

CRIME, POLITICS AND THE GIRL

Shane Maloney

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Of the five “Murray Whelan” novels written by Shane Maloney, two have just been produced as telemovies for the Seven Network. *Stiff* was adapted and directed by John Clark and the second, *The Brush Off* (also screen written by Clark) was directed by Sam Neill. Both episodes star David Wenham in the Murray Whelan role with Mick Malloy as his hapless boss, Angelo Agnelli – minister for various portfolios in various State Labour governments. A cast of real Labour luminaries make cameo appearances as themselves including: Barry Jones, John Button, Joan Kirner (former Victorian Premier), and current serving Premier, Steve Bracks. Other titles in the Murray Whelan series of novels include *Nice Try*, *The Big Ask*, and *Something Fishy*.

Paul Davies: Murray Whelan works for the Labour Party...

Shane Maloney: He's a Labour party functionary. It depicts someone in their world with a degree of affection. What's interesting about the Labour Party is its self mythologizing. It also skeptically examines its own self mythologizing. In a way that the Liberal party just doesn't. Which makes it both attractive and tragic at the same time. And allows it to kind of dangle this hope. It used to be said that the difference between the Liberals and Labour is about half an inch, but it's that half inch in which we manage to live. I worked for local government in Brunswick where I had been a community arts officer. And then for Melbourne City council as a cultural bureaucrat. I could do things. I could organize events, write letters from which all meaning had been bled. I was clearly someone suited to work in the corporate sector or in government. But I wasn't a team player. So when Melbourne failed to secure the Olympic bid I realized after 18 months on that particular job I had been exposed to organized crime in a sense. I had my subject matter.

Paul Davies: So you wrote a book about the Olympics?

Shane Maloney: Yes. And I also realized that it would be impossible to tell that story.

Paul Davies: Because of defamation issues?

Shane Maloney: Yes. Some of the (Olympic) bids around the world, their essential purpose was to advance people's careers and for that to happen entire cities had been persuaded to spend forty-sixty million dollars on an entirely quixotic project.

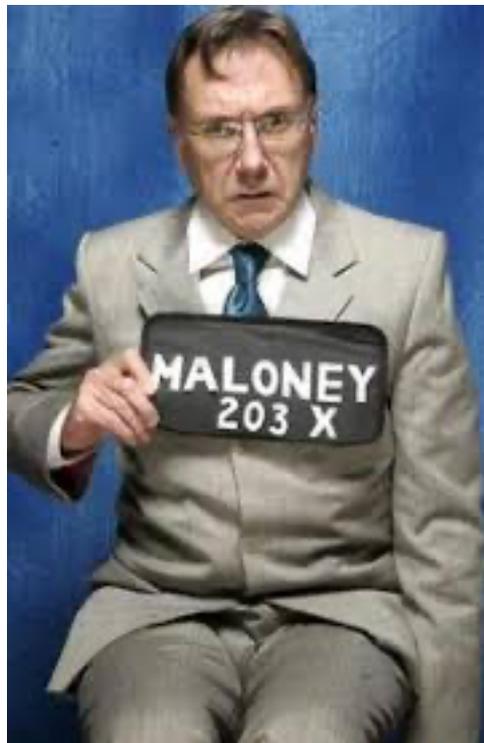
Paul Davies: Was this the basis for (the third Murray Whelan novel) *Nice Try* ?

Shane Maloney: *Nice Try* used part of it after the story broke. But what happened was, I wrote an airport novel. Big cover, embossed type, 800 pages, two athletes compete in the arena at the Olympic games and twenty/thirty years later are competing to be president of the IOC. And in the meantime the sweeping epic of the Olympics from a sort of amateur event to a global brand name is told as well. So I sat down and wrote a 150,000 word novel. After a while I realized there were severe problems with it. One of them was that the characters were wooden. Like a Tom Clancy novel – the kind of novel I didn't read myself. Plot driven. One dimensional characters. Dialogue that existed only to advance the story, provide information. Nobody was even really alive in it. And while there are people who can write those kinds of novels very successfully I realized I wasn't one of them. There were two lessons. One, that I could write big slabs of descriptive prose. The other thing was that I wasn't in good faith with my material. And therefore it didn't have any life. The animating spark wasn't there.

Paul Davies: It must've been hard though, having invested so much time, to finally to ditch the project...

Shane Maloney: I was also writing a monthly humour column for *Arena* magazine. So I was the funny page in the Marxist journal. And people liked that. The take, the humour. It occurred to me that what I should do was find a story which could be a vehicle for my social observations. And that it should be something I knew about. Not researched. But something I was intimately connected with. So that it would be a smaller novel. Write smaller, write local, something that used my voice. And all that came together in the creation of Murray.

Paul Davies: So why the crime genre?



