

Scarlet and Black: Non-Mainstream Religion as 'Other' in Detective Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Detective fiction, a literary mode developed in the nineteenth century, is most often a conservative genre. From as early as Conan Doyle's seminal *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), new religious movements have provided detective and crime novelists with fertile subject matter for exploring deviance and anti-social motivations. Conan Doyle's Mormons are exotic, secretive, and hold 'strange' beliefs and values; they are therefore more likely to be the perpetrators of actions that defy, rather than support, mainstream norms. This alerts the critical reader to the purpose of non-mainstream religion's presence in detective fiction: the authors do not seek to understand these communities, but use them as a challenge to the norms of society. The conservative nature of much detective fiction demands that the values of mainstream society are reaffirmed in the plot's resolution; this frequently results in the demonization and punishment of the minority religion featured.

The core of this paper is devoted to an analysis of two recent popular novels by Kathy Reichs, American forensic anthropologist turned author. Her first novel, *Deja Dead* (1997), introduced Dr Temperance ('Tempe') Brennan, her largely autobiographical heroine. The second, *Death du Jour* (1999), and the fourth, *Fatal Voyage* (2001), rely for their plot operations on the pseudo-speciation of various new religious movements, in the former the Order of the Solar Temple, in the latter an occult initiatory brotherhood. Using these examples, this paper will argue that new religious movements are pictured as 'Other' to mainstream society in both past and recent detective and detective literature. This analysis expands our knowledge of other popular reactions (for example, the media) to new religious movements.

THE DETECTIVE NOVEL AS A PRODUCT OF SECULARIZATION

Scholars of religion in the contemporary West commonly note that the religious context has changed profoundly since the mid-nineteenth century, as a result of secularization. Peter Berger's classic definition of secularization is 'the process by which sectors of

society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols,¹ and this shift is clearly observable in the West, although there are still disputes among scholars as to its meaning. Two other important changes mesh with secularization, intensifying the move away from traditional institutional religion and towards personal spiritualities. These are individualism, which resulted in the voluntary principle and personal choice being favoured over tradition and inherited occupations;² and consumer capitalism, which encouraged this choosing self to enhance life through the acquisition of possessions. This consumption now extends beyond things, in that Western people consume ideas, spiritualities, identities, and cultures, among other things.³

The most important result of these radical changes in Western society is that religious symbols, doctrines and other manifestations become detached from their historical, traditional and institutional contexts and are floating, unanchored. They are then appropriated by seekers, the spiritual consumers of the present age,⁴ and combined in ways that are personally satisfying. Consequently, the sacred, which once was carefully controlled by religious professionals serving institutions, now frequently manifests outside of formal religion, and ostensibly secular phenomena such as sport, rock and roll music, fashion and dance party culture may therefore cross into sacredness on occasion, or for particular people.⁵

The rise of the novel as a Western literary form from the eighteenth century paralleled the rise of the middle classes, and the detective story as a genre dates from the mid-nineteenth century. Prior to that, detective stories existed, though the figure of the detective who interprets the events and provides a resolution was absent. The relationship of writings about detective to religion has been commented on extensively: Stephen Knight remarks of *The Newgate Calendar*, a very popular collection of detective stories first published in 1773:

¹ Peter Berger: *The Social Reality of Religion*, London, 1967, 107.

² Steve Bruce: *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Oxford, 2002, 10-12.

³ David Lyon: *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, 2002 [2000], Chapter 5, 'Shopping for a Self.'

⁴ Colin Campbell: 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization,' *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, 5, 1972, 119-136.

⁵ David Chidester: 'The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Pottlatch of Rock'n'Roll,' in Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H Mahan, editors *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Berkeley, 2000, 219-238.

