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January 2008 • 5 volumes • 2,388 pages • 8"x10"

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ISBN: 978-1-58765-397-1
Print List Price: \$399

eBook Info

e-ISBN: 978-1-58765-444-2
eBook Single User Price: \$598.50

Agatha Christie, creator mystery fiction's most famous woman detective, Miss Jane Marple. (Library of Congress)

Critical Survey of Mystery & Detective Fiction Women Detectives: An Overview

The title of P. D. James's novel *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972) describes the often-expressed view of the female detective in both fiction and reality. Literary critics tend to regard detective fiction as a genre supportive of patriarchy, even when that fiction is written by women. They tend to dismiss women detectives in these works as second-rate versions of their male counterparts. During the late 1920's, the distinguished mystery novelist Dorothy L. Sayers complained about the depictions of women detectives in fiction when she wrote introduction to the first *Omnibus of Crime* (1928):

There have . . . been a few women detectives, but on the whole, they have not been very successful. In order to justify their choice of sex, they are obliged to be so irritatingly intuitive as to destroy that quiet enjoyment of the logical which we look for in our detective reading.

Sayers also complained that most women detectives in fiction were too young, too beautiful, too interested in marriage, and too often prone to walk into physically dangerous situations and interfere with men trying to solve crimes. While acknowledging some exceptions to these deficiencies, Sayers maintained that a "really brilliant woman detective" was yet to be created.

When Sayers wrote these words, women had been detecting in fiction more than sixty years. Although many fictional female detectives do exhibit the undesirable traits that Sayers noted, others have represented impressive achievements by their creators. In 1864, a little more than two decades after Edgar Allan Poe created the modern mystery form, the British writer Andrew Forrester, Jr. introduced the first female detective character, Mrs. Gladden, in *The Experiences of a Lady Detective*. Typical of the "casebooks" of its time, Forrester's book collects seven cases narrated by Gladden, whose deductive methods and energetic approach anticipated those of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who would first appear in 1887. Gladden even has abstruse areas of expertise, such as interpreting boot marks, which she says "have sent more men to the gallows . . . than any other proof whatever." Indeed, she advises criminals to provide themselves with extra pairs of boots, adding that she will still hunt them down.

In the story titled "The Unknown Weapon," Gladden becomes interested in events at Petleighcote that she learns about in a newspaper. A death has occurred, seemingly accidentally. Although

solving the mystery will yield her only one hundred pounds, she is fascinated by "several peculiar circumstances." A young man has been found dead outside his parents' house; the cause of death is an arrowlike barb. Gladden visits the scene of the incident, talks to local people, and reads the report of the inquest. She also studies the contents of the dead man's pockets. To examine the house without interference, she lures its housekeeper to London through a fake advertisement she places in *The Times*. Like Poe's earlier C. Auguste Dupin and the later Holmes, Gladden regards the constabulary as less competent than her pet dog at solving crimes. Like her male counterparts, she eventually solves the case; however, the murderer escapes.

Mrs. Gladden was soon joined by another English female investigator, Mrs. Paschal, the protagonist in W. Stephens Hayward's *Revelations of a Woman Detective* (1864). A widow aged forty in search of a job, Paschal is employed by Colonel Warner, chief of London's police detectives. She solves ten cases, three for her employer and seven on her own. Her cases involve theft, murder, kidnapping, forgery, and impersonation. No retiring Victorian gentlewoman, she would make a hard-boiled American detective proud. She carries a Colt revolver, which she knows how to use, trails suspects, and searches houses. Paschal, who relates her own adventures, claims that her sex gives her certain advantages over her male counterparts because criminals do not recognize her as a detective. She demonstrates this advantage by competing successfully with men trying to solve the same crimes she investigates. In so doing, she is open to Sayers's complaint of relying too heavily on intuition. At the same time, she exhibits many of the qualities that characterize her best successors: She is brave, independent, and unswayed by emotions. Both Gladden and Paschal are adept at disguise. In "The Nun, the Will, and the Heiress," Paschal camouflages herself as a novitiate to rescue a young heiress imprisoned in an Ursuline convent.

Kate Goelet, a detective created by Harlan P. Halsey (writing as Old Sleuth) in *The Lady Detective* (1880), is a beautiful twenty-three-year-old New Yorker. Despite her youth and inexperience, she is smart, courageous, patient, clever, and feels "perfectly able to take care of herself." She devises weapons that would do credit to James Bond, such as six-inch daggers that emerge from her sleeves. In *The Lady Detective*, Goelet seeks to recover a large cache of missing bonds so she can claim the reward. Henry Wilbur has been accused of stealing them, but Goelet proves his innocence and in the process falls in love with him. At the end of the book they marry.

