
The Desert Noir Detective Novels of Jon Talton

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“Phoenix is a magnet for rough-hewn faces. Misfits, losers, con artists, ex-cons, desperate Oakies and Oaxacans, second-chance Johnnies—they all end up here, as if the city is the last fence line catching the unattached debris of a windy world. I often imagine faces from the streets of Phoenix transported into primitive black-and-white photography of the Old West. You couldn’t tell the difference. Only the clothes give away their place in time.”

(Jon Talton, *Dry Heat* 66)

There are two interesting facts about Phoenix, Arizona. One is that the city—and, by extension, the Greater Phoenix area and central Arizona Valley of the Sun in which it is located—reputedly has few interesting modern stories to tell. At least, no stories that relate to the settlers who arrived in the empty desert in the early 1870s, some four hundred years after the mysterious disappearance of the Hohokam indians. The archeological remains of the Hohokam, complementing the primitive canal system successive generations of settlers have converted into part of a major irrigation system, keep cropping up in the excavations of the burgeoning megalopolis. The other fact is that, of the approximately two dozen novels that have been written about Phoenix, something like two-thirds are crime novels. It is my contention that these two facts are inextricably related.

Although there is an interesting inventory of detective/mystery writers who set their stories in Phoenix, it is clear that Phoenix is often merely a circumstantial backdrop for those stories, and there is little contribution to an understanding of Phoenix as a society with its own history and social configuration. By contrast—and this is a major point concerning the importance of his novels—Phoenix writer Jon Talton is profoundly committed to the importance of recounting the particular stories that are relevant to the history of Phoenix as an interesting postmodern, sunbelt metropolis. As a consequence, his novels make use of the conceit of the mystery story in order to counter the proposition, made both locally and abroad, that such a relatively recent and homogenous city like Phoenix has no interesting stories to tell. Precisely for Talton, the opposite is true: the plot configurations of his novels,

grounded as they are in the subgenre of the detective/mystery story, are designed to counter the, for him, false claim that Phoenix is a “narrativeless society.”

I suppose that the sense of what we might call a “narrativeless” society can be accounted for in part with reference to older areas of the country with a concomitant longer accumulated record of human experience, although some West Coast cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and even Seattle, as far as their Anglo history goes and discounting the now heavily romanticized Hispanic past in the case of the first two, are not that much older than Phoenix. This despite how Seattle and San Francisco generated great wealth far earlier than sluggish Phoenix, a wealth that allowed for an extensive cultural production and its institutions. Perhaps the way in which so many citizens of Phoenix are what Talton calls second-chance Johnnies displaced from somewhere else instills in them little interest in the historical foundations of their new society, although the West Coast cities mentioned are also societies grounded in large measure on adult outsiders, and even more so in the case of the high incidence of foreign-born immigration they had long before Phoenix (a circumstance that also includes Hispanic groups in the Valley, by the way: if Hispanics or Latinos now make up over one third of the population, this has only been so in the last decade or so).

Rather, this narrativeless condition is the result of something like an “ana-narrativity”: the opposition to producing narratives, which would require recognizing that there are stories to tell and recognizing the nature of such stories. True, there does exist a trove of narratives about Phoenix that, in addition to serious fiction, are continually recycled as part of the tourist industry, such as those relating to the cowboy west (the abiding theme of Scottsdale’s self-image), surviving the summer heat before refrigerated air-conditioning, the Goldwater legacy, and the occasional monumentalized scandal such as the ax-murderess Winnie Ruth Judd and the two trunks of body parts put on the train to Los Angeles in the middle of October 1931 (see Bommersbach). But not much else gets out from behind the blank stares of old-timers and newcomers alike as regards what an inventory of the interesting stories of Phoenix might look like. If only Phoenix, like San Francisco, had something in its past like the 1906 Earthquake or L.A.’s fabled Hollywood, accompanied by something like the villainous LAPD. Nor does Phoenix supposedly have anything like Seattle’s devious Dave Beck and the Teamster’s legacy in that city. So rather than invent stories—beyond the disingenuous ones that might appeal to nevertheless rather disinterested tourists—one simply repeats the mantra that Phoenix has no history other than the thin gruel of routine annals.¹

