The Role of Probation and Rehabilitation in Ruth Dugdall's Crime Novels

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Abstract

This critical commentary accompanies my Cate Austin series of four novels (2010-) and argues they make an original intervention within the genre of crime fiction through a new sub-genre of domestic noir that I designate *probation noir*. This sub-genre centres on a probation officer as the protagonist and authorial narrator, effectively shifting the definition of crime fiction as a broad and encompassing genre that usually focuses on the activity between a crime committed, the solving of it and subsequent capturing of the criminal, to a new reading of crime that highlights and challenges commonly held misconceptions about the treatment of criminals in modern Britain. Currently, in British crime fiction the probation officer rarely features as a protagonist or narrator, even though the probation service is integral to the criminal justice system. The Cate Austin series as *probation noir*, reveals the reality of rehabilitative work delivered by the probation service, and its importance in ensuring a safe society. As a writer, I argue that my *probation noir* novels also call upon *method writing* as a creative practice, sharing features of Stanislavski's method in relation to actors, to allow the creation of *emotion-memory* in crime fiction. This approach develops an emotionally affective foregrounding of rehabilitation and desistance in crime fiction, offering readers a new perspective on crime, criminals and rehabilitation that goes beyond the apprehending of the criminal and the solving of a crime. Furthermore, I show how *probation noir* with its focus on a desire to initiate a more nuanced understanding of criminality and the criminal justice system, has been seen to affect international social policy, and offer new impactful ways of reading crime fiction. In this way, the Cate Austin series as an example of *probation noir* is an important and new contribution to the crime fiction genre.

Key words: crime fiction, domestic noir, probation noir, rehabilitation, social justice, crime, policy, creative practice, emotion memory, creative writing.

Introduction

Probation, Rehabilitation and Method Writing in Ruth Dugdall's 'Probation Noir' novels

In 2005 a draft of *The Woman Before Me* won the Crime Writers' Association Debut Dagger for unpublished writers. Despite winning this prestigious award, my literary agent was unsuccessful in finding a publisher for the book. Rejections cited two recurring themes: firstly, my narrative was considered too bleak and pessimistic for readers' tastes at that time. Secondly, my foregrounding of the probation role, which takes place *after* the pursuit of the criminal, was unfamiliar and therefore deemed problematic from a marketing perspective. This reaction indicated my originality in having a probation officer protagonist, and the resistance of crime publishers to encompassing this approach. It also reflected a general lack of knowledge about rehabilitation and the probation service.

In 2009, four years after winning the Debut Dagger and resigning from my probation career, I eventually secured a publishing contract with Legend Press which was announced in *The Bookseller*[1]. In Chapter 1, I explore how this correlated with the popularity of a sub-genre of crime, into which my novels could be placed and marketed. The term 'domestic noir' was coined in 2013 by novelist Julia Crouch for works of psychological crime fiction, in a domestic space, with a central

[1] Catherine Neilan, "Dugdall wins the 2009 Bitmead bursary," *The Bookseller,* (October 30 2009): https://www.thebookseller.com/news/dugdall-wins-2009-bitmead-bursary

female protagonist[2]. By 2013 I had completed two novels: *The Woman Before Me* (2010) and *The Sacrificial Man* (2011). Both conformed to Julia Crouch's definition of domestic noir as having female-led narrative set within the domestic sphere and Laura Joyce's assertion that: 'domestic noir is a capacious, flexible category that encompasses realistic writing about domestic violence, intersectional feminism, religion, mental illness, and women's rights.'[3] *The Woman Before Me* (2010) focuses on infanticide, and includes themes of mental illness and suicide. *The Sacrificial Man* (Dugdall, 2011) is about suicide, and has themes of mental illness and sexual abuse. Both books had been rejected as bleak and pessimistic but now belonged in the same genre as bestsellers *Gone Girl* (2013) by Gillian Flynn and *Girl on a Train* (2015) by Paula Hawkins. The titles of both these novels uses the word 'girl' to describe protagonists in their thirties, but I rejected this convention as infantilising the female experience and used the word *woman* to accurately describe Rose Wilks in *The Woman Before Me* (2010) and only used *girl* when it was appropriate, in *Nowhere Girl* (2015) which is concerned with the disappearance of 17-year-old Ellie Sheen[4].

In Chapter 2 I provide an abbreviated history of probation work, including its historical roots, to provide a context for the intervention of probation noir. Chapter 3 focuses on my contribution to probation noir, through the Cate Austin crime series. I explore how readers, through Cate Austin as the protagonist, discover the inner workings of the British criminal justice system and are privy to process normally hidden from public view, such as sentencing and parole. One step towards parole

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[2] Julia Crouch introduced the term 'domestic noir' on her blog, *Genre Bender,* on 25th August 2013. https://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender

[3] Laura Joyce, "The Origins of Domestic Noir", *National Centre for Writing:* https://nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/writing-hub/the-origins-of-domestic-noir/

[4] Ruth Dugdall, *Nowhere Girl,* (Legend Press, 2015), 25.

transparency was *The Root and Branch Review of the Parole System*[5] (March 2022) which enabled hearings to be heard publicly, and this may lead to increased visibility in popular culture. There is an increased appetite for narratives that explore the post-arrest stage of the justice system, such as the television series *Adolescence* (Netflix, broadcast March 2025)[6]. However, *The Woman Before Me* (2010) stands alone in revealing the parole process from the first stage, when Cate is allocated Rose Wilk's report, through the entire assessment process to Cate's final recommendation to the parole board. Further, *The Woman Before Me* (2010) authentically depicts life in a British prison at a time when the law courts are sentencing more people than ever to custody and the prison system is unable to cope.[7] The alternative is community sentencing, but for this to be successful the public must have confidence in, and knowledge of, the probation service. This is the intervention provided by probation noir.

In Chapter 4, I argue that my writing is aligned to a process I designate 'method writing', which shares features with Stanislavski's method in relation to actors, to allow the creation of emotion-memory in crime fiction. This also draws on my lived experience, working as a probation officer, qualifying in 1996 and working until 2006. I have previously said in an interview: 'Most of my career I've worked mainly with men, but I don't believe they are more criminally minded. I think society struggles so much with the idea that women can be bad that it ignores and minimises the

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[5] Ministry of Justice, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, and Parole Board. *Root and Branch Review of the Parole System*. (London: Ministry of Justice, 2022).

[6] Jack Thorne's four-part television series *Adolescence* aired on Netflix on 13th March 2025, to much acclaim and discussion. Episode 3 is a two-hander, between the boy and a psychologist.

[7] Matt Dathan's article, 'Criminal Justice system in state of 'slow-motion collapses' in *The Times*, 22nd October 2025, notes that the UK sends more people to prison that any other western European country, and our prison are currently at 98% capacity.

active role women take in crime'.[8] This was my motivation in foregrounding female criminality in the Cate Austin series, and in three of the four books in the series it is a woman who has committed the crime. The exception is *Humber Boy B,* in which the criminal is a boy. In all cases, I am writing about an unexpected perpetrator.

I conclude this thesis by exploring the societal impact of the Cate Austin series. The novels have provided me with a platform, on which to speak about crime and rehabilitation, and I am regularly interviewed on BBC radio. On 10th January 2024 I was interviewed about *Mr Bates vs. The Post Office,* and I emphasised the power of creative narratives on attitudes and opinions, which in turn can influence policy.[9] This can most clearly be evidenced in Luxembourg, where my novel *Nowhere Girl (*2015) instigated policy change, prompting the British Ambassador in Luxembourg to create a multi-agency policy document, in relation to Child Protection.[10] Furthermore, *Nowhere Girl* (2015) has been the subject of academic study on human trafficking, cited as portraying: 'the pervasiveness of child trafficking and the invisibility of modern slavery in everyday life.'[11] I explore further the impact the novel had on policy as a final argument for the importance of creative narratives on shaping discourse around crime, and thereby influencing policy and legislation.

