Theatrical release was delayed in sensitivity to Kenzie & Gennaro series, winning 2003 version of Elsewhere. Since this writer attracted widespread quirkily baroque, drifting grifting misfits a way as to meditate on how ordinary people this new wave is Dennis Lehane, whose Boston-and Richard Price (New York), and George Michael Connelly (Los Angeles), Andrew Vachss encapsulate the contours of present social ills. Their milieux and lifeworlds may more accurately – so that a point of view properly rooted within routinely on the poor. Lower-class strata may proposition that the suffering associated with cartoonish violence – such as in films by John Dahl and Quentin Tarantino – with social and political cartoonish violence and the glamourisation of crime at the cinema, where earlier shades of grey in classic film noir had mutated by the 1990s into lurid stylisation and the glamourisation of classic film noir had mutated by the 1990s into lurid stylisation and the glamourisation of crime at the cinema, where earlier shades of grey

There is another trajectory in recent noir fiction which starts from the empirically obvious proposition that the suffering associated with criminal violence falls disproportionately and routinely on the poor. Lower-class strata may be stigmatised and marginalised in terms of media portrayal as well as in achieving American dreams, yet constitute the bulk of the population – so that a point of view properly rooted within their milieux and lifeworlds may more accurately encapsulate the contours of present social ill. Alongside authors such as Walter Mosley and Michael Connelly (Los Angeles), Andrew Vachss and Richard Price (New York), and George Pelecanos (Washington DC), a prime exponent of this new wave is Dennis Lehane, whose Boston-based stories deal with urban impoverishment, gentrification, racism, organised crime and political and institutional corruption in such a way as to meditate on how ordinary people collectively understand and negotiate extremes of adversity – preferring vernacular versimilitude in geographical and temporal specificity to the quirkily baroque, drifting grifting misfits elsewhere. Since this writer attracted widespread attention with Clint Eastwood’s multiple Oscar-winning 2003 version of Mystic River (first published in 2001), several more of his books are now the source material for big-budget films whose producers expect equally impressive worldwide audiences. The next adaptation to reach the screen and fulfill the projection was Gone, Baby, Gone’s UK theatrical release was delayed in sensitivity to the Madeleine McCann case – an association no doubt boosting box-office despite the two child abduction scenarios bearing scant resemblance. The salacious jostling of news-team vultures would be one common denominator – here descending on the depressed environs of Dorchester, South Boston, Massachusetts. Their typically hysterical saturation coverage highlights single mother Helene McCready (a magnificent Amy Ryan) lamenting her disappeared four-year-old Amanda, shepherded by steely-eyed police with neighbours and family rallying supportively even in a prevailing mood of ominous pessimism. First-time director Ben Affleck (co-scriptwriter with Aaron Sorkin) as well as the story’s creator also hail from these mean streets, while thirty-something protagonist PIs Patrick Kenzie (Casey Affleck) and Angie Gennaro (Michelle Monaghan) have lived there all their lives. Passionate attachment to the blue-collar ‘hood is reflected in the latter’s preoccupations (e.g. Kenzie: “Things you can’t choose... make you who you are”), and in the camera’s regular carefully naturalistic pans around inner-city blight, alighting on variously battered and bequeathed, resigned and/or residually energetic real residents – many of whom are also cast in supporting roles and minor caricatures complementing consistently fine acting by stars.

