The Broken Window: A Lincoln Rhyme Novel

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The Broken Window: A Lincoln Rhyme Novel & The Scarecrow

A Review Essay By Jeffrey Barlow


One of the perennial conundrums of the mystery or crime fiction writer is how to concoct a story in such a way that the reader can solve it along with, if not slightly ahead of, the sleuth. While some stories may turn on character development or the horrors of great puddles of gore, it is generally the reader’s desire to solve the crime that attracts.

Stories conventionally then, though not always, must turn on the discovery of clues or data. Solving the case sometimes depends on the protagonist stumbling over data, as in the many iterations of the “clueless sleuth” who somehow muddles through, or upon the protagonist seeing meaning in data that appeared unconnected to those who are not Sherlock Holmes, Miss Jane Marple, or Nero Wolfe. Most readers have not responded well to clues from heaven—data unexpectedly introduced from some previously unknown source. [1]

At some point after traditional crime novels appeared—no authority seems to agree exactly when [2]—the criminal’s own voice or point of view was also introduced into the novel. This gave the author new flexibility, and the sleuth new problems as the reader inevitably begins wondering how the detective can possibly catch up with the perp.

The Internet has introduced new problems. One is how the writer is to keep the sleuth in the dark while building suspense. If the sleuth seems not to know information that we ourselves know, our first reaction may well be a heartfelt “Duh! –So why didn’t you Google that, dummy?”

In the spring of 2009, two crime novels by very successful writers [3] came out in paperback
within weeks of each other. Each involved a killer with access to all the data in the “Hidden Internet,” the information stored everywhere in massive data farms and searchable via data mining. The two works were Michael Connelly’s *The Scarecrow* [4] and Jeffrey Deaver’s *The Broken Window*. [5] Both play upon current widespread fears about the Dark Side of the Internet.

In each case, the criminal is not only a mastermind in that he or she has arcane computer skills most of us lack (including the sleuth in both cases), but also has access to all the information there is, while the sleuth labors along with a very limited view. In the case of Deaver’s detective, Lincoln Rhyme, he has the additional handicap of being a paraplegic, pretty much confined to his admittedly very tricked-out apartment.

Each of these novels is also to an unusual degree cautionary or exhortative. Both writers feel that important cultural values are being lost with the rapid expansion of data storage and the Internet. In Connelly’s case, it is newspapers that are being lost, and investigative journalism is going with them. In Deaver’s case, it is privacy.

Deaver’s concerns about the loss of privacy are reflected throughout the book. At one point, Deaver’s detective, Lincoln Rhyme, has a skilled programmer do data mining on the personal information of Emilia Sachs, his partner and lover. The result is a 500+ page file of personal information. [6] Another data mining of Sach’s telephone and credit card usage gave a complete record of her activities and movements in real time and for the past 24 hours. [7]

All of this information on any real person is, of course, available to those with sufficient access, which is Deaver’s point.

Deaver’s plot hinges on an individual with a murderous psychosis and the skills and access which permits him/her to data-mine information. This permits the criminal to orchestrate complex crimes beyond anything dreamed of by Poe or Conan Doyle.

Deaver has sold a great many books, and his fertile mind continues to play with the “what ifs” of popular culture. He clearly feels that culture is at a critical point in its history, if not in risk of outright endangerment. He concludes the book with a list of web sites where others with similar concerns can research the current state of privacy, and perhaps join efforts to preserve it. [8]

Michael Connelly’s work, *The Scarecrow*, introduces quite a different protagonist, Jack McEvoy, and another psychotic perpetrator. Jack, a journalist of the old school (and also a character with a series of works of his own, like Deaver’s Rhymes) is losing his job at the Los Angeles Times to a “mojo.”

“– a mobile journalist nimbly able to file from the field via any electronic means. She could file text and photos for the website or paper, or video and audio for television and radio partners. She was trained to do it all but in practice she was still as green as can be. She was
probably being paid $500 a week less than me, and in today's newspaper economy that made her a greater value to the company. Never mind the stories that would be missed because she had no sources."[9]

It is not irrelevant that the author was formerly a journalist, associated with a number of newspapers which have since ceased to exist. Just as Deaver warns us of the loss of privacy, Connelly, a bit less obviously, continuously tells us what we are losing with the demise of major daily newspapers such as The Rocky Mountain Times, where, coincidentally, his protagonist worked in a previous work, The Poet.

