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The Axeman's Jazz – Book Notes

Below is the slightly edited Preface to one of the editions of The Axeman's Jazz...

Preface

It was by accident that I came to write a crime novel. A few years ago I was contacted by a friend of mine with 'a great idea for a film'. He sent me a link to the wikipedia page of *The Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run*, a serial killer who was active in Cleveland in the 1930s, suggesting we should adapt the story for the screen. The story was an interesting one, not so much on account of the killer (who was never caught), but on account of the detective who failed to catch him – Elliot Ness, who was on something of a downward spiral since his success with *The Untouchables*.

I began researching the story and working up the usual intricate plot required of all crime films, when a few months into the process, everything came crashing down: I decided to check that no-one else was working on a similar idea, and after a quick look on the internet, it turned out a famous director had secured the financing to make a movie based on the story, and filming was supposedly scheduled to start in a few months' time.

I called my friend and told him there was a rival project in development and we called an end to the process. It's distressing to lose that much work, but it's something of an occupational hazard, and I learnt my lesson – always check the internet before starting a new project. I began to work on other writing assignments, but as the weeks went by, the idea of writing a historical crime story kept nagging away at me. The reconstruction of a lost time had been immeasurably appealing, and I had discovered research was very addictive. (Despite what some people may say, research isn't a chore. It mainly involves buying books, reading them, and underlining the bits you find interesting.) So I decided to start again on the project, but with the mystery centring on a different serial killer. The only problem was, I didn't know who. I was a writer in search of a serial killer.

If there's one thing I've found the internet is good for, it's auditioning serial killers. I spent the next few months delving into various true crime websites, and online serial killer directories (they do exist), and it was in these I first came across the Axeman of New Orleans, a somewhat forgotten entry in the world's list of serial killers. The Axeman's crimes were gruesome enough, but they were also couched in the supernatural, with people at the time proclaiming him a demon, a product of the city's long association with voodoo and the

occult. And just like Jack the Ripper, the Axeman had sent a letter ‘from hell’, which was published by the press. The letter caused an uproar, not least because the Axeman used it to offer the citizens of New Orleans a pact – it granted immunity to anyone that had jazz music playing in their house.

A jazz-loving demon from the Big Easy? I had found my killer.

I re-started my research, and as I read about the New Orleans of 1919, I became as beguiled by the setting as I was by the Axeman – the war had ended, prohibition was just around the corner, and the city was giving birth to jazz. It quickly became apparent the world I wanted to explore could not be encapsulated in a film script and only the greater scope and breadth of a novel could do the setting and the story justice. A novel would also allow me to utilise a multi-stranded plot, where different detectives searched for different truths within the same crime.

A ‘who’s gunna solve it?’ as well as a ‘who dunnit?’

Over the next few years I worked up the story with help from an army of people too numerous to mention here, and what you have in your hands is the result. I hope you enjoy it.

Books are often the children of other books and it would be remiss of me not to mention the two biggest influences on this novel; firstly, the writings of the musicologist Thomas Brothers; and secondly, the writings of Louis Armstrong himself, who was a talented and prolific writer, publishing in his life-time two memoirs, numerous newspaper and magazine articles, essays, music reviews and book criticism, as well as penning thousands of letters of correspondence.

But what of the film based on the story of *The Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run*? The film whose appearance on the internet started the chain of events that led me to write this novel?

The film was never made.

So perhaps after all, the lesson is *not* to look on the internet before you start a project.