Halsey also introduced another female sleuth in *Cad Metti: The Female Detective Strategist; Or, Dudie Dunne Again in the Field* (1895). Metti is strong enough to knock out an antagonist; she is also wily and a genius at disguise. Dunne, her male partner, tries to protect her, but Metti also shadows him to save him from any rash action. Halsey also wrote *Mademoiselle Lucie, the French Lady Detective* (1904). That book's Mademoiselle Lucie works with Jerry Mack to save Agnes Tift from her in-laws.

Albert W. Aiken created two proto-hard-boiled female investigators. In *The Actress Detective; Or, The Invisible Hand: The Romance of an Implacable Mission* (1889) he made twenty-five-year-old Hilda Serene an excellent pugilist who is comfortable with both guns and bowie knives. The associates of the criminal she captures claim that no man on the New York City police force could have brought the culprit to justice. This type of implicit, or actual, competition with men, in which the woman always emerges victorious, is a staple of books featuring women detectives. In Aiken's *The Female-Barber Detective; Or, Joe Phoenix in Silver City* (1895) Mignon Lawrence of the New York police force moves to Bearopolis, New Mexico, where she pretends to be a barber to conceal her investigations. Aiken presents her as strong, clever, courageous, and determined--a match for any male detective or criminal.

These earliest women detectives were all created by male writers. The first woman writer to introduce such a character was Anna Katharine Green, author of *The Affair Next Door* (1897). Its protagonist, Amelia Butterworth, is of good family, financially secure, and independent. Male investigators dismiss her abilities, but she solves the case through careful observation. For

example, she recognizes that the victim's hat was worn only once because it has only one hatpin hole--something a male detective would probably not notice.. She also determines that the case's victim was killed with a hatpin. Butterworth reappears in *Lost Man's Lane* (1898) and *The Circular Study* (1900). Green created a second female investigator in *The Golden Slipper and Other Problems for Violet Strange*(1915). In this book Violet Strange, who takes up detecting to earn money for her sister, solves nine crimes, including five murders and a robbery. A debutante, she encounters the same problem that many of her successors face: Men do not take her seriously. She tells one male client who regards her as unfit for practical work that she is "nothing if not practical."

The New Woman

The 1890's marked the emergence of the so-called New Woman, an early feminist movement that advocated liberating women from domesticity by allowing them to become professionally and financially independent. This movement was also reflected in detective fiction of the era. In M. McDonnell Bodkin's *Dora Myrl, the Lady Detective* (1900), for example, the title character is the well-educated daughter of a Cambridge don. She is a good shot, observant, adept at disguises, and intuitive. Although the culprit, Dr. Phillmore, denies the ability of a woman to detect, let alone capture, a criminal, Myrl proves him wrong when she arrests him. Myrl resurfaces in *The Capture of Paul Beck* (1909), in which she and the title character marry.

Joan Mar, the creation of Marie Connor Leighton in *Joan Mar, Detective* (1910), is even more the new woman. After she rescues Brian Charlton, Charlton's fiancé expresses the hope that Mar will marry. However, Charlton recognizes that domesticity does not interest Mar. She prefers to remain free to work at her profession and win fame until "the whole criminal world shall tremble at the name of Joan Mar, detective."

Equally independent is C. L. Pirkis's Loveday Brooke, who first appears in *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* (1894). Well-read but impecunious, she chooses detecting over more conventional work, such as being a governess. When a client questions her competence as a detective, her employer, Ebenezer Dyer, defends her ability and intelligence. In many ways Brooke recalls her contemporary, Sherlock Holmes. Like Holmes, she often uses disguises to help penetrate the disguises of others. She makes observations in a Holmesian manner and draws brilliant deductions from what she sees. Also like Holmes, she becomes bored when she is not detecting, and she always outwits both the criminals and the police.

Even more closely modeled on Sherlock Holmes is Madelyn Mack, whom Hugh C. Weir introduced in *Miss Madelyn Mack, Detective* (1914). Mack's personal drug of choice is kola nuts, which she consumes when she is bored with no case to solve. Also like Holmes, she relishes the idea of confronting a criminal "who has really raised murder to a fine art!" Her other Holmesian traits include turning to music to help her think, distinguishing among types of tobacco ash, and asking seemingly pointless questions that later prove highly revealing. By the time her Watson, Nora Noraker, meets her, Mack at twenty-five is already a successful detective. Relying on deduction, Mack maintains that women have more imagination than men. In the five murder cases she solves, she demonstrates that she is right.