Despite high-minded pronouncements by Crimes Against Children Unit cop supreme Captain Jack Doyle – who years ago lost his own child to kidnappers – and ace detectives Bessant and Poole being assigned to the case (Morgan Freeman, Ed Harris and John Ashton respectively lending grizzled gravitas to proceedings), official inquiries quickly falter. Specialist skip-tracers hunting down debtors and errant spouses, the initially reluctant Kenzie and Gennaro are beset by Amanda’s aunt Bea (Amy Madigan) and uncle Lionel (Titus Welliver) to join the investigation. After putting the word out on the street, local confidence in their discretion immediately yields leads – first, a recently-paroled child-molester may be in the area; then, the potential involvement of notorious gangster kingpin Cheese Alamoon (Edi Gathegi) and missing drugs-money. Helene’s own substance-abuse, chaotic self-centred behaviour and neglectful parenting compound suspicious unreliability, and her elusive boyfriend Skinny-Ray Lakanis (Sean Malone) sudden violent execution clinches the link. No longer patronised by the police for naive amateurism, the investigators uncover the cash and Doyle brokers a highly unorthodox exchange for Amanda at a remote flooded quarry. Unfortunately the botched switch leaves Cheese shot dead, and she’s believed drowned when a favourite doll is found floating in the treacherous waters. Doyle is sacked for culpable incompetence and retires in disgrace to the sticks; the little girl’s funeral is held; crime-and-punishment pundits seek new shock-horrors; and everyone sees tragic closure achieved. Except for Kenzie, who still smells a rat – but a subsequent spiralling descent into the violent degradations of child abuse and addiction eventually reveals depths of duplicity at all levels even he’d never dreamed (surely also wrongfooting most viewers – so anyone not wanting the suspense ruined should not read on). When another local child disappears, Kenzie’s old schoolfriend, now drug dealer, Bubba Rogowski (Boston rapper Slaine) confirms that cocaine addicts Leon and Roberta Trett (Mark Margolis and Trudi Goodman) are sheltering paedophile Corwin Earle (Matthew}

In Locos Parentis

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The innocent purity to be protected here is the lingering quasi-religious illusion that things might turn out right by trusting the benevolence of those in charge and believing their rationalisations.

Rule of Law
These plot twists in the last part of the film certainly serve to undermine our assumptions as cultivated so far – and Kenzie and Gennaro's too, leaving them disagreeing over a final dilemma so fundamental as to terminate their professional and romantic relationship. Nevertheless, ultimate judgements and justifications concerning rights, wrongs and likely consequences remain suspended. Not only are heroic rescue, reassuring redemption, and cautionary tragedy refused, but the conservative grounds upon which viewers might expect such outcomes – from banal Hollywood crime-action pulp to the parallel (but no less fantasy-ridden) morbid tabloid shock-horror over current affairs – are comprehensively undercut. Such disconnecting limbo was obviously deliberate, and scriptwriting decisions altering and cutting the source novel wholesale pass the buck to us even more starkly. But, when the crunch comes, the alternative courses of action are already so thoroughly tainted by association with webs of corruption, collusion, dishonesty and degeneracy that imagining integrity in any pat answer is out of the question. The story's unusual strength, then, is to insist that apparently straightforward moral choices, positing isolated individual instances in simplistic good-versus-evil binaries, don't stand scrutiny once their complex, ambivalent contexts and histories are laid bare. 'Doing the right thing' thus depends on what inevitably has to be ignored, assimilated, or denied.

The critical consensus concerning Gone, Baby, Gone, however, has been that the potential force of any such sophisticated philosophy is scuppered by the denouement's implausibility. So deeming it unbelievable that the entire saga should constitute a conspiracy choreographed by Doyle in connivance with his lieutenants all the way down to Helene's disapproving relatives; with varying material, malicious and purportedly altruistic interests and self-righteousnesses interweaving in spiriting the lass to 'safety' while her mam drank in the bar. The ensuing host of casualties, whether dead or bereft – unmourned criminals, Bressant and Poole, sundry written-off lower-class dopes – are then blithely sacrificed, pawns for the patriarch's peace of mind on relinquishing burdensome responsibility. But what really galls, one suspects – for those of conventional bent – is that out the window also go all pretensions of institutional credibility. Crucially, the scheme's success hinged on acceptance at face value of the normal scripts, cliches and homilies of governance, public service and basic decency among higher-and lower-order model citizens obeying the law along with those charged with upholding it. Whereas not only does the arrogance of power lead the rogue detectives to assume they can get away with their scam, but we are invited to tacitly underwrite their belief that their actions are in the best interests of the child – which was supposed to be the official remit all along.

