



The 'Noir' in David Peace's Shadow

by Manuela Barretta

A Conversation with David Peace
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DAVID PEACE was born in 1967 and grew up in Ossett, near Wakefield, UK. He left England in 1991 and went to Istanbul to teach English. In 1994 he took up a teaching position in Tokyo where he still lives with his family.

David Peace's early years were shadowed by the activities of the Yorkshire Ripper, which had a strong impact on him, resulting in his profound interest in crime. His Red Riding quartet grew out of Peace's obsession with the dark side of Yorkshire: they are powerful novels dealing with crime and police corruption and using the Yorkshire Ripper as their basis and inspiration. They are entitled *Nineteen Seventy-Four* (1999), *Nineteen Seventy-Seven* (2000), *Nineteen Eighty* (2001), and *Nineteen Eighty-Three* (2002), and they have been translated into French, Italian, German and Japanese.

It is difficult to imagine that there is today any other novelist who could do what David Peace has done in crime fiction. Reading *Tokyo Year Zero* is like reading poetry, albeit poetry of a kind: its obsessive rhythms, a rapid and bare narrative, and its fevered interior monologues account for the closeness to poetry and create an atmosphere that keeps the reader off-balance.

The story of *Tokyo Year Zero*, the first novel of what will be the Japanese trilogy, is based on the true story of the serial killer Kodaira Yoshio, who raped and killed ten women during the US Occupation. The detective in charge of investigating on the murders is Minami, a reserved man who is trying, with no success, to fight the ghosts of his own past. Minami reconstructs himself by facing the problems with his memory, his dreams and his guilt, and, at the end, this process becomes a reconstruction of Japan's collective memory too.

In 2003 David Peace was named by *Granta Magazine* among the "Best of Young British Novelists".



M. Barretta: *Let's start with your latest novel, Tokyo Year Zero. Why did you choose the US Occupation of Tokyo as your basic issue in this book?*

D. Peace: Sometimes before I started to write my novel, I read *Tokyo Rising*, a book by Edward Seidensticker, in which there was a paragraph that described two murders of Kodaira Yoshio,¹ happened in the Shiba Park in 1946, and I wanted to know why this two murders happened there, why in Tokyo and not in London, for example, and why they happened. I strongly believe that crimes happen at a particular time, in a particular place, to a particular person for very, very, very particular reasons. The book I read was set in the period of the US Occupation, so I thought it would be interesting to speak of those years in order to analyze Japanese society. In the meanwhile I was teaching English to Japanese students and I asked them about this case, but nobody knew anything. In that period I was kind of keeping notes about Tokyo, because the area in which I was living, the East part of Tokyo, was destroyed first by an earthquake in 1923 and then by the bombing in 1945. It was a strange feeling when I walked around the area where I lived, there were no signs of what happened ... you know, Tokyo goes on being completely rebuilt, rebuilt, rebuilt, and I always have this feeling of living in a new place. In 1923, a hundred thousand people died there where I lived and then, in 1945, a hundred thousand people died, and everyday I walked around on this kind of past ashes. I asked people about it, but nobody liked talking about it. I was fascinated by how Tokyo rebuilt itself twice in the 20th Century. My original plan was to write four books covering the time span from the end of World War II to the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. I thought the Olympics marked the time when Tokyo was kind of accepted back into the world. And I want to use crime to tell this story: I feel that crime is a way to describe society, because when you examine a crime, you try to guess why it happened in that society, at that time. I wanted to start with that case, because the victims of that crime, to me, were victims because of the economic and social conditions, because the killer was able to catch them by offering them food or work. Now, in Tokyo, it couldn't work, it couldn't happen again: this makes the difference between yesterday and today.

M. Barretta: *In Tokyo Year Zero Minami endlessly repeats: "I'm a survivor". Did you collect stories from survivors of those years?*

D. Peace: When I was teaching, I met some very old students and they told me what they knew about the story I wanted to tell. I was interested in this subject, so I asked them to tell me what they remembered. I really never spoke with survivors, but before I began the book, I knew I wanted to write about this period from the point of view of the Japanese survivors.

