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Identity, place and belonging in *Shetland*

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Abstract

First broadcast on BBC One in 2013, *Shetland* has become the most high-profile and successful networked Scottish TV drama of recent years. In this article I examine the ways in which the show uses the conventions of crime drama to explore the specificity of Shetland as a place and a location, how it informs the plot lines and its relation to the main protagonist, DCI Jimmy Perez's, sense of identity and belonging. This in turn indicates the importance of *Shetland* to both the vitality of this perennially popular genre and to questions of national representation and identity in post-devolutionary Scotland.

Keywords

Shetland, crime drama, police procedural, place, identity, BBC Scotland

Introduction

In 'Raven Black', the first of three discrete stories comprising the second series of the BBC crime drama *Shetland* (2013–), DCI Jimmy Perez (Douglas Henshall) encounters Magnus Bain (Brian Cox), a mysterious and dishevelled recluse whose dark and dilapidated cottage is located close to a remote beach where a young girl has been found strangled. In his strong local dialect, Bain immediately asks Perez: 'Whaur's du fae (where are you from)?' Perez responds in a convoluted and imprecise manner: 'I'm fae Fair Isle... originally, and then Glasgow, and now I live in Lerwick'. Bain subsequently becomes the prime suspect in the murder investigation but is ultimately cleared of this and the suspicion that he was responsible for the disappearance of another young girl several years previously. After being returned home, he repeats his initial question, with a quizzical emphasis that challenges the detective's previous response: 'Whaur's du fae?'

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This time Perez responds with an empathic sense of certainty: ‘Fair Isle!’ A connection between the two men is thus affirmed, rooted in mutual belonging to a specific place.

By solving the case and exonerating a social outcast who has lived under suspicion for most of his life, Perez also reinforces a sense of purpose and duty to his community. We already know that he returned to Shetland with teenage stepdaughter Cassie (Erin Armstrong) following the death of his wife, Fran. Responding to this tragic loss, Perez has consolidated his small family unit in a place that he considers a haven of safety and security, which as the head policeman he is entrusted to maintain. This motivation is pithily captured in response to disparaging remarks from Cassie’s biological father, Duncan Hunter (Mark Bonnar): ‘(on Shetland) most people don’t lock their doors, and I’d like it to stay that way’ (Series one, episode one). Yet Perez is continually confronted by the darker and more destructive side of humanity; in that the succession of murder cases he investigates serve to challenge and unsettle both his role as protector and his (re) identification with Shetland as ‘home’.¹

First broadcast on BBC One in 2013 *Shetland* has become the most high-profile and successful networked Scottish TV drama of recent years.² At the time of writing, 10 series have been screened, with domestic viewing (broadcast plus streaming) figures consistently exceeding seven million. The show enjoys a strong international profile having been sold to around 20 territories including the USA and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Japan and across Europe. The first seven series of *Shetland* featured Perez as the central protagonist, heading up a small team of officers including Detective Sergeant Alison ‘Tosh’ Mackintosh (Alison O’Donnell) and Detective Constable Sandy Wilson (Steven Robertson). In 2022, the show faced a watershed moment when Henshall announced he was leaving. However just as *Taggart* (1983-2010) survived the death in 1994 of Mark McManus who played the eponymous Glasgow detective, so *Shetland* has evolved with the introduction of a new protagonist in DI Ruth Calder (Ashley Jensen), a native Shetlander working for the London Metropolitan Police who in series eight returns to the Islands in pursuit of a witness to the murder of a police informant.

Shetland follows the classic form of the police procedural, with each discrete story driven by a specific murder investigation – usually instigated by a killing or discovery of a corpse early in the first episode. As the case develops suspicion may fall on various parties who are subsequently ruled out before the identity of the true killer is revealed. Along the way other murders or suspicious deaths may occur, some directly related to the primary case, others initiating secondary plot lines.³ But what distinguishes the show – as its title suggests – is its unique setting. Sited 110 miles from the Scottish mainland, the Shetland Isles are the most remote part of the UK, providing a suitably dramatic, picturesque – and *unfamiliar* – location for a crime drama.⁴ The relationship of protagonist to place is another recurring trope in the genre, and the association between Perez and Shetland echoes that between *Taggart* and Glasgow, *Inspector Morse* (1987-2000) and Oxford, *Luther* (2010-2019) and London, *Vera* (2011-25) and Northumberland and *Happy Valley’s* (2014-2023) Catherine Cawood and the Calder Valley in West Yorkshire. Moreover, these protagonists are frequently complex and flawed and Perez, grieving the loss of his wife and struggling to be an effective father to his stepdaughter, conforms to the convention. The geographical and social constitution of Shetland as a place also has a

direct bearing on the nature of the homicides and the subsequent investigations in the show.

The construction and function of place in relation to questions of identity and community, informed by the familiar tropes and conventions of the police procedural, provide the focus of my own critical investigation in this article. Moreover, *Shetland*'s status as a popular and enduring mainstream television drama poses wider questions about the show's relevance as an example of UK 'regional' production to broader considerations of representation of (post-devolutionary) Scotland in contemporary British television.