Ray Celestin,

London, 2014

The Axeman's Jazz – Reading Group Questions

1. Which of the three main characters – Ida, Michael and Luca did you relate to the most?
2. Each of the three detectives ends up pinpointing a different person as the one responsible for the killings. Who do you think came closest to the truth?
3. The main theme of the book is truth and prejudice – how what we consider to be the truth may just be our own, personal interpretation of the world around us, and how that interpretation can be influenced by our prejudices. How are the Axeman and his crimes used to show the way people's prejudices affect how they view the world?
4. Race is the other main theme of the book. Ida, Lewis, Michael and even the Axeman have lives that are shaped by the racial politics of the time. How does each character react to the impositions put on them by the racist society they lived in? How does each character react to the racial prejudice they experience? Do they fight or run or compromise?
5. Do you think the racial prejudice in the book still exists in society today?
6. Ida is a misfit partly because she is an African-American girl that is light-skinned enough to pass for white. How has this fact shaped her personality?
7. All three detectives have a personal motivation for wanting to solve the case – redemption, self-worth, self-realisation. Contrast these different motivations – what do they say about where each character is in their life and career?
8. Ida, Michael and Louis all end up as different people from the ones they were at the start of the book. Are all these changes positive, or have they been damaged by the events of the book?
9. Luca committed many reprehensible crimes in his time as a corrupt cop – do you still consider him a hero despite all the bad things he has done? Do you feel that he finally found the redemption he was looking for by the time of his death?
10. The book is littered with mentors and students, both good and bad. Luca and Michael, Michael and Kerry, Ida and Lefebvre, Lewis and Marable. At the end, Michael becomes Ida's new mentor. How do these different relationships play out in different ways?
11. Michael and Annette's marriage, a marriage that was legal in some states but illegal in others, has parallels with the gay marriage debate in current society. Is it fair or valid to draw a parallel between the legalisation of inter-racial marriages and the legalisation of gay marriages?
12. Michael goes to church every Sunday despite professing to having no religious feelings. Can you understand why he does this?

13. The main characters all have a love-hate relationship with the city of New Orleans. Ida, Lewis, Michael and Luca all want to leave the city at some stage in the book. What are the reasons for the complex relationship they each have with the city of their birth? Would you leave your home-town under similar circumstances?
14. Simone protects her brother despite the fact he is a killer. She rationalises that he is mentally disturbed and not responsible for his crimes. How would you react in such a situation? Would you shelter a loved family member, or give them up to the authorities?
15. Similarly, Michael decides to inform on Luca in the corruption trial. Unlike Simone, he betrays the person close to him. Was Michael justified in doing this? Would you do the same in a similar situation?
16. Do you think the Axeman was justified in taking revenge on his parents' killers?
17. Is the reason the Axeman's parents were murdered linked to the themes of truth and prejudice?
18. A large part of the book is an exploration of the culture of New Orleans – its music, its folklore, its French heritage, its unique racial mix – which of these elements did you find the most interesting and why?
19. The letter printed in the book is a real letter received by the Picayune newspaper at the time. What do you think the intention of the real-life letter-writer was?
20. The author has included newspaper reports, police reports, correspondence and other paperwork in the book. What did these add to the story and the book?
21. The author included many biographical details of Louis Armstrong in the book – did these change the way you thought of Armstrong? If so, how?
22. Who do you think the real-life killer was, and why was he doing it?

Dead Man's Blues – Book Notes

Below is the historical note I wrote as an afterword for the original UK edition of *Dead Man's Blues* (**contains spoilers**)...

Afterword

I have tried to make this book as factually accurate as possible, but as always with historical fiction, I sometimes had to choose between historical accuracy and telling the story I most want to tell. In some cases, different histories contradicted each other, or there was not enough evidence to determine what had actually happened. Below are some notes on where I deviated from established fact, or made calls between opposing accounts; any other deviations were either too minor to include here, or are my own errors or omissions, for which I apologize.

Armstrong's journey to Chicago in the prologue is based on his description of that journey in his autobiography (*Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*). I deviated from the story to include elements from other people's accounts of their journeys northwards as part of the Great Migration, so that the episode became something of an amalgam.

The Mafia funeral that starts the book is also an amalgam, in this instance of a number of Chicago gangster funerals: most notably those of Dean O'Banion and Mike Merlo in 1924 (the latter is the source of the blue-flower theme). The planes full of flower petals are also based on fact. For 'Diamond' Joe Esposito's funeral in 1928 two planes were indeed loaded with flowers to create a rain of roses; on the day, however, due to bad weather, the planes never took flight.

Sherlock Jr., the Buster Keaton film Ida and Louis go to see, was actually released four years earlier in 1924. Keaton's film of 1928 was *Steamboat Bill Jr*, perhaps his masterpiece. I chose the earlier, less well-regarded film as it closer fitted the book's themes.

Perhaps my greatest sin against history was the inclusion of the Long Count Fight between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey. This fight actually occurred in September 1927, some nine months before the events of the book. I wanted to include both this, and another landmark event – Louis Armstrong's recording of '*West End Blues*'. The latter, though, occurred in 1928. In deciding to fit both into one summer, I had to choose between misrepresenting the history of boxing, or of jazz, and ended up choosing the former.

