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THE LOUIE KNIGHT SERIES OF M. PRYCE

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to place the series of novels by Malcolm Pryce in the tradition of regional novels, hard-boiled detective fiction and pastiche. It also tries to assess the reception of the novels by literary critics and the general public in and outside Wales. The work traces the tradition of Pryce to the hard-boiled detective fiction of Chandler, particularly by foregrounding the elements of violence and sex in the series. It also locates the series in the tradition of regional novels. It further argues that a knowledge of the locale is essential for the appreciation of the novels. The paper also tries to throw light on the pastiche nature of the works. Elements of literary parallels and intertextuality are brought to notice along with some of the facts and concepts of history, mythology and popular media Pryce introduces into his works. The last section of the paper mainly focuses on the reception of the works. Despite being quite popular, the opinions of the readers are very disparate. Non-Welsh readers are unable to cherish the works the way the natives do with their knowledge of the locale, myths and history. However, the series finds enthusiastic receptors among appreciators of pastiche. The kind of personal love expressed by the local readers and the stylistic appreciation of the international readers seem very distant. It is concluded that catering the works to a less informed audience could have increased the level of appreciation among the general reading public.

Keywords: Aberystwyth, Pastiche, Detective fiction, Regional novel, Reader reception

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This is an attempt to place the series of novels by Malcolm Pryce in the tradition of regional novels, hard-boiled detective fiction and pastiche. I am also trying to make an assessment of the reception of the novels by literary critics and by the general public, both Welsh and non-Welsh. I will make an effort to find out how each of these features of the novels has contributed to the success, failure or in some cases both, of the novel among the readers of English Literature.

The Novelist

Though Malcolm Pryce was born in Shrewsbury, he moved to Aberystwyth when he was nine and stayed there until his A level examinations. A graduate from Warwick University, he has travelled to many countries like Tahiti, Fiji, Thailand, Philippines and Singapore. After trying his hand at a variety of jobs, he became a copywriter in Singapore. It was during this period that the concept of Aberystwyth Mon Amour was born. In 1998, he left his job to concentrate on the book.

He maintains a website www.malcolmpryce.com which gives detailed information on the creation of the series. It presents a conscious writer aware of the tradition he is following, the influences on his writing, the choice of style and his intentions in using particular techniques. Pryce shares his impressions of the backdrop of his novels, *Aberystwyth*. He turns out to be one of the best critics of his own writing. He is well-aware of the process of writing and has launched a creative writing workshop under the name of Qwertyuop College.

The Novels

The first novel of the series *Aberystwyth Mon Amour* was first published in 2001. In the book, Pryce introduces Louie Knight, *Aberystwyth's* best detective, also the only detective in *Aberystwyth*. In this novel the background is set and we meet most of the characters who will become constant presences in the world he takes us to. Calamity Jane who will later become his partner, Eeyore, Knight's father who once fought the injustices in the town, but now is old, poor and spends his time taking care of his donkeys, Sospan, the ice-cream man-cum-philosopher, the Druids who are the major perpetrators of evil in the town, the corrupt mayor Jubal, the policeman Llnuos with whom he will form a brotherly bond, Myfanwy the singer at the druid-run night club Moulin who will become Knight's girlfriend, the Patagonian veterans, Brainbocs the evil scientific genius who stopped growing at the age of fourteen and the many supernatural or mysterious powers at work. Pryce draws a clear map of the town and its neighbouring places, tactfully placing his fictitious locations within the actual landscape of *Aberystwyth*. In an interview he gave to the BBC, Pryce says that the book was originally written as a one-off. But he had created an alternate universe of *Aberystwyth* and a world of characters that presented the scope for further novels.

The mystery in the first novel is the disappearance of a string of school boys following which Knight gets involved with his all-time enemy the games teacher Herod Jenkins and the druids. Knight and Llnuos become aware of their plan to burst the dam to create a flood so that they may get the arc they built in the school ground into the sea

in an effort to gain access to the semi-mythical lost land of Wales, Cantref-y-Gwaelod. But they are unable to stop the explosion and the flood shatters the infrastructure of the town. The town was rebuilt quickly though the flood has left its mark.