¹ Kodaira Yoshio was a serial killer who raped and murdered ten women between May 25, 1945 and August 6, 1946 in Tochigi and Tokyo. After the fifth murder, he started committing necrophilia with the corpses. His murder victims included teenagers. He also raped about 30 women in addition to his murder victims. On August 20, 1946, Kodaira was arrested. One of the victims was never identified. The Supreme Court sentenced him to death on November 16, 1948. He was executed on October 5, 1949.



M. Barretta: *In a paragraph of your book you describe Nishi as a clown, facing the American troops, while, on the other side, there is Minami who is really angry with Americans because of their violent ways with Japanese people, women especially. This part deals quite explicitly with the different attitudes of Japanese people to the American invaders – because they felt the Americans were actually invaders – during the occupation. However, even today I see the same attitude in young Japanese people towards Western people. Do you think it depends from the education they have received, or from a sort of envy and admiration they feel towards people from the West?*

D. Peace: It is not education, it is fear. Under the occupation, Japanese people were forbidden to travel abroad, under the occupation they were kept apart from Americans, Americans didn't go to the same movie theatres, for example, so they couldn't interact, there was no contact. During this ten-year period there was a bad propaganda about foreigners, but then, with the Korean War, with the Olympic Games, they started to travel abroad and they travel generally in groups, then they don't really interact. In my experience Japanese people are very, very, nervous and afraid of foreigners, even now.

M. Barretta: *In your book some Japanese people accept the American occupation, some others reject it. Do you think this ambiguity is still present today?*

D. Peace: If you talk about the occupation period, this is just not discussed. As a matter of fact you don't see any traces of that occupation. But my book was well received in Japan: it sold a lot of copies, it won a prize, a Japanese film company would like to make it into a movie. In this aspect I don't think there is hostility. In the period after the occupation, and in the years from 1952 to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Tokyo was totally rebuilt and there are very sentimental films and manga about the period after the occupation.

But, basically, everything in Japan, even now in 2008, the politics for example, goes back to the US Occupation, because in this period the Americans gave a political Constitution to Japan. After 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan and the War in Iraq, the Bush administration needed Japan to support the war, but in the Japanese Constitution it is forbidden to use the army to attack. Since 1952, the same political party, that in Japan is called Jiminto, has always been in charge. Jiminto has always wanted to change the Constitution, but when Bush asked the party to go to war with him, this request wanted to be used by the Jiminto Government – which is right wing oij – to change the Japanese Constitution, therefore they had the chance to change Constitution, but they didn't. So you have a bizarre situation now, where the Japanese Communist parties, for example, are defending the Constitution that the same American country gave to Japan back in time, and we must note that this was a very good Constitution. What I'm saying is that Japan is becoming more nationalistic and also it's reacting against the Constitution, and it all goes back to the occupation period, especially for younger people.



M. Barretta: *How did American readers react to Tokyo Year Zero?*

D. Peace: They did OK, few female reviewers attacked the book, but last September I went to America to promote it, it was my first time, I've never been to America, and it was... interesting! [*laughs*]. I went to New York City, Seattle and San Francisco... I mean, as an English person, as a European, I have a kind of pre-conception that Americans are not so politically aware, but actually, with this book, when I did interviews, most of the questions were about parallels between the occupation of Japan and the occupation of Iraq, so the questions were really quite specifically about war, about Iraq, about Japan, and contrasts and comparisons, so I was quite surprised.

M. Barretta: *And what about the reaction of the English people?*

D. Peace: English people are not interested in Japan, really. In England there are two kind of stereotypes of Japanese culture, the culture of the temples, of the geishas, of the kimonos, and then there is that kind of manga, Murakami, sushi, of lights and deafening noises of Tokyo, but beyond that, they are not really interested in Japan, which is understandable because it is a culture so different from the western one. I didn't know much about Tokyo before I arrived here. For Americans it is different because fifty thousand troops are still here so, to them, Japan is a very safe place. Besides English people are quite closed-minded, not very international, and when I do interviews in France or in Italy or in Germany, people are more interested in other cultures; in England they are not. For example, in England the number of translated books has gone down dramatically, when I was a teenager everybody wanted to read foreign writers, but now it's not so.