Under Arrest - Shane Maloney

Shane Maloney: Because it's got a plot. A story. My recurring joke is that I have a character who must be both a hero and a member of the Labour Party. So I thought I would write that out. I want someone who, when he does save the day, does so entirely by accident. He's filled with good intentions. Doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve. People describe him as cynical. But he is appropriately skeptical. In fact he's far too skeptical to be a member of the Labour Party.

Paul Davies: One of the great shadings of Murray is the single dad thing. It gives him a certain humanity inside a world of politics that is essentially indifferent to

the personal side. I guess the question is: why does a man with such good intentions remain inside an obviously corrupt system?

Shane Maloney: He describes it as being a member of a family, this large, dysfunctional family. I see Murray as the team player who is at the same time the outsider. It's a two party world. And he knows which party he's with. He does ruminate on the Tories "nosing the gates of power open with the bumper bars of their Rolls Royces". On the other hand he's also existentially dismayed at the crowd which, of necessity, he's stuck with. So he doesn't think much of the individuals that comprise his team; but it is the only team he could ever see himself playing for. The amount of corruption per se that he meets is of course very slight compared with the very genuine, very real corruption that he would encounter in that world.

Paul Davies In *The Brush Off*, when Murray gets the money at the end, he gives it back to Agnelli.



Arts Minister Agelo Agnelli (Mick Malloy) and Murray Whelan (David Wenham)
The Brush Off (2004)

Shane Maloney: He does it because the minister has blown the re-election funds on a bad investment. That's the 'McGuffin' in this story. *The Brush Off* begins when Murray goes back to the office and finds there's been a cabinet reshuffle and he overhears a conversation and he realizes his boss is doing something which he shouldn't do for his own sake and the party's sake. So when an opportunity arises to fix that, Murray does. He walks away having done his job. And that's the extent of his professional ethics.

Paul Davies: He does it to keep his job too. Which is constantly under threat. But we get the feeling there's something more to it all than just having an income.

Shane Maloney: It's his personal code. That's why, as Murray advances through the ranks, he follows the standard career path of a Labour party apparatchik- pretty much exactly: electorate officer, ministerial advisor, member of parliament and in due course he'll be a minister and his old minister will be his advisor. (Laughs.)



Murray Whelan (David Wehnham) in a spot of bother

Paul Davies A lot of the narrative hinges on Murray getting himself into trouble. Getting into a hole literally - stuck in the basement (*The Brush Off*) - or in *Something Fishy* he's stuck on a buoy out in the Great Southern Ocean. It's all about him getting into difficulty, digging himself in deeper, then clawing his way back and not only solving the crime, but also he gets the girl. Or we're left at the end with the URST (UnResolved Sexual Tension) established and maybe he gets the girl, or maybe he doesn't, we're not sure...

Shane Maloney: He doesn't get the girl in *Stiff* because he's not completely free to get the girl - yet. Because his wife has gone off to pursue her career and she's doing better than he is. And he cops all of that. He doesn't have a problem with the fact that his wife is more successful. It's not a challenge to his manhood. It's just - she was a bitch. In a way. And she will eventually go off and revert to type. She's a girl from the eastern suburbs and she's had a bit of a dalliance with fashionable political and feminist issues and that's when he connected with her. We don't know why they broke up. Only that they have and she's just too full-on for him. So he doesn't get the girl. Then he does get the girl. By the third book the girl's gone and there's another girl.

Paul Davies: But there's always a girl. And there's always his son.

Shane Maloney: I'm having trouble with the sixth book because they're constructed from his personal life up. I start from his personal life and it's: how can things come into his life that set the story in motion? If you've got a cop or private eye - well, they go to the office in the morning and there's a dead body sitting on the desk and there's a note from the boss saying: 'Dead body, solve crime'. Whereas Murray has no reason to encounter a dead body, or a crime. If he does he'd call the police like everyone else.

Paul Davies Unless he's suddenly working for the Minister of Police.

Shane Maloney: But they're out of power.

Paul Davies: But it's fiction. You can make it up. You can bring them back.

Shane Maloney: No I can't. This is the problem with this character. I think he has been successful. And for a book (*Stiff*) to be in print for 10 years... The books that won the Premier's Literary Awards that year - they're no longer in print. It's like having the novel published in the first place. It's of that order.

Paul Davies: And there's another order of success which is getting the books made into telemovies. How did that come about?

Shane Maloney: There'd always been an interest from the very first book from filmmakers. *Stiff* was optioned, then *The Brush Off* was optioned. In fact I was commissioned to write the screenplay by Andrew Knight.

Paul Davies: Which you did?

Shane Maloney: Which I did. But Andrew had moved on to *Siam Sunset* and *Seachange* was looming on the horizon...

Paul Davies: So that script wasn't used by John Clark?