But there is another way of looking at the matter, and this leads to what is the narrative material of Talton’s writing. Talton would have us understand that Phoenix’s

history, both in its founding instances and current daily reality, is filled with dirty secrets simply waiting to be discovered and told, secrets relating to the treatment of minorities (as evidenced in eternally ongoing spiteful measures to control alleged illegal immigration and perennially unresolved issues such as the teaching of English to those who are not native speakers, even when they may be U.S. citizens), the violent opposition to unionization (most Phoenicians do not know that César Chávez, who co-founded the United Farm Workers in California in the 1960s, was run out of his native Arizona by growers willing to do anything to prevent any form unionization in their state), or the widespread shenanigans of wolfish land developers whose expansive ways go unchecked because they are guarding the hen-house in the form of city counsels and the state legislature. Then there's the matter of the Mafia and other crime syndicates. These and many others are stories waiting to be told, but first you have got to acknowledge their existence before anyone might think to tell them and others to read them as anything other than wild slanderous fictions at the expense of the All American Cities that all the Greater Phoenix communities aspire to be, anchored as they are by their vast churches and equally vast shopping malls that are really two sides to the same coin: Arizona Mills on Saturday and the Valley Cathedral on Sunday.

Talton was born in the late 1950s and counts himself as a fourth-generation Phoenix native. Although he left the Valley for an extended period as an adult, he returned in the early 1990s to assume the post as editorial writer covering business and related issues for *The Arizona Republic*, a Gannett newspaper. His triweekly columns are often provocative and generate a fair amount of hostile responses, and Talton tells about particularly relishing responding to disgruntled readers who order him to go back where he came from to the effect that, in fact, he is where he came from to the effect as of this writing, Talton is the only *Republic* editorial writer who is a native of Phoenix. Talton's columns are often backgrounded by the malevolence and sleaze that he has fleshed out in his novels.

Talton has published four crime novels set in Phoenix: *Concrete Desert* (2001), *Camelback Falls* (2003), *Dry Heat* (2004), and *Arizona Dreams* (2006); all bear the subtitle *A David Mapstone Mystery*. *Dry Heat* won the 2006 Arizona Library Association award for best fiction. One of the traditions of crime novels that cuts across languages and cultures is the practice of tying a group of novels by an author together on the basis of their major figure, whether a lawyer, a district/prosecuting attorney, a private investigator, or some combination of these categories; indeed, some writers will use different noms-de-plume, one for each major fictional character in a set of their novels. It is also part of the same tradition that many of their major characters assume a culturally iconic importance beyond the novels so that they become

synonymous with some social phenomenon, such as a way of life (the ur-English Agatha Christie's Miss Marple), a way of thought (the hyper-intellectual Sherlock Holmes), or a city (Los Angeles' Philip Marlowe). David Mapstone falls into the latter category. Although a native son of Phoenix, Mapstone leaves the Valley to do graduate work in history, fails to achieve tenure, and returns to Arizona, where he obtains something like a charity post with the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, where an old friend, Sheriff Mike Peralta,² employs Mapstone as a cold case specialist. Mapstone reconnects with old friends and lives in the house he has inherited from his grandparents. It is the house in which he grew up in the historic Willo area of downtown Phoenix (where, incidentally Talton himself now lives, around the corner from the house in which he grew up). But—most significantly—his professional employment brings him into contact with many of the unpleasant details of “ancient” Phoenix history. Important figures in Phoenix would just as soon not encourage a return to this past, both because its involves their own unsavory origins and deeds and because its brings to the fore aspects of the city best left unavailable to tourists and investors: mandatory archeological excavations are a bothersome inconvenience to the expansive built environment of Greater Phoenix, but digging around in old police files can be downright dangerous because of the revelations that they might yield regarding the ugly past and deeds of important civic leaders. The strategy of these civic leaders is to pretend that the past does not exist, that, quite simply, there is no past—in short, that there are no stories from the past to be told. As a consequence, Mapstone, whose work on cold cases is meant to be a public relations ploy for the Sheriff's office,³ is repeatedly exposed to the vengeful violence of those individuals inconvenienced by his diligent investigations into the past, and that violence extends to Lindsey, who is first his girlfriend (in *Camelback Falls*) and then his wife (in *Dry Heat*), and who is also employed by the Sheriff, as an expert in sleuthing in cyberspace.

Talton's four novels in one sense are standard crime-story fare involving revenge killings, corrupt business dealings, and the business activities of the mob (in this case the Russian mafia), along with scheming women and police skullduggery. Our concern here is not the originality in Talton's crime themes or in his narrative plotting of them, but in the way in which Mapstone serves as a filtering consciousness for the interpretation of Phoenix at the height of its apotheosis-like emergence as the nation's largest state capital, as the fifth demographic concentration in the country, and as an important station along the new Camino Real of the Southwest that stretches from Los Angeles to Houston, the much vaunted Sunbelt that is the consequence of political, economic, and technological forces of the late twentieth century.