The recording is a seminal one, not only in Louis Armstrong's life, but also in the history of jazz and popular music. Armstrong had spent years experimenting with song structures and forms for the solo (the form he established back then is still used across genres today). In the recordings he made in the summer of 1928 his achievements in these areas found their perfect expression. The 1920s was a decade of modernism and artistic avant-gardism – Armstrong's radical innovation and experimentation means there is a case to be made for adding him to the pantheon of 1920s modernist stars – a case eloquently made in Thomas Brothers' *Louis Armstrong: Master of Modernism* and Kevin Jackson's *Constellation of Genius: 1922: Modernism and All That Jazz*.

The arrival of Paul Whiteman's Orchestra in Chicago, and the subsequent jam sessions between them and Louis and his band-mates, actually occurred a few months earlier as well, in November 1927.

Throughout this entire period, Armstrong and Capone were indeed on familiar and friendly terms. The two got on so well together that their closeness was remarked upon by other jazz musicians who were in Chicago at the time. The two men's lives did indeed have all the parallels mentioned.

Poison booze was a widespread phenomenon during prohibition. The inspiration for the batch of champagne in the book was the real-life case of amateur chemists Harry Gross and Max Reisman, who developed an adulterant that would allow Jamaican Ginger extract (a medicine that was 70% ethanol) to pass Treasury Department tests while preserving its drinkability. Unfortunately, the adulterant they developed turned out to be a neurotoxin. Poisoned Jamaican Ginger led to thousands of cases of paralysis and death. The most common effect was a withering of the muscles in the foot and ankle, causing victims to walk with a peculiar limp or shuffle. The infirmity was so widespread, a number of blues songs were written and recorded about it.

The conspiracy at the heart of the book – heroin dealers attempting to make inroads into Chicago – is based on fact. The 'French Connection' (the route through which heroin made its way from Turkey to the United States) was already well established in the late 1920s. New York gangsters (notably 'Lucky' Luciano) were already involved in the distribution and sale of the drug, whilst the older guard were against it. Capone was content to keep his focus where he had originally made his money – alcohol, gambling and prostitution.

Luciano and his associate Meyer Lansky used the tactic of letting rival factions attack each other before stepping into the breach in the *Castellammarese War* in New York in 1930–31. The war was fought by the Masseria and Maranzano crime families for control of the city. Almost as soon as Salvatore Maranzano won and declared himself *capo di tutti capi*, Luciano stepped in, assassinated him, and set up a power-sharing commission. I thought it possible that if New York gangsters were looking to wrestle back control of Chicago in 1928 (as indeed they were), they might use the same tactic. Due to the timing of the Castellammarese War, however, Michael's knowledge that it was brewing in 1928 is somewhat fanciful.

Capone's visit to the doctor I invented. Whether he knew about his syphilis in 1928 is hard to confirm, although he was certainly showing signs of it by then, having contracted it as a youth in Brooklyn. The first documented evidence of it is from 1932, when Capone underwent a medical examination on entry to the Atlanta US Penitentiary (the exam also revealed he was suffering from gonorrhoea).

The extent of Capone's cocaine use is yet another matter for debate. That he used it is not in doubt, but the evidence that he was a habitual user seems to rest solely on his autopsy in 1947, which revealed that he had a perforated septum, a symptom of heavy cocaine use, but also of syphilis.

Capone's war with Bugs Moran reached its climax about eight months after the end of this book, in the St Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929. Capone hired men to attack Moran's North Side Gang in their Lincoln Park headquarters. Posing as police officers, they lined seven of Moran's men against a wall, then gunned them down. With Moran's customary good luck, he was by chance not on the premises at the time. The massacre was the beginning of the end for Capone. Bloody photos of the incident made front pages around the world, the goodwill of the city allocated ever more resources toward having him imprisoned. He was convicted of tax evasion in 1931 and released eight years later, by which time he had been ravaged by syphilis, both mentally and physically. He died on his Florida estate in 1947, at the age of forty-eight, an invalid with the mental age of a child.

