

# WRITING SOCIOLOGICAL CRIME FICTION YOU WILL HAVE YOUR DAY IN COURT

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## Résumé de l'article

In this article I share and discuss a poetic work of experimental sociological crime fiction titled “You Will Have Your Day in Court” (in Crockett Thomas, 2020c). In it I reimagine the “true crime” story of “King Con” Paul Bint, who for a period in 2009 successfully impersonated Keir Starmer, the then Director of Public Prosecutions. I first introduce my collaborative approach to writing sociological crime fiction, connections to poststructuralist philosophy and conceptualisation of research as a process of translation. After sharing the piece, I discuss thematic aspects of the work, such as the popular fascination of fraud, desire for explanations for criminal acts, and the narrative constraints placed on people who have experienced criminalisation. I also consider stylistic elements including use of narrative voice, characterisation, and narrative structure. I hope that this article is of interest to scholars aiming to marry poststructuralist thought with an experimental approach to writing sociological fiction.





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## WRITING SOCIOLOGICAL CRIME FICTION: YOU WILL HAVE YOUR DAY IN COURT

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**Abstract:** In this article I share and discuss a poetic work of experimental sociological crime fiction titled “You Will Have Your Day in Court” (in Crockett Thomas, 2020c). In it I reimagine the “true crime” story of “King Con” Paul Bint, who for a period in 2009 successfully impersonated Keir Starmer, the then Director of Public Prosecutions. I first introduce my collaborative approach to writing sociological crime fiction, connections to poststructuralist philosophy and conceptualisation of research as a process of translation. After sharing the piece, I discuss thematic aspects of the work, such as the popular fascination of fraud, desire for explanations for criminal acts, and the narrative constraints placed on people who have experienced criminalisation. I also consider stylistic elements including use of narrative voice, characterisation, and narrative structure. I hope that this article is of interest to scholars aiming to marry poststructuralist thought with an experimental approach to writing sociological fiction.

**Keywords:** sociological fiction; crime; criminalisation; translation; ontology

## An Introduction to Sociological Crime Fiction

Writing fiction as a qualitative research method can help sociologists develop the “affective sociological narratives” necessary for public engagement and dialogue (Watson, 2016). Patricia Leavy argues it can help researchers and audiences alike “build empathetic understanding across differences, and promote resonance” (Leavy, 2012: 517). As a sociologist who engages in this process as a method of enquiry and knowledge production, I contend that creating fiction and poetry can extend the aesthetic, affective, and ontological possibilities of social research in exciting and challenging ways (Crockett Thomas, forthcoming, 2020b). Before sharing an example of my work, I will give some context about my practice. According to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century literary theorist Victor Shklovskii, art has the power to “enstrange” (Shklovskii, 1990: 5–6) the familiar. Enstrangement<sup>1</sup> shows a familiar object or concept to be unnatural and invented by manipulating it in a way that makes its audience see it afresh. Most of the sociological fiction and poetry I have created so far has been sociological crime fiction, taking “crime” as the concept to make strange. This work has been created through undertaking experimental, empirical, processual research with a number of people, including those who have experienced criminalisation or victimisation and people who are involved in policing social deviance and defining crime. The resulting sociological crime fiction aims to performatively demonstrate how different social actors assemble their version of crime and show why this difference matters. This is not an incitement to relativism. It is important to establish here that I employ a non-unitary conception of the self, in which people are in process, and are produced from their material and affective relations with the rest of the world. I take up Annemarie Mol’s point that one of the limitations of critiques which draw attention to different perspectives on an object or event is that the “object of the many gazes... remains singular, intangible, untouched” (Mol, 1999: 76). As such, rather than interpreting these research encounters as providing multiple perspectives on crime as a singular object, I argue that crime itself is a multiplicity. In the conceptual schema of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2004) it is an “assemblage”: a “reasonably mobile configuration of affects, utterances, things, practices and acts that produces effects based on its shifting configuration and connection with other assemblages” (Crockett Thomas, 2020a: 70). When advancing a conception of crime as an assemblage, experimental sociological fiction offers a medium which both affords the problematisation of simplistic accounts of crime and criminality, and helps us imagine how we might assemble crime differently, and perhaps better. As novelist Ursula Le Guin argues:

The exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary. (Le Guin, 2004: 183)