In the *Last Tango in Aberystwyth* druids have lost their influence considerably and Mrs Bligh Jones of the meals-on-wheels gets the control of the underworld. This time Knight gets entangled in a dreadful situation when Dean Morgan who teaches at the Faculty of Undertaking receives a suitcase meant for a druid assassin. As he takes on the case of the missing Dean, Knight and Calamity are led to the 'What the Butler Saw' movie industry. The plot is further complicated with the death of a ventriloquist and the reappearance of Myfanwy who had apparently left the U.K at the end of the first novel. This book contains some tense situations as when Calamity is threatened with murder, and the affection of Knight towards Calamity and his love of Myfanwy makes the involvement of Knight in the case more than professional. Knight rescues Calamity from the druids and Myfanwy from the clutches of Dai Brainbocs who is obsessed with her. Brainbocs had abducted her and used on her a love potion he scientifically prepared. But to his disappointment, he finds that she is in love with Louie Knight and a change cannot be affected by the potion.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being in Aberystwyth solves more than one mystery. The clients include an ex-convict who lost his memory and approaches the agency with a request to investigate a burglary that happened in 1849, a monkey who used to work at the linguistics department of the university who is looking for her son Mr. Bojangles who disappeared fifteen years ago and as Myfanwy disappears quite early in the novel, the detective is pre-occupied with the thought of finding her. Though the potion invented by Brainbocs left no effect on Myfanwy at the moment, it has grave effects on her health later. With the meagre living he earns from the agency, Knight tries to keep her in a nursing home. A new character Frankie Mephisto is introduced in this novel. Brainbocs finds a cure for Myfanwy's illness and makes another effort to secure her love by creating

for her the heaven she dreamed of as a girl. But he fails in this effort.

In *Don't Cry for Me Aberystwyth* we find that though Myfanwy is physically cured, she has stopped singing and finds comfort in spending most of her time sleeping. It is Christmas and Knight is investigating the murder of a man dressed in the costume of Santa Claus. Knight sets out to find a legendary document that was stolen from Adolf Eichmann which is said to have some revelation about the fate of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. This work finds Knight dealing with a division of Welsh Intelligence which is trying to hide the Welsh errors during the Patagonian war.

In *From Aberystwyth with Love* a man wearing a Soviet museum curator's uniform sends Knight on an errand to find a girl who mysteriously disappeared thirty years ago. It is rendered difficult by a renegade spinning wheel salesman, dangerous snuff philatelists and an inevitable visit to a castle in Transylvania and a meeting with a descendent of Vlad the Impaler. Pryce brings more history and mythology into this work with the introduction of the dream city of Hughesovka.

Detective Novels

Eugène François Vidocq (1775-1857), a French criminal and criminalist is considered to be the first private detective in real life. He first went to prison at the age of thirteen, offered his service as an informant in 1809 and became the leader of a security police unit in 1812 which later became Sûreté Nationale. In 1833, he founded Le bureau des renseignements which was a mixture of detective agency and private police. In 1828, Louis François L'Héritier published the four volumes of the memoirs of Vidocq which were written with the help of some ghostwriters. The accounts were largely fictional. It became a bestseller which inspired many imitators. Vidocq inspired contemporary writers like Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas. Eugène Sue's Rodolphe de Gerolstein and Émile Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq were also inspired by him. Monsieur Lecoq was a major influence for Sherlock Holmes. It is also believed that Edgar Allan Poe was influenced by a story about Vidocq while creating C. Auguste Dupin for the first detective fiction in English, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

Poe published *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841. Poe's detective who features in three short stories is an unemployed philosopher who gains the status of a detective through curiosity. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the most famous detective series was profoundly influenced by Poe. Drew R. Thomas, a devout Sherlockian and the founder of The Society for the Immense Knowledge of Sensational Literature analyses how closely Doyle has studied Poe's works. In the article 'Edgar Allan Poe's Influence on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle', he quotes several passages from both the authors to show the evident influences. Holmes criticises Dupin, as Dupin criticised Vidocq before him. The way in which the detectives react to particular situations is similar. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle said, "Each [of Poe's detective stories] is a root from which a whole literature has developed.... Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?"

The 1920s and 1930s is known as the Golden age of crime fiction. The authors belonging to the age wrote detective stories following similar pattern and style. Agatha Christie, Philip MacDonald and Dorothy L. Sayers wrote in this style. Most of the authors and their detectives of the Golden age were British. In 1929, Ronald Knox codified ten rules of writing detective stories. S. S. Van Dine's 'Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories' was published in the American Magazine in 1928. Most of the stories of the period were 'whodunnits'. The hard boiled crime fiction was a reaction to it. It is characterised by the unsentimental portrayal of violence and sex. While the fictions of the Golden age were set in British country-sides, the hard boiled fictions were set in American cities. The Black Mask magazine launched in 1920 nurtured the talents of such writers as Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler who popularised the literary style. The biggest innovation of the hard boiled school was the use of first person narrative.

