COMIC CRIME AND CRIMINAL COMEDY IN RICHARD OSMAN'S "THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE"

Anca Bădulescu
Assoc. Prof., PhD, „Transilvania" University of Braşov

Abstract: Richard Osman's second novel, "The Man Who Died Twice", a sequel to "The Thursday Murder Club", is as surprising as the title itself. Although the leading theme of the novel is the solving of several crimes by the four restless septuagenaries, Elizabeth Best, a former MI5 agent and her friends, Joyce, Ron and Ibrahim, what really drives the foursome is their wish to escape the realities of old age, and their fear to be isolated and forgotten by society. Although they are exposed to dangerous, life-threatening situations, a sense of real jeopardy is entirely absent. The novel proves to be superbly entertaining, full of sparkling humor and witty comments. This article aims at concentrating on the comic side of this crime story and at discovering the sources and means of achieving sparkling humor.

Keywords: MI5, detective, diamonds, cocaine, dementia

To begin with, 'comic crime' seems to include a contradiction in terms. Not with Richard Osman, the much-loved TV personality and author! Not with the elderly foursome eager to add some salt and pepper to their lives in a retirement village in Kent! Elizabeth, Joyce, Ron and Ibrahim – introduced in "The Thursday Murder Club", but also the Polish handyman, Bogdan, embark upon another life-threatening adventure, one which is told in a jolly, kind-hearted, very entertaining way.

In Osman's first novel the four senior citizens and friends, living in a secluded retirement community, have chosen a different kind of life: instead of assembling usual 5,000-piece jigsaws, they use their talents to solve murders, some of them long abandoned and forgotten by the authorities. Their front-runner, Elizabeth Best is definitely the best (as her name anticipates), but she is successfully seconded by the other three members of the 'gang'. Ron, a former union agitator, questions and doubts everything he is told, Ibrahim, a retired psychiatrist of Egyptian extraction, makes lists and endeavors to give an answer to every unsolved case by planning every single step, and, last but not least, Joyce Meadowcroft, the cheerful, smart and impossible to shock former nurse, provides most of the humorous instances in the novels. In addition, she is one of the most likeable narrative voices both in "The Thursday Murder Club" and "The Man Who Died Twice", filtering the perilous proceedings through her optimistic, serene perspective.

The three interlaced threads of the plot in "The Man Who Died Twice" keep the reader alert and often aghast. The third chapter starts with Joyce's surprising statement that clearly prepares the pending turmoil: *I do wish something exciting would happen again. I don't mind what. (Osman, 2022:18)* and, to be sure, a lot happens not long after. First, Ibrahim who wants to enjoy a day on his own in Fairhaven, is beaten up by teenage thugs who steal his phone and leave him unconscious on the pavement. He is ushered into hospital and has to keep to his room to recover for most of the plot. The second crisis involves a local drug dealer, Connie Johnson, who is romantically attracted to Bogdan (who does not seem to be aware of this), a reliable friend to the foursome. The author ironically tells the readers that, although she is seriously and repeatedly trespassing the law: *In a way, you had to admire Connie Johnson's confidence. She did things with a bit of style. (Osman, 2022:39)* The major conflict, though, arises from the stealing of twenty million pounds' worth of diamonds by Elizabeth's ex-husband, Douglas

Middlemiss, about whom none of the septuagenaries knows. Douglas and his assistant Poppy are shot in the head by a mysterious killer. It takes around four hundred pages to solve the enigma and to find out that 'the man only died once', not twice as the title of the novel says. All this while, Richard Osman keeps us guessing, supposing, siding with one or the other character. The three storylines eventually merge creating lots of suspense, surprise and humor. In the end, everything falls into place, the muddle is solved, all criminals are caught, some are killed, others go to prison.

For all of the author's skill in creating breathtaking situations, Osman's real mastery consists in doubling danger with light-hearted humor and irony. The deliciously benevolent comic tone arises mostly from the personalities of the characters themselves but also from the relationships between them. Although they are aware of sobering realities like: the running out of time, the losing of loved ones to death or dementia, feeling threatened by the modern world which they no longer understand, the generation gap between them and their children and grandchildren who consider them behind the times and tiresome, they succeed in making fun of difficulties and barriers. Moreover, Osman's heroes, while solving violent crimes and deciphering cryptic messages hidden in 'dead-letter drops', are still concerned about their health, play chess regularly, drink a nice cup of tea or sip wine and tease each other.