Unquestionably, a dominant paradigm for the American detective is the rough-and-tumble noble savage, the man who must walk alone the mean streets of the city—and, like Mapstone, mess around in its mean police archives:

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man, and yet an unusual man.... The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startle you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. (Chandler 991-992)

Certainly, Talton's Mapstone does not get much chance to walk the mean streets of Phoenix: no one walks the mean streets of the city, and "streetwalker" is only a fossilized metonymy for the prostitutes who, like most other sin in the sun, are very much hidden away in air-conditioned shadows. (Of course, the degree of air conditioning is always relative to the economic standing of the sinners in question.) Rather, Mapstone must rove the city in official and personal cars, the only reliable mode of transportation in the urban sprawl that is the Valley. Yet the ethos of the privileged observer is never out of mind for the narrative voice of Talton's novels, and one of the major functions of that voice is to observe the city in terms of both what it is and, relative to its decidedly humble past, what it has become. It is important to note that Mapstone's critical scrutiny of Phoenix is significantly different from Philip Marlowe's relationship to Los Angeles. While Chandler unquestionably is successful in transmitting the gritty texture of post-war Los Angeles and figuring the many dimensions of its official and personal corruption, Marlowe's mean streets are simply those that, perforce, must be experienced as they are, but never as they have become vis-à-vis something else. There is no nostalgia for an idyllic lost Los Angeles, which would connect with (mostly outrageously fanciful) legends of its romantic Spanish heritage and unquestionably none of the historical correlation undertaken between past and present Los Angeles as we have in the case of Roman Polanski's detective Jake "J.J." Gittes in Polanski's 1974 film *Chinatown*.

It is not so much that Mapstone entertains any gripping nostalgia for his youth in a prelapsarian Phoenix, although there is unquestionably a certain measure of that: the interrelated Thomas Wolfe motifs of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) animate most of us in our relationship to our hometowns, particularly in a society like the United States where few live in their hometowns and, given the accelerated rate of social change in this country, the way in which many hardly recognize after a while those hometowns, either due to the presumed benefits of progress or as a consequence of economic decay and decline.

One of the controlling rhetorical strategies of Talton's novels is to play off the way in which Mapstone repeatedly experiences consternation over the changes in Phoenix since the sleepy desert-town days of his youth in order to describe one of the American cities that has most experienced, as the phrase constantly goes, dramatic change since World War II.⁴ Often the commentary that is the narrative realization of that consternation does not contribute significantly to the crime novel plot: it may provide incidental contexts for it, but the elimination of that commentary would not have significant impact on the main story line. Rather, in fact, that commentary exemplifies the way in which the crime story is more the pretext for Mapstone's social history observations, rather than how these might be merely grace notes in the playing out of the central plot.

Talton's foregrounding of Mapstone's social history eye is particular evident at the outset of *Dry Heat*, which opens with the discovery of a dead body in a decaying swimming pool in the rough and frayed neighborhood of Maryvale on Phoenix's less desirable west side—less desirable, that is, than the old north Central Phoenix corridor and the East Valley communities of Scottsdale, Paradise Valley, and, more lately the southwest quadrant of Mesa, Chandler, and Gilbert suburbs).⁵ This less desirable west side is demarcated not by the conventional railroad tracks of so much of the American social imaginary,⁶ but rather the north/south axis of U.S. Interstate 17, which in the 1960s created an unbridgeable split between west Phoenix on the one side and central and east Phoenix on the other. Mapstone arrives on assignment at the site where a body has been discovered in Maryvale and remarks as follows (this is the opening page of the novel):

Maryvale! Fortunate home of the American dream. A single-family detached house in the suburbs: three bedrooms, living room, den, all-electric kitchen and carport, laid out in a neat rectangle of a one-story ranch house. We've got thousands of 'em, ready to sell, on safe winding streets in brand-new Phoenix. New as a hoola hoop. New as a teal '58 Chevy. New as this morning's hope. Leave behind those snow shovels and below-zero winters. Leave behind the old dingy cities of the East and Midwest, with their crime and racial trouble. Time for a fresh start, thanks to a VA mortgage and the FHA. You've earned it: backyard lifestyle with a new swimming pool. Here in Phoenix, its eighty degrees in January, and in summer, we've got air-conditioning. Green lawns, blond children, pink sunsets. All in Maryvale.

