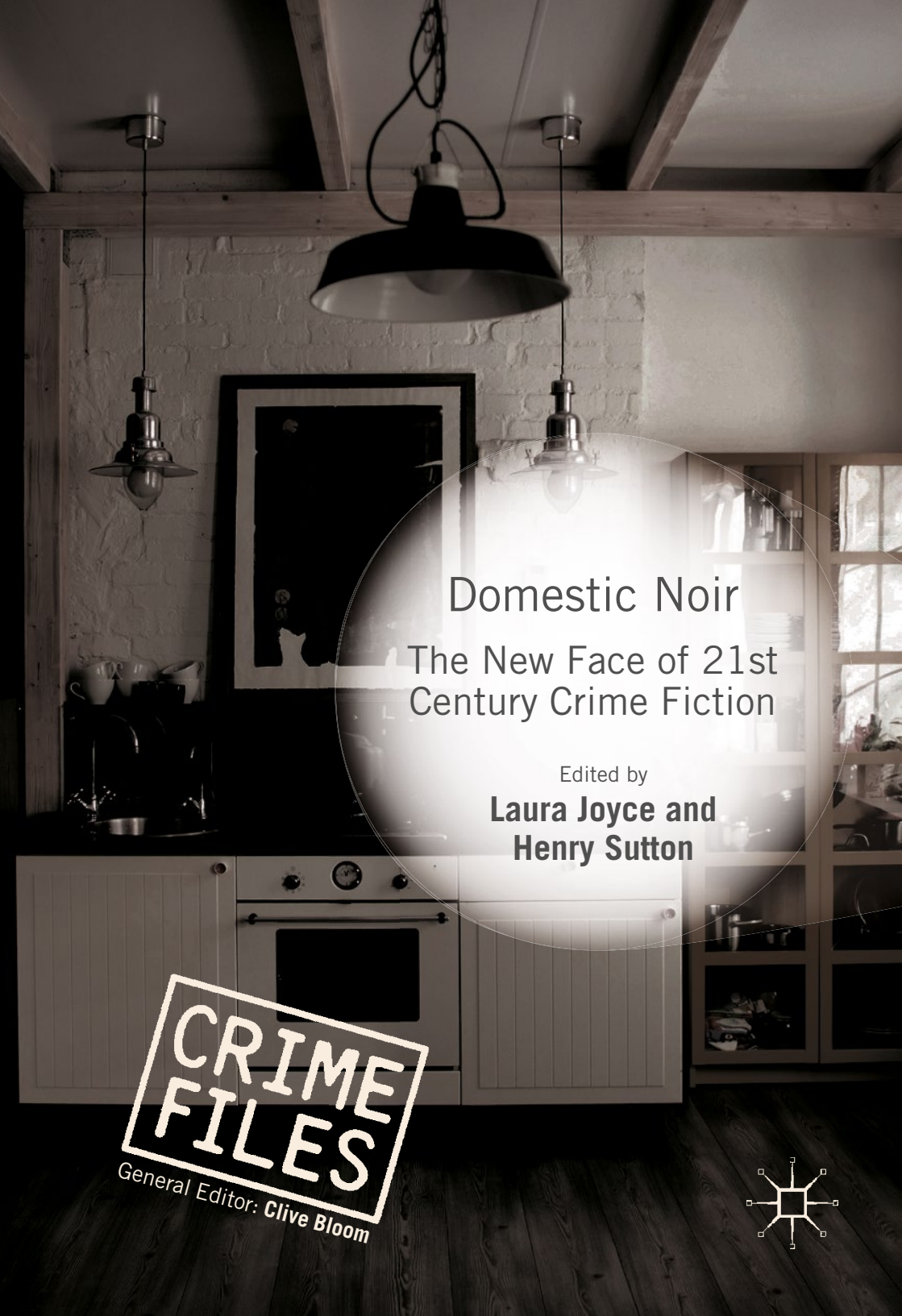

Domestic Noir

The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction

Edited by

Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton

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Foreword: Notes from a Genre Bender

When I wrote my first novel, *Cuckoo* (published in the UK by Headline, 2011), I gave little thought to genre. Had I done so, I would have said it was a sort of darkish, literary/women's fiction crossover. But I didn't: I had written the book of my heart, a book that unfolded a story I wanted to tell, and my literary models were Virginia Woolf, Fay Weldon, Julie Myerson, Tessa Hadley, because I loved the way they conjured narrative from the internal lives of their characters. However, on my first meeting with my former agent, Simon Trewin, he sat back in his Soho chair and said, "You know you've written a piece of crime fiction, don't you?" I was appalled. Yes, I loved reading Agatha Christie when I found her lurking on a holiday cottage bookshelf. I devoured Barbara Vines and had a penchant for Patricia Highsmith. But they were the greats. Wasn't contemporary crime fiction a bit, well, downmarket? And anyway, I didn't have one single police person in my novel, and there was only the merest glimpse of a whodunnit element.

My novel was an exploration of female friendship and the destructive power of lust. Yes, it was dark—exceptionally so in some parts—but *crime*? I didn't think so. And why did my agent have to stick me in a box, anyway? Couldn't my writing just stand on its own merit? He gently explained that genre is *exceptionally* important in publishing. It is, he told me, the way books are sold—how publishers, booksellers and reviewers categorise them, and how readers find what they want. He went on to say that I was being a bit of a snob, that crime fiction is the most vibrant genre, one of the best ways literature has of holding up a mirror to all areas of society. He finished up—with a glint in his eye—by pointing out that it was the

best selling of all genres by far (in 2013, 39% of all UK adult fiction sales were in the crime, thriller or horror genres) and that I could have a piece of that. I decided to listen to him.

Going forward as crime fiction, then, *Cuckoo* quickly found a home at a publisher. It was 2009, and Sophie Hannah was on the up. Her *Little Face* had just come out, and the Culver Valley series was riding high in everyone's minds—so much so that even non-crime-fiction readers like me were lapping them up. Yes, she had police, but the interesting part for me was the concentration on the female, domestic experience, and the what-goes-on-behind-closed-doors aspect of her work. So hungry was the publishing industry for this brand of psychological thriller that at one event I attended, where publicists were introducing their debut writers to librarians, a full five of us (including S.J. Watson, whose *Before I Go to Sleep* came out at the same time as *Cuckoo*) were introduced as "the new Sophie Hannah". So *Cuckoo* was published as crime, under the subgenre of psychological thriller.

Over the next couple of years, through wide reading and appearing at events such as *Theakstons Old Peculier Crime Writing Festival* (Harrogate), *Bloody Scotland* (Stirling) and *CrimeFest* (Bristol), I really got to know—and appreciate—crime fiction and the crime writing and reading community. I began to realise that as much skill goes into a well-written, page-turning, (often) present-tense, all-action thriller as into any delicate, introspective examination of the human condition.

All fiction writers have to create a believable, breathable world that draws the reader in. They have to create characters who are credible, and whose actions produce or result in a narrative. They also have to write well, of course. And even "literary fiction" relies to some extent on plot. As E.M. Forster says, plot arises out of causality, so all fiction relies to some extent on mystery—the reader wants to know why something happened, or what's going to happen next. But with crime fiction, the mystery is far more central than in other genres—in many cases it is the main narrative driver. This requires enormous plotting skill on the part of the writer. Knowing what to reveal, what to hold back, and when to release, requires great craft. Misjudge it, and you can lose your reader through frustration. Get it right, and you have them turning the pages and complaining on Twitter that you have kept them up all night.

So I realised pretty soon that crime writers have to achieve all that literary writers do, plus some. And so I was happy with the crime-fiction label. But I was less pleased with the psychological-thriller part. Psychological I could buy—my work is all about the goings-on inside people's heads (but

then what fiction isn't?). But thriller? I had issues. An example of the kind of thing I was up against can be found in James Patterson's introduction to a 2006 collection of short stories he edited (*Thriller: Stories to Keep You Up All Night* published by Mira Books) where he wrote:

> [W]hat gives the variety of thrillers a common ground is the intensity of emotions they create, particularly those of apprehension and exhilaration, of excitement and breathlessness, all designed to generate that all-important thrill. By definition, if a thriller doesn't thrill, it's not doing its job.

While I wouldn't want to say that my books don't thrill the reader at all, I'm not sure that it's the same sort of high-octane effect that James Patterson is describing. His portrayal, to me, sounds more of a stereotypical man thing. Yes, I have car chases, crashes, fights, even the odd gun, but my books are more about the build-up, rather than the climax. Like the world I create, the thrill dynamic is more female. All books—including my own—attract the odd one-star review on Amazon. Quite a few of my detractors complained that my books weren't the "thrillers" they were expecting. While I don't believe every writer should change their work to please their critics, publishers should most certainly look at the way they are selling the books.

At the time, I had a wonderful young publicist called Sam Eades. She has since gone on to become Senior Commissioning Editor at Trapeze, an Orion imprint. She was a great champion of my work, and we would often retire to the bar after an event to discuss genre—she, too, felt that psychological thriller didn't quite do it for my books. It was over a G&T at the 2013 *CrimeFest* that I came up with the term "domestic noir". Sam liked it so much she bought the next round. By this point I had published three books, and was working on my fourth, and I could see a pattern in my work. Domestic noir is the perfect label for it, and I am really pleased that it also fits the work of many other brilliant writers being published today, that it so perfectly describes what readers currently hunger for.

Domestic noir puts the female experience at the centre. The main themes are family, motherhood, children, marriage, love, sex and betrayal. Setting is important: the home a character inhabits, and the way they inhabit it, can tell us as much about them as what they say or do.

At the centre of these stories is a subversion of the idea of home as sanctuary. Home can also be a cage, a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence. As the domestic-violence charity Women's Aid points out, for many women this is tragically the case in real life: "On average two

women are killed by their partner or ex-partner every week in England and Wales. Domestic abuse-related crime is 8% of total crime. On average the police receive an emergency call relating to domestic abuse every 30 seconds."[1] Add to that the fact it will take, on average, 30 physical attacks before a woman picks up a phone to make one of those emergency calls, and the picture becomes even grimmer (and yes, men are victims of domestic violence, too, but the numbers are far, far smaller).

Going back to the idea of crime fiction holding a mirror up to society, these stories of women and children inhabiting unsafe homes are important. They are stories that readers relate to. They are stories, also, that have been handed down through the ages—from *Medea* to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, to *A Doll's House*, to *The Yellow Wall-Paper*. The difference with modern domestic noir is that the women at the heart of these novels aren't simply victims—they are sometimes perpetrators, too. They are flawed, damaged, sometimes beaten by events, sometimes victorious. And, crucially, the stories are seen subjectively, through the eyes of the female protagonists.

I have encountered some resistance to the use of the word "domestic"—can't these woman-based stories inhabit the world outside the home? Of course they can, but for me, writing about the domestic is as much a feminist act as writing about women who are captains of industry. The worldwide reaction of women of all ages to Trump's pussy comments is just one indication that the personal is still as political as it was to us feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. And that's why domestic noir is an important subgenre. It puts the female experience at the centre of the narrative, rather than just allowing it to support or decorate or provide the springboard for the main, male story. It is a new kind of thriller, for a new kind of world.

Brighton, UK Julia Crouch

Note

1. "How Common Is Domestic Abuse?", *Womens Aid*, https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/how-common-is-domestic-abuse/

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all our brilliant contributors for engaging with the topic in such an enlightened, informed and challenging way. Particular thanks to Sarah Moore for her inspired editing. Thank you to Palgrave Macmillan for their support and belief in the project. Thanks, too, of course, to the University of East Anglia, and to our colleagues in the School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing for the tremendous support, academic, collegiate and financial, including: Rebecca Stott, Matt Woodcock, Jean McNeil, Peter Womack, and Andrew Cowan. Julia Crouch deserves special mention for starting it all, while Megan Abbott, fittingly, here at least, has the last word.

Laura Joyce

Henry Sutton

Contents

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Elena Avanzas Álvarez is a PhD candidate at the University of Oviedo, Spain. She is also the founder of *Books & Reviews*, a blog focused on feminism and crime fiction, and she is a reviewer for the noir section of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

Eva Burke Having completed an MPhil in Popular Literature at Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), Eva Burke is an Irish Research Council scholar currently in the second year of doctoral studies at TCD under the supervision of Dr Clare Clarke, focusing on the history and popularity of "domestic suspense" fiction. She was shortlisted for the Feminist and Women's Studies Association essay prize in 2015 and has published articles in the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *Trinity Postgraduate Review* and *Feminist Spaces*. Her research interests include the gendered dynamics of victimhood in popular crime fiction and depictions of the monstrous feminine in horror fiction.

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Introduction to Popular Fiction (2015), as well as articles on postmodern detection in Paul Auster's work, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and the 'soft-boiled' domestic noir of Elizabeth Sanxay Holding.

Julia Crouch is the author of several crime novels including: *Cuckoo* (2011), *Every Vow You Break* (2012), *Tarnished* (2013), *The Long Fall* (2014), and *Her Husband's Lover* (2017). She is also the originator of the term "domestic noir".

Nicoletta Di Ciolla has published on female-authored Italian literature. She is co-editor of *Differences, Deceits and Desires: Murder and Mayhem in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction* (2008) and is author of *Uncertain Justice: Crimes and Retributions in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction* (2010). Her more recent work considers the crime genre as an instrument to promote civil and civic responsibility. She is associate editor of *Italian Cultural Studies.*

Andrea Hynynen wrote her doctoral thesis on subversive gender and sexuality in Marguerite Yourcenar's novels (Åbo Akademi University, Finland, 2010). Her current research focuses on feminist and queer readings of contemporary French crime fiction, including authors like Fred Vargas, Dominique Sylvain, Pierre Lemaitre, and Maud Tabachnik.

Shelly Ingram's publications have focused primarily on the connections between folklore and twentieth-century literature, including the interplay between literature and belief, ethnographic narrative, and audience reception.

Rosemary Erickson Johnsen's publications include *Contemporary Feminist Historical Crime Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan) and articles on crime fiction, Irish literature, and public scholarship. She is on the editorial advisory board of the *Journal of Popular Culture.*

Laura Joyce is Lecturer in Creative Writing (Crime Fiction) at the University of East Anglia. She teaches on the Crime Fiction MA. She has written two crime novels: *The Museum of Atheism* (2012) and *The Luminol Reels* (2014). Her monograph, *Deadly Landscapes: The* Locus Terribilis *in Contemporary Crime Drama*, will be published by Bloomsbury in 2018. Her short fiction and criticism have appeared in *PLINTH*, *Metazen*, *Spork*, *Sleepingfish*, *Necessary Fiction*, *The Collagist*, *Black Sun Lit, Largehearted*

Boy, *Montevidayo*, *3:AM*, and *Entropy*. She was project coordinator of the Global Queer Cinema network in 2012–2013.

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Anna Pasolini works in the area of gender studies, particularly on the representation and mapping of gender(ed) and transcultural identities in noir fiction. She has published on Angela Carter, Derek Raymond, and David Cronenberg, and is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Other Modernities*.

Fiona Peters is a Senior Lecturer in English and Cultural Studies at Bath Spa University, with research and teaching specialisms in crime fiction, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the literary and cultural representations of evil. She is the author of *Anxiety and Evil in the Writings of Patricia Highsmith* (Ashgate, 2011) and numerous articles and book chapters, and is Director of the Captivating Criminality Network and its associated annual conferences.

Leigh Redhead is completing a PhD on Australian noir fiction and writing a domestic noir novel with an adolescent female protagonist. She is also the author of four crime novels—*Peepshow* (2004), *Rubdown* (2005), *Cherry Pie* (2007), and *Thrill City* (2010)—featuring stripper/private investigator Simone Kirsch.

Henry Sutton is director of the Creative Writing MA Crime Fiction. He teaches creative writing at all levels and supervises creative critical PhDs. He is the founder of the Noirwich Crime Writing Festival. He is the author of eleven novels, including *My Criminal World* (2014), and most recently *Time to Win* (2017) and *Red Hot Front* (2018), part of the Goodwin crime family series, under the pseudonym Harry Brett. He has judged numerous

awards, including the Theakston's Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year, and regularly appears at literary festivals and academic conferences.

Diane Waters is an Honorary Research Associate of The Centre for Research into Gender and Culture in Society (GENCAS) at Swansea University. She has been an Independent Scholar at Cardiff University; her PhD was on the significance of place in Florida crime fiction (Edge Hill, UK).

Heather Worthington was Reader in English Literature at Cardiff University. Her research interests are crime narratives from the nineteenth century to the present and children's literature. Publications include *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction* (2005), *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (2011), and contributions to, amongst others, *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (2010), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English Vol II: The Nineteenth-Century Novel* (2012), *Roald Dahl: New Casebooks* (2012), and *Roald Dahl: Wales of the Unexpected* (2016). She is on the Editorial Board of *Clues: A Journal of Detection* and of *Studies in Crime Writing*.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to *Domestic Noir*

Laura Joyce

Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them.[1]
—Margaret Atwood

When Henry and I began to discuss the viability of a collection on the crime subgenre known as domestic noir we had no idea that a few short months later the whole world would feel like a more sinister, violent place. A place that felt closer than ever to Margaret Atwood's Gilead. Fiction has always functioned in part to reveal and critique contemporaneous cultural anxieties, and fiction that deals with domestic, intimate, and sexual violence, that deals with a lack of recourse for victims, and that asks questions about the safety, rights, and freedoms of those most vulnerable in society, is having a moment.

These stories are interested in asking why a disproportionately large number of people are assaulted and murdered as a result of intimate violence, as opposed to stranger violence. In the USA, where gun laws are far more lax, the tragedy of domestic violence, intimate violence, and gendered violence is higher. An even more chilling statistical outlier involves the

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accidental shootings of siblings, parents, and self-perpetrated fatalities by toddlers and young children.

Repressive right-wing governments and media in the UK and USA (where the majority of domestic noir novels are published) form the backdrop to these stories and this manifests itself particularly in relation to intimate, domestic, and gendered violence. The continuum of harms for those seeking support and justice for assault and murder includes funding cuts to sexual assault services, cuts to labs that process rape kits and other forensic evidence, and legal systems that punish victims and act indifferently towards perpetrators, allowing sexual predators to have no fear of recourse when they boast of sexual crimes. This collection emerges in the months after Brock Turner's arrest and by the time it is published he will be free. Into the world of the increasingly dystopian detention centre Yarl's Wood (which disproportionately harms queer women of colour), and the destruction of domestic violence services, and into a world where in many countries, parts of the UK included, abortion is illegal. Though this is the political and legal landscape, there is something far richer, more nuanced, working through the texts examined in this collection, and each of the chapters offer a unique perspective on how domestic noir re-enacts existing tropes and mythologies, whilst offering a particular, specific index of the current cultural anxieties which produce these narratives.

A version of domestic noir appears in the early filmic "marriage thrillers" popular around the time of the Second World War, a period characterised by death, loss, and, more pertinently to the plot of these thrillers, high instances of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental illnesses in men returning from combat. Men really did come back with a whole range of personality changes, often manifesting in anxiety and paranoia, but also in higher levels of violence and aggression. These marriage thrillers ultimately question the centrality of the heterosexual relationship, finding it alien and strange rather than embedded and natural: spouses become unknowable, marriages shift beyond repair.

