



Giulio Segato*

INTERVISTA A VICTOR GISCHLER E A REED FARREL COLEMAN

Il romanzo poliziesco anglo-americano negli ultimi trent'anni ha mostrato nuovi sviluppi e nuove direzioni, sia nella caratterizzazione dell'eroe, vittima di una crisi morale senza precedenti, sia nella rappresentazione della violenza, ormai priva di qualunque forza rigeneratrice. Anche l'ambientazione delle storie ha subito profondi sconvolgimenti: il setting preferito dai nuovi scrittori di crime fiction, infatti, non è più la grande metropoli come Los Angeles, New York o San Francisco, ma piccole cittadine del southwest o del midwest. Infine, alcuni tra i più efficaci romanzi hard-boiled anglo-americani sono stati costruiti attraverso la commistione di elementi narrativi tipici del poliziesco (come grattacieli, inseguimenti in macchina e detective del FBI) ed elementi del western (come cavalli, cappelli da cowboy, stivali e sceriffi), creando così un sottogenere ibrido di grande fascino.

Questi sono solo alcuni dei temi trattati nelle brevi interviste effettuate a due autori di romanzi polizieschi piuttosto conosciuti negli U.S.A., molto meno in Italia: Victor Gischler e Reed Farrel Coleman.

Reed Farrel Coleman: *nato a New York, vive con la sua famiglia a Long Island. È stato vice-presidente dell'associazione "Mystery Writers of America". Ha pubblicato quattordici romanzi, sette dei quali con protagonista Moe Prager, il suo eroe più conosciuto. Coleman ha vinto tre volte il premio Shamus per il miglior romanzo poliziesco americano dell'anno e una volta il premio Anthony. È docente di scrittura creativa alla Hofstra University di Long Island. In Italia i suoi romanzi sono inediti.*

Victor Gischler: *vive a Baton Rouge, in Louisiana. Ha pubblicato otto romanzi, di cui sette polizieschi. È uno degli sceneggiatori più noti e ricercati della Marvel Comics. Ha insegnato diversi anni scrittura creativa presso la Rogers University in Oklahoma. Alcuni suoi romanzi sono stati finalisti dei premi Edgard (Gun Monkeys) e Anthony (Shotgun Opera). In Italia i suoi libri sono tradotti e curati da Meridiano Zero. Nel 2011 ha vinto il premio "Corsaro Nero" in occasione delle celebrazioni per il centenario della morte di Emilio Salgari.*

INTERVISTA A REED FARREL COLEMAN, 20 gennaio 2014.

GIULIO SEGATO: Mysteries and crime fiction do sell, especially people expect a particular formula. Do you write differently or approach differently? Does the mystery formula cramp your original style?

REED F. COLEMAN: Cliché is only cliché if you let it be. The idea for me is to play with the formula while exploiting the reader's expectations. I never approach a novel with the idea that I must strictly conform to literary concepts. I know there must be a crime and possibly a solution, but not always justice. So, no, I never feel cramped or constrained by expectation.

GS: The original American "tough-guy" hero, like Philip Marlowe, has a strict moral code. Do you think that Moe Prager has something like that?

RFC: Yes, we all do, whether we're a PI, a criminal, a cop, or the woman delivering my mail. Moe's code is less clean, less black and white than Marlowe's. Moe is more realistic about the gray area in which we all operate, and makes accommodations for that. Moe struggles to always find the truth of things, but comes to the sad realization that the truth often, if not always, makes things worse, not better. But Moe is fiercely loyal to his friends, his family, and his clients.

GS: You create amazing dialogues. Do you do anything in terms of listening to dialogue?

RFC: I have always had an ear for dialogue. I have always been able to imitate accents, so it comes very naturally to me. I teach my writing students some tricks to help readers differentiate between their characters. The best trick is to try not to imitate real speech. No one in books speaks as they do in real life. In real life, people speak over each other all the time. They interrupt one another. They don't finish sentences, speak tangentially. So the idea is to establish a believable sort of para-speech with a pleasing rhythm that readers accept as real speech.

GS: Some of your novels might once have been called “hard-boiled”, but they are now called “crime fiction”. Do you think these two terms have the same meaning?

