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The New Female Detective

Carolyn G. Heilbrun

she's long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.
Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents,
taking the light upon her
as least as beautiful as any boy
or helicopter

What I have to say is simple enough: it is that the first genuine woman hero, previously depicted, may be found incarnated as the contemporary female detective in fiction. Starting in the 1970s, women detectives who were neither conventional nor committed to the safe and sure began to emerge in mystery narratives. Women detectives had been imagined before; but it was not until the list of books in print included more women sleuths than I could count that I felt a revolution had arrived. Like all women’s revolutions, it had been little noticed and noticed by the media only to be scorned. Not perfection; not even comfort, or acclamation, or absolute success marked the careers of these intrepid women. But there they were, for the first time in literature: female protagonists who did not conform to any female pattern yet devised, inscribed, or recommended.

Why has no one recognized them for the miracle they are—“miracle” in the sense of something not before imagined? Considering the degree to which the contemporary female detective scorns the dictates of custom, history, and the earlier restrictions of womanhood, it is remarkable that her unique destiny has been largely unnoticed and even more rarely commented upon. The reason, of course, is because she has appeared in popular fiction.

Geniuses do not spring from nowhere to dazzle us with their perfection. The way is cleared for geniuses, whether in music, or literature, or art, by less
astonishingly gifted creators who take the chances, try out the new, and leave behind works deeply flawed and oddly original. They never achieve the magnificence, the style, the elegance of those who will eventually follow them, but they are as essential to the production of geniuses as they are often ignored or disdained. Today women writers do win prizes, but not because they have broken through to new itineraries for women’s lives or dared to arouse the establishment’s condescension or the reviewer’s scorn.

If feminist detective novels will never win a mainstream prize, one day such a prize will be worn by a writer who learned from these stories how to imagine a female protagonist in no way ready to settle for love, or domesticity, or submission, or the ancient lure of coupledom. Few will guess in what context this creature was born, any more than those who relish a performance of Hamlet are aware that without Kyd’s popular revenge tragedies we would have had no Shakespeare.

In addition, popular feminist detective fiction will entice more women than might otherwise be so tempted to read of new revolutionary females. Let us admit it: women detectives forge for themselves the chance to enter the world of “men’s work.” To put this another way, crime fiction is uniquely attractive because it demonstrates how women may achieve an autonomy at least as great as that available to men: they willingly engage, though differently, with the same kinds of risks and dangers as men. And like men, women detectives are inclined to take sex where they find it, provided it is allied with tenderness and respect; like men, they avoid, or at any rate escape, the bonds of love. Women detectives, as do their male counterparts, risk their lives, get beaten up, and even fire a licensed gun when necessary.

These women detectives inherit the detective novel’s traditions, but combine their elements into a new form. From America comes the macho model of the private eye, uncommitted, interested neither in justice nor in law, but only in his job. From England comes the more “feminine” male sleuth, usually an amateur with apparently effete mannerisms, but committed to justice and the rescue of those the powerful have trampled upon. Combining American self-employment with English sensitivity and moral passion, these new fictional women detectives move in a world they partially create, of which they are the first inhabitants. Even Kinsey Millhone, not particularly feminist or troubled by moral wrongs, reports the melancholy induced in her by America’s violence, consumerism, the destruction of the environment, and the plethora of guns. Kinsey tells a lover why she is feeling depressed:

The usual, I guess. I mean, some days I don’t get it, what we’re doing on the planet. I read the paper and it’s hopeless. Poverty and disease, all the bullshit from politicians who’d tell you anything to get elected. Then you have the hole in the ozone and the destruction of the rainforests. What am I supposed to do with this stuff? I know it’s not
up to me to solve the world’s problems, but I’d like to believe there’s a hidden order somewhere.¹

Above all, these new women detectives prize their independence, offering no hostages to romance. Their living space remains their own, suited only to their needs. They know that the passion of love transmutes too easily to the passion of hate, and they are not prepared to sacrifice their own need for moral action to others’ principles. They do not put men first in their lives, but they are rich in friends, sometimes men, and in lovers, sometimes women. Marriage cannot lure them, at least, not more than once, and then briefly. Childless, they often mentor girls and young women.

They are incited by injustice; what begins as a puzzle or a job usually ends for them in a battle against racism, or institutional bullying, or the illicit power of money. If they fight a large institution, they cannot reform it, but they change it a little; they fight skullduggery in high places.

