

**The subterranean in crime fiction:  
examining Edinburgh's underground in Ian Rankin's John Rebus novels**

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To be published in *Social and Cultural Geography*

**Abstract**

Given the prominence of subterranean settings and imagery within crime fiction, this article critically examines the genre's representation of the subterranean. Influenced by scholarly work on the subterranean, I focus on the writing of one prominent crime novelist, Ian Rankin, and his Edinburgh-set John Rebus detective novels. From a relational standpoint, two issues are focused on: *subterranean place* (namely the attachment of meaning to the subterranean, the power relations that run through the subterranean, and the underground's connections to the aboveground) and *subterranean time* (notably the role of the subterranean in shaping the relationship between the past and the present). Traversing Edinburgh's basements and graves, as well as hell and the underworld, I demonstrate that Rankin uses subterranean place and time to accentuate some of the hidden harms, inequalities and injustices of urban life.

Keywords: detective novels, place, time, harm, relationality

**Introduction**

In the opening chapter of Ian Rankin's (1994) crime novel *Mortal Causes*, the protagonist Detective Inspector John Rebus walks through a door on the side of the City Chambers in Edinburgh's Old Town. He descends some stairs to reach a barely lit series of subterranean alleyways called Mary King's Close, 'three or four storeys beneath road level' (*ibid.*, p. 8). The close is a real and unusual place – associated with the plague of 1645, partly built over in 1753 and partly demolished in 1853 – and many years later in Rankin's Edinburgh, Rebus sees a dead body there. Hanging from a hook inside a former butcher's shop, the body has been shot in the head, elbows, knees and ankles. It is identified as Billy Cunningham, the estranged son of a recurring gangster in the Rebus series called Morris Gerald Cafferty. Cunningham has been 'six-packed', Rebus claims, a form of punishment associated with terrorist organisations in Northern Ireland (a clue that encourages Rebus to explore religious and political divides in Edinburgh and Belfast). 'The hidden city, quite a revelation' exclaims the pathologist Dr. Curt upon his arrival into the crime scene (*ibid.*, p. 10). A group forms – all male, except one – and they try to distinguish a word that appears to have been written in the earth by Cunningham's dangling toes:

'Is that Neno or Nemo?'

'Could even be Memo,' offered Dr Curt.

'Captain Nemo,' said the Constable. 'He's the author of *2,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea*.'

'Jules Verne,' said Curt, nodding.

The constable shook his head. 'No, sir, Walt Disney,' he said. (*ibid.*, p. 12)

What is striking about this opening chapter – aside from the unnamed Constable's misremembering of the title of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* – is the 'subterraneanness' of both its setting and intertextuality. Mary King's Court is a dark and hidden place, holding secrets and shadows, and used metaphorically by Rankin. Its metaphorical use becomes clear in this passage from the subsequent Rebus novel, *Let It Bleed*:

As he [Rebus] walked through the main door of the City Chambers, he looked down at the floor, aware that directly beneath it was Mary King's Close, Edinburgh's buried plague street. They covered the street up and built on it anew: that was the Edinburgh way, to bury and forget. (Rankin, 1995, p. 161)

Mary King's Court is one of many vivid subterranean settings in the Rebus novels. In fact, the Rebus series reflects a wider, long-standing fascination with the subterranean in crime fiction (and in popular culture more generally). In this article, I reflect upon representations of the subterranean within crime fiction, using a case study of Ian Rankin's John Rebus detective novels. In doing this, I speak to the growing academic literatures on what I call literary subterraneans (e.g., François, 2021; Cohen, 2023; Pinkus, 2023) and subterranean geographies (e.g., Squire and Dodds, 2019; Woon and Dodds, 2021; Bosworth, 2023). Inspired by these and other studies, I focus on the themes of *subterranean place* (specifically the attachment of meaning to subterranean space, the power relations that permeate the subterranean, and the underground's connections to the aboveground), and *subterranean time* (notably the role of the subterranean in shaping the relationship between the past and the present). Examining graves and basements, hell and the underworld, I demonstrate that Edinburgh's subterranean place and time are used by Rankin to emphasize some of the hidden harms, injustices and inequalities of urban life.

