

Whodunnit Devices in Ruth Rendell's Whydunnits

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Статията „Елементи от детективския роман в психологическите трилъри на Рут Рендъл“ изследва въпроса доколко и по какви начини световноизвестната британска авторка използва стилистични похвати от детективския поджанр на криминалната литература в едно от трите направления, в които пише – направление, което по множество белези определено не принадлежи към същия този поджанр. Разгледани са първият роман на авторката в това направление, издаден през 1965 г. – който по голям брой формални характеристики се доближава значително до общоприетата концепция и дефиниция за детективски роман, – отбрани нейни произведения, публикувани през следващите четири десетилетия, и последният засега психологически трилър на писателката, излязъл през 2010 г. Заклучава се, че Рендъл периодично взаимодейства, в по-малка или по-голяма степен, типични елементи от традиционния детективски роман или роман загадка, като ги използва по свой оригинален начин и често преобръща значението им в цялостния контекст на повествованията си.

The article explores to what extent and in what various ways this British author of worldwide recognition makes use of the stylistic devices of the detective subgenre of crime fiction in one of the three principal strands in which she writes – a strand which in many respects does not belong to that same subgenre. The study focuses on Rendell's first novel in that strand, published in 1965 (which in many formal ways approximates the generally accepted definition of a detective novel, or whodunnit), a selection of her works over the next four decades, and her latest psychological thriller, or whydunnit, published in 2010. The paper establishes that in her whydunnits Rendell periodically draws on the conventions of the classic whodunnit, exploiting and often subverting these conventions to her own artistic purposes.

Introduction. Ruth Rendell published her first novel, *From Doon with Death*, in 1964. A murder mystery, it introduced readers to Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford and met with both critical acclaim and commercial success. Rendell's next book, *To Fear a Painted Devil*, which came out on the following year, was not another Wexford mystery but a stand-alone crime novel which featured no police investigation. Since then, in an impressive career spanning nearly thirty years and numerous literary awards, when writing under her own name³⁰ the author has alternated between these two strands: Inspector Wexford police procedurals (twenty-three novels and one collection of short stories to date) and non-series works (twenty-five novels, two novellas and six collections of short and long stories).

The books in the Wexford series can be placed within the sub-genre of crime fiction known as murder mystery, detective novel or *whodunnit*, insofar as

³⁰ In 1986, Rendell launched another byline and started writing under the name of Barbara Vine

each of them is centred on a crime whose perpetrator must be discovered. The stand-alone works are harder to categorise and have been called stories of suspense, (psychological) thrillers, noir novels and *whodunnits*. The reason for this is that they focus more on psychology than on detection – often exploring extreme psychological states or probing the minds of psycho- or sociopaths – and frequently deliberately defy or subvert the narrative conventions of traditional mysteries.

'The Wexfords are the only whodunnits I've ever written,' Ruth Rendell says (Bati 1991). This, however, is only partially true. While it is a fact that many of her non-series novels have as central characters criminals, or people who are about to become criminals, others do come closer to the whodunnit subgenre in that the identity of a criminal is unknown to the reader until the denouement, and that the mystery of that identity plays a part – although of varying importance – in the overall plot.

This paper will examine the different ways in which Rendell has appropriated and played with the conventions of the whodunnit in her stand-alone works, from her very first such novel, *To Fear a Painted Devil*, to her latest one (for now) – *Tigerlily's Orchids*, published in 2010. The novels written as Barbara Vine will not come under investigation as they constitute quite a different strand of writing altogether and merit special attention in their own right.

Origins and Development of the Whodunnit. As is self-evident, *whodunnit* (short for 'who done it') denotes a narrative built around a crime and geared towards revealing the identity of the perpetrator of that crime. The term is believed to have come into being in the 1920s or 1930s, when it was jokingly used to refer to the already existing sub-genre of crime fiction known as the detective story or murder mystery – as by that time the prevailing crime in such narratives was murder. The origins of the detective story, however, go much further back in the history of literature.

There are two main approaches to the origin of detective fiction. The first one posits that initial examples of detection are to be found as early as in the Bible or in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, while the second one holds it that detective stories proper, as opposed to stories of crime in general, came into existence only after the foundation of a police force in Europe. In fact, while it is certainly true that horrific crimes and their consequences feature in many fairy tales, in ancient Greek and Roman drama, or in the tragedies of the English Renaissance, for instance, '[t]he general critical consensus is that the detective story begins with Edgar Allan Poe, the "father" of the detective genre.' (Scaggs 2005: 7)

An American poet, writer, editor and literary critic, Poe published the short story 'The Murders in The Rue Morgue' in Graham's Magazine in 1841, acknowledging some debt regarding both its structure and content to English writer William Godwin's earlier novel *Caleb Williams* (1794). Poe's story introduced C. Auguste Dupin, an eccentric and extraordinarily intelligent young man who, with the help of his American friend – the unnamed narrator – solves the mystery of the brutal murder of two women whose bodies are found in a locked room.

'The Murders in The Rue Morgue' is generally recognised as the first detective fiction story. It, and two further stories featuring Dupin, contains certain literary devices which were later to become staples for detective fiction – the brilliant armchair detective (relying above all on his powers of 'ratiocination', as Poe called it), his less gifted sidekick narrator, the locked-room mystery, the least likely suspect turning out to be the culprit, and the whole narrative centring on the solving of the crime puzzle.

The immense popularity of Poe's work in France soon crossed over to England. The first significant detective in British literature is acknowledged to be Inspector Bucket from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852), although that novel can hardly be considered an example of detective fiction. It is Dickens's friend and collaborator Wilkie Collins who is considered to be the author of the first detective novel in the English language, *The Moonstone* (1868), a tale built around the search for a stolen jewel. With its large cast of potential suspects, secluded country house setting, inept local policemen and top-rate Scotland Yard officer, among other features, the book would prove to have a significant impact on later writers in the detective fiction tradition.

