



**APPRAISAL OF 'ONLY WHEN IT RAINS'**



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## Novel Overview

ONLY WHEN IT RAINS is the story of the investigations of Michael Lancer, ex special forces military and his investigations into an ingenious drug smuggling operation based out of France and Bristol. His delving into the mysterious goings on see him face death more than once and cause him to meet and defeat a cast of chilling villains, aided by a plucky female side-kick and an old contact from his days as a military operative.

The prose is appealing and fast moving and settings are rendered with an exquisite eye for detail, resulting in the reader feeling thoroughly grounded in a sense of place and time. Action sequences are well handled and manage to be exciting as well as entirely credible; the attention to detail and inventiveness of the methods to defeat security alarms and scramble up rock faces, as just two examples, is superb and gives the reader a sense that the author has 'been there' and is reporting back.

The action of the novel moves to France in the second half of the book and the country, inhabitants and a sense of an untold history of the area in question are lovingly and meticulously crafted.

This is a novel that is unafraid to confront the visceral realities of violence and does not shy away from showing the consequences of evil intent and action. The justice meted out by Michael Lancer is often summary, but always with the moral imperative to back it up. Again, the consequences are not shied away from and the honest examination of the stakes of violence and unlawful behaviour give the narrative a bite and certain edge.

The body of the report looks at the novel in more depth, using the following elements to clarify the analysis as these usually provide a good basis for understanding the construction of a narrative:

- ◆ Character
- ◆ Plot
- ◆ Point of View
- ◆ Setting

A summary of development points follows and recommendations for next steps with regard to potential submission to agents and publishers.

## Plot

### *Plot Overview*

ONLY WHEN IT RAINS opens with the protagonist, Lancer, encountering Suzie Compton who is running from unknown assailants. Suzie is known to him through Martin Compton a one time friend. Inspired by gallantry, a sense of loyalty and latent attraction, Lancer offers to give Suzie a lift and take her home to recover and get warm.

It turns out that Suzie is on the run after being discovered snooping around Bristol docks at the address she found on a label filched from a 'friend's' pocket. Once discovered she is chased by the men guarding the warehouse and escapes over the Bristol Portway and was on the run when Lancer happened across her as he was out for an evening walk.

The following morning Suzie disappears, taking Lancer's car. Making his way back to Bath in a hire car, he discovers Suzie has left his Range Rover at his garage and his feelings of annoyance subside, leaving a sense of curiosity in its wake. Why were the men chasing Suzie? Why did she take off? Lancer, being Lancer, feels the need to investigate and drives down to the address on the docks he saw on Suzie's label.

The paper factory is guarded and Lancer is threatened and decides to retreat, after teaching one of the thugs a lesson. He has no luck getting in touch with Suzie's parents and is horrified the following day to see a picture of Suzie in the local paper. She has overdosed on heroin and alcohol. Lancer attends the inquiry where Suzie's boyfriend leaps up to deny she ever touched drugs. Lancer follows him to a local pub, intent on questioning him. Except, Lancer finds his body in the toilets, throats slashed and then is brutally slugged himself on the back of the head.

He wakes in the rear of a speeding van, bound and destined for a shallow grave. Using his ingenuity, Lancer escapes his bonds and causes the van to crash, killing the drivers and causing himself to be flung clear where he is found by a passer-by, Elaine Woodgate, who takes pity on him and nurses him back to health, reminded by him of her dead husband.

In due course Inspector Peter Bland makes contact, wishing to see Lancer. It transpires that Bland has had recommendations with regard Lancer from Special Branch and the forensic evidence puts Lancer in the clear with regards the murder. The two of them put heads together to ponder the sequence of events resulting in the death of Suzie Compton and her boyfriend.

Lancer's investigations into the doctor at the coronary eventuates in threats that he stays out of business that isn't his own but Lancer brushes them off until

Elaine is brutally assaulted and left tied to his Range Rover as a warning. Lancer decides that Elaine is best staying with him to protect her from further attacks from the thugs arrayed against them. Additionally, Lancer decides to extract revenge on the men by visiting the warehouse address once more and torching it.

This act of revenge forces the gang leader out of the woodwork and he calls Lancer to offer a meet and the potential for a truce. Lancer agrees and when arrives at the designated spot, finds the man responsible for Elaine's assault dead, his corpse left at a staged motorbike crash. The warehouse owner then sets out his deal; Lancer and Elaine leave the country for a couple of weeks and stay out of his business and he will consider scores to be settled. Lancer decides its best to accept, all the while considering his next move in the investigation of the label which originated from an address in France.