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[8] Ruth Dugdall, "Ten things we didn't know about Ruth Dugdall", Interview for *Female First* (blog). April 2015. https://www.femalefirst.co.uk/books/ten-things-we-didn-t-know-about-Ruth-Dugdall-688855.html

[9] Ruth Dugdall, interviewed by Sonia Watson, "These Stories Need to be Told", BBC Radio Essex. (January 10 2024). The discussion was about James Strong's *Mr Bates vs. the Post Office* which aired on ITV, January 1, 2024.

[10] Anon, 'Gripping Book puts Child Protection on the Agenda', *Luxembourg Times*, 10th November 2015. https://www.luxtimes.lu/luxembourg/gripping-book-puts-child-protection-on-agenda/1220195.html

[11] Christiana Grigoriou ed, *Representations of Transnational Human Trafficking: Present-day News Media, True Crime, and Fiction,* Palgrave Pivot (2018), 98.

Chapter 1

Domestic Noir and a New Sub-genre, Probation Noir

To begin any discussion about British crime fiction it is useful to summarise the evolution of the genre. To do so, however, is not straightforward; what constitutes 'crime fiction' is not fixed, and the inclusion of many sub-genres has created a wide and ever-changing landscape. Julian Symons writes in *Bloody Murder, From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* that, 'the first problem facing anybody writing about crime fiction is to take out the limits of the theme'[12].

From its outset, crime writing has been diverse and varied. Lyn Pykett persuasively argues in *The Newgate Novel and Sensational Fiction 1830-1868,* that the Newgate Prison calendar, a monthly bulletin, was a direct influence on early nineteenth century crime fiction, which included the publication of chapbooks and, from the 1830s, the popular Newgate novels which in their turn led to the 'sensational' novels, including Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. Wilkie Collin's *The Moonstone* introduced the British hero-detective and is an early example of the police procedural. The evolution of crime writing can be seen to mirror, and react with, both historical events and societal concerns. Thus, after the brutality of the First World War, crime fiction was dominated by 'Golden Age' writers who treat crime as a blood-less intellectual

[12] Julian Symons. *Bloody Murder. From the detective novel to the crime novel.* Penguin, 1972, 13.

puzzle. Julian Symons describes, 'the fairy-tale land of the Golden Age was one in which murder was committed over and over again without anybody getting hurt' [13].

Post World War Two, and revelations of the atrocities that had been committed, there was much academic discussion and scientific experimentation into how this had been possible. Reflecting this, crime fiction became increasingly psychological and concerned with the concept of 'evil'. In the seventies and eighties, authors like Ruth Rendell and P.D James began placing their psychological thrillers in a domestic space; plots revolved around marriage or childbirth, and females were not only victims but also perpetrators. In 'Post-War British Crime Fiction', Martin Priestman describes how these novels reflected, 'new uncertainties about the traditional social restrictions of marriage, and about the younger generation's more casual attitude to sex, merge with a pre-feminist instinct that woman who test these boundaries deserve some kind of retribution.'[14]

During the final decades of the twentieth century, crime fiction became increasingly graphic and socially realistic, with female authors like Minette Walters and Val McDermid using the form to reflect societal issues, and to foreground the female experience. In her chapter 'Women Detectives', Maureen T. Reddy states that, 'in the 1980s, 207 new series by woman writers began, with the huge majority featuring female protagonists'[15].

In 2005, when I began to write the first Cate Austin novel, these forerunners had already pushed the parameters of what a crime novel could look like. The ground had been laid for a new crime genre that would emerge in the first decade of the twenty-first century and prove hugely popular on a global stage and it was within this genre that my novels would fine their literary home. On 26th

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[13] Julian Symons. *Bloody Murder. From the detective novel to the crime novel.* Penguin, 1972, 96.

[14] Martin Priestman (ed). 'Post-War British Crime Fiction', *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction.* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 179.

[15] Martin Priestman (ed). 'Women Detectives', *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction.* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 201.

June 2016 I organised and chaired a panel at the Felixstowe Book Festival. I entitled it *Home is Where the Hurt is* and invited fellow domestic noir authors Julia Crouch and Elizabeth Haynes to discuss why the sub-genre was so popular with female readers. We concluded that it represents a safe space to explore their fears, exposing troubling insights about family life that are typically overlooked, marginalised or silenced. A year earlier I wrote an article about domestic noir and stated that: 'the inference is that, behind closed doors, any family can be a criminal. And that is a terrifying thought, born out in how horrified we are when we discover, in real crimes, that the culprit is a family member like when the Philpott's house was burned down killing six children, or when Shannon Matthews went missing. Wouldn't we all have preferred the culprit to be a stranger?' [16] These are the uncomfortable ideas with which my novels are concerned.

There has been debate around the origins of domestic noir, but Laura Joyce traces it back to: 'the early filmic 'marriage thrillers' popular around the time of WWII, a period characterised by death, loss, and, more pertinently to the plot of these thrillers, high instances of PTSD and other mental illnesses in men returning from war.'[17] Joyce cites the 1944 adaptation of Patrick Hamilton's play *Gaslight* (1938) as an important influence on the genre.[18] The 1944 American film, directed by George Cukor and starring Ingrid Bergman as Paula, sums up the female experience of coercive control so effectively that the term 'gaslit' is now commonly used to describe the experience of being manipulated and lied to, resulting in a questioning of one's own reality, another trope of domestic

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[16] Ruth Dugdall, "Ten things you didn't know about Domestic Noir", *Female First,* October 2015.

[17] Laura Joyce, "The Origins of Domestic Noir", *National Centre for Writing*. https://nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/writing-hub/the-origins-of-domestic-noir/

[18] Laura Joyce, "The Origins of Domestic Noir", *National Centre for Writing*. https://nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/writing-hub/the-origins-of-domestic-noir/

noir. As the detective tells Paula, 'You're slowly and systematically being driven out of your mind.'[19] Tracing this thematic thread, through female-authored books, we can see prototypes of domestic noir in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Charlotte Perkins' Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In all three novels the central female protagonist is 'gaslit' into a distorted reality by her current, or future, husband.

However, I have argued that the roots of domestic noir can be traced even further back, to Greek theatre and its preoccupation with problematic domesticity: 'think of Medea, that nightmare of a mother, rocked out of her sanity by her husband's infidelity. A parent who kills their children to punish an unfaithful spouse. Such an ancient story, yet one we see repeated in news headlines around the world…the power of domestic noir is that it is frighteningly familiar'.[20] It is this familiarity that makes the plot unsettling, especially when the criminal is not a stranger, but a member of the family, who should be a figure of protection and love. Domestic noir challenges pre-conceptions of female behaviour, for example, in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) Amy is attempting to frame her husband, Nick, for her murder. She has staged a crime scene with 'clues', hoping this will lead to his conviction and that he will receive the death penalty. This is his punishment for infidelity and consequence of Amy's rage after conforming to being a dutiful wife and 'cool girl' only to discover she has been betrayed. Amy tells the readers: 'Cool girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm a cool girl'.[21]

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[19] George Cukor, Dir. *Gaslight.* 1944. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Amazon Prime Video, accessed December 15, 2025.

[20] Ruth Dugdall, "Ten things you didn't know about Domestic Noir", Interview for *Female First,* (October 2015): https://www.femalefirst.co.uk/books/nowhere-girl-ruth-dugdall-889157.html

[21] Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl,* (Orion 2012), 210.

After Amy disappears, she changes her appearance by dying her hair mousy brown and wearing glasses, shedding the 'cool girl' image. She addresses the reader in first-person narration and would be described by Rimmon-Kenan as an 'unreliable' narrator: 'The main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme.'[22] The sections of my novels that concern the central perpetrator protagonists (Rose, Alice, Ben and Bridget) are told in first-person narration. This perspective is compelling in its immediacy and directness, but the reader is also aware that, because of the subjective point of view, it cannot be relied on as a wholly reliable account.

