

“That’s No Job For A Woman”

Female Detectives and Gender Roles in American
Crime Novels, 1930-1994

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Introduction

Studying detective novels allows us to “think broadly and deeply about American history and culture...the villains and heroes of popular literature are very instructive; they tell us about what we fear and who we would conjure up to contain what threatens us. They reveal our racial and religious prejudices and our gender biases”.¹ Detective novels require analysis as pieces of popular culture, which both reflect and influence cultural values and norms, which is evident in regards to gender roles and femininity in popular culture. The changing portrayals of female detectives in American crime novels written by women throughout the twentieth century parallel changes in cultural ideas about femininity and gender roles. In short, such crime novels and their female detectives became increasingly diverse in terms of sexuality and race. As a result, many of the crime novels from the Depression era through the early 1990s became more diverse, focused on social issues, and were self-consciously feminist, reflecting changes in American values over the twentieth century.

The decades spanning the Depression to the early 1990s were host to large social movements and changes in America, the effects of which are also seen in crime fiction written during these years. As such, mystery novels written by women featuring female detectives are useful for analyzing changes in feminine gender roles throughout the twentieth century, as they reflect cultural values and ideas about appropriate feminine behavior from their respective decades. Many of the “traditional” feminine gender roles of domesticity and virginity were solidified in girls’ series of the early and mid-twentieth century, while changes in the genre and in these detectives in the later twentieth century can be traced to social and historical movements such as second-wave feminism. Looking at specific female detectives from the 1930s through the

¹ Nickerson, introduction, 3.

early 1990s illuminates these changes in portrayals of femininity and gender roles as well as their effects on detective fiction in general.

Teen detectives like Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton from girls' series represent—and sometimes break with—many of the traditional values of the 1930s through the 1950s, when girls' series were incredibly popular. Professor Kate Fansler first appeared in 1964 and initially stood as a transitional figure between the values of the previous three decades and those of the latter half of the twentieth century. Detective fiction written by women was often openly feminist and concerned with social issues in the 1970s and 1980s with the creation of the hard-boiled characters Kinsey Millhone and V.I. Warshawski. The rise in visibility of lesbian fiction—within and outside of detective novels—in the 1980s also brought further attention to issues of sexuality, represented here by Detective Kate Delafield. Finally, the early 1990s saw further expansion of diversity in the genre with African American detectives like Marti MacAlister; the creation of Stephanie Plum—though she is white—and her connectedness to her multicultural neighborhood and city also represents this increase in racial and ethnic diversity. An analysis of these detectives and their portrayals—especially in terms of their relationships with authority, their class, race, sexuality, location, and the construction of their femininity—will help reveal changes in American cultural values and gender norms.

Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton: Role Models for Middle-Class Girls

As Gail Collins discussed in *America's Women*, many women in the 1930s turned to forms of popular culture such as romance novels, soap operas on the radio, and “women's movies” in their limited free time as ways to escape the pressures and problems of life in the

Great Depression.² Series featuring heroines like Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton provided a form of escapism for the younger sisters and daughters of these women. Girls' series books were extremely popular in the late nineteenth century through the 1930s, although they remained widely read throughout much of the twentieth century. As discussed in *Nancy Drew and Company*, many librarians and educators “considered them ‘trash’” despite the fact that many of these series reinforced dominant social norms of these decades.³

Nancy Drew was an especially attractive heroine in the 1930s, as she “was free of the constraints of school” and financial worries in addition to being “strong and mind-bogglingly competent.”⁴ Heroines like Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton served as independent role models for young girls, but it is important to note that these books also helped “perpetuate traditional gender relationships and class stereotypes” and that “not all readers were equally ‘welcome’ to these books, which tended to feature middle-class or upper-middle-class white heroines.”⁵ The relatively privileged positions of Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton as middle-class–upper-middle class in Nancy’s case—strengthen their investigative skills, and their suburban locations and physical appearances root them firmly in traditional feminine gender roles despite their independence.

As the most popular and well-known girls’ detective series of the twentieth century, the Nancy Drew books were written under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene at the Stratemeyer Syndicate and Grosset & Dunlap.⁶ Published in 1930, the first Nancy Drew mystery, *The Secret*

² Gail Collins, *America’s Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 350-52, 364-68.

³ Sherrie A. Inness, ed., *Nancy Drew and Company: Culture, Gender, and Girls’ Series* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 5.

⁴ Collins, *America’s Women*, 369.

⁵ Inness, ed., *Nancy Drew and Company*, 6, 10.

⁶ Melanie Rehak, *Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and the Women Who Created Her* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2005), xii-xvi.

of the Old Clock, introduces Nancy Drew, an affluent and “attractive girl of eighteen” with a new blue convertible, a lawyer father, and a live-in housekeeper.⁷ Nancy’s status as an upper-middle class white teen in small-town America gives her a greater degree of privilege and autonomy than many real women had in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In *The Girl Sleuth*, Bobbie Ann Mason argued that for all Nancy’s privilege and “masculine” traits—brave, adventurous, strong, intelligent—“the reader of a Nancy book is never allowed to forget that our heroine...is a sweet young lady who dresses nicely and enjoys having tea with little cakes.”⁸

As an independent girl detective, Nancy is full of contradictions, especially in terms of the construction of her femininity. In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, Nancy’s interactions with her father help reveal these contradictions. Nancy goes to her father for help while he is at work: “‘Now what?’ Mr. Drew asked, smiling, as she burst in upon him. ‘Have you solved the mystery or is your purse in need of a little change?’ Nancy’s cheeks were flushed and her eyes danced with excitement. ‘Don’t tease me,’ she protested. ‘I need some information!’”⁹ This scene clearly illustrates the complexity of the construction on Nancy’s femininity: here, she breaks with the idea of women only needing and wanting money from men, but she also relies on her father and other forms of male authority for information in order to investigate in a traditionally masculine role. Mr. Drew tells her that “‘I wonder if you realize just what you are getting into, Nancy?...Detective work isn’t always the safest occupation in which to engage...I didn’t want you to march off into battle without a knowledge of what you might be up against.’”¹⁰ Such

⁷ Carolyn Keene, *The Secret of the Old Clock* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1930), 1.

