to create a black comic hybrid of a novel. The protagonist's first person narration appropriates a tone reminiscent of the original noir writers such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and Mickey Spillane who were themselves influenced by the hard-boiled writing found in the pulp magazines of the 1920s which contained 'detective stories characterized by sequential action and violence, rather than by the deductive conventions of "classic" detective fiction' (Eburne, 2010, p. 739). The work of these writers helped me to create a comic hard-boiled narration which I chose to combine with the transgression and chemical indulgence of the Beats.

In my second novel, *The Fixer*, I experiment with a more traditional crime milieu by exploring the genre staple of the genius serial killer who outwits the forces of law and order at every turn. I set out to confound the reader's expectations by presenting this character as someone to be admired rather than condemned, particularly in the eyes of the novel's protagonist and narrator, Tobe Darling. As with *Hitman*, my intention with *The Fixer* was to subvert genre conventions as much as adhere to them and create a darkly comedic anti-hero whose twisted perception

infects the prose throughout. Todorov (2014 p. 227) defines a whodunit as a detective story that contains: ‘not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation’. Neither *Hitman* nor *The Fixer* contains a traditional detective character and there is very little traditional detection. While the two books might be more loosely termed mysteries, a classification which leans towards an American terminology for the genre of crime writing, their main focus is not the eventual solution of a puzzle related to a criminal enterprise. Instead, the crimes that are present in the novels form part of a wider tableau of transgression and deviancy, and the solving of them is not a primary concern.

The Fixer was published just a few weeks before 9/11, an event that ushered in an entirely new geo-political landscape which was very quickly reflected in popular culture. The threat of a seemingly whole new form of terrorism still casts a shadow over literature and genre fiction to this day and in *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* I decided to adapt my approach in response to this contemporary milieu. Whereas in the first two novels I had deliberately blurred and confused the crime thriller conventions of moral protagonist and immoral antagonist in favour of outlandish and sometimes surreal scenarios including, in the case of *Hitman*, some supernatural flourishes, the intention with the second pair of books was to root the stories firmly in a contemporary realism. With regards to crime fiction in general, Worthington (2011, p. 19) observes that ‘it is still the genre which most clearly and immediately represents society back to itself.’ This is true of all four of my books although the societies that are explored in the first two books are very different from the ones found in the later novels.

As with the two books preceding them, *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* were published as part of a two book contract. This was signed in 2011 with the publisher, Quercus, which had recently achieved, via its imprint, MacLehose Press, much commercial

success with the English translations of Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2008), *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2009) and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (2009). Quercus was keen to publish British thriller writers that might sit alongside Larsson and other genre writers such as Peter May whose *The Blackhouse* (2011), the company had only recently published to critical and commercial success.

When writing *Baptism*, I was much more observant of thriller conventions, namely clearly identifiable antagonists with specific terrorist objectives; a protagonist who risks everything to prevent the antagonists from achieving those objectives; and a race-against-time narrative structure that maximises the kinetic momentum expected of novels in this genre. Nonetheless, my intention was still to test, modify and extend the remit of those conventions in order to strive for a literary peculiarity that might not always be apparent in this area of genre fiction. For example, the character of Ed Mallory, the hostage negotiator in *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, eschews the physical primacy of so many thriller heroes by being disabled; the religious fundamentalism of the terrorists is not Islamic, as is customary in a post-9/11 thriller, but Christian.

Baptism and *Sacrifice* also diverge significantly from *Hitman* and *The Fixer* in terms of the way they handle point of view. As in Simon Kernick's *Siege* (2013), one cataclysmic 'criminal event' is narrated in close third person from multiple points of view. As Todorov (2014, p. 229) describes this form of plotting: 'There is no point reached where the narrator comprehends all past events, we do not even know if he will reach the end of the story alive.'

As Martin (2015, 1%) notes with regards to the importance of location in crime thrillers: 'The setting of the book is crucial. A crime is often the product of the society around it, and that in itself is heavily influenced by the environment...the

setting evokes emotion and knowledge in the reader, which helps to give the narrative a context.’ This is illustrated in everything from classic LA Noir novels such as Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) to Ian Rankin’s Edinburgh-set Rebus series. In all four of my novels, London, both as a location and as an idea, is a character, as well as an environment I can continually modify so as to provide the necessary cultural, political, philosophical and thematic setting for the respective stories.

The London found in the first two novels is a moveable backdrop that might include a nuclear fallout shelter beneath Westminster – as in the *Fixer* – or locations that are psychically permeable, allowing time travel and alternate realities to lurk in the shadows, as in *Hitman*. The latter’s gonzo surrealism is influenced by Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972). By utilising a playful sense of location, London itself is as unreliable as the narration of the story, becoming something that Martin (2015, p. 8) describes with regards to the fiction of Iain Sinclair: ‘a city where memory and the places of memory seem increasingly unreliable, where knowing where you are today is no guarantee that you will wake up in the same place tomorrow’.

The Central London I write of (and extensively researched) in *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, by contrast, is stripped of the playful psychogeography of *Hitman* and *The Fixer* in favour of a rigorous geographical realism and stark authenticity. Only occasionally do I allow fantastic elements, and only when the narrative requires it. One notable instance is the River Lime in *Baptism* which I added to London’s existing underground rivers so that it might run alongside the tunnel on the Tube network between Leicester Square and Tottenham Court Road stations and provide the source of the flood that engulfs the train. ‘In the event of the River Lime flooding

in this section, the Northern Line tunnel would fill with water in a matter of hours' (Kinnings, 2012, pp. 230-231).

When I started writing fiction in the early 1990s, I did not set out with the intention of becoming a crime or thriller novelist. However, I found that due to the genre's focus on the extremities of human behaviour within society, it allowed me to explore characters and situations in ways that appealed to me. In *Hitman* and *The Fixer*, I rooted both stories in contemporary popular culture so that I could reflect upon it. I wrote *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* with the same intention, it was just that the contemporary culture had changed.

As a literary form, crime fiction has been championed by critics and writers since the early twentieth century, a time seen by many as the golden age of detective fiction. But even T.S. Eliot, a great champion of crime fiction, could not resist the discussion of rules as Grimstad (2016) notes, so as to 'establish parameters of fairness'. For example, Eliot believed that characters should have 'normal' motives; the occult was forbidden. However, rather than adhere to any genre restrictions, my intention has always been to explode them; *Hitman*, for example, is a crime novel in which the occult and the supernatural play an important part throughout.

I wrote all four novels with the intention of arousing emotional responses in readers, to challenge their perception of social issues such as media representation, violence, politics, narcotics and religion. The first two books combine traditional elements of the crime genre with dark satirical comedy and the supernatural. The second two books tackle issues of politics, terrorism and disability with regards to the traditional thriller hero. All four books were published by mainstream commercial publishers and were well received in the media. This critical review will explore the

impact the novels have had alongside a reflection on the intentions and influences that informed my writing of them.

LITERARY INFLUENCES AND POPULAR CULTURE IN 1990S LONDON

Working in the music industry in London in the early 1990s allowed me to witness first-hand the ascendancy of electronic dance music in the UK and its accompanying hedonism. The prevailing pop cultural mood of the 1990s suggested that the ‘swinging sixties’ were being replayed with livelier drugs and a more eclectic soundtrack. It is perhaps somewhat overstated but worth noting nonetheless that: ‘By the mid-1990s, the British media had woken up to the fact that the nation contained two societies: the traditional leisure culture of alcohol and entertainment (spectator sports, TV) versus the more participatory, effusive culture of all-night dancing and Ecstasy’ (Reynolds, 1998, p. 237). If it sometimes felt as though the 1960s was a glorious technicolour template on which the 1990s was being mapped, the two decades also shared a heartfelt – if often misguided – belief in William Blake’s assertion that: ‘The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom’ (Blake, 2014, p. 9).

Just as the so-called hippy revolution of the late 1960s was fuelled by the widespread experimentation with LSD or ‘acid’, the dance-based psychedelia of the late 80s and early 90s had MDMA or ‘ecstasy’ as its recreational drug of choice. Discussing this era, Plant (1999, p. 168) notes that ‘MDMA’s mellow and welcoming effects introduced the mainstream world to the whole pharmacopoeia of psychoactive drugs: LSD, speed, cocaine, even crack and heroin, were now thrown into the recreational mix. Consumption became conspicuous.’ Across many areas of society in the early 1990s but particularly within the creative industries, it became acceptable to openly discuss and indulge in drug consumption. Over and above its new ‘opium for the masses’ status, ecstasy also opened up new doors of perception – just as acid had done in the 60s – and meant that a new found spirit of creativity permeated certain

sections of society. The old tribal boundaries in youth culture which had been so heavily reinforced during the 1980s began to melt away in a reinvigorated spirit of free expression. Rave culture was all-welcoming and careless of social, economic, sexual or racial barriers – or at least that was the (modified) perception. The inevitable down side of this smiley-faced, sunny disposition – and its insidious irony – was the unwelcoming criminal underclass that fed the hunger for the chemical stimulants necessary to keep one dancing – and smiling – all night.

The second half of the 1990s saw the rise of what the media came to call ‘Lad Culture’. This was set to the accompaniment of the musical genre labelled Britpop which counted Oasis, Blur and Pulp as its principle exponents. The magazine, *Loaded*, was first published in 1994 and at its peak in 1998 had a circulation of 457,000. Its exuberant editorial style which openly celebrated hedonistic excess was an instant success. Witnessing this burgeoning phenomenon at close quarters, planning and buying media campaigns on behalf of record companies and concert and comedy promoters, it was clear to me that this cultural milieu was ripe for satire in literary form.

Hitman is a comic novel as much as a crime thriller. When conceiving the story and characters of *Hitman*, however, my intention was much broader than just to satirise the excesses of smiley-faced Lad Culture. I wanted to create a story that conformed to certain conventions and tropes in terms of the crime genre – the fetishisation of illegal drugs, guns and violence for example – and subvert them via a narrator and environment that are intrinsically unreliable and made all the more so by the protagonist’s comically excessive consumption of narcotics.

Former stand-up comedian turned crime writer, Mark Billingham, describes the similarities between telling a joke and creating suspense in a crime or thriller novel:

The ‘reveal’ is an effective technique, and one with which I am very familiar from my time as a stand-up comedian. It may sound surprising, but a joke and a crime novel work in very much the same way. The comedian/writer leads their audience along the garden path. The audience knows what’s coming, or at least they *think* they do until they get hit from a direction they were not expecting.

(Billingham, 2012, p. 110)

In terms of embedding comedy within a crime thriller, I was influenced by the novels of Elmore Leonard and Carl Hiaasen and in particular, *Maximum Bob* (Leonard, 1992) and *Lucky You* (Hiaasen, 1998). However, it was not just fictional comedy thrillers that influenced the writing of *Hitman*. Due to my involvement with the marketing and production of former international drug smuggler turned author and raconteur, Howard Marks’s, first live show *An Evening with Mr Nice* (1997), I not only read his true crime memoir *Mr Nice* (1997) but discussed with the author many of the larger than life characters that featured in the book. Marks’s absurdist characterisation was very funny and one of the reasons why his live shows and readings were a success. ‘Then a Volkswagen van pulled up. Inside was McCann, still yelling into a switched-off walkie-talkie, sitting in front of a ton of boxed-up Pakistani hashish’ (Marks, 1997, p. 102).

While 1990s crime writing – whether fictional, non-fictional or comic – was an influence on the writing of *Hitman*, it was the transgressive American literature

that emerged in the post-war years, and in particular, the writing of William Burroughs that exerted the most influence. Talking of his breakthrough novel, *Naked Lunch* (1959), Burroughs told his contemporary, Jack Kerouac, in answer to a question about the book's content: 'I get these messages from other planets. I'm apparently some sort of agent from another planet but I haven't got my orders clearly decoded yet. I'm shitting out my educated Mid-western background once and for all. It's a matter of catharsis, where I say the most horrible things I can think of. Realize that – the most horrible dirty slimy niggardliest posture possible' (Baker, 2010, p. 97). As with so much of Burroughs's oeuvre, his oft-quoted world view and deviant real life behaviour are as influential as the novels themselves. Nonetheless, the idea that one can achieve creative catharsis by exploring and embracing deviant behaviour was potent and liberating to me when planning the novel.

While Burroughs did not hold with Kerouac's avowed belief in the supremacy of spontaneous writing – Burroughs rewrote and edited his work almost obsessively – he did believe in the inviolable honesty of his visions. Assisted by his chosen sacraments of opiates and hallucinogenic drugs, he saw himself as a sort of shaman, journeying to the farthest reaches of his own consciousness to bring back his literary treasure.

During the initial writing of *Hitman*, my intention was to avoid much planning and allow the plot to emerge through the writing of a series of short sections, much as Burroughs had done with the writing of his 'routines' – as he called them – which especially came to the fore during the writing of *Naked Lunch* and the early cut-up novels. Burroughs (1999, p. 83) describes a routine as: 'a usually humorous, sustained tour de force, never more than three or four pages'.

However, while Burroughs made a conscious decision to reject traditional plotting, my intention with *Hitman* was to combine intriguing picaresque events with the narrative drive of escalating jeopardy found in a traditional thriller. Burroughs's commitment as a writer, his seeming willingness to risk his entire existence in order to create his work, was inspiring to me. 'I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and manoeuvred me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write myself out' (Morgan, 1991, p. 199).

How much of this is Burroughs burnishing his own iconography and attempting to excuse himself for the 1952 shooting of his wife, and how much is something that he genuinely believes, is difficult to gauge. But Burroughs's work is rich in the supernatural and this idea of writing as exorcism, as a means of attempting to cast off control in all its forms, including that from the spirit world, is something that runs through much of his work and was a key inspiration to me in the writing of the supernatural sub-plot in *Hitman*. 'To Burroughs, behind everyday reality there was a reality of the spirit world, of psychic visitations, of curses, of possession and phantom beings. This was the single most important element of his life' (Morgan, 1991, p. 235).

