



Crime Stories and Urban Fantasy

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Abstract. Among the many unexplored areas of urban fantasy is its relation to crime fiction. This article explores how features of the crime story are used to emphasize, reinforce, or introduce urban fantasy's social commentary. It looks at the genres' relationship, analyzing three urban fantasies and their respective crime fiction elements.

Speculative fiction, whether science fiction, fantasy, or supernatural horror, has often been cast in the shape of, or combined with, crime fiction. In urban fantasy—stories about myths and magic in modern urban settings—it is particularly common to use crime fiction elements. Urban fantasy's *dramatis personae* features the criminal investigator with striking frequency and often as protagonist. The private eye, police officer, journalist, or freelance guardian of the law may simply stumble across something weird in their mundane line of duty, but they often specialize in crimes related to the supernatural. Several of these investigators actually belong to the fantastic domain themselves. Examples are numerous, including specialized police units (in books by Liz Williams, Ben Aaronovitch, and China Miéville) as well as private investigators such as Jim Butcher's Harry Dresden, Mike Resnick's John Justin Mallory, and Simon R. Green's John Taylor.

By analyzing how urban fantasy and crime fiction come together in three texts—Michael Swanwick's locked-room mystery "A Small Room in Koboldtown" (2007), Kim Harrison's hard-boiled private-investigator book *Dead Witch Walking* (2004), and Terry Pratchett's police novel *Feet of Clay* (1996)—this essay argues that one of crime fiction's important contributions to urban fantasy is to reinforce the commentary on social concerns. The function of crime fiction elements in urban fantasy—providing an arena for social commentary—will be discussed. The selected texts illustrate a range of urban fantasy types while presenting clear (rather than representative) examples of three types of crime fiction. To facilitate a comparative analysis, all texts can be considered to be *immersive fantasies*: although the fictive world is what Tolkien refers to as a "secondary world" ("Fairy-Stories" 139–40), the readers occupy a narrative position in which they are assumed to be as much a part of the fictive world as the characters encountered within it (Mendlesohn 59).

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The combination of crime fiction and urban fantasy is not as unexpected as it may seem. Urban fantasy is a very broad generic category, drawing from a great number of sources such as crime fiction (Ekman 452), which, in itself, has the ability to combine with unexpected genres such as steampunk and post-apocalyptic fiction (Andrew and Phelps 141). Maurizio Ascari, exploring the relation among crime fiction, the supernatural, and the gothic, discusses a number of “supernatural sleuths” and “psychic detectives” of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (77–87). Today, these detectives of the supernatural find their descendants among the many urban-fantasy investigators who solve crimes related to the mythical and magical.

That either crime fiction or various subcategories of the genre are suitable for addressing different social concerns is well established. Peter Messent, for instance, emphasizes the capacity of crime fiction to weave social issues into the narrative. He observes in *The Crime Fiction Handbook*:

crime fiction confronts the problems of the everyday world in which we live as directly as any form of writing can. It allows its readers—though sometimes indirectly and obliquely—to engage with their deepest social concerns, their most fundamental anxieties about themselves and their surrounding world. This engagement, though, can vary in intensity and vary too in explicit recognition by the reader of its presence. (7)

Even if the level of engagement varies, Messent’s point is that a confrontation with the readers’ social concerns and anxieties is ubiquitous. Peter Clandfield similarly argues that the “connection between dysfunctional social systems and menacing urban environments is a foundational convention of crime fiction” (80). The three urban fantasies discussed below offer such dysfunctional social systems and menacing urban environments, although the menace is generally of a supernatural kind.

Not all types of crime-fiction plots are equally well-suited for urban fantasy. The Golden Age detective story (as championed by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers) is set in locales and populated with a cast that positions it far away from most urban fantasy. Although some of its structures (such as the clue-puzzle) may be used, its typically conservative and bourgeois value system (such as Stephen Knight describes in his discussion of Christie [107]) is less easily transplanted. The tradition growing out of the hard-boiled detective stories of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Mickey Spillane, on the other hand, has contributed much, partly through the physical investigations required by the hard-boiled P.I.: rather than performing an intellectual armchair exercise, the private eye travels from one place to another. There is also congruence in setting. Messent’s description of the hard-boiled setting as “a complex and labyrinthine urban world” (*Crime* 30) fits a great many urban fantasies as well. The three examples offer labyrinthine settings, but only the second, by Harrison, offers a clear parallel to, and comment on, the hard-boiled tradition. The third example, by Pratchett, is a clear-cut police novel. The first to be analyzed is a text by Swanwick that draws on arguably the oldest form of crime fiction: the locked-room mystery.



