

In the Shadow of Inspector Morse

Writing new crime for the old city

By Cara Hunter

Mid-way through his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, set in Lyme Regis, John Fowles talks about how he 'came under the shadow of great novelist who towers over this part of England of which I write'. Thomas Hardy, of course.

And I know how he feels. Only in my case the shadow isn't so much a novelist as the character he created, one who by anyone's estimation does indeed 'tower over this city of which I write'.

As this weekend's conference programme proves, a whole shelf-load of writers had set their crime books in this city before Morse came along, but afterwards – what you might call 'AD – not anno domini but 'after Dexter' - well, trust me, that's a whole different matter

And let me say straightaway, I've always been the most massive Morse fan. The TV series was ground-breaking in its day, and the character of Morse blossomed in the capable hands of John Thaw (though perhaps 'darkened' is a better word, since he's a good deal grumpier on screen than he was on the page). And for anyone who lives or has studied in this town, there's the additional pleasure of location spotting (and opining to anyone who will listen that 'you can't get to Christ Church by walking up St Giles...')

If you watch re-runs now, the series still holds up remarkably well – forensics have moved on, of course (DNA would have killed a story like *Greeks Bearing Gifts* for a start) but the writing and the characterisation have definitely stood the test of time. As, of course, has the setting....

Indeed, even 30-plus years later, this city is defined by the Morse franchise, both topographically and in the popular consciousness: there are guidebooks, walking tours, location handbooks; and yes, the pubs *still* market themselves as 'Morse drank here...'

All of which beggars the question, is there any room – metaphorical or otherwise – for anyone else?

Is there some corner of this much-murdered city that another writer can hope to occupy?

Well, I confess, my instinctive first response was to try to swerve the issue altogether. I was convinced that after Morse, Lewis *and* Endeavour everyone would just be completely ‘Oxforded out’.

So the first version of *Close to Home* wasn’t set in ‘Oxford’ at all. I mean, of course, it was set here really, I just called it something else. I had quite a lot of fun thinking of names, actually, settling eventually on ‘Kingstead’. A reference to the fact that the city was Charles I’s HQ in the civil war. Hence ‘King’, and ‘stead’ from the Anglo-Saxon for ‘place’.

I had even more fun with Cowley, renaming it ‘Car-stow’: stow as a suffix means ‘place of assembly’. Though I’m pretty sure the Saxons didn’t have a BMW assembly line in mind...

But it was all to no avail. As it turned out, when I met my editor at Penguin, Katy Loftus, almost the *first* thing she said to me when we first met was ‘This is Oxford, isn’t it?’

So that was my career as a master of disguise crashing and burning before it even got off the ground....

So what was I going to do next? Beyond hitting the ‘find and replace’ key, of course

But I should say right now, that Katy was absolutely right – setting the books in Oxford has made them hugely more appealing – and intelligible - to readers around the world, and if Fawley’s been translated into 25 languages so far, the star quality of this city has definitely played its part.

But I was still left in a quandary: if you’re going to write new crime for this old city, how *do* you solve a problem like E. Morse?

Let’s start with the ‘Who’.

I think it helped that I didn’t start out with the aim of writing a police procedural centred on a single detective

The idea for *Close to Home* came to me first as the final twist (which I’m not going to give away!). But having got that idea, the challenge was – in effect - to ‘work backwards’: to develop a story – a family and a community – that would make that twist both a complete surprise, and at the same time, completely logical.

So it was in many ways more ‘psychological suspense’ or ‘domestic noir’ than it was police procedural.

But because it’s a story about a missing child, a criminal investigation was always going to be a central component of the plot.

And to start with, that’s all Adam Fawley was – a piece of plot machinery, albeit a pretty important one.

But crucially, the book was never ‘about’ him – I didn’t know it would even be published, never mind turn into a series, so I didn’t write it that way. I never thought about him as being a character who would have a life beyond one book

But once I did start to write Fawley, I admit that in the early versions he was shaped primarily by fear: I was so afraid he would be ‘too like Morse’ that he started to evolve ‘in opposition to’ Morse. He began as being what Morse isn’t – his ‘negative’, if you like

He wasn’t single, wasn’t childless, wasn’t a loner, wasn’t an intellectual, wasn’t much of a drinker, wasn’t particularly fond of classical music, and wasn’t particularly bad-tempered. And – as he himself says, very early on

“While I’m at it, the car is a Ford. In case you were wondering. And I don’t do bloody crosswords either”

Though speaking of crosswords, I do include a small homage to Morse in the name of my feisty and very definitely *female* detective Erica (E) Somer (SOMER), which the sharp-eyed among you will immediately have spotted is an anagram...

But five books on, Adam Fawley has become much more than just a negative of Morse.