Burroughs was drawn towards locations that he believed had their own unique psychic landscape from which he could seek inspiration and connection. The most notable of these places were Mexico City (which I visited during the writing of *Hitman*), the Peruvian jungle (where he sought the supposedly telepathy-inducing narcotic sacrament, Yagé), London, Paris, and most importantly of all, Tangier in Morocco, the inspiration for so much of his writing from *Naked Lunch* onwards. As

he wrote to Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg on November 2nd 1955 (using his own preferred spelling of Tangier): ‘Tanger is the prognostic pulse of the world, like a dream extending from past into the future, a frontier between dream and reality – the ‘reality’ of both called into question’ (Harris, 1993, p. 302).

Due to my interest in Burroughs’s work, I toured Morocco in the early 1990s and visited Tangier. My experience of Moroccan culture and superstitions contributed to the creation of *Hitman*’s Moroccan antagonist, Hassan Nazar, who is possessed not only of a vast intellect but also uncanny abilities. Moroccan culture is rich in the occult; curses are commonplace. Local customs and traditions relating to magic and the spirit world were willingly received and processed by Burroughs, a man who had always held a fervent belief in such things. ‘Burroughs’s belief in, practice of, and thought about the occult – particularly in its operative form as magic and curses – can be traced back in his letters and interviews at least to the 1950s’ (Shenasa, 2013, p. 4). My intention with the curse that is placed upon Mar Kettle in *Hitman* was to make it deliberately Burroughsian, albeit filtered through the prism of the pop cultural landscape of London in the late 1990s. Hassan Nazar is an end-of-the-century reimagining of Hassan-i-Sabbah, the mystical Persian missionary who founded the *Hashishin* or Assassins, an order of Ismaili Muslims, in late 11th century Persia and Syria.

The character of Hassan-i-Sabbah was introduced to Burroughs by the artist, Brion Gysin, who gave him a copy of *Le Vieux de la Montagne* (The Old Man of the Mountains), by Betty Bouthol in 1959 (Miles, 2014, p. 361). He rapidly became one of Burroughs’s obsessions and his influence is found throughout his work. Hassan-i-Sabbah’s famous dictum ‘Nothing is true, everything is permitted’ has achieved cult status amongst those denizens of the counterculture who enjoy its hip subversive

implications. In *Hitman*'s protagonist, with his drug-induced psychosis and supernatural enemy, I attempt to render the dictum true.

Burroughs's belief that he was possessed by an entity which he called the 'Ugly Spirit' was absolute: 'When I go into my psyche, at a certain point I meet a very hostile, very strong force. It's as definite as someone attacking me in a bar. We usually come to a stand off' (Miles, 1993, p. 260). In *Hitman*, a world of possession and curses extends from Tangier in the 1960s to London in the late 1990s. There is also the ever-present suggestion that the supernatural events – and indeed almost everything that takes place in the novel – might possibly be just a drug-induced hallucination in the mind of an unreliable narrator.

J.G. Ballard's description of Burroughs as 'the hitman of the apocalypse' (Ballard, 1998), was my inspiration for the book's title. My intention was to explore what it might mean to be a hitman of the apocalypse. While deliberately mysterious and opaque in meaning, it hints at both a noir and a supernatural entity. As in Burroughs's work in the 1950s and 1960s – itself so influential on the burgeoning counter-culture of the time – and my work in *Hitman* in the 1990s which was reacting to the resurgence of many of those same counter-cultural values, reality is changeable and malleable and bereft of the realism that is often associated with crime fiction. Burroughs felt that the great noir writers from which he had found inspiration in terms of his own writing style did not – as is commonly assumed – deal in reality. 'I mean this idea that this is the hard-boiled, realistic style is completely mythologic. Raymond Chandler is a writer of myths, of criminal myths, not of reality at all. Nothing to do with reality.' (Burroughs, 1999, p. 83).

One key area of *Hitman* that draws on tropes and conventions found in both the writing of the Beats and classic crime writing going as far back as the original Noir

writers of the 1920s is driving, and in particular, car chases. The hitman's prowess as a driver, something we only have his word for due to the unreliable nature of his narration, harks back to the existential freedoms and reckless high speed action of New Hollywood drivers such as the eponymous Frank Bullitt in *Bullitt* (1968) and Kowalski in *Vanishing Point* (1971). These films were themselves products of America's post-war love affair with the automobile embodied in the character of Dean Moriarty – the driving legend of the Beat Generation – in Kerouac's *On the Road* (1959): 'I could feel the road some twenty inches beneath me, unfurling and flying and hissing at incredible speeds across the groaning continent with that mad Ahab at the wheel' (Kerouac, 1959, p.52). The real life Dean Moriarty, Neal Cassady, had gone on to drive Ken Kesey's Magic Bus as the Merry Pranksters set about their crusade to turn on the youth of America to LSD: 'Cassady could still be counted on to move. It was as if he never slept and didn't need to. For all his wild driving he always made it through the last clear-oiled gap in the maze' (Wolfe, 1989, p. 93).

In my novel, I ensured that the hitman character pilots his own cosmic chariot – the 'beamer' – in the same way as though he has some hidden knowledge gleaned from his shamanic pilgrimages to the 'other side': 'It's beautiful, man and Beamer as one. What others might consider risks, situations where the odds of survival narrow, are for me just moments for increased concentration so as to ensure that should there be an area of potential danger, I am obeying my intricate laws of momentum and moving away from it rather than towards it' (Kinnings, 2000, p. 122).

In terms of the hitman's outward appearance, it is not just his much-loved car that is resolutely mass market. As a reflection of the intervening years between the late 1960s and the late 1990s and the drug culture's assimilation into mainstream society, the hitman does not maintain the appearance of the countercultural outlaw.

He chooses to avoid a spectacular display of ‘otherness’ although his rejection of normality is no less enthusiastic than that of his forebears.

As with *Hitman*, the creation of satire in *The Fixer* was as important if not more so than the employment of crime writing conventions in the writing of *The Fixer* although, as with *Hitman*, the novel was marketed and classified as crime fiction by the publishing and retail industries. Rather than a typical detective archetype, Tobe Darling more closely resembles – and is influenced by – the character of John Self in Martin Amis’s *Money* (1984): ‘Jesus, I’m so fat these days. I tell you, I appal myself in the tub and on the can. I sit slumped on the ox-collar seat like a clutch of plumbing, the winded boiler of a thrashed old tramp. How did it happen?’ As with John Self, Tobe Darling is disgusted by his own appearance and behaviour but makes almost no attempt to modify his depravities.

Creating a morally bankrupt anti-hero as a novel’s protagonist is a difficult enterprise for a writer. In *Money*, Amis succeeds in what is, to many people, his best and certainly his funniest novel. The novel’s comedy is crucial in that it seduces the reader into empathising with Self’s character. This same comedic redemption is evident in *The Fixer* although the depravities for which Tobe Darling craves, focused as they are on serial killing as a media enterprise, are far more morally repellant than John’s Self’s. Even with the most acutely engineered comedic self-laceration, it is difficult for a reader to empathise with a man who appears to have no moral values whatsoever. But this was the challenge when writing *The Fixer* and its critical reception would indicate its – at least partial – success in this regard.

Tobe Darling is fascinated by the crimes of true life serial killers and the murders perpetrated by The Piper – the media-fixated serial killer who becomes his client. This is a symbiotic agent/client business relationship; Tobe is a man who

invites horror into his life, hungry to explore scenes of carnage both within an imaginary realm and finally, of course, for real. The Piper provides the real life theatrical content for his mental cravings. But as with Patrick Bateman in Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) and Tyler Durden in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), we're never entirely sure exactly where the horrific imaginings end and reality begins. The violence is absurd and cartoonish – as it is in *Natural Born Killers* (1994) in which various scenes are rendered in comic book-style animation.

In my portrayal of violence and deviant behaviour in *The Fixer*, Tobe Darling's stream of consciousness often strives for the tone of JG Ballard's four novels published in the first half of the 1970s, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High-Rise* (1975). These novels offer a stylistically hyper-real presentation of narrative events so they are clearly realistic but also deeply suspect at the same time. In *The Fixer*, the events are shot through the prism of a peculiarly 1990s pop cultural cynicism and in their narrative tone are also redolent of the work of novelist and screenwriter, Terry Southern, perhaps most famous for his contribution to the screenplay of *Doctor Strangelove* (1964). Southern's books from the late 1960s, firstly a collection of short fiction and essays entitled *Red-Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes* (Southern, 1967) and the novel, *Blue Movie* (Southern, 1970) helped me to identify ways in which to reflect on contemporary popular culture and its behind-the-scenes machinations.

In *The Fixer*, I present terrorism satirically, as a potential form of mass entertainment. Terrorism as a theme continues into my two post-9/11 novels and while very different in tone and form, it nevertheless feels prescient. After Tobe's heartfelt assertion that 'terrorism is the new rock 'n' roll', the novel finishes with a description of a terrorist atrocity in New York. 'Fireballs erupt from the gash in the

building and roll upwards, throwing off clouds of black smoke. Burning objects come tumbling out of the building, some of which I can only presume are bodies... I raise my glass of champagne and take a sip. Up above the buildings, in between the clouds, I can just make out the white vapour trails of airliners, like scars on the night sky' (Kinnings, 2001).

The events of 9/11 and what Jonah Berger describes as 'some unbreachable rupture with the past, a fissure whose visible emblem was the horrifying, smoking absence at the southern tip of Manhattan' (Greenberg, 2003, p. 56) were instrumental in the change of style I adopted after *Hitman* and *The Fixer* were published. In the later books, I made a conscious decision when planning what I intended to become a series of thriller novels to leave the comedic tone of the earlier books behind in order to focus the plotting on the threat of global terror on the streets of London. In so doing, I set out to employ the pacing and suspense of a race-against-time thriller narrative in order to place realistic characters in situations of the utmost jeopardy.

CREATING A THRILLER SERIES IN POST-9/11 LONDON

The impact of the 9/11 terror attacks on politics, and the shockwaves they created in popular culture, inspired many creative artists, and writers in particular, to explore the mechanics and meaning of this new form of terrorism. As Quay and Damico (2010, p. 102) observe: ‘Initial writings focused on representing and witnessing the attacks. As time went by, the need to record shifted to the need to understand, to analyze, even to question and synthesize the events that shook the nation on that fall day in 2001.’

From Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) to Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), many literary novelists attempted to address the single most cataclysmic event of the age but mostly did so through ‘marriage and relationship narratives’ (Keeble, 2016). Few achieved much critical acclaim and a debate was initiated as to the exact nature of what novelists should attempt when faced with exploring the incomprehensible. As Keeble notes with regards to these novels: ‘Clearly, the debate about the 9/11 novel evoked larger ideas about what fiction is for and how it should deal with crisis or catastrophe in the 21st century.’

After completing *The Fixer*, my intention was to write another satirical novel. However, 9/11 changed the cultural and political landscape to such an extent that my interests moved away from an interest in satirising contemporary culture towards exploring international geo-politics and specifically terrorism. As with *Hitman* and *The Fixer*, however, I wanted to explore the contemporary landscape through crime fiction so as to shine a light on ‘the anxieties, the morals and values of the contemporary society’ (Worthington, 2010, pp. 6-7).

I started to write *Baptism* as the first of an intended series featuring the central character of Ed Mallory. As Haynes (2011, p. xii) notes: ‘Crime fiction, probably

more than any other fictional genre, is largely identified with the concept of series. Stand-alone novels are certainly not uncommon, but series of novels built around one or more main characters are the standard for the genre.’

Casting a hostage negotiator as the central protagonist of both *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* allowed for the creation of a character who could become embroiled in complex psychological situations that would require his advanced skills of resolution and negotiation to resolve. Presenting both sides of the argument as to the effectiveness of writing a series of novels, crime writer, Val McDermid (2012, pp. 133-134) points out that: ‘Writing a single series has major limitations for a writer...Series characters have individual clusters of limitations and abilities and the writer is stuck with those.’ However, as a counter to this, she also states that: ‘Series fiction is attractive and satisfying for writers and readers alike...it’s like a friendship – as the years go by, our understanding of the central characters and their world grows’ (McDermid, 2012, p. 133).

The plot of *Baptism* was initially inspired by a personal experience that took place on July 22nd 2005. This was the day after a series of failed bomb attacks on London’s Underground rail network and just over two weeks after the bomb attacks that killed fifty-two London commuters and left over seven hundred injured. 7/7, as it came to be known, represented, ‘the first multiple suicide terrorist attack on UK soil’ (Richards, 2007, p. 89).

Travelling along the Northern Line of the London Underground that day to attend jury service at Southwark Crown Court, I was alarmed when I found myself stationary in a tunnel for over forty minutes, not least because of the paranoid atmosphere created by the knowledge that there were terrorists at large. With no information forthcoming from the driver of the train, or the authorities, normally

taciturn London travellers became talkative; I was particularly struck by my fellow passengers' nervous laughter. There was an unspoken understanding that what was taking place might be part of a terrorist or security incident. Subsequently, however, it transpired that in a tragic case of mistaken identity, the Brazilian electrician Jean-Charles de Menezes had been falsely identified as one of the terrorists who had failed to detonate their explosives the day before and been shot dead in the train in front of the one in which I was travelling.

