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Something More Than Night

The role of trauma in the creation of the Middle Eastern crime fiction of Matt Rees

Matthew Beynon Rees

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
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I am indebted to my thesis committee: Dr. Rob O'Connor, senior lecturer in Creative Writing and Creative Industries at York St. John, for bringing his genre fiction expertise to bear on my study; and Andrew Pepper, professor in the School of Arts, English and Languages at Queen's University Belfast, whose wide-ranging crime fiction publications are gratefully cited throughout this thesis.

In researching and writing this study, I encountered many new ideas and theoretical frameworks. But I also reached back in time to textual concepts I learned as an undergraduate and found that they remained more firmly embedded than I had expected. I am grateful to Terry Eagleton, Robin Robbins and Alan Ward for having introduced them to me. I see this work as an academic culmination of a study of literature that goes back still further to the inspiring teaching of Colin Bagnall, Allan Cubitt and Andrew Spicer.

As a PhD by Publication, my thesis is grounded in the work of the publishers, editors and agents with whom I published the novels that are the subject of this study, including Deborah Harris, Lisa Erbach Vance, Caspian Dennis, Toby Mundy, Håkon Harket and Thomas Mala. To differing degrees, the novels were based on real events and people, so I owe great thanks to those who were involved in those events or whose characteristics I adapted for my fiction, including: Jamil Hamad, Matthew Kalman, Roger Hercz, Larry Kaplow, Matt McAllester, Kim Ghattas, Nabil Feidy, David Blumenfeld, Dubak Weinstock, Nizar Hassan, Dan Klaidman, Ben Lynfield, Ilene Prusher, Deborah Horan, Aharon Klein, Azmy Keshawi and Mohammad Dawwas.

In Chapter 1, this study refers to my decision to write the first of my crime novels. It came as a result of a conversation with my wife Devorah Blachor, and it's only one of many things for which I'm forever grateful to her. Like Devorah, my children had to deal with some of the effects on me of the trauma that is the subject of this study, though they could not have known it at the time. Despite this, Cai and Mari are the most wonderful people I know, and I'm sure they could both have written a better study than the one I present here.

Abstract

This thesis examines the role of my trauma in the form and content of my crime fiction, the writing of which was informed by my experiences as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East between 1996 and 2015. The study draws on an analysis of my Palestinian mystery novels featuring the amateur sleuth Omar Yussef and my international thrillers centred on US agent Dominic Verrazzano. In these novels, trauma is more than a mere thematic element. Rather it is a force underpinning narrative structure, characterisation, tone and genre.

The thesis builds on Sarah Trott's analysis of Raymond Chandler's war trauma, examining its narrative function from an authorial perspective, rather than as something experienced by fictional characters. The crime fiction genre structures this trauma, feeding it into narrative momentum and plot resolution. The genre's formal progress from disturbance to investigation and thence to closure mirrors psychological processes of confrontation with and attempted mastery of traumatic experience, as theorised by Freud and more recent trauma scholars.

Through first-person reflection and textual analysis, the thesis illustrates how my experience of conflict-related violence informed the evolution of protagonists with differing degrees of agency, from the constrained moral authority of Omar Yussef to the action-orientation of Dominic Verrazzano. This evolution reflects my increasing awareness of my trauma and need to assert control over it in narrative form. The crime fiction form derives energy from the author's personal trauma, while its structure brings stability to the traumatised psyche, allowing the formation of socially and politically critical narratives rooted in Middle Eastern settings.

The thesis contends that crime fiction is as an expressive, therapeutic form. Rather than offering a mirror of traumatic fragmentation, it provides a structured means of engaging with and partially resolving its enduring effects.

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Introduction

I worked as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East, primarily in Israel and Palestine, from 1996 to 2015 for United Kingdom and United States media. During that time, I had a number of conflict-related traumatic experiences. The normative structures of journalism restricted my ability to portray the conflict as I experienced it, so I chose to write about it through a fictional lens. This study analyses the impact on my books of this trauma, which was at first unconscious and gradually more clearly perceived. In parallel, it examines the role of the novels in my progress towards a less traumatised condition.

Crime fiction provided a means of writing about an insoluble conflict that, nonetheless, draws the narrative to a conclusion in which the detective/hero resolves some aspect of the conflict and punishes the villain. This is true of both main sub-genres of crime fiction in which I have written: mysteries, in which a puzzle has to be solved; and thrillers, in which a crime must be solved or prevented in a tight timeframe.¹ My novels about US agent Dominic Verrazzano would be categorised by Franks as thrillers, while the novels about the Palestinian detective Omar Yussef would be mysteries. (That Verrazzano is an American agent, rather than of British nationality like me, is linked to the greater control over the narrative/trauma that I sought in those novels, which I shall examine in Chapter 2, the United States being

¹ Franks, Rachel, "May I suggest murder? An overview of crime fiction for readers' advisory services staff." *The Australian Library Journal*, 60:2, (2011) 133-143.

militarily more powerful than the United Kingdom and more central to the “War on Terror” in which Verrazzano first participates.) The other novel that I will consider here, *The Ambassador* (2015), set in Berlin in 1938, illustrates the blending of crime fiction with other genres, in that it would be classified as an alternative-history thriller, because its main character is the Israeli ambassador to Nazi Germany, Dan Lavi, in a plot based around the fact that Britain came close to establishing Jewish and Palestinian states in Mandatory Palestine a decade before the eventual establishment of Israel. That alternative-history context, however, is processed through the thriller format, in which Lavi faces the unfolding catastrophe of the Holocaust, is forced to act to save Jews, his wife and his new country, while under the constant and growing threat of the Nazi regime. In the case of genre blending, I would argue that crime fiction tends always to provide the structural form of the narrative, while the addition of components of other genres contributes more towards high-concept elements in the “What if” that provides the initial impetus for the narrative.

Writing within the crime genre, I discovered that my experiences of trauma shaped the narrative, the character of the detective/hero, and the language/tone of the story. In fact, my traumatic experiences underpin the narrative at every stage and every level, interacting with the crime fiction genre to give it a crucial energy. The implication of much critical writing is that better authors violate the perceived limitations or rules of genre fiction. I will contend that the tropes of the genre are necessary to contain, shape and direct the effects of my trauma in narrative form. While some of the critics I will cite suggest that genre is in a process of being constantly dissolved by better writing (even as it consumes lesser writers), I argue that it's a vital resource for a good writer, provided the genre format interacts with an

emotional underpinning to drive the novel beyond the trite tropes that give genre a bad reputation. In this study, I conduct an analysis of my novels and examine my experiences in the Middle East, including traumatic experiences and other events that contributed to the production of the novels. I build upon Sarah Trott's analysis of the crime fiction of Raymond Chandler, whose World War I trauma shaped his detective/hero Philip Marlowe². Through this first-person perspective, I analyse my own work in the context of the experience of trauma in contemporary conflicts in the Middle East, which is largely unexamined in crime fiction genre studies. I draw a clear comparison between my Middle Eastern fiction and the tradition of hardboiled crime, in the portrayal of a corrupt and anarchic setting and the traumatised response of the hero forced to contend with it. As Chandler wrote of Los Angeles, "The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night."³ This description is absolutely applicable to Damascus, Bethlehem, Gaza and Beirut during the last three decades, when I spent so much time there. I lived throughout the period in question in Jerusalem, so it could not be said that I travelled to dangerous places where I was exposed to traumatic experiences and then returned to a calm location to decompress. My environment for two decades was one of constant high stress, and this thesis will include examples of my own experiences in relation to trauma. I did not, however, place a journalist character at the centre of my novels. Just as Chandler used a Los Angeles detective to channel the trauma triggered by his service as a Canadian officer in Europe in World War I, so I connected my trauma to protagonists who would be expected to face trauma to a greater degree than a journalist and, thus, would enable me better

² Trott, Sarah. *The Detective as Veteran: The trauma of war in the work of Raymond Chandler*. Swansea University, 2010. <http://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa42370>

³ Chandler, Raymond. *The Smell of Fear*. Book Club Associates, 1983. Quoted in Trott, op. cit., p. 26

to convey the depth of my responses. Many readers might be unaware that a journalist may experience trauma, and in any case the often poor public reputation of journalists might be less likely to prompt the sympathetic response I wanted to evoke in my readers.⁴ As I will lay out in Chapter 3, I also did not identify closely with the other journalists around me and, further, my trauma essentially resituated me in the Middle East, overcoming my status as a foreigner by the force exerted upon me by my local experiences—a point upon which I expand in Chapter 4.

My focus is on the role of Dominic Verrazzano, the hero of my ICE agent thrillers (*The Damascus Threat* and *China Strike*), and Omar Yussef, the sleuth in my Palestinian mystery novels (*The Bethlehem Murders*, *The Saladin Murders*, *The Samaritan's Secret*, and *The Fourth Assassin*). Both characters reflect authorial choices dictated consciously or subconsciously by my experiences in conflict situations. Omar Yussef is a protagonist without most of the attributes typically bestowed upon a hero in the crime fiction genre. He is relatively old and in poor physical condition, but he is morally superior to those he encounters, like the typical hardboiled detective who maintains a deep moral code beneath a cynical exterior. Yussef is prone to outbursts of temper and responds to violent situations with a heightened adrenaline response, similar to my reactions at the time during which I wrote the books, as a result of my exposure to traumatic events. He is able to

⁴ There is an increasing number of journalists willing to write about their traumatic experiences. Dean Yates, an Australian war correspondent, wrote about his mental health problems and recovery in *Line in the Sand* (Macmillan, 2023). A range of journalists wrote essays on their traumatic experiences from Northern Ireland to Bangladesh and COVID-19 hospitals in *Breaking: Trauma in the Newsroom* (Lindsay, Chris and O'Neill, Leona, editors, Maverick House, 2022), while Matthew McAllester's *Bittersweet: Lessons from my Mother's Kitchen* (Bloomsbury, 2011) is a memoir by a correspondent who finally confronted his own war trauma after the death of his mentally ill mother. I would suggest that this literature is largely unknown, however, to most crime fiction readers.

resolve the mysteries in these books due to his moral superiority, rather than by using violence, crime scene forensics, or any other typical crime fiction tropes.⁵

However, Omar Yussef's impact is limited to relatively discrete murder/corruption plots. As my career developed and my understanding of the impact of trauma on my life increased, I created Verrazzano who, by contrast, has a greater power and potentially a broader impact. The expansion of my hero's impact in these later novels reflects my need to assert control over the world around me—a need evidently unfulfilled by the earlier novels and increased by my understanding of the depth of my trauma. Powerlessness is a typical psychological symptom of trauma and the change in my central character between these two series of novels reflects recognition of my need to position myself as having a greater degree of agency over my trauma. Omar Yussef is a refugee who lives in a fragile environment that is not even recognised as a state; Verrazzano is a citizen of the world's most powerful country. Verrazzano's apparent indestructibility and omniscience in my two thrillers allows him to assert control over narratives that have much larger geopolitical implications than the earlier plots of the Yussef novels, which is one of the prime reasons for my move into thrillers, after initially writing mysteries.⁶ Powerlessness

⁵ Tzvetan Todorov's typology of detective fiction specifies three types of crime fiction: "whodunnits", "thrillers" and "suspense novels". Written in 1977, this is now somewhat reductive, given the genre-blending developments of the decades since Todorov wrote, with the advent of historical mysteries, supernatural thrillers, and many more variations. However, his typology illustrates that there are differing narrative structures and characteristic attributes of the sub-genres within the larger crime fiction genre. Each of these sub-genres would conform, of course, to Todorov's general description of crime fiction as the interplay between the story of a crime and the story of its investigation. Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Typology of Detective Fiction", in *The Poetics of Prose*. Trans. Richard Howard. Basil Blackwell, 1977. pp. 42–52.

⁶ Much crime fiction has a local focus, Pepper and Schmid write, while "thriller narratives have always concerned themselves, instead, with international conspiracies, global operations of business and capital, national and international security, global locales, and tangled institutional, political, religious, and ethnic relations." Pepper, Andrew and Schmid, David, "Introduction", in *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction: A World of Crime*, edited by Pepper, Andrew and Schmid, David. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. p.17

leads to anger in a trauma context⁷, and here the role of narrative structure is intrinsic to the characterisation of the protagonists of my novels. Omar Yussef is prone to outbursts of anger because the mystery sub-genre does not allow him to act. He must think, instead. Verrazzano is cooler, because he *must* act in every chapter, as the protagonist of a thriller. Despite what Gary K. Wolfe calls the “chronic instabilities”⁸ of genre as interpreted by much recent academic work on the topic, my novels derive structure and stability from their genre elements, which are revived by the injection of energy and reality that comes through genre’s encounter with my traumatic experiences. Authors seeking to escape the disdain aimed at genre writing by breaking genre boundaries may have made the crime fiction genre unstable and, certainly, traumatic events made *me* unstable; paradoxically the combination of the two leads to a narrative construct of considerable stability.⁹

My experience of disillusionment with journalism combines with my trauma to lead me to write in a crime fiction structure in which the hero finds redemption. The crime fiction genre counters disillusion, even as it enacts it, because the detective/hero

⁷ Chemtob, C.M., Novaco, R.W., Hamada, R.S., Gross, D.M., and Smith, G. (1997). “Anger regulation deficits in combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder”. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 10(1), pp. 17-35.

⁸ Wolfe, Gary K. *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature*. Wesleyan University Press. 2011. p.7. Wolfe’s focus is on science-fiction writers, the best of whom seem “out to explode the notion of genre altogether.” He writes: “To some extent, these problems affect all genres: The work of John Le Carré (and before him of Graham Greene) has never quite nestled comfortably within the conventions of the espionage thriller, nor have those of P.D. James or Scott Turow fit easily into the mystery genre. In a few cases, such as that of Raymond Chandler and the hardboiled novel, the very works that helped to define the genre far surpassed what would eventually become the terms and conventions of that genre” (p. 58). I would suggest, however, that this argument does somewhat perpetuate the disdainful conception many critics have of genre fiction. Rather, I would say that genre writers fall into two categories: the poorer ones who essentially reproduce previous genre novels; and better writers who seek to examine new ideas and seem therefore to violate the perceived rules of the genre, whereas in fact the genre structure is key to their ability to confront these new ideas and that they turn to the genre in order to do so.

⁹ In writing about the novels of Shari S. Tepper, which violate many of the genre constructs of fantasy and science fiction, Wolfe asserts that in “post-genre writing...the author and not the genre is in control of the material” (p. 55). The implication is that authorial control makes for a superior novel than one in which genre leads the author. I would argue that neither genre nor the author is entirely in control, especially when both are subject to the impact of the author’s trauma, yet both are clearly fundamental to the narrative.

faces down a corrupt environment and overcomes it. As Maysaa Husam Jaber writes: "Crime fiction deals with mysteries and the detective's efforts to solve crimes, but it is also concerned with closure and making peace with traumatic experiences."¹⁰ I compare the violence and anarchy of Damascus and Beirut to Chandler's Los Angeles and draw on Trott's analysis of how this environment leads to a hardboiled style. After all, when I first started to write my Palestinian crime fiction, I intended to mimic the naïve, cosy style of Alexander McCall Smith's *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, whose deliberate simplicity and quiet humour I thought might infuse my own writing with an antidote for my underlying feelings of disturbance due to the violence around me. Instead, as I started to write, I found the narrative and tone of my first Palestinian crime novel irresistibly descending into what the Publisher's Weekly reviewer told me in a conversation after her review appeared was "the darkest mystery I have ever read."¹¹ The hard boiled style, after all, represents a toughness in response to emotions triggered by violence that obviates a comic or naïve style such as that of McCall Smith. In contrast to this response to McCall Smith, Chandler's work unconsciously sparked elements of my novel even at the level of individual sentences or phrases, in a process I considered quite mystical until Trott's account of Chandler's trauma highlighted for me that I was responding to a creative representation in his text that had been born of a traumatic

¹⁰ Jaber, Maysaa Husam. "The 'Unclaimed Experience': Trauma and Crime Fiction", Arab World English Journal Proceedings of KUST, Iraq Conference 2022. pp.114-125, <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/KUST.9>, p 120

¹¹ Trott (op. cit.) examines the relative darkness of different periods of crime writing in her examination of the post-Vietnam period in her Chandler study. The writers of that period were significantly darker than most of their predecessors. Certainly, the role of trauma in stories either by Vietnam veterans or in which veterans play a leading role as characters reflects the anger and resentment of a generation of American men forced to undergo traumatic experiences for which they were subsequently shunned. The resolution that the crime format provides can be seen, for example, in David Morrell's thriller *First Blood*, in which Rambo, a Special Forces veteran in the grip of PTSD, fights his way to his own Valhalla and earns the respect of his pursuer as the two of them die.

experience and which, in turn, caused a spark of creativity in me that was charged by my own trauma.

This leads me to an examination of the capability of the crime genre to act at once as a “norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text”¹² and, at the same time, to accommodate developments that force the genre into territory not previously encountered. Here I assert that traumatic experiences are the narrative catalysts and provide the momentum of the novels right to the denouement. I base this assertion in part on the cathartic component of trauma laid out by Freud.

Repetitive traumatic dreams puzzled Freud, because, as Cathy Caruth writes, they represented the return of a literal event, rather than carrying an unconscious meaning.¹³ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud wrote that traumatic dreams are attempts to “master the stimulus retrospectively.”¹⁴ Andrew Barnaby writes that the author’s grappling with “a past that is not yet assimilated into an unfolding life narrative” is comparable to the goal of psychoanalysis.¹⁵ Freud’s traumatic dreams carry no unconscious meaning, but they occur unconsciously; the trauma sufferer certainly does not *choose* to experience them. In much the same way, I found my narratives ineluctably founded upon and driven by trauma to an extent of which I was unaware.