The production context of *Shetland*

Produced by Silverprint Pictures, part of ITV Studios, for BBC Scotland, *Shetland* emerged out of executive producers Elaine Collins and Kate Bartlett existing relationship with the crime writer Ann Cleeves. Having created *Vera* from the novels featuring Northumbria-based detective Vera Stanhope, Bartlett and Collins then turned their attention to Cleeves' *Shetland* series of books. They brought in the experienced screenwriter David Kane, whose distinguished career stretches back to the late 1980s and includes several crime and investigative dramas.⁵ Kane's adaptation of 'Red Bones' (2009) for the *Shetland* pilot series made some significant changes to the novel. While Jimmy Perez's developing relationship with Fran Hunter is a key feature of the first four books before she is tragically killed in 'Blue Lightning' (2010), Kane removed Fran's physical presence to establish Perez as the main protagonist and key focus of the show from the outset. He also introduced the character of Tosh as the detective's principal foil, creating a central dynamic that pairs the returning Shetland native and the lowland incomer. Kane also renders Duncan Hunter – an egotistical bully in the novels – a more substantial and nuanced presence that provides a more significant and impactful locus of emotional and moral struggle for Perez.

The BBC initially adopted a cautious approach to the show with the first series comprising just two 60-minute episodes. However, a £3 million commission for a more ambitious second series was announced less than month after the *Shetland* pilot aired in March 2013 (McGinty and Brown, 2013). This featured two-part adaptations of three other books in Cleeves' series, broadcast in March and April 2014. Kane adapted 'Dead Water' (2013), while Gaby Chiappe (who had previously written three episodes of *Vera*) and Richard Davidson provided scripts for 'Raven Black' (2006) and 'Blue Lightning', respectively. *Shetland* subsequently evolved into the more familiar format of a six-part series featuring a single original storyline written by a showrunner, providing a larger dramatic canvas to develop characters, plots and themes.⁶ It was Chiappe, working with the more experienced Robert Murphy,⁷ who was given responsibility for the first original story for series three before Kane assumed the role of showrunner for the next four series, handing over to Paul Logue⁸ following Perez's departure.

The show has represented the Corporation's most enduring commitment to Scottish drama production over the past 15 years. As Kim Toft Hansen and Valentina Re note, '*Shetland* represents traditional British public service drama and contemporary public service obligations to cater local and regional audiences, speaking directly into the BBC's

constitutional basis in the Royal Charter' (2024: 194). Consequently Gaynor Holmes, who became the BBC's first Drama Commissioning Editor for Scotland in 2016, is another key contributor to *Shetland's* continued significance with the Corporation's drama output. Over the years the show has provided opportunities for a wide range of creatives including directors (initially assigned to each two-episode story in first two series before a pattern of two per series was implemented) cinematographers, editors and designers. Moreover, in addition to providing a rare regular platform for Scottish acting talent – exceeded only by the long running soap *River City* (2002-26) – *Shetland* has featured an array of high-profile English and Irish performers.⁹ While the iconic presence the Shetland isles is central to the diegetic world of the show, at least 50% of the production is filmed in and around Glasgow, including studio interiors for the Lerwick police station (whose exterior is provided by the town's Sherrif court) and Perez's iconic waterfront house. However, as location manager Tim Maskell reveals, while everything else tends to be 'real', extensive use is made of 'split locations' with exteriors shot in Shetland and interiors on the mainland (Weisel, 2022). Production has also been carried out at Loch Thom near Greenock, a treeless area with water that mirrors the terrain on Shetland.

'We are all connected one way or another on Shetland': The Significance of Place

The visual representation of place in *Shetland* aligns with familiar depictions of Scotland on screen in which the nation is frequently associated with picturesque rural landscapes – mountains, lochs, moorlands and islands – characterised by rugged beauty and a sublime sense of scale and power, and on occasion a melancholic emptiness and isolation. These tropes are central to both the romantic sense of identity and belonging within the Scottish imaginary (Blaikie, 2010) and the external construction of Scotland as a peripheral 'other', distant and remote from metropolitan centres of cultural power (Petrie, 2000). In the case of Shetland as a specific place, remoteness is reinforced by geographical location, effectively rendering the archipelago as doubly displaced: a hinterland of a peripheral (devolved) nation, where even the Scots are 'outsiders'.¹⁰

The fields of cultural geography and geocriticism provide invaluable insights into the construction of islands and islandness as sociocultural phenomena that function as a site of complex and contested meaning, most notably between external and internal perspectives and the divergent understandings and lived experiences of islanders and mainlanders (Foley et al., 2023). Kathryn Burnett, Ray Burnett and Mike Danson argue that: 'Scotland's offshore islands remain culturally and powerfully configured from outwith as "remote".... (moreover) remoteness is both real and imagined: articulated to position the experience of islandness as distinctive and different' (2021: 3). There is a prevailing power dynamic in that that dominant discourse on islandness tends to reflect external projections, interests and needs. Owe Ronström notes: 'islands have long since been a focal point for fantasies of remoteness, to such an extent that remoteness is now a hallmark of islandness, alongside boundedness, smallness and isolation' (2021: 271). Another key element of islandness is the relationship between space and time, as Ronström explains, if 'nostalgia emphasises distances in time, remoteness underlines

spatial differences’ (2021: 287). Thus, ‘(t)ravelling to remote places... coincides with a movement backwards in time. While the ‘here-and-now’ is located in the centre, the ‘there-and-then’ is the given position of the remote’ (2021:277). Yet the understandings, perspectives and fantasies of those who are indigenous to islands will be very different, and while “‘remoteness” as exotification persists... it also lends itself to creative responses that redefine, challenge and critique what is “known” or assumed in the name of ... island places and people’ (Burnett et al., 2021: 3).