The locked-room mystery does not feature widely in urban fantasy, making Swanwick’s text an interesting but uncommon example. In a discussion of Charles Williams (author of *Descent into Hell* [1937]) and his method for making a mythical story work in the present, Brian Attebery observes that Williams “borrow[s] a plot from a popular formula, the detective story” (50). Like Williams, Swanwick blends modernity and myth, but

his is a modern society populated by creatures of folklore using a mixture of magic and science—making a modern story work in a mythical world rather than vice versa. Swanwick draws on a variety of formulae to meld the two together, bringing to the fore a number of perspectives such as the relationship between law enforcement and particular social groups.

The locked-room mystery in “A Small Room in Koboldtown” recalls Edgar Allan Poe’s seminal example, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841). The main character, Will, is an assistant to Alderman Salem Toussaint and finds himself involved in the murder of the boggart (bugbear) Bobby Buggane.¹ On the surface, this is a typical locked-room mystery: Buggane’s body is found with his heart torn out, in a room with bars in front of the half-open window and a deadbolt locking the door from the inside. Once this familiar type of puzzle has been established, the mystery is turned on its head, seeming to be no mystery at all. The police detectives reason as follows:

1. The door is locked. The perpetrator must have been able to walk through locked doors.
2. Haints (ghosts) can do this, unless there is a ward (a type of guard against ghosts) above the door.
3. There is no ward above Buggane’s door, but the door to the building has a ward.
4. Thus, the only haint who is allowed into the building must, *ipso facto*, be guilty.

By making use of the possibilities offered by his mythical world and creatures, Swanwick quickly turns the explicit locked-room mystery into a setup. The locked door is not the total barrier that it could so easily be assumed to be but is rather the equivalent of a door to which only a single person has the key. It becomes a filter: find the person with the key, and you have the killer. The main suspect’s culpability is established solely by his ability to walk through locked doors. The mystery resolves itself into an open-and-shut case not despite but rather by virtue of its locked-room quality. Yet, by observing a number of incongruities between the crime scene and the detectives’ simple explanation of what must have transpired, Will returns the open-and-shut case into a locked-room mystery: Buggane’s heart was ripped out while he was standing by the window, but the body was found in the bathroom, and the victim washed his hands as his last act. How is it, however, that neither heart nor blood could be found outside, below the window? The facts do not fit the simple solution required by the police.

In Swanwick’s world, creatures have peculiar abilities and magic exists, but it is a magic that follows rules. Haints can walk through closed doors. Boggarts can live for a period without a heart, and, moreover, a magical crystal heart can bring its owner back to life hours after death. Along with the reader, Will uncovers these facts and—armed with this information and some minor observations—he can deduce the hows and whys of the case and eventually capture Buggane and his accomplice as they try to leave the morgue.

The crime is not particularly complex; one good clue is all it takes to solve it. Much more interesting is the use of the crime plot to describe the world and society. The scene of the crime is in Koboldtown, an urban area characterized by social inequality. The reader is told how “Koboldtown was a transitional neighbourhood with all the attendant tension. There were lots of haints on the streets but the apartment building the police cars were clustered about had sprigs of fennel above the door to keep them out” (Swanwick, *Dragons* 211). Haints occupy a low social position and are kept out of apartment buildings—a fact that is central to the case: the haint that works as a janitor in the building is the only one let in, thus making him the prime suspect. That haints are generally despised becomes even

clearer from one police detective referring to the suspect with the apparently derogatory term “spook” (Swanwick, *Dragons* 213). The boggart victim is referred to by the same detective as “[j]ust another lowlife” (Swanwick, *Dragons* 211). Rather than questioning the oddities surrounding the case—how did the blood end up where it was? Where did the heart go? Why did the victim wash his hands *after* having his heart torn out?—the police settle on a simple solution that conforms to their social preconceptions. Will solves the case only to realize that Toussaint had figured the whole thing out from the beginning. When asked why he did not tell the police, the Alderman explains that the police preferred hearing the story from “a white boy” rather than from him. This is an intradiegetic reference to Will being an elf and therefore part of the ruling class/race but also a thinly veiled allusion to the sometimes strained relations between the police and various ethnic groups in the actual world.

