

Slicing Through Noir Fiction

Volume 2: Exegesis

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An Exegesis on the novel 'The Suitcase'

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Abstract

The Suitcase and ‘Slicing Through Noir Fiction’.

The Suitcase

In the cold of New York City, the Gramercy Park Hotel stands over a dead man concealed in a private park, his stiff hands grasping a suitcase filled with millions of dollars. Five strangers linked by their pasts converge - coincidence for some, planned for others – and together they stumble across the money, the dead man and a decision.

‘Slicing Through Noir Fiction’

Dr. Gregson, serial killer from *The Suitcase*, steps out of the pages of the novel and into the world where he kills a journalist whose next job was an interview with the author of *The Suitcase*, H J Nash. Dr. Gregson goes on a journey of discovery, knowledge, darkness and violence, to discover an allusive term fervently discussed by critics and academics, and yet shrouded in confusion and subjectivity: noir.

Through Dr. Gregson, I analyze two primary works of noir fiction, Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country For Old Men* and Iain Banks’ *The Wasp Factory*, and then conduct a faux interview of myself, the author, contextualizing *The Suitcase* and its creation in the vast world of fiction.

Statement of originality

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. In the case of *The Suitcase* there will be a two year embargo.

Heath Nash

November 2014

Slicing Through Noir Fiction

INTRODUCTION

When I was a young boy I watched television late at night with my father whenever the opportunity arose. My father was obsessed with British crime television; shows such as *Silent Witness*, *Rebus*, and *Cracker*; all of which involved a somewhat flawed detective or detective-like protagonist, a murder, and a subsequent mystery to unveil. I was enamored by these television shows, sitting back on the couch with a bowl of potato chips and a glass of *Pepsi Max*, eyes glued to the rain and the wind, the guns and the murder. There was a constant narrative from my father, a pervading echo, a secondary audio source blended with the sound emanating from the television. He would discuss the suspects, the murder, the protagonist's intuition, but, of course, my father's intuition was displayed more than any other: he would predict who the killer was ten minutes into the show, and by the time my bowl of chips and glass of *Pepsi* were empty, my father would be gloating about being 'always right'. Looking back now, I find it difficult to delve into the reaches of my childhood mind to attempt to fashion a cogent reasons as to why I enjoyed these Friday and Saturday nights so much – was it the murder or the detective-driven narrative or the suspense? Or was it the constant bleak cityscape of rain and wind, an association that I will always have with the United Kingdom? It may well have been all of the aforementioned, or it could have been the simple pleasure of sitting down, late on a Friday or Saturday evening, watching television with my dad, sharing in the mystery. To be honest I will never know the reasons why I enjoyed these moments, I can only tell you that I did, and that these early years shaped my tastes in the future.

A few years later, when I hit my teenage years, British crime television progressed to movies: dark movies with dark narratives often set in urban landscapes

where violence, drugs, depression, and death – always death – were constant themes. There were so many movies that I loved, so many that I will always remember, but to name a few: *Reservoir Dogs*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Fight Club*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Seven*, *Fargo*, *Memento* – the list goes on and on. These movies gave me something greater than a formulated plot-driven narrative with the same predictable protagonists; they delivered a sense of pessimistic realism – the feeling that these characters in these urban settings in these unfortunate situations could actually exist. Each movie was an experience, each character was a memory; they gave me something that simple ‘whodunit’ detective-driven narratives could never quite provide: gritty realism.

Later on, the movies turned to novels, novels that involved violence, murder, and flawed characters. The first novel that I remember, which, after having read it, gave me this feeling of exhaustion, of existential nihilism, was Albert Camus’ *The Outsider*. There are others that have stuck with me too: Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country For Old Men*, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, and Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. So naturally, when I came to write my PhD novel, it made sense to compose a bleak narrative about unfortunate characters that find themselves surrounded by violence and death. I knew there must have been a genre or a subgenre to describe this type of novel, but I couldn’t find it. It wasn’t a crime novel as there wasn’t a detective, it wasn’t a thriller novel as the plot moved too slowly, it wasn’t a horror novel as the deaths and the killings were a backdrop to the story not the predominate factor, and it wasn’t a mystery novel as there was not always a puzzle to be solved. So what was it? Where would it sit in a bookshop? After much searching, one word kept coming up: noir. But what is noir? Can my novel, *The Suitcase*, fit into that genre? Is noir even a genre? This term ‘noir’ became the backbone for my exegesis and an eventual analysis of my own creative work.

This exegesis is not an in depth analysis of noir, as to do so would require an exegesis of far greater length in order to ascertain a specific categorization of a term that is seemingly impossible to categorize; a movement to some, a genre to others, a mood to many. This exegesis is a brief introduction to noir, a term we often hear bandied about when marketing a novel, a movie, or a TV show; a term most of us know little about.

Told through the eyes of Dr. Gregson, the serial killer from my novel *The Suitcase*, this exegesis will also look at contemporary noir fiction, specifically looking at a few of its most common archetypes. This exegesis will analyse two novels from the past few decades, by authors whose work has, somewhere along the line, been coined ‘noir’ by critics, reviewers or academics. Finally, through the voice of the author, I discuss my own creative work, a novel titled *The Suitcase*, in order to identify whether these noir archetypes are present in my work, discern whether or not my creative work is noir fiction, discuss how I came to write the novel, and whether or not I intended to create a work of noir or merely write a pessimistic work of fiction. Rather than a strictly academic essay, this exegesis is written in a creative manner, through the voice of the author (myself), but narrated by Dr. Gregson – the serial killer from the novel *The Suitcase*.

This thesis, therefore, is constructed in two parts, the creative component, a novel entitled *The Suitcase*, and the exegesis, *Slicing Through Noir Fiction*.

PART 1 - NOIR

It has been a year, maybe two. Time is lost when you are deep in work: all you feel are the seasons, the cold, the warmth, the wind. I look out the window onto a concrete playground on West 78th: there are no children playing, only rain and emptiness. I think it is winter again: it is my second winter in New York City, or perhaps my third or fourth? I guess it doesn't matter, time is of no importance, and yet the insignificant question bothers me. Is it even winter? I press my latex covered hand onto the cold window and pull it away, leaving a bloody handprint. Not cold enough. It must be spring – the season of life. But with life comes death, and I am that harbinger of death, I am God's dark angel, his soldier, his right hand.

I feel the sweat grow thicker beneath my gloves, and as my fingers squirm I realize that I'm still holding the fish knife. I grab the curtain with my gloved hands and I wipe the blade clean, leaving blood smeared across the white drapes. I move away from the window and back to the journalist. I kick his limp body to make sure there's no life left in him, and I move over to the dining room where he has papers sprawled out across the table.

I'm curious, so I pull back a chair, take a seat, and slide in. With my back straight, I look down at the table: a mess of papers and articles and a laptop, dirty and overused. I pick up a random scribbled note and I read it:

Noir? Is it a really a genre? I need to get this clear for the interview. I believe it's not. I believe it's a movement.

I pick up another piece of paper, the handwriting is messier this time, but I see that word – noir. I push the papers to the side and open up the laptop, and on the

desktop I find a folder titled 'noir - author interview'. I open up the first document titled 'A Brief History of Noir' and I begin to read:

Film to fiction or fiction to film?

When looking back at the origins of noir, most commentators end up at the same point – 1946, in the same country – France, where the French film critic, Nino Frank, described a certain 'mood and tone' of post-World War Two American cinema as 'film noir' (189 Simpson). Initially this word 'noir' lacked endorsement, and at the time, film noir movies were categorized as 'crime stories, suspense pictures, psychological thrillers and melodramas' (Keeseey 10). And to be honest why would 'noir' have stuck? It was a French word meaning 'black' or 'dark', it didn't mean anything to the directors making the movies in the 1940's and 1950's, and it didn't mean anything to the writers who wrote the novels that many of these films were based on. The artists didn't set out to make a 'film noir' movie, or write a 'noir' novel, because this word 'noir' didn't exist in their artistic discourse.

It wasn't until almost a decade later that the title 'film noir' became popularized in America, when more French critics, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumenton, conducted a popular study of American film from 1941 to 1953, called *Panorama du film noir americain*, which identified a number of films sharing a common visual style that was said to have been influenced by German Expressionism (Rich 8): no colour - black and white on screen, utilization of "oblique camera angles and obsessive use of shadows" (Rich 8), and taking place in a city of a seemingly endless night. This German Expressionist

influence is believed to have spawned from the many German and Austrian directors working on American films at the time (Rich 8) who seemed to favor films with a moral uncertainty, in a time filled with post-war anxiety (Park 1). As Rich puts it: film noir “is the place where the American dream goes to die” (Rich 8).

I look back over the words on the screen and I smile at that word: anxiety. It is the moral uncertainty of man himself that creates such anxiety, not wars, not books or film. It is an inability to have complete faith in God. I want to close the lid, but the dead man’s words have garnered my interest. But I don’t understand the necessity for names and dates. Not all things require a name; some things just are, and names can’t explain what or why they are. Academics should have better things to do than debate about something so trivial as a name. Not everything requires a name. Some things are greater than a name. What’s in a name? That which we call blood by any other name would taste as sweet. Nevertheless, I keep reading:

There was more to film noir than visual aesthetics. Film noir had distinctly identifiable characters, specifically the anti-hero with moral flaws, often prone to violence, paranoia, betrayal, and murder. Post-World War Two, the beginning of the Cold War, was a time of instability, of anxiety, and these characters seemed to portray those fears that were held deep in American culture.

There isn’t a clear, resonating time or date establishing when these movies, now classified as film noir, are said to have begun. Some commentators believe

film noir easily could have began in the 1930s with the many Alfred Hitchcock thrillers (Naremore 17), which to American reviewers at the time seemed to capture that pessimism and anxiety of the Great Depression in America. But a majority of commentators seem to agree that film noir began in American in 1941 with *The Maltese Falcon* (Park 1), a film based on the novel by Dashiell Hammet, whose work is known as hardboiled private-eye fiction. *The Maltese Falcon* is a murder mystery centered around the private-eye detective Sam Spade, a philandering, violent anti-hero. Visually, the film features low-key lighting, intriguing camera angles, and slivers of light through venetian blinds to suggest prison and immorality, which are readily apparent visual identifiers of the film noir genre. If film noir began with *The Maltese Falcon*, based on Hammet's novel, then it is reasonable to assume that noir fiction began earlier. *The Maltese Falcon* was first published in 1930, and like most of Hammet's early work at the time, it was originally serialized and published in the mass produced pulp fiction magazine *Black Mask* (Piepenbring 1). Hammett's fiction "is prototypically noir in the way it establishes the thematic landscape of corruption, violence, pathological sexuality, and psychological character study" (Simpson 190). Like film noir, Hammett's work possessed an underlying pessimism and violence captured on the silver screen over a decade later, becoming the catalyst for this movement of American Cinema (Hirsch 1), that was later dubbed 'film noir' by the French.

Much of film noir was closely linked with the hardboiled detective novels they were based on, not only in plot, but also in style and mood. There is a whole body of work that has been recognized as Film Noir, not all of which were based on novels, but the most recognizable films were based on stories

from American Pulp Fiction magazines; these include films such as: *The Glass Key* (1942), also based on Hammett's hardboiled fiction from 1931; *Double Indemnity* (1944) based on the serialized fiction of James M. Cain first published in *Liberty* magazine in 1936, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) based on Cain's novel from 1934, and *Slightly Scarlet* (1956) based on Cain's novel *Love's Lovely Counterfeit* published in 1942; and *Murder My Sweet* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946) and *Lady in the Lake* (1947) inspired by Raymond Chandler's bestselling detective novels.

