

## ABSTRACT

From Miss Marple to Bones: How Crime Fiction Draws Women to Forensic Science

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The field of forensic science has become female-dominated in recent decades. Research regarding the cause of this phenomenon has been scarce, although speculation abounds. In this thesis, I argue that the development of crime fiction opened the door for women who wanted to study and practice real-world forensics. To do so, I trace the evolution of crime fiction from its late-nineteenth century progenitors to current television and film, revealing the influence and inclusion of women at each stage.

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FROM MISS MARPLE TO BONES: HOW CRIME FICTION DRAWS WOMEN TO  
FORENSIC SCIENCE

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, for their eternal love and support

To the Hwangs, for their advice and encouragement

To Byron, whose critique and good humor were sorely missed

To Sarge and Dr. Smith, for their wisdom and guidance

To Annie, Kylie, and Grace Ellen, without whom I surely would have lost my mind

And to the residents of Alexander Hall fourth floor, whose antics infuriated and inspired  
me in equal measure

## CHAPTER ONE

### Women in Forensic Science

In the decades since the 1980s, the field of forensic science has seen an influx of women. Across the United States, undergraduate and graduate level forensics programs and forensic science laboratories—all once dominated by men—now frequently boast female majorities. Jenifer Smith, M.A., a professor of Forensic Science at Pennsylvania State University, said in a 2013 interview that forensic science is “one of the areas of science in which women outnumber men.”<sup>1</sup> Noted researcher Max M. Houck surveyed accredited forensic science programs in the United States (both graduate and undergraduate) and found that, as of 2008, a whopping “78% of the students are female; the average female to male ratio was 4:1, with a range of 2:1 to 7:1.”<sup>2</sup> By contrast, of the computer science degrees awarded to undergraduates in 2015, women took only 18%.<sup>3</sup> While casual observations and research data agree that women have come to dominate the field in recent years, examination regarding potential causes for this phenomenon has been surprisingly scarce.

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Beattie-Moss, “Probing Question: Do women dominate the field of forensic science?” *Penn State News*, n.d.

<sup>2</sup> Max M. Houck, “Is Forensic Science a Gateway for Women in Science?”, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Shana Vu, “Cracking the code: Why aren't more women majoring in computer science?”, 2017.



### *Women Earning Degrees*

One potential reason for the prevalence of women in forensics is simply that jobs in forensic science require college degrees. Today, there are both more women in higher education than there were in the past and more women than men pursuing post-secondary degrees. In the 2013-2014 academic year, more women than men earned undergraduate college degrees (both bachelor's and associate's), a majority which persists in every racial category surveyed. That is, not only did more women than men earn degrees overall, but more white women than white men, more African American women than African American men, and so forth graduated from post-secondary educational institutions.<sup>4</sup> From these statistics alone, it would be easy to assume that more women than men are entering the field of forensic science purely because more women than men are graduating from college. However, other STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields—for instance, computer science and mechanical engineering—also require college degrees for employment and remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, despite the relatively high attrition rate among men in undergraduate programs. I therefore conclude that the non-traditional gender gap in forensic science is not an issue merely of raw numbers.

### *Women Entering STEM*

When cursorily considering forensic science's new female majority, it may seem a reasonable conclusion that, as American society has become more accepting and even laudatory of women in science, more women are choosing to enter STEM fields in general, and

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

that the recent prevalence of female forensic scientists can therefore be attributed to an overall increase in the number of women in STEM jobs—or even simply in the workforce—since the 1980s. However, although women comprise 48% of the total workforce of the United States, they represent only 24% of STEM workers.<sup>5</sup> These numbers, moreover, have remained almost perfectly constant over the past decade or more, and the data even express a downward trend for women in some STEM fields. For instance, in 1984, 37% of computer science majors were women; in 2014, the percentage of female computer science majors had dropped to just 18%.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, considering only degree program enrollment or even graduation rates can give a false impression of the number of women in STEM because the percentage of women earning STEM degrees is significantly larger than the percentage working in STEM fields. Women are more likely than men to use their science degrees in education after graduation;<sup>7</sup> for example, while a man with a chemistry degree would usually pursue a laboratory or other research- or application-based position, a woman would be more likely to use the same degree to become, say, a high school chemistry teacher.

### *Academic Modeling*

If women are more likely than men to use their STEM degrees to seek employment in education, then it seems plausible that an abundance of female professors teaching in

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administration, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Gaby Galvin, “Study: Middle School Is Key to Girls' Coding Interest”, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administration, 2011.

forensic science programs might entice women to the field, or simply make them more comfortable pursuing a degree in forensics. According to one study, female students whose first course in a STEM subject is taught by a woman are more likely to take subsequent courses—and even seek a major—in the subject in question than those whose first course is taught by a man, especially in areas like statistics and math. In the same study, researchers even observed a similar effect among male students in traditionally female-dominated fields; young men who first study education under a male professor are significantly more likely to major in education and, on average, take “12.9 more subsequent credit hours” in the field than those who study first under a female professor.<sup>8</sup> I refer to this concept as academic modeling: the idea that students gravitate toward relatable professors (academic role models), with whom they identify and by whom they feel accepted. An eighteen-year-old, female college freshman might feel intimidated by the cohort of male professors heading, for instance, the physics department of her university, but be more confident entering a program headed primarily by female professors. If college-level forensic science programs in the United States employ majority-female faculty, then academic modeling could contribute to (though still not entirely account for or explain) the abundance of women entering the field.

According to Study.com, the top four forensic science programs in the United States can be found at the following universities: Pennsylvania State University; Syracuse University; the University of California, Davis; and Boston University. Of these four, only

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<sup>8</sup> Eric P. Bettinger & Bridget Terry Long, “Do Faculty Serve as Role Models? The Impact of Instructor Gender on Female Students”, 2005.

Boston University boasts a majority-female faculty at 60%—a figure which becomes significantly less impressive with the revelation that the department only encompasses ten professors: six women and four men. The numbers for the other three universities are even worse: at Penn State, only one of seven departmental professors (14.3%) is female; at Syracuse, six of sixteen adjunct professors (37.5%) and only two of nine teaching faculty (22.2%) are women; and at UC Davis, just seven of twenty-three lecturers (30.4%) are female.<sup>910</sup>

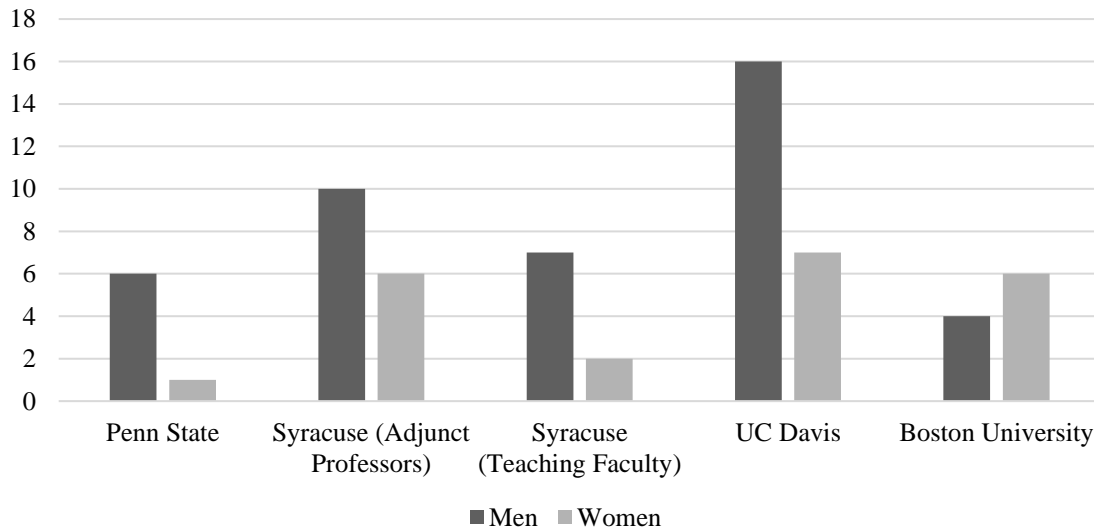


Figure 1: Gender breakdown of forensic science faculty in top university degree programs. This figure displays raw number data as of Fall 2017.