¹² Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975. p. 136

¹³ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p 59

¹⁴ Quoted in Caruth, op. cit., p 63

¹⁵ Barnaby, Andrew. “The Psychoanalytic Origins of Literary Trauma Studies”, in *Trauma and literature*. Ed. Kurtz, J. Roger. Cambridge University Press, 2018. p. 33

Chapter 1: How I turned to crime

Trauma defines the arc of my publications from my first book of nonfiction in 2004 to my latest thriller a decade and a half later, because they all grew out of my experiences as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East, mostly in Israel and Palestine, over twenty years. And it happened without my really being aware of it, which is how much of the content of my writing happens, at least in so far as it is drawn from the unconscious interpolation of traumatic experiences. Bargh and Morsella write that “unconscious” is traditionally taken to mean “subliminal”.¹⁶ However, they state that more recent research shows that the actions of the unconscious mind simply precede the actions of consciousness. In other words, action precedes reflection and is, thus, the foundational element in the establishment of consciousness. Writing can be seen as what Bargh and Morsella call an “automaticity effect” by which mental processes of judgement or behaviour are “triggered and then operate in the absence of conscious intent and guidance.”¹⁷ Without the unconscious stimuli, there would be no conscious action, no conscious analysis of a narrative developed perhaps in large part through unconscious impulses. With the opportunity in this reflective piece to look back over the period in which I experienced these traumatic events, I am able to analyse and understand their full role in providing material for my novels and, indeed, the unconscious

¹⁶ Bargh, John A. and Morsella, Ezequiel. “The Unconscious Mind”, in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* Vol. 3, No. 1, [From Philosophical Thinking to Psychological Empiricism, Part I \(Jan. 2008\)](#). pp. 73-79

¹⁷ Bargh and Morsella, op. cit., p 74

emotional responses that are the basis of the written work. These traumatic events underpin the themes and the readings of Middle Eastern and international politics contained within my novels, because that is the context of the books, but they are also inherent in my gravitation towards crime fiction.¹⁸

Academic writing on trauma has mostly focused on its portrayal of characters in a set of crime novels, rather than on the impact of an author's trauma on their choice of genre, character or setting.¹⁹ My thesis here is informed by Sarah Trott's analysis of the role of Raymond Chandler's World War I trauma in his creation of the character of Philip Marlowe and his characterisation of Los Angeles in his series of great hardboiled novels. I take that forward a step by writing from the perspective of the author. How might Trott's analysis have been developed, for example, had she had access to Chandler himself, explaining the traumatic experiences that in reality he rarely spoke of and examining their impact on his creative writing? This thesis is an attempt to parallel that situation.

This entails more than simply paging through my novels, finding the incidents that are based on traumatic events I experienced, and noting them. The impact of trauma is ever-present. It becomes as constant a factor in every facet of my life as, for example, being born in Wales or being a father of two: it does not determine every conscious decision, but it can never be said to have been entirely uninvolved in any

¹⁸ In discussing this and related ideas with well-known crime novelists, I have encountered a fair amount of cynicism. One bestselling UK writer of police procedural novels said rather dismissively that, when he writes, "I do all the typing," as though my position were that my writing channels ghosts. By contrast, I have discussed this idea with a number of actors, who often responded that they carry out a similar operation because of the need to connect the text of the script to the emotion expressed on stage or on camera without any apparent mediation: they are not pretending to be scared or in love or angry, when on stage or screen; to be convincing, they must experience that emotion by drawing on the intersection of the script with their unconscious.

¹⁹ Whitehead, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004; Hamilton, Cynthia S. *Sara Paretsky: Detective fiction as trauma literature*. Manchester University Press, 2015.

given development. Like Marx's idea that "men make history, but they do not make it just as they please," so too trauma is "directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."²⁰ Trauma is generated by an initiating action, just as the structure of a crime fiction novel is born of an inciting event. Trauma inheres in every element of the life of a traumatised person, and the inciting trauma is present throughout the crime novel, even on a page where no one makes direct reference to it. Heta Pyrhönen notes that Freud enjoyed detective fiction, particularly the work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Like Freud, Conan Doyle was trained as a doctor, and both men referred to their texts as "cases". It should hardly be surprising, then, that a text intertwines crime fiction and a mental condition like trauma.²¹ For my novels, trauma is what Frederic Jameson calls "a kind of lateral message about their own process of formation," even while they seem more directly to "speak the language of reference."²² Cynthia Hamilton argues that trauma is central to further investigation of the crime fiction genre in that the disturbance, therapy, and ultimate resolution of traumatic symptoms is mirrored in the structure of the crime novel:

It is tautological to say that detective fiction deals with violent crime, but to suggest that detective fiction is a literature of psychological trauma is to move the discussion into new territory. I would argue that the paradigm offered of the impact, symptoms, and recovery process for those who suffer trauma

²⁰ Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Karl Marx Library*, Vol. 1, edited by Padover, Saul K., McGraw Hill, 1972. pp. 245–246.

²¹ Pyrhönen, Heta, "Psychoanalysis", in Eds. Allan, Janice, Gulddal, Jesper, King, Stewart and Pepper, Andrew. *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Routledge, 2020. p. 129.

²² Jameson, Frederic. *The Prison-House of Language: a critical account of structuralism and Russian formalism*. Princeton University Press, 1972. p. 89.

provides a valuable tool in understanding the textual dynamics of detective fiction; it is a paradigm that also helps to explain the appeal of the genre.²³

Rather than simply mirroring the process of traumatising and treatment, trauma is, in my novels, the driving factor, a constant presence, and the final cathartic destination. As it appears in my novels, trauma can be an undeniable element—when Dominic Verrazzano, the US agent who is the protagonist of my thrillers *The Damascus Threat* and *China Strike*, recounts his breakdown after he assassinated an innocent woman in front of her child in Beirut—or a sensory atmosphere that impinges upon the perception of an entire environment, in this case the city of Damascus at night:

The car pulled away. Verrazzano watched it round the corner and listened to its engine noise meld with the patter of gunfire from the suburbs. The heart of the city was fearful and empty around him. The moon glimmered on the surface of the Barada. Down in its culvert, the river twisted between banks of festering trash.²⁴

Throughout my novels, there is an aura of silent menace. This is at once an element common in hardboiled fiction and a result of the trauma I experienced in the places where the novels largely unfold, leaving their malicious traces in every situation. It is also a constant element in the behaviours displayed by characters with conflict

²³ Hamilton, [op cit.](#), p. 13

²⁴ *The Damascus Threat*, p. 202

experience, even when it is not overt, and in observations written in their point of view. In *China Strike*, Verrazzano observes that a Federal Bureau of Investigations agent is likely to pick up on unspoken aggression between him and a former Special Forces colleague that is rooted in their shared conflict experiences, because the tension between them crackles “with the electricity of secret shame”.²⁵ The introduction of a central role for trauma in both the plot of my novels and the choice of the crime fiction genre was not a conscious decision, but a reflection perhaps of “man’s universal capacity not only to formulate structures, but also to submit his own nature to the demands of their structuring,”²⁶ as Terence Hawks puts it in describing Giambattista Vico’s notion of “poetic wisdom”. When I first decided to write fiction that used my reporting on the Israelis and Palestinians as its basis, I was not a particularly big reader of crime fiction. However, my nonfiction book *Cain’s Field: Faith, Fratricide, and Fear in the Middle East* (Free Press, 2004) represented a step from journalism towards the crime genre. The creative nonfiction techniques I employed in *Cain’s Field* were intended to allow me to express an understanding of the conflict that went beyond the limiting normative structures of Western journalism and to write in a more expressive and creative style. The incorporation of my experiences of violence into a narrative format that is based around an inciting violent event was the natural next step.²⁷

²⁵ *China Strike*, p. 24

²⁶ Hawks, Terence. *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen, 1977. p. 15.

²⁷ Here is where a modern assessment of the role of genre is important. Gulddal and King call genre more of a “format” for the writing, rather than a strict set of rules, in which there is a “tension between the conventionality and innovation inherent in crime fiction”. (Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King, “Genre”, in Allan, Gulddal, King, and Pepper, op. cit., pp. 13-14). Gulddal and King note that early definitions of crime fiction tended to treat it as a puzzle, rather than a literary product, with the text setting a problem and then solving it. “It might be a more promising move,” they write, “to resist the definitional desire altogether and explore instead how the crime genre is *used* by various agents in the literary field.” (p. 20) This perspective allows me to examine the role crime fiction plays in providing a therapeutic or cathartic perspective on my trauma, and the role my trauma plays in driving the narrative of my crime fiction.

Journalistic restrictions were quite rigid at Time magazine, where I worked as Jerusalem bureau chief from 2000 to 2005, the years of the second Palestinian intifada. They consisted of certain writing tropes—any time I wrote about what Palestinians thought, I had to follow it with a paragraph that began “To be sure, Israelis say...”, and vice versa—and a geopolitical perspective that tracked statements by governments and expectations of behavioural norms by parties to the conflict that were in contrast to the reality I observed on the ground. (Six months into the intifada, when thousands were already dead, my editor in New York responded to a story I filed about suicide bombings and shootings by asking, “What does this mean for the peace process?” The answer, of course, was that there was no longer a peace process, although US diplomats were yet to concede this publicly.) Just as Roland Barthes wrote in *Mythologies* about the innocent presentation of the “real world” in the media as a cloak for the reinforcement of a bourgeois worldview,²⁸ so I found that the tropes of US journalism were invested in a hopeful Middle Eastern stasis that could not possibly survive examination on the ground. Within those strictures, my journalistic response was to write stories that focused on the internal battles of Israeli and Palestinian societies, which were typically ignored or seen as peripheral to the main “peace process” coverage. Only in re-examining the stories of the people featured in *Cain’s Field* for this project did I come to see the extent to which I was responding as a storyteller to the traumatic experiences of those I featured as the main “characters” of each chapter, rather than to the purported journalistic theme of the book. I wrote about a Hamas leader betrayed and hunted by the Palestinian authority, an Israeli settler who lost his son to terrorism and resented his demonisation by Israeli leftists, Holocaust survivors whose post-traumatic stress

²⁸ Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*, Editions du Seuil, 1957.

disorder had been ignored for decades, survivors of an Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip town of Rafah. In writing about these traumatised individuals, I developed an idea in the book that I called “total psychosis”. I considered the notion that, as in *The Bible’s* Book of Genesis, humanity started its existence without trauma, but centuries of viciousness piled upon each other to the extent that our societies are built around a single traumatised consciousness; those who experience individual trauma are subject not only to the suffering engendered by that single event, but are forced to confront the realisation of all the suffering that has gone before.²⁹ I know that trauma is part of why I write crime fiction; perhaps total psychosis is why so many people read the genre.³⁰ Certainly, total psychosis was a concept that helped me to understand my own susceptibility and to empathise with the people I wrote about.

²⁹ El-Khalil et al write that “the detrimental effects of trauma can be passed down from one generation of survivors to their children and grandchildren through a phenomenon known as intergenerational trauma.” (El-Khalil, Christina, Tudor, Denisa Calculidis, and Nedelcea, Catalin. “Impact of Intergenerational Trauma on Second-Generation Descendants: A Systematic Review.” *BMC Psychology*, vol. 13, 2025, Article 668. Springer Nature, <https://bmcp psychology.biomedcentral.com/counter/pdf/10.1186/s40359-025-03012-4.pdf>. p. 2) This is, according to research on the descendants of Holocaust victims, possibly a result of lower levels of cortisol, the hormone that regulates stress response. El-Khalil et al state that, “When a group experiences traumatic events, such as war, genocide, or displacement, the impact can be felt across generations. Collective trauma shapes how people see themselves, relate to others, and how society functions. Unlike individual trauma, collective trauma is distinguished by its broader social scope, its potential to influence cultural values and norms, and the interconnectedness of individual identities within the collective.” For example, Brave Heart and DeBruyn assert that “historical unresolved grief” from the decimation of Native Americans in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries is at the root of the high rates of suicide, alcoholism, homicide and child abuse in their communities today. Trauma becomes “an organisation of the self” that is transferred along with culture through the generations. (Brave Heart, Maria Yellow Horse, and DeBruyn, Lemyra M. “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief.” *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1998, pp. 56–78. Colorado School of Public Health, https://coloradosph.cuanschutz.edu/docs/librariesprovider205/journal_files/vol8/8_2_1998_60_yellowhorsebraveheart.pdf?sfvrsn=e65fe2b9_2. p. 60)

³⁰ This concept provides a more profound understanding of the appeal of crime fiction than that most common in non-academic approaches to the genre—and some academic assessments, typified by Dennis Porter’s description of the crime novel as a “machine for producing thrills” (Porter, Dennis. *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, Yale University Press, 1981. p. 108), in which readers’ physiological responses to a suspenseful narrative, such as sweating palms, are paralleled to a roller-coaster ride. However, Porter touches upon something deeper, when he notes that *The Big Sleep* provides more than sweating palms, because of the narrative’s examination of the protagonist’s emotional state. In psychological terms, the thrill of the roller coaster is a compulsive return to the experienced trauma, and it is brought to the reader not by a fairground structure but by the genre format.

Their stories formed the basis of sections of *Cain's Field* and were central to the overt thesis of the book that no amount of negotiations—overseen by the US and backed by huge international financial donations—would succeed until both sides worked to heal their internal divisions: individual trauma is a microcosm of group trauma, which is in turn reflected in trauma experienced by entire nations during a conflict. The Palestinian Authority would have to reconcile with Hamas; secular Israelis in Tel Aviv would have to come to an understanding with religious Jews building settlements in the West Bank; Yasser Arafat's old guard would have to share more power with the young leaders who had remained in the refugee camps while they were in exile in Tunis; Jews whose parents immigrated to Israel from Europe needed to give better treatment to those who had come from Arab countries; and so on. Each of these divisions and any number of others was enough to destroy a potential peace.

These stories often necessitated reporting on the Palestinian underworld. Under a corrupt regime and with Israeli restrictions on trade, Palestinians often resorted to gangster activity. By combining gang activity with minor acts of “resistance” against Israel, any group of armed men made itself unassailable: for any Palestinian to criticise the gunmen's actions was to label themselves a collaborator. The tribal and clan structure of Palestinian society facilitated this dynamic. In writing this book, I was trying to portray a history of that period of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that had not been revealed in normative journalism because it was too dirty and complicated, despite being true. That I developed this further through crime fiction, with its frequent and necessary focus on corruption and gangsters, should perhaps not be a

surprise to readers of James Ellroy's Underworld USA series or Jean-Claude Izzo's Marseilles Trilogy.³¹

I considered following up *Cain's Field* with a nonfiction book about Jews in Prague during World War II. I went so far as to interview a number of survivors linked to a group of scholars who had been forced by the Nazis to create a "Museum of the Extinct Race" in Prague, to preserve for future generations artefacts that, as the Nazis saw it, would illustrate the degeneracy of the Jews that had made their extermination necessary. This collection eventually became the basis for the current, popular Jewish Museum in Prague. It was undoubtedly a good story that no one had told, except partially and in academic texts, mostly in German³². However, the research for this projected book left me depressed, with no energy to pursue the project. Later, I concluded that the format of the nonfiction book provided no final, positive resolution and, furthermore, no means of resolving the points at which the narrative touched on my own experience of trauma. Almost all the scholars in Prague, after all, died either in a camp or on one of the death marches from those camps. (This is certainly not to say that my experiences are even remotely comparable to those of Holocaust victims; only that they make me susceptible to being drawn into another's trauma.) This episode highlights the formal characteristics

³¹ This signals a clear path from this first nonfiction work to my Verrazzano thrillers, which carry within them—both thematically and formally—an awareness of the dirty realities that globalisation and capitalism seek to hide. As Paul Copley writes, "The burden of knowing what goes into the construction of 'freedom' in the globalized world is the spy thriller's preoccupation." (Copley, Paul. "Geopolitical Reality: The Thriller, Global Power, and the Logic of Revelation", in Eds. Pepper, Andrew and Schmid, David. *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction: A World of Crime*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. p. 204.)

³² The theory of the manipulation of memory by the Nazi perpetrators and its mediation by Jewish scholars seeking to preserve their culture even as they recognised the likelihood of their personal destruction is best delineated in Dirk Rupnow's *Täter, Gedächtnis, Opfer: Das „Jüdische Zentralmuseum“ in Prag 1942–1945*. (Picus Verlag, 2000). Rupnow's book is not translated into English, though he has published articles in English. (For example, "From Final Depository to Memorial: The History and Significance of the Jewish Museum in Prague." *European Judaism* 37, no. 1 (2004), pp. 142–159.)

of crime fiction that do, in contrast even to a creative form of nonfiction, provide a means of creative therapy that I shall detail later.

The creative nonfiction element of *Cain's Field* had been very fulfilling to me. I dropped the Prague project and, instead, decided to take some of the events portrayed in *Cain's Field* and to use them as the basis for a novel.

But what kind of novel should I write?

In 2005, Alexander McCall Smith was experiencing great success with his *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series of cosy crime fiction novels set in Botswana. McCall Smith's simple style and humorous characterisation took the undoubtedly difficult conditions of life in Botswana (where the murder rate is four times higher than that of the United Kingdom³³, while gross domestic profit is only one seventh that of the UK³⁴) and made them seem mild and even rather delightful. I thought that perhaps a cosy crime novel set in Palestine might accomplish the same reversal, which would be appealing to readers, as well as a palliative to my stressful associations with the location and events. Writing such a book would not play on my trauma in the same way as the Prague story seemed to have done. That is how I started to write *The Bethlehem Murders*, the first of my Palestinian mysteries (which was published a few months earlier in the US than in the UK under the title *The Collaborator of Bethlehem*). Little did I know that I was entering upon a genre that, even in its least threatening manifestations, mirrors the process of traumatising:

³³ <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/bwa/botswana/murder-homicide-rate>, visited 29/10/2025;

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024>, visited 29/10/2025

³⁴ <https://tradingeconomics.com/botswana/gdp-per-capita>, visited 29/10/2025;
<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/GBR>, visited 29/10/2025

The detective—confronted with inexplicable facts, lapses of memory, and strategic evasions—must construct a narrative that offers reassurance that the rupture in experience precipitated by inexplicable violence is capable of coherent narrative expression; that such experience can be made safe. This is of paramount importance for, as Cathy Caruth notes, the threat posed by trauma is directly related to the inability of those who experience it to fully see or comprehend the event experienced.³⁵

I found out the moment I started to write.

³⁵ Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p 19.