George Cukor remade Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play *Gaslight* in 1944, at the tail-end of the Second World War. *Gaslight* stars Ingrid Bergman as Paula, the niece of a famous opera singer, Alice, recently murdered. Paula soon marries Gregory, an abusive, violent con man, who isolates his wife and convinces her that she is losing her mind. The film is named for the dimming of the gaslights in their house (also the house of the dead aunt) as Gregory searches through the attic to look for valuables of the woman he is later revealed to have murdered. As Maria Tatar explains in her book

on the Bluebeard myth and the early marriage thriller *Secrets Behind the Door*, Gregory convinces Paula that she is losing her sense of perception as "[t]errorised by light and sound, the distraught Paula becomes so powerful a symbol for a person being driven mad that the term 'gaslight,' used as a verb, has entered common parlance to signify deluding a person into thinking he or she is insane".

In a year where *Teen Vogue* has been amongst the most vocal opposition to the Donald Trump presidency, Lauren Duca's piece "Donald Trump is Gaslighting America" from November 2016 became the most widely read *Teen Vogue* article of all time. Tressie McMillan Cottom's 2017 article "A Few Notes on Gaslighting" advanced this argument to demonstrate how hegemony functions, and has always functioned, through constructing social fictions that benefit those in power:

> For example, let's take the very idea of "race". Race is a way to stratify a society. Ergo, there must be some hegemonic power served by the creation of this social fiction. As it turns out, the fiction of biological, irrefutable, natural "racial groups" serves the interests of those at the top of that hierarchy. In our current world, that would be whiteness (the idea or concept) or white people (the persons and groups granted the privilege of that idea and concept).[2]

McMillan Cottom shows how important it is to analyse reality in the same way as we might fiction, and to analyse fiction as an index of our political realities by revealing that underlying societal structures are balanced in favour of hegemonic groups.

Domestic noir is a capacious, flexible category that encompasses realist writing about domestic violence, intersectional feminism, religion, mental illness, and women's rights but that can also include fantastic and even supernatural storylines perhaps most notably in Sarah Pinborough's *Behind Her Eyes*. Television, cinema, and even videogames have become saturated with domestic noir in the last five or so years, since the publication of Gillian Flynn's phenomenal bestseller *Gone Girl*. *Doctor Foster, Apple Tree Yard*, and *The Replacement* were given prime-time television slots on the BBC in the last 12 months; whilst *Her Story*, a videogame focussing on a six-day period of police interviews with the wife of a dead man who is strongly suspected of his murder, was a huge indie hit in 2015, selling over 100,000 copies.

We are very proud of this collection, which brings together practitioners, academics, social scientists, writers, and literary and film critics to interrogate the specific, cultural moment that domestic noir is having. The

book opens with a foreword by acclaimed crime writer Julia Crouch, who gives an insight into the origin story of the term "domestic noir", from the night she coined the term in the bar at a crime-writing festival. She offers the map for territory that is uncharted yet familiar.

In Part I, "The Origins of Domestic Noir", Fiona Peters brings into focus the sexual and gender politics of Patricia Highsmith's flawless mid-twentieth-century thrillers, and argues that she has been a huge influence on contemporary domestic noir. Stefania Ciocia gives a really intriguing look into a lesser-known originator of deadly feminist writing, Vera Caspary, whose novel *Laura* was made into an extremely successful film noir. She also engages with the work of Dorothy B. Hughes, whose first-person serial killer narrative has been historically overlooked in favour of Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*. Both Peters and Ciocia argue that there would be no domestic noir subgenre now without these impressive and overlooked early writers, and both chapters celebrate the critical and commercial interest in these writers that has been reignited due to the contemporary taste for domestic noir.

The second part of the collection is on the archetypal domestic noir, a book which combined critical acclaim with huge commercial success, and which has been hugely influential on the commercial crime market: *Gone Girl*. This novel offers an anchor-point for the discussion of domestic noir, and many later chapters reference this work, even if only tangentially. Henry Sutton, co-editor of this volume, first offers an innovative analysis of *Gone Girl*, giving a short history of crime fiction, generic categorisation, academia, and the uneasy relationship between literary criticism and commercial success. The companion chapter in this section is written by Eva Burke, who investigates the freedoms and perils that the character of Amy faces in *Gone Girl* as she performs various gendered roles from "cool girl" to "dead girl" in order to maximise benefits and curtail losses in a stacked patriarchal game. Burke reframes the tired question as to whether *Gone Girl* is a feminist work by offering a more pertinent, and radical, perspective of her own: "a more illuminating critical inquiry may be the one revolving around Flynn's treatment of female likeability and female vulnerability and the ways in which we, as a culture, interact with and respond to the victimisation of certain women". This perspective informs much of the discussion in Part III, which deals with intimate, sexual, and gendered violence.

Emma Miller's chapter addresses the topic of female agency, focussing in particular on the more "active" role that domestic noir can offer female

crime characters; that is, a role beyond the "inert body to be looked at, dissected, and penetrated". Miller argues that Amy, the protagonist of *Gone Girl*, is safer "in motion" and is always "on the move". Flynn's novel popularises the dislikeable, even sociopathic, female protagonist in a way that attempts to redress the hegemonic cultural obsession with the passivity of the beautiful, female corpse. The next two chapters in Part III offer a more detailed look at specific familial roles that are given particular weight in domestic noir narratives: the adolescent girl and the violent mother. Redhead, a crime author and critic, argues that the rise of fatal teenagers in contemporary crime fiction is the corollary of a culturally driven sexualisation and objectification of young women in the neoliberal context, and that "by juxtaposing these updated teenage *femmes fatales* with adult women characters, the authors provide a feminist critique of contemporary western society". Di Ciolla and Pasolini refer to these maternal characters in their sociological enquiry into representations of the "violent mother" and how these perceptions affect public opinion and serve to reinforce the hegemonic, patriarchal imaginary. They contend that "[o]bserving how the problematic relation to motherhood is expressed in narrative fiction offers a wider span of examples of women's agency in situations of violence within the family (specifically against children), which go beyond entrenched stereotypes of the violent mother as 'mad' or solely as reacting to victimisation". This final chapter on gender and violence serves to underline the symbiotic relationship between representation and perception, and shows how important it is to develop more complex, nuanced characters in popular fiction.

Part IV focusses on the "domestic" aspect of the subgenre, and is concerned primarily with the way in which domestic noir makes the home not only alien and uncanny but fatal. Ingram and Mullins, in the opening chapter, take a detailed reading of Tana French's novel *Broken Harbour* and carefully draw out the palimpsest of hauntings in the various domestic spaces of the novel, spaces that are derelict, decaying, and, which function ultimately as crime scenes: "what drives Jenny to eventual murder lies in the accumulation of small wrongnesses that seem to batter the inside of her house as incessantly as the sea and wind do the outside". Elena Álvarez in her study of Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* (now a huge HBO television series) describes how the perfect, expensive homes on the elite Pirriwee peninsula are a cover for unravelling marriages and domestic violence. Álvarez argues that the novel "is not as much a whodunit as a polysemic work that weaves together three female lived experiences to offer a

more complex take on domesticity, motherhood, sexuality and marriage". Finally in this section, Waters and Worthington address the congruence of the US cosy crime novel and domestic noir as responses to the threatened home, particularly in light of the 2008 global recession. They argue that "in terms of its relationship to Golden Age narratives, domestic noir takes the enclosed setting to claustrophobic extremes. The key difference is that while female characters may spend much time in the house, they are not at home there." This theme of claustrophobic enclosure, danger, and violence in the home persists.

The final section draws on domestic noirs set outside the UK and USA, including works in translation. Rosemary Johnsen focusses on Tana French, and she considers the specifically Irish context of the Dublin Murder Squad series. Her focus is on the way in which French captures the Irish housing crisis and its relation to historic imperial force. She notes that a character in French's novel *The Likeness* gives "a lesson in Irish history in which he argues that the English turning the Irish into mere tenantry made 'everything else an inevitable consequence'". Andrea Hynynen examines the thrillers of Pierre Lemaitre, who writes "socio-critical" French dramas that share many points of continuity with domestic noir novels, "such as central female characters, harmful personal relationships and a growing sense of suspense leading up to sudden plot twists and surprise endings". However, they operate within a specifically French tradition that is in opposition to neoliberal capitalism. Finally, Patricia Catoira discusses gender roles in Marcela Serrano's *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad,* which is set in both Chile and Mexico, and written originally in Spanish. Catoira explores how "*Nuestra Señora* dialogues with the formulas of detective fiction by evoking and contesting them at the same time. Rosa's double discourse allows the novel to effectively challenge patriarchal values in general, and in Chilean society in particular." Domestic noir is having a cultural moment globally, and the particularities of the contexts in which these novels are being written is having a profound effect on their reception.

The collection finishes with an afterword by acclaimed novelist and scholar Megan Abbott, who writes about the recent phenomenon of domestic noir in "The Woman Through the Window". She writes that the "domestic sphere is a world where knowledge is always only partial, where power in any relationship is fleeting, and where marriage—at least most of them—is always a bit of a masquerade". This collection examines that painful and sinister truth, as it allows the reader to process the larger political

climate. Domestic violence takes centre stage in fiction, film, and television in 2017, a year in which there has been a huge critical conversation around sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and reproductive rights through shows such as *Big Little Lies*, *The Keepers*, *Three Girls*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in Naomi Alderman's Baileys Prize-winning novel *The Power*. These works are global bestsellers, and hugely entertaining, but they also reveal that audiences are hungry for representations of horrors they already experience, in order to bear witness and effect change. We hope very much that this collection may contribute to this project and we are deeply indebted to our collaborators for making this work possible.

Notes

1. Mary Dickson, "A Woman's Worst Nightmare", *PBS*, http://www.pbs.org/kued/nosafeplace/articles/nightmare.html [accessed 16 June 2017].
2. Tressie McMillan Cottom, "A Few Notes on Gaslighting" (2017), https://tressiemc.com/essays-2/a-few-notes-on-gaslighting/ [accessed 27 July 2017].

PART I

The Origins of Domestic Noir

CHAPTER 2

The Literary Antecedents of Domestic Noir

Fiona Peters

Patricia Highsmith remains the epitome of the psychologically focused crime fiction author, renowned for her ability to convey extraordinarily high levels of anxiety within and through her novels, not just in the minds of her, often hapless, protagonists but also in those of her readers. However, I will be arguing here that she also deserves recognition as an antecedent of the recent "domestic noir" subgenre. While Highsmith's protagonists are predominantly male, my contention is that this is no impediment to the particularly "feminine" discourse that she evokes throughout many of her texts. Although she occasionally writes novels featuring female protagonists, such as Edith in *Edith's Diary* and Carol in *Carol*, Highsmith does not need her "heroes" to be biologically female in order to interweave the domestic and feminine into her profoundly disturbing criminal perspective.

While the success of very recent novels, such as *Gone Girl* (Gillian Flynn), *The Girl on the Train* (Paula Hawkins), and *The Silent Wife* (A.S.A. Harrison), has shifted boundaries and redefined perceptions of the contemporary crime thriller, this chapter, while substantively agreeing with such claims, will nevertheless urge caution from two perspectives. First, that previous authors have already trodden this path from an arguably more sophisticated and multi-textured perspective (I will focus on

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Patricia Highsmith, but arguments could also be made for Daphne du Maurier and Ruth Rendell/Barbara Vine for example). Second, it can be argued that some attempts to write from "the female perspective" are theoretically and politically restrictive. At the same time, if the position is maintained that only female protagonists represent femininity, the subgenre risks becoming unnecessarily prescriptive. In fact it could pervert the avowed intention, to represent female experience, by pathologising female agency and experience.

Recent domestic noir novels have been commercially extraordinarily successful with both *Gone Girl* and *The Girl on the Train* having already gained box-office success with their film adaptations, while the film version of *The Silent Wife* is forthcoming. Contemporary domestic noir can be categorised as a literary and cinematic phenomenon foregrounding the home and/or workplace which, by exposing those seemingly "safe" spaces, highlights and reflects women's experience:

> In a nutshell, Domestic Noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants. That's pretty much all of my work described there.[1]

In this 2013 extract from her blog, Julia Crouch suggests the new label domestic noir partly as a way of distancing her own and some other writers' work from the umbrella term of crime fiction. Prior to this and continuing today, the crime fiction subgenre she and her compatriots could be argued to inhabit is that of the psychological crime novel. Domestic noir is categorised under two umbrella terms, which in my view are in danger of becoming conflated: crime fiction and the thriller. In fact, these are not at all the same and I would argue that it is central to the case currently being made for the existence of the domestic noir subgenre that they are distinguished from each other, in order to avoid elements from both being appropriated into each other without reflection. Crime writer Val McDermid recently argued in an interview that crime fiction is at heart "leftwing," while thrillers are "rightwing":

> … the current preoccupations of the crime novel, the *roman noir*, the *krimi* lean to the left. It's critical of the status quo, sometimes overtly, sometimes more subtly. It often gives a voice to characters who are not comfortably established in the world—immigrants, sex workers, the poor, the old. The

> dispossessed and the people who don't vote. The thriller, on the other hand, tends towards the conservative, probably because the threat implicit in the thriller is the world turned upside down, the idea of being stripped of what matters to you.[2]

While the position is clearly not as simplistic as Val McDermid suggests above, classic thrillers such as Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959) and the novels of John le Carré, particularly *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963), concern themselves with spies, corporations and political systems. Whether the author is left- or right-wing on a personal level, the thriller's terrain is very clearly not that of domestic space but of intrigues and plots, deals and double-crossing. If the newly self-designated subgenre of domestic noir is to prove more than a temporary fashion that will quickly pass in favour of the next label to whet the public imagination, then it is necessary to unpick some of the conflations that will inevitably occur once a label is attached to a group of loosely aligned texts with easily identifiable tropes.

In an interview in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Gone Girl* author Gillian Flynn cites Patricia Highsmith's *Deep Water* (1957) as her favourite book. She describes her experience of reading *Deep Water*, one that resonates with many readers:

> She has a strange ability to make completely unreasonable emotions and actions seem extremely reasonable, where you find yourself completely empathizing with a sociopath and murderer. There's something incredibly chilling about that, looking up from a book and finding that you've been rooting for an average person's murder.[3]

Deep Water is set in the small town of Little Wesley, a suburb typical of late 1950s New England, where Highsmith's quietly tragic protagonist Vic Van Allen suffers within his dysfunctional and increasingly physically and psychologically unstable marriage to wild extrovert Melinda. Unlike Highsmith's most infamous hero, the eponymous Mr. Ripley, Vic is trapped both in his marriage and within the stifling US suburban environment that Highsmith loathed and that both she and her favourite character escaped from—into the freer, more liberating potential of European culture and society.

The relationships documented within the USA-based novels of this period, *This Sweet Sickness* (1961) and *The Cry of the Owl* (1962), along with *Deep Water* and the earlier *The Blunderer* (1954), focus on the

domestic hell that society inflicts on the individual, exemplified by the shackles and social habits of the domestic suburb. In 1992 Highsmith said in an interview, while discussing why she had not lived in the USA for many years, that she wouldn't know where to live there and as far as US suburban life went: "I wouldn't set foot in it. It's deadly."[4] In this book, as in many of her other novels, Highsmith exposes the horrors of the quietly domestic. *Deep Water* is perhaps the novel that most clearly demonstrates the ways in which Highsmith charts the psychic disintegration of a character who at the outset is merely viewed as a little strange by those around him. A particular skill of Highsmith is the way that she articulates the peculiarity of her protagonists, without relying on simplistic ascriptions of mental illness or madness. While Vic in *Deep Water*, along with David Kelsey in *This Sweet Sickness*, does descend into forms of complete mental breakdown by the end of the novel, her heroes' differences from those around them are utilised by Highsmith to reflect upon the craziness of the "normal", everyday life that they are situated in. Her characters do not indulge in grand gestures until the final pages of her novels; their gradual downfalls are generally quiet affairs. In *The Wall Street Journal* interview, Gillian Flynn describes Vic and Melinda's disintegrating relationship in ways that (unconsciously or not) could be used to describe her own *Gone Girl* protagonists, Amy and Nick Dunne:

> Melinda's not controllable in the way he thought she was. He's definitely not controllable in the way she thought he was. And they're both stubborn and psychologically entwined enough that they're not going to part, so you just know that it's going to lead to something very bad for one or both of them. And it's that delicious feeling of trying to figure out where it's going to go, but because they've both become so unpredictable, in a way that's very true to their characters. It doesn't feel cheap, it feels like two people going off the rails together.[5]

It could be argued that control in all its forms is a central element of domestic noir: thwarted desire to escape the control of others while conversely exerting one's own control over them. While Vic cannot control Melinda, she also tries to control him, by flaunting her numerous lovers in front of him and by attempting to goad him into a violent response that he, in turn, and for most of the novel, denies her. Highsmith refuses to write Vic as a character in possession of clichéd masculine attributes, such as possessiveness towards his wife or testosterone-fuelled acts of sexual

revenge against her lovers. By presenting her protagonist in this way, Highsmith subverts culturally traditional representations of masculinity that predominate in the crime fiction and thriller genres. Vic does however recognise that he will be more respected within the rampantly heterosexual and misogynistic community in which he lives if he makes it appear he has in fact murdered one of Melinda's lovers, when he is perfectly innocent. He masquerades masculinity to appear to be like other men: "He had seen it in their faces, even in Horace's. He didn't react with normal jealousy and something is going to give. To have burst out, finally, was merely human. People understood that."[6] The actual murderer is quickly caught and Vic lapses back into the role of the cuckolded husband and primary caregiver to his and Melinda's only child Trixie. At one point in the novel he sits up all night with Melinda and her latest flame—whom he will in fact go on to murder, albeit in the most passive way possible—both of them drunk, feeding them scrambled eggs: "He sat beside her on the sofa and fed them to her in tiny amounts on a fork. Every time the fork appeared she opened her mouth obediently."[7]

There is, in *Deep Water*, only one example of Melinda behaving in a traditionally feminine role, and it's played out at the point in the novel where she has become suspicious of her husband and is in fact playing the domestic role in order not to please him but to trap him into inadvertently revealing his guilt:

> During the dinner—squabs, mashed potatoes, braised endives, and watercress salad—he tried to relax and really not think, because he was groping in his mind for clues, for leads, as a man in a dark room might grope for a light pull, knowing the light pull exists yet having no idea where. He was hoping the aimless play of his brain might brush against the reason for Melinda's goodness.[8]

This example demonstrates Highsmith's inversion of masculine and feminine in ways that may not on the most obvious, literal level meet the criteria of writing from a predominantly female narrative perspective. However, I would argue that she is doing something far more transgressive and challenging in writing from a feminine position, regardless of the biological gender of the protagonist. Highsmith feminises Victor Van Allen, as she does with many of her biologically male protagonists, by her consistent destabilisation of environments that, in their banality, reactionary and conformist status (the suburban home, the workplace), prove to be ideal

backdrops and reflections of death itself. Highsmith achieves this destabilisation by actively seeking to feminise her male protagonists during a time period where gender roles were to a great extent fixed within popular fiction. The murders themselves, exemplified by Vic's eventual murders in *Deep Water*, evolve and develop as an integral and inevitable element of each particular situation (in *This Sweet Sickness*, David Kelsey's fantasised relationship is even described throughout as "The Situation") and when they happen, the reader barely notices. Highsmith's male heroes lack any element of conventional masculinity at the moment of murder: they drift passively into killing in a manner which works opposite to today's domestic noir female heroines, who often perform culturally masculine behaviours.