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It is easy enough to see that these two systems of detecting detective, personal guilt and social observation, could only develop in a deeply Christian world, with small social units where everybody is known, where hiding is hard and socialization tends to be public.... But in the period when the stories were printed, the implied social model was disappearing. Not everybody was devotedly Christian, many people lived in large and increasing conurbations... In fact *The Newgate Calendar* is not offering a real account of detective control: it is ideological in that it offers hope and comfort to people, and in that it is itself based on ideologies, the twin beliefs that we are all Christian at heart and that our society is integral and at root a single healthy body.⁶

As organized religion retreated, it became more difficult to believe the theologically-charged notion that good and evil do not go unpunished, and that human life is ultimately meaningful, even when random violence threatens to destabilize both individual and community. The figure of the detective, exemplified by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, was one possible replacement for the religious confessor in the process of ascribing meaning to the otherwise random *minutiae* of existence. Conan Doyle modeled Homes on Dr Joseph Bell, his teacher when he was a student of medicine, and the aura of the healer (another religiously-derived function) consequently adhered to the classical detective.⁷ This quality later led authors to feature religious figures as detectives; the earliest being G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, and later examples including Harry Kemelman's Rabbi David Small, Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael, and Peter Tremayne's Sister Fidelma.

Certain academic commentators on the detective story have sought to explain its appeal in terms of the secularized world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The poet W. H. Auden prefigured the postmodern collapse of the distinction between high and low culture when he argued that the detective story performs the same role for its readers as the classical Greek tragedy did for its viewers, permitting them to experience the cathartic power of dark emotion vicariously;⁸ another man of letters, C. Day Lewis (writing as 'Nicholas Blake') suggested that the formal aspects of detective

⁶ Stephen Knight: *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Bloomington, 1980, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸ W H Auden: 'The Guilty Vicarage,' in Robin W Winks, editor, *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, 1980, 15-24.

fiction were intended to substitute for departed patterns of religious certainty;⁹ and critic Elliot L. Gilbert viewed the detective as 'the apostle of pure reason.'¹⁰ Scientist and religious commentator John Wren-Lewis puts the case most forcefully:

The ascendancy of detective as we know it coincides with the post-Darwinian period when religious belief was declining sharply among the literate Western public. The detective emerged as a saviour-image as people began to lose faith in those more traditional saviours, the holy man, the righteous ruler, and the knight in shining armour. And stories about evil as a mystery became popular as ancient myths about the so-called 'problem of evil' began to seem discredited.¹¹

One consequence of the detective story's absorption of secularized theology was that it became, inevitably, a conservative genre. As a genre, it also reflected the changes that took place in Western society; therefore there were few women detectives prior to women's liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, and no women who challenged professional male detectives until the 1980s.¹² Furthermore, the purpose of reading detective fiction has, negatively, been presumed to be seeking consolation. Christine Ann Evans is damning when she condemns the desire to read formula detective fiction:

the seemingly harmless appeal of the redundancy of formal elements and formulae hardens into something more menacing when the familiarity of the 'already known' slides into a schematization of accepted ideology. Popular forms accept and exploit the prevalent ideology¹³

NON-MAINSTREAM RELIGION IN EARLY DETECTIVE FICTION

Arthur Conan Doyle was an innovator in terms of plot, detection methods, and subject matter. In his novella, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), he makes use of an exotic new religion, Mormonism (founded

⁹ Knight, op cit, 1.

¹⁰ Elliot L Gilbert: 'The Detective as Metaphor in the Nineteenth Century,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1:3, 1967, 257.

¹¹ John Wren-Lewis, 'Adam, Eve and Agatha Christie: Detective Stories as Post-Darwinian Myths of Original Sin,' *Australian Religion Studies Review*, 6:1, 20-21.

¹² Irmgard Maassen: 'An Unsuitable Job for a Woman? Gender, Genre and the New Detective Heroine,' in H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight editors, *The Art of Murder: New Essays on Detective Fiction*, Tübingen, 1998, 152.

¹³ Christine Ann Evans: 'On the Valuation of Detective Fiction: A Study in the Ethics of Consolation,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, (nd) 161.

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by Joseph Smith at the beginning of the nineteenth century), as the backdrop against which the mystery unravelled by Sherlock Holmes takes place. The story is structured in two parts. The first opens with Holmes' companion Dr Watson graduating from medicine in 1878. He takes rooms with Holmes and is drawn into the detective's world. Inspector Gregson of Scotland Yard approaches Holmes when the body of an American, Enoch J. Drebbler of Cleveland, is found dead. Later, Joseph Stangerson, Drebbler's secretary, is also murdered, with the word 'rache' (revenge in German) written by both bodies. Holmes avers he knows the identity of the murderer, to the irritation of Gregson and his fellow-policeman Lestrade, and apprehends another American, Mr Jefferson Hope, at the end of the first part of the novella.