After having been robbed and assaulted, Ibrahim is not interested in taking revenge: *They say a man who desires revenge should dig two graves, and this is surely right. (Osman, 2022: 87)* He prefers to spend his time playing *Minecraft* with Kendrick, Ron's grandson and has very interesting warm conversations with the child. When eight-year-old Kendrick asks him what is better a penguin or a monkey, Ibrahim says: *Now penguins are better than monkeys, because 'penguin' is a very specific term, and 'monkey' is very unspecific…words are very important, most people don't know that, and the more specific a word is, the better it is. (Osman, 2022:257)* Likewise, Stephen, Elizabeth's husband, who suffers from dementia, oftentimes plays chess with Bogdan, and although he keeps falling asleep while playing, he manages to win. He forgets a lot of usual things, but he also comes up with very witty and reasonable explanations, sometimes even giving clues to unsolved dilemmas. Ron, on the other hand, while mostly being suspicious and questioning his companions' findings, joins in their adventures and supports them. Thus, when Ibrahim wants to discourage him to accompany Elizabeth and Joyce in the woods, he replies: *Oh, stop being such a weather forecast…Off to the woods we go, old friends. (Osman, 2022:209)*

Even the local police, represented by DCI Chris Hudson and PC Donna De Freitas have taken to the jolly group of friends – in the first book, they were the antagonists – and answer all calls for help from them. Chris is in love with Donna's mother, Patrice, is on a diet and has had a haircut, all for her sake. Donna has recently broken up with her boyfriend and feels lonely and miserable. She decides to ask Ibrahim, who is recovering from the assault, for psychiatric help. When they spy on Connie, the drug dealer, they are easily caught red-handed by the woman who does not take them seriously: *Now, we haven't been introduced, but I think you're Donna and Chris. I bought you coffees from the garage…I'm Connie Johnson, but I think you know that...I also bought sausage rolls, if you'd like one? (Osman, 2022: 236)* Clearly, she is not surprised or in any way impressed by the police embodied by Chris and Donna.

The one who criminals, big and small, spies past and present, should fear is Elizabeth, the brain of the 'gang' who deciphers hidden messages, figures out intricate dilemmas. Although she rarely jokes, Elizabeth gladly responds to humorous remarks. Her only real weakness is Stephen, her husband suffering from dementia. She treats him with a lot of kindness and understanding and tries to raise his spirits. The conversation they have at four o'clock in the morning is bound to bring a smile on any reader's face: *…he [Stephen] had been showing off about some mountain or other he had climbed when he was a young man. She had then invented an even bigger mountain she had climbed – 'without a Sherpa, darling' – and*

then upped the anti and was climbing Everest without Sherpas or oxygen, and then she was climbing Everest carrying a great piano and the two of them were in fits and giggles. (Osman, 2022:226)

By far the most amusing character in the novel is Joyce, whose voice and opinions come to the foreground at regular intervals. Although her role in the cracking of the intricate burglary seems to be a minor one, she proves to have a sharp subtle mind. Elizabeth herself can't help acknowledging this: *Oh Joyce. You really are annoyingly clever sometimes. (Osman, 2022:320)* Apparently innocent and distracted, she notices details, gathers information and proves to be a very good companion for Elizabeth, the former MI5. Unlike her friends, she has an Instagram account and is eager to access it. In a conversation with her daughter, Joanna, she has answers and arguments for all of Joanna's frustrations:*...I told her that I loved her unconditionally, and she said well of course I loved her unconditionally, I was culturally hardwired to love her unconditionally, but that sometimes she wished that I actually liked her. (Osman,2022: 254)* Even in most critical moments she does not lose her sense of humor. When the stolen diamonds are still missing and the investigation does not seem to lead to the prey, Joyce's commentary is hilarious: *Perhaps we could just keep one or two of the diamonds?...I don't think anyone would notice? (Osman, 2022: 341)* Of course, everyone involved would have noticed and Joyce knows it! Joyce is not just astute and imaginative, she is very considerate, kind and understanding, too. After Poppy's death she muses: *And Douglas? Well, if he's dead then probably he had it coming too. But Poppy should have been in a different story, and I'm sorry she ended up in this one. (Osman, 2022:212)* She is determined to save a dog named Alan from the rescue center (one of the stray dogs brought over from Romania of all places: *Lots of the dogs are from Romania; they save them and bring them over [Osman,2022:19]*), even though Ibrahim tries to make her change her mind, arguing that Alan might overlive her.

Osman's characters are ordinary old people, yet much deeper and more complicated than they seem. All of the four friends and allies suffer from pains in the knees or hips, but they are kind, warm and humane. They are driven by benevolence and a powerful sense of humor. Their conversations and debates make the reader smile, often laugh, relax and enjoy. Tension is built by short chapters which shift fast from one viewpoint to another and from one event to another.

For all the delicious humor and jolly atmosphere, "The Man Who Died Twice" ends in a bitter sweet way: *Well, well, well, well, well. And there we have it, "The Man Who Died Twice". I hope you liked the ending? I read a book about thirty years ago where the very last line was integral to the plot, and I'd always liked that as an idea. (Osman, 2022:421)* And this is how Osman's second novel ends too. The twenty million pounds are donated anonymously -of course - to "Living with Dementia – Living with Love". It looks like Joyce's wish to keep one or two of the diamonds was not granted. In exchange, it would alleviate the pain and grief of so many old people suffering from dementia, just like Stephen, Elizabeth's husband. Humor and pathos, crime and compassion, old age and youthful minds – all these are united in Richard Osman's 'comic crime' novel.

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