⁸ Bobbie Ann Mason, *The Girl Sleuth: On the Trail of Nancy Drew, Judy Bolton, and Cherry Ames* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 48-9.

⁹ Keene, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, 61.

¹⁰ Keene, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, 62.

statements reinforce the association between detective work and masculinity and highlight Nancy's potential inability to perform the role of detective due to her femininity.

The Nancy Drew books contain other double standards for girls, especially in terms of sexuality and morality. Mason argued that "Nancy and her girlfriends are shockingly independent, but a strong moral code guards them...The books affirm a double standard for female sexuality: attention to beauty and clamps on virginity."¹¹ Ned Nickerson, Nancy's boyfriend later in the series, does not make an appearance in *The Secret of the Old Clock*, but Nancy's beauty, endless optimism, and kindness are frequently mentioned throughout the book, all of which are traditionally feminine traits. A scene taking place in a department store does not only serve to further Nancy's investigation, but it also results in her buying a "lovely" new dress, treating the saleswomen with kindness, and being "too discreet to engage in gossip."¹² This scene paints Nancy as an admirable role model for young girls in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s: she is physically attractive, wealthy, independent, kind, and abides by a strict set of morals, all of which were encouraged traits for young girls in the mid-twentieth century.

Sex and sexuality are clearly not openly discussed in these books, and as a result, Nancy is a role model for virginity and morality, never even thinking impure thoughts. Nancy's construction as a physically attractive but virginal role model was not unique, as such portrayals of girls and young women were common in mid-twentieth century popular culture. Women in films during the 1950s in particular, like Debbie Reynolds and Sandra Dee, "played perky young women who the leading man overlooked during the early action, when he lusted after a larger, older, and more aggressive seductress," and the Nancy Drew books' portrayals of Nancy

¹¹ Mason, *The Girl Sleuth*, 65.

¹² Keene, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, 26-7.

certainly lines up with this idea of women being energetic and engaging but sexually pure.¹³ Nancy “has all the glamour of a starlet, but the entrances to her emotions and physical desires are closed up tight,” an example for girls of these decades to follow and of the double standards for women in popular culture and in reality.¹⁴ It is important to note, however, that the relative absence of sexuality and subsequent emphasis on purity in the books extends to characters like Mr. Drew and Hannah Gruen, the Drews’ live-in housekeeper, as well. Readers are never shown even a glimpse of sexual actions, feelings, or desire from any characters in the book, which reinforces the overall lack of overt discussion of sex or sexuality in this time period.

The Judy Bolton mysteries were written by Margaret Sutton from 1932 until 1967, and while both Judy and Nancy are successful teen detectives, Judy’s class background makes her a detective who is more strictly bound by traditional feminine gender roles. Judy, in contrast to Nancy, is required to do chores and housework, which at this time were strictly female activities, and she shares an allowance with her brother rather than getting lavish gifts like a new convertible—like Nancy does—from her parents.¹⁵ At the beginning of *The Vanishing Shadow*, published in 1932, Judy is staying at her grandparents’ farm while her physician father and her mother are on vacation.¹⁶ While the Boltons are financially stable and firmly middle-class, Judy’s father’s “business brought [Judy] in contact with all kinds of people as she often went with him when he made his calls,” presumably including those of color and of low socioeconomic status.¹⁷ *The Vanishing Shadow*, like the Nancy Drew mysteries, neglects to mention these groups of people, further excluding them from the genre and from public thought.

¹³ Collins, *America’s Women*, 409.

¹⁴ Mason, *The Girl Sleuth*, 65.

¹⁵ Margaret Sutton, *The Vanishing Shadow* (Bedford: Applewood Books, 1932), 8-9.

¹⁶ Sutton, *The Vanishing Shadow*, 2.

¹⁷ Sutton, *The Vanishing Shadow*, 2.

While Judy's status as a middle-class white heroine in the 1930s creates a lack of diversity in the novels, her lack of privilege when compared with Nancy Drew also creates more patriarchal barriers to her role as detective and her ability to investigate. Looking at Judy in relation to the patriarchal structure of her social world, it is clear that:

Judy is more real than the syndicate sleuths or Nancy Drew because she has to fight male chauvinism...Judy is both protected and challenged by the male world with which she manages to cope, and against which she jousts—with wits, not Wonder Girl advantages...Judy solves mysteries as an independent girl detective in spite of the limitations forced upon her by society. Her struggles potentially strengthen the reader's determination to be free.¹⁸

Judy's class background limits her ability to devote the majority of her time to detecting, as Nancy Drew does, or to investigate with the same freedom. Judy does, however, share Nancy Drew's passion for solving mysteries and partaking in a traditionally male activity. Speaking to her brother Horace, Judy says, "'Sometimes I wish I were a boy.' 'And you would be—' 'A detective,' she broke in quickly. 'A great one who goes into all kinds of dangers. I wouldn't mind that—afterwards. There would be that thrill of finding out things. You can't imagine what a satisfaction there is in hitting on a real live clue.'"¹⁹ However, Judy, unlike Nancy, does not have the freedom to solve mysteries whenever she pleases; Sally E. Parry argued in "The Secret of the Feminist Heroine" that Judy is "less able to separate her roles as daughter, sister, and wife, from her role as detective" than Nancy, probably due to their class differences.²⁰ Despite their differences, it is clear that Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton represented independent role models for young girls during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s while at the same time remaining firmly enmeshed in cultural ideas of women and girls as innocent, ladylike, and dependent on men.

¹⁸ Mason, *Girl Sleuth*, 84.