A further convention of domestic noir is the split, or 'fractured' narrative.[23] I had already made the structural decision to divide the narrative between Cate Austin and the perpetrator protagonists with whom she is working. In each novel, Cate's sections are in third person and authoritative, a choice which reflects her closeness to my own experience working as a probation officer and my decision to foreground the rehabilitative role. My intention is for the reader to trust Cate's version of events, to make hers the 'authorial' voice, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan describes this in *Narrative Fiction* (1983) as imbuing the character with 'reliability'.[24]

Unreliable narration is a feature of domestic noir novels, and this is often signified to the reader through an addiction or mental health issue. In S.J. Watson's *Before I go to Sleep* (2011) Christine is unreliable because of her psychological condition and in Paula Hawkins's *Girl on a Train*

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[22] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. *Narrative Fiction.* (Routledge, 1983), 100.

[23] Deborah Philips, "Gaslighting: Domestic Noir, the Narratives of Coercive Control", *Women: A Cultural Review*, *32*(2), (2021), 145. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09574042.2021.1932258

[24] Rimmon-Kenan Shlosmith, *Narrative Fiction,* (Routledge, 1983), 100.

(2015), Rachel is an alcoholic; both protagonists are being 'gaslit' by their male partners into believing they are unstable, when in fact they are victims of coercive control.

Deborah Philips observed that the domestic noir genre was: 'charting the psychological abuse of women before coercive control was recognised as a criminal offence'.[25] In the Cate Austin series the female characters are not 'gaslit' victims (like Christine and Rachel); they are perpetrators of crime. The first-person narration of the perpetrator is central to each novel: Rose (*The Woman Before Me, 2010),* Alice *(The Sacrificial Man, 2011),* Ben *(Humber Boy B, 2015)* and Bridget *(Nowhere Girl, 2015)* speak directly to the reader, using the device of a diary or letter, which increases the confessional and persuasive aspect of their subjective voice. This deliberately challenges the reader, who is required to understand and invited to empathise with the perpetrator. In her 2024 Reith Lecture *Is Violence Normal?* Dr Adshead stated: 'Listening to what perpetrators say about what they have done may offer insights into potential interventions for violence reduction and prevention.'[26] Giving the perpetrator a voice is central to the Cate Austin series. In *The Woman Before Me* (2010) we learn that Rose Wilks's childhood was psychologically damaging, her mother took her own life, and Rose's father was a philanderer. Consequently, Rose has a mistrust of other woman and a fear of abandonment from men, both of which influence her relationship with Jason.[27] Rose is infatuated with Jason, but he is indifferent to her as he is still besotted with his ex-wife, Emma, who has left him for another man. Jason is vulnerable, and Rose exploits this, inviting him into her home, then finding him a job. Ultimately, Rose coerces Jason into sex: 'I reclaimed you, sucking in the pain. I stroked

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[25] Deborah Philips, "Gaslighting: Domestic Noir, the Narratives of Coercive Control", *Women: A Cultural Review*, *32*(2), (2021), 140-160.

[26] Gwen Adshead, *Is Violence Normal?* The Reith Lectures, BBC Sounds, 2024, 11.45 minutes.

[27] Coercive control was made a criminal offence in England and Wales by the Serious Crime Act 2015, section 76.4.b identifies it as behaviour within an intimate relationship that creates, 'serious alarm or distress which has a substantial adverse effect on [partner] B's usual day-to-day activities'.

and caressed your shaking body, burying my agony as I pulled you into me. An animal marking her territory, wiping out the other female's claim. I made you make love to me'.[28] After this act, Rose is pregnant. Nine months later, having just birthed their son, Joel, Rose realises Jason has been unfaithful. To punish him, she murders Joel, mirroring the ultimate revenge enacted by Medea[29]. This narrative challenges gender stereotypes at every turn, firstly that women do not rape.[30] Secondly, if they kill, they must be mad, bad or sad.[31]

Though a useful categorisation for the Cate Austin series, domestic noir is not wholly satisfactory. The four novels have features which belong more properly to a sub-genre that I have designated probation noir. Here is my definition: 'probation noir focuses on rehabilitation and reveals the workings of the criminal justice system post-conviction. The criminal protagonist, rather than being 'othered', is presented as a flawed individual, whose behaviour is linked to social and psychological criminogenic factors. The narrative involves them, and the reader, in gaining understanding and agency, with the possibility of redemption and reform.'

Whereas domestic noir focuses on the female experience of crime within a domestic setting, probation noir very specifically directs the reader to contemplate the outcome of the crime and especially the post-conviction process, including the enacting of justice and rehabilitation. The placing of the focus *after* the crime, and its concern with questions of redemption and change, makes probation noir a more specific sub-genre of domestic noir.

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[28] Ruth Dugdall, *The Woman Before Me,* (Legend Press 2010), 121.

[29] Euripides, *Medea,* (Penguin Classics, 1996).

[30] Sarah Hall, 'Woman found guilty of towpath rape'. *The Guardian,* 17th March 2001. https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/mar/17/sarahhall

[31] Siobhan Weare,"The Mad", "The Bad", "The Victim": Gendered Constructions of Women Who Kill within the Criminal Justice System, *Laws* 2, no. 3 (2013), 337-361. https://www.mdpi.com/2075-471X/2/3/337

There are other distinctions: within domestic noir, the central female protagonist is often a disruptive figure, challenging and subverting societal norms, and – like Amy in *Gone Girl* (2013), or Rachel in *The Girl on a Train* (2015) – they often go unpunished for their own criminal behaviour. Authors associated with crime fiction that involves probation work, such as Noelle Holten or myself, whose writing is grounded within the parameters of the judicial process, are more likely to show the criminal being punished in the denouement of the novel. A belief in rehabilitation is revealed within the fictional worlds, supporting the argument that these novels belong within the sub-genre of probation noir.

Further, probation noir's location within 'noir', signifies its uncomfortable and darker themes; this aspect to the writing is significant, and deserves analysis. Writing that can be described as 'noir' is varied and nuanced, as the definition has changed and evolved, but it is associated with urban cities, night, the rain, and the invocation of the *femme fatale.* 'Noir' is a creative space where the moral ambiguity of protagonists, who can be both victims and perpetrators, is explored. In my novels, criminal protagonists are also revealed as having experienced trauma, and therefore as victims, creating a nuanced and challenging narrative for the reader; the 'noir' world is murky and dark, things are not as they initially appear. In his book on film noir, *Somewhere in the Night*, Nicholas Christopher explores the archetypes of noir characterising it as, 'gritty, textured renderings of urban life, sharply drawn characters, and psychological complexity[32].

In my novels, this process is facilitated by probation officer, Cate Austin. For example, at the start of *The Sacrificial Man* (2011) Alice believes she helped Smith to die as an act of assisted suicide, and she romanticises this decision as an act of love. Through her work with Cate, who shares with

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[32] Nicholas, Christopher. *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City.* The Free Press, 1997, xii.

her Smith's diary, Alice realises Smith's true intention: he was suffering from an incurable disease which can only be contracted by consuming flesh and his request for Alice to eat him was potentially a death sentence. At the end of the book, Alice realises Smith has infected her, but she has agency and finally accepts the love offered from her friend Lee: 'This was the moment I sought all along. The gift of love. She loves me, even now. Knowing I killed a man. Even knowing I may be diseased. Unconditional, immovable love.'[33] *The Sacrificial Man* (2011) concludes with Alice's death, but not because of Smith's contamination. Instead, she has chosen her own demise, and Lee tends to her like she is a child. Cate's intervention has been the catalyst for Alice's shift in perspective from one of limited insight, at the start of the novel when she is convinced she has done nothing wrong, to a place of painful realisation that she has been victimised. Finally, she reaches a position of acceptance and peace.