If film noir is characterized as a movement (Hirsch 1) then it must have a point where the wheels stopped rolling. That point occurred in 1958 with *A Touch of Evil* (Keeseey 10, Hirsch 1), which most commentators agree was the last of its kind, flavoured with the German Expressionist techniques that were the first markers of the film noir style.

As time passes, culture shifts, what was once breaking boundaries becomes old hat, but noir had not altered its course, and, in America in the mid to late 1950s, noir was still being fed by the mass culture of existentialism, anxiety and a paranoia of the big city: this pessimistic culture having stemmed from the stories in cheap, ubiquitous pulp-fiction magazines brought to life on the silver screen, and it appeared that nothing could stop the movement. The omnipresent, artistic pervasion of society that was noir finally hit a bump in the road in the late 1950s, and that bump was American Senator James McCarthy. McCarthy was the American face of anti-communism, so much so that the American public coined a term *McCarthyism*; and his plots to destroy anything subversive or unsettling to a nation coming to terms with potential nuclear fallout from the looming Cold War with Russia spelled the end of film noir and

noir fiction. That is why it is believed that noir was indeed a movement only, “restricted in time and place” (Schrader 53), “the answer to a historical situation which doesn’t exist anymore” (Hirsch 1). The 1940s and 1950s was indeed a time of historical significance, a time of change, when the government was at the forefront attempting to dispel the culture that these existential works had germinated in the American people.

The doorbell rings and takes me from my reading. I listen again, I listen for footsteps, for voices, but all I hear is the rain, and the squealing of distant car brakes. As a force of habit, my hands caress the fish knife in my pocket, and I can hear the latex gloves rub against the bloody steel, but nothing more. I wait a few more seconds, and still, I hear nothing, perhaps it was my imagination? My eyes return to the laptop, to noir.

It is clear that the roots of film noir stem from World War Two, and the movies and novel of the 1940s and 1950s can be seen as “metaphoric representations of the war’s traumatic impact of issues of gender, patriarchy, and sexuality” (Hirsch 2). Much great art, both film and fiction, grapple with the issues that tear into the social fabric (Schrader 54), and that is exactly what noir is: it *is* that tear in the social fabric, it is existentialism, pessimism, fatalism, paranoia, anxiety, represented metaphorically by film and fiction ripe with violence, lust, and greed. Noir is dark. Noir is black. And yet the term noir still baffles us.

The doorbell rings again. I close the laptop lid, slide back and stand up. I glance around the room until my eyes find a backpack on the sofa. I rush over, stepping on the least bloody part of the journalist (his face), and return to the table.

The doorbell rings.

I unzip the bag, put the laptop in, and then I grapple all of the miscellaneous papers and books and put them inside too. I take off my plastic jacket and my latex gloves, wrapping them in the bloody side of the jacket, and I stuff that in the bag.

The doorbell rings.

I carefully pick up my hat, place it low on my head so as to shadow my eyes, put the bag on my back, and give a final glance at the journalist. ‘Your work will live on,’ I say. And I head for the door. I use the sleeve of my jumper to open and then close the door to his apartment, and I make my way down the narrow stairs, until I reach the bottom, where I see a silhouette waiting on the outside. I head straight for the door, for the silhouette, and I open the door quickly. The cool city air hits me, and I avert my eyes and make sure that the door closes before the man can enter.

‘Hey, I need to get in there,’ he says.

I laugh, I push past him, and I continue walking. I hear curses fade in the distance as the rain taps softly against the brim of my hat.

I walk east toward Central Park, toward the 81st street subway, eventually shoving aside a group of tourists having just left the Natural History Museum, and I catch the A Train downtown. The train appears to take longer than normal, as all I can think about is opening the laptop and reading more about noir. A few minutes later I’m walking down Washington Place, and I’m upstairs in my apartment. I head over

to the dining room table and I sling off the backpack. I remove its contents, dispersing the papers and books across the table, just as the Journalist had done, and then I remove the laptop and discard the bag to a lonely corner of the room.

I open the laptop, and I continue reading:

The problematic naming of noir

As Hirsch describes in his book, *Detours and Lost Highways: a Map of Neo-noir*, the naming of film noir was retro-active, and this was a big part of the problem of noir as a loose categorization (2). William Park (2) sums up the ambiguity: “Some consider film noir a genre; others think it a style ... and still others refer to it variously as a ‘movement’, a ‘cycle’, a ‘hybrid’, some kind of ‘generic field’ (Walker 38) or ‘transgeneric phenomenon’ (Palmer 30) which defies classification”. Robin Wood believes that noir is “occupying an indeterminate space between a style and a genre” (264), and others are of the belief that noir never existed (Neale 151). As with all art, there is always going to be subjectivity: authors, critics, reviewers, publishers, and producers, are all going to put their own spin on describing something in a new light. Every film or novel means something different to each of its viewers or readers, but in film noir there is a sense of style, the look of the films, visual motifs such as lighting and camera angles (Park 2) that is easily recognizable. And with novels, these markers are in the matter of voice, use of exposition, type of dialogue, pace of the narrative of the writing. But noir fiction doesn’t need to be a genre sitting alone; I believe that noir can cross genres. There can be noir fantasy, noir

science fiction, noir horror, noir crime, or literary noir. As Hirsch writes: “those who argue against noir as a genre maintain that it is defined by elements of style, tone and mood, that are easily transported across generic boundaries” (2).

Regardless of what noir is exactly, or what it was for that matter, it is still used today to describe both film and fiction from 1920 to the present. Today, however, there are many coined phrases to attempt to classify or categorize works of noir that came after the traditional noir from the 1940s and 1950s: “postclassic noir, nouveau noir, neo-noir” (Hirsch 4), “noir thriller” (Horsely 1), “Texas noir” (Kirn 1), fantasy-noir, noir-romance. With an abundance of attempts at recreating noir as a term to describe both fiction and film, it is no surprise that film noir from the 1940s and 1950s has even been rebranded as ‘classic noir’ and ‘traditional noir’. Of all the different ‘noirs’ that have been bandied about in an attempt explain contemporary film and fiction that share many of the traditional noir sentimentalities in style and theme, ‘neo-noir’ is the term that has had the most support, and still survives today. But as Hirsch asks: “... how long can noir continue to be a ‘neo’ phase?” (4). Nevertheless, this neo-noir is said to conform to the underlying pessimism, tearing at the social fabric, more than even traditional noir. As Hirsch puts it:

These films made ‘after noir’, in fact, may well constitute the strongest case for noir as a genre. For over six decades at this writing, stories, settings, and characters with a distinctive dark tone have continued to be made regardless of how they have been named; and audiences, then as now, have recognized noir when they’ve seen it whether or not they have a label for it (4).

The debate over ‘what is noir?’, in particular ‘what is film noir?’, could very well be a perpetual discourse, and I don’t think that it is possible to approximate a pragmatic conclusion, let alone theoretical one, for the answer in itself would be purely subjective. Noir fiction, however, has not been examined to the same degree as film noir, and as the first ‘noir’ novels came prior to film noir, it is sensible to forestall re-labeling noir fiction as anything new, and instead simply utilize the term ‘noir fiction’. Before venturing into the archetypes that identify noir fiction, one issue needs to be addressed: there are common misconceptions with noir fiction, that the story is always driven by the detective or the private eye, and that there is always a mystery to be solved – archetypes synonymous with hardboiled fiction. Before looking solely at noir fiction and its specific archetypes it is, therefore, important to separate noir fiction from hard-boiled detective fiction.

I take my eyes away from the laptop, push aside a few of the hand-scribbled notes, and pick up one of the books: a novel titled *The Suitcase*. There is a picture of the Gramercy Park Hotel bleeding out of the windows and onto the street. This makes me smile. It is written by ‘H J Nash’, a name I’ve never heard before. I open up the novel, and a piece of paper falls out:

After speaking to the author over the phone, and briefly discussing genre, influences etc., a few books kept popping up: Cormac McCarthy’s No Country for Old Men, Iain Banks’ The Wasp Factory, Bret Easton Ellis’ American Psycho, Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club, Sylvia

Plath's The Bell Jar. I must read and take notes on all of these novels before the interview. They are his influences, but why are they important to him?

So, he definitely has an interview with this author? I wonder when and where? Perhaps I can conduct the interview? Perhaps this author, H J Nash, can be God's next sacrifice if he or she is worthy? Hmm. I contemplate the idea, and realize that if I am to be a faux-journalist, I must have the knowledge base of a journalist: I must further investigate noir. I nod my head, look left out the window, and notice it has grown dark outside, the last of the sunlight would be washing over Washington Square right now, and my chance for a daily stab through the park has vanished. I shrug my shoulders and open up the laptop and continue to read the journalist's essay:

Separating Noir Fiction from Hardboiled fiction

The term noir has been taken from film noir and shared with fiction. But it is believed that noir fiction began decades before film noir (Hoppenstand 151). Gary Hoppenstand (151) argues that the original noir fiction began in the 1920s, before film noir, evolving out of the 'Jazz Age' where moral and social injustice were excessive at the time when Americans were in the bleak decade of the Great Depression. These original 'hardboiled' stories of the 1920s, much like traditional film noir, featured plots that "highlight a dark urban setting in which characters find themselves trapped by fierce hedonistic passions for greed or sex, or trapped by an indifferent social system where the pursuit of justice translates into police brutality ... or trapped by

everyday events beyond their ability to control” (Hoppenstand 151). Authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were the first to publish hardboiled detective fiction in American pulp fiction magazines in the 1930s, preceding film noir by a decade.

Even though noir fiction is said to have evolved from these original 1920s ‘hardboiled’ detective stories, noir fiction is not limited to stories driven by the individualism of the private eye. Lee Horsley (3) argues that noir fiction is separate from and is a much broader fiction than the hardboiled detective story, often involving non-detective characters. Noir novelist, Richard B. Schwartz, puts it more simply:

For me noir has connections with the gothic, has connections with horror writing, and it certainly has connections with pulp writing ... but [noir is] average people being in the wrong place at the wrong time; the average person meeting the wrong person in perfect misalliance ... with cosmic forces, the pressure of fate, operating in a real world context ... a realistic tragedy, I think that’s what it [noir] is (1).

When referring to noir fiction, rather than film noir or hardboiled fiction, Schwartz’s view is simplistic, and fails to grasp the underlying existential pessimism in plot and tone, rendered around characters that are morally flawed, nihilistic, and involved in seemingly inescapable turmoil. Noir fiction may have its roots in hardboiled crime fiction, but Penzler argues: “Noir and hardboiled are diametrically opposed, with mutually exclusive philosophical premises” (2). For example, where the noir crime novel has characters that are morally flawed, subject to greed, consumerism, lust, jealousy and alienation, the hardboiled crime novel has a private

detective with strict morals in a morally corrupt setting (Horsley 7). Crime novelist Raymond Chandler said of the hardboiled private detective:

... down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor -- by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things (4).