Shane Maloney: No. I co-wrote that with someone and I accepted a lot of the assumptions. I was just told: 'well obviously he had to get the girl...'

Paul Davies: So they were changing the book?

Shane Maloney: Yeah the book was changed. And that was just the first draft. But by then it was clear that they weren't going to proceed (Artists Services). Initially when there was film interest, I of course got excited; and then I learnt after about three or four of these approaches and after I'd sold the rights, I just learnt not to be too

excited. Show me the money, that was it. Because it was a world I knew nothing about. I had no control over it. Being a novelist is the ultimate mono-maniacal activity. You can't delegate even if you wanted to. You have complete control over your own material. So I'd go off and write another book and get some progress report (on the film option) and it would fall over or... what usually happens is that people just stop. They don't ring you up. Then after six months you ring them up and they don't return your call.

Paul Davies: Did you have an agent?

Shane Maloney: I had Rick Raftos for a while, but I'd already done the deal when I went to them and I think what I learnt from them was that it would be good if I was in Sydney - went to cocktail parties and things like that. There are also very practical rights as to what I'm selling. Am I selling the storyline? Am I selling the character? If so, how many storylines? Because any contract is going to use the word 'sequel' and this shocking neologism, 'prequel'- so the investors want to tie up everything that comes within a million miles of the original property. The T shirt rights, the golf shoe rights. All have to be negotiated and dealt with. So if I'm selling you the *Brush Off*, is the prequel rights to that, *Stiff*? If those stories are already written, is it a case of buy one get two free? No thanks.

Paul Davies: Nevertheless an agreement was made for *Stiff* and *The Brush Off* for the Seven Network...

Shane Maloney: The computer in 2001 had to be used to write the contract. It involved most of the computing capacity on Earth. (laughs). The fact that we were in furious agreement and wanted a contract that would express this did not in any way deter the lawyers from going at each other like pit bulls. I have a theory that film funding agencies artificially suppresses the price the novelist can expect to get for their work and often that's why we're seeing very poorly developed films on the screen.

Paul Davies: So how exactly did the translation from page to screen happen?

Shane Maloney: People always say the books are very filmic. They're not really because they're a first person narrative. So there are bits that might be vivid but that's because I've managed to persuade them to project the right images into their minds. It's quite odd really. It's part of the artifice of a novel to make a reader feel like he's watching a movie. And that way, all of the expense of the camera work, the lighting, and costuming and casting is put onto the reader. The consumer pays for the movie. Apart from some conversations with John (Clark) in the initial stages of the script and John ringing me up at three and four drafts along the way and asking me what I meant by this in the book or if this happened where was he (Murray), or why did he do this?... And I had to wrack my mind because there must've been some logical

reason why it was in there. Because both of the books happen over a very precise period of time. Because if you look at my manuscripts you will find that I've got the time down the side. Virtually sentence by sentence. When he's stuck in *The Brush Off* he appears to be locked in a building in the pre-mobile phone era because I needed him out of action for three hours for the story to work. So I had to lock him somewhere. Once I had him down there and door is slammed I wrote a little scene and it became a whole other thing.



Murray locked in a lift with male ballet dancers
The Brush Off (2004)

Shane Maloney: Whereas with *Stiff* there are a number of scams happening that are not connected with each other at all.

Paul Davies: Which is potentially confusing.

Shane Maloney: Oh yeah, what I discovered was that while in the novel, particularly a crime novel, you need a certain amount of plot just to hold the structure up. In film, no matter how complicated the plot appears to be, it has to be fairly simple. And less is more and you create tension in all sorts of ways. There's much less information you can convey. I was interested (in the *Brush Off*) in the idea that a curator could approach a major art collector and say, "look I'm in a position to raise some serious doubts about the provenance or the authenticity or the value of your art collection and so if you don't pay me I can create financial difficulties for you".

Paul Davies: Which is easy to say but fraud always seems difficult to capture on film because essentially it's about dodgy paperwork.

Shane Maloney: It's about paper work. It's about perception. It's about a nod and a wink. And even in the book that conversation was never made explicit. So John (Clark) would ring me up and we'd talk about these things. And I clearly had a lot of confidence in John's ability to deal with the character, the nature of that world, the

fact that it's all pretty chaotic. Then David Wenham's name came up as an attachment for it... he was involved very early in the piece which meant that he must have read the books. So that was nice. You see the character is never described in the book. Physically never. For the obvious reason that the reader can inhabit the character. Soon as you give the character a single physical characteristic you immediately exclude the reader from thinking they are inside that person's head, skin, whatever...

Paul Davies: Whereas it's almost the first thing a screen writer does. It sometimes starts with the casting.

Shane Maloney: Yes. So people would come to me and say who is your idea of Murray Whelan? And I'd say, well Gerard Depardieu. (laughs) That master of disguise...