A critical reason for designating a new sub-genre, is that having a central protagonist who is a probation officer, differentiates the series from other crime novels. In their book on the occupational culture of the probation service, *Doing Probation Work: Identity in a Criminal Justice Occupation* (2013), Rob C. Mawby and Anne Worrall include a chapter entitled 'Perceptions, misconceptions, representations' in which they say: 'Female probation workers rarely feature in books (though see Todd 1964 and, more recently Ruth Dugdall's novels (2010, 2011) featuring Cate Austin)'.[34] Over a decade later, the rareness of probation characters still remains true except for Mary Shields in Helen Fitzgerald's stand-alone novel *Worst Case Scenario* (Fitzgerald, 2019). Mary Shields is a probation officer working in Glasgow, she is cynical and funny as she describes a career choice that is viewed as irregular and unappealing: 'Few folk understood why someone who'd completed a degree in law

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[33] Ruth Dugdall, *The Sacrificial Man,* (Legend Press, 2011), 293.

[34] Rob C. Mawby & Anne Worrall, *Doing Probation Work. Identity in a criminal justice occupation.* (Routledge, 2013). 101.

would be a social worker, but Mary had a good answer: by accident - her Higher results made her do it. One semester in, though, she realised she wouldn't feel good about herself as a defence lawyer, and that she was not capable of bowing to men in wigs.'[35]

Like Cate Austin, Mary Shields maintains a moral sensibility that enables her to show compassion and clear-sighted judgement. Like myself, Helen Fitzgerald utilised her professional background (as a criminal justice social worker) and she also describes her novels as domestic noir. I would argue they fulfil the criterion of probation noir, which focuses on rehabilitation and reveals the workings of the criminal justice system post-conviction. Another member of the probation noir sub-group is crime writer Noelle Holten, who worked as a Senior Probation Officer before writing *Dead Inside* (2019), the first in the series for her protagonist Detective Constable Maggie Jamieson[36]. This novel features Lucy Sherwood, a probation officer. In 2022 Holten published *6 Ripley Avenue*, a stand-alone novel, set in a probation hostel, demonstrating a continued commitment to narratives of desistance based on her working knowledge.

Probation noir includes a very select group of authors, as Kate Simants discovered when she wrote an article for *The Guardian* to promote her novel *A Ruined Girl* (2020), featuring probation officer Wren Reynolds[37]. Simants was tasked with identifying ten books about probation and she acknowledges: 'probation has a bit of PR problem – with that perceived lack of excitement it's hardly surprising that so few novels take the space between incarceration and what follows as their setting.

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[35] Helen Fitzgerald, *Worst Case Scenario*, (Orenda Books, 2019), 15.

[36] Noelle Holten, *Dead Inside*, (KillerReads, 2019), 11.

[37] Kate Simants, "Top 10 Books About Probation", *The Guardian*, 5th August 2020. The article highlighted the scarcity of probation characters in fiction generally, as Simants included books where the probation character was minor. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/05/top-10-books-about-probation

By the time a convicted criminal is released on licence, most of the obvious drama is over.' To identify ten books, Simmants was forced to include five American novels, one from the 1970s, and these examples therefore do not reveal the working of the probation service, but rather the correctional post-release system in America, that is managed by parole officers.

The list includes my novel, *Humber Boy B* (2015), Holten's *Dead Inside* (2019) Fitzgerald's *Worst Case Scenario* (2019). It also includes Jonathan Trigell's novel, *Boy A* (2011) which is set post-release as Jack attempts to start a new life with the assistance of his probation officer, Terry: 'Terry's spent fifteen years working for this, waiting to see Jack striding down a sunny street.'[38] Terry's intervention is vital for Jack and, although it is never stated that Terry is a probation officer, this is an excellent depiction of post-release supervision.

This list of ten books, and its need to broaden the scope to include non-probation narratives, is a reminder of the paucity of the probation perspective, which is problematic in a democratic society aspiring to effectively address crime and recidivism. Probation noir is therefore important in showing how rehabilitation works in practice, by illuminating the parole process or post-release supervision and encouraging a more informed and compassionate approach to perpetrators as well as a greater understanding of the social context of crime.

[38] Jonathan Trigell, *Boy A,* (Serpent's Tail, 2004), 1.

Chapter 2

Changes in the Criminal Justice System and the Emergence of Probation Noir

My probation noir series introduces readers to Cate Austin as she undertakes her work, assessing risk and helping her clients to desist in crime, thereby raising questions about structural and policy changes to the probation service, which are in themselves a reflection of the political agenda and societal changes in attitudes towards punishment and the feasibility of rehabilitation. In *Probation* (2011) Rob Canton describes how the roots of probation are philanthropic and religious, starting in the 1870s with Police Court missionaries: 'probation articulated its mission as helping deserving wrongdoers to find redemption.'[39] Informally, the mentoring of offenders began even earlier, for example when Matthew Davenport Hill (1792-1872) was working as a recorder [a judge] in the 1830s he sentenced juvenile offenders to just one day in prison, providing that they subsequently received supervision from a responsible adult[40] but it was not until 1907 that the Probation of Offenders Act

[39] Rob Canton, *Probation,* (Routledge, 2011), 20.

[40] D Dressler, *Practice and Theory of Probation and Parole.* 2nd ed. New York, (Columbia University Press 1969), 22.

(POA) formalised supervision into a statutory role[41]. The role gradually became more secular, though still maintained its moral and social mission to improve the lives of perpetrators and assist them in leading a law-abiding future. From the 1980s, Probation Officers were required to be qualified as social workers, and this training gave them a working knowledge of criminogenic factors such as poverty and addiction. In the Cate Austin novel series, we see Cate attempt to mitigate these social ills. For example, in *Humber Boy B* (2015) Cate helps Ben with accommodation and benefits as well as finding him work experience at a local aquarium, to help him re-integrate into the community after serving eight years in prison. Cate is optimistic about Ben's chances for rehabilitation and when a colleague suggests he needs to: 'live like a hermit, on a vow of silence,' Cate replies: 'I'd like to think we can do more than that, and give him a chance of a normal life….he was only ten when it happened. Barely formed.'[42]

Cate's client-centered approach reveals her social work training. Like me, she belongs to the last cohort of probation officers to be trained via the social work route, before it was replaced by a workplace National Vocational Qualification. I qualified in 1996 with a master's degree in social work after two years of academic study and three work placements. The Criminal Justice Act 1991 set out expectations for a managerial approach that included a greater emphasis on risk assessment and public protection. Language changed: 'clients' became 'offenders'. National Standards were introduced in 1992, stipulating a minimum level of contact between probation officer and client as well as strict rules around enforcement with breaches of probation orders now resulting in a return to court and re-sentencing. The transition from mentorship to management was further solidified by the Criminal Justice Act of 2003 which confirmed that, rather than the POA 1907 dictat to 'advise, assist

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[41] Rob C. Mawby & Anne Worrall, *Doing Probation Work. Identity in a criminal justice occupation,* (Routledge, 2013), 2.

[42] Ruth Dugdall, *Humber Boy B,* (Legend Press, 2011), 17.

and befriend', the new purpose of sentencing was: 'the punishment of offenders; crime reduction; the reform and rehabilitation of offenders, the protection of the public; and the making of reparation by offenders to people affected by their crimes'.[43]

These changes instigated a restructuring of the probation service which, alongside the impact of the historical training gap, has left the service with an estimated shortfall of 10,000 staff.[44] Probation officers are demoralised and under-appreciated, with most of the public having little idea of what their vital work involves. The only stories in the media focus on probation failures, with no representations in popular culture to encourage young people to pursue a career in probation. This is why probation noir is both vital and timely.

[43] The Criminal Justice Act of 2003 re-emphasised public protection, and in a shift that was further solidified by the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014, introduced a raft of extended sentencing options and a more rigorous framework for offender management, such as a new risk assessment process (OASys) and punitive consequences for breaching a probation order.

