

## CRIME SCENE, A CRIME ZINE

by Allan Guthrie © 2005

<http://crimescenescotland.com/>

A couple of years back, I stumbled on a great new webzine. Articles, reviews, essays, interviews, original short fiction. Crime, crime, crime. Great glooping goutts of it. Mainly of the dark variety, which was entirely to my taste. So much so, that my tastebuds kicked into Pavlovian mode and before I knew what was happening, I'd drooled all over my keyboard. Which was fair enough, I'm not complaining. In fact, I'm only too happy to accept that water and electricity don't mix (although I don't accept that planes can fly: they're clearly too heavy).

Well, anyway, I'll get to the point, cause I'm sure you're all wondering what this webzine was: It's called Crime Scene Scotland and it's run by a couple of fellow Scots, Russel McLean and Doug Shepherd. Courtesy of a little web chat, I can allow them to introduce themselves. I asked Doug to tell me a little about Russel.

*"He's the intellectual round here, and by that I mean he's the one with no practical skills whatsoever although he does have a few bits of paper telling us how smart he is and how he can spell 'philosophy'."*

Clearly Doug was being self-deprecating, since he just proved that he too can spell "philosophy". (I, on the other hand, cannot.)

Russel, who can do more than just spell phillosofy (see?)—he actually knows what a syllogism is—had this to say about Doug. *"If you believe the pictures on the website, he's small, with white fur and black patches. But that's just because he's camera-shy and thought no one would notice he'd put up a picture of his girlfriend's cat. In his day job, he spends half his time telling university lecturers they haven't plugged in their printer and turned on the power. He started writing after having several fantasies about offing some of the more stupid people he has to help. Which might explain a few things about his work. He's also a voracious reader and very opinionated which is why he came in to help me on the site and worked his way up to 'fiction editor'."*

So there we have it. In a nutshell: Doug's shy, opinionated and has violent fantasies, Russel can spell and philosophize. What further qualities do you need to run a successful webzine?

Crime Scene was launched—when was it launched? I had to ask the boys. I asked Russel first. He passed the question to Doug. Eventually, they agreed it was the tail-end of 2002. Russel continued: *"I was taking a year out from university and tried to start a second hand bookshop specializing in crime fiction. But since I have "no practical skills" I was completely out of my depth. So I got out of the thing before it went belly up and left me with debt collectors out to break my legs. I was left with a legacy of loads of second hand crime books and webspace under the name "http://crimescenescotland.com". So I thought, with one year already paid for, I'd have some fun and post some fiction up there, maybe try and sell some of those books as well. . I decided to give the zine format a try and suddenly it went out of control. I quickly lost the really crap bookselling portion of the site (you'll still find me hawking the remainder of my wares at the occasional car boot sale in Tayside and Fife). I thought I'd maybe get a few friends to contribute fiction as well, and suddenly I started getting people I'd never met before approaching me to put up their work. But it was getting a bit out of control, and I knew I needed someone who wasn't afraid to tell the people who were bad writers to sod off. So Doug agreed to lend his gentle touch."*

Aha. So it's only cameras Doug's shy of. Doug had this to add: *"It was about getting another perspective on the work that came in, right? Bringing two different viewpoints to the story, having two different mindsets examine submissions. Of course, mostly my job entails my apologizing for Russel missing deadlines and taking his time getting back to people!"*

Ouch! That's the sort of thing that can turn a man passive-aggressive, if he's not careful. So, I wondered, what's the main drive behind Crime Scene?

*"Right now we're about promoting new short fiction and writers," Russel replied. "Promoting crime fiction over mystery fiction because there's a difference between the two."*

*"A gigantic fucking chasm of a difference!"* Doug added.

What was the word Russel used? 'Opinionated'? Damned if the lad ain't right, though.

Russel carried on, seemingly oblivious to the rude interruption: *"Mystery fiction is a very cosy term – a very constricting term – and while we're not averse to cosy or traditional "mysteries", per-se—"*

I could imagine Doug elbowing Russel out of the way to type: *"Speak for yourself!"*

Then Russel came back online. *"Well, we've done a few cosy reviews: good writing is good writing, after all. But it's about promoting new – and promising – crime writing (which covers a huge range of stories) whether it be through short stories or through our reviews. And because our reading habits tend to be hardboiled or noiresque that's the kind of style we'll gravitate towards."*

Did Doug have anything to add? Of course he did. *"As long as it's a good story. Just being in the right genre isn't quite enough to impress us."*

Well, so much for altruism. I wondered if the guys were hoping to achieve anything personally as a result of Crime Scene.

