THE LONE WOLF OR THE WHOLE PACK: ACHIEVING JUSTICE IN THE EARLY REBUS NOVELS

Roxana Elena Doncu
Lecturer, PhD., University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Carol Davila" of Bucharest

Abstract: Ian Rankin's Rebus novels have been classified either as "tartan noir" (the Scottish hard-boiled) or as police procedurals. Both classifications make sense, the first from the point of view of the character type, the second from the way the investigation of murder and the apprehension of the murderer are staged in the novels. My paper will analyze the early Rebus novels both as instances of the "tartan noir" and as police procedurals, dwelling on the Gothic elements as the heritage of Robert Louis Stevenson and on the staging of justice as a collective enterprise.

Keywords: crime fiction, tartan noir, police procedural, justice.

One of the most successful crime writers today, Ian Rankin, "the king of tartan noir", as James Ellroy dubbed him, is the author of one of the most famous detective characters in contemporary detective fiction: John Rebus. The Rebus novels have been classified either as "tartan noir" (the Scottish hard-boiled) or as police procedurals. Both classifications make sense, the first from the point of view of the character type, the second from the way the investigation of murder and the apprehension of the murderer are staged in the novels. Since the social-realist slant of Rankin's crime fiction and the long series of novels featuring Rebus (which have been also serialized for TV) tend to obscure the momentous 'birth' of Rebus, my intention is to focus on Rankin's first three novels, where the character of Rebus was first outlined and then gradually developed, and on how they interpret the rules of the genre, taking into account the author's own pronouncement that he was astonished at everybody's classification of the first Rebus novel as a whodunit.

In the foreword to *Rebus: The Early Years*, Rankin confesses that he took to writing novels under the spell of McIlvaney, and that both the first (*Knots and Crosses*) and the second Rebus novel (*Hide and Seek*) were written with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde[1] in mind. The theme of duplication inherent in Jekyll and Hyde will not only turn into a recognizable feature of Rankin's titles (*Knots and Crosses, Hide and Seek, Tooth and Nail, Black and Blue*), but it will also influence the creation of John Rebus, who, like Jekyll, is never too far from the opposite side of his (usually good and moral) personality. In *Knots and Crosses*, while passing by a small grocery shop "outside of which were stacked crates of milk and morning rolls" and whose owner, Rebus remembered, "had complained in private to [him] about petty and occasional thefts", he pinches some of the rolls. In a kind of reverse *Crime and Punishment* psychology (later the reader finds out that this was one of his favourite novels), Rebus "walked on tiptoe back to the shop, the criminal returning to the scene of the crime" (35) and lifted an additional pint of milk from its crate – to go with the rolls. His name, Rebus, as either the plural of the Latin *res* (thing, things), or the English word that designates a picture puzzle, where images stand for words, points to his practical side as well as to the puzzle of his personality, a puzzle that will become the focus of the first Rebus novel, *Knots and Crosses*.

[1] "I wanted to update Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde to 1980s Edinburgh. My idea was: cop as good guy (Jekyll), villain as bad guy (Hyde). So I wrote Knots and Crosses. […] And then I decided to have another bash at Jekyll and Hyde, only this time I'd pun Hyde with 'hide'. This became *Hide and Seek*." (vii)

BDD-A27937 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:11:08 UTC)

The novel opens with Rebus visiting the grave of his father, who had been a stage hypnotist, and the house of his brother Michael, who followed in their father's footsteps. The esotericism of his family's occupation may at first sight clash with the supposed rationality of police work, but this is just an old trick that Rankin employs to draw the reader's attention. What is more important is Rebus' past, which is only sketched, with a lot of information gaps: having run away from home at fifteen, Rebus joined the army, and then the Special Air Service[2], whose motto "Who dares wins" is not just indicative of his being one of the "tough guys" (in the tradition of the hard-boiled), but it is also one of Rebus's recurring strategies: faced with dangerous criminals, he never hesitates to take risks, even when important information is missing and he could be jeopardizing the investigation, himself or other people. A Detective Sergeant at this stage, he is not well liked by his colleagues, and is in a more or less open conflict with Chief Inspector Anderson. A loner by nature, he does not respond well to authority, yet at the same time he sticks to the rules of hierarchy and order, and is not very good at forging personal relationships.

The first Rebus novel is concerned with deciphering part of the enigma that is Rebus himself: his past until he became Detective Sergeant in the Lothian and Borders police. Being assigned an abduction and murder case, and having to face a serial killer who kidnaps young girl and murders them apparently for no reason, Rebus will concomitantly have to recover part of his memory which had been shut down as a result of an unspecified trauma he had suffered while undergoing training for a secret unit of the SAS. The discovery of the murderer and the recovery of his memory are dependent on each other, as the abductor/serial killer is none other than his former friend and cellmate Gordon Reeve, together with whom he had been on a survival course and shared a traumatic experience in an experiment of the SAS.

