

## **Authenticating a Community: Exploring Scottish Conflicts in *Mortal Causes* by Ian Rankin**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Crime fiction is explored here as a distinctively authentic Scottish genre, a label which contemporary writers generally refuse. The text looks at the nature of the Catholic-Protestant conflict in Scotland as it features in Ian Rankin's crime story *Mortal Causes*. Rather than making hasty conclusions derived from the history of mutual violence, Rankin presents his modern and, as he claims, authentic version of the sectarian conflict as a part of local identity. At the same time, Rankin's protagonist remains carefully "sitting on the fence" making sure that neither side of the conflict is his own. The text argues that it is Rebus's in-betweenness which makes him a typical representative of his community.*

The paper was supported by the Czech Science Foundation grant GA CR 19-02634S.

### **KEYWORDS**

Scotland, crime fiction, Ian Rankin, *Mortal Causes*, Scottish city

Ian Rankin can be safely named the prime representative of contemporary Scottish crime fiction. He himself associates his works with the distinctive label of 'Tartan Noir', which is often compared or contrasted with the contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction. While in comparison with the Scottish crime novels, the Scandinavian crime writing has been enjoying more significant worldwide popularity, Rankin has no doubt about the quality of Scottish writing: "Scandinavia doesn't have better crime writers, it just has better PR" (Anderson 1). And more than that, he is also one of the genre's most fervent promoters e.g. by starting the first international crime fiction festival *Bloody Scotland*. Like many other crime writers, Rankin acknowledges contemporary crime fiction as one of the most authentically Scottish genres. Whereas many writers in Scotland have perceived the "Scottish" label as limiting and have explored its alternatives, crime writers adhere to it. Being called a "Scottish crime writer" represents a set of characteristics which are recognised internationally. One of the reasons could be found in the source of inspiration: many Scottish crime writers, including Rankin, draw rather from Scottish literary tradition (Robert Louis Stevenson, William McIllvanney) than from the crime fiction classics like Agatha Christie. In spite of the genre's international validity, this paper focuses more on the local features of Scottish crime fiction. Rankin's work, can be analysed as a truly authentic depiction of a particular community and even if the conflict, which is tearing it apart, is a matter reaching far beyond Edinburgh's skyline, it is presented in a specifically local setting and form. This text deals with the crime story *Mortal Causes* in which

Rankin displays his own view of the Catholic/Protestant conflict and its Edinburgh version. The analysis focuses on how this conflict is presented as the authentic characteristic of local community, how the local community created its own version of this conflict, and how the protagonist attempts to remain uninvolved despite his own personal history or his own local identity.

Some of the local character is conveyed already by the choice of the genre. Even though Rankin did not approach his Rebus novels as crime fiction (let alone the series of), his name has become the name most often spelt out in connection with Tartan Noir. Although Rankin is the author of the label Tartan Noir, his actual representation of the genre is doubted by some critics. Len Wanner, for example, claims that Rankin simply is not “noir enough”. Rankin’s detective does have a flaw or two, but still believes in the existence of some order which he defends. Furthermore, Wanner claims that “if Rankin wrote Noir, his heroes would not have any flaws, because he would have no heroes, just protagonists”. (136) Yet the question whether he actually does write noir or whether his work is just “quite dark fiction” about life in Edinburgh does not really affect this particular analysis. There are features that John Rebus, Rankin’s famous protagonist, shares with some definitions of Tartan Noir. As a variation of hard-boiled fiction, the foundation of which is most often attributed to William McIlvanney, Tartan Noir stresses the alienated detective figure as a metaphor of anti-Thatcherism and crime fiction as the ideal mode for exploring the state of Scotland (Plain 132). Rankin’s Rebus fits the characteristic of the alienated detective perfectly. Being born outside Edinburgh and supposedly “remaining a Fifer at heart” (Rankin 21), but feeling strongly part of the city; being raised a Protestant, but finding it more comfortable to confide in a Catholic priest; having a dubious reputation of both admiration and disdain among his colleagues are only some examples of Rebus’s floating identity of the “in-between”. Furthermore, Rebus is clearly intent on keeping his detached status in spite of being pressed to make his allegiances clear. Lin Anderson adds that Tartan Noir gives voice to an erudite and educated man, an urban philosopher, who just happened to be a policeman (1). And again, we see how much Rankin’s hero fits these characteristics. The author repeatedly paints the picture of Rebus’s flat being mainly furnished by books (even though he admits not to have read all of them). Moreover, in *Mortal Causes* the reader is invited to enjoy the theological disputes between the detective and Father Leary, a Catholic priest who seems to have more awareness of Rebus’s belief than anybody else. Rebus’s involvement with the local community is that of an anthropologist. His hazy position and seeming lack of identification with the locals allow him to make comments and judgements which are as impersonal as academic texts. A good metaphor of Rebus’s determination to