The second part is titled 'The Country of the Saints' (referring to the Mormon Church's official name, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) and begins on May 4, 1847. Here the reader learns the reason for Jefferson Hope's murder of Drebbler and Stangerson thirty years later. In the American desert a man, calling himself John Ferrier, and his five-year-old daughter, Lucy, are near death from thirst, the only survivors of a party of twenty-one. They are rescued by a caravan of travellers, whom Ferrier questions:

'Who are you, though?' he continued, glancing with curiosity at his stalwart, sunburned rescuers; 'there seems to be a powerful lot of ye.'

'Nigh upon ten thousand,' said one of the young men; 'we are the persecuted children of God – the chosen of the Angel Merona.'

'I never heard tell on him,' said the wanderer. 'He appears to have chosen a fair crowd of ye.'

'Do not jest at that which is sacred,' said the other sternly. 'We are of those who believe in those sacred writings, drawn in Egyptian letters on plates of beaten gold, which were handed unto the holy Joseph Smith at Palmyra. We have come from Nauvoo, in the state of Illinois, where we have founded our temple. We have come to seek a refuge from the violent man and from the godless, even though it be in the heart of the desert.'

The name of Nauvoo evidently recalled recollections to John Ferrier. 'I see,' he said; 'you are the Mormons.'¹⁴

¹⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle: *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Long Stories*, London, 1929, 84.

After their rescue, Ferrier and Lucy reside in Salt Lake City and he becomes one of its foremost citizens, though he earns the ire of the Mormon community because he refuses to marry. Lucy, at seventeen, is courted by Jefferson Hope, a family friend of John Ferrier from St Louis, and they become engaged. Conan Doyle's attitude to Mormonism is clearly negative, and his picture of their society is dark and contains warnings of perversion and detective. Ferrier, meditating on Lucy's engagement to Hope, concludes that '[h]e had always determined, deep down in his resolute heart, that nothing would ever induce him to allow his daughter to marry a Mormon. Such a marriage he regarded as no marriage at all, but as a shame and a disgrace.'¹⁵ Prurient curiosity about the Mormon practice of polygyny (plural marriage) was rife in late Victorian England, and the US federal Morrill Anti-Bigamy Law (1862) 'made bigamy a federal offence and assigned a punishment of up to five years in jail and a \$500 fine.'¹⁶

Conan Doyle's portrayal of Mormons, however, went considerably further than implied sexual immorality. *A Study in Scarlet* shows the Danite Band, or the Avenging Angels, a Mormon vigilante group, kidnapping very young girls for plural marriage, and murdering the husbands of other women, so that they too could be abused in Mormon households. Although he visited Utah on his second American lecture tour in 1923 and maintained cordial relations with the Mormons he met on that occasion, Conan Doyle insisted that 'all I said about the Danite Band and the murders is historical so I cannot withdraw that, though it is likely that in a work of fiction it is stated more luridly than in a work of history.'¹⁷ It could be argued that fiction inevitably sharpens the emotional power of the author's raw material, and in a genre such as detective fiction, which 'is seventy-five per cent moralism anyhow,'¹⁸ the reader cannot do other than reject the Mormons as perverted and evil, and their religion as a sham and immoral.

In *A Study in Scarlet* the Mormon leader and promoter of plural marriage Brigham Young visits John Ferrier, to reproach him over his

¹⁵ Ibid, 94.

¹⁶ 'Polygyny in the Mormon Movement: Polygyny During the 19th Century' at www.religioustolerance.org/lds_poly.htm

¹⁷ Harold Schindler: 'The Case of the Repentant Writer: Sherlock Holmes' Creator Raises the Wrath of Mormons,' at www.historytogo.utah.gov/case.html

¹⁸ Dr Erik Routley, author of *The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story*, quoted in H R F Keating, *The Bedside Companion to Crime*, New York, 1989, 82.

wifeless state, and to insist that Lucy must accept a Mormon husband within the month. In Chapter 11 Ferrier sends a message to Jefferson Hope and sends away Elder Drebber and others (including Stangerson) who come to sue for Lucy's hand. Ferrier and Lucy are terrorized and Jefferson Hope attempts to reach them without being detected. In Chapter 12, called 'The Avenging Angels,' food begins to run out, and when Hope returns from the hunt one day he finds a fresh grave, marked with John Ferrier's name and that he died on 4 August 1860. Of Lucy there is no sign. After five days wandering, he meets a Mormon called Cowper who says that Stangerson killed John Ferrier and that Lucy Ferrier was married to Elder Drebber the previous day, and appears marked for death. She dies shortly after. Hope attempts to take revenge over the years, and his desire eventually culminates in the deaths that Holmes investigates in London in 1878.

