



## **CORMORAN STRIKE – THE UNCONVENTIONAL HOUSEHOLD NAME**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Robert Galbraith is the pseudonym of the famed J.K. Rowling. Rowling has adopted a male pseudonym to write her detective fiction. Her first novel under the pseudonym was The Cuckoo's Calling (2013). It is the first novel of the Cormoran Strike series and this was followed by two more novels The Silkworm (2014) and Career of Evil (2015). When asked about her favourite of the three novels, Rowling answered as follows: "I have loved writing all the books so far, but I think the latest, Career of Evil, has to be my favourite. It was an incredible amount of work, but I thoroughly enjoyed developing the plot, whilst giving the reader a little more about Strike and Robin. It was fun too weaving in the great lyrics of Blue Oyster Cult" (robert-galbraith.com). And as she has said, we get a more about Robin in this novel and about the kind of work Strike did when he was in the SIB. Career of Evil is a pure hard-boiled detective fiction which deals about a serial killer. The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the novel Career of Evil which made Cormoran Strike, a household name.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Detective Fiction is one of the genres with a large number of readers where the central theme revolves around one question – who done it? This is what detective fiction is about. No matter how many murders or even murderers the central question remains the same and this is what hooks the readers. The readers also actively take part in solving this puzzle, connecting the links and clues, entering into the mind of the detective and so on. "At the base of the whodunit we find a duality, and it is this duality which will guide our description. This novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. In their purest form, these two stories have no point in common" (Todorov 44). Right from origin of the detective fiction, many writers have tried to formulate a style of



writing that is exclusive for detective fiction. However one might devise the rules or change them, ultimately everything is revealed even before the end of the story in the form of clues.

The modern detective story writers also follow this convention to a particular extent and Robert Galbraith is no exception. Robert Galbraith is the pseudonym of the famed J.K. Rowling. Rowling has adopted a male pseudonym to write her detective fiction. Her first novel under the pseudonym was *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013). It is the first novel of the Cormoran Strike series and this was followed by two more novels *The Silkworm* (2014) and *Career of Evil* (2015). When asked about her favourite of the three novels, Rowling answered as follows: "I have loved writing all the books so far, but I think the latest, *Career of Evil*, has to be my favourite. It was an incredible amount of work, but I thoroughly enjoyed developing the plot, whilst giving the reader a little more about Strike and Robin. It was fun too weaving in the great lyrics of Blue Oyster Cult" (robert-galbraith.com). And as she has said, we get a more about Robin in this novel and about the kind of work Strike did when he was in the SIB. *Career of Evil* is a pure hard-boiled detective fiction which deals about a serial killer. The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the novel *Career of Evil* which made Cormoran Strike, a household name.

Dashiell Hammett and Ray Chandler were the forerunners of Hard-boiled detective fiction which is happening now among the readers. Chandler's hero Marlowe becomes the stereotype of modern PI.

*...Chandler's Marlowe is perhaps the best example of the alienated, 'outsider' status of the PI: He lives alone, in rented flats or houses. He works alone, in a cheap, comfortless office. He drinks and smokes a lot: a single, masculine lifestyle. He is choosy about his work, never showing much interest in money. In general, he has dropped right out of the normal family and financial patterns of modern culture. (Scaggs 60)*

Cormoran Strike fits the above description perfectly. He is a loner and lives alone. He is almost homeless and uses his office as his home, his lifestyle is very much masculine with no proper girlfriend or the family attachments. His only friend link with the outer world is through his assistant Robin. In the previous two novels of the series, Strike only had to find the murderer to bring them to justice. But in this novel, his very life is threatened along with his job which he has painfully constructed. A serial killer is on the move with his focus targeted at Strike. Strike and Robin continue their routine of solving the cases and one day everything changes. "A woman's severed leg had been crammed sideways in the box, the toes of the foot bent back to fit" (Galbraith 8). The box is addressed to Robin in which there is a woman's severed leg along with a note consisting of the lyrics of the "Blue Oyster Cult".



But the original address was made to Strike first, and then a paper had been pasted so it had been addressed to Robin in the end. It is clear that the sender or the killer has planned Strike as his first target but switches to Robin in the end enabling Strike to understand that he knows Robin well. More body parts arrive and the police find more bodies of women who are raped and dismembered.