Swanwick subverts the murder-mystery formula by using fantasy elements as essential plot components. The ability to walk through locked doors, to live for a while without a heart, and to return to life with a magic crystal are all necessary for the construction of the mystery. The reader is clearly not meant to solve the case, something that becomes obvious as the reader is not informed about the magic heart when Will finds out about it. By mixing fantasy elements, contemporary urban markers, and a murder mystery, Swanwick draws attention to social and ethnic problems in a general fashion. Political power, ethnic and social conflicts, and the police as representatives of the establishment are brought together in this short episode, allowing space for reflection on social or racial profiling by law enforcement in the reader’s own society. The murder-mystery plot—well established and clearly recognized by most readers—functions as a catalyst, bringing out the confrontations between various groups without focusing on any particular society’s problems.



The second text, by Harrison, draws on the private eye tradition. In the concluding paragraphs of “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler describes the detective who must walk down the “mean streets” of the world. It is a lengthy description of the private eye as a man of (rare) integrity in a world of (ubiquitous) crime. In conclusion, Chandler offers his view of what a detective story ought to be: “The story of this man’s adventure in search of a hidden truth” (508). In many ways, this is just as much a description of an urban fantasy as of a crime narrative. Chandler’s untarnished, fearless, and unusual detective could be a suitable hero in either genre. Although Chandler would not have been familiar with the range of supernatural beings that haunt the worlds of urban fantasy, he might have recognized the mean streets of their societies and would certainly have recognized the people who go down them, men such as Harry Dresden (Butcher), John Taylor (Green), and John Justin Mallory (Resnick), and women such as Vicki Nelson (Tanya Huff), Ivy Granger (E. J. Stevens), and the example under discussion: Rachel Morgan.

Harrison’s *Dead Witch Walking* is the first of the 13-book Hollows series featuring the witch and private investigator (“runner”) Rachel Morgan. In the first chapters, Rachel quits her job with a law enforcement agency for freelance work with two colleagues. Her vengeful ex-boss promptly puts a price on her head, and there are recurrent assassination attempts throughout the book. In an attempt to buy her contract, Rachel decides to provide her former employer with evidence against the businessman and politician Trent Kalamack, whom she believes to be the city’s foremost drug lord. The plot moves Rachel from one clue to the next, culminating in the interception of a shipment of illegal biodrugs, although Kalamack evades capture.

The hard-boiled detective story combines with urban fantasy in drawing attention to the ills of the fictive world and thus commenting on the reader's own society. Particularly conspicuous in *Dead Witch Walking* is the social criticism through the portrayal of a world gone wrong, in which the detective needs to be hard-boiled, autonomous, and a person of integrity while facing a sexual threat from femmes and hommes fatale. W. H. Auden famously refers to Chandler's setting as "The Great Wrong Place" (265), and Rachel's world matches Chandler's in wrongness if not bleakness. It is a society in which a corrupt police force hires assassins while politicians and captains of industry rub shoulders with criminals, and a toothless legal system fails to protect the weak. It is also a world of magic and supernatural creatures: although identifiable as a version of present-day Cincinnati, the series is set in an alternative timeline in which supernatural beings such as vampires, were-creatures, and witches (collectively called "Inderlanders") came out of hiding and kept civilization running when a pandemic nearly wiped out humanity. Humans are inferior in this brave, new world, and even law enforcement is divided, split into the humans-only Federal Inderlander Bureau (FIB) and its Inderlander-run counterpart Inderlander Security (I.S.). Rachel's society is one of human/Inderlander segregation and social tension—a "Great Wrong Place" different from the actual world yet recognizable in its structural problems.

It is in this world of wrongness that Rachel has to balance the toughness and independence required by her society against her personal integrity and the loyalty she inspires in her allies. Tony Hilfer argues that "The Great Wrong Place suits the tough detective, giving him something to be tough about" (32), and Dennis Porter suggests that the fact that the P.I. "can take the occasional beating [is] the ritualised proof of a private eye's power to survive in a tough world" (109). Rachel advances the plot by moving from one place to the next, often paying for a clue with some form of physical punishment, demonstrating that her world is not for the weak. Like other tough detectives, Rachel and her ability to "take the occasional beating" underscore the wrongs of her society, highlighting the critical social discourse.