The extent to which the Mormons are demonized becomes clear at the tale's conclusion. Jefferson Hope, it turns out, did not really murder the (depraved and worthy of death) Drebber and Stangerson. He is in the last stages of a fatal illness and offered the two men a wager: he has pills of South American arrow poison and harmless ones. He would give one to each victim and eat the other himself, and fate could decide. Drebber, when drunk, accepted the wager and was poisoned. Stangerson refused to take the pills and sprang at Hope, so Hope stabbed him. Hope is therefore a good man, who acted honourably, and he is spared the humiliation of a trial, as he dies shortly after being arrested. Critics of detective fiction have noted that authors are inclined to 'let off' murderers if their victims are in some sense deserving of their fate. Nancy Wingate remarks:

[i]n the 'detective's justice' books, the infallible detective-hero correctly solves the case, satisfying our requirement that the truth come to light, but ignore the requirement of justice for the guilty. Usually because he sympathizes with the murderer or shares a general hatred of the victim, he decides to suppress the truth.¹⁹

Holmes sympathizes with Jefferson Hope, as he wanted only to decently marry his fiancée in defiance of perverse and immoral plural Mormon arrangements. Stangerson was a murderer and Drebber,

¹⁹ Nancy Wingate: 'Getting Away With Murder: An Analysis,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, XII:4, 1979, 582.

through his forced marriage with Lucy and her subsequent death, was a rapist and effectively a murderer. They had escaped justice because they lived under Mormon law, which permitted such conduct; that it did was proof positive of the depraved nature of Mormonism, a false new religion. The authority of reason and traditional values, expressed in Sherlock Holmes, 'serves to preserve order' and 'offers a sense of continuity and wisdom in the midst of rapid change and unsteady beliefs.'²⁰

KATHY REICHS, NON-MAINSTREAM RELIGION, AND THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF NRMS

The twentieth century saw rapid change and unsteady beliefs become a hallmark of Western society. As traditional religion (Christianity) retreated, a plethora of new religions sprang up, attracting smaller, but still notable converts. Scholars of religion have been quick to point out that the existence of these new religious movements challenged the original formulation of the secularization thesis, which posited that religion would eventually die out in the West.²¹ Further, academics have argued that the existence of new religions has had a transformative effect on society and must be viewed as positive. In 1979 Roland Robertson claimed that:

[a] particularly evident feature... has been the greater empathy, indeed sympathy, exhibited on the part of the analyst, compared to previous attitudes towards religious movements. It is no accident that in the American context a 'pro-religious' orientation on the part of some prominent sociological practitioners developed generally in the same period as the 'new religious movements' motif crystallized. For some scholars, at least, some of the new religions have constituted welcome harbingers of new modes of individual existence. They were on occasion seen as the bearers of potentially effective critiques of the wider society.²²

This positive assessment of new (and thus non-mainstream) religions continues to be influential in academia. However, the popular hostility to new religion evidenced in *A Study in Scarlet* is still very much in evidence in non-intellectual circles. O'Donnell has noted the negative effect that Waco has

²⁰ Horace Newcomb: 'The Mystery: Order and Authority,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, VII:4, 1973, 980.

²¹ Yves Lambert: 'Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?' *Sociology of Religion*, 60:3, 1999, 303.

²² Roland Robertson: 'Religious Movements and Modern Society: Towards a Progressive Problem Shift,' *Sociological Analysis*, 40:3, 305.