RFC: Crime fiction is now more the accepted term for the broader area of what was once called mystery fiction. Hard-boiled is more a term that covers a specific band on the crime fiction spectrum, or a subgenre. To me, hard-boiled is a story that offers a chance at small redemptions and a return to balance. Notice that I say offers and doesn't promise. My take on hard-boiled is that it promises what it can't actually deliver: redemption, balance, justice. It can only seem to restore things, especially in plots that involve murder. Once someone is gone, what really can be done to restore what's absent? Or, as my friend and award-winning author SJ Rozan says, hard-boiled offers explanations for what in life comes with no explanation. It supplies reasons where there are none.

GS: the historian Richard Slotkin wrote a great trilogy on the American frontier mythology. According to Slotkin, the myth that better describes the American culture is the myth of “Regeneration through Violence”. Your novels don't lack in violence. Do you think that violence in your books could be considered “regenerative”?

RFC: No, not at all. In fact that's the great sadness behind my work. Moe's core belief is that violence only begets violence. One of the best lines I've ever written is “There are victims of the Holocaust yet to be born.” That sums it up. Violence echoes and reverberates into the future. So that when the characters in my books resort to violence, the reader must sense that people will continue to pay for it long after the initiators of the violence are gone.

GS: do you think that the Vietnam War has changed (in some way) the popular American fiction and, in particular, his hero?

RFC: Absolutely. I grew up during Vietnam. Had a draft card, but thankfully the draft was winding down by the time my number could have come up. I think violence became more integral to all of crime fiction in the wake of Vietnam. It also bred a complete distrust in government, which was in opposition to the Spillane era. And it became easier to introduce the anti-hero hero and to use the uncommon man or woman as a hero. Vietnam paved the way for the introduction of the black, gay, woman, non-traditional hero.

GS: The most important hard-boiled heroes of the last thirty years are actually war veterans (for example, James Crumley's C. W. Sughrue, James Lee Burke's Dave Robicheaux, John Connelly's Harry Bosh...) and Moe Prager is an exception. Could you suggest a reason for that? Is there a connection between the veterans and the new detectives?

RFC: Yes, Moe Prager is not a Viet veteran, but rather a veteran of the NYPD. And that was a conscious decision. War and the military harden and coarsen you in a way that I didn't want Moe hardened or coarsened. The key to Moe is a tough kind of sensitivity that being a war veteran might have made less believable.

GS: “The crime novel is an excellent instrument to analyze society and crime as part of it (...) The crime novel is the best mirror of society”. This quotation comes from an interview of the Swedish crime writers Per Wahloo with Maj Sjöwall. Do you think this sentence is still working today?

RFC: Absolutely, 100% as true today as it was 80 years ago. It is the perfect venue to see the contrasts in society between wealth, power, mobility, and corruption. It is the perfect setting to show the contrast between the individual and the machine, the individual against the state, the momentum for change against the interests of the status quo.

INTERVISTA A VICTOR GISCHLER, 20 febbraio 2013.

GIULIO SEGATO: Do you see yourself as primarily a crime writer or simply a writer?

VICTOR GISHLER: A writer. Much of my early success has been with crime writing, so I'm not offended if somebody calls me a crime writer. It's fine. But I enjoy writing (and reading) all kind of things. Probably my editors would be happier if I stuck to crime writing. It's easy for a reader to identify. I wrote a satirical novel called *Go-Go Girls of the Apocalypse* and the editors seemed not to know what to do with it. They were going to see it as satire then later said science fiction. In reality, it is both and neither. In Italy, they call the book *Black City* and put a picture of a vampire on the cover. There is nothing like a vampire anywhere in the novel. So I think crime writing is at least less likely to confuse editors.

GS: Some of your novels might once have been called “hard-boiled”, but they are now called “crime fiction”.

Do you think these two terms have the same meaning?

VG: Terms change and shift and mean something different to each reader, so I'm not too concerned with them. I mean, I suppose we need some kind of label to help readers find what they are looking for. To me "crime fiction" is still the general term, and "Hard-boiled" indicates you're getting something with a little more edge.