*The novel again employs a closed circle of suspects. P.D. James talks about the advantages of having a limited number of suspects in Talking About Detective Fiction: “[The closed circle of suspects] has a number of obvious advantages. The stain of suspicion cannot be allowed to spread too far if each suspect is to be a rounded, credible, breathing human being, not a cardboard cut-out to be ritually knocked out in the last chapter.” (Hamari 37)*

The songs of the rock band “Blue Oyster Cult” is given with the severed parts. The link between the band and Strike goes long back. His groupie mother Leda Strike has sported a tattoo of the band’s lyric in her body. This makes Strike doubt that the killer must be someone whom he knows and has crossed paths in the past. He zeroes-in-on four persons who could have committed the murders. Strike has put them off during his days in Special Investigations Branch (SIB). He suspects:

1. Terence “Digger” Malley – a crime syndicate member who is put into jail by Strike. But at the time of the murders, Malley is nowhere in England and so Strike rules him out and concentrates on the other three.
2. Donald Laing – a woman abuser who is convicted because of the evidence provided by Strike against him.
3. Noel Brackbank – a paedophile who is discharged from his army service because of Strike.
4. Jeff Whittaker – the second husband of Leda Strike. Strike believes that he murdered his mother but was not able to prove that in court.

We are allowed to know more about the killer in this novel. Galbraith’s previous novels never revealed killer till the end. But in this novel, we are given certain clues as to guess who the killer is. The killer is animalistic in nature and he shows no humane feelings at all. He is also constantly referring to another person as “it” and so we know that he is living with someone and he is using this person as an alibi for his witness. The brutal animalistic nature of the killer is revealed in the following quotation.



*He had not managed to scrub off all her blood. A dark line like a parenthesis lay under the middle fingernail of his left hand. He set to digging it out, although he quite liked seeing it there: a memento of the previous day's pleasures. After a minute's fruitless scraping, he put the bloody nail in his mouth and sucked. The ferrous tang recalled the smell of the torrent that had splashed wildly onto the tiled floor, spattering the walls, drenching his jeans and turning the peach-coloured bath towels – fluffy, dry and neatly folded – into blood-soaked rags. (Galbraith 1)*

The above quotation clearly brings out the evil nature of the serial killer, a sadist who gains pleasure by hurting others. We could find that many serial killer novels are based on this simple thing – the monstrosity inherent in the killer. Though he kills for pleasure and for his satisfaction, his primary target is Strike. We find that Strike is the main reason for his imprisonment and the separation from his family. So he wishes to do the same to Strike. Since Strike is a loner, he concentrates on Robin and even attacks her once but she escapes.

*The Secretary's value to him – over and above the value any female had to him, if he could get her alone – was in what he was going to do, through her, to Strike. His ambition to be avenged on Strike – permanently, brutally avenged – had grown in him until it became the central ambition of his life. He had always been this way. If someone crossed him they were marked and at some point, whenever opportunity presented itself, even if it took years, they would get theirs. Cormoran Strike had done him more harm than any other human being ever, and he was going to pay a just price. (Galbraith 39)*

Finally, Strike identifies the murderer. The leg which was sent to Strike belongs to Kelsey Platt, sixteen year old girl who is fascinated by Strike's stump and chats with other nut cases on how to cut the leg. She is a frequent member of an online site where people discuss as to how to hack the body parts. Strike meets Haze, the half-sister of Kelsey and Hazel's boyfriend Ray, a retired firefighter. It is none other than Donald Laing who has been using another identity as Ray Williams, living in Finchley with Hazel. Strike finds him by observation of simple things that are normally not even noted by others. Ray says that he was with friends during the time of Kelsey's murder as his alibi even showing a photo as the proof. But Strike notices the unnoticeable, the flowers which are out of season. "‘Sea holly,’ repeated Strike. ‘Sea holly isn't in bloom in April. Summer and autumn – I spent half my childhood in Cornwall. The picture of Laing and Ritchie on the beach . . . there was sea holly. I should've realised then . . . but I kept getting sidetracked’" (Galbraith 483-84). Also Strike has found pills that are used for acne and also for the psoriatic arthritis which Laing has





suffered from. Strike visits the house where Laing keeps his “collections”, a fight follows in which Strike is able to tame Laing with the help of Shanker, his friend.