<sup>9</sup> These numbers were collected from each university's departmental website and are accurate as of the Fall semester, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> It is possible that academic modeling occurs through graduate students, since undergraduates in introductory classes may be more likely to interact with graduate student teaching assistants than salaried professors. This hypothesis merits exploration in future research. However, because Baylor University's forensic science program does not employ graduate teaching assistants, and yet remains overwhelmingly female-dominated, I feel comfortable pursuing other explanations for the trend.

It could be argued that the paucity of female professors in forensic science programs results not from any characteristic of the field itself, but from the fact that men are more likely than women to become professors in general; because, although women are more likely than men to become educators after graduation, men are still more likely than women to be employed full-time at the college level.<sup>11</sup> In the United States, a massive 56% of college professors are white males, an already enormous figure that fails even to account for males of other races. If black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander males are included (which still excludes Native American and so-called “mixed race” males), the number jumps to a whopping 67%.<sup>12</sup>

To test the hypothesis that it is simply a lack of female professors in general, rather than any particular element of forensic science that results in such scanty numbers, I decided to find similar statistics about a traditionally female-dominated field for comparison. My choice was elementary education, a field ideally suited to women who tend toward childrearing and caregiving.<sup>13</sup> According to UNESCO, elementary education programs

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<sup>11</sup> Sexism in university hiring practices, although widely acknowledged and worthy of both research and reprimand, is beyond the purview of this paper. In this context, I am simply exploring the possibility that female professorship contributes meaningfully to women’s interest in forensic science.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> The reasons underpinning women’s gravitation toward these subjects—children, nurturing, etc.—are hotly debated among both expert sociologists and laypersons. Some argue that women are merely socialized into their apparent community-mindedness, while others maintain that women are predisposed, either biologically or by decree of a higher power, toward family building. This debate, while fascinating, is not the topic of this paper and will not be explored further here. For those interested, I recommend *Psychology Today*’s litany of articles on the subject, including “Man the Fixer, Woman the Nurturer—the Caregiving Gender Gap” (Denholm, 2012), “A Woman’s Biological Need to Nurture—

enroll eighty-seven percent women. The best university programs for elementary education, per TeacherCertificationDegrees.com, are Dallas Baptist University and Texas A&M University. Of the twelve professors in DBU's elementary education program, eight are women (66.7%). At Texas A&M, 124 of 218 faculty are female (56.9%).

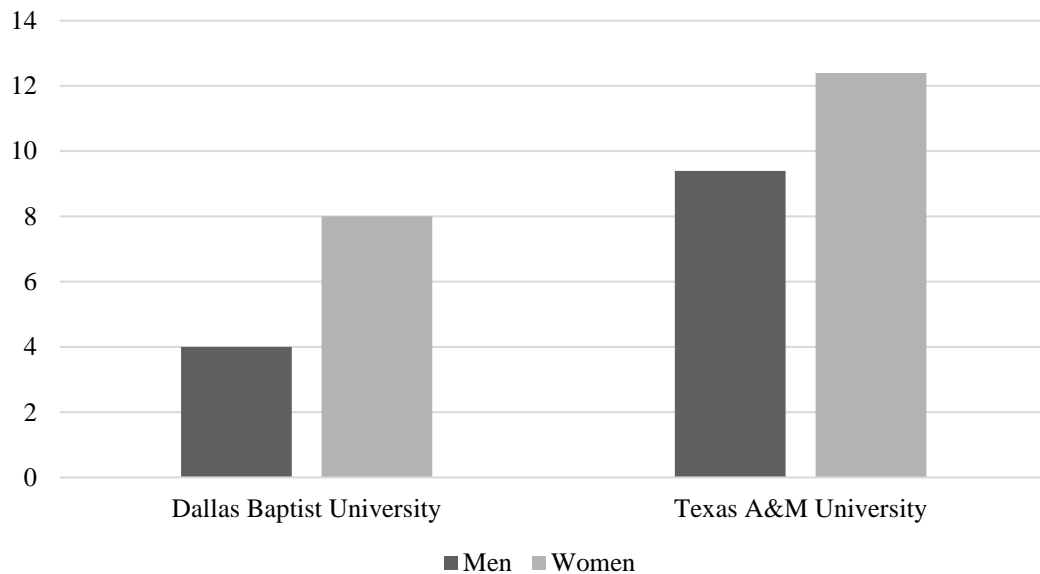


Figure 2: Gender breakdown of elementary education faculty in top university degree programs. This figure displays raw number data for Dallas Baptist University. To facilitate visual comprehension, data for Texas A&M has been reduced by a factor of ten (94 men displayed as 9.4 men; 124 women displayed as 12.4 women).

In sum, although increasing the number of female professors in scientific disciplines can encourage young women to pursue academic study and, later, occupations in STEM fields, this phenomenon cannot account for the influx of women into forensic science in recent years. Men still outnumber women in forensic science teaching positions,

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And How To Satisfy It When You're Not a Mom" (Walker, 2011), and "Are Women Really More Compassionate?" (Seppälä, 2013), all of which are available online.

and not simply because they form a majority within professorship as a whole; women still dominate the academic scene in more traditionally female-dominated (non-STEM) fields like elementary education. I therefore conclude that the nationwide academic immigration of women to forensic science cannot be explained by academic modeling alone.<sup>14</sup>

### *Women in Forensic Textbooks*

Another possibility, which is closely related to academic modeling, is that the prevalence of women in forensic textbooks encourages undergraduates to enter the field.<sup>15</sup> If students open their books to find examples of women in forensics, chronicles of their sex's contributions to the field, and homages to the female paragons of science, they might find themselves inspired to follow in the footsteps of these greats. However, my survey of popular forensic science textbooks found that if women are mentioned at all, it is generally in one of two capacities: individually, as victims; or collectively, in terms of their biological differences from men (often for the purposes of victim identification).

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<sup>14</sup> Sgt. Huggins recently reminded me of a phenomenon which he calls the "Old Girls' Network", in which undergraduate upperclassmen who are already studying forensic science encourage incoming freshmen to take classes in the subject. This description is based upon his personal observations, not empirical data, but warrants future research as another possible contributor to the overall trend of women entering forensic science. However, while the Old Girls' Network may contribute to the continued success of women in forensic science, it cannot account for women originally entering the field in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I will therefore continue in my present course of inquiry.

<sup>15</sup> I find this explanation unlikely because forensic science is not usually offered as a general education course, so students are unlikely to simply wander into a forensics class to fulfill degree requirements (as the might with, say, sociology or geology). However, in the interest of exploring as many potential explanations as possible, as well as contrasting academic literature with the fiction that will be discussed later in this paper, I will elaborate on the issue.

In one textbook, published in 2012, the author makes no mention of women in any capacity, but cites papers written by two women in the first chapter alone.<sup>16</sup> In this book and others like it, although the substantial contributions that women are making to the field of forensic science are referenced and incorporated into the body of the text, their discoveries and accomplishments are attributed to them only as endnotes, and their names are not mentioned alongside those of men like Calvin Goddard (inventor of the comparison microscope often used in forensic firearms examination), William Herschel (the first person to use fingerprints for criminal identification), or Edmond Locard (of Locard's Exchange Principle).

In another introductory text, the author mentions Agrippina, the wife of Roman Emperor Claudius, and Sabina, the mistress of Nero, at the beginning of a section about forensic odontology. Although he states that these women were arguably the first in recorded history to use human teeth as a means of postmortem identification, in the next sentence he explicitly denies them credit for founding the field, saying that "[i]n any event, neither of the two women is likely to be remembered as the mother of forensic odontology".<sup>17</sup> Historically, the attribution of women's discoveries, accomplishments, and accrued knowledge has often been treated as folkloric nonsense at best and witchcraft deserving of capital punishment at worst. Modern forensic textbook authors intentionally or unintentionally reflect this mindset by minimizing or overlooking the contributions of women to the field.