Chandler likened the detective to a knight, a hero (Penzler 2): a view completely opposed to the characters in noir, who lack the moral decency of the detective and fall deeper into disillusionment and the despair of their own fatalities. There is a sense of honour in hardboiled fiction (Penzler 2); no matter how dark or violent or deceptive or attractive the misdemeanours are, the private detective will never succumb to the dark seductions of the inner city and will remain morally decent, doing battle with those who oppose him. A private eye can break the law or commit acts of violence (even murder) in order to pursue justice, where a noir character breaks the law, steals and murders in order to satiate his or hers morally corrupt souls (Penzler 3). A resonant distinction, therefore, is in the protagonist: the hardboiled crime novel has a private detective who enters a world filled of darkness and corruption, but who remains honourable, and morally sound; the noir novel is told through characters that are often

not detectives, characters that are morally corrupt, prone to lying, cheating, stealing, or even murdering and who are always on the “downward spiral of their own doom” (Penzler 2).

Noir fiction novels have more complex protagonists too. From “transgressors and victims, strangers and outcasts, tough women and sociable psychopaths” (Horsley 3). These are characters who are tarnished and afraid, and who find it difficult to escape from the bleakness, darkness, alienation, disintegration, the sense of disorientation and nightmare that are associated with the “modernist crisis of culture” (Horsley 3).

There is also clear distinction between the conclusion of a noir fiction novel, and the conclusion of a hardboiled fiction novel. A hardboiled novel can end happily for the protagonist, the private detective, but this is not true for the protagonist of a noir crime novel: “... it will end badly, because the characters are inherently corrupt and that is the fate that inevitably awaits them” (Penzler 2). At the end of a hardboiled crime novel, the detective “will emerge with a clean ethical slate” (Penzler 3), whereas in the noir crime novel, the protagonist will often end up being killed or financially, mentally or physically ruined due to their ambition and immorality. Hardboiled fiction novelist James Ellroy suggests that “noir indicts the other sub-genres of the hard-boiled school as sissified, and canonizes the inherent human urge toward self-destruction” (1).

Horsley suggests that noir fiction typically involves violence and murder and morally flawed characters that cannot escape the bleak darkness and alienation of the modern society (3). Noir fiction author Richard Thomas believes that noir fiction can be many things:

It's contemporary dark fiction. It was built on the backbone of classic noir and hardboiled fiction, but it's evolved to be so much more than that. It is a genre-bending subgenre that includes edgy literary fiction, as well as fantasy, science fiction, and horror. It also touches on niche storytelling like magical realism, slipstream, transgressive, and the grotesque. There is a movement out there, right now, one that has been heating up over the last ten years (1).

Noir fiction appears to cover a vast field of novels from different genres, styles, and forms, not just your typical detective driven fiction. And unlike traditional hardboiled detective fiction, noir fiction has essential archetypes, and themes within the narrative embedded in both character and setting; themes such as existentialism, consumerism, alienation, paranoia, violence, and moral ambivalence. It is, therefore, important to analyze these archetypes and themes that appear in novels that have been coined noir fiction to provide a framework to understand the modern-day noir fiction novel.

Existentialism? Consumerism? Violence? Alienation? I want to know more. I look at all the notes, the articles, the papers, and the books, covering the table like a moss of dead wood and coloured ink. There are notes upon notes about noir: film noir, noir fiction, neo noir, traditional noir. And then I look past the laptop and the table and I realize that the light outside has faded to darkness. I have spent much time reading about noir. Perhaps this is not a bad thing. This is research; research for my next kill: the author, should he or she be worthy of my fish knife. I smile, and I open

up a new document titled '*No Country For Old Men – an example of modern day noir fiction*':

PART 2 – Violence, existentialism, and fatalism in *No Country for Old Men*

There's no such thing as life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.

CORMAC MCCARTHY, *The New York Times*, April. 19, 1992
(Woodward 1).

Cormac McCarthy is a critically acclaimed, non-genre specific fiction novelist. His work is dark, violent, and often utilizes depressingly empty and harsh landscapes in order to achieve a bleak undertone to each of his novels. Scorned by some due to the distinct lack of punctuation and overuse of the word 'and' to join thoughts and sentences, he's a distinctly male oriented writer, and his work is ripe with misogyny and sentimentality for the mostly-absent female characters. Violent characters and exposition are often what drive his plots through harsh landscapes described in such a way that they come alive on the page, only for the characters to die horribly within them. These are a few of the reasons why he is disliked, but it is also the reason he is loved, and the reason why he is one of the most influential American novelists of his generation. He is

a cult novelist and adored by his fans, and so he should be: there is no voice as beautifully violent as his.

Cormac McCarthy's ninth novel, *No Country For Old Men*, is a very minimalist novel, fast paced, and violent. Character's thoughts are voiced sparingly, and we, the reader, are taken on a brief journey across the unforgiving American southwest, along dark highways, spending our nights in seedy motels, and eating at diners that serve chicken deep fried in diesel. The prose moves so fast that when Cormac McCarthy does stop to rest, he gives us indelible images, grotesque sequences of violence, and the divine philosophical rants of a psychopath. This novel is almost like a movie script, in that its pace is only matched by its imagery, and the dialogue resonates so believably that at times it is more thrilling than the action and violence that ensues.

No Country For Old Men is unreservedly noir fiction. Cormac McCarthy utilizes a desolate empty setting, landscapes often shrouded in darkness, a fast-paced violent narrative filled with death and foreboding. And his characters are distinctly noir: a psychopath driven by twisted philosophies of determinism and fatalism, an anti-hero who takes something that doesn't belong to him and consequently enters a world filled with turmoil where he spirals downward toward his eventual death, and an old sheriff who obsesses over murders in the Texas newspaper and seeks redemption for his past cowardice. The novel could be seen as an homage to post-war veterans: retired soldiers caught in a fight between drugs and money and honour. But above all this novel is wrought with the tropes that are the foundation of the genre that isn't quite a genre: noir fiction.

No Country For Old Men is doused with violence, blood, death and murder; as we read, our minds are subjected to witnessing the callous, unforgiving, violent nature of the world. Violence is, and always has been, a salient part of noir fiction, and it is the most obvious noir fiction trope, as anyone knows violence when they see it or read it. James M. Cain paved the way for writers like Cormac McCarthy, violence (or the thought of imminent violence) being the backbone of his thrilling plots, but unlike Cormac McCarthy, Cain's descriptive passages of death were subtle and he avoided displaying the violence to the reader. In *Double Indemnity*, Walter, insurance agent, falls for housewife Phyllis, and together they plot to murder Phyllis' husband in order to obtain insurance money from his death. The planning of the murder is intricate, and covers almost a third of the novel. The eventual murder, however, lasts only eight lines:

I raised up, put my hand over his mouth, and pulled his head back. He grabbed my hand in both of his. The cigar was still in his fingers. I took it with my free hand and handed it to her. She took it. I took one of the crutches and hooked it under his chin. I won't tell you what I did then. But in two seconds he was curled down on the seat with a broken neck, and not a mark on him except the crease right over his nose, from the crosspiece of the crutch (Cain 406).

As the mass culture of the 1940s began to favour cheap, ubiquitous pulp fiction magazines, violence in literature became somewhat mainstream, and a few years later, authors became more daring with their depiction of violence:

insinuations were the past, action was the future. English author, Patricia Highsmith, was one of the front-runners, and her first novel, *Strangers On a Train* (1950), exhibits the progression of violent imagery in literature of the early to mid 20th Century:

His hands captured her throat on the last word, stifling its abortive uplift of surprise. He shook her. His body seemed to harden like rock, and he heard his teeth crack. She made a grating sound in her throat, but he had her too tight for a scream... He sunk his fingers deeper ... Her throat felt hotter and fatter ... When he relaxed his fingers, it felt as if he had made deep dents in her throat as in a piece of dough... he fell on her again, hitched himself onto his knees to do it, pressing her with a force he thought would break his thumbs. All the power in him he poured out through his hands. And if it was not enough? He heard himself whimper. She was still and limp now. (Highsmith 81).

As the genre moved forward, the violence did too. And with the arrival of the postmodern world, the new technological age embedded violence into Western mass culture, spurted all over the news on a nightly basis, on movies and TV shows, and subsequently violence became a prevalent part of the noir fiction movement, a movement that is always at the forefront of pushing the boundaries. You need only open Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, enter the mind of Patrick Bateman – the alienated, apathetic, existential, psychopathic consumer – and violence is satirically slapped all over the page for gruesome entertainment:

... I push him back, hard, with a bloodied glove and start randomly stabbing him in the face and head, finally slashing his throat open in two brief chopping motions; an arc or red-brown blood splatter on the white BMW 320i parked at the curb, setting off its car alarm, four fountainlike bursts coming from below his chin. The spraylike sound of the blood. He falls to the sidewalk, shaking like mad, blood still pumping... to make sure the old queer is dead and not faking it (sometimes they do) I shoot him with a silencer twice in the face and then I leave, almost slipping in the puddle of blood that has formed by the side of his head... (Ellis 159).

Violence in noir fiction is not only seen in American and British writers, but also in authors from other parts of the world such as Ryu Murakami's *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*:

Seized with a nameless fear, he pulled out his commando knife, pressed the blade against the still-wailing siren of her throat, and sliced horizontally. Her neck opened as if it were a second mouth, and there was a whooshing sound followed immediately by a gusher of blood. Sugioka snickered to himself as he ran away. He glanced back just in time to see the Oba-san crumple to the pavement (22).

Where the passages of violence in *American Psycho* and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era* are almost surreal and overtly imagined, the violence in *No Country For Old Men* is anything but: it is convincing fiction, bloody realism; in

McCarthy's violence there is no grotesque humour to be found. Like Cain and Highsmith before him, violence is the skeleton that holds Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men* together, a novel with a very basic, clichéd 'drug deal gone bad' plot: anti-hero Llewelyn Moss stumbles across the remains of a drug-related shootout in the middle of the empty Texas desert. Amongst the dead dogs and dead Mexicans he finds a truckload of drugs and a suitcase filled with millions of dollars; he takes the suitcase and the risks that come with it. Anton Chigurh, psychopathic hit man, attempts to retrieve the case and kill Moss for the inconvenience. And almost-retired Sheriff, "an unreconstructed patriarchal geezer for whom aggressively enforcing the law is less important than passively keeping the peace" (Kirn 1), follows the path of bodies, hoping to find Moss before Chiguhhr does. Violence surrounds the tale, beginning in the first lines of the novel, with the narration from Sheriff Bell: "I sent one boy to the gas chamber at Huntsville... He'd killed a fourteen year old girl... he told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he'd do it again" (McCarthy 3).

The thought of death, and the act of murder, are features of noir fiction, especially within the minds of killers in first person narrative, who routinely kill without reason or remorse. Death and murder are essential tropes in noir fiction. Unlike much of noir fiction that is written in the first person, *No Country For Old Men*, however, is predominately written in third person past tense, and employs action to display much of its violence, and dialogue to display the inner working of the mind of the serial killer. From this third person narrative, death seems emptier, stripping meaning from existence, and as we follow Anton Chigurh through the American-Mexico borderlands, we witness bodies holding

onto their last breath as the blood begins to pulse out of them: “He dropped his cuffed hands over the deputy’s head and leaped into the air and slammed both knees against the back of the deputy’s neck and hauled back on the chain ... He was gurgling and bleeding from the mouth. He was strangling on his own blood” (McCarthy 5-6)

All of the killing from this point on in the novel is done using guns (even if one is a cattle gun), which makes *No Country For Old Men* a cleaner version of noir fiction when compared to novels such as *American Psycho*, where the physicality of murder without firearms adds to the gruesome nature of death. McCarthy, however, makes death via gunshot more interesting than the mere pull of the trigger and: he often tells the story of the blood post gunshot: “Chigurh shot him three times so fast it sounded like one long gunshot and left most of the upper part of him spread across the headboard and the wall behind it” (McCarthy 103). McCarthy not only describes the path of the blood as it leaves the body, he also uses bloody exposition, in an almost poetic fashion, as if there is life in the blood that has left the man:

... Chigurh shot him in the face. Everything that Wells had ever known or thought or loved drained slowly down the wall behind him. His mother’s face, his First Communion, women he had known. The faces of men as they died of their knees before him. The body of a child dead in a roadside ravine in another country. He lay half headless on the bed with his arms outflung, most of his right hand missing (178).

