



Being Genre-Fluid

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GENRE, LIKE GENDER, is, for me, a continuum, a spectrum; or maybe a Venn diagram where things meet or then disperse — bit of this, bit of that. It's the pick and mix of fiction. Just as I like to wear supposedly men's boots and elaborate eye-make-up and a masculine fougère as a perfume, I like to pop a spot of fantasy into my crime, a literary smock upon a horror doll, a dollop of romance in science fiction. Genre boundaries to me feel like a challenge rather than a demand.

I think it helps that for a long time I had no idea that there was anything to do with genre. As far as I could tell when I was a child, my beloved mobile, school and local libraries were split into two genres: children's books and adult. When I had rampaged through all the children's books, by the time I was seven or eight, I was allowed into the adult section early — handed the precious blue adult tickets (this was in the days when library books were stamped out by a librarian in a delicious ritual rather than self-scanning a barcode). I was permitted to roam in the adult stacks. There I read Dickens and Shakespeare and Austen and Lovecraft and Poe, Agatha Christie and Angela Carter, Pratchett and Fry, Whitman and Wilde, T. S. Eliot and J. K. Jerome, Georges Eliot and Orwell, the Brontës, the Mitfords...they were all stories to me.

They had no genre; they were fiction; they were poems. And if anything, genre to me was just whether something was a novel, a poem, a play, nonfiction or short story. It was about form not content. It wasn't till I was in my twenties that I heard the phrase 'genre fiction', said in a dismissive



way. I looked into it. Turned out that genre fiction refers to most fiction other than literary or nonfiction, and maybe children's, depending on definitions; so crime, fantasy, horror, science fiction, westerns, historical, science-fantasy, YA, romance, each one was sub-genres within each of them. My argument to that at the time, and now, is what genre would Shakespeare be? His works contain horror, history, myth, fantasy, ghosts, crime. Dickens, too. I always have a Dickens on the go, still, and dip in just as I would a giant bag of pick and mix, plucking out white-mice words and pink-shrimp phrases, dizzy snakes and fudge. I want a novel to have it all; after all, why not?

I do understand the need to market stories in a way that reaches its possible audience. And some people love to read, specifically, cosy crime, or psychological thrillers. I appreciate that these distinctions are useful and need to be drawn for some. It also provides an easy shorthand for pitching stories to publishers or producers — 'This is an historical ghost story'; or 'This is hospital romance'. They can then know if they already have a Victorian ghost story on their books and know if there is a current trend for hospital ghost romances of the eighteenth century.

I, though, find it reductive and restrictive. At the moment I'm writing a crime novel with metafictional elements, throwing in fairytale and psychogeography — and anything else I'm going to be interested in at the time. For me, writing original fiction is about distilling interests, influences, passions and protests, into a unique mix and a distinctive voice. So I sit down and write with my pick and mix of influences, and make a mix that's uniquely my own. And then I get to share it. Pick and mix genre, anyone?