I established this creative research approach in my doctoral project (Thomas, 2018) for which I wrote a collection of sociological fiction and poetry entitled *Crime Series* (Crockett Thomas, 2020c), which included “You Will Have Your Day in Court,” the piece highlighted in this article. Subsequent projects included “We Who Are About To...” (Thomas, 2017): an open-ended collaborative work of speculative fiction reflecting on the first workshop of an action-research project, and *Stir* (2020d), a collection of poetry based on undertaking ethnographic field work in Scottish prisons (see Crockett Thomas, 2020b)<sup>2</sup>. My research for *Crime Series* involved working with people who had experienced state punishment and criminalisation, and so were in possession of stigmatised knowledge about crime. They spoke about how there was a tacitly authorised version of “their story,” which they had reproduce repeatedly to enable progress through the criminal justice system and gain access to welfare and support. I argued that the dominance of this state sanctioned “enforced narrative” (Steedman, 2000) acted to limit the way in which people could express their knowledge of crime, and further, that their experiences of criminalisation overdetermined the kinds of stories they could tell about themselves. Following this critique, I developed a method to counter this narrative constraint by writing fiction and poetry which blended imagination, interviews, fieldnotes, and other resources.

Research necessarily involves affecting and transforming our objects of study, and as such has ethical and ontological implications. Inspired by actor-network theory, I have come to think about research as a form of “translation” (Callon, 1981, 1984), by which I mean a process of transforming data into different forms, primarily written texts, but also film and collage. In actor-network theory, translation figures as a verb; it is an active process rather than a fixed output. It is important to point out that translation is not conceptualised as a special action – it is inherent to all acts of representation. Whilst the translator attempts to preserve the sense of whatever they are a translating, a crucial aspect is the gap, or the difference between versions of content and the information that cannot or will not be translated (Latour, 2014). Aside from the aspects that are lost when we move between different media, my decisions about what to translate and what to lose or disguise are based partly on my narrative and aesthetic preferences, and partly on ethical reasoning about the impact of my work on the lives of the people who gave me information. When I have drawn substantially on data from participants, I have created characters that disguise or anonymise my participants, and have returned the fiction to them to ensure that they are comfortable with what I have made. This does not mean that I re-present the data as it was presented to me in my sociological fiction, and as such involves a careful conversation about truth in fiction and research. For a more substantive discussion of the process and rationale for writing fiction as a social research method see my forthcoming article “The Researcher as Unreliable Narrator” (Crockett Thomas, forthcoming). Unusually, in “You Will Have Your Day in Court,” the protagonists have the names of living people. This is because,

instead of working from interview material and in collaboration with a research participant, I used news articles about a publicly known story as a catalyst to explore “public feelings” (Cvetkovich, 2012) about crime and criminality.

“You Will Have Your Day in Court” reimagines the “true crime” story of “King Con” Paul Bint (1962-), who for a period in 2009 successfully impersonated Keir Starmer (1962-), at the time, a high-profile barrister and Director of Public Prosecutions. When I started writing the piece in 2015, Starmer was standing for election as the Labour Party MP for the London constituency of Holborn and St Pancras. Since April 2020 he has been the leader of the UK Labour Party. He is also rumoured to be the inspiration behind the character of Mark Darcy in Helen Fielding’s (1996) *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, which I play on in the piece. Bint had previously presented himself as a ballet dancer, a doctor, a policeman and an aristocrat among other identities. As Keir Starmer he was involved with several women. Bint was caught when he charged a large taxi fare to Starmer’s chambers. In “You Will Have Your Day in Court,” the story is told through “stream of consciousness” prose from the imagined perspectives of both Starmer and Bint, who throughout the text are both referred to only as “Keir.” The appearance of the text on the page works as a key to who the reader is following, with Bint’s story on the left and Starmer’s story on the right. The plot begins with Bint engaging in some banter as “Keir” in the pub, then the narrative jumps to Starmer leaving another pub some months later. Starmer walks home, drunkenly reflecting on his prospects as a Labour candidate, juries, being impersonated by Bint, and the sudden appearance of a young woman out of the darkness. Some of these reflections are built out of my painful experience of undertaking jury service in my early twenties, and sensory memories of being intoxicated while walking through public space at night. The rest of the narrative flows between the two Keirs’ dreams.

## You Will Have Your Day in Court

*“To paraphrase T.E Lawrence:  
All men dream –  
it only becomes dangerous  
when those dreams  
turn into reality.”*

– Paul Bint,  
*Daily Mail*, 2011.

*“Is he pleading not guilty? Is he  
definite that he is Keir Starmer.  
And if he gets acquitted, where  
do I stand?”*

– Keir Starmer,  
*Evening Standard*, 2012.