As promised by the author, we get to know more about Robin in this novel. Robin has turned into a full-time investigator as well as a secretary to Strike after completing an investigative course which was arranged by Strike. Though her professional life is as she wished, this brings the storm into her personal life. Matthew is more worried about Strike presence in their lives. On the other hand, there come other problems between them through their mutual friend Sarah Shadlock who keeps driving wedges between them. Robin tells Strike about her life and her rape when she comes out of the house after knowing that Matthew has slept with Sarah. Robin was raped when she was in the university and this incident made her quit her college. Robin filed a case against the criminal but she was hurt and humiliated so much in the court that she left the place soon.

*What he had done to her shattered her view of her place in the world, ended her university career and drove her back to Masham. It forced her through a gruelling court case in which the cross examination had been almost as traumatic as the original attack, for his defence was that she had invited him into the stairwell for sex. Months after his gloved hands had reached out of the shadows and dragged her, gagging, into the cavity behind the stairs, she had not been able to stand physical contact, not even a gentle hug from a family member. He had polluted her first and only sexual relationship, so that she and Matthew had had to start again, with fear and guilt attending them every step of the way. (Galbraith 151)*

This incident is the only reason which made Robin to choose her career as a detective and she is hell bent on becoming one with the guidance from Strike. Robin is not spared by the killer. When Robin is distracted one evening on her way home, she is attacked by the killer who stabs her hand. But Robin escapes from him. This makes her angrier on contrary because everyone around her wants her to stay home away from the danger and isolate herself. But she does not want to do get away to run away from the problem – from the same situation where an unknown guy robs her of her power and control over her life. Robin is more helpful to Strike especially in this case. Robin traces out Noel Brocbank and finds him. When she comes to know about the two little girls, she is so sure that they must have been suffering in the hands of Noel and she risks her life to save them. With the help of Shanker, Robin makes Alyssa believe that Noel is sexually abusing her daughter. But all these does without Strike’s knowledge and this angers him. So he visits Robin only to tell that she is sacked. Finally Strike goes to attend her wedding, despite Matthew blocking his number in robin’s mobile. Shanker drives him to the place and robin beams on seeing him.



In their original form, they are quite prolix and may readily be summarized by the eight following points:

1. The novel must have at most one detective and one criminal, and at least one victim (a corpse).
2. The culprit must not be a professional criminal, must not be the detective, must kill for personal reasons.
3. Love has no place in detective fiction.
4. The culprit must have a certain importance:
  - (a) in life: not be a butler or chambermaid
  - (b) in the book: must be one of the main characters
5. Everything must be explained rationally; the fantastic is not admitted.
6. There is no place for descriptions nor for psychological analyses.
7. With regard to information about the story, the following homology must be observed: "author : reader = criminal : detective."
8. Banal situations and solutions must be avoided... (Todorov 49)

*Career of Evil* fits all these conventions perfectly. Cormoran Strike is the PI in the Denmark Street famous for solving the complex but famous cases such as the murder of Lula Landry and the murder of the novelist who was killed in a gruesome way. The killer is not one by profession, but he kills for his personal reasons because he is a psychopath. He hates women and views them only as objects of amusement and so he goes on playing with them and killing them. Besides this the major reason for focusing on Strike is more personal to him. It is Strike who is the reason for his imprisonment and the loss of his family. So he wants to do the same – rip everything off Strike which he values the most. Strike has no personal life and his only job is his profession. And so the killer wants to destroy the professional image which Strike has meticulously built over the years. In the picture comes Robin, the beauty with the brains. Laing sees her as another object and wants to inflict pain in Strike by killing her too. All the killings are accounted for and the evidence is concrete which are perfectly theorised and proved by Strike. Not at any instance we find the play of fantasy or conjecture while



finding the killer. And it could be observed that Cormoran Strike is becoming avidly popular among the reading public. *Strike* is a 2017 BBC television series based on the novels starring Tom Burke as Cormoran Strike and Holliday Grainger as Robin Ellacott. This proves that Strike is going to be a household name with his uncanny abilities and unconventional nature.

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