Highsmith seduces the reader into feelings of empathy with her murdering heroes, which is liable to induce feelings of great anxiety. That, I would argue, makes reading her a unique experience, however familiar we become with psychologically focused crime fiction. Her forte here is twofold: while charting the decline of her heroes into murderous activity as if it were inevitable, she leads her readers into both empathising with their actions while being suspended in a fug of dread, anxiety, and apprehension. Anxiety is manifested as a protective strategy that Highsmith's protagonists deploy: never stable or contained, contributing to the peculiarity of the experience of reading a Highsmith novel, while the characters slide into psychosis when the protection afforded by anxiety breaks down.

Anxiety, psychosis, psychopathy, and mental states are all grist for Highsmith's mill. Most readers are introduced to her writing by reading *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), the first of the five books that constitute the "Ripliad" and featuring the charming, urbane, and guilt-free serial killer, Tom Ripley. Tom feels no remorse and no strong emotional links with other people yet a heavy feeling of anxiety permeates both this and the subsequent Ripley texts. Highsmith created Tom Ripley in part as a foil for herself and her own virtually overwhelming anxieties and fears. Her portrayal of Tom Ripley allowed her to experience life without the feelings that she felt blighted her existence and were kept at bay only through writing, an act that she believed worked as her psychic "glue" to ward off her own propensity for depression, even, as she viewed it, insanity. In a 1963 diary entry she confides: "[s]uch unhappiness and loneliness that I felt today must be counter-acted by work, or I shall go mad."[9]

Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests we are doomed to suffer conflict and anxiety in our relationships, since these are a futile attempt to replace the

sense of a lost, real love—and we can read in Highsmith's characters a fundamental suffering because they are unable to close the gap in their own lives. First however, the ways in which Freudian, Lacanian, and Žižekian psychoanalytic theory renders reductionism within texts in respect of "female" and "male" characters will be outlined.

In psychoanalytic theory, as Lacan stresses in respect of his "return to Freud", the human baby is born biologically male or female, but no cultural or linguistic value attaches to this distinction. Sexual difference occurs at the point where the child begins to speak, to enter into the world of words, of other people and of the Law, in Lacan's sense. Prior to this moment (and at the point where the biological carries no meaning) the primacy of the maternal figure (or first object) is maintained by Freud, and later Lacan, as one of the first principles of psychoanalysis. It is important to note that for Freudian psychoanalysis the child moves from the all-encompassing totality of its demand for the mother, and no one else, to becoming a human subject within a world where exclusive ownership of another exists only within the realms of fantasy and pathology.

Clearly, the child must develop an identity separate from the mother to become a subject, to enter into culture and civilisation, and to transform its bodily drives and the misrecognition and narcissism of the Imaginary (in Lacanian terms) into inter-subjective relationships that at least attempt to gain recognition. The problem is that we never achieve this, and this is what Lacan means by "there is no sexual relationship". The separation from the mother, that the *fort-da* game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* illustrates, builds on the loss instigated by and through the mirror stage. Thus, psychoanalysis is fundamentally a tragic discourse about loss that can never be found; it is the condition of being human and it can be explained perhaps most comprehensively with the example of sexuality, desire, and love. This leads on to Lacan's concepts of Need, Demand, and Desire, corresponding roughly to Freud's notion of the Oedipal and castration complexes. Need—that which the child is born with, as every other baby animal. These needs (for food, comfort, etc.) are satiable, e.g. with the breast, which also strengthens the dyadic bond. There is however no sense at this point for the child that the care giver is distinguishable from itself (it has no self) and it has no sense of itself as a discrete object in the world (its everything). It is need and these needs can be satisfied.

But in order to move from being a baby animal to a human it has to separate from this attachment and enter the world of discrete identities. This is what involves loss. At the point of the mirror stage the child, initiated into

the state of loss, begins to demand more than the mother can ever give. This demand is not for food, to be changed, to be cuddled, etc. but is for the absolute, unconditional and dyadic love that is an impossible thing, according to Lacan. This is often illustrated as a concurrent awareness that the child is not all to the mother, that the mother has other concerns as well as it, in Lacanian terms the third term, the third element that splits the dyadic unity forever. This aligns to Freud's castration complex and the internalisation of the prohibitions that form the super-ego. The child sees in the mirror its "ideal ego": an object, a perfect and whole object, while it still feels all over the place. This is the source of the fictive nature of wholeness and also the belief that we can somehow find the "other" part of us in the love object (you complete me and so forth). We see ourselves as whole but we are not. So, human demand is for total love that is impossible.

Desire comes into the place where physical need is subtracted from impossible demand. So, needs can be satisfied, demand is total, that place between the immediate satisfactions and demand is what Lacan terms desire, and it's impossible. Sexuality finds its place here. Lacan argues at this point in his work that the death drive is operable in the speaking being as its reminder almost of what we are not, what is lacking in us. The notion of the Thing takes its place here, as that which is both life-giving and deadly and reminds us of the Real and its continuing presence in our everyday lives. "The Thing is that which in the real, the primordial real, I will say, suffers from the signifier, and presents itself to the analyst in the gap produced by the signifying cut."[10] What he means by this is that there are objects that cut in and remind us that we are simply not all-knowing and that the Symbolic cannot encompass all, in fact just a bit. In Lacan's reading, the Freudian cotton reel of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is an example of what stands in for the real, and Lacan develops the concept of *object a* to demonstrate that this is never achievable. The object of our love is only ever a replacement—and an inadequate one— for the lost real. Thus, for Lacanian psychoanalysis, relationships that try to close the gap, or the lack, are always tainted with conflict and anxiety.

Lacan argues in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* that, contra desire, love exists as a drive, inherently attached to the death drive:

> You will now understand that—for the same reason that it is through the lure that the sexed living being is induced into his sexual realization—the drive, the partial drive, is profoundly a death drive, and represents in itself the portion of death in the sexed living being.[11]

Highsmith documented her anxiety through her diaries and letters but primarily within her literary output. In respect of gendered subject positions within her work, the status of anxiety is central, and it is useful here to turn to Slavoj Žižek's theorisation of "sexuation" in respect of this. He starts to replace the term "sexual difference", familiar to readers of psychoanalytic theorists Freud and Lacan, with this new term which reflects and pinpoints the levels of anxiety Highsmith's characters project. He introduces this to emphasise a difference between this process and that of the often used term "sexual difference" when theorising how the gendered human subject becomes such through the process of entering the world of symbolisation and lack:

> What we (or at least, most of us) experience as the most 'natural' sexual relationship is something learned, internalized through a series of traumatic cuts, interventions of the symbolic law. So the answer to Lacan's problem is: we enter human sexuality through the intervention of the symbolic order *qua* heterogeneous parasite that disrupts the natural rhythm of coupling.[12]

Lacan argues that in his theorisation of sexuation, that which he terms "the act" is gendered feminine, whereas mere "activity" is masculine. Sarah Kay explains: "The Žižekian act is a paroxysm that shakes the symbolic order; activity by contrast, consoles its users and fortifies its codes."[13] In *Deep Water* Highsmith presents her clearest example of a man who, while for most of the novel remains stultified, inactive, and inhabiting the traditionally passive female domestic space, then *acts* in this way; a radical act that propels him out of the symbolic and into the non-symbolic, non-gendered space of psychosis. If an "act" such as Vic's decimation of the domestic by his murder of Melinda triggers his final descent into psychosis, it can be argued that utilising a male character in this way reveals a submerged femininity, which means the biological sex of the narrative character (and voice, although Highsmith's books are always written in the third person) is irrelevant:

> Utilising Žižek's distinction between feminine and masculine in respect of the *act* is useful insofar as it highlights the inherently anti-symbolic moves that fracture the passivity of the key characters within the novels. Aligned to that, it is in this respect that her writing reveals a certain 'submerged' femininity, on that it might be possible to evoke as a response to an understandable belief that she lacks an understanding of femininity because her portrayals of women are less than sympathetic.[14]

The fatal act of the de-masculinised domestic creature Vic had existed as throughout the novel implodes as he leaves the house in which the domestic psychodrama of *Deep Water* has played itself to an end point of no return:

> But Melinda is dead and so I am, he thought. Then he knew why he felt empty: because he had left his life in the house behind him, his guilt and his shame, his achievements and failures, the failure of his experiment, and his final, brutal gesture of petulant revenge.[15]

Highsmith, in my psychoanalytically influenced reading, refuses binary oppositions between male and female, thus demonstrating a liberating potential that current domestic noir could and perhaps should emulate. *Deep Water* is *all* about the domestic, the subtle irritants that become all important, and the levels of rage that perforate the banality of everyday life. For example, Vic loves listening to classical music and believes Melinda's choice of trite popular music of the time is chosen to spite him: "The record was 'The Teddybears', one of her recent purchases."[16] He plays his favourites while she gets ready to go out dancing with one of her latest flames: his "few Bachs. Some Segovia, some Gregorian chants and motets, and Churchill's speeches".[17] Subverting cultural and heteronormative masculine behaviours, while not aligning Vic with any gay or other limiting sexual identity, Highsmith is able to write him as a victim of the stifling nature of suburban life in the late 1950s. As mentioned above, she has been criticised for less than positive representations of female characters but her ultimate target is the ways in which both men and women are forced into gendered positions that entrap them within restrictive moral codes. Her choice of men, exemplified through the character of Vic, is her particular and very individual counterbalance to the rigid and often restrictive attempts of identity politics to assign sex to gender.

A pattern emerges throughout Highsmith's writing career. She turned to Ripley as light relief from what she termed her other, "depressing" novels, such as *Deep Water* and *Edith's Diary* (1977), writing that: "It [*Edith's Diary*] was a depressing book for me. I'd like to do one more Ripley soon, Ripley is never depressing."[18] *Edith's Diary* is a rarity in her oeuvre in that the protagonist is female, but it follows a similar pattern to some of her other texts, in which the main character slides inexorably towards mental breakdown, often psychosis. Her early, specifically domestic noir novels are mainly set in small towns in her native USA, a nation she

deplored, feeling, as already alluded to, that the suburbs and the homes within them were deathly environments that stifled individuality and creativity. It is no accident that the hero she is most known for, Tom Ripley, escapes the USA in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In that novel he experiences visceral disgust when he encounters Americans at a party in Venice: "The loud grating American voices found their way into his ears again, and sank like claws into the nerves of his back."[19] He goes on to say he will vomit if he has to stay at the party any longer. Tom Ripley then settles in a bourgeois house an hour or so south of Paris, with a wife and a housekeeper. This is however a domesticity that differs in every way to the toxicity of the US suburbs. In his house, *Belle Ombre*, Tom and his wife Heloise lead a life that relies on the beautiful and the aesthetic, aligned with a total lack of sharing and passion, a situation that Highsmith, through Ripley, implies is the only basis for an ordered and tranquil domesticity.

Highsmith considered *Edith's Diary* (1977) "her masterpiece", although it was initially rejected for publication as it was viewed as a text which didn't fit neatly into the crime genre category, or that of literary fiction. It is the story of 20 years in the life of Edith Howland, who, when the novel begins, is a liberal, leftist housewife living in New York City in 1955 with her husband Brett and 10-year-old son Cliffie. At the beginning of the novel they leave the city for a new life in Brunswick Corner, Pennsylvania. This book covers a similar terrain to Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*, although unlike that novel the sassy, feminist women who leave the city are not gradually killed off and replaced by domestic goddess robots to fit their weakened yet seething misogynistic husbands' fantasies of the perfect, passive female.

Once settled in New Brunswick, Edith's more open and liberated life starts to narrow. While, as already discussed, protagonists like Vic do not conform to cultural paradigms of masculinity in any way, when Highsmith was asked by interviewers about her preference for male characters she tended to argue that it is being tied to the home that proves limiting on women and, I would argue, why she finds female characters less protean than male ones. *Edith's Diary* is a classic domestic noir text many years before the term emerged. The move from city to country is one of hope, of a search for community denied in the melee of city life, and the chance to "make a difference"; in this case for Edith and Brett to start up a local, liberal newspaper. This is of course not the idyll Edith persuades herself it will be. Soon, Brett's ghastly, dirty, and smelly Uncle George moves in with them and Edith become a drudge to both him and the increasingly

strange, disturbed Cliffie. It is Cliffie who commits the only murder that occurs in this novel, when he gives Uncle George an overdose of codeine. What enables this novel to transcend a bleak but one-dimensional plot is that Edith keeps a diary in which her life is that of domestic harmony and bliss. In it Cliffie marries a lovely woman and has beautiful children and Brett does not leave her for his secretary. Highsmith treats the concept of adultery with a younger and more subservient woman with disdain for its clichéd inevitability. In 1952, 25 years before *Edith's Diary*, Highsmith had written *Carol* (original and US title *The Price of Salt*) under the pseudonym of Claire Morgan, only acknowledging it as her own work many years later. This novel seemingly contradicts the argument that she seeks the abnormal in everyday situations, for it deals with love: the young Therese's love and obsession with the older Carol. The novel was indeed groundbreaking in its portrayal of a happy ending for the two female protagonists, something that had been absent in previous lesbian romances. However, the story was based on an experience in Highsmith's own life. While working (like Therese, the novel's protagonist) in a Manhattan department store, she became obsessed with a customer whom she later stalked, taking the train to New Jersey to spy on her, exactly as she described happening in the novel. Highsmith then fantasised about putting her hand around the woman's neck and squeezing her to death. Even when writing love, Highsmith seeks the pathological.

Blankness lies at the heart of Highsmith's killer heroes; she claimed herself that Ripley is amoral and feels no guilt or remorse—he kills and then he reasons it away. However, he is an exception in her books, and to know only her Ripley novels is to lose out on the meticulous ways in which she dissects mental disintegration caused by the transgressions of the moral law. She said of her "suffering heroes": "They're always chewing over their guilt, wondering how well they'll sleep at night with that on their consciences."[20] This of course goes hand in hand with the domesticity of the novels that feature the suffering heroes, and contrasts with Ripley's detached and emotionless domestic situation; one carefully crafted by him to avoid any of the conflicts and anxieties the everyday domestic brings in its wake.

At the age of 8, Patricia Highsmith found a copy of Karl Menninger's *The Human Mind* in her parents' study, and set to reading it. This 1930 text was one of the first works to interest not just a small and select group of psychiatrists but to have mass appeal. It examined many "dark" areas of the human mind that Highsmith was later to focus on in her literary writing,

and appealed to a mass audience insofar as it was written in clear, non-specialist language and also used examples from real-life patients. It is debatable whether or not the young Highsmith was drawn to the book because she already had a penchant for the abnormal within the seemingly sane world that Menninger's case histories catalogued, or if reading the book planted the seed of that obsession within her (probably the former). What is clear is that the book provided her with material that she would build up and expand into her characters and the toxicity of the proximity to others later on. In her short story "The Terrapin", a 12-year-old boy, Victor, is emotionally abused by his mother when she causes a small tortoise to die in agony by dropping it into a pot of boiling water. The boy thinks that he heard the creature scream and in revenge stabs his mother to death in the night with a kitchen knife. At the time he is reading *The Human Mind*. The story is reminiscent of Vic in *Deep Water*, who, at the end of the novel, is taken away by the police after descending into full-blown psychosis. In "The Terrapin" his young namesake ends up being examined in a psychiatric unit. In Highsmith's work psychic disintegration is key to her belief that, within aberrance, the myth of the normal can be exposed. Slavoj Žižek points out that the one protagonist who lacks guilt and remorse and is often labelled psychopathic is actually the most normal of her heroes: "… it is Ripley who is uncannily 'normal,' and the 'straight' man who is uncannily weird, even perverted".[21]

The everyday traumas that eventually split the psyches of Highsmith's characters apart cannot, as I have argued, be separated into male or female. The horror of the young boy whose mother "tortures" the tortoise and Vic's attempts to retain his psychic integrity within the toxicity of his marriage to Melinda are psychoanalytically no less "feminine" than Edith's retreat into the fantasy life of her diary in order to attempt to evade the daily drudgery of her narrow domesticity. I have argued throughout this chapter that, decades before the new domestic noir label, Highsmith performed a forensic examination of the perils of the domestic, through marriages, parent–child relationships, and her recognition that female characters are not necessarily privileged in terms of the ways in which the domestic exerts its stranglehold over the individual.

The new interest in domestic noir is an exciting and timely move towards incorporating the new with earlier manifestations of the transgressive female, such as Vera Caspary's Bedelia or Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley. Including Highsmith in a key publication such as this collection adds another element of the term that actively works to transgress and

problematise gender boundaries themselves. Unlike many of the new domestic noir thrillers, however, the elusive nature of Highsmith's work—which leaves much to her readers' imaginations—means that film adaptations of her work tend to avoid or gloss over the implications of her swingeing attack on marriage and relationships. They focus instead on period style, which can be viewed as a recognition of the bleakness of her vision regarding her belief, echoing Sartre, that hell is other people.

Notes

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10. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 205.
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13. Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 86.
14. Fiona Peters, *Anxiety and Evil in the Writings of Patricia Highsmith* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 45.