Bringing to light the traumatic memories from the darkest recesses of his consciousness is no easy task for Rebus, who is assisted in this job by his brother Michael, the hypnotist. John and Michael is another Jekyll and Hyde pair, with one standing for rationalism and enlightenment and the other for mysticism and dark (hidden) knowledge. The Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde theme is however best employed by Rankin in the construction of his murderers: all three murderers from the first Rebus novels show a remarkable gift for passing for either nice, trustworthy, respectable or successful and well-reputed characters: Gordon Reeve alias Ian Knott works as a librarian in the children's section of the Main Public Lending Library, Malcolm Lanyon is the most successful lawyer in town, while the Wolfman, the serial killer in *Tooth and Nail*, turns out to be none other than the best criminal prosecutor in London, Malcolm Chambers.

The second Rebus novel, *Hide and Seek*, plays with the motifs of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde at every level: the name of Hyde is echoed in the title, in the initial screams of the future victim, and in the name of another character, a bizarre aristocrat called Vanderhyde; quotations from the novel are reproduced at the beginning of every chapter; the mysticism/rationality binary is carried over from the first novel, with the interplay of esoteric elements (one of the possible explanations for the murder is connected with an esoteric ritual) and cold rationalism (in the end the motive proves to be money and power); and last but not least in the name of the main culprit Malcolm Lanyon, which echoes that of Dr. Lanyon, the representative of scientific rationality who is Jekyll's foil in Stevenson's novel. One could almost guess the murderer by playing an intelligent literary game with the clues that Rankin proffers. A literary competence is also what is needed for the expert reader to guess what game the murderer in *Knots and Crosses* is playing: whenever he kidnaps and kills a girl he sends Rebus a note. The first note reads: "There are clues everywhere." And yet Inspector

[2] The Special Air Service (SAS) is a Special Forces unit of the British Army, which is involved in covert reconnaissance, counter-terrorism and hostage rescue.

BDD-A27937 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:11:08 UTC)

Rebus is wonderfully blind to all the murderer's insinuations. One explanation may be of course that as long as his memory is incapacitated by trauma, his investigative skills are affected. The other explanation has to do with the construction of the character: as Todorov explained in "The Typology of Detective Fiction", the age of the whodunit was over when the thriller appeared in the United States, replacing mystery with suspense (52). The detective hero of a whodunit is altogether a different character from the hard-boiled or the thriller detective. Active suspense means that the detective comes down from the heaven of pure rationalism into the dark world of the flesh. Or, as Todorov remarked, "These characters enjoyed an immunity […] in the whodunit; here they constantly risk their lives." (51). A superhuman intelligence ("the grey cells") made Hercule Poirot invulnerable and kept him one step ahead of the reader – in contrast, the detectives of later crime novels give up their superhuman status in favour of a frail and sometimes faulty humanity. Thus, it may become easier for the expert reader to guess the identity of the murderer before the detective himself does, especially if the author leaves clues "everywhere". A literary-minded reader will notice, for example, that the names of the killed girls in *Knots and Crosses* make up an acrostic, revealing the hidden intention of the murderer: to kidnap and strangle Rebus' daughter, Samantha, and thus take revenge on the father. As a kind of authorial irony, it is Michael Eiser, Professor of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, and not John Rebus, who solves the murder by detecting a pattern in the girls' names. Though he is by no means quick in solving conundrums and enigmas, Rebus is quick in taking action, and from a pragmatic and realist point of view, this is what makes all the difference between discovering and catching a murderer. In the whodunit, the focus was on the discovery of the murderer, and it went without saying that discovery was to be followed by arrest and punishment. Not so in the thriller, a more realistic genre than the whodunit. There are no guarantees that the criminal will be apprehended and punished, and therefore a good detective is he who manages to catch or kill the criminal. Rebus is stubborn, his stubbornness at the same time the sign of a true Scotsman and of a good policeman. He manages to solve his cases by sheer perseverance and a stroke (or two) of luck, driven as he is by his innate sense of justice.

