

REVIEWS



Pluto Crime

October Heat

Gordon de Marco, Pluto £2.95

Morbid Symptoms

Gillian Slovo, Pluto £2.95

Murder in the Central Committee

Manuel Vazquez Montalban, Pluto £3.50

The China Option

Nancy Milton, Pluto £3.50

Crime fiction is a particularly appropriate form for the exploration of political ideas because it deals with two elements of human behaviour which are central to politics - power and appearances: power, as exercised by the state, by employers, by men over women or by individuals over each other, ultimately embodied in violence or 'crime'; and appearances - which the reader is deceived by, and the investigator must unravel. As a mass cultural form, replete with symbolic meanings, the crime thriller is comparable with romantic fiction in its ideological and psychological power.

Presumably in recognition of this fact Pluto Press have launched a new series of political crime thrillers ('Pluto Crime'), of which four have already been published. It's a good idea, so it is unfortunate that three of the four fall short of convincing either as fiction or as politics. The fourth (**The China Option** by Nancy Milton) really belongs to a different genre altogether, that of the political thriller au Carre.

Each of the other three books in the series takes a simple 'who dunnit?' plot and places it in a politically charged historical venue. **October Heat** (Gordon de Marco) is a Chanderlesque story of investigation and political intrigue in 1930s San Francisco. A routine case of blackmail

takes private eye Riley Kovachs down a trail which leads to an underground fascist organisation financed by right-wing politicians and anti-union bosses, and an assassination plot. It is a fascinating historical moment, but this in itself is not enough to inject any excitement into this lifeless tale.

October Heat fluctuates between crude political tract with a simple moral - virtue equals sticking up for the 'little guy'— and an amateurish exercise in Chandler imitation, the dialogue an unconvincing pastiche of the Marlowe style, the characterisation banal, and the plot simply failing to thrill. De Marco breaks some pretty basic rules of crime writing: he gets us feeling that Kovachs is a lot less bright than the average private eye, and that we are being led up obvious blind alleys in order to throw us off the scent. As a result the constant reference to historical events and persons (there is even an interview with Charlie Chaplin at one point) begins to seem like desperate attempts to give some adventitious solidity to this insubstantial story.

The second of the series, **Morbid Symptoms**, situates its tale of crime and discovery in the contemporary world of left-wing, alternative, middle-class London, with a plot involving an agreement between South Africa and Argentina to develop nuclear weapons. Kate Baeier, 'feminist, sex-playing journalist', is hired to investigate the demise of a researcher on a radical third world economic review. The investigation takes us through a sort of Chaucer's Prologue of North London's radical chic scene. The plot is unexciting and unconvincing, and the main burden of the book is located in the political and cultural environment in which these familiar characters move. The narrative teeters perpetually between the candid and the

caricature — it's difficult to take these people seriously, and yet they are more embarrassing than funny; the dialogue somehow manages to be both slapstick and pedestrian. The contemporary cultural signals turn out to be little more than gimmicks to sell a poor story, and Kate Baeier to be less than a match for her prototype in P D James' *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*.

Murder in the Central Committee, the third in the series, is a more considerable book. The story of veteran detective Pepe Carvalho's investigation of the murder of the Spanish Communist Party general secretary is set against a background of the struggle within the party between the 'Euros' and the 'old guard'. The plot is both intriguing — the assassination takes place during a blackout in a closed meeting of the central committee — and full of political resonances. Unlike Riley Kovachs or Kate Baeier, Pepe Carvalho knows how to conduct an investigation: always keeping just a step or two ahead of the reader, and reconstructing the scenario bit by bit instead of all at once in the last six pages.

It's a rough-hewn narrative however,

strewn with inconsequential 'formula' scenes, with mysterious would-be assassins gratuitously thrown in Carvalho's path apparently only in order to reveal his prowess in self-defence, and nuggets of undigested recipe-book to demonstrate his skill as a chef. The political debate which forms the story's backdrop never becomes more than that — it doesn't affect the course of the investigation and it's never really articulated by any of the characters. And Montalban is content for his hero to conform completely to the stereotype macho Latin male: Carvalho likes women in the same way he enjoys food or wine, and the — again formula — 'love scenes' are offensive. Despite its narrative energy and the quality of the writing, **Murder in the Central Committee** ultimately doesn't come off.

The last of the four, Nancy Milton's **The China Option**, unquestionably does come off. It is set in a China seething with unrest, which is being ensnared into a military alliance with the US as a ploy against the Russians. Anne Campbell, China correspondent of the *Washington Inquirer*, eventually stumbles on a secret US plan to arm China with nuclear

weapons. The ensuing furore results in the defeat of the hawks in the US administration and the reversal of its China policy. Whether she is describing the cynical manoeuvres of super-power politics or the details of everyday life in Beijing, Nancy Milton's writing is powerful and convincing. Anne Campbell is a far more vivid and likeable character than any the other books have to offer.

The very best crime fiction writers have shown that it is possible to use crime fiction for the expression of political ideas, but also that you can't do it just by pinning a thriller plot onto a 'political' backdrop. The first requirement of a crime thriller is that it should work on that level — the characters must live, and the narrative must keep you on the edge of your seat from beginning to end. Writers like Patricia Highsmith or William McIlvanney are also able to make their characters — and their readers — grow, as the unravelling of the plot takes them through a realised labyrinth or personal and political discovery. Let's hope that future additions to the Pluto series will reveal new talents of this kind.

John Millner

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