

## **SACRO**

### **How many Serial Killers does Glasgow actually Have?**

#### **A Journey into the Dark Heart of “Tartan Noir”**

**Professor David Wilson**

I actually stopped counting when I reached 27.

Life, I reasoned, is just too short, but I’m also certain that if I had had more time and considerably more patience, I could have found many, many more.

So, whatever I tell you this evening, 27 is an underestimate of the numbers of serial killers prowling the streets of Glasgow.

Not real serial killers of course, but the fictional ones that populate “tartan noir”. The serial killers, in other words, that drive the plots of best-selling novels and pose problems for dogged detectives and offender profilers of various backgrounds, different genders, evolving professional lives

and bizarre neuroses; the often charismatic, magnetic serial killers that stick in the imagination and fascinate us, as much as they should repulse, shock and horrify.

These are the serial killers that people ask me about, almost as if they are “real”, as opposed to imagined offenders.

But how did I reach this number before I gave up counting and why did I start? I blame it on having to binge my way through the latest outputs within tartan noir in preparation for presenting BBC Scotland’s *Crime Files*. Quite quickly I began to notice a trend, and then wanted to see just how far that trend might stretch. And stretch it did. Frankly, it went on and on and on.

So, this is what I did. Let me explain to you the not-too-academic methodology that I used to come up with a number, just in case you think that I am exaggerating.

The books that I consulted had to be fictional, rather than “true crime” (which increasingly has become crime fact that looks like crime fiction). I therefore excluded Denise Mina’s *The Long Drop* (given that it is based on the real serial killer Peter Manuel and true events) - and the novels had to be largely, if not wholly, set within Glasgow and the city’s suburbs. I started by reading the output of a number of writers, whom I will characterise as my “usual suspects”, that I knew used Glasgow as a back-drop to their narrative, and then scoured their websites and the various online resources that they had contributed to so as to build up a picture of their favourite characters and plots.

These “usual suspects” you will instantly recognise; they are the stars of the genre:

Alex Gray; Lin Anderson; William McIlvanney (who of course hated the label “tartan noir”); Denise Mina and Douglas Skelton.

However, I also looked at other, less-well known authors, such as M R Mackenzie, Helen Fitzgerald and even Liam McIlvanney – the son of the late William McIlvanney, who wrote about a serial killer in *The Quaker*. In total I consulted the work of some 25 authors, although I am aware that there are many, many more novelists who might fit my criteria.

I then excluded plots that were essentially about “mass” murder – as opposed to serial murder - and therefore stuck strictly to the academic definition of a serial killer as being someone who kills three or more people in a period of greater than 30 days.

I also excluded plots that were about “hitmen”, or want-to-be “hitmen”. Criminologically we see “hitmen” as being extrinsically motivated – they do it for the money – whereas serial killers are intrinsically motivated. In other words, they kill because of some inner compulsion (whatever that might be) to take the lives of other people. This meant that I excluded the wonderful “Glasgow trilogy” of Malcom Mackay, as his plots revolve around a hitman, climbing – or attempting to climb - an organised criminal hierarchy in the city. Please, please don’t get me started on organised crime!

And to re-enforce my point about the novel having to be set in Glasgow and its environs, I excluded all the tartan noir novels that have serial killers stalking their pages in Inverness, Aberdeen, this fair city of Edinburgh, various Hebridean islands, the Highlands more generally and even – my personal favourite – Linlithgow.

If I had counted all of those, I would easily have reached 75. So, 27 is an underestimate of the numbers of plots that use serial killers within Glasgow, and I have no doubt that 75 is also an underestimate of all the tartan noir plots that use serial killers in Scotland as a whole.

In short, tartan noir loves a serial killer.

I hope that the following two brief extracts will offer you a frisson of qualitative insight into my rather weak quantitative analysis.

In *A Study of Flesh* Alex Gray's heroic Detective Inspector (as he then was) William Lorimer is going to have to manage his "worst nightmare". In other words, "a serial killer is on the loose in his city" – but here's the twist "not just one, but two serial killers operating at once in Glasgow. It's his worst nightmare come to life". In Lin Anderson's series about a

forensic scientist called Rhona McLeod, the plot of *Easy Kill* can be summed up by the line “this man has killed before – and he’ll kill again and again”. In other words the label “serial killer” isn’t actually used, but that is what is implied.