One of these was Arthur Conan Doyle, who 'was to bring the detective novel to its greatest tuition – a marriage of author and character that few have achieved since.' (Forshaw 2007: 3) Inspired by Poe's Dupin, Doyle's observant, ingenious, unconventional, violin-playing and drug-using Sherlock Holmes is both one of the world's best-known fictional detectives and one of the most famous Englishmen in literature, and his relationship with his loyal but less intelligent assistant Dr Watson inspired the creation of many similar pairs in detective fiction to come, for instance Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings. Such was the popularity of Holmes in his days that when Doyle, tired of his series character, tried to kill him off, Britain went into mourning, the author was flooded with begging or threatening letters from readers and he was eventually forced to revive Holmes and continue the canon for another twenty years or so, up until the 1920s.

The 1920s also brought what has come to be generally regarded as the Golden Age of British crime fiction – the period between the two world wars, although certain works usually considered within it were written before WWI, and some of the major practitioners of the crime genre went on writing and publishing well after WWII. One major change in crime writing that took place

during this period was that the short story gradually gave way to the novel. Symons (1985) points out that this development was linked to social, technical and economic changes. The post-war emancipation of women meant that women now had more leisure time to read – and write – books: among the greatest crime novelists of the Golden Age were the so-called Queens of Crime Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh. Another factor is that the rise of the large circulating libraries significantly changed middle-class reading habits, as reading became a much cheaper pastime than it had previously been.

As crime narratives grew longer and the puzzles they faced readers with more elaborate, murder became the norm for the central crime they were built around. In the preceding decades, when most tales of crime were short stories, murder did feature in them but not as often as theft, fraud or blackmail, for example. Now, it became a rule that the crime in detective novels must be murder.

The 1920s was actually a period of laying down rules for crime fiction. Up to that time, despite their growing popularity, crime stories had not been considered a specific type of literature, and no attempt had been made 'to assess the detective story as something having rules which could be strictly formulated and which it was important to observe. By the end of the decade, however, a body of criticism had been produced which tried to lay down the limits within which writers of detective stories ought to operate.' (Symons 1985: 93) By 1928, the Detection Club had been founded as an organisation of British mystery writers, whose members swore to obey the rules of 'Fair Play'. For the detective story had already come to be seen as a game (one of the most severe criticisms levelled at Golden-Age writers today), and the game had to be played fairly, so as to provide the reader with the same chance at guessing the guilty party as was given to the detective.

Ronald A. Knox, one of the Detection Club's members, summarised these rules in the so-called Decalogue in his preface to *Best Detective Stories of 1928-29*:

1. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
2. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
4. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.

5. No Chinaman must figure in the story.
6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
7. The detective must not himself commit the crime.
8. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.
9. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.'

(Knox 1992: 194-196)

Rules and restrictions, however, do not make for good literature, and the Decalogue was rarely strictly adhered to. Agatha Christie, for instance, member of the Detection Club and perhaps the best-known Golden Age writer today, frequently bent or broke Knox's ten commandments, making present-day crime novelist P.D. James call her the 'arch-breaker of rules.' (James 2009: 53)

Despite not all writers following the rules set by the Detection Club, and the variety of crime narratives produced during the Golden Age, it is still possible to identify 'a coherent set of practices which were shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by most of the writers then at work. Elements that were randomly present in earlier crime fiction suddenly become a norm, like multiple suspects, and some earlier tendencies largely disappear, notably the use of coincidence and historical explanations. A genre of crime fiction, best named for its central mechanism as the clue-puzzle [...], clearly forms a recognisable entity by the mid-1920s.' (Knight 2003: 77)

Other common features of clue-puzzle novels, which soon came to be called whodunnits or cosies, are: a closed, frequently rural setting, as detectives stopped running their investigations in the foggy London streets walked by Sherlock Holmes (often in disguise), and moved them to the country houses of the upper class; a closed circle of dramatis personae with a variety of motives, multiple red herrings, and, as with previous detective stories, clever amateurs who, with or without the assistance of Scotland Yard, proved much more capable of solving the mystery at hand than the inefficient local constabulary. Conspicuously absent from these crime tales are issues such as sexuality, unemployment, trade unions, recession, war and dictatorships, although they were very much present in society. Julian Symons explains this with the fact that most Golden Age writers were right-wing and conservative, and that the novels

they produced provided escape from the changing realities to 'a fairy-tale land [...] in which murder is committed over and over again without anyone getting hurt.' (Symons 1985: 96). Conceding that detective fiction, like many other literary genres, always did provide some form of escapism, he points out that the crime narratives of the Sherlock Holmes age were at least situated in a recognisable urban reality often unflinchingly portrayed. Likewise, P.D. James remarks that most Golden Age crime novels are paradoxical, as they deal with violent death and violent emotions, but do not require of the reader to feel any pity for the victim, empathy for the murderer, or sympathy for the falsely accused, and their plots ensure that in the end 'all will be well – except of course with the murderer, but he deserves all that's coming to him. All the mysteries will be explained, all the problems solved and peace and order will return to that mythical village which, despite its above-average homicide rate, never really loses its tranquillity or its innocence.' (James 2009: 66)

The above-mentioned restrictive conventions of Golden Age whodunnits led to a mutiny among certain writers and to the emergence, in the United States, of a parallel sub-genre of crime fiction during the period – the hard-boiled mode, best exemplified by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Inspired by Ernest Hemingway's prose, hard-boiled fiction is an unsentimental style of writing which brought a new tone of realism and even naturalism to the detective novel, dealing with topical issues such as bootlegging, prostitution, corruption and gangster wars. 'The hard-boiled style is terse, tough and cynical, like the hard-boiled detectives it features, and the typical hard-boiled story is one of violence, sex and betrayal.' (Skaggs 2005: 145).