Immediately after the poetic description of blood and man, McCarthy takes us back to the reality of life and death, that Wells is just a body, no longer a man with a history, everything human from the moment before is stripped away, leaving behind only a half headless corpse. This 'give and take' style of prose creates an existential impression, as if life is meaningless, and in death there is no man, only flesh, blood, and bones.

Noir fiction has a tendency to dwell on the meaninglessness of existence, and absurdity of life. The indifference of life and death, of human existence, can be seen as early as Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*:

I had decided to kill myself that night. I had firmly intended to do so two months before, and poor as I was, I bought a splendid revolver that very day, and loaded it. But two months had passed and it was still lying in my drawer; I was so utterly indifferent that I wanted to seize a moment when I would not be so indifferent – why I don't know (3).

After Dostoyevsky, Albert Camus took the existential reigns with his noir fiction novel *The Outsider*, where he often dwells of existence and the absurdity of life:

I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done this thing but I had done another. And so? It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he. Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a

dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living (121).

And after Camus, American writers like Sylvia Plath, author of *The Bell Jar*, explored characters, such as Esther Greenwood, who continually experienced existential and often morbid thoughts about life and its choices:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (72).

Both *American Psycho* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* deal with the notions of life and death, of existentialist thought, in a very transparent fashion. In *American Psycho*, Bateman is continually reflecting on the meaninglessness of existence and the feeling of inescapable nothingness:

There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being—flesh, blood, skin, hair—but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that my normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning (271).

Fight Club shares the same existential nihilism as *American Psycho*, somewhat less effective through the second person, but the message still resonates: "You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else, and we are all part of the same compost pile." (Palahniuk 134).

This existential nihilism is a trope of noir fiction, and although both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, in their most reductive forms, focus on consumerism as the agent for the loss of the individual in society, *No Country For Old Men* doesn't focus specifically on consumerism, instead it uses an agent of consumerism – a suitcase filled with millions of dollars – as a means for its anti-hero, Llewelyn Moss, to make a moral choice, followed by an immoral action – to take the case and leave the dead – in an attempt to break free from his

social restraints and transcend into a higher social status where he might seek to find freedom and happiness. McCarthy delves in the existential notion of the absurd, and Llewelyn is an example of Camus' nihilistic view of existentialism. The incongruity between Llewelyn's "hopes and desires" (Stewart 258) for a better future and the "ultimate meaninglessness of his own existence" (Stewart 258) can be seen in McCarthy's prose as Llewelyn attempts to explain the meaninglessness of life, reflecting on his own experience, to a fifteen year old hitchhiker:

You dont start over. That's what it's about. Ever step you take is forever. You cant make it go away. None of it... You think when you wake up in the mornin yesterday dont count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it's made out of. Nothin else. You might think you could run away and change your name and I dont know what all. Start over. And then one mornin you wake up and look at the ceilin and guess who's layin there? (227)

Llewelyn Moss is your archetypal noir fiction existential anti-hero: he is morally corrupt, and his actions result in deadly consequence, whereby he spirals ever downward to his own doom. He makes a choice, taking the case, in order to attempt to make his life consequential. Llewelyn understands that he is responsible for his actions, and understands the ramifications of those decisions: that he is responsible for his own freedom and, if chance should have it, his own death: "You live to be a hundred, he said, and there wont be another day like this one. As soon as he said it he was sorry" (McCarthy 20).

Llewelyn is perhaps the most immoral character in the novel. He steals a suitcase filled with money – an act of greed – risking his wife, Carla Jean’s, life, and his love for her, if it exists, appears rather flippant and misogynistic. And yet, he is also governed by morals and has an altruism that many of the other characters lack, thus creating moral ambivalence, a theme often seen in noir fiction. When he first discovers the remnants of the gunfight that led him to the suitcase and the money, he comes across a Mexican man, shot up and bleeding, begging for water. Llewelyn has no water, but later that day in the middle of the night, at home in his trailer, he cannot help but think of the man he left to die:

He took the jar of water from the refrigerator... Then he just stood there holding the jar with the water beading cold on the glass, looking out the window and down the highway toward the lights. He stood there for a long time ...

Dead quiet. Not even a dog. But it wasn't the money that he woke up about. Are you dead out there? he said. Hell no, you ain't dead.

(McCarthy 22-23)

Llewelyn decides to go back to the floodplain in the middle of the night and give the dying man some water. When he arrives, he sits in silence, in the emptiness of the night, with his gun on the seat next to him, and one can only guess that he muses over the possibility of death:

When next he stopped he just shut off the engine and sat with the window down. He sat there for a long time ...

Then he took the .45 off the seat and shut the door quietly with his thumb on the latchbutton and turned and set off toward the trucks.

They were where he'd left them, hunkered down on their shot-out tires. He approached with the .45 cocked in his hand. Dead quiet. Could be because of the moon. His own shadow was more company than he would have liked. Ugly feeling out here. A trespasser. Among the dead. Dont get weird on me, he said. You aint one of em. Not yet. (McCarthy 26-27)

This action of moral decency ultimately led to his demise, as he found the dying man shot in the head, and found himself miles from his truck with the Mexican drug cartel hot on his tail. He realizes that his only act of moral decency has resulted in immoral consequence, and possibly cost him his life, whereby he comes to terms with his own mortality, the potential end of his very existence, and annoyance with the decision he made; he says to himself: "It's all right, he said. You need to be put out of your misery. Be the best thing for everbody ... I'll tell you what. Why dont you just get in your truck and go on out there and take the son of a bitch a drink of water?" (McCarthy 28-29).

And later he acknowledges the fact that the life he had, once inconsequential, is gone and has been replaced by something much worse, a life looking over his shoulder, knowing that death is as close as life: "He knew what was coming. He just didnt know when... It had already occurred to him that he would probably never be safe again in his life and he wondered if that was something that you got used to" (McCarthy 108-109).

No matter what path Moss takes, good or bad, moral or immoral he is destined to die; a fatalism that flows through the novel. And on multiple occasions, McCarthy hints at his death, when Moss continually recognizes that his death is coming sooner than he'd have wished: "Three weeks ago I was a law abidin citizen. Workin a nine to five job. Eight to four, anyways. Things happen to you they happen. They dont ask first. They dont require your permission" (McCarthy 220).

These forces of fatalism and determinism, archetypes of noir fiction, seen in many contemporary noir fiction novels, such as Dennis Lehane's *Mystic River*, where Jimmy is trying to convince Sean that a single choice can change the entire direction of one's life:

'You ever think,' Jimmy said, 'how the most minor decision can change the entire direction of your life?'

Sean held his eyes, 'How so?'

Jimmy's face was pale and blank, the eyes turned up as if he were trying to remember where he'd left his car keys.

'I heard once that Hitler's mother almost aborted him but bailed at the last minute. I heard he left Vienna because he couldn't sell his paintings. He sells a painting, though, Sean? Or his mother actually aborts? The world's a way different place. You know? Or, like, say you miss your bus one morning, so you buy that second cup of coffee, buy a scratch ticket while you're at it. The scratch ticket hits. Suddenly you don't have to take the bus anymore. You drive to work in a Lincoln. But you get in a car crash and die. All because you missed your bus one day.'

Sean looked at Whitey. Whitey shrugged.

‘No,’ Jimmy said, ‘don't do that. Don't look at him like I'm crazy. I'm not crazy. I'm not in shock.’

‘Okay, Jim.’

‘I'm just saying there are threads, okay? Threads in our lives. You pull one, and everything else gets affected.’ (217)

Like Lehane, McCarthy employs fatalism throughout his work, including in *No Country For Old Men*, especially through the hit man, Anton Chigurh. But fatalism is a theme in almost all McCarthy's characters, from the insignificant religious ramblings of Carla Jean's grandmother: “I told her what was going to happen, didn't I? Chapter and verse. I said: This is what will come to pass.” (180), to Carla Jean herself, who explains to Sheriff Bell about meeting her husband, Moss, how it was fate, and that it was meant to be:

... I had this dream. Or it was like a dream. I think I was still about half awake. But it come to me in this dream or whatever it was that if I went down there that he would find me. At the Wal-Mart. I didnt know who he was or what his name was or what he looked like. I just knew that I'd know him when I seen him ... he read my nametag and he said my name and he looked at me and he said: What time do you get off? And that was all she wrote. There was no question in my mind. Not then, not now, not ever. (132)

Fatalism is such a strong theme within *No Country For Old Men* and indeed in all noir fiction, so much so that when you read a noir fiction novel, you are essentially waiting for something bad to happen. And this is the case with McCarthy's plot, which captures its characters in a downward spiral, taking them deep and darker, until their deaths.

Anton Chigurh's ideals of fatalism and determinism are driven deep within his psychopathy, and he sees no course of action other than death. Through the course of reclaiming the suitcase and the money, he kills numerous people. He does so without remorse, without looking back, following a principle – a strict deterministic moral code of life and death, only to be tested, on rare occasions, by the toss of a coin. This can be seen when Chigurh stops for gas, meeting a simple elderly store clerk, whose stupidity has annoyed Chigurh enough to end his life. Chigurh offers the clerk a chance to continue living; he offers him a coin toss:

Chigurh took a twenty-five cent piece from his pocket and flipped it spinning into the bluish glare of the fluorescent lights overhead. He caught it and slapped it onto the back of his forearm just above the bloody wrappings. Call it, he said.

Call it?

Yes.

For what?

Just call it.

Well I need to know what it is we're callin here.

How would that change anything?

... You need to call it, Chigurh said. I cant call it for you. It wouldnt be fair. It wouldnt even be right. Just call it.

I didnt put nothin up.

Yes you did. You've been putting it up your whole life. You just didnt know it. (McCarthy 55-56)

He is a psychopath with principles, different from many noir fiction psychopaths like *American Psycho's* Patrick Bateman, who has become so detached from society, from being human, that his principles have been lost, and he is trapped in his violent paranoia and alienation, in a consumer-driven nihilistic world that is destroying the individual. Unlike Bateman, Chigurh is very much driven by principles, his psychopathy is controlled, knowing that no matter what he does, his path has already been chosen, that there is no way to alter its course, and therefore he is completely free. Free from worrying about life, from potentially fretting about the meaningless of his own existence, from thinking about what course of action to take. His principles of determinism and fatalism create freedom, which makes him a very unique noir fiction character, as he is not trapped by external forces, instead he embraces them, knowing that nothing set in motion can be altered. And because of this, there are no rules, only acts, acts and death, which can be seen in McCarthy's dialogue, especially in the scene where Chigurh is about to execute fellow hitman Carson Wells:

Chigurh leaned back. He studied Wells. Tell me something, he said.

What.

If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?

I dont know what you're talking about.

I'm talking about your life. In which now everything can be seen at once ...

You're not outside of death.

It doesnt mean to me what it does to you.

You think I'm afraid to die?

Yes.

Just do it. Do it and goddamn you.

It's not the same, Chigurh said. You've been giving up things for years to get here. I don't think I even understood that. How does a man decide in what order to abandon his life? We're in the same line of work. Up to a point. Did you hold me in such contempt? Why would you do that? How did you let yourself get to this situation?