¹⁹ Sutton, *The Vanishing Shadow*, 53.

²⁰ Sally E. Parry, "The Secret of the Feminist Heroine: The Search for Values in Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton," in *Nancy Drew and Company*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 145.

The 1960s: Kate Fansler and a Time of Transition

Professor Kate Fansler first appeared in *In the Last Analysis*, published in 1964, and she serves as a transitional figure in detective fiction between the traditional values of the Depression era through the 1950s and the gradually feminist works of the 1970s and beyond; this transitional status is also reflective of larger changes regarding gender and cultural ideas about women in America at this time. The first Kate Fansler novel was published in the early years of the sexual revolution, though according to Beth Bailey, “the most important decade of [the sexual] revolution was the 1970s when the ‘strands’ of the 1960s joined with gay liberation, the women’s movement, and powerful assertions of the importance of cultural differences in America.”²¹ Kate does hold some unconventional views of sex and marriage for 1964, but the so-called sexual revolution is essentially absent from *In the Last Analysis* and her character. Bailey argued that the sexual revolution was more evolution than revolution, as many of the “dangerous” sexual behaviors that people associated with the movement, like higher rates of premarital sex, had been part of American culture at least since the 1920s.²² So while Kate herself narrates that she has practiced sex outside of marriage—since she has never been married—this would probably have been less scandalous to readers because Kate is at least in her late thirties, if not older, and the sexual revolution was mostly associated with youth culture. Kate is a transitional figure, especially in regards to larger social movements, because she provides a lens through which to glimpse the presence and absence of the early sexual revolution in popular culture.

²¹ Beth Bailey, “Sexual Revolution(s),” in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 239.

²² Bailey, “Sexual Revolution(s),” 237-8.

As an English professor at a prestigious university, Kate operates within a largely male-dominated world, just as her creator, Carolyn Heilbrun—writing and publishing under the pseudonym Amanda Cross—did. In “Carolyn Heilbrun & the Sisterhood of Sleuths,” an article written for *The Washington Post* in 1989, Paula Span quoted Heilbrun’s reasoning for publishing under a pseudonym as a way to protect herself prior to receiving tenure at Columbia University: “It was dangerous as it was; I was suspected even then of being a feminist.”²³ Though Heilbrun identified herself as a feminist, the early Kate Fansler mysteries, including *In the Last Analysis*, are not, and these early novels adhere to traditional female gender roles. Maureen T. Reddy discussed how academics fit in with detective fiction and feminism in *Sisters of Crime*, and she focused largely on Kate Fansler in this section. In the early Kate Fansler novels, Kate is “quite happy playing the traditional professorial role without worrying much about that role’s limitations or about the patriarchal structure of the university.”²⁴

When viewed through the context of the early 1960s, however, Kate Fansler is certainly a strong-willed and independent woman with unconventional views about sex and marriage.²⁵ Fans of the series applaud these values: “Kate was smart. She held down a major job in a major place. She was strong. She was a single woman who regarded marriage as a choice, not a destiny. She was vocalizing some of the things a number of us had felt or wished for.”²⁶ These elements of Kate’s character are not fleshed out until later novels, however, so while Kate’s views on sex and marriage are unconventional for 1964 and echo aspects of the early sexual revolution, she cannot be seen as a feminist heroine in *In the Last Analysis*. Rather, she presents a mix of traditional and

²³ Paula Span, “Carolyn Heilbrun & the Sisterhood of Sleuths; 25 Years Ago, Her Amanda Cross Mysteries Set a Feminist Standard,” *The Washington Post*, August 29, 1989, 2.

²⁴ Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1988), 52.

²⁵ Amanda Cross, *In the Last Analysis* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1964), 55-7.

²⁶ Span, “Carolyn Heilbrun & the Sisterhood of Sleuths,” 2.

transitional values in the novel. For example, Kate relies on her connections with men, often previously sexual in nature, in order to obtain information about the case in *In the Last Analysis*. Kate uses her friendship—and later in the series, sexual relationship and marriage—with lawyer Reed Amherst; without Reed and access to the information he provides, it would be much more difficult for Kate to solve cases.²⁷

Kate, like Nancy Drew, is a privileged detective, despite the fact that she works in a male-dominated profession. In an interview with Diana Cooper-Clark, published in *Designs of Darkness* in 1983, Heilbrun stated:

I made [Kate] rich because your detective has to be rich. You can't have a detective who's too poor to leap on a plane at a moment's notice. And I made her a woman, and this was before the woman's movement, because I knew how women talk and behave and because I thought it would be fun. I made her beautiful which I now rather regret. I made her too much of a fantasy figure.²⁸

Heilbrun's comment about the necessity for detectives to be rich excludes those women who are not wealthy, upper-middle class, or even middle class, from having a place in the genre, which then excludes a large amount of women of color as well. Heilbrun's acknowledgment of Kate's physical attractiveness also adheres to the traditional expectations for women to keep up their appearances and remain sexual objects. While Kate's status as a single female professor and beliefs about sex and marriage tie her to transitional values of later social movements of the late '60s and '70s, her ultimate reliance on men to obtain information also grounds her character in traditional values. It is clear that this novel's portrayal of Kate is representative of the contradictory mix of traditional and transitional cultural values in the early and mid 1960s, especially in regards to movements like the sexual revolution.

²⁷ Cross, *In the Last Analysis*, 99.

²⁸ Diana Cooper-Clark, "Interview with Amanda Cross," in *Designs of Darkness: Interviews with Detective Novelists* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1983), 191.

