Foreword

Maurizio Ascari

Given the relevance of tattoos in the varied territory of detective and crime fiction, it was high time a volume like *Tattoos in crime and detective narratives: Marking and remarking* was written. Thus it is with sincere gratitude that I thank its valiant editors – Kate Watson and Katharine Cox – and contributors for joining efforts and investigating this fascinating subject with so much energy and critical acumen. What I can offer in the space of a brief foreword is what waiters in restaurants call an ‘amuse bouche’, a small starter that aims to whet the appetite for more.

Tattoos are complex bodily artefacts that may include figurative and/or decorative elements (often endowed with symbolic value), also in association with writing. Harmonising with the design of the body, they fulfil an aesthetic function, but they also testify to an individual’s history, personality and allegiances. The narrative potential of tattoos and related body modifications is associated with the ‘life stories’ of those who bear them, a coin that inevitably has two sides. In a variety of epochs and social contexts, tattoos signified ownership, as in the case of slaves and prostitutes, while fugitive slaves, criminals and deserters were also branded or otherwise marked with the aim of ensuring subsequent recognition at recapture or of preventing ‘offenders’ from achieving anonymity.

Given the importance branding has had throughout the centuries as an emblem of either being included in or excluded from a social group, it does not come as a surprise that it is present in literature right from the Bible. In *Genesis*, the primal murderer – Cain – is not only cursed and condemned to a life of exile, but also bears a mysterious mark, apparently to prevent others from killing him. This original outcast, an offender who cannot wash his mark of infamy clean because of divine decree, casts a long shadow over the course of the centuries.

Tattooing as a custom to mark punishment ended towards the end of the

1 'Malefactor's register'.

eighteenth century, having found its way into literature thanks to works such as *The malefactors register or the Newgate and Tyburn calendars* (1779), where the anguish and spectacle of branding is clearly represented (see Figure 1). Likewise, in Alexandre Dumas's *The three musketeers* (1844), it is a *fleur de lys* mark that reveals the original guilt of the perfidious Milady de Winter. Contrasting the woman's ability to change identity, the permanence of the tattoo ultimately unmasks her, bringing her underlying nature to light.

The invention of photography and the development of forensic science definitely made branding redundant as a means of identification. In the meantime, however, a related form of body writing – criminal tattoos – had acquired new meaning in the eyes of criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, whose attempt to grasp complexity by combining biological and cultural data testifies both to his intellectual daring and dangerous inclination towards self-validating theories.

Tattoos are prominent already in the first edition of *L'Uomo delinquente* (1876).¹ After describing tattoos as 'eternal traces of the ideas and passions that predominate in the man of the people' (1876: 45; my translation), Lombroso uses them to prove that deviance results from atavism (the survival of the primitive within civilisation). Statistically associating tattoos with male criminals (and a smaller minority of other social categories, from soldiers and mariners to prostitutes), Lombroso explores the tattoo's symbolic meaning, pertaining mainly to the spheres of war, love/sex, religion and profession.

Tattoos manifest allegiance to a social group and a concomitant need to prove one's courage, sexual drive and affective needs, not to mention forms of 'superstition'. Regarding tattoos as symptoms of atavism, Lombroso associates the customs of European criminals to those of extra-European 'savages' and ancient populations. Different times and spaces, different peoples and art forms are nonchalantly conflated by Lombroso, who reminds us of the importance tattoos had for ancient Britons (from the Greek *pittanoi*, tattooed) and Picts (from the Latin *picti*, painted).

Relating the disposition of tattoos to the 'professional' exposition of certain body parts (as is apparent in the case of mariners and miners), Lombroso regards this as explaining the obscene, ironic or even poetical tattoos certain prostitutes have on their private parts. To exemplify this anatomical dimension, the text features the portrait of a prisoner (see Figure 2) whose tattoos trace an affective map, displaying his vengeful nature, his love for his mother and his political allegiance, as symbolised by the emblem of the House of Savoy.

Only, this emblem is tattooed on the prisoner's penis, the glans of which shows a woman's visage. The prisoner's choice of having his genitals thus marked enables Lombroso to expand on a central aspect of his theory – the criminals' insensitivity to pain, which approaches them to savages. Everything

2 Cesare Lombroso's 'Prisoner with tattoos'.

is connected in this investigation of evolutionary drawbacks, which we cannot help seeing as a caricature of the positivist faith in science.