So feminism and the female detective danced hand in hand into the last third of the twentieth century. They were as new as they were unexpected; they elected action; they abandoned passivity. We need to recognize them as the first female protagonists able to arouse women readers from their state of masochism, from “Harlequins” and all such books designed simultaneously to assuage masochism, and to feed it. As I have elsewhere declared, it is not primarily lives that instill in us knowledge of what is possible: only stories can do that. Widely displayed and sold, and with a narrative trajectory that urges the reader along, detective fiction featuring women sleuths are the readiest, the newest, the only stories waiting to alter society’s expectations of women, expectations that have endured through human history and all literature.

Here are a few examples of such women detectives: Sara Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski; Margaret Maron’s Deborah Knott; Laurie R. King’s Kate Martinelli; P.D. James’s Kate Miskin; Janet Neel’s Francesca Wilson; Marissa Piesman’s Nina Fischman.

As must be obvious, these sleuths I have mentioned appear in books that encompass in their plots and social judgments ideas that either mirror my own, or, while differing from my own beliefs, are not absolutely discordant with them. One cannot, as a reader, critic, or writer, insist upon too narrowly defined cultural expectations, but at the same time, the assumptions of some writers are so discordant that one can hardly welcome them, however best-selling and popular they are. Rather than provide a more extensive list of my admired feminist sleuths, or examples of sadly counter-feminist writers, I shall instead try to elucidate my judgments by comparing two extremely successful, widely admired English writers, P.D. James and Ruth Rendell. In so doing, I hope to suggest the sort of writer capable, or incapable, of portraying the female detective as woman hero.

¹. SUE GRAFTON, M IS FOR MALICE 54 (1996).
Despite my often profound disagreements with P.D. James's views on major social issues, I honor her as a novelist: she is a fine writer, relishing the English language and never abusing it. I have in addition a deep personal affection for Phyllis, as I have been allowed to call her; she has been kind to me but above all I cherish her because like me, although with far more impressive achievements, she has been permitted the gift of a rewarding old age. Certainly the second half of her life has been fulfilled and happy to a degree unimagined in earlier years. Her life in its first half was a period of struggle: the struggle to earn a living, to try to begin a writing career, to support two children and, before his death, a loved but mentally disturbed husband who frequently needed to be hospitalized. Her work at the Home Office and, before that, at less prestigious jobs, while in many ways beneficial, hardly offered her the intense pleasure that the writing of her novels and her publishing success has recently accorded her.

*Time to Be In Earnest,¹* her recent account of her seventy-eighth year, is an astonishing record of unceasing activity. This diary of her daily undertakings during the year between her seventy-seventh and seventy-eighth birthday delighted me even as it left me stunned. James gives more prizes, takes part in more good causes, visits more friends than I have done in my entire seventy-something years. A baroness, she is celebrated and welcomed everywhere. (The title of her diary is borrowed from Samuel Johnson: “At seventy-seven it is time to be in earnest,” a view with which, she adds, “I am in entire agreement.”)

While James is certainly a conservative woman, and while she probably shares many beliefs with Ruth Rendell, a friend of hers, I hope to show how different are the ways their political views are exploited in their novels.

Both women despise “political correctness,” unaware that this concept originated in an attempt to limit or abolish casual racism, sexism, and other long-held habits of almost unconscious traditional disdain. Both writers dislike feminism, and reveal a clear preference for males, whether children, detectives, or victims. Neither writer seems happily to incorporate Jews or non-whites into their books, to say nothing of lesbians.

Rendell’s *An Unkindness of Ravens*, however, could have been written by Rush Limbaugh, with his references to “feminazis.” It deserves a steady look. A Sergeant Martin reports that he called a feminist teacher, Ms. Caroline Peters, “Miz not Miss. She got very stroppy, sir, when I called her Miss. I called her an instructress too and had a job getting my tongue round it but that wasn’t right either.”³ This, mild enough, is still the sort of joke made early in the women’s movement; James might have agreed with this sentiment, but no

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one not furious at "women libbers" was saying it in 1985. We ascend from there.

The plot of the novel concerns a group of "militant feminists" who are in the habit of knifing men who offer them rides on lonely streets. As one of those in the group called "Arria" explains, "in order to prove herself a true feminist, a woman ought to kill a man... I don't mean everyone who joined ARRIA has to have to kill a man to get in to be a member. The idea was for groups of three or four to get together and..."  