Jack muses about the future:

Think of all the great journalism we've seen in our lifetimes. The corruption exposed, the public benefit. Where's that going to come from now with every paper in the country getting shredded? Our government? No way. TV, the blogs? Forget it. [10]

While Jack is not completely without Internet savvy, the search to uncover the criminal is largely a struggle between Jack's unaided mind using traditional investigative techniques, such as personal interviews and library research, vs. the perpetrator's command of data mining. At one point the perp electronically stalks a potential victim:

"It was always amazing to X how trusting or naive young people were. They didn't believe that anybody could connect the dots. They believed that they could bare their souls on the Internet, post photos and information at will, and not expect any consequences. From her blog X was able to glean all the information X needed about Angela Cook...X was circling her and she didn't even know it."

This protagonist, like Deaver's, is seriously warped and raises in our minds the insane criminal, something like Poe's narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," or Dostoyevsky's in Crime and Punishment. A critical distinction between these classic killers and the Internet killers is that they may be stalking us on the Internet but we cannot see them. If they babble and drool, they do it in their cubicles, and we cannot know to cross the street to avoid them.

Clearly, each of these two works in their own way takes our fears about the impact of the Internet in general, and the evil possibilities of mining data collected by gigantic corporations or huge government bureaucracies, to a new level. Some readers may take the authors' concerns as overly exaggerated. To do so would be to ignore the truly massive extent to which data has been collected and aggregated and is, in fact, available to the determined hacker. [11]

There is now so much data that at present the question as to even roughly how much is stored is unanswerable. It was announced in the summer of 2008, for example, that a number of major universities and corporations were creating a research consortium to answer that question. [12] It is very likely, however, that whatever techniques the group designs to estimate or measure
stored data, the reality will continue to outstrip our imaginations. [13]

Each author is imminently readable, though I sometimes find Deaver’s characters a bit too superhuman, whether good or evil, and they can be hard to identify with, unlike Connolly’s cynical, but ultimately accessible, Jack McEvoy. The audiences for these books are, of course, extensive. Each has a cult following and determined publishers who keep all of their works before us at our every trip to the supermarket.

Crime or mystery writing is a very venerable form. It began, some argue, with the Tales of Scherazade, elements of which may date back to the 9th century. With the almost simultaneous release of these two works, it is clear that each new major development on the Internet will inevitably become a setting for crime writers and may well be a new sub-genre of writing.

To see Internet-mystery writing move forward, occupying a creative space somewhere between the locked room mysteries solved by John Dickson Carr’s venerable Doctor Gideon Fell [14] and the escapades of science fiction sleuths such as Philip K. Dick’s Rick Deckhard of Blade Runner [15], would be a welcome and entertaining development. It will be hard, of course, for fiction to keep pace with reality. We have already had real world Internet-related killings. [16]

Those of us who insist on both entertainment and realistic descriptions of such critical factors as technology and those personalities who choose to immerse themselves in it in our leisure reading should be satisfied with Michael Connelly’s The Scarecrow and Jeffery Deaver’s The Broken Window. And we can learn a great deal about popular perceptions of the Internet as we read.

Endnotes

[1] And in my own case, I respond even less well to the author who feeds the reader misleading data—information that later turns out to be incorrect, as in the case of my personal least favorite but nonetheless highly popular writer, Stephen King. At the same time, I also find King’s Hearts in Atlantis one of my favorite works, because of what it has to say about the addictive pleasures of gaming in college communities, whether those games are “Tour of Duty” played on an X-Box or “Hearts” played with greasy decks of cards. See book site at:

[2] In English language fiction at least, I personally think it likely to be In Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”. See http://www.literature.org/authors/poe-edgar-allan/tell-tale-heart.html

[3] That is, each has written many bestsellers and has established well-known series characters, some of whom have featured in several films.

[4] See book site at:

The data report, formatted as in the text, reads: "Welcome, NGHF235, please enter (1) the Subject’s 16-digit SSD code; or (2) country and number of Subject’s passport, or (3) Subject’s name, current residence, Social Security number and one telephone number. “Type in the information for the person you’re interested in.” Rhyme dictated the details about Sachs. On the screen appeared: Confirm access to 3E Compliance Dossier? Yes No. Cooper clicked on the former and a box appeared, asking for yet another passcode. With another glance at the ceiling, Whitcomb asked, “You ready?” As if something significant was about to happen. “Ready.” Whitcomb gave them another sixteen-digit passcode, which Cooper typed in. He hit ENTER. As the text began filling the computer screen, the criminalist whispered an astonished, “Oh, my God.” And it took a lot to astonish Lincoln Rhyme. RESTRICTED POSSESSION OF THIS DOSSIER BY ANY PERSON NOT HOLDING AN A-18 CLEARANCE OR HIGHER IS A VIOLATION OF FEDERAL LAW Dossier 3E–Compliance SSD Subject Number: 7303-4490-7831-3478 Name: Amelia H. Sachs Pages: 478 TABLE OF CONTENTS Click on topic to view Note: Archived material may take up to five minutes to access PROFILE Name/Aliases/Nics/Nyms/A.K.A.s Social Security Number Present address Satellite view of present address Prior addresses Citizenship Race Ancestral history National origin Physical description/distinguishing characteristics Biometric details Photographs Video Fingerprints Footprints Retinal scan Iris scan Gait profile Facial scan Voice pattern Tissue samples Medical history Political party affiliations Professional organizations Fraternal organizations Religious affiliations Military Service/discharge DOD evaluation National Guard evaluation Weapons systems training Donations Political Religious Medical Philanthropic Public Broadcasting System/National Public Radio Other Psychological/psychiatric history Myers-Briggs personality profile Sexual preference profile Hobbies/interests Clubs/fraternal organizations INDIVIDUALS TETHERED TO SUBJECT Spouses Intimate relationships Offspring Parents Siblings Grandparents (paternal) Grandparents (maternal) Other blood relatives, living Other blood relatives, deceased Relatives related by marriage or tethering Neighbors Present Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Co-workers, clients, etc. Present Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Acquaintances In person Online Persons of Interest (PEOI) FINANCIAL Employment–present Category Salary history Days absent/reasons for absence Discharge/unemployment claims Citations/reprimands Title 7 discrimination incidents OSHA incidents Other actions Employment–past (archived, may be delay in accessing) Category Salary history Days absent/reasons for absence Discharge/unemployment claims Citations/reprimands Title 7 discrimination incidents OSHA incidents Other actions Income–present IRS reported Nonreported Foreign Income–past IRS reported Nonreported Foreign Assets currently held Real property Vehicles and boats Bank accounts/securities Insurance policies Other Assets, past twelve months, unusual disposition or acquisition of Real property Vehicles and boats Bank accounts/securities Insurance policies Other Assets, past five years, unusual disposition or acquisition of (archived, may be delay in accessing) Real property Vehicles and boats Bank accounts/securities Insurance policies Other Assets, past five years, unusual disposition or acquisition of (archived, may be delay in accessing) Real property Vehicles and boats Bank accounts/securities Insurance policies Other Assets, past five years, unusual disposition or acquisition of (archived, may be delay in accessing) Real property Vehicles and boats Bank accounts/securities Insurance policies Other Assets, past five years, unusual disposition or acquisition of (archived, may be delay in accessing) Real property Vehicles and boats Bank accounts/securities Insurance policies Other Assets, past five years, unusual disposition or acquisition of (archived, may be delay in accessing) Real property Vehicles and boats Bank accounts/securities Insurance policies Other Credit report/rating Financial transactions, U.S.-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year Past five years (archived, may be delay in accessing) Financial transactions, foreign-based institutions Today Past seven days Past thirty days Past year
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[7] Deaver Loc. 6860-75 That report reads: “GEOGRAPHIC POSITIONING PROFILE SUBJECT 7303-4490-7831-3478 Time parameters: Past four hours. 1632 hours. Phone call. From subject’s mobile phone to landline of Subject 5732-4887-3360-4759 (Lincoln Henry Rhyme) (tethered individual). 52 seconds. Subject was in her Brooklyn, NY, residence. 1723 hours. Biometric hit. CCTV, NYPD 84th Precinct, Brooklyn, NY. 95% probability match. 1723 hours. Biometric hit. Subject 3865-6453-9902-7221 (Pamela D. Willoughby) (tethered individual). CCTV, NYPD 84th Precinct, Brooklyn, NY. 92.4% probability match. 1740 hours. Phone call. From subject’s mobile phone to landline of Subject 5732-4887-3360-4759 (Lincoln Henry Rhyme) (tethered Individual). 12 seconds. 1827 hours. RFID scan. Manhattan Style Boutique credit card, 9 West Eighth Street. No purchases. 1841 hours. Biometric hit. CCTV, Presco Discount Gas and Oil, 546 W. 14th Street, Pump 7, 2001 Honda Civic, NY License Number MDH459, registered to 3865-6453-9902-7221 (Pamela D. Willoughby) (tethered individual). 1846 hours. Credit card purchase. Presco Discount Gas and Oil, 546 W. 14th Street. Pump 7. Purchase of 14.6 gallons, regular grade. $43.86 US. 1901 hours. License plate scan. CCTV, Avenue of the Americas and 23rd Street, Honda Civic MDH459 northbound. 1903 hours. Phone call. From subject’s mobile phone to landline of Subject 5732-4887-3360-4759 (Lincoln Henry Rhyme) (tethered individual). Subject was at Avenue of the Americas and 28th Street. 14 seconds. 1907 hours. RFID scan, Associated Credit Union credit card, Avenue of the Americas and 34th Street. 4 seconds. No purchase.”