The New York Times called Hammet, "the dean of the... 'hard-boiled' school of detective fiction." Though Hammet had a strong influence on many later writers, among them, it was Chandler who redefined the genre which led to the coining of the adjective Chandelersque. Critics term the

novels by Malcolm Pryce, a series of Chandeleresque detective novels set in an alternate universe version of Aberystwyth. While Chandler's Marlowe lives in L. A, Pryce's Knight lives in Aberystwyth. As Pryce himself says, placing a hardboiled detective like Marlowe who fights the crimes in the populous city of L.A, in as serene a location as Aberystwyth is his radical innovation.

The Louie Knight Series as Hard-boiled Detective Novels

Pryce has modelled his works on the American hard-boiled novels. His novels almost get the status of a meta-fiction with its very conscious use of chandler-like style. There are specific moments as in the reference to 'wisecrack' in 'Don't Cry for me Aberystwyth' where the quality of meta-fiction becomes hard to be neglected. It is significant that most of the common readers find the mysteries in his work contrived, but appreciates his style. Chandler himself has said that he doesn't take the mystery element that seriously. He believed that style was the most durable thing in writing and he tried to perfect it.

The hard-boiled detective fiction used graphic depiction of sex and violence. There are many instances when Knight uses violence to force people into giving him the information he needs, to proceed with his case. In some situations, he assists Llunos, the policeman, in his violence. For instance, in *Last Tango in Aberystwyth*, Llunos plays a game of Welsh roulette as an inventive way of torturing Harri Harries into speaking. He explains the rules of the game thus:

"We spin the wheel. If the ball lands on black seven, I hit you seven times with blackjack. If it lands on red two, I hit you two times with redjack. The game is over when you tell us where Calamity is."

Sometimes Knight is willing to take thrashings if that will help in the progress of his case. Even though to a lesser extent, the 'What the Butler Saw' movie industry and the constant presence of the strippers of the night clubs makes sex a preoccupation in most of the novels of the series. Knight is heavily dependent on alcohol and has the wry, cynical attitude that reminds of Chandler's Marlowe. Calamity Jane fills the role of the side-kick. Knight

finds it difficult to make the ends meet with the pay he receives from his clients which is another characteristic of a hard-boiled detective. It is also significant that we hear the story from the detective himself and not his assistant or side-kick.

Regional Novels

Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* published in 1800 which is set prior to the constitution of 1782 and satirises the then Anglo-Irish landlords, is considered to be the first regional novel. The genre became popular during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. They mainly focus on the environment's influence on the inhabitants. Regional novels may be set in an actual place or an imaginary place like Hardy's Wessex and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. It describes the customs and speech of the people and how the landscape affects the lives of the people of the region. Walter Scot's regional novels are historically informed and show an aesthetic appreciation of the places.

Novelists like Tony Hillerman, Harry Kemelman, Walter Mosely and Sara Paretsky have written regional detective novels which helped to bring various subcultures to a mainstream audience. Tony Hillerman's novels are set among the Native American population around New Mexico. Harry Kemelman's Rabbi Small series are set in the Conservative Jewish community of Massachusetts and Walter Mosely's Easy Rawlins books are set in the African American community of 1950s Los Angeles. Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski books have explored the various subcultures of Chicago.

The Louie Knight Series as Regional Novels

Even though the world of the series is an alternate universe of Aberystwyth, all the landmarks and many of the characters remain true to the actual place. Pryce's characters make their everyday journey through the familiar landscape of Aberystwyth. The Constitution Hill, the promenade, the harbour, the Penglais Hill, the National Wales Library, the Pier, St. Micheal's Church, the Trefechan Bridge, the Bronglais Hospital- all features in the novels. The holiday makers, night clubs, the professors and students of the university are all part of the life in Aberystwyth.

Wales is hardly ever seen as a suitable setting for detective stories. Unlike the big cities of

the U.S, Wales is seen as a beautiful place with friendly, harmless people. But Pryce is able to create an alternate universe of the town, drawing his material from the native history and culture. In addition to the people in the real Aberystwyth, you will find druids who are the gangsters of the town, Patagonian veterans, strippers wearing stove-pipe hats and evil and crazy characters like the boy genius Brainbocs and the game teacher Herod Jenkins. If they don't make the Aberystwyth streets a match to the streets of L.A and New York, there is the supernatural or mysterious presence of witches and ghosts. Pryce's novels with the unlikely setting use the regional element as a means of comic and absurdist defamiliarisation.