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<sup>16</sup>James T. Spencer, *An Introduction to Forensic Science: The Science of Criminalistics*, 2012.

<sup>17</sup>William G. Eckert, *Introduction to Forensic Sciences*, 1997.



The absence of women from forensic science textbooks does not result from any scarcity of influential female figures in the field's history, including many far more recent than the Roman Empire. Take, for example, Frances Lee Glessner. Glessner, an heiress from Chicago, spent tens of thousands of dollars and countless hours of her own time founding Harvard's forensic medical program to teach coroners death investigation; training investigators to look for minute clues and details at crime scenes in specialized seminars; and designing, creating, and staging miniature, incredibly detailed "dollhouses of death" for those seminars.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Clea Koff's work recovering and identifying hundreds of human bodies in Rwanda—tragic victims of that country's tumultuous and violent civil war—on behalf of the United Nations rattled the world of forensic anthropology, and indeed the world in general.<sup>19</sup> These women's achievements have reshaped investigative science and affected thousands of people, yet their names remain conspicuously absent from the pages of forensic textbooks.

In conclusion, it is not the prevalence of women's contributions in academic literature that spurs young scholars to study investigative sciences. Although women have revolutionized forensic science and used it to great advantage, textbooks rarely acknowledge their achievements, preferring to cast them as victims or a biological category for comparison. If anything, these textbooks should, hypothetically, deter women from the field, not draw them to it. Where academic literature has failed, however, popular literature may have succeeded.

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<sup>18</sup>Katherine Ramsland, "The truth in a Nutshell: the legacy of Frances Glessner Lee", 2008.

<sup>19</sup>*Biographical Dictionary of Anthropologists*, s.v. "Koff, Clea (1972-)", n.d.

## *Crime Fiction*

One idea which has gained popularity of late is that young women in forensic science find their role models not in the classroom or the pages of textbooks, but on the small screen. News outlets like the *Washington Post* and *ABC News* posit this hypothesis, and Jenifer Smith, M.A., whose interview was cited at the beginning of this chapter, makes the same speculation.

The “CSI effect” is an oft-cited phenomenon with at least two definitions. In judicial circles, it is often taken to mean that jurors enter the courtroom with certain expectations about evidence and procedure based on televised crime dramas like *CSI* and *Law & Order*. These individuals believe themselves to be experts—or at least thoroughly educated—on topics like DNA collection and analysis, fingerprinting, and other investigative measures simply because they have watched three seasons of a procedural drama. Unfortunately, this belief persists even though TV writers often treat forensic techniques the way that authors in other types of literature treat magic or futuristic technology: as vague, jargon-laden, and largely inexplicable, but capable of neatly tying together any loose ends for the sake of the plot.

From a more sociological perspective, however, the “CSI effect” is the ability of popular media to influence young people to pursue degrees and careers in forensic science. In one study, researchers asked female undergraduates in Marshall University’s Forensic Science Program about their reasons for studying forensics. Nearly one third of respondents reported that popular culture had been a major contributor to their interest in forensic

science.<sup>20</sup> Characters like Dr. Temperance Brennan (FOX's *Bones*), Abby Sciuto (CBS's *NCIS*), and Molly Hooper (BBC's *Sherlock*) provide role models for girls and young women interested in forensic science; they are complex, dynamic, and competent, and their contributions to investigations are often fundamental to the successes of their respective teams. Unsurprisingly, both laypersons and experts are quick to point to these fictional women as having encouraged the scientific pursuits of their real-world counterparts.

However, journalists reporting and even researchers investigating the so-called "CSI effect" miss a crucial point: strong women did not enter the crime fiction scene with the advent of primetime television. Rather, crime fiction has been shaped by women since its inception, and for decades the prevalence of competent female characters in investigative and scientific roles has presented young women with the idea that forensics is a field that is open to them, far more so than many other STEM fields. In the chapters that follow, I outline the history of this influential genre, introduce its major players (both real and fictional), and explore the role of crime fiction in the female accession into the field of forensic science.

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<sup>20</sup>Catharine G. Rushton & Nega Debela, "Why More Women are Pursuing Forensic Science Graduate Degrees Instead of Other Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Degrees: A Qualitative Study", n.d.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Women and Crime Fiction Novels

Before the invention of the television—indeed, before the invention of the radio in 1895—the book served as the most popular and accessible storytelling medium for much of the western world. Thus, long before the advent of detective films, investigative television serials, and radio murder mysteries, the masses turned to crime literature to satisfy their need for intrigue and suspense. This chapter explores the early days of detective fiction, the rise of the female author in the late nineteenth century, and the arrival of the female protagonist, with a final note about girl investigators in popular children’s literature.

#### *The Birth of a Genre*

As the popularity of modern television programs like *Forensic Files* and *Cold Justice* would suggest, many Americans experience a certain morbid fascination with crime and curiosity about the investigative process. This captivation is apparent not only in the twenty-first century United States but across cultures and, indeed, through millennia of recorded human history; crime stories date back as far as Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and further to the Jewish narrative of Cain and Abel. Edgar Allan Poe, however, is generally credited as “the ‘father’ of the detective genre.”<sup>1</sup> The renowned author and poet, known

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<sup>1</sup> John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 2005.

for his specialization in mysteries, supernatural horror, death, and similarly gruesome topics, published his first work of crime fiction in a Philadelphia magazine in 1841.<sup>2</sup> At the time, the occupation of “detective” was a relatively new invention, and many scholars believe that the memoirs of the adventurous François-Eugène Vidocq, who founded the first detective agency in France in 1817, inspired Poe to create his protagonist, French investigator C. August Dupin.<sup>3</sup> Though it remains one of Poe’s lesser-known works, the short story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” was the foundation of the detective genre and influenced later recognizable writers, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Early Female Crime Fiction Authors*



Figure 3: Metta Fuller Victoria Victor, author of *The Dead Letter*

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Cestre et al., *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. “Poe, Edgar Allan”, n.d.

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Detective Story”, n.d.

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, n.d.

The first female American crime author, Metta Victoria Fuller Victor (1831-1885), had already been publishing her written works for fifteen years when she wrote her detective novel *The Dead Letter* in 1866.<sup>5</sup> *The Dead Letter* is widely recognized as the first full-length detective novel ever written by an American of either sex. It features a male protagonist (Richard Redfield) and was published under the masculine *nom de plume* “Seeley Regester.”<sup>6</sup> Over the course of her “long, successful, and extremely prolific” writing career, Victor employed nearly a dozen pseudonyms, both male and female.<sup>7</sup> Although the use of pen names by both men and women was common at the time, especially among writers of popular fiction, it is noteworthy that *The Dead Letter* was Victor’s first work published under a male pseudonym. Victor died without publishing her memoirs, so any attempt to parse out the motivations for her chosen alias constitute pure speculation. It is telling, however, that she evidently felt no need to disguise her femininity when publishing most of her earlier works: poetry, romances, temperance novels, and recipe books.<sup>8</sup> Her controversial abolitionist literature, much of which predated *The Dead Letter*, warranted total anonymity.<sup>9</sup> Despite the success of *The Dead Letter*, Victor did not linger in detective fiction. Instead, she continued to explore a variety of genres throughout the remainder of her life.

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<sup>5</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. “Victor, Metta Victoria Fuller”, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> *Duke University Press*, “The Dead Letter and The Figure Eight: Description and About the Author”, n.d.

<sup>7</sup> Felicia L. Carr, *American Women’s Dime Novel Project*, “Victor, Metta”, n.d.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See note 5 above.