Note here that we’ve had two characters that are a senior police officer and a forensic scientist. However, Skelton uses a “maverick private investigator” called Dominic Queste (lols); Helen Fitzgerald employs a female probation officer; and M R Mackenzie a female Criminologist. So, the tartan noir genre is expanding to accommodate different roles within and also outside of the criminal justice system to allow, I think, new plots to evolve beyond the rather tired and frankly, at times, laughable “police procedural”.

Here’s my last point about these Glasgow based novels before I begin to use some of these strands to make three more serious comments. If I look at when these novels were

published, Alex's first book came out in 2002 and Lin's the following year. William McIlvanney's trilogy about Inspector Jack Laidlaw was published between 1977 and 1991 and I thought it interesting that he therefore started to write before the onset of the "serial killer thriller" – perhaps most popularly associated with Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* - and the moral panic about actual serial murder that started in the 1980s. Of note, McIlvanney senior does not use a serial killer to drive his plots, whereas his son – in an obvious nod to "Bible John" - does.

So far, so good, but does any of this actually matter?

I think that it does; it matters deeply and I hope to explain to you why.

My first more serious point is that the majority of the novels that I read, or analysed, were written, published and

consumed within a period of time that saw an unprecedented – and I would go as far as to argue poorly acknowledged – decline in murder in Scotland more generally and Glasgow specifically. As recently as 2004 Glasgow had the unenviable reputation for being “the murder capital of Europe”. Ten years later – largely due to the Glasgow Violence Reduction Strategy (now the Scottish Violence Reduction Strategy) the murder rate within the city had declined by some 60 per cent. This is a remarkable achievement which we would do well to celebrate, although I wonder to what extent we Scots have ever been good at celebrating success.

However, whether we celebrate it or not, we live in Scotland at a time when our bloody, brutal and violent past really has become History and when virtually every aspect of our current social, cultural and criminological life has become

blessed by unprecedented levels of peaceful co-existence.

Perhaps you have already started to smirk, but that's actually the point that I am making.

Of course violence still exists; it hasn't disappeared completely and people – all too often women and children – still get hurt and others get killed – all too often by violent men, but tartan noir has embraced the serial killer when murder is at remarkable and historically low levels.

What I am arguing is not that 27 is far in excess of the actual numbers of Glaswegian, or indeed Scottish serial killers. For the record, I would suggest that there have been only 5 operating within Scotland since the end of the second world war (and I deliberately choose not to name them), or that “geographically stable” serial killers, such as the ones who kill within the Glasgow of tartan noir, would be much more quickly caught than those who are “geographically transient”,

but that perception has begun to shape reality – or what is seen as reality. Specifically, that perception shapes the public's understanding of murder and serial murder; who is likely to fall victim to this dreadful crime; and what we can do to reduce its incidence.

I have argued, for example, that we'd make Scotland far safer from the threat of real serial killers if we challenged homophobia, misogyny, had a grown up debate about sex work, and gave the elderly a voice in our culture, rather than seeking their silence. Keeping us safe from the actual phenomenon of serial murder is rarely about dogged detectives, especially insightful and gifted offender profilers (bless you), or about developments in forensic science, but has much more to do with ensuring that there are common and shared values of civility and respect. And, more politically, it is about ensuring that the gap between the

haves and the have-nots does not widen in our society to obscene levels of privilege on the one hand, and abject poverty on the other.

And, when we do imprison violent men, we have to be prepared to help them to stop committing crime.

The plots of tartan noir inevitably – gothically - pathologise and individualise and, in doing so, lets society off the hook.

Perhaps that's why tartan noir is so successful. It suggests that serious, violent and deadly crime is simply about the personal responsibility of the offender, rather than a responsibility that should be shared much more widely. It implies that the solutions to serious, violent and deadly crime are therefore held within the hands of the criminal justice system in the guise of all the dogged – if flawed – detectives who keep the barbarians from the gate, rather than through

sweeping changes that might be necessary within society and the political will to introduce them.

So, my second serious point is that in the same way we know that binge drinking or eating is unhealthy and cannot just be tackled at the level of the individual who binge drinks or eats, the binge consumption of tartan noir – consuming the ever more ingenious plots of this cultural product - is in the end, for me, harmful. Of course I cannot prove a cause and effect here in the way that we can show that smoking causes lung cancer, although I do wonder if one of the legacies of Clarice Starling are the numbers of women who are increasingly drawn into this field and, more generally, a recent willingness to use prison in Scotland rather than non-custodial options. Scotland's prison population is now at an all-time high and I wonder why that should be the case? Are the Scots any more prone to committing crime than the Welsh, the English,

the Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Icelanders, Finns – you can see where I am going here – and why we have started to choose to incarcerate our offenders at a rate that our near-neighbours do not?