Although Lombroso's theories are thankfully no longer viable, their cultural import is undisputed since they contributed to shaping the collective imagination of the criminal at a time that was crucial to the formation of detective fiction as a literary genre. Lombroso's ideas were disseminated all over Europe and beyond. Alexandre Lacassagne's *Les tatouages: Étude anthropologique et medico-légale* (1881) extensively discusses Lombroso's theory of atavism, partly in an attempt to revise it, while Havelock Ellis's *The criminal* (1890) includes a chapter on tattooing (see Figure 3), where the 'findings' of Italian criminal anthropologists are integrated with further data concerning Great Britain.

3 Cesare Lombroso's 'French sailor and deserter'.

4 'Gambier Bolton's back tattooed by Sutherland Macdonald'.

Tattoos, however, were not univocally associated with crime in the context of the *fin de siècle*, as proved by an article that appeared in *The Strand magazine* in 1897. The author of 'Pictures on the human skin' – Gambier Bolton, a Fellow of the Zoological Society – presents tattoos as a form of art by means of several photographs. The article lavishes praise on Sutherland Macdonald, whose taste for painting and career in the Royal Engineers translated into the invention of the electric needle that he uses to produce 'the very finest tattooing the world has ever seen' (1897: 431). The author's enthusiasm is shown to be written on his own body in the final set of illustrations (see Figure 4).

Bolton's article testifies to what Watson and Cox label in their introduction as the first renaissance of tattooing, which was triggered by the mechanisation

of the process, juxtaposing it to the second renaissance that we are currently experiencing.

Spanning the divide between criminal subcultures and pop culture, tattoos convey a flair for transgression and the primitive to which our hyper-civilised societies respond with a mixture of fear and desire. Tattoos also call our attention to the body as a signifier at the interface between the individual and society; a privileged observatory on social norms and their violation, as transpires from the present collection of essays, which offers a 'thick reading' (to paraphrase Clifford Geertz) of crime fiction, keeping in focus both text and context, literary and the anthropological phenomena.

The insightful critical investigation this team of scholars has conducted under the expert guidance of Watson and Cox enables us to reflect on the shifting relevance of criminals in fictions of crime and detection. While gothic and sensation novelists – such as Louisa May Alcott, who is paid homage in this book together with Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle – freely explored the narrative potential of villains and villainesses, offenders were often confined to the background in Golden Age novels, where detection is centre stage and guilt resides with the least likely suspect. It was the twentieth-century rise of subgenres, such as the hardboiled and the psycho-thriller, that shifted the balance back, while critics responded to this metamorphosis by re-defining the genre itself, starting from Julian Symons's *Bloody murder. From the detective story to the crime novel: A history* (1972). This example was soon followed by Stephen Knight and others, who opted for the label of crime fiction as a more inclusive alternative to detective fiction.

Although the criminal is at the core of contemporary literature (and criticism), this is not to the detriment of the investigation, as the boundary between detective and offender is often blurred in recent narratives. Characters such as Leonard Shelby (*Memento* 2000) and Lisbeth Salander (*The girl with the dragon tattoo* 2005) come to mind. Both extensively discussed in this collection, their traumatic experiences translate into various forms of otherness, including an array of tattoos that testify to their multi-layered and self-conflicting personalities. These tattoos, moreover, resonate with a nearby notation concerning their talent for detection, which enables Salander 'to get *under the skin* of the person she was investigating' (2005: 33; my emphasis). We are again in the realm of complexity. These traumatised, 'vulnerable' detectives coexist within the pages of Watson and Cox's critical volume with less predictable heroes such as Harry Potter or Sam and Dean Winchester (*Supernatural*, 2005–present), whose bodily marks remind us that in order to fight the dark side one must somehow be in touch with it.

As we can see, using tattoos as a critical lens enables us to shed light on both the history of crime fiction and its present – as marked not only by the centrality of the body, but also by an investigation into the intricacies of the

psyche and of social structures, of individual and collective drives, concerns and belief systems. Firmly grounded on this awareness of complexity, *Tattoos in crime and detective narratives: Marking and remarking* bravely embraces a wide array of genres, media and cultures, not to mention their unceasing hybridisation, in order to render the global dimension of crime and detective fiction. Reading this book has been an enlightening and exciting experience for me, and I can only conclude by wishing other readers the same degree of cognitive and emotional involvement.

NOTES

- 1 A summary of which would appear in translation as *Criminal man* in 1911.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Gambier, Bolton (1897), 'Pictures on the human skin', *The Strand magazine*, xiii (January–June), 425–34.
- Larsson, Stieg (2011), *The girl with the dragon tattoo* [*Män som hatar kvinnor*], trans. R. Keeland (London: Macle hose Press).
- Lombroso, Cesare (1876), *Criminal man* [*L'Uomo delinquente*] (Milano: Hoepli).