**KEIR 2:**

She's not as young as

**DRINKING COMPANIONS:**

A cracking girl

She's not exactly as young as

Gorgeous smile

She's not as young as

Really good teeth actually, has she had them done?

No spring chicken

"Last orders at the bar!"

But

What?

Are you complaining mate?

I'd be after her m'self if I could

But I

But I bet you get all the girls right?

What with being a barrister and all...

all the girls.

Smart girls too, educated...

Lend me your little wig some time mate!

You've got it sussed though, wish I'd been

switched on like you Keir

law school and that

how many years is it?

Um

And!

You kip above the pub I hear. Nice and central,

bring the ladies back for a nightcap

like it's your own public lounge.  
 Her eyes as big as your cock sounds  
 when you shake notes at the staff.  
 The barman rolling his olives at your smooth moves.  
 Then it's wink, wink boys  
 I'm turning in for the night.  
 Hand on her arse all the way up the stairs,  
 finger on her bumhole.  
 We. See. You.

### **KEIR 1:**

Keir leaves the pub and pushes up his  
 shoulders past the cold and fume of  
 that old man there, outside the church.  
 His spine inclined like split cheese  
 strings from his white stick. Is he really  
 blind?

Is it a crutch or a prop? The sage's  
 speech echoes around the square:

### ***THE BIRD OF ILL OMEN:***

"Crime is the end-point of a continuum of disorder! It is not separate from other forms of aggravation and breakdown. It is the run-down council estate where music blares out of windows early in the morning; it is the graffiti on the walls; it is aggression in the shops; it is bins that are never emptied; oil stains across the streets; it is kids that show no respect; it is large trucks racing through your roads; it is streets you do not dare walk down at night; it is always being careful; it is a symbol of a world falling apart. It is a lack of respect for humanity and for fundamental human decency" (Lea and Young, 1984: 55).



A sweet disorder in address, and words that  
spittle down his chin.  
It holds and hurts.

Keir turning,  
pockets all this mess and walks on –  
dangerous to stop too long, it would seem like an  
endorsement.

He cannot be seen to listen as if he did not  
already know the answers.  
He is the D.P.P, soon he will be the Labour  
candidate. He is heartily endorsed.  
Back patted and it's a safe seat, just need to get  
on, get in, and sort it all out.

Actually –  
it looks quite bad with that man standing there,  
brings down the tone of the area somewhat. This  
is the home of the legal profession after all...  
it now seems accusatory.

Perhaps he should call somebody?

In the morning,

another then.

Just a half...

"King's Head?"

"Night Bill!"

And tripping on his exit.

Body erupting happily with the plant inside him,  
belly stretched with beer, his fish-guts now the  
filter. His throat caught against the scratching  
scarf, he crosses the street and takes the first left,  
a ditch, a broken fence into  
a yard, a piss?

And tosses his nose towards the darkness proud,  
with more a turn of the neck than needed,  
“fuckafox!”

Stop.  
So close,  
and poised with leg raised,  
is Keir imagining, photographing?  
A sarky stare into his eyes, the D.P.P,  
the stare out sickens him, the look,  
I know you asshole – from this fox,  
a brazen look: you’re just a larger animal.  
Keir changes up the pace, strides on,  
a different route home to unstick the brain.  
The fox’s eyes, the brazen.

Boxy hedges with wandering hands,  
solitary workman’s gloves, trick pavements.

Keir wishes suddenly that he could just have a  
drink with the guy, this man pretending to be him,  
it was just so odd  
and sad.

His shit teeth.

The fox, the look the cab driver gave him seeking  
“Keir’s” fare was: and what’s so special about you  
mate? Just another posh lawyer with a clear  
baritone and a generous forehead.

‘kafox! Again!

But how had “Keir” picked him out, selected him  
for skin. Was it the McLibel stuff or Tomlinson?  
Did he like his face, fancy him? Had he met him,  
shook his hand? Shit, had he represented him in  
court?

All the girls, the women he's fucked or tried it on  
with in his name.  
A life's work on a cocktail stick,  
Keir's resume muttered into slurry breasts.

Where'd she come from!

Not lost at least, and happy drunk or purposive,  
her phone a flame in mitts.

Carol concert girl.

Still young enough to get dragged to church and  
sit glowering under a greasy fringe, whilst all the  
fathers around notice  
how grown up she's becoming.  
Flesh trembling on her pretty legs, skirt thumbing  
a lift off her thunderous butt,  
winnowing her way.

A live body to follow home.

She turns her face towards him,  
just a hint, a blink of fear.

He thinks better to cross the road as we're going  
the same way.  
I'll accelerate out of her unease.