In such a society, being tough is not the same as the ability to retaliate—it is about self-control and integrity, about being better than the enemy. From an urban-fantasy perspective, Harrison's protagonist follows in the footsteps of the "tough female protagonists" (Donohue) that have become a genre staple in the wake of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) but that can be traced back at least to the 1980s and independent female protagonists such as Jilly Coppercorn in Charles de Lint's Newford stories and Emma Bull's Eddi McCandry in *War for the Oaks* (1987). As detective, Rachel may be cast in the same mold as the "[f]it, self-contained, and street-wise" female P.I.s of Marcia Muller, Sara Paretsky, and Sue Grafton: able to handle guns and face threats and attacks (Gavin 264), although she is decidedly less inclined to kill. Her weapon of choice is nonlethal white magic and, although she finds herself training in unarmed combat and the use of other magic during the course of the series, she is cast in stark opposition to the corrupt and violent police force she has rejected. In contrast to Kalamack's political machinations, her former colleague's graft, and the spiteful vengeance of her ex-boss, Rachel comes across as pillar of virtue in a corrupt society. She fits the image of a hard-boiled P.I. who serves as an example of "(by and large) honesty and integrity in a modernized urban world generally associated with greed, chicanery, and political corruption" (Messent, *Crime* 17) and responds to Kalamack's attempt to buy her loyalty with a resolute "I quit my job, . . . not my morals" (Harrison 168). Over the course of the novel, her fairness, self-sacrifice, and morally upright behavior earns her the loyalty and friendship of many of those she encounters. They become

her greatest assets but also the greatest challenge to her independence and thus become a focal point for conflicts in the novel.

Autonomy is a central driving force for Rachel, something she shares with a number of other male and female detectives (Walton and Jones 30–31). In *Dead Witch Walking* she paints Kalamack as a ruthless dealer of illegal substances, a representative of a corrupt political system and a society where money can buy anyone. But although she does her best to rid the world of Kalamack, she is first and foremost striving to save herself. Throughout the novel, it is Rachel's autonomy that is mainly at stake. She seeks an understandable independence from the I.S., but she is also loathe to become dependent on her friends: "I owe Nick and Jenks my life," [she] said, hating it. "What's so great about that?" (Harrison 323). She wants to depend on no one, because she ultimately fears placing someone else in danger. Her role as private eye thus comes into conflict with her role as fantasy hero. Like so many heroes in quest fantasies, she finds herself the unwilling leader of a motley crew of companions whose loyalty she commands. Over the course of the novel, Rachel therefore changes from a lone wolf to the center of a traditional fantasy fellowship. "Looks to me like you've become the leader here," the guide figure Keasley tells her at a pivotal moment. "Accept it. People will be doing things for you. Don't be selfish. Let them" (Harrison 323). Grudgingly, she does, consolidating the roles of fantasy hero and independent P.I.

Friendship and leadership provide one challenge to Rachel's autonomy, highlighted through the dissonance between fantasy and crime fiction traditions. A far more explicit threat is cast in the guise of the femme fatale, an additional character type that emerged in the hard-boiled formula as it developed in the *Black Mask* magazine, assuming an often central role (Moody 233; Cawelti 147). John G. Cawelti describes it as a role of sexual temptation, challenge, and threat to the male detective's honor that serves to distract the detective's attention from the quest for justice (154–56). With a female detective, the threat takes the shape of an homme fatale, with the additional threat of rape (Mizejewski 153; Klein 180; Walton and Jones 174). In *Dead Witch Walking*, dangerous sexuality is a recurring theme, and Rachel finds herself in gradually more threatening situations. Although she manages to maintain control in early encounters (in a bar [13–14] and with her ex-boss [43–45]), that control becomes more tenuous (see 83–84, 141–43) until the sexual threats culminate in a confrontation with a demon that almost kills her (295–96). The demon takes the shape of a person close to Rachel, leaving her not only mortally but also emotionally wounded. Rachel's resulting trauma is physical as much as a result of a confusion of animosity, lust, and fear; her (physical and emotional) vulnerability parallels that of abuse and rape victims.

The complexity and centrality of the femme/homme fatale role in Harrison's series lies in the merging of features from crime fiction with tropes from urban fantasy and modern vampire stories. Vampires, or "vamps" (the homonymy making the combination obvious), hold immense hypnotic, sexual power in Rachel's world. Vampires have a long literary tradition of being cast in the role of sexual threat (Höglund 56), and the motives of vampire women and "Fatal Women" have been amalgamated since the nineteenth century (Höglund 146–53). Harrison's vamps—male and female—are described as irresistibly attractive and sexually desirable but also as soulless and remorseless predators. By merging the femme/homme fatale and vampire characteristics, they are established not only as personal threats but also as a social danger: they are powerful beings not only in terms of their domination over other people but also in terms of their wealth and political influence, operating beyond the very laws passed to control them.