Other choice bits follow: The group has a poster on which:

a harpy-like creature with the head and breasts of a woman and the body, wings, and claws of a raven clutched at an unfurling ribbon on which was painted the name—acronym—Arria. The raven woman had a face like Britannia or maybe Boadicea, one of those noble, handsome, courageous, fanatical faces, that made you feel like locking up the knives and reaching for the Valium.  

One of the young women tells Rendell's Inspector Wexford that "'Arria Paeta was a Roman matron, the wife of Caecina Paetus. Of course she was obliged to take his name.' Wexford could tell that she was one of those fanatics who never miss a trick." She explains that the letters stand for "Action for the Radical Reform of Intersexual Attitudes":

She was dressed exactly like a boy: blue jeans, leather jacket, half-boots, no make-up, hair cropped in a crewcut. Wexford had never before personally encountered the kind of militant feminist who advocates total separatism. As described, it is not separatism: indeed, the young woman he is talking to has a boyfriend. As Wexford explains to Burden, his second in command, "Rule 10: Women wishing to reproduce should select the potential father for his physique, health, height, etc., and ensure impregnation in a rape or near-rape situation." "What does it all mean?" Burden asks. "Wexford said, quoting: 'Margaret Mead says men of the Arapesh fear rape by women just as women in other cultures fear rape by men.'"

Burden's wife, a feminist, explains to her husband that "revolutionaries are always extreme. If they're not, if they compromise with liberalism, all their principles fizzle out and you're back with the status quo." Wexford's view is more practical: "The way I see it, we have to think along these lines... We have the radical feminists, of whom we know (a) that the notion of killing a man was at any rate considered by them and (b) that they are required by their own rules to carry offensive weapons..." And Wexford adds, "It's tempting to

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4. Id. at 126-27.
5. Id. at 35.
6. Id. at 129.
7. Id.
think of a group of those ARRIA girls grabbing hold of poor old Williams like the Maenads with Orpheus and doing him in on the Lesbian shore.”

Nor does Burden’s wife’s feminism hold firm; when she discovers her unborn child is a girl, she has a nervous breakdown, threatening her sanity and their marriage. As it turns out, the amnioscentesis is mistaken and the child is a boy, restoring happiness to the couple. Wexford comments that the mistake caused a lot of misery:

“Misery, yes,” said Burden, “but maybe not unnecessary. Jenny says it’s taught her a lot about herself. It’s taught her she’s not what you might call a natural feminist, and now she has to approach feminism not from an emotional standpoint but from what is—well, right and just.”

Thus Rendell’s views. Not all her books are this detailed in their venom, but the sentiments persist throughout her oeuvre. When we recognize how immensely popular Rendell is, as well as the winner of so many awards, we begin to guess at how unusual and brave are the creators of feminist detectives. Certainly Rendell’s popularity suggests that either a writer of her opinions is more readily acceptable to mystery readers than are more feminist authors, or that many detective story addicts do not let such opinions bother them.

One must look for encouragement to Sara Paretsky; she is not a bestseller by Rendell standards—for one thing, she has written far fewer books—but she is very popular and is considered exceptional by all feminist readers of mysteries, and by many readers who are not feminist. In this context, it is worth pausing over how Paretsky’s detective regards feminism and lesbians. V.I. Warshawski clearly states her feminist views and her memories of the early women’s movement to a police officer she has long known:

“Agnes and I met when we were both students. . . . I’m not going to try to describe to you what it felt like in those days—you don’t have much sympathy for the causes that consumed us. I think sometimes that I’ll never feel so—so alive again.”

A wave of bittersweet memory swept over me and I closed my eyes tightly to keep tears at bay. “Then the dream started falling apart. We had Watergate and drugs and the deteriorating economy, and racism and sexual discrimination continued despite our enthusiasm. So we all settled down to deal with the reality and earn a living. You know my story. I guess my ideals died the hardest.