... Well the hell with it. I think I saw all this coming a long time ago. Almost like a dream. Déjà vu. He looked at Chigurh. I'm not interested in your opinions, he said. Just do it. You goddamned psychopath. Do it and goddamn you to hell.

... Chigurh shot him in the face. (175, 177-178)

On multiple occasions, Cormac McCarthy employs fatalism before death, often relating the 'knowing of fate' to a dream-like state experienced in the past. In the above passage of dialogue, Wells says "I think I saw all this coming a long time ago. Almost like a dream" (178), referring to his own imminent death. Similar to Carla Jean who explains the fatalism of meeting a stranger, Moss,

who she knew would be her husband “I had this dream. Or it was like a dream. I think I was still about half awake” (132).

The most telling moments of fatalism and determinism, however, are seen with Chigurh and his moral code, one guided by a twisted belief in determinism: that all the actions of your entire life have set you on a course that cannot be undone. Chigurh sees himself as a divine executioner, the last link in a series of actions that brought his victim to the end of his gun. When he feels a sense of ambiguity, a moral uncertainty, he leaves the matter of life or death to fate: to the flip of the coin; believing that no matter what we can do or have done, we will always come to the same place, a place that fate has decided for us. The coin is nothing more than an affirmation of determinism, the flip finalizing the course, the life, of the person calling heads or tails. Before killing Carla Jean, he gives her the chance of the coin toss:

You should try to save yourself. Call it. This is your last chance.

Heads, she said.

He lifted his hand away. The coin was tails.

I'm sorry.

She didnt answer.

Maybe it's for the best.

She looked away. You make it like it was the coin. But you're the one.

It could have gone either way.

The coin didnt have no say. It was just you.

Perhaps. But look at it my way. I got here the same way the coin did.

She sat sobbing softly. She didnt answer.

For things at a common destination there is a common path. Not always easy to see. But there. (McCarthy 258-259)

Chigurh believes that you cannot change course once you are on a given path, that you cannot take the 'other road', that you must continue on the road that fate has given you, that you have given yourself. He believes that you are there because of everything you have done before, that fate brought you there, to his gun, or to his coin. And that he has no control of the matter, that not even he can change fate. He explains this to Carla Jean before killing her:

You wouldnt of let me off noway.

I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning. (McCarthy 259)

It is a mixed philosophy in the mind of a psychopath, difficult to unravel. Chigurh's philosophies create a foreboding uncertainty, exuding from the unadorned dialogue that Cormac McCarthy has written, making *No Country For*

Old Men a fine example of a noir fiction. But like much of noir fiction, Chigurh's psychopathy goes deeper. He sees himself as different, saying that he's a 'simple man' not driven by greed.

You think I'm like you. That it's just greed. But I'm not like you. I live a simple life ... You wouldn't understand. A man like you ... It's no good, Carson. You need to compose yourself. If you don't respect me what must you think of yourself? Look at where you are. (McCarthy 177)

The fact that only he understands the notion of existence, that nobody else is free, that every one else fears death, is why he sees his own existence as of great consequence. His past experiences of life and death have cemented his psychopathic principles, his divinity. He lives in a world where he is not responsible for his own actions because he is no longer in control of them – the path cannot be changed – which is a fatalism similar to some of the earliest works of noir fiction, specifically in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novella, *Notes From The Underground*, where the narrator, The Underground Man, reflects upon why he gets serious pleasure from unseemly deeds:

... bad as it is, it cannot be otherwise; that there is no way out for you, that you will never change into a different person; that even if you had enough time and faith left to change yourself into something different, you probably would not wish to change; and even if you did wish it, you would still not do anything, because in fact there is perhaps nothing to change into. (9)

Like *The Underground Man*, Chigurh believes that a person cannot change their course or their person, he believes that others must take responsibility for their own actions, for the paths they have already taken, even if they themselves are not in control of their present. Chigurh displays a narcissistic divinity, and he enjoys knowing that he is the last face that people look upon before their life ends:

The man was lying in a spreading pool of blood. Help me, he said. Chigurh took the pistol from his waist. He looked into the man's eyes. The man looked away.

Look at me, Chigurh said.

The man looked and looked away again.

Do you speak english?

Yes.

Dont look away. I want you to look at me.

He looked at Chigurh. He looked at the new day paling all about. Chigurh shot him through the forehead and then stood watching. Watching the capillaries break up in his eyes. The light receding. Watching his own image degrade in that squandered world. (McCarthy 121-122)

He is the divine executioner, god's last voice. And because of this, he sees himself as all-powerful, as if he can only live according to his principles of fatalism, determinism and death, principles that he acquired from the path that was given to him. He cannot change that path, it is embedded deep within his psychopathy:

He shook his head. You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn't allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps. In this case to small purpose. Most people don't believe that there can be such a person. You can see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which they refuse to acknowledge the existence of. Do you understand? When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You can say things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world. Do you see?

Yes, she said, sobbing. I do. I truly do.

Good, he said. That's good. Then he shot her. (McCarthy 259-260)

No Country For Old Men, is, among other things, a noir fiction novel. It is rich with noir fiction tropes: violence, existentialism, fatalism, psychopathy. And the world in which these characters, destined to death, briefly live, is dark, unforgiving, and empty.

I take my eyes away from the laptop, enraptured by the blue screen, the only light in the dark second storey apartment building. I stand up, turn on the light, fix myself a glass of water, and sit down at the table. I close the laptop and glance at the papers and the two books: one the novel, *The Suitcase*, and the other a diary. I pick up the diary; I open it up and flick through the coming week until I find what I'm after:

*Interview with H J Nash - noir fiction author, 12pm – Barnes and Noble
Upper West side. Remember No Country For Old Men and The Wasp Factory –
influences.*

I lean across the desk, pushing aside some papers and I grab the novel. I open it up and I begin reading. A smile hits my face as my left hand caresses the fish knife in my pocket.

I will read this novel, *The Suitcase*, and I will ready some questions that I can ask this author. I can learn from the author, and see if he or she is indeed worthy. And, if not, the author may be worth killing anyway, to keep me on my toes.

But first I must find this other book, *The Wasp Factory*, and I must read it, and I will attempt to write something similar to what the journalist did for *No Country For Old Men*, but mine will be darker, mine will be more interesting. I want to read about this killer from *The Wasp Factory*, what was his name, Frank, and I want to prepare myself for this interview. I am a journalist now, a murderous journalist, a divine journalist, I am your saviour should God's blade ever find you. Chigurh and I are not so different, but I'm more than just a psychopath with principles of determinism: I am God's voice.

PART 3 – The Wasp Factory

It has been two days. I read the *Wasp Factory*, I set fire to a dog, and now it's time to take off my soldier's hat and put on the faux-journalist hat. So here I go: pen to paper, or in this case letters to screen. An essay, a blog, a journal entry, preparation; call it what you will, it matters not, it is merely my analysis of this 'noir fiction' novel. I type my first words onto the laptop screen, my first thoughts:

The Wasp Factory: noir fiction at its most vulnerable?

By Dr. David Gregson – divine murderer.

I'm laughing, it's not a bad start. That word, vulnerable, it is apt, for the protagonist of *The Wasp Factory*, young Frank Cauldhame, is indeed vulnerable; as well as paranoid, violent, with a dark mind and soul, and an absolute delight to behold. Before I let my excitement take me, let me first tell you a little of the author. He is dead now, a shame, for I would have loved to discuss death with him, trade tales of murder. Unfortunately, however, I cannot. I can tell you a little about him, but I'll be brief, for I'd like to talk about darker things than a dot point of a greater life.

Iain Banks was voted one of Britain's fifty best authors from 1945 to present and whether his work was a "space opera or paranoid thriller, his books combined lurid sex and violence, complex story structure, black humor and, frequently, political subtext" (Slotnik 1). In just under 30 years Iain Banks published sixteen general fiction novels and twelve science fiction novels, and he wrote at least one novel that could be considered noir fiction, his first novel, *The Wasp Factory*. If you are a murderer like me, then opening the cover of *The Wasp Factory* and reading the quotes from reviewers should prompt you to read the novel: "Death and blood and gore fill

the pages ... there is something foreign and nasty here” (Punch); “If a nastier, more vicious or distasteful novel appears this spring, I shall be surprised ... infinitely painful to read, grotesque but human ...” (Mail on Sunday). Need I say more? On to the real action, the book, the content, on to the ‘noir’.

Let us step past the reviews, away from the author’s preface and to the first page of the novel, *The Wasp Factory*: “I had been making the rounds of the Sacrifice Poles the day we heard my brother had escaped. I already knew something was going to happen; the Factory told me” (Banks 1). Immediately, in the opening sentence, I feel the presence of something sinister at work with the naming of the “Sacrifice Poles”. And a few lines later, the sinister is depicted: “One of the poles held a rat head with two dragonflies, the other a seagull and two mice” (Banks 1). I laugh, the notion of such a mundane ritual: the killing of animals and insects. But do not judge just yet, there is something deeper here than just the traditionally bleak noir landscape, there is a psychosis at work, we are in the mind of a killer – Frank Cauldhame: “... a sadistic, ritualistically violent, self-confessed multiple murderer ...” (McClements).

A web of noir fiction tropes are present throughout the novel, and, disclosed within that very first page, we see the trope of fatalism. In this case, represented by the Factory – its signs, its predictions. It is plain to see from the first two paragraphs that we are entering a work of noir fiction: dead things impaled on poles in an isolated and empty landscape, the foreboding of a brother who ‘escaped’, fatalism at work in the ‘Factory’, and all told to us in the untrustworthy narrative of a psychopathic killer. Through the Factory, a foreboding sense of fatalism courses through the veins of the novel. But what is the Factory? The Factory is a ritualistic place that Frank holds dear. It is his God, and it is in the Factory where he finds himself, where life is explained, where the future is determined:

All our lives are symbols. Everything we do is part of a pattern we have at least some say in. The strong make their own patterns and influence other people's, the weak have their courses mapped out for them. The weak and the unlucky, and the stupid. The Wasp Factory is part of the pattern because it is part of life – even more so – part of death. Like life it is complicated, so all the components are there. The reason it can answer questions is because every question is a start looking for an end and the Factory is about the End – death, no less. Keep your entrails and sticks and dice and books and birds and voices and pendants and all the rest of that crap; I have the Factory, and it's about now and the future, not the past ... The Wasp Factory is beautiful and deadly and perfect. It would give me some idea of what was going to happen, it would help me to know what to do. (Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 153-154)

Fatalism is present, but there are other noir fiction tropes that shine through, that glitter off the hostile coastal landscape of this novel. On a quick review, the novel seems quite simply envisioned: an account of Frank's murders, brief glimpses of a shaky relationship with his father, the killing of living creatures on the island, the alienation and isolation Frank and his family have from society, and the imminent approach of an equally psychotic older brother who likes to light dogs on fire. But there is far more at work in *The Wasp Factory* than a simplistic plot, and the novel is presented in such a way that it may not be a work of noir fiction. Why you ask? Ha. It is a matter of voice; a matter of plot. Killing is humorous, the protagonist does not make us feel uneasy, as all the accounts of death and murder are in the past, and there

is no malice to any of the murders, in fact Frank sees the murders he has committed as mundane, trivial, something that had to happen:

Two years after I killed Blyth I murdered my young brother Paul, for quite different and more fundamental reasons than I'd disposed of Blyth, and then a year after that I did for my young cousin Esmerelda, more or less on a whim.