remain an uninvolved observer is his reaction to the Orange march in *Mortal Causes*. He determinedly listens to *Jethro Tull* in his car to prevent himself from humming the marches played by brass bands, which would symbolically tie him with one of the sides of the sectarian conflicts as well as evoke unwelcome memories of Rebus's own past experience. Wickman suggests that Tartan Noir is a "template of one of the most problematic features of modern being: the relationship of the unique to the generic, the individual to the stereotypical, the 'authentic' to the 'recycled', the one to the not-one (90). Coming into play at times of disillusionment with institutions, with representative structures and moral imperatives, noir naturally invites its disaffected heroes to seek their own and unique position aside or in-between. After all, Rankin characterises Rebus as a "typical working-class Scottish male, happiest with his music, his junk food, and the drinkers at his favoured pub. But there are layers to his personality, and many of these layers stay hidden, in the grand Scots tradition" (34). No matter how frustrating the author's explanatory comments may be for the reader or critic, who perhaps want to make a different sense of the main hero, Rankin makes it clear that in spite of his ambiguity, Rebus should be interpreted as an authentically Scottish hero.

Rankin's desire to create an authentic Scottish hero is accompanied with his effort to authenticate the setting. The author presents his characteristics of Edinburgh as authentic, because he offers the insider's view. Rankin claims that "the figures of the detective and the novelist are the similar in some ways. Both seek the truth through creating a narrative from apparently chaotic or unconnected events. ... Both are voyeurs." (30). Sandroock suggests that the whole Rebus series represent Rankin's "quest for authenticity". And Rankin on one hand agrees acknowledging that Edinburgh is a city of multitudes and examining its many faces combined: "There is room both for the city of *Trainspotting's* Begbie and the city of Alexander McCall Smith's *Sunday Philosopher's Club*" (92). On the other hand, the author stresses that his Edinburgh is not Rebus's Edinburgh and that he is mainly writing to make sense of the place. This contradictory disclaimer could be easily explained as a problem of the author being his own critic, but it can also be perceived as one of the typically Scottish internal conflicts or dualities. The idea that Scotland is a place of internal conflict is nothing new and was formulated famously by Gregory Smith in his concept of Caledonian Antisyzygy. Taking his definition of Scotland and Scottishness as a union of differences enables the analysis of Rankin's local communities and their internal divisions as the very sign of authenticity and the author's attempt to challenge the outsider's view. In *Mortal Causes* he criticizes the tourist appropriation of Edinburgh: "The Edinburgh Festival was the bane of Rebus's life. ... Edinburgh's history was full of licence a riotous behaviour. But the Festival, especially the Festival Fringe, was different.

Tourism was its lifeblood...” (Rankin 2001:466). Rebus makes his feelings of the Festival quite clear several times. He even makes a point of wiping away festival leaflets from his windscreen as a metaphor of his insider view being blocked by the *tourist gaze*. The fact that the initial murder in *Mortal Causes* is committed literally under the tourists’ feet, in the underground street, is a brilliant metaphor of the superficiality of the tourist gaze, which cannot go beyond the surface. Rebus’s own view of the Fringe as a symbol of the tourist version of the city is intensified at the end of the novel, when the bomb threat coincides with the Festival fireworks. The reader is provided with an explanation: “He and his kind detested the Festival. It took away from them *their* Edinburgh and propped something else in its places, a façade of culture which they didn’t need or couldn’t understand. There was no underclass in Edinburgh, they’d all been pushed out into schemes on the city boundaries. Isolated, exiled, they had every right to resent the city centre with its tourist traps and temporary playtime.” (Rankin 2001:680). Hence, in his attempt to authenticate his community, Rankin adds yet another duality to the already rich list of the Scottish doubles: the city centre and the outskirts. The exploitation of some of the Scottish dualities stands at the heart of the following analysis.