A hard case to prosecute, pubescent child abuse  
often is. The defendant seemed confused by the  
barely-illegal, and seeing how the jury judged  
those girls and their fat, feral mothers:

No good girls,  
tiny future-sluts,  
skinny now but  
look at that  
body on the mum:  
drama spilling out  
and written up her arms.

But Keir knows better. Not bad girls, poor girls,  
and not without charm. Remember who's on trial  
here.

He wants to shake the jury by its necks, all high  
on CSI and photographs. And photos?

But they had seen the footage too, that showed  
how scared they were the morning after. Giving  
statements in tracksuits and long rat-tailing hair,  
their story straight and credible despite their  
youth.

Their terror made them beautiful –  
Kate Moss topless on a beach circa 1990  
something, coaxed out of a bra by a kindly female  
photographer.

Scared of him,  
and blonde policewomen  
with their hats off and recorders on.

Another pub, a drink, alone?  
How famous am I really?

The lights are passed now, don't double back, it's  
late, but why did the pub, life pressed to windows  
like hands on glass  
make him feel so reeled about?

He looks back at the dark figure, a smooth point  
of nowt beyond the bins, walk on.

And just be glad they came.

Imagine girls at court whose mothers stay away,  
and girls are not their mothers anyway.

Silent night.

A nation of shopkeepers now artisanal bread-  
makers, just itching to do something with their  
hands. Their blackboards tucked up for the night,  
in painful carefree modern calligraphy.

Ah! Excepting the 24hrs. Pop in, ask  
for a pint, to make pancakes for the morning, and  
mark the light extravagantly.

“Hi Shaq, I’m making pancakes for the wife, just  
milk no mix, I’m doing it the old-fashioned way,  
how’s things?”

**SHAFIQUE:**

“The loitering and thieving,  
they think it’s cowboys and Indians!”

“they’re just kids,” his joke not Keir’s,  
(they both know he’s from Pakistan).

“Night!”

“Night mate.”

And sleep.

**KEIR 2:**

And sleep -

I am Keir  
Sleepwalker.

I’m on the sand shifting, a boy’s own,  
choose your own adventure.

Out here in the desert I am of Arabia,  
both of and not of the desert.

All that can be sure is that I might deign  
to have dealings with you. That in doing  
so I would have the fairness of a  
landscape in a timer.

You please me and sand piles dimpled  
round your feet, you disappoint me and  
I wriggle off a sand-snake frown.  
Soft simplicity.

I would bring you stories of other  
worlds, trickled detail at first and then  
pouring out – an unchecked wound.

Always a note deliberately off-key,  
like the tiled floor of a madrasa.  
No one could pity me my stories.

Anyhow, you seem to soak them up like  
moss.

#### **KEIR 1:**

Keir is free-skiing gracefully, effortlessly,  
doing star jumps and  
smashing into triangular trees that burst  
into flames.  
He accumulates no injuries,  
is not fatigued,  
yet the yeti always runs out to get him  
after 2000 metres.

#### **KEIR 2:**

So long inside the bird.

Don't believe it when they tell you  
that one can go anywhere in the mind.

If I could have folded myself  
inside her I would have.  
Me: the mirror snapping shut,  
hers: the handbag I'd get lost in.

But as long as she's always looking for me,  
doesn't forget about all my shinys.  
I would be safe in her,  
belonging among the things.  
Depended-upon, woman's things.

I sing she's gonna love me forever.  
Just the thought of being alone, of dying  
alone with drink and black fingernails,  
it's an absolute killer.

My father with black fingernails.

Elbow steady on table,  
microphone in hand  
Face is cheekbones,  
mic in mouth.  
Elbow steady on table,  
mic in hand,  
right hand pen en pointe.

No! that's too much,  
too aggressive.  
Put the pen down  
Face is cheekbones,  
mic in mouth.

Face not moving from the jury,  
never,  
not even when addressing/dismissing –  
“an outrageous claim,”  
his competition.

He's edifying.  
Carving himself into the seat,  
the hulk of justice in a navy suit.

Coming to in 1984,  
wake me up before you go go

Gradual detail disappointing – prison again.

***GUARDS:***

“Come on mate, you can handle this,  
it’s not like you’ve not been here before.”

I'm never gonna dance again.

"It's not like you won't be here again."

**KEIR 1:**

Believe you me -  
once we slip down the slippery slope of  
presumption, away from the snug ski  
lodge of neutrality, we will quickly lose  
the scent of justice, warm as pies and  
rising high above the pines.