The experience of being trapped in the tunnel inspired me to create a story in which travellers on the London Underground are held hostage by religious fanatics. In particular, I wanted to focus on the psychological effects of a terrorist act on multiple characters and explore their very different perceptions of it. As Sprang (2003, p. 133) notes: 'Different perspectives, life experiences, and personality characteristics might cause one individual to view the [terrorist] act as traumatic and develop significant distress, whereas another individual might have little or no reaction to the event.'

Baptism was influenced as much by contemporary politics and terrorism – and their reporting in the media – as it was by the work of other thriller writers. A number of comment pieces and news articles following 9/11 pointed out the similarities between the events of that day and the plots of thriller novels with author Tom Clancy, in particular, being identified as a writer who had seemingly predicted the use of airliners as weapons of mass destruction in his novel, *Debt of Honour* (1994). As Groll (2013) notes and quotes from *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 'national security officials were reading Clancy' and '[The Clinton Administration counter-terror official] Richard Clarke told us that he was concerned about the danger posed by aircraft... But attributed his awareness more to Tom Clancy novels than to warnings from the intelligence community.'

Despite this, few thriller novelists – at least at first – felt a desire to tackle terrorist atrocities, as noted by McGrath (2004): ‘What’s odd is that most of our thriller writers – the people who in the past have taught us what we know about intelligence gathering and intelligence failure – don’t seem to be interested in the post-9/11 landscape.’

Within British society, greater political engagement since 9/11 had coincided – some would say was fuelled by and in turn fuelled – political extremism, particularly via the internet. As Hogan (2010, p. 425) observes: ‘Lacking the personal accountability of face-to-face politics, the “virtual” political world has become a refuge for hatemongers, conspiracy theorists, and other assorted political crackpots and extremists.’ Whereas the characters of Tobe Darling and the Piper in *The Fixer* utilise digital communications and have a workable knowledge of ‘new media’, the terrorists in *Baptism* are ‘digital natives’, as defined by Palfrey and Gasser (2008, p. 1): ‘They were all born after 1980, when social digital technologies...came online. They all have access to networked digital technologies. And they all have the skills to use those technologies.’ Hence it is only to be expected that the first demand of these digital native hostage-takers is for wi-fi to be provided to the train in the tunnel: ““You can tell him that I want a wireless router installed in the mouth of the tunnel at Leicester Square tube station so that the entire train will have access to the internet”” (Kinnings, 2012, p. 166).

This ‘informational exuberance’ as Chadwick (2009, p. 195) calls it, is central to the story of *Baptism* as the terrorists set about disseminating their message to the world. I continued and extended this theme of dissemination in *Sacrifice*, mirroring contemporary terrorism’s embrace of digital technology: ‘The Internet and similar networked systems are ideal for terrorist activities and operations. At the most general

level, they provide capabilities for worldwide communications and security at exceedingly low cost' (Wagner, 2005, p. 7).

In *Baptism*, the phone calls, messages, live video and audio streams which are produced and transmitted from the train are intended to provide the attackers with a mouthpiece through which to broadcast their demands and also to allow their victims, the passengers on the train, to contact their loved ones, thereby heightening the terror caused by the atrocity. In this, I was mirroring the events of 9/11 when passengers on United Airlines Flight 93 were encouraged by hijackers to use their mobile phones to contact loved ones. "To keep discontent down, they encouraged passengers and crew to contact their families by cell phone... This relaxed style came back to haunt the hijackers, for passengers who contacted family members learned that three other aircraft had been hijacked and had been turned into flying bombs' (Atkins, 2011, p. 413).

While the events of both *Baptism* and *The Fixer* are narrated in the first person, thereby creating a single catalogue of events, the experience of writing screenplays told through the points of view of multiple characters and multiple narratives encouraged me to structure *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* in a similar style. One writing project in particular was to have considerable influence on the writing of the later two novels and best illustrates the dichotomy between the first two books and the second in terms of the creation of suspense and momentum.

My unproduced screenplay, *Dark Entry* (Kinnings, 2004), tells the story of a group of teenagers – the feral youths of the then-current popular folklore – who break into a large house in the country only to find that the homeowner is in residence. Nick is a middle-aged businessman on the brink of losing everything: his trophy wife, his business and his home. Drunk, suicidal and looking for someone to blame for his

predicament, he decides to take bloody revenge on the folk devils that have invaded his world. The story was inspired by the case, in 1999, of the Norfolk farmer, Tony Martin, who had shot and killed one of two intruders who had broken into his farmhouse. I intended to explore and contribute to the debate that had played out in the media regarding issues of home ownership and how far one should be able to go – in a legal and moral sense – to protect one’s property. The film achieved some funding success when it was awarded a €30,000 development grant from the EU MEDIA fund via the producers, Caravan Film, who had optioned the screenplay.

The writing of *Dark Entry* was an attempt to create a low budget thriller that could be produced primarily in one location, namely in and around Nick’s large country property. Most importantly, in terms of the subsequent writing of *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, the events in the screenplay play out over a short period of time, and in places, simultaneously or in ‘real time’. The process of creating multiple, overlapping narratives, building both singly and collectively via multiple crises to a climax, and doing so within a condensed timeframe was something I found I wanted to explore further in prose. Freed from the confines of writing a screenplay for a low budget feature film, I set about creating a larger and more cataclysmic storyline.

The timeframes that I employed in *Hitman* and *The Fixer* were vague. Both stories take place over the space of a few weeks. In both books, time is a malleable commodity with little specific relevance. Not so, in the later two novels when the exact timing of specific chapters is so crucial that I included time codes in the books’ chapter headings. This greater attention to detail in terms of timing also served to focus my attention much more closely on pacing and suspense.

The study of screenwriting with its processes for manipulating audience emotion and engagement was useful in the plotting of multiple narrative strands. The

better of the screenwriting how-to manuals provide practical procedures for injecting pace into a screenplay. For example: ‘Hard outs are generally more about pacing. A hard out (“We’ve got him cornered inside the warehouse – let’s go!” or “I’m sorry. We did all we could, but you’ll never be able to walk again”) at the end of a scene is generally used for the purpose of impact and pacing’ (Bennett, 2013, p. 142).

Consideration of the creative limitations inherent within the process of screenwriting – and specifically writing to a low budget – helped to focus my imagination. Robert McKee, possibly the most successful and also controversial of the screenwriting how-to ‘gurus’ speaks of his ‘principle of Creative Limitation’ (McKee, 1997, p. 97) which ‘calls for freedom within a circle of obstacles. So we deliberately put rocks in our path, barriers that inspire. We discipline ourselves as to what to do, while we’re boundless as to how to do it.’

As noted by Sullivan (2014, p. 62), writing from multiple third person points of view allows ‘a lot more flexibility in the writing, giving the reader a much more three-dimensional vision of the story. And there is the advantage, third person gives the writer of including other third person characters in scenes where the first person/narrator is not present.’

My intention was to present the narrative in *Sacrifice* in the same style as *Baptism*. Most crime series rely on a singular consistent point of view for their returning protagonists. However, this is not always the case. In *Killing Floor* (1997), the first of Lee Child’s series of novels featuring Jack Reacher, a former major in the military police, the story is told in the first person. Reacher describes the events from his perspective throughout. All narrative details are delivered to the reader via his perception: ‘I was arrested in Eno’s diner. At twelve o’clock. I was eating eggs and drinking coffee’ (Child, 1997, p. 9). *Die Trying* (1998), the second novel in the series,

however, is told in the third person. This allows for a multi-stranded narrative as the story events are delivered from multiple protagonists, Reacher included. 'Jack Reacher stayed alive, because he got cautious' (Child, 1998, p. 11).

When read consecutively, the change in narrative perspective between the two novels does jar a little. Having been party to Jack Reacher's thoughts and inner life in *Killing Floor*, the reader feels somewhat shut out from this internal narrative in *Die Trying*. However, what is lost in terms of first person immediacy and reader intimacy is more than made up for in *Die Trying*'s multiple narratives which provide for a more complex and arguably more satisfying story. As Child (2003) himself observes:

'First-person is very intimate, and it's great for cementing a relationship between the character and the reader... But third-person is very much more flexible in terms of what it lets you do with plot. You can see around corners, you can know stuff that the hero doesn't know – much easier to create suspense that way. So ultimately it's about horses for courses – what does the plot need? Is this a book where a very personal point of view is needed?'

Later novels in Lee Child's Jack Reacher series are written from either first or third person perspectives with no specific pattern emerging other than – as one might expect – those stories that are presented with Reacher very much at the centre of the narrative events are in the first person and those in which there are simultaneous narrative strands, are in the third. Due to the nature of the post-9/11 stories I planned to write, it was necessary to construct the narratives of both *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* via multiple third person perspectives as the various characters observe the cataclysmic events taking place around them. Lasting only a few hours, the storylines of *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* give the reader the impression that she is witnessing the events play out in a semblance of real time.

Writer/director Paul Greengrass utilises this technique to great effect in *United 93* (2006). The film plays out like a real-time documentary and cuts between the authorities trying to make sense of the attacks of 9/11 to the passengers and terrorists on the eponymous airliner, creating levels of tension and suspense that some found traumatic: ‘Some audiences reported being traumatized by the film’s images, and many theaters pulled *United 93*’s trailer or displayed warnings prior to running it’ (Sisco King, 2011, p. 132). To attempt a similar narrative effect in the fictional world of *Baptism* created various technical challenges.

The short chapters in *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* are narrated in the third person from the points of view of the respective protagonists, antagonists and secondary characters. Some of these chapters overlap so that we may see the same event from two or more characters’ perspectives. When writing the novel, this presented a number of issues in terms of the duration of the narrative strands and how they might intersect according to the various timings in play. In order to ensure that there were no inconsistencies, it was necessary to keep a diagram of story events plotted against a time axis.

Hitman and *The Fixer* both have a straight chronological structure, as do the vast majority of commercial crime novels and thrillers. Fractured chronologies present difficulties for crime writers where a natural progression of discovery is a crucial component of the ongoing detection, itself a central convention of the genre. This perceived wisdom is of course subverted to ingenious effect in director, Christopher Nolan’s film, *Memento* (2000), in which the main narrative of investigation plays out in a series of scenes presented in reverse chronological order. These tell the story of the central character’s investigation into his wife’s murder which is made all the more difficult by a brain injury that means he is unable to form

new memories.

While nowhere near as structurally complex as *Memento*, both *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* are narratives of investigation and both include a structural anomaly. As in *Fight Club* (Palahniuk, 1996), both novels start with a chapter which describes a scene from which the storyline then jumps back in time to an earlier point in the story. From there, the narrative moves forward in a straight chronological order until it arrives at, and continues past, the events of the opening chapter. This plot device proved popular with editors when *Baptism* was submitted to them and afterwards with readers when the book was published. Putting this later chapter at the start throws the reader straight into a point of extreme action and suspense. Two armed police officers walk into the Tube tunnel to try to make contact with the stricken train and are brutally despatched by the Belle Denning character using a sniper's rifle. As in *Fight Club*, the intended effect on the reader is to foreshadow the events of the opening chapter which take place further along the narrative timeline.

While it was important for my writing process to produce detailed outlines of both of the later novels in order to configure multiple storylines, not all writers agree with this method of working. Lee Child eschews a formal outline altogether, starting at the beginning of the novel and writing one single draft, making only minor revisions as he does so. This was the writing process that I employed when writing first drafts of *Hitman* and *The Fixer*. As far as the writing of commercial genre thrillers is concerned, Child's process is perhaps the exception that proves the rule in terms of the effectiveness of outlining and editing: "I don't want to improve it. When I've written something, that is the way it has to stay. That's how I was that particular year...It is what it is. Honesty demands that you own up to it and leave it alone" (Martin, 2014, 13%).

While Ed Mallory is the central investigating character of *Baptism*, he is not the novel's only protagonist. The driver of the hijacked Tube train is arguably as important to the overall story as Mallory himself. George Wakeham is a dreamer whose former creative ambitions have been buried beneath the realities of family life: 'There was a time when driving a tube train was just a day job, something to pay the bills while he tried to pursue a creative career. But now he was a tube driver – that alone – and nothing more' (Kinnings, 2012, p. 18). Wakeham represents the eyes and ears of the reader as the train is hijacked and the hostage situation unfolds. His fear and self-doubt is tested but finally, after many false starts, he attempts and achieves the heroics that he feels have eluded him all his life.

While Ed Mallory, the negotiator, is physically on the periphery for most of the story, George Wakeham is located right at the heart of the hostage crisis, becoming instrumental in it as Tommy Denning, the hijacker, uses him as a mouthpiece to keep the passengers calm. This structure, whereby there is a central character in the middle of the hostage situation, providing a counterpoint to Ed Mallory's point of view as the negotiator attempting to resolve the situation, was mirrored in *Sacrifice*. Lily Poynter, the daughter of the disgraced banker, Graham Poynter, has a similar purpose to George Wakeham in that, through her, the reader observes the hostage-taking first hand.

Unlike Lee Child who has won plaudits for the raw hard-boiled style of his prose, thriller writers such as Dan Brown and James Patterson have found great commercial success more for their plotting and pacing than their literary skills. What their writing illustrates, however, is that short chapters create pace and suspense in a thriller novel in much the same way as short scenes and fast editing in a thriller film. However, as Batty and Waldeback (2008, p. 40) say, "*pace* is not the same as

speed... Sometimes a genre, style or particular story needs to be a slow “pressure cooker”, but it can still have tight pace in the sense that it contains no superfluous material in its scenes.’ It is this filmic economy of writing combined with powerful hooks and plot reversals, most notably and frequently at the end of chapters, that I employed in the writing of both novels.