“Agnes and I were good friends at the University. And we stayed good friends. And in its way that was a small miracle. When our rap group followed the national trend and split between radical lesbians and, well, straights, she became a lesbian and I didn’t. But we remained very good friends—an achievement for that era, when

8. Id. at 130-32.
9. Id. at 219.
Politics divided marriages and friends alike. It seems pointless now, but it was very real then."10

P.D. James’s novels fall somewhere between those of Rendell and Paretsky. She allows herself to comprehend some feminist principles, as in her famous An Unsuitable Job for a Woman. Critics of P.D. James have pointed out, however, that she virtually abandons Cordelia Gray as an independent operator in the only other novel in which Gray appears, The Skull Beneath the Skin, and it is probable that James felt unwilling to imagine the continuing career of so autonomous an individual. But James gives us another woman sleuth, Kate Miskin, a police officer. Not that explicitly feminist causes are ever stated by Miskin as such, but her life is one to which feminists can readily assent. After the early death of her parents, Miskin was forced to grow up in a slum, cared for by a self-pitying grandmother. Yet she charges herself not to be caught in anger about the past: “The past has happened. It was part of her now and for ever. And had it been so much worse than the childhoods of millions of others? She had health, she had intelligence, she had food in her belly. She had had her chance.”11

And her chance had not been devoted to finding a husband; her ambition was to create a career for herself that gave her what she wanted. In the police force, she found power instead of a family, work as part of a team, salary sufficient to buy her a pleasant, private place to live in, with a river view. She refuses to leave all this and England to follow her lover, who is going abroad. She offers similar advice to the victim of a male criminal whom she visits in hospital: “Stop bleating for love, love yourself, take hold of your own life. If you get love it’s always a bonus. You’ve got youth, health, money, a home. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”12 Clearly this admonishment is what James herself believes in and has herself lived.

How to keep one’s feminist detectives from succumbing to obsessive love or marriage is answered differently in different stories. Paretsky and Grafton among others allow their detectives, like Kate Miskin, to avoid, or at any rate escape, the bonds of lasting commitment. Both V.I. Warshawski and Kinsey Millhone are offered more permanent relationships with male lovers, and decline them, as do the majority of their fictional peers.

Lesbian detectives are, on the other hand, likely to be in a serious relationship, or to have just lost a much-loved partner. Lesbian love is new to mystery fiction and the living patterns of lesbian detectives are rendered as distinct from conventional heterosexual bonds. So Sandra Scoppettone’s detective says to her lover, “I wonder if heterosexuals invite their ex-lovers to

12. Id. at 354.
their anniversary parties." To which her partner replies, "Who cares what they do?"

Adrienne Rich, in the lines at the head of this essay, said "she" was long about her coming. For me, of course, "she" is the newly created woman detective. Simone de Beauvoir, from whom Rich borrowed some of her phrases, put it this way: "She comes down with the remoteness of the ages, from Thebes, from Crete, from Chichén-Itzá; and she is also the totem set deep in the African jungle; she is a helicopter and she is a bird."13 But alas "she" has been so lost in the "remoteness of the ages" that even eager young women readers of earlier times never encountered her.

How used as girls we were to reading as men, while refusing to identify with the girls who hoped to marry the men in the books. Like Cathy in Wuthering Heights we could say, "I am Heathcliff." As a reader at an early age, I was Christopher Robin, I was Nancy Drew, I was Tom Sawyer, I was Kim, I was Mowgli. And as I went on to adult books, this identification did not alter. I was the men in Dickens' novels, the men in Conrad's novels; yes, I was Scarlett O'Hara and her ancestor Becky Sharp, but I was mainly Rawdon Crawley, Becky's husband. When he said to Becky, "Why couldn't you share with me? I always shared with you," I was on his side, and did not yet understand why, to save herself, Becky could share with no man, and no woman either. I was Hamlet. I could not be Cleopatra; what great man, let alone an Antony, would fall in love with me who was no beauty, queen of no country? I was Aeneas; I thought Dido a fool to die for love. I was Ulysses, Homer's version, not Joyce's, not Tennyson's. Certainly I was not and am not "the aged wife" to whom Tennyson's Ulysses found himself tediously bound. We all used to read as men; the alternative, to read as women, that is, as objects being molded for our inevitable satellite function in men's orbit, was not admissible.

Florence Nightingale asked, "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity—these three—and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?" (But of course, I did not read Cassandra by Florence Nightingale when I was young, nor was it published in the United States until the Feminist Press brought it out in 1979.) Nightingale knew about romance, and about the state of marriage to which it was, ideally, to lead. "The true marriage," she wrote, "probably does not exist at present upon earth." Nor does it exist now, but some women at least have been enabled by feminism to stop expecting or anticipating it.