Criminal Justice System
Now, this narrative device – of illegal activity by law-enforcement personnel seeing no other way to fulfil their sworn duty – can be interpreted not as a rare unfortunate exception, but rather a particularly vicious and vivid expression of business as usual. Such might be the response, for example, of those on the habitual sharp end of prejudicial insult, harassment and stitch-up from police officers and, for that matter, oficialdom in general. In which case an overarching metaphor comes into focus – the police force standing for the entire institutional paraphernalia of government, including its purportedly benevolent arms – whose main function is to keep the lid on all the cans of worms threatening polite society. From this jaundiced perspective, at least, Gone, Baby, Gone's plot may not seem outrageous at all, resonating far beyond its particular setting to the War on Welfare everywhere. But in a South Boston rapidly decaying beyond reasonable hopes of salvation, Kenzie and Gennaro are cast as representative of a grass-roots, working-class sensibility, yet without the luxury of cynical fatalism if they are to nail the truth and do their job. And although the film loses the bulk of Lehane's meticulous dialogue, conveying the full convincing texture of conflicting attitudes in action, viewers are given several hints among the blood-red herrings that the protection of childhood innocence is (quasi-) for the most prunal pretext for other, guiltier, agendas.

So, encouraged to receive Helene harshly through circumstantial implication, explicit condemnation, and the harsh glare of unforgiving attention, we never glimpse direct evidence of her actual everyday relationship with her daughter. We are expected to assume the worst. Kenzie, though, sees genuine grief (as opposed to selfish pity) beneath her white-trash bravado – which inclines him to accept the mission – whereas Gennaro embraces advocacy for Amanda herself, regardless of the concerns of the adults. These combined criteria, without which the case would have gone decisively cold, specifically rebut any stereotypical dismissal of Helene. Contrariwise, Doyle's parental fitness is unchallenged, despite his known trauma and willingness to wreck lives to heal it. Who is the child, to him, beyond a substitute salvaging private pain? Do his influence and affluence – displaced from urban hell to rustic idyll – guarantee saintly credentials in arrogating to himself godlike choice? Then shouldn't all the suffering children be saved from the agony of the ghetto and the evils of impoverishment produces? Even if the manner of its accomplishment adds to the oppression and injustice nourishing desperation in the first place, simultaneously prejudices its youthful renewal? While, irrespective of increments of positivity which might (arguably) transpire, serving the selfish desires and fantasies of those in positions to exploit the system to advantage? ... Anything for a happy ending?

No. The relentless message from media and politicians is to abandon the irredeemably poor, demonising any deviation from passively respectable defeatism. The innocent purity to be protected here, then, is the lingering quasi-religious illusion that things might turn out right by trusting the benevolence of those in charge and believing their rationalisations. Whereas, surely, if a single soul spared is the best to hope for, this betrays an utmost cynicism – the complete collapse of legitimacy of the status quo to match its guardians' insincerity. But Kenzie won't give up on his people (or himself), following simple ethics, fulfilling his promise – returning Amanda to her mother – when others see Greater Good accepting thoroughly-going corruption in a broken society. Even he suspects he chose wrong, in the final scene mournfully contemplating prospects, Helene again out on the razzle. Yet with no individual correct solution to a collective quandary, maintaining honesty, integrity and compassion and nourishing them around you may represent a pragmatic faith preferable to fairytale wish-fulfilment making token exceptions to busted flush rules. Credit is due to Gone, Baby, Gone's makers for going against the grain to render such thorny issues even conceivable on mainstream screens.