As with the earlier two books, *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* reflect a contemporary milieu and are very much of their time. What sets them apart from *Hitman* and *The Fixer* is that rather than satirising contemporary targets for comic effect, they reflect upon the perpetrators and victims of terrorism and how they are represented in the media. They explore the fears and neuroses of characters caught up in violent frightening situations. The writing is much more controlled and focused on the mechanics of plot and characterisation. While some genre conventions are adhered to, others are subverted, namely one in particular, that the protagonist of a thriller should be able-bodied.

UNRELIABLE NARRATION AND (ANTI-)HEROICS

Both *Hitman* and *The Fixer* employ unreliable narration. As Booth (1983, p. 158) points out in relation to a ‘fallible’ narrator: ‘If he is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed.’ In discussing the reason why a writer might employ this style of narration, David Lodge (2012, p. 155) notes that it is ‘to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter’. The unreliability of the narration in *Hitman* is, however, not a by-product of a self-conscious attempt to ‘distort or conceal’ but rather a side effect of copious drug consumption. The hitman character discovers that he becomes immune to the psychic manoeuvres of his nemesis, Hassan Nazar, only when narcotically inebriated. The problem he faces – and the source of much of the book’s comedy – is that being in such an intoxicated state, the protagonist finds it almost impossible to decipher what is real and what is drug-induced illusion.

Rather than employing a ‘historical present’ mode of narrative delivery, the first person present tense style (FPPT) that I employed in *Hitman* means that the reader is encouraged to surrender to the hitman’s perception as it is described via his ongoing stream of consciousness. In this respect, my intention was to reflect and adapt the US gonzo style of Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*: ‘We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like “I feel lightheaded; maybe you should drive.”’ (Thompson, 1972).

In *Hitman*, the cartoon-like behaviour of Thompson’s fictional alter-ego, Raoul Duke, and his attorney, Dr Gonzo, infects a millennial London as the hitman and his

friend and sidekick, Luke, undertake their own odyssey. Reflecting Raoul Duke's style of narrative delivery, there are numerous asides and digressions which comment upon pop cultural phenomena. As with Duke, the hitman has a fascination with driving cars while incapacitated and every time he smokes another joint, snorts another line or pops another pill, his unreliability as a narrator intensifies.

I rub my eyes in an attempt to clear the madness but all I succeed in doing is throwing swathes of brilliant colour across the increasingly bizarre scene unfolding before them. My sense of visual perspective has inverted so that the lines and planes of objects don't move away from me and diminish in clarity as normal but turn about face and charge back at me with vengeful purpose. They pulsate and breathe and demand my unwavering attention. And still the train bores into the earth, spinning like some demented drill bit burning through the rock going straight to hell. (Kinnings, 2000, p. 228)

The hitman's drug-infused consciousness creates a disorientating effect that enhances the novel's weird and uncanny events. In this respect, the unreliable narration that I created in *Hitman* is constantly testing and experimenting with Todorov's (2014 p. 227) definition as both 'the story of the crime' *and* 'the story of the investigation' are filtered through the prism of a narcotically modified perception.

The central character of *The Fixer*, Tobe Darling, is a hard-bitten showbusiness manager and press agent, a character created as an exaggerated hybrid of clients and colleagues I encountered during my former career involved with the advertising and marketing of live music, theatre and comedy. As Tobe sets about managing the serial killer known as the Piper who murders American tourists in their

hotel rooms, we are provided with a personal testament of Tobe's life and times, delivered – as with *Hitman* – via first person present tense: 'I'm a showbiz fixer by trade. Part image consultant, part personal management guru. Armed with an almost pathologically intuitive understanding of the media and the entertainment industries, I can predict the seismic shifts in the tastes of the public with an accuracy that borders on the telepathic' (Kinnings, 2001, p. 3).

In all four of my novels, a constant theme is a blurring of the line between hero and anti-hero. The unnamed protagonist in *Hitman* is a drug-taking chancer with a dubious moral compass. Ed Mallory, the protagonist of both *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, is a flawed hero, rendered as such by his inability to achieve the necessary psychological connection to the hostage-takers with which he negotiates who are themselves, misguided idealists. Tobe Darling in *The Fixer* harbours such contempt for his contemporaries and people in general that he wants to see them die.

As Russell (2003) notes, 'From its early days, detective fiction has drawn on the antihero archetype, embodied in characters as notable (and noble) as Sherlock Holmes and Lord Peter Wimsey. Both Holmes and Wimsey are, in a conventional sense, virtuous and moral figures, but they are also social misfits, psychologically damaged or lacking in some way.' My intention with Tobe Darling was to create a detective of sorts – he wants to discover the truth of his predicament – but his ultimate aim is not crime prevention or the apprehension of a criminal. Far from it. He chooses to become involved in a criminal enterprise by publicising its perpetrator and thereby creating a legend for his own nefarious reasons.

When traditional anti-hero detectives in crime fiction undertake immoral and often criminal activities, they are usually excused in the eyes of the reader because ultimately their quest is to rid the world of a greater evil than themselves. Tobe

Darling, however, has no such intention. His redemption, such as it is, comes from an altogether different source, namely that of comedy, and in particular, his own tragic self-awareness. “‘You’re quite an ugly little man, aren’t you? Quite fat and misshapen.’ She was right, of course, and I laughed nervously. ‘I should imagine you don’t get much, other than the occasional sweaty fumble you are forced to pay for.’” Again she was right and again I laughed nervously’ (Kinnings, 2001 p. 23).

When writing *The Fixer*, I was very conscious that Tobe Darling should not represent a heroic anti-hero as defined by Spivey and Knowlton (2013, p. 52): ‘This *good guy who does bad things for the right reasons*’. I wanted him to be a villain in the literal sense and rework – in a British millennial way – the character of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (Easton Ellis, 1991). The publication of Ellis’s novel was revolutionary in terms of its cultural reception and its influence resonated throughout the 1990s, emerging in the work of numerous writers, most notably Chuck Palahniuk and Quentin Tarantino. As Simpson (2000, p. 149) asserts, ‘Ellis has summed up as well as anyone can the overriding theme of *American Psycho*: the self-cannibalizing aspects of 1980s capitalism.’

While Ellis was satirising 1980s capitalism in New York, my intention with *The Fixer* was to satirise the hunger for celebrity in London in the late 1990s. Ellis used extreme violence to shock and force the reader to contemplate the target of his satire while my satirical intentions were more overtly comedic. Tobe Darling is not, for the most part, a perpetrator of violence himself, as being a show business agent, he is a cultural intermediary. But as with a real life character such as the disgraced press agent, Max Clifford, the culture of the late 1990s started a process of focusing on the cultural intermediaries themselves and calling on them to become stars too. Hence the rise of a character such as Simon Cowell, himself the subject of satire in the form of

record company executive Steven Stelfox in John Niven's novels, *Kill Your Friends* (2008) and *The Second Coming* (2011). Similarly, Tobe Darling outgrows his desire to be a celebrity brand's facilitator; he wants to become the brand itself.

An early version of *Baptism* was published in Holland as *Claustrofobia* (Kinnings, 2009). The events in the narrative are presented in straight chronological order without the structural anomaly regarding the opening chapters that are found in *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*. It also includes a different Ed Mallory character. In *Claustrofobia*, what is in effect my first attempt at Ed Mallory, the character bears some similarity to Dr Edward 'Fitz' Fitzgerald, the protagonist in the British television series, *Cracker* (1993-1996). This is especially so in terms of his extra-curricular activities, namely his archetypal anti-hero detective personality traits of broken marriage and excessive drinking. This Ed Mallory was wracked with self-doubt and feeling unable to cope with the terrorist situation as it unfolds, he goes momentarily AWOL and stiffens his resolve with whisky.

Despite the novel being published in Holland, editors at British publishers still had issues with this version of the Ed Mallory character and I made the decision to reconsider his personal attributes. Piper (2015, p. 152) identifies the appeal of the Fitz character as being that he can crack the case and prove 'whodunit' but also 'why apparently senseless or evil crimes are committed'. In rewriting and re-imagining the character of Ed Mallory, I chose to accentuate this aspect of his personality.

Another influence on my writing as I undertook this process was the character of Alex Delaware who appears in a long running series of novels by Jonathan Kellerman. Delaware is a forensic psychologist for the Los Angeles Police Department. Formerly a child psychologist, Delaware is a postmodern detective identified by Gibson (1994) as 'often sensitive, caring, insightful, and socially aware'.

He is ‘the opposite of the classical detective’ who Gibson characterises via the film noir of the 1940s and 1950s as: ‘rough, uncultured, even violent; he chain smokes and contemporary social workers would consider him at least a borderline alcoholic.’ While neither version of Ed Mallory is as extreme in its characterisation as these archetypes, in reinventing the divorced big drinker as a sensitive deep thinker, I modified his personality so that he changed from being a classical detective to a postmodern one.

My decision to make Ed Mallory blind grew out of my research into the nature and practice of hostage negotiation and in particular, the importance of ‘active listening’. Strentz (2011, p. 10) defines Active Listening Skills as ‘doing something to encourage the other person to do most of the talking. That means we engage in activity to induce and produce more listening content.’ This ability to ‘reduce emotional excitation and distress’ thereby ‘resulting in more rational problem solving focused on surrender’ (Hammer, 2007, p. 49) is highly prized in the training of negotiators. ‘Every negotiator training course pays homage to active listening’ (Slatkin, 2010, p. xii).

Considering this area of a hostage negotiator’s practice and how it might be enhanced by a physical disability led to my idea that Ed Mallory might be blind. In turn, this idea spawned numerous others, most related to the back story in which Mallory sustains the injury which leads to his blindness. Although it would involve a substantial rewrite, it was an intriguing and original direction in which to take the central returning character of a potential series of books. But I felt it was important that this depiction of the character did not become trivialised by glossing over the realities of his disability. Discussing their investigation into the use of deaf protagonists in detective stories, Mitchell and Snyder (2001, p. 200) highlight the

main issue at stake: ‘The protagonist rarely experienced the dilemmas of life as a hearing-impaired person negotiating a hearing world.’

Attempting to avoid any such criticism with regards to Ed Mallory’s blindness presented specific technical challenges. Writing in a close third person point of view usually relies heavily on the consideration of visual information. As Scott (2014, p. 54) points out: ‘All narratives are representations of a world (be they primarily linguistic, or visual, or abstract) which is somehow recognisable to the “receiver” of the narrative – for our purposes the reader.’ When writing as a blind character, sensory details must be confined to the character’s functioning senses, particularly hearing which may be enhanced by sight loss: ‘Several studies suggest that blind individuals may be superior in temporal discrimination of meaningful sounds like speech’ (Cattaneo and Vecchi, 2011, p. 16).

Taking into account his beneficial disability, I undertook an extensive rewrite of the earlier version of *Baptism* that had been published in Holland, changing the Ed Mallory character in terms of his demeanour, personality and back story. I excised all visual references from his point of view while also heightening the auditory and non-visual sensory information that he received, allowing for some occasional dramatic licence: ‘Ed could feel something in the vibrations given off by the men in the room. There was no mistaking it; the fear came off them in waves’ (Kinnings, 2012, p. 112).

Of my four novels, *Sacrifice* is by far the most politically engaged and this is reflected in its characters. 2012 saw the second full year of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in the UK and an ongoing national debate continued to rage with regards to where the culpability lay for the financial crash of 2008 and the recession that it caused. ‘Here most of the experts agreed that it was impossible to effectively regulate the casino activities of investment bankers – in a sense, these banks were the

casinos in which betting took place' (Jordan, 2010, p. 33). The character of Graham Poynter personifies the reckless banker archetype who is caught out by fluctuations in the market. While not quite in the realms of Bernie Madoff and his 'epic betrayal' (Kirtzman, 2009, p. 10), Poynter is nonetheless a character who invites the reader's opprobrium on account of his lack of self-awareness regarding his fraudulent activities. 'The world was in crisis; Graham had been caught out by the markets. It wasn't as if he was the only one' (Kinnings, 2013, p. 25).

In the novel, as in reality, ranged against the profligate bankers and their political facilitators are a rag-tag coalition of 'hacktivists' such as Anonymous and LulzSec. On the subject of Anonymous, Olson (2013, 6%) outlines the organisation's ambitions: 'No quarry would be too big: a storied media institution, an entertainment giant, even the FBI itself.' Yet despite the threat posed by cyber crime, there has been only limited research conducted into 'cyber criminology' (Jaishankar, 2011, p. xxvii). Jaishankar goes on to discuss 'space transition theory' which focuses on how people behave differently 'when they move from one space to another'. The first postulate of the theory is that 'Persons with repressed criminal behaviour (in physical space) have a propensity to commit crimes in cyberspace that they otherwise would not commit due to their status and position' (Jaishankar, 2011, p. xxviii). This, I felt, presented some interesting opportunities in the development of an antagonist whose criminal behaviour is exported from cyber space to physical space. In making this transition, the antagonist in question, the cyber-vigilante known as the Adversary, also breaks with the 'deliberately and consciously nonviolent' tradition of hacktivism (Fleckenstein, 2009, p. 179). What the Adversary does, in a misguided pursuance of social justice, forces the reader to explore a moral grey area replete with scales and grades of benign and malignant behaviours.

While legislatures and lawmakers struggle to counter cyber activity, the individual is forced to refine their own sense of social justice in the face of those who venture into what has become known as the ‘dark net’ – hidden internet content that cannot be indexed by standard search engines: ‘an underworld set apart yet connected to the internet we inhabit, a world of complete freedom and anonymity, and where users say and do what they like, uncensored, unregulated, and outside of society’s norms’ (Bartlett, 2014, p. 3).

