

“He was a gangster type, and it wouldn’t have come out that well for me, so I got my revenge in a different way.”

Having always wanted to be a writer, she was inspired to tackle the genre in 2000, after attending a crime-writing panel at the Melbourne Writers Festival featuring Kinky Friedman and Robert Crais. Suddenly she had her inspiration – and the perfect plot.

“I realised I had my story; the body of the club owner washes up on St Kilda beach. That was the first scene I wrote [in debut novel *Peepshow*] and it felt so good.”

Seven years and four novels later, several real-life figures have met gruesome fictitious ends in her novels featuring Melbourne PI Simone Kirsch.

“Writing crime makes you really chilled out,” she explains, “because anyone who’s pissed you off, you can dispatch. In my fourth book, *Thrill City*, I disembowelled a female literary writer I had a run-in with at a festival. A sleazy personal trainer got burnt to death.”

Redhead’s years as a stripper provided a noir world full of fascinating characters, and a gang of gutsy girls on which to model Simone. “Strippers are always portrayed as victims and as catty backstabbers. Those writers obviously haven’t worked in the industry because there’s a great camaraderie.”

In the name of research, she enrolled in an accredited PI course, which she didn’t complete, but she did learn a few tricks, including how to tail and stake out a target. The less said about peeing into funnels on the job, the better.

In many ways, Redhead argues, female writers are more brutal than their male peers, and more honest, too. She notes that sex scenes in male-written crime novels are often improbable. “They have this grizzled, old, shambolic detective with vomit down his front and then a gorgeous 18-year-old jumps in the sack with him just like that. When Simone gets laid, it’s a bit more plausible, because she’s a 21-year-old stripper.”

These days Redhead juggles writing with bringing up baby Hugh, who is four-and-a-half months old. Plenty of other Sisters in Crime members are also raising kids; Redhead will appear alongside Angela Savage on a panel about motherhood and crime writing, hilariously named *Hand That Rocks The Cradle*.

“I’ve made really good friends who are so generous and supportive,” she says. “For everyone to be in the same place at the same time, I’m so excited my head’s going to explode.” Hopefully not thanks to a gunshot from the disgruntled writer dispatched in *Thrill City*.

Angela Savage, 45, Brunswick

Having narrowly missed out on this year’s top gong at the prestigious Ned Kelly Awards for crime writing for her second novel, *The Half-Child*, Savage insists there’s no plot to murder her rivals. “The Australian crime writing scene’s very supportive because it’s a niche genre. There was a lot of love in the room.”

Savage always wanted to be a writer, and has the forensic evidence to prove it. “I have a book of very bad poetry, some of it plagiarised, that I tried to write at the age of eight. It even has the author’s blurb at the back.”

Abandoning a couple of attempts at novel writing in her late teens, she decided she needed a good dose of life first, and traveled extensively, living in south-east Asia for six years. Based in Vientiane, Hanoi and Bangkok, she managed an HIV/AIDS prevention program for the Australian Red Cross.

Her short story *The Mole on the Temple*

came third in Sisters in Crime’s Scarlet Stiletto competition in 1998, giving birth to her passion for crime fiction, and also to her protagonist, Jayne Keeny, an ex-pat Aussie detective based in Bangkok.

Although the similarities are remarkable, Savage and Jayne aren’t one and the same person, apparently. “I made the foolish mistake of giving her my dark, curly hair. She’s tragically single, in her 30s, living in Thailand and rejecting what she’s left behind. I’m 40-something, I’ve been with the same person for 20 years, I’m settled and I’ve given up smoking.”

She says her years living abroad and working with different cultures prepared her for being a crime writer. “Trying to figure out the big picture from a small set of clues, figuring out who’s a reliable source, searching for meaning lost in translation.”

Studying criminology at Melbourne Uni in the 1980s also helped, and she spends many hours researching the devious machinations of her killers, both online and in books, as well as talking to “excellent, but unpaid” researchers in Thailand.

One resource she sadly didn’t make enough of was her late grandfather, a NSW cop who worked in Kings Cross in the ’80s. Only after his death did she find out he worked with controversial former NSW police detective Roger Rogerson.

Savage was cradling her newborn daughter, Natasha, while finalising her first novel, *Behind the Night Bazaar*. Now that Natasha is almost six, Savage writes at night around motherhood and working four days a week at a community centre.

Despite her obvious ability to multitask, she isn’t surprised that people automatically assume a man can produce better crime fiction. “Since Julia Gillard became prime minister it’s been highlighted that we are still a profoundly misogynistic society. So I think there is always a degree to which people are surprised by the violence that women can and do choose to write about.”

She says she’s never been obsessed with pathological killers like so many in the genre. “I don’t read a lot about forensics and psycho killers. The challenge I like to set myself is to get the reader to, if not sympathise, then at least understand the bad guy, so they aren’t one-dimensional.”

“That said, in my new novel I’ve been exploring a sociopath. I’ve realised why they are fun, because you don’t have to provide a motive.”

PD Martin, 41, Surrey Hills

Martin is often asked if her particular brand of crime fiction could incite real-life copycats to murder. She maintains that those who really would plan a cold-blooded murder would do so regardless of what she writes. “Reading a book won’t influence them.”

Having studied criminal psychology at university, though she never worked in the field, Martin is fascinated by what goes on inside the head of vicious killers.

A born performer, she began penning her own songs as a child and then, inspired by favourite books such as *The Famous Five* and *Nancy Drew*, she began writing stories. After several unsuccessful attempts to get her own young adult fiction published, she turned to crime. Recalling a brutal nightmare full of blood and violence that eerily coincided with the late night death of a close friend, her dark path was set.

With only three criminal profilers based in Victoria, she decided to look further afield when conjuring up her heroine, Sophie Anderton – a Shepparton native who now

works for the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit. Sophie first appeared in 2006’s *Body Count*. Four more novels and an e-book have followed.

“When I was younger I wanted to be a detective working homicide, for years and years,” she explains. “It’s almost like Sophie represents a career path I could have followed, so it’s not too hard to put myself in her shoes. Writing is like acting in that respect.”

One of the tricks of getting the genre right is keeping up with the science behind forensics. In *Fan Mail*, Martin wrote a scene where the investigators identified both the brand and the specific shade of a lipstick. Her editor was dubious whether or not this was possible, but Martin could point to her research as proof.

Martin writes while her four-year-old daughter Grace is at kindergarten. Next year she goes to school, which should make things easier. The author is now ready to put Sophie behind her and explore a new character. But she tied up the series’ loose ends with an interactive e-book where readers could decide the course of events on a weekly basis.

“I don’t usually write with a plan, so it was hard going chapter by chapter,” she admits. “Sometimes I get 80,000 pages in and don’t know who did it. Once I know I have to go backwards and make sweeping changes to the plot, adding and removing characters.”

Whodunit indeed! ■

SheKilda is on October 7–9 at Rydges on Swanston, Carlton. For details, visit shekilda.com.au

From left: Angela Savage, Leigh Redhead and PD Martin plot the perfect (fictional) crime at the State Library. Photograph by Teagan Glenane.