Until you go out one fine day and find a body facedown in the green water of what was once the swimming pool. (*Dry Heat* 1)

Many things are going on in this passage, not the least of which is the mockery of the sales pitch of almost fifty years ago for the new planned community of Maryvale, a name in itself so aggressively all-American, in its steadfast denial of any historically

local or indigenous place names. Yet, it is a sales-pitch—certainly stylistic flourishes and design details aside—not unlike those one sees every day in the pages of the Valley’s newspapers for housing developments that offer today the same fantasy fulfillment as Maryvale did a half-century before: my depressing favorite is the mega-development El Verrado. And the implication is unmistakable: in time all of these planned communities will likely come to experience unremitting decline, pinpointed here with reference to the most salient icon of the mid-twentieth-century ranch-style house, the swimming pool. The aquamarine waters of the backyard pool party, with the bouncing heads of blond children, are replaced—in time, but here, specifically by the demands of narrative logic—with the fetid algae-green scum bearing a facedown floating corpse.

Talton’s narrative logic, therefore, makes the corpse a symbol for the “death” of the Maryvale subdivision, at least in terms of its once trumpeting advertisement, and later in this opening chapter, the implied promise of an Anglo safe zone (i.e., no Mexicans allowed) is disrupted by the comment that the house seems to have served as way-station or drop house for undocumented aliens, who have all fled before the police arrive (*Dry Heat* 4), although neighbors are clustered on the sidewalk, speaking softly in Spanish (*Dry Heat* 2). Both the dated nature of this boosterish example of urban planning (but not, *pace* Jane Jacobs, the grim concept of urban planning) are signaled by the reference to the hoola hoop and the teal ’58 Chevy, along with the manifest falsehood of a liberation from crime and racial troubles: the important Maryvale substation of the Phoenix Police Department is not located there by accident.

Mapstone continues his assessment of the neighborhood:

I could have written a fascinating paper on the evolution of the American automobile suburb in Phoenix, how places like Maryvale that once seemed so full of promise had evolved into postmodern slums. How abandonment of place in the West is as old as the Hohokam, the ancient Indians who first settled in the river valley that became Phoenix, and then disappeared. It would seem fascinating to me, at least. But I don’t see any need for that skill in what looked like one more dreary west-side killing—the “curse of the Avenues,” as my wife Lindsey called it, referring to Phoenix’s grid of numbered avenues on the west of Central, numbered streets on the east. (*Dry Heat* 5)

Mapstone is speaking here as the professional (albeit, failed academic) historian, and, in one important sense, the novel in which he appears is, in fact, a treatise on the urban destiny of Phoenix, as are the three other Talton novels in which he appears. As the reader will discover, however, the so-called curse of the avenues is, as is always the case with such denominations, mostly symbolic and contains a grain of

the disingenuous. That is because said curse does not affect the entire hemisphere of the designated avenues in Phoenix, but only a subset of them: those in places like Maryvale, but not Del Webb's contemporary yet apparently still thriving community a couple miles to the north and a bit to the west (the first Sun City development dates from 1960 and remains a signature event in Phoenix's residential development); there is also a subsequent Sun City West, further north and west of the original development. Nor does it affect Mapstone's own residential neighborhood, where he has come to live in the grandparents' house he grew up in on W. Cypress St. Actually the alleged curse of the avenues seems to move west from N. 27th St., immediately west of the railroad-tracks barrier and deep trench of the north-south interstate discussed above. Mapstone, however, lives well to the east of that barrier, as the Willo Historic District (one of the city's thirty-five such neighborhoods) extends only between N. Central Avenue, the point of the east-west divide, and N. 7th Ave., and only one mile from W. McDowell Rd. north to W. Thomas Rd. Mapstone speaks in idyllic terms of this neighborhood, both as it continues to exist today, eighty years or more after the majority of the homes were built, and as it existed when he was a child, one assumes around the time of the Korean War. Then, the area, outside the Phoenix City limits when it was first built up, was still on the fringes of the downtown district, surrounded by citrus groves and little else. While the citrus groves are long gone, the area is still noted for its lush greenery, with, as the real estate pitches proclaim, carefully tended lawns, stately palm tress, and noble citrus and other shade-providing trees.