Our understanding of right and wrong is tested when considering the behaviour of hackers and hacktivists just as it is when considering the ethics of governments who carry out surveillance of their citizens in the interests – or so they claim – of intelligence and/or national security. In this respect, *Sacrifice* appropriates genre conventions identified by Simpson (2010, p. 190) when discussing the protagonist of *The Killer Inside Me* (Thompson, 2010): ‘Disturbingly, the narrative tempts the reader to partake of Ford’s attitudes and, by implication, to assume some degree of his sociopathology. Such reader/character identification, seemingly benign in other types of fiction, takes on a disconcerting edge in the psycho thriller.’

By analysing the characterisation in the four novels, it is clear to see that in evolutionary terms, my respective protagonists and antagonists are drawn according to wider contemporary concerns. Rather than being creations devised in order to service the requirements of plot, plot grows from the characterisation itself. However, I ensure that the relationship between character and plot is symbiotic and never so intransigent that it cannot be modified – even after initial publication – in order to accommodate further development, as evidenced by the changing nature of the Ed Mallory character between the first publication of *Claustrofobia* in Holland and the book’s later publication as *Baptism*.

FILM & TELEVISION, CELEBRITY AND THE LONDON UNDERGROUND

The world of film and television, whether in terms of the showbusiness milieu explored in *Hitman* and *The Fixer* or the rolling news networks in *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, is a constant presence in my work. In the writing of *Hitman*, much of the comedic haplessness, in particular the hitman character's internal monologue and ironic deadpan dialogue, owes much to a British feature film, *Withnail and I* (1987). This cult favourite, with its singular dialogue and mise-en-scène was written and directed by Bruce Robinson, a writer who has often been compared to Hunter S. Thompson as much for his vision and temperament as his writing style.

‘Danny’s here. Head Hunter to his friends. Head Hunter to everybody. He doesn’t have any friends. The only people he converses with are his clients and occasionally the police. The purveyor of rare herbs and prescribed chemicals is back. Will we never be set free?’ (*Withnail and I*, 1987).

‘He’s not cut out for a life of crime. He’s not cut out for anything much beyond recreational drugs and knowing a good band when he sees one. Life for Luke is just a medium for getting from one party to the next, just something that happens while he gets stoned. Murder’s not his scene at all’ (Kinnings, 2000, p. 60).

While *Withnail and I* focuses on characters whose perceptions are chemically and alcoholically modified for comic effect at the tail end of the 1960s, the characters in Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993), are firmly rooted in the contemporary heroin subculture of Edinburgh in the late 1980s. The success of *Trainspotting* – both as a novel and particularly the subsequent film adaptation (1996) – meant that it became acceptable for mainstream fiction and film to portray hard drug use without the traditional cautions and caveats. *Trainspotting* focuses on comic archetypes identified

by Wickham (2005 p. 136): ‘It is the character comedy that really grips, proving that what always works best in British comedy is deluded losers.’

When creating the hitman character, I ensured that his lack of self-awareness permeates his entire narrative delivery: ‘My usual brilliance of co-ordination is sorely lacking and I’m angry which always makes dangerous driving that bit more dangerous I find’ (Kinnings, 2000, p. 151). It is not just the central character but also the secondary characters and even the peripheral ones – some of whose sole function is to provide material for individual mini-biographies – that deliver much of the absurdist comedy in the book. ‘Mum was killed during a police reconstruction. She was knocked down by a car. The others, the camera crew and the drama students got out of the way but Mum, even though she could walk...tried to wheel herself away in a wheelchair. Whatever made her do this when she could have run for it like all the rest, I’ll never know’ (Kinnings, 2000, p. 79).

Film-making and televisual themes are present throughout *Hitman*: Mar Kettle was as an actress in 1950s Ealing comedies; Joyce, the hitman’s neighbour is a former star of pornographic movies; the hitman’s disposal of the body of Mar Kettle’s lawyer is interrupted by the arrival of a film crew; a number of questions in the radio phone-in quiz, *Titch’s Triffic Trips*, are film-related and many of the peripheral characters work in film and television. ‘His increasingly erratic programming ideas of late have culminated in his most recent format which is a *You’ve Been Framed*-style home video programme, the only twist being that the hapless victims of these more serious domestic accidents really do end up dead. He wants to call it *You’ve Been Killed*’ (Kinnings, 2000, p. 201). This all contributes to a world which is saturated in pop music and culture and the knowingly dark, deadpan absurdism of its narrative delivery reflects the work of satirist Chris Morris in his television shows, *The Day*

Today (1994) and *Brass Eye* (1997-2001) in which ridiculous news stories are delivered in a serious manner: 'The effects of a heroin overdose are lethal. Yes, in the short term, but there's been absolutely no research into the long-term effects' (*Brass Eye*, 1997).

Just as Chris Morris is satirising the delivery of rolling news coverage, in *Hitman* I satirise the entertainment industry and the people who inhabit it and aspire to it. This theme, most often explored through multiple characters' ongoing hunger for stardom, continues into *The Fixer* where it is amplified yet further. Drawing on a similar satirical tone as Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) – screenplay by Quentin Tarantino – my intention with *The Fixer* was also to focus on both the media's hypocritical obsession with violence and violent imagery on the one hand and a character carrying out homicidal acts almost purely for theirs and the public's gratification on the other.

Born of a very different tradition of film-making from *Natural Born Killers* but with a similar satirical objective with regards to its comic horror realism is the Belgian film *Man Bites Dog* (1992). This uses a highly effective mockumentary form to explore the horrifically funny day-to-day exploits of a serial killer. The deadpan to-camera commentary of the Ben character – the subject of the documentary – resonates through Tobe Darling in *The Fixer*. Ben discusses how he might despatch an old lady with a heart condition by shouting at her and thereby shocking her into a cardiac arrest, while Tobe discusses his ongoing media and marketing strategy for his serial-killer client, The Piper. '*Man Bites Dog* is interesting because it shows that we, like the documentary film crew, have crossed the line; we have lost our foundation stone and are no longer at a remove from the events' (Mathijs, 2004, p. 218). In a similar way, *The Fixer* attempts to make its reader complicit in the criminal activity described

in the narrative while employing a FPPT viewpoint that closely approximates the immediacy of *Man Bites Dog*'s documentary style. As Krogh Hansen (2008) points out. 'One could claim that the widespread use of FPPT is to be understood with reference to audio-visual media narration insofar that it also establishes a registering "here-and-now" mode.'

Freed from the financial expense of script development which is inherent in the commissioning and production of television drama, producers and broadcasters have long been aware of the viability of non-fiction and documentary content. However, it was not until the enormous growth in audiences for reality television formats in the late 1990s that this area of television and web-based broadcasting really flourished. Reality television, characterised as it is by voice-overs and inserts containing interviews with the participants who comment on ongoing events, however trivial, has been imitated and absorbed by television dramatists and writers, most notably in the work of satirical writers and performers such as Ricky Gervais, Sacha Baron Cohen and Charlie Brooker. As Krogh Hansen (2008) goes on to say, citing the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet: 'the exploration of the possibilities of adapting cinematographic narrative forms to written fiction was common throughout the twentieth century.' *Hitman* and *The Fixer* were both written with a similar exploratory intention but the nature of the contemporary 'cinematographic narrative form' had changed and now included reality television.

Man Bites Dog follows in the 'found footage' tradition of the notorious 'video nasty' *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). As defined by Heller-Nicholas (2014, p. 16), found footage horror films 'rely on the *fictional* premise that the footage from which they are constructed existed previously, and has been reutilized into a new, separate work'. Following the success of *The Blair Witch Project* (1997), found footage

became its own horror sub-genre in films such as *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *[Rec]* (2007). Just as the Piper films his slaughters via a web-cam prior to uploading the footage to the internet, the narrative in *The Fixer* as a whole is presented as though described by the Tobe Darling character in real time, as if he is documenting and surveilling his own life and his occasional hallucinatory perception of it.

The later three of my four novels all have plots in which characters are eager to disseminate a viral message via the media. In the case of *The Fixer*, it is the serial killer, the Piper, who wishes to distribute news of his murderous escapades far and wide. It is to increase his media ‘reach’ and enhance his public profile that he makes contact with media fixer, Tobe Darling. The Piper, Darling and the antagonists in both *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* share a hunger to ensure that their public image is presented in the best possible light and their message is broadcast to as broad a circulation as possible. It is only in *The Fixer*, however, that the primary intention of the media message is to create a celebrity: ‘to tap into the global obsession with horror and supply the demand... We will bring snuff to the masses’ (Kinnings, 2001, p. 260).

The Fixer was completed in 2000, the year in which the reality television series *Big Brother* (2000-2017) was first broadcast in the UK and became a media phenomenon. The entertainment industry of which I was a part at that time displayed a fascination for creating celebrities out of supposedly ordinary people plucked from obscurity. The internet had already transformed habits of media consumption and revolutionised the methods employed by marketing and public relations professionals to access their celebrity clients’ target audiences. As Berger (2013) notes: ‘Exclusivity is also about availability, but in a different way. Exclusive things are accessible only to people who meet particular criteria... But exclusivity isn’t just

about money or celebrity. It's about knowledge. Knowing certain information or being connected to people who do.'

This concept of accessibility to celebrities predates social media which would subsequently provide platforms for fans to be allowed to feel as though they could communicate – and in some cases actually communicate – directly with the celebrities of their choosing. The Piper does not aspire to 'micro-celebrity' which Marwick (2013, p. 114) describes as, 'a state of being famous to a niche group of people' but rather, traditional, 'real' celebrity. As Marwick (2013, p. 162) goes on to say, 'Celebrity culture is considered high status, and so will probably always draw those interested in improving their status within their particular communities.' The Piper's intention is not just to become a notorious serial killer; he wants to be the most notorious serial killer of the modern age. Indeed, as Tobe Darling puts it, he wants to 'transcend his serial killer status and become a bona fide legend' (Kinnings, 2001, p. 80). In order to achieve this, he requires the services of a professional. As Rojek (2001, p. 10) notes, 'No celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public.'

Hunger for celebrity, its attainment and its constant burnishment are themes that are embedded in *The Fixer* and provide the novel's key satirical targets. A mindset that celebrity in and of itself is something to be coveted above all else is nothing new but by the turn of the century, it had never been more visible, aided in no small part by the rise of magazines such as *Hello*, *OK!* and *Heat*. Rojek (2001, p. 15) explains how the cult of celebrity extends to serial killers themselves and their public perception: 'Ian Brady, Myra Hindley, Rosemary West, Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Harold Shipman and Timothy McVeigh were all deluged with fan mail while in

prison...Far from being reviled and outcast, notorious celebrities are cherished as necessary folk devils by significant layers of the public.’

Tobe Darling shares the public’s obsession with psychopaths and eventually becomes one himself. The reader is finally appraised of this quite late on in the novel when the full extent of his moral degeneracy is made clear. Earlier in the story, the reader is led to believe they are reading a story about a psychopath *and* a showbusiness fixer. It is only later that it becomes clear that the story is about a showbusiness fixer becoming a psychopath. In this regard, the story mirrors the trajectory of the facilitators in the media/showbusiness nexus: ‘The exposure of celebrity production mechanisms itself has celebrity effects, as exemplified by the cultural intermediaries who help to produce celebrity themselves often becoming celebrities’ (Kavka, 2012, p. 149). For Tobe Darling, just managing a celebrity psychopath is not enough.

While personal experience of the entertainment industry provided much of the background knowledge of the world of *The Fixer*, the same could not be said of the technical details and terminology associated with the London Underground which provides most of the setting of *Baptism*. In order to ensure realism and authenticity with regards to this aspect of the novel, I undertook research into the Tube’s inner workings and procedures. I was particularly interested in finding out details of the communication system between trains and the London Underground Control Centre as well as the equipment and components with which a train driver would be familiar. Visits to the London Underground Museum in Covent Garden and its library proved helpful but I realised that what would be most beneficial would be to interact with former and current Tube train drivers and London Underground staff. Posting questions on the message boards of *District Dave’s London Underground Forum*

(2016), a website that is dedicated to the exchange of information between London Underground staff, provided some valuable research. The responders to my questions were mainly Tube train drivers themselves and provided the necessary language and terminology employed in the novel.

The subterranean realm has always been rich in symbolism within literature and this is particularly true of the London Underground. Mellor (2011, p. 202) points out: ‘From below, the subterranean world of the ever-expanding underground railway offered rapidity, discombobulation, and multiple metaphorical fears.’ The London Underground found in *Baptism* is a place where characters’ natural fears of disembodiment and claustrophobia are tested to the limit. The story could claim kinship with what Welsh (2010, p. 8) describes with regards to the response of the arts to this new realm of travel at the start of the 20th century: ‘This outpouring of underground writing led to what may be called Tubism, a reconfiguring of cultural iconography and a new focus for the role of transport in the city.’

Nearly a hundred years after the Tubism that Welsh describes, the terrorism of 7/7 would add a whole new range of imagery to this cultural iconography. Modern media spread this terrorist imagery across the world to such an extent that a victim of the bombing at Edgware Road Tube station, John Tulloch, a professor of journalism at Brunel University, when speaking of his convalescence, stated that ‘what “trapped” him most (consciously, at least) in these therapy sessions was the realization that his memories of 7/7 had been constructed in part via his process of talking about the event to the media’ (Tulloch and Blood, 2012, p. 179).

The London Underground in *Baptism* is, as it is to the millions that travel upon it, a constant presence, both physical and metaphysical, and confirms Pleßke’s (2014,

p. 226) observation that: 'The underground is material as well as imaginary, it symbolises the dream-scape between the conscious and the unconscious.'

RELIGION, CONSPIRACY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND VIOLENCE

In an early outline of *Baptism*, the terrorists who hijack the train were young Muslim men who are duped by British security services into taking part in a ‘false flag’ operation. In later drafts, however, making the perpetrators Christian in terms of their chosen religion allowed me to subvert the expectations of a typical post-9/11 terrorist situation and created the symbolism of the passengers on the train being drowned in a forced ‘mass baptism’. It also allowed me to explore Christianity as a source of terrorist activity.