Feminist Crime Fighters in the '80s: V.I. Warshawski, Kinsey Millhone, and Kate Delafield

The crime novel of the 1980s became a medium through which female writers could experiment with gender norms and issues in response to second-wave feminism. Writers like Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Katherine V. Forrest “used their novels as spaces in which to explore the dilemmas germane to real women’s lives, such as the conflicts that arise from gendered codes of value about work, home, kinship networks, success”; topics like “homelessness and poverty, homophobia, sexism and racism, [and] domestic abuse” were also explored by these authors.²⁹ The inclusion of these issues in such novels and the broadening of crime fiction corresponds with changes in American society as a result of feminism. This is clearly reflected in the National Organization for Women’s (NOW) “Statement of Purpose,” written in 1967:

We...believe that the time has come for a new movement toward true equality for all women in America, and toward a fully equal partnership of the sexes, as part of the worldwide revolution of human rights now taking place within and beyond our national borders. The purpose of NOW is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men...We realize that women’s problems are linked to many broader questions of social justice...we expect to give active support to the common cause of equal rights for all those who suffer discrimination and deprivation...³⁰

The impacts of such thoughts and second-wave feminism are clearly reflected in *A Is For Alibi*, *Indemnity Only*, and *Amateur City* and their respective protagonists, especially in terms of the divide between family and work and working in male-dominated fields.

²⁹ Margaret Kinsman, “Feminist crime fiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 154.

³⁰ National Organization for Women, “Statement of Purpose,” in *1960 to the Present*, vol. 3 of *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism*, eds. Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 16.

In *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, Sally R. Munt discussed the intersectional nature of feminism and detective fiction, turning to popular culture to gain a better sense of the cultural values of the late twentieth century. Although crime fiction is associated with masculinity, during the 1980s “women were enthusiastically consuming these books—there had to be something in it for them,” especially with the increased publication of feminist crime fiction in the wake of second-wave feminism.³¹ Munt also added that “during the latter part of the 1970s and most predominantly in the 1980s a particular type of woman crime writer gained ascendancy. Typically white, professional, and middle class, often holding a Ph.D. from a well-known university, this intellectual has integrated liberal feminism into her texts as political discourse.”³² Authors like Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Katherine V. Forrest fit this description; although they and their values were instrumental in broadening detective fiction as a genre and feminine gender roles within it, the 1970s and 1980s still saw an overall lack of female detectives of color and racial diversity.

Written in 1982, Sara Paretsky’s *Indemnity Only* introduces hard-boiled, feminist private investigator V.I. (Vic) Warshawski. The novel takes place in Chicago with a grittier and more dangerous atmosphere than the suburban Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton novels or the ritzy neighborhoods of New York City like the Kate Fansler novels. Paretsky’s descriptions of Chicago create an ideal backdrop for a solitary detective:

The night air was thick and damp. As I drove south along Lake Michigan, I could smell rotting alewives like a faint perfume on the heavy air...On shore traffic was heavy, the city moving restlessly, trying to breathe. It was July in Chicago...Away from the lake the city was quieter. The South Loop, with no entertainment beyond a few peepshows and the city lockup, was deserted - a drunk weaving uncertainly down the street was my only companion.³³

³¹ Sally R. Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27.

³² Munt, *Murder by the Book?*, 33.

³³ Sara Paretsky, *Indemnity Only* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1982), 1.

Vic's solitude amidst the "restless" urban setting reinforces her hard-boiled characterization, which challenges the traditional portrayal of hard-boiled detectives as masculine. Vic is "isolated and distanced, not from other people or society as [the traditional hard-boiled male detective] is, but from what society dictates is a woman's place."³⁴ Vic's name adds to this sense of masculinity and subversiveness; male characters repeatedly ask her throughout *Indemnity Only* what V.I. stands for—Victoria Iphigenia—and she often refuses to tell or be addressed with her "real" feminine name. For example, when Ralph, a suspect in the case as well as Vic's lover, asks her what the "I" stands for, Vic replies, "None of your goddamn business," maintaining the confidentiality of her feminine identity.³⁵

However, while Paretsky gives Vic several "masculine" traits—she often indulges in unhealthy foods and alcohol, her apartment is a mess, she used to be a lawyer—a 1985 review from *The New York Times* points out Vic's carefully constructed femininity. The reviewer wrote that Paretsky "has been successful in portraying a woman in a man's world, and the emphasis is on 'woman.' V.I. Warshawski is tough but never loses her femininity, and she is an altogether believable creation."³⁶ Though she does not have a traditional family or a steady romantic partner, Vic maintains her femininity most noticeably through her clothing choices. Munt argues that Vic's outfits—"often silk and almost always...expensive"—could serve to "[reassure] the female reader that 'dressing up' enables you to do the job," even in male-dominated professions.³⁷ Clothing and appearances were vital aspects of being a "good" woman in the 1980s, when "feminism was once again confined to the dust bin of history, women reembraced high-heeled shoes and dress-up clothing, and fear of spinsterhood reemerged as a popular

³⁴ Kinsman, "Feminist crime fiction," 152.

³⁵ Paretsky, *Indemnity Only*, 48.

³⁶ "Crime," *The New York Times*, September 15, 1985, 33.

³⁷ Munt, *Murder by the Book?*, 47.

pathology.”³⁸ Popular figures like Vic could serve as examples for women of how to maintain an appropriate level of femininity while holding feminist views and working in masculine professions; this balance would have served women of the ‘80s well as the decade continued to place importance on attracting men and marriage.

However, Vic does break the traditional feminine gender roles of motherhood and marriage, more so than fictional female detectives prior to the 1980s, and her connections to the police force and other authorities give her information that previous detectives were unable to access. Before his death, Vic’s father was a police officer, giving Vic connections to people like homicide lieutenant Bobby Mallory, who only sometimes—and reluctantly at that—gives Vic information about her cases. Vic says that Bobby usually “tries to pretend I’m not working, or at least not working as an investigator,” which is clear when he says that she should “be a happy housewife now, instead of playing at detective and making it harder for us to get our job done...being a detective is not a job for a girl like you, Vicki—it’s not fun and games.”³⁹ Bobby’s disapproval of Vic’s choice of profession both creates barriers to obtaining information from authorities, despite her connections, and speaks to her disregard for traditional feminine gender roles, which she cites as having created issues earlier in her life. Vic tells Ralph, her love interest in *Indemnity Only*, that:

the reason my first marriage fell apart was because I’m too independent...with men, it always seems, or often seems, as though I’m having to fight to maintain who I am...I’m not sure why I married [Dick]—sometimes I think it’s because he represented the white Anglo-Saxon establishment, and part of me wanted to belong to that...There really are times when I wish I did have a couple of children and was doing the middle-class family thing. But that’s a myth, you know...I know I’m feeling a longing for a myth, not the reality. It’s just—I get scared that I’ve made the wrong choice...⁴⁰

³⁸ Collins, *America’s Women*, 447.