There will be no beautiful Bavarian  
barmaids, blindfolded and dispensing  
beer to every man who sprouts a glass.



Justine the partially-sighted alpine,  
gives herself freely to all that ask.

It is true that some are shy of Justine  
and do not know how to enquire, and,  
for the same complaint cannot ask the  
others how to make an approach.

Just offer them the full range of books to  
swear on, to make them feel at home.

We must fight for the retention and  
state-funded maintenance of the ski-lift  
of legal aid, without which some will  
never be able to scale Justine's  
vertiginous bar.

But many will argue, why do the poor  
aspire to go skiing anyway?  
It is a luxury leisure pursuit.  
Why would they need to pay for  
Justine's services when they're always  
at it from what we hear? If they're really  
serious they will do it the old-fashioned  
way, pull themselves up by their snow  
straps.

## ***KEIR 2:***

Because I am a good bloke, I really am.  
I really, really liked these girls  
and I wanted them to like me too.

It's hard though, once you've felt that on  
you –  
the gaze of a beautiful woman. She's so  
impressed with you, and she's glowing,  
so lovely because you could have had  
anyone but you're learning her and she  
feels like a fraud – all women do, that's  
the rub, she can't believe she's good  
enough –

Like Baby Spice: understated and not  
flashy. Sexy but in a really secret way.  
All grown up but smelling of damp  
sugar.

A colleague once suggested:  
    “Like Hitler,  
    but a few shades lighter.”  
    Public speaking:  
    keep the passion  
    but show a little less  
    Make *them* lean in.  
How far are your wrists thrown  
from their sleeves by that gesture?  
    With cufflinks?

Now imagine them there,  
    at the notch of the wrist,  
    the arm’s instep –  
    their small diamonds will  
    slow you down in future.

Now.  
Walk slow and talk slower.  
Always walk more slowly  
    than you normally would  
and then slow down even more,  
    dropping to child level,  
    just glide to knees,  
    a stoop so subtle.  
    Like a buzzard  
    landing in a field  
    to snatch  
    a graceful victory –  
    this is how you politic.

Make them feel that it’s not an effort for  
you to meet them at their level,  
LITERALLY.

But, *don't* touch them or use their knees  
as leverage, or groan  
as you stand back up.

And,  
if you speak with them –  
no more than five minutes,  
you've got to work the room.

When I see pictures of the Spice  
Girls looking happy and tidy in  
*Hello Magazine* I always cry a little.

Deserved happiness.  
Especially Geri.

Staring into the eyes of the middle-  
distance, as if you and she share an  
understanding.

Stepping smoothly off his horse  
(someone silently leads it away),

nodding slowly to Mr Bingley.  
Wishing all the people would leave now  
or stop looking at him.

Why had he thrown this party?  
Walking too abruptly from the room.

Sometimes you don't need a great big  
stick, you just need a forum.

I made a rod for my own back and I  
accept that.

How do you tell a girl you really like that  
you've been inside?

They don't like it, not the nice girls, the  
lovelies: ones that make you feel better  
just by being near them, elevated, if you  
know what I mean!?

But seriously, you're with a beautiful girl,  
you treat her right, she's hanging on  
your every word. This could be the start  
of something big...

How you gonna tell her:  
"Darling, I'm not the DPP, I'm a con?!"  
It's just not going to happen and  
anyway, you *are* a barrister for her, you  
are that guy. You're giving her free legal  
advice for Pete's sake, it's real advice,  
good advice. That's what you are, sitting  
there, having a lovely meal together,  
you're a barrister for you too. You need  
to believe it to do it right, this is my  
perfect moment – it's not going to fall  
apart just because I don't have some  
posh certificate. Because my mum and  
dad didn't care enough to set me on the  
right path.

You're not hurting anyone – they want  
to believe.

Isn't all love a con if you think about it?  
A willing suspension of disbelief?

**MR. DARCY:**

“In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”  
(Austen, 1975: 221)

I loved that bit!  
I know, I'm really soppy.  
You're probably the most interesting  
man they've met.  
A man who is what he says,  
a man who lives,  
a dangerous man.  
There's a little mystery about me,  
it's not big-headed if it's the truth!  
So how do you make them believe?  
You just don't give them a moment to  
think otherwise,  
throw them something,  
if it doesn't carry,  
forget it,  
throw them something else.

**KEIR 1:**

Keir is dreaming about sex.  
The libidinal voter – he appeals to them.  
Is that a problem? Crass, to play on that?  
To be dynamic but concerned,  
to take their pulses under pressure.