The two primary actors in what became known as the War on Terror, President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, were both open about their Christianity which led to the drawing of inevitable parallels between the battles being waged in modern-day Iraq and Afghanistan with the crusades of the middle ages. As a born-again Christian, George Bush is said to believe in the Rapture, an event that many fundamentalist Christians seem to think will take place at the ‘end-time’ when all the remaining believers on earth will be transported into heaven by God. As Newman (2014, p. 105) points out: ‘For Bush the war was a struggle between good and evil.’ And MacAskill (2005) quotes Bush as saying, ‘God would tell me “George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq”. And I did.’

As Baelo-Allué (2011, p. 157) notes: ‘Conspiracy thrillers respond to the development of a conspiracy culture especially since the 1960s countercultural distrust of the authorities.’ This distrust became so much deeper following the events of 9/11 when conspiracy theories focusing on the US government’s potential complicity in the attacks abounded. As Byford (2011, p. 86) notes, the ‘9/11 Truth movement cites the “fact” that some prominent travellers...had been warned not to fly

on 9/11, as clear evidence, of government involvement in the attacks.’ Byford identifies this supposed foreknowledge as ‘ubiquitous in conspiracy theories’ (2011, p. 86).

In *Baptism*, the British security services are not complicit in the mechanics of the hijack but they are aware that it is imminent. By intending to allow the hijack plot to run its course right up to the day of the proposed attack and then foiling it before anyone is hurt, they hope to win plaudits in all quarters of media and government, thereby ramping up security fears and safeguarding their funding. They are wrong-footed by Tommy Denning, the architect of the plot, however, and the attack takes place a week earlier than anticipated.

Following the events of 9/11, the internet was – and still is – awash with conspiracy theories regarding western governments’ complicity in terrorist attacks. While most of these theories are fanciful in the extreme, there are some more sober and credible voices, including those belonging to academics and professionals in highly specialised fields (*Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth*, 2015), that believe that the US government in particular is withholding information regarding the exact details of the terrorist attacks. ‘We call upon Congress for accountability, which includes a truly independent investigation with subpoena power. We provide the evidence that indicates that three World Trade Center buildings, #1 (North Tower), #2 (South Tower), and #7 (the 47-story high-rise across Vesey St.) were destroyed not by jet impact and fires but by controlled demolition with explosives and incendiaries.’

My research into the various conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11 and 7/7 led to the creation of the main sub-plot in *Baptism*, namely the foreknowledge of the UK security services and the withholding of it for politically expedient reasons. ‘It wasn’t as though the media could paint it as a black op or anything like that, although given

half a chance, they would no doubt try. All that he and Hooper had – all that could be proved that they had – was a little foreknowledge. They were monitoring Denning but they didn't have any specific intelligence' (Kinnings, 2012, p. 348).

One of the reasons that readers and audiences are drawn to conspiracies, both real or imagined, might have something to do with an amelioration, however minute, of the powerlessness that they feel in the face of global politics and terrorism. As Dean (2002, p. 102) observes: 'Conspiracy writing, especially in the exuberance of its interpretations and associations, seizes a pleasure from the pain caused by the conspiracies it documents.'

Novelist Dennis Lehane (2003, p. xiii), believes that crime fiction 'has taken the place of the social novel, and it's no surprise as to the reason...the works easily lend themselves to a moral fury that is, at times, easily detectable and worn on the sleeve but just as often floats below the margins of the story itself'. The creation of a scenario in *Sacrifice* where a disgraced hedge fund manager and his family are held hostage by a hacktivist organisation, was motivated by my desire to explore the frustrations and anger felt by many in society regarding the slide to the right in UK politics during the opening years of the coalition government.

Graham Poynter is hounded by the press or 'the scum' as he refers to them. He is abused and threatened by people on social media. 'False social media identities had been set up in his name...a few were downright scary, people threatening to attack him and his family and fantasizing about doing so' (Kinnings, 2013, p. 22). The media are represented as almost universally malign and there to be exploited by warring factions. On one side is the establishment with its propensity for corruption, as personified by Graham Poynter, and on the other, ranged against him, are the politically non-aligned free spirits of the hacktivist networks, personified by James

Watts, also known as the Adversary. Both characters are extremists, but one has become radicalised to the extent that his sense of social justice now encompasses justification for acts of terrorism. ‘As Thomas Jefferson had said – and he loved to quote – “Sometimes the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” Jefferson might have added, “and bankers”. James would add it for him’ (Kinnings, 2013, p. 438). In Watts’ mind, he is a Robin Hood figure (Kinnings, 2013, p. 443); what he is doing is for the greater good. Finally, he voices his over-arching intention in almost childlike terms: ‘The time had come to stop the bad people from winning’ (Kinnings, 2013, p. 472).

While the violent retribution that the Adversary plans for Graham Poynter is both criminal and terrorist in its intent and provides the story with an enterprise that Ed Mallory must try to avert, it also taps into the public mood with regards to bankers’ conduct both prior to the crash of 2008 and after it. ‘Millions of people lost their jobs or suffered from lower living standards because of the recession brought on by the financial collapse. Yet almost no bankers have faced legal sanctions for their part in precipitating the crisis’ (*The Economist*, 2013). The frustration that many in society feel with regards to the popular belief (Ferguson, 2012) that: ‘over the past 30 years, banking has become criminalised in a way that threatens global stability’ is explored via the activities of the Adversary. While his violent actions are never condoned, I present them as a misguided but justifiable attempt to strike a blow for social justice.

Portrayals of violence are present in all four of my novels as they are in much of my screenwriting. While there are, of course, expectations from a crime or thriller readership that violence will be depicted as a consequence of criminal or terrorist

behaviour, the exploration of violence in literature has been ongoing throughout human history and extends from our natural humanity:

Murder gives us an X-ray of the inner core of human nature. It lays bare the things that matter most to humans everywhere – the necessities of survival, the attainment of status, the defense of honor, the acquisition of desirable partners, the loyalty of our lovers, the bonding of our allies, the vanquishing of our enemies, the protection of our children, and the successes of the carriers of our genetic cargo. These are the things that we humans and our astonishingly victorious ancestors have always been willing to kill and die for. (Buss 2005, p. 244).

As Carroll (2013, p. 33) notes: ‘Violence is pervasive in literature because literary authors and their readers want to get at the inner core of human nature.’ While this suggests that many writers might include portrayals of violence in their work as a subconscious expression of their own humanity, those writers whose work focuses on terrorism and murder, consider the violence they employ in an altogether more forensic manner due their readers’ expectations.

The violence employed in the first two of my novels is very different in terms of its tone and its intended effects on the reader than the violence in the later two. The most flamboyantly violent of the four novels is *The Fixer*, the initial outlining of which coincided with the re-issue of Tobe Hooper’s, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). On its initial release in the UK, the film had been condemned by an overly puritanical British Board of Film Classification as a ‘video nasty’ but gradually earned its reputation as a hugely influential and intelligent piece that succeeded in

transcending its genre to become a classic of early 1970s American film-making. On viewing the film in a cinema on its re-release, I was struck by the audience's shocked laughter. Hooper is not afraid to allow humour to emerge through his depiction of grotesque violence. The impact of this imagery is, if anything, enhanced by the occasional comedic note, something that influenced a generation of horror filmmakers, most notably, the director, Sam Raimi.

The comic violence that I explored in *Hitman* is accentuated in *The Fixer* as the violence itself becomes a fixation – a source of almost orgasmic thrill – in the mind of the Tobe Darling character. The violence is grotesque and ultimately absurd, thereby neutralising its shock value in the mind of the reader. As Cunningham and Eastin (2013, p. 82) note, 'The more comedic violence deviates from reality, the less likely the viewer will take the violent act or behavior seriously.' My intention with *The Fixer*, however, was to have it both ways, namely to satirise the portrayal of violence in the media and the arguments around it while also providing a portrayal of violence that is stylised and original.

In so doing, I was drawing on filmmaking practice. From Sam Peckinpah and Arthur Penn in the New Hollywood era right up to contemporary directors such as David Fincher and Gaspar Noé, violence has been portrayed in increasingly provocative ways in order to arouse specific audience responses. As King (2004, p. 126) notes, 'Comedy often plays an important role in helping to "legitimate" – or enable filmmakers to "get away with" and/or make pleasurable – representations of violence that might otherwise be more contentious.'

While in *Hitman* and *The Fixer*, the violence was portrayed as cartoonish and comedic, in *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, my intention was to make the violence as realistic as possible. Violence is, as Spring and King (2012, p. 215) point out: 'an inherent part

of crime fiction'. How much of it one shows depends on the nature of the story one is telling. If the story is a post-9/11 one in which characters use suicide as a weapon, as is the case with both *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, then the inherent violence is very much in the foreground and the attempts made by the authorities to counter the violence are often themselves, violent. 'We are designed by nature to resist violence, and our first instinct is to resist violence with violence' (James, 2012, p. 413). While it is an overstatement to say that: 'most instances of violence in modern crime fiction appear to pander to a widespread interest, real or induced, in forms of sado-masochism' (Knight, 2010, p. 235), it is certainly true that 'gratuitous violence' has become an increasingly staple presence in crime fiction since the 1980s, so much so that a sub-genre, 'the thriller of violence' can be identified 'where the author appears to introduce as much innovative and sensational violence as possible' (Knight, 2010, p. 235).

Crime writer, Val McDermid quoted by Hill (2009) identifies: 'a general desensitisation among readers, who are upping the ante by demanding ever more sensationalist and gratuitous plotlines.' While this is undoubtedly true, particularly with regards to the serial killer crime sub-genre, the use of violence in my later two novels was employed to provide an accurate reflection of terrorist activities taking place in the world post-9/11. Critically reflecting on the novels with the benefit of hindsight, however, there are a few instances where I describe violent incidents in a way that is deliberately intended to arouse a reaction in the reader. One in particular, appears in the first chapter of *Baptism*. 'He glanced at Rob but there was something wrong with him. The upper right-hand quadrant of his head was completely missing, leaving a jagged fringe of shattered bone fragments and ruptured brain in its place

from which blood sluiced freely as his legs gave way and he collapsed to the ground’ (Kinnings 2012 p. 2).

However much thriller writers might reassure themselves that they are merely representing natural violence in the wider world – as though they are journalists in their own stories – there is always a temptation to cross the line between a realistic representation of violence and one that is deliberately provocative. ‘Blood-soaked ten and twenty pound notes were protruding from his distorted mouth where Lucas had driven them with the handle of the skillet, breaking his teeth and choking him to death’ (Kinnings, 2013, pp. 184-185).

Portrayals of violence, however, have extended beyond writers’ intentions to thrill their readers. As Gomel (2003 p. xiii) notes, ‘The violent subject, as a murderer, a terrorist, a soldier, or a martyr, has become one of the main foci of postmodern culture’s fears and desires.’ The fact is that, ‘People voluntarily expose themselves to, and often search out, images of violence’ (Goldstein, 1998, p. 2). A thriller writer who chooses to indulge a prevailing interest in violence is therefore doing no more than creating another point of engagement with their readership.

In *Sacrifice*, I tell a story in which social media and traditional news networks reveal their obsessions with violence and their intrinsic desire to recycle violence and perpetuate its effects. The story is told from the points of view of the perpetrators of the violence, their victims, the characters who are trying to bring the violence to a close and the media who are poring over the ongoing events to feed their insatiable news cycles. Violence and its ever-present threat is represented as the media’s most valued currency, something that although heightened in recent years on account of the proliferation of rolling news on the internet and social media, still confirms the old newspaper adage of ‘if it bleeds, it leads’.

When writing novels in the thriller genre, particularly those which are focused on acts of terrorism, the creation of violent scenarios comes with the territory. However, its inclusion in my novels, and thrillers in general, also serves another important purpose beyond that of satisfying readers' and audience's desires and expectations. Violence, when combined with jeopardy, helps to create suspense which is, as Dąbala (2012, p. 97) points out, 'the most important way of evoking emotion, particularly in literature and film'.

PUBLICATION, CRITICAL RECEPTION AND IMPACT

The first of a two book deal with publishers Hodder & Stoughton, under their Flame imprint, *Hitman* was published in 2000 and received a number of favourable reviews. Kathleen Wyatt in *The Times* (2000) spoke of the ‘hypnotic world of adrenaline and paranoia’ and went on to describe the book as ‘a highly accomplished, confident first novel’. Mike Ripley in the *Daily Telegraph* (2000) called the novel ‘an almost mystical extravaganza’ and highlights the key literary influence: ‘A black, comic homage to William S. Burroughs.’ Isobel Montgomery in *The Guardian* (2000) perhaps overlooked some of the satirical intent behind the writing when she described it as ‘pure pulp fiction’ but conceded that ‘the entertainment factor is high’.

Magazine reviews explored further influences on the novel. *The List* (2000) identified a key one: ‘Max Kinnings’ debut is a return visit to the place Bukowski tried to take his readers in his last great novel *Pulp*.’ Andrew Holmes in *Front* (2000) recognised further influences: ‘Imagine Carl Hiaasen meets Hunter S. Thompson – but funnier and with more drugs. Superb.’

In the BBC Radio 4 programme, *With Great Pleasure* (2000), thriller writer and author of *Bravo Two Zero*, Andy McNab spoke of how the novel influenced him to read more: ‘The books I tend to read are non-fiction...*Hitman* by Max Kinnings is one of the exceptions. It's in the mode of *Trainspotting*...it's the sort of book that I would have never bought. In fact, I found it on an empty train carriage. So I picked it up and started to read, and I found myself enjoying reading novels for pleasure.’