Religious definition of Scotland is not simple. The idea of Northern Ireland as “the place apart” which George Boyce (13) suggests was not witnessed anywhere else in the UK is challenged by Rankin. In the novel *Mortal Causes* Rankin chooses to use the Catholic-Protestant conflict to show the division of several Edinburgh’s communities. However, he combines sectarian violence with the notorious class distinction. He shows the conflict’s rash-like spread into the Scottish urban communities to disguise their long-term social problems. Sectarianism in Scotland is an unspoken and unquestioned local characteristic: “In Scotland, no one needs to ask ‘Are you a Prod or a Pape?’ Instead, they’ll sift evidence such as your Christian name and surname, or your football allegiance, to glean all the information they need.” (Rankin 36). Hence the dismay over Rebus’s colleague, Siobhan Clarke, whose football allegiance is inconsistent with such assessment and earns her a lot of sneer. Like most Catholic and Protestant cities in Britain, Edinburgh has its Catholic football club – Hibernian, or the Hibs, as well as a Protestant one – The Heart of Midlothian, or the Hearts. Mixing football allegiances up is simply not done. Clarke’s Irish name should link her with the Hibs and her stubborn support of the Hearts does not make her unique, it rather turns her into a misfit. Rebus’s own faith remains undecided: he ranges from a kind of Christian to a ‘Pessimisterian’, clearly a Presbyterian pessimist (Rankin 40), but his desire to find answers to his big questions is evident. His partner in the search for answers often is Father Leary, whose view of Rebus can be perhaps best characterised by the Romantic notion of the noble savage. In his own words, Father Leary loves

to find out what the Prods are thinking as it gives him food for thought over a glass of Guinness when there is nothing on telly. In *Mortal Causes*, Father Leary paves the path for the sectarian theme. It is his concern over the activities of a Catholic priest, who was meant to re-start a community centre in a poor housing scheme that leads Rankin towards the secret Protestant paramilitary group. In a seemingly philosophical dispute, Leary voices the urgency of the whole matter: “We are not here for very long, are we?” Rebus said now. Father Leary frowned. “You mean here on earth?” “That’s what I mean. We’re not around long enough to make any difference.” “Tell that to the man with a bomb. Every one of us makes a difference just by being here.” (Rankin 2001:475) The sense of urgency of the problem is enhanced by the composition, so typical for the genre and for Rankin, which interrupts the course of the plot by jumping to another line of investigation. Yet, the clues here are repeated. Rebus’s colleagues refer to the ritual way in which the victim was killed, which points at the IRA, to the number of guns around and the ease with which they can be obtained. Further investigation therefore leads inevitably to the most crime-ridden parts of Edinburgh, not coincidentally also the poorest ones.

Combining sectarianism with social identity, or rather social deprivation, helps Rankin to keep the sense of urgency going. Sectarianism as a religious conflict may be (no matter how mistakenly) perceived as the matter of the past. By stressing the social facets of the conflict or even its connection to the current criminal world, the conflict becomes up-to-date. Rankin does not miss any opportunity to make the reader realise the connection between sectarianism and poverty. He makes sure, the reader is on location and spares no chance to intensify: “The Gar-B. It’s the roughest scheme in the city, maybe in the country.” (Rankin 2001:457). The same resonates in Belfast: when Rebus comments on the red, white and blue painted curbs in the Protestant part of Belfast as a “nice piece of propaganda”, his RUC colleague retorts: “it’s a work of art. These are some of the poorest streets in Europe, by the way.” (Rankin 2001:558) Rankin’s finger pointing at sectarianism, is in fact poking further. His authentic picture of local community is that of social criticism. His picture of Gar-B, although rough, does not put the blame on its inhabitants. Rankin does portray their criminal activities and makes sure that Rebus, as a policeman, stays on the side of the law (precisely one of the reasons for which Len Wanner include Rankin in the noir genre), but his sympathies are made clear: “You had to admire their ingenuity. Give these kids money and opportunity and they’d be the saviours of the capitalist state. Instead, the state gave them dole and daytime TV.” (Rankin 2001:481) One of the moments, where the reader feels social compassion most is the scene with young mothers from Gar-B, one pushing a pram with a crying baby, the other dragging a toddler resisting to walk. Rebus or Rankin comments: “Both baby and toddler were being brought back into the

