

Public Service Denouncement

Tom Jennings

Crime fiction has enjoyed something of a renaissance since the 1980s – aspiring to the status of serious literature as well as pulp populism, and embracing ambitions to critical social commentary from pungent perspectives outside of and in opposition to mainstream complacency. Many younger writers were inspired by neo-noir pioneers like James Lee Burke, Elmore Leonard and James Ellroy, who built on the genre's founding characteristics pitting independent 'working stiffs' and 'little guys' against the corporate corruption of the monstrous modern urban machine. However, these authors' somewhat old-fashioned, backward-looking sensibilities – partly, no doubt, due to their generational positioning – result in a pessimistic, ultimately even conservative, outlook concerning prospects for change. Beyond, that is, the temporary victories of cynically lovable rogues unmasking the amoral excesses of the rich and powerful – but which promise no enduring impact, either on the overarching societal structures and conditions which foster and shelter large-scale wrongdoing, or on the range of strategies employing variations of brutal and cunning self-seeking machismo shared by heroes and villains alike. These dispiriting trends are reinforced in the most popular latter-day descendants of private eyes in visualisations of urban chaos and crime at the cinema, where earlier shades of grey in classic film noir had mutated by the 1990s into lurid stylisation and the glamourisation of cartoonish violence – such as in films by John Dahl and Quentin Tarantino – with social and political context or nuance obliterated by technicolour nihilism and comic-book characterisation.

But there is another trajectory in recent noir fiction which starts from the empirically obvious proposition that the suffering associated with criminal violence falls disproportionately and routinely on the poor. Lower-class strata may be stigmatised and marginalised in terms of media portrayal as well as in achieving American dreams, yet constitute the bulk of the population – so that a point of view properly rooted within their milieux and lifeworlds may more accurately encapsulate the contours of present social ills. Alongside authors such as Walter Mosley and Michael Connelly (Los Angeles), Andrew Vachss and Richard Price (New York), and George Pelecanos (Washington DC), a prime exponent of this new wave is Dennis Lehane, whose Boston-based stories deal with urban impoverishment, gentrification, racism, organised crime and political and institutional corruption in such a way as to meditate on how ordinary people collectively understand and negotiate extremes of adversity – preferring vernacular verisimilitude in geographical and temporal specificity to the quirkily baroque, drifting grifting misfits elsewhere. Since this writer attracted widespread attention with Clint Eastwood's multiple Oscar-winning 2003 version of *Mystic River* (first published in 2001), several more of his books are now the source material for big-budget films whose producers expect equally impressive worldwide audiences. The next adaptation to reach the screen and fulfil the projection was *Gone, Baby, Gone* (directed by Ben Affleck, 2007; originally published in 1998), providing a convenient opportunity to evaluate any advances made by this revisionist hardboiled realism.

In Loco Parentis

Based on the fourth book in Lehane's acclaimed Kenzie & Gennaro series, *Gone, Baby, Gone's* UK theatrical release was delayed in sensitivity to

the Madeleine McCann case – an association no doubt boosting box-office despite the two child abduction scenarios bearing scant resemblance. The salacious jostling of news-team vultures would be one common denominator – here descending on the depressed environs of Dorchester, South Boston, Massachusetts. Their typically hysterical saturation coverage highlights single-mother Helene McCready (a magnificent Amy Ryan) lamenting her disappeared four-year-old Amanda, shepherded by steely-eyed police with neighbours and family rallying supportively even in a prevailing mood of ominous pessimism. First-time director Ben Affleck (co-scriptwriter with Aaron Stockard) as well as the story's creator also hail from these mean streets, while thirty-something protagonist PIs Patrick Kenzie (Casey Affleck) and Angie Gennaro (Michelle Monaghan) have lived there all their lives. Passionate attachment to the blue-collar 'hood is reflected in the latter's preoccupations (e.g. Kenzie: "Things you can't choose ... make you who you are"), and in the camera's regular carefully naturalistic pans around inner-city blight, alighting on variously battered and beleaguered, resigned and/or residually energetic real residents – many of whom are also cast in supporting roles and minor caricatures complementing consistently fine acting by star-turns.