That's my score to date. Three. I haven't killed anybody for years, and don't intend to ever again.

It was just a stage I was going through. (Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 49)

As you can see: trivial, Godless. Murder should be more than just an act on a whim, it should be an act of salvation, but I digress, I will not ponder the virtues of those inclined to murder. Instead, let me ask you: if there are noir tropes present in *The Wasp Factory*, isn't the novel then noir fiction? Does noir fiction require more than specific archetypes to be dubbed noir fiction?

For the purpose of this essay, blog, whatever you deem to call it, I will, in brief, discuss only things 'noir', I will discuss two more noir fiction tropes, violence and alienation, although, one could discuss many other themes within this particular novel such as masculinity and gender, religion, psychology, and perhaps even feminism. But I won't bore you with such things that are no doubt omnipresent within the world, within society, and within academic discourse. This is academic discourse, I assure you. And I would love to discuss religion, to entertain you with my bloody actions that I perform in the name of God. But let us talk about noir. Noir fiction. And

the noir fiction tropes that live within the *Wasp Factory*. And then I will ask: is the *Wasp Factory* noir fiction? Fatalism is present in the form of the Factory, a place of ritualistic sacrifice, a place where the future is told, now let us move forward, let us discuss two other noir fiction tropes: violence and alienation.

Noir fiction trope 2 – Violence

This is an interesting one. Violence. How does one discern what is and is not violence within a novel? Is a simple fight violence? Or does it have to involve death? Murder? Do the deaths have to be the loss of humans? Or can animals be killed? Is that violent enough? Does violence have to happen in the now, or can we reflect upon violence in the past? Where does the line begin and end? For a novel to be considered noir, there must be death. Of this much I am sure. But in the case of Frank Cauldhame, much of the violence we see through him is in reflection of actions or, if in the present, revealed only in passing:

‘I hope you weren’t out killing any of God’s creatures.’

I shrugged at him again. Of course I was out killing things. How the hell am I supposed to get heads and bodies for the Poles and the Bunker if I don’t kill things? There just aren’t enough natural deaths. You can’t explain that sort of thing to people, though. (Banks ‘The Wasp Factory’, 9)

This kind of violence makes Frank’s actions appear strangely normal, as we are not witnesses to the violence, instead the violence within the plot almost acts as a means to build Frank’s character, his delightful psychopathy. There is a lot of

suggestive violence, and Frank continually flirts with thoughts of violence, which adds colour to Frank's character:

Soon I'll have enough money for a really powerful crossbow, and that I'm certainly looking forward to; it'll help make up for the fact that I've never been able to persuade my father to buy a rifle or a shotgun that I could use sometimes. I have my catapults and slings and air rifle, and they could all be lethal in the right circumstances, but they just don't have the long-range hitting power that I really hanker after. (Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 70)

One unusual little facet of *The Wasp Factory* is that almost all of the violence Frank performs is done to animals, which takes the 'human' away from the murders, the seriousness of life and death, and this makes the killing of animals somewhat interesting and playful:

Before I realized the birds were my occasional allies, I used to do unkind things to them: fish for them, shoot them, tie them to stakes at low tide, put electrically detonated bombs under their nests, and so on. (143)

They are only animals after all. Why should killing an animal be violent? We eat animals, murder them on a daily basis and package them in paper and plastic, and often we waste them, we kill for nothing. Therefore I ask: would a novel about a butcher be violent? I would counter that it would be gruesome perhaps. But violent? No. But Frank is different; he is not a butcher, but rather a scientist, a schemer. He kills to test himself, to solve puzzles, to acquire the means to keep his island working

and the Wasp Factory alive to guide him with the sacrifices he makes. Because of this, Frank's killing of animals is trivial and a normal part of his life on the island. Perhaps to entertain himself as much as the reader, Frank makes the killing of animals humorous, as we imagine little animals flying through the air to their end, landing in mud, which he sees as 'ploppy deaths':

As for the little animals, the gerbils, white mice and hamsters, they had to die their muddy little ploppy deaths so that I could get to the Skull of Old Saul. I catapulted the tiny beasts across the creek and into the mud on the far side so that I could have funerals. My father would never have let me start digging up our graveyard for family pets otherwise, so off they had to go ... I told my father I was trying to get them over to the far side, to the mainland, and that the ones I had to bury, the ones which fell short, were victims of scientific research, but I doubt I really needed this excuse; my father never seemed bothered about the suffering of lower forms of life...
(Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 141)

These mammalian deaths are not human deaths, which strips the meaning and violence away from the deaths. Frank seems unusual, weird, and savage. Not inhuman, perhaps not even violent at all. But occasionally, the savageness of these animal murders make Frank appear more forcefully violent than a majority of his narrative leads us to believe:

I ended up lying in the scrubby grass at the bottom of the hill, my knuckles white as I throttled the rabbit, swinging it in front of my face with its neck

held on the thin black line of rubber tubing, now tied like a knot on a black string. I was still shaking, so I couldn't tell if the vibrations the body made were its or mine. Then the tubing gave way. The rabbit slammed into my left hand while the other end of the rubber whipped my right wrist; my arms flew out in opposite directions, crashing onto the ground ... It was dead; the head rolled slack, neck broken, when I lifted it. (Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 35-36)

This image of Frank strangling the rabbit is morbidly entertaining, and has more impact than other deaths perhaps as a rabbit is perhaps more human than a mouse or a bird. And later when Frank kills a dog, the action seems even more violent, the death more upsetting. But I would argue that violence can only be committed against man, as whilst acts upon the rest of God's creatures are savage and cruel, they are a necessary part of life. More so, these animal murders are mundane because they must happen, because this is how life on the Island happens. This creates a rather light mood to the savagery, as Frank narrates these actions in such a playful fashion. One could argue, therefore, that the violence in *The Wasp Factory* is unlike the violence and brutality seen in most noir fiction, where the killing is not of animals and insects, but of humans. Frank does not murder in a brutal fashion like Anton Chigurh in *No Country For Old Men* or Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, but Frank is responsible for the death of three humans. Although when Frank reflects on the killing of his sibling and other relations we are not witnesses to the murder in the same gruesome fashion as noir fiction novels like *American Psycho* and *No Country For Old Men*, we do not get to watch a human life collapse into red blood and limp bones. This makes *The Wasp Factory* unlike modern noir fiction works where

violence and murder is visualised by the act of shooting or stabbing or strangling someone, someone human. Instead, murder to Frank is planned; it is clean, and he merely manoeuvres his victims into position and waits for the seemingly unfortunate coincidence to take place. Death is like an experiment, and Frank is the scientist and the island is his lab. This planned method of murder can be seen when Frank decides to kill his younger brother, Paul. Frank tells Paul to hit an old navy bomb that has washed up on the shore, hoping that such action will result in Paul's death:

Paul was a distant puppet, jerking and leaping and throwing back his arms and whacking the bomb repeatedly on the side. I could just hear his lusty yells over the whisper of the grass and in the wind. 'Shit,' I said to myself, and put my hand under my chin just as Paul, after a quick glance in my direction, started to attack the nose of the bomb. He had hit it once and I had taken my hand out from under my chin preparatory to ducking when Paul, the bomb and its little halo-pool and everything else for about ten metres around suddenly vanished inside a climbing column of sand and steam and flying rock, lit just the once from inside, in that blindingly brief first moment, by the high explosive detonating ... I ran down. I stood about fifty metres away from the still steaming crater. I didn't look too closely at any of the bits and pieces lying around, squinting at them from the side of my eye, wanting and not wanting to see bloody meat or tattered clothing. (Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 88-89)

Murder is murder, but whereas the brutality of most noir fiction murders makes us feel uneasy, when Frank murders we see the murder as unfortunate, not bloody and

gruesome or violent. I know that violence is indeed present in *The Wasp Factory* and yet for some reason I do not feel the violence, because I do not fear Frank. Instead, I am entertained by Frank, by the mundane nature of the horror; I am not at all tense, reading and waiting for something bad to happen, instead I want something bad to happen so I can be entertained, and humoured by the violence.

The casual horrors are trivial in Frank's world, on Frank's island, and this is because it is indeed his world, not your world or my world. It is not a world of God or rules or culture, of drugs and guns, of consumerism and apathetic psychopaths, it is the world of Frank Cauldhame, isolated, alienated, self-entertained and confused by the moralities of what should be a normal life. To Frank violence is normal, not bloody, or pathological, but the everyday occurrence of his own universe.

It is true that violence is a trope of noir fiction, and violence is present in *The Wasp Factory*, but does that make *The Wasp Factory* noir fiction?

Noir fiction trope 3 – Alienation

We are there already. Alienation. The world of the abnormal, the social outcasts, the strangers. What is alienation but a separation from the real world, from society's view of normality? We live in a world where individuals are ridiculed and punished for being different. But what is different? Frank is different; estranged from his past and uncertain about his identity, which feeds his alienation. Alienated people are vulnerable, and their vulnerability stems from an inability to adapt, to fit in. Frank fears the outside world, because he doesn't know exactly who he is, or how to fit in. His island is his homeland, his universe; everything on the outside is another planet that does not understand him. Iain Banks writes in the preface to *The Wasp Factory*:

“The island could be envisaged as a planet, Frank, the protagonist, almost an alien.”

But why is alienation important in noir fiction? Perhaps alienation germinates action to repel those who make one feel different. Alienation can lead a character to violence, to suicide, to murder. Frank is indeed alienated, and he does all he can to avoid those on the outside who would seem to judge him:

... they would run from me, or shout rude things from a distance, so I kept a low profile and restricted my brief visits to the town to a taciturn minimum. I get the odd funny look to this day, from children, youths and adults, and I know some mothers tell their children to behave of ‘*Frank’ll get you,*’ but it doesn’t bother me. I can take it. (Banks ‘The Wasp Factory’, 62-63)

There are moments in the novel when you feel as though Frank’s alienation will lead him to abhorrent acts, to pursue those neighbourhood kids who harass him, but we are let down, violence does not ensue. This alienation is indeed present, but so long as Frank remains on the island, he is safe and invulnerable, and unlike his brother Eric, immune to the lure of the outside world:

Finally though, that outward urge consumed him, as it does any real man, and it took him away from me, to the outside world with all its fabulous opportunities and awful dangers. Eric decided to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a doctor. He told me then that nothing much would change... but I knew it wasn’t true, and I could see that in his heart he

knew it too. It was there in his eyes and his words. He was leaving the island, leaving me. (Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 182)

Ultimately, however, Frank has to come to terms with the fact that he must leave the island, but he fears the outside world, he fears what became of his brother when he left the island. Yet again, Frank's alienation is expressed in thought rather than violent action:

I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't stay here, and I'm frightened of everywhere else. But I suppose I'll have to go. What a bummer. Maybe I'd consider suicide, if some of my relatives hadn't produced such difficult acts to follow. (Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 241)

Alienation is indeed present in *The Wasp Factory*, but Banks does not use this alienation to create tension, to drive the plot into the violent conflict that is prevalent in noir fiction, where the characters fall deeper into disillusionment and despair. But tension would not have fit in the context of this novel. *The Wasp Factory* is not a novel about violence or alienation; this is a novel about Frank Cauldhame, it is a novel about identity. This search for identity is made evident at the end of the novel, when Frank discovers that he is in fact a woman, not a man, that his father has been feeding him lies and male hormones his entire life, that his mangled penis is in fact a large clitoris. It is this uncertainty, this deception, which explains his horrific actions. Frank understands that he must leave his father and the island and the Factory so that he can search out his true identity, discover himself:

Believing in my great hurt, my literal cutting off from society's mainland, it seems to me that I took life in a sense too seriously, and the lives of others, for the same reason, too lightly. The murders were my own conception; my sex. The Factory was my attempt to construct life, to replace the involvement which otherwise I did not want.

