

SheKilda3: One-day Crime Spree
The 25th anniversary of Sisters in Crime
9.30am Saturday 19 November 2016
St Kilda Town Hall
Keynote address by Professor Sue Turnbull

Whatever you do, said venerated crime writer Elmore Leonard, never begin by describing the weather. It's the first of his ten rules of writing. But Leonard was a brother in law – and as all crime writing sisters know - rules are meant to be broken - so.

In the beginning: It was a dark and stormy night on the 24th of April 1991, 25 years ago, that Sisters in Crime Australia was born in a flat in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda just down the road from Leo's Spaghetti Bar, a cheerfully shabby Italian restaurant where for many years the back room - just past the men's toilets and complete with a mirror ball and bar - was the spiritual home of Sisters in Crime.

Back in 1991, the embryonic Australian Sisters in Crime was conceived by the Sister of all Sisters, Carmel Shute, and attended at her birth by a company of outstanding midwives, including Mary-Ann Metcalf, Rivka Pile, Jan Van Bommel and Claudia Hirst who helped bring the little organisation into the world.

It was, of course, a virgin birth and her conception quite immaculate.

Her proud godmother was US crime writer Sara Paretsky, the founder of Sisters in Crime in the US, who was happy to welcome a new sister organisation into the world and blessed her from afar, and then again here at the Town Hall in St Kilda.

While Paretsky's Sisters in Crime came into existence in order to counter an inherent bias against women's crime writing on the part of publishers, reviewers and conference organisers, here in Australia, Sisters in Crime was initially conceived as an organisation for enthusiastic readers of the wave of feminist inspired crime fiction that had begun to emerge during the 1980s.

But, like all children, the Australian little sister very rapidly took on a life of her own. And pretty soon she too was taking on the challenge of seeking to promote and encourage women to write more crime.

This was the thinking behind the conception of the Scarlet Stiletto short story competition initiated in 1994 – not to mention a bit of a shoe fetish. Since then 3084 short stories have been submitted to this competition. And 22 Scarlet Stiletto winners, including category winners, have gone on to have their novels published from Cate Kennedy (the first) to Anna Snoekstra (the latest).

This event marks the 25th anniversary of Sisters in Crime by inaugurating the very first Silver Stiletto to be awarded tonight.

In 2001, once again Sisters in Crime was on the front foot. This time establishing the Davitt Awards for women's crime writing named in honour of Ellen Davitt (1812-1879) who wrote Australia's first full length mystery novel – *Force and Fraud*. These awards now include six

categories and guest presenters have included Chief Police Commissioner Christine Nixon (the first) and Liane Moriarty (the latest).

And here we are today, celebrating the third SheKilda Event – back were it first started in the St Kilda Town Hall – and asking: Where are we up to Sisters?

As someone who regularly writes about crime fiction, one of the questions I am often asked is ‘what is the difference between crime fiction written by men and crime fiction written by women’.

At which point I might add that I think there is as much difference between a crime novel written by Patricia Highsmith and Kerry Greenwood – as there is between Patricia Highsmith and the crime fiction of (for example) Andrew Nette, Robert Gott or Jock Serong to name some of our favourite Australian ‘brothers-in-law’ who will be in attendance today.

But gender does, of course, make a difference. Let me attempt to explain. Anyone who has ever been tempted to write may well have been told by their mentor that the secret of successful writing is ‘to write about something you know’.

I might add that as an academic, I frequently choose to write about something I don’t know in order to find out more about it. Writing can also be a process of discovery. So I don’t necessarily think that ‘write about something you know’ is the best advice either. Another rule to be broken maybe?

But back to the main point - for the most part, everyone who writes about whatever it is they are writing about will bring to that endeavour all of their prior experience of the world. So let’s suggest that the experience you are writing about is childbirth.

Now, let me ask you what a male writer will bring to that experience that a female writer will not – and vice versa? (And here I might note that my darling husband sat in a rocking chair doing a crossword puzzle – while I forced our son into the world with the aid of many drugs and a lot of profanity). He witnessed the blood. I felt the pain. Would we write about this experience differently? You bet.

Now let me suggest that our experience of the world is always gendered – from the moment as children that we realise that we have got different ‘bits’ and are being dressed and treated differently as a consequence - to the moment when we realise that those bits may affect our education, our workplace, our experience of relationships, of ageing – of the world.

This may, of course, present a problem. Our bits may not be who we think we are – and a shout out here to all our transgender sisters. I might note that I was rather dissatisfied with my bits for a while would only answer to the name Simon between the ages of five and seven.

But back to the main point - – I do not think men and women write crime differently. However, I do think they may bring different experiences of the world to the craft of writing – and indeed to reading – crime.

The next question I am asked is what is the state of crime writing today?

At the moment, we appear to be in the midst of two new crime waves that should be of particular interest to women.

The first is what has loosely been described as 'domestic noir' – although publishers appear to favour the term 'psychological thriller'. What characterises these books is the absence of an investigator, a detective or a private eye.

It might be noted that for men to publish in this genre, a writer like S.J. Watson who wrote *Before I go to Sleep* decided to use only his initials to disguise his gender – a move that Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell (a.k.a. The Bronte Sisters), not to mention George Eliot, might have found vaguely amusing.

What is attractive about the sub-genre of domestic noir for women is that these are not stories that require you to sidle up to your local police officer in order to find out how it works. These are books that revolve around the principle of being threatened by someone or something that is very close to you. These are books that trade on anxiety – and we live in anxious times.

For example, while the serial killer may have haunted our dreams and our crime fiction in the 1990s, today the threat of domestic violence and betrayal by those whom we trust in positions of authority is a much more terrifying and immediate threat.

And here we might note that crime fiction has always been responsive to social anxieties and has always functioned as a form of social commentary, even at its most entertaining and amusing.

The second trend is that of localism and regionalism. Just in case you hadn't noticed - we are in the middle of a Scandinavian crime wave. This would include fiction from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Finland (though I haven't quite made it there yet).

What the success of the many authors and books from this region has made manifest is that crime fiction as a familiar genre offers people the world over a lens through which to observe and think about crime in very different places to the ones in which they live.

Of course, there is the thrill of the 'exotic' – what could be more exotic than a crime in Reykjavik or far North Iceland to an Australian. (And I'm thinking *Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent here). But what reading crime from Iceland or Sweden or Denmark may tell us is that what drives humans to commit crime are the same the world over.

Domestic violence in Reykjavik is the same as domestic violence in Australia.

Meanwhile, back in Australia, crime continues to explore the ways in which we live now – and have lived in the past – from the real Byron Bay to fictional Rusty Bore somewhere in northern Victoria.

Indeed, if you want to find out about what is going on in Australia today, one of the best ways to feel the pulse of the nation would be through its crime fiction.

However, on a recent study tour that had me checking out the airport bookshelves in Dubai, London, Paris, Marseilles, Reykjavik, Vancouver and Los Angeles, I did not see one Australian

crime novel – by a sister – or indeed a brother - on any of the shelves – with the notable exception of Liane Moriarty. Something, dear sisters, is not working in our favour.

However, rather than seeing this absence as a failure, we should be seeing it as an opportunity.

The world, Sisters, is waiting for the next Australian crime wave. So for all of you exceptional writers gathered here – and for all of you nurturing an embryonic crime fiction or true crime novel in your bosom – rest assured – there are a whole lot of birthing buddies assembled in this room to help you bring her into the world.

We just need to get her out there and to start waving.

Here at St Kilda³, in the St Kilda Town Hall, is where the next wave begins....