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had in America, despite the fact that the violence was provoked by the military and the police, rather than the Branch Davidians themselves:

[i]n addition to the greater suspicion with which new religious movements are viewed generally in the wake of the Koresh controversy, charges of 'brainwashing', corruption, and intimidation of critics against specific new religious movements further alienate these groups from the large segment of the American populace who would blanch at the thought of any circumspection of the First Amendment rights of adherents of major religions.²³

The detective novels of Kathy Reichs, to which we now turn, are fascinating in that the author so often uses a deviant religious movement as the context for detective. Her second novel, *Death du Jour* (1999), and the fourth, *Fatal Voyage* (2001), explicitly locate criminal activity in the context of non-mainstream religion.²⁴ Following earlier analysis which indicated that the detective fiction genre reacted to social trends, Reichs' heroine Dr Temperance ('Tempe') Brennan is a successful professional woman in her forties, divorced with one daughter, with a joint career in academia in Charlotte, North Carolina and with the Laboratoire des Sciences Judiciaires et de Medecine Legale in Montreal, Quebec. Incidentally, these are the positions held by Reichs herself, and suggest that there is considerable kinship between the author and her character. The forensic science setting offers the possibility of grisly detail, making these novels more 'hard-boiled' than earlier (pre-1980s, generally) detective fiction.²⁵

Death du Jour opens dramatically, with Tempe disinterring the remains of Sister Elisabeth Nicolet, a nun who died aged forty-two in 1888 at the Convent of Notre-Dame de l'Immaculee-Conception in Montreal. Sister Elisabeth may soon be canonized, hence Tempe's expertise being required. This plotline is interwoven with the investigation of a fire in St-Jovite in which several people (including twin infants) have died. In her quest to understand Sister Elisabeth, Tempe meets Dr Daisy Jeannotte, in Religious Studies at McGill University. Jeannotte has occult interests, is pallid and creepy, and is the teacher of Anna Goyette, niece of Sister Julienne at the Convent. Anna goes missing and is said to have joined a 'Satanic cult'. Dr Jeannotte is dismissive, asserting that such labels are merely terms 'folklorists use to describe how people integrate their fears with popular legends. It's a way to explain bewildering experiences.'²⁶

²³ John P O'Donnell: 'Predicting Tolerance of New Religious Movements: A Multivariate Analysis,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 32:4, 1993, 356.

²⁴ It could be argued that *Deadly Decisions* (2000) also fits this model, in that the initiatory biker gang fulfills the role of the deviant religious group in the plot.

²⁵ Carl D Malmgren: 'Anatomy of a Murder: Mystery, Detection, and Crime Fiction,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30:4, 1997, 127.

²⁶ Kathy Reichs: *Death du Jour*, London, 1999, 102.

The novel's plot is very convoluted. Tempe's younger sister Harry is dabbling with a group called Inner Life Empowerment, and in North Carolina a 'cult' group is detected with connections to the Montreal victims. It is a community of twenty-six living on the island of Saint Helena under the apparent leadership of Dom Owens. Three dead girls are found, and Kathryn, a young mother and a member of the group, reveals she knew Brian and Heidi, the St Jovite victims, and their twins. Tempe seeks further information from another academic, Red Skylar, at Charlotte. He is explicitly contrasted with Daisy Jeannotte, and proceeds to lecture Tempe on 'cult' formation:

A cult forms around a charismatic individual who promises something. This individual possesses some special knowledge. Sometimes the claim is access to ancient secrets, sometimes it's an entirely new discovery to which he or she alone is privy...The leader offers to share the information with those who follow. Some leaders offer utopia...In a cult it's this charismatic leader who eventually becomes the object of devotion; in some cases he's actually deified. And as that happens, the leader comes to hold extraordinary control over the lives of his followers.... Then there are the cults that recruit followers for life. These groups use organized psychological and social persuasion to produce extreme attitudinal changes. As a result they come to exert enormous control over the lives of their members. They are manipulative, deceptive, and highly exploitative.²⁷

It is clear that Tempe Brennan (and by implication Kathy Reichs) is more comfortable with Red Skylar's characterization of malign, mind-controlling cults than with Daisy Jeannotte's tolerant acceptance.²⁸ It is also interesting, in view of the genre's conservatism, that Skylar is a large, authoritative man and Daisy Jeannotte a small, neurotic woman. In Chapter 24 the Order of the Solar Temple is first mentioned, and a link is found between the St-Jovite killings in Montreal and the Murtry Island deaths in North Carolina. Kathryn confides in Tempe that the sex lives of the group are carefully controlled, and that Brian and Heidi had fallen in love in defiance of this. By this time Tempe and the police have identified ten victims.

²⁷ Ibid, 253-255.