Well, it is always easier to succeed at death.

Inside this greater machine, things are not quite so cut and dried (or cut and pickled) as they have appeared in my experience. Each of us, in our own personal Factory, may believe we have stumbled down one corridor, and that our fate is sealed and certain (dream or nightmare, humdrum or bizarre, good or bad), but a word, a glance, a slip – anything can change that, alter it entirely, and our marble hall becomes a gutter, or our rat-maze a golden path. Our destination is the same in the end, but our journey – part chosen – part determined, is different for us all, and changes even as we live and grow. I thought one door had snicked shut behind me years ago; in fact I was still crawling about the face. *Now* the door closes and my journey begins. (Banks 'The Wasp Factory', 243-244)

The Wasp Factory is at its most 'noir' at its denouement, we see the tropes of existentialism, determinism and fatalism, but even still, the mood is hopeful. The world is not presented as unforgiving or harsh even in the light of all Frank has done, of all those humans and animals Frank has killed, of all Frank has been subjected to – his father's twisted secrets and affectations. At this end point, we forget about the murders, the violence, and we are left feeling happy, positive. This is not noir fiction.

The Wasp Factory is not noir fiction, even though it encapsulates many of the tropes present in noir fiction. I can deduce, therefore, that there is more to noir fiction than tropes and archetypes synonymous with the genre, it is about colour, about darkness, it is about nothingness and the harshness of the violent unforgiving world, about hopelessness. Noir fiction is mood, a dark troubled mood, and it is most certainly more than a collection of tropes.

PART 4 – The faux-journalist. The interview.

I walk down 82nd Street heading toward Broadway. The spring wind touches my face. There's something about Upper West Side that I find so appealing. There is a decadence that wafts casually through the backstreets, hidden behind playing children prone to violence, while their middle-aged professional parents watch on wishing nothing more than their child's tragic death so they can move on with their life and their wealth. It is the deception that is the appeal. The deception of their rapacity.

I spot the next square bed of tulips and I tread through them, and kick over a small sign that reads 'please don't pick'. It never said 'please don't kick'. A smile slices my face and I think about the author, and me – the faux journalist with a knowledge base of psychology, religion, and now noir. Psychology is the past, religion the present. But what is noir?

Over the past few days I became enamoured with this term 'noir', an elusive locution, an untouchable ghost, fervently coined, misunderstood and alluring. It was originally a benign curiosity that grew, grew until it festered and transformed into a cancer, a cancer that has wasted my time, that has wasted God's time, and so it must end today, maybe tomorrow if this author is worthy of deeper investigation: if the path of the journalist takes me further still along the path of the righteous then this curiosity will not be an egocentric one. If he is destined for God's plate of avarice, then this meeting today will be destiny. It will be God's will.

I look up ahead: Barnes and Noble. I push through the spinning glass door, and take the escalator upstairs to the Starbucks cafe and one H J Nash. As I stand motionless, and yet moving up, I caress the notebook and novel with one hand, and the fish knife within my pocket with the other. I step off the moving metal, and walk

toward Starbucks, looking around the tables for a man or woman who might be looking around for me – the journalist. I stand for a few more minutes looking around for a complete stranger, until a bald man holds up his arm. I walk toward him. He stands up and holds out his hand. Why is he early? I wanted more time. Time to look over my questions, one last time to sift through his novel.

‘Hi, I’m Heath, Heath Nash,’ he puts out his hand for me to shake. ‘Are you the journalist? From *The Times*?’

I take my hands away from the sharp blade in my pocket and I shake his hand. ‘Yes, that’s me, nice to meet you, Heath.’ I lie a smile, put down his novel and my notebook onto the small, round table, and I sit down. I remove my hat from my head and carefully place it on the empty chair beside me. I would have preferred to shove my knife through his hand rather than make contact with his clammy skin, but then I would not be conforming to the Journalist’s code of ethics, would I? I guess I should offer this thing a coffee, so I do, and he says yes, and I wait in line, looking up at the cheap paintings of dead authors that line the entire Eastern wall of the café. I come back with two coffees, a long black for me, and a mint latte for him. His choice of beverage has already made me want to kill him. I sit.

Let the game begin. Will I kill you today? ‘So, let’s get started shall we?’

‘Sounds good,’ he says, smiling. He sips the mint latte, and I’m already thinking of a condiment to add to God’s plate. My hand is in my pocket, caressing the fish knife again, until I pull it away, and focus on my role as faux-journalist.

‘So, you are from Australia, whereabouts?’

‘Adelaide, but that’s in the bio section of the novel. Have you read the book?’

His arrogance annoys me; a normal person would have stated where they were from as opposed to making me read his useless bio.

‘Yes, I have read your novel, but I’ll ask you the questions, from now,’ I tell him. ‘I thought about a way to approach this, the angle for the article, and I want to focus on your influences and life experiences, how you came to write the novel, and then I want to talk genre. I’m not interested in the content, or the story or the characters, I can learn about them from reading your book again. Nor am I interested in how you wrote the novel – sitting in bed or at your desk or in a café or whatever. I want to know why you wrote it and what it is you think you wrote.’

He nods his head ‘Okay, cool.’

I look over my notes. ‘*Where did you get your ideas from, when writing The Suitcase?*’

‘Peter Carey once said: “I used to begin with an image – a strong symbolic picture – and then ask myself what do you have to do to arrive at this point? It’s like one of those houses of cards where everything underneath has to hold up the top two cards.” (Carey 444). That’s what Carey used to do with his early novels, but then he pushed himself away from an image and focussed on characters and would set out to write “a book about voices telling stories” (Carey 445). I guess I’m a little bit of both, and I imagine all writers must be. Initially I started with an image – I imagined money and death: a dead guy still holding onto a suitcase with money spilling out. That was the first thought. Then New York City entered my head, due to the presence of money, and I imagined the dead guy in a park in Manhattan. Then I thought about how he got there and who would find him? This is where Carey’s ‘voices’ come in. I imagined five different people loosely connected, and I thought about why someone would want all that money, and the burdens that came with that much money. It was the characters that drove the story to that end point, to the ‘top two cards’. And that was essentially it.’

‘Why did you decide to write five perspectives? What was the influence there?’

‘I find it nearly impossible not to be influenced by film and fiction. I liked the idea of multiple character viewpoints and multiple stories within a linear narrative. McCarthy’s *No Country For Old Men*, and the *Game of Thrones* series by George R. R. Martin were the biggest influences there. I liked how they created a juxtaposed perspective within the narrative, how each of the characters intertwined and interacted and how they could adjust the narrative with action, and the importance of seemingly insignificant events and thoughts. I think the visuals of TV and film had a big part to play in visualizing the characters and the setting, imagining how the characters would react to the setting, and also the sequence of events that takes place: I almost imagined scenes rather than chapters – pictured events in my head, and then the characters viewpoints influenced the creation of these scenes, which later became chapters in the novel.’

‘You refer to the setting, New York City. Did you live here prior to writing the novel, or did you imagine the landscape? How did New York City influence the creation of the novel?’

‘Neither, I guess. I came to New York City a few years ago, for five weeks, during spring, to write another novel – not *The Suitcase*. And I found myself alone for a decent period of time, for the first time in years, in a big city, a city filled with tourists and strangers. There were millions of people walking past one another like blind and deaf ants. And I didn’t think so much about what that meant when I was over here – loneliness in a perpetual crowd. I noticed it when I returned home to Adelaide, where, like any city, the same thing happens, but just on a much smaller

scale than New York, so not confronting at all. And that word ‘confronting’ germinated an idea in my head, that later grew into the novel.’

‘So you’re saying the setting impacted the creation?’

‘When I commenced writing *The Suitcase*, I wanted to write something dark, something naturalistic, where the environment played a big part in the mood of the novel and somehow impacted the characters whether in thought or action. I wanted to write something about the consumerist disposition that drives our lives. There is no better place than New York, a city governed by consumerism and advertising. Everywhere you look there is something and that something has a price. And I guess I wanted to ask the question, what is the real price? How much is one willing to give up for something more? To different people life means different things. Does money really mean that much to me as it does to you? Does money really have such a high importance?’

‘And does it?’

He shrugs. ‘Through each of the characters money means something different: for Gavin it meant a ticket home, for Amy it meant security in a spendthrift city, for Jane it offered perspective, for Dr Gregson it was a game, and for Andrew it was nothing. And in the end, I guess the characters answered that question in their own unique way.’

‘Why was approaching consumerism important to you?’ I’m judging you here, Nash. Will you be served on my plate?

‘We live in a capitalist society. We’re all judged on a social ladder, and the higher up the ladder you are the more money you have and the more important you are. In Adelaide, this is more prevalent and noticeable: even in your thirties you’re

still asked about what school you went to – a question indicative of class and social status. It's weird.'

'And why is it weird?' My hand grazes the fish knife. He's not free yet.

'It's weird because the twisted notion of wealth as a monetary value strips so much from life: the importance of family and friends, the importance of health and happiness. Just because you're wealthy doesn't mean you're happy. Would you prefer to have a bunch of money, or your wife or child or mum or dad or brother or sister or friend back from the grave? Would you prefer to sit behind a desk punching numbers until all hours of the night to meet a 'budget', or be free to live, work, and do what makes you happy, regardless of wealth? Life is judged on money, on how much you have.

'That money is expressed by what you wear, where you live, where you work, what school you went to, what car you drive. We are sheep eating and shitting and killing for money, and capitalism is the shepherd feeding us our daily fix of advertising. Advertising on TV, in magazines, in newspapers, on the Internet. We continue to spend, to consume until, for some, life becomes empty, that's what's weird – it's like eating as much as you can until you eventually starve. Capitalism has created such an artificial way of thinking, about what is and what isn't important. It's created a veil for the gluttonous: an obese woman draped in gold is now more attractive than a healthy woman clothed in rags. It has taught us to be ignorant, egocentric, narcissistic. It's no longer about the people, but about the person. New York: Wall Street, Times Square, it is the epitome of capitalism. The juxtaposed image of a homeless man begging before a Tiffany's jewellery sign says it all. It's depressing.'

'Do you think that God created these challenges as a test?'

He laughs. 'When people use God to explain things for them, to put things into perspective, they're losing sight of the problem. God is for the ignorant.'

For the ignorant? The knife presses harder against my finger, and I can feel the skin break. You are a child. You know nothing, only self-love. God will judge you. You are nothing but matter waiting to be recycled to the earth. I can make that happen faster. *'But still, I can't help but ask you about God. In the second sentence of the first paragraph you mention God. And throughout the novel you mention God, but a belief in God is present only in the killers within the novel. Why? Was that intentional?'*

'For starters I don't believe in God, but I did not want my atheism to come across in the novel. Religion is a touchy subject, and I didn't set out to write a novel for me alone, so I couldn't ignore God and religion completely. Instead I use religion to drive the characters into violence. For the purpose of the story, I liked the notion that God is unforgiving and his world is full of violence and filth and hopelessness, and that his servants would be the most unforgiving, believing that violence is indeed God's will and that they are acting on behalf of God. God was kind of like an antagonist. I believe that if people choose to believe in God, they can't be blind to all that is going on in the world, to all God's actions, even if his actions are abhorrent or seemingly unexplainable.'