³⁹ Paretsky, *Indemnity Only*, 28-9.

⁴⁰ Paretsky, *Indemnity Only*, 160-62.

Vic acknowledging the difficulties of justifying her lack of children and a husband but ultimately standing by her choices makes her a more relatable character for women of the 1980s, especially in a decade when women were still expected to take on maternal and feminine roles even if they were working.

Kinsey Millhone presents a similar combination of independence, feminism, and strength as a female detective. Also published in 1982, Sue Grafton's *A is for Alibi* is Kinsey's first appearance and like *Indemnity Only*, this novel was popular among a wide audience of readers and remains so today. Like Vic, Kinsey was among the increasing number of fictional female detectives in the 1980s who were "liberating themselves from the literary confines of the traditional hapless heroine in need of a manly rescuer."⁴¹ Kinsey has been divorced twice and has no children, like Vic, and Reddy argued that both detectives are "shown both to relish [their] independence and to seek intimate connections with others; however, for that cherished independence to be preserved, the connections must fall outside the boundaries of those socially sanctioned relationships that have defined and oppressed women," like that of mother and wife.⁴² This social network and chosen family help Kinsey solve mysteries just as they help other female detectives, but like Vic, Kinsey's previous experiences as a police officer allow her to access information more easily. Kinsey's independence, as well as her status as a white, middle-class woman, also give her a more privileged status than female detectives of earlier decades.

The location of *A is for Alibi* in California impacts Kinsey's characterization similarly to how *Indemnity Only*'s setting in Chicago impacts Vic as tough and urban. Clothing plays a less important role in Kinsey's life than it does in Vic's, but Kinsey frequently jogs, as do those

⁴¹ Deirdre Donahue, "Women of mystery; Lady sleuths pack heat and realism," *USA Today*, July 27, 1989, 1D.

⁴² Reddy, *Sisters in Crime*, 105.

around her, and staying fit and thin are priorities for her, which could stem from California's appearance-focused culture. Kinsey says that when she goes running, "palm trees line the wide grassy area between the sidewalk and the sand and there are always other joggers, most of them looking lots better than I"; in response to an overweight woman telling her that "fat is beautiful," Kinsey says, "I don't know...I keep trying to avoid it myself."⁴³ This culture of keeping one's body "in shape" is not unique to California, but the inclusion of these passages in the novel highlight the importance of appearance for women in the 1980s and Kinsey's adherence to this specific gender and appearance norm.

Though Kinsey is a former police officer and has closer ties to the law enforcement system than previous female detectives, she recognizes the corruption of the system and receives patronizing treatment from men still working in law enforcement. Homicide lieutenant and Kinsey's former co-worker, Con Dolan, tells Kinsey, "'You'd get more out of me if you'd learn to flirt,'" to which she replies, "No I wouldn't. You think women are a pain in the ass. If I flirted, you'd pat me on the head and make me go away."⁴⁴ Although she is clearly no stranger to working in male-dominated fields, Kinsey's independence creates issues for her in a society that emphasizes women's status as dependent, just as Vic's independence caused problems in her personal life. Dolan tells Kinsey that bad politics and bureaucracy are "'why you didn't like being a cop yourself, Kinsey. Working with a leash around your neck'"; later in the novel, Kinsey says that "I've never been good at taking shit, especially from men...private investigation is my whole life. It is why I get up in the morning and what puts me to bed at night. Most of the time I'm alone, but why not? I'm not unhappy and I'm not discontented."⁴⁵ Kinsey's

⁴³ Sue Grafton, *A is for Alibi* (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1982), 67, 91.

⁴⁴ Grafton, *A is for Alibi*, 13.

⁴⁵ Grafton, *A is for Alibi*, 16, 248, 262.

independence alienates her from people and represents her breaking with cultural expectations for women to be dependent on and subordinate to men.

One of the largest similarities between Vic and Kinsey, however, deals with their sexual relationships with men. Both Vic and Kinsey become sexually involved with suspects in their cases. Kinsey acknowledges that her gut tells her seeing Charlie Scorsoni is “not good,” and Vic’s lover, Ralph, nearly gets the two of them killed by not trusting Vic’s investigating skills; Ralph tells Vic that ““I should have listened to you. I couldn’t believe you knew what you were talking about. I guess deep down I didn’t take your detecting seriously. I thought it was a hobby...””⁴⁶ Reddy argued that Vic and Kinsey face “the greatest difficulty in breaking free of the codes governing heterosexual relationships, with sexual involvement with a man always a threat to her independence, as the man eventually either perceives the detective’s commitment to her job as an obstacle to be overcome or asserts his need to protect her in some fashion.”⁴⁷ Not only do these relationships threaten Vic and Kinsey’s independence, they also threaten their lives themselves, which casts a negative light on these detectives’ decisions when it comes to sexual relationships. So while Vic and Kinsey adhere to cultural norms of heteronormativity by engaging in these relationships, the novels begin and end with them maintaining their independence, which marks a larger shift toward an acceptance of changing female gender roles.