While literary devices and literary games play a huge part in the discovery of the murderer in the first two novels, in *Tooth and Nail* what gives the murderer away are the linguistic marks of his personal style. The novel, which sets Rebus against the complicated background of a London murder, is built around linguistic competence (or incompetence). The main reason for Rebus' initial rejection by his London colleagues is his "thick" Scottish accent, which causes a lot of misunderstandings. The difficulty with catching the Wolfman is that he never leaves any clues behind, and so the police cannot pin him down. In an effort to make the murderer react and thus betray himself, Rebus resorts to persuading the press to publish an article in which the theory that the murderer is homosexual is advanced by a psychologist. In a threat letter addressed to the psychologist, in spite of the extra-care that Chambers takes to produce a seemingly illiterate style, he gives himself away by first two words: "Get this", an American phrase he uses unconsciously. Rebus remembers having heard Chambers utter these words in a private conversation, and knowing that he had studied in the States, he puts two and two together.

If a literary and linguistic competence becomes necessary in order to solve the enigma of the murderer, what kind of competence is necessary for the apprehension/arrest of the murderer – in other words, once the identity of the murderer is revealed, how does one see that justice is done? The answer to this question is seminal to a discussion of the Rebus novels, which can be classified as hard-boiled, yet seem to be more (or less) than that. Though having a lot in common with the detectives of the hard-boiled fiction, Rebus is only partially involved in life-threatening situations, which leads to a minimizing of suspense. Stubbornness and a sense of justice are the dominant features of Rebus, who sees things in black and white

BDD-A27937 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:11:08 UTC)

and believes in the old fashioned concept of an eye for an eye. As a policeman, it is no wonder that he thinks in this way. What else can anyone expect from the institution responsible for the upholding of law and order? Rebus' work as a policeman, with its focus on the detailed police procedures that lead to the capture of a criminal becomes thus one of the key defining characteristics of the novels, which function at the intersection between the Gothic of the noir and the police procedural. Indeed, as the series advances, the focus shifts from the "tartan noir" to the police procedural, and the reader becomes more and more immersed in the complicated universe of police investigations. However, although often police procedurals concentrate solely on the story of how the murderer (who is known from the beginning) is caught, this is not the case of the Rebus novels, who still keep the mystery of the whodunit, so it would be improper to see them as inverted detective or reverse whodunits. What the Rebus novels share with the police procedural is the attention they pay to the truthful depiction of police procedures, investigations, the gathering of evidence, autopsies and forensics, and interrogations. The reader becomes familiar not only with police routine, but also with its hierarchy (DS, DI, DCI), modes of sociality, and the institutional relationships the various departments establish with one another or with the media. In *Knots and Crosses*, Rebus has an affair with the Press Liaison Officer, Gill Templer, who proves an invaluable help in discovering the identity of the murderer. In contrast, in *Tooth and Nail*, the London counterpart of Gil Templer, Cath Farraday, is much too interested in herself and her own career to dare run any risks, and her attitude proves to be one of the major impediments in catching the Wolfman. The police and media constantly interact with each other, as the representation of case in the media can influence the course of an investigation. This relationship works both ways, with policemen being influenced, in their turn, by their representation in the media. Witnessing the activity of the London police at the scene of a crime, Rebus takes a critical stance towards these representations, which he considers inaccurate and silly:

> Rebus felt like an onlooker himself and thought of all the TV dramas and films he'd seen, with detectives swarming over the murder site in minute one (destroying any forensic evidence in the process) and solving the murder by minute fifty nine or eighty nine. Laughable, really. Police work was just that: work. Relentless, routine, dull, frustrating, and above all, time-consuming. (409)

Starting as a DS (Detective Sergeant) in the lower ranks, Rebus knows all about routine work, spending days and nights over files, reading through "the case histories of all the bloody perverts and sex-offenders" (26). In fact, at the beginning of *Knots and Crosses*, he is dividing his time between reading paperwork and going to his favourite watering-holes. His two addictions, alcohol and smoking, are the result of his having to deal with the bulk of bureaucracy, in the sense of its being too much: too many files[3] (collecting and storing past information is an important police procedure) that require a lot of stamina, and too much negative information[4], requiring some kind of resilience.

If, according to Todorov, mystery is what defines the whodunit and suspense the thriller, what could count as the salient feature of the police procedural? Even if most police

[3] In *Knots and Crosses*, Rebus compares police paperwork to the mythological Hydra: "The paperwork was still there, large as life. Useless.Always incomplete. No sooner had he finished with a case than another two or three appeared in its place. What was the name of that creature? The Hydra, was it? That was what he was fighting. Every time he cut off a head, more popped into his in-tray." (19)

[4] The perusal of police files gives Rebus the same feeling as reading the Gothic horror stories of R.L. Stevenson: "The two men sat in silence for twenty minutes, flicking through the facts and fantasies of rapists, exhibitionists, pederasts, paedophiles, and procurers. Rebus felt his mouth filling with silt. It was as if he saw himself there, time after time after time, the self that lurked behind his everyday consciousness. His Mister Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson, Edinburgh-born." (28)