He parts ways with Elaine; she deciding it is too painful for her after the sexual assault and Lancer's continual reminder of her dead partner.

Lancer makes for the south of France where he encounters a fellow ex-military man Bob Hart who is heading up a canoe expedition trip. Exchanging pleasantries they carry on their separate ways, Lancer heading for the address on Suzie Compton's label: that of Modeltex a company that specialise in industrial paper production.

Waiting for an opportunity, Lancer breaks into the factory to investigate it further. Inside he discovers that the machinery is set up to cut out chunks of the paper roll and leave a gap which can then be stuffed with the polythene bags of white powder he spies the leader of the gang bringing to the factory. Lancer realises he has stumbled on an ingenious and well run drug smuggling operation. He is discovered, captured and forced to drive into the mountains, but manages to outwit his pursuer and cast him over the edge of a road-side cliff.

The next morning, retracing his steps into the mountains, Lancer happens upon Monsieur Dubois who is visiting the spot of a wartime atrocity. Dubois and Lancer bond over the tale of a brave defence of the valley and Dubois reveals that the nearby house, the one Lancer was being forced to, belongs to Raymond Le Tattre.

Lancer deduces this man is the leader of the drug smuggling operation and scales the boundary wall to investigate. After scouting, and his car being discovered, he beats a retreat to call Buck Campbell, a high-level contact in Washington who gives him the low-down from his files on Le Tattre.

Lancer retires to a bar to consider what he has learned where he is caught up in a violent altercation, an outpouring of hatred against Le Tattre's men. He is helped out by Bob Hart, who was quietly minding his own business but decided

to step in. A man is killed in the violence and Lancer decides it is too much of a risk to leave him in the street and so he and Bob agree to dispose of him in a river pool nearby that Bob knows of. In return Lancer tells Bob of why he is in France and what he intends to do; break into the factory and remove a roll of drug-stuffed paper to serve as evidence. Bob offers to help in any way he can and offers Lancer Jenny Williamson's room to stay in.

That night, Bob's accommodation is raided by police and Jenny sneaks back to her room to warn Lancer. Together they escape and canoe down the river, capsizing on a treacherous rapid before walking to a nearby town and spending the night, chastely, in a hotel. Jenny is kidnapped by the men and Lancer decides to strike back to Le Tattre's house, assuming that is where she will be taken. En route, he visits a bar Pierre Dubois mentioned in their previous meeting.

Dubois is there and explains to Lancer the disgust Le Tattre has engendered in the village by his men's repulsive behaviour and attack on young women. Lancer confides that he wishes to breach Le Tattre's house and Dubois tells him of a secret route in, through wartime caves sunk into a cliff.

With Dubois' help, Lancer secures the necessary equipment and firepower and gears up for an assault on the house. Pushing through the wartime caverns, full of poignant reminders and a frozen tableau of a death, Lancer makes it into the house complex where he surprises Le Tattre meeting his lieutenants. To his surprise there is not only the man who made the threatening calls to him in England, but Martin Compton also, the father of the murdered girl who initiated the whole chain of events.

After a tense stand off and shoot out, Martin is killed and compounding Lancer's surprise further, Suzie herself appears. Her death was faked to get her out of the country after she accidentally killed a man during her nosing around the warehouse. Crazy by grief she attempts to kill Lancer and he is forced to shoot her dead after she wounds him in the leg.

Close to death, Lancer rescues Jenny and faces down Le Tattre on the road outside in a climactic finale. As all seems to be lost, Bob Hart turns up with Elaine who had the Modeltex address and wracked herself with guilt that she couldn't let him go alone, tracing him to Le Tattre's house.

The novel closes with them escaping the scene, the drug operation decapitated and reported in to Buck Campbell, and Lancer going home.

## *Plot Assessment*

The plot premise itself is a good one i.e. a drug smuggling operation that uses hollowed out paper rolls as its means of transportation and avoiding border controls. The precision with which the operation has been envisaged means it is entirely credible for the reader and in line with expectations that drug smugglers are innovative types.

However, there are a couple of elements of the plot itself which could be tightened up. The first is the relatively weak instigating incident and the second is the episodic nature of the development.

We can look at Lancer's motivations in more detail in the 'Character' section of the report but let's for now examine the method upon which he becomes embroiled in the plot sequence. Whilst out walking in the rain, he happens upon a girl who is clearly running away from someone. Deciding to stop, he lets her in and it so happens that the girl knows him to the extent she feels comfortable enough in his presence to go with him and then set out in detail what exactly has caused her to be on the run.