Chapter 2: Crime fiction in an Arab setting

No writer, Arab or otherwise, had written a crime novel set in the Palestinian territories, when I started to write *The Bethlehem Murders*. The history of crime fiction in Arab and other Middle Eastern countries is thin, when examined through a contemporary definition of the genre, though there is a tradition of stories involving bandits that are sometimes examined by academics in the context of the crime tradition.³⁶ Genre fiction in general, including romance or science fiction, is largely ignored in the Arab literary tradition, because of the dominance of social realism.³⁷ This absence of detective fiction is generally ascribed to the mistrust of authority and the corruption of security forces in the Arab world. Smolin notes that even in the mediaeval stories of the Arabian Nights, no one would turn to the police for help, even if they were of high social status.³⁸

The success of crime fiction in the West—and in particular its burgeoning since the 1970s—has drawn some Arab authors into the genre, however. In an interview, Algerian crime novelist Yasmina Khadra says that “Arabs are great poets. They

³⁶ Alessandro Buontempo writes, “Thieves in classical Arabic literature form an autonomous and self-conscious literary category which displays important similarities with other [literary] anecdotal categories, such as those of uninvited guests (*tufaylīs*), or clever madmen (*‘uqalā’ maḡānīn*)”. But, he notes, detective novels are otherwise almost completely absent from Arabic literature. Buontempo, Alessandro: “Vertigo and The Dove’s Necklace as Romans Noirs: A Hypothesis on Arabic Crime Fiction”, in Sagaster, Börte, Strohmeier, Martin, Guth, Stephan (editors) *Crime Fiction in and around the Eastern Mediterranean*, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016. p. 9.

³⁷ Smolin, Jonathan. “Lies and Deceptions: Saint Janjah, Social Critique, and the New Arabic Police Novel”, in Sagaster, Strohmeier, Guth (editors), op. cit. p. 45.

³⁸ Smolin, Jonathan. “Arab Crime Fiction”, in Eds. Gulddal, Jesper, King, Stewart, Rolls, Alistair, *The Cambridge Companion to World Crime Fiction*, Cambridge University Press. p. 161. Smolin cites the story of *The Porter and the Three Ladies*, in which the Abbasid vizier refers to the police as corrupt and violent, even though he is right in front of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, whose servants they are.

prefer to engage in ambitious, uncompromising literature. Generally speaking, the detective novel doesn't fit their conception of literature. However, given the extraordinary worldwide appeal of detective novels today, thanks in particular to some great writers, certain Arab authors are reconsidering their position."³⁹ Some of these writers have responded to situations of extreme violence by framing their stories as crime fiction, with particular success in some post-colonial situations, responding perhaps as I did to the violent incident that is usually necessary at the start of a crime fiction narrative. Yasmina Khadra's Commissaire Llob works against the backdrop of Algeria's particularly murderous civil war of the late 1990s, though the circumstances lead him to idealise the colonial period for its relative stability.⁴⁰ Similarly, Driss Chraïbi's Inspector Ali harks back to the mediaeval period when Morocco was a centre of learning and more advanced in science and medicine than Europe. Perhaps this is the natural result of fiction written by Arab intellectuals witnessing the decline of their nations. In *Le Passé simple*, Chraïbi writes: "The hero's name is Driss Ferdi. Maybe it's me. In any case, his despair is mine."⁴¹ By contrast, my novels look towards the future of the Middle East. My Palestinian detective Omar Yussef is a history teacher, who concludes that the role of the detective is to protect the future from a repeat of today's mistakes (Detection, he thinks, is "about protecting the future from the people who committed evil and would

³⁹ In the interview, Khadra answers the question, why is the Arab detective novel rarely seen? "Les Arabes sont de grands poètes. Ils préfèrent s'engager dans une littérature ambitieuse, pure et dure. D'une façon générale, le roman policier ne sied pas à leur conception de la littérature. Néanmoins, face à l'extraordinaire audience du roman policier aujourd'hui dans le monde, notamment grâce à d'immenses écrivains, certains auteurs arabes sont en train de reconsidérer leur position." Quoted by Guardi, Jolanda, "Le roman policier algérien en langue arabe", in Eds. Ghosn, Katia and Tadié Benoît, *Le récit criminel arabe / Arabic Crime Fiction*, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021. p. 113. The translation in the text is mine.

⁴⁰ Celestin, Roger Celestin. "Post-Colonial Slumming Angels: Driss Chraïbi's Inspector Ali and Yasmina Khadra's Commissaire Llob," in Gulddal, King and Rolls, *op cit.*, p. 58.

⁴¹ Chraïbi, Driss. *Le Passé simple*, Denoël, 1979. p. 2 (first edition: 1954.)

do so again.”⁴²), which also happens to be a good rationale for the study of historical knowledge and points to an ameliorative social role for the detective similar to that of a teacher. My US agent character, Dominic Verrazzano, acknowledges that “the thing about the past...is that it’s all ahead of you.”⁴³ As Todorov says, each crime novel is made up of two stories—that of the crime and of the investigation of the crime.⁴⁴ Something always lies in the past, shaping the present narrative and defining the future towards which the novel is driven. My novels display a drive towards resolution, rather than an idealisation of the past, a search for a solution over any dwelling on the problem: this is fitting to both the structure of the crime novel and the treatment of traumatic symptoms. In the Middle Eastern context, the confluence of crime novel and trauma makes the affliction a psychological or medical one that can be resolved in my novels, rather than a seemingly unameliorable backdrop, like the region’s politics, against which the individual action of author or fictional detective seems powerless. It is for this reason that the role of the detective or the agent is quite frequently explained across my books through the point of view of the protagonist or those close to them, considering their own role in the narrative in moments of metatextual contemplation. In each case, the detective or agent can be substituted for the writer grappling with trauma and seeking to play it out in a fictional format. In *The Bethlehem Murders*, Omar Yussef’s friend Khamis Zeydan, the Bethlehem police chief, lays out the role of the detective:

⁴² *The Bethlehem Murders*, p. 264

⁴³ *The Damascus Threat*, p. 295

⁴⁴ Todorov, op. cit. pp. 42–52.

“A detective is a little like a psychiatrist. When you treat a mental illness, you had better know the workings of your own mind, or you risk becoming sicker than your patients. The disease can spread from one mind to another. That’s how it is for a policeman. To catch a villain, you have to think like a villain, and when you think like a villain, perhaps you already are a villain.”⁴⁵

Omar Yussef also sees the act of detection as a restorative, positive action to counter the affliction of crime that is, at the same time, the structural framework for the reaching of a healthy conclusion: “He wondered when it would be that Allah would restore life to him. Hell, he would have to do it for himself, and the case of George Saba would be his vehicle.”⁴⁶ This decisive step into the dynamic of the narrative is structurally key to the crime genre, in which typically the detective/hero must initially doubt their ability to resolve the crime or resist involvement, and it brings with it a power that overwhelms the desire of the trauma victim to avoid confronting their trauma. Soon after Omar Yussef starts to investigate, he notes that the act is bringing him a degree of stability: “I’m not a victim, Omar Yussef thought. He held his hand out before him and laughed. For the first time in years, it wasn’t shaking.”⁴⁷

My novels portray Arabs and the Arab world as recapturing the agency that is denied them in narratives—both Western and regional—of their victimhood. In this respect, my choice of the crime genre is significant. Whereas Chraïbi and Khadra hark back to an earlier time when the Arab world was not in decay, my novels portray Arab

⁴⁵ *The Bethlehem Murders*, p61

⁴⁶ *The Bethlehem Murders*, p 63

⁴⁷ *The Bethlehem Murders*, p. 86

characters as defined by specific intentions that are more complex than the superficial political status accorded them in journalism. This is made explicit in the second of my Palestinian novels, *The Saladin Murders*, when Omar Yussef says, “Sometimes the things historians ought to say are said better by writers of literature.”⁴⁸

Andrew Pepper argues that the espionage thriller set in “the War on Terror” since the attacks of 9/11 “legitimizes human rights abuses by the West, particularly state-sanctioned torture, by depicting the West, rhetorically, as the virtuous bringer of rights”.⁴⁹ Pepper refers in particular to the Netflix series *Homeland* and to the novel *I Am Pilgrim*. Having spent years in Arab countries after 9/11 covering that same “War on Terror”, I had experienced its events more profoundly and personally than most writers of thrillers.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, I would argue that the power of the war-on-terror thriller lies in the same experience of trauma that underpins my work, though it is subsumed largely to the kind of xenophobia and jingoism with which Western agents might “bring rights” to the region. These thrillers are enacting the need for settlement of the 9/11 trauma experienced widely in Western countries and particularly in the US. Torture in a thriller or other crime fiction succeeds as a representation of the desire for revenge, though it is known that in reality it does not work as a means of obtaining useful intelligence. It is a sublimation of our desire for a world in which evil is punished, and as such is entirely suited to the crime fiction genre, where the structural appeal is in the movement from disturbance to jeopardy and, thence, to

⁴⁸*The Saladin Murders*, p 154

⁴⁹ Pepper, Andrew. “Spy Narratives in post-9/11 American Culture”, in Ed. Raczkowski, Chris, *A History of American Crime Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2019. p. 20.

⁵⁰ I examine the role of location and the thriller genre more fully in chapter four: “Why I write about the Middle East, and why thrillers”

resolution in the form of punishment for the bad actors. In reality, the violent actions of positive characters portrayed in this kind of thriller engender further evil, cast by their victims as reprisals for oppression. Evils such as torture set off a chain of real-life circumstances utterly beyond the control of those who try to fight against one link in that chain, even as they open up new, unforeseen avenues for further evil, whereas the conventions of the thriller genre allow the evil to be contained and channelled towards a final resolution in which the torture appears as no more than another plot point in a pattern dictated by the conventions. My choice of a US agent as the protagonist of these novels undermines the “bringing of rights” narrative common to other fictional representations of the war on terror, in that Verrazzano is a traumatised veteran of the War on Terror. Thus, in combination with the cynical, hardboiled style of the novels, he disturbs the institutional idealism that in *Homeland* even manages to survive the occasional mental disintegration of its bipolar hero.

Unlike *Homeland* (broadcast between October 2011 and April 2022) or *I Am Pilgrim* (2013), my thrillers present Arab fighters as having specific economic goals that are driven by the need to survive in a war zone that began as a proxy of the Cold War powers and later became outposts of the post-9/11 battle between Islamists and the West. When my protagonist Verrazzano confronts such men, he makes deals with them based on the exchange of information or favours, and resorts to violence only under threat to himself. The portrayal of Arab characters is based on people I met, whose extreme methods of operation they either explained to me or allowed me to observe. The response of war-on-terror thrillers to Arab characters is based on an othering due to lack of contact. Verrazzano knows the region and is therefore able to operate without prejudice on a transactional level with characters such as the Damascus-based arms dealer Marwan Touma:

“You don’t trust me? Well, I don’t trust me either. I gave in to my unnatural feelings of gratitude to you for sparing my life.” Tuma shivered comically, as though he experienced some unpleasant sensation. “I hope I am not becoming a reformed character.”

“It’ll pass.”

The Palestinian’s voice darkened. “Now Marwan Tuma and Dominic Verrazzano are even.”⁵¹

The role of the Western agent in war-on-terror thrillers is mirrored in the putative hero of Ahmad Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, a 2013 Iraqi novel that was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize.⁵² Playing on the story of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, an invincible criminal appears to be carrying out murders in Baghdad. A junk dealer, Hadi, confronts someone known only as “the Whatsitsname”, who admits that he is killing to avenge those whose body parts have been used to make up his body. The Whatsitsname ultimately fails in his attempt to impose justice. However, the discarded body parts that constitute the Whatsitsname, the instrument of reparation, represent the traumatic events that underly the choice of a crime fiction structure. Saadawi has said that the idea for the book came to him when, working as a journalist, he witnessed someone arriving at the morgue to collect the dead body of a family member, only to be told that due to the large number of dead and the violence of their demise, he should gather up sufficient body parts to make a body

⁵¹ *The Damascus Threat*, p 202

⁵² Saadawi, Ahmad. *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, translated from the Arabic by Jonathan Wright, Oneworld, 2018

and take them instead.⁵³ With that background of traumatic experience, the Whatsitsname does not have the power to create a clean resolution in the style of Western war-on-terror thrillers. In the same way, Omar Yussef acknowledges that for society to be cleaned up (or for a crime novel to reach a clean resolution), the detective must sustain and retain the trauma from which he attempts to protect others:

“Really, Abu Ramiz, is it the job of a detective to make sure everyone knows just how bad things are?”

Omar Yussef lifted a finger, as he did when he lectured in his classroom.

“Detectives are like the cloth that polishes a tarnished piece of silverware. The silver is displayed proudly, shining and admired. The cloth is tossed into a cupboard, filthy and unseen, imprinted with a record of the dirt everyone else believes to have been erased forever.”⁵⁴

To fully understand the function of the Middle East in my fiction, however, we must move from this analysis of crime fiction in the region and incorporate the role of trauma.

⁵³ <https://rowayat.org/frankenstein-in-baghdad>

⁵⁴ *The Samaritan's Secret*, p297

Chapter 3: Crime fiction and trauma

After the publication of my nonfiction book *Cain's Field* in 2004, I spoke to a group of Israeli-American retirees in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem where I lived. Many of the group had lived through the Holocaust as survivors; others had been born in the United States before World War II to immigrant parents but had lost their extended family in Europe at the hands of the Nazis. I talked about the thesis of the book, my research and the experiences that contributed to it. I alluded to some of the effects of these traumas, but I did not detail them. The atmosphere was constructive and warm, and I enjoyed it more than a good many of the other book events I subsequently attended. On leaving the event, my wife smiled at me and said with considerable sarcasm, "You've got some nerve, talking about *your* trauma to a bunch of *old* Jews." On the one hand, she was quite right; what many of the people at the event had experienced was far more traumatic than my experiences over the previous eight years. On the other hand, she did not know what I had been through because I was either reluctant to share or incapable of doing so, and she was unaware of how it was affecting me and continued to do so for some time.

I arrived in Jerusalem in 1996, after working as a journalist in New York for six years. I first worked for The Scotsman, reporting news stories and features, which necessitated of course that I should go to places where news was happening. Even though this was a relatively peaceful time in the Middle East, the news often consisted of suicide bombings in Israeli public places or on buses, or violent riots at Israeli checkpoints around Palestinian towns. Unlike many of my fellow

correspondents, I did not enjoy these incidents; I always saw myself as quite cautious, compared to them. Whereas most of them preferred the big events that attracted a flock of journalists but also guaranteed a spot on the front page, I liked to travel to places where no other correspondent happened to be, to take the time to explore the cultures and people I encountered. My first visit to a Palestinian town was to Nablus, to attend the mourning rituals for a young activist in Yasser Arafat's Fatah Party who had been beaten to death by Arafat's police for challenging their control of local protection rackets. The story was outside the typical Israel-versus-Palestine format of news stories, and the setting was fascinating. I used many of the details gathered there for the funeral scene in chapter 11 of *The Bethlehem Murders*, though it wasn't the last Palestinian funeral I would attend. Later I worked for the news weeklies Newsweek and Time, which meant I was less compelled to gather information at daily crisis points than other correspondents. I was able to indulge my preference for reporting around the edges of big events, rather than in the heart of the maelstrom. Nonetheless, I was inevitably forced to attend scenes of carnage or to be present at moments when violence either threatened or broke out.

When I close my eyes and remember the moments of violence and threat and stress and tension, here are the first things that flicker across my consciousness: At the funeral of Syrian President Hafez Assad in Damascus in 2000, the crowd suddenly became a swirling mass of rage as the coffin passed by, almost crushing me and making me feel very exposed as the only non-Syrian in the press. Near the Palestinian refugee camp of Balata, I found myself trapped between a roadblock of burning tyres and an advancing mob of young men wielding stones, who I persuaded not to attack me by waving my "Foreign Press" sign and talking to them; until they threw stones at me anyway, as I drove away. After a suicide bombing in the

Mahaneh Yehuda neighbourhood of Jerusalem, I reached the cordoned-off centre of the bombing by sneaking through an old woman's small house, only to emerge onto a street where the dead suicide bomber lay on his back against a wall with one leg crooked like a man relaxing in the sun. At a suicide bombing in Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda Street, I happened to stand beside a policeman when he asked a soldier where the bomber's body was; "It's under here," the soldier said, lifting a green tarpaulin that covered the charred, scarred torso and head of a Palestinian man, severed from his legs at the waist where he had secured his suicide bomb belt. In southern Lebanon, an Israeli shell fell some distance away, shaking the ground like an earthquake and sending the old woman I was interviewing scuttling away, waving her hands and calling out to God. I visited Hamas and Aqsa Martyrs Brigades sentries in the small hours during the intifada in the Gaza neighbourhood of Jabalya; a car came over the hill from the direction of an Israeli settlement and the sentries readied for a confrontation with an Israeli undercover hit squad, though thankfully it was only a night shift worker on his way home. In the Nablus casbah, Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen fought a battle that suddenly shifted, so that the gunfire seemed to be behind me, cutting off my escape, and closer than I had expected. Outside a coffee shop in Jerusalem late at night after filing my story to Time in New York, a suspicious Israeli border policeman held his gun on me while I opened my coat and lifted my shirt to show that I was not wearing a suicide bomb belt. Conducting man-on-the-street interviews in Amman, Jordan, during the Iraq war, a crowd gathered, calling out their anger about the war; one of them grabbed my notebook and yelled in Arabic, "He's writing in Hebrew," which could certainly have resulted in my being lynched; I tugged the notebook back and said in Arabic, "Shame on you," before pushing my way through the crowd to escape in a taxi. Playing with

my baby daughter in a Jerusalem park, sirens warned of incoming missiles, so I hid in a doorway with her and heard the impact of a missile landing. I drove up Jabotinsky Street in Jerusalem with both my children in the back of the car, watching Israeli defensive missiles intercept Palestinian missiles overhead in bursts of white cloud. Visiting Palestinian youths injured in the intifada, a doctor took my hand and plunged it through a young man's curly hair to demonstrate that this lustrous growth disguised the fact that part of his head was missing, blown away by an Israeli bullet; I wondered if the young man's sudden panicked expression was more extreme than my own. Trying to leave Gaza during heavy fighting, I walked across the no man's land between the Palestinian and Israeli checkpoints, stopping occasionally in the hope that the Israeli sentries in their guard towers would realise that I was a foreigner and not a danger; a walk usually of two minutes took me fifteen that day, though it felt much longer. Spending the night in an Israeli outpost on the Egyptian border next to the Gaza Strip town of Rafah, the commander pointed out that there was only an inadequate force of six soldiers in the post, all of them Israeli Bedouin or recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union, which made them expendable; I sat among them while they fought off several Hamas attacks and listened for tunnelling underneath them that might set off a bomb that would destroy the entire outpost. Looking out of the bombed-out window of a Palestinian security headquarters in Ramallah, I was surprised to see an Israeli tank immediately below me and ducked out of the way.