BDD-A27937 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:11:08 UTC)

procedurals (at least the early ones) do away with the mystery, some preserve it. It is not just the case of the Rebus novels, but also that of the Inspector Morse series (written by Colin Dexter) and of Midsommer Murders, one of the most famous crime TV series. In a police procedural the emphasis is on justice and they way it is achieved – in other words, its institutionalization. For the detective (and the reader) of the whodunit, the climax is the revelation of the identity of the murderer – this is why we have those formal gatherings at the end of every Agatha Christie book, where the court is assembled for the final verdict. Justice may or may not come afterwards; what is important is that poetic justice, *the knowledge of who the murderer is*, is arrived at. In the thriller, justice becomes secondary to the confrontation between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and the anticipation of the outcome of this battle creates the effect of suspense. In a police procedural, the enactment of justice becomes the sole objective of the narrative, and of the crime team. Justice is not just an abstract concept, a type of knowledge, but a matter of social definition and social negotiation. Justice can never be the work of only one man, but the result of co-operation – and this is why police procedurals, staging the activities of the police, concentrate on protocols and procedures: how to find and gather information, how to talk to a (prospective) criminal, how to make them confess. The police procedurals are perhaps the best media for showing how justice is socially negotiated and achieved. With the police procedural we return to the ethos of the Greek tragedies, albeit in a modern form: crime is seen as hubris, a temporary disturbing of social balance, which has to be set right again. This matter becomes the center of activity of several departments: SOCOs (scene of crime officers), forensic specialists, detectives, media officers, and, last, but not least – of the criminal world itself. Or, as Rebus puts it in *The Naming of the Dead*, "The world and the underworld, coexisting down the generations." (152) The best detectives are those that have a huge network, both of colleagues willing to do them a favour, or of petty criminals who can be persuaded to offer or to trade information. By helping Tracy, a junkie, Rebus is able to find out more about the victim in *Hide and Seek*, and when Callum McCallum, his ex-wife's lover, is caught taking part in some illegal animal fights, he offers Rebus just the information he needed in order to solve the case. The policemen are never too far away from the criminals[5], and if there are criminals ready to help the police in their investigation, there are also cops that act like criminals: Tony McCall, in *Hide and Seek*, conceals the same information that McCallum offers, in order to protect both his brother and himself, while Lamb, the London policeman that calls Rebus a 'Jock' in *Tooth and Nail* turns out to be "on the payroll" of a known law-offender. Neither the police, not the criminal world are closed systems: there is constant trade and negotiation between them, and solving a 'big' murder case is just a matter of successful negotiation between opposite sides.

In *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World*, Mary Evans offers as an argument in favour of crime/detective fiction being considered more than a subgenre of literature the fact that "Writers of detective and crime fiction inform their novels with debates about the collective world: about those subjects of social order, social morality and the various tensions between rich and poor that may form the context rather than the foreground of more conventional fiction." (2) The great merit of detective/crime fiction is that it stages, in a simpler form, the debates around the meanings of good and evil which, with the advent of science and the retreat of religion into the private sphere, have tended to disappear. If the whodunit stages these debates from a more philosophical standpoint (the best example in this respect are G.K. Chesterton's *Father Brown* stories), the police procedural is

[5] Mary Evans argues that the lack of "boundaries between the criminal and the non-criminal worlds" reflects "an ambiguity about our moral codes, which is not found in normative public discourses" and that this ambiguity can provide "something of an imaginative bulwark about facile judgments about guilt and innocence familiar to many discussions of crime in the real world." (12)

BDD-A27937 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:11:08 UTC)

concerned with the social definition of good and evil - which is, of course, relative. This is why there is a blurred line between the policeman and the criminal. The police procedural also shows how the line between good and evil has to be constantly drawn and constantly defended, and what is the right (that is the correct) approach to punishment. Justice has to be achieved collectively, and this is the business of the police. It is as wrong to commit murder, as it is to take justice into your own hands. And what is so reassuring about the Rebus novels is that at the end of the day, in spite of the detective's frailty and faults, in spite of the imperfection of the system, justice can be and is achieved – as a collective striving.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Evans, Mary. *The Imagination of Evil. Detective Fiction and the Modern World.* London: Continuum, 2009.
Rankin, Ian. *Rebus: The Early Years*. *Knots and Crosses. Hide and Seek. Tooth and Nail.* London: Orion, 2000.
---. *The Naming of the Dead*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006.
Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Typology of Detective Fiction". *The Poetics of Prose*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977. 42-52.

BDD-A27937 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:11:08 UTC)