McNab also introduced a reading from the novel by the actor, Kenneth Cranham.

When the mass market paperback of *Hitman* was published in September 2000, sales

to the week ending the 7th October earned it a place (at number 11) in the 'Top 15 first novels' section of the publishing industry magazine, *The Bookseller* (2000).

As discussed earlier in this essay, *Hitman* and *The Fixer* are very much novels of their time in that they reflect satirically on the prevailing cultures that inform them. They both borrow from a number of literary traditions – crime, mystery, fantasy, horror, picaresque, narcotic – and press them into service to create stories that set out to amuse their readers with absurdist black humour. As Temple (2014) notes: 'Cult novels often comes from the fringes, they often represent countercultural perspectives, they often experiment with the form' and while this is true of *Hitman* and *The Fixer*, neither failed to attract 'a squadron of rabid fans swearing that it changed their lives' which Temple pinpoints as something that makes certain novels appear 'cultish'.

As can be seen from the reaction of the book's press reviewers, *Hitman* was perceived first and foremost as a funny novel in which that most British of comedy archetypes – the loser – is pitted against a villain with fantastical powers. As a comedy, it succeeds; as a satire, however, it is less successful in that the targets of its satire – the London media and music industry tribes – were also its intended readers and as it glories in the culture of excess that it also wants to skewer, the satire is not as merciless as it might have been. As a crime novel, the writing is more concerned with its grotesque characterisation and funny Burroughsian 'routines' than the creation of suspense. While the deployment of fantasy and surrealism in a crime narrative is nothing new, having been used most effectively and amusingly in Bukowski's *Pulp* (1994), it was perhaps too generically diverse for the mainstream crime thriller readership at which *Hitman* was marketed.

Like its predecessor, *The Fixer* also received a number of national press and magazine reviews on its publication in trade paperback in 2001 and mass market paperback in 2002. Andrea Henry in *The Mirror* (2001) described the book as a ‘funny and stylish thriller’ and went on to say: ‘There’s real humour running through [*The Fixer*], and it’s fascinatingly off-the-wall.’ Perhaps due to the target of the its satire, celebrity magazines *Hello* and *Heat* both reviewed the book: ‘This shocking take on what might happen to our obsession with reality culture if it were taken to its furthest logical conclusion is a twisted, gasp-a-minute page turner for our times’ (*Hello*, 2001). ‘A disturbingly topical satire on celebrity culture and moral relativism’ (*Heat*, 2001).

The Fixer is a novel that satirises celebrity and the industry that was devoted to its creation at the end of the 1990s. At the time it was published, the satire was successful, highlighting the cultural intermediary as the key component of the celebrity equation. However, after the cultural phenomena of *The X Factor* (2004-2017), *I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* (2002-2017), *Big Brother* (2000-2017) and the accompanying comedies focused upon them – Ricky Gervais’s *Extras* (2005-2007) and Peter Kay’s *Britain’s Got the Pop Factor* (2008) to name two of the most well known – the satire is stripped of the newness of its original premise.

There was interest from independent film companies in both *Hitman* and *The Fixer* which led to me writing various drafts of, as yet unproduced, screen adaptations of both novels. This screenwriting experience led to my collaboration with other screenwriters and directors on a number of projects funded by independent film producers in the UK and internationally. Of these, two feature films, *Act of Grace* (2008) and *Alleycats* (2016) – both thrillers – have been produced.

A pilot episode for a proposed television sitcom called *The Murderers* led to a ten year writing collaboration with actor, comedian and writer, Rik Mayall, up until his death in 2014. *The Murderers*, which was developed with comedy actor and writer, Steve Coogan's production company, Baby Cow, and which Mayall described, in an interview in *The Sun*, as 'as good as *The Young Ones*' (Francis, 2005), drew heavily on the horror-comedy genre stylings of *The Fixer*.

During the writing of *The Murderers*, Rik Mayall read *Hitman* and *The Fixer* and enjoyed the novels to such an extent that when he was subsequently commissioned by Harper Collins in 2004 to write a memoir, he asked that I co-write the book with him as an uncredited ghost writer. This collaboration resulted in the publication of Rik's spoof autobiography *Bigger Than Hitler Better Than Christ* (2005) which became a fixture on the Sunday Times non-fiction bestseller chart for six weeks when published in September 2005. The absurdist delivery of the semi-fictionalised memoirist 'The Rik Mayall', drew on the delivery of the central protagonists of both of my early novels, particularly Tobe Darling, the eponymous hero of *The Fixer*: 'And that, viewer, is how I came to be represented by Heimi Mad Dog Finkelstein. It's just like that dear dear friend of mine, lovely Peter whats-his-name used to say – no, sorry, it's gone' (Mayall, 2005, p. 61). Rik Mayall was intrigued by the character of Tobe Darling and wanted to play him in a proposed stage adaptation for which we co-wrote a script.

Baptism was accepted for publication by Quercus Books (*Bookseller* Publisher of the Year 2011) as the first book of a two book contract just as *Hitman* had been with Hodder & Stoughton twelve years previously. On the book's publication in July 2012, Peter Millar in *The Times*, described *Baptism* as a 'bold attempt to play on current neuroses' and a 'tense blockbuster with worryingly credible characters'.

In 2001, a number of print magazines had reviewed *Hitman* and *The Fixer*. Perhaps as a reflection of the changing media landscape, in 2012, it was the crime blogs that were targeted by the press campaigns that accompanied the publication of the two books. *Crime Fiction Lover* (Prestidge, 2012) stated that *Baptism* was ‘audacious and ambitious’ and a ‘novel of almost unbearable tension’. Margot Kinberg (2012) wrote: ‘*Baptism* is a modern thriller with an innovative setting and some very high stakes. It features the sympathetic characters of George Wakeham and Ed Mallory and plays out with the fast pace, tension and action that keep the story moving along.’ *Mystery People* described the book as a ‘nerve-racking, impeccably researched and violent thriller’ (Hayes, 2012).

Perhaps the most prestigious and impactful accolade in media terms that *Baptism*, or any of the novels, received was the ‘starred review’ of the American edition in *Publishers Weekly* – given to books of ‘exceptional’ merit (*Publishers Weekly* 2014): ‘Kinnings (*The Fixer*) offers keen insights into the psychological ramifications of desperate hostage situations as he ratchets up the tension to near-unbearable levels.’

Sacrifice was *e-thriller*’s ‘Thriller of the Month’ on its release: ‘He [Kinnings] manoeuvres the reader into and outside his characters’ heads, constantly playing with the perspective and making reading joyfully compulsive...this is another deftly crafted, page-turning thriller’ (Scott, 2014). *SHOTS* (Jarossi, 2014) stated that: ‘The intricacies of hostage negotiation are well explored and gripping to read...the plot drives forward relentlessly to produce a page-turner that rarely takes its foot off the gas.’

On the *Thinking About Books* blog, Marshall (2014), stated that compared to *Baptism*, he found *Sacrifice*: ‘more compelling because it takes its time to capture and

analyse the strengths and weaknesses of all involved...The result is highly readable and strongly recommended.

The two later novels comment upon the socio-political effects of global terrorism, and 9/11 and 7/7 in particular, questioning society's religious pre-conceptions with regards to acts of terror. They also investigate media representation of terrorism and the iconography of terrorists as well as, in the case of *Sacrifice*, exploring social justice with regards to the perpetrators of financial crimes.

In the character of blind hostage negotiator, Ed Mallory, *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* undertake an unusual diversion from one of the central conventions of the crime/thriller genre in which central returning characters are predominantly presented as able-bodied. In their portrayal of a disabled character whose professional abilities are enhanced by his disability rather than compromised by it, they contribute to the evolution and expansion of the crime-thriller genre.

All four of the novels in their various print editions in English and in translation, their ebook editions and audio versions, have had significant economic impact both in the UK and abroad in terms of printing, wholesale and retail distribution, marketing, publicity, media and accounting. Print sales for *Hitman* currently stand at 4253 while sales for *The Fixer* are 489 (Nielsen, 2017). Sales of *Baptism* (US, UK & commonwealth) total 16,213 (Arcus, 2017) while the total for the German edition stands at 4952 (Rizzo, 2017). Sales of *Sacrifice* (UK & commonwealth) total 1,580 (Arcus, 2017) while the figure for the German edition is 774 (Rizzo, 2017).

Hitman and *Baptism* were both the first of two book publishing deals, while *The Fixer* and *Sacrifice* were the second. Due to publishing contracts being issued on the strength of the first two intended books, it often means that these books receive

the bulk of the attention in terms of press and publicity. This was certainly my experience with the publication of *The Fixer* which received equally favourable reviews as *Hitman* – if not better – but sold a fraction of the number of copies. *Hitman* was part of a ‘three for two’ promotion at Waterstones and the distribution of the mass market paperback edition was extensive. However, *The Fixer* was not picked up for this same promotion which meant that marketing activity surrounding its publication was reduced.

On its publication in 2012, *Baptism* was chosen for supermarket promotions (Asda and Sainsbury’s) much to the delight of the sales team at Quercus. However, by the time that *Sacrifice* was published in late 2013, Quercus was in financial difficulties prior to its sale to Hachette in March 2014 when the company became a division of Hodder & Stoughton. This was clearly due in part to an over-ambitious expansion in which the company had, ‘moved into new offices, set up in the US, established its own sales force, and made several significant book acquisitions that failed to produce bestsellers’ (Clee and Thomson, 2014).

The film adaptation of *Baptism*, the novel that has had probably the most impact of the four, is currently being developed as a feature film in Hollywood by British producers, The Philm Company. In April 2013, *Baptism Spec*, a proof-of-concept trailer of my screen adaptation of the novel was shot in multiple locations across London. This was instrumental in the Philm Company’s winning of the UK Trade & Investment, ‘Talent Goes to Hollywood’ competition (2015) which secured funding for the director and producer to meet with various industry figures in Los Angeles which in turn has led to the involvement of a leading Hollywood producer.

The Economic and Social Research Council (2015) defines research impact as ‘the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the

economy'. In these terms, the novels that form this PhD by Published Work have made a 'demonstrable contribution' to society via the cultural dissemination and discussion of their themes and characters both in the media and amongst their readers. Their contribution to the economy can be demonstrated via their involvement in and contribution to the business of bookselling. The books also represent a body of original creative work which is the basis of my fiction writing practice. My position on the Creative Writing programme at Brunel University has allowed the dissemination of this practical research and knowledge from within an academic context and has expanded the subject area of Creative Writing as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This critical review of my four novels has revealed their key themes, contribution to knowledge, methodologies and research impact. From a more personal perspective, however, my investigation of and reflection upon the writing of the novels has allowed me to consider my own evolution as both a novelist and screenwriter.

Considering the over-arching themes or controlling ideas of the novels has allowed me to see that within my writing, I have moved away from focusing on my own close personal environment to adopt a broader, more politically engaged world view. If the key controlling themes of *Hitman* and *The Fixer* are hedonism and showbusiness respectively, then these reflect the popular culture of the time and the industry in which I was working when they were written. *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*, on the other hand, are concerned with terrorism and social justice, and as such, explore a much broader contemporary political and social environment.

Scaggs (2005, p. 2) highlights one of the defining characteristics of crime fiction as ‘its generic (and sub-generic) flexibility and porosity’. The process of writing this critical review has allowed me to realise how an exploration of this ‘flexibility and porosity’ in terms of my own experimentation with a variety of genre conventions has been a constant feature of my work.

In the writing of *Hitman* and *The Fixer*, the intention was to combine elements of detective fiction, in particular a noir-like first person tone of narrative voice, with absurdist, comedic, high concept plots. Critically, this proved popular; commercially, it was less so. However, an understanding of crime fiction readers and their expectations that I gained through the writing and publication of the books was invaluable and instrumental in making me adapt my style of writing to a different

contemporary milieu. Rather than filtering the narrative through one authorial viewpoint, *Baptism* and *Sacrifice* were told through multiple close third person points of view. Focusing on one singular event through multiple overlapping perceptions of it – the events in question lasting only a few hours – represented an evolutionary swerve in my writing style, the trigger for which was 9/11 and its cultural and political reverberations.

But while 9/11 was an influence in terms of broadening my interests from popular culture to geo-politics and current affairs, there were other factors that contributed to the change in style. My change of career from creating media and marketing campaigns in the live entertainment industry to working as a novelist and Creative Writing academic was important but it was my work as a screenwriter, writing my own original screenplays and being paid as a screenwriter-for-hire that had the most influence. The study of screenwriting and its practical application in my work led to a much greater interest in the value of structure and story outlining generally. Developing screen projects alongside fellow screenwriters, directors, producers and actors provided a unique perspective on narrative structure, development and analysis.

My creation of a disabled protagonist in the latter two books was part of this desire to experiment with the thriller genre and, on reflection, I was probably influenced by my father becoming disabled due to illness following the writing of the first two books. The decision to make the Ed Mallory character blind was taken not just to experiment with conventions related to the protagonists of crime thriller novels but also to incorporate the disability specifically within the plot so that it might afford the character advanced ‘active listening’ capabilities, crucial to the science and practice of hostage negotiation.

The technical challenges of writing thriller novels grounded in realism as opposed to surrealism influenced a change in the mechanics of my writing process. Detailed outlining was essential. However, reflecting on the writing of both these novels with a few years' hindsight, I can see that a degree of imaginative complexity and above all, intrigue for the reader, is possibly lost with this method and this has been partially confirmed in the writing of my new novel. This is a return to the first person point of view of the first two novels, although it will eschew the first person present tense style in favour of first person past tense. The aim is to combine the confessional narrative of the first two novels with the realism and intricacy of plotting of the latter two.

