

Hannah Verrier

Ian Rankin and 'Tartan Noir':

Literary Origins and Generic Potential
of the Inspector Rebus Series

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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*To Leah,
whose smile is all the reward I need*

*To Christian,
without whom I would not have fallen in love with Scotland*

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Abbreviations

<i>Baskervilles</i>	Arthur Conan Doyle's <i>The Hound of the Baskervilles</i>
<i>Big</i>	Ed McBain's <i>Big Bad City</i>
<i>Black</i>	Ian Rankin's <i>Black & Blue</i>
"Concrete"	Ian Rankin's "Concrete Evidence"
<i>Cutting</i>	Louise Welsh's <i>The Cutting Room</i>
<i>Dahlia</i>	James Ellroy's <i>The Black Dahlia</i>
<i>Darkness</i>	Ian Rankin's <i>Set in Darkness</i>
<i>Domain</i>	Val McDermid's <i>A Darker Domain</i>
<i>Dragon</i>	Thomas Harris' <i>Red Dragon</i>
<i>Falcon</i>	Dashiell Hammett's <i>The Maltese Falcon</i>
<i>Garnet</i>	Denise Mina's <i>Garnethill</i>
<i>Goodbye</i>	Raymond Chandler's <i>The Long Goodbye</i>
<i>Harvest</i>	Dashiell Hammett's <i>Red Harvest</i>
<i>Hater</i>	Ed McBain's <i>Cop Hater</i>
<i>Hide</i>	Ian Rankin's <i>Hide & Seek</i>
<i>Jekyll</i>	Robert Louis Stevenson's <i>Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i>
<i>Knots</i>	Ian Rankin's <i>Knots & Crosses</i>
<i>Laidlaw</i>	William McIlvanney's <i>Laidlaw</i>
"Letter"	Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter"
"Morgue"	Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue"
<i>Naming</i>	Ian Rankin's <i>The Naming of the Dead</i>
"Problem"	Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Final Problem"
"Rogêt"	Edgar Allan Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt"
<i>Saints</i>	Ian Rankin's <i>The Saints of the Shadow Bible</i>
<i>Scotland</i>	Ian Rankin's <i>Rebus's Scotland. A Personal Journey</i>
<i>Sinner</i>	James Hogg's <i>The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner</i>
<i>Sleep</i>	Raymond Chandler's <i>The Big Sleep</i>
<i>Time</i>	Josephine Tey's <i>The Daughter of Time</i>
<i>Tooth</i>	Ian Rankin's <i>Tooth & Nail</i>
<i>Ugly</i>	Christopher Brookmyre's <i>Quite Ugly One Morning</i>
<i>Vicarage</i>	Agatha Christie's <i>Murder at the Vicarage</i>

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, crime fiction has not only gained popularity with the majority of readers¹ but has conquered the sphere of serious literature, evolving into a genre of literary substance.² Scottish crime fiction has played a vital role in this process due to the outstanding productivity and creativity of writers such as Ian Rankin.³ Rankin's series of 'tartan noir' novels featuring Edinburgh-based Detective Inspector John Rebus⁴ (1987-present), currently one of the most widely read series in British crime fiction, is a fine example of a crime writer functioning as a "chronicler and interpreter of contemporary Scotland" (Boccardi 2003: 302). The series' ongoing contribution to the (re)formation of generic patterns renders it an intriguing object of academic research. The present thesis aims at demonstrating how generic modifications in the Rebus novels, which are equally rooted in the tradition of crime fiction and in Scottish literary history, are functionalised to mould the crime novel into a medium of contemporary Scottish concerns and national identity. To accomplish this, it is essential to examine how exactly Rankin's series refers to its literary antecedents and in what way different lines of tradition are combined, remodelled and (re)functionalised in the series.

1.1 Approaching Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus Series

The central subject matter of the present thesis is introduced by way of outlining the Rebus series' scope and genesis. While the series' real-time temporal setting "offers both a strong sense of continuity and the capacity for subtle development in character and setting between the novels" (Kydd 2013: 111), the "novels' fierce independence from one another" (Marshall 2013: 11) must not be neglected. Each volume must be recognised as a self-contained work of art.