[8] Deaver Loc. 7715-22 “Readers wishing to know more about the issue of privacy might want to peruse some of the following organizations’ Web sites: Electronic Privacy Information Center
(EPIC.org); Global Internet Liberty Campaign (www.gilc.org); In Defense of Freedom (www.indefenseoffreedom.org); Internet Free Expression Alliance (http://ifea.net); The Privacy Coalition (http://privacycoalition.org); Privacy International (www.privacyinternational.org); Privacy.org (www.privacy.org); and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (www.eff.org). I think you’ll also enjoy—and be unnerved by—the excellent book from which I borrowed several quotations to use as epigrams, No Place to Hide, by Robert O’Harrow, Jr.”

9 Connelly, Loc. 281-85.

10 Connelly Loc. 467-70


13 See, for example, Michael Lesk “How Much Information Is There In the World?” (1997) http://www.lesk.com/mlesk/ksg97/ksg.html

14 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gideon_Fell

15 See http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/science_fiction/bladerunner.html


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9 THOUGHTS ON “THE BROKEN WINDOW: A LINCOLN RHYME NOVEL & THE SCARECROW”

Editor

on September 1, 2009 at 4:42 PM said:

Poster Name: Anonymous
Message: The perp in Broken Window is all knowing — in that he can find out very large amounts of data about almost anyone. This can be very damaging. However the plot
slips in making him all powerful. Most databases are not 2 way. If database A pulls information from database B, changing it on A does not change it on B. Several of the events in the story would depend on this: E.g. changing a person’s bank balance, changing their citizenship status, changing their criminal records. This would require access to many individual databases, each with it’s own security barriers. Not surprisingly database administrators as a class are paranoid about who has write access to their data, and often access is logged in detail, with both new and old versions of the data kept.

Editor
on September 1, 2009 at 4:43 PM said:

Poster Name: bandsxbands
Message: My friend and I were recently discussing about how involved with technology our daily lives have become. Reading this post makes me think back to that discussion we had, and just how inseparable from electronics we have all become. I don’t mean this in a bad way, of course! Ethical concerns aside… I just hope that as the price of memory decreases, the possibility of uploading our brains onto a digital medium becomes a true reality. It’s a fantasy that I dream about all the time.
(Posted on Nintendo DS running R4i SDHC DS NePoF)

Jessie Huckeba
on January 30, 2014 at 6:13 PM said:

That is really interesting, You are an overly professional blogger. I have joined your rss feed and sit up for in quest of extra of your excellent post. Additionally, I've shared your website in my social networks!

voyance gratuite
on February 2, 2014 at 3:09 PM said:

Its like you learn my mind! You appear to grasp so much approximatly this, such as you wrote the eebok in it or something.
I think that you just could do with some % to power the message home a bit, but instead of that, that is magnificent blog.

An excellent read. I’ll certainly be back.

voyance gratuite
on February 3, 2014 at 10:22 PM said:

Hi, after reading this amazing paragraph i am as well happy to share my familiarity here ith colleagues.

voyance gratuite
on February 4, 2014 at 3:00 PM said:

This paragraph is in fact a good one it helps new web visitors, who are wishing for blogging.

voyance gratuite
on February 4, 2014 at 3:26 PM said:

What’s up it’s me, I am also visiting this site regularly, this web site is in fact pleasant and the users are really sharing nice thoughts.

dungeon hunter 4 hack
on February 6, 2014 at 10:22 AM said:

Quite good post. I simply found your own site along with wished to say that I absolutely enjoyed searching your blog threads. All things considered I shall be opting-in on your own feast and i am expecting you’re all over again as soon as possible!
Thank you so much a whole lot with regard to discussing the following wonderful you you will identify what you’re discussing! Added. Kindly additionally pay a visit to my own website =). I will use a website link alternate arrangement among you