Hazel Campbell's *Olga Knaresbrook, Detective* (1933) offers a fascinating variation of the Holmes-Watson partnership. Knaresbrook's cousin Molly Kingsley serves as her sidekick, like Holmes's Watson; however, Kingsley unmask Knaresbrook's own criminal activity after Knaresbrook baffles three professional male investigators. Kingsley comments on the prejudice of men who assume that being five-foot-three and having naturally wavy hair, soft brown eyes, and a rose-leaf complexion preclude the possibility of having brains or business acumen. Kingsley demonstrates that one can be both beautiful and smart, both feminine and a detective. Her fiancé and fellow detective, Hal Barnard, suggests that they become partners as well as husband and wife, but she decides to abandon her career.

Marriage vs. Careers

Choosing between marriage and careers is common in stories about female detectives. Dora Myrl, for example, also decides to marry. The solitary detective, whether man or woman, is, however, by no means a universal. Agatha Christie's Tommy and Tuppence (Prudence) Beresford are equal partners, with Tuppence often the more active and astute. The married couple Richard and Frances Lockridge wrote about the married investigators Jeremy and Paula North. Nicholas Blake (C. Day Lewis) created the married detecting couple Nigel Strangeways and Georgia Cavendish. After Georgia is killed in the Blitz, she is succeeded by Clare Massinger. Amanda Cross's Kate Fansler solves most of her cases after her marriage, and Dorothy Sayers's Harriet Vane helps her husband, Lord Peter Wimsey, with an investigation during their honeymoon.

Solitary Sleuths

The solitary sleuth, either male or female, nonetheless remains the more common type, following the example of Poe's Dupin and Doyle's Holmes. The most famous spinster detective is Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple, who first appeared in 1928 in "The Tuesday Night Club." Although the best known and one of the most appealing woman detectives ever created, Marple comes from a long line of predecessors, particularly Amelia Butterworth. Christie may also have drawn on Jeanette Lee's Millicent Newberry (*The Green Jacket* , 1917; *The Mysterious Office* , 1922; *Dead Right* , 1925). Newberry had worked for Tom Corbin's detective agency, and in *The Green Jacket* Corbin requests her help. Her cases generally involve women; men prove less adept in these instances. Jane Marple's knitting may owe something to Newberry's, who not only knits but also encodes information in her stitches.

When she was first introduced in 1930, Miss Marple was sixty-five, the age at which she would remain through the nearly fifty years of her detecting career. The club in "The Tuesday Night Club" comprises Sir Henry Clithering, the recently retired commissioner of Scotland Yard; a lawyer named Petherick; Dr. Pender, a minister; artist Joyce Lemprière; and Marple's nephew, writer Raymond West. Lemprière suggests that each person present relate an unsolved mystery that the group will then seek to explain, a detective's version of Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1349-1351) and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400). Lemprière assumes that Marple, who leads a quiet life in an English village, will listen but have nothing to contribute. Marple herself modestly observes that although she is not clever, "living all these years in St. Mary Mead does give one an insight into human nature." In view of Marple's later accomplishments as a detective, that comment is one of the great understatements of all time.

Sir Henry begins the series with a tale about of Mr. and Mrs. Jones and her elderly companion. At dinner all three eat the same food prepared by Gladys Linch, the young cook. All become ill, and Mrs. Jones dies of what is discovered to be arsenic poisoning. The husband is suspected of murder, but the police lack evidence to make an arrest. After each member of the club offers a solution to the crime, Sir Henry asks Marple for her opinion. Lamenting that she has dropped a knitting stitch, Marple then demonstrates what becomes her signature habit of appearing to ignore the case at hand while discussing an apparently irrelevant tale of village life. In this instance, she recalls an old villager named Hargraves who left his money to his former housemaid instead of his wife. It turned out that Hargraves had led a double life and had had five children by the other woman. West cannot understand why his aunt is rambling on about Hargraves, and he is even more puzzled when she adds, "I suppose the poor girl has confessed now," alluding to Gladys Linch. West protests that his aunt has gotten muddled, but Sir Henry confirms her solution of the case. When West expresses amazement that his aunt has discovered the killer, she replies, "You don't know as much of life as I do."

Although Marple seems to exhibit the kind of intuition that Sayers condemned, in fact she observes her surroundings and understands that human nature is everywhere the same. Hence, life in St. Mary Mead does not differ from that in London or a country estate. In Sir Henry's story, she recognizes that a man who has a young, attractive servant and an old wife will be inclined to exchange the latter for the former. In another Marple story, *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), a vicar comments that "no detective in England" is equal to a spinster woman "of uncertain age with

plenty of time on her hands." In *The Body in the Library*(1942) Sir Henry concedes that Marple is a better detective than he is.