Figure 4: Anna Katherine Green, author of *The Leavenworth Case*

Anna Katherine Green (1846-1935) entered the American literary scene close on Victor's heels. Her first novel, entitled *The Leavenworth Case*, was wildly popular and sold over 150,000 copies. Green went on to write fourteen more crime thriller novels between *The Leavenworth Case* in 1878 and her final work, *The Step on the Stair* in 1923. Though Victor may have been the mother of the detective novel, Green popularized it. Her novels, like Victor's, featured male protagonists, but Green distinguished herself with her realistic plots, which were grounded in the understanding of criminal law that she cultivated as the daughter of a lawyer.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Victor, Green published her mysteries under her own name, and is therefore often considered the mother of the American detective novel.

#### *Renowned Female Authors*

Once American women had begun the genre of detective fiction, their British sisters made their own appearance. Many of the most recognizable names in crime fiction, including Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, and Daphne du Maurier, hail from the British

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<sup>10</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Green, Anna Katharine", n.d.

Isles. Each placed her mark upon the genre and has influenced later writers, both male and female.

An Oxford graduate and former teacher, Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) started her writing career in the advertising business and did not begin publishing her novels until 1923, at age thirty.<sup>11</sup> She is best known for her series of detective stories chronicling the investigations of Lord Peter Wimsey, a gentleman detective. In several novels, Wimsey is assisted in his work by the Oxford graduate and novelist Harriet Vane, whom he eventually marries. Sayers also made Harriet the protagonist of one of her later novels, *Gaudy Night*.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 5: Dorothy L. Sayers, author of the Lord Peter Wimsey novel series

Sayers was one of the first women to receive a formal degree from Oxford University. Although women were allowed to study in many of Oxford's prestigious colleges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they did not receive degrees upon graduation. Sayers, who graduated in 1915, would only have received her official degree in medieval literature retroactively, after the university changed its policy for female students

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<sup>11</sup> Liam Rodger and Joan Bakewell, *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. "Sayers, Dorothy L(eigh)", n.d.

<sup>12</sup> See "Female Protagonists" below.



in 1920. In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers alludes to her experiences in the male-centric world of academia through the tribulations of her protagonist Harriet Vane and her female colleagues, displaying an attitude of quiet exasperation toward the habitual condescension and patronization experienced by those countercultural women. Yet Harriet also reflects Sayers's stoic determination in spite of the systematic opposition she faces. Sayers's choices to attend university, to pursue a career as a writer, and especially to publish in a genre like detective fiction, as opposed to more acceptable areas of female expertise like romances or morality stories were rebellious at minimum, and the mentality that spurred her to make those difficult decisions permeates her works. Young women who read Sayers's novels in their heyday would have been introduced to the radical idea that women can be investigators, can plot their own courses in life, and can subvert centuries-old cultural norms.

Agatha Christie (1890-1976) began her writing career in earnest while working as a pharmacist's assistant during World War I.<sup>13</sup> Working in pharmacies and hospitals during the war gave Christie intimate knowledge of subjects like poisons and death, which formed the foundation of her plausible and gritty writing. She drew upon her experience in the medical field to compose her first published novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which features a poisoning via the chemical interplay between medicinal strychnine and bromide.

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Kelsch Breznau, *Critical Survey of Long Fiction*, "Agatha Christie", n.d.



Figure 6: Agatha Christie, author of the Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple novel series

Christie confirms the influence of her personal experiences on her compositions in her autobiography, published in 1977.<sup>14</sup> This raises a fascinating point about the connection between the World Wars and the migration of women into classically male-dominated fields. During World War I and again in World War II, women stepped into traditionally masculine roles to fulfill the needs of man-less nations while their husbands, sons, and brothers were stationed overseas. After the wars ended, British and American men tried to restore society to its former system by reclaiming their jobs as laborers and professionals, but the women they evicted from these roles retained their experiences and the knowledge they had gleaned from the temporary arrangement. It was the beginning of a widespread breakdown of the gender-based segregation of occupations, a process which continues today. Women like Christie were deeply affected by their wartime experiences, and they began to undermine, however indirectly, the imbalance of power in the working world. Christie tapped into the psyche of the thousands of women who had been disenfranchised from occupations for which they had proven themselves qualified. Gripping, suspenseful, and occasionally rather macabre detective novels are not a product of traditional women's

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

work; an Agatha Christie who spent her young adulthood embroidering handkerchiefs could not have produced the cultural monuments that her pieces of fiction became. Much like Sayers's works, Christie's novels, especially as they were published under her own name, have now shown several generations of women that investigative sciences and deduction are not a realm for men alone to traverse.



Figure 7: Dame Daphne du Maurier, author of *Rebecca* and “The Birds”

A slightly less well-known, but no less significant author completes the triumvirate of influential female detective fiction writers: Dame Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989). du Maurier (épouse Lady Browning) is most remembered for her suspense novel *Rebecca*,<sup>15</sup> which Alfred Hitchcock later adapted to film. Another of du Maurier's stories, “The Birds,” which she originally published in a compendium of her other works, became one of Hitchcock's most renowned movies.<sup>16</sup> du Maurier did not constrain herself to detective fiction, but extended her writing talents to romances, plays, and other genres and modes of

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<sup>15</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. “Dame Daphne du Maurier”, n.d.

<sup>16</sup> *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. “du Maurier, Dame Daphne”, n.d.

literature. Her many literary successes earned her the title of Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, an award bestowed upon British civilians who make significant contributions to artistic and scientific fields.

Unlike Sayers and Christie, du Maurier seems to lack an inciting incident for her interest in composing detective novels. As the daughter of famed actor-manager Sir Gerald du Maurier,<sup>17</sup> early exposure to the worlds of fiction and drama likely swayed her in favor of writing as an occupation, but she never underwent evident trials in the manner that Sayers and Christie did. Nevertheless, and despite her relative anonymity, her work was massively influential, as it caught the attention of Alfred Hitchcock and therefore reached millions of people. Many of her stories, including *Rebecca*, featured not only female protagonists, but female villains, antiheroes, and victims as well, each with complex motivations and characterization in a way that few films manage even today.

### *Female Protagonists*

Many of the earliest literary detectives were women. Wilkie Collins, one of the first mystery novelists, liked to frame his works around a central heroine; his short story “The Diary of Anne Rodway” (1856), for instance, follows its titular character through the twists and turns of a Gothic murder mystery. Andrew Forrester’s novel *The Female Detective* (1864) features Mrs. Gladden (“G.”), who uses her powers of observation and deduction to solve crimes in an extremely Holmesian manner, more than two decades before

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published his first story about literature's most famous detective.<sup>18</sup> A series of dime novels, which functioned much like an early television serial and attracted avid followers, was begun in 1882 and chronicled the adventures of Denver Doll, the "Detective Queen". Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Smith (n.d.p. L.T. Meade) and co-author Robert Eustace penned several mysteries around the turn of the nineteenth century in which crimes were solved by Florence Cusack, a young, unmarried amateur detective. Many of these early works have since been eclipsed, however, by more popular and renowned female detective characters, in many instances wrought by the same beloved authors discussed earlier.

In her celebrated Lord Peter Wimsey series, Dorothy L. Sayers introduces Harriet Vane, an intelligent, capable, and independent mystery writer who both assists Wimsey in his work and, occasionally, conducts investigations of her own. Harriet is the protagonist of *Gaudy Night* (1935), in which she investigates a series of increasingly dark "pranks" at her alma mater, Oxford, beginning with threatening notes and culminating in physical assault against Harriet herself. Sayers makes Harriet an excellent female role model in many ways; she frequently demonstrates courage, persistence in the face of adversity, and a stubborn adherence to her principles. Unfortunately, her agency is often compromised by Wimsey when he steps in and solves her problems for her. Her primary function as a supporting character for Wimsey further undermines her status as an investigator. However, despite these shortcomings, Sayers was ahead of her time in her portrayal of Harriet, and the writer-investigator has appealed to generations of readers—both male and female—in the years since *Gaudy Night*'s publication.