Islands also have a material reality as geographically located places. Faced with an apparent dichotomy between such ‘literal’ and ‘metaphorical’ understandings, Ronström invokes a ‘constant and wayward sliding between the physical places we call islands, and all the figures of thought that we attach to such places’ (2021: 271) Writing specifically about Scotland, James Oliver contends that ‘islandness presents us with a double ontology: the relationality of place and the relationality of emplacement. This engages an interaction of dialogues and dialect(ics) that iterate and evolve between islandness ‘on the ground’ and islandness ‘in the mind’, where islandness articulates more than just traditional, located social cohesion experiences but also personal communities of practice (2021: 241). Ronström also notes the increasing discussion of islands as relational phenomena (2021: 272), perhaps most notably invoked by the archipelago or archipelagic relations which invoke a network of connections, entanglements and interdependencies among and between islands (Burnett et al., 2021: 4), which in turn undermines (externally conceived) ideas of insularity or isolation. As Oliver points out, ‘Islandness in Scotland is about inter-island as well as intra-island relationships and relationality’ (2021: 242).

These various tropes and associations have had implications for the representation and function of islands in cultural production. Ronström argues that for centuries islands have been constructed as highly evocative fantasy spaces: ‘paradises, utopias, dystopias, futurotopias, and retrotopias. Like all projections, the images of “the island” mirror the ideas, needs, and realities of the projectors’ (2021: 292.) Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher argue that ‘(g)enre fiction is emphatically placial; that is, it is anchored in the knowledge that place is the condition for the construction and telling of stories’ (2023: 639) and utilising Fletcher’s (2011) concept of ‘performative geographies’, they point out that islands are granted metaphorical agency in fiction, actively participating in the production of meaning rather than passively providing a backdrop to that fiction (2023: 640). This is notably resonant in specific genres, notably crime fiction which ‘takes for granted existing tropes (containment, restricted access, limited suspects) and transfers them to island locations where the topography becomes an active player in the story’ (2023: 642).

This applies equally to screen fictions and in her study of television crime drama, Ruth McElroy identifies the creation of a sense of place as a major characteristic of the genre, which applies across a variety of national contexts:

Stylistically, the prominence of British landscapes in British contemporary crime drama is striking. landscapes and seascapes, many of which are beautiful and meditative in their composition and editing. Series such as *Broadchurch*, *Shetland*, *Vera* and the bilingual crime drama, *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* (2013–) appear to take inspiration from other television genres, most notably geographic television as exemplified by the hugely successful BBC series, *Coast* (2005–15). (2017: 12–13)

Ann Cleeves has acknowledged the inspiration that the Islands' geographical specificity provided for her: 'Shetland is perfect for my kind of traditional crime fiction. It has everything that I need: an enclosed community so only a limited number of suspects could have committed the murder, the possibility of secrets that go back for generations and a backdrop of bleak open spaces and wide horizons' (Tweedie, 2015).

The association of islands with a bygone time is given a dark twist through the tropes of secrets, lies and past misdemeanours (common themes in crime dramas, particularly those set in isolated and tight-knit communities). In *Shetland* plotlines are regularly motivated by the consequences of previous events, returning to wreak their destructive force on the present. This theme is strongly established in the initial quartet of adaptations. In 'Red Bones' two people are murdered to prevent the discovery and identification of a skeleton of a Norwegian killed after the end of the War by a pair of Shetlanders – a revelation given further poignancy when it transpires that the victim was Sandy Wilson's grandfather. In 'Raven Black', the death of a teenager is linked to the discovery of the body of another young girl who had gone missing almost two decades previously. In 'Dead Water', an elderly fish farmer kills two men to prevent the discovery of the body of his brother, who he had also murdered several decades before to prevent him selling off the family land. While in 'Blue Lightning' – where the action is confined to Fair Isle during a storm, evoking an Agatha Christie-style 'whodunnit' murder mystery – two ornithologists are killed to prevent revelations about the real paternity of the son of the first victim. The return of the past continued in some of David Kane's original *Shetland* stories. In series four the acquittal of Thomas Malone (Stephen Walters) reopens the case of Lizzie Kilmuir, whose strangled body had been found in a lime kiln on Unst 23 years previously. In series six two murders are committed to prevent the involvement of three prominent men in the (accidental) death of a young woman at a party on Fetlar more than 20 years previously coming to light. This story also marks the return of Donna Killick (Fiona Bell), revealed as the killer in series four, released from prison on compassionate grounds following a terminal cancer diagnosis and set on wreaking revenge on former lover Duncan Hunter. While in series seven an American, forced to flee the US several years before after being framed for the killing of a policeman, is confronted by a figure from his past.