²⁸ It is also clear that Kathy Reichs has read, or consulted scholars who have read, basic material on new religious movements, such as W S Bainbridge and R Stark: 'Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models,' *Sociological Analysis*, 40:4, 1979, 283-295. This seminal paper proposes that 'cults' begin through entrepreneurship, psychopathology, subcultural evolution, or a combination of any of these factors.

A number of revelations are made, including the fact that Sister Elisabeth could not have been the child of her mother's husband, and had in fact been more or less immured in the convent because her father was a black anti-slavery activist, Abo Gabassa, and the Nicolets could not pass off the child as their own. Also, Daniel Jeannotte, Daisy's brother, is found to be a member of the group. The showdown builds, with the information that once the 'guardian angel' has located the right number, all will die. Tempe and the police race to another cult house at Ange Gardien, where Tempe's sister Harry is found being held against her will. Several, including Daisy Jeannotte, die. The final revelation analysis of the group indicates that a woman known as Elle, real name Sylvie Boudrais, is the actual leader: 'Boudrais read extensively, especially philosophy and ecology. She was convinced the earth would be destroyed, and before that happened she would take her followers away.'²⁹ Tempe Brennan's conclusion is that the madness, death and violence found in the group are inexplicable.³⁰ This is contrasted with her acceptance of the value and solidity of the Catholic Church.

The assessment of alternative religion in *Death du Jour* is wholly negative; the secretive initiatory group is a front for a 'New Age' lifestyle movement, Inner Life Empowerment, which is a recruiting ground for victims ultimately to be immolated prior to the end of the world. The leaders are never presented as charismatic, though Elle apparently must be, but as banal and dull, foot soldiers of evil rather than evil geniuses. The sexual control aspects of the group are intended particularly to shock, as they flout the contemporary Western belief that choice in love and sex is paramount. The tragic love of Brian and Heidi provides a curious, but satisfying, link with Lucy Ferrier and Jefferson Hope in *A Study in Scarlet*, with the Mormons and the Solar Temple-like movement representing perverse sexuality.

Fatal Voyage, the second Reichs novel considered here, continues the themes established in *Death du Jour*. The novel opens with Tempe arriving in North Carolina at a Fokker 100 crash site, where

²⁹ Reichs, op cit, 372.

³⁰ Thomas Robbins and Roland Robertson: 'Studying Religion Today: Controversiality and 'Objectivity' in the Sociology of Religion,' *Religion*, 21, 1991, note that some scholars of religion have been 'questioning as to whether scholars have been too uncritical in their approach to religion and too easy on 'sinister' groups', 325.

the bodies of eighty-two passengers and six crew members were scattered. Andrew Ryan, Tempe's sometime romantic interest and a policeman, is there as the plane was carrying his work-partner, who was escorting a prisoner. Tempe finds a foot, Specimen 387, which is too decomposed to have come from the crash. She also locates a mysterious lodge in the woods (owned by the H & F Investment Group, specifically one Prentice Dashwood). By Chapter 8 it is clear that Tempe has offended someone, and the chief medical examiner Larke Tyrell sacks her. She remains at High Ridge House, run by Ruby McCready. Ryan and Sheriff Lucy Crowe assist her in identifying suitable missing persons for the stray foot, which turns out to belong to Jeremiah Mitchell, who was half black and half Cherokee.³¹

Another corpse is discovered, Tempe's middle-aged black laboratory assistant Primrose Hobbs is murdered, and she is warned off by a local notable, Parker Davenport. Tempe is assisted by the snake-handling Reverend Luke Bowman of the Eternal Light Holiness-Pentecostal House of God, who tells her that some gravestones do not have corpses buried underneath them, and by her ex-husband Pete, who offers to be her attorney. Usually a cat person, she also acquires a dog, Boyd, rather unexpectedly. Lucy Crowe and she investigate the lodge, where they find two corpses (the rest of Jeremiah Mitchell, and George Adair, a missing fisherman). Other finds suggest there are eight corpses in all. The lodge is decorated with reproductions of paintings, including 'The Raft of the Medusa' by Gericault and 'Saturn Devouring his Children' by Goya.

The element of perverse religious ritual enters the novel after three hundred pages, when Tempe is examining the remains. She and Crowe have already worked out that when a member of H & F Investment Group dies, another person goes missing a few days later. There are deliberate knife cuts in the femurs of the corpses:

'Are you talking cult?'