M. Barretta: *You just talked about the deafening noises of Tokyo. I also noticed Tokyo is a very noisy city...*

D. Peace: In my experience, most Western people who visit Tokyo think it is a noisy city, but actually my Japanese friends think Tokyo is a quiet city and I know what they mean, because, for example, if you take the subway everybody is quiet, instead in England people used to be talking. In Japan nobody talks with nobody else, everybody is listening to their iPods, or reading a book, and they're not interacting in any way. So when you get off the train and the music starts, it's strange.

M. Barretta: *In Tokyo there is music everywhere. Is this a cultural factor?*

D. Peace: It is just the fear of silence. Normally, when I was teaching English, there was music in the classroom. Sometimes it was ridiculous, because during the day I "tried" to teach in a private school, but it was not easy, so I went to see the manager and said to her: "When we are teaching, please turn the music off" [*laughs*], but she



said that the problem was, if prospective students came to visit the school, and it was quiet, they became nervous and intimidated by the silence.

M. Barretta: *At the airport there is a great silence and I felt this kind of sensation there, I was like intimidated by that silence.*

D. Peace: Yes, the airport impact is not very friendly. When you arrive at the Tokyo airport you have to do the fingerprints in your eyes, and it is not a very welcome impact. At the moment, it is quite paranoid because of the G8 in Hokkaido. In 2002, during the World Cup, there was the same atmosphere and they were very scared of hooligans. The FIFA World Cup was interesting because I think Japanese nationalism started there. Japan shared the World Cup with Korea and at first, when Korea was playing, the Japanese young people supported the Korea team. But the media started to report that in Korea, when Japan was playing, Korean young people were cheering for the opposing team, they wanted Japan to lose and so a manga² started saying that Korea cheated at the World Cup and at the same time, there was a Korean romantic drama³ and a lot of Japanese women fell in love with the actors of this movie. I think, really, Japanese men felt anger after the combination of these two facts, so maybe this brought a kind of reaction. Then there were problems with China too, so another manga started about anti-Chinese movements, a kind of racist manga⁴ and after that, Japanese people kept having this negative feeling.

M. Barretta: *Maybe this happened because Japan is a closed country. Why did you choose Tokyo to teach English and then to live with your family?*

D. Peace: Just for money. I left England in 1992. I graduated in 1991 at Manchester University where I studied English and meanwhile I was writing a book. When I finished University I stayed unemployed for one year, I was writing a novel that has never been published. It is a very, very long novel [*laughs*].

M. Barretta: *What kind of novel?*

D. Peace: Inside there is a crime element too, but it was more inspired by Burroughs, Ballard and that kind of writers. By that time I needed money, so I went to Istanbul in 1992 to teach, I stayed there for two years and I liked it but, you know, Turkish Communism was a nightmare. I shared an apartment with a guy who had

² *Manga Kenkanryu* is a controversial manga written by Sharin Yamano dealing with Korean-Japanese disputes and the anti-Korean sentiment in Japan. The manga started as a web comic on the author's website entitled *Chosen*, and after being refused publication for two years, it was published by Shinyusha Co., Ltd.

³ The drama is *Winter Sonata*.

⁴ *Introduction to China* is a comic book that portrays the Chinese as a depraved people obsessed with cannibalism. The two comic books, portraying Chinese and Koreans as base peoples and advocating confrontation with them, have become runaway best sellers in Japan in the last four months of 2005.



been to Tokyo and he suggested me I should go there for a year to earn more money than in Istanbul, so I went to Tokyo in 1994 and I am still here.

M. Barretta: *So you arrived here just for money, not because you were fascinated by Japanese culture...*

D. Peace: Yes, because I wanted to write, but I needed money to live. When I arrived here, I knew no one and I couldn't speak Japanese, so I was writing in the morning, all the mornings, and I did it for six years. Then I met my wife, who is Japanese and we just stayed here. But when I came here I had no plan to stay. I was not really interested in Japan before, I mean, I saw some movies, but in 1980s we didn't have the manga, sushi, Murakami culture. I knew a little bit but I didn't have any real interests. Then I became more interested, but at the same time I was working at the book about England, so for a long time I didn't really interact with Japanese people, I stayed in my room in the morning to study and write and I went to school to teach English and then I came back home and I wrote again. I didn't have Japanese friends and now, in my house, we want the children to learn English, so we speak English because they go to a Japanese school and so I have never really discovered the Japanese idiom.