Ultimately, however, even Rachel contributes to the wrongness of her world, her integrity notwithstanding. Her relentless hunt for Kalamack leads to the capture of biodrugs that he attempted to smuggle into the city. Through Rachel's narration, they are described as highly illegal contraband, but the reader can see them for what they are: medication for diseases such as Huntington's, cystic fibrosis, and diabetes, banned by a human society that almost exterminated itself through its own biotechnology. Protagonist, antagonist, and setting all dissolve into shades of gray as Kalamack's humanitarian efforts are brought to naught by Rachel's efforts on behalf of a nation that has outlawed and murdered its own bioengineers.



Pratchett's *Feet of Clay* is the third novel about the Ankh-Morpork City Watch. The first two examples include crime-fiction elements in what are primarily urban fantasies. *Feet of Clay*, in contrast, is both crime fiction *and* urban fantasy. Of the three exemplar texts in this article, this is the only one with any previous published scholarship. Edward James reads the six City Watch novels in terms of the police procedural and examines, amongst other themes, their representation of political views and racial issues. *Feet of Clay* will be discussed in terms of its narrative focus as a police novel and the issues of race and gender that it foregrounds.

There is no doubt that *Feet of Clay* is a police novel. James classifies it, along with *Men at Arms* (1993), as “basically detective stories” (193), and it certainly has all the necessary components: a number of interrelated murders or attempted murders; a force of police investigators, including a forensics specialist; and insightful discussions about clues and the rule of law. It also draws attention to a number of social and political issues, including whether the rich and the poor are the same in the eyes of the law, whether the dehumanizing (and the concomitant slavery and lynching) of golems is morally acceptable, and whether racism and sexism are present in the police force. It is a tightly plotted novel, as James points out (193), but it is also a novel that personalizes major social issues through its narrative structure.

The police novel brought with it a shift in focus from the single detective to the investigative team. Lee Horsley observes that there is a common overlap between this team and the individual investigator who “often retains considerable autonomy” (101–02) within the police force. Messent suggests that police novels exist in a spectrum between, on the one hand, policemen and policewomen who carry out their duties without qualms about the law that they represent and, on the other, stories about the individual law enforcer whose social values lead to a questioning of the system and a distancing from the larger policing group (“Police” 180). *Feet of Clay* features both ends of this spectrum, offering a double perspective on policing that provides a social critique on both a political and a personal level.

Commander Vimes of the City Watch is the investigator who provides a broader political critique of society. Mainly autonomous in his policing, Vimes is the character most prone to criticize the social system of the Ankh-Morpork city state but from an awkward position. Rising from poverty to become a member of the establishment, he is stuck in a social no-man's-land, “[a] jumped-up copper to the nobs and a nob to the rest” (Pratchett, *Feet* 16). When someone attempts to poison the city's ruler, Vimes tries to save the man and solve the crime mainly out of a sense of duty and an awareness of how damaging such a murder would be to the city. The collateral deaths of an old woman and a toddler are much more important to him, partly because they lived in his old neighborhood but also

because the perpetrators simply did not care about their deaths. To the largely cynical and misanthropic Vimes, the greater crime is to kill someone for impersonal reasons, simply because you have more power or money than they have. He wants the law to be a social leveler, but, as James observes, ultimately his desire for justice will be frustrated “because for him justice means social justice, and not just the capture of criminals” (James 194). Through Vimes’s character, the point that the collateral damage of political power-games is actual people is made forcefully.

The other end of the spectrum demonstrates how teamwork solves crimes, with focus on the men and women of the force rather than their collective effort. “[C]rime and police work,” Leroy L. Panek claims, “have a unique impact on the way men and women work as well as the way they live” (156). The policing activities and investigations of the Watch are related from the individuals’ points of view, centering on their concerns. Sociopolitical issues remain people-sized. Some current crime fiction criticism “holds that the genre meets head on bitter racial, ethnic, class, and gender conflicts without providing easy answers” (Pyrhönen 48), and the City Watch novels are no exception. In *Feet of Clay*, racial and gender issues are of particular prominence.