[44] Bob Dale, "Recruits needed to fill gaps in probation service", BBC News online, 21st August 2025. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdd3n833170o

Chapter 3

The Cate Austin series as an Intervention in Probation Noir and Probation Work

Cate Austin's first appearance is in the novel *The Woman Before Me,* first published in 2010, returning in three subsequent novels: *The Sacrificial Man* (2011)*, Humber Boy B* (2015) and *Nowhere Girl* (2015). The series is now under contract with Harper Collins and will be re-published in 2026, along with two new titles. In addition, the BBC, the leading national television broadcaster, has signed a co-production deal for the television rights to the entire series. Sixteen years after first publication, there is a new appetite for the probation perspective which is now seen as topical and original in a crowded crime market.

I have always used my lived experience to create Cate's fictional world, starting with the plot of *The Woman Before Me* (2010) which I devised on the night I gave birth. It was a snowy February and the potent cocktail of pain-relief medication, with the falling snow, and the sound of another mother having a traumatic birth, all kept me awake. By the time the sun rose, I had an idea for a novel. *The Woman Before Me* (2010) is Rose's story, told in first-person, through her Black Book diary entries. Rose portrays herself as a rather plain and ordinary young woman, who finds herself homeless and in need of a job when her Aunt Rita dies of lung cancer. She finds work in a seaside hotel where she meets Jason. Despite his disinterest, Rose pursues him, and after he loses his job and dips into a depressive state, she persuades him to move in with her.

Rose is unwilling to release Jason even though he clearly wants to be with Emma. She addresses Jason (and by proxy, the reader) directly in her Black Book: 'However much you loved Emma, I couldn't ask you to go…. I loved you and I would make you love me. I would bind you to me forever, not through marriage - Emma had proved how weak that tie was - but with blood. Flesh and blood.'[45] Rose believes that having a baby with Jason will make him love her. This is not the case. On the maternity ward, Rose meets Emma, whom she recognises from a photo in Jason's wallet.

Rose leaves hospital, bereft of her baby, and meets Emma in a supermarket. Emma is now suffering from post-natal depression and wants time away from her baby, Luke. Rose babysits Luke and discovers that Emma is continuing her affair with Jason. Rose begins to 'stalk' Emma, creeping into the house (with a stolen key) as Emma sleeps. When Luke tragically dies in a fire, Rose is convicted of arson as she was in the house at the time. This has all already happened when our story begins, and Rose is now eligible for release on parole. Cate Austin arrives in prison to write Rose's parole report and make the risk assessment. Cate is a single mum and has been seconded to the prison after having a period off work with depression. The novel follows her through the steps of parole assessment; work with which I was familiar because I too had been seconded to a prison where I had worked for two years.

Through Cate I was able to re-examine a type of crime, colloquially called 'stalking', that I had encountered as a probation officer when I supervised individuals sentenced under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. In his book *Stalking,* Bryan Nicol, claims the reason this crime is so unsettling is it: 'revolves around desires and emotions we all share.'[46] Typically, perpetrators have created a distorted narrative of the relationship to justify following, assaulting and tormenting the

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[45] Ruth Dugdall, *The Woman Before Me,* (Legend Press, 2010), 119.

[46] Bran Nichol, *Stalking,* (Reaktion Books, 2006), 13.

victim. Supervising such cases was emotionally taxing, and listening to many hours of distorted thinking had a traumatic impact which I was only able to explore fully when I created Rose's character in *The Woman Before Me* (2010). Through the character of Cate Austin, I was able to re-examine what I had heard as a probation officer. I also channeled my own post-partum anxieties. Finally, I foregrounded probation and reveal the challenges of the work, including difficulties I encountered when working in a prison, including institutional misogyny and the bureaucracy of the penal system.

Through Cate's work with Rose, the reader experiences the complexities of making a parole assessment. As is often the case with long-term inmates, Rose gains agency within the prison through manipulating others, especially Janie, whom Rose describes as: 'small and forgettable, perfect for any number of crimes.'[47] Rose's first-person narration reveals her subjective and limited perspective on her crime. It also gives emotional space to the childhood trauma of losing her mother to suicide, enacted after she discovers her husband's (Rose's father) infidelity. The reader therefore understands, and potentially empathises, with Rose's devastation when she discovers Jason's infidelity.

Empathy is a crucial feature of probation noir and essential to the work of probation, as is the acceptance that criminal behaviour is a result of sociological and psychological factors, rather than innate badness. Cate Austin's interviews with Rose reveal the possibility of rehabilitation, as she finally admits her crime: 'oh Joel, Joel. Forgive me. It was only you I wanted. If only I'd been able to keep you, if only you were alive.'[48] This moment of remorse marks a major shift from Rose's position when she first meets Cate, when she is controlled and resistant to disclosing anything relating to her crime. Through their meetings, Cate helps Rose to shift her stance. This breakthrough moment, when Rose admits to murdering Joel, her own son (and not Luke, the victim of the crime for which

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[47] Ruth Dugdall, *The Woman Before Me,* (Legend Press, 2010), 52.

[48] Ruth Dugdall, *The Woman Before Me,* (Legend Press, 2010), 284.

she is imprisoned) is unexpected and confirms Cate's decision not to recommend parole. Additionally, the reader has seen parole assessment conducted with care and rigour.

My second novel, *The Sacrificial Man* (2011), was inspired by a German case featured in a 2003 Channel 4 documentary, *Bodyshock, The Man Who Ate his Lover*[49]. The documentary told the story of Armin Meiwes who had developed an erotic fascination with finding a 'willing victim' to kill and consume. More than two-hundred men responded to his advert, and he met four or five other candidates before deciding on Bernd Brandes[50]. On 9th March 2001, Meiwes bled Brandes to death. As he lay dying in the bath, Miewes cut off Brandes's penis so they could both taste it. Afterwards, Miewes maintained that he had 'assisted suicide' rather than committed murder. I wanted to understand the psychological triggers that would cause two people to collude in such a tragic and sad act.

The Sacrificial Man (2011) is one of very few novels that look at cannibalism, with the exceptions of the horror novel *The Silence of the Lambs* (2009) and the erotic literary novel *The Taste of A Man* (Drakulic, 1996) in which Tereza, a Polish poet living in New York, kills and eats Jose, a Brazilian anthropologist, to stop him returning to his wife. She believes that by eating him, she will keep them together: "I cannot pinpoint exactly when it fully came to me that I would not let us part.[51] Tereza is justifying and romantising Jose's murder by suggesting that the cannibalistic act is uniting them, and it is significant for the themes of the novel that Jose is studying the Andes flight, in which

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[49] *Bodyshock, The Man who Ate his Lover*. Channel 4, 2003. https://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-man-who-ate-his-lover

[50] *Australian Broadcasting Corporation.* 'German cannibal sentenced to eight and a half years.' 30th January 2004. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2004-01-30/german-cannibal-sentenced-to-eight-and-a-half-years/128202

[51] Slavenka Drakulic, *The Taste of a Man,* (Abacus, 1996), 97.

the survivors resorted to cannibalism to stay alive, an act that was subsequently defended by the Catholic church.[52]

Both *The Taste of a Man* (1996) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (2009) ultimately present the criminal, in both cases a cannibal, as unrepentant and they are 'othered' as monstrous, for example when Hannibal Lecter tells Clarice Starling: 'A census taker tried to quantify me once. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a big Amarone.'[53] At the end of both novels, neither Hannibal Lecter nor Tereza exhibit remorse, in fact Tereza is nonchalant: 'It hurts, for now it still hurts. But in time the pain will evaporate, just like the smell.'[54] Although the oversimplifying and demonising of the perpetrator places both books outside of my definition for probation noir, FBI agent Clarice Starling's quest, in *The Silence of the Lambs* (2009), is for understanding. Like Cate Austin, Clarice shows respect and compassion for the perpetrator and hopes to gain an insight into the psychological profile of 'Buffalo Bill' so that she can catch him before he kills again. Both Clarice and Cate are young, attractive, females operating in a male-dominated and often misogynist environment. Just as when Clarice enters the secure unit, when Cate enters Bishop's Hill Prison, she is made to feel insignificant: 'The prison officers behind the reinforced glass continued talking to each other, ignoring her, so she banged on the window and pushed her ID under the grille.'[55]

