

The Literary London Journal



Review

**Cathi Unsworth, *Bad Penny Blues*, Serpent's Tail, 2009, 433 pages.
ISBN 978 1 846686788. £7.99**

Reviewed by

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***The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 2 (Autumn 2013)**

<1>Cathi Unsworth, hailed as the first lady of noir fiction by David Peace, is among the vanguard of women crime writers redefining noir through the female gaze. Women have always been at the heart of noir, as victims, femmes fatales and neglected partners of hard-living detectives. But Unsworth gives them a voice and creates three-dimensional characters, locating them at the centre of the narrative drive, rather than relegating them to tick boxes for the genre. *Bad Penny Blues* is focused on two main characters – Pete Bradley, a young police officer from Yorkshire building a family and a career in London, and Stella, a talented young woman clothes designer. The book centres on a series of murders of prostitutes and the police corruption that allows it to happen, drawing in all the social strata of London society. Unsworth has said that she sees her books as an exploration of the fates of women trying to get by in a man's world and it's the female characters that hold the centre in this book.

<2>Set in London in the late fifties and early sixties and pulsing with all the real-life characters of the era, either as themselves or thinly disguised, *Bad Penny Blues* resurrects the same era covered by Jake Arnott in his debut novel, *The Long Firm* (1999). While Arnott uses the gangster hinterland of the sixties to explore masculinity and the grey line between machismo and homoeroticism, Unsworth's female characters share a sense of vulnerability and defiance, as they collaborate to survive. With the exception of Stella, they don't stray far from the role of noir victims, but as Unsworth points out in an article appearing in *The Guardian* in 2012, 'It is not the investigators, but the victims of crime to whom I want to give the main voices in my novels'. Unsworth tackles spiritualism, sexuality and paedophilia through her female characters with such a deftness of touch that you hardly notice being drawn deeper into a credible world of sisterly secrets that stands in stark contrast to the double-crossing, sickening misogyny of most of the male characters. But this is noir after all.

<3>The book is riven by division – black versus white in Notting Hill, suburban policing against West End CID and the aristocracy against everyone beneath them. The theme is literally cemented in the plot with the arrival of the Hammersmith Flyover carving up West London communities and pitting traditionalists against modernists. It forces its way through the novel in the by now familiar tale of the spirit of the sixties battering at the crumbling walls of the post-war social consensus. London's underworld has always provided a rich source of characters, and Unsworth brings Soho criminal heyday to life. In the sixties, the media documented their lives as the celebrities of the day mixed with gangland chiefs. Soho was being carved up by, among others, the Richardson Gang from South London and the Krays from the East End. Meanwhile, West End CID was a mixture of those in their pay and others eager to stamp out their ambitions, by any means necessary.

<4>What distinguishes Unsworth and Arnott from earlier London noirists is their location of the action within a broad socio-political landscape. Their predecessors documented the mundane everyday life of the pub, the broken men and lost women, and their tango into the darkness. Patrick Hamilton's portrait of Earl's Court and the politics of the saloon bar in *Hangover Square* (1941) created a claustrophobic world where escape seemed impossible. Equally, Derek Raymond, drawing on bitter experience, documented the rivalry within the police and their immersion in the criminal fraternity in his 'black' novels. (For those who don't know Raymond's work, start with *He Died with His Eyes Open* (1984).) While Hamilton and Raymond's books referenced their eras too, the devil was in the details that told of decay or degeneracy. Unsworth and Arnott paint with a broader brush, bringing the notables of the day into the plot, even if only tangentially, to create a sense of the sickness in society as a whole, and what bearing the social and political climate has on attitudes between the sexes. Arnott created Harry Starks out of a composite of Ronnie Kray and Charlie Richardson, while Unsworth sketches small parts for characters based on Screaming Lord Sutch and Joe Meek in *Bad Penny Blues*. Meek's music, particularly its haunting later incarnation, provides a disturbing backdrop to the murders in the book. It also neatly ties the spiritualist theme to the music that informs not only the novel's title but all of its 44 chapters. Each one is named after a popular tune of the day, and subtly linked to its content. In 'Women and Noir' Unsworth describes the role of music in her novels as 'the most evocative time tunnel to memory and place' and in combination with the role of Meek's music in the murders, it forms an accomplished rather than contrived backdrop to the novel.

<5>However, there is always a challenge in working with the established mythology surrounding historical figures. These larger-than-life characters risk becoming tired tropes trotted out in period fiction. To Unsworth's credit she avoids this by creating new characters with recognisable characteristics, carefully drawn. The exception is Harold Wesker, the corrupt police officer in charge of West End CID, whose amoral approach to law enforcement leads to his downfall. Wesker is based on Harold 'Tanky' Challenor, a founder member of the SAS and scourge of Soho gangland, who was disgraced after being convicted of planting evidence on an innocent protestor during a visit by the Queen of Greece. Challenor's literary career is long and distinguished, perhaps most famously as the model for Inspector Truscott in Joe Orton's *Loot*. His obituary reads like a 'Boy's Own' tale for the first part and like a Derek Raymond novel for the second ('Harold "Tanky" Challenor'). His moral compass was smashed beyond recognition by wartime experiences that left him with a severe case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and contributed to his later psychosis, which many considered (incorrectly) to be faked

to escape from justice. For Challenor, life was always a simple case of us against them. Unsworth's focus on the psychology of the victim might necessarily preclude exploring that of the perpetrator too closely, but Wesker's portrayal veers close to that of pantomime villain and seems a missed opportunity to explore his psychological complexity. She drew on strong source material for Challenor, not least his own account of events, which, while disarmingly frank in places, clearly holds a lot back and doesn't give a sense of his deeper motives (Draper). I knew Tanky well and the stories he could tell of his time at West End CID surpassed any of the fictional portrayals by quite some margin. But that's another story.

<6>*Bad Penny Blues* traces a journey through London in both time and place, mapping the psychogeography of its broad range of characters during a period of rapid social change. As the book opens in 1959, a fresh, young Police Constable Pete Bradley looks out at the river and 'it didn't feel like he was in London at all. The Thames Road between Hammersmith and Chiswick Bridges could almost remind him of home sometimes' (3), reflecting the optimism of the beginning of the sixties. But after the plot has taken him to the pubs of the Portobello Road and the clubs of Soho, he emerges five years later into the bleak suburban wastelands. The 'golden beams that glitter on the surface of the water' and 'long gardens full of honeysuckle and roses' (3) are long gone, to be replaced by 'a railway bridge in Acton ... a bleak, brown range of low brick and concrete buildings, cooling towers rising out of them, corrugated iron and barbed-wire fencing circling them, crouched and frowning under a grey sky' (409), and his moral journey is at an end.

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To Cite This Article:

Alex Clelland, 'Review of Cathi Unsworth, *Bad Penny Blues*.' *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 2 (Autumn 2013). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/autumn2013/clelland.pdf>.

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The journal is online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

The Literary London Journal is fully peer-reviewed. It is published twice a year, in spring and autumn, and is indexed by the MLA International Bibliography. For past issues and information about submissions, please visit the journal home page.

ISSN: 1744-0807 | <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>