Violence is God's will. Why would I be here otherwise? *'Let's go back to the themes within The Suitcase. One of your themes is consumerism, I guess you could say religion is a theme, but what other themes are present in your novel? And did you set out to include certain themes in the novel?'*

'No, I didn't set out to include this theme and that theme. The themes come naturally with the writing and the mood of the story and particularly the creation of

character. Apart from consumerism, the one persistent theme that arose is loss. All of the characters have lost something: Gavin's wife was murdered, Dr Gregson kills his own wife, Andrew lost his wife to suicide, Amy accidentally killed her mother and her father committed suicide, and Jane's father died when she was a child. This 'loss' helps colour the mood of the novel. I guess you could say that the novel is a tale about the loss of loved ones and the acquisition of wealth. Does money imply happiness? Does money make you forget? I don't know. Make of it what you will. In the end the reader will see what they want to. Each of us can create our own story within the narrative of others. It's just about finding the message that you want to find. That's the beauty of the story and fiction. Nothing is real unless you want it to be, unless it can affect you in some way, cause you to reflect on your own existence and the existence of those around you, or at the very least the story should entertain you. That's if a depressing novel can be entertaining.' He laughs.

'Why did you choose to write a depressing novel?'

He shrugs. 'I had just read a stream of depressing novels *No Country For Old Men*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, *The Bell Jar*, *The Outsider*, so I was in a particular mindset, a mindset that I commonly seek out to evoke emotive thought. I don't really attain any inspiration from happiness, it's only when I think upon sadness that I can actually appreciate happiness or be motivated to do something that will create happiness. So I decided to write something dark, about people alone in a big city, surrounded by consumerism. A couple of years ago, I came back to New York, in the dead of winter, over the Christmas period, and I felt the hostility of the environment, the cold winds and the rain. This setting only added to the isolation, the nihilism, that feeling of nothingness in a world where the consumer was more

important that the human. That notion, that existential thought became the backbone for the tone of the novel, and I felt like that is the tone that I wanted to express.’

I pretend to scribble something in my notebook, but I’m drawing a picture of his face with an axe buried in it. ‘*You spoke about the novels that influenced you, can you talk a little more about how they influenced the writing? No Country For Old Men, for example.*’

‘*No Country For Old Men* had a very small part to play in that it provided me with an agent to drive the plot through a consumerist city like New York. That is: a suitcase filled with money, which is what McCarthy used to drive the plot of *No Country For Old Men* through the American Southwest. But the idea of a suitcase filled with money, or filled with something valuable, isn’t unique to *No Country For Old Men*, you notice it more in film than fiction – *Pulp Fiction*, *Ronin*, almost any gangster or heist film. But I guess more than anything I think the idea of a suitcase filled with cash is just a mechanism to provide conflict. Money is a very powerful thing for humankind, but for any other animal it’s just another place to shit.’

He takes a sip of his mint latte, I choose not to talk and let him continue: ‘But after re-reading my novel, I noticed a few other McCarthy splashes in my work. An example is a tendency for my characters to be frozen with thought, staring into nothingness, or in my case staring into the rain, which McCarthy’s characters in *No Country For Old Men* do rather frequently. But, yet again, the whole staring into nothingness idea isn’t unique to McCarthy either. Every protagonist in almost every book has moments of reflection. So apart from those two similarities, which one could argue aren’t unique to Cormac McCarthy, it’s nothing like *No Country For Old Men*. I mean there’s a serial killer or two, but that’s nothing distinctly similar. More than anything, I was influenced by the nihilistic tone and hopelessness of McCarthy’s

book. But, I'm sure if you went digging you could enlighten me with more similarities.'

I'm sure if I went digging, it would be your grave. I smile, but I still want to kill him. *'Over the phone you mentioned a few other novels, one in particular – The Wasp Factory. Can you talk about that novel and if and why that influenced writing this particular novel?'*

'The Wasp Factory is an interesting one, because it's not really like the other novels, which are more existential, dark of mood and voice, and rather depressing. Unlike *No Country For Old Men*, it's also a singular first person narrative. The fact that it's first person removes some of the distance, and somehow makes the novel warmer. It gives the reader empathy for the character, Frank, even though he's a killer. More than that is the fact that the murders are in the past and reflected upon in such a fashion so as to make them seem almost forgivable and human. I liked this idea of first person narrative for a serial killer as it fostered humanity for the monstrous and also provided a unique perspective for the reader. So I used first person for one of my serial killers, but not for the other. This created insight to the mental inner workings of one serial killer, and the fear of the unknown for the other, the latter in a somewhat similar fashion to Anton Chigurh in McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*, the former more akin to Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*.'

He pauses, but I say nothing. Keep talking asshole. My calloused fingers scrape against the fish knife and I nod my head. 'And the others? Over the phone you mentioned *Fight Club*, *The Bell Jar*, *American Psycho*, *The Outsider*.'

'Tone. It's all about tone. The way those novels promote existential thought. The way they can shock you with thoughts that are so familiar and yet so foreign. The harshness, the violence, the hopelessness of life. They're the kind of novels that

question the way you live, and perhaps the way you view western society, its expectations and naïve restrictions. They influenced me on a subconscious level more than anything. I mean, my characters are depressing too, but I don't think you can read something, a good book that is, and not be influenced by it in some fashion. I think it's important to be able to acknowledge your inspirations, rather than be ignorant, and reading provides that foundation, but that's not to say that whatever you read doesn't influence you creatively on a subconscious level. But I didn't set out to write something similar to anything I've read. I wanted to evoke a similar emptiness and hopelessness, like the novels I mentioned, but nothing more.'

'These books, I've only read a few of them, but they are all noir fiction, right?'

He shrugs. Then sips his coffee. His mint flavoured coffee. I don't know why it bothers me, the mint, but it does.

'Do you think your novel is noir fiction?' I ask him. *'Did you set out to write a noir fiction novel?'* I watch him sip the mint latte again, and then put down his cup delicately.

'No, I didn't set out to write a 'noir fiction' novel. In fact, when I first had the idea for *The Suitcase*, I asked myself: what is this story, what genre is it? I Googled movies and books that I thought shared the same depressing mood as the novel that I was about to write, and the search kept coming up with this word 'noir'. I didn't really know what noir fiction was. But after enlightening myself, I can say that I think noir fiction is a mood. It is darkness. It is hopelessness. It is violent. And it is unforgiving, just like life. So in that regard yes, I do believe my work is a work of noir fiction. And I did set out to evoke such a mood, but whether or not that implies I set out to write a work of noir fiction, I'm not sure. *The Suitcase* could equally be called grunge literature, thriller, or perhaps just fiction? I don't know. I think that one

book can be many things, that one book can cross many genres. I don't think something should be pigeonholed – leave that to the reviewers or journalists.' He smiles.

I'm neither of those, you arrogant little twat, I am a divine murderer. A taker of lives in the name of our Lord, of our God. I clench my jaws together, biting the side of my mouth. I can taste blood. *'Do you think that your book is adding to the genre of noir fiction?'*

'I'm not sure I like this whole classification and genre angle, but I do believe that there is a gross mislabelling of what noir fiction actually is. It doesn't have to be a detective novel, it doesn't have to have a femme fatal, leave that to the hardboiled school of writers. Like I said, noir is a mood, and you could say that the mood is often generated by a concoction of tropes. That's all. And if the novel is depressing enough, somewhat existential, violent, with flawed human characters, some of who die, telling some kind of emotive narrative, then I think that it is noir. I believe a lot of 'literature' is noir fiction, from the classics like Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to newcomers like Nic Pizzolatto's *Galveston*.' He taps a novel that sits on the table next to his mint latte.

I point at the novel, *Galveston*, and I ask: *'This novel, Galveston, can you read a passage that shows this mood?'*

He picks up the novel and flicks through the pages, and then he start reading:

You're born and forty years later you hobble out of a bar, startled by your own aches. Nobody knows you. You steer down lightless highways, and you invent a destination because movement is key. So you head toward the last thing you

have left to lose, with no real idea of what you're going to do with it.

(Pizzolatto 155)

'If anything is noir, that is noir,' he says. 'It's existential, it's depressing, the mood is dark. But I do believe that a lot of already mislabelled noir fiction novels aren't noir fiction, these are mostly genre fictions, like 'crime' for example. They aren't noir fiction, as I believe the writing isn't sound enough to evoke the right mood or frame of mind when reading. Often with crime novels you're not experiencing a mood, rather you're merely being driven by a plot that makes you uneasy. Most of crime fiction is not noir fiction, but, like I mentioned earlier, genres can overlap, intersect, and mesh together, so some crime fiction is noir fiction and vice versa. This is the problem with labelling a piece of creative work. You're limiting another's interpretation. What you think is noir I might call fantasy. Just read what's been said about Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*: he writes in the afterword of the novel that one reviewer called it 'science fiction', another a 'satire of corporate white collar culture', another a 'horror', where as Palahniuk himself called *Fight Club* 'a classic, ancient romance but updated to compete with the espresso machine and ESPN' (216). Anything creative is subjective. Everyone is affected differently by creative work. Do you see what I'm getting at?'

'To a degree, yes. But can you be more specific? Why isn't the crime genre noir?'

'Some is. Some isn't. Like I said, I think that a lot of crime writing focuses too much on plot, it becomes almost like a movie script instead of a novel, and it just feels like it's lacking something very fundamental that a good 'literary novel' should possess. Like 'literary fiction', noir fiction novels have that something unexplainable,

that something else, you can just feel it when you read it. It grabs you the right way: the way in which the characters are thought out and written, knowing that they had a life before the novel that somehow galvanises their place within the plot, and explains their situation and actions, and also how the landscape interacts with these characters. Modern noir fiction novels force you to reflect about the nature of human life in an often capitalistic, unforgiving, unbalanced world. Through these characters the novelists are sending a message.'

'What message? What message are you sending?'

'I don't know. Money doesn't matter?' He sips his coffee. 'Oftentimes the author may not know it, and I don't think they have to: some writers are just good readers, interpreters of people and the world that surrounds us. So I think it is difficult to answer your question, about a message and about noir fiction, as noir fiction is a very blurred 'genre'. In fact, I don't believe noir fiction should be called a genre, but if anything, it should be perhaps a sub-classification of literary fiction.'

'You didn't really answer my question. I've read your book, The Suitcase, and it is noir fiction. So, I'll ask it again: do you think that your novel is adding to the noir fiction genre?'

'Well, I'm not sure I know how to answer that question. It's not that I don't believe my novel is noir fiction, because it could well be, but at the same time it isn't. I'll return to creative subjectivity: what I believe is noir fiction and what you believe is noir fiction may be fundamentally different. That is the problem with giving something a defining label, when that something is obscure and purely subjective. I think my novel is adding to general fiction, literary fiction, in that it is an image of people in a harsh city landscape. My novel is not quite fast paced enough to be called crime. So, it's difficult to answer your question without knowing your definition of

noir fiction, so why don't you tell me what you think noir fiction is, and then I can tell you if my book is adding to your definition of noir fiction.'

I stroke the fish knife in my pocket. I was supposed to ask him the questions, and here he is again, asking me. *'Let us go with your rather vague definition: literary fiction that is existential, depressing and violent.'*

'Then yes, *The Suitcase* is noir fiction. If we look around, we will see that the world is noir non-fiction.'

I can feel my finger slice open, as the fish knife presses against my skin. I look at him and I smile as my bloody right hand caresses the fish knife and my left hand reaches for my hat, for Bernie's hat.

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