Then came the Second World War, which acted as a sort of watershed between the classic Golden Age whodunnit and the modern crime novel. As economic realities continued to change and the class structure began to be viewed differently, the country-house settings of the novels produced between the two world wars appeared even more unrealistic and the omnipotent amateur detective started to look extremely unconvincing alongside the development of forensic methods. By sacrificing almost everything else in its attempt to construct the detective story as a perfect crossword mechanism, Golden Age crime fiction seemed to have reached a dead end and criticism towards it became increasingly harsh: it was now blamed for trivialising the battle between good and evil and for treating tragedy with insensitive lightness. Like WWI, but to an even greater extent, the war had shattered the assumption of the traditional detective story that human affairs are governed by reason, crimes being 'small holes torn in the fabric of society [to be] mended by the detective who represented the force of order' (Symons 1985: 138), and writers now had to face the fact that the world was a place where violence irrationally prevailed over reason.

Of course, not all writers were willing or able to acknowledge this, and some of the practitioners of the Golden Age whodunnit continued to ply their

trade with minor changes in focus or style. Others updated the puzzle story by infusing more realism into it and, eliminating the ingenious amateur detective, making the police force its central investigative authority, thus evolving the sub-genre of crime fiction now known as *police procedural*, much influenced by Belgian writer Georges Simenon, whose famous creation, Commissaire Maigret, made his appearance as early as 1930. The police procedural highlights the actual methods and procedures of the police when investigating a crime, and 'usually features a team of police officers, often pursuing a number of different cases at the same time, and the procedures of modern police work, including forensic technology, the interviewing of suspects, and records searches, are emphasised.' (Scaggs 2005: 147) The subgenre served to humanise the detective, as the officers it features tend to be ordinary people of working or lower middle class origin, sometimes weak, fallible and alienated from friends and family (a formula so overused as to have become clichéd by now); also, the emphasis in procedurals is usually on team work, and the mysteries are more often than not solved through hard work and persistence rather than superior powers of reasoning.

For many new post-WWII writers, however, the question they asked in their crime narratives was no longer *who* or *how*, but *why*, and their why was 'often concerned with the psychological make-up and social background of killer and killed.' (Symons 1985: 144) To some extent, the classic whodunnits of the Golden Age did feature certain psychological aspects, but psychology was mostly employed in order to highlight the methods used by the detective – e.g. Agatha Christie's prim spinster Miss Marple, who solves all sorts of crimes the police cannot cope with because she observes people's behaviour and is knowledgeable about 'human nature'. Post-WWII crime fiction gradually shifted the focus from the detection of a crime to the psychology behind the crime and the criminal, thus leading to the emergence of what Symons (1985) calls *crime novel*, Scaggs (2005) labels *crime thriller*, and is also widely known today as *psychological thriller* or *whydunnit*.

In his ground-breaking study *Bloody Murder – From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History*, first published in 1972, Julian Symons outlines the main differences between the detective story and the crime novel in terms of plot, detective, method, clues, characters, setting, social attitude and puzzle value as follows:

Plot

Detective Story: Based on a deception which may be mechanical (locked room), verbal (misleading remarks), concerned with forensic medicine (poisons, blood groups, fake prints) or ballistics. Book is constructed backwards from this deception, revelation of which is the climactic point to which everything leads.

Crime Novel: Based on psychology of characters – what stresses would make A want to kill B? – or an intolerable situation that must end in violence. No deceptions of locked room or faked print kind, no obscure poisons. Most often the problem is something like: 'Has A really killed B, and if he has what will happen to him?' Book is constructed forwards from such a problem.

Detective

Detective Story: May be professional or amateur, and if amateur may run detective or inquiry agency, or get involved by chance in criminal cases. Always at the centre of story's action, most often the hero, and generally a keen observer who notices things missed by others.

Crime Novel: Often no detective. Occasionally a detective runs through a series of stories, but rarely shown as a brilliant reasoning machine. Most often the central character is just somebody to whom things happen.

Method

Detective Story: If the crime is murder (it almost always is), method may be bizarre or misleading, i.e. the victim appears to have been shot but was in fact poisoned. Sometimes the method may be highly ingenious, as in locked room mystery or itself puzzling, as in a poisoning case where everybody ate and drank exactly the same things.

Crime Novel: Usually straightforward, rarely vital although ballistic or forensic details may play an important part.

Clues

Detective Story: An essential element. There will be perhaps a dozen of them in the story. The detective may explain their meaning at the time, or deductions may be left to the reader.

Crime Novel: Quite often no clues in the detective story sense.

Characters

Detective Story: Only the detective is characterized in detail. Otherwise characterization is perfunctory, particularly after the crime when people become wholly subsidiary to plot.

Crime Novel: The basis of the story. The lives of the characters are shown continuing after the crime, and often their subsequent behaviour is important to the story's effect.

Setting

Detective Story: Mostly confined to what happens before the crime. Later, plot and clue requirements take over and setting (school, newspaper office, theatre, etc.) fades.

Crime Novel: Often important to the tone and style of the story, and frequently an integral part of the crime itself, i.e., the pressures involved in a particular way of life lead to this especial crime.

Social Attitude

Detective Story: Conservative.

Crime Novel: Varying, but often radical in the sense of questioning some aspect of law, justice, or the way the society is run.

Puzzle Value

Detective Story: Generally high. The detective and the puzzle are the only things that stay in the memory.

Crime Novel: Sometimes high, sometimes almost non-existent. But characters are often remembered for a long time.

(Symons 1985: 162-4)

Internationally, two writers who were extremely influential in popularising the crime novel were Georges Simenon, with his non-Maigret works, and American-born Patricia Highsmith, with her acclaimed series about sociopathic murderer Tom Ripley, as well as her stand-alone stories and novels about weak or warped minds. In Britain, one of the first writers to start writing in this vein in the decades after the Second World War was Ruth Rendell.