This is far from a comprehensive list. And it does not include the stress of moments when nothing actually happened, which could be considerable. Each time I drove my armoured car into the West Bank, I felt my pulse racing. I frequently lost my temper and exhibited other risky behaviours known to be the result of post-traumatic stress. I

dealt with it as best I could, taking meditation courses which helped me tune into the roiling sensation in my stomach whenever stress arose, or playing Mozart on my car stereo for the great composer's purported calming effect (though at volume levels more typically accorded to Iron Maiden than to classical music). Even many years later, I remain prone to highly emotional responses to artistic or news representations of untrammelled happiness, enthusiasm or optimism. I weep at the resolution of a Disney princess film, at crowds cheering a new pope on the balcony of St. Peter's, at an account of a chimpanzee's resilience in a BBC nature documentary, or at the revelation of Roger Scratcherd's bequest to Mary Thorne which means that she may marry her true love Frank Gresham at the conclusion of Anthony Trollope's *Doctor Thorne*. Any happy ending or signpost towards one sets me off, because it suggests that disturbance can be overcome, that trauma can be resolved, though I know that in my case it will always be with me.

Each of the traumatic incidents noted above appeared in my novels, transformed by the structure and plot. Their dynamic role in driving the gestation of the novels, the choice of genre format, and the writing is central.

Before examining these issues, further I should look at previous examinations of crime fiction and trauma.

The American Psychiatric Association defines trauma as a "direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person... The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror."⁵⁵ For Sigmund

⁵⁵ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV-TR*. American Psychiatric Association, 2000. p.463

Freud, trauma is “an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way”. The result is “permanent disturbances of the manner in which the energy operates”.⁵⁶ More recent work theorises trauma in relation to literature and philosophy. These works examine the representations of trauma. One of the most influential studies is by Cathy Caruth, who writes that, “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event”.⁵⁷ The act of writing then surely transposes and reconfigures this traumatic image. Its power can be transferred from the traumatised author to its impact on the psyche of a character in a literary text. That can be an act of unwitting self-therapy by the author, or even an automatic gesture. But the link to crime fiction and its genre structure is telling. As Maysaa Husam Jaber writes: “Despite the fact that crime fiction deals with a multitude of challenging topics like violence, evil, amorality, it is ultimately concerned with the moral order in societies.”⁵⁸ Crime novelists are reminded by the conventions of the form constantly to raise the stakes for the hero. What could represent higher stakes than the mental health of the author themselves? By introducing, knowingly or not, references, signs and images from the author’s traumatic experience, the need for a resolution and the upholding of a moral order becomes a compulsion. To reach that moment, however, the author/detective must face a puzzle, the denial of the path to this healthy conclusion, and warnings that it would be better to follow a different path. In this, the genre mimics the psychological strategies of repression that prolong trauma, while writing the novel to its conclusion represents a form of cure.

⁵⁶ Freud, Sigmund. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*. S.E. XVI. 1916. p.275

⁵⁷ Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. p.4

⁵⁸ Jaber, op. cit., p. 120

Most writing about trauma in crime fiction focuses on the trauma of *characters* in the novels, rather than on the trauma of the novelists themselves and its transposition into and shaping of the text. Mary Anne Gillies writes that Patricia Cornwell's medical examiner protagonist Kay Scarpetta "accumulates layers of trauma—physical and psychological—that assume more prominent roles in the narratives as the series progresses."⁵⁹ Veterans of war become murderers because of their traumatic experiences in Bettina Balàka's *Eisflüstern*.⁶⁰ Other academic writers have examined novels that delve into terrorist attacks themselves, though once again these mostly focus on the traumatic experience of characters in the novels, such as *The Attack* by Yasmina Khadra or Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*.⁶¹ My experience shows that trauma in literature is not limited to the *portrayal* of psychological impact, but the very structure of the literature itself. In this same way, trauma is not "in your head"; it manifests as a physical force, in physiological symptoms or signs, such as an elevated pulse. So, in literature, trauma inheres in the literature itself. It is not a layer that might be compared to the setting of a novel in a hospital or the ascription to the detective of a grumpy personality. Rather, trauma is a central force underlying every element of the novel, *when the author has been subject to trauma*. Without the trauma, the novel could not exist.⁶²

⁵⁹ Gillies, Mary Anne. "Trauma and Contemporary Crime Fiction", in CLUES • A Journal of Detection, Volume 37, Number 1, Spring 2019. McFarland, 2019. p. 40.

⁶⁰ de Buitelér, Nóra. "Losing the plot? The veteran as murderer in Bettina Balàka's *Eisflüstern*", Trinity College Dublin, Ireland Journal of War & Culture Studies, Vol. 6 No. 4, November, 2013, pp. 313–327

⁶¹ Richardson, Michael, "Trauma in the Excess of Effect", in *Trauma and literature*, Ed. Kurtz, J. Roger Cambridge University Press, 2018.

⁶² I would offer another example of the process worked on genre form by the author's own trauma, in the crime novels of Chester Himes. Himes's autobiographical novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) details the rage and consequent risk-taking behaviour of a black man in 1940s Los Angeles, where Himes has described himself as having become "saturated with hate." (Sallis, James. *Chester Himes: A Life*, Walker, 2000, p. 150). In Himes's first published crime novel, *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), the main character chases around Harlem from one panicked misstep to another of still more disastrous consequence, mirroring the stress Himes's own traumatic rage places on the genre format, as does the secondary role played by the actual detectives, "Grave Digger" Jones and "Coffin Ed" Johnson, in this detective novel. By the time of

One of the first to theorise the link between trauma and literature, Cathy Caruth, notes that Freud describes trauma through Tancred's accidental killing of his lover Clorinda in Tasso's epic *Jerusalem Delivered*.⁶³ After the accident, Tancred strikes a tree, which turns out to be hiding the spirit of Clorinda, who cries out in pain. The reenactment of the initial trauma releases "a voice...through the wound."⁶⁴ Thus, trauma can be read as a text, rather than a physical wound. And unlike the conscious decision of an author to "address" trauma through the ascription of traumatic experiences to a character, the unconscious nature of actual trauma leads an author to infuse a work with energy and impulses derived from that trauma. As Caruth notes, "it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet."⁶⁵

Where studies have examined trauma in the lives of given authors—rather than trauma ascribed to the backstory of a novel's characters, as in the example of Cornwell's *Scarpetta*—the assumption is that the traumatised author writes about traumatised characters so that the author can expunge their own trauma.⁶⁶ There is

Himes's later crime novels, such as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), Jones and Johnson take on a more central role, investigating in a manner that is more familiar to readers of the crime genre. I would contend this represents a fuller incorporation of Himes's trauma within the genre format, similar to the one I describe in my novels. Himes's rage is so great it threatens at first to overwhelm the genre format, but eventually the format is strong enough to bring about an accommodation between itself and the author's trauma.

⁶³ Caruth, op. cit., p. 3

⁶⁴ Caruth, op. cit., p. 2

⁶⁵ Caruth, op. cit., p.3

⁶⁶ As noted earlier, Freud identifies the repeated dreams of trauma sufferers as an unconscious attempt to work through the pain. This occurs outside the realm of dreams too, with unconscious reenactment of a traumatic event sometimes designed to replace the original experience with a revised, less painful version. In an interview, Caruth describes how an ambush that took the lives of their comrades led US soldiers in Vietnam to return to a nearby location the following day and carry out the infamous My Lai massacre. The meaninglessness of their loss led them to orchestrate a battle situation in which they would fight for a "meaningful" cause, even though their assumption of battlefield postures belied the fact that they faced only civilians. "They were representing this as the thing they were trained to do," Caruth says, "to go beyond the trauma." This representational revisiting could apply to writing, of course, when

also some work on traumatised writers, such as Ernest Hemingway, whose work *denies* their trauma, even as it lays it bare.⁶⁷ There has been little work on writers who translate their trauma into characters whose trauma is not their textually defining characteristic but whose responses and perceptions are freighted with it, as I have done in my novels.

Poststructuralism informs much of what has been written about the link between trauma and narrative. As Joshua Pederson lays it out, this has led to an understanding of a disjuncture between trauma and its manifestation in the text:

Trauma theorists see literature as opening up new insights onto traumatic experience: they contend that trauma and language are formally similar. The argument grows out of poststructuralist literary theories...and it goes something like this: trauma...hits the human psyche with such force that it delays (or even disables) the mind's ability to access memories of the event...Traumatic experience is either inaccessible or only indirectly accessible to the individual. For Caruth and others coming out of the poststructuralist tradition, language has a similar structure. From Saussure to more radical deconstructionists working later in the twentieth century, poststructuralists question (or even deny) the link between signifier and

carried out by a trauma sufferer. (Caruth, Cathy, Pasquer Brochard, Romain, Tam, Ben, "Who Speaks from the Site of Trauma: An interview with Cathy Caruth". *Diacritics*, Volume 47, Number 2, 2019, pp. 48-71)

⁶⁷Some of Hemingway's trauma, of course, may not have been rooted in his conflict experience but rather in his family's history of mental illness and suicide, just as not all my traumatic experiences were necessarily located in the Middle East. "Hemingway demonstrated on a mythic scale how the pursuit of a journalistic career and its expansion into a drive for artistic success can be connected to a history of family and personal dysfunction and a lifetime of traumatic experiences that grew out of his risk-taking philosophy of life." Underwood, Doug. *Chronicling Trauma: Journalists and Writers on Violence and Loss*, University of Illinois Press, 2011. p.1.

referent. Says Caruth, there is the possibility that “reference is indirect, and that consequently we may not have access to others’ or even our own histories”⁶⁸. Put simply, for poststructuralists, there is a break between word and world; for trauma theorists, there is a break between word and wound.⁶⁹

Poststructuralists would, of course, contend that a text does not mean only what the author thinks it means. In the case of trauma-inflected fiction, we might add that the emotional impact of a text is not just what the author feels, either. However, the format of genre fiction at least signals that an emotional response is intended by the author and appropriate for the reader. This is one of the main reasons for my switch from the “neutral” style of journalism, which is intended to allow reporters to convey events that would certainly spoil the newspaper reader’s breakfast were they written more emotively. That the neutral tone does not protect journalists from the context in which they operate is evident from my observation of foreign correspondents at work and a knowledge of the wreckage of many of their family lives.

Doug Underwood examines the role of risk-taking behaviour in authors as it can be seen to be generated by trauma. He notes that Graham Greene, who he calls “one of the legendary drinkers, drug takers, and womanizers among the journalist-literary figures”, wrote that:

⁶⁸ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 10

⁶⁹ Pederson, Joshua, “Trauma and Narrative”, in Kurtz, op. cit. p. 100

“[w]riting is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic and fear which is inherent in the human situation.”⁷⁰

Though I consider myself to have been less than “legendary” in most of the sybaritic categories in which Greene excelled, I have indulged in all of them and did so to a greater extent after I started to encounter traumatic experiences in the course of my journalism career in the Middle East. And, like Greene, I sometimes wonder what people who do not write find to do with their time, or what they could possibly have on their mind at any given moment, if they do not have a novel idea to develop or a plot twist to plan out. Certainly, when I divert myself from such a focus, I find my thoughts tend towards a darkness.

Underwood ascribes to “those who have questioned Greene’s sincerity” the position that none of the themes with which he wrestled represented genuine suffering on the part of the author. Rather, any religious, psychological or human conflict in which Greene found himself was, in fact, welcome to the author, because it represented material for writing and “not a reflection of real angst.”⁷¹ The most obvious response to that criticism might be: Why can’t a conflict be both writing material and a source of genuine angst? Survivors of conflict trauma are often compelled to further risky behaviours or situations, which perpetuate and increase the “angst” while also providing undeniably dramatic material for artistic production. Undoubtedly this is one of the reasons journalists turn to fiction: they are able to use all their sensory and interpretative responses to a traumatic situation in the creation of a novel, in

⁷⁰ Underwood. op. cit., p. 3

⁷¹ Underwood, op. cit., p. 59

contrast to the “Just the facts, ma’am” formulae of journalism. Underwood believes this is a way to camouflage traumatic feelings by injecting traumatic experiences “into fictional characters in ways that could be presented as reflecting only indirectly on the real emotions of the author, as well as creating in the scenario of a novel some distance between genuine and fictionalized inner pain.”⁷² He cites as an example the writer often described as the first great author in the crime genre, Edgar Allan Poe. Crime’s genre formulas, though nascent in Poe’s time, allowed him to “put on display the compulsive behaviours that were killing him at the same time.”⁷³ In the case of Greene, though he didn’t ask Hitler to Blitz London around him to provide material for some of his early great novels, he did make the decision to travel to the war in Vietnam or to cover violence in Haiti for some of his later masterpieces: in other words, once trauma has been experienced and provided an impetus for creativity, it may be difficult for a writer to break a cycle of risk-taking in the gathering of material for the next work. Of course, the risk-taking that comes with conflict experience may already be a constituent part of the psychology of the journalist-who-becomes-a-writer, as may have been the case with Greene. Underwood carried out an extensive survey of writers who experienced armed conflict as journalists or in the military and found that 60% had suffered some childhood trauma, such as losing a parent, abandonment, or an alcoholic or mentally ill parent. Three quarters struggled with emotional problems or substance abuse at points during their adult lives, while 90% had experienced either childhood abandonment, mental health problems, addiction, or substance abuse.⁷⁴

⁷² Underwood, op. cit., p. 31

⁷³ Underwood, op. cit., p. 54

⁷⁴ Underwood, op. cit., p. 119

I am often profoundly untouched by events in the Middle East that horrify or enrage those around me, who I notice are moved to protest or register extreme political statements. That's because I see this compulsion as the route to hatred, aggression and violence, which I fear and detest. However, by transferring the experience of reality to a fictional format, I can express the repressed emotions without tipping into crisis. I would suggest that the experience of trauma at once makes a writer more sensitive to suffering and fear—their own and that of those they encounter (in a conflict situation, for example)—but also makes it harder for them to respond in an open, human manner to that suffering and fear because it threatens to overcome their repression and force them to unleash their despair.

As Underwood's substance abuse statistics show, transferring trauma to a fictional format doesn't protect all writers from the symptoms of trauma. However, fiction allows me to experience reality in a manner that does not seem open to me outside its structures. I find myself unmoved by journalistic accounts of events in the Middle East, and I always have been. Even as a reporter on the ground, I rarely made the kinds of judgements that were common in journalists around me—about who was right or wrong in the Israel-Palestine conflict, for example. When listening to the stories of people's lives, I would grow excited at the prospect of writing about them, rather than responding on a personal level to the suffering they described. During the intifada, I drove at night through a Gaza refugee camp to meet the gunmen who stood watch in anticipation of Israeli attacks. Several of them took some persuading that I was not a danger to them, holding their guns on me in the meantime, while also warning me that the roads down which I was passing had been boobytrapped to counter incursions by Israeli soldiers. My Palestinian colleague in the Time Magazine office told me on my return to Jerusalem that he considered what I had done

unnecessarily risky. “I would not have done it,” he said. It was only weeks later that I ran over the events of that night and, with a prolonged shiver of finally released tension, concluded that he might have been right. Even today I have vivid memories of the excitement I felt and, despite the clear danger, how unjustifiably safe I convinced myself I was.

The traumatic impact of a dangerous moment—even when danger does not ultimately ensue—is evident to me through some of the ways in which such moments emerged in my novels. In 2002, as Time’s Jerusalem bureau chief, I oversaw a team reporting a story on the battle between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian militias in the Jenin refugee camp that killed 23 soldiers and 54 Palestinians, some of whom were fighters and some civilians. Though since dwarfed by the scale of the conflict in Gaza in 2024-2025, it was at the time the biggest battle of the second intifada and the largest number of Israeli soldiers killed in one day since the country’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon. My report in Time⁷⁵ won an Edward Luce Award for Reporting. It also could have cost the life of one of my team. Aparisim Ghosh, an Indian-American reporter known as “Bobby”, joined my usual team to help with the investigation. For ten days, he went each morning to the ruins of the Jenin refugee camp in the north of the West Bank to interview survivors of the battle, including some combatants. On the day when he was due to finish his reporting, a group of gunmen drove up to him and questioned him. My Palestinian colleague Jamil Hamad received a warning from a friend that the gunmen intended to kidnap Bobby that morning: they were suspicious of his repeated visits and did not believe that he was really an American, due to his Indian ethnicity. In a phone

⁷⁵Rees, Matt. “Untangling Jenin’s Tale”, Time Magazine, May 13, 2002, <https://time.com/archive/6666376/untangling-jenins-tale/>

conversation with Bobby that morning, he told me he was willing to complete one last interview in the camp before he left, though he did seem disturbed by the contact with the gunmen. I should have told him to leave immediately, but I was swayed by the importance of the interview, which was with a medical worker who had dealt with the victims of the battle. I allowed Bobby to remain and, though thankfully he left safely an hour or two later, I felt a deep dread and self-hatred that overshadowed the eventual success of the article. This experience, which of course represented no danger to my own safety, remains a source of guilt and stress. Even as I write this, I am aware of a release of adrenaline causing a shaking in my upper chest, churning in my stomach, and a sharp pain in my sternum. Fictional decisions on plot, which involve sending a detective or other character into danger, represent a transference of the guilt and horror of this Jenin experience. They figure a harmless way of exerting control over similar situations in which the worse the result, the more heightened the payoff may be on the page. In *The Saladin Murders*, the second of my Palestinian novels, Omar Yussef ultimately saves Magnus Wallander, his Swedish UN boss, who has been kidnapped during a visit to Gaza. This is an unconscious response to my having put Bobby, a visiting correspondent, into a dangerous situation which I, as the local/Omar figure, should have been better able to judge. This same impulse developed further in the Special Agent Verrazzano novels, in which the agent is the leader of a team of five other US agents. As the plot develops in parallel tracks over different geographies, the team checks in with Verrazzano to ask for guidance on their next steps. He frequently worries about the places he sends them; it is a necessary weakness in the otherwise powerful Superman figure I created, because it reflects the traumatic potential of distant

actions that occur as a result of decisions made by the main protagonist. The team dynamic illustrates the breadth of impulses that can result in traumatised reactions.