15. Patricia Highsmith, *Deep Water* (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 259.
16. Patricia Highsmith, *Deep Water* (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 27.
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CHAPTER 3

Hollywood and the Trailblazers of Domestic Noir: The Case of Vera Caspary's *Laura* (1943)

Stefania Ciocia

The spectacular popularity of domestic noir in recent years has been accompanied by a more muted, interrelated literary phenomenon: the rediscovery of female crime writers of the Second World War era such as Vera Caspary, Dorothy B. Hughes and Elizabeth Sanxay Holding. Their most famous novels have all been reissued by independent publishers, from both sides of the Atlantic, who specialize in neglected women writers: The Feminist Press at CUNY brought out Hughes's *In a Lonely Place* (1947) in 2003 and Caspary's *Laura* (1943) in 2005 as part of the series "Femmes Fatales: Women Write Pulp," while Holding's *The Blank Wall* (1947) is one of the most successful titles of the London-based Persephone Books, which first reprinted it in 2003. Since then *In a Lonely Place* and *Laura* have been included in mainstream lists, too, as a Penguin Modern Classic (2010) and a Vintage Classic (2012) respectively, and Persephone have made *The Blank Wall* available as an ebook. The three texts have received an additional imprimatur with their inclusion in Sarah Weinman's *Women Crime Writers: Four Suspense Novels of the 1940s* (2015) for the Library of America.[1] Asked whether there is "a direct line of influence"

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from these early authors to contemporary crime fiction, Weinman explains that this genealogical thread—from what she calls "domestic suspense"[2] to present-day domestic noir—lies at the heart of her editorial selection, as testified by the following pairings:

> Laura Lippman is absolutely our Margaret Millar, and Megan Abbott is unmistakably influenced by Dorothy Hughes. Separately, Gillian Flynn has written about being influenced in a major way by Patricia Highsmith. In other cases, the influence was more unconscious, laying the groundwork for contemporary crime fiction even if the current authors weren't fully aware of it. Which is why when you look at current suspense novelists selling extraordinarily well, including Tana French and Paula Hawkins, you also have to look back at those who preceded them.[3]

Before this new lease of literary life, it was primarily the existence of early cinematic adaptations that stood between these mid-twentieth-century novels and oblivion. As John Irwin has argued with reference to male-authored hard-boiled classics, the presence of films noirs inspired by them is the single most influential reason why the books themselves have retained, or even acquired, their canonical status.[4] For the three above-mentioned pioneering examples of domestic noir, however, the connection with Hollywood has been a double-edged sword; the staying power that the novels have been afforded on the strength of their early adaptations has come at a price: the cinematic taming of their subversive gender politics. As I have discussed in a previous essay,[5] *The Blank Wall*'s treatment of motherhood and domesticity—already *per se* unusual themes in noir thrillers—offers an original, critical look at the plight of the modern housewife, whose "soft-boiled" characterization is lost, alongside other crucial nuances, in the more "black-and-white" universe of *The Reckless Moment*, Max Ophuls's 1949 adaptation. Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) uses even greater creative licence in its relationship with its source material; despite the eponymous title, the film changes significantly the novel's plot, not least in making the main character Dix Steele no longer a misogynist serial killer targeting young women, "but a flawed man whose insecurities and violent temper, fed by the doubt and mistrust of those closest to him, lead to tragedy".[6] Amongst "those closest to him" is Steele's romantic interest who, as intimated by this cursory summary of the film, therefore shares some responsibility for the man's bursts of aggression against her.[7]

In this chapter I turn my attention to the third of these novels of domestic suspense whose fame is closely bound with their cinematic afterlife: Caspary's

Laura. Much like Hughes and Holding, Caspary invokes the masculinist conventions of hard-boiled fiction and tough-guy movies the better to destabilize them: for example, her protagonist transcends the noir dichotomy between *femmes fatales* and *ingénues* to flourish as a fully-rounded, not necessarily flawless, yet entirely sympathetic modern woman. The feminist charge of the novel's nuanced characterization of Laura, and of her male admirers, is further thrown into relief when discussed alongside Preminger's famous 1944 film adaptation which reverts back to the very same tropes so carefully challenged by the original narrative. In highlighting this difference, my comparative analysis of the two versions of *Laura* wants to add its voice to Weinman's plea that the "misplaced generation of crime writers" to whom Caspary belongs "deserves, more than ever, to take their place at the literary table",[8] especially now that a new cohort of female authors are following in their footsteps. After all, with heroines displaying great psychological complexity, fierce independence and an egalitarian attitude in their relationship with men, these mid-twentieth-century writers anticipate key traits at the heart of contemporary domestic noir. It is high time that the history of women's crime fiction paid these extraordinary trailblazers their due.

Preminger's *Laura* owes much of its iconic status to its ability to make the most of Caspary's ingenious twist on the motif of the spider woman, whose dangerous spell on the male protagonist—a menace both to his sanity and sense of morality—apparently knows no bounds.[9] Like the original narrative, the cinematic version follows the investigation into the murder of Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney), a young advertising executive on the eve of her wedding to the attractive, though not quite trustworthy, Shelby Carpenter (Vincent Price). This union—about which, it turns out, the woman had been having second thoughts—incurs the opposition of Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb), a writer famous for his erudition and acerbic wit, and an erstwhile mentor and constant admirer of Laura's. Intrigued by her mysterious character and captivating beauty, police detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) becomes obsessed with her; as is often the case in encounters between hard-boiled sleuth and *femme fatale*, professional interest gives way to an improper personal entanglement, so much more disturbing here since the object of Mark's infatuation is a dead woman. It would seem that the *femme fatale*'s perilous hold on her prey reaches out from beyond the grave, adding necrophilia to the list of moral hazards that threaten to engulf and destroy the investigator. But this is Caspary's clever hook, and not the story that she really wants to tell. One third into the narrative, both in the novel and in the film, Laura is revealed

to be still alive; she thus becomes the prime suspect for the killing of Diane Redfern, the girl initially mistaken for her and a rival for Shelby's affection.

In the end, contravening the characterization of the spider woman as a deadly, corrupting creature, Laura is shown to have been the intended murder victim after all. The story closes with the violent demise of the real culprit, Waldo, when his second attempt on Laura's life is thwarted by Mark in his rightful guise of (enamoured) law enforcer, rather than malfeasant dupe. In spite of its faithfulness to this basic plotline, Preminger's adaptation inflects Caspary's story with a different, "mythopoeic"[10] emphasis: widely recognized as a classic noir,[11] the film exploits the opportunities afforded by the cinematic medium, and unavailable to the written page, in order to foreground Laura's mesmeric appeal and, by extension, re-establish her essential affinity with the *femme fatale* or, more generally, with an archetypal ideal of womanhood. For this reason, the film plays down Laura's independence and agency, turning Caspary's flesh-and-blood career woman into a striking but passive icon, whose power is limited to sex appeal and those other feminine guiles through which men are ensnared by the dark ladies of noir. This particular interpretation chimes with recent correctives to the critical orthodoxy that identifies the *femme fatale* as a manifestation of a crisis in masculinity prompted by women's entry into the job market during the Second World War. In fact, the most memorable spider women in noir are kept "slackers", rather than workers, "rarely seen in public space, but […] almost always located in domestic interiors or nightclubs, where they wile [sic] away their time in boredom as they await the return of their men or are presented to the world as spectacles that display their partner's power".[12]

The prominence of Laura's painted portrait is the most obvious and effective way in which the film, starting from the opening credits, quite literally flattens her personality and erases her status as a successful working woman: the image that Mark falls in love with depicts Laura in a black evening dress. While the seductive charge of the painting is also a feature in the novel, Caspary devotes to it little more than one ekphrastic paragraph, where we learn that Jacoby (the fictional artist responsible for it) "had caught the fluid sense of restlessness" of his model, "perched on the arm of a chair, a pair of yellow gloves in one hand, a green hunter's hat in the other".[13] Caspary's Laura is poised for action, and the practical items of clothing that she holds, presumably to be worn outdoors, suggest a life beyond the glamorous equivalent of the domestic sphere—the province of

the arresting hostess/socialite—captured in the film's portrait. This more formal and somewhat idealized version of Laura—witness the luminous halo that sets her out from her dark background—is described by Waldo as failing to convey her "vibrance" and "warmth", for all that Jacoby was in love with her. In the novel, instead, Waldo's criticism dwells precisely on the degree to which this is a "sentimental portrait", "a trifle unreal, […] a trifle studied, too much Jacoby and not enough Laura"[14]; in other words, an exercise in male showmanship coloured by the painter's feelings for his subject. In drawing attention to how the likeness is affected by compositional rules, as well as by Jacoby's emotional investment in the whole enterprise, Caspary makes sure that readers cannot ignore how Mark's initial attraction for Laura is a response to an image already heavily informed by masculine artistic conventions and further infused with the painter's heteronormative sensibility. Conversely, the film mentions Jacoby's love for Laura only to sideline it in the next sentence, together of course with any suggestion that he might have romanticized her image. In spite of the ostensible visual evidence, in Preminger's adaptation the portrait is verbally presented as a non-idealized, mono-dimensional stand-in for the real Laura; that is, as a relatively transparent sign, requiring no deep critical scrutiny. The film thus manages to capitalize on what is clearly, in its iconographic simplicity, a mythical rendition of womanhood while encouraging us not to explore its constructed nature. "Look at her", says Waldo in the film, inviting Mark to admire the portrait as if it were the same as looking at Laura herself.[15]

In this very scene Mark's hard-boiled credentials are being established by his tough talk about "dolls and dames", but his indifference is just a front; later on that night he returns to the house alone, having made a bid to buy the painting which will continue to feature conspicuously, looming large from its elevated position in the cinematic frame, in the sequence when he gets woken up by Laura's appearance. In fairness, the novel strives for a similar uncanny effect when the half-asleep Mark first lays eyes on the actual Laura ("My voice told me that I was alive. I jerked myself out of the chair. The girl backed away. The picture of Laura Hunt was just behind her"[16]), but the brief verbal acknowledgment of the portrait in the background is no match for the calculated strong visual impact of its big-screen counterpart. This stark impact is replicated in the interrogation scene at the Homicide Bureau, complete with details—the lighting, the drape of Laura's clothes—which deliberately recall the painting.[17] The same is true of a tableau-like scene that accompanies Waldo's voice-over

account of his early relationship with his protégée: "Tuesday and Friday nights we stayed home, dining quietly, listening to my records. I read my articles to her. The way she listened was more eloquent than words". This final point is illustrated by a shot of Waldo in an armchair with Laura seated on a higher surface: she might be dominating the frame, but only in the role of silent devotee or muse, or perhaps more accurately as an ornamental figure, since she is far more intent on smoking and gazing into the distance than on signalling her approval to her companion. Incidentally, the beginning of this sequence serves to underscore Laura's professional debt to Waldo:

> Her career began with my endorsement of the pen. I secured other endorsements for her, introduced her to important clients. I gave her her start but it was her own talent and imagination that enabled her to rise to the top of her profession, and stay there.[18]

Waldo's participation in Laura's advertising campaign is mentioned in the book, too but, short of elaborating on his role in her career break, there the mentor takes credit specifically for her social polish: "Under my tutelage she developed from a gauche child to a gracious New Yorker. After a year no one would have suspected that she came from Colorado Springs".[19] Caspary configures Waldo's guidance as a sort of finishing school for Laura; her professional success is more firmly her own in the novel than in the film script.

Another tool through which the film magnifies the protagonist's appeal as an ethereal creature, and mimics the obsessive quality of her hold on Mark, is its soundtrack; Laura's theme is played several times, but never to its end. "Unresolved music equals ephemeral woman […] unrequited love, perpetual longing"[20]; it also heightens Laura's elusiveness, and therefore her desirability and allure, but it does so in the most abstract of terms. This is part of what McNamara refers to as a "process of derealisation",[21] which involves the erasure of concrete details about Laura's multifaceted identity, such as her interest in baseball or her literary tastes. In comparison, the novel places much greater emphasis on Laura's unconventional independence, which it glosses with a clarification about the root of her self-fulfilment. The press report her case as "THE BACHELOR GIRL MURDER" and, predictably, cast her as "a dangerous siren who practiced her wiles"[22] in bohemian high-society. Stripping away the sensationalist patina of Laura's representation for public consumption, Waldo's matter-of-fact summary of her circumstances is an unapologetic condemnation of

double standards, including those about women's right to a sexual life: "Marriage wasn't her career […]. Would you have prescribed a nunnery for a woman of her temperament? She had a man's job and a man's worries. Knitting wasn't one of her talents. Who are you to judge her?"[23] Dubious as it may seem to identify a feminist champion in the story's killer, we ought to remember that Waldo's motive is a desire to possess, and not to chastise, the emancipated Laura.

In Caspary's novel, the crime is triggered by (sexual) jealousy, as confirmed by the outlandish murder weapon: Waldo's walking-stick-cum-hidden-firearm, a clunky overcompensation for his impotence.[24] Waldo's violent streak is hinted at in at least two passages: the episode where he smashes a coveted glass globe, promised by the antiques dealer to another collector,[25] and the morbid denouement of Waldo's story about the Amish Conrad's infatuation for an unattainable woman. This Poe-esque parable ends with the male protagonist finally getting to hold the beloved in his arms:

> though he had heard her name whispered in the city and knew her reputation to be unsavoury, […] his eyes had never met such purity as he saw in that marble brow, nor such chastity as was encased in those immobile lips.[26]

The woman, of course, is dead; Conrad is her undertaker. Following the perverse logic foreshadowed by this odd little sketch—only in death can he possess Laura—Caspary's Waldo destroys what he cannot have. The intra-diegetic tale about Conrad and Waldo's churlish act of vandalism are both excised by the film, which stages the irreparable ruin of a different object: the ornate grandfather clock where Waldo had secreted his rifle, the murder weapon. Replacing the buckshot-filled glass globe both as precious collectible and as repository of ammunition, the clock gets broken in the final scene, during the second failed attempt on Laura's life. His broadcast on the eternity of great love has just finished playing on the radio, when Waldo surprises Laura in her bedroom to declare:

> The best part of myself. That's what you are. Do you think I'm going to leave it to the vulgar pawing of a second-rate detective who thinks you're a dame? Do you think I can bear the thought of him holding you in his arms, kissing you, loving you?

Notice how Waldo conceives of Laura as "it", his most polished possession, at risk of being spoilt by careless handling. The emphasis is on the

woman's impalpable perfection, while Waldo's unattainable wish to preserve her purity forever and/or hold her in perpetual ownership is neatly symbolized by the clock. By contrast, the key symbol in the novel—getting pride of place on the original book cover—is Waldo's reflecting, distorting glasswork; together with the frequent references to mirrors, this is an obvious allusion to the difference between appearance and reality which is one of the central themes in the text.[27] We see it reiterated in Conrad's story, too, where the beloved's rumoured, earthly flaws are no obstacle to the man's desire for her. Conrad continues to see her as the epitome of virtue, as indeed she has become with her demise: the association between death, or "a state of sickness unto death", and an "icon of virtuous femininity"[28] is after all a familiar trope in our culture.

The idea that the perfect woman is a dead one is undoubtedly at the very heart of the novel, but as a mere provocative gambit, which the narrative then proceeds to dismantle. Caspary *teases* us with the suggestion that Mark has fallen in love with one such model of feminine excellence; in fact, the policeman is demonstrably taken with the real, living Laura ("If he'd been wallowing in frustrated romance, he'd never have been so glad when I came back",[29] she remarks) and soon the two find themselves sharing a simple, homely intimacy, as discussed below. As far as Waldo is concerned, his decision to kill Laura is not rooted in an attempt to crystallize—or even bring into effect—her perfection, but rather because he fears that he is about to be supplanted by Shelby as the only steady man in her life. As already mentioned, Waldo has no illusions about Laura's (sexual) purity, and does not seem to love her any the less for it. Over the years he has had to resign himself to her various relationships, but his jealousy had never reached its murderous extreme before because he had always been able to drive these men away,[30] and remain the constant male presence in Laura's life. Note too that in the novel Waldo is not aware of Laura's second thoughts about her marriage until her return. Conversely, Preminger's Waldo knows of Laura's misgivings, yet goes ahead with his murder plan anyway: whether about to get married or not, this Laura can only live up to her Pygmalion's impossible standard of perfection as an inanimate object. The adaptation thus subscribes to the idea that death is the only way for Waldo to keep the "best part of [him]self" unsullied. As a consequence, Caspary's story of pent-up sexual passion becomes a somewhat more cerebral, demure affair on-screen, with a dutifully sanitized heroine: while in an early draft of the script "Laura and Waldo are evidently involved in a romance",[31] the final cut suggests otherwise.[32]

The non-equivalence between appearance and reality epitomized by the glass globe is reprised in Caspary's treatment of the main male characters, especially in her deconstruction and reconfiguration of the facile opposition between effete aesthete and uncouth tough guy. At first glance, Waldo and Mark seem to embody/perform diametrically different gender and class identities: the effeminate, fleshly, well-spoken intellectual and the manly, trim, plain-talking gumshoe. Caspary modelled "her fastidious, fascinating, and fat villain" on Count Fosco, the evil, criminal mind in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), and her choice of a police detective as Laura's love interest revisits the "romance across class lines" between Collins's heroine—coincidentally, another Laura—and her drawing master.[33] Waldo's own literary influences date back to the fin de siècle, as intimated by the elaborate titles of his books, whereas "McPherson's style of narration is firmly in the Hammett-Chandler hard-boiled school. […] Waldo calls the air 'sulphurous.' McPherson says 'rotten eggs'".[34] Markers of class are cleverly imbued with gendered connotations as well: attended by his "Filipino manservant",[35] Waldo sports exotic items of clothing, a "Persian dressing gown" and "loose Japanese clogs".[36] These details are suggestive of the spheres of home and leisure through deft colonial touches. By contrast, Mark accentuates his "lean and hungry look" with his utilitarian work attire, dressed as he is "darkly in blue, double-breasted, worsted, unadorned white shirt and dull tie".[37] When Waldo offers him "cigarettes from a Haviland casket", Mark pulls out a pipe[38]; Waldo's penchant for sophisticated, and often foreign, accoutrements is met by Mark's no-nonsense determination not to miss the next baseball game, a manly, all-American pastime.

Yet even as he flaunts his opulent tastes, and ascribes to Mark an ancestral Puritan strictness, Waldo recognizes several points of contact with the investigator, conceding that a Presbyterian Scottish background is not incompatible either with intellectual curiosity or with a snootiness all of its own.[39] Despite his allegedly dour streak, he enjoys the finer things in life, as demonstrated by his appreciation of the rich breakfast he has at Waldo's during their first meeting. The two share several meals in the novel; to his amazement, Waldo realizes that Mark is "greeted as an honoured customer" at Montagnino's, one of his own favourite restaurants. "I saw then that it would take very little effort to guide [Mark] along the road of good taste",[40] he concludes. Tellingly, Waldo reads the detective's physical hardiness as overcompensation for an injury sustained in a police operation: "I am jealous of severed bone, of tortured muscle, of scars whose existence

demands such firmness of footstep, such stern, military erectness".[41] Besides being a bodily inscription of heroism, Mark's silver shinbone signals his relatively recent vulnerability, another trait he now shares with Waldo, who has always lacked the *physique* to be a leading man.[42] For his part, however, Mark plays down his courage ("Bravery's got nothing to do with it. A job's a job"[43]) and his eventual success both with Laura and in solving the case: "I fell for a woman and she happened to like me. That circumstance furnished the key that unlocked the door".[44] This is the real difference between Waldo and Mark: deep down the former bemoans his lack of traditional masculine qualities, whereas the latter refuses to be labelled a hero, and eventually embraces an alternative version of manliness that is as nuanced and full of contradictions as Laura's take on femininity.

These subtleties fail to make the cinematic cut, and are replaced by details that rather play up the disparity between the worldly, upper-class art-lover and the down-to-earth, blue-collar tough-guy. Waldo's decadent eccentricity is signposted in his first scene: he receives Mark in his lavishly furnished bathroom, while working at his typewriter in the bathtub. New York is in the grip of a heatwave, just like in the novel, but Waldo's method for cooling down is a cinematic addition with meaningful connotations. "Lolling in the tub may express hedonism, or it may be a sign of infantilism"[45]; in either case, it makes a good contrast to Mark's mannish, almost boorish stance as he sits astride a chair, his arms resting casually on the backrest. Unperturbed by Waldo's antics, Mark sneers when the naked man comes out of the bath, expressing disdain for the writer's self-indulgence, for his figure, or perhaps both. He had sneered too after perusing Waldo's collection of exotic masks, distinctly unimpressed by his eclectic, exquisite taste and what it stands for.[46] There is no talk of Gibbon here—or of any other authors of ponderous, historical tomes—to counterbalance the detective's antagonistic ridicule of refinement, unconventionality, and ultimately of Waldo himself. Shortly afterwards, Mark begins to play with a rolling-ball dexterity puzzle, whose background represents a stylized baseball field. Waldo's barb about the object having been "confiscated in a raid on a kindergarten" is given short shrift by Mark's retort: "it takes a lot of control". Together with a subsequent exchange in which Mark explains that his compulsive playing keeps him calm, this scene has unambiguous implications: even an ostensibly juvenile activity signals that Mark is a real man, to the point that he is aware of his need for self-restraint. (A later, completely unwarranted, punch-up will confirm what

he is capable of otherwise.) In short, there is very little in the film to differentiate Mark from the wisecracking, cynical, and pugnacious antiheroes that populate the world of noir. There is also no suggestion that Mark is an apt partner for Laura because he is the right male counterpart to a modern woman; if anything, the pathetic inadequacy of his rivals makes Mark's tough-guy charisma all the more irresistible.