Ruth Rendell: The Beginnings. Rendell's first published book, which launched the Inspector Wexford series, was not meant to be a whodunnit: it 'began as a character-driven situation, which preceded the detective format' (Rowland 2001: 194), but the author's publishers demanded she change it into a detective novel and 'Wexford was invented [...] simply as a structural device so that a genre could be fitted to the story the writer wanted to tell' (*ibid*: 195). The outcome was a seemingly conventional tale about a police inspector and his partner investigating a murder, but it drew critical attention, both in Britain and internationally, because of the author's lucid style, acute psychological characterisation, and a daring (for 1964) motive for murder – frustrated lesbian desire.

Rendell's first non-series work, *To Fear a Painted Devil*, was also marketed as a traditional murder mystery. The blurb on the 1979 edition could well have graced any Golden Age novel:

When Edward Carnaby attempts to buy cyanide from his local chemist – supposedly to rid his house of wasps – the news rockets round the town of Linchester.

At a disastrous party the following weekend, Patrick Selby – the richest man in the community – is unaccountably attacked by a swarm of wasps. He dies during the night. An unfortunate coincidence. Or is it?

It doesn't take much investigation to reveal that Selby was the most popular man in Linchester – disliked by everyone he came into contact with; hated by his own wife...and despised by Edward Carnaby.

There are almost too many motives!

(Rendell 1979, back cover)

One wonders what Rendell would have to say of the above text, as it is a well-known fact that she 'rejects the classic mystery in which the suspects are corralled by a Poirot-like detective, who spins a dazzling narrative [...] before dramatically unmasking the unlikely killer [and] has little patience with some of the mystery genre's best sellers.' (Lyll 1995: 9) Nevertheless, the novel does bear many similarities to the classic whodunnit, and in this respect differs from many of the stand-alone stories the author was later to write.

The book's setting is so enclosed as to border on the claustrophobic: the housing development of Linchester, built on the grounds of a former country manor and consisting of 'eight beautiful architect-designed houses around a broad green plot with a pond in the middle' (Rendell 1979: 20) and three smaller bungalows. All the residents know each other and, for most of the time, can observe each other's doings, making Linchester not unlike Agatha Christie's fictional village of St. Mary Mead, where bird-watching Miss Marple practises her sleuthing skills. The one major difference between Linchester and the country house setting of Golden Age whodunnits, however, is that the former reflects ongoing socioeconomic changes in Britain of the 1960s: the manor that once stood there is now gone, for after its owner died a city developer acquired the land from the one remaining heir, who was financially incapable of maintaining the estate, and built homes for affluent Nottingham businessmen. The heir, Crispin Marvell, now lives in genteel poverty in the almshouses built by his

ancestor, and spends his time tending his garden, minding his bees and writing down the history of the Chantefleur estate which no longer is.

This setting makes for a closed circle of characters, though sufficient in number to provide enough potential suspects for the murder of rich, successful, and highly unlikeable Patrick Selby. On the one hand, they are introduced at the author's leisure, with subtle characterisation and fine psychological touches, which is a departure from the Golden Age tradition; on the other, most of them have a solid reason for strongly disliking Selby, which is perfectly in keeping with the conventions of the classic whodunnit, where 'nothing more was required of the victim than that he or she should be an undesirable, dangerous or unpleasant person whose death need cause no grief to anyone.' (James 2009: 126). First, there is Selby's wife, the young and beautiful Tamsin, who finds it increasingly harder to suffer through the supercilious manner of her husband and his obsessive punctuality and cleanliness. Besides, as is eventually revealed, she has embarked on a secret affair with Oliver Cage, who has tired of his third wife – the penny-pinching Nancy – which in turn may give *him* a reason for wishing to have Patrick out of the way. Meanwhile, Patrick himself has been carrying on with the homely Freda Carnaby, and if anything serious is to come out of the relationship, it might bring unwanted changes in the life of Freda's brother: the widowed Edward, who relies on his sister to look after both the house and his young daughter – 'He was her brother, but he was also her twin and as jealous of her time as a husband might be.' (Rendell 1979: 15) Then there is Denholm Smith-King, who just might lose his business because someone has been building up a stake in it lately, and Patrick almost admits that this is his doing: 'Denholm will have to watch his step or I'll be taking him over one of these days,' he informs Smith-King's wife maliciously. Finally, Edith Gavestone definitely holds a grudge against Patrick Selby, who in her opinion deliberately influenced her two children to abandon their intended careers and take up inferior jobs: 'Patrick Selby behaved very badly, very wrongly [...]. And it was just wanton mischief. He's perfectly happy and successful in *his* job.' (Rendell 1979: 46)

These and a few other individuals are gathered together, as are their respective narrative strands in the novel, when Tamsin Selby throws a birthday party – a convenient plot device in classic whodunnits, the one difference here being that Tamsin's party takes place nearly halfway through the novel, which has Rendell slowly building up the tension to the central crime rather than posing it as a puzzle to be solved earlier on. The atmosphere at the party is strained because of the numerous personal conflicts seething beneath the surface, and the event is further spoilt by an attack of wasps, which have been tormenting Linchester over the past few days. In his attempt to dismantle the wasp nest, Patrick Selby is stung a number of times and is despatched to bed by the local doctor, Max Greenleaf, with an anti-histamine and a capsule from his own bottle of sodium amytal. On the next morning, Patrick is found dead.