By critically examining the subterranean in the Rebus novels, this paper starts to make up for the limited attention that academics – across disciplinary boundaries – have given the subterranean within crime fiction. This paper also calls for more geographers to study crime fiction. So, while there has been some engagement with crime fiction by geographers and in geography journals (see, for instance, Howell, 1998; Schmid, 1995; Brosseau and Le Bel, 2016; McLaughlin, 2016; Kingsbury, 2023), the genre has largely been overlooked by the discipline. Yet, crime fiction has much more to

offer geography. Even though some crime fiction is formulaic, predictable or lacking depth (cf. Brewster, 2017), the genre frequently provides nuanced insights into the social world – a point made by crime novelist Val McDermid on BBC Radio 4's *A Point of View* (2018, n.p.):

Writing [crime] fiction allows us to turn a critical eye on the society we live in and raise awkward questions for our readers. We want to leave them with something to chew over afterwards. And isn't that what all writers are supposed to do? Murder. Violence. They are just the carnival barkers' pitch to get you inside the tent.

The insights offered by crime novelists are useful for geographers to 'chew over'. In fact, crime novelist Ann Cleeves hints at a commonality between crime novelists and geographers during her appearance on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* (2019, n.p.): 'I quite like the idea that what I do is human geography; I'm interested in community'. More similarities can be drawn out: both groups usually cast a critical eye on society; both situate individual actions within wider social and spatial contexts; both are interested in places, especially cities; and both ask awkward questions about the social, economic, political and environmental fault-lines and injustices within society. The ideas of crime fiction novelists are, therefore, useful for geographers to reflect on.

### **Understanding the subterranean**

In a recent article in *Progress in Human Geography*, Bosworth (2023, p. 1) identifies a recent growth in academic studies focusing on the 'vertical, voluminous, subsurface, subterranean/subaqueous, geological, or underground'. Indeed, an impressive array of scholarly writing has now been published that examines subterranean practices, infrastructures and places (e.g., Fernandes, 2021; Garrett, 2016; Hine and Mayes, 2022; Slesinger, 2020; Squire, 2017). Yet, as Bosworth reasons, we should avoid claiming this upsurge in interest as *geography's recent discovery* of the subterranean. Not only has there

been a longer-than-usually-acknowledged history of academics studying the subsurface, writings on the topic also come from a variety of disciplines. A pertinent example here is recent work on literary subterraneans conducted by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds – a set of literature that I bring into dialogue with work on subterranean geographies in this section.

Studies of literary subterraneans critically analyse literary representations of the subterranean (e.g., Crane and Fletcher, 2016; Redford, 2016; François, 2021; Cohen, 2023; Gomel, 2023; Pinkus, 2023). Across this work, several genres have been examined, including thrillers (Crane and Fletcher, 2016) and horror (Gomel, 2023), yet crime fiction has received little attention. François (2021), for instance, examines literary depictions of Mexico City's subterranean, casting a critical eye on its political, ecological, historical and aesthetic dimensions. Cohen's (2023) *Going Underground*, by contrast, explores literary subterraneans in the nineteenth century United States. Using 'manifestos, songs, speeches, newspaper reports, poetry, travel writing' (p. 133), Cohen demonstrates that

a range of writers turned their attention to subterranean spaces and invested them with new possibilities. In these works, caves, tunnels, mines, volcanoes, and cellars become sites of agitation, collective refusal, freedom, or simply living otherwise. (p. 133)

Focusing on the intersection of race and space, Cohen reasons that not only have 'ideas of racialized Blackness shaped ideas of the underground, ideas of the underground [have also] shaped ideas of racialized Blackness' (p. 9). *Subsurface* (2023) by Karen Pinkus, meanwhile, brings into dialogue current debates on climate change with 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction set in the subterranean. Returning frequently to the work of Jules Verne, Pinkus considers the changing portrayals of cracks, extraction, burial, depth and subterranean futures.

In contrast to much of the literary subterranean literature, the academic literature on subterranean geographies often takes its cues from studies of verticality and volume (e.g., Elden, 2013; Graham, 2016; Harris, 2015; Jackson *et al.*, 2019; McNeill, 2019). Here, subterranean geographies scholarship – written often, but not always, by geographers – investigates different subterranean practices, infrastructures and places, typically connecting them with wider political, economic and cultural processes (Bosworth, 2023). There are occasional references to literary subterranean work within subterranean geographies literature (and *vice versa*). A lot of recent subterranean geographies literature is written by those interested in geopolitics, and this work has successfully framed the subterranean as an important site of colonialism, exploitation, extraction, nation-building, occupation, resistance and struggle (see, for instance, the special issues edited by Squire and Dodds, 2020 and Woon and Dodds, 2021). Away from geopolitics, Lahiri-Dutt (2023) explores the gendering of the subterranean through a feminist political ecology lens. Urban scholars, in addition, connect the urban subterranean to wider processes of urbanisation, urban development and urban inequalities (Burrows *et al.*, 2022; Connor and McNeill, 2022; Melo Zurita, 2020; Ruming *et al.*, 2021).