The geographic proximity of Shetland to Norway – at 140 miles only slightly further than the distance from the Scottish mainland – is another significant consideration. The importance of Norse cultural heritage to Shetland's identity is explored by Andrew Jennings who notes the key role that a group of local intellectuals including authors Jessie Saxby and J.J. Haldane and the antiquarian Arthur Laurensen, in propagating 'a nordophile, Shetlandic identity, distinct from that of the Scots' (2021: 79). This identification continues to resonate today through the flying of the Shetland flag (a white cross on a blue background in the style of the other Nordic countries), the Norm origin of local dialect, Viking archaeological sites and the annual Up Helly Aa fire festival (2021: 92).

This deep cultural connection made it inevitable when *Shetland* first appeared it was immediately associated with the high profile and popular Nordic Noir television genre, epitomised by popular Scandinavian crime drama series like *The Killing* (2007-12), *Wallander* (2008-16) and *The Bridge* (2011-18). The *Shetland* pilot series, 'Red Bones' foregrounded the Nordic dimension, the action unfolding against the backdrop of

preparations for the annual Up Helly A Viking festival that culminates in the ritual burning of a longship, while the story of the ‘Shetland Bus’, a covert military operation during WW2, emerges as an important element of the central murder plot (Agger, 2020). The islands’ physical closeness to Scandinavia is explicitly articulated in the final scene when Perez remarks to Cassie that on a clear day you can see both Norway and Iceland from their home in Lerwick (Agger and Tange, 2019).

The influence of Nordic noir on *Shetland* has been noted by various other scholars. Glen Creeber identifies the show alongside the Welsh-based *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* (2013–16) as key examples of a ‘new breed of ‘Celtic Noir’, with both:

set amongst eerie landscapes and grey foreboding skies that create a geographical and psychological terrain that is strangely Nordic in tone. Both also share a sombre and pensive atmosphere with their monochrome colour schemes and brooding rural scenery that attempt to expose the hidden worlds of their remote communities. (2015: 27)

Elsewhere, Les Roberts develops the discussion in relation to the preoccupations of crime drama as a genre, suggesting that:

the Nordic influence ‘at home’ may in part be read as a kind of ‘importation of otherness’: landscape viewed, or re-imagined, through a de-familiarising lens. The sheer scale of the landscape (juxtaposed to that of the human presence within it or moving through it) and the sense of openness and peripherality serve as a mechanism by which the affects of place conducive to the procedural genre – an air of mystery, the unknown (or unknowable), fear and uncertainty, a sense of existential disquiet or dread, the disturbingly irrational – can be more palpably felt. (2016: 374)

These themes are effectively and efficiently established in *Shetland*’s short nine-shot credit sequence, evoking natural beauty, melancholic isolation and a darker underlying sense of threat or foreboding.¹¹ This begins with a dark and brooding image of the sea and a clifftop on which the small figure of a man – whose jacket and physical stance clearly identify him as Perez – gazing out over the water, and is followed by another shot of cliffs and sea, this time from the clifftop, then images of waves crashing on rocks, before an ominous pairing of an abandoned and dilapidated boat, followed by black rags caught on a fence dancing in the wind. We are then presented with a medium close-up of a pensive-looking Perez, shot in profile and framed in the doorway of a derelict building, the interior dark, the exterior landscape bleak. As he turns away, we cut to an abandoned bicycle outside the building, then a wide shot of the town of Lerwick, culminating with a return to a bleak seashore topped by a black sky in which storm clouds have gathered. Some of the images feature a visual overlay that evokes a painting. A similar juxtaposition of Celtic romance, subtly unsettled by a tugging dissonance, is conveyed by John Lunn’s theme music. The prominence of darker undercurrents call into question Lélia Farsooni’s argument that *Shetland* functions as a manifestation of the British pastoral, defined as ‘an idealised spatio-temporal (rural) realm’ (2023: 445).

In his study of Nordic Noir, Robert Saunders (2021) explores a number of key recurring themes, including ‘corporeality’ – organic communities challenged by outside

forces, but also the significance of dead bodies, victims of crime whose fate is the outcome of larger forces beyond any individual homicidal motive; and ‘borderlands’ – which invokes liminal zones, boundaries and frontiers and core tensions between mobility/restriction and inclusion/exclusion. These are resonant in *Shetland*, often in combination, where the physical and symbolic characteristics of place have a significant bearing on how the drama – and the criminal cases – is staged and unfolds. The dispersed population and the logistical challenge of accessing remote places requires the use of ferry services as well as public roads and it is significant that the first murder in series one occurs outside a lonely croft on Bressay, establishing a convention that persists throughout with homicides committed or dead bodies discovered on isolated beaches, desolate moorland, in a loch or the sea, at the foot of cliffs and so on. Physical isolation empowers killers, renders victims vulnerable and poses an obstacle to investigations, with the outlying islands of Fair Isle (‘Blue Lightning’), Unst (series four) and Fetlar (series six) following Bressay as even less accessible sites of murders or other suspicious deaths.