They search out his wedding ring  
(pity, a daddy too) in conversation.  
He has that thing, erotic capital. And  
prosecution is a tease.

You know what you've got,  
you're the only one who does,  
they're waiting, but unwitting.  
They know you know the law intimately,  
and that is enough for them.  
It is for the jury anyway.

Softer option Labour.  
Parents who cycle with babies  
but feel guilty about it,  
balanced on the back,  
so close to the wheel.  
Hardworking families, I appeal to you.

If you're looking for a reason it's not  
hard

I'd go back to when I was twelve.  
Not much love lost in my family,  
not much.

I mean my mum, she didn't encourage  
me much, didn't stand up for me/  
to me either when I needed it.

So you see, not much choice

It's okay.

I had  
few friends,  
real friends. I think they were jealous.

The girls loved me though, even then!  
They can always spot a bad boy, a true  
romantic.

My stepdad hit me though,  
knocked me, when I was twelve.

**JOURNALIST:**

“Where did you get that fur coat?”

This is all for you.  
There’s no one left  
and now I’ll be  
unwatched forever.  
Write that down –

He lit his Cuban cigar, I offered him a match.  
He smoked it slowly his oversized Omega  
watch slipping back down his skinny wrist  
into the fur after each puff.

“Are you getting all this?  
Do you want me to show  
how it’s done, the con?  
What are you into? Girls? Cars?”

Stubble smile, lips putting forth snaggleteeth.

Shit teeth.

“You’re a car man I can tell.”

Too thin for his padded shoulders.

“Let’s get us a ride.  
People in glass showrooms shouldn’t,  
heh, there’s a joke in there somewhere.  
That one’s free.  
I could have been a journalist.”

I curse my littleness as  
they all look on expecting me.  
“Keir do something!”

Wake me up in a crisis,  
not to get broken glass in my feet,  
a tea towel to stem the bleeding.

My words bubble in my mouth,  
they crane their necks  
to read-repeat them  
flickering on the film, before I even.

All my folly is larger now and fit for  
recollection.

“I am sorry about your result,  
I am so, so sorry.  
The case was solid,  
but you can never tell with juries.”

Lying beside them.  
Breath misting up their skin between  
shoulder blades and not being able to  
bite, to nip only with these teeth, this  
touch, what's realer than that?

That's what I tell them,  
when they asked me why –  
you asked me to hold you.

It made me just so happy to be sat  
beside them, just watching rubbish telly.  
Rubbing feet and ribbing on the passing  
scenes, but them thinking he is so  
clever and this is how a smart guy  
watches telly.

It made them feel good I knew it. Better,  
that I had chosen them, to share with  
this sweet time.

I honestly loved them all.  
They'd tell their friends:  
“Oh I forget the details, but Keir always  
remembers that [politics] kind of stuff.”

They were smart girls. I could tell,  
they wanted the secrets of the Big Man,  
the famous barrister and that I needed  
them – that was the secret and it made  
them love me more.



Perhaps I shouldn't have done it but  
I know I made them happy,  
their dream.

It was for the girls really.

All rise.

## Discussion

As a writer engaged in creating characters, I am fascinated by fraud. As a poststructuralist scholar I am concerned with the conditions for identity fraud within the conceptual framework of the performative self. Successful fraudsters attract a strong cultural fascination, attested by both the popularity of fantastical true crime stories (for example, Jean-Claude Romand, who pretended to be a doctor for eighteen years, and killed his whole family when he was discovered), novels (for example, Patricia Highsmith's (1955) "talented" Tom Ripley) and fictionalised true stories (for example, the story of Frank Abagnale Jr, realised in film by Steven Spielberg as *Catch Me If You Can* (2002)). Bint's story captivated the tabloids, in no small part because he was a serial impersonator of individuals holding high status jobs such as doctors and barristers, and because he seems to have impersonated men with higher social statuses partly in order to seduce professional and well-educated women. In the public reception of cases of imaginative and sustained fraud such as Bint's, there is already something of a slippage between moral condemnation and appreciation of his experiments with truth. This ambiguity provided a pool of affective responses for me to play with in constructing this work. As Lauren Berlant noted, the social inequities of late capitalism yield a "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011) which encourages aspirations which can harm those structurally unable to achieve them. As such, whatever one makes of the harm Bint caused others, there is an upwardly-mobile class-"passing" element of his story which is seductive and aspirational. Helpfully, for my narrative structure, Starmer is also from a working-class background – unusual for such a powerful public figure. I characterised Starmer as a member of the establishment who feels something of an "imposter" with his increased social status, as a way of thinking about identity fraud as part of a spectrum of social performativity. I also used the benefit of hindsight to characterise

Starmer as having (then-unrealised) political aspirations at the time of Bint's impersonation, and that he had worked as a barrister, as a way to comment on the performative aspects of politics and law. This is in addition to the exploration of interpersonal relationships that the more obvious performance of Bint's fraud affords.