Pastiche

Authors of pastiche integrate themes, ideas, concepts or characters which have already been used by other authors or plays with an entire genre in literature. It is generally seen as a postmodern trend. William. S. Burroughs, Margaret Atwood, Umberto Eco, Derek Pell and Thomas Pynchon are known for their pastiches. For instance, Umberto Eco uses detective fiction, fairy tales and science fiction in his works.

Pastiche is a very popular form in the field of detective stories. *The Canary Trainer* by Nicholas Mayer, *The Chess Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes* by Raymond Smullyan, *Sherlock Holmes and the Railway Maniac* by Barrie Roberts, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes: The Missing Years* written by Jamyang Norbu are all pastiches based on the Sherlock Holmes stories written by Sir. Arthur Conan Doyle. *The Dying of the Light* by Michael Dibdin is a pastiche on Agatha Christie's detective novels and *Greedy Night* by E.C. Bentley is a pastiche on Dorothy Sayers' novels.

The Louie Knight Series as Pastiche

The very titles of the books in the series point to the pastiche nature of the works. 'Hiroshima Mon Amour', 'Last Tango in Paris', 'The unbearable Lightness of Being', 'Don't Cry for me Argentina' and 'From Russia with Love' are only too familiar phrases to be lost to the readers. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is a 1959 drama film which shows an intensely personal conversation between a French-Japanese couple about memory and forgetfulness.

Last Tango in Paris is a 1972 Italian romantic drama film on the sexual relationship of an American widower with a Parisian woman. The portrayal of sexual violence and emotional turmoil in the movie caused international controversy and many levels of censorship. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a philosophical book written by Milan Kundera on the artistic and intellectual life of Czech society during the Communist period. 'Don't Cry for Me Argentina' is a song from the 1978 musical *Evita*. *From Russia with Love* is a 1963 movie, the second in the James Bond spy film series.

Apart from borrowing Chandler's style, Pryce uses history, mythology and literature in the creation of his pastiche. He constantly discovers some new element in the ancient mythology or history of Wales or Britain that may be introduced to the novels for the benefit of intrigue and complexity without disrupting the regional character of the novels. Thus Patagonia, Hughesovka, Cantref-y-Gwaelod and Pinkerton features in his novels. Historical Patagonia is a Welsh settlement in Argentina established during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Hughesovka is a Welsh city founded by John James Hughes in Ukraine. One can see traces of walls and roadways under the sea at Carmarthen Bay which gave rise to the legend of the 'Lost Lowland Hundred' or Cantref-y-Gwaelod. Pinkerton is a private U.S. security guard and detective agency established in the U.S by Allan Pinkerton, a Scottish immigrant in 1850. Pinkerton became famous when he claimed to have foiled a plot to assassinate president-elect Abraham Lincoln, who later hired Pinkerton agents for his personal security during the Civil War. *Uncle Vanya* and the descendent of Vlad the Impaler are instances of his borrowings from literature. *Uncle Vanya* is a play by the Russian playwright Anton Chekov while *Vlad the Impaler* is a reference to Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia who is said to have inspired Bram Stoker's character Count Dracula.

Reception by the Critics and Readers

The series is published by Bloomsbury publishing. Since its founding in 1986, Bloomsbury publishing has had a remarkable growth acquiring a number of companies and expanding into, a variety of fields such as children's publishing, educational

publishing, sports publishing and scholarly publishing, and various countries such as the U.S, Germany and Qatar.

Pryce's agent, Rachel Calder holds the responsibility of the Sayle Literary Agency. Sayle Literary Agency is an independent full-service agency with a tradition of more than a hundred years. The Sayle Literary Agency founded by J. B. Pinker has represented authors such as Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Henry James and Dashiell Hammett, the dean of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction.

The reputation of the publishing house and the agency, definitely gives Pryce an edge among the masses. The critics have warmly welcomed the inventive work.

"Despite the outrageously over-the-top characters and situations, Pryce's wonderfully smooth prose sweeps you along and there is nothing slapstick about the humour. It is deftly done and packed with pithy and often poignant observations on human nature."¹

Gill Oliver says in *The Oxford Times*.

"And Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, ventriloquised onto the surreal mean streets of Aberystwyth, undeniably add a distinctive new tincture and timbre to the literary landscape."²

Says the editorial of the *New Welsh Review*.