To Protect and Serve
While acknowledging that it was no mean feat to adapt over five-hundred pages of original novel down to a script five-times shorter – yet still managing to effectively convey the spirit and overall ambivalence that the author intended – it is worth looking more closely at the heavy culling involved in the process of visualising Dennis Lehane’s scrupulously character- and dialogue-driven prose. In his writing, responses to, evaluations of, and wider ramifications pertaining to even the most harrowing experiences are contrived to flow naturally from the culturally and emotionally realistic perspectives of his
protagonists and their idiosyncrasies – rather than the structures of power which are imbedded in the imposed stock motivations that Hollywood is notorious for. Most obviously in this respect, the blockbusting set-piece action scenes and the extremes of violence portrayed sit awkwardly with the sentimentally direct depictions elsewhere of mundane everyday poverty and its smaller-scale, if no less brutal, social and physical conditions. In fact Lehane admits to imagining the kinetic, baleetic characteristics of such sequences according to cinematic iconography, and the film treatment certainly should be ascribed although with a consistent concentration on the visceral and psychological suffering incurred, evoking horror rather than cinematic terror. Their conflictual relationship is central to the narrative arc, the plot progression and the tension and negotiation of their ugly depths cannot conceal the fact that the pivotal confrontation at the quarry and storming of the paedophile’s den, for example, are side issues both in terms of the specific narrative logic as well as the more abstract themes being developed.

True, there is a balanced, gradual progression of heightening danger, more immediate physical threat and raised stakes the further and deeper into the mire Kenzio and Gennaro stumble. But in the book’s trajectory – although each blow dealt, injury sustained, and narrow escape accomplished wracks indelible damage on bodies and psyches that in the film are not really the object of any retribution. For the novel’s dilemmas and active cases these deadly situations are overshadowed by the shared struggle to interpret their significance in the light of provisional, provisional understanding. So, not surprisingly, the very real evils of organised crime and the undeniable prevalence of child sexual abuse were considered prime candidates to account for Amanda’s abduction. As favoured by moral panics they also feature centrally in the genre literature, which pander to the seductions of materialistic misanthropy. In fact the critics deem this preposterous to the point of absurdity. Without in any way minimising the dreadful facets of masculinity, the emphasis was shifted entirely by downgrading its grounding in the mutual deterioration of their socio-economic and psychological wellbeing – a comparable shift towards a shared priority in circumstances in which business as usual is decisively threatened”.

Notes
1. See my review for Mystic River, No. 27
2. See my review for True Detective, supplement (as the driver of the narrative arc – even if the central role of Kenzio’s extended elective family is also sadly sidelined in the filmic logic. But in fact plot structures are secondary in most Lehane novels, being tailored to wider ranging metaphors and signifying characters connecting working-class adjustment to changing conditions – especially in A Drink Before The War (1994) treating racism, gang warfare, political corruption and child abuse and Darkness, Take My Hand (1996) with serial killers given succour by family, neighbourhood, criminal and municipal complicity, as well as in Gone, Baby, Gone. So it seems that mainstream US media remain unwilling or unable to counterpoint stories which properly respect the real misery neoliberal barbarism produces at home being its surplus populations, but also hint at the potential for “genuine solidarity and the pursuit of shared purpose in circumstances in which business as usual is decisively threatened”. Whereas the opportunity to follow such lines of flight is increasingly exploited in new-school American cinema, the babylonian pyramid tilts towards old-school staples of vicious impasse and hopeless tragedy – from, for example, Spike Lee’s 1995 adaptation of Richard Price’s Clockers (1992) through to HBO’s much-heralded television soap opera The Wire, chronicling the small-time drug trade and its policing in Baltimore, Ohio (featuring scripts by Price, Pelecanos and Lehane, among others). Conversely, one cinematic exception to this recalcitrant rule is Ray Lawrence’s remarkable Jindabyne (Australia, 2002). Here an attack on a child again radiates heart-wrenchingly throughout a community, with the murder whodunnit also irrelevant, yet the film clasles optimistically as ordinary folk mobilise their sorrowful social fabric towards fellow-feeling and a fresh start. In other words, it can be done – in the imagination as in real life – however much we are encouraged to disbelieve it.

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