Following, the seed of the plot proper is the discovery by Suzie Compton of a label from her 'friend's' possession and the motivation for her deciding to investigate it further is set out in the following passage:

"It all started this morning at an old warehouse down by the docks," she said. "I went to find out what happens there, because I was curious. I didn't go expecting it to mean anything - it was just idle speculation. You know how it is when you think 'why' often enough about someone you know well. Eventually you talk yourself into being nosy, especially if it's just for a giggle."

This means the novel's plot opens with the chance combination of Lancer's involvement and the instigation of the chain of events born out of 'idle speculation' and a fairly unlikely coincidence of a meeting. This can't help but flavour the perception of the importance of what is taking place (i.e. an incidental moment indulged on a whim happened on by coincidence) and also can seem somewhat incredible – i.e. a sense that the events have taken place because they need to, because a novel requires a plot.

It is this feeling that carries on into the development of the plot throughout the rest of the book. I stated above that the plot development is 'episodic' and it is worth looking at exactly what this means.

'Episodic' can be defined as 'made up of separate *loosely connected* episodes' (my italics for emphasis). It is this loose connection that is at the heart of what needs to be addressed in terms of the plotting of the book.

The connections between 'episodes' i.e. significant events of the book aren't loose in the sense that there is no casual connection between them; quite the opposite. Each event is in direct response to the one preceding it and this is part of the problem. There is little in the way of an overarching mystery that needs to be solved, or wrong that needs to be righted that we are kept in touch with. Rather than a focussed escalation of a central conflict, the plot is more akin to a series of short term problems that Lancer is minded to overcome.

The loose connection is in the tying to the overall arc of what is happening. The mystery of the label takes a back seat and gets lost in the immediate moment of the meeting of a new girl or an action sequence of a fight or factory break in.

Related, is the lack of playing out of the central conflict. If we can think of the mystery of the label and what is being done in these factories as the central conflict, we find that that all is revealed approximately half way through the novel:

That of course was it! When the rewinding was finished, it would be impossible to tell from the outside of the roll that it was not just another reel of printing paper! Re-bagged in polythene, identified as faulty, and for return to the manufacturer - no customs man in the world would ever suspect it. Even if opened for inspection, there would still be nothing to see. I knew now how Suzie, the smarmy queer and poor old Simon Windows were all tied together.

And so, with this conflict resolved the question has to be asked what is giving the narrative drive now, apart from the momentum of events that Lancer is caught up in? Perhaps it is investigating how Suzie was involved and ended up murdered? But there is little reference to her beyond the occasional passing recollection and not much in the way of emotional attachment. As such it doesn't have enough impact on the reader to tie together the events into a coherent whole.

The episodic nature of the plot has impact on the characters (which we'll examine in Character) and on the *escalation* of conflict. With focus switched away from the resolving of a central conflict, the dramatic stakes are then required to be generated by the peril of the characters facing each drama. However, Lancer's life is endangered fairly much from the outset; there is a lead-in of some threats but then the danger level remains fairly flat (although at a high level) and Lancer seems impervious until right at the end when he is shot in the leg.

## Character

In the following section the main characters are listed and comments appended:

### *Michael Lancer*

Lancer is a man's man; fond of a drink, handy in a tight spot and attractive to women. Ex-military and extremely capable, he is a protagonist who is resourceful and never for a moment doubts who he is or what he is doing. This certainty can be very appealing for readers of fiction; it enables to project ourselves into a character that is brave/foolish enough to do things we'd never even consider in 'real life'.

As capable as Lancer is, there is something lacking about him. We get little in the sense of what drives him. He leads a comfortable existence without appearing to have to work or support himself financially. He is divorced but he seems mostly untroubled by this. There is also something lacking in his getting involved in the events of the novel. We never get a sense that that events have tapped into a strong sense of moral outrage or burning curiosity or any other driver that would credibly enmesh him into this world.

We do get little clues from his past that might help explain this lack of passion – perhaps it is in part attributable to the extensive training he must have received in his time in the armed forces. But even his past and history is treated with an emotional distance and we don't have enough detail to form any kind of view as to what he must have done and experienced.

In the plot section above, reference was made to how the episodic nature of the plot development also has influence on, and is influenced by, Lancer and his motivations. Having a lack of strong motivation for the protagonist's involvement exacerbates the lack of central plot conflict which reinforces the feeling of the plot playing out episode by episode.

