

The bank robber as a literary motif

JAILHOUSE REFLECTIONS | There is a fascination with unconventionality and those who rob banks for a living

BY MIKE BEAMISH
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“My job was to make panic leave but fear stay,” a bank-robbing character says in *Jackrabbit Parole*, the novel written by B.C.’s Stephen Reid, a member of the notorious Stopwatch Gang.

Robbing banks is mostly a story of failure, not success. But for Reid and a handful of Canada’s most notorious holdup artists, incarceration has led to cultural credibility, if not respectability, in the eyes of the literary public.

Nobody wants to admit it, but there is a fascination with unconventionality and those who rob banks for a living. Most get caught and locked away for long stretches. And with time for reflection, many turn to writing to conquer the boredom.

“Many feel the need to tell their stories,” says Danine Farquharson, who teaches a course in prison literature at St. Jerome’s University in Ontario. “Writing is a freeing act, but it’s also an act of resistance. They’re locked away. Writing is a reaffirmation of who they are.”

Reid isn’t the first Canadian crook to get a measure of celebrity through the crime genre. Roger “Mad Dog” Caron won a Governor-General’s Award for literature in 1978 for *Go Boy!*, his autobiography. Establishing

himself as the country’s foremost practitioner of con-lit, Caron wrote three more books. But like Reid, he developed a drug habit, couldn’t stay straight and ended up back behind bars.

Another Canadian crook, Mickey McArthur, summed up what he considered the public view of his profession in his autobiography, *I’d Rather Be Wanted Than Had*.

“There is the whole folklore about the robber, a romanticism in terms of public appeal,” Farquharson says. “Unlike murder or sexual assault, there is a feeling you can read a story about a bank robber and not feel too

guilty. There is a mythic romance associated with it. After all, they’re taking money from a huge institution.”

The police, courts and the front-line personnel in the banking or convenience store industry see armed robbery in a completely different light — violent and hardly victimless, even when the culprits are note-pushers and don’t necessarily produce a gun to strike fear in their victims.

“One of my greatest regrets is not being able to contact my former victims and make amends,” says Troy Evans, who did seven and a half years in federal penitentiary for armed rob-

bery and works today as a motivational speaker in Phoenix, Ariz. “By law, I’m not allowed to communicate with them. But I want them to know how sorry I am for the trauma I caused.”

Eleven years ago, Evans, needing to support a drug habit, gave a deposit slip to a teller bearing the words, “This is a holdup.” Because he had the butt of gun protruding from his jeans to show he was serious, even though the weapon wasn’t loaded, Evans was given a much stiffer sentence when he was finally apprehended. “It’s an automatic five years [in the U.S.] if you carry a gun,” he says. “you don’t

even have to point it at someone. I wish I’d known about that.”

A girlfriend turned him in and, in hindsight, Evans says he is grateful. He believes he probably would have been shot if he’d carried on much longer.

“One thing I tell people is that there’s nothing glamorous or romantic about bank robbery,” Evans says. “It’s not at all the life portrayed by Hollywood — living from seedy hotel to hotel, feeding a drug or gambling habit, losing your freedom in the end. Having met others and heard 300 stories in prison, I can assure you there’s very little glory aspect to it; it’s something you do out of necessity.”

Evans speaks to young people to get that message across. He also works with banks and law enforcement officials to look at security measures from a robber’s point of view. “Who better to talk to a group of bankers than a bank robber,” he says.

After picking up a pair of bachelor’s degrees in prison, he wants to take a page from the Canadian tradition of con-lit and tell-all books and publish his story. But don’t expect to see him on a book tour north of the border any time soon.

“Unless a presidential pardon comes along, your country won’t allow me in,” Evans says. “The price you pay for doing time never ends.”

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Stephen Reid was a member of the bank-robbing Stopwatch Gang in the 1970s and gained cultural credibility by writing about his life of crime. This photo was taken after his arrest in 1999 for another bank heist that landed him back in jail.

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