Despite high-minded pronouncements by Crimes Against Children Unit cop supremo Captain Jack Doyle – who years ago lost his own child to kidnapers – and ace detectives Remy Bressant and Nick Poole being assigned to the case (Morgan Freeman, Ed Harris and John Ashton respectively lending grizzled gravitas to proceedings), official inquiries quickly falter. Specialist skip-tracers hunting down debtors and errant spouses, the initially reluctant Kenzie and Gennaro are beseeched by Amanda's aunt Bea (Amy Madigan) and uncle Lionel (Titus Welliver) to join the investigation. After putting the word out on the street, local confidence in their discretion immediately yields leads – first, a recently-paroled child-molester may be in the area; then, the potential involvement of notorious gangster kingpin Cheese Olamon (Edi Gathegi) and missing drugs-money. Helene's own substance-abuse, chaotic self-centred behaviour and neglectful parenting compound suspicious unreliability, and her elusive boyfriend Skinny-Ray Likanski's (Sean Malone) sudden violent execution clinches the link. No longer patronised by the police for naïve amateurism, the investigators uncover the cash and Doyle brokers a highly unorthodox exchange for Amanda at a remote flooded quarry. Unfortunately the botched switch leaves Cheese shot dead, and she's believed drowned when a favourite doll is found floating in the treacherous waters. Doyle is sacked for culpable incompetence and retires in disgrace to the sticks; the little girl's funeral is held; crime-and-punishment pundits seek new shock-horror; and everyone sees tragic closure achieved.

Except for Kenzie, who still smells a rat – but a subsequent spiralling descent into the violent degradations of child abuse and addiction eventually reveals depths of duplicity at all levels even he'd never dreamed (surely also wrongfooting most viewers – *so anyone not wanting the suspense ruined should not read on*). When another local child disappears, Kenzie's old schoolfriend, now drug dealer, Bubba Rogowski (Boston rapper Slaine) confirms that cocaine addicts Leon and Roberta Trett (Mark Margolis and Trudi Goodman) are sheltering paedophile Corwin Earle (Matthew



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Maher). Not waiting for backup, Kenzie, Bressant and Poole's shootout with the Tretts leaves the latter three dead, whereupon Kenzie finds the missing boy already murdered and kills Earle in cold blood. Soon afterwards, uniformed cop Devin (Michael Kenneth Williams) – another mate from back in the day – provides vital corroboration of the suspicions Kenzie has developed about Bressant who, disguised as a stick-up artist, desperately threatens to assassinate Kenzie and Titus to seal their silence. But a trigger-happy bartender gets him first and Titus confesses their collaboration in Amanda's disappearance. Putting it all together, Kenzie and Gennaro travel upstate and discover Amanda playing happily with Doyle's wife. However, refusing Gennaro's ultimatum to leave the child where she'll (assumedly) have a chance of a decent life, Kenzie reports the crime and Doyle is arrested. When the dust has settled, Kenzie visits the reunited mother and daughter. He finds Helene apparently cleaned-up, but preparing for a new date (courtesy of the local

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celebrity status afforded her by the media) and obligingly babysits, considering the situation thoughtfully as Amanda gazes mutely at the television ...

Rule of Law

These plot twists in the last part of the film certainly serve to undermine our assumptions as cultivated so far – and Kenzie and Gennaro’s too, leaving them disagreeing over a final dilemma so fundamental as to terminate their professional and romantic relationship. Nevertheless, ultimate judgements and justifications concerning rights, wrongs and likely consequences remain suspended. Not only are heroic rescue, reassuring redemption, and cautionary tragedy refused, but the conservative grounds upon which viewers might expect such outcomes – from banal Hollywood crime-action pulp to the parallel (but no less fantasy-ridden) morbid tabloid shock-horror over current affairs – are comprehensively undercut. Such disquieting limbo was obviously deliberate, and scriptwriting decisions altering and cutting the source novel wholesale pass the buck to us even more starkly. But, when the crunch comes, the alternative courses of action are already so thoroughly tainted by association with webs of corruption, collusion, dishonesty and degeneracy that imagining integrity in any pat answer is out of the question. The story’s unusual strength, then, is to insist that apparently straightforward moral choices, posing isolated individual instances in simplistic good-versus-evil binaries, don’t stand scrutiny once their complex, ambivalent contexts and histories are laid bare. ‘Doing the right’ thing thus depends on what inevitably has to be ignored, assimilated, or denied.