Doug: *"I was promised fame, riches and an invitation to the Playboy Mansion. I'm still waiting."*

Russel's response was more ... well, philosophical. *"It's just the challenge of doing it. It's about promoting the writers whose work we use and review. That, and maybe people might remember my name and buy my fiction. But if I got an invitation to the mansion I wouldn't complain. And I'm sure Doug's in it for similar reasons: I never promised him an invite to the Playboy parties. At least not while sober. And if I did, he's going to have to wait till I get my invite."*

Cool. So, two very different personalities. How do they divide their roles?

Doug: *"I do all the damn work and he codes the site."*

Russel: *"No, you do the reading of the fiction subs and then pass the decent ones on to me."*

Doug: *"And then you veto everything!"*

Russel: *"Not everything! But we both have a hand in editorial suggestions (although he does far more of them than I do!). I take care of stuff like the writing reviews and liaising with authors and keeping the*

*public side of the site going. So if you're not writing fiction you'll probably be dealing ninety percent of the time with me."*

Having got them nicely wound up, I thought it'd be a good time to broach a potentially sensitive question. There was no easy way round it, so I put my fingers to the keys and typed: "You both write." I paused. Then: "Who's better?"

Silence for a while. I could almost hear my computer breathe. Although it was probably the fan. It can be pretty noisy sometimes.

Finally, Doug said: *"In the end, Russel writes a lot more."*

Russel came right back with: *"What's that supposed to mean?"* which I thought was very brave.

Doug: *"Well, you do. That's, what, several short stories and a novel?"*

Russel: *"Currently being edited, so don't hold your breath for publication just yet!"*

Doug: *"Compared to my two shorts – one of which was on Crime Scene Scotland itself! For those interested, the second one will be appearing in an issue of Crime Spree towards the end of the year. I've also got a few other shorts doing the rounds, but we'll wait and see what happens."*

Russel: *"Doug's got a very dark sense of humour; he takes a more direct approach than me to his violence, I think."*

Doug: *"You take things very seriously! But then you seem to do all the literary poses. And I think that slow, measured approach is chilling in a very different way from my own "kick em in the crotch while they're down" style."*

Russel: *"The upshot is we write very differently."*

Doug: *"But I kill a lot more people."*

Fortunately, Russel added "On the page," or I'd have been just a little scared. No, scratch that. I was a little scared regardless.

I'd have to watch my step.

Being Scottish myself, I wanted to ask how important the 'Scotland' part of Crime Scene Scotland was? National pride was at stake here. I was hoping the answer would be: *"Vital,"* or *"we wouldn't have continued without it"*.

Russel replied: *"It was the only address that worked."*

Oh, well.

Russel must have caught the depressed tone of my internet connection and tried to pluck a reason from the depths of his black, black soul.

*"The shop,"* he said, *"was going to be called The Crime Scene but all permutations of that were taken, so since we were based in Scotland it, uh, became CrimeSceneScotland.com. So the Scotland part is really that we're based in Scotland. Other than that we're very multinational (as long as that nationality writes in English!)."*

And then Doug went off on an accusatory tangent: *"You keep saying you're going to change the name or at least make the banner do the crimescenescotland thing. Because no one knows what to call us. We've been Crime Scene, The Crime Scene and Crime Scene Scotland (and sometimes all the words have been run together). And there's no one to blame here but you!"*

Only to be lulled into temporary serenity by Russel: *"I know. Different people give us different names. But the official consensus is that we are Crime Scene Scotland just based on the popularity of that way of describing the site (we're truly democratic!). So I'm going to have get round to changing that banner!"*

Things were heating up. I had to calm these guys down before somebody got hurt.

Right, um, a question that wasn't contentious. Hmmm. I thought long and hard and finally came up with the interviewers equivalent of a pitcher of cold water. *"Which is your favourite issue so far?"* I asked.

*"We've been getting better with each one," Russel said. "From a few early compromises to finally establishing what we want, it's been a huge learning process. #12 is my favourite so far because we're finally getting the mix of fiction/non fiction/reviews which is what I always wanted, and #13 should be great fun, too. We're putting the finishing touches to that one as we speak (although by the time this comes out we might be a couple of issues further on and hopefully even better!)."*

Doug reckons they're getting a better mix of fiction. *"More coherence in terms of style but still hopefully more than a few surprises for regular readers. I know there was a story in issue #12 that shocked a few people (it certainly shocked us when it came in) but the shock was justified. Issue #8 packed in a lot of excellent fiction (that was really my issue; I think we had five or six stories there compared to the usual two or three). But Russel's right: as we're learning more about this zine business, I think we're leaving some of the early issues far behind (although there was still some very good stuff, particularly that short story Russ commissioned for the #0 issue!)."*

The postbag's a regular feature of the zine, and it's a feature I find just as compelling as the problem pages of the Scottish Sun. I asked the lads if they got many comments from visitors to the site.