¹ Knight refers to "a global estimate that a third of the fiction published in English belongs to the genre" (2004: x). Crime fiction quantitatively exceeds all other genres, constituting an important social factor (cf. Nusser [1980] 2003: 7f.).

² Scott R. Christianson argues against a division between detective fiction and serious literature. He demonstrates that hard-boiled detective novels are modernist literary fiction by drawing parallels to T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem "The Waste Land" (cf. Christianson 1990: 141ff.).

³ This is evident in the huge number of internationally successful Scottish crime authors (e.g. Alexander McCall Smith, Val McDermid, Denise Mina, Ian Rankin and Louise Welsh) and the design of study materials on Scottish crime fiction. Moreover, Edinburgh became the first UNESCO City of Literature in 2004 due to its vitality as a centre of literature, expressed e.g. by the astonishing number of writers living there and internationally renowned events like the Book Festival.

⁴ A 'rebus' is "a puzzle consisting of pictures representing syllables and words" (cf. *Collins English Dictionary*, s.v. rebus). Rebus's telling name both refers to the clue puzzle tradition and playfully hints at the puzzling nature of his character.

Looking both at character development and formal aspects, the (currently) twenty Rebus novels⁵ can be divided into four distinct phases of development,⁶ keeping in mind that this division "into distinct periods is an artificial one and that the boundaries are frequently blurred" (ibid.: 12). The early series, comprising the first three volumes (1987-92), is partly inconsistent with the characters and generic formula of the later series. The early novels are comparatively short but also innovative, "more experimental in terms of narrative devise than some of the subsequent [...] novels" (ibid.: 17).⁷ They foreground the motif of appearance versus reality whereas later novels tend to be more complex, incorporating an increasing number of plotlines and issues and exhibiting greater (topographical) realism. Although John Rebus is a round character and troubled personality from the beginning, he differs from his later self in crucial respects: he listens to Jazz, is an avid reader of classical literature and searches for a form of religion which suits his own private beliefs (which continues into the second phase). Central characters of the series, i.e. Rebus's colleague Siobhan Clarke and Edinburgh's most powerful underworld figure Morris Gerald Cafferty (mentioned once in *Tooth & Nail*, 1992: 115) have not yet been introduced. Rebus is already the main focaliser but focalisation is flexible, including several minor characters. Plotwise, there is "a sense of narrative closure which later examples from the series resolutely deny" (Kydd 2013: 111): in *Knots & Crosses* (1987) the perpetrator is killed, in *Hide & Seek* (1990) those most deeply involved in Hyde's Club are killed or commit suicide. However, closure is undermined as Rebus continues to be traumatised by his SAS training and the Hyde's Club affair is covered up to prevent a national trauma. The puzzle element is central in the early novels while the importance of golden age patterns decreases later in the series.

The second phase of development includes the novels written between *Strip Jack* (1992)⁸ and *Dead Souls* (1999) or *Set in Darkness* (2000). The series' generic formula and its major characters are now firmly established and easily recognised. Rebus's character has solidified: he has found his musical taste and has lost his interest in high-brow literature and (gradually) religious matters. He is an increasingly troubled character, isolated, obsessive and a heavy smoker and drinker. Focalisation is almost exclusively limited to Rebus, with very few exceptions such as the serial killer Bible John in *Black & Blue* (1997). Rebus works mostly on his own, "more like a trans-Atlantic private detective [...] than a police officer" (Marshall 2013: 12). Siobhan Clarke

⁵ The twentieth volume of the Rebus series, *Even Dogs in the Wild* (2015), was published after this thesis had been completed.

⁶ The following structure is informed by Christopher Kydd's three-phase model (cf. 2013: 111ff.) and Rodney Marshall's structure, which distinguishes 'apprentice years', 'classic Rebus', 'late Rebus' and 'post Rebus' (cf. 2013: 11f.).

⁷ Gill Plain stresses, for instance, that "*Knots & Crosses* is a very literary novel" (2013: 20), which depends on a variety of literature for both plot and allusions.

⁸ Marshall ends the 'apprentice years' with *Tooth & Nail*, arguing that "*Strip Jack* is a more mature book" (2013: 47) with a multilayered plot.