

“Foul deeds will rise”

Detective Novels: More to them than entertainment?

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2023

a review of

This Rancid Mill: An Alex Damage Novel by Kyle Decker. PM Press 2023

Foul deeds will rise

Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.

—Hamlet

When C. Auguste Dupin solves the case in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders on the Rue Morgue*, the chilling elements comprising the grizzly killings and the shocking conclusion contain the model for much of subsequent murder mystery and detective fiction. The genre's popularity, almost 200 years later, remains undiminished in literature and film. Ones with depth, raise not only the question of who-dunnit, but along the way, pose larger, wide-ranging considerations of greed, revenge, power, politics, trust, friendship, sex, family, or combinations.

At least this is what is addressed on the surface of the stories. Rarely do books or films get to the substratum of what engenders murderous or corrupt behavior or why dominant values are so frequently under threat and violated so often.

Poe's story, published in 1841, is considered the first murder mystery, bringing forth the elements of mystery and sleuthing that still define the template of that type of writing today. This story-model accesses a dread lurking deep inside the mass psyche of the modern world where social bonds are frayed or non-existent, particularly in the anonymity of large cities.

However, foul deeds are also perpetrated and murders solved in tales set in rural areas, suburbs, and even tribal reservations where it is up to the police detective or private dick to relentlessly, even obsessively, engage their analytic skills, and often physical prowess, to find the perpetrator and ensure the transgression is punished.

Although the books and films are consumed for pleasure, their pervasiveness speaks to an unspoken dis-ease, a fear that the quiet neighbor could have a basement filled with rotting corpses.

There are many subtexts to this genre. Some film historians, when discussing the classic period of film noir, the 1940s and 1950s, offer that during the House Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC) investigations of communist influence in Hollywood, the Red hunters were less concerned with leftist content in scripts and more with what the popular dark, mystery films portrayed.

And, indeed, many screenplays were written by those with communist sympathies. It was a period of American triumphalism yet film noir plots depicted a nation with a dark underside, corrupt and often murderous. After the cleansing of leftist directors and screen writers, breezy comedies and sappy musicals replaced the cynical and existential plots.

This Rancid Mill brings all of the traditional qualities of the craft to its plot with a smash-bang telling. Kyle Decker's narrative reads like a Raymond Chandler novel told in a Charles Bukowski-like first-person narrative.

Decker's sleuth setting is Los Angeles as it was for Chandler, and like his forbear, the City of Angels provides Decker with all of the elements necessary for excitement and suspense. Similar to plots with Philip Marlowe, Chandler's private eye, what begins for Decker's Alex Damage as a somewhat simple case to solve, quickly swirls into a labyrinth of corrupt politicians, crooked cops, junkies, and neo-Nazi skinheads, all who are trying to kill him. It is never clear whether he can trust his closest allies or even his client. Not an original plot line, but Decker does it well..

Damage is more akin to Walter Moseley's character, Easy Rollins; a neighbor guy who does a little investigating on the side without a badge. However, in probably the most unique character in detective fiction, Damage is a denizen of the early 1980s LA punk scene, an anarchist who sports a blue mohawk and a torn leather jacket.

Decker has gone to great lengths to recreate the feel of that era with its club scenes, violent mosh pits, actual venues, and real bands from his research gleaned from zines, memoirs, and documentaries. The subculture's gritty nature is such that when friends greet each other, it's often with a "Fuck you," rather than a hello.

Damage swings into action when he suspects that the over-dose death of Jerry Rash, a popular punk band lead singer of Bad Chemicals, was murder. His suspicions are confirmed when another OD death occurs and Damage is employed by Rash's girl friend to get to the bottom of it.

Then, the joy ride begins down the corridors of both high power and the lowly punk scene. Damage discovers that Rash had a dark side that tied him into drug and pornography scenes run by the city's most dangerous mob boss, Eddie Nash. A corrupt U.S. senator whose daughter had ties to Rash had no love for the rock singer nor did a rival punk band that claimed he had stolen one of their songs. In fact, everyone around Damage is a possible suspect with a motive to murder including his client, who he falls for.

Typical detective stuff including the obligatory scene where the hero is knocked unconscious by the crooks and wakes up tied to a chair about to be brutalized. However, this rendering gives new meaning to the phrase "gratuitous violence." We get it. The bad guys are bad. The details of torture add nothing that a few punches in the face wouldn't have sufficed.

And, when Damage finds a woman who gave him crucial information brutally murdered in his own apartment, again, we understand that dangerous forces are sending him a message. But, the description of the body is unpleasant enough that it will stick with the reader much longer than they would prefer.

Explicit gore is increasingly prevalent in movies and TV series. You rarely can watch a detective drama without being exposed to a close-up of an autopsy, a rotting corpse, or a pathologist poking the body of a dead victim. This is media without filters when it comes to language, sex, and now the reality of death. None of this was present in films a generation ago.

The one clinker is that about a third of the way through the book, we learn that Alex Damage is 22-years-old. There are youthful sleuths in fiction harkening back to the Nancy Drew mysteries of the 1930s, but Damage's character speaks in its Philip Marlowe-like narrative, too wise and too experienced for someone of that age. And, one of the suspects in Rash's murder is 15, who also uses a voice way beyond his age.

I'm sure this won't be much of a spoiler to say that when the book comes to an end, justice triumphs, the bad guys and their minions are punished, and the hero gets the girl. But it's all done well and a good addition to the pantheon of mystery writers whose story not only confronts evil, but also exposes the corruption of power.

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Fifth Estate #414, Fall 2023

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