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander McCall Smith, *GoodReads*, "The Female Detective", n.d.

Another famous investigative heroine, Miss Marple, owes her inception to Agatha Christie, who wrote and published novels and short stories featuring the elderly mystery-solver over a span of nearly fifty years.<sup>19</sup> Miss Marple has also been a central figure in many movies, several television shows, and even an anime series. Miss Marple stands in stark contrast to Christie's other investigative genius, Hercule Poirot; where Poirot relies on rationality and logic (his "little gray cells", as he calls his brain) to solve mysteries, Marple turns instead to intuition and gossip. This contrast might at first seem demeaning toward Miss Marple and female investigators, but it actually reflects an important reality about female investigators.

Women are, in general, more emotionally intelligent than men,<sup>20</sup> and, as such, are often more likely than men to use social resources to solve problems, rather than trying to invent solutions on their own. That is not to say that women overlook objective evidence, but rather that women are more likely than men to incorporate other people's input and experiences into their investigations. This kind of evidence can be extremely valuable for filling in gaps in investigators' knowledge of events or providing crucial details about interpersonal history between victims and suspects. Modern investigators often interview friends, family, and neighbors to try to understand what has happened after a crime has been committed. In other words, what is called "gossip" in reference to the Miss Marple series, in other contexts might be called "eyewitness testimony."

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<sup>19</sup> Miss Marple first appeared in "The Tuesday Night Club" (1927, *The Royal Magazine*). Christie's final Miss Marple story was *Sleeping Murder: Miss Marple's Last Case* (1976).

<sup>20</sup> K.V. Petrides & Adrian Furnham, "Gender Differences in Measured and Self-Estimated Trait Emotional Intelligence", 2000.

This raises another important point about the subversive nature of the Miss Marple stories: outgroup reporting. Many of Miss Marple's investigations hinge upon her discovery of details overlooked by police—a theme which underlies most fictional detectives, from Sherlock Holmes to Hercule Poirot—however, her method of discovery diverges from those of her male literary counterparts. The term “gossip” is extremely gendered. It carries connotations both of femininity and unreliability. Many feminist theorists consider this negative characterization of female social networking and information-sharing an attempt to systematically silence women, a form of oppression at the most basic linguistic and societal levels. After all, if laymen and police alike can dismiss women's accounts of what happens behind closed doors as “idle gossip”, they need not address the problems that affect women or acknowledge women's accusations or perspectives on social issues.<sup>21</sup> With Miss Marple, Agatha Christie undermines this practice. The heroine—an old spinster, traditionally one of the most marginalized and least credible members of society—uses the “gossip” that police and other “real” investigators so often ignore to achieve the same results as other great detectives: namely, solving mysteries, including murders. Christie shows female readers that their skills and their social communications are valuable—indeed, just as valuable as the skills of men like Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes.

No chronicle of women in detective literature would be complete without Irene Adler, originally created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), but incorporated into many works since, sometimes as the main character. Adler, simply called “the woman” by Sherlock Holmes, is the only female character known to have bested

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<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Damm McPeters, “Invitational Rhetoric and Gossip: A Feminist Rhetorical Reading of Agatha Christie's Jane Marple”, 2017.

Holmes at his own game. Like many of the other heroines on this list, she is courageous, intelligent, and independent, but Irene Adler is also almost unique in her character's adaptability; she can be protagonist or villain, or even in some cases a more nuanced anti-heroine. Although Sir Arthur Conan Doyle explicitly states in "A Scandal in Bohemia" that Holmes's regard for Adler is too unemotional to constitute love, *per se*, readers and adapters since have insistently cast her as a love interest and seductive foil for Holmes. Despite her role as a supporting character both in Doyle's original work and in many subsequent adaptations, she has nevertheless maintained a sense of agency and independence over the years and retains a unique ability to capture audiences' imaginations and, often, the spotlight.

### *Children's Literature*

As important as the aforementioned literary giants undoubtedly were in influencing the attitudes of generations of women toward crime-fighting and detective work, children's literature may have been even more so. After all, throughout most of the twentieth century, an adult woman who was already married and settled would have difficulty pursuing higher education or a career in investigation or forensics; it was young readers whose life direction could be most powerfully influenced by literary heroines.

Arguably the most famous fictional female detective of all time, Nancy Drew, was first conceived in the late 1920s by Edward Stratemeyer as a female counterpart to his recently-published and already wildly popular Hardy Boys series. The Nancy Drew books have been written by many authors over the years, all published under the nom de plume Carolyn Keene, and the debate between scholars about the identity of the "original" author



is ongoing, although most agree that either Mildred Wirt Benson (an employee at Stratemeyer's publishing company) or Edward Stratemeyer himself penned the first few novels.

From her first book, *The Secret of the Old Clock* (1930), Nancy Drew was an utterly revolutionary children's heroine, her competence and agency standing in stark contrast to traditional damsels in distress.<sup>22</sup> Her two best friends, who fit classic female stereotypes (Bess the girly-girl, George the rough-and-tumble tomboy) help Nancy eschew those very roles, making her a middle-ground, relatable heroine who did and still does serve as a role model for millions of readers. Unfortunately, Nancy has often been criticized for her seeming perfection: her skill at everything she tries, her classic good looks, and her idyllic life with her wealthy family and doting boyfriend. However, for readers who disliked Nancy Drew (and those were relatively few), more options shortly presented themselves.

Another girl sleuth soon joined Nancy Drew on the shelves with *The Vanishing Shadow* (1932): Judy Bolton. At the beginning of her series, Judy is still in high school, and therefore younger than Nancy, but over the course of thirty-nine novels, she grows up and marries suitor Peter Dobbs, who works for the FBI. Even after her wedding, Judy continues to pursue her mysteries and adventures, including occasionally solving her husband's cases by accident—a bold and even subversive choice for writers in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of the Judy Bolton episodes were inspired by true events, particularly ones that affected the life of their author, Margaret Sutton. Like Nancy Drew, the Judy Bolton series has been extensively criticized for its heroine's upper-class status. Many modern

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<sup>22</sup> Jeannie A. Ferriss, "A Sleuth of Our Own: A Historical View of Nancy Drew, Girl Detective", 2014.

readers suspect find such obvious wealth irritating and suspect that it may have made both Nancy and Judy difficult to relate to, especially for girls reading the earliest novels during the Great Depression. However, some scholars suggest that the financial stability of these girl detectives was originally part of their appeal, as it offered a form of escapism during times of economic distress.<sup>23</sup> Girls growing up in poverty could read about Nancy Drew driving her sports car or Judy striking out on her own in search of a missing child and fantasize that one day they, too, might enjoy such luxury and independence.

Another series similar to the Hardy Boys, *The Boxcar Children*, features a balanced cast of characters: two brothers and two sisters, each with unique strengths that help the Alden team solve mysteries. Jessie Alden, the elder of the two girls, is the planner and organizer of the group, while Violet is the creative mind.<sup>24</sup> The books, published sporadically from 1924 through the late 1970s and revived in the 1990s, effectively balance the roles of the boys and girls. Where girl detectives like Nancy Drew showed readers that they could be independent problem-solvers, *The Boxcar Children* taught young girls that they could be valuable members of mixed-gender teams of detectives, a message at least as necessary as the other for encouraging women to enter law enforcement and investigative science careers.

Striking a middle ground between Nancy Drew and *The Boxcar Children*, the Trixie Belden mysteries, although slightly lesser-known, boast the best qualities of both series. The titular character is a curious, independent girl detective in the vein of Nancy Drew, but

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<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Carpan, *Sisters, Schoolgirls, and Sleuths: Girls' Series Books in America*, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> "Meet the Boxcar Children!", *BoxcarChildren.com*, 2016.

her co-ed sleuthing team, which consists primarily of her own siblings, greatly resembles the Alden family. Still, Trixie is unique in her relatability; she is well-known for struggling in school and complaining about chores. These small, humanizing elements endear her to readers who feel distanced from Nancy Drew's wealth, Barbie-like appearance, and effortless mastery of everything she attempts.<sup>25</sup> Trixie reinforces the idea that detective work is an area in which *all* girls have the freedom to excel; it is not restricted to gorgeous, talented, upper-class socialites.