Barry Forshaw of *The Independent* says about the *Last Tango in Aberystwyth*, "If the book lacks the freshness of its predecessor, the off-kilter imagination that made Aberystwyth Mon Amour such fun is firing on all cylinders again."³

Like Ted Buckley from the Amazon website the readers who have lived in Aberystwyth find immense pleasure in the books, savouring every bit of image and the slightest hint of a sly remark dropped by the author:

"The odd folk who frequented The Angel (I know, cos I was there!), the ventriloquists with their dummies who frequented the upper reaches of Great Darkgate Street (yup, that's where the Students Union HQ was!), the apprentice thugs in the pubs around the station (yes - no student ever went near The Terminus, and lived), and the ladies of dubious repute in Welsh cozzies who frequent the Prom (I wish!! - the only kick I got on the Prom was The Bar!!)... So, if you ever lived in Aber, this is the book for you, and if you didn't, it's still worth the pryce!"

The humour and familiarity of the novels amuse the Welsh and the people familiar with Wales and its culture and tradition. But most of these are lost to the general reader. While the readers are struck by the Chandeleresque style, they are almost puzzled by the plot and the characters, the humour being totally lost to them. Pryce seems to presuppose a certain knowledge of Wales among his readers. Even the relevance of as simple a thing as the stovepipe hat will be lost to even an English person. While one can do without the knowledge of the ancient druids or Patagonia and still enjoy the novel, many passages may turn out to be dull without the knowledge of such things as the image of the traditional Welsh woman at the spinning wheel and the donkey ride on the beach. The knowledgeable enjoy the added benefit of knowing first-hand such things as the Welsh stew-cawl. While such comments as the ones on the National Library of Wales amuses the few familiar with the system at the library, the majority are left without a clue at the comments like "...if you don't know in advance what you want you might as well not turn up." Even the ignorance of the English of the Welsh language as seen when Knight visits Brainbocs at the infirmary in Shrewsbury where he is said to have invented a new language which turns out to be Welsh, might not strike as humorous to a person who has never been to Wales at all.

"I always read the Louie Knight books with my best intentions. I genuinely want to like them," says a J. M. Salinas in the Amazon website which is the kind of sentiment expressed by a number of

¹ Oliver, Gill, 'Aberystwyth with Love', *The Oxford Times*, 22 April 2010

² 'Wales Through the Looking Glass', *New Welsh Review*, Issue 73

³ Forshaw, Barry, 'Private eyes, druids and whelk stores', *The Independent*, 13 Oct 2003

readers of Pryce. On my research on the internet and offline, I have come across many readers of the series, British and international, who even with the best efforts, find it hard to enjoy the books; whereas the natives of Aberystwyth or Wales find it infinitely humorous and entertaining. It seems like, the work is meant for the people who are aware of the Welsh culture and for the few who are ready to do their research in an effort to understand the novel. Considering the fact that the value of the books as a distinctive piece of work lies in its setting and the Welshness that runs throughout the stories, it seems too much to ask. While the book is accessible to a wider public and the style and language promising, it might not be wise to presuppose the Welsh awareness of the readers.

The sensibility of a huge audience has been influenced by the great number of hard-boiled detective fictions that comes out every year. They can connect with the literary style and the familiar plot structure. Many readers seem to approach the works with the hope of finding something about Wales or Aberystwyth. In his blog Peter Rozovsky from the U.S says "In my innocence, I did not realize that Pryce had created an alternative universe until close to the end of the book. (Well, I never thought that the Druids were real.)" The humour that escapes them and the intermingling of fact and fiction added with the improbability of the plot bordering on ridiculousness seem to confuse rather than satisfy the general reader. A surprisingly large number of readers have noticed the pastiche nature of the work and they seem to enjoy the work for its sake, while a few, even in this area are confused as they do not see the humour and the story seem to follow an old familiar style and structure. They wonder where the value of the work lies.

In discussions of the series, the excitement of the natives and the dull surprise of the non-natives take the extremes leaving the scholarly readers in between. These are the opinions of Adam Ferguson from Nottingham as expressed in his blog.

"The only reason I got to the end is because it's only 245 pages long (and because I refuse to stop reading books once I've invested any amount of time in them. Let's call it OCD)... His prose is clean and I believe

if he kept his imagination under a little more control Aberystwyth Mon Amour could have been a corker."

If Pryce had addressed a less knowledgeable audience, this regional novel might have had more effect on the preservation and recognition of Welsh culture than the more intentional and organised methods of promotions. Now it seems like the work needs to heavily lean on critics to get the wide appreciation it has the potential to acquire.

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