No unnatural causes are detected and in the end there is no inquest or police investigation. However, in the closed community of Linchester it does not take long to start tongues wagging. Gossipy Nancy Cage is quick to pronounce Patrick Selby's death 'fishy' on account of the fact that his father committed suicide; plus, she has learned that Edward Carnaby tried, though unsuccessfully, to purchase cyanide on the day before the ill-fated party. Meanwhile, Freda Carnaby informs Dr Greenleaf about her affair with Patrick, and about Tamsin's affair with Oliver Cage, who she is certain killed Patrick because she saw him carrying a mysterious white package over to the Selbys' house later on the night of the party. Crispin Marvell ponders the fact that Patrick Selby had many enemies and a lot of people must be glad that he is dead, discusses untraceable poisons with Greenleaf and even wonders about the possibility of killing someone by injecting air into a vein, as in Golden Age writer Dorothy Sayers's *Unnatural Death*. Despite Dr Greenleaf's repeated statements that no poison could have been used on Selby, Marvell, obviously a connoisseur of detective fiction, pronounces in classic whodunnit tradition, 'I've a mind to do a spot of detecting', and requests Greenleaf's assistance because this exercise 'obviously needs a doctor'. (Rendell 1979: 113) This is again a conscious or subconscious nod to the Golden Age of crime fiction when, post-WWI, '[t]he omni-talented amateur with apparently nothing to do with his time but solve murders which interest him [had] had his day, partly because his rich and privileged lifestyle became less admirable, and his deferential acceptance by the police less credible, in an age when men were expected to work. Increasingly the private eye had a profession, or occasionally some connection with the police. Doctors were popular.' (James 2009: 56) Thus, although somewhat reluctantly, Dr Max Greenleaf gets to play amateur sleuth, a role for which he seems well-suited because, Miss Marple style, he likes studying people 'from a psychological perspective' and 'he had to know about human nature, it was part of his job'. (Rendell 1979: 64-5) He also begins to play a much more prominent part in the overall structure of the novel, as befits the detective figure in a detective novel.

As the story – and Dr Greenleaf's discreet investigation – unfolds, suspicion turns first on this suspect and then that, always coming back to the main one: Tamsin Selby, the dead man's wife, whom the reader has been led to distrust from much earlier on. The novel opens with an unsettling scene of a nine-year-old boy – spending his first day in an English house and stumbling upon a terrifying picture hanging in the hall: a painting of Salome holding a plate with John the Baptist's head in a puddle of blood. The boy, who the reader later learns is Patrick, screams in terror and flees. Flash forward to the night when Tamsin – Patrick's wife and also his cousin – has her birthday party and invites her guests to view that very same picture, which used to belong to her and Patrick's grandmother and which she has now requested as a gift. The guests are horrified, but none is as aghast as Patrick, whose reaction Tamsin seems to enjoy. Then, when Patrick dies, she unexpectedly goes away on holiday, and comes back tanned, dressed in the bright clothes her husband did not let her

wear, looking happy and care-free, planning to sell Patrick's business and vowing never to marry again.

Tamsin Selby is not, of course, the murderer in the story – for murder it proves to be. In true whodunnit fashion, the perpetrator of the crime is one of the most unlikely suspects, not least because he initiated the investigation into Selby's death. The motive is a time-honoured one: money, 'always a credible motive for murder' (James 2009: 127), which in the killer's view is the only real temptation: 'Love, beauty, power, they are the obverse side of the coin that is money.' (Rendell 1979: 174) But the reason he kills Selby, hoping to lay his hands on the latter's money by marrying Tamsin, is in fact more complex: he does not covet the money just to secure himself a comfortable life, but to hold on to the remains of his ancestral home, which he cannot bear to part with. And when Tamsin rejects him, he gets Dr Greenleaf to probe into the circumstances of Selby's death out of a suddenly developed hatred for her – and again, out of his love of detective fiction:

'Naturally, I intended to get away with it at first. [...] But when I knew that I had killed Patrick in vain, for nothing, I wanted – I suppose I wanted to salvage something from the waste. They say criminals are vain.' With a kind of wonder he said: 'I *am* a criminal. My God, I hadn't thought of it like that before. I don't think it was that sort of vanity. All the moves in the game, they seemed like a puzzle. I thought a doctor and only a doctor could solve it. That's why I picked on you, Max.'

(Rendell 1979: 179)

Thus, Ruth Rendell simultaneously supplies her murderer with complex motivation for his actions and makes a tongue-in-cheek comment on the conventions of the Golden Age murder mystery, nonetheless providing a solution to the central puzzle of her novel that is quite in keeping with the surprise factor of denouements in that subgenre of crime fiction. Also, the levels of deception she lays on before the final revelation are numerous enough, and the murder method she devises sufficiently bizarre to place *To Fear a Painted Devil* within the detective story category rather than that of the crime novel, as per Symons's classification. Vital to the investigations of Dr Greenleaf are the number of stings Patrick Selby received on the night of the disastrous party, for it eventually transpires that he went to bed with four but on the next morning his dead body bore five. And no, the murder method was not a hypodermic syringe, but a *live bee* – for all his life Patrick has been allergic to bees and has had an aversion to honey (hints of which are dropped a number of times throughout the novel, among the many misleading mentions of the wasp plague visited upon the Linchester community). With typical psychological acuity, Rendell has the

murderer make the following heartfelt but simultaneously chilling speech on his act, mourning the killer bee rather than the human victim:

'I put the bee on his arm and I – I teased it, Max, till it stung him. [...] I can't tell you how I hated doing it. I know it's sentimental, but the bees were my friends. They'd worked for me faithfully and every year I took their honey away from them, all their treasure. [...] Now I was forcing one of them to kill itself for my sake. It plunged its sting into those disgusting freckles...My God, Max, it was horrible to see it trying to fly and then keeling over. Horrible!'

