For office use

Receipt issued to student □ (tick)

Date stamp:

Certificate in Novel Writing – Fictional Forms Essay:

The Use of Setting in Ian Rankin's Rebus Novels

Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus novels are notable for their vivid use of setting – principally in Rankin and Rebus's home city of Edinburgh. Rankin skilfully employs his settings to illustrate character, create convincing plotlines and also to raise social and political issues in the books.

Edinburgh's geography, history, architecture and political culture have provided fertile material for many contemporary writers. Kate Atkinson's recent novels have been largely set in Edinburgh and also feature an enigmatic detective – Jackson Brodie. 'One Good Turn' is set during in the Edinburgh festival; its plot is sparked by a violent incident witnessed in the sunken streets of the Old Town. Reggie, the orphaned female protagonist of 'When Will There Be Good News' starts the novel shuttling between the deprived area of Gorgie where she lives and child minding for prosperous doctor Jo Hunter in 'the really nice side of Edinburgh with a view of Blackford Hill'..

Irvine Welsh used exclusively gritty settings in novels such as 'Trainspotting' – the council estates of Granton, Milton and Muirhouse. Welsh's Edinburgh is relentlessly bleak, involving drug use, prostitution and violence and many other vices. While Ian Rankin explores similarly seedy aspects of Edinburgh life, he leavens his plots and characters through exploiting particular aspects of the city – particularly its paradoxes, which are internalised in his characters and often resonate in the plots.

The city's geography is particularly distinctive – Edinburgh castle stands centrally on a volcanic plug of hard rock, towering over 250ft above the city below. The dark, inscrutable castle is elevated above the neighbouring areas. The castle features in most of Rankin's novels: for example, an MP commits suicide in 'The Naming of the Dead' by plunging from the castle walls down the sheer rock face that surrounds the castle on three sides.

The city's geography leads to many other examples of vertical separation – Arthur's Seat, a volcanic mountain, overlooks the city from the south-east; many old streets pass through dark chasms, spanned by road bridges above; and Waverley, the main railway station, lies in a central gorge, offering emerging visitors a spectacular first view of Edinburgh.

The Castle's strategic position as a fortress its centre profoundly affected Edinburgh's developing culture of Edinburgh. The city grew along the only accessible route into the castle – a ridge to the east which is now known as the Royal Mile. The need for protection from frequent attacks and the inhospitable nature of much of the surrounding area led the city's residents to live in exceptionally crowded and unsanitary conditions – access to houses being down extremely narrow alleyways (known as wynds) and many tunnels were constructed in the rock beneath the city. This original part of the city became so squalid that in the 18th century an alternative city centre was planned and constructed – this became the Georgian New Town and has remained a stark contrast to the original Old Town by the castle ever since. The New Town represents the rationality and openness of its enlightenment creators while the Old Town is dark and organically primeval. The two are distinctly separate

geographically, which makes Edinburgh far more obviously bifurcated than comparable cities.

This duality is a metaphor that recurs in much of the fiction set in Edinburgh – its respectable, impregnable aristocratic aspects compared with its figurative and literal low-life. This contrast was classically represented in 'The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde' by Robert Louise Stevenson, also an Edinburgh author. Although the novel was set in London, Ian Rankin recognised the duality of Edinburgh in the split personality of the protagonist: his second novel in the Rebus series ('Hide and Seek') was a retelling of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde relocated to Edinburgh.

Rankin explicitly refers to this dichotomous personality when discussing the city.

> 'How is it possible for a city to be both blazingly public and intensely private at the self-same time?…This quirk is something I've explored many times in my novels, because to me it says lots about the very nature of Edinburgh and how it came to be the way it is…Edinburgh has always seemed to me a furtive place. Throughout history it has made its money from invisible industries such as banking and insurance…It was once called a city of "public probity and private vice" and this still rings true.' Rankin (2009)

Clearly, the concept of vice hidden amongst probity is appealing to a crime writer. Rankin's principal genre is detective fiction, which is ideally suited to the exposition of concealed felonies. The plot is driven by the discoveries made by the detectives, Detective Inspector John Rebus and, in later novels, his subordinate Detective Sergeant Siobhan Clarke, who are the agents of law and order and represent of the 'respectable' side of the city. However, the protagonists necessarily need to be well acquainted with the disreputable side of the city and lead the reader on a tour through the Edinburgh underworld:

> 'Fleshmarket Close was a narrow, pedestrian-only lane connecting the High Street to Cockburn Street. The High Street entrance was flanked by a bar and a photographic shop...This end, it entrance boasted a bookmaker's one side, and a shop opposite selling crystals and 'dream catchers': old and new Edinburgh, Rebus thought to himself.' Rankin (2004)

Another vital function of setting in the crime fiction and detective genre is to provide a frame of reference for the reader. Many actions in the plot are, by definition, extreme and beyond the experience of most. Therefore, a setting with which the reader is familiar provides a credible counterpoint that subconsciously re-inforces the suspension of disbelief that is required to interpreting a work of fiction: if a writer provides a convincing account of a something familiar then the reader may place more trust in the verisimilitude of a the author's account of an extraordinary crime event that is beyond the reader's knowledge (e.g. police procedures, medical details, methods used by criminals, etc.).

This technique of anchoring a reader in familiarity is also reflected in the tendency of the crime genre to produce series of novels featuring the same dramatis personae: Rankin does this with Rebus, Clarke and many other recurring characters but the practice is almost universal (e.g. Agatha Cristie, Raymond Chandler, Colin Dexter).

Rankin synthesises the familiarity of character with settings that are recognisable to the reader – creating an authentic world for the novels. Rebus is closely associated with various locations in Edinburgh which, in turn, shed light on his character. These places recur so frequently that reader of the novels develops an intimate familiarity. The Rebus novels have always been based in Edinburgh – featuring its settings in general terms. However, Rankin's novels have become more specific during the development of the series. Initially certain locations were fictionalised. For example, Rebus's original police station, Great London Road, was imaginary although he later moved to real stations, such as St. Leonard's,

which Rankin researched in great detail. Perhaps as Rankin matured as a novelist he realised and then exploited the relationship between plot credibility and familiarity of setting?

Certain locations are still fictionalised, even in the later novels. These include some of the desperate, blighted crime-ridden estates on the fringes of the city. These are created by the author to perhaps avoid offending the real-life inhabitants (or possibly to deter fans from visiting unsavoury areas?). The foreword to 'Fleshmarket Close' states:

> 'The village of Banehall doesn't exist, so please don't pore over maps looking for it. Nor will you find a detention centre called Knoxland on the western outskirts of Edinburgh.' Rankin (2004)

Settings are also changed to suit the mechanics of the plot. In 'The Naming of the Dead' Rebus visits a modern-day shrine adorned with items of clothing called the Clootie Well which, in the book, is located near Gleneagles. The well exists in reality, but is near Inverness, so Rankin relocated it into the reaches of Rebus territory.

The best known of Rankin's actual locations is the Oxford Bar, a small pub in the New Town, which Rebus, a drinker, treats as a second home. (In the earlier novels the pub was fictionalised as the Sutherland Bar). Rankin explained in an interview in the Times why he chose this pub as a setting:

> '"The Oxford?" he considers the place. "It just seemed to tick all the boxes — it's the kind of pub Rebus would drink in anyway. No bells or whistles, just beer or chat. It's central but nobody knows about it. It's part of that hidden Edinburgh that I was trying to write about, thematically it was right. And it was full of police, so the first few times I went in as a student, I ended up talking to cops.' Wade (2009)

The Oxford Bar is a small, unremarkable back-street local, although typically for Rankin's Edinburgh its ordinariness sees it located next to power and influence. In a scene from 'Exit Music' Rebus stands outside the pub:

> 'Rebus... busied himself with the cigarette. At the other end of the street, the lights were on at the First Minister's residence.' Rankin (2007)

It has a small front bar and a larger room at the back of the bar which Rankin uses as a location for longer scenes. Appropriately, Rankin sets Rebus's retirement party in the back room at the Oxford Bar in 'Exit Music'.

> 'The back room had indeed been set aside for their use – with the help of strips of crime-scene tape.' Rankin (2007)

The front room of the pub has a long bar but is too narrow for much customer seating (there are only a few benches by the wall). Standing at the bar encourages dialogue between the bar staff and customers, notably Rebus. This provides a method of moving the plot forwards which is a useful device as Rebus lives alone (as do many other curmudgeonly fictional detectives). The pub is also quiet ('there was no music, but then it wasn't needed' (Rankin (2004)). Rebus's visits to the refuge of the Oxford Bar also perform a similar function in the novels to a soliloquy – where the reader can be re-appraised of plot developments during the main character's period of reflection.