There are two themes, I argue, that are important to consider when analysing crime fiction's subterranean. These are subterranean place and subterranean time. Both themes appear unevenly in literary subterranean and subterranean geographies literatures – ranging from highly visible in some work to absent in others. I consider these two themes in turn, starting with subterranean place. Place, of course, is a key concept within geographical research (e.g., Cresswell, 2015; Edensor *et al.*, 2020), and place has been widely discussed in the study of literature (e.g., Alexander, 2017; Anderson, 2015; Gabellieri, 2022; Geherin, 2008; Hausladen, 2000; King, 2020; Pezzotti, 2012; Tuan, 1985). Three aspects of place are particularly useful to consider when thinking about the subterranean in crime fiction. These are (1) the *meanings* associated with subterranean places (nodding to early humanistic studies of place, e.g., Tuan, 1977); (2) the *power relations* that run through subterranean places (influenced by critical studies of power, inequality and resistance in place, e.g., Harvey, 1996; O'Hare, 2020); and (3) the *connections* between underground and aboveground places. The latter aspect speaks

to relational thinking about place (e.g., Dovey, 2020; Massey, 1993) and relational understandings in literary geography (e.g., Anderson, 2015). It also resonates with much subterranean geographies scholarship – and with some of the literary subterranean literature (e.g., Cohen, 2023) – where the connections and mobilities between the underground and the aboveground are closely examined. Such work challenges the view that ‘the subterranean is a world apart, detached from the sociopolitical worlds of the surface, and instead focus[es] on the complicated relations and processes that remake and weave meaning into often unseen depths’ (Marston and Himley, 2021, p. 2). Viewing the subterranean in this way requires us to acknowledge that it is not an exclusively ‘top-down’ power dynamic – the aboveground dictating activity underground – as the underground shapes the aboveground too. Research on the urban regeneration and planning in Newcastle (Australia) by Ruming *et al.* (2021) illustrates this:

the material agency of Newcastle’s mining past [...] affects the planning and development processes shaping the city’s current and future development. While the underground mining ceased long ago, the shafts used to mine coal and the underground voids that remain have emerged as material presences (and absences) that shape, configure and inhibit social, physical and economic development in the city [...] The materiality of the coal which catalysed urban development in the early 19th century left underground voids which have emerged as barriers to urban redevelopment and regeneration initiatives in the early 21st century. (*ibid.*, pp. 161-162)

The underground, for Ruming *et al.*, is neither passive nor inert; but ‘actively agentic in the configuration of aboveground development’ (*ibid.*, p. 160, see also Hine and Mayes, 2022). The underground and aboveground should, therefore, be seen as co-constitutive.

The temporalities of the subterranean is the second theme that can help us make sense of crime fiction's subterraneans. The roles of time and temporality within fiction has been much studied. Here, scholars have considered issues such as memory, ageing, speed, the night, the past/present/future, the experience of time, as well as time's relationship with place and space (cf. Silber, 2009; Howell and Beckingham, 2015; Martin, 2016; Cook, 2022). Subterranean studies, by contrast, have usually focused on the spatial rather than the temporal. However, a handful of studies of subterranean geographies have brought the issue of temporality into focus. Garrett's (2021) work on underground bunkers and doomsday preppers, for instance, shows the importance of the future in the preparation, construction and discourse of bunkers. Childs (2020), meanwhile, reasons that both space and time are important in understanding the geopolitics of deep-sea mining. Elsewhere, work on subterranean lead mining soughs by Endfield and van Lieshout (2020) identifies a variety of temporalities that shape sough development, such as 'changing flows of water underground over time, the waxing and waning of sough developments depending on changing economic, political and social configurations and the cross-generational nature of the legal disputes which were raised over soughs and the productive landscapes they drained' (p. 68). Together, these studies send a clear message that temporality is important – if not, necessary – to consider when making sense of the subterranean.

We can build on these insights by reflecting on the influence of the subterranean on the ways in which time is experienced, produced, manipulated, governed and, like place, infused with meaning. Investigating the role of time in the relationship between the aboveground and underground is important too. Once again, a relational ontology is helpful as it brings into view the relations between places, between place and time, and between different forms of time – of particular interest here is the influence of the past on the present (a familiar trope in crime fiction).