Before examining how the novel celebrates in Mark a new kind of man, it is worth discussing another ostensible opposition deconstructed by Caspary: that between Waldo, the decadent metropolitan artist who trades on his wits, and Shelby, the handsome Southern gentleman who trades on his looks. Against Waldo's corpulence and Mark's leanness (and their respective physical flaws), Shelby cuts an uncomplicated masculine figure: "Male energy shone in his tanned skin, gleamed from his clear gray eyes, swelled powerful biceps".[47] A shallow sensibility must necessarily accompany such physical perfection, hints Waldo, who talks about Shelby with blatant disdain as the "Apollo Belvedere",[48] (the marble statue once held as a paragon of classical beauty until its fall from favour, against the ascendancy of a Dionysian aesthetics, in the mid-nineteenth century). From a different, less erudite perspective, Mark reaches a similar conclusion about this cool, self-contained Apollonian paradigm; to him, Shelby looks disconcertingly "familiar and unreal".[49] The memory of where he might have seen him before tantalizes Mark "like a dream, unsubstantial and baffling",[50] until he realizes that that is precisely what Shelby is: "a dream walking […] God's gift to women", a simulacrum of the idealized masculinity peddled in modern Western culture not so much by classical statuary but "in the advertisements".[51,52] Confronted with Shelby's inauthenticity, Mark finds himself sounding like "a detective in a detective story"[53] and "talking detective-story language"[54]: "It seemed to me that words were printed on a page or rolling off a soundtrack. A gallant hero protecting a helpless female against a crude minion of the law."[55] In reality, Shelby's nonchalant gallantry is no less cultivated than Waldo's dandyism; Laura herself exposes this posturing in her own account of the interrogation during which Mark had felt so self-conscious: "Shelby became very man-of-the-house, protector of frail womanhood. It was all pretense, his courage was as thin as tissue paper, he trembled inwardly. […] Auntie Sue once told me I would grow tired of a six-foot child".[56] Shelby's veneer of civility is pierced through by Laura's brutal critique of his Southern ethos, too: he "came from 'gentle' people; they had slaves to comb their hair and put on their shoes. A gentleman cannot see a lady work […]; a gentleman opens

a door and pulls out a lady's chair and brings a whore into her bedroom".[57,58] Plainly, this particular "gentleman" is a throwback to an old-fashioned understanding of gender and racial roles—cue Caspary's reliance on the negative connotations of the American South.

By his own admission, Shelby feels emasculated by his fiancée's greater disposable income and professional success: "it's hard on a man's pride. I was brought up to think of women […] differently".[59,60] Such anachronistic views inevitably lead him to doubt the sincerity of Mark's behaviour, because it does not fit with gender or class stereotypes: "He ought to be hard-boiled. You'd expect him to be tougher. I don't like his trying to act like a gentleman."[61] Laura ridicules this suggestion, and proceeds to challenge Shelby's archaic diction for good measure, describing his use of the word "caddish" as "old-fashioned" and "out of date. People don't talk about cads any more. It's Victorian."[62] A reference to the same period, in a similarly pejorative context, will later crop up when a horrified Laura ponders that that is how Waldo would like to conduct their relationship: "It was unreal; it was a scene from a Victorian novel. I sat with my hands locked in his hands, a frail creature, possessed, like a gentle, fading, troubled woman of long ago. And he […] had become strong and masterful, the protector."[63] Having failed to kill her, Waldo positively wishes for Laura to be charged for Diane's murder: in this way, he will come to her rescue, defending her name in his syndicated column, casting her as the wronged "heroine", his "greatest creation" to be loved by millions of readers.[64] If he still cannot possess her as a lover, he will pin her down on the page.[65] Shelby's and Waldo's shared Victorian connotations and inauthenticity—notice how both of them are associated with the word "unreal"—indicate their common subscription to an archaic notion of masculinity. Paradoxically, this ideal is further from their reach than Mark's, as Bessie, Laura's faithful maid, pointedly observes: "Most of them that comes here are big babies or old women. For once, even if he is a dick, you've met a man."[66,67]

The film's pared-down characterization transforms Shelby from a superannuated model of (debatable) gentility into a rogue not altogether devoid of appeal, if only because of his disarming lack of hypocrisy: dubbed by Waldo "a male beauty in distress", he is practically a gigolo, happy to accept money from Laura's Aunt Ann (Judith Anderson), and expensive presents from Laura herself, without the slightest compunction.[68] In the climactic scene of Laura's arrest, Mark's contempt for what he perceives as a sorry excuse for a man finally flares up: wishing that Shelby himself had

been killed on the fateful night of the murder, McPherson cuts short their verbal sparring with a knock-out punch to his opponent's stomach. Like his aggressive handling of Laura, the blunt use of physical violence is part of the hard-boiled detective's repertoire, and is meant to remind us who the real man, and worthy romantic lead, in this story is. In the wake of this scene, it is no wonder that Laura replies to Mark's question about whether she is in love with Shelby with the admission: "I don't see how I ever could've been". Afterwards, she goes on to meet the revelation that her arrest was just a ruse engineered by Mark "to get rid of that one percent of doubt" about her innocence, with a conciliatory "then it was worth it". Needless to say, these melodramatic set pieces along unreconstructed gender lines are absent, or significantly toned down, in the novel. For a start, the original Mark eschews gratuitous displays of violence and histrionic third degrees. Though not averse to playing a part in order to further the investigation, he is utterly perturbed when he senses that he might be responding to Shelby's gallant hero posturing by taking upon himself the role of a stereotypical bad cop. Unsurprisingly, his "business-like"[69] interrogation of Laura—conducted in the woman's living room, in the absence of the dramatic trappings of the Homicide Bureau—is inconclusive. Trailing off with Laura's unanswered query about whether Mark believes her to be a killer, this passage ends Part 2 of the novel (the first of two sections narrated by Mark) with the detective doubting himself ("I couldn't trust my own judgement. Personal feelings were involved"[70]) as well as Laura's sincerity ("Frankness was her role now. She put it on like a coat"[71]): so much for the instinctive ruggedness and the inspired hunches with which Preminger's Mark confidently ascertains that the woman is telling him the truth, and then ploughs his way to the solution of the crime.

Caspary's handling of the melodramatic catalyst for the conclusion of the story—the closest equivalent to the set piece in the film's interrogation scene—also ends in a mood of uncertainty and heartache, on this occasion for Laura. Having opened her eyes to the self-serving viciousness of Waldo's attitude towards her admirers, Laura abandons herself to a passionate embrace with Mark. The gesture outrages Waldo, who slips away, followed immediately by Mark, who had been counting on this reaction. Naturally, Laura is left feeling confused and manipulated, "like a slut […]. Like a doll, like a dame, a woman to be used by a man and thrown aside"[72]; her raw emotional fragility is an eloquent reminder of the effect that the routine use of these derogatory terms, *even by the good guys*, and perhaps

in jest, can have on a female character, however strong and confident. Though we realize the reasons for Mark's odd behaviour—and they are infinitely more plausible and effective than those behind the cinematic third degree—the novel emphasizes his unwitting cruelty, instead of sweeping it under the carpet with a pat line about the end justifying the means (the above-mentioned "then it was worth it"). In Mark's defence, his hard-boiled categorization of women as either venal creatures ("A doll in Washington Heights got a fur fox out of me"[73]), or more generally in the grip of an obsessive quest for a life-partner ("Always wanted to take you past furniture stores to show you the parlor suites"[74]) is later balanced by a meditation on how the "romance racket" makes fools out of men too: "I didn't stop to think that men aren't much different, that I had wasted a lot of adult time on the strictly twelve-year-old dream of getting back to the old neighbourhood with the world's championship and Hedy Lamarr beside me on the seat of a five-grand roadster."[75] If women dream of luxurious clothes and of setting up home, men indulge in romantic fantasies of their own, about sporting glory, fast cars, and beautiful film stars. Interestingly, in another astute reversal of gender stereotypes, in Caspary's narrative Laura is the one person who very nearly succumbs to the lure of the "trophy" partner, as she admits when reconsidering her relationship with Shelby: "I had used him as women use men to complete the design of a full life, […] wearing him proudly as a successful prostitute wears her silver foxes to tell the world she owns a man. Going on thirty and unmarried, I had become alarmed".[76] Laura and Mark are linked by these extraordinarily frank glimmers of critical self-awareness which simultaneously reveal and account for their flaws, drawing attention—especially in her case—to societal expectations about gender roles, like the pressure on women to join the married ranks once over a certain age.

Details like this—which, it has to be said, are hard to incorporate into a 90-minute film script partly for reasons of space, partly because the confessional first-person narratives of the novel do not have an easy correspondent on the big screen, other than Waldo's initial voice-over—allow Caspary to develop her two main characters into fully rounded, multifaceted human beings, whose qualities often fail to conform to, and therefore complicate, gender stereotypes. For instance, Laura's intelligence manifests itself as business acumen, but abandons her in matters of the heart; her wilful independence and "taste for privacy"[77] are not incompatible with a generous gregariousness; her professional drive does not imply an outright rejection of the pleasures of home. But it is in the burgeoning

of Laura's relationship with Mark that Caspary explicitly targets staple conventions that noir has inherited by way of its connection with hard-boiled crime fiction: Laura repeatedly observes that Mark is nothing like a typical investigator ("You're not so hardboiled, McPherson"[78]; "You don't seem at all like a detective"[79]; "You're a sensitive man, you react to nuances"[80]), and indeed Mark opens up to her, disclosing very personal information about his family life, such as the loss of his kid brother, in a way that belies his identity as a *private* eye—his affiliation with the police notwithstanding—at least in one sense of the word. The incongruity between the reason for their initial meeting and the tone of their developing acquaintance is not lost on Mark:

> We laughed. A girl had died. Her body had lain on the floor in this room. […] And we couldn't stop laughing. We were like old friends, and later, at half past three, when she said she was hungry, we went into the kitchen and opened some cans. We drank strong tea at the kitchen table like home-folks. Everything was just the way I had felt it would be with her there, alive and warm and interested in a fellow.[81]

As in contemporary domestic noir, *Laura* revolves around the threat of violence lurking behind our intimate relationships and in the spaces where we ought to feel most comfortable and secure. Narrative strategies and thematic concerns featured in *Laura* have been reprised—and taken to shocking extremes—by a bestseller that epitomizes the evolution of the genre in the twenty-first century: Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). Both novels exploit the potential for intimacy—later disrupted by the revelation of unreliability—of multiple first-person narratives; both focus on female characters who are idolized by their male admirers and who inevitably fail—nay, refuse—to live up to gendered expectations of perfection; both draw attention to the intrusive presence and the sensationalistic drive of the media; both capitalize—though in radically different ways—on the motif of the woman presumed dead who in fact turns out to be alive. Then as well as now, the genre exposes the gaps between private selves and public personae, and asks readers to rethink cultural orthodoxies about the domestic sphere. In the 1940s, this final goal most certainly entailed demystifying the gumshoe's attitude towards home life, and in her vivid characterization of Mark McPherson, Caspary does exactly that. As Bran Nicol argues in his 2013 study of the private eye in the film noir canon, this iconic figure is deeply concerned with the "'domestic', 'personal', or

'small-scale', the opposite of grand, public or professional affairs",[82] and yet his preoccupation with these intimate spheres in his work life requires the sacrifice of his own private existence. Like his literary antecedents—the knight errant of medieval romances, the picaro or the modern flâneur—the hard-boiled sleuth is effectively *homeless*, and has at best a fraught relationship with the domestic. Not so Caspary's detective: after his dinner with Waldo at Montagnino's, Mark purposefully misses the turn that would take him back home, realizing that he does not want to be there. So far, so hard-boiled: "I didn't feel like bowling or pool, my mind wasn't sharp enough for poker, and I've never sat in the lounge in the two years I've lived there. The steel furniture in my bedroom reminded me of a dentist's office. There wasn't a comfortable chair in the room, and if you lay on the couch the cover wrinkled under you."[83] This is a merely functional domicile, unlike Laura's then empty apartment, which Mark gets drawn to precisely because it feels like home: "I let myself in as coolly as if I'd been entering my own place."[84] On-screen, this sense of cosiness is replaced by Mark's unease as he tries to settle down in an unfamiliar environment. According to Nicol, the "impression is of a man intruding into another, alien world", so much so that "[t]hereafter the film is about McPherson's struggle to reassert his professional composure and regain control over the case, and over the effect Laura has had upon him".[85] By comparison, Caspary's Mark is easily converted to the pleasures of "housekeeping": the passage where he returns to Laura's the following morning with breakfast ingredients—a detail retained in the film, but without much of the original dialogue/accompanying narrative—is used in the novel to underscore the two characters' mutual appreciation for homely "folksiness": "It seemed natural for me to be carrying the groceries and lounging in the kitchen while she cooked",[86] thinks Mark; shortly afterwards Laura, not to be outdone, utters the immemorial line: "There's no place like home."[87] And, in this context, we believe her. Attuned to, and supportive of, changes in gender relationships that had begun to make it possible for women to embark on successful careers, Caspary manages a tricky balancing act: even as she tells a story of extreme domestic violence, she refuses to concede that women may not seek and find fulfilment in both their private and professional lives. To achieve this, of course, one needs the right partner: controlling manipulators and trophy husbands need not apply. What Caspary conceives is an equal romantic relationship in a working couple where the woman earns significantly more, and has a more prestigious profession, than her partner. Even at a distance of more than

70 years since its publication, this is one of the traits that makes *Laura* truly revolutionary. With its gutsy feminist politics and its keen eye for psychological analysis, the novel is a worthy precursor to the best of today's domestic noir.

Notes

1. With its 1950s companion featuring novels by Charlotte Armstrong, Patricia Highsmith, Dolores Hitchens, and Margaret Millar, this volume provides an important counterpart to the male-dominated anthologies *American Noir* (1997) and the Hammett (2001) and Chandler (1995) box-sets, through which this publisher had already elevated crime writing to the rank of literary fiction. Weinman's 1940s selection also features Helen Eustis's *The Horizontal Man* (1946); this lesser-known (compared to its three companions) novel had been reissued in 2011 in "The Best Mysteries of All Time" series by ImPress, an imprint of The Reader's Digest Association.
2. Sarah Weinman, "Introduction to Women Crime Writers", http://womencrime.loa.org/?page_id=187 [accessed 9 September 2016].
3. *Library of America* [online], "Interview with Sarah Weinman", 11 February 2016, https://loa.org/news-and-views/1122-sarah-weinman-on-_women-crime-writers_-they-had-their-own-stories-to-tell-in-distinct-sometimes-ruthless-ways [accessed 9 September 2016]. Elsewhere, Weinman credits specifically Gillian Flynn "for paving the way" for her own project of rediscovery of neglected female crime writers (quoted in Laura Miller, "The Grandmothers of *Gone Girl*", *Salon*, 16 August 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/08/16/the_grandmothers_of_gone_girl/ [accessed 9 September 2016]). In her review of Weinman's box-set, Val McDermid concurs with the idea that "there is a clear line of descent from this style of storytelling to the current crop of best-selling novels labeled by the book trade as 'domestic suspense' or 'suburban noir.' I can't help thinking that authors like Gillian Flynn, Laura Lippman, Megan Abbott and Paula Hawkins have learned a thing or two from such foremothers" ("Women Crime Writers: Eight Suspense Novels of the 1940s and 1950s", *The New York Times*, 28 October 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/books/review/women-crime-writers-eight-suspense-novels-of-the-1940s-and-1950s.html?_r=0 [accessed 9 September 2016]).
4. John T. Irwin, *Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them: Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 204. Tellingly, the cover of the Penguin edition of *In a Lonely Place* is a still from Nicholas Ray's 1950 film. Persephone Books also capitalize on the existence of two film adaptations in their online blurb for *The Blank Wall* (see http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/the-blank-wall.html).

5. Stefania Ciocia, "Lost in Cinematic Translation: The 'Soft-boiled' Housewife in *The Blank Wall* and American Gender Politics after WWII", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 43.3 (2015), 170–87.
6. James W. Palmer, "*In a Lonely Place*: Paranoia in the Dream Factory", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 13.3 (1985), 200–207 (p. 201).
7. See also Lisa Maria Hogeland: "The film raises the question of the extent to which the investigation itself is a trigger for Dix's violence", "Afterword" in Dorothy B. Hughes, *In a Lonely Place* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2003), pp. 225–50 (p. 246). Her brief assessment of Ray's film reaches the conclusion that "however unintentionally, something of Hughes's proto-feminist analysis does survive the adaptation", p. 247. For an insightful reading of Hughes's novel, and Ray's film, see Christopher Breu, "Radical Noir: Negativity, Misogyny, and the Critique of Privatization in Dorothy Hughes's *In a Lonely Place*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 55.2 (2009), 199–215.
8. Sarah Weinman, "Introduction" in *Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives: Stories from the Trailblazers of Domestic Suspense* (New York: Penguin, 2013), pp. xv–xxv (p. xviii).
9. Janey Place opens her incisive overview of female characters in film noir with the observation that "[t]he dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in western culture" ("Women in Film Noir" in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan [London: British Film Institute, 1998] pp. 47–68 [p. 47]). The film noir *femme fatale* is a modern incarnation of this deadly figure, whose explicitly sexual, and dangerous, iconography finds memorable expression in Barbara Stanwyck's Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Jane Greer's Kathie Moffat in *Out of the Past* (1947). Place offers Gilda—from the eponymous 1946 film—and Laura as examples of spider women who turn out not to conform to the archetype; nevertheless, "the images of sexual power they exhibit are more powerful than the narrative 'explanation'" that vindicates their real nature and individual identity (p. 58).
10. Eugene McNamara, *"Laura" as Novel, Film, and Myth* (Lewinston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. ii.
11. As Elizabeth Cowie remind us, *Laura* is "one of the original films designated by Nino Frank as a *film noir* when he coined the term" in *L'Ecran français* in 1946 ("Film Noir and Women" in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) pp. 121–56 [p. 126]). In their seminal *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941–1953* (1955), Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton mention *Laura* as one of the five titles through which French moviegoers discovered this new cinematic genre in the summer of 1946. These early taxonomies have undoubtedly cast a long shadow

over the history of reception of *Laura*. Later critics have variously pointed out that the film "still possesses much of the structure of the classical whodunnit detective story" (Michael Walker, "Film Noir: Introduction" in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron [London: Studio Vista, 1994] pp. 8–34 [p. 10]) or have drawn attention to where it departs from noir conventions altogether, especially if compared to movies that decidedly belong to that canon: "next to *Double Indemnity* […] we can see that *Laura* is not a *noir* […] Laura is not a spider woman" (McNamara, p. 10) or "*Laura* signifies a reversal of traditional noir story structure. Laura Hunt's woman of mystery is a polar opposite from the traditional noir images of Jane Greer, Claire Trevor or Barbara Stanwyck" (William Hare, *Early Film Noir: Greed, Lust and Murder Hollywood Style* [Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2003], p. 125). Note that Laura's distance from the *femme fatale* trope is identified as the reason why the film is not a typical noir.