This distance between my unemotional response to real events that evoke compassion in others and my relatively overemotional response to fictionalised representations did not begin with my conflict experience. I would ascribe this to an early childhood sense of abandonment that was reinforced by experience of high-school bullying. However, it became far more pronounced as a result of conflict trauma. The result is that I am detached from the world as it seems to be experienced by most around me, but very much alive to everything depicted in artistic representations—particularly my own. As noted, it was not the “big story” that attracted me, as a journalist, because it would draw a crowd of other foreign correspondents and a pressure to report if not the same story as everyone else, then at least something that accorded with their response to events; I was at my happiest when I was reporting from a location where there were no other foreign journalists and the story I told could be unique. It is this distance which underlies my choice of protagonists, none of whom are journalists. This decision allows my fiction to mimic my own status in my Middle East experiences, as someone who is at once outside the societies about which I write and yet through language acquisition, empathy, and subject preference is more “inside” than most other foreign correspondents.⁷⁶ In Lebanon, I spent a day with Syrian guest workers who were living in abandoned,

⁷⁶ This sometimes manifested itself in a form of imposter syndrome I experienced when among other foreign correspondents at major regional news events. During a period of my life when a fear of overusing alcohol made me teetotal, I found myself in the bars of the Semiramis Hotel in Damascus, the Intercontinental in Amman, or the American Colony in East Jerusalem, surrounded by foreign correspondents flushed with drink, puffing on cigars and swapping stories with great hilarity. At the time, I ascribed my sense of not quite belonging to my eschewing of the alcohol that seemed to lubricate everyone else. I now see it as a combination of a long-term imposter syndrome first encountered as an undergraduate at a prestigious university that was elevated by my guilt at failing to fully accord to the bluff, fearless image of the foreign correspondent, a feeling rooted in my awareness of the impact trauma was having on me.

bombed-out buildings, and I felt a profound joy at uncovering something of the world about which no one else was writing. In Syria, I was the only Western journalist present when troops filled the streets of Damascus in anticipation of a revolt, just as the death of President Assad was announced in parliament. In Gaza, I waited for a Hamas leader outside his mosque while little boys sought to provoke a humorous reaction by sneaking up on me, throwing gravel at me and pinching my bottom before running off. Each of these moments evokes a stronger reaction in me now than any occasion on which I watched events unfold in the company of other journalists.

These experiences were pleasurable, not traumatic. The sense memory that recurs with a traumatic experience is still stronger. Yet the original traumatic experiences occurred without evoking any immediate, outward response, no panic or fear. That would come later, and in some cases only when I incorporated the experience into a scene in a novel. I will detail one of those experiences now to illustrate this point.

The novelistic event portrays a climactic plot point that is more dramatic and fatal than the original event. This illustrates the depth of trauma, in that the act of writing and the interpolation within the structure of a novel heightens the emotional response to the event and leads to its presentation as an incident as deadly as the original experience *could* have been.

The event occurred in 1998. I drove down into the valley of the Balata refugee camp on the edge of Nablus. I had gone to a village on the hill above to interview the family of a shepherd killed by Israeli settlers living on the hilltop. Nominally, the rioting into which I drove was an expression of anger at the shepherd's death and it was directed against Israel. As I reached the road around the camp, I saw a group of several hundred young men one hundred yards to my left. I knew that they would be

throwing stones at passing cars, so I turned right. Around a corner I ran into a barrier of burning tyres and was forced to stop. The young men came towards me at a fast jog. More emerged from the hillocks at the side of the road, creeping forward, all clearly toting a rock. This was not long after young men like these in Nablus had killed six Israeli soldiers, in some cases by stoning them, just along the valley at Joseph's Tomb. I knew exactly how dangerous a rock could be when thrown at a moving car, and it was just as clear that I could not drive through this crowd of young men without many stones hitting me from close range. By approaching them with my "Foreign Press" sign held aloft, I was able to halt their attack. I spoke to them in Arabic and pointed out the Cyprus licence plates on my car. They agreed to let me drive away. I pointed out that there were sure to be more groups of stone throwers on the route past the camp and asked for one of them to accompany me. One youth climbed into my passenger seat and we drove off, slaloming around rocks left on the tarmac from attacks on other vehicles. Within half a mile, we came to another group of stone-throwers, as I had predicted. My escort leaned out of the window and called to them that they should hold their fire, as I was a foreign journalist. They started to let us pass. But then one of them threw a stone and suddenly the car filled with a sound that was like being under an umbrella in a hailstorm. My escort leaned out of the window, shouting, "Stop, you sons of whores, *I'm* in here." Still weaving between rocks, I managed to drive to the main road, where I parted with my escort with handshakes, a kiss and many compliments. Throughout the incident, I had felt entirely calm. Only that evening when I recounted the story to a friend did I become voluble and express what I had truly felt: that I would have wanted every one of the young men who had attacked me to die, rather than that I should be hurt.

"Exterminate all the brutes," said my friend, quoting Joseph Conrad's *Heart of*

Darkness (1899). It was not a pleasant thought to have confronted, but the literary allusion reduced my guilt somewhat: I was not uniquely cruel in my response to a threat.⁷⁷

Here is how this incident is transformed into an episode in my second Palestinian mystery. In *The Saladin Murders*, Omar Yussef reaches the vehicle his friend James Cree, a UN worker, has been driving. The SUV has been blown up by a roadside bomb and a jeering crowd is pelting the burning wreckage with stones.

Omar Yussef pushed to the front of the group of youths. A boy of about fourteen wound up to hurl a stone at the car. Omar Yussef grabbed the boy's arm, pulled the stone from his hand and threw it to the ground. He wrenched the boy around and leaned close to him.

"Shame on you," he growled.

The boy's expression was ecstatic, but his frenzy disappeared as Omar Yussef looked at him. His jaw dropped and he tried to back away.

"Shame on you, you son of a whore," Omar Yussef said, squeezing the boy's wrist, feeling his muscles shake all the way up his own arm with the effort of holding the kid and from the adrenaline deep within.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ A day later at the Palestinian parliament in Ramallah, I encountered the leader of the Fatah faction in Balata, whose office I had visited many times for fascinating interviews. I recounted the story of the incident. He smiled and shook his head with amusement and some pride, as if to say: "Ah, those are my boys." In addition to the trauma of coming under attack and escaping a potentially fatal beating, I was disturbed by the fact that the youths had not really cared at all whom they stoned, just so long as they could attack *someone* to vent their anger.

⁷⁸ *The Saladin Murders*, p 179

Omar Yussef's friend Khamis Zeydan drags him away from the riot, telling him that Cree is in fact at the hospital. Omar Yussef responds with a version of the disgust for the violence of the rioters and the desire to punish those who threaten him that I felt outside Balata: "Omar Yussef didn't move. 'Give me your gun.' He pulled Khamis Zeydan close, by the lapel of his jacket. 'I'll kill them. I'll kill them all.'"⁷⁹ When I wrote this scene, I again experienced the sensations that I had repressed during the incident upon which it was modelled. I shook with adrenaline and I wept, standing at my desk as I worked. Re-reading the scene recently for the first time in some years, I cried once more—a measure of how profound the original traumatic experience was and the extent to which the sensations and emotions of the incident transferred to the written scene. This emotional authenticity in the writing experience is, I would contend, the difference between someone who wants "to be a writer" and someone who is actually writing. I have known a number of journalists who, writing non-fiction books about their experiences, disguised their emotional fragility through journalistic distance. They ended up with worthy, undistinguished books. They were able to tick the box of having published a book, which is a considerable mark of status among news journalists, marking one out as a serious person, but they were unable to make the connection between narrative structure and emotional openness that gives a book deeper resonance.

The recurrent nature of trauma and its impact is a factor in my thrillers *The Damascus Threat* and *China Strike*, in which veterans—some of whom are rivals or enemies—talk about or even taunt each other with the impact of their trauma:

⁷⁹*The Saladin Murders*, p 180

“Wyatt let me do my thing because he always prefers to let the operative on the ground make the decisions. But yeah, he thought we should try something else.”

Some people carried evil on them the way rats hosted plague fleas. Wyatt was the very contagion itself, the bacillus of the Black Death in camouflage fatigues. “Which was?”

“‘Joy arises in a person free from remorse.’ You’ve studied the Buddha, haven’t you, Sergeant Major? Sure you have. Anyone who sees death the way we did ends up in a meditation class, because the other option is to find nirvana with the barrel of a pistol in your mouth. You ever think about being ‘free from remorse?’”⁸⁰

At the close of the first of these two thrillers, the main character, Verrazzano, receives a text from his old Special Forces commander, who has been a shadowy, malign presence in this novel and features prominently in the second book. The text message suggests that elements of Verrazzano’s past will carry forward into the next book, as Wyatt tries to manipulate him in the ongoing plot. However, it also highlights the role of Verrazzano’s past traumas as a dynamic in the novel:

“The thing about the past,” the text read, “is that it’s all ahead of you.”

“Ain’t that the truth, Wyatt,” he whispered to himself.⁸¹

⁸⁰ *China Strike*, p 25

⁸¹ *The Damascus Threat*, p 295

The aim of the Verrazzano books is to uncover the trauma of those who are forced to do the dirty work (of the War on Terror, in this case) that allows our society to function as it does. My experience of trauma enables me to read society from a similar perspective as those others who underwent conflict trauma as participants, rather than as observers. It is a critical reading, even a radical one, though it does not propose a political agenda so much as a compassionate agenda. The former military men in *The Damascus Threat* who carry out the attack on the United Nations building in New York are, to differing degrees, portrayed as victims of a system that treats soldiers as disposable objects and rejects them on their return to domestic life. The man who recruits and leads them into the UN, Kyle Massie, suffers from trauma and uses society's rejection as a tool to persuade the others to engage in the wrongdoing that drives the plot, in this case the paraplegic Martin Chavez:

Massie bent forward, his elbows on his knees. "I know where you're at, man." He rolled up the cuff of his bomber jacket. His wrist was scarred across with what psychiatrists call hesitation marks. The traces of attempted suicides. "I've been there, bro."

Chavez swallowed. "How did you know?"

"I didn't lose my legs, and I didn't lose my eyes, neither. I see what's going on with you. I *did* damn near lose my fucking mind. Nightmares, sweats. I was mad as hell *all* the time. Some dipshit spilled my beer, and I broke his teeth. I did ninety days for that in Indiana. I was a total piece of shit. I couldn't even kill myself. A real fucking loser."

“But you’re good now?”

“I’ve got a job with a private security firm. They found me help.” He put his hand on Chavez’s fingers where they gripped the controller of his wheelchair.

“I want you to have the same protection, man. I want you to join us.”⁸²

This resentment is portrayed in a more stylised way in one of the bad guys in the book known only as “The Janissary,” after the young boys kidnapped into slavery and trained as mercenaries for the Ottoman Empire. He is a figure whose only purpose is to kill and to die, the ultimate hardboiled villain and yet with his own traumatic backstory in the murder of his family in a real historical crackdown on dissent by the Syrian regime in Hama in 1982. His experience of conflict has made him (almost) physically invulnerable, as a highly trained fighter. The same is true of Dom Verrazzano, whose confidence in a conflict situation is the counterpoint to his emotional vulnerability when he considers his actions in previous warzones:

“Time to make a move, Dom,” Quanah said. “These guys are about to kill us.”

“They’re about to try,” Verrazzano said. “The poor bastards.”⁸³

This illustrates a similar ice-cold ability to negotiate a threatening situation as I demonstrated in the stoning incident at the refugee camp near Nablus, and of course it is paralleled by the shock, fear and irrationality of the delayed emotional reaction

⁸² *The Damascus Threat*, p 38

⁸³ *The Damascus Threat*, p 188

that I encountered in that case. Another of the team of operatives hired by Wyatt taunts Verrazzano with this fact as he tortures him in a Damascus hotel room: “Back then in Beirut, Wyatt sent me to watch you. Make sure you got the job done. I followed you after you whacked that bitch. I saw you go down by the shore and cry like a little girl.”⁸⁴ Part of the fear experienced by the trauma victim is the (repressed) memory of a moment of powerlessness. I contend that a further component is the fear that whatever behaviour brought the sufferer into a traumatic situation might be repeated; that the sufferer has learnt nothing and has not changed, making them likely to respond in just the same way and leading them into a cycle of trauma. Tom Frisch, another of Verrazzano’s former Special Forces comrades who now works for Colonel Wyatt’s outlaw team, recognizes this, but offers a reassuring appraisal of Verrazzano:

“That’s what you’re scared of, isn’t it? The possibility that you might still be nursing something evil in here.” Frisch touched his chest, as he went down the off-ramp toward the station. “Some guys are so bad, they never come back. The worst thing they’ve done is the real them. Other guys make a mistake and they never forgive themselves. But you—you’re not going back to it.”⁸⁵

Verrazzano has come through the traumatic experiences and, though he doubts himself as any trauma sufferer might, Frisch recognizes that he has become the kind

⁸⁴ *The Damascus Threat*, p 212

⁸⁵ *The Damascus Threat*, p 210

of hardboiled knight errant figure personified by Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Sarah Trott argues persuasively that Chandler's experience of conflict in the Canadian military in World War I is the basis for this characterisation of Marlowe. While some hardboiled fans have lauded Dashiell Hammett over Chandler because he had actually worked as a professional detective, Trott makes the case for Chandler based on the emotional dimension he adds: "Personalising the hard-boiled genre with the use of a first-person narrative, Chandler propelled crime fiction further than his predecessor Dashiell Hammett by linking his work to the inner turmoil depicted so vividly by the 'Lost Generation.'"⁸⁶ Trott notes that critics separated the "literary" productions of the Lost Generation—writers like Hemingway who had experienced conflict during World War I or, in the case of F. Scott Fitzgerald, had almost done so—and the genre work of Chandler. Chandler never makes his own trauma the subject of his novels, while the Lost Generation made it part of their identity. That's why they were called "lost", after all. As Trott lays it out, Chandler uses genre to transfer the impact of his trauma to an interrogation of American urban society. It's more tangential than the obvious examination in *The Great Gatsby*, but Chandler's has had a greater impact on the culture and ultimately on literary production.

The affectless style favoured by most American literary novelists (acquired second-hand by many UK literary novelists and lauded by literary tastemakers) originates in the repression of trauma, though it has come to be taken as high style by those for whom it does not carry out the same emotional operation, leading to many novels and short stories that seem to be without emotional content of any kind, rather than struggling to contain emotional turmoil. This "iceberg style," as Hemingway called it,

⁸⁶ Trott, op. cit., p 1

is “a method of writing which enabled the author to use language that was far less embellished but still retained the overall message and tone in his work.”⁸⁷ Once the traumatic repression is lacking and Hemingway’s style is reproduced by untraumatized writers, however, the effect is not of unseen depths. Rather it is transformed into what I would call an “iceberg lettuce style”, floating on the surface, disguising the fact that if you bite into it, there is little taste and even less to digest. The role of genre is to place a traumatised writer in the traces of Chandler, whose focus was maintained constantly on the inner life of the detective/hero due to the therapeutic role he played for the author and due to the demands of the structure. Rather than the distanced characterisations of the iceberg lettuce style, trauma inheres in the crime genre because of the requirement of a death or other major disturbance, forcing the novelist to confront their own reaction to threat and fear, and to configure them through the actions and reactions of his detective as he drives towards the resolution of the crime. Human reaction to violence and death is the core of crime fiction.

This has a dual purpose for Chandler, as Trott sees it. It channels Chandler’s World War I trauma and sense of himself as damaged and unworthy into Marlowe, who remains admirable and worthy even as he dives into the underworld in a profession for which few show any respect. It also sets up a critique of the disappointing America for which Chandler and his comrades who didn’t make it home from the war had fought:

⁸⁷ Trott, op. cit. p 3

While Los Angeles became the “stage” on which Chandler sought to re-create in some small way the dangers he had encountered on the front line in France, Philip Marlowe became the persona on which Chandler set out to highlight the ills besetting society.....Yet each new case he accepts only heightens his disillusionment with a changing society, and unsurprisingly his initial idealism is hastily displaced as he becomes resigned to his life of mounting cynicism and frustration.⁸⁸

Trott has hit upon an element of Chandler that I sensed over many readings and which has a creative element that I would add to her analysis. Whenever I started to write one of my novels, I would re-read one of Chandler’s crime novels with a notebook at my side. Frequently, an image, description or *bon mot* from Chandler would spark an entirely different phrase in me that I would note down and use in my novel. The translation from Chandler’s text to a creative impulse experienced by me and transferred to one of my books was an unconscious process. I viewed it as almost entirely mystical until I read Trott’s account of Chandler’s trauma and concluded that my response was triggered by a representation in the original text that was born of a traumatic experience, even though it may not have seemed to be related in any way. In other words, I recognised the trauma in Chandler’s work, even though it was not explicit, and responded creatively. Gulddal, King and Rolls write that “the crime story seems to relieve the reader of the burden of criticism by undertaking this criticism itself” due to the form’s strong orientation towards the ending, in which the detective protagonist provides the first and authoritative reading

⁸⁸ Trott, op. cit., p 105-106

of the text by delineating the solution to the mystery.⁸⁹ So, if the genre is reading itself, it is also in a sense writing itself, in my case by taking my trauma and instilling the plot with its emotional energy. This also meant that I unconsciously responded to a similar process in Chandler's work.