Gar-B. But not without a fight.” (Rankin 2001:483) thus creating a metaphor of a futile resistance and dark future. Attaching sectarianism to social deprivation allows Rankin to appropriate it as a problem of his community, because sectarianism in Scotland is usually dismissed as the problem of Glasgow. Even in *Mortal Causes* Rankin uses the character of the Glaswegian policeman Killpatrick, whose patronising approach and the know-it-all attitude angers Rebus until the final disclosure of Killpatrick’s agency in the *Sword and Shield* Protestant paramilitary organisation. Furthermore, portraying the paramilitaries basically as the new gangsters allows Rankin to make sectarianism an international theme. After all, the *Sword and Shield* is not bound to Scotland, its reach goes as far as the U.S.. Linking sectarian violence directly to organized crime does not only allow Rankin to acknowledge the hard-boiled tradition as a source of his inspiration, but more importantly, he strips sectarianism off all its supposed noble causes and puts it bluntly as a means of making profit, gaining influence, keeping a tight grip on a community.

Authentication of the community in *Mortal Causes* is secured through a doubled insider view: Rebus is not only a local in Edinburgh, but also a former soldier deployed in Northern Ireland and thus, has a personal experience of sectarian violence. Throughout the novel, Rebus allows himself only one single glimpse back at that experience – a mess of visual and emotional flashbacks and a combination of fear, disgust and shame. On the other hand, Rebus confesses his experience of the fascinating wave of collective identity he had experienced as an Orange march participant in his youth: “It was only when you saw them in groups like this that you caught a whiff of something else. Alone, they had nothing but a nagging complaint; together they had a voice: the sound of the *lambeg*, dense as a heartbeat; the insistent flutes, the march” (Rankin 42). Both are enough to confirm his insider status. Yet, the awareness of how catchy such experiences are, distances the older Rebus from further involvement. His sarcastic comments, which he makes in form of an internal dialogue, say it all: “Only an Orange Marching band could make the flute sound martial to the ears. Well, an Orange marching band or Ian Anderson from Jethro Tull.” (Rankin 2001:497) The question of whose side Rebus is on remains unanswered. In several other novels he is pressed by other characters to climb off the fence. Clear identity is seen as a necessity. Rebus resists. Perhaps Rankin resists. But it is precisely this resistance which allows the reader to see the protagonist as an authentic member of his local community. In order to provide its credible, yet authentic picture, he has to keep his in-betweenness, his mongrel self of the “uninvolved insider”. A duality, which in fact makes him more at home than the above choice would. A duality which is the best characteristic of his location: “That’s the beauty of Edinburgh, you’re never far from a peaceful spot.’ ‘And never

far from a hellish one either.” (Rankin 2001:477). Rankin remains faithful to his declared literary influence of R. L. Stevenson, faithful to the “grand Scots tradition”, faithful to his location and his aim to provide its authentic literary version.

The article examined the picture of a particular community provided by a piece of popular fiction, i.e. a crime novel *Mortal Causes* by Ian Rankin. It is interesting to see that while most Scottish writers have sought alternatives to the Scottish label, Scottish crime writers have accepted the label as the possibility to create an authentic picture of a local community. Tartan Noir or not, Rankin challenges the clichéd view of Edinburgh by stressing its internal conflicts – a typically Scottish feature indeed. Here, the main duality is represented by the sectarian conflict, however, the author looks beyond sectarianism into the complex social network of the location, disclosed by the main protagonist, who himself avoids direct identification with either of the conflict’s sides. Thus, he serves as a great representative of an internal conflict – supposedly the most fitting Scottish characteristic.

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