'No. Yes. I don't know. I don't think so. But I do think the victims were used in some sort of ritual.'...

'Cannibalism?'³²

³¹ Kathy Reichs: *Fatal Voyage*, London, William Heinemann, 2001. This is a summary of the first 228 pages of the novel.

³² Ibid, 308 and 313.

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At this point, Tempe and the investigative team realize that all the paintings at the lodge referred to cannibalism. Tempe's friend Anne provides further information, indicating that when on holiday in England she had learned of one Sir Francis Dashwood, a member of the Hellfire Club (hence H & F) and that Prentice Dashwood, who has died, was a descendant of his. In Chapter 31 Tempe's room at High Ridge house is wrecked, Boyd is possibly killed, and she is taken prisoner by Ralph Stover, an initiate of the cannibal cult. Before being rescued by Andrew Ryan and Lucy Crowe, Tempe engages Stover in an extended discussion about the beliefs of the group:

'It's over for your Hellfire Club.'
'It will never be over. Since the dawn of time the mediocre masses have tried to suppress the intellectually superior. It never works. Conditions can make us dormant but we re-emerge when the climate changes'....
'Kulkulcan is a creator god. You destroy life.'
'Mortals are transient. Wisdom endures.'
'Whose?'
'The wisdom of the ages, shown to those worthy to receive it.'
'And you ensured its survival through ritual slaughter?'
'The body is a material envelope, of no lasting value. We discard it in the end. But wisdom, strength, the essence of the soul, these are the forces that prevail.'
I let him rant on.
'The brightest of the species must be nurtured. Those passing from this earth must yield their mana to those who remain, add to the strength and wisdom of the chosen.'
'How?'
'Through blood, heart, muscle, and bone.'
Dear God, it was true.³³

The doctrine that emerges from this sensationalized dialogue appears to place this initiatory group in the Western esoteric tradition. Antoine Faivre has argued that the core characteristics of the Western esoteric tradition are the existence of symbolic and real correspondences, the idea of living nature, the use of imagination and mediation, the process of transmutation, the practice of concordance, and the emphasis on the means of transmission of an

³³ Ibid, 342.

esoteric teaching from master to disciple.³⁴ Reichs makes use of five of the six, excluding living nature. However, Western esotericism does not generally lead to murder and cannibalism, but rather manifests in movements such Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, and in sundry New Age teachings. Again, Reichs has gravitated to the shocking and unusual possibilities in exotic ritual, rather than the documented examples of harmless and even respectable groups.

After Tempe is rescued she learns that Boyd, the dog, did not die but led Ryan and Crowe to her by tearing Stover's hospital bracelet from his wrist. Simon Midkiff, the creepy anthropologist, has been granted immunity from prosecution in return for his testimony against H & F, of which he was a seemingly reluctant member. Tempe goes to see Midkiff, driven by her desire to understand what she calls 'this insanity'. Midkiff offers her a more sinister possibility than faith in the powers of cannibalism. He suggests that perhaps Prentice Dashwood developed the ritual because of the power it gave him:

'Perhaps he simply used the idea, and for the inner circle the actual act, as a way to keep the club intact. Collective indulgence in the forbidden. The in-group, out-group mindset. Prentice understood that cultural rituals exist to reinforce the unity of those performing them.'³⁵

The crude desire for power might be more frightening to the ordinary citizen, the reader of detective novels, than believing the teachings of a charismatic madman. Tempe's encounter with the cannibal cult and her narrow escape from death lead her to look ahead to life with Andrew Ryan, and to keep Boyd, transforming her into a dog owner.

³⁴ Antoine Faivre: *Access to Western Esotericism*, State University of New York Press, 1994, p 10-15. See also Wouter J Hanegraaff: *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Albany, 1998.

³⁵ Reichs, op cit., 355.