Nancy Drew

It is a curiosity of literary history that the genre's two most famous female detectives made their first appearances at almost the same time. In 1930, Mildred Wirt, using the pseudonym Carolyn Keene, published *The Secret of the Old Clock* for Edward Stratemeyer's syndicate. Its protagonist was the sixteen-year-old amateur sleuth Nancy Drew, with her blue roadster, speedboat, and airplane, all of which she could handle as easily as she could ride an unruly horse. Despite her youth and sex, Nancy could fell an assailant with a single blow. Fearless and rational, she rejected supposedly supernatural warnings and solved all her mysteries logically. Typical of the subgenre of mysteries with female detectives, Nancy is told repeatedly that detecting is an unsuitable job for a woman, but she perseveres and competes successfully with boys and adults. Stratemeyer's daughter, Harriet S. Adams, later took over the Nancy Drew enterprise. Nancy's age advanced to eighteen, where it has remained ever since through numerous adventures.

Nancy Drew is very young, but Margaret Sutton's Judy Bolton is even younger, fifteen. Her detecting career ran from 1932 to 1967, beginning with *The Vanishing Shadow* (1932). The daughter of a small-town Pennsylvania doctor, Judy matured to the age of twenty-two and married Peter Dobbs, an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). She then became her husband's secretary, but she also continued to investigate cases unofficially and even pursued smugglers while on her honeymoon.

Hard-Boiled Women Detectives

Nancy Drew and Miss Marple always remained genteel and ladylike, even as they engaged in what men consider unladylike activities. Other female detectives, looking back to those created by Halsey and Aiken, behave like their male hard-boiled counterparts. Writing as A. A. Fair, Earl Stanley Gardner introduced Bertha Louise Cool in *The Bigger They Come*(1939). Bertha is indeed big; in her first appearance she weighs 275 pounds, later reduced to 164. Her partner is Donald Law. Reversing the stereotypical handling of such male-female partnerships, Law focuses more on the intellectual side of detecting, Cool on the physical.

Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, and Sara Paretsky's Victoria Iphigenia Warshawski continue this hard-boiled tradition. All three women detectives are in their mid-thirties, unmarried, self-reliant, intelligent university graduates. Physically and mentally tough, they do not hesitate to take risks, and they respond forcefully, even lethally, when attacked. In their world, men continue to question their abilities. In *Indemnity Only* (1982) Bobby Mallory of the Chicago police force objects to Warshawski's working as a detective, and Andrew McGraw in that book hesitates to hire her to find his daughter because Warshawski is a woman. Ralph Devereux dismisses Warshawski's detecting skills and is nearly killed as a result. By the end of the novel he has fallen in love with her, but he recognizes that she does not need him or any man. Warshawski certainly does not need protection. In the climactic scene of the book, she bests three men in a shoot-out and brings the culprits to justice.

In *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979), sociologist Carolyn G. Heilbrun complained that women have been too content to accept as natural their dependency on men. She challenged women writers to create "female characters who are complex, whole, and independent--fully human." Grafton, Muller, and Paretsky may be seen as having taken up Heilbrun's challenge by creating strong, independent women detectives. Some male writers have also created similar characters. Examples include Jim Conaway's Jana Blake during the 1950's, James D. Lawrence's Angela Harpe during the 1970's, and David Galloway's Lazaar Ransom during the late 1970's.

Heilbrun herself, writing as Amanda Cross, created Kate Fansler in *In the Last Analysis*(1964) as a similarly independent woman. An academic like Heilbrun, Fansler is rational, rich, and well born. Also tall, elegant, smart, and independent, she wants neither children nor a husband. Although she accepts the latter after much persuasion, she continues to act on her own. A large

portion of writers and their detectives in the subgenre of academic fiction are women. Examples include Susan Kenney's Roz Howard, Theodora Wender's Gloria Gold, Joan Smith's Loretta Lawson, Valerie Miner's Nan Weaver, Edith Skom's Beth Austin, and Carol Clemeau's Antonia Nielson. Alexander McCall Smith's *The Sunday Philosophy Club* (2004) inaugurated a series of mysteries with Isabel Dalhousie of Edinburgh, accomplished philosopher and editor of the *Review of Applied Ethics*.

In his introduction to *Feminism in Detective Fiction* (1995) Glenwood Irons commented, "Women detectives created in the past thirty years are outgoing, aggressive, and self-sufficient sleuths who have transcended generic codes and virtually rewritten the archetypal male detective from a female perspective." As a survey of female detectives shows, such rewriting of the archetypal male detective has been occurring since the first fictional female detectives appeared during the 1860's during the reign of Great Britain's Queen Victoria, who also rewrote an archetypal male role, that of sovereign, from a female perspective. Given this literary history, as well as ongoing social transformations in gender roles, such reimagining will no doubt persist.

Joseph Rosenblum

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