In an interview in the *Daily Mail* (Tozer, 2011) Bint likened himself to T.E Lawrence also known as "Lawrence of Arabia," whom he considered a man of unusual agency. As men of decisive action, I bring the figure of Lawrence of Arabia into the text to haunt both Starmer and Bint. When the press tried to understand a motive for his crimes, there was much interest in the confession that Bint might make, and speculation as to whether he was psychologically "abnormal." I aimed to avoid the audience assembling Bint as mentally ill. In my characterisation of Bint, he is largely engaged in producing social explanations for his crimes, which change depending on the audience. Sometimes he adopts a confessional tone, sometimes he rehearses what he thinks people want to hear using the language associated with that form – for the jury he is the victim of childhood neglect or "he just wanted to be loved." Performing for the male journalist, he is "in control" and "living the dream," possessed of enviable criminal knowhow. This is not a special form of criminal duplicity, but an expression of the performativity of social life which Erving Goffman identified in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1990). However, Bint's ability to adapt to the expectations of a social encounter has great potential to be over-coded by his crime and read as a sign of social deviance.

My decision to focus on Bint's mobilisation of common social explanations for crime was encouraged by an anecdote told to me by one of the participants in my research for *Crime Series* (Crockett Thomas, 2020c), whose alias for the purposes of the project was "Hitherto." The anecdote centred on an interview with a journalist who had published an online article on Hitherto's life story which contained multiple damaging errors. He felt that the journalist had assumed that as a vulnerable person living in a hostel he would not have access to the internet, or would not care, or even know about the article or how he was being represented. The misleading article was read by his family, causing serious problems for him, of which the journalist was blithely unaware. When I asked him why he had not pursued it with the journalist, he replied, "what's the point?" Aside from the obvious ethical issues here about careless misrepresentation, I was compelled by what Hitherto seemed to be saying about the way marginalised people might be imagined to be unaware of worldly representations of themselves or people in similar situations. In contrast, during our interview, Hitherto mobilised and played with numerous social narratives on crime and criminality. Following this, in my characterisation, Bint does not provide a final rationale for his crimes. His changeable confessions are not evidence of mental illness, but rather show how he produces explanatory stories in collaboration with what he knows of affective

and moral responses to crime and the psycho-social literature on the causes of criminality that feed into popular culture. Following from my conceptualisation of subjectivity as assemblage, I provide no other narrative voice to step in and reveal the (one) “truth.” All these confessions could be true, or equally some or none of them could be true. Nevertheless, that some explanations are more “stratified” or seem more compelling is something I hope my work materialises and problematises for its audience.

As I have noted, in “You Will Have Your Day in Court,” the story is told through “stream of consciousness” prose from the imagined perspectives of both Starmer and Bint, who throughout the text are both referred to only as “Keir.” I often use the well-established literary technique of “free indirect style”<sup>3</sup> in my work, as it allows me to subtly remind the audience that there are multiple voices and perspectives at play in the work. One of the features of this style of prose is a cinematic cutting and switching combined with an appeal to the audience’s emotional and affective capacities – to engage “affect as immanent evaluation, instead of judgement as transcendental value” (Deleuze, 1989: 141). Although their monologues are intertwined on the page, Starmer and Bint do not interact with each other directly within the narrative. They do occasionally interact with other characters, and when they do so, the language becomes less poetic and takes on more of the aspect of reported speech, situating them in their worlds. There are differences in the kinds of language I have used for Starmer and Bint; for example, Starmer’s text often indulges in rhetorical cliché such as “Believe you, me.” When I was writing the text, I attended one of Starmer’s political hustings to get a sense of his linguistic style, and have used samples from his speech such as “sometimes you don’t need a great big stick, you just need a forum” and “the slippery slope of presumption.” Starmer’s dreams are full of speeches reformulating these phrases, including an absurd extended metaphor built from the “slippery slope” involving the “ski lifts of legal aid.” The character I have created is terrified of saying or doing the wrong thing, and of reputational damage. In comparison, Bint uses more intimate, chatty and sentimental language, and his prose is often cloyingly romantic and emotive. Although we rarely hear the voice of the person he is speaking with, we can hear how he shifts his narrative based on his reading of his interlocutor and his sense of what they want to hear.