The Sacrificial Man (2011) tells the story of Alice, a beautiful and talented professor at the University of Essex who has murdered her lover, Smith, at his request. The novel starts after Smith's death and Alice's conviction, when Cate Austin is allocated the case. She will write a pre-sentence

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[52] Anon, *Two Catholic Aides defend cannibalism in Chilean air crash.* New York Times, December 28, 1972, Page 8 https://www.nytimes.com/1972/12/28/archives/two-catholic-aides-defend-cannibalism-in-chilean-air-crash.html
[53] Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs,* (Arrow, 2009), 27.
[54] Slavenka Drakulic, *The Taste of a Man,* (Abacus, 1997), 212.
[55] Ruth Dugdall, *The Woman Before Me,* (Legend Press, 2010), 26.

report on Alice and recommend a sentence, and we follow Cate's process as she assesses Alice's motives, responsibility and remorse. We learn Alice's backstory, and her psychological reasons for responding to Smith's online post which reads: 'Man seeks beautiful woman for the journey of a lifetime: I will lift mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help. Will you help me to die?'[56] This approach to attracting a 'beautiful woman' parodies modern dating apps and underlines the fact that Alice is seeking love.

Alice only discovers after Smith is dead and she has already consumed him, that he was terminally sick with variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (vCJD)[57]. This part of the plot evolved from my research into the cannibalistic funeral rights in Papua New Guinea and discovery that some mourners developed *Kuru,* or vCJD after eating infected brain tissue.[58] Smith convinces Alice that the cannibalistic act is spiritual, manipulating her Catholic upbringing and belief in the transubstantiation process when the bread and the wine become flesh and blood and are consumed as an act of faith. Alice is also susceptible to Smith's manipulation because of her passion for Keats and his romanticising of death. She explains this to Cate: 'As Keats said…now more than ever seems rich to die. To cease upon the midnight with no pain. A perfect death is a way to cheat the dulling, dumbing effect of time. To die at the height of love is the only way to preserve its purity'.[59] From this distorted starting point Cate must help Alice to accept responsibility, then guide her towards remorse and

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[56] Ruth Dugdall, *The Sacrificial Man,* (Legend Press, 2011), 15.

[57] Morag K Kendell, "Mad Cow Disease and vCJD: should I worry?" *WebMd,* 6th February 2024. The article examines the anxiety people had about this disease after an outbreak in the UK in 1993, with 1000 cases reported each week, as a result of eating contaminated meat. https://www.webmd.com/brain/mad-cow-disease-basics

[58] "Eating human brains helped Papua new Guinea tribe resist disease, research shows", *The Guardian,* 10th June 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jun/10/brains-helped-papua-new-guinea-tribe

[59] Ruth Dugdall, *The Sacrificial Man,* (Legend Press, 2011), 69.

ultimately redemption in a plot structure that mirrors the work of a probation officer, which is emotionally demanding.

In his article 'Exposing the emotional toil of probation work' (2021) Chalen Westaby describes probation work as being 'emotional labour' with three stages: 'deep acting', in which the probation officer taps into their own experiences; 'surface acting' where they suppress negative emotions to build a rapport; 'a genuine emotional response' where they express how they really feel.[60] Cate Austin goes through these stages of emotional labour with Alice, and the reader is alongside her. Finally, Cate and the reader reach a place of compassion for Alice: 'Cate would not fail David [Smith]. But she would not fail Alice either. Both of them were victims.'[61] This underlines the duality of probation work, which aims to address offending behaviour, but also to rehabilitate the perpetrator. To do so, the probation officer must show compassion and believe change is possible; again, revealing the historic roots of the service in enacting a 'moral enterprise'.[62]

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[60] Chalen Westaby, "Exposing the Emotional Toll of Probation Work," *Knowledge Applied*, Sheffield Hallam University, 2021. https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/in-action/projects/emotional-labour-in-probation

[61] Ruth Dugdall, *The Sacrificial Man,* (Legend Press, 2011), 277.

[62] Rob Canton, *Probation,* (Routledge, 2011), 20.

Chapter 4

Method Writing and 'Emotion Memory': Applying Stanislavski's Method to Probation Noir

Stanislavski's seminal book *An Actor Prepares* (1980) became a useful reference point in understanding my immersive approach to the craft of writing. Method Acting requires the actor to portray the character so completely that they *feel* the emotions, rather than simply *showing* them. This is achieved by drawing on 'emotion memory', which Stanislavski's teacher tells him is: 'that type of memory, which makes you relive the sensations you once felt…your emotion memory can bring back feelings you have already experienced.[63] My writing process aligns with this as it enables me to relive my experiences as a probation officer, utilising my emotion memory, to create authentic characters. Stanislavski's teacher said an emotional objective in creating character was, 'absolutely necessary to us, necessary as air and sunlight'.[64] Perhaps because probation has more female workers than any other criminal justice service, or perhaps because of its religious roots, there is an acceptance that the work will trigger emotions and probation officers receive regular 'supervision' where they can discuss these feelings in a confessional and supportive space. My writing is an extension of this 'supervision' and a way for me to understand what I experienced. Although the phrase 'method

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[63] Constantine Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares,* (Methuen, 1980. Reprint, Theatre Arts, Inc., 1936), 168.

[64] Constantine Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares.* (Methuen, 1980), 301.

writing' has occasionally been used in creative writing, I am here applying it to Stanislavski's teachings and would define it thus: 'Method Writing involves the writer in immersive research to create a store of emotion memories which can be transferred onto the page, thereby producing an emotionally powerful and intellectually stimulating experience for the reader'.

Stanislavki's method of preparing an actor for performance emphasised the importance of creating authentic and truthful art. This was the result of the actor immersing themselves in the character, in order that they may better understand the character's inner psychology. Widely influential in the world of acting and theatre studies, Stanislavski's method has also been successfully applied to different fields. One example is the work of drama therapists, who use Stanislavski's techniques to help their clients imagine alternative scenarios, or to experience the feelings of other people in a safe and therapeutically ethical way. Dramatherapist Sue Jennings was a pioneer in re-appropriating Stanislavski's tools for actors, into the clinical setting, in order to address psychological difficulties and help the client to find 'equilibrium'[65].

I would argue that Stanislavski's acting techniques can also be applied to the writing process, to reveal a deeper psychological experience for the writer, and the reader. Techniques such as creating 'emotion memory' can help a writer create a more psychologically believable character, in the same way as an actor using this technique, can bring a character to life on a stage. Like an actor, a writer needs a 'bank' of emotions upon which to draw, and these can be stored during lived experiences. When I write, I am drawing on what I experienced whilst working as a probation officer, and the interactions I had with the clients assigned to me. I am using these memories as a foundation for my characterisations, just as a method actor would create a character for the stage. The authentic 'emotion

[65] Sue Jennings. *The Handbook of Dramatherapy.* Routledge, 1994, 124.

memories' into which I immerse myself, brings conversations I had as a probation officer, into a fictional context. *Humber Boy B* (2015) is the creative result of the two years (from 2000 to 2002) when I worked as a probation officer on a high security unit within a Suffolk prison for boys (aged 15 to 18) who had been convicted of 'grave' crimes, as defined under Section 53 of the Children and Young Person's Act 1933, which included murder, manslaughter, arson and rape[66]. This is the same Act under which the two ten-year-olds who murdered Jamie Bulger in February 1993 were sentenced, a murder that sent shockwaves through British society and brought scrutiny to the Criminal Justice System. It also prompted a media reaction which Bob Franklin and Julian Petley describe as: 'sensational and vilified [the two ten-year-olds] as 'monsters', 'freaks', 'animals' or simply 'evil'[67]. Sensational reporting also: 'feeds readers beliefs that the criminal justice system is too soft on offenders, especially young offenders.'[68]

As a direct result of this case, four specialist prison units were established to house the small but high-profile group of young offenders who had committed murder and other serious crimes, and I was the probation officer on one of them. The boys I worked with were troubled; most had experienced physical or sexual abuse, bereavement or severe neglect, and their crimes were extreme and often horrific. I experienced cognitive dissonance when reading witness statements, often sickening in their content, which jarred with the demeanor of the boy who had committed the act, who was often vulnerable and in desperate need of safety and care: how could this *child* have

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[66] Gwyneth Boswell, *Young and Dangerous: The Backgrounds and Careers of Section 53 Offenders,* (Avebury, 1996), 4.