Trott's description of Marlowe's trauma and social function for Chandler parallels the personal and political elements of my Middle Eastern novels. In my earlier novels, Omar Yussef is a detective without many of the traditional physical powers of the detective. He is relatively old and in relatively poor physical condition due to longtime smoking and drinking habits he has now forsworn. He lacks any experience as a fighter. But he takes on the gunmen of Bethlehem, Gaza and Nablus. This brings him the higher moral status that Chandler accords to Marlowe. We may conjecture, however, that Marlowe was not enough to absorb all Chandler's traumatic symptoms, because he continued to engage in the kinds of behaviours displayed by trauma sufferers throughout his writing career, from womanising to heavy drinking, all while clearly hankering most strongly for the security of the bond of love with his wife Cissy. Similarly, Omar Yussef did not represent a full transfer of my traumatic emotions, either. After the four Palestinian novels, I wrote two historical crime novels (about Mozart and Caravaggio), in which I reconfigured the deaths of these Austrian and Italian masters as sacrifices to the ideal of love, making both of them moral emblems. I followed these with an alternative-historical crime novel, *The Ambassador*. Here I imagined a history of the Holocaust in which the findings of the UK government's Peel Commission had, in fact, been implemented, leading to the

⁸⁹ Gulddal, Jesper, King, Stewart and Rolls, Alistair. *Criminal Moves: Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction*, Liverpool University Press, 2019. p. 5

foundation of Israel in 1938, rather than 1948. The main character, the Israeli ambassador to Hitler's Berlin, attempts to work with the Nazis to rescue Jews from the Reich until the implementation of the Final Solution begins, at which point he sacrifices himself to destroy the Auschwitz death camp. As with Chandler's Los Angeles, the hero represents a bright counterpoint to a historical context in which politics has been degraded to inhumane levels.

Each of these characters represented for me a step up in the degree to which they responded to my need to control my own life and exert control over it in the authority and force they brought to bear over the textual representation of the world around them. Dominic Verrazzano was a still greater step and, perhaps, the one I really needed, though I would add that trauma is never entirely "cured" and, consequently, no single genre or sub-genre can entirely encompass the energy of trauma to the extent that the resolution of the novel represents the total expunging of traumatic impact on the writer's work. Trott has noted that Chandler wrote in other unpublished forms, such as poetry, attempting perhaps to find new ways to handle his lingering traumatic symptoms. In the same way, I am aware that any future novels I write will be shaped by trauma; having written this thesis, however, I hope to have a better understanding of its effects and potentially to exploit the text for a greater degree of catharsis. The act of writing is meditative; it provides a period of calm in which my trauma is mediated by the text. The greater understand that has resulted from this thesis will, I believe, enable me to carry that same sensation forward to the periods in between writing, as well.

Omar Yussef ends his cycle of novels by giving a speech at the United Nations in New York in which he criticises the government of Palestine for its corruption and lambastes the Arab countries for lip-service rather than true support for the freedom

of the Palestinian people. This was an opportunity for me to differentiate the earned experience underlying my novels from the normative assessments of the Middle East promulgated by most journalism, by politicians and diplomats, who seek to set any conflict in a binary that can be controlled, channelled and ultimately eliminated. The sting of trauma, like the reality of events in the Middle East, can be soothed, but it is always present and a period of unawareness can feed it with new strength. Omar Yussef highlights this by referring to the *sensations* that define the Palestinian experience for him, rather than the political categories at the heart of journalistic writing:

“Let me begin by saying that whatever you already know—the suicide bombs; the battles with the Israeli soldiers; the names of the factions, Hamas, PLO, PFLP, DFLP—these are nothing but background. The real story is the smell of cardamom in the sacks outside a spice shop in the casbah. It’s the laughter of the little schoolgirls in their blue-and-white-striped smocks going home after a day at an overcrowded school. It’s the noise of the lathe in a single room in Bethlehem where men are making olive-wood beads for tourist rosaries. It’s the life that remains when politics is sluiced away like that filth a stray dog leaves in the street. Let me flush away the rhetoric...and show you the Palestine I know.”⁹⁰

Yet Omar Yussef’s speech is cut off by the Egyptian chairman of the plenum, and he has no expectation that either the United Nations, the Palestinian government or the

⁹⁰ *The Fourth Assassin*, p 264

Arab nations will change their policies or actions in response to his words. Instead, he returns to the Palestinian neighbourhood of Brooklyn where most of *The Fourth Assassin* takes place and resolves the mystery of the crime fiction plot in the final act—a plot that plays out in a more personal sphere after the politics of his speech. This level of control over the textual outcomes represents my own ability to counter my traumatic symptoms at the time: I was aware of them and doing my best, but the results were limited, just as Omar Yussef is able in each novel to finger a bad guy, though he is unable to prevent the violent deaths of innocent characters he attempts to protect.

Subsequently, I developed the character of Special Agent Dominic Verrazzano so that I would have a hero better suited to a thriller, rather than the mystery sub-genre in which Omar Yussef functions. The thriller structure embodies the nature of the battle against traumatic symptoms still more directly than the mystery novel. It begins with a startling disturbance; the hero is pursued by elements that are a consequence of that disturbance, all the while seeking to restore the reputation/freedom/safety that they have lost; and the novel ends with a purgative confrontation. By the time I wrote *The Damascus Threat*, Verrazzano's first appearance, I was able to maintain greater control over the consequences of my traumatic experiences. I was also more aware of their power and extent. This, I believe, is why I chose a hero who would have the physical, mental and institutional ability to act as a powerful figure of almost superhero status throughout the book, despite his backstory of parental abandonment and traumatic conflict experience. Still, as with the Omar Yussef novels, the body count is not limited to a single, inciting victim; it rises as the novel progresses. This is a mirror of the experience of the trauma victim and a signal of the impact of trauma on the typical structure of the genre: the pressure and stress of

trauma is not singular; Omar and Verrazzano are constantly faced with their own failure to prevent another death. The consequence of the narrative unfolding is that, before they solve the mystery or tie up the conspiracy, they will allow others to die, each time reliving their own trauma.

Despite my change in crime fiction sub-genre and in the characteristics of the protagonist, the consistent Middle Eastern theme underlying the action is significant. Both Verrazzano books were written after I had left the Middle East and after I had written two novels that did not take place in the Middle East (about Mozart and Caravaggio) and a third that was set in part in the early days of the Israeli state. The Verrazzano novels contain scenes that take place in North America and continental Europe, where I have also lived. Yet the continued presence of the Middle East as I moved into the thriller sub-genre of crime fiction is a clear recognition of that region as the centre of my traumatic experiences. One might argue that the traumatic experience haunts my present reality in the physical representation that emerges on the page, even as the more extreme manifestations of trauma in my life diminish. This duality is evident in the manuscript of a supernatural historical novel on which I am currently working, in which a traumatised Gallipoli veteran is confronted with actual murders of former comrades and the appearance of figures from Greek myth seeking violent redress for an offence whose origin he must investigate in order to protect those he loves. In my thrillers, then, the portrayal of the Middle East represents my response to the region as a source of narrative electricity and emotional connection, rather than the political ideology with which other journalists who had similar experiences might write about it. They are still repressing their trauma through the formulae of journalism, where disturbance is a sign of unprofessional emotional display and political bias, while I am unleashing the

disturbance into the structures of genre fiction, in which it provides the narrative drive. For example, immediately after a suicide bombing in one of Jerusalem's main shopping streets, I saw the torso of the suicide bomber, charred and flayed, separated from the lower body because the bomb belt had been wrapped around his waist. This horrific image recurred in some of the descriptions of bodies portrayed in my novels. The impact of the image is heightened, when it is applied to a character who has been developed over the course of many chapters, rather than used as it might be in journalism for a nameless bomber (who happened also to have killed four shoppers, as well as himself). When Omar Yussef enters his school after a bombing that was intended to kill him, he finds the headmaster dead:

The American's shirt was scorched away in the front. His pale chest and stomach were smeared with black and scraped bright red by the blast. He was half upright against the bevelled bottom of the burning bookshelf, his head tilted back. He looked as though he might be resting, snoring gently through his slightly open mouth.⁹¹

The haunting nature of such sights is reflected in Omar Yussef's reaction, which evolves over the remainder of the book, as a trauma often takes on new significances with each recurrence of memory. He also reflects on the impact of such trauma on those about him:

⁹¹ *The Bethlehem Murders*, p 176

All afternoon, he had examined his own hand, holding it before his face in the same position in which he'd seen Steadman's, seeming to scratch itself along the floor tiles, like a scorpion, scuttling to catch up with the director's charred body. Omar Yussef wondered how often Khamis Zeydan thought about his lost hand. Would that not turn anyone to drink?⁹²

The personal psychological function of this reconfiguring of a traumatic memory is that I should experience the moment of trauma again and with intensity, by embedding it in a dramatic incident that is nonetheless discreet and fictional. The fictional image provides a safe release, where the original image demands a repressive psychological response.

The longer I spent in the Middle East, the more I considered the breadth and depth of such trauma as it must have been experienced by everyone around me. Even those few Palestinians or Israelis who had not been directly exposed to violence were surely overwhelmed by the constant news focus on violent events. Israeli bus drivers tuned into the radio after suicide bombings on buses, forcing their riders to listen to constant coverage of the very thing they probably feared would strike them at that moment. Israel's national television stations would all break into their normal programming to go live to any terrorist attack, and would remain live for hours, with journalists speculating in weighty tones as the screen showed the same few images over and again. Palestinians looking for comfort or spiritual distraction would not find it on a Friday in the mosque, where their imam was likely to harangue them about the evil of Israelis and the great sacrifice of those "martyred" that week.

⁹² *The Bethlehem Murders*, p 202

E. Ann Kaplan writes about “vicarious traumatization”.⁹³ Therapists can become traumatised by listening to their clients recount trauma. Just so, media consumers can be traumatised by images or audio, particularly in constant loops on news channels. I was aware in writing about violent events as a journalist that I might be triggering some readers. Early in my own time in Jerusalem, deadly riots broke out around the tomb of the biblical Joseph in Nablus. Before I went to the town to report on these events, I saw footage on Israeli television of black smoke emerging from the engine of an army jeep, filling the cab. Though they were surrounded by a mob of Palestinians, the soldiers opened the door for air. One Palestinian youth struck repeatedly at the driver with a paving slab, though the driver was obscured by smoke. The occupants of the jeep were known to be dead when this footage was aired. I had arrived a month earlier in the Middle East at a favourable moment in the Oslo peace process, only to understand now with a shock that I would have to face awful events like this to progress in my career and satisfy the needs of my editors at The Scotsman. I suffered more at this vicarious traumatization than I did at several subsequent violent events I witnessed firsthand, because of the anticipation of violence that it promoted in me.⁹⁴ Knowing that I was heading into this environment

⁹³ Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, Rutgers University Press, 2005

⁹⁴ Kaplan writes that “despite the mediation involved in seeing images, the relaying of trauma to the public through photographic imagery can be most graphically demonstrated in Susan Sontag’s description of her initial reaction to photographs of concentration camps. Sontag describes her life as divided into two parts, ‘before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about’ (Sontag, *On Photography*, pp.19–20). She goes on to describe how ‘when I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.’” Kaplan, op. cit., p. 91

created a disturbing level of stress that remains with me every time the image of that burning jeep and the blows with the paving slab recur in my mind.⁹⁵

Each exposure to violence—vicarious or immediate—deepens the existing level of trauma. Over the course of the four Omar Yussef novels, the intensity of the trauma experienced by the main character rises, until in *The Fourth Assassin* he finds a headless body in his son's bed and for a time believes his son to have become a victim:

He crumpled the pages in a bloodied fist and laid his shaking hand on the corpse's chest. His pulse palpitated so strongly in his palm that his hand seemed to rise and fall, as though the dead man's ribs still lifted with breath. The pooled blood seeped into his trousers, chilling his knees. May the King of the Day of Judgement forgive me for all my transgressions, he thought, and find it displeasing that this should be my boy before me. As his joints stiffened in the cold gore, he knew that he lacked the faith that might will this body back to life. He was not a believer. His prayer only made him feel more desperate and isolated.⁹⁶

The thriller format of the Verrazzano novels means that, even as he suffers guiltily for a killing he carried out in his previous Special Forces role, Verrazzano must continue

⁹⁵ An American colleague in Baghdad recounted to me similar feelings after he felt duty-bound to watch one of the videos posted online by jihadists of the beheading of a Western hostage. I never did watch one of those videos, though years later when I saw a video of a Jordanian air force pilot executed by Islamic State being burnt to death, I felt horror and rage—and the traumatised person's compulsion, which I successfully managed to deny myself, to relive the experience by watching it repeatedly.

⁹⁶ *The Fourth Assassin*, pp 7-8

to confront villains who seek his death. These villains personify the worst experiences he has faced, and their goal is to inflict traumatic destruction upon entire populations. Verrazzano must enter this traumatic realm so that he can prevent broad trauma in society and resolve the mystery around his own trauma, thus relieving it. This mirrors the act of writing in which my traumatic experiences are translated into the fictional plot around Verrazzano. It is his clinical violence in response to the threat posed by the villains that represents Verrazzano's attempts to control his trauma. As Trott highlights with Chandler's Marlowe, Verrazzano maintains a moral clarity, even as he is forced to operate in an environment of wicked villains in corrupt or degraded locations. The control that this represents is highlighted by the words with which Verrazzano addresses the Janissary as they fight to the death:

The man murmured the phrase by which a Muslim hopes to guarantee a home in Paradise. "*Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un.*" *We belong to Allah, and to Him we shall return.*

"No. You belong to me," Verrazzano yelled.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ *The Damascus Threat*, p 270

Chapter 4: Why I write about the Middle East, and why thrillers

Why did I write about Palestinians in my first novels, rather than foreign correspondents? Or about a US agent, rather than a journalist, in my subsequent thrillers? The role of the Middle East in my novels is to present the site of my own trauma, to allow it to deliver its narrative drive to the plots with limited mediation, and to set up a context in which even Western settings become alien and disturbing to the reader, mimicking the disturbance of the underlying trauma. Sarah Trott writes of Joseph Conrad's influence on Chandler, noting that the protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, shares a name (with the exception of a final e) with Chandler's hero. She adds that this extends to the "characterisation" of Marlowe's Los Angeles:

There is much to suggest that Joseph Conrad especially influenced Chandler in a number of ways, having used both a first-person narrative and also a protagonist called Marlow in his novel *The Heart of Darkness* which chronicled the effects of European colonialism in Africa. But while Conrad's Marlow lived literally in the jungle, Chandler created his own metaphorical jungle for Philip Marlowe on the streets of Los Angeles.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Trott, op. cit., p. 125

The Los Angeles “jungle” where violence is unleashed as if by wild animals is profoundly disturbing and heightens our appreciation of Marlowe’s willingness to face its dangers. This function is easily fulfilled in the Omar Yussef novels by Bethlehem, Gaza and Nablus. Their geographic beauty and the emotional response it evokes is quickly undercut by the reality of the disturbed, traumatised location, as when Omar Yussef looks out from his hotel in Gaza:

It was a long time since he had seen the Mediterranean from the coast of Palestine. The sea rippled a deep turquoise, as though it were a tide of gemstones. Its motion was so beautiful and free that his eyes filled with tears.

He looked along the sand. There was trash on the beach, burned out oil drums and plastic bottles protruding from shiny black sprays of kelp. Two boys were throwing stones at another kid as he untangled his fishing net.⁹⁹

In *The Fourth Assassin*, Omar Yussef travels to New York, which takes on this discomfiting role, in part because of the transfer of the Palestinian context to Brooklyn in a neighbourhood called Little Palestine and also because my trauma continues to work its effects, underlying the narrative. Like Chandler’s Los Angeles, New York becomes a character in the novel, laying traps for Omar Yussef as dangerous as Nizar, the man he believes is trying to kill him:

⁹⁹ *The Saladin Murders*, p. 29

It was as if the whole metropolis flooded down like the rain onto this block, a teeming, distracting chaos of noise and smells, flashing lights and video screens. He tried to close the city out of his head and imagined that he was leaving it behind him, watching it recede from the window of an airliner. He backed through the entrance, as though to ensure that neither Nizar nor New York stalked him up the stairs.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, the central locations of the Verrazzano thrillers are in the Middle East, but the trauma generated by that region is powerfully present even when the scene changes to New York or Palma, Prague or Chicago. As the conspiracy takes him to Cologne, Verrazzano faces a low point, aware that Wyatt's Middle Eastern operations extend across Europe, unable to work out how to fight back, and almost ready to succumb to the darkness of despair:

That programmer was the only one who knew how to stop the attack that Wyatt was about to launch all over Europe and America. But Special Agent Dominic Verrazzano was clueless and stymied on a side street in a German city in the dark. He swayed with exhaustion. He was beyond the fatigue that manifests itself in the lactic-acid grip on the hamstrings during a long run or the burn in shoulders struggling to lift more weight. It was the desperate weariness of a soul surveying the landscape of malevolence and disorder in which it exists and hankering for the freedom of the grave.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ *The Fourth Assassin*, p. 270

¹⁰¹ *China Strike*, p. 150

The disturbance of the traumatic element in the narrative is figured in the undercutting of all standard geopolitical and social divisions. This is one facet in which the Middle Eastern setting combines with the trauma to set up a radical confrontation with traditional dualities of good and bad, East and West, left-wing and right. Even for Wyatt, as for Verrazzano, the Middle East may be traumatic, but it is a disturbance that he has come to live with and in which he exudes a certain confidence. Once he ventures out of this territory, he finds himself again a victim subject to the unpredictable force of a hegemonic power with which he is unfamiliar. In *China Strike*, one of the leaders of the Chinese conspiracy, Feng Yi, devises a test for Wyatt on the Vienna U-Bahn. Befriending local anti-capitalist protestors by posing as a North Korean, a member of a society in confrontation with the West, Feng Yi kills one of the Austrians to force Wyatt to cover up for him, illustrating his power over Wyatt through his ability to add new levels of trauma to the man whose apparent indomitability Feng knows to be a disguise for years of damage:

The train burst out of the tunnel into the station no more than ten yards from Feng and the two Austrians. Feng yanked hard on Bernd's hand and swung the young man out onto the track. The train screeched into him, the brakes squealing louder even than the girl. Feng punched her hard in the face. She fell to the ground.