### **Situating the subterranean within Rankin's Edinburgh**



This section starts with two observations. First, the subterranean within the John Rebus novels is typically an *urban* subterranean. Indeed, the Edinburgh-set Rebus novels echo crime fiction's 'long-standing engagement with the city' (Plain, 2018, p. 151; see also Andrew and Phelps, 2013; Knight, 2016; Willett, 1996; Brosseau and Le Bel, 2016). Second, Ian Rankin does not depict the subterranean as being separate to the city of Edinburgh; instead, the subterranean is an important component of the city assemblage (cf. Ruming *et al.*, 2021). Rankin connects Edinburgh's subterranean to the aboveground in a myriad of ways, and the author imaginatively uses the subterranean to illustrate his thoughts on, and experiences of, urban life. Given the urban and relational character of Rankin's subterranean, it is important to reflect first on Rankin's broader portrayal of Edinburgh before heading underground.

Ever since Rebus's full-length introduction in 1987's *Knots and Crosses*, Edinburgh has been central to the Rebus series. Its protagonist lives and works in Edinburgh – in fact, Rebus resides on the same street (Arden Street) that Rankin inhabited as a student. Rebus and Rankin are intrigued and confused by Edinburgh. Rankin often compares Edinburgh to a puzzle – one that the author, detectives and readers attempt again and again to piece together. Mirroring the depiction of cities by other crime novelists, Rankin repeatedly portrays Edinburgh as a violent, threatening and secretive place, haunted by its past failures and injustices (Cook and Rowe, 2023). It is a place engrained with patriarchy and toxic masculinity, as well as a territory fought over by male gangsters.

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of Rankin's Edinburgh is its duality. Here Rankin takes inspiration from the Edinburgh-born author Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). In *Knots and Crosses*, for instance, Rankin describes Edinburgh as 'a schizophrenic city, the place of Jekyll & Hyde sure enough' (Rankin, 1987, p. 193). Rankin views Jekyll and Hyde as metaphors for the dual personalities of Edinburgh: its respectability and deviance, day and night, visibility and invisibility, surface and subsurface. Rankin is particularly interested in revealing the hidden – or Hydden – side of Edinburgh that tourists rarely see. It is perhaps no surprise then that

the Rebus novels cast a light on a multitude of concealed social harms – such as deprivation, exploitation, corruption and murder – that manifest above and below Edinburgh’s surface, whose victims are disproportionately from marginalized groups.

Rankin is keen to accentuate the verticality of Edinburgh. Here, Rankin describes Edinburgh as a ‘precipitous city’, one that ‘contains an intensity of heights and depths’ (Rankin, 2009, p. 2). Viewing Edinburgh in this way, Rankin is influenced once more by Stevenson, who used the phrase precipitous city in *The Weir of Hermiston*’s dedication (Stevenson, 1896). Rankin’s Edinburgh retains the steep hills, crags and crevices as well as many of its tenements that Stevenson (1878) described many years prior in *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*. Rankin complements these features with more recent ones such as high-rise estates and penthouse apartments. Importantly, Rankin emulates Stevenson further by showing that the city extends vertically beneath the surface, by peering into different subterranean places such as basements and graves.

Edinburgh’s verticality is used by Rankin to emphasize discomfort and danger. Two small but telling examples are Rebus struggling with stairs during his 60s and 70s (with his health declining) and his occasionally mentioned fear of heights. These vertical nuances reveal a protagonist who is ill at ease with the precipitous city that he resides and works in. Another example is the large number of people in Rankin’s Edinburgh who metaphorically and literally fall. We read, for instance, of several deaths by hanging in the novels as well as those who fall from great heights. Did they jump or were they pushed? That’s the question frequently posed to the detectives and readers. One recurring character, Father Conor Leary, suffers a heart attack and falls over a railing after giving a speech in Surgeons’ Hall in *The Falls*. An exchange after the event between Rebus and Donald Devlin links this fall to the ideas of Stevenson:

‘He’d just made a fascinating speech,’ Devlin said. [...] ‘The fall of man, that was his starting point. [...] The fall of man, and then he fell [...] Perhaps Stevenson was right.’

‘What about?’

‘He called Edinburgh a “precipitous city”. Maybe vertigo is in the nature of the place ...’

Rebus thought he knew what Devlin meant. Precipitous city ... each and every one of its inhabitants falling slowly, almost imperceptibly (Rankin, 2001, pp. 154-155)

This extract echoes wider cultural associations with falling and downwards movement – for instance, fear, failing and a lack of power (Claid, 2021; Winters, 2014). These associations are important to bear in mind as we descend into the depths of Rankin’s subterranean Edinburgh.