In common with poetry, the spacing of text on the page is an indication of how I want the work to be read. When text is blocked together tightly it should be read quickly, and when there are gaps there should be pauses. Each reader should find the pace that feels right to them. I was much inspired by the poem *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (A dice throw at any time never will abolish chance) by Stéphane Mallarmé (2008). In the poem, he dispensed with punctuation and instead used the size of fonts and the space between words to create something like a musical score, leading the

audience into the rhythm in which he wished his composition to be read. The viscosity of Mallarmé's text is striking, and is not an afterthought but rather an integral feature of the piece.

Another literary technique I use to interrupt a seamless narrative flow is quotation and intertextual references. For example, I found some possibly apocryphal references on the internet to Starmer being the inspiration for the character of Mark Darcy in Helen Fielding's (1996) novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Darcy is one of the heroine's romantic interests, with a name and manner modelled on Jane Austen's character Mr Darcy from the novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Austen's Darcy is a man under considerable social pressure to "do the right thing" as a wealthy landowner, and I have incorporated a little of Darcy into Starmer's anxious dreams about his social power. There are also intertextual references to the criminological literature I was reviewing at the time for my thesis. For example, the "left realist" criminology-quoting street sermoniser who entrances Starmer when he leaves the pub was inspired by a comment from the influential criminologist Leon Radzinowicz:

The figure of the criminologist I have left looming in the background. What can I say of him? ... Perhaps he cannot avoid appearing as a bird of ill omen, a kind of academic vulture brooding over the dark figure of crime. It is unlikely that he will be short of employment for a long time to come. (Radzinowicz, 1964: 926)

In the quotation above, Radzinowicz employs the evocative metaphor the "dark figure of crime," a phrase in common usage in criminology and policy discourses since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> It refers to the predicted quantity of unknown (and potentially vast) unreported or unrecorded crime at any specified time. In my sociological crime fiction, Starmer is haunted, as he walks home, by the "dark figure" of crime, who I turn into a figurative presence lurking behind the bins. Starmer's fear is meant to suggest that in his anxiety over his responsibility to define and manage crime, he gives it an existence outside of himself in order to vanquish it.

The characters presented in "You Will Have Your Day in Court" are fragmented and multiple, formed and reformed under varying social pressures and processes. This ties to my poststructuralist critique of "essential" criminality and the nature of crime. The piece assembles crime through the interweaving of the voices of "Keir" and his impersonator and by giving them parity. Using stream of consciousness-style prose here allowed me to bring together many aspects of the crime assemblage, including notions of justice, the role of juries, fraudulence, class and agency. Reflecting on my sociological fiction as a series, I note that despite their differences, the stories and poems in *Crime Series* (Crockett Thomas, 2020c) have something important in common. They are all about characters who are struggling with, or testing the limits of, their power to affect other lives – working through their position and options for

movement. My practice has reaffirmed that attempting to assemble crime is always also to assemble the social; they cannot be prised apart. I hope that this sense of crime as socially entangled and complex is transmitted to the audience.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Following Benjamin Sher's translation of Viktor Shklovskii's work, I am using the neologism *enstrangement* in preference to the more commonly used *estrangement* to reflect the fact that the Russian "ostraniene" is also a neologism. As a translation, "estrangement" domesticates the term by turning it into a recognizable English word. See (Sher, 1990: xviii).

<sup>2</sup> *Crime Series* (Crockett Thomas, 2020c) is open access and available to download at <https://crowdedmouth.wordpress.com/fictionpoetryplays/crimeseries/>. *We Who Are About To...* (2017) is open access and available to download at <https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/media/we-who-are-about-to/>. *Stir* (2020d) is open access and available to download at <https://crowdedmouth.wordpress.com/fictionpoetryplays/stir/>. *We Who Are About To...* and *Stir* were created as part of my role as research associate on the Distant Voices project (2017-2021). Distant Voices aims to explore and practice re/integration after punishment through creative collaborations (primarily songwriting) and action-research. It is a partnership between the universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and the West of Scotland, and the Glasgow-based arts charity Vox Liminis. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ref: ES/P002536/1).

<sup>3</sup> Free-indirect style/discourse: "The presentation of thoughts or speech of fictional characters which seems by various devices to combine the character's sentiments with those of a narrator" (Cuddon, 1999: 330). I often do this simply by collapsing speech marks, and not framing my character's thoughts and actions, i.e. Keir thought: "..."

<sup>4</sup> For a survey of the development and uses of the "dark figure" metaphor, see (de Castelbajac, 2014).