In conclusion, women formed the very foundation of the detective genre as some of its earliest authors and most beloved heroines. The evolution of crime fiction and its coincidence with the emigration of women from housewifery to paid occupations created a potent mix, perfectly poised to inspire women to pursue careers in detective work and forensic science. Literary role models, from Nancy Drew to Miss Marple, taught women and young girls that they need not wait around for male detectives to rescue them; instead, they could solve their own mysteries and save the day themselves.

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<sup>25</sup> Lori Shontz, "Waiting for Trixie Belden", *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2003.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Crime Fiction in Cinema and Television

At the turn of the twenty-first century, just as crime novels were gaining traction, a new mode of storytelling entered the scene: film. Television and cinema revolutionized popular media, and although both TV and movies were (and, in many cases, remain) male-dominated industries, the coincidence of their rise to popularity with the World Wars set the stage for female-driven crime fiction in the new media.

#### *Television*

##### *Early Television*

The invention of the television revolutionized storytelling as humanity had known it. Its recent precursor, the radio, built upon the millennia of oral tradition that had previously defined human history, and the novel upon the only slightly less ancient communicate of the written word. Even the film, which predated broadcast television by only a few decades, was restricted in its audience to those with access to a projector and the expertise to change film reels. With the advent of the television, however, it became possible to broadcast both picture and audio to a much wider audience, simultaneously, within people's very homes.

Some scholars consider *Telecrimes*, which aired for two seasons in 1938 and 1939, to be “the first drama series on British television.”<sup>1</sup> The series was interrupted during World War II, when television broadcasts ceased in both the United States and Britain, but resumed for a single season in 1946.<sup>2</sup> The whodunnit-style serial followed the investigations of the fictitious Inspector Cameron (played by James Raglan). Unfortunately, because recording technology was still in its infancy, the show was only ever broadcast live and has therefore been lost to history.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps as a testament to the original crime show’s success, however, two true crime series soon followed *Telecrimes* onto the British airwaves: *The Murder Rap* (1947) and *War on Crime* (1950).<sup>4</sup>

### *Crime Serial Dramas*

The original function of the serial drama for broadcasting companies was to ensure a returning audience, especially in the years before technologies like the digital video recorder (DVR) existed. More viewers tuning in every week naturally meant more revenue for broadcasters, a phenomenon discovered and used to great effect by the publishers of newspapers and journals in the nineteenth century, who included serial short stories or novels published chapter-by-chapter in their publications. Over the years, most serial dramas have become increasingly dependent on a meta-plot that spans each season—or even

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<sup>1</sup>Derek Johnston, *Genre, taste and the BBC: the origins of British television science fiction*, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Murdock, “Public broadcasting and democratic culture: Consumers, citizens, and communards”, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> “Telecrime (TV Series 1938–)”, *IMDb*, n.d.

<sup>4</sup> Su Holmes, “‘Neighbours to the Nation’: ‘Soap Opera’, the BBC and (Re)Visiting The Grove Family (1954–57)”, 2008.

multiple seasons—of the show to keep audiences captivated.<sup>5</sup> Soap operas provide the classic example of this phenomenon; although each individual episode contains some standalone action or plot, it also typically ends on a cliffhanger, failing to provide any real resolution to at least one major conflict and enticing viewers to “tune in next time”. Almost every television series currently available on Netflix includes a “last time on [show title]” or “what you missed” spot at the beginning of each episode to summarize the major, relevant meta-plot points from preceding episodes. Indeed, these thirty-second memory joggers have become so popular that Netflix has developed a procedure to automatically skip the recap (along with the show’s opening sequence) to avoid redundancy when episodes are viewed back-to-back but show it when a viewer tunes in again hours or days later.

Crime dramas, however, are nearly unique in their episodes’ ability to function both as series following a meta-plot and as standalone episodes, a trait which likely contributes to their extraordinary popularity. In a show centering on, for instance, high school drama (like *Glee*, *Gossip Girl*, or the more recently popular *Riverdale*), the show’s appeal is based upon ongoing interpersonal drama, which means that viewers who jump into the middle of a season (especially a season after the first) will likely have no idea what is happening. It is difficult for writers to separate the action into neat sections without significant overlap and context. By contrast, crime shows are relatively easy to segregate, with each episode containing a single case to be solved; writers only need to include a splash of meta-plot to keep avid viewers happy. Indeed, some scholars do not consider such shows to be true

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Hammond, “Introduction: The Series/Serial Form”, *The Contemporary Television Series*, p. 76-77, 2005.

“serials” at all, precisely because their episodes do not tend to function as part of an overarching narrative so much as standalone stories. Instead, their conflict stems from the introduction of external threats to the core characters from guest stars (usually the perpetrator, but sometimes a rival lawyer or investigator incorporated temporarily).<sup>6</sup> Of course, this method of storytelling has its practical downfalls: due in large part to the “CSI effect” discussed in Chapter One, jurors often expect real-world criminal cases to be cut-and-dry, “wrapped up in forty-five minutes, minus commercials”.<sup>7</sup> It does, however, make crime dramas accessible to an enormous audience, as viewers can tune in for an episode or two, no matter the season of the show or whether or not they have even seen it before, and still understand the vast majority of the content of any given episode. In fact, only crime shows in decline rely heavily on meta-plot.<sup>8</sup>

This accessibility has made crime drama one of the most popular TV genres. According to data analysis performed by Nielsen, two of the ten most popular shows on American television in 2017 were crime dramas; *NCIS* ranked fifth and averaged roughly 17.7 million viewers per new episode, surpassed only by media giants like *NBC Sunday Night*

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<sup>6</sup> Greg Smith, “Serial Narrative and Guest Stars: Ally McBeal’s Eccentrics”, *The Contemporary Television Series*, p. 102-103, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt. James Huggins, Baylor University.

<sup>8</sup> This is a personal observation, based on my own experience watching shows like *Criminal Minds*, *Bones*, and *NCIS*. I have not found any explicit, empirical research on the subject, and therefore cannot speculate on the potential direction of causation between these two elements: whether the shows’ increasing reliance on interpersonal drama and meta-plot causes their decline, whether writers fall back on those elements in an attempt to revive shows with waning popularity, or whether a third variable or combination of variables is responsible for both.

Football (#1) and *The Big Bang Theory* (#2).<sup>9</sup> With such a massive audience comes enormous social influence. Millions of women and girls across the United States have grown up watching these shows, seeing capable women working in law enforcement and forensic science, and learning that such roles are open to them.

### *Female Role Models in Modern Crime TV*

The most popular crime show in the United States, *NCIS* (2003-present), follows a team of American investigators as they examine crimes related to the United States Navy and Marine Corps. The main cast includes half a dozen diverse and memorable female characters, most notably Abby Sciuto (Pauley Perette), a forensic scientist whom Agent DiNozo describes as “the happiest Goth you’ll ever meet”<sup>10</sup> and Ziva David (Cote de Pablo), an Israeli soldier who balances toughness and deadly military prowess with feminine allure and playfulness.<sup>11</sup> The women of *NCIS* are powerful, intelligent, and well-respected, each with her own motivations, character arc, and complex storylines. The writers and actresses who have shaped these characters have made a concerted effort to portray them as both likeable and unlikeable, both good and flawed, both assertive and caring—essentially, as Dorothy L. Sayers would put it, as human beings.<sup>12</sup> Not only has this all-too-uncommon characterization likely contributed to the show’s longtime and ongoing

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<sup>9</sup> “Tops of 2017: Television and Social Media”, *Nielsen.com*, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> Season 7, Episode 1, *NCIS*.