[67] Bob Franklin & Julian Petley, "Killing the Age of Innocence: Newspaper Reporting of the Death of Jamie Bulger", *Thatcher's Children? Politics, Childhood and Society in the 1980s and 1990s,* Jane Pilcher & Stephen Wagg ed, (Routledge, 1996), 134.

[68] Bob Franklin & Julian Petley, "Killing the Age of Innocence: Newspaper Reporting of the Death of Jamie Bulger", *Thatcher's Children? Politics, Childhood and Society in the 1980s and 1990s,* Jane Picher and Stephen Wagg ed, (Routledge, 1996), 141.

committed murder? My work was, in the first instance, to help each boy accept responsibility for his crime and then to understand the reasons for it. This was emotional labour (Westaby, 2021) and especially challenging as the prison environment was not conducive to rehabilitative interventions.

A decade later I finally processed these emotion memories and wrote *Humber Boy B* (2015). In contrast to the sensationalised media reporting of such cases, Ben is sympathetically portrayed. As Cate asserts: 'he was just a child. There's got to be some sort of explanation.'[69] My aim in writing *Humber Boy B (*2015) was to explore what these might be.

At the start of the novel, Ben has been released from prison with a new identity after serving 8 years in prison for the murder of his friend, Noah, whom he pushed off the Humber Bridge when they were both just ten years old. When Ben first meets Cate, he is nervous and fearful, just like the boys with whom I worked. The relationship between my probation work and my writing craft has always been close, and I found creative ways to work with the boys in prison. To encourage empathy, I used a dramatherapy technique described by Sue Jennings as taking the 'character seat'[70]. I would ask the boys to play the part of their victim, a task many struggled with, but which ultimately led to breakthrough moments as they described how their victim may have felt during the attack. In the two years I worked with them I became close to the boys but never forgot their horrific crimes.

Perhaps the single biggest misconception of the probation officer is that they are 'on the side' of the offender rather than the victim, but rehabilitative work involves confronting a criminal with the consequences of their actions in order that future crime is prevented. After meeting Leon at the aquarium, who lost his son, Ben finally understands the devastation he has caused Noah's family. In the final scene, which takes place on the Humber Bridge, Ben is confronted by Noah's mum, Jessica.

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[69] Ruth Dugdall, *Humber Boy B,* (Legend Press, 2015), 18

[70] Sue Jennings, *The Handbook of Dramatherapy,* (Routledge, 1994), 56.

She asks Ben to push her from the bridge, to end her misery, and to ensure he is returned to prison. Exhausted and struggling with life in the community, Ben does as she asks. Rehabilitation has failed, despite Cate's efforts, and everyone has lost as a result. Cate returns home, devastated: 'Cate needed to see her daughter, needed to hold her. Watching Jessica fall from the bridge, it had made her feel the fragility of life, the need to clasp love tight as it was so vulnerable.'[71] This bleak ending to Ben's story reveals the challenges of rehabilitation. For someone who has spent their formative years in custody, life on the 'outside' is terrifying, and Ben is unable to start afresh as he is being hunted on Facebook.

Ben's childhood and his crime took place in Hull, which was my home until I was seven. I re-visited the city on a research trip, simultaneously thinking of my own life and Ben's, as I walked across the Humber Bridge and visited The Deep aquarium, both important locations in the novel. Method writing includes visiting places to experience the sensations of that environment. Guy Debord described this practice as 'Dérives': 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects and are thus quite different from notions of journey or stroll.[72] As I walked around Hull, I observed the people who lived there, I listened to the sounds and cadence of the speech, inhaled the scent of the docks and the salty air. This psycho-geographical research helped me develop the novel and it was also therapeutic, as method writing often is.

Between 2014 and 2016, whilst living in Luxembourg with my husband and young family, I experienced severe homesickness; I did not speak any of the three dominant languages (Luxembourgish, French and German) nor did I understand the local customs. I felt alienated and

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[71] Ruth Dugdall, *Humber Boy B,* (Legend Press, 2015), 344.

[72] Guy Debord, "Theory of Dérive", *Internationale Situationniste,* 1958. https://rohandrape.net/ut/rttcc-text/Debord2006e.pdf

alone. Loneliness, as Olivia Laing says in her memoir and social commentary, *The Lonely City* (2016), 'Is by no means a wholly worthless experience, but rather one that cuts right into the heart of what we value and what we need'.[73] Whilst I was experiencing this, two significant events took place. The first was the disappearance of a young girl from the local area and the increased presence of police around my children's school. It was assumed the victim had been taken across the border into one of the neighbouring countries where Luxembourg police had no jurisdiction. This was the inspiration for *Nowhere Girl* (2015). Cate and her daughter Amelia have only recently arrived in Luxembourg when a girl from Amelia's school, Ellie Sheen, goes missing from the annual fair, known as the Schueberfouer. Cate is unable to stop herself getting involved, especially when she feels the local police are not doing enough, and she uncovers a human trafficking operation. Dominic Dean states in *Killing Children in British Fiction: Thatcherism to Brexit, ,* that 'a migrant or transnational child always threaten to become a citizen of the world, a citizen of nowhere, haunting Britain's confused attitude towards cosmopolitanism, migration and race in its post-Empire and increasingly neoliberal era from the early 1980s to the mid-2010s.[74]

I wanted to show the reasons why people might become involved in human trafficking and my inspiration was a personal health scare when I experienced a Transient Ischemic Attack (TIA)[75]. I remained in hospital for a week, but a problem with my insurance documents meant that my treatment was stalled. I had the resources to fix the situation, but my thoughts quickly turned to others less fortunate, someone who had been trafficked, for example, and had no legal right to remain. Following my discharge, I began to research human trafficking and arranged a meeting with the

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[73] Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City,* (Picador, 2016), 8

[74] Dominic Dean, *Killing Children in British Fiction: Thatcherism to Brexit.* Suny Press, 2024, 175.

[75] https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/transient-ischaemic-attack-tia/ A TIA is sometimes called a mini-stroke.

Commissaire en Chef of the police, who introduced me to a social worker with Assistante Social at the Association de Soutien aux Travailleurs Immigres (ASTI). Through ASTI I learned about people who had been turned away from medical treatment, including a family whose four-year-old daughter needed cancer treatment. These were the people I had thought about in hospital and the only way in which I could help to shed light on their situation was by writing about it.

After Ellie goes missing in *Nowhere Girl* (2015) the reader is introduced to Amina, who narrates the story of being trafficked from Algeria to Luxembourg with the help of Uncle Jak. Jak lives in the city with his wife, known to Amina as 'Auntie', and their young son, Fahran. They have no legal right to remain in Luxembourg and Amina learns that Fahran has a brain tumour and needs urgent treatment[76]. Jak's motivation for trafficking is financial, as he wants to pay for treatment for Fahran, and this is also why he takes Ellie. Charlotte Beyer identified that my treatment of human trafficking avoided cliches or tropes and: 'Although some of the mothers depicted appear to have power or agency at times, this agency is consistently shown in Dugdall's *Nowhere Girl* to be circumscribed and limited by a patriarchal society that favors and privileges white males'.[77]

In an act of dérive, I visited the Gare area of Luxembourg where undocumented migrants lived in overcrowded apartments, existing by any means possible. This often meant working in nail bars or restaurants, but could include drug dealing, prostitution or other crimes and I discovered that several undocumented migrants were remanded in the Luxembourg prison. I began working as a prison visitor with Association Luxembourgeoise des Visitors de Prison (ALVP) and was allocated a young man who had been trafficked from Ghana before being arrested for drug dealing. His court

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[76] Ruth Dugdall, *Nowhere Girl,* (Legend Press, 2015), 111.