The central protagonist, Luke Riley, a former Royal Marine who is facing a court martial for desertion, is a character who tests the archetype of the obedient, patriotic soldier and is possessed of a political conscience that is constantly questioning and investigating his predicament, namely his involvement in a British government conspiracy. The character's wry, occasionally satirical delivery allows for commentary on a corrupt and hypocritical ruling class and its security apparatus. Many of the themes found in my earlier novels are present. Most of the novel takes place in London; a section takes place in a subterranean location – the sewers – and media messages and their dissemination and interpretation are at the forefront of the story. Alongside my four books that have formed the basis of this critical review, my intention is to continue to experiment with character, point of view, and story structure as a whole, in order to further extend the literary form of the thriller novel.

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APPENDIX #1: PLOT SUMMARIES

HITMAN

The unnamed protagonist – a second rate private detective with a taste for strong hallucinogenic drugs – visits an old lady called Mar Kettle in her fortified apartment on the top floor of a tower block in central London. Mar Kettle tells him a story about her former life in Tangier and her seduction of a neighbour by the name of Hassan Nazar who subsequently murdered his wife and declared his undying love for Mar. Mar tells the protagonist that having decided to spurn Nazar's continued advances, she turned him into the police and he was sentenced to life in jail. But before his incarceration, he sent her a letter – written uncannily in her own handwriting – telling her that he had placed a curse upon her and would, one day, take his revenge. Mar tells the protagonist that she has just received word that Nazar has been released from prison in Morocco and is making his way to London.

Certain that Hassan Nazar is intent on killing her, Mar Kettle hires the protagonist to kill Nazar before he manages to catch up with her. Our anti-hero is now an unlikely hitman and he goes to see his friend, Luke, to tell him the news and enlist his help. Thinking that Mar Kettle is delusional on account of her advanced years, they take up position in one of the old woman's properties and wait for their target to arrive, having been tipped off by her that this is his supposed destination. When an elderly Moroccan arrives at the house and attacks them, the hitman shoots him dead with the gun that Mar Kettle gave him. However, it transpires that rather than killing Hassan Nazar, the hitman has killed her lawyer instead and strange events starts to

take place as Luke and the hitman begin to experience the effects of Nazar's psychic powers.

Having been bitten by a phantom Jack Russell terrier, Luke starts to display canine tendencies and eventually turns into a 'were dog' while the hitman makes a discovery that the only way to make himself immune to Nazar's powers is to take considerable amounts of hallucinogenic drugs. However, in so doing, he struggles to differentiate between his own genuine hallucinations and those that are being planted in his consciousness by Nazar.

The hitman comes face to face with his nemesis on a shape-shifting London Underground train where Nazar explains that he is a Mind Demon and any attempts by the hitman to defeat him – or carry out his hit – will prove futile. The climax of the story takes place at Mar Kettle's tower block where Nazar makes good his threat of revenge upon the old woman. He reverses time so that she becomes a young woman once more and then accelerates it, leaving her as a corpse. After the hitman manages to feed drugs to Luke thereby releasing him from his curse as a were dog, Luke manages to despatch Nazar and they make their escape while Mar Kettle's apartment is consumed by flames. After receiving payment for the contract killing from Mar Kettle's former butler, life for Luke and the erstwhile hitman returns to some semblance of normality.

THE FIXER

Tobe Darling is a showbusiness PR agent and fixer based in London's Soho. On a television panel debate, a drunken Tobe is invited to voice his opinion about a notorious serial killer known as the Piper who is carrying out gruesome murders in London's West End. He professes his fascination and admiration for the killer and declares that the Piper is more interesting and talented than any of the other so-called celebrities currently plying their trade.

When the Piper makes contact with Tobe, a Faustian pact is forged between the two men and Tobe dissolves his business partnership and goes out on his own with only one client to his name. After a vacation in Thailand during which Tobe plans his showbusiness strategy, he returns to London and a meeting between Tobe and his new client is arranged.

The Piper lives in utmost secrecy and Tobe is directed to an anonymous door in Whitehall and from there, down through a number of passageways into a former nuclear fall out shelter that was built to house members of parliament in the event of an atomic bomb attack on London. In a luxury subterranean compound, Tobe comes face to face with his new client. The Piper tells him of his former job as a contract killer and explains to Tobe his intention to create the world's most celebrated serial killer by way of an artistic statement.

‘So how do you see yourself, as serial killer or artist?’

‘I don't really care what labels people want to pin on me. All I know is I'm transcending the shallow, hopeless cult of celebrity and showing all those losers just what they really are – bubbles, little bubbles that look pretty for a

moment then float away and, pop, they've gone. There's nothing left. No substance, nothing. With me, on the other hand, my legend will reverberate throughout history and no one will ever know who I was or why I did what I did.'

'Just like Jack the Ripper?'

'If you like, yes. Are you a fan?' (Kinnings, 2001, pp. 212-213)

Despite their new business relationship, Tobe soon realises that once he has imparted all of his advice to the Piper that he will make himself dispensable and that he must develop an exit strategy before it is too late. But the Piper is one step ahead of him and tricks Tobe into meeting him in a hotel room, where he plans on making Tobe his next victim. Tobe, however, gets lucky and manages to kill the Piper.

In New York, Tobe Darling sits in a bar overlooking the skyscrapers all around. In a building opposite is a lavish showbusiness party at which the leading celebrities of the day are in attendance. When the building is shaken by a bomb blast, it becomes clear that Tobe has appropriated the Piper persona and has taken to extending his inherited brand's field of operations into terrorism.

BAPTISM

A monk is murdered in the farmhouse of a religious sect called *Cruor Christi* – the blood of Christ – in a remote part of Wales. So begins a terrorist attack which is the sinister project of a former British soldier called Tommy Denning. His team comprises his sister, Belle, and Simeon Fisher who is a double agent, planted within the cell by MI5.

In South London, a Tube train driver, George Wakeham, wakes to the hottest day of the year with his wife, Maggie, and his children. As George goes to work, his family are taken hostage by Tommy Denning and his gang and George is contacted and told that unless he does exactly as he is told, his family will be killed. George drives his train up the Northern Line to a section of tunnel between Leicester Square and Tottenham Court Road stations where Tommy enters the cab and tells him: ‘OK George...this is the end of the line. This train terminates here’ (Kinnings, 2012, p. 67).

When all radio contact is lost with the train, blind hostage negotiator, Ed Mallory, is tasked with trying to make contact with whoever is responsible. Mallory was blinded during a hostage situation that went wrong. His error of judgement meant that the pregnant wife of an IRA informer was killed and this episode has haunted him ever since. When Ed is told that he is to be partnered on the negotiation with an MI5 agent by the name of Mark Hooper, he realises that the authorities might know more about the situation than they are prepared to divulge.

Contact is made with the train and George Wakeham is instructed by Tommy Denning to issue his demands, that a wi-fi signal be put in place in the tunnel. Ed argues with the MI5 agent, Hooper, that they should comply but Hooper is reluctant,

citing concerns that the hostage takers might want to communicate with conspirators above ground. Ed manages to win the argument and the wi-fi is deployed. Having detonated explosives in the tunnel which rupture a water source, Tommy speaks via a webcam and announces to his global audience that he is a former soldier and, though a Christian, claims a brotherhood with Islamic and Jewish worshippers and calls on all religious believers to rise up against non-believers. To facilitate the beginning of this battle, he will carry out a mass baptism. The water will fill the tunnel and drown everyone on the train – himself and his co-conspirators included.

When the authorities display a reluctance to send in special forces on account of fears that explosives will be detonated, Ed Mallory breaks with all legal conventions and makes contact with the IRA informer whose wife was killed in the hostage negotiation in which he was blinded. Despite Ed's negotiations with Tommy and attempts by a group of passengers and George, the driver, to free themselves, Tommy manages to flood the train. But Ed manages to procure some Semtex which he and the IRA informer use to breach a service tunnel adjacent to the flooded tunnel, thereby draining off sufficient water to save the lives of all those on the train. As the water level drops further, special forces secure the train.

In the aftermath of the attack, however, Mark Hooper, the MI5 agent who, it transpires, had foreknowledge of the train hijack, tries to silence all those who know of his complicity. He kills Tommy Denning but when he goes after George Wakeham and his family, Ed Mallory manages to alert George to the danger and George rises to the challenge and kills Hooper, drowning him in a flooded tunnel.

SACRIFICE

Christmas Day, Belgravia, Central London. An armed security guard patrols the roof terrace of a mansion belonging to a disgraced banker. An unknown assailant pushes the guard from the roof and onto the railings below.

Some hours earlier, the banker in question, Graham Poynter, arrives at Heathrow with his wife, Helen and teenage daughter, Lily. When they arrive at their home, they are met by a pack of photographers outside the house and an armed security detail within. Graham's hedge fund is the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation and he has been exposed to the harsh spotlight of media scrutiny, something that he finds extremely uncomfortable.

Across London, blind hostage negotiator, Ed Mallory, is dealing with a domestic hostage situation. When Ed is given the opportunity to go inside the stronghold and negotiate with the male hostage taker face-to-face, Ed's commanding officer won't allow it and the man kills himself.

Helen and Graham Poynter are arguing in their living room when the security guard lands on the railings outside. They hurry to the safe room built into the house but shortly after raising the alarm they are accosted by a man dressed in black paramilitary clothing who gains entry and locks them all inside the safe room, himself included, along with James, the driver from a food company who has come to deliver the Poynter family's Christmas dinner.

After the failed hostage negotiation, Ed Mallory receives a phone call from an old colleague, Nick Calvert, who tells him that he's needed in Belgravia where a hostage situation appears to be in progress. The authorities decide that they will inject sleep-inducing gas into the safe room and have special forces troops undertake an

armed assault on the house. But when the operation goes ahead, the safe room is found to be empty. The hostage-taker has taken his hostages up to the roof of the house and attached a grenade to Lily Poynter's neck. He makes it known that if anyone tries to attack him or apprehend him, he will detonate the grenade.

Across London a psychotic character called Lucas finds his way inside Graham Poynter's business partner's rented property and extracts a password from him before killing him.

The hostage-taker's identity is finally established as a former SAS officer who has a terminal illness. Ed Mallory takes the opportunity – denied to him in the negotiation earlier in the day – to go into the stronghold and negotiate face to face. Once on the roof though, it is clear that Ed cannot persuade the hostage-taker to surrender and when he tries to burn Graham Poynter alive with petrol, Ed uses the slight light sensitivity in his one eye to navigate on the roof and throw Poynter and himself from the building and through a glass roof into the swimming pool below.

With the hostage-taker now despatched by snipers, James, the delivery driver, who has forged a bond with Lily, is revealed to be 'the Adversary', the mastermind of the entire operation, a young but notorious master hacker who wants to raid Poynter's bank account to finance an Anonymous-style hacking collective to further his ideological beliefs that bankers should be made to pay for their institutionalised and government-facilitated corruption. Using the explosion of a car bomb as a decoy, and despite Ed Mallory's best efforts, James manages to escape, having gained access to Graham Poynter's bank account containing millions of pounds of embezzled funds.

APPENDIX #2: EMAILS (SALES FIGURES)

Quercus Books, UK and US sales figures for *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*

On 12 April 2017 at 16:56, Richard Arcus <Richard.Arcus@quercusbooks.co.uk> wrote:
Afternoon Max,

Thanks for your patience in awaiting the sales figures. Here goes:

Combined UK and US sales for *Baptism* are 16,213, across all editions.
Combined UK sales for *Sacrifice* are 1,580 copies, across all editions.

Please don't hesitate to let me know should you need anything else.

Best, and hoping you have a great Easter,
Rich

From: max.kinnings@gmail.com [<mailto:max.kinnings@gmail.com>] **On Behalf Of** Max Kinnings
Sent: 10 April 2017 11:42
To: Richard Arcus
Subject: Sales figures for PhD


Dear Richard,

Hope you're well. I see you've been promoted since we were last in touch. Congratulations on that. I am just in the process of completing my PhD by published works as part of my position at Brunel University in the Creative Writing department. As part of my research, I need to find out the sales figures of all my novels. Would you be able to point me in the right directions for someone who can provide me with the necessary figures for all editions (including the US edition of *Baptism*)? Would be grateful for any help.

All best wishes,
Max.

Max Kinnings
07971 475629
www.maxkinnings.com

Goldmann Publishing, German sales figures for *Baptism* and *Sacrifice*

 **Kate Rizzo** via greenheaton.onmicrosoft.com
🔒 to Max, Antony ▾

📧 26 Apr (8 days ago) ☆



Hi Max,

Latest statements from Goldmann are attached with overall sales figures of 774 copies for *SACRIFICE*, and 4,952 for *BAPTISM*. Let me know if there's anything else you need.

Best, Kate

From: max.kinnings@gmail.com [<mailto:max.kinnings@gmail.com>] **On Behalf Of** Max Kinnings
Sent: 24 April 2017 17:38
To: Kate Rizzo <KRizzo@greeneheaton.co.uk>; Antony Topping <ATopping@greeneheaton.co.uk>
Subject: Re: books

Hi Kate,

Hoping you might be able to help me with this. I'm in the process of completing a PhD as part of my work at Brunel University where I teach Creative Writing. The PhD is 'by published work' and I need to find out the sales figures of my most recent novels, *BAPTISM* and *SACRIFICE*. I have the English language sales but the novels were published in Germany by Goldmann (Random House) as '9 Stunden Angst' and 'Stirb Fur Deine Sunden'. Would it be possible to request sales figures from Goldmann for these? Would be grateful for any help.

All the best,
Max.

Max Kinnings
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