Feng skipped through the turnstile and went past Wyatt. "Clean it up," he said. He went along the tunnel, back toward the Hotel Sacher.¹⁰²

This, then, is the role of the Middle East—to site the trauma of the characters in the same events as my own, and to make them subject to it even when they are in a different region. In narrative terms, the trauma of a Palestinian or a former Special Forces soldier is more earned than that of a journalist, though those characters are essentially guided by my trauma. The traumatized journalist might be perceived as peripheral to the action and, therefore, unlikely to have been truly traumatised.

Trauma is, of course, not a competition, but I felt the peer pressure of other journalists—and while I was writing my first novel I still worked as a foreign correspondent—to remain somehow emotionally aloof and secure from the subject of my coverage. Further, I wrote about people who had experienced truly appalling conditions during the Holocaust, the intifada, conflicts in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq; yet it was my own traumatic experiences, melded with but not overshadowed by events in the lives of Middle Easterners, that dictated the genre, the tone and characterisation of my novels. I was passing on my trauma to characters who would be expected to experience such symptoms as a means to express the depth of what I felt.

Location is vital to these novels, because place plays a central role in my traumatic experiences, as I covered violent situations across the Middle East and, throughout this period, lived in Jerusalem. While some correspondents travelled to cover violent outbreaks in the Middle East, many would return to decompress in familiar, calm

¹⁰² *China Strike*, p. 173

surroundings; my refuge was in a divided city known across the world as a centre of violence and, to say the least, stressful conditions. When Barbara Pezzotti writes about “transnationality” in crime fiction, she refers to the employment of the crime fiction format by authors from all over the world, often in a way that takes them beyond their own national group, though usually without leaving their domestic environment:¹⁰³ for example, the Afrikaner writer Deon Meyer writing crime novels set in South Africa that include Zulu characters, or the occasional appearance in Andrea Camilleri’s Sicilian novels of Tunisian migrants. My novels represent a different facet of transnationality: my experiences in the Middle East were so shocking that they ripped me out of my British roots and re-rooted me in the Middle East. After I had left the Middle East, my then-agent read the manuscript of *China Strike* (which I wrote in Europe) and commented that the segments set in Lebanon were the best parts of the book: “As I was reading,” she told me, “I was thinking, ‘Matt really *lives* in the Middle East.’” Even though I was no longer present in the Middle East, trauma sited me in the region’s geography through its psychological hold over me, even as it secured itself in my writing through the plasticity of the crime fiction format. Revisiting the Middle Eastern site of trauma allows me to navigate and process it; it also infuses the text with the power of the trauma, which, it may be, is not present to the same degree in my writing about other regions (though even then I would argue that the characters are likely to be living a distantiated version of my Middle East trauma, just as Philip Marlowe carries Chandler’s WWI trauma, despite the setting of those novels in Los Angeles, rather than Flanders.)

Trauma victims can find it hard to feel at home in any situation. I have felt a personal inability to settle and to feel that I belong anywhere throughout my adult life, but

¹⁰³ Pezzotti, Barbara. “Transnationality”, in eds. Allan, Gulddal, King and Pepper, op. cit.

since my traumatic experiences in the Middle East this has posed a still greater challenge. The character of Omar Yussef was clearly an attempt to resolve this, because he is part of a tightly knit community in Bethlehem, a member of a large clan who is respected as a schoolteacher. However, he is also a deracinated Palestinian refugee who fled his home in 1948, and each of the four mysteries in which he features takes place in a different town (Bethlehem, Gaza, Nablus, Brooklyn). This is in contrast to many current crime fiction series, which are built around specific and consistent locations, such as Ian Rankin's Rebus novels in Edinburgh or Donna Leon's Commissario Brunetti novels in Venice, almost as though staking claim to the place like a commercial brand.¹⁰⁴ The international thriller structure of the Verrazzano novels is still more clear in its use of place as a reflection of underlying trauma. The international thriller dictates that the hero is forced to move between New York, Syria, Lebanon and other US and European locations, with flashbacks to a time before he had to live this way, a time now lost as a result of his traumatising conflict experiences.

Detective fiction displays "the fragmentation and complexity of modern life and...undermine[s] the tendency of narrative to achieve control and closure".¹⁰⁵ Crime fiction is the opposite of the journalistic narrative, which aims to neutralise and direct, minimising uncertainties and alternative directions. The journalist who is most aware of the impact of trauma is at a disadvantage, while this awareness is an asset to the novelist. While I worked for Time Magazine, another correspondent became known for taking somewhat outrageous risks in his coverage of Afghanistan and Iraq.

¹⁰⁴ Slavoj Žižek argues that the narrowing of focus in crime fiction series to a single location is a "dialectical counterpart" to the effect of globalisation on crime fiction. Žižek, Slavoj. "Parallax", London Review of Books, 25.22, 20 November 2003, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v25/n22/slavoj-zizek/parallax

¹⁰⁵ Willett, Ralph, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA*. Manchester University Press, 1996, p.8. Cited by Trott, op. cit., p.40

I had met him before the Iraq war when we attended the same hostile environment training and found him to be unassuming, friendly and lacking in the dominant ego that often afflicted colleagues. On a visit to the New York office when the war was two years old, other staff recounted to me stories this correspondent had told them about witnessing rocket grenades taking the heads off US soldiers with whom he had just been in conversation and other horrific incidents that clearly gave them a vicarious frisson. Towards the end of my visit, I encountered him and found him transformed from the man I had first met into a swaggering braggart. Not long after, I was laid off (and decided to leave journalism to write my second novel), while the correspondent was transferred at a reportedly massive salary to work for CNN. Because I did not choose to commodify my traumatic experiences in the workplace, I was not retained. On the morning on which I was laid off, I felt a profound relief. At the time, I thought it was because I had tired of the job of leading a team of reporters in the Middle East, often dealing with conflicts between the Palestinian and Israeli correspondents, and of writing within the limiting formulae of journalism. I now believe that I felt freed of the need to place myself in danger in order that I would meet the expectations of my editors, who told me that my safety was paramount but rewarded the correspondent who regaled them with the most bloodthirsty anecdotes.

The nature of this freedom is broader than simply the relative lack of editorial control exerted by editors at publishing houses these days, compared to the weekly desire of magazine editors to put their stamp on an article and to channel it through the same translational processes as every other article in the publication. It is a deep reckoning with disturbances that might be too threatening to face directly and can only be unleashed through the distancing of the trauma within the narrative and its ascription to a character other than the author. As D.H. Lawrence wrote, "One sheds

one's sicknesses in books, repeats and presents again one's emotions to be master of them."¹⁰⁶ This is clearly a natural process that the psyche attempts of its own accord, even in those who are not writers. David Aberbach summarises Sigmund Freud's observations of the repeated nightmares of shellshocked soldiers in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as "a violent attempt on the part of the unconscious to master the trauma in all its horror and to overcome it."¹⁰⁷ Death always comes with a narrative that we read ritually in the funeral service, whether to master it or merely to cope with it. *The Saladin Murders* ends with the arrival of a British embassy official to read the funeral service over the grave of a dead soldier of World War I whose bones have been a plot element in the mystery solved by Omar Yussef: "He pulled some printed sheets from his jacket pocket and read the burial service, as the others gathered around the grave with their heads bowed."¹⁰⁸ The crime that drives the narrative is solved and the trauma that underlies it can be laid to rest by a representative of institutional order through the enactment of a ritual text, mirroring the role of the genre structure.

Ultimately the quiet, contemplative element of the Omar Yussef mystery novels is less reflective of the nature of trauma than the constant tension of the Dominic Verrazzano thrillers that came after them. While the mysteries represent the gradual acceptance that I am subject to trauma and am willing to face occasional increases in tension, the move to the thriller subgenre reflects my growing realisation that trauma is ever-present and must be confronted constantly. To that end, my choice of the Zen proverb "The obstacle is the path" as the epigraph of *China Strike* illustrates

¹⁰⁶ Lawrence, D.H. *Letters*, Volume II, p.90, Eds. J.T. Boulton et al.. Cambridge University Press, cited by Aberbach, David, in *Surviving Trauma: Loss and Literature*, Yale University Press, 1989. p. 2

¹⁰⁷ Aberbach, op. cit. p.2

¹⁰⁸ *The Saladin Murders*, p 340

the nature of the textual operation carried out here. The urgency of the need to create order is built into the thriller sub-genre, in which the character—and the reader—are intended to experience fear in every chapter, rather than sensing an undertone of danger during a quiet investigation in a mystery novel. Each chapter represents a ticking up of the volume in a crescendo of pressure that propels the narrative to its conclusion. David Glover writes that:

The thriller was and still is to a large extent marked by the way in which it persistently seeks to raise the stakes of the narrative, heightening or exaggerating the experience of events by transforming them into a rising curve of danger, violence or shock. The world that the thriller attempts to realise is one that is radically uncertain.¹⁰⁹

The thriller challenges the hero to complete a mission, often a moral one, but, Glover adds, “the thriller is equally, and in some instances, *more* concerned with creating obstacles, proliferating setbacks, traps, inconveniences, dead-ends and discomposure.”¹¹⁰ The constant placement of obstacles before the hero of *The Damascus Threat* and *China Strike* allows me to enact the overcoming of trauma as an obstacle with which I am in constant confrontation.

Siting the thrillers primarily in the Middle East allows me to confront the geopolitical issues that led to the conflicts in which I was traumatised and their ongoing

¹⁰⁹ Glover, David. “The Thriller”, in Ed. Priestman, Martin, *Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹¹⁰ Glover, op. cit., p. 130

manifestations. This is a more conscious channel in the novels, and it counters a criticism that has sometimes been made of the thriller genre: that the hero's individualistic triumph at the end of the novel does not affect any change in the structural societal or institutional issues that have more broadly caused the disturbance at the heart of the plot, and that these are allowed to carry on undisturbed. Andrew Pepper cites both Rita Felski and Franco Moretti as suggesting the thriller leaves the "larger systems of power...innocent and thus free to carry on."¹¹¹ This element of the thriller, in fact, allows the traumatised author/protagonist to come to terms with the irresolvable, unending nature of traumatic effect. At the end of *The Damascus Threat*, Verrazzano has prevented the immediate destructive plot to release poison gas into the United Nations during the US president's speech, but on the final page he is made aware of the continuation of the broader conspiracy by a text message from his former Special Forces commander, Colonel Wyatt, which propels him into the second book. In that novel, *China Strike*, Verrazzano once again fights through a final confrontation with the book's villains on a yacht in the harbour at Palma de Mallorca. However, he notices one conspirator climbing from the water across the marina and realises that there is another dimension to the conspiracy he believed he had ended. Though Verrazzano must continue his pursuit, he has found a peace in the realisation of the scope of what he confronts. As the final paragraphs of the novel suggest, the trauma driving the narrative is no longer personal; it is shared and, as such, less of a source of shame and more of a message that, once understood, can be transmitted in narrative form by the act of detection and by the

¹¹¹ Pepper, Andrew. "Regional Crime Fiction", in Gulddal, King and Rolls, op. cit. pp. 87-88.

author in utilising the knowledge gained through confrontation with trauma to highlight the greater issues faced collectively by victims of violence:

He plunged into the sea. Under the surface, the space around him was as silent and cool as his soul. He came back up. On the deck of the yacht, Jahn watched him with her husband at her side. The Krokodil gave Verrazzano a small nod of understanding.

Verrazzano struck out for the shore.¹¹²

Furthermore, I would not accept that the thriller or crime fiction in general fails to highlight the power systems of oppression. Andrea Camilleri's Inspector Montalbano novels portray a figure of authority in the Sicilian police, yet the author's leftist politics are evident in the main character's criticisms of the system within which he operates. Against a more violent backdrop, Jean-Claude Izzo's *Marseilles Trilogy* plots the movement of ex-policeman Fabio Montale from someone who "believes in justice, the law"¹¹³ to a figure aware of how the deck is stacked against him by powerful international alliances of criminals and politicians. The crime genre is particularly powerful, in fact, as a means of confronting such realisations, because its classic form promises the opposite, a neat conclusion that restores stability and trust by a detective explaining his reasoning in the library of a country house. A disturbance of this structure is, thus, an emotive and striking feature.¹¹⁴ When this disturbance

¹¹²*China Strike*, p 278

¹¹³ Izzo, Jean-Claude. *Total Chaos*. Translated by Howard Curtis, Europa Editions, 2005. p. 92

¹¹⁴ Journalism, which would typically site itself in a more directly confrontational posture towards power structures, is less geared towards a forceful condemnation because of the limits placed on the portrayal

reflects the underpinning of the narrative by trauma, it generates still more of an emotional impact.

An element of this disturbance and its inherent critique of hegemonic societal forms can be seen in the blurred division between “good guy” and “bad guy” in my Verrazzano thrillers. Because the two categories are both afflicted by the conflict trauma that is the true underpinning of the narrative, neither is wholly pure or impure, good or bad. Though Verrazzano works for a US government agency and might thus be cast as a representative of capitalist institutions or bourgeois interests in the classic Marxist reading of crime fiction,¹¹⁵ his transgression of the heroic mould in his Lebanon conflict backstory and consequent traumatic symptoms allow him to posit revolutionary ideas or to harbour a countercultural attitude towards authority:

“Verrazzano knew that the politicians wouldn’t be able to wait long, and when they pushed the button, it would be guys like him who would end up either dead or with a conscience bad enough to blight the rest of their lives.”¹¹⁶ The same is true of the “bad guys.” In *The Damascus Threat*, each of the men recruited to the team breaking into the United Nations building to inject sarin gas into the air-conditioning system has a conflict background that has left them maimed and/or traumatised, suffering other impacts on their family lives and mental health. The apparent leader of the conspiracy, Colonel Wyatt, is himself damaged by his own exposure to violence. Near the start of a section of *China Strike* in which Wyatt infiltrates the Beirut headquarters of Hezbollah with the intention of allowing himself to be tortured almost to death to convince his captors that he is telling them the truth, the former Special

of emotions and, as cited earlier, the tendency of journalism, according to Barthes, to converge upon a bourgeois ideology.

¹¹⁵ Knight, Stephen. *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Macmillan, 1980.

¹¹⁶ *China Strike*, p. 111

Forces colonel expresses the desolate worldview of a man who has failed to crawl out from under his trauma:

The driver turned on his tape deck. The sound of an imam reciting the one hundred and third sura of The Koran blasted through the car, high and nasal and hanging onto the vowels. "By the mysteries of the dimensions of time, truly man is lost," he recited. There are more reasons than that, Wyatt thought.¹¹⁷

Given that Verrazzano is cast as a superman because of my need to assert control over my trauma, just as he is able to enforce control over a situation through physical force or ingenuity, Wyatt takes this a stage further, because as the "bad guy" he is unhindered by moral considerations entirely: "Nothing would scare him and absolutely nothing could kill him. If these Hezbollah men could've forced Wyatt to swallow a hydrogen bomb, he'd have crapped out a mushroom cloud and carried on."¹¹⁸ However, Wyatt's apparent ability to be at least a step ahead of Verrazzano fails at the end of *China Strike*, where he realises the scope of the conspiracy of which he has been a part and his betrayal by his powerful connection. Verrazzano, by contrast, seems at that point to have known this would be the case all along. This supreme capacity of Wyatt and its ultimate failure reflect the powerful stage of traumatic affliction in which despair, pain or depression become highly attractive as apparent salves to the struggle to repress the traumatic event. Verrazzano's ultimate

¹¹⁷ *China Strike*, p. 92

¹¹⁸ *China Strike*, p. 95

triumph over his old commander is a pointer towards the value of a positive response to trauma.

The role of trauma in the crime fiction narrative is to undermine the status quo, the structure of the psyche as it is reflected in the classic detective form. Trauma creates the circumstances in which the male, dominative detective can be overthrown and replaced with a detective whose vulnerabilities are the means by which his role and actions create a critique of governmental, societal or capitalist structures.

In 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', Todorov defines the limitations of the crime genre: "Detective fiction has its norms; to 'develop' them is also to disappoint them: to 'improve upon' detective fiction is to write 'literature', not detective fiction."¹¹⁹

Franco Moretti argues that "detective fiction links a continuous novelty of content to a perennial fixity of the syntax."¹²⁰ Both these structuralist assessments of the genre fail to acknowledge how the structure can be subverted by a narrative driven by traumatic conflict symptoms, which are of course disruptive of the rational application of an absolute structure—or, to put it in Todorov and Moretti's terms, how trauma alters the apparently unchangeable syntax of the form. More recent readings of crime fiction challenge this approach,¹²¹ and the political context of my Palestinian mysteries and my US agent thrillers certainly defies the convention—asserted by Moretti and others—that crime fiction inevitably delivers a conservative master narrative. Omar Yussef solves the individual crimes that constitute the inciting event in the four novels in which he appears, but in each case is aware of the looming

¹¹⁹ Todorov, op. cit., p. 43

¹²⁰ Moretti, Franco. *Signs Taken for Wonders*, Verso, 1983, p. 141.

¹²¹ Andrew Pepper writes that "the idea that genre is something so fixed and unyielding as to imprison subversive ideas surely needs to be revised, particularly if form as well as content is determined by not just aesthetic but also political considerations." (Pepper, Andrew, *The Contemporary American Crime Novel: Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Class*, Edinburgh University Press, 2000. p. 54)

presence of a corrupt government, unrestrained criminal gangs and, in *The Fourth Assassin*, the unwillingness of the Arab nations to work to resolve the problems of the Palestinians. In the thrillers, Verrazzano battles a conspiracy that expands with every new revelation, tracing it to a member of the US president's ministerial cabinet, though it is never certain that it ends even there.