A great introduction to the era is Bill Bryson's excellent *One Summer: America, 1927*. For more information on the Chicago jazz scene in the 1920s, I would recommend Thomas Brothers' *Louis Armstrong: Master of Modernism*, and William Howland Kenney's *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History 1904–1930*. The most enjoyable of the Capone biographies I read was Laurence Bergreen's *Capone: The Man and the Era*.

Dead Man's Blues is intended to be the second in a four-part series which charts the history of jazz and the Mob through the middle fifty years of the twentieth century. In an Oulipo-inspired conceit, each of the four parts will contain a different city, decade, song, season, theme and weather. Part Three will be set in 1940s New York in the autumn. The weather, theme and song are yet to be decided, although for the latter, '*Autumn in New York*' seems an obvious choice. Maybe too obvious. We'll see. The main characters from the first two books will reappear in the next two.

Dead Man's Blues – Reading Group Guide

1. The story is split into three distinctive investigations. Was there a particular storyline you looked forward to reading the most?
2. 1920s Chicago is depicted as violent and corrupt, yet amidst the chaos, it is also the scene of the great cultural flowering now known as *The Chicago Renaissance* – of which Louis Armstrong was a part. Did this culture arise because of the turmoil? Or were these two aspects of the city independent of each other?
3. Music is a constant theme running through the book – the plot itself is structured like the jazz song *West End Blues*. What did you think of Celestin's description and use of music?
4. Do you think Jacob should have been allowed in the police force? Or did his unique position make him more effective?
5. Michael and Ida initially turn down the fifty-thousand dollar reward for finding the missing heiress, but then change their minds. Were they right to take it? Have they become corrupted by the corrupt city in which they live? What would you have done in their situation?
6. Chicago is depicted as a segregated and racist city. And yet in the city's jazz nightclubs, the races intermingled freely. Discuss the novel's portrayal of race issues and possible reasons for why such a segregated city would use jazz clubs as a 'safe space' for racial intermingling.
7. The characters living in the Blackbelt bemoan the fact that the area is being used for slumming by rich whites. They believe that this activity somehow undermines and destroys the culture that was created in the neighbourhood. Is this view valid?
8. *'Things didn't have to move forward via the clash and jostle of opposites; progress also occurred through texture... it was Louis who was teaching the world how to do it, but even he knew that solos were nothing without chorus.'* So Louis characterises the differences between himself and Capone, with Louis representing the ideal of collectivism (choruses), and Capone representing the ideal of individualism (solos). What do you think of these two famous figures being used to represent these two different ideals? How are themes of individualism versus society played out in the book?
9. There is a focus on the dehumanising, mechanical aspects of the city – Michael describes Chicago as a *'city of lines and force'*. Jacob feels being in Chicago means *'being a cog in some colossal, unfathomable machine'*, Ida cannot get used to the city's *'unearthly growl'*. Why do you think the city is depicted in this way?
10. The book references voodoo in a number of different ways – Coulton likens the financial system to voodoo – *'You want to know what the similarity between voodoo and money is? ... They only work if people believe in them.'* A sentiment echoed by the

journalist Lowenthal (Chapter 28) and the drug dealer Michigan Red (Chapter 32). Dante also mentions how Capone's power over the city is voodoo-like (Chapter 38). So voodoo is used as a byword for the invisible, violent forces that stratify and organise the city – what do you think of this analogy and how it is used?

11. Along with the voodoo described above, other supernatural and fairy-tale elements exist in the book – Gwendolyn is described as a princess, Capone as a king, and his hotel as '*metamorphosing into a castle*', Ida dreams of Chicago as a '*fairy-tale city*', cinemas and skyscrapers become '*palaces*', and there is the recurring motif of the dragon – the neon dragon above the alleyway crime scene, the dragon-train Dante watches as he injects himself on the beach, the factories on the city's outskirts, whose chimney fires Jacob likens to '*a dragon was laying waste to the land.*' What do these magical, fairy-tale elements add to the stark realism that's also present in the book? Does the mix work?
12. What genre would you put *Dead Man's Blues* into? Were there any elements that didn't fit neatly into that category?
13. '*But the emptiness is the starting point. Maybe it's meaningless so you've got the space to build your own meaning.*' So says Jacob to Ida when discussing the horrors he has seen as a crime scene photographer. Do you agree that if life has no meaning, it's so as to allow us a space in which to create our own meaning?