The critical consensus concerning *Gone, Baby, Gone*, however, has been that the potential force of any such sophisticated philosophy is scuppered by the denouement’s implausibility. So deeming it unbelievable that the entire saga should constitute a conspiracy choreographed by Doyle in connivance with his lieutenants all the way down to Helene’s disapproving relatives; with varying material, malicious and purportedly altruistic interests and self-righteousnesses interweaving in spiriting the lass to ‘safety’ while her mam drank in the bar. The ensuing host of casualties, whether dead or bereft – unmourned criminals, Bressant and Poole, sundry written-off lower-class dupes – are then blithely sacrificed, pawns for the patriarch’s peace of mind on relinquishing burdensome responsibility. But what really galls, one suspects – for those of conventional bent – is that out the window also go all pretensions of institutional credibility. Crucially, the scheme’s success hinged on acceptance at face value of the normal scripts, clichés and homilies of governance, public service and basic decency among higher- and lower-order model citizens obeying the law along with those charged with upholding it. Whereas not only does the arrogance of power lead the rogue detectives to assume they can get away with their scam, but we are invited to tacitly underwrite their belief that their actions are in the best interests of the child – which was supposed to be the official remit all along.

Criminal Justice System

Now, this narrative device – of illegal activity by law-enforcement personnel seeing no other way to fulfil their sworn duty – can be interpreted not as a rare unfortunate exception, but rather a particularly vicious and vivid expression of business as usual. Such might be the response, for example, of those on the habitual sharp end of prejudicial insult, harassment and stitch-up from police officers and, for that matter, officialdom in general. In which case an overarching metaphor comes into focus – the police force standing for the entire institutional paraphernalia of government, including its purportedly benevolent arms – whose main function is to keep the lid on all the cans of worms threatening polite society. From this jaundiced perspective, at least, *Gone, Baby, Gone*’s

plot may not seem outrageous at all, resonating far beyond its particular setting to the War on Welfare everywhere. But in a South Boston rapidly decaying beyond reasonable hopes of salvation, Kenzie and Gennaro are cast as representative of a grass-roots, working-class sensibility, yet without the luxury of cynical fatalism if they are to nail the truth and do their job. And although the film loses the bulk of Lehane’s meticulous dialogue conveying the full convincing texture of conflicting attitudes in action, viewers are given several hints among the blood-red herrings that the protection of childhood innocence is a (perhaps *the*) primal pretext for other, guiltier, agendas.

So, encouraged to perceive Helene harshly through circumstantial implication, explicit condemnation, and the harsh glare of unforgiving attention, we never glimpse direct evidence of her actual everyday relationship with her daughter. We are expected to assume the worst. Kenzie, though, sees genuine grief (as opposed to self-pity) beneath her white-trash bravado – which inclines him to accept the mission – while Gennaro embraces advocacy for Amanda herself, regardless of the concerns of the adults. These combined criteria, without which the case would have gone decisively cold, specifically rebut any stereotypical dismissal of Helene. Contrariwise, Doyle’s parental fitness is unchallenged, despite his known trauma and willingness to wreck lives to heal it. Who is the child, to him, beyond a substitute salving private pain? Do his influence and affluence – displaced from urban hell to rustic idyll – guarantee saintly credentials in arrogating to himself godlike choice? Then shouldn’t all the suffering children be saved from the agony of the ghetto and the evils impoverishment produces? Even if the manner of its accomplishment adds to the oppression and injustice nourishing desperation in the first place, simultaneously precluding youthful renewal? While, irrespective of increments of positivity which might (arguably) transpire, serving the selfish desires and fantasies of those in positions to exploit the system to advantage? ... Anything for a happy ending?