In addition to independent, feminist female detectives, the 1980s also saw a rise in lesbian fiction, including lesbian crime novels as a sub-genre of detective fiction. Reddy wrote that “the process of accepting a lesbian identity is one thematic center of [many] lesbian crime novels,” with the plots of the novels often “paralleling the hero’s investigation of a crime or

⁴⁶ Grafton, *A is for Alibi*, 73; Paretsky, *Indemnity Only*, 236.

⁴⁷ Reddy, *Sisters in Crime*, 105.

mystery with her investigation of her own psyche.”⁴⁸ This is certainly the case in *Amateur City*, published in 1984 by one of the most well-known authors of lesbian crime fiction, Katherine V. Forrest. *Amateur City* introduces Detective Kate Delafield, described in a book review from 1988 as a “more sombre and self-conscious figure” in comparison to Vic and Kinsey.⁴⁹ One of the most obvious reasons for Kate’s self-awareness is her sexuality; though the 1980s saw a broadening of detective fiction, identifying as lesbian still posed a threat to norms of heteronormativity and female reliance on men.

While Vic and Kinsey are able to “forget” about their sexuality at points in their novels, Kate is always aware of and defined by her sexuality. After a man remarks that being a female detective must be challenging, Kate feels “the familiar heavy weariness at being reminded of her singularity...Always. Growing up, she had been taller and stronger, more aggressive than the other girls; in look and manner, hopeless unfeminine by their standards. And always there had been that one essential difference: she was a woman who desired only other women.”⁵⁰ Kate is not “out” to her colleagues at LAPD, although many of them have presumably guessed or know about her sexuality. Though Kate experiences some anxiety about her sexuality, she still stands as a strong, independent figure in a masculine profession; Forrest instead uses Kate’s sexuality as a way to expose social issues like sexual and racial discrimination in the workplace. Kate argues that her identification as lesbian makes working as a female detective easier because it allows her to be viewed as a “pseudo-[man]” and allows the men to continue believing that “any woman

⁴⁸ Reddy, *Sisters in Crime*, 123.

⁴⁹ Stephen Knight, “Innovation and Renovation is the Name of the Crime Game,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 30, 1988, 77.

⁵⁰ Katherine V. Forrest, *Amateur City* (Tallahassee: Bella Books, Inc., 2011), Kindle edition, 27.

who wants to be a cop must be suffering from penis envy and my being a lesbian confirms that,” but that “all gay male cops are in the deepest darkest end of the closet.”⁵¹

The critical reception of these novels and how these reviews changed parallels shifts in cultural values, with more positive reviews for feminist crime fiction appearing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Early reviews for *A is for Alibi* are more critical than congratulatory:

This first book is competent enough, but not particularly original. Miss Grafton uses deliberately flat prose in an effort for realism. Kinsey Millhone, not a very interesting woman, is a cliché-ridden character representing the loneliness and alienation of her male counterparts...What is basically wrong with the book is that the writing lacks real flair. It is no better or no worse than the majority of related books, and that is about all.⁵²

Such early reviews reflect the barriers facing feminist crime writers in the early 1980s in gaining credibility, despite second-wave feminism. A 1982 review of *Indemnity Only*, less critical, describes the novel as unremarkable: “It’s not a splashy debut, but Paretsky writes with assurance about a milieu that she knows well...Paretsky is breaking no new ground, but she writes smoothly within the bounds of convention. Warshawski is a warm, likable gal...”⁵³ The positive ways in which these novels were described later in the decade, however, can be seen as a greater acceptance of feminist values by mainstream culture. A review of female-authored crime fiction from 1989 argues that “just as women’s real-life opportunities have expanded, so have the opportunities for their mystery counterparts...in the last decade, women writers have toughened up.”⁵⁴ While a 1991 review describes Vic as “beautiful, sexy, funny and super fit,” it also notes that “she refuses to accept that there is a place where women cannot be”; in a similar vein, another review quotes Paretsky as saying that “the response I get from women who read

⁵¹ Forrest, *Amateur City*, 184.

⁵² Newgate Callendar, “Book Review Desk,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1982, 41.

⁵³ Jean M. White, “Book World; Mysteries,” *The Washington Post*, February 21, 1982, 10.

⁵⁴ Donahue, “Women of mystery,” 1.

my books is a feeling of empowerment.”⁵⁵ Such positive responses to blatantly feminist crime novels and detectives speaks to the growing popularity of these books among women and a growing cultural acceptance of female independence, and they also represent the validation of female readers’ opinions.

An Expanding, Diverse Genre: Marti MacAlister, Stephanie Plum, and the Early 1990s

In “Race and American crime fiction,” Maureen T. Reddy wrote that if the 1980s were the decade that saw a rise in feminist crime fiction and feminist detectives, “then the 1990s may well have been the decade that undid the grip that whiteness had so long maintained on the genre.”⁵⁶ Detective fiction of the 1990s became increasingly racially diverse, just as American culture and feminism itself had done. Feminists of the 1990s became more aware of the necessity of including *all* women in the feminist movement, not just white women. Barbara Ehrenreich wrote that “women are also members of classes and races and ethnic groups - so it wouldn’t make any sense to have one equality without the other. If feminism means anything it means a movement for all women, not just some women, not just white women, or corporate lawyer women, or wealthy women.”⁵⁷ The rise in multiculturalism and inclusive statements within the feminist community in the early 1990s is also reflected in detective fiction of this time.

Such thinking materialized in the rise in publication of black media, particularly books by black authors. A 1995 article in *The Denver Post* stated that “the bashful courtship between

⁵⁵ Carter D., “The Siren of Sleuths,” *Herald Sun*, August 13, 1991, 33; Anita Manning, “Woman of Mystery: V.I. Warshawski creator Sara Paretsky; Detective is the author’s alter ego,” *USA Today*, July 25, 1991, 1D.

⁵⁶ Maureen T. Reddy, “Race and American crime fiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 145.