(Rendell 1979: 178)

To Fear a Painted View is certainly rich in psychological insights, mostly to be found in Rendell's mastery in building up characters with subtle but memorable touches. In that respect, as seen from the above-quoted passage, the novel is a *whydunnit*, as it searches for motives of behaviour buried deep beneath the surface. On the other hand, formally – in its setting, cast of characters, narrative structure and puzzle value – it stands firmly within the *whodunnit* tradition, standing close to the classic murder mysteries of the Golden Age, which has also come to be known as 'cozies': stories which 'frequently involve a close, intimate community – a family, a small town, a university. [...] The detective uses close observation and rational deduction to explain how a crime was committed, identifies the single individual responsible for it, and ultimately restores social order by expelling that individual from the community.' (Herald 2006: 137) One major difference, however – a feature that would become even more prominent in future novels by Rendell – is that the novel ends on an abrupt and uneasy note, with the murderer's confession and suicide and the detective's horror at his discovery, without there being any real sense of social order restored and without portraying the other characters happily getting back to life as usual.

Ruth Rendell: From 1965 to 2010. In the forty-five years between Ruth Rendell's first non-series novel and her most recent one, the writer has played with the conventions of the whodunnit in various ways, at times employing them with subtle innovations, at others consciously violating them. The author's second stand-alone book, *Vanity Dies Hard* (1966), is a suspense novel which cunningly plays on readers' expectations. Its heroine, dowdy but rich Alice Whittaker, is not only concerned about her beautiful friend Nesta's disappearance, but, after she starts experiencing symptoms of a mysterious illness, becomes increasingly convinced that someone is trying to poison her and her own life is in peril. As Alice gathers clues about the last days Nesta was seen

in town, the number of suspects grows: it could be her younger husband, her brother- and her father-in-law, all of whom seem to have had some previously unrevealed relationship with the missing woman, or the local doctor, who appears to play a much more sinister part in the novel than does Max Greenleaf in *To Fear a Painted Devil*. The tension mounts, and the reader is deftly led to believe that a cruel killer is at work, that one murder has been committed and another is slowly being committed. Then comes the final revelation: Nesta has not been murdered, but – as the title implies – has been hiding away, not wanting her friend to see the effects of myxoedema on her figure and her hair, both of which she was exceptionally vain about; and the symptoms Alice has been experiencing do not result from someone slipping untraceable poison into her food and drink, but from an unrealised pregnancy. Thus, *Vanity Dies Hard* ultimately proves to be neither a whodunnit nor a crime novel, as there is in fact no crime committed, but a psychological investigation into its central character's state of mind, the main question being why Alice is so ready to believe someone from among the people around her has murdered her friend and is now attempting to kill her, too, and whether she subconsciously wished her friend dead.

With this novel, Ruth Rendell made it clear that her non-serious work would focus on exploring unstable mental states (verging, in some of her latest novels, on the psychopathic), regardless of the outward genre trappings she uses. With the exception of *Vanity Dies Hard*, her stand-alones do feature crime, and the crime is murder, but the degree of importance of that crime and of its perpetrator to the overall narrative may vary. 'I don't think that I have really ever been interested in crime, but I rather like puzzles,' the author has said.³¹ Undoubtedly, she is more interested in the effects of crime on both the criminal and the rest of society, but it is inarguable that her novels have a high puzzle value. The reader may know who is about to commit a crime – a lot of Rendell stories are about murder waiting to happen – but may have no idea whom it will be against, when, where and how it will be committed, and above all what drives the perpetrator to criminal behaviour. Thus, the whodunnit element is absent from many of her non-series novels, the most notable example being *A Judgment in Stone* (1977), where the opening paragraph gives away the identity of both the killer and her victims, as well as the apparent motive and the outcome of the investigation. For Ruth Rendell's novels are mostly *mysteries of the mind* in which the author explores human fallacies, obsessive delusions, disease and mental disorder, as well as features of modern society which alienates people and puts pressure on the individual. The settings are realistic and, with very few exceptions, (sub)urban, the characters are either damaged but recognisable people or psychopaths whom society chooses to ignore until it is too late, there is certainly no brilliant detective to resolve a cunningly conceived crime, and in fact there is frequently no or little detection – even the police, when involved, are frequently portrayed as inept, pursuing wrong directions and

³¹ <http://www.penguin.ca/nf/Author/AuthorPage/0,,1000032990,00.html>

chasing after innocent people. In that respect, the writer's stand-alone tales are definitely crime novels as opposed to murder mysteries in the traditional sense.

Nevertheless, Rendell has occasionally revisited the whodunnit to provide puzzle value, though nearly always giving the apparatus of that subgenre a twist. Both *The Secret House of Death* (1968) and *The Face of Trespass* (1974) provide a murder ingeniously plotted and a surprise identity of the perpetrator – and the former novel even has a character acting as amateur detective, a figure Rendell is to mock in later works, for example in the short stories 'Paintbox Place' and 'Front Seat' from the collection *The Fever Tree* (1982). However, neither of the above mentioned novels can be called a whodunnit proper, as the focus is more on characters who will come to be affected by the murder, and the crime itself takes place late into the story. *Master of the Moor* (1982), on the other hand, provides readers with two books in one, being both a whodunnit and a whydunnit. The novel features an unknown serial killer strangling young women of a certain type and taking locks of their hair as trophies. The two investigating officers focus on the protagonist Stephen Whalby as a main suspect. The reader knows from the start that Whalby is not the killer, as the story is told mostly from his point of view, and begins with his discovery of one of the bodies. One of the policemen, however, becomes fixated on him as a suspect, and the narrative focuses on Whalby's state of mind as he is being pestered by that officer. It soon become clear that Stephen Whalby is a seriously disturbed, sexually dysfunctional young man who not only turns killer himself at one point, but becomes obsessed with the real killer and the question of his identity. This is not because of amateur detective enthusiasm or in attempt to clear suspicions about himself, as might happen in a classic whodunnit, but because he comes to see the killer as a man of character who is not afraid to follow his animalistic instincts, which Stephen finds admirable and starts dreaming of meeting and even beginning a communal life with the serial strangler. Thus, *Master of the Moor* is as much about who is murdering those young women as about how far its protagonist will go in his increasing derangement. And when the identity of the serial killer is revealed on the final pages, it not only comes as a surprise but proves crucial in explaining, at least to some extent, Stephen's mental instability. In other words, in this novel Rendell successfully combines the puzzle element of the traditional murder mystery with the psychological explorations of the crime novel. She also manages to subvert the conventional whodunnit denouement by having only the reader and the non-detective protagonist establish the identity of the killer, while the police are left clueless.