Paul Davies: What, so he wasn't available? (smiling)

Shane Maloney: I didn't really think about it. So, when David Wenham's name came up I thought: 'well, why not? That's pretty good'... and then Sam (Neil) was brought on as a director - any reservations you have about your work being treated by other people sort of disappears at that point. You might not be 100% delirious about everything they've done with it but I can't imagine anyone else that I could repose that much confidence in.

Paul Davies: There's still three novels to go (*Nice Try*, *The Big Ask*, *Something Fishy*). Will we see them as telemovies?

Shane Maloney: They've got an option on another two - if Channel 7 are happy. And that means if it gets an audience and that depends on when they put it on... if it works for them they will commission the other two. Another book has been published since. The notion is that I'm running ahead throwing books over my shoulder. And they're coming up behind and turning them into two telemovies a year.

Paul Davies: Would it be like a *Halifax*- type operation? With a team of writers dreaming up Murray Whelan plots?

Shane Maloney: That's one way it could go. It does seem unthinkable to a novelist that you could delegate. Obviously it's got attractions. After six novels that are in the first person voice you begin to repeat yourself. I'm very concerned that characters begin to say the same things over and over again. The same expressions. Same Les Pattersonisms. You mine the Australian vernacular as many times as possible - like 'her nipples were as hard as Chinese algebra' - they become harder to find.

Paul Davies: But if you've got the character and you've got the same basic situation... Television does it all the time, things are given and writers have to invent.

Shane Maloney: That's why it's attractive. There are two reasons people become writers: indolence and vanity. The pay off is in the vanity. So you have to overcome your natural indolence in order to write something that results in people saying 'that was good...' You could (delegate and) swing the indolence side in. But if you did that why would you keep writing novels? I can think of plenty of Murray Whelan stories.

Paul Davies: All you need is a storyline.

Shane Maloney: There are three components to a Murray Whelan story. There is the crime plot. The political plot. And the girl/kid thing. Now the kid is seventeen.

Paul Davies: So he'd leaving home in about ten, fifteen years?

Shane Maloney: Yeah, well he's doing VCE this year. So it's: what subjects is he doing? He's going to Wesley, catching the bus...

Paul Davies: Does the single father thing then tend to trail off a bit?

Shane Maloney: That's why logically there are only two more books. There's one now where Red is seventeen - fifteen in the last one. He'll either turn out very organized - the opposite to his father. Go off and do an MBA or Science. Or he's going to present some crisis to Murray by dropping out and nicking off. But I don't know if I can keep doing that...

Paul Davies: Red seems to be the more sensible half of the team. Down to earth, grounded.

Shane Maloney: And quite capable of looking after himself. Although he did go off with that dingbat in the bushes at Lorne. A girl he was chasing (Jodie Prentice in *Something Fishy*).

Paul Davies: While his father was drowning off the beach.

Shane Maloney: It was a valuable learning experience for him. The last (Murray Whelan) novel will take place on Crete where Murray goes for a parliamentary delegation to lay a wreath for the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Crete and there's some tie in with the Greeks in Thornbury, and I know how I'm going to get Murray off the hook of the Labour party - he will do a Dimitrie Dolos - the shadow minister for planning during the Kennet years who made no bones about the fact that

he wasn't interested in being in politics and not in power. He kept nicking off to Greece. I want to do that with Murray - where he's got to save one of his father's old mates from the war or something, and at the same time there's an interesting Greek woman putting the moves on him, and Red's there doing a masters in Archeology. I don't know the exact setup. But Murray will be de-selected, Labour will be back in power, he will have been successfully shafted by someone close to him at a time when he thinks, "ah fuck it who cares" and he'll have 8 years of super- two terms of super.

Paul Davies: Comfortable enough for the Mediterranean lifestyle.

Shane Maloney: He'll have sun. Backpacking around Europe. He's got the babe.

Paul Davies: Running a taverna on some Island. Going back to the pub. Back to his roots.

Shane Maloney: Exactly, he'll do what his father did. Run a pub. And it'll be the male equivalent dream of *My Life In Tuscany*.

Paul Davies: So that's it. Exit Murray?...

Shane Maloney: As far as the books go. It gets harder and harder. I have to be in good faith with him (Murray). I can't just get him to do things because I want to. No matter how creaky and outlandish these plots appear to be there should always, somehow, be an invisible, logical connection between one sentence and the next. It's that incremental thing about politics as well. It's – if you look at way things move over time you can discern a logical thread running through it all. But on a day to day basis...it never quite appears like that.



“There are two reasons people become writers:
indolence and vanity. The pay off is in the vanity.”

(Interview held at Shane Maloney’s place, East Brunswick 25/5/2004)

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