CONCLUSION

It could be argued that the consistently negative portrayal of non-mainstream religion in Kathy Reichs' detective fiction resulted from both a personal orientation and the conservative tendencies evident throughout the genre. Were this the case, although these books are popular and disseminate these views dramatized in the stories, no intent to blacken the reputation of new religious movements could be attributed to Reichs. It could also be argued that the formal qualities of the detective genre are not as innocent as might appear and that the 'illusion the reader obtains of being released from guilt and dissociated from the murderer'³⁶ segues into the pleasure s/he derives from the reinforcement of prejudices. If non-mainstream religion or ritual associations are presented as bad, readers may well believe it, especially, as Porter notes, because 'in a post-religious society...[detective fiction] is frequently the only kind of widely read material that attempts to distinguish between right and wrong or set up models to be imitated.'³⁷ Moreover, the comparison with Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* indicates that detective fiction has a long history of calumniating non-mainstream religions; a contention supported by the recent novels of Australian Carmel Bird.³⁸

Negative portrayals of new and non-mainstream religions are not limited works of fiction. Considerable scholarship indicates that hostility to new religious movements is habitually encountered in the print media and in broadcast media. Wright claims that this is predictable, because few journalists are specialist religion reporters and even among those that are, there is considerable ignorance about the field of religion in general, and an abyss of ignorance about new religious movements in particular.³⁹ Dart supports this view,

³⁶ William O Aydelotte: 'The Detective Story as a Historical Source,' *The Yale Review*, XXXIX:1, 1949, 83.

³⁷ Dennis Porter: 'Detection and Ethics: The Case of P D James,' in Barbara A Rader and Howard G Zettler, editors, *The Sleuth and the Scholar: Origins, Evolution, and Current Trends in Detective Fiction*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1988, 12.

³⁸ Carmel Bird: *The White Garden*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1995 (which uses features of the Chelmsford Hospital 'deep sleep' therapy scandal); Carmel Bird, *Red Shoes*, Vintage, 1998 (which features Petra, a cult leader who requires her devotees to wear red shoes); and Carmel Bird, *Cape Grimm*, Flamingo, 2004 (in which Caleb Mean, the Chosen One, incinerates his isolated religious community on his thirty-third birthday).

³⁹ Stuart A Wright 'Media Coverage of Unconventional Religion: Any 'Good News' for Minority Faiths?' *Review of Religious Research*, 39:2, 1997, 104-105.

adding that reporters are more attracted to negative than positive stories and suggests that:

Combating ignorance about religions small and large, conventional and unconventional, must be a high priority in the newsroom. The facile use of the term 'cult' in the headlines and stories about little-known religious groups continue unabated. Words like 'mind control' and 'brainwashing'... appear without attribution or disputation.⁴⁰

Reinforcing the negative attitudes of journalists (which are directly communicated to their audience) are anti-new religious movement groups like the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) which notoriously campaigns for the banning of non-mainstream religions, participates in the forced de-programming of members of these groups, usually because family members request it, and promote notions such as 'brainwashing' and 'mind control', despite the fact that these are highly problematic psychologically.⁴¹

In conclusion, it is undeniable that while scholars in the academy seek to understand and document the beliefs and practices of non-mainstream religious groups, the attitude of the general public, evidenced by the popularity of detective and detective fiction (which often demonizes such groups) and the print and broadcast media (which features sensationalist stories that are almost always negative, a 'stream of controversies',⁴² about non-mainstream faiths), remains hostile. The easily-digested nature of the print media and of detective fiction makes this hostility a matter for concern; it is easy to 'spice up' a plot by inserting a non-mainstream religion and connect it to the detective. Hilfer stresses that 'the function of the detective hero is to guarantee the reader's absolution from guilt. This is basic to the genre's form of wish-fulfillment.'⁴³ It might be added that for the reader this absolution extends beyond the detectives portrayed in the novel; it is absolution from critical thought, from testing the limits of prejudice and bias, from having to meet the 'Other' as just like 'us.'

⁴⁰ John Dart: 'Covering Conventional and Unconventional Religion: A Reporter's View,' *Review of Religion Research*, 39:2, 1997, 150.

⁴¹ James T Richardson and Barend van Driel, 'Journalists' Attitudes Towards New Religious Movements,' *Review of Religion Research*, 39:2, 1997, 125-126. See also Murray L Steinman, 'In the Belly of the Beast,' *Paranoia*, Winter 1995/6, 24-31.

⁴² Barend van Driel and James T Richardson: 'Print Media Coverage of New Religious Movements: A Longitudinal Study,' *Journal of Communication*, Summer 1988, 127.

⁴³ Tony Hilfer: *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre*, Austin, 1990, 2.