### **Subterranean Edinburgh, Rankin-style**

Depictions of the subterranean in popular culture – and crime fiction especially – are sometimes positive: intriguing and beautiful, a site of shelter, resistance, adventure, endurance and possibility (Redford, 2016; Woon and Dodds, 2021; Cohen, 2023; Pinkus, 2023). More frequently, however, they are represented in a negative light. Crime fiction shares some (toned down) similarities here with the horror genre regarding their representation of the subterranean (cf. Gomel, 2023; Raine, 2021; Winter, 2014): both portray the subterranean as dark and dangerous, a place engulfed in a claustrophobic and frightening atmosphere, where innocent victims are trapped, outsiders and deviants are banished, and secrets are buried. Rankin tends to draw on these negative associations when writing about the subterranean but, as we shall see, he challenges some of them too.

Edinburgh’s underground in the Rebus novels is a place where simultaneously the disadvantaged are most likely to be trapped or buried, and the powerful are more able to occupy (of

their own accord), work and play illicitly, hide and bury their secrets. As we will see, Edinburgh's subterranean is a patriarchal place where men (typically powerful and wealthy) control who enters and what happens there, operating out of the gaze of the police. The subterranean is used by Rankin to express his belief that Edinburgh – with its cultured veneer and genteel, morally upstanding façade – is a corrupt place full of hidden secrets. For Rankin believes that Edinburgh is 'all appearances [...] fur coat and no knickers' (Rankin, 1987, p. 193) – 'the perfect Jekyll and Hyde city, its secrets tucked away quietly beneath apparent probity' (Rankin, 2005, p. 30). There is an important spatiality to Rankin's suggestion: secrets are not only hidden; they are often buried beneath a literal or metaphorical surface. The subterranean is one such storage facility, where harms, immoralities and injustices are concealed. In a related way, Edinburgh is presented as a city where things are regularly 'swept under the carpet' – a frequently-used metaphor in the novels, especially when the detectives cynically discuss the actions of Edinburgh's elite and their police colleagues (with the Rebus series often exposing corrupt, rule breaking and violent practices of the police).

The temporalities of buried secrets within Edinburgh are important too. Rankin suggests that this is a long-standing practice, one that is both *futile* – as secrets will inevitably resurface in the future (Cook, 2022) – and *harmful* – as secrets haunt residents of Edinburgh during and after their burial (MacDonald, 2012). The burying of secrets adds to Rankin's message that the past lingers and 'contaminates the present' (Plain, 2007, p. 134). Forgetting is not possible in Rankin's Edinburgh. The resurfacing of the past is vividly captured in the extract below taken from the epilogue of *Deal Souls*, when we encounter Rebus observing a demolition site in the Old Town where the Scottish Parliament, the offices of the *Scotsman* newspaper and a (never-to-arrive) theme park were due to be built:

Demolition had stopped for the day [...] They'd all be ready for the twenty-first century. Taking Scotland into the new millennium. Rebus tried to raise within himself a tiny cheer of hope, but found it stifled by his old cynicism.

No longer twilight now. Darkness had fallen. Shadows seemed to rise all around him as a bell tolled in the distance. The blood that had seeped into stone, the bones that lay twisting in their eternity, the stories and horrors of the city's past and present ... he knew they'd all come rising in the digger's steel jaws, bubbling to the surface as the city began its slow ascent towards being a nation's capital city. (Rankin, 1999, p. 405)

The difficulty of containing the illicit past under the surface is symbolized further by the frequent appearances in the Rebus novels of dead bodies floating in water (such as the city's canals and docks). Death occurs sometimes before and sometimes after they enter the water. Either way, the bodies are unlikely to remain submerged; their buoyance representing the almost inevitable rise to the surface of the illicit.

Police work in the Rebus novels is also frequently described using more positive subterranean metaphors. We see detectives – such as Rebus in *Resurrection Men* (Rankin, 2002) – going ‘undercover’ as ‘moles’. The police are often described as ‘scratching the surface’ and ‘digging’ into cases. When, for example, Rebus discusses a case with Cafferty in *Even Dogs in the Wild*, he remarks that Detective Constable Christine Esson ‘did the digging – she’s as thorough as any gold miner’ (Rankin, 2015, p. 290). This focus on what François (2021, p. 239) calls ‘digging as truth-seeking’ is given a temporal dimension in several of the books when Rankin compares police work with archaeology. When an archaeologist guides a team of detectives around Queensbury House in *Set in Darkness*, Rankin (2000, p. 14) writes: ‘Digging up the past, uncovering secrets... it struck Rebus that they [archaeologists] weren't so unlike detectives’; both occupations are, as Rankin (1993, p. 52) suggests in *The Black Book*, interested in ‘old bones and hieroglyphs, trying to make the dead come to life’.