The first series of *Shetland* coincided with an increase in the use of drones in film and TV production and the (sea)bird’s eye view that aerial photography provides quickly became a distinguishing feature of the visual language of the show, serving to continually emphasise the distinctive *landscape* that exists beyond the drama. The use of drone shots also conveys the movement through outdoor space that characterises the investigations. While the general pacing of *Shetland* is notably slower than many crime dramas – another feature it shares with Nordic Noir (see [Toft Hansen and Waade, 2017](#)) – this is punctuated by moments of speed, with the recurring image of a car racing along empty roads, frequently in the effort to get to the scene of a crime or related emergency (the rural equivalent of the blue light moment in urban dramas), further emphasising the distance between places and people on the islands.

While the impact of external forces is present in the first two series, the greater narrative scope of series three onwards facilitated a more ambitious and two-way exploration of the relationship between the islands and the outside world. The idea of separation is continually underscored by frequent depictions of the main airport at Sumburgh and the ferry terminal in Lerwick as points of connection, departure and arrival. This also returns us to the idea of island relationality, underpinned by differential perspectives and power dynamics ([Foley et al., 2023](#)). Of particular significance are the more serious criminal forces that come to impact on Shetland, fuelling Perez’s determination to resist this external threat to his community. Series three tackles the impact of the drugs trade on Shetland and the professional killing of a recent incomer who turns out to be on a witness protection scheme, leading Perez and Tosh to Glasgow where they come into conflict with a ruthless crime boss and his duplicitous lawyer. In series four Perez and Tosh travel to Bergen to investigate an apparent Norwegian connection to the murder of a young reporter, bringing them into contact with Neo-Nazi paramilitary activity in Norway. Series five revolves around a people trafficking operation in Shetland run from Glasgow. While in series seven the murky past of a former policeman whose son has gone missing (and is later found murdered) takes Perez to Ayr where he uncovers the activities of another drugs gang.

The main plot of the latter series involves the activities of ecoterrorists, motivated by the events of January 1993 when the Braer oil tanker ran aground during a storm and the

subsequent spill killed more than 1500 seabirds ([Marine Accident Investigation Branch, 2015](#)). The discovery of oil and gas in the North Sea had been transformative for the Shetlands, further emphasising their distinctiveness from both the Orkneys and the Hebrides ([Burnett, Burnett, Danson, 2021](#): 11) and prompting substantial inward investment which raised living standards and boosted the population by more than 30% during the 1970s.¹² This inward migration also served to open up the islands to the world, the consequences of which permeate and motivate the drama in *Shetland* in a variety of ways. Interestingly, the popularity of the show has made its own contribution to this process of interaction and to the Shetland economy through the stimulation of screen-related tourism, further stimulating interest in the islands as a visitor destination.¹³

‘The Loneliness of the Lawman:’ Perez and his relationship with Shetland

In addition to their close association with place or location, the central protagonists of crime drama are frequently depicted as complex or flawed, offering an alternative puzzle or conundrum for viewers alongside the case or cases they are investigating. In considering this aspect of *Shetland*, the links with Nordic Noir remain instructive. As Anne Marit Waade notes, the protagonist in these dramas

is often a lonely investigator, but also a person who has a hard time trying to balance their private life with their working life. Their relationship with their partner is challenged by working relations, many of them fail as a parent (they forget appointments, get upset, lie and betray others) and they are characterised by emotional complexity including traumas, struggles and melancholic thoughts and emotions. ([2017](#): 384–5)

Aspects of this description are clearly echoed in the character of Jimmy Perez. Ann Cleeves’s original conception is a descendant of a Spanish sailor from the defeated Armada of 1588, whose dark hair, hooked nose and swarthy complexion cause him to physically stand out in a community with stronger connections to Scandinavia. Cleves’s Perez is also an introverted, lugubrious and dishevelled individual, living alone and dwelling over a failed marriage and his ex-wife’s accusations of his emotional incontinence.

The casting of Douglas Henshall for the TV series created a rather different version of the character, both physically and psychologically. In addition to his pale complexion, sandy hair and blue eyes, Henshall’s performance style presents Perez as outwardly purposeful, controlled, moral and compassionate, whose surface composure is occasionally breached to reveal flashes of fierce anger or moments of melancholic vulnerability – although his stoicism and dry wit (echoing other fictional Scottish detectives from Jim Taggart onwards) prevent him from becoming morose. Perez’s determination to be a good father to Cassie is reflected in organised and orderly living habits, epitomised by a spacious and tidy home with its open plan kitchen in which Perez is regularly depicted relaxing over a glass of wine or preparing meals. It is notable that he is less encumbered by his psychological disposition than other ‘complex’ protagonists in Scottish and Nordic crime drama such as the insubordinate and hard drinking John Rebus,

the intensely melancholic Kurt Wallander, or the neurodiverse Sarah Lund from *The Killing*. However, Perez's underlying vulnerability is regularly glimpsed, reaching crisis point in series six which begins with the funeral of his mother and his struggles to care for a father with dementia and culminates in a potentially career-ending suspension for covering up Duncan Hunter's role in the death of Donna Killick.

