DIRTY DEEDS
AND DRUNKEN DICKS

Pete Cockcroft talks with Peter Corris

He gave me a smile as thin as my motel mattress and said, “How are you?” I tensed, shifted my weight to my left buttock and said, “I'll ask the questions.”

“Drink?” I considered the three quarts of Johnny Walker I'd just put away, the five bottles of Panadol and the fact that I hadn't slept for three weeks. I needed something to brace me.

He walked to a fridge that was the size of my living room and suddenly whipped round fast, like a middleweight. There was a flagon of riesling in his hand and his voice was deadly serious.

“Am I getting paid for this?” he asked.

Detective novels have a long association with the left. The communist politics of one of the big three writers from the U.S. West Coast, Dashiell Hammett, go some way towards explaining this, but the other two, Ross McDonald and Raymond Chandler also have significant followings.

In some ways they mark the dividing line between the old left and the new. They are stylised with an intricate plot in which the hero — lone wolf male private eye — encounters numerous characters and subplots, ingests massive quantities of booze, gets beaten up a couple of times, is hounded by both gangsters and cops and finally emerges with the plot solved, his virtue soiled but intact and the big wide world more or less unchanged.

The heroes are sexist loners and that’s how the authors come across. The image of the man alone fighting an individual battle (both physical and intellectual) against the rest of

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the world “for something a sucker like me calls ethics” has an obvious appeal for a movement with its back against the wall.

It’s a bit out of place in the eighties. One can’t see an unstructured collective working it out that Terry Lennox wasn’t really dead in “The Long Goodbye.” And the sexual politics are very much on the nose.....

Still, the clients are rich and powerful and tell lies, the politicians and cops are usually corrupt and such sympathetic characters as appear are usually cut off from the power and the money.

Now Australia has its own reproduction of a West Coast detective. Peter Corris has published the first of a series of books, written in the genre of Chandler etc. and set in Sydney. He was the literary editor of the National Times, squeezed between the wine pages and the Ferrari ads, and has several of my CPA comrades as his fans for a book on Australian prize fighting called Lords of the Ring.

There are plans for the new detective, Cliff Hardy, to break into the electronic media with ABC production of a series. (I hope they do a better job than a recent small screen version of James Garner playing Marlowe).

Searching for the politics of it all, I talked to Peter Corris at his home on the South Coast where he lives with the feminist writer Jean Bedford and their children. We only drank coffee and neither of us wore trench coats.

The Genre and some Mild Heresy ....

We started on the genre and its practitioners — the big three and how, after the passage of time, they rate as writers, and in comparison with each other. This is a bit like asking a Tolkien buff to describe Middle Earth, but Corris has enough humor to take the edge off his obvious passion for the form.

He says, “Well, the line of development is very clear. Hammett was writing, Chandler was looking round for something to do, Hammett saw what Chandler could do, thought he could do it better, but differently, and took it along from there. McDonald started very clearly as a conscious Chandler imitator. (The early McDonalds are very much closer to Chandler than the later ones.) Then McDonald got ideas of his own.

Dashiel H Hammett has recently enjoyed a revival with the film Julia, which featured his companion Lillian Hellman, and the republishing of some of Hellman’s work in which he appears. He was jailed in the McCarthy period for his politics, but that doesn’t necessarily make him a good fiction writer.

I’d mentioned earlier that I’d been very disappointed with Hammett. His writing mostly bang-bang-bash-bash stuff reminded me of the Hank Jansens and Mickey Spillanes of adolescence and, given his political commitment, it was a shock to find that, in his writing, he was the least political of the three.

“Yes, that’s always struck me as curious that there’s a convention that Chandler is a bit soft, Hammett much tougher and, of course, much sounder. That might be true in their personal lives, though the whole story’s not told about that .... but I don’t think that Hammett’s class consciousness, political analysis or the rest show very much in his writing at all. And certainly not dramatically or effectively.”

I say that it’s very unsatisfactory — and not a unique experience — to feel obliged to like the politically sound writer.

“I have that feeling, too. I went back to reading The Maltese Falcon again, just to sort of refresh at the well springs, and I stopped about half way through. I found it stilted and stiff, and really pretty dull.”

Back to the genre, a tight format with rules
DIRTY DEEDS, DRUNKEN DICKS

like a haiku or a sonnet. Corris has written non-fiction and short stories but these are the first novels. Does he feel constricted or happier?