A lack of strong motivation also leads to reactivity on behalf of the protagonist i.e. they simply react (however skillfully and cleverly) to what comes along next. This 'passive active' behavior can lead to the protagonist becoming almost transparent – a vehicle for the next action sequence or development point. This weakens reader empathy with the most crucial character in the novel.

Lancer has the feel of a 'serial' character at present and I would be interested to know if this is a second or subsequent book written with him as the protagonist.

### *Suzie Compton*

Suzie is well portrayed as a troubled youth who initiates the plot events. The sexual tension between her and Lancer is handled skillfully and in the short

period of time she is 'on stage' she manages to dominate the narrative, suggesting a complex set of drivers that govern her behavior.

Her subsequent removal for the vast majority of the novel does then minimize any attraction or empathy we might feel for her, which serves to dilute the emotional impact of her being shot by Lancer in the denouement.

### *Elaine Woodgate*

Elaine provides the main 'love interest' and foil for Lancer through the most part of the novel. She is plucky and generous, troubled and brave and delineated well through her acts and back-story. There is a certain sexual tension between Elaine and Lancer and this is handedly subtly, leaving the reader wishing that they'd somehow find a way to be together. This adds an extra dimension to the narrative.

There was one section where plot seemed to gain ascendancy and the credibility of Elaine was strained – that is her recovery from the sexual assault she suffered as a warning to Lancer. She takes it all remarkably well, given the brutality of the event and is soon, after a bath, asking for brandy, flirting lightly with Lancer and joking about the length of her assailants fingernails. Her coping mechanism and transference and transmutation of the negative emotions onto Lancer also seem somewhat expedient. A rape is a devastating incident but here seems to fade quickly into the background as a platform for a revenge motivation but without having a lasting effect on Elaine.

### *Raymond Le Tattre*

Le Tattre is the villain of the piece and performs his job admirably. Due to the point of view adopted in the novel, the sequence of events is told from Lancer's perspective which necessarily limits the antagonist's time on stage. However, when he does appear his presence is chilling and you sense that he is capable of cold, ruthless efficiency in those that cross him. Classically, he underestimates Lancer in the final climactic scene, assuming that the rules he imposes on the world will be observed by others, knowing that Lancer will not shoot him in the back. Lancer, however, operates on a more complex code and Le Tattre pays for his lack of understanding with his life.

### *Inspector Bland*

Inspector Bland harkens back to the golden age of detective fiction; an Inspector with a chummily adversarial attitude to Lancer, a problem maverick, but who also recognizes a useful ally when he sees one. We learn little of Inspector Bland outside of his love of drinking on duty and pipe-smoking and he is the main means for introducing the ratiocination around the crimes of Suzie and her boyfriend's killings.

### *Bob Hart*

Bob comes onto the scene when the action has moved to France and, like Lancer, is ex-military. The men recognise the qualities in each other and bond immediately. Bob serves as a useful adjunct and side-kick for Lancer and is reasonably lightly sketched as his main dramatic function is to provide support to Lancer in action sequences and enable plot development.

### *Jenny*

Jenny, similar to Bob, comes to Lancer's aid when required. Again, there is some excellent sexual will-they-won't they tension and she serves an essential dramatic function in providing Lancer with motivation in storming Le Tattre's house. That she was so willing to leave a hotel in the middle of the night and canoe, then walk several miles to a town with a man she'd only briefly met did seem somewhat unlikely and her motivations could be strengthened in her providing assistance.

### *Pierre Dubois*

Another ally for Lancer but one who has a strong passion remaining from the war – his discourse with Lancer with regard the defence of the valley and betrayal by the Allies reveals a man of depth and passion. He generates a good deal of character sympathy as a man of integrity and honour

## Setting

The following section comments on the 'setting' of the novel. This means simply more than the physical location (even though this is an important part) – rather it is a comment on the 'world' of the narrative.

### *France*

The action of the novel moves to France in Chapter Nine and it is the latter part of the book that is exquisitely rendered in terms of attention to the sense of place. France is lovingly and exquisitely portrayed – a real sense of the place oozes from the text and it is clear that this is being 'reported back' and not simply imagined which gives the narrative a weight and credibility.

The history of the region is also worked in well – through dialogue with Dubois but also then as an integral part of the plot i.e. Lancer gaining access to Le Tattre's house through the wartime caverns. Readers like to feel they are learning something whilst reading fiction and this caters to this requirement excellently.