No. The relentless message from media and politicians is to abandon the irredeemable poor, demonising any deviation from passively respectable defeatism. The innocent purity to be protected here, then, is the lingering quasi-religious illusion that things might turn out right by trusting the benevolence of those in charge and believing their rationalisations. Whereas, surely, if a single soul spared is the best to hope for, this betrays an utmost cynicism – the complete collapse of legitimacy of the status quo to match its guardians’ insincerity. But Kenzie won’t give up on his people (or himself), following simple ethics, fulfilling his promise – returning Amanda to her mother – when others see Greater Good accepting thoroughgoing corruption in a broken society. Even he suspects he chose wrong, in the final scene mournfully contemplating prospects, Helene again out on the razzle. Yet with no individual correct solution to a collective quandary, maintaining honesty, integrity and compassion and nourishing them around you may represent a pragmatic faith preferable to fairytale wish-fulfilment making token exceptions to busted-flush rules. Credit is due to *Gone, Baby, Gone*’s makers for going against the grain to render such thorny issues even conceivable on mainstream screens.

To Protect and Serve

While acknowledging that it was no mean feat to adapt over five-hundred pages of original novel down to a script five-times shorter – yet still managing to effectively convey the spirit and overall ambivalence that the author intended – it is worth looking more closely at the heavy culling involved in the process of visualising Dennis Lehane’s scrupulously character- and dialogue-driven prose. In his writing, responses to, evaluations of, and wider ramifications pertaining to even the most harrowing experiences are contrived to flow naturally from the culturally and emotionally realistic perspectives of his

protagonists and their idiosyncrasies – rather than the arbitrary manipulation to serve externally-imposed stock motivations that Hollywood is notorious for. Most obviously in this respect, the blockbusting set-piece action scenes and the extremes of violence portrayed sit awkwardly with the unsentimentally direct depictions elsewhere of mundane everyday poverty and its smaller-scale, if no less corrosive, aggressions and menaces. In fact Lehane admits to imagining the kinetic, balletic characteristics of such sequences according to cinematic iconography, and the film treatment certainly obliges – although with a consistent concentration on the visceral and psychological suffering incurred, evoking horror rather than cartoon titillation. Nonetheless the slick revelation and negotiation of their ugly depths cannot conceal the fact that the pivotal confrontation at the quarry and storming of the paedophile's den, for example, are side issues both in terms of the specific narrative logic as well as the more abstract themes being developed.

True, there is a balanced, gradual progression of heightening danger, more immediate physical threat and raised stakes the further and deeper into the mire Kenzie and Gennaro stumble. But in the book's trajectory – although each blow dealt, injury sustained, and narrow escape accomplished wreaks indelible damage on bodies and psyches that is never trivialised – the objective qualities of these deadly situations are overshadowed by the shared struggle to interpret their significance in the light of limited, provisional understanding. So, not surprisingly, the very real evils of organised crime and the undoubted prevalence of child sexual abuse were considered prime candidates to account for Amanda's abduction. As favoured moral panics they also feature centrally in prevailing discourses justifying the whole panoply of legal powers whereby the state protects society via monitoring and intrusion. Whereas here these are manifestly unfit for purpose, dysfunctioning only as pretext and smokescreen, so that any regressive cathartic release after the usual suspects are disposed of dissipates rapidly as no payoff accrues. With the child still missing, only obstinate dissatisfaction with received wisdom, relentlessly seeking sense, eventually makes the difference. And this perverse persistence feeds on a constant interplay of repartee, interplay and synergy between Kenzie and Gennaro mulling over matters arising within their network of close friends, colleagues and acquaintances among criminals, cops and ordinary folk – an immersion which is precisely what the film's condensation abandons.