Nightingale from an early age despised the female destiny. "What am I that their life [her family's] is not good enough for me? . . . The thoughts and feelings that I have now I can remember since I was six years old." And she loved a man, Richard Monckton-Milnes, who was an intellectual, a social

reformer, and at the center of a group of outstanding men: it was joked at the
time that if Jesus returned to Earth, Monckton-Milnes would have had him to
breakfast. He proposed to Nightingale and she refused him, explaining her
action only to herself:

I have an intellectual nature which requires satisfaction, and that would
find it in him. I have a passionate nature which requires satisfaction,
and that would find it in him. I have a moral, an active, nature which
requires satisfaction and that would not find it in his life. Sometimes I
think I will satisfy my passionate nature at all events, because that will
at least secure me from the evils of dreaming. But would it? I could
be satisfied to spend a life with him in combining our different powers
in some great object. I could not satisfy this nature by spending a life
with him in making society and arranging domestic things.14

Not until the woman detective would such a statement again be made, this
time for the reading public, in a work of fiction. Simone de Beauvoir came
close to living it; she did not marry Sartre, and theirs, in fact, was an important,
lasting relationship; it was not a marriage.15 Yet no woman private investigator
would offer a man the devotion Beauvoir offered Sartre. I do not think she was
wrong to do this; she, like Nightingale, lived in a different time. But the refusal
to dwindle into wife, seen as a pattern and not an anomaly, had to await the
arrival of the female sleuth as protagonist. It is notable that Beauvoir, no more
than George Eliot, did not create an autonomous female protagonist in her
novels, though she evoked her in The Second Sex.

It remains only to add one fact about detective fiction too little noted: it is
written by and read by highly educated individuals. As Howard Haycraft
remarked in his The Art of the Mystery Story, almost all critics have wondered
"that so frankly unserious a literary form has managed to attract as devoted
readers so many men and women of superior intellectual attainment."16
Marjorie Nicolson, in "The Professor and the Detective," an essay written in
1929, noticed long ago that "it is . . . no mere coincidence that scholars,
philosophers, economists, are creating a demand for detective stories
unparalleled in the past; that the art which might otherwise have been expended
upon literature is transforming the once-despised 'thriller' into what may easily
become a new classic."17

Not only the readers are educated, are perhaps even (whisper) intellectuals,
the writers often are themselves. Whether products of higher education or
autodidacts, these authors are highly intelligent and notable literate. This does
not mean that the woman detective herself can necessarily make any such

14. Florence Nightingale, Cassandra 7-8 (Feminist Press 1979) (1860). See also Cecil
Woodham-Smith, Florence Nightingale (1951).
15. For an excellent account of Beauvoir, her life and her philosophy, see Toril Moi, Simone de
exalted claim. But whether she is African-American, Jewish, working class, lesbian, all or none of these, her creator is well-read, knowledgeable, and capable of writing correct, even elegant English. Many, on first hearing this claim, insist upon refuting it, but research, I do assure you, soon dispels their doubts.

What significance for feminism resides in this fact? The tendency of individuals to broaden their minds, consider new ideas, test their assumptions against experience, and abandon convention when it fails to serve them or their aims in the gifts of education and the women detectives created by those on whom this gift has been bestowed. We note, in this connection, the recent increase in detective novels by women set in the legal world—in courts, in the careers of prosecutors and defenders, in the offices of lawyers and the sacred precincts of law schools. The women lawyers featured in these works are on the side of justice, they have claimed authority for their undertakings, they often fight to publicize and punish violence against women, and they, like their real-life models, have transformed the law, its practice, and its effects.

Dorothy Sayers wrote that the detective story “does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement.” And she suggested that this is so because the detective story is a “literature of escape” and not “a literature of expression.” Raymond Chandler, who wrote macho thrillers but who longed to be considered the writer of “a literature of expression” quoted this in his famous essay, “The Simple Art of Murder.” He and Sayers were both wrong in hesitating to claim for their “popular” fiction real “literary achievement.”

The truth is that we have now come to understand the importance and the influence of “popular” fiction which can dare to embrace new ideas, and rush in where angels fear to tread. Feminist detective stories have—that is my thesis—created a new female protagonist, which is more than the “higher” forms of literary art have managed to achieve from earliest times until now.

As Byron observed in Don Juan,

There is a tide in the affairs of women,

Which taken at the flood, leads—God knows where.

I have tried to suggest the somewhere to which his “where” has led.