"Very much happier. Like most people who actually get novels published. I've thrown unpublished ones away, historical novels, an attempt at a social novel, terrible failures. I find that when the ground rules are known, far from stiffening up the style, they make me feel more confident and I can get into the story. I can develop the character, I can get the thing moving much more easily than starting in an open situation."

Marxism vindicated,
Sexism put down ....

But he picked this genre rather than Mills and Boone romances or science fiction or whatever. Why?

"I think I just like it, but for particular reasons. I like reading and writing in the first person. It seems to me to be direct and easy to get into, both for writer and reader. That comes partly from Hemingway. I've always liked first person Hemingway. But other than that, it's a matter of a personal taste for action, wit, humor, accessible entertainment."

I mention marxism and the novel. That analysis which traces the move from the drama (primarily Elizabethan and after) to the novel as a move from a social form (pre-capitalist) to an individual form. Rather than a writer, director and players speaking to an audience, one writer speaks to one reader.

"I can understand that and I think it's true. A number of people such as Julian Simons and Stephen Knight, who are writing criticisms of detective fiction now, are right in saying that the private eye character is very much an alienated bourgeois individualist.

"I can see the truth of that, and maybe that could be a score against it if you're running a very class-conscious analysis of literature. But I don't think it needs to be because then it depends on what you do with it. And what you say, what is endorsed, not endorsed and so on. I think you can redeem the style, if you want to put it that way, by how you handle it."

And there are positive things about the way the genre handles it. I mention the war against generalised corruption .... the rich, corrupt clients. In Chandler there always seem to be one or two characters who are out of touch with the wealth and power and who are the only redeeming features in the plot. They are reasonably human and uncomplicated and tell the truth. There's a curious sort of left liberalism at work ....

I'd talked around and found a quote from Tom Uren about Peter Corris' work. How did he regard it? He says the quote is about something completely different. So much for my research.

So what about sexual politics? Not just of his work but of the genre. Does he feel constrained to enter into the sexual attitudes of the 'fifties, or does he locate himself in the 'eighties?

"The latter; I'm getting better at it, or at least I'm doing it more easily. I think this is one of the things that sticks out about Hammett. I mean, Chandler's sexist, very clearly, and Chandler's very worried about homosexuality, you can see the anxiety. But Hammett maintains straight-out male dominant characters all the way through.

"In the early draft of the first novel I stuck very closely to the Chandler form and a lot of the wisecracks were sexist and a lot of the description was sexist, and I revised this extensively and self-consciously, to tone down sexism but I suppose to leave .... a taste. I don't think you can get away from it completely but I'm trying to, as I go along.

For the third book, I've just done a fairly extensive rewrite. I really restructured it quite a lot with that as one of the things in mind. What actually happened, it seems to me, is that it turned out better, more dramatically
interesting, to build up a couple of the female characters and not make them doormats.

"I think it's something in the background that's shaping the writing. It's a useful gestalt thing to be aware of, rather than a problem."

**A Digression on Dogs ....**

An issue I'd been longing to raise. It relates back to Chandler with the hero-as-pastoralist. The way he brings in the weather, the countryside where he travels. Corris doesn't actually name the song-birds and flowers as Chandler did, but what is this macho-pastoral bit?

"I'm not sure about that. It's partly convention, partly a version of punctuation, some thing you do to have a break between the action. Or it's supposed to be (he grins) a sort of metaphor for 'thought'? When you're soaked in the stuff, when you're tapping it out, it comes into your head. Now it's time to cast your eye about a bit.

"I haven't quite done it properly; someone was telling me that I didn't have any dogs barking where, in certain circumstances, there certainly would have been. Noises from dogs or crap on the pavement. So, to some extent, it's just a convention or a metaphor, but I should be paying attention to the reality of it."

I mention that if he ever goes out letterboxing in an election campaign he'll find out all about dogs. He grins again. He has a face which seems made for a sardonic leer, but it's saved by a voice which carries a permanently gentle chuckle.

**A complaint conceded ....**

The first novel which features the character, Cliff Hardy, *The Dying Trade*, is out in hardback and the paperback will appear as soon as publisher's marketing plans allow. More are coming, and it's clear that they are developing all the time. But Corris can only be judged by what we've seen. What grated badly for me was one character, a black Pacific Islands woman revolutionary who is supposed to be in with the villains on a drug-smuggling racket. I said that, not only was this unrealistic, it wasn’t the sort of thing that one should be putting about.