<sup>11</sup> Here, I am paraphrasing actress Cote de Pablo’s own explanation of her portrayal of Ziva.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, “Are Women Human?” 1938.



popularity, it has, since *NCIS*'s premier in 2003, given young women intensely relatable role models in a forensic setting.

Another longstanding crime drama, *Criminal Minds* (2005-present), tracks a team in the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU). These investigators specialize in "criminal profiling", which allows them to identify the perpetrators of unsolved crimes, often serial murders. Like *NCIS*, *Criminal Minds* welcomes a cast full of incredible women, many of whom seem somewhat more in touch with their nurturing side than the investigators in *NCIS*, a characterization choice likely stemming from their involvement in psychology, which is often considered a caregiving science. Jennifer "JJ" Jareau (A.J. Cook), for example, is known for her compassion and is often hallmarked by her role as a mother, which has served as a major plot point several times over the course of the show; yet she demonstrates the same tenacity, confidence, and ambition that her male colleagues share. Penelope Garcia (Kirsten Vangsness), a technical analyst and communications liaison who works behind the scenes to track the team's "unsubs" from her computer in Quantico, is very feminine—she wears flowers and polka dots and often openly expresses sorrow and sympathy for victims in her tone—but other aspects of her character, like her computer expertise and strong opinions, are traditionally masculine. *Criminal Minds* refrains from boxing in its female characters and portrays them as complex, multidimensional individuals. This teaches viewers that women of all kinds can find a place on an investigative team, from which they can use their own unique skills to help fight crime and save lives.

Many individuals, when asked to identify a crime show that centers on women, immediately think of the recently-concluded Fox series *Bones* (2005-2017), which follows

a female forensic anthropologist (Dr. Temperance “Bones” Brennan, played by Emily Deschanel) as she conducts investigations involving human remains both in the field and the laboratory.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the titular character, although played by a conventionally beautiful actress, is not presented as classically feminine; she is cold and calculating, lacks social skills, and often remains stoically unaffected by things—beyond the obvious human remains—that would shock and disturb other people. Her presence is rough and uninviting, which causes some characters to refer to her as “masculine” or “not a real woman”. She is contrasted, in many ways, by her best friend, Dr. Angela Montenegro (Michaela Conlin). Angela is the artist to Bones’s scientist, the heart to her brain, and the free spirit to her austerity. Hence, the show portrays the forensic lab as a space that welcomes women of diverse temperaments and skill sets, again inviting female viewers into real-world crime fighting.

No exploration of influential modern American crime dramas would be complete without mentioning the show that started it all. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015) drew millions of viewers and spurred three popular spinoff series (*CSI: Miami*, *CSI: NY*, and *CSI: Cyber*). While the female characters in the original *CSI* fit into somewhat stereotypical categories (the “tough girl”, the “feminine one”, etc.) and do not display the complexity or development of women in later shows, they laid the groundwork for the characters that followed them by showcasing their intelligence, ambition, and natural chemistry within the investigative team.

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<sup>13</sup> “Bones”, *IMDb*, n.d.

### *True Crime TV Series*

As important as crime fiction likely was in bringing women to forensic science, the use of television to showcase real female investigators has also undoubtedly piqued your women's interest in forensics. Several noteworthy true crime series have captured audiences' attention in recent years, including *Cold Justice*, which featured former prosecutor Kelly Siegler and former crime scene investigator Yolanda McClary re-opening unsolved murder cases to seek justice for victims, even years after crimes had been committed. The show inspired a spinoff, *Cold Justice: Sex Crimes*, which follows former prosecutors Casey Garrett and Alicia O'Neill, who, as the title suggests, investigate not murders, but sex crimes. These shows, though not as popular as fictional crime dramas, are nonetheless crucial in their ability to influence young viewers, especially women and girls. Both shows follow teams of female investigators persevering in cases on which others had abandoned hope, which many young women may interpret with the empowering message that women can enter situations and produce meaningful results where others—both men and women—have failed before, especially in law enforcement and forensic science. Other shows, like *COPS* and *Forensic Files*, in which producers make sure to tail female officers and spotlight female scientific experts and investigators, also play a major role in building forensic science as a woman-friendly field in our cultural psyche.

## Film

### *The First Crime Movie*

*Bluebeard*, widely considered the first crime film, was a nine-minute feature made in France in 1901 under the title *Barbe-Bleue*. It debuted in the United States in 1902.<sup>14</sup> The story of Bluebeard is a classic fairytale about a famously wealthy man who sequentially marries and then kills a number of women. The film follows the lord's unnamed eighth wife, who marries him against her will and discovers the remains of her predecessors hidden in the castle. Her brothers ultimately rescue her and kill the murderous Bluebeard, at which point an angel descends and revives his other victims.<sup>15</sup>

Although *Bluebeard* portrays its heroine as a classic damsel in distress, in desperate need of saving by her brothers, it nonetheless grants her a degree of agency in discovering the grisly secret of Lord Bluebeard in the forbidden chamber. By disobeying her husband in a violation of women's expected conduct at the time, she uncovers evidence of a series of crimes which had been suspected but not proven by society at large. This autonomy, evident even in such an early work, was the tone set by the first crime movies, which then became the foundation for the genre in ensuing decades.

### *Female Role Models in Crime Films*

Cinema's capacity to inspire audiences—even in such life-altering ways as career choice—is well-documented. In 1986, for example, Navy recruiters waited outside thea-

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<sup>14</sup> "Bluebeard (1901)", *IMDb*, n.d.

<sup>15</sup> *Barbe-Bleue*, 1901.

ters to catch audiences leaving showings of *Top Gun*, and the naval aviation officers' program saw increased interest in the months following the film's release.<sup>16</sup> Though serious crime dramas starring female leads have been relatively few and far between, several noteworthy examples of women in detective or law enforcement roles surfaced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These characters, all of whom were fundamental to their films' plots, displayed competence and strength, and may have influenced young female viewers to pursue careers in criminal justice.

Often touted as one of the best female police officers in cinema, Anne Lewis (Nancy Allen, *Robocop*, 1987) is vital to the success of her partner, Robocop, even going so far as to save him from a traitor on the police force when he is wounded. *Robocop* diverged from both the typical "buddy-cop" movie, which is still popular today, and classic science fiction tropes by partnering its titular hero with a non-romantic female partner. This absence of a romantic subplot allows Anne to follow her own development arc, even while serving as a supporting character for Robocop's story.

In *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), FBI trainee Clarisse Starling (Jodie Foster) matches wits with Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in order to catch "Buffalo Bill" (Ted Levine). Clarisse faces unique challenges because of her womanhood, including uncooperative male colleagues, unwanted advances, and outright harassment, but she overcomes each obstacle and manages to kill Buffalo Bill and rescue his last victim. Her exceptional combination of empathy and determination, perceptiveness and intuition make

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Evje, "'Top Gun' Boosting Service Sign-ups", *Los Angeles Times*, 1986.

her a groundbreaking character who has stood the test of time and inspired multiple generations of women to pursue careers in law enforcement and forensic investigation.

### *Comedies and Children's Movies*

Long before film and television made their debut, forward-thinking authors and playwrights were making statements through comedy, concealing social commentary beneath thin layers of irony and farce. In recent years, several popular comedy films have featured women in investigative roles, each bearing deeper messages about women's capabilities and the ability of female social connections to influence the investigative process.

In *Miss Congeniality* (2000), FBI agent Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock) sheds her tomboyish exterior to work undercover at a national beauty pageant that has received multiple terror threats. The film's comedic elements, fashion montages, and romantic subplot do not, however, detract from its central messages. Gracie's discovery and eventual embracement of her own femininity demonstrate that a woman does not need to sacrifice her femaleness—and, indeed, may sometimes need to rely upon it—in order to succeed in law enforcement. Gracie also learns to rely upon the other pageanters, forming strong female friendships for what seems to be the first time in her life. Their appreciation and acceptance of her, and hers of them, helps her to solve the mystery and save Cheryl (Heather Burns), her new best friend, from the bomb. Though it does depict the FBI as something of a boys' club, *Miss Congeniality* also shows that women can be a vital part of investigative work, especially when dealing with victims or suspects in female-oriented spaces. Writers could have made the same film, but substituted the pageant scene for, say, a nunnery or brothel and delivered the same message in a much heavier tone.