⁵⁷ Barbara Ehrenreich, “Beyond Gender Equality: Toward the New Feminism,” in *1960 to the Present*, vol. 3 of *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism*, eds. Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 449..

mainstream publishing and black writers that began a few years ago...is now a firm, deepening union...Book sales to blacks rose 48 percent between 1990 and 1993.”⁵⁸ The popularity of Eleanor Taylor Bland’s series featuring Detective Marti MacAlister, first appearing in *Dead Time* in 1992, speaks to the increasing diversity of feminist crime fiction in the 1990s.

Like many other female detectives, Marti is self-reliant, but her status as a black woman as well as a mother set her apart from the hard-boiled female protagonists of the 1980s. A 1996 review from *The Denver Post* stated that the Marti MacAlister series has “proved popular with critics and readers who enjoy the fast-moving mysteries that touch upon race but don’t dwell upon it.”⁵⁹ Marti’s race is a larger issue for those around her than something she needs to come to terms with. In the first chapter of *Dead Time*, a group of old women gossips about Marti; one woman says, “well, *she* certainly isn’t a police officer. I thought they were only letting people in on official business,” while another replies that Marti has “cop written all over her. Now ain’t that a sight, Betty? Black and a woman and not wearin’ no uniform...Ain’t ladylike lettin’ ‘em walk around in pants.”⁶⁰ These women’s reactions to Marti represent the backlash against the increasing numbers of women of color in power in the early 1990s in fiction and in reality. Bland is quoted as saying that in her novels, Marti’s status as a black woman is “not an issue of race. The goal is to tell a good story. That’s what everybody else does. They just leave us out. I include them...I have two objectives: to tell a good story and to include the whole culture. People have to be reflected in the culture, and the written word is part of that culture.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Tananarive Due, “Black literary movement flourishing Authors, readers grow at breakneck speed,” *The Denver Post*, September 11, 1995, G-10.

⁵⁹ Sandra Brooks-Dillard, “Author pens mysteries to keep ‘right brain’ sharp,” *The Denver Post*, August 4, 1996, 8.

⁶⁰ Barbara Taylor Bland, *Dead Time* (New York: St. Martin’s Paperbacks, 1992), 10.

⁶¹ Brooks-Dillard, “Author pens mysteries to keep ‘right brain’ sharp,” 8.

In addition to being a positive example for black women making gains in professions they were traditionally denied access to, Marti is an example for women trying to balance careers with motherhood while still maintaining their independence. After the death of her husband, Marti and her two children relocated from Chicago to the smaller city of Lincoln Prairie. In Lincoln Prairie, they share a house with Marti's best friend Sharon and Sharon's son, which allows them to save money. This housing situation gives Marti access to Sharon's network of information, as Sharon keeps "her finger on most of what was going on and could tap into a lot of informal resources."⁶² Motherhood, a network of female friends, and social support helps Marti maintain her femininity despite her independence from male support, and as such, she remains within female gender norms. Marti's appearance, however, presents a break from the previous characterization of female detectives as sexualized and concerned with thinness. In the first chapter of *Dead Time*, Bland describes Marti as "five-ten and a hundred and sixty pounds," and that "she was what her mother had called healthy. Her size pleased her, and most people tended to move out of her way."⁶³ Rather than worrying about putting on weight like Vic and Kinsey do, Marti uses her size to her advantage and embraces the power it gives her, presenting a more positive relationship with her body for women to follow than had been available before.

Like other female detectives, Marti also experiences sexism from men working in law enforcement. Marti's partner, Matthew "Vik" Jessenovik, expresses many sexist views throughout the novel: "Police work, as far as Vik was concerned, was divided into two categories: man's work, which involved supervising the evidence techs and all other personnel at the scene, and women's work, interviewing people..."⁶⁴ Marti's work as a police detective

⁶² Bland, *Dead Time*, 56.

⁶³ Bland, *Dead Time*, 10.

⁶⁴ Bland, *Dead Time*, 12.

violates many of Vik's "traditional" ideas about women, and she ignores them. Though these ideas do not directly harm Marti, their inclusion in the novel speaks to the continued presence of sexist ideas about appropriate professions and actions for women in the 1990s.

However innovative and expansive feminist crime fiction was in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was becoming too cliché for some critics. In a 1995 book review, Margaret Cannon wrote that "the sassy female detective is becoming as ubiquitous a cliché as the smartass male."⁶⁵ Echoing this idea, another review from 1995 argued that "the female sleuths seem to have lost their way...all these independent women sleuths belong to feminist times: active, heroic, beating men in a man's world. But the problem is that feminism isn't what it used to be. We don't really know what feminism is anymore. The slickness and aggressive wit of female detectives thus becomes unfocused, a source of unease."⁶⁶ Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum, first seen in *One for the Money* in 1994, represents a departure from the feminist detective of the 1980s, appearing in the midst of such conflicting ideas about feminism and its relationship with crime fiction.

While *One for the Money* shares traits with feminist crime novels of the 1980s—a single woman as the protagonist, strong connection with location, working- and middle-class origins—its differences also help mark transitions in detective fiction and feminism in the early 1990s. Stephanie Plum, an out-of-work lingerie buyer living in Trenton, New Jersey, becomes a bounty hunter out of financial necessity, and her mother's reaction to this choice is similar to the disapproval that Marti and Vic experience working in male professions. Stephanie's mother tells her, "...Stephanie, what are you thinking of? This is no kind of work for a nice young lady."⁶⁷ While this type of reaction at breaking traditional feminine gender norms is typical, Stephanie's

⁶⁵ Margaret Cannon, "Murder & Mayhem: New clues for detective novels," *The Globe and Mail*, February 25, 1995, 1.

⁶⁶ Nicci Gerrard, "Gunning for the Girls," *The Observer*, April 23, 1995, 6.

⁶⁷ Janet Evanovich, *One for the Money* (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1994), 41.

frequent contact with her family is not common among most of the other female detectives examined, as most are characterized as loners. Stephanie's family, social network, and the informal ways in which she gathers information are tied to the strong sense of place exuded in this novel.