### **Graves and basements in Rankin's Edinburgh**

The Rebus novels visit a variety of subterranean places, some places that are literally underground while others are more figurative places. This section explores two noteworthy examples of the former (graves and basements) and the next section examines two important examples of the latter (hell and the underworld).

Starting with graves, they are commonplace in cities and crime fiction, and feature regularly in the Rebus series. This is especially so in *Standing in Another Man's Grave* (Rankin, 2012) where graves are central to the narrative. The novel begins with Rebus attending a funeral of a former colleague at an unnamed cemetery in Edinburgh. Later an 'all-too human hand, jutting up from [a...] makeshift grave' (Rankin, 2012, p. 254) is discovered, hinting at the easily punctured divide between the underground and aboveground. Four more graves are unearthed, all five located in the woods at Edderton (approximately 200 miles north of Edinburgh). Rebus then watches television footage of the funeral of one of those found in Edderton – Annette McKie – and soon after the funeral, her brother – the youthful Edinburgh gangster, Darryl Christie – kidnaps the suspected serial killer and forces them to stand in a shallow grave during the climax of the novel (before Rebus and his ally Detective Inspector Siobhan Clarke intervene). Of course, there is also the grave in the novel's title.

Whether legal or illegal, in Edinburgh or elsewhere, graves and their aboveground accompaniments, headstones, regularly appear in Rankin's gothic-inspired novels. All too often, neither the grave nor the headstone, the dead nor the mourning appear peaceful. In *Dead Souls* (Rankin, 1999), for instance, Rebus discovers that his father's headstone is splattered with paint, while *Fleshmarket Close* (Rankin, 2004) features children using a skull from a desecrated tomb as a football. These instances sit alongside Rankin's regular mentions of Edinburgh's real-life resurrectionists who sold exhumed bodies (and sometimes bodies they murdered) to surgeons during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Rankin gives us a clue as to how to interpret the graves and headstones in *The Hanging Garden*: 'In the past, it had been a history lesson to Rebus – headstones telling the story of nineteenth-century Edinburgh

– but now he found it a jarring reminder of mortality’ (Rankin, 1998, p. 146). Graves and headstones, therefore, are signifiers of a grim past and, perhaps, an equally grim future.

Graves and headstones are also accompanied by ghosts in Rankin’s novels, all of whom are reminders of the painful past haunting Edinburgh, its denizens and Rebus especially (MacDonald, 2012). Indeed, Rebus is continually reminded of the dead; he is drawn to graveyards, is regularly visited by ghosts, and is tormented by the difficulties of achieving justice for the dead (Cook, 2022). Graves, headstones and ghosts contribute towards an image of the past acting like a palimpsest in the present; ‘superseded, even covered, but never erased’, and at any moment ‘liable to rise up and insinuate itself into the present’ (Cook, 2014, p. 144).

Venturing indoors, basements appear regularly in crime fiction too. Sharing some similarities with the horror genre once more, crime fiction depicts basements as having menacing atmospheres; places ‘in which unspeakable horrors lurk [...] invariably associated with murder, the concealment of terrible crimes and illicit burial’ (Murphy, 2009, pp. 154-155). While basements appear only periodically in the Rebus series, they are important places and, like graves, feed into the wider cultural associations between depth, deviance and death. Furthermore, Rankin’s basements echo the temporalities of basements within popular culture, having gruesome pasts and terrifying futures. One notable appearance is in the second Rebus novel, *Hide and Seek* (Rankin, 1990) – a novel that underscores the Jekyll and Hyde duality of Edinburgh. *Hide and Seek* culminates in a police raid on a basement club, symbolically named Hyde’s Club. It is situated in a Georgian terrace – presumably in the city’s New Town – accessible via some hidden stairs in a casino named Finlay’s. The owner of the basement club, Finlay Andrews, along with lawyer Malcolm Lanyon, orchestrate illicit and harmful activities that are hidden beneath the surface:

Calum McCallum [...] had told Rebus all about the rumours he'd heard, rumours of a little club within a club, where the city's increasingly jaded begetters of wealth could place some 'interesting bets'. A bit out of the ordinary, McCallum had said. Yes, like betting on two rent boys, junkies paid handsomely to knock the daylights out of one another and keep quiet about it afterwards. Paid with money and drugs. (Rankin, 1990, p. 244)

Run and frequented by men, the basement club allows voyeurs to watch others have sex through a see-through mirror. Andrews and Lanyon secretly take photographs of attendees which are stored as future bribery aides. What happens underground, their threat goes, may not stay underground if you do not comply (the porosity of the subterranean coming through once more). Hyde's Club embodies the division and concealed exploitation within Edinburgh. Hyde's Club also acts as the subterranean expression of Edward Hyde, while the casino plays the 'above-board' role of Henry Jekyll (Geherin, 2008). After the raid, when Rebus worries that the powerful elite of Edinburgh will cover up the basement and the associated deaths, the novel returns us to the trope of the illicit being buried:

'They're going to bury it, Brian,' Rebus said, his voice an angry vibrato. 'They're going to bury it, I know they are, and there'll be no cross marking the spot, nothing. A junkie died of his own volition. An estate agent committed suicide. Now a lawyer [Lanyon] tops himself in a police cell. No connection, no crime committed.' (Rankin, 1990, pp. 258-259)

Once more, Edinburgh's powerful – and predominately male – elite collude in the burial of secrets. This 'cover up' is yet another subterranean reminder that Rankin's Edinburgh is corrupt and rotten, 'built on double standards and dark secrets' (Plain, 2018, p. 17).

### **Hell and the underworld in Rankin's Edinburgh**



The terms basement, cellar, grave, cemetery or headstone are not used in the Rebus novels as often as another subterranean term: hell. Across the series, up to and including *A Heart Full of Headstones* (Rankin, 2022), hell or variations of it average a considerable 35 mentions per novel. Used largely in the dialogue, hell is mostly used as an interjection, with the term hellish or hell also being used to describe a miserable and insufferable situation or place (usually a place aboveground). For instance, Inspector Anthony McCall describes the fictional Edinburgh estate of Pilmuir as ‘[b]loody hell on earth’ in *Hide and Seek* (Rankin, 1990, p. 18).

Temporality runs through wider depictions of hell, situating hell as (1) retributive punishment in the future for sins of the past and present, and (2) a subterranean site of *eternal* damnation. These temporalities are not conjured up in the Rebus novels, although the repetitive use of the word does emphasize the length and intensity of suffering by residents, victims and the police. Temporality is important too in the moments when Rankin’s characters invoke hell to suggest that morality is declining over time. For instance, when Rebus visits London in *Tooth and Nail*, Detective Inspector George Flight states:

Everything’s going to hell in this city, Arnold, and I’m inclined to just shrug my shoulders and join in. Understand me? Why should I play fair when nobody else does, eh? (Rankin, 1992, p. 224, emphasis added)

Meanwhile, Chief Superintendent “Farmer” Watson evokes Hades when lamenting Edinburgh’s growing drug problems (Hades being both the land of the dead in Greek mythology and a pseudonym for hell in popular culture):

You probably know that I'm interested in this city's drug problem. Frankly, the statistics appal me. [...] Here, Inspector, it's Hades. Plain and simple [...] *this city is turning into Hades*. (Rankin, 1990, p. 28, emphasis added)

Importantly, the Rebus novels regularly refer to hell's most infamous resident, the devil. Indeed, devil or variations of the term appear in all but one of the novels, typically used in dialogue that playfully or aggressively refer to other characters. The gangster Cafferty is frequently called the devil – an association stressed in *Rather Be the Devil* (Rankin, 2017) where Cafferty comes out of 'retirement', removing his rival Christie (who is imprisoned) and symbolically taking over Christie's basement club on the Cowgate called the Devil's Dram. It is a nightclub where, under Christie's ownership, '[p]lastic gargoyles leered from the ceiling, while bearded satyrs cavorted along the walls' (Rankin, 2017, p. 94), with 'the smell of disinfectant heavy in the air' (p. 96) and whose music sets Clarke's 'teeth on edge' (p. 96). A hellish, masculine and subterranean place where Christie and Cafferty feel at home.

Rankin is not superficially dressing up people, places and situations through references to the devil, hell and Hades; instead, he is giving them nuance and depth. When Rankin describes Cafferty as 'a kind of devil, who is always standing behind Rebus with this seductive voice saying 'It feels good to do bad things, why don't you give it a go[?]' (quoted in Plain, 2002, p. 13), we can see that Cafferty is used to demonstrate how tempting it is to cross the line. When Rebus tells Cafferty '[w]e all look like hell' in *Rather Be the Devil* (Rankin, 2017, p. 232) and comments 'we all have a bit of devilment in us, don't we?' in the additional material of *In a House of Lies* (Rankin, 2018, p. 9), Rankin is able to subtly ask his readers this question: do we all have an Edward Hyde inside us?