Perez and Cassie share a strong reciprocal bond, but his overprotectiveness creates tensions, notably when she is still at school. Cassie loves her stepfather but is stifled by him and finds Shetland very limited. By series three she has moved to Glasgow to University but following a relationship break up moves back to Shetland for series four before picking up her studies again in series five. Cassie's vulnerability, perceived or real, remains a recurring source of anxiety for Perez. In series three his investigations cause Perez to cross a Glasgow gangster, placing the safety of Cassie and her maternal grandparents in jeopardy. This theme is reprised in series five when Cassie is explicitly threatened by the people traffickers that Perez is closing in on, culminating in a thwarted abduction attempt at Kelvingrove Art Gallery. In series four the threat is closer to home when it is revealed that Donna Killick, who Cassie is working for, is a murderer. And in series seven she is one of many people who are placed in imminent danger of an attack by ecoterrorists in Lerwick town centre.

Perez's parental responsibilities are also aligned with his professional orientation as a policeman, where he functions as a father figure to his younger colleagues, who are both initially presented as rookies. In series one Tosh, who has come to Shetland from Glasgow, wears braces on her teeth (empathising her youth) and has been jilted by her fiancé. However, she quickly gains in confidence and by series two is asserting herself as both an effective detective and a sharp and witty sidekick to Perez. While Sandy is a local and so understands the community and their mindset in a way that Tosh initially struggles with, he is also naïve and lacking in self-confidence, which is further dented when he is sidelined from the investigation in the first series which involves the murder of his grandmother. In series two Sandy nervously prepares for his Detective exams, worried that success will mean a transfer away from Shetland, although with Perez's support he is subsequently retained as a Detective Constable. The theme of the professional family is enhanced by the avuncular presence of Sergeant Billy McCabe (Lewis Howden) and his friendly dog, local GP turned Pathologist, Cora McLean (Anne Kidd), and procurator Fiscal Rhona Kelly (Julie Graham), a notably close colleague and ally for Perez with whom he shares a bond of trust and respect.¹⁴

Perez's sensitivities as a father are frequently exposed by the numerous occasions in which he must break tragic news to or interact with bereaved parents, a situation that occurs in no less than seven out of the nine stories he appears in. In series four Perez struggles with the devastating revelation that a former police inspector, apparently grieving the murder of his daughter, is the actual perpetrator of the crime. Some encounters notably puncture his professional veneer of calm resilience, particularly when he is accused of not doing enough or failing in his duty of care. In series four Perez is berated by the distraught mother of young man whose dismembered body parts have been discovered on a beach and whose daughter has also been kidnapped by the traffickers who are suspected of murdering her brother. While in series seven continual jibes from another traumatised mother, whose missing son is subsequently suspected of killing his girlfriend,

undermines Perez at a moment of acute personal vulnerability precipitated by his mother's death and father's dementia.

Perez's relationship with Duncan Hunter provides another key source of tension and conflict. The men are bound by their connections with Cassie and committed to both playing a role in her life – although Duncan is notably more permissive than Jimmy, which challenges some of Perez's parental decisions. Initially presented as a charming and likeable rogue, Duncan is also a philanderer and prone to shady business dealings, which at points risks compromising Perez's integrity. In series four Duncan is briefly a suspect into the reinvestigation of Lizzie Kilmuir and is then revealed to have had an extra marital fling with the actual perpetrator, Donna Killick. In series six the return of a terminally ill Donna culminates in her framing Duncan for illegally facilitating her suicide, and Perez being suspended. But despite the conflicts, Perez remains loyal to Duncan, a further testament to his moral code and commitment to 'family'.

Perez's inability to overcome the death of his wife and form a new romantic connection define the limits of his emotional resources. In series two he is attracting the interest of forensic pathologist Willow Reeves (Nina Sosanya),¹⁵ followed by more substantial opportunities in series three – with witness protection officer Asha Israni (Archie Panjabi), and five – with Alice Brooks (Catherine Walker), the disenchanted wife of a local businessman. But all these encounters end in failure, due to a combination of Perez's fear of involvement and his (over)investment in his job. In a notably poignant scene, Alice confronts Perez with the observation that he is destined to be alone if he is to continue to do his job as a detective on the grounds that everyone in Shetland is connected and so he must remain apart. This message is repeated in series seven by American Lloyd Anderson (Patrick Robinson), who likens Perez to the lonely town Sheriff in an old western who must keep his distance from those he protects from the villains. When Perez denies he is lonely, Anderson responds: 'Sure, you got people around you, people who love you. But you can never give them all of you. Because you just don't know. And it's going to be that way until you find another line of work' (Series seven, episode four).

But if Perez's identification with his community is challenged by his inner struggles, any wider sense of social cohesion is undermined by the way in which identities are continually called into question in *Shetland*. In series three murder suspect Michael McGuire (Ciarán Hinds) is revealed to be a former criminal turned informer brought to the islands by witness protection. In series four a Norwegian policeman is unmasked as a fanatical Neo Nazi. In series five a hotel owner is identified as a Glasgow criminal. And in series seven Lloyd Anderson is the assumed identity of long-term fugitive Walter Edwards. Even more fundamental is the recurring theme of concealed paternity, initially raised in the first two series but resurrected in series three when McGuire is revealed to be the biological father of Robbie Morton (Andrew Rothney), the young man found dead in a shipping container in the first episode. Most poignant of all is the revelation in series four that Duncan Hunter is the biological father of Alan Killick (Gerard Miller), afforded added jeopardy by Cassie's growing romantic attraction to someone who is actually her half-brother. In series five distraught mother Olivia Lennox (Rakie Ayola) taunts the detective about Cassie: 'That daughter, she's not really yours, is she? Me and Zezi and Daniel are blood. And blood is everything', causing Perez to harshly and uncharacteristically retaliate by challenging Olivia's commitment to her own kids. Given the

regularity by which assumed identity is destabilised or called into question in *Shetland*, it is ultimately Perez's commitment to protecting, loving and supporting Cassie, that affords him legitimacy as a parent.