One thing that was puzzling was the decision to render some of the dialogue in French. Whilst it did something to add to the sense of place, this was far outweighed by the obfuscation it entailed. If dialogue is important enough to understand, then it should be in English as an author cannot suppose a reader having a command of another language. If the dialogue is of no particular importance and so the exact meaning is unimportant, you have to question why the dialogue is there in the first place.

You can easily retain the sense of 'Frenchness' by the use of idiom or dropping in the occasional culturally appropriate reference. An explanation of Lancer's ability with the language and then reference to when the speaker is using French in the dialogue attribution will allow the dialogue to be had in English.

### *Golden Age Detective v Modern Thriller*

Fiction, like everything else in our culture, is subject to trends and evolution. Narratives which might have been credible previously might be diluted due to the change in readership requirements and cultural shifts. The fiction of Agatha Christie for instance, whilst a marvellous read, thoroughly enjoyable and still popular was a product of its time. Fast forward to this millennium, if a writer is looking to write 'golden age' crime fiction then they have to be conscious that they no longer writing contemporary fiction and there are certain elements of contemporary life that need to be removed.

In ONLY WHEN IT RAINS there is a feeling of something of a culture clash i.e. elements of golden age detective fiction and modern thriller writing. So, for example, firmly in the golden age camp is the pipe-smoking police Inspector who is happy to pop round for a drink in the morning and verbally fence with an ex-special forces potential trouble maker. There's the protagonist who solves crimes for a hobby – having no financial incentive or driving emotional requirement to do so. There's the language and sentiment; where everyone displays a stiff upper lip and, on occasion, calls each other 'old boy or 'dear girl'.

Then there is the thriller element; the constant proximity of brutal death, a serious and graphically represented sexual assault, realistically rendered modern locations and venturing out into the world and dealing with modern themes. Currently, this novel feels to have a foot in both camps and its not an easy line to straddle i.e. there might be too much 'old-boy' cosiness for a thriller reader and too much hard-hitting modernity for a golden age reader. The author might reflect on the type of audience he is writing for and edit accordingly.

## **Point of view (POV)**

This section examines the POV from which the narrative is related.

One of the strengths of this novel is the cast-iron POV that it is told from i.e. Michael Lancer's first person rendering. The POV remains consistent and credible and contributes a great deal to the reader's sense of who Lancer is. Temptation is resisted to shift POVs to other characters, even though it might have made development of the plot that much simpler and this is to be commended. The strong POV adds greatly to the sense of immersion that the novel produces.

The element that particularly stood out as well done was the way action sequences were handled. Lancer sets out the methods of his actions (such as orchestrating a break-in, torching a factory, scaling a rock-face using a rope harness) with convincing authenticity and this is a testament to the authors skill, knowledge and imagination. At no point in these sequences do we feel we are being told the information for the sake of it and in any event, it is fascinating stuff.

This relaying of expertise helps cement in our mind that Lancer is extremely capable and has had a past which has taught him these skills. His quipped 'asides' also reinforce this air of casual ability.

More widely, the POV makes good use of dialogue, description and interior monologue seamlessly to immerse the reader. There are no slips in POV in terms of it shifting momentarily to other characters or inconsistencies in Lancer's world view or 'voice'. This is effected in part by the clear, technically proficient writing and sentence construction. Time is also handled well and its passage is credible and skilfully handled.

The POV and voice makes the novel a very agreeable read; accessible, concise and appealing.

## Summary of recommended development points

Listed below are summary bullet points which pull out the main comments of previous sections. They do not represent definitive editorial assessments and can be discussed further during the telephone follow-up if the author wishes.

- ◆ Look to tighten the initiating event and Lancer's subsequent involvement
- ◆ Consider how the plot development may be more strongly held together by an escalation of a central conflict – this may require a reordering of events and more attention to the release of 'clue' information to the reader
- ◆ 'Raise the stakes' for Lancer. Why is he getting involved? What does this mean to him?
- ◆ Allow us to see more of Lancer's back-story to enable us to build greater empathy
- ◆ Revisit the secondary characters to understand if you can build on their motives to lessen the feeling that the plot is paramount and they are requirements for it
- ◆ Augment the French setting by examining the dialogue and consider recasting in English
- ◆ Give some consideration to the tone of the book with the regard the 'golden age' and thriller feel and pare back elements, or enhance as appropriate

## Next Steps

This is a very polished piece of work and, with some tweaks, written to a level which is suitable for submission to agents for consideration. During our follow-up call we would be happy to recommend courses of action with regard agents and how you might choose to approach them.