These metaphorical ideas about the subterranean are taken one step further in several of Rankin's latter novels. Here he draws on the notion of the underworld. It is an evocative but vague term

which, since the early twentieth century, has been widely used to describe ‘the alternative habitat of the criminal, the deviant, and the dangerous outsider’ (Shore, 2016, p. 171). Geographically, the term is often associated with cities and, while it has subterranean associations, it is a label for a variety of places above and below the surface. Rankin draws on existing understandings of the underworld and reformulates them in Edinburgh. The term underworld is first used within the Rebus series in *A Question of Blood* (Rankin, 2003), but it is in the next novel, *Fleshmarket Close* (Rankin, 2004), where the author challenges our understanding of it. Here, Rebus says to Detective Sergeant Ellen Wylie, ‘I’ve got this theory [...] We spend most of our time chasing something called ‘the underworld’, but it’s the *overworld* we should really be keeping an eye on’ (Rankin, 2003, p. 118). In writing this, Rankin speaks to the corrupt and harmful practices of the ‘legitimately’ powerful in Edinburgh such as senior figures in business, government and the police. Later novels develop this idea, making the case for the co-existence and intertwining of the underworld and overworld. They also demonstrate that occupants of both ‘worlds’ crave power and use harmful means to achieve it. Rankin uses Cafferty to illustrate the interconnectedness and complexity of the underworld and overworld:

Big Ger Cafferty had for many years been king of Edinburgh’s underworld. These days, he lived a quieter life: at least on the surface. But with Cafferty, you never could tell. (Rankin, 2004, p. 129)

Cafferty had, to all purposes and appearances, gone legit. A few friends in the right places and deals got done, fates decided. [...] It was, Rebus realised, how things worked in the overworld [... The] buzz Cafferty got, buying drinks for businessmen and politicians ... Cafferty: unfinished business, and likely to remain that way if Rebus heeded [Chief Constable James] Corbyn’s orders. Cafferty unfettered, free to commute between underworld and overworld. (Rankin, 2007, pp. 188-189)

Cafferty's occupation of both the underworld and overworld is illustrated in recent Rebus novels when Cafferty not only takes over Christie's basement club but also moves soon after into a 'penthouse duplex in the Quartermile development, just across the Meadows from Rebus's tenement' (Rankin, 2018, p. 99) – away from his former 'house on a wide leafy street in Merchiston' (Rankin, 2017, p. 29). The vertical symbolism is important: Cafferty is rising, reclaiming his city, surveying his turf from up high – using his telescope, introduced in *A Heart Full of Headstones* (Rankin, 2022) – pulling the strings from above and below, and taunting Rebus in plain sight. His ease of movement between the underworld and overworld – aided no doubt by his gender and wealth – reminds us that Edinburgh is a complicated web of corruption.

## **Conclusion**

He could scream all he liked.

They were underground, a place he didn't know (Rankin, 1994, p. 1)

The subterranean, as this article demonstrates, is an important yet under-examined place in crime fiction. Taking cues from the expanding literatures on literary subterraneans and subterranean geographies, I have started to address the lacuna by critically exploring the subterranean in Ian Rankin's Edinburgh-set John Rebus novels. To summarize, this article has shown that Rankin's subterranean is a place rich with meaning (associated with uncertainty, death, deviance, secrecy and injustice) and imbued with power relations (being an unobserved, soundproofed and accessible haven for wealthy men while also being a site where disadvantaged groups are disproportionately harmed and trapped). Edinburgh's underground is not a self-contained place; instead, it is an important component within the city's verticality and assemblage. The underground and aboveground are interwoven, demonstrated by the blurring of the underworld and overworld in the novels and the frequent rising to the surface of buried secrets. Place and time, of course, are entwined too, with the subterranean in the Rebus novels

having noteworthy temporalities. For many of Rankin's characters, the experience of time is shaped by the subterranean – take, for instance, the uncertainty of the future (when or if people will resurface), the length and intensity of suffering that a metaphorical hell suggests, or the painful wait for answers and justice for family and friends of the (possibly) 'dead and buried'. The subterranean is central to the relationship between the past and the present too; it is a place where characters – usually the powerful – attempt to hide and forget the past, but it is also a place where the past can rarely be contained, creating a lingering, palimpsestic imprint above and below the surface. In sometimes familiar and sometimes original ways, Rankin uses the spatiotemporality of the subterranean to illustrate and critique some of the injustices, inequalities and harms hidden beneath the cultured façade of Edinburgh.

Looking ahead, I hope that this article encourages three types of conversations. First, conversations about the role and representation of the subterranean in crime fiction (and in other genres). Second, conversations about crime fiction that involve geographers and occur during working hours (after all, I've met many geographers who regularly read crime fiction outside of work). Third, conversations about the subterranean that involve academics from different disciplines. Fingers crossed some, or all, of these conversations happen, and I look forward to participating.

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