GS: Mysteries and crime fiction do sell, especially people expect a particular formula. Do you write differently or approach differently? Does the mystery formula cramp your original style?

VG: I don't use a formula. Many of my books have similar elements and maybe even use some of the same tricks, but I don't refer to a formula while writing like a recipe. I'm not baking a pie. Other writers are very successful with formula but I don't want the same reading experience over and over again. I'm not knocking formula writers. Janet Evanovich and Sue Grafton made a ton of money putting the same character through the ringer over and over again. But it's just not for me.

GS: The historian Richard Slotkin wrote a great trilogy on the American frontier mythology. According to Slotkin, the myth that better describes American culture is the myth of "Regeneration through Violence".

Your books are not lacking in violence. Do you think that violence in your books could be considered "regenerative"?

VG: I'd have to think about that. For me, the violence in my novels allows me a sort of macabre choreography. I am playing with my dolls and making them dance a ballet of violence. It is often quite stylized and cinematic. But I can sort of see what Slotkin might mean. Think of child birth. Very violent. Life springs from a kind of violence. Even flowers fight to rise from the soil.

GS: Would you say there are themes that unite all your books? What are they?

VG: Often, my characters think they are one kind of person but discover something different. That happens a lot in my novels. Themes of identity. My novel *The Pistol Poets* is often misunderstood. Some readers think I'm relying on racial stereotypes, but what I really want is for us to look at those stereotypes and examine where they come from. Again, I'm looking at matters of identity. I also like to think of what makes a "family" and how people relate to one another. So there are themes ... but I never let those themes get in the way of a good time. They always evolve organically just as I try to tell a crazy story.

GS: According to many scholars, the western and hard-boiled hero is actually the same.

In your books the link between western and hard-boiled (in particular I'm thinking about *The Deputy*) is often evident. Is this a deliberate choice?

VG: The same? Almost. I've discussed this before in terms of film. I think the noir film picks up where the western left off. The western is often outward looking. It is about the frontier. The noir tale is about what happens when the frontier runs out and the cowboy hero is forced to turn back on himself, to turn inward. He trades in his cowboy hat for a fedora. I think it is sort of the same character but not at the same stage. The noir hero was once the cowboy ... but no longer.

GS: "The crime novel is an excellent instrument to analyze society and crime as part of it (...) The crime novel is the best mirror of society". This quotation comes from an interview of the Swedish crime writers Per Wahloo with Maj Sjöwall. Do you think this sentence is still working today?

VG: Sure. But I would never sit down to write a crime novel and think "I'm going to hold the mirror up to society today." Hopefully authors are thinking about character and story and any mirroring of society comes naturally or it doesn't. Frankly, just speaking of my own work, if I'm holding up a mirror to anything, then it is a carnival fun-house mirror that distorts everything it reflects.

GS: Who is the American writer to whom you feel closest to? Do you have any "literary fathers"?

VG: John D. MacDonald was the author who first got me interested in crime fiction. But in my subtle ways I feel more kinship to writers like Philip K. Dick and Kurt Vonnegut. Or maybe I just wish for a kinship since I admire them so much.

** Giulio Segato (Verona, 1982) si è laureato in filologia moderna all'Università Cattolica di Milano. Sta concludendo un dottorato di ricerca sulla rappresentazione della violenza nei polizieschi anglo-americani post-Vietnam presso l'Università di Genova. Si occupa di narrativa poliziesca statunitense, di letteratura bellica e di storia della cultura anglo-americana. È cultore della materia all'Università Cattolica di Milano per i corsi di Antropologia e cultura anglo-americana e di Letteratura anglo-americana e all'Università Cattolica di Brescia per il corso di Cultura e storia dei paesi di lingua inglese.*

Giulio Segato earned a Master's degree in Modern Philology at Catholic University of Milan. In April 2014 he will defend his Ph.D dissertation on contemporary American detective fiction. His main fields of interest are Anglo-American popular literature, cultural history and war literature. Currently he is Teaching Assistant (cultore della materia) at Catholic University of Milan for the following courses: Anglo-American literature and Anglo-American Anthropology and Culture.