Evanovich's descriptions of the "burg," Stephanie's suburb of Trenton, New Jersey, root Stephanie squarely in blue-collar, working-class America. Stephanie's travels to other areas of the city give the novel a multicultural dimension missing in novels from the 1980s like *A is for Alibi*. Multiple reviews cite Evanovich's treatment of the burg as one of the novel's strengths, with one from 1994 stating that "Evanovich wonderfully captures the tight-knit neighborhood atmosphere where not only does everyone know each other's name, they know each other's dirt."⁶⁸ This social network as a result of living in the burg allows Stephanie to access information and solve crimes without complete reliance on established forms of authority, a trait common among the female detectives examined from all of these decades. The first chapter of *One for the Money* begins with a description of the burg; Stephanie says that she was "born and raised in a blue-collar chunk of Trenton called the burg. Houses were attached and narrow. Yards were small. Cars were American. The people were mostly of Italian descent, with enough Hungarians and Germans thrown in to offset inbreeding...And, if you had to live in Trenton anyway, it was an okay place to raise a family."⁶⁹ Stephanie's family and the connected nature of the burg shape her success as a bounty hunter: she gets the job as a bounty hunter because her cousin owns the business, the secretary at the company went to high school with Stephanie's sister and gives her information, and Stephanie's cousin is married to the cop who gives her information, to name only a few of the ways in which the burg helps Stephanie. While Stephanie

⁶⁸ Deirdre Donahue, "'Money' rich with mystery and comedy," *USA Today*, October 25, 1994, 6D.

⁶⁹ Evanovich, *One for the Money*, 1.

relies on an informal social network to solve cases, just as other detectives do, this network is familial in nature and sets her apart from the other detectives examined here.

The construction of Stephanie's femininity and the ways in which critics received *One for the Money* also reveal cultural ideas about women in the early 1990s. More emphasis is placed on Stephanie's appearance in reviews and in the novel itself than other on detectives like Vic or Marti. At one point in the novel, Stephanie and Joe Morelli, her love interest, plan to use Stephanie as bait to try and trap the killer; in order to do so, she plays up her femininity:

I dressed in strappy sandals, a tight black knit miniskirt, and a stretchy red top with a low scoop neck that showed as much cleavage as was possible, given my bra size. I did the mousse and the spray thing with my hair so that I had a lot of it. I lined my eyes in midnight blue, gunked them up with mascara, painted my mouth whore red, and hung the biggest, brassiest earrings I owned from my lobes. I lacquered my nails to match my lips and checked myself out in the mirror. Damned if I didn't make a good slut.⁷⁰

Here her femininity is both a tool and endangers her at the same time. This scene encourages women to realize the power of their own physical appearances but to understand the potential consequences of doing so, which in this scene and in real life could result in sexual harassment or abuse. Though she usually does not dress as garishly as in this scene, descriptions of Stephanie's appearance are frequent throughout the novel, so much so that nearly every review mentioned her physical appearance. A 1994 review from *The New York Times* stated: "A Jersey girl with Bette Midler's mouth and Cher's fashion sense - big hair, gold hoop earrings, Spandex bike shorts, tons of turquoise eye shadow and attitude out to here - Stephanie kind of glows in the dark...The plot has more potholes than a street in downtown Trenton, and Stephanie's investigative procedures are pretty slapdash...But with her brazen style and dazzling wardrobe, who could resist this doll?"⁷¹ In a decade when serious feminist crime fiction and hard-boiled

⁷⁰ Evanovich, *One for the Money*, 236.

⁷¹ Marilyn Stasio, "Crime," *The New York Times*, September 4, 1994, 17.

female detectives were becoming more common, the emphasis placed on Stephanie's appearance, humor, and the lightheartedness of *One for the Money* speaks to the centrality of women's physical appearances in determining their worth even in the wake of second-wave feminism.

Conclusion

By examining fictional female detectives from the Depression era through the early 1990s, shifts in ideas about women's roles become evident. While protagonists of girls' series like Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton do break certain feminine gender roles—they are curious, brave, daring, and often question authority—their constant portrayals as proper young ladies despite their detecting made them ideal role models for young girls of the 1930s through the 1950s. The creation of Professor Kate Fansler marked the beginning of a transitional period between the values of the Depression era, mid-twentieth century, and the beginning of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s. Kate does hold some unconventional ideas about sex and marriage, which echo sentiments of the early sexual revolution, and she is independent—largely because she is a conveniently wealthy and white woman. However, she ultimately relies on information from men like Reed in order to solve cases, at least in early novels like *In the Last Analysis*.

The effects of second-wave feminism are clear in the overtly feminist crime novels of the 1980s, with Vic, Kinsey, and Kate Delafield all possessing masculine traits and rejecting feminine gender norms like motherhood and marriage. Vic and Kinsey's masculine traits are “balanced” by their adherence to appearance norms and their outward femininity, which makes them more acceptable examples of feminine but independent women in the 1980s. Kate's rejection of feminine gender roles is “explained” by her identification as lesbian; the introduction

of these feminist protagonists of varying sexual orientations speaks to the broadening of detective fiction even during a decade known for its conservatism. The 1990s, building on traits of 1980s female detectives, saw even further diversity the genre and its portrayal of women; women of color became much more visible in the 1990s with the popularity of figures like Detective Marti MacAlister as an example of a woman balancing motherhood with a career in a male-dominated profession. Stephanie Plum's contradictory portrayal as a sexual, comedic, sometimes inept but strong female detective figure speaks to the changing nature of feminism itself and what made a "good" woman in the 1990s; the emphasis placed on her beauty is also indicative of the continued importance that a woman's physical appearance had at this time. Analyzing fictional female detectives from the Depression era to the 1990s reveals the sexually and racially diversifying effects of social movements on the portrayals of these characters, their femininities, and the messages they sent to the women who read these novels.

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