The writer's experiments with the narrative conventions of the whodunnit vary from novel to novel. In *The Keys to the Street* (1996), someone is murdering the homeless of London and impaling their bodies on the iron spikes of Regent's Park; the police announce that a serial killer is at work and the search is on for the criminal. This, however, does not occur until a quarter of the way into the novel. Meanwhile, the reader meets a wide number of characters whose only connection seems to be that, living in its vicinity, sooner or later they

walk through the park. House-sitting, organ donation, dog-walking, jealous wrath, drug dealing and addiction, violent extortion, S/M sexual practices, male prostitution, blackmail and fraud have brought these disparate characters into the area, but the connection between them is at best tenuous. And the killings go on, which naturally has readers guessing which protagonist of the numerous narrative threads is behind them. None, as it transpires in the end: the mysteries of each thread are resolved, but the horrific killings turn out to be so peripheral to the main storylines that it takes a second reading of the novel to check that the author is not cheating. She is not: the killer has been briefly introduced at some point in the novel, the motive supplied, and the specifics of the location are certainly crucial in providing the basic clue to his identity (that clue being the fact that all the bodies are hung on the *outside* of the park). His marginal role in the whole story comes as a much greater shock than if any of the major characters had proved to be the perpetrator.

If *The Keys to the Street* is a kind of peripheral whodunnit, then *The Rottweiler* (2003) can be called a partial whodunnit, as it presents a curious mixture of form. It begins as a murder mystery, with yet another unknown serial killer roaming the streets of London, feeding media frenzy and community panic. Again, Rendell introduces a large number of characters, each of whom might be a suspect, and each of whom is given equal narrative space. Then, one third of the way into the story, she suddenly reveals the identity of the killer. From that point on, the novel makes fun of the conventions of the whodunnit, as the police embark on an ineffectual investigation and, just as in *Master of the Moor*, start hounding the wrong man, while the actual killer gets to play the role of amateur detective, as he attempts to conduct psychoanalysis on himself in order to discover what exactly causes his murderous urges in certain circumstances.

With the arguable exception of *The Rottweiler*, in the 2000s Rendell seemed to be straying as far from the traditional murder mystery as possible. *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* (2001) and *Thirteen Steps Down* (2004) both follow unstable characters about to stumble into criminality. *The Water's Lovely* (2006) never really poses the question of whether a crime was committed, and by whom, years ago, but probes the puzzle of why it was actually committed. And in *Portobello* (2009), the writer appears to have almost abandoned crime as a subject – the two killings that take place in the story are more or less incidental and are committed by and upon characters who are not only known to the reader but who can at best be said to be peripheral to the overall narrative. Ruth Rendell, however, certainly likes to challenge readers' expectations, and after *Portobello* the author came out with *Tigerlily's Orchids* (2010), which – on the surface at least – appears to mark a sort of return to the whodunnit.

Ruth Rendell: The Latest Offering. Like most of its predecessors, *Tigerlily's Orchids* is set in a particular area of London – Kenilworth, 'as dreary as only a London outer suburb can be' (Rendell 2010: 2) – and involves multiple narrative

threads. The characters they are built around are the residents of a small block of flats, Lichfield House, the inhabitants of the semi-detached houses across the street, and a few others whom they interact with. These people are as disparate as can be: there is the ageing alcoholic Olwen Curtis, whose one ambition in life is to drink herself to death; the two former hippies Rose and Marius, neither of whom wishes to acknowledge remembering their brief sexual encounter in a 1970s commune; Dr Michael Constantine, who writes a largely fabricated health column for a newspaper, and his vacuous wife Katie; the three student girls sharing one of the flats; Duncan Yeardon, who spends most of his time enjoying the warmth of his house while speculating on the lives of his neighbours; the oversexed and unfaithful fashion journalist Claudia Livorno, whose lawyer husband sets up bugging devices to spy on her doings; the gruff caretaker Wally Scurlock, whose secret hobby is watching child pornography on the internet; his wife, the mini-skirted, high-heeled cleaning lady Richenda; and last but not least, the mysterious Asians occupying one of the houses, who show no sign of wishing to get to know their neighbours. With the exception of the latter group, all of the above characters are brought together when the newest tenant of Lichfield House, the narcissistic and not very worldly Stuart Font, throws a party – the same whodunnit narrative device used by Rendell in her very first stand-alone novel, *To Fear a Painted Devil*.

Tigerlily's Orchids is 'the perfect read for lovers of the so-called English cosy', finds one reviewer, positing that:

Instead of Agatha Christie's country pile, we have a block of flats [...] surrounded by neighbours who always seem to be at their windows observing. But there are the same detailed descriptions of interiors, a ritual gathering of suspects (a party thrown by the central character) and an acerbic appreciation of the truth that human beings have a deadly passion for concealment and revelation.