This subversive element is evident in all my novels. My trauma and its role in the narrative is key to this fact, because of the disruption represented by the recurrence of the traumatic memory. My Palestinian novels undercut the journalistic/diplomatic narrative, which certainly has the kind of overwhelming stratifying power ascribed by Todorov to the crime genre's structure. This narrative sees the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as being simply between two sides facing intractable differences, but the novels subvert this by locating the essence of the conflict and its effects as being *within* each society.¹²²

The Verrazzano novels are still more radical in their re-reading of the role of a US agency in the Middle East and in the new capitalist Cold War with China. By making Verrazzano an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent, I place him within an institution that, at the time I wrote the books, was little known (though it has recently become infamous for its roundups of immigrants under the Trump administration). For those who saw ICE in 2016 and 2017, when the books were published, as a tool of repression, the choice of agency would have made Verrazzano's anti-establishment ideas and unconventional methods a disturbance of the traditional role of the thriller hero because they are so obviously at odds with the general execution

¹²² If this weren't the case, then the governments of the two sides would either have made peace or destroyed each other. The fact that they haven't is evidence that neither can overcome the objections of particular groups within their societies and are, therefore, unable to take decisive steps.

of the agency's duties. He commands a freedom that drives the narrative, allowing the disruptive impetus of the underlying trauma to take over. The trauma underlying the narrative—my trauma—and the trauma in Verrazzano's backstory give him a degree of agency that overcomes the traditional limitations of the thriller hero, positioning him as a radical challenge to the perceived conservatism of the form. That Verrazzano should search for a radical rethinking of the world is inherent in his confrontation with traumatic symptoms. As Judith Herman writes: "The trauma is resolved only when the survivor develops a new mental 'schema' for understanding what has happened."¹²³ This is true of Verrazzano, for whom the underlying emotional drive of the novels is his coming to terms with his trauma. I would contend that it applies to the author too, though the fact that trauma is never so fully "resolved" as to be wiped away entirely is evident in the extent of discovery of its impact upon me and my work that I have experienced while writing this thesis.

Verrazzano has been a Special Forces soldier and a federal agent. These are not the typical characteristics of the anti-establishment radical. It is his trauma experience, introduced to the novel's narrative through the underpinning of my trauma, that leads him to understand the world differently and to take action against the structures that have led to his traumatising in the first place.

This is figured in Verrazzano's resolution of the mystery behind the scalping of the Chinese murder victims in *China Strike*. The victims were all part of a Chinese team of computer programmers sent to work at Western automobile companies, so that they could infect onboard car computers with software that allows the vehicles to be

¹²³ Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*, Pandora, 2003, p. 41

controlled remotely from China, to disastrous effect. Verrazzano solves this puzzle when he shaves the head of the last survivor of this group to find the software code tattooed onto the scalp, having been hidden by the re-grown hair. The symbolism is evident, in that the solution is found on the heads of the victims, the brain being the organ most affected by traumatic symptoms. This solution is written near the seat of trauma for Verrazzano to uncover.

My alternative historical thriller, *The Ambassador*, makes this change in the main character's understanding evident on a larger scale. The protagonist, Dan Lavi, is the Israeli ambassador to Berlin in an alternative scenario in which Britain approves its own Peel Report, which was issued in 1937 and, in reality, rejected because of Arab opposition; Palestine is divided into two states, Jewish and Arab, a decade before this actually happened. Throughout the first and second acts of the book, Lavi tries to maintain working relationships with Nazi officials, in particular Adolf Eichmann, so that he can secure permission for as many of Germany's Jews as possible to emigrate to the new Israeli state. This puts him in conflict with Shmulik Shoham, the Mossad chief based in the Berlin embassy who plots to assassinate Hitler as his preferred method of halting the persecution of Jews. When Shoham is killed soon after a failed attempt on Hitler's life, Lavi comes to understand the true nature of the Nazis' intentions towards the Jews and orchestrates the bombing of Auschwitz by US, British and Israeli planes. While he sets up this attack, his wife is arrested and sent to Auschwitz. The result is that Lavi is at Auschwitz, rescuing his wife, when the bombs start to fall and appears to sacrifice his life in guiding the aircraft to the correct target, the gas chambers, after the first bombs go astray. My trauma, which underlies *The Ambassador* as it does my other work, brings Lavi considerable agency to resolve a great historical trauma; I had to come to

understand the endlessness of its impact on me and, therefore, Lavi's confrontation with the greatest evil of the twentieth century is an appropriate parallel. Omar Yussef's realisation at the conclusion of his first case is relevant here, in that it highlights the often-overlooked forward-looking element of crime fiction. Whereas detective novels and thrillers are, in the reading that casts them as conservative, built around a final reckoning that restores societal order as it was before, Omar Yussef sees the role of the detective/thriller hero as a reform of reality, a challenge to accepted norms that succeeds when the detective removes a future threat to the structure of morality:

There was a legacy, he thought, that might be found in detective work, just as much as in teaching. It was a mistake to believe that detection was a matter of figuring out what had happened in the past and then taking revenge for it. He understood now that it was about protecting the future from the people who committed evil and would do so again.¹²⁴

For Dan Lavi to have destroyed the capacity of the Nazis to carry out the depredations of Auschwitz is a forceful illustration of Omar Yussef's conception. It is the structure of the crime genre that provides Lavi with the framework in which to do so, and it is my own trauma that carries him towards it.

¹²⁴ *The Bethlehem Murders*, p. 264

Conclusion: Mirrors of Trauma

Anne Whitehead writes that “trauma fiction relies on the intensification of conventional narrative modes and methods. There are, however, a number of key stylistic features which tend to recur in these narratives. These include intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice. Novelists draw, in particular, on literary techniques that mirror at a formal level the effects of trauma.”¹²⁵

I would argue that this may be a technique employed by authors who have not suffered any particular trauma, but who seek to build a portrayal of trauma through stylistic tropes that mimic what they imagine to be the disturbing impact of trauma on the psyche. As I have shown in this study, writing enacts a form of therapy for me, *resolving* the underlying fragmentation, so that my novels home in on one point of view, that of the protagonist, as a therapist would focus on the emotional response and overriding storyline of their patient, probing it but not seeking to undermine it. My books do not try to be mirrors of trauma; they are examinations and resolutions of trauma. In part, this may be a reflection of the tendency of trauma victims to find their perception entirely filled with their own issues: “When you’re a victim, there’s no room in your life for other people’s suffering.”¹²⁶ Predominantly, it is a more positive factor than that, however. Whereas the narrative techniques posited by Whitehead seek almost to promote “vicarious trauma” in the reader of the damaging type that I laid out earlier, I have shown that trauma in my novels is a representation of a

¹²⁵ Whitehead, op. cit., p. 84.

¹²⁶ *The Saladin Murders*, p. 184

challenge on the path to mental health figured in the genre format, the essential disruptions that propel the plot towards a final resolution of the disturbance, whether that is the crime at the centre of the novel or the trauma that underlies it. Thus, the traumatic experience of Omar Yussef during his time in Gaza is not portrayed through a “fragmented narrative voice,” but is rather coherent and cathartic. He feels it, expresses it, and strives to resolve it, tormented in his sleep by the method of death suffered by other characters in the narrative, without disturbances to the form of the crime novel:

Omar Yussef dreamed of death. He sweated through the explosion that killed James Cree, shaken by the shuddering blast and swathed in the flames, jarred by the twisted metal of the UN Suburban, broken by the stones the local boys hurled. He choked through the last breaths of Bassam Odwan’s life, even as the blood pumped from his severed fingertips. He recoiled as an antique rifle discharged its bullet into his rib, fragments of bone tearing his lungs. The shot came again and again, each time thrusting him into the mattress. Death wasn’t following him anymore. It was sharing his bed, not like a wife, but like an illicit lover, jealous and angry, giving him no sleep.¹²⁷

The deliberately disjointed trauma writing described by Whitehead is in fact distant from trauma itself, portraying the perceived dissonance of traumatic symptoms as a disturbance of the ideal of literary wholeness. As such it is unsympathetic and judgemental. The depiction of trauma in my novels represents the recent

¹²⁷ *The Saladin Murders*, p. 217

development in our understanding of trauma and empathy for its sufferers. One might parallel it to the public perception of damaged veterans of the Vietnam War, who were outcasts, perceived as being less than whole, and Iraq or Afghanistan war veterans, who were relatively well-received on their return and whose suffering was seen as treatable. The reader can only *observe* the “trauma” portrayed through Whitehead’s dissonant style and is likely to be disturbed and even revolted by it. In my novels, traumatic symptoms provide an opportunity to share the character’s sense experiences with the reader and, thus, provide a deeper connection and understanding.

To reveal the severity of the trauma underlying the narrative and experienced by the main character, the structure and style of the novel have to be undisturbed, acting as a frame for the trauma rather than a reflection of it. Importantly for my writing, as I have shown, this is also a contrast with journalistic form, which would pretend to be very much a mirror of the reality that it aims to present.¹²⁸ Journalistic formats may be surprisingly unwilling to accommodate a transgressive reality, whereas the crime novel’s structure is supple enough to encompass it.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ To illustrate the deceptions inherent in this typical journalistic postulation, I would cite a long investigative article I was commissioned to write in 2014 by *Moment*, the US-based Jewish magazine. The commission was for a long article on the Bedouin who live within the borders of Israel. I had met the editor of *Moment* at a book event and was asked to write both as a journalist with experience of the Middle East, where I still lived at the time, and as a novelist who had written books about Palestinians. After several months of research, I delivered the long piece, only for *Moment* to decline to publish it, because it highlighted the difficulties faced by Israel’s Bedouin, from land confiscation to urban poverty in the new towns created to bring them out of the desert. The magazine had hoped that I would provide a more positive portrayal of a community that some Israelis and many US Jews believe is positive towards the state and well-integrated into Israeli society, serving in the Israeli army and carrying Israeli passports. I declined to revise the story. The article was published unchanged in another US Jewish publication, *Tablet*, shortly afterwards (Rees, Matt. “The Lost Tribes of Israel: The Jewish State Seeks to Bring the Bedouin in From the Desert”, *Tablet*, 29 January, 2015. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/the-lost-tribes-of-israel>)

¹²⁹ One novel that incorporates elements of both journalism and crime fiction, Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), illustrates the conflict between the two writing approaches. The crime genre elements—a closed-room mystery set on an island and the cyberthriller staple, the punk computer hacker—are encumbered with lengthy journalistic digressions that reflect Larsson’s background in

The form of crime fiction takes the disturbance of crime and the author's underlying trauma and, as I have shown, carries it to a resolution in which the protagonist achieves a degree of control over their trauma, though often not an absolute resolution of the crime or of the trauma. The degree of resolution varies, depending on the extent of the author's underlying trauma and the breadth of geopolitical violence or institutional corruption overlaying the single crime that is the focus of the novel. A cynic might add a third reason: the author's desire to continue his use of the protagonist in a series of novels. Publishers urge authors to write series of novels and not to diverge from an annual publishing schedule, so long as the series is successful, because the habit of purchasing each instalment in the story of a particular detective that is common to many readers obviates the need of the publisher to find a new audience for each successive book. The counterargument here would be that, if an author resolves their trauma successfully enough, there may be a lack of motivation to write further novels or any novels that they do write may lack energy. Nonetheless, the writing may be the one thing managing the trauma. In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe speaks for Chandler when he asserts that, "the only salvation for a writer is to write," even if "he has fallen out of love with the kind of stuff he writes".¹³⁰

The form of crime fiction is, in itself, a resolving factor. However, within that resolving structure, are there other signposts that signal the protagonist's willingness or

investigative journalism. From violence against women to far-right extremism and the failure of the Swedish welfare state, the digressions average about six pages. Though some reviewers saw these sections as providing valuable social commentary, the best that can really be said about them is that they would have made interesting footnotes, with their removal having little effect on the narrative. Journalism presents "facts" as if undeniable and inalterable, so that they sit in Larsson's book like blocks of concrete that he is unable to weave into the narrative. The introspective nature of a crime fiction investigation seems infinitely more supple alongside them.

¹³⁰ Quoted by Trott, op. cit., p. 177.

eagerness to overcome the trauma as it manifests in his backstory and his character arc within the novel? The period in which I wrote the novels that are the subject of this study are bookended by my marriage and a stage twelve years later when I achieved a certain acceptance of myself, allowing me to be more secure and a more patient father to my two children, who at that time were ten and six years old.¹³¹ This is reflected in the moments in the novels at which, on a recent reading, I experienced some of the most profound emotional responses: the engagements between the protagonists and the women and children of the novels. I have chosen to examine this aspect of the novels in the conclusion of this thesis, because of the remedial and determinative role it plays as a theme in the books.

Trauma leaves its victim feeling unmoored, desiring that they be understood but convinced that they are no longer worthy of love. It may seem surprising that the hero of a hardboiled novel seeks acceptance and softness in domestic relations or a tender moment with someone who isn't drinking whisky or threatening to hit him on the back of the head with a cosh. However, Chandler himself spoke directly to this idea, when he said of Marlowe: "His toughness has always been more or less a surface bluff."¹³² A bluff that is undercut by the eagerness with which Marlowe seeks a deeper relationship with people for whom he feels sympathy throughout Chandler's work. At the end of Chandler's final completed novel, *Playback*, the possibility that Marlowe will now find happiness with his old flame Linda Loring is almost heart-

¹³¹ One key indicator here is that I started to sleep much better, welcoming the rest that comes with bedtime, rather than anticipating a night of frequent waking and disturbing dreams. As Judith Herman writes, "The traumatised person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly." Herman, op. cit., p. 35.

¹³² Quoted in Trott, op. cit., p. 25

breaking, because we have seen him struggle to build relationships, despite a clear desire to do so, as is so common among trauma victims.

Omar Yussef does not suffer from Marlowe's limited ability to sustain a relationship. He is a family man with deep roots in his community in Bethlehem and has a long-standing friendship with the local police chief, Khamis Zeydan. However, when Bethlehem—or other settings for the novels in which he appears—become dangerous and unwelcoming and he loses faith in the ability of Zeydan to enforce a moral code, Omar Yussef turns for support to women and children, such as his granddaughter Nadia, with whom he shares a running joke about his new career as a detective and who is, in *The Samaritan's Secret*, reading a Chandler novel whose plot she describes to her grandfather. In *The Saladin Murders*, Omar Yussef fantasises about fleeing the traumatising reality of his experience to take refuge with Nadia: "He wanted to leave Gaza and go to her now. He would tell her detective stories. It would be more pleasant than being an actual detective, and less risky."¹³³ In this novel, Omar Yussef is driven to investigate the abduction by the Palestinian secret police of a university professor, because of his emotional response to the loneliness of the man's young son, though he knows it will plunge him into danger:

The boy straightened. He hooked his fingers through the chicken wire. One of the canaries perched on his thumb. "Will my father be okay, *ustaz*?"

Omar Yussef sniffed and cleared his throat. "Of course."

"Did he do something wrong?"

¹³³ *The Saladin Murders*, p. 176

“The exact opposite. Your father stood up for what is right. In a place full of wrongs, that’s a dangerous thing to do.”¹³⁴

After the professor is killed, Omar Yussef returns to the family home, nominally to deliver the news and console the family, but also to gather strength from the presence of women and children for the confrontations he knows he will face in the denouement of the book.

Verrazzano provides somewhat of a contrast with Omar Yussef, in that he does not have a family life on which to fall back. His emotional drive is still, however, based around a family element. The incident that pushed him into breakdown during his Special Forces career was the assassination of a Lebanese political activist in front of her child:

When he killed Maryam Ghattas, he had driven down to the Corniche and stared through his tears at the deep blue of the Mediterranean. The light was grey in Cologne, but he sensed all the shame he had felt back then, and his eyes were wet. The wind through the railway arches chilled him. He wiped his knuckle across his eyes.¹³⁵

To the other members of his Special Forces squad in Beirut, such as Colonel Wyatt, Verrazzano had failed to carry out the mission because he did not kill the child as

¹³⁴ *The Saladin Murders*, p.73

¹³⁵ *China Strike*, p. 149

well, allowing his potential identification by a witness. In *The Damascus Threat*, Brennan, a former member of Verrazzano's Special Forces team who still works for Wyatt, fights Verrazzano in a Syrian hotel room. As Brennan shocks Verrazzano with the electricity from a bathroom cable, he goads him about that failure:

"Wyatt sent me back there later to kill the only witness—the only person who could identify you. See how he took care of you? But you spat in his face and left the company."

Verrazzano shook his head. "Witness? You mean—"

"Her kid. You should've taken him out, and you know it."

The current incapacitated Verrazzano. Soon it would kill him. He had to finish this. He forced his body forward. He drove Brennan's shaven head against the tiled wall.¹³⁶

This fight is a metaphoric representation of the trauma of the failed hit for Verrazzano. The electricity is very much like the shivering adrenaline that comes with a traumatic flashback, and it is Brennan's head, where traumatic memory resides, that Verrazzano targets. Further, the violation of the family bond in the murder of a mother before the eyes of her child taps into Verrazzano's early traumatic backstory, in which he lost his mother to a drunk driving accident and, subsequently, his father closed off to him emotionally.

¹³⁶ *The Damascus Threat*, p. 212

The Damascus Threat also highlights a further factor in trauma symptoms: the tendency of the victim to hide the consequences of their affliction. Chavez, the disabled veteran, has a very strong marriage and a deep bond with his wife Adela. However, he keeps secret from her his failure to find work and his suicidal thoughts. When he takes a job on the team that will break into the United Nations, he is angered by her innocent questions about the role, sparked into a defensive rage as trauma victims often are by any hint of opposition, even as he acknowledges that she is guiltless. The challenge that trauma poses to a strong, honest marital relationship, to family life, or deep friendship is something that I experienced during the years in which I wrote these books. The difficulty of dealing with these disruptions in actual emotional life is figured in Verrazzano's remarks to a female FBI agent before he departs to engage in the final confrontation with Colonel Wyatt:

"Stay safe, Dominic."

"That's your job. If I intended to stay safe, I'd—"

She cocked her head, quizzically.

He stopped short and started again. "I guess I just wouldn't know how."¹³⁷

Unknown to him, Verrazzano is travelling towards safety on the structure of the crime novel. That I worked out how to stay safe is, in large part, due to my wife and children. It is also due to the structures of the crime fiction that I wrote. Like Verrazzano, they led me to a solution.

¹³⁷ *China Strike*, p. 181

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