Mapstone's Phoenix functions, therefore, on two historical planes, which is not surprising, given the narrative conceit of his training as a historian. On the one hand is the Phoenix of his childhood:

I drove across the Seventh Avenue overpass, made a right on Grant Street, and then turned back north on Nineth. Up through the 1970s, this had been the industrial heart of a much smaller city. The Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads sliced through on their way to Union Station. The railroads also served scores of produce warehouses and other agricultural terminals. Old Phoenix was a farm town, where irrigated fields and groves yielded oranges, grapefruits, lemons, lettuce, and cotton for markets back east. Mile-long trains of refrigerator cars were made up here, sending fresh Arizona citrus to the tables of families in Chicago and Dayton and Minneapolis. Now those families seem to have moved to Arizona, and the old produce district had been long abandoned. (*Dry Heat* 31)

Having grown up in an area adjacent to the citrus fields that fed the agricultural commerce of the Old Phoenix, it is to be expected that Mapstone would also wax

dithyrambic about the then of what is now the blighted district only a couple of miles southwest of where he lives.

The Then vs. Now deictic axis is very strong in Talton's writing, and no more so in *Dry Heat* from among the four David Mapstone mysteries he has published so far. Notable about *Dry Heat* is that the crime story it is based on, the 1948 murder of an FBI agent, whose badge turns up on the derelict found floating in the Maryvale pool, functions as part of the Then vs. Now axis. However, the significant point is that the FBI agent was not murdered by the mob or anyone else of the ilk, but was killed by a child trying to protect her mother. The "historical facts" of the cold case that Mapstone uncovers, an activity that brings very much into to play the crime syndicates of contemporary Phoenix, most especially the newly arrived Russian Mafia, was that the mob of the old days lived by a gentleman's agreement that excluded the murder of reporters and cops. Mapstone's boss Peralta, also a long-time Phoenix resident, observes pointedly that "These Russians [who have killed at this point two of his deputies] are on the offensive. They don't follow any of the old rules" (*Dry Heat* 48).

The second axis of the novel is the relative quality of life in surviving Phoenix neighborhoods. While the Willo area is at least three decades older than the Maryvale area, the relative circumstances of their locale—historical core vs. isolated western fringe—account in part for the way in which the first has allowed for an interesting combination of survival and renewal, such that Willo is now considered one of the great bungalow communities of America, while Maryvale has been exposed to a wide array of the features of urban rot and decay. This process is integral to Phoenix history and cannot be simply attributed to regrettable chance and, indeed, must be correlated with larger patterns relating to the urban configuration of the city.⁷

In the end, while Talton's novels, like Chandler's and other noir writers', turns on a skillfully crafted crime tale, its fundamental interest lies in the interpretation of the circumstance of that tale as part of the dynamics of contemporary urban cities in America, particularly those of the Southwest such as Phoenix. And in the end, the most important literary contribution of Talton's writing is to bring out the historical forces that have shaped contemporary Phoenix and, in the process, to provide it with one set of the stories many, naïvely or disingenuously, would like to pretend it lacks. ✱

Notes

⁷There are serious academic historians of the city, Like Brad Luckingham and Philip VanderMeer and their graduate students. However, so far, Luckingham is the only one

to have published a formal scholarly monograph on the history of Phoenix (*Phoenix: The History*).

²Mexican-American Peralta is a nice conceit of these novels. The “real” Sheriff of Maricopa County is the Italian American Joe Arapaio, who touts himself as “the toughest sheriff in America.” It is debatable whether Arapaio is particularly unsympathetic to Mexican Americans, in the aggressively so-called anti-illegal immigrant climate of Arizona. But there is not doubt that Talton in his editorial columns from suffers lightly the frequently disingenuously buffoonish publicity grabbing antics of the Sheriff.

³Talton’s own newspaper, *The Arizona Republic*, a few years ago began to publish a column each week that featured an important cold case; one wonders if the editors were inspired by Mapstone’s lead.

⁴This is the recurring motif of photo-essay books like those of Luckingham (*Discovering Greater Phoenix*) and VanderMeer, as well as photographic “then and now” projects such as the one by Allen A. Dutton. Significantly, the photo-essay books in question are principally exercises in the selling of Phoenix to the business and commercial community, both investors and specialist newcomers, on the beneficent qualities of Phoenix’s meteoric growth.

⁵Maryvale was developed by the Valley’s mega-developer, John F. Long. According to Philip VanderMeer, it was named after his wife Mary: “The models opened in 1955 to huge crowds; at \$7,950 for a threebedroom house, Long was selling 125 houses a week” (39). There is an accompanying photo that records the circus-like opening of the development.

⁶I have written elsewhere about how the east-west railroad tracks in Phoenix serve as part of the imaginary north/south divide in the city which has, historically, been also an Anglo/Chicano divide (Foster).

⁷Pointedly, while both Willo and Maryvale are “historical” districts in the academic sense of the word (as I have said, Maryvale was an important development for middle-class housing in Phoenix after World War II), only Willo is one of the thirty-some officially designated historical districts in Phoenix.

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