In the City Watch novels, racial and ethnic issues are conflated through the various species that populate Pratchett’s world and dwarfs, in particular, provide fodder for his satire on ethnicity. The subject of race is dealt with quite explicitly in a number of Discworld novels, but it is handled in general terms by portraying the conflicts between different species rather than different races. In a memorable passage, Pratchett explains how “[r]acism was not a problem on the Discworld, because—what with trolls and dwarfs and so on—speciesism was more interesting. Black and white lived in perfect harmony and ganged up on green” (*Witches* 147n). The narrator valorizes Vimes for his accepting as watchmen a wide range of beings, including not only dwarfs but also trolls, a werewolf, a gargoyle, and—at the end of the novel—a golem. The rights of golems are a central issue in *Feet of Clay*: the text argues against the enslavement of intelligent beings and clearly condemns the persecution and killing of golems, even though it allows characters to hold a wide range of views on the subject. Discussing racism in the texts, James points out how the complexity of the issue is maintained by having even sympathetic characters harbor prejudices against one species or another (211). *Feet of Clay* sports several such prejudices among sympathetic Watch officers: against vampires, golems, werewolves, and the undead. Prejudice becomes something to be confronted on a personal level. A case in point is the friendship between the dwarf Littlebottom and the werewolf Angua. Angua discovers that Littlebottom is female (something kept secret by dwarfs), but the dwarf fails to realize that her new friend is a werewolf. Dramatic irony mounts as Angua suffers the dwarf’s anti-werewolf sentiments while still supporting Littlebottom’s desire to express her female nature.

Through Littlebottom’s attempts to assert her femininity as a dwarf and police officer, gender issues are similarly made personal. Pratchett employs the well-established fantasy trope that dwarf men and women look alike (presumably originating with Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, appendix A [1954–55]) to have the female dwarf critique a concept of equality that requires everyone to behave like men. Step by step, and with Angua’s support, Littlebottom “comes out” as female by wearing make-up and high heels, finally changing her name from Cheery to Cheri, much to the confusion of her colleagues. Triumphant at last, the dwarf spreads her idea of feminine expression among the other female dwarfs in the Watch, forcing her colleagues to accept that knowing that someone is a woman does not mean that she should be treated differently.

Feet of Clay is told as a patchwork of various Watch members' points of view, along with those of several other characters—a fragmented narrative familiar from the police novel. The use of this multitude of “criss-crossing” narratives, Messent observes, undermines the single or shared perspective of the private eye or police and downgrades their narrative authority, something that he finds to be “increasingly common in contemporary crime fiction” (*Crime* 68–69). Ankh-Morpork is described with a constantly shifting narrative focus and perspective: from the ruler and the murder victims to beggars and members of the Watch. The result is a “wider representation of urban reality” (Messant, *Crime* 69), with a narrative that moves its perspective from the pinnacles of society to its lowest depths, from bystanders and victims to police and perpetrators. Rather than having a detective move around, providing a varied but coherent path through the city, the narration changes its focalizers. A city “cannot be known as a panoptic whole” (Messant, *Crime* 70); through the men and women of the force, whether the cynical loner Vimes or the close colleagues of the Watch, the reader of *Feet of Clay* is presented with a fragmented, albeit broad, view of city life with a decidedly personal perspective.

To Messent, “[t]he police novel is a form that, at its best, has mutated into an ongoing (serial) enquiry into the state of the nation, its power structures and its social concerns” (“Police” 178). The police novel structure of *Feet of Clay* offers such an inquiry, even though it dresses its social critique about race, gender, and power in the concerns of enslaved golems, female dwarfs, and ancient vampires.



It is clear that crime fiction and urban fantasy amalgamate nicely. It also is clear that this amalgam has a great propensity for creating narratives that accentuate and/or debate society's ills and shortcomings. Despite the many differences—in terms of structure, setting, and style—of the three texts analyzed, the crime fiction elements help bring out various aspects of social commentary in each. Swanwick's text shows a police force quick to jump to a racially motivated, erroneous conclusion. Harrison provides her tough female protagonist with a background in a divided, corrupt, and brutal law enforcement environment, echoing a divided, corrupt, and brutal society. Pratchett places his City Watch officers in the middle of very personal ethnic, gender, and class conflicts. Their social commentaries thus become part of urban fantasy's concern with displaying “the less savory aspects of modern/urban life: criminality, homelessness, addiction, prostitution, and physical and sexual abuse” (Ekman 466). Not every reader notices every aspect of this social commentary. “For many readers,” Messent observes, “any further social or cultural resonance a text may have will remain below their conscious radar and unexplored—and none the worse for that” (*Crime* 8). But by merging features from the two genres, the social criticism of the societies in which the stories are set and, by extension, of the reader's society can be made more powerful, more compelling—and perhaps more noticeable.

Keywords: Harrison, Kim; Pratchett, Terry; social commentary; Swanwick, Michael; urban fantasy

NOTE

1. The short story was later incorporated as an episode in *The Dragons of Babel* (208–23). References will be made to the novel, as it is more widely available.

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