12. Mark Jancovich, "Phantom Ladies: The War Worker, the Slacker and the 'Femme Fatale'", *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 8.2 (2010), 164–78 (p. 172).
13. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 33.
14. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 33.
15. Preminger used "a photo of Gene Tierney touched up to look like a painting", (A.B. Emrys, *Wilkie Collins, Vera Caspary and the Evolution of the Casebook Novel* [Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2011], p. 119). For Emrys, the "glamorous" portrait "embodies the male gaze of the infatuated artist rather than the living woman" (p. 119) both in the film and in the novel. While I agree with this point, I would argue that the film tries to obscure the extent to which this image of Laura—the Laura Waldo and Mark fall in love with—is a projection of their masculine desires.
16. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 65.
17. On this scene, see Bran Nicol, *The Private Eye: Detectives in the Movies* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), p. 170: "the image of her in close up, bathed in light, wearing a shawl which resembles the dress in the painting, echoes the earlier phantasmatic image in the portrait".
18. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 65.
19. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 14.
20. McNamara, p. 2.
21. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 48.
22. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 28.
23. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 34.
24. In a 1971 article entitled "My *Laura* and Otto's", Caspary explains that "the cane was a symbol (Freudian) of Waldo's impotence and destructiveness, actually the theme of the novel" (*Saturday Review*, 26 June 1971,

36–7, p. 37). She also recalls her unsuccessful battle with Preminger about retaining Waldo's deadly walking stick in the film.

25. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 104.
26. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 61.
27. In a scene recollected by Mark towards the end of the novel (p. 158), Waldo "turn[s] to the mirror" (p. 12) and sees himself looking innocent. He imagines Mark pacing in front of the same mirror (p. 19) which will later frame the detective's first impression of Shelby (p. 21) and of Laura's Aunt Sue (p. 23). Waldo sees Mark's "guarded countenance" (p. 50) in a mirror, and regards Mark's pallor as a "reflection" (p. 55) of his own. Laura's maid Bessy first sees the corpse in the reflection on the glass globe (p. 32), whose distorting qualities are discussed by Waldo (p. 103). Even Mark is drawn to check in the mirror to see if he "look[s] like the kind of sucker who trusts a woman" (p. 159).
28. Bram Dijkstra, quoted in Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 59.
29. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 146.
30. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 155.
31. McNamara, p. 42.
32. The casting of "the virtually 'out'" Clifton Webb as Waldo, and his characterization as "a classically waspish, fussily dressed queen" strengthens the impression that his love for Laura is non-sexual (Richard Dyer, "Postscript: Queers and Women in Film Noir" in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 123–29 [p. 123]).
33. Emrys, p. 114. Caspary's choice of the name of her protagonist predates her discovery of Collins, who is widely identified as one of the pioneers of detective fiction. On Caspary's adoption of the "Wilkie Collins method of having each character tell his or her own version" of the story, see Emrys, p. 112 and ff.
34. McNamara, p. 28.
35. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 1.
36. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 13.
37. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 6.
38. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 7.
39. As Waldo observes, Mark is well read and, in his idiosyncratic way, "a snob […] worse, a Scotch snob" (p. 9), "a prig […] a proletarian snob with a Puritan conscience" (p. 93).
40. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 52.
41. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 18.
42. Compare with the treatment of the same incident in the film, where the "siege of Babylon" which leads to Mark's injury is recalled by Waldo as evidence of the detective's heroism: "Are you the man with the leg full of lead? The one who walked right in and got him [the gangster with the

machine gun, who had already killed three policemen]?" Mark takes Waldo's admiration at face value ("I hope you won't have any reason to change your mind about me"), inviting the audience to subscribe to his characterization as an effortlessly courageous and dynamic man.

43. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 9.
44. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 158.
45. McNamara, p. vi.
46. See also McNamara, for whom these two early occasions when Mark "almost smiles […] serve to reinforce the opposition in two types of character. One is the tough, physical man of action and the other the aesthete whose chief weapon is verbal wit", p. v.
47. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 21.
48. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), pp. 10, 100.
49. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 84; see also p. 21.
50. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 84.
51. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 107.
52. See also Waldo's take on Shelby, reported by Mark in his section of the narrative: "*The hero she could love forever immaturely, the mould of perfection whose flawlessness made no demands upon her sympathies or her intelligence*" (p. 107).
53. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 108.
54. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 110.
55. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 110.
56. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 122.
57. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 129.
58. The final remark is a bitter reference to Shelby's tryst with Diane, to whom Laura nonetheless lends her apartment while she goes away to spend the weekend in her country house. Shelby is in Laura's bedroom when Diane opens the door to Laura's would-be murderer, and gets killed in her place.
59. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 23.
60. See also, "'I hope you don't think I'm completely a heel, Mr. McPherson,' Shelby said ruefully. 'I never liked borrowing from a woman'" (p. 27).
61. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 123.
62. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 123.
63. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 142.
64. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 142.
65. This passage closely informs one of the scenes in the film which, as already discussed, really does bank on Waldo's self-perception as Laura's maker. In the novel, however, the task of recording and shaping her story is described by Waldo at the beginning of the narrative as a poor substitute for the part he would have liked to have played: "For all of his rough edges, [Mark] was the man I should have been, the hero of the story. The hero, but not the interpreter. That is my omniscient role" (p. 18).
66. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 136.

67. We have already dealt with Shelby as a big baby. Laura compares Waldo to "a sickly, sensitive child" (p. 149), but also to "a fussy old maid" (p. 78). See also Mark's observation that Waldo's voice is "like an old woman's" (p. 104).
68. A predatory version of the novel's Aunt Sue, Ann has her own matrimonial designs on Shelby, whom she recognizes as being "no good", like herself. Her other argument in favour of the suitability of her match with Shelby is that she "can afford him". (Incidentally, Preminger's characterization of Shelby as a "gigolo" outraged Caspary; see "My *Laura* and Otto's", p. 37). Ann's callousness is given a vaguely malicious edge by the casting of Judith Anderson, who played the evil Mrs Danvers in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). Hitchcock's film, based on Daphne du Maurier's novel, explores much more ominously than *Laura* the destructive influence of a beautiful dead woman.
69. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 108.
70. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), pp. 110–11.
71. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 111.
72. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 157.
73. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 31.
74. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 31.
75. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 107.
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78. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 69.
79. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 70.
80. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 80.
81. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 71.
82. Nicol, p. 11.
83. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 64.
84. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 64.
85. Nicol, pp. 169–70.
86. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 77.
87. Vera Caspary, *Laura* (London: Vintage Classics, 2012), p. 77.

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PART II

The Influences of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*

CHAPTER 4

Gone Genre: How the Academy Came Running and Discovered Nothing Was As It Seemed

Henry Sutton

Introduction

Detective novels have long and variously served as examples of the theoretical and critical arguments of European and anglophone literary theorists and critics. Todorov extended his theory of structuralism through the dissection of the balance of plot and narrative direction in detective fiction, in his essay "The Typology of Detective Fiction".[1] Modernist writers were seduced by the close parallels between detectives and canny critical readers. Gertrude Stein made her own foray into the genre with *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*,[2] while T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden (clearly articulated in his essay "The Guilty Vicarage"[3]) were renowned for their love of the formulas and patterns, the play and tidy escapism, of the detective fiction of Wilkie Collins, Conan Doyle, Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie and others.

The close parallels between detective fiction and literary discourse have only strengthened through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For literary critics, the flamboyant detectives of nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction have continued to fascinate, while the narrative devices of

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the genre offer striking examples of broader theoretical claims. There were a swathe of Freudian and deconstructive analyses of the stories of Edgar Allan Poe in the 1980s and 1990s, informed by the work of Derrida and Lacan, focussing on how Poe's writing exemplified the techniques of hidden meanings and surface distortions. Borges riffed marvellously on this in his short story "Death and the Compass",[4] where the detective is undone by his own detecting. Bennett later linked the two in his essay "The Detective Fiction of Poe and Borges".[5]

In more recent criticism, the close proximity of detective fiction and critical interpretation continues to fascinate. Cultural historical accounts, such as *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* by Samantha Walton,[6] have established close links between Golden Age crime fiction and the then thinking surrounding British law and the evolution of psychology in the 1930s. Theorists meanwhile continue to look to detectives and crime stories for key metaphors of interpretation, such as Rita Felski's theoretical exposure of the parallels between sleuths and critical readers, who by definition are suspicious, in *The Limits of Critique*.[7] "Both critics and detectives, to pick up a phrase from Ernst Bloch", Felski writes, "like to fish in murky waters". She continues in this vein, stating: "Detective fiction has often been the playground for the latest theories of interpretation."

Of perhaps more pertinence to this chapter, and indeed volume, are Felski's observations on interpretation and morality, narrative, plot, storylines and understanding. She asks: "What are the guiding affinities between suspicion and storytelling?"

> Specifically, I pursue the analogies between detection and critique and styles of suspicious reading that blend interpretation with moral judgement […] And here the similarities proliferate at a dizzying rate: a penchant for interrogating and indicting, a conviction that deceit and deception are ubiquitous and that everyone has something to hide, a commitment to hunting down criminal agents and a reliance on the language of guilt and complicity.[8]

Felski's recent work can be connected to recent and growing criticism, and what can be called, here, self-criticism, and/or metafiction, within the crime genre. While aspects of detective fiction, and the Golden Age in particular, continue to attract critical attention—and Walton's work also suggested this—with a move arguably towards a greater awareness of social context, far less critical attention has been paid to noir and, as Lee Horsley

coined it, the noir thriller. There is a growing sense that under the huge umbrella of crime fiction, work of great social, cultural and literary significance—especially in relation to power, gender, domination, sexual, racial and class politics, and, in a literary context, structural and thematic form—is being produced, and slowly recognised.

What has been the impact of literary critical techniques on the narrative strategies of "crime" novelists, and their thinking particularly around context (or employment of metafictional strategies)? While this question is implicitly posed in many of the studies mentioned above, it has rarely been the explicit starting point for analysis. Asking the question from this way round yields some different lines of enquiry. In other words, how knowing are certain crime writers? Felski discusses the concept of "interpretation-as-narrative", stating that it is "the means by which a critical sensibility spins out storylines that connect understanding to explaining. What are the guiding affinities between suspicion and storytelling?"

The issue of storytelling versus literary expression is, of course, loaded. The long-standing critical distrust of plot and any artificial structure, in favour of a more random and lifelike "realism", has not served the broader reaches of the crime genre well. However you look at it, the suspicion has been bound up with literary merit. Crime fiction, and particularly detective fiction, and most pertinently the locked-room mysteries of the Golden Age, are nothing more than a structuralist's plaything; a way of imposing a certain critical and theoretical thinking that was already partly developed. But, and as implied earlier, what if we twist this all round? What if we suppose that crime fiction is the narrative that interprets; that a crime novel can reveal connections to a critical and theoretical literary understanding, is knowingly situated, socially aware, while also opening up great moral questions in relation to judgement, and the accused, and all in a package that is commercially digestible? This chapter will suggest that a certain writer has turned the tables, that the critical and theoretical landscape is her "locked room". It will chart the dismal critical respect for the crime genre as anything other than a structuralist's plaything, and a serious writer and critic's escape button. Notably, it will highlight the recent and rapid rise of the domestically themed psychological thriller, several decades after James M. Cain, Dorothy B. Hughes, Jim Thompson and Patricia Highsmith first published. This is where the terrain has so recently shifted. A world has woken up to the fact that crime fiction is diverse and dynamic, and has always been at the sharp edge of modern literary thought.

Underpinning this chapter is one of the most knowing and, to use Felski's language (borrowed from Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion"), suspicious, recent metafictional crime novels: *Gone Girl*.[9] This novel is unusual, both because it is a hugely popular commercial success, ***and*** for the sheer range of its literary-critical and theoretical knowingness. It is replete with metafictional crime references, formal play, and tricky plot reversals. It positions the reader as a kind of literary critic in search of hidden meanings, surface signifiers, non-existent depths, while artfully enhancing suspense and narrative drive, as if storytelling were not a literary dirty word. Or rather the flamboyance of the populist approach (albeit a deeply informed one) suggests a writer having some fun with a suspicious narrative; where, as Jim Thompson notably proclaimed as the key tenet to mystery and suspense fiction (his anyway), "things are not what they seem".[10] Above all, it positions the text from the perspective of a cynical gender critic alert to all the foils of "natural" gender distinctions, the ruses of identity politics and the notion of a narrative, or fictional, closure. The question I want to ask, then, is whether Flynn's mining of the literary-critical repertoire, and now clichéd critical approaches to the perceived narrow form of the detective story and the high walls of the locked room—genre bias notwithstanding—makes merely for a sophisticated crime novel, or whether it signals something new about the long-established links between crime and criticism. At least it stretches our terminology, and specifically genre fiction has long relied on terminology and being bracketed, partly because it makes the marketing so much easier, while adding great weight to context.

"I am penniless and on the run. How fucking noir", declares Amy Elliott Dunne three-quarters of the way through *Gone Girl*, when the reader has already learned that the girl they thought was gone because she was a victim of a crime is actually gone because she has masterminded one. The innocent victim of domestic assault is in fact a sociopath. Here Flynn has blatantly disturbed the old order of what often constitutes a crime novel, particularly the casting of victim and perpetrator. Interestingly, the public perception of the novel—and of course when it comes to worldwide bestsellers, public perception is key—her work has proven that the genre is as dynamic as it is as difficult to categorise, or, and surprisingly, at least slip into a subgenre. Commonly *Gone Girl* has been portrayed, marketed, as a thriller. Or a psychological thriller. Or as a literary thriller. Indeed, as a "riveting noirish thriller", "a five-star suspense mystery", "a terrifically intelligent thriller", "a funny, cunning thriller", "a psychologi-

cal suspense". It's also been called, "a near-masterpiece", from an "extraordinarily good, brilliantly accomplished, writer". This "absolute must-read"[11] however has not, to my knowledge, been described as a literary novel. Therefore, if it's not a literary novel, and if it's not a straightforward thriller, what exactly is it?

The long-standing idea that by defining a work as genre somehow devalues it, at least in a literary sense, still holds sway. Crime fiction is the most popular adult literary genre in the UK, and the anglophone world. Yet its reception within the academy has been far from wholesome. Works like this collection do still strive to increase the audience for the serious critical study of crime fiction, and alter entrenched critical positions. Tzvetan Todorov, in his seminal essay "The Typology of Detective Fiction" (within his work *The Poetics of Prose*[12]), which was first published in English in 1977, maintained that the theory of genres had remained singularly undeveloped until very recently. He went on not only to define, quite clearly, three types of "detective fiction", but to expand on the idea that crime fiction could easily be put into brackets, for the sake of the clarity of its purpose and the narrative effect intended.

Noir

In that essay the word "noir" is, surprisingly, not mentioned, except obliquely in relation to the French rubric *série noire*, which Todorov simply translates as meaning "thriller". Noir, or literary noir, could be the closest definable term relating to *Gone Girl*. There are numerous elements of Flynn's work that are noir, many of which have evolved from noir's literary (as opposed to cinematic) inception in the late 1920s, to its twenty-first-century incarnation, as thoroughly explored by Lee Horsley in *The Noir Thriller*.[13] There is the underlining idea of the transformation of the transgressive woman; the idea of a bad girl in comfortable, suburban hiding, prepared to go to whatever lengths to protect herself and exact her violent but calculated desires. But the ending of *Gone Girl* is not exactly apocalyptic, as strict noir would determine. A child is to be born. While satiric, the overriding tension appears more domestic than societal. Its concerns are contemporary and political, certainly, but the fears and anxieties at play for both Amy and her husband Nick, whom she tries to frame for her disappearance, too readily switch to positions of personal and deeply intimate strength and advantage, and back again. It's a particularly slippery dual, indeed triple, or in fact quadruple narrative: Amy's diary

entries, Amy past, Nick present, Amy present. One of the key themes of noir, that of doomed innocence, has been blown out of the water here, in preference for generic, or subgeneric, and stereotypical interplay, or manipulation. Crashing straight back into the narrative, and our perception of it, is society and its mores.

As such this can be seen as a comment on our lack of innocence, as a society, conceivably more than aware of larger genre conventions. Or at least this is Flynn artfully positioning or repositioning the text, and playing with broad conceptions and preconceptions. This makes for a particularly interesting double-think because it is Amy's objective awareness of the genres we use to define and determine our lives (and narrate them in news coverage and films et cetera) that means she can manipulate the system to her advantage. Conversely, it is Nick's initial ignorance of how societal discourses shape his life and those of others that makes him so easy to villainise and ultimately victimise. He behaves according to the script, the misunderstood husband who has an affair, and this makes it so much easier for Amy to cast him in another drama of her own design. Indeed, Amy is performative throughout with her references to being the "cool girl", and she has learnt this behaviour from her parents who cast her as "Amazing Amy". But this is a behaviour that is applicable to everyone, albeit in a less psychotic way. We are shocked by Amy and she appeals to us because she is us, every one of us; we recognise in her extreme application of our own choices, our own desires. She is both supervillain and superhero—as all good superheroes always are *au naturellement*.

The text becomes not just self-referential—knowing and then expanding on its place within a literary noir tradition—but increasingly intertextual and metafictional. This is what Nick wants to tell a chat show host: "We are so used to seeing these murders of women packaged as entertainment, which is disgusting, and in these shows, who is guilty? It's always the husband." But of course in *Gone Girl* it's not. Or is it? Amy, addressing Nick, a little further on, says: "Everything I do, I do for a reason […] Everything I do takes planning and precision and discipline." Now, if writing a piece of standard detective fiction, you would need, arguably, planning, precision and discipline—certainly the end result would have to suggest as much. But, aside from the fact that Amy is in part deluding herself, Nick quickly retorts, "You are a petty, selfish, manipulative, disciplined psycho bitch—." She comes back at him with, "You are a man […] You are an average, lazy, boring, cowardly, woman-fearing-man. Without me, that's what you would have kept on being, ad nauseam. But I made

you into something." Subgeneric conventions are toyed with knowingly and authorially.

Love

Nick sets out to write his version of the truth, to counter Amy's forthcoming memoir, also to find out just who he might be as an individual. "I am a cheating, weak-spined, woman-fearing coward", he thinks, "and I am the hero of your story. Because the woman I cheated on—my wife, Amy Elliott Dunne—is a sociopath and a murderer." He concludes, almost triumphantly: "Yes. I'd read that." We, or many millions of us, have read this. At one point Amy, knowing of Nick's intentions to write his version, believes she has to take precautions, because she knows Nick's not writing "a love story". Or is he? She knows she's not and never will be wholly in control, wholly safe. Nick regards the rekindling—if that's quite the right word—of their relationship as "kind of romantic. Catastrophically romantic". Are we then in the grip of a love affair that's gone horribly wrong? In a way, yes. Or are we just witnessing the extremity of the romantic fantasy, and in the authorial control of a writer who knows those tropes too? After all the greatest love stories of all time involve heroes and heroines that have at the very least committed questionable acts. Many of these, like *Gone Girl*, would be classified in crime fiction's close cousin, that of the gothic. It all depends on who's telling the story and who's doing the reading. Is Mr Rochester the brooding hero of idealistic romantic fantasy, or is he a wife abuser who manipulates a teenage girl in his employ? Similar challenges can be brought to the verdict on *Wuthering Heights*,[14] or even, more recently, to Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*.[15] (Worth considering here is the lack of literary merit connected to romance fiction. Yet when romance meets crime or violence it arguably stretches into new and conceivably more favourable literary terrain. Can the blood of one literary corpse feed the health of another?)