A world in flux to be deciphered by the hard graft of socially-situated knowledge instead hard-boils down to showcase showdowns in a static fantasy universe of heroic fallen angels and archetypal demons puppet-mastered by unseen fiendish hands. It resembles all those tiresomely mechanical detective thriller formats, onscreen and in the genre literature, which pander to disgusted fascination at the depths of human depravity while working overdrive to reassure us of our distance from it. But Lehane's version flirts with these conventions only to flout and transcend them, and Kenzie is no lone crusader for justice – despite the screenplay's best efforts. Most importantly, Gennaro's role is attenuated to the extent that she appears no more than a feminine accessory representing empathy, concern and support counterpointing Kenzie's masculine detachment and objectivity. Whereas practically the opposite is the case in the book, where he is intuitive and she more practical and organised, a better planner and indeed a better shot – she actually shoots Bressant, and saves Kenzie's bacon much more often than vice versa throughout the series. As a partnership of rough equals, their conflictual relationship is central to the investigation's progress, and their contrasting perspectives on relationships and family arising from their own wretched childhoods have left them both deeply flawed and of questionable moral stature in various different respects. Their

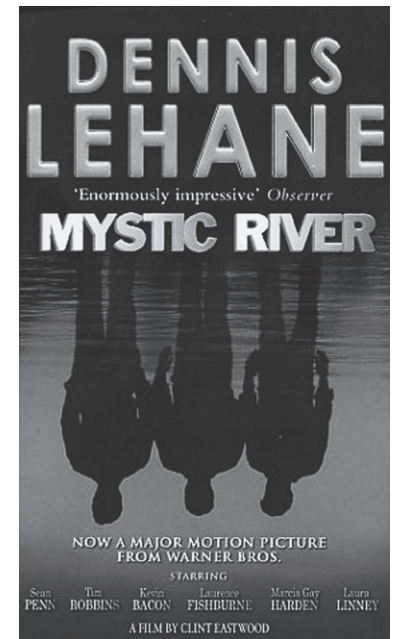
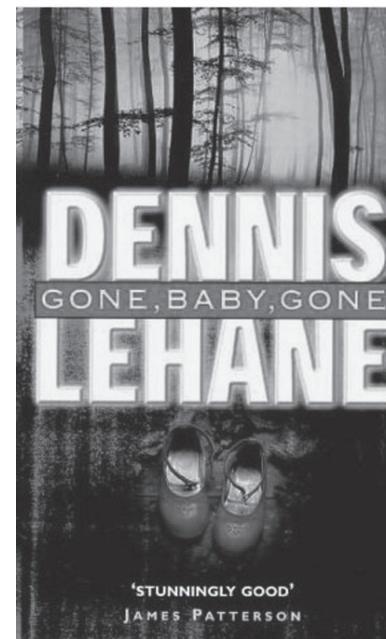
estrangement at the end then reflects the deeply personal resonances of the situation rather than dogma – and even this is accommodated in the subsequent instalment, *Prayers For Rain* (1999), by which time each sees the merits of the other's position.

Moreover Kenzie, Gennaro, Rogowski, and Cheese, along with other excised characters, were all childhood friends, schoolmates or neighbours with shared histories straddling all sides of the law. Bubba Rogowski is the couple's most steadfast friend and protector, not just an old acquaintance – a borderline-psychotic weapons-dealer and feared enforcer with extensive Mob connections rather than a local pusher. Devin (and his partner Oscar) are longstanding close friends too, and Homicide detectives (not patrolmen) into the bargain. They have been kept in the loop and in fact make the decision to arrest Doyle, who had not lost his own child at all; while Bressant was ex-Vice squad (where the rogue activities originated) and married to a former prostitute. Unable to have biological children or adopt legally, they had also stolen a child – with strong hints of an established pattern involving many parents deemed deserving or unfit. Thus, among countless elements lost from the plot, such details indicate that, for Lehane, the function of Kenzie and Gennaro's familiarity with their neighbourhood wasn't simply getting information from people who don't trust the authorities. More ambitiously, it was to develop all of the themes of the story from the bottom-up, within a working-class community split along all manner of fault-lines, where no one's hands are clean or consciences clear – our heroes being just as implicated in the degeneracy that they encounter and sometimes initiate as are the residents saturated with it, the police powerless to control it, and the traditional villains of the piece seeking to profit.