"I think that’s a fair criticism. In fact, there are a few characters in that book that float around and aren’t really anchored. They’re off-stage people who help to move scenery around. I’ve had to read the book through for the paperback edition, and I find that character and the handling of her tasteless."

What can you say? We’re not in China, and that’s the closest I’ve heard a writer come to self-criticism of his own recent stuff. I say "Fair enough."

**The writer's craft, sides flapping ....**

He's writing for television. Is it the same thing? Is this work going through some form of development too?

"Well, it’s certainly going through changes. Similar to the ones going on in the writing of novels. I'm finding it interesting to do and a bit of a struggle. There are different problems in writing short bursts of this stuff.

"The double plot is just about out for me. I can’t see how you could do it. So you substitute an ironical twist somehow for the double plot. Or some other kind of device."

"In writing the novels, I'm working with other problems; whether to make them more modern or not; how much contemporary political and social content to put in. So the novels are much more interesting."

He lived in San Francisco for a while, the capital city of the private-eye world. What parallels does he see with Sydney, where Cliff Hardy operates?

"The initial feelings are just impressionistic and superficial. Things about the city and the people in it. The geography. I really don't know how the comparisons would run on their political histories or the sociology of both places. My guess would be that there are pretty good similarities."

How about things like corruption?

"Yes. Well, again, there are good parallels for that. Ross McDonald has said that he ...
his story lines from trials, talking to coppers, reading the papers. That's the obvious and best way to do it. Though he doesn't really come out like the stuff you read, you just get a hint and a clue and then change it completely; turn the bottom on its head and leave the sides flapping. But there's got to be some kind of reality."

.... And the politics

I wanted to get into the basis of the genre. The individual detective is always confronted by money of some sort, corruption of some sort. He proceeds through various adventures in which, if the cops aren't crooked, he's surprised. He gets beaten up by gangsters and there are always parallels to be drawn between the overtly criminal and the overtly respectable.

All these things are intrinsic. You never see Marlowe bad-mouthing some poor old widow who wants to find her long-lost son, only the rich. It's something which is not intrinsic in any other form of fiction. And when I read it there is a sort of "now". One knows there are people like that crawling around Vaucluse, Double Bay, Toorak ....

"Yes, I think so. In a way, I think what it's really about is people's anxiety, people's apprehensions of what is disorderly around them, what is out of phase and causing them distress.

"Detective stories are just a device for writing about social disorder and stress, and how individuals cope with them, or don't cope with them.

"You heighten this and dramatise it, but that's the thrust behind it. And it's why people are interested in it; they find something they can relate to. They can imagine people behaving like this. They've felt twinges of it themselves and they know it does happen."

There's a positive and a negative here, though not of the dialectical variety. The negative is that what's postulated is this lone wolf going out there and sorting them out which, translated into political terms, one can only see in terms of the bomb and bullet brigade — terrorists. A blind alley despite its increasing popularity among the talkers.

The positive side is that, at the end, there's never any illusion that there's been some dramatic change made. That the world is a better and safer place for what I've done, and all that. You know that the corruption will carry on and that there's a whole class of these people who are doing this sort of thing and will continue to do so.

(The interviewee is agreeing with all this, but I'm in full flight — like Don Lane on a bad night.)

So while the genre feeds off that feeling Corris talks about, it doesn't dispel the feeling, as purely adventurist writing will do. You don't come away feeling, "Ah, that's better".

"I hadn't thought of that. But, as you say it, I think it's right. Sherlock Holmes is much more prone to resolve. A Sherlock Holmes story will resolve the disorder. It will be put right."

And Agatha Christie?

"And Agatha Christie. Very much. The bad apple will be rooted out. Someone will suffer certainly, but things will then go on. Boy will marry girl, and the country estate will pass down ...."

To the rightful ....

"Owner. That's right."

"This kind of fiction is postulating a much more disorderly and unjust scene."

The questions were getting longer than the answers. It was time to stop. There is something very refreshing about a professional writer who is changing his ideas and is honest enough to say so; not to mention a genre writer who can look at his passion with a clear eye.

The misplaced quote from Tom Uren which I mentioned earlier was actually about Lords of the Ring. Tom said that Peter Corris' class politics shine through in his writing, whether he realises it or not.

The same will be increasingly true of the adventures of Cliff Hardy.