(Blundell 2010: 22)

A closer look at the novel, however, establishes that the above statements are not completely true. When murder finally takes place in *Tigerlily's Orchids*, it does so on page 183 – which means, as another reviewer rightly notes, that 'the reader has two-thirds of the book to wonder who the victim is going to be and another third to puzzle over the identity of the killer.' (Batten 2011: 7) Admittedly, halfway through the book it does appear that it is Stuart Font who is the most likely murder victim, but there is also a sense that violence may possibly come from other quarters, such as Scurlock's illegal online hobby, one of the student girls' forays into petty thievery, or the increasingly suspicious behavior of the Asian family, if family they are indeed. As in most of Rendell's later books, none of the characters is particularly likeable, so it is hard to single

out a single candidate for victim or for criminal. Still, it is Font who is eventually killed, and when he is found stabbed in the nearby park, there are at least a number of potential suspects, which is in keeping with the whodunnit tradition. The murderer could be Claudia Livorno's husband Freddy, who, on discovering his wife has been having an affair with Stuart, beats him up twice, the second time threatening to kill him; it could be the histrionic Claudia herself, after Stuart tries to dump her unceremoniously; and again, it could be someone from the Asian household, for Stuart has secretly established contact with one of them and is on his way to an assignation with her when he gets murdered. On the other hand, there are characters who the reader most certainly will not suspect, for lack of means and motive, such as the constantly inebriated Olwen, now housebound after an accident, or Rose and Marius, who are by this time too busy reigniting their romance of decades ago to notice much around them, or the deluded young Molly, who has been doing everything she can to engage Stuart's affections. The storylines of these characters obviously cannot be linked to Stuart's murder, at least in the traditional whodunnit fashion, and they are in the novel simply to help the author explore different mentalities and behavior modes.

In fact, *Tigerlily's Orchids* belongs to a certain type of novel which Ruth Rendell seems to have been developing over the past ten years or so, with a growing number of narrative threads, none of which is treated by the author as more important than the others. Stuart Font and his murder constitute only one of the storylines in this particular book, a whodunnit storyline indeed, but while it may serve to hold all the other plotlines together and propel them forward, it never comes to be the central or indeed the only one, as would be the case in a classic cosy. The reader certainly wants to find out who killed Stuart, but he or she is equally interested to discover how poor Olwen will end up, whether the thieving Sally will eventually get caught and, ultimately, what those Asian characters are really up to – to give but a few examples. For the act of Stuart Font's murder serves 'to accelerate the destructive actions of ostensibly civilized strangers when they're suddenly involved in their neighbors' private lives' (Stasio 2011: 19), as at some point in the story 'everyone in Lichfield House will cross a behavioral line and do something rash or foolish or even criminal – but which somehow seems entirely in character' (*ibid*).

Thus, *Tigerlily's Orchids* is much less a murder mystery proper than *To Fear a Painted Devil*, and not so much a crime novel as simply a story with a crime in it – which, however, has a high puzzle factor, for the revelation of Stuart's murderer certainly comes as a surprise. As in a number of previous Rendell novels, he turns out to be a minor character introduced quite late into the novel, and one who neither the reader nor the police come to suspect. His motive is a classic one – jealousy, fuelled by the antisocial behavioural tendencies displayed by many modern youth – and his identity is not established through any detection or investigation, but by means of a chance discovery made by one of the other characters. With this plot resolution the author, while

largely retaining the mystery element of a whodunnit, pokes light fun at that crime fiction subgenre – for the novel actually features a character akin to the amateur detective of the Golden Age. This is self-appointed people-watcher Duncan Yeardon, whose ambition as a teenager ‘had been to become a detective, largely because he enjoyed finding solutions to puzzles’ (Rendell 2010: 30). He did achieve his ambition and joined the police, but then got shot at in the line of duty and ‘lost his nerve’ (*ibid*: 30). Now a retired car mechanic, Duncan, like the numerous spinster sleuths of traditional cosies, can be found nearly all the time behind his window, keeping track of his neighbours’ movements and assigning motives to their actions. The problem is, his deductions are always wildly off the mark: he immediately assumes Stuart Font must be gay, because of the latter’s obvious attention to appearance; Olwen, with her shopping bags full of gin or vodka, he first decides must live with many sisters or an invalid husband, then attributes to her grown-up children and grandchildren; the Asian man and girl he takes to be husband and much younger wife, in keeping with his idea of Occidental traditions; and, assigning to the girl the name Tigerlily, he engages in visions of her gently tending orchids for the royal family.

Neither the Tigerlily of the title is called Tigerlily, nor are the orchids she and her fellow nationals allegedly keep in their house really orchids. Duncan Yeardon and his false assumptions are the perfect vehicle for conveying the principal message of the novel: that appearances are deceptive, and that one never knows what seemingly respectable veneers may conceal. For the confined, dull-seeming setting of *Tigerlily’s Orchids* will eventually explode with the dark subject matter of tabloid headlines – murder, pedophilia, sociopathic behavior, drug rings and human trafficking – as Ruth Rendell tackles the social horrors of the day, raising her novel much above the level of the comforting cosy. And once again, social order is not restored to its previous state, as all characters are affected, for better or worse, by the effects of the events which have taken place, and at the end of the novel Lichfield House stands empty, waiting for a new caretaker and new tenants.

Conclusion. Throughout her literary career, Ruth Rendell has at times appropriated certain conventions from the murder mystery/detective novel/whodunnit/cosy in her non-series crime novels, which are best described as psychological/suspense/noir thrillers, or whydunnits. The writer’s first stand-alone tale, *To Fear a Painted Devil*, comes very close to the traditional whodunnit in terms of setting, number of suspects and motives, choice of victim and murder method, puzzle value and surprise ending, but bearing the classic Rendell hallmarks of sense of place and time and psychological depth. From that point on, the author would either abandon the devices of the whodunnit or return to them and use them, in various ways and to varying extents, to heighten the puzzle value of her stories while exploring the psychological reasons for and effects of violent crime alongside modern-day social issues. Her latest non-series

novel, for the time being, *Tigerlily's Orchids*, also bears a mystery plotline, complete with an enclosed setting, several possible suspects and a surprise denouement, but this narrative thread is interwoven with a number of others into the broader fabric of the novel in order to probe the deceptive appearances, uncertain realities and potential dangers of 21st century life.

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