[77] Charlotte Beyer, "Resisting invisibility: Mothers and human trafficking in Ruth Dugdall's Nowhere Girl and Susanne Staun's Skadestuen", *Clues, 38*(1), 2020, 37-47.

case was approaching, and he was terrified he would be deported. Through the months of our visits, I listened to the 'push' factors that had sent him from home, such as poverty or corruption, and to the 'pull' factors that drew him to Luxembourg, which include false promises of wealth and freedom peddled by unscrupulous traffickers.

My research became even more immersive when I met a woman who had travelled to Luxembourg from the Djurdjura mountains. She showed me the few precious trinkets she had brought with her including a comb and prayer mat; objects I describe in *Nowhere Girl* (2015) as belonging to Amina: 'there was also a cotton nightdress, a comb that had been her grandmother's and had a piece of coral at the centre, a precious stone bought with the first harvest from the vineyard.'[78] My intention was to humanise the story of trafficking, to show the desperation behind the decision; an important narrative at a time when there is increasing intolerance of refugees.

The way stories are told is important, and representation of human trafficking in the media influences discourse around the subject, and this then impacts on policy decisions. My novel has been identified by academics as presenting human trafficking in an authentic and empathetic way: 'Dugdall's *Nowhere Girl* (2015) uses the crime fiction subgenre of domestic noir to portray trafficking of girls and young females from the Global South by means of *harraga* to Western Europe homes for the purposes of forced labour and sexual exploitation.'[79] I discovered the term 'harraga' during my immersive research, it's literal meaning is 'those who burn', referring to the burning of

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[78] Ruth Dugdall, *Nowhere Girl,* (Legend Press, 2015), 81.

[79] Christiana Gregoriou ed, *Representations of Transnational Human Trafficking,* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018), 98.

papers at border crossings, but the people who used the term spoke the word with awe, aware of its gravitas and the perilous journey it involves.[80]

Luxembourg is a small city and the inhabitants soon discovered that a British crime writer was researching for a new novel, which resulted in me being invited to meet the British Ambassador, Alice Walpole. Ambassador Walpole was interested to hear about my research and especially my belief that a child taken in Luxembourg could so easily disappear across the border into one of the three neighbouring countries. What, I asked her, would be the British Embassy's response to this situation? She admitted there were no specific safeguards in place and took details of the police and social work contacts I had made. She then suggested *Nowhere Girl* (2015) should be launched in the British Embassy.

[80] Christiana Gregoriou ed, *Representations of Transnational Human Trafficking,* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018), 99.

Conclusion

The Impact of the Cate Austin Series

Nowhere Girl (2015) was launched at the British Embassy in Luxembourg in April 2015 and in the audience were the people I met as part of my immersive research. Ambassador Walpole gave a speech, in which she described our first meeting, and how she had been unable to answer my question about procedures for safeguarding a trafficked child. She then announced a new protocol to be enacted if a child was taken. There would be a multi-agency response to the situation, to ensure a more comprehensive safeguarding of vulnerable children, and a document had been prepared with contributions from those in the room that evening. My novel, and conversations around it, had instigated a change in policy. Ambassador Walpole said in an interview for the *Luxembourg Times*: '[Ruth's novel] led us to think what sort of services we provide, whether they are limited, how we help people with particular needs in the field of child protection and how we pass them on to services in Luxembourg. [It provided] a welcome opportunity to gather experts in the field of child protection and talk about it.' The article also quotes British Pro Consul Evelien d'Hertog: 'We think it's important when someone is in need but we cannot help, to signpost them or at least give them a brochure…We thought the book (*Nowhere Girl)* was a welcome opportunity to gather experts in the

field of child protection to talk about it.'[81] The knowledge that my novel had instigated a protocol to ensure swift action if a child was kidnapped in the future, was deeply moving. It also proves the power of creative narratives on influencing policy and practice, and specifically the impact of probation noir on policy relating to criminal activity.

Local media outlets in Luxembourg reported that *Nowhere Girl* (2015) enabled and facilitated policy change and raised awareness about human trafficking: 'Inspired partially by crime author Ruth Dugdall's novel Nowhere Girl, the British embassy has published a 20-page pamphlet on child protection in Luxembourg. The novel, which revolves around a case of child abduction and human trafficking in Luxembourg, was the basis for discussions among local child protection experts, parents and British embassy staff after a reading by Dugdall upon its launch in November 2015.'[82] In addition, Lycée Bel-Val, a secondary school in Luxembourg, studied the novel as part of their curriculum and I was invited to the school to run a series of workshops. In June 2016, a group of thirty 16-year-old students from that school visited Suffolk, meeting with me and the Felixstowe Mayor and attending the Felixstowe Book Festival.

This thesis has argued that the Cate Austin series has raised awareness about probation work and encouraged discourse around rehabilitation. Further evidence is the regular invitations I receive to speak on regional BBC Radio about crime. For example, in October 2025 I added to the high-profile debate around the wrongful release of prisoners. I pointed out that prisons are overcrowded

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[81] Anon, "Gripping Book puts Child Protection on the Agenda", *Luxembourg Times,* 10th November 2015. https://www.luxtimes.lu/luxembourg/gripping-book-puts-child-protection-on-agenda/1220195.html

[82] Duncan Roberts, "Child Welfare Advice", *Delano*, 15th April 2016. https://delano.lu/article/news_child-welfare-advice

and that the solution lies in prioritising the rehabilitative services, such as probation, which will not only ease the pressure on prisons it also reduces the risk of re-offending and produces a safer society[83].

Probation narratives need to be seen on our screens, and portrayed in books, for the public to understand the importance of the probation service on the rehabilitation of offenders, something which is essential for a safe society. This thesis has shown that probation narratives are scarce because there is a lack of knowledge around probation work and the rehabilitation of offenders, and an increasing sense of the failure of the criminal justice system.

This thesis has further demonstrated that probation noir, with its focus on rehabilitation and the post-conviction narrative, is a necessary intervention. There is a burgeoning audience for these narratives. James Graham's play, *Punch* (2025) had significant box-office success and includes a positive portrayal of a probation officer character who, despite referring to the challenges of her role, effectively supports Jacob to address his offending[84]. The global popularity and critical success of Jack Thorne's television drama, *Adolescence* (2025) demonstrates the public's interest in understanding the reasons behind offending. The 140 million global views suggest an appetite for probation noir and crime narratives that begin after the offender has been caught. At the same time, my Cate Austin series is enjoying new interest, with a re-publication in 2026.

This thesis has demonstrated that probation noir is an important sub-genre of crime fiction. Crucially, it is a genre that foregrounds rehabilitation and requires the reader to undertake the same journey as the probation officer, moving from condemnation of the crime to a place of deeper

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[83] Ruth Dugdall, interviewed by Sonia Watson. BBC Radio Essex. 28th October 2025. https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m002l0cg

[84] James Graham, *Punch,* Nottingham Playhouse Production. Apollo theatre, London, December 2025. The play is based on a true story, the death of Adam Penfold after being hit with one punch. The drama takes place after the crime and is concerned with retribution and justice.

understanding. This thesis has shown how probation noir can impact policy. The Cate Austin series offers a persuasive medium to generate empathy and compassion, and the novels themselves are a result of immersive research and the utilisation of emotion memory, a process which I have designated method writing.

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