Perhaps *Gone Girl* is far from a noir, but actually a romance, at least a love story. Or do these genres (and subgenres) need to be distinctive? Who's doing the positioning? The author or the reader/critic? It's perhaps no surprise that James M. Cain never thought of himself as a crime writer, or a writer of detective fiction. "I write love stories", he memorably said, in a *Paris Review* interview.[16]

While *Gone Girl* works on one level because of its emotional pull, traditional detective fiction works precisely because of the opposite, its almost

complete lack of emotion, and a reader's collusion with a particularly adept, if peculiarly disconnected, detective. To have a genre which can accommodate both positions creates a strikingly diverse, if not confused, message. No wonder crime fiction—and I'm using that term in its broadest sense—has struggled to find a sure footing within the critical academy, and even, in the case of many institutions, a footing at all. The genre, if indeed that's what it is, is too large, too varied, too disparate, effectively (and certainly concisely) to come under one umbrella. The boundaries are far too flexible, dynamic. That so much critical study continues to focus on traditional detective fiction is no surprise; this is the one area that is beset by rules and parameters, and that can be defined, a world where nothing changes. Yet it's not the most popular form today, and certainly not the most innovative or challenging in a literary sense. Arguably, its very association with works such as *Gone Girl*, Megan Abbott's *The End of Everything*,[17] which is a play on Nabokov's *Lolita*,[18] detracts literary attention, if not appreciation.

Popularity

The biggest commonality between, for example, the work of Agatha Christie and Gillian Flynn is popularity. But popularity creates its own problems with regards to expectation and literary worth. Arguably, crime fiction has always been on the back foot, critically, because there's been a struggle to define just what it is. Definitions, terms, subgenres, come and go, not necessarily leading us any closer to answers, and answers that address the most crucial questions: what is crime fiction and what is crime fiction now? Just because a novel has a murder in it, that doesn't mean it's a crime novel. And just because there isn't an actual murder doesn't mean a novel isn't a crime novel. Intent and a strong narrative drive, or menace and motivation, are some of the key things my MA Crime Fiction creative writing classes at the University of East Anglia discuss. But these pointers can quickly become quite abstract. (Although it's worth remembering that there are few, if any, crime novels that don't have crimes, or at least suggestions of crimes, and criminal behaviour in them. However, criminal acts are bound by the law, strictly, as necessarily opposed to a moral or faith sense, and as such are not necessarily universal.)

It is easy to defend popularity, less easy to defend, or even define, within this context, literary merit and/or genre innovation. A number of crime-thriller writers have been particularly vocal. Lee Child to me: "To say

we're judged by the literary establishment is like a dog being judged by a flea. We're doing our thing and they are doing their thing—ours is very big and theirs is very small."[19] Raymond Chandler, on the other hand, went for literary credibility, with his polemical 1950 essay "The Simple Art of Murder".[20] He wrote: "As for literature of expression and literature of escape, this is critics' jargon, a use of abstract words as if they had absolute meanings. Everything written with vitality expresses that vitality; there are no dull subjects, only dull minds." But here Chandler wasn't championing the genre as a whole, but his version of it. Indeed, he was attacking Dorothy L Sayers's idea, voiced in her introduction to *The Omnibus of Crime*,[21] that the detective novel could "never attain the loftiest level of literary achievement" because it was a "literature of escape" and not "a literature of expression". Chandler maintained that he, like Shakespeare, simply did not know what the loftiest level of literary achievement was, and was effectively proposing the idea that all reading for "pleasure is escape", and that to say otherwise was to be an "intellectual snob, and a juvenile at the art of living".

W.H. Auden came to his defence in another hugely influential essay, "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on The Detective Story, by an *Addict*",[22] where he declared: "I think Mr Chandler is interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of a criminal milieu, the Great Wrong Place, and his powerful, but extremely depressing books should be read and judged not as escape literature, but as works of art". The mean streets of LA, or the Great Wrong Place, nevertheless was not Auden's favourite place to be. He preferred the library, the locked room, that stuffy English vicarage, where stiff archetypes shuffled from tea to sherry. Why? Because from such contained order, any criminal disorder could ingeniously and ultimately be identified—the detective working in tandem with the astute reader, though a step or so ahead—and then swept under the carpet. That the puzzle mystery's pull continues is testament to its reliance not just on logic and deduction, but form. Anything so contained, narratively, is particularly attractive not just to critics and theorists, but fiction writers, who by the very nature of their medium and creativity struggle to tow a strong narrative line, in a far more abstract and random world (as Felski noted). The author is left to question contrivance versus reality, character versus story, though not necessarily expression versus escapism. The greater literary puzzle, or expressionistic puzzle, is not "whodunnit?", of course, or necessarily even "whydunnit?", but as Martin Amis suggested in his noir homage *Night Train*: "why are we even here?"[23] The only mystery that

really counts, is the mystery of existence. While Camus was notably influenced by James M. Cain—saying he modelled *The Stranger*[24] on *The Postman Always Rings Twice*[25]—so Amis brought a metaphysical tone to the language of Elmore Leonard (Amis often acknowledging his debt to the so-called Dickens of Detroit).

Structure

While *Night Train* becomes increasingly concerned with cosmology and metaphysics, it began with the investigation into a suspicious death. In this sense Amis followed Paul Auster in "post-modernising" some traditional detective fiction tropes. Auster's *New York Trilogy*[26] included many an old locked-room riff. And there are plenty more examples of authors playing with classic detective and mystery fiction tropes, from the likes of Nabokov, Pynchon, Murakami. Are these, as with *Night Train*, works of crime fiction, or literary fiction, however ludic? Regardless, within both are understandings of the more formal and traditional aspects of detective fiction. These very parameters and expectations have long exerted extraordinary influence, if not control. Todorov relied almost solely on a structural and thematic orthodoxy instigated by the likes of Dorothy L. Sayers, G.K. Chesterton and Agatha Christie and their particularly stringent, yet commonly adhered to "Detection Club" rules, further cemented by S.S. Van Dine.

Such parameters might be a structuralist's dream, but fictionally a solvable puzzle, where the rules are clearly defined and widely understood, can only ever be a route to escape, rather than a mode of expression. While there has been some recent revaluing of Agatha Christie's psychological acuity in relation to her characters (Walton in particular), that is to detract from the true purpose of a piece of detective fiction and its most concentrated form, the puzzle mystery, which is the inevitable solution. Tim Parks highlighted this critique in the *London Review of Books*,[27] when writing about Georges Simenon. "To read the breadth of Simenon's work is to be made aware of the unbridgeable gulf between genre fiction and serious fiction. After reading five, six, seven Maigrets, one grows weary. Nothing new can happen in these books, however intriguingly the old pack is reshuffled." He then discusses Simenon's non-Maigret and non-crime novels, such as *Dirty Snow*, or *The Man Who Watched Trains Go By*, and how each of these alone is worth at least a dozen Maigrets, because of

their "genuine exploration of how people push relationships to extremes", of how they offer "a far more arduous and exciting level of engagement". In *Gone Girl*, Flynn doesn't so much reshuffle the old pack of cards as cut it with a couple of other packs, so while we think we're playing the same old game, we're actually being made to reconsider the rules and why they are there; we're being reminded of all that's gone before, and then we have to challenge, confront and comprehend them. For Flynn it's deeply, knowingly metafictional; for the reader, perhaps, it's a self-reflexivity embedded in the reading process that makes it narratologically literary, but on a rather thrilling edge.

Addiction

The addiction to "detective fiction" from within some quarters of the critical academy has overshadowed the breadth and dynamism of the genre as a whole; and that's if we can even conceive of it as a genre. Todorov began his essay declaring that to "classify several works in a genre is to devalue them". Continuing: "The major work creates, in a sense, a new genre and at the same time transgresses the previously valid rules of the genre." He went on: "As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre." This perhaps exemplifies the problem. How do you identify a subgenre say, such as domestic noir, which is a subgenre of, or deviation from, the psychological thriller, from indeed a whole new genre? (Or, as the parlance appropriately goes, from a standalone?) "There are no rules that a genius can't circumnavigate", E.M. Forster stated in *Aspects of the Novel*.[28] By extension, there are no parameters to works of genius, but parameters are the very things that genres seek to determine.

Todorov extended his thematic from the whodunnit, to include two further distinctions, or subgenres, of detective fiction. He identified these as the thriller and the suspense novel. A number of distinctions were then made, still revolving around the interplay between active and inactive storylines, though bringing in such arguably literary considerations as milieu, description, amorality, love, violent passion—the stuff of life, or expression, as Chandler might have deemed. Yet Todorov strongly maintained that detective fiction "followed precisely the succession of these forms". He stated that novels such as Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr.*

Ripley,[29] which, in his terminology, tried to do without both "mystery and the milieu proper to the thriller", were too few to be considered a separate genre. He also said that no thriller is presented in the form of memoirs specifically: "there is no point reached where the narrator comprehends all past events, we do not even know if he will reach the end of the story alive". While Todorov details what he terms the "purely geometric architecture" of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*,[30] he does not mention James M. Cain's novel, also published in 1934, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, which features the first-person confession of a murderous young drifter. There's also no mention of Jim Thompson's 1952 noir classic *The Killer Inside Me*,[31] featuring again the first-person voice of a particularly knowing serial killer.

Thompson turned to crime fiction after he failed to make it as a writer of literary fiction. A passage in *The Killer Inside Me* would seem to suggest he had quite an understanding of the difference, creatively and critically. This statement comes from the narrator Lou Ford:

> In lots of books I read, the writer seems to go haywire every time he reaches a high point. He'll start leaving out punctuation and running his words together and babble about stars flashing and sinking into a deep dreamless sea. And you can't figure out whether the hero's laying his girl or a cornerstone. I guess that kind of crap is supposed to be pretty deep stuff—a lot of the book reviewers eat it up, I notice. But the way I see it is, the writer is just too goddam lazy to do his job. And I'm not lazy, whatever else I am. I'll tell you everything.
>
> But I want to get everything in the right order.
>
> I want you to understand how it was.

This might be a self-referential call to arms, as Gillian Flynn, via Amy Dunne Elliott, sees it, for planning, precision, discipline. How it was controls how it will be, in the narrative sense of cause and effect. Our engagement with this process, this narrative, nevertheless is dependent not on clues and deduction but character and conviction. Does the psychology stack up? Is it all expressed convincingly? Todorov concludes his essay by asking, though not quite answering, the question: "what is to be done with novels which do not fit our classification?" Let's remind ourselves of Todorov's earlier point: "As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own […]". And that, "to improve upon detective fiction is to write literature not detective fiction".

Conclusion

Bran Nicol determined in his essay in *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Popular Fiction*[32] that one function of popular fiction is to provide a moment of escapism amid the monotony of ordinary existence, while literary fiction's key functionality is to enrich our lives, or teach us something we did not know. Nicol's essay focuses on the founder of hard-boiled fiction, Dashiell Hammett, who while mass-appealing to blue-collar workers in the handy pulp format of the time, was also a writer of great syntactical skill, notably recognised by Faulkner, Hemingway and Chandler. A literary thriller writer, we might refer to him now. To Chandler, Hammett's great gift, aside from demonstrating that "the detective story can be important writing", was to create an "effect of movement, intrigue, cross-purposes and the gradual elucidation of character". To Nicol, *The Maltese Falcon*[33] "is a remarkable, contradictory text: a plot-driven popular thriller, full of action, violence and sexual intrigue, but which resists final meaning and suggests that the value of narrative is not what it can reveal but how it can be *used*". This tallies of course with the concept of suspense, and the psychological thriller concerning itself more with issues of subjectivity and how acute the thriller can be in picturing a modern psychology, which of course has its heart in a modern, or contemporary, society. This is the nature of narrative, however contrived, or how a plot might be resolved (or not be resolved). Clive Bloom described popular fiction as that which "most becomes its period and which is most caught in its own age", and was effectively not just a "barometer of contemporary imagination", but of all that is "ephemeral artistically".[34]

What is *Gone Girl*? A work of crime-thriller fiction that got away? Not the only one, for sure. More importantly, perhaps, for any work of fiction to engage (and on such a popular scale) it must do at least one thing—come alive. As Nick Dunne acknowledges: "We had spent years battling for control of our marriage, of our love story, our life story. I had been thoroughly, finally outplayed. I created a manuscript, and she created a life."[35] Gillian Flynn adds great currency to the concept that long-form fiction is an intensifier. What is the last line from Nick in the novel? "We are one long frightening climax."[36] But this isn't quite the end. That goes to Amy, of course. "I don't have anything else to add. I just wanted to make sure I had the last word. I think I've earned that."[37] In reality, Flynn has both the first and last word. Knowingness is only one part of *Gone Girl*. How the novel became more than a literary-critical exercise, a

work steeped in the nuances of a genre that has always defied convention, and busted through another barrier of acceptance and populism, is testament to the strength, dynamism and adaptability of crime fiction to grab the current, and go way beyond the surface. In crime fiction things are never what they seem. Context isn't always everything; however, Flynn reminds us that art well situated stands up to closer inspection, while providing fuel for greater critical and creative interpretations: or, if you like, a way forward.

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CHAPTER 5

From Cool Girl to Dead Girl: *Gone Girl* and the Allure of Female Victimhood

Eva Burke

This chapter focuses on Flynn's most recent novel, *Gone Girl* (2012), and the fetishisation of female victimhood as a cultural phenomenon. This novel (Flynn's most successful, having spent eight consecutive weeks at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list in 2012 and served as the basis for a critically acclaimed film) centres on a female protagonist whose canny ability to control the dynamics of her own apparent helplessness is unmatched by her literary predecessors in Flynn's earlier books, Camille and Libby. *Sharp Objects* (2006), Flynn's debut novel, revolves around Camille Preaker, a troubled young journalist whose return to her parochial hometown of Wind Gap in the wake of the murder of two young girls, Ann Nash and Natalie Keene (both found strangled and with their teeth pried out), results in a destructive family reunion. The venomous domestic politics which undercut her homecoming ultimately engulf her, and she is forced to confront her own toxic heritage. *Dark Places* (2009) similarly works to deconstruct the gendered binary of victimhood and problematise straightforward interpretations of female victimisation, this time via a recalibrated "survivor" narrative. The novel revolves around Libby Day, the only survivor of a rural family massacre for which her older brother Ben has been imprisoned for 25 years. Reluctantly convinced to revisit and

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reinvestigate the annihilation of her family, Libby begins to engage with her own victimhood and the extent to which it has doomed her to a kind of arrested pre-adolescence, unable to disentangle herself from the emotional wreckage of her early years but equally powerless to come to terms with it.

Gone Girl centres on the possible murder of Amy Dunne, a beautiful and accomplished young woman whose seemingly picture-perfect marriage is dragged under the microscope of public scrutiny in the wake of her abrupt disappearance on the morning of her fifth wedding anniversary. Her husband Nick, a local bar owner and community college professor, immediately falls under suspicion; his narrative (our point of entry into the story of Amy and Nick) comprises a series of half-truths and troubling admissions, including the confession (smouldering with barely suppressed violence) that he often pictures "opening [Amy's] skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it, trying to catch and pin down her thoughts".[1] Nick's inability to correctly perform the part of the heartbroken husband proves to be his undoing—paralysed with confusion and haunted by the memory of his fiercely misogynistic father, Bill[2] (who intermittently breaks out of his assisted living facility and descends upon Nick), he is unable to fulfil his role in the pre-established media narrative surrounding the disappearance. His reluctance to comply with this narrative is also underpinned with misgivings about the marriage and what appears to be palpable relief at Amy's disappearance: "I already knew Amy wasn't phoning back. I wanted the next part to start."[3] This disclosure indicates that, for all his professions of obliviousness, Nick may be subconsciously aware of his wife's capacity for deviousness and malice.

The first half of the novel is narrated by Nick and interspersed with excerpts from Amy's diaries; each entry documents an episode in their seven-year relationship. As Nick is pursued by police (the investigation is headed by Detective Rhonda Boney, a woman described by both Nick and Amy as surprisingly homely[4]) and convicted in the court of public opinion, Amy's diary entries are replaced by her own interior monologue—she is revealed to have staged her disappearance with the intent of framing Nick for murder, a pathologically spiteful plot inspired by her discovery that Nick has been conducting an affair with Andie, a 23-year-old student of his. Having accurately foreseen the resulting media circus and correctly predicted Nick's reaction to it, she plans to remain hidden during his trial and eventual execution, and eventually take her own life. Her diary entries are an artful blend of fact and fiction, tailored to buttress her carefully crafted public persona and underscore Nick's evident wrongdoing.

Amy's scheme is contingent on the co-operation of the media; she relies on certain gendered cultural signifiers as a means of influencing their interpretation of her narrative—'Diary Amy' (the version of herself which she allows other people to scrutinise) moves effortlessly from witty idealism to weary self-sacrifice, all the while assuring the reader that her faith in Nick is unwavering (she quite adeptly fulfils the role of the tacitly aggrieved wife). Her masterful exploitation of certain well-worn feminine tropes allows observers to provide their own context for her narrative and interpret her silences accordingly (her very non-presence in the narrative of her own undoing is an irrefutable statement of sorts, as far as these onlookers are concerned, namely an inability or unwillingness to verbalise an implicit indictment of Nick). Although she is described by Nick as frosty and self-centred, Diary Amy's artificial demeanour, informed as it is by her razor-sharp observations, is a tone-perfect homage to the type of idealised femininity which she actually so vehemently opposes.

Amy's motives are both simple and elaborate; she seeks revenge for Nick's affair, but also aims to punish him for neglecting to help maintain the idyllic façade of their relationship and, ultimately, failing to even comprehend the façade. In her narcissistic rage, she reflects that:

> Nick loved a girl who doesn't exist. I was pretending, the way I often did, pretending to have a personality. I can't help it, it's what I've always done: the way some women change fashion regularly, I change personalities […] the Cool Girl. Men always say that as *the* defining compliment, don't they? *She's a cool girl*. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl.*[5]

This tirade serves as a vivid articulation of the dissatisfaction and self-deception at the heart of such gendered performances, and the context in which the monologue emerges further hints at the hypocrisy therein. Amy has moved from Cool Girl to Gone Girl, from one archetypal embodiment, the acquiescent female, a co-conspirator in her own marginalisation, to another: the victimised or missing woman, a paradigmatic void of sorts into which anything can be, and frequently is, projected. However, she is

no closer to living an authentic existence (and arguably no more inclined towards one, having benefited from her manipulation of these archetypes); she is unable to escape the often stifling symbolic confines of femininity in spite of her machinations.