Duty of Care

Despite Ben Affleck's laudable effort to translate the substance of its original subtlety and force into screen entertainment, then, *Gone, Baby, Gone*'s passage from the written word loses, to a significant extent, its characters' embedding in a collective search for meaning in relation to self, family and class in a concrete historical setting. Here, the worldviews of those who grew up poor in the 1970s and 1980s, when the economic, political and geographical profile of urban America twisted so drastically, inevitably involve particular inflections of disillusionment with grand narratives of democracy and freedom and broken promises of upward mobility and social inclusion. The moral landscapes, intellectual priorities, and practical choices of those of the younger generations who still pursue a better life without succumbing to the seductions of materialistic misanthropy can hardly be expected to show patience with the middle-class liberal pieties that have failed them so miserably. Instead they fall back on their own resources – such as they are – and manage in this story to penetrate opaque veils of deception and delusion, misdirection and malice. In the process the fascistic overtones are exposed of a contemporary cultural eugenics foisted on the weak by the strong in the name of a humanistic duty of care which no alternative means can be found to fulfil. Yet the critics deem this preposterous to the point of mendacity – so that one wonders which world they inhabit.

Without in any way minimising the dreadful anguish precipitated by a lost child, Lehane cultivates those associations of this iconic image which loom largest in today's deprived neighbourhoods – not least the shattered aspirations of parents for their offspring and the vain hopes of a bright future among the youth themselves. The careful accretion of biographical detail and the backstories of the protagonists situate these problematics squarely within their lived experience, modulating their ethics and conduct, so that they are fully part of a local scene which, on the other hand, the filmmakers can only objectify in sweeping anthropological survey. Here,



Affleck's self-effacing lead performance at least captures the author's intention to sidestep the tortured existential solipsism of the traditional private dick (along with his femme fatale's Oedipal supplement) as the driver of the narrative arc – even if the central role of Kenzie's extended elective family is also sadly sidelined in the filmic logic. But in fact plot structures are secondary in most Lehane novels, being tailored to wider organising metaphors and signifying chains connecting working-class adjustment to changing conditions – especially in *A Drink Before The War* (1994) treating racism, gang warfare, political corruption and child abuse and *Darkness, Take My Hand* (1996) with serial killers given succour by family, neighbourhood, criminal and municipal complicity, as well as in *Gone, Baby, Gone* and *Mystic River*.

However, while Eastwood's cinema version of the latter retains the quasi-Shakespearean symmetry of three characters representing disastrous facets of masculinity, the emphasis was shifted entirely by downgrading its grounding in the mutual deterioration of their socio-economic and psychological wellbeing – a comparable truncation to that observed with *Gone, Baby, Gone*. So it seems that mainstream US media remain unwilling or unable to countenance stories which properly respect the real misery neoliberal barbarism produces at home among its surplus populations, but also hint at the potential for “genuine solidarity and the pursuit of shared purpose in circumstances in which business as usual is decisively threatened”.¹ Whereas the opportunity to follow such lines of flight is increasingly exploited in new-school American crime writing, on screen the balance consistently tilts towards old-school staples of vicious impasse and hopeless tragedy – from, for example, Spike Lee's 1995 adaptation of Richard Price's *Clockers* (1992) through to HBO's much-heralded television soap opera *The Wire*, chronicling the small-time drug trade and its policing in Baltimore, Ohio (featuring scripts by Price, Pelecanos and Lehane, among others). Conversely, one cinematic exception to this recalcitrant rule is Ray Lawrence's remarkable *Jindabyne* (Australia, 2006). Here an attack on a child again radiates heart-wrenchingly throughout a community, with the murder whodunnit also irrelevant, yet the film closes optimistically as ordinary townfolk mobilise their sorrowful social fabric towards fellow-feeling and a fresh start.² In other words, it can be done – in the imagination as in real life – however much we are encouraged to disbelieve it.

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Notes

1. See my 'Rose Coloured Spectacles', in *Variant*, No. 27
2. See my review for *Freedom* magazine, available at <http://libcom.org>