He’s not an intellectual, but he is bright, and he did go to university; he’s not bad tempered but he can have a short fuse; he’s not a drinker, but he does like a glass of wine (merlot for preference); he’s not a loner, but he is a very private person, he’s in love with his wife but it’s a marriage damaged by a tragedy not of their own making.

In five books, he’s become his own man, with a personality and a childhood that I hadn’t visualised (or even realised) at the beginning. And he even has a fighting chance of making it onto the screen himself one day. Fingers crossed...

Next up: the ‘Where’

In Morse, ‘Town’ is pretty much synonymous with ‘Gown’

But as someone who was there as a student ten years earlier than the TV series, the university of Morse was always rather a chocolate-boxy version of the real place (one of my pet peeves both then and now is the way both dons and students are always depicted wearing gowns for tutorials – that was long gone even by my time, and yet the TV series carried on doing it right through to *Lewis*)

And I always used to wonder how the 1990s university ever managed to teach anyone, given how many dons were bumping each other off behind the arras...

But joking apart, safe to say, the university has had its fill of murders. And given Morse does that so well, what’s the point trying to compete?

Close to Home was never a ‘university’ story anyway, but when Penguin commissioned more books I made the deliberate – and very conscious – decision to avoid anything ‘spire’ related –

As the city council’s ‘Inspector Morse City Trail’ shows, the Morse books tend to revolve – literally, around the centre of the town

But ‘Fawley’s Oxford’ is the opposite: I stand, so to speak, in the centre of city, and look outwards. I ‘turn the camera the other way’,

So mine is definitely *not*, as the Irish Times put it in 1999, “the Oxford where a certain kind of England comes to die”.

Fawley’s Oxford is darker, edgier, more real – a city of contrasts, focused on the very different communities that ring the city

From leafy North Oxford where the classic red-brick Victorian houses are “divided into small, large, large small, and small large”

To the west – and Seacourt ‘cathedral’ “leering down the Botley Road in mockery of the spires”

To the south, and Blackbird Leys, and the east: to the Cowley Road, which, as Fawley observes, “has always gone its own way, and the

Victorian developers who tried to turn it into a lucrative mini model of its grand northerly neighbour quickly found it wouldn't take"

It's where these communities overlap that tensions arise, and as every crime reader - or writer - knows, that's where the stories are

Talking of stories,

The final piece of the puzzle is the plot: the 'how' of a crime book – the story, and the way you tell it

The Morse books are very conventionally written, and likewise the Morse dramas are very conventionally structured

The books are almost Victorian in their formality: prologues (some even called 'Prolegomena'), then the narrative, often divided into books, then subdivided further into chapters, each with its own literary epigraph Georg Eliot would be proud (and as a former English student I say that absolutely without irony)

And the TV is pretty traditional too. One strong linear narrative, very few flashbacks, a consistent single point of view. It's the broadcast equivalent of a 19th-century third-person narrative.

It's also very different from much of the cutting-edge crime drama being made today

A show like *Line of Duty* doesn't just have extremely complex and demanding plots but an incredibly pacey presentation with lots of short intercut scenes, and different points of view.

And that's what I've tried to emulate in the Fawley novels.

There are no chapters, no division into books – in fact I've done all I can to 'break the fourth wall': to give my reader the sense that this is 'really happening'

So, not only does Adam speak directly to the reader (as in the comment about crosswords just now), the reader is also regularly given 'unmediated' access to documents and other source materials relating to the case, so that they can become detectives in their own right, working

alongside Fawley's team to analyse and decipher the crime (and judging by the feedback, this is something my readers really love)..

There are interview transcripts, WhatsApps and texts, body diagrams, blog posts, a fire scene report, and crime scene drawings (the one on the left is from *In the Dark* and was drawn for me by a real-life CSI). There are maps too, and yes, there are maps in Morse sometimes as well, but these are always placed where you would conventionally expect to find them – at the front.

So even on the page, and certainly in the reading, a Fawley book is a very different experience from a Morse.

Another crucial aspect of this drive for a strong 'reality effect' is my slavish attention to authenticity when it comes to police procedures and investigative processes.

To cite just one small example, police in the UK have never, as far as I know, worked in pairs, as Morse and Lewis did (and as they do in the US). It's always been a team effort. One which subject, there was a lovely anecdote from Val McDermid in the *Guardian* obituary for Colin Dexter in 2017: early in her career, when she'd told him she was anxious about 'getting it right', he just replied "Well, my dear, I had written five Morse novels before I had even set foot in a police station."

And it worked – of course it did. And brilliantly. But I hope that by taking such a very different approach I've managed to find room for another detective in this wonderful city, and another way to write decent crime.

Who knows, maybe one day they'll be doing DI Fawley tours. You can but hope...