M. Barretta: *Noir* is a genre with quite standard features all over the world. For example, the central character of your book, Minami, is a Japanese detective, but he could be an American or a French detective too. Do you think that *noir* could overcome the cultural differences that characterize the literary tradition of a country?

D. Peace: We don't have a strong *noir* tradition in England, like in America, in France or in Italy, but I think crimes happen in every country. Now there is a kind of globalization, people are interested in Swedish *noir* literature, you know, the biggest writer is Mankell. Nowadays every country has a kind of "one writer" in a literary genre, and they translate his [*sic*] works all over the world, it's a kind of tourism. However, to me, the most important thing about *noir* or crime fiction is what you do with the crime. I mean, if you're just going to write about the mystery and who the killer is, it seems like a game to me. Or if you do like Thomas Harris with *Hannibal Lecter*... I'm not interested in that. I don't want to read books about imaginary serial killers. I don't want mystery and suspense because I've got that everywhere I look. I want truths and answers. Because crimes happen in every country, I think, to some degree, we are all responsible when crimes happen in the society in which we live. If you write about crime, you have to have a kind of political or moral reason to do it. I'm writing because I want to examine this society and I think crime is the best way to examine our society. I believe the crime writer, by his [*sic*] choice of genre, is obliged to document his times with his crimes.



M. Barretta: *Do you feel there should be a different atmosphere in a Japanese noir, compared to an Italian noir, for example?*

D. Peace: Yeah, I read a lot of Japanese crimes. There was a writer called Matsumoto Seicho who wrote a series of detective novels, which are a kind of *noir* stories, but once they were translated into English they were a bit similar to George Simenon, with this kind of classical kind of detective. He also wrote non-fiction, in particular a book called *Black Fog Over Japan*, that is not translated into English or Italian, it is only in Japanese, and this novel is about strange cases, strange crimes that happened during the US Occupation. I don't agree with him, because he thinks every case can be connected to the Americans and I don't think it is true, but he is a very interesting writer. Generally, I think the level of Japanese crime fiction is a kind of Agatha Christie one, a kind of mystery and suspense, or, on the other hand, it is a kind of Raymond Chandler one, with a private eye, rainy streets... that kind of stereotyped things. So here I haven't really found anything particularly unique or original.

M. Barretta: *Were you interested in noir or crime stories when you were young? I mean, what happened in your life to lead you to write the kind of novels that you write?*

D. Peace: You know, when you are a child, your parents and your teachers give you the books to read, but the first books I chose were not children's readings, they were the *Sherlock Holmes* series and at the same time I read the *Marvel* comics and the *DC* comics. At first I wanted to be a comic book writer but I really can't draw... But to be honest, I think the single biggest influence upon me was growing up when and where I did. I was ten years old when Jayne McDonald was murdered in Leeds in 1974. From that day, until the capture of the Yorkshire Ripper in 1981, I was obsessed with trying to solve the case. I used to cut out photographs of dead prostitutes and all kind of articles related to the killer, I think because I was interested in *Sherlock Holmes*, in *Batman* and in *Marvel* comics. In England I have a huge collection of *Marvel* and *DC Comics* from 1972...

M. Barretta: *I think that noir is man's stuff, because some novels are explicitly sexist. What do you think about it?*

D. Peace: I don't really like *noir* very much, or crime fiction, not really, I mean, because it is so closely linked to the American pastoral tradition, with a crime and the man who comes and makes the world all right and then it becomes a redemption, and there is some kind of romantic "femme fatale" type, and, to me, it is just... rubbish.

M. Barretta: *But in your novel there is a kind of "femme fatale" too.*

D. Peace: Unfortunately there is, kind of. What I mean is quite evident in the book. I don't agree with this idea of a woman, but that's how a lot of men think when they idealize a woman. I think it's difficult to write about this, because, for example, with this book, sometimes I was accused by female critics, in America, of using



stereotypes, but the difficulty is that the stereotype exists, so you can't ignore it. Now I'm writing the second book, and I really try hard to change the point of view. In this book, for the first time, I'm using two female narrators, basically twelve different narrators and two of them are female; one of them is the wife of the detective and the other one is the survivor of a sex crime. It's really important to try to think of a way to counter the traditional detective kind of narrative and hopefully in the second novel of the Japanese trilogy there will be more balance.

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