As evidence of Nick's guilt mounts (he is revealed to be thousands of dollars in debt and dependent on Amy to keep his business afloat), he reflects on his own dishonesty (in particular his affair with Andie, one of his journalism students) and the suppressed hostility which has come to define his relationship with Amy. Margo, Nick's twin sister and a veteran of their father's abusive rages, offers financial and emotional support, though even she begins to entertain the possibility of his guilt at a critical juncture: "we were growing sick of each other, something I never thought could happen. It was more than basic stress […] expecting [Margo] to read my mind as always, and what Go had read was that I'd killed my wife. I couldn't get over that, and neither could she."[6] This breach of sibling trust,[7] although momentary, only serves to intensify Nick's emotional claustrophobia and the reader's uncertainty as to how the overt misogyny of his father may have impacted on him: "[he was] a man of infinite varieties of bitterness, rage, distaste. In my lifelong struggle to avoid becoming him, I'd developed an inability to demonstrate much negative emotion at all […] it was a constant problem: too much control or no control at all."[8] The case against Nick is only strengthened by his self-conscious attempts at emotional containment and dubious alibi—as the novel progresses, he begins to reflect on his reaction to Amy's disappearance, the downward trajectory of their marriage and the seeming inexorability of subsequent events.

The disturbing narrative which is rapidly being constructed around Nick and Amy by sceptical onlookers (most of whom are all too eager to consign Amy to the ever expanding catalogue of women mistreated, brutalised and butchered by their husbands or partners and reconstructed as a media spectacle, women whose lived experiences have been reduced to a few threadbare clichés) is eminently plausible precisely because of its ubiquity.[9] Indeed, it is only by invoking the memory of these silenced and annihilated women that Amy can initiate her revenge plot—their end is, quite literally, her beginning (parallels may be drawn with Amma in *Sharp Objects*, the precocious younger sister of the novel's protagonist, whose demeanour wavers between self-aware juvenility and cultivated brutality, and her semi-sacrificial offerings, the girls who must die so that the stifled parts of her psyche may live). Magpie-like, Amy borrows a new personality, patched together from the remnants of her departed forerunners—she

is apprehensive but trustworthy, gentle but with an endearingly sharp wit and an evident propensity for compliance; a woman people will want to remember, the ideal "Dead Girl".

Crucially, she makes certain to avoid cynicism or self-assurance, noting that these attributes may negatively impact on other people's response to her; her performed self is above all pliable because, as Amy asserts, "'I like strong women' is code for "I hate strong women.'"[10] She tests this affable character on friends and neighbours, going out of her way to offer a small kindness to Nick's old friend Stucks, whom she loathes: "'she's such a sweet person. One time, she saw me out painting a house […] and she drove on to 7-Eleven, got me a giant pop, and brought it back to me, right up on the ladder.' This was a lie. Amy cared so little for Stucks or his refreshment that she wouldn't have bothered to piss in a cup for him."[11]

Amy's journal is a pitch-perfect retelling of her growing frustration and disillusionment as the years pass; she is shown to be fearful but optimistic, initially confident that their faltering marriage will recover and their affection may be rekindled by her unexpected pregnancy. The breathless hopefulness of her early entries is offset by the apprehension and doubt of her final confessions—she confides that their marital antipathy has escalated to physical violence (there is some ambiguity with regard to whether or not these entries are entirely fictitious; Nick certainly harbours a lot of resentment towards her and loses interest in their relationship when she neglects to maintain the "Cool Girl" façade—"Cool Girl/Diary Amy", after all, is designed to appeal to Nick and the reader's preconceptions with regard to femininity and certain gendered signifiers, and the page serves as a holding space for the woman she is pretending to be. Amy goes on to write a best-selling account of her ordeal; like the diary, this allows her to cultivate a public identity moulded to fit the narrative of victimhood she has constructed), and discloses that she fears Nick will kill her, confiding that she has bought a gun as a precaution: "I don't really think Nick would hurt me. I just would feel safer with a gun."[12] The juxtaposition of these narratives is as reassuring as it is obfuscating—Amy's version of events is an all-too-familiar story[13] which necessitates very little critical scrutiny, as far as many observers are concerned (and, indeed, as far as many readers are concerned: the false comfort of an ostensibly familiar narrative is brief but compelling).

She appropriates a discursive space reserved for victims of male violence, a space legitimately inhabited by Margo, whose memories of her father's abusive rages have taken a devastating emotional and psychological toll:

> my dad had limitations. That's what my good-hearted mom always told us. He had limitations, but he meant no harm. It was kind of her to say, but he did do harm. I doubt [Margo] will ever marry: if she's sad or upset or angry, she needs to be alone—she fears a man dismissing her womanly tears.[14]

This is a calculated attempt to exploit the virtues of victimhood while maintaining narrative dominance. She is supported in this endeavour by the efforts of Ellen Abbott, a news anchor whose coverage skews heavily against Nick.[15] The ubiquity of the figure of the murderous husband ensures that Amy need only invoke certain journalistic touchstones in order to garner the attention she desires; prior to her disappearance, she already possessed a type of celebrity as a consequence of her parents' decision to write a series of children's novels featuring "Amazing Amy", a literary facsimile who is marginally but noticeably superior in small ways: "I can't fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right: when I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book […] when I blew off the junior tennis championship at age sixteen to do a beach weekend with friends, Amy recommitted to the game."[16]

Having lived in the shadow of her flawless alter-ego (and symbolically adjacent to the ghosts of her unborn sisters: "my mother had five miscarriages and two stillbirths before me […] they were all girls; they were all named Hope […] they got to be perfect without even trying, without even facing one moment of existence, while I am stuck here on earth, and every day is a chance to be less than perfect"[17]) for much of her life, impeccably engineered grabs for attention have become a fundamental component in the formation and delineation of Amy's (non-fictional) self.

Self-victimisation is a key aspect of this attempt to establish her own being, distinct from the cloying perfection of Amazing Amy[18]; the real Amy enjoys the idea of being stalked by obsessive fans and invents several tales involving dangerously infatuated friends and boyfriends. Like Krissi Cates in *Dark Places*, she seeks parental validation by embracing the socially inscribed role of female victim, but, unlike Krissi, this is a role she is able to control—she can slip in and out of it as needed and alter the dynamics of her own subjection. Although she attempts to reject the overbearing superiority of her fictional counterpart, Amy is obsessively invested in her own supremacy; at one point, she observes that "love is [not] a competition. But I don't understand the point of being together if you're not the happiest."[19]

This compulsion to triumph at all costs even extends to the construction of her victim status; in many ways, she is the "perfect' victim. Both she and Nick are middle-class and notably attractive; their existence is couched in enough privilege to warrant a kind of collective *schadenfreude* in the wake of their marital implosion and Amy's disappearance.[20] Unbeknownst to Nick, Amy has gone to great lengths to cultivate a discrete persona which appeals to a specific section of the population—she befriends a local woman, Noelle Hawthorne, a stay-at-home mother of triplets who is thoroughly convinced by Amy's performance of benevolence and allegations of domestic abuse. Although Noelle is glibly dismissed by Nick and Margo (she is referred to by Margo as "Triplet Cunt"[21]), her lack of guile makes her the ideal character witness for "Diary Amy"; she attests to Amy's gentle nature and burgeoning marital anxiety. So thoroughly has she subscribed to Amy's narrative of domestic victimhood that she wholeheartedly endorses the version of events peddled by the likes of Ellen Abbott. Noelle is a spectre of mediocrity who embodies the very Middle-American mindset Amy detests; she describes her as "nice enough but with a soul made of plastic—easy to mold, easy to wipe down. The woman's entire music collection is formed from Pottery Barn compilations. Her bookshelves are stocked with coffee-table crap."[22] The drastically divergent approaches both women take to motherhood underscore the fundamental differences in their respective relationships to gendered social norms: Noelle is content in her maternal role and happily announces a new pregnancy, to Amy's derisive bafflement ("triplets weren't enough, apparently"[23]), while Amy views potential parenthood as just another opportunity to augment her performative victimhood. Reasoning that her case will garner even more attention with the added dimension of impending motherhood, she decides to fake a pregnancy. This provides both an extra motive for Nick (who, according to Amy's diary, does not want children) and further sanctifies Amy (who is extremely savvy with regard to the fickleness of public attention and the necessity of controlling the narrative she is creating) in the popular discourse: "perfect. Nick gets another motive, I get to be sweet missing pregnant lady, my parents suffer even more […] it was thrilling to be selected finally, officially for *Ellen Abbott* among all the hundreds of other cases."[24] Indeed, Amy is publicly remembered by her childhood friends as "'a nurturing, motherly type of woman'".[25] Just as Diondra in *Dark Places* is retroactively robbed of any potentially dissident power by Ben, "Gone Girl"/"Dead Girl" Amy is reconstituted as a benign nonentity, stripped of her malignant brilliance and memorialised with a series of bland fabrications.

Amy's obsession with the perverse power of victimhood is all-encompassing, to the extent that even the myth of her own oppression becomes a full-time project. She refuses to acknowledge her behaviour as pathological, choosing instead to view it as a logical consequence of her gender; for all that she decries the stifling invasiveness of idealised femininity, she is inclined to pronounce moral judgment on the women around her and invoke gendered slurs like "slut", "whore", "bitch" and "cunt", indicating that although she is adept at negotiating and deconstructing these feminine ideals when it is beneficial to her, she is unwilling or unable to truly transcend the virgin-whore complex[26] governing the experiences of these women; indeed, she repeatedly appeals to the very discourse she seeks to critique. Whether or not she subverts this discourse in the process of invoking it is arguable; her sociopathic rationale complicates straightforward interpretation of her actions.[27] As a result, many of her more extreme transgressions (particularly as she begins to diverge from the rigid configuration of her original plan) appear more anarchic than strategic.

Much of her frustration hinges on a kind of paradoxical resentment; she possesses enough self-awareness to question other people's conformity to gender and class norms, but much of her contempt for these norms seems to stem from disappointment at her own inability to internalise them. In the early days of her relationship with Nick, she admits, "I was willing to try […] I ate a MoonPie, I walked barefoot, I stopped worrying. I watched dumb movies and ate chemically laced foods […] I could feel myself getting shallower and dumber. But also happy."[28] Her ultimately unsuccessful attempts to cohere to these norms and offset her sociopathic antagonism have only served to make her more cynical; like Amma in *Sharp Objects*, she uses the destructive impulses of others to gauge her own vulnerability and control it, manipulating the power dynamics of her own subjugation. It is worth remembering that the conclusion originally envisioned by Amy revolves around her own self-destruction (on the morning of her disappearance, Nick struggles to identify a song he overhears her humming: "it was the theme to M*A*S*H. Suicide is painless."[29]).

She exhibits the same proclivity for self-harm as that displayed by Amma and Adora in *Sharp Objects* but she outstrips them with her ambition. She plans to:

> travel south along the river, where I will meet up with my body, my pretend floating Other Amy body in the Gulf of Mexico […] I will swallow sleeping pills, and when no one is looking, I'll drop silently over the side, my pockets full of Virginia Woolf rocks.[30]

The fact that she plans to take her own life rather than live out the rest of her days under a new identity indicates that, for all that she rages against Nick, Amy continues to view self-victimisation as the most powerful outlet for her violent agency. She ultimately changes her mind, however (she claims that she "can't stomach the injustice. It's not fair that I have to die. Not *really* die. I don't want to. I'm not the one who did anything wrong",[31] but also seems reluctant to close her narrative with such a drastic self-silencing tactic), opting for a more oblique conclusion to her narrative.

The final diary entry confides that Amy "[catches] him looking at me with those watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation, and I think: *This man might kill me*. So if you find this and I'm dead, well …"[32] The insidious condemnation of these diary entries is complemented by a meticulously contrived anniversary treasure hunt—Amy uses a series of carefully placed clues to guide Nick on a tour of his own indiscretions and failures.[33] The first half of Amy's narrative (comprised almost entirely of these fictional diary entries and barbed "clues" designed to remind Nick of his own inadequacy) is comparable to the tangle of words borne on *Sharp Objects*' Camille's skin—both consist of carefully selected words, chosen for their power to hurt (literally or figuratively), both concealed, for the most part, from the larger world; narratives that are entirely theirs to shape. According to her diary, she plans to reveal her unexpected pregnancy to him at the end of the treasure hunt; the investigating officers speculate that her disappearance may be the result of Nick's violent reaction to this news.

Over the course of the investigation, Amy's written account of herself and their marriage provides a conveniently tidy framework for her disappearance—she is the patient, selfless wife to a violent and immature man, a man whose financial impotence has driven him to homicide. So hackneyed is this story that Nick reverts to cinematic cliché almost immediately following the disappearance, half-aware that the only roles available to him in this tableau are that of the distressed spouse or the brutish abuser. Another man, Desi Collings, is initially cast as Amy's rescuer (she plays to his vanity and obsession with her veneer of fragility) but usurps Nick's villainous role when Amy decides to alter the narrative.[34]

The novel ends with Amy and Nick reunited, with Amy having murdered Desi and framed him for her abduction and rape. The story Amy provides on her return is designed to absolve Nick of any responsibility regarding her disappearance: Desi, an obsessive former boyfriend with a "craving for ruined women",[35] is said to have imprisoned Amy in his home and subjected her to a campaign of sexual and psychological abuse. As Amy relates

her heroic decision to fight back and escape, fabricated though we know the anecdote is, the reader is encouraged to invest in the kind of "brave rape victim" narrative which Flynn has set out to deconstruct. Amy returns to the land of the living, rescued from oblivion (the Gone Girl resurrected, her silence broken, her victimhood a badge of honour) and, with another twist in her narrative, she impregnates herself with a sperm sample of Nick and thus seals their fate. United in passive-aggressive loathing, they assume new roles and make plans to co-parent a child who (we can only assume) will become another weapon in their marital conflict. Amy has written an account of her ordeal (entitled *Amazing*) and has seemingly succeeded in talking Nick into submission, even insisting on having the last word: "I think I've earned that."[36] Nick, though, continues to antagonise her from time to time: "'[I] feel sorry for you […] because every morning you have to wake up and be you.'"[37]

Gone Girl comprises Flynn's most thorough exploration of female victimhood as a cultural phenomenon while remaining thematically faithful to her earlier work. Although much of the critical dialogue surrounding the novel has focused on the question of whether or not it seeks to deconstruct or reinforce a patriarchal narrative of victimisation and disempowerment, a more illuminating critical inquiry may be the one revolving around Flynn's treatment of female likeability and female vulnerability and the ways in which we, as a culture, interact with and respond to the victimisation of certain women. For all that the novel has sparked debate with regard to its more subversive passages, the wider critical reaction to these passages may prove more illuminating than any of Amy's tirades. For example, the "Cool Girl' passage has been hailed as a call to arms of sorts, an indictment of "a certain mode of femininity that our current cultural moment valorises and celebrates".[38] Interestingly, interpretations of Flynn's work as explicitly feminist have simultaneously been disputed by critical observers who posit that Amy is "stereotypically evil in the same way that many would characterize 'evil feminists' […] if we strapped a bunch of Men's Rights Advocates to beds and downloaded their nightmares, I don't think we'd come up with stuff half as ridiculous as this plot."[39] Such varied readings indicate that Flynn's work, and her female characters in particular, may prove seminal in terms of re-establishing critical understandings of female villainy and victimhood.

Flynn has yet to confirm details of another novel (although she has mentioned plans for "a big, sprawling American folkloric tale of murder [and] a YA [young adult] novel after that"[40]), but her work thus far has

proven consistently challenging, provocative and a valuable addition to the canon of crime fiction. The ongoing debate with regard to Flynn's authorial intentions and potentially feminist agenda, while certainly interesting (ranging as it does from hero worship to outright disdain), arguably threatens to oversimplify or overshadow the complexity of her creation: her characters may be read as misogynistic caricatures or powerfully subversive anti-heroes; it is this critical divergence and the questions it raises with regard to the social obligation of female likeability and changing perceptions of female victimhood which renders her work rich for critical analysis, and will potentially make her fiction as enduring as it is intriguing. With regard to the domestic noir genre as a vehicle for the reconfiguration of cultural concepts of gendered public and private spaces, in addition to female disempowerment and victimhood, Flynn's work has been exemplary in reshaping the paradigms of the broader crime genre in order to emphasise the latent dread and oblique violence of the domestic space.

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Notes

1. Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 3.
2. Nick's anxiety with regard to his genetic inheritance and the idea that he might come to re-enact the sins of his forebears mirrors that of Camille in *Sharp Objects* (Flynn's debut novel), in a sense—both harbour fears that they may consciously or subconsciously replicate the misdeeds of their parents. Bill's periodic visitations are actually prompted by Amy: "I [whispered] over and over again into Bill Dunne's spiderweb brain: *I love you, come live with us, I love you, come live with us.* Just to see if it would catch […] I love the idea of Bill Dunne, the living totem of everything Nick fears he could become, the object of Nick's most profound despair, showing up over and over and over on our doorstep." (Ibid., pp. 355–356.) This orchestrated "return of the repressed" underscores the extent to which Nick has internalised his father's hateful behaviour, despite his determination not to. Nick indulges in a number of misogynistic rants as the novel progresses, displaying an increasing fondness for the word "cunt". Like his father, who is compelled to spit the word "bitch" at troublesome women, Nick continually reverts to this verbal tic when challenged or outdone by the women around him. Amy uses it too; she reflects that Andie is "a good girl (for a cunt)." (Ibid., p. 335).

3. Ibid., p. 41.
4. The fact that both Nick and Amy separately make this observation is telling—they are both described as uncommonly good-looking but their interfacing monologues reveal an ugliness of character which gives the lie to their alluring veneer and indicates that they are actually disposed towards similar lines of thought. While talking to Shawna Kelly, a middle-aged woman who flirts with him during the initial search efforts, Nick shrewdly categorises her dislike of the detective as "the mantra of all attractive women. 'Women don't like me all that much.' She shrugged." (Ibid., p. 96) It is worth noting that the unattractive detective Boney and Margo (who is described by Nick as "strange-faced") display a breadth of moral reasoning of which the protaganists are seemingly incapable.
5. Ibid., pp. 299–300.
6. Ibid., p. 476.
7. Margo's fleeting uncertainty signifies that their sibling bond is so invasive that she may have intuited that Nick has been nursing violent desires with regard to Amy.
8. Ibid., p. 65.
9. Eleven thousand, seven hundred and sixty-six American women were murdered by their husbands or intimate partners between 2001 and 2012, according to FBI statistics. Three American women are murdered daily by a current or former spouse or partner (Alanna Vagianos, "30 Shocking Domestic Violence Statistics That Remind Us It's An Epidemic", *Huffington Post*, 23 October 2014). Indeed, the novel ends with what appears to be another spousal murder: "a Nashville singer discovered his wife was cheating, and her body was found the next day in a Hardee's trash bin near their house, a hammer covered with his fingerprints beside her." (Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 405.) This is actually the fulfilment of one of Nick's unrealised fantasies; at one point, he contemplates the possibility of "hitting [Amy] with a hammer, smashing her head in until she stopped talking, *finally*, stopped with the words she suctioned to me: average, boring, mediocre, unsurprising, unsatisfying, unimpressive. *Un*, basically. In my mind, I whaled on her with the hammer until she was like a broken toy, muttering *un*, *un*, *un* until she sputtered to a stop." (Ibid., pp. 390–391).
10. Ibid., p. 223.
11. Ibid., p