*"A surprising number," Russel said. "Kind comments from well-wishers, as well as the occasional death threat. Enough to keep the postbag going most months." All letters are edited down to those parts they feel they can best respond to or those that amuse them.*

Doug doesn't deal too much with the actual readers, although a reader did once beg to see what Doug really looked like. But She Who Must Be Obeyed still holds copyright on his image and apparently he has to go around at work with a bag on his head.

So he says. But I'm not convinced. I suspect he's just an ugly bastard. Not that I said as much, though. Indications are that Doug's something of a closet psycho and I wouldn't want to end up a victim of the Bag Man of Dundee.

No, I held my tongue and ventured on. No serious interview is complete without asking a writer for their literary influences.

Russel said: *"The fella whose work made me think I could do this writing gig was Philip K Dick. But he's no longer a direct influence because I realised I'm crap at writing science fiction. But these days: Chandler (and I know I'm committing a cardinal sin when I say Hammett had less of an influence on me although I appreciate his genius), James Lee Burke (I even like the intense descriptions), and Block's Matt Scudder mysteries (they were the first PI series I really got into). But the real answer is absolutely everything I've ever read, even the bad shit. In fact the bad shit's the best because it really shows me what not to do and is usually tremendously entertaining for all the wrong reasons. One other influence someone suggested recently was Ross McDonald, but I'd only read one book of his at the time so he doesn't really count!"*

And Doug is predictably a little different: *"So I gave you a little gift of a couple of books so's you could catch up on something I'm shocked you missed. If you haven't read them by the time this interview goes to press you will be duly slapped. Anyway, as to my own influences, we're talking Willeford, Leonard, Stark (and Westlake!), the list goes on. I loved Thompson's The Getaway (read it before I saw the film). Ellroy was huge in teaching economy of style although I could never write like that. Hunter S Thompson was an incredible powerhouse of energy and ideas and I always reckon if I could get half that power into my own work I'd be getting somewhere. Anyone who can write dark (in any genre) but still have a sense of humour. Ethan Coen's Gates of Eden, for example, contains some wonderfully dark and funny short stories. I love the Coens' work, but oddly enough of all their films the one which I can say for sure influenced me was their very first, Blood Simple."*

Now it may appear from what you've read so far that Crime Scene is two people, Russel and Doug. But in my single-handed investigative (and, dare I say, perilous) navigation of the Crime Scene website, I discovered a name: Rebecca Simpson. It sounded made up to me, but Russel claims differently.

*"Rebecca", he says, "is a dear friend, and was our proofreader/general dogsbody for the first several issues of Crime Scene. She was the reason that spelling mistakes and general bad linkage was kept to*

*a minimum in the beginning; she was the first to see the site so she could tell us any pathetic cock-ups we'd made."*

*And Doug adds: "But these days she's just a supporter of the site, although Brain Box here hasn't updated the staff/faq pages in so long you can't trust anything you read there!"*

The Simpson mystery solved. So, finally, I get to the all-important question, the one I've been dying to ask since I first discovered Russel was a philosopher.

I clear my throat and start typing: *"Russel, which do you reckon is the better analogy in Edie Brickell And The New Bohemians' classic song, 'What I am?'*

*a) 'philosopheeeeeey is the talk on a cereal box'*

*or b) 'philosopheeeeeey is a walk on the slippery rocks'"*

*And Russel replies: "I used to have a philosophy lecturer who shouted that in no uncertain terms could philosophy ever be boiled down to song lyrics. But in this case (and since his rant was mainly about undergrads quoting Oasis songs and thinking they were deep) I'll take b). Why? Because a lot of the philosophy books you take out from university libraries are covered in mould like you find on beach rocks. Oh, wait, you want a serious answer? Um, still b) I reckon. Because, metaphorically speaking, whenever you do philosophy you find yourself on slippery ground and if someone pushes you just right you're going to land really hard on your backside. Oh and it can't be a) because generally philosophy isn't advised before nine in the morning. If you're going to try it then, you really should consult your doctor first."*

Well, now I know.

But I'm a little worried. Doug just emailed me to say that he can't get that bloody Edie Brickell song out of his head.