The Rebus series followed its protagonist's career approximately in real time: by 2007 he had to retire. Rankin's next novel, 'Doors Open', therefore does not feature Rebus. It is set in the Edinburgh art world, which allows Rankin to continue to use the city's setting. When one of the characters tries to avoid being followed, Rankin uses typically precise geographical description:

> 'Chib's idea was to hit the shopping crowds on Princes Street. Cars weren't allowed down there so any tail would have to come after him on foot. He could then climb the steep flight of stairs at the side of the Mound and head for the

> quieter streets of the Old Town, streets where anyone following on foot would be easy to spot.' Rankin (2008).

The authenticity of Rankin's locations and their temporal setting in the recent past has resulted in the Rebus novels becoming chronicles of Scottish political and cultural issues, with devolution a strong thread. The infamous Scottish Parliament building inevitably features in the later novels. Rebus and Clarke visit the MSP's offices in 'Exit Music' and make topical comments on the building's expense:

> '" Plenty of concrete and wood," Rebus commented.
> "And glass," Clarke added.
> "The special, expensive kind, of course," Rebus speculated.' Rankin (2007)

The novels combine setting with topicality in various other ways. 'The Naming of the Dead' uses the 2005 G8 summit at Gleneagles as a location and element in the plot (in a humorous touch Rebus and Clarke are supposedly responsible for George W. Bush's notorious bicycle accident).

Rankin suggests that the line between the good and evil sides of the city is complex and difficult to define: the plots of the novels are heavily driven by paradoxes when the ostensibly respectable is found to be illicit (such as corrupt politicians and criminal bankers) or those on the wrong side of the law behave with unpredicted morality (e.g. asylum seekers, sex workers, etc.). Rebus's work often switches between locations such as the 'pubic triangle' (an area of lap dancing clubs and late-night bars) and the nearby plush hotels and bank headquarters. Rankin describes how Rebus looks back on his career:

> '[Edinburgh] was still the oxygen in his bloodstream, but with mysteries still to be explored. He'd lived there for as long as he'd been a cop, the two – job and city – becoming intertwined. Each new crime had added to his understanding, without that understanding ever coming near to completion. Bloodstained past mingling with bloodstained present; Covenanters and commerce; a city of bankers and brothels, virtue and vitriol...Underworld meeting overworld...' Rankin (2007)

As the Rebus series progressed, the blurring of the distinction between the 'good' and 'bad' sides of the city was represented by Rebus's symbiotic relationship with Edinburgh's biggest gangster – 'Big Ger' Rafferty. A close relationship between hunter and hunted is often a feature of crime fiction but, by the time of the last book in the series 'Exit Music' Rebus is obsessed with Cafferty, almost stalking him by parking his car at night outside Cafferty's house. The final scene of 'Exit Music' finishes with Cafferty flatlining in an Edinburgh hospital and Rebus frantically giving his old enemy cardiopulmonary resuscitation: the two are conjoined halves of the same psyche, just as interdependent as the two sides of Edinburgh.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Rankin is not reluctant to publicise the real locations used in his novels. He has presented television programmes on 'Ian Rankin's Edinburgh' in which he visits locations used in his novels and also authored newspaper and magazine articles. Tour guides have also taken tourists on 'Rebus Tours' around Edinburgh, an enterprise set up in consultation with Rankin and his publishers. This is an acknowledgement of the importance of setting to Rankin's novels and how they are inspired on several levels by the city of Edinburgh.

2,320 words

References

Atkinson, K. (2008), 'When Will There Be Good News?', Transworld, London.
Atkinson, K. (2006), 'One Good Turn', Transworld, London.
Bruce-Gardyne, T., (2002), 'Ian Rankin's Edinburgh', Daily Telegraph, 14th August 2002
Lownie, A, (2005), 'A Literary Guide to Edinburgh', Polygon, Edinburgh.
Rankin, I. (2008), 'Doors Open', Orion, London.
Rankin, I. (2007), 'Exit Music', Orion, London.
Rankin, I. (2004), 'Fleshmarket Close', Orion, London.
Rankin, I. (2009), 'Ian Rankin's Edinburgh', BBC Lonely Planet Magazine, November 2009.
Rankin, I. (2006), 'The Naming of the Dead', Orion, London.
Wade, M., (2009), 'Times Literary Walks: Ian Rankin's Edinburgh', Times, 22nd November 2009.
http://www.ianrankin.net/ (accessed 26th November – 2nd December 2009)