*Legally Blonde* (2001) also features an over-the-top feminine woman entering a severe, male-dominated space: Harvard Law School. Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) is a sorority girl with an affinity for hot pink who, following an unexpected breakup, enrolls at Harvard Law and goes on to solve the mystery behind a high-visibility court case, ensuring the acquittal of the accused (Brooke, another former sorority sister) without compromising either her own values or Brooke's trust. Elle develops strong ties with all of the women she encounters, from the academic dean to the cosmetician at the nail salon, and relies on her female friends to help her overcome the obstacles that might prevent her from reaching her goals. Like Grace in *Miss Congeniality*, Elle is able to solve the case not in spite, but *because* of her womanhood; Brooke is comfortable confessing her alibi to Elle in confidence because of their shared sorority background, and later Elle is able to refute the guilty party's alibi because of her specialized knowledge of hair care. Once again, comedy shows female audiences that they can be valuable participants in the investigative process, bringing unique knowledge and skills to situations that would leave most men out of their depth.

As a final note, I want to briefly discuss children's movies. Proportionally, very few children's movies have featured female protagonists, even in recent years. One analysis shows that only 10% of animated children's movies released in the United States between 2003 and 2012 boasted a female lead.<sup>17</sup> Of those female leads, even fewer take on even a cursory investigative role; many are princesses of either the traditional or warrior variety, and the central conflicts of their films involve romance (e.g. Aurora, Ariel, Belle),

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<sup>17</sup> Ashley Woods, "Zootopia's Judy Hopps: A Unique Female Protagonist in a World of Animated Men", *Animation World Network*, 2016.

family drama (e.g. *Merida*, *Rapunzel*, *Anna and Elsa*), and perhaps a quest to save their homeland (e.g. *Mulan*, *Pocahontas*, *Moana*). However, one of Disney's most recent blockbuster successes introduced audiences to a noteworthy exception: Judy Hopps of *Zootopia* (2016), a rabbit police officer who teams up with a fox to uncover a massive conspiracy enacted by Assistant Mayor Bellwether of the city Zootopia. The film touches on diverse, mature themes including prejudice, government corruption, and optimism versus realism. As a character, Judy is astonishingly unique in the world of children's film: an adult woman (rabbit) pursuing a professional career in a traditionally male field. Interestingly, the movie follows the near-trope of introducing an influential female friendship early in the film between Judy and the Assistant Mayor, only to turn audiences' expectations on their heads by revealing that the peppy, helpful sheep is actually the main villain. This might, at first glance, appear anti-feminist, but, as some scholars have pointed out, feminist media must recognize not only women's capacity for strength and heroism, but also their capacity for evil and malice if it is to include women in the human experience. The plot twist, which shows the Assistant Mayor to be manipulative and ruthless, actually contributes to the feminist message of *Zootopia* by preventing women from becoming a sort of deity—a misconstrual that is, in many ways, just as alienating and damaging as portraying women as sub-human. Chaining women to a pedestal isolates them just as much as chaining them in a dungeon.

While children's movies may not have urged women into law enforcement in the past in the same way that children's books did, a new generation of girls inspired by their favorite animated "bunny cop" may well be poised to join the ranks of investigators and



forensic scientists. *Zootopia* teaches girls that anyone, no matter his or her background, can become a successful police officer with enough dedication and an open mind.

In sum, television and film have followed an evolutionary path similar to crime fiction in literature and have therefore likely encouraged women to enter investigative science and law enforcement fields. TV serial dramas have been especially popular, and comedies may be surprisingly influential. Disney's *Zootopia* may indicate a new trend in children's movies toward portraying women as independent, capable investigators, so researchers may see a further increase in the number of women in forensic occupations in the next decade or more.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

In forensic science, as in many scientific disciplines in the last century, reality has displayed a tendency to imitate fiction. Much like the flip phones of the 1990s and early 2000s were inspired by the communicators in Star Trek, many of the last century's advances in investigative science have built upon the fictional technologies in detective novels and television procedural dramas. What many individuals often overlook, however, is that every step in the evolution of crime fiction has been shaped by women, both real and fictional, and that women thereby secured their place in investigative science. Women helped to invent the genre and created powerful, relatable female characters who entered into forensic science and investigation, often despite significant opposition. Reality evolved to reflect that as women, inspired by those literary heroines, took up the cause.

#### *The Evolution and Influence of Crime Fiction*

Chronologically, the invention of the crime fiction genre, the inception of modern forensic investigation, and the emergence of women into the workforce coincided such that the field of forensic science was ideally poised to accept women. The World Wars were especially influential in the development of crime fiction—and, therefore, of the realities of forensic science—because during those early decades of the twentieth century, women found a freedom they had never known before. The World Wars granted women both an opening to begin work outside the home en masse, including in medicinal and other scientific disciplines, and experiences that allowed them to compose intricate and compelling

murder mystery plots. These real-world women created and inspired the creation of fictional women who held—and still hold—enormous sway over Western culture’s perception of investigative science and investigators alike.

This influence has been largely welcoming to women. Crime fiction tends to portray women, especially female investigators, as intelligent, competent, and independent. It also usually shows them as an important part of successful investigative teams because they bring their own strengths and unique contributions to the field. These portrayals have shaped popular opinion, convincing certain women that they could become forensic scientists and the rest of the world that those women could succeed. The female characters in detective fiction have further served as role models for young audiences. From Miss Marple to Clarisse Starling, fictional detectives have captured the imaginations of young women who would not be content in any other field. Children’s fiction, especially novel series, have had a particularly profound effect on generations of young readers; characters like Nancy Drew and Trixie Belden have shaped the lives and career aspirations of thousands of young girls.

### *Future Research*

Unfortunately, the depth and breadth of these influences have yet to be investigated. Scientific examination—indeed, serious academic consideration of any kind—of these phenomena has, until now, been virtually nonexistent. This paper serves primarily as a survey of the authors and works of crime fiction in question and, to some extent, their historical context and literary analyses. However, future sociological research on this topic should analyze other kinds of archival data, particularly enrollment in degree programs for

forensic science and criminal justice and application and hiring patterns for law enforcement laboratories and investigative jobs. I hypothesize that, as with *Top Gun*'s influence on young men's pursuit of naval aviation, the criminal justice system has seen upticks in female interest following the release of significant works of crime fiction such as *The Silence of the Lambs* and *CSI*.

Interview-style case studies and surveys, particularly if conducted by social psychologists, might provide a more in-depth examination of the influence of crime fiction on individuals, including the effects of specific characters, traits, or motivations that have encouraged women to enter the field, which might give researchers clues regarding the elements of these stories that have the most powerful influence.

For instance, crime fiction depicts investigation as a mode through which women can help people—especially other women. Shows like *CSI* and *Criminal Minds* give their female characters power over men who prey on women. In a world where nearly every woman has a friend, sister, or other female relation who has been assaulted or abused, that message is incredibly powerful. These books, movies, and shows tell their female audiences that pursuing a career in investigative science gives them an avenue to fight back against their aggressors, to stand up for and defend the most vulnerable member of society, to find truth and do their part to ensure that justice will prevail. These ideas might seem trite or romantic, but they inspire women to do incredible things: to push through long hours in the laboratory, to see and experience the very worst depravity of humanity, to make enormous sacrifices in their personal lives for the sake of their work, and to maintain hope despite all of these struggles. That is the power of crime fiction; it sparks a belief in

women that justice is not only achievable, but that they can meaningfully contribute to its attainment.

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