I know from my work as a Criminologist – as a teacher and as someone who will still offer advice to the police within live investigations or cold case reviews – that what people think that I do is far removed from the reality of what I actually do if I am profiling, or talking or working with an offender, or someone who has been accused of committing a crime. My reality has little impact on people's perception because I cannot ever hope to compete with the glamorous and exciting worlds, or with the alluring if flawed characters created within tartan noir and the black and white solutions that we encounter there.

Indeed, I wonder to what extent perception has shaped your reality too and if I were to ask you now what percentage of all the murders committed within a given year gets cleared up in the UK, what would you say?

What would you say?

Some of you might be thinking that all of this is a bit rich coming from me. However, please don't accuse me of being an hypocrite – I am not seeking to benefit from the work that I do as a Criminologist. Indeed this is exactly why I helped to create *Crime Files* and produced a professional memoir to explain what it is that I actually do! That cultural product is about reality and so, for me, as I have consistently argued, the binge consumption of the fictional serial killer skews our insight in ways which are detrimental to our understanding of that phenomenon – even if it is entertaining. It skews our understanding of how we can help violent men. Of course I

am entertained too; I am not some born-again Calvinist who is seeking to ban books. But, if we are being honest with each other, I think we'd all agree that there would be an audience for public hangings too, but no one can surely be in any doubt that that would not serve as a public good for society.

Here I should acknowledge that this isn't just a Scottish phenomenon. I've looked at "Scandi noir", for example, and especially the work of Jo Nesbo, who has had his dogged detective Harry Hole track down six Norwegian serial killers, even if there has actually only ever been one! Yes – you heard me correctly. One.

And the Norwegians gave him their most severe penalty – 21 years in prison.

He killed 23 people.

My final more serious point – without wishing to become too academic – is about ontology. Can there still be Truth in a world where only opinion dominates; especially an opinion that is sincerely held and robustly expressed? Elvis still lives; the World is in fact flat; there is no such thing as human-induced global warming; the Barlinnie Special Unit (BSU) failed. It is almost as if the Enlightenment – which this city and the Scots more generally did so much to create – never happened. Personally I blame Foucault, but there must be a point at which reality and “truth” trumps (see what I did there) fiction; when reality has to be given authority over perception, or prejudice.

Reality is that two women a week are murdered in the UK by a partner, or ex-partner and that one child a week is murdered by their parents, or carers. The reality of serial murder is that gay men and sex workers get disproportionately

killed and that all too often the policing of these crimes is at best shoddy and at times diabolical. Serial killers prey on the weak and the vulnerable and they are made weak and vulnerable by what we as a society prioritise, promote and cherish. Or alternatively, what we as a society disavow and discredit. Those who are disavowed and discredited all too often end up dead.

The reality is that we have to help violent men to stop being violent and yet Scotland closed the one place in its now overcrowded penal system which actually did just that. The BSU may not have found political, or even popular favour – it was disavowed and discredited - but it worked; it closed not because it failed, but because it was successful! Of the 36 damaged, dangerous and disturbed men that entered there between 1973 and 1994 only 4 have ever been re-convicted. The reality is that the BSU shows us not that “nothing works”,

“what works” or “some things work”, but a peculiarly Scottish trait – “some things can’t be seen to work”. We need to rediscover a sense of pride in what happened in the BSU, because all the violent offenders whom we bang up today are (mostly) still going to be released, but will have had little or no help to counter their offending behaviour whilst they’ve been imprisoned. That does not contribute to making our country safer and begins to threaten all the gains that we have made and should be justly proud of.

These realities might not sell many books, or tickets to blockbuster films but they are realities which are based on fact. Say it loud, and repeat after me, we live in Scotland at a time when our bloody, brutal and violent past really has become History and when virtually every aspect of our current social, cultural and criminological life has become blessed by unprecedented levels of peaceful co-existence.

And, if we want to make it even more peaceful and safe in the years to come, we should help the violent men that we imprison to stop committing crime and consider if the time is now right to re-open the BSU; we should re-double our efforts to challenge misogyny, homophobia and have a grown up debate about those young women (and some young men) who still sell sexual services.

Tartan gris anybody?