Similarly, Perez's bond with Shetland is, in the end, revealed to be contingent rather than essential. In series six he encounters Meg Pattison (Lucianne McEvoy) a nurse providing Donna Killick with palliative care. Meg is not only attracted to Perez, she has greater resilience and empathy than Alice Brooks, and slowly the detective begins to acknowledge his shortcomings, notably his fear of getting close to anyone and using his job as an excuse to keep people at a distance. But the demons persist and having tested Meg's patience, potentially to the point of destruction, a resolution is found once the case has been solved, and Perez decides to knowingly break the rules in allowing Lloyd Anderson to escape extradition to the United States. This professional transgression forces him to resign, creating the possibility of a new future with Meg.

Jimmy Perez's ability to move on is further facilitated by the rise of Tosh, whose own character development across the first seven series of *Shetland* is notable. While her initial gaucheness and inexperience is quickly replaced with gumption, competence and a line in verbal wit to match Perez, in series three Tosh is subjected to a major trauma when she is abducted and raped by a member of a Glasgow crime gang. Initially retreating into wounded silence and self-recrimination, repeating Perez's inability to accept help, Tosh gradually regains a sense of self over the following series – displaying courage and resilience in the face of danger, gently but firmly rebuffing the amorous advances of a Norwegian detective, and demonstrating a greater capacity for empathy than her colleagues with Thomas Malone, who despite serving more than 20 years in prison is still being persecuted for Lizzie Kilmuir's murder. Tosh also tentatively begins a relationship with the gentle and patient Donnie Russell (Angus Miller) and by the following series is strong enough to offer support to Perez at his own lowest ebb. Tosh then falls pregnant and series seven marks a reversal as she struggles to balance motherhood with her dedication to work (echoing Perez's overinvestment in his role) and is confronted with another traumatic experience when she is almost killed while investigating a booby-trapped caravan. But these trials ultimately prove to be her making, allowing Tosh to step up and be acknowledged by Perez as his worthy successor.

Conclusion: *Shetland* and post-devolutionary Scotland

Since the millennium, the most successful networked TV dramas made in Scotland have tended to be crime dramas, the bulk of them police procedurals featuring a central detective or team. On one hand this reflects the high profile and popularity of Scottish crime fiction or 'Tartan Noir' (Wanner, 2015), with the work of acclaimed authors like Ian Rankin, Val McDermid and Irvine Welsh providing familiar and thus marketable source material. On the other, it confirms the wider popularity of the genre amongst producers and broadcasters operating in an increasingly competitive market and the tendency has become even more marked since 2019. While *Shetland* has effectively taken on the mantle of *Taggart*, which comprised an astonishing run of 27 series from 1983 to 2010, as the preeminent recurring Scottish crime drama, this has been accompanied by numerous other shows.¹⁶ While this risks perpetuating a rather restricted range of national

representations, collectively these shows have offered a much more diverse set of images of Scotland in terms of both place and people. Alongside familiar locales such as Glasgow and Edinburgh or the Highlands, these shows feature places that are rarely seen in TV drama including Aberdeen, Dundee (Scotland's third and fourth largest cities), Fife, the Clyde estuary, Harris and, of course, Shetland. Collectively they also mark a departure from the recurring character types that distinguished earlier dramas like *Taggart* or *Rebus*, with several featuring female and non-white protagonists and a greater gender and ethnic diversity in the wider cast. In the case of *Shetland*, the arrival of DI Ruth Calder and the formation of a formidable and mutually supportive partnership with Tosh has provided a new central focus for the show. This trend not only reflects the changing demographics of 21st Century Scotland, it is also a consequence of the adoption of EDI standards by broadcasters and public funding bodies like Screen Scotland promoting greater inclusion on both sides of the camera (BBC, 2024; BFI, 2025).

But what about the deeper significance of *Shetland* to questions of national identity and representation in post-Devolutionary Scotland? The show established itself as a popular returning drama in the aftermath of the 2014 independence referendum in which Scots voted to reject independence and remain part of a United Kingdom and the Brexit vote, which saw the UK leave the European Union despite a strong 'remain' result in Scotland. The underlying cultural tensions and contradictions of this period can perhaps be discerned in the contrast between *Shetland* and *Monarch of the Glen* the previous most popular recurring BBC drama series made in Scotland, which ran for seven series from 2000-2005. Set on a fictional highland estate in Speyside, *Monarch of the Glen* is a cozy comic drama that reaffirms a romantic and nostalgic representation of Scotland, a settled and hierarchical social order underpinned by a deep association with an Anglo-unionist Establishment. By comparison, *Shetland's* diegetic world and dramatic tone is not only darker and more unsettling, it also more outward looking, interconnected and contemporary. Indeed, the key tropes associated with spatial and temporal remoteness in discourses of islandness arguably apply more readily to *Monarch of the Glen* than *Shetland*.

This alludes to another important shift in a post-devolutionary cultural zeitgeist in Scotland and the Nordic dimension of *Shetland* is of particular significance here. Michael Stratura has identified a growing interest in Scotland's relationship with Scandinavia, noting that this 'international perspective is central to post devolutionary Scottish literature and criticism.... Imagining Scotland as part of a larger northern or Nordic world has been a discernible aspect in the devolutionary and post devolutionary process' (2013: 122–123). This similarly applies to the world of film on both an industrial and a cultural level, with significant levels of trans-national collaboration between Scottish and Scandinavian (primarily Danish) filmmakers since the early 2000s resulting in several co-productions, explored by Jonathan Murray (2012, 2015). Elsewhere (Petrie, 2016), I have considered emergent representational, cultural and industrial connections between Scotland and Scandinavia in the context of a discussion of a small number of Scottish films concerned with questions of identity and belonging that are set, like *Shetland*, in rural coastal locations facing the North Sea. Given its firm associations with Nordic Noir, *Shetland* clearly invokes that broader trans-national context. Yet at the same time it functions as an exemplar of 'local production' – in this case Scottish – within the current UK public service broadcasting environment (McElroy and Noonan, 2019).

Shetland also poses some interesting and important questions about personal identity, which chime with this post-devolutionary resistance of essentialism. While maintaining the profound association between character and place that echoes the relationship Jim Taggart and John Rebus have with their respective cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh (Petrie, 2004), Jimmy Perez comes to comprehend the cost of his (over)identification with Shetland, precipitating his decision to break the connection by leaving ‘home’ for a second time. In doing so he chooses to reject the existential loneliness and social dysfunction that defines the predicament of many other iconic fictional detectives. But Perez also confronts the fundamental contingency of identity where a sense of self is ultimately defined and reinforced less by some essential connection to place (whaur’s du fae?) and more by a combination of personal agency, human relations and an expanded sense of ‘home’.

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Notes

1. In reality, *Shetland* had the lowest recorded crime rate in Scotland for 2024 with 187 crimes per 10,000 of population. *Shetland News*, 12 September 2025. There have been two murders on the islands since 2019.
2. The long running soap, *River City*, which appeared in 2002 and is due to end in 2026, is broadcast only in Scotland.
3. Some of these stories also significantly increase the body count, with eight in series five and five in series six.
4. Prior to the TV series, perhaps the best-known representation of the isles on screen was *The Edge of the World* (Michael Powell, 1936), filmed on Foula, the most remote island in the Shetland archipelago.
5. These include originals like *Jute City* (1991), *Finney* (1994) and *Sea of Souls* (2004-2007), seven episodes of *Taggart*, and adaptations of novels including four *Rebus* stories (2006-7), Denise Mina’s *The Field of Blood* (2011) and *The Dead Hour* (2013) and Iain Banks’ *Stonemouth* (2015).
6. Series three aired in 2016, with subsequent series appearing in 2018, 2019 and then, following the hiatus caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, annually from 2021.
7. Murphy’s previous credits include the series *Murder City* (2004-6) and several episodes of *DCI Banks* (2010-16).
8. Logue had written episodes for series four to seven.

9. They include Anna Chancellor, Archie Panjabi, Ian Hart, Saskia Reeves, Ciaran Hinds and Gemma Chan.
10. Although as Atina Nihitenen (2015) has demonstrated, since political devolution and the advent of the new Century, the boundaries between islanders and mainland ‘newcomers’ has eased.
11. This version ran from series two to seven. The pilot featured a slightly different montage without Perez’s presence and the effects overlay.
12. Ironically, one location on the islands that due to security reasons the series is forbidden to film anywhere near is the Sullom Voe oil terminal. See Weisel (2022).
13. In 2024 the Shetland Islands Council reported that 51% of leisure visitors were inspired to visit by TV, literature and films sources, with *Shetland* being the most frequently cited example. <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/shetland-statistics/economy/4>.
14. It is significant that when Kelly temporarily leaves Shetland in series six, she is replaced by Maggie Kean (Anneika Rose) who is notably more antagonistic towards Perez.
15. In the novels Willow Reeves is a detective sent from Inverness to head up murder investigations in Shetland and whose relationship with Perez develops over the second quartet of books.
16. These include BBC crime drama *Guilt* (2019-23) – three series, *Vigil* (2021-23) *Granite Harbour* (2022-24) – two series each, the Gregory Burke reboot of *Rebus* (2024), and the Hebridean Gaelic-language *An t-Eilean/the Island* (2025). The BBC have also broadcast two series of both *Traces* (2019-22) and *Annika* (2021-23), shows initially made for Alibi, a digital channel specialising in crime. ITV/STV have contributed *Crime* (2021-23), *Karen Pirie* (2022-25) – two series each, *Six Four* (2023) and *Payback* (2023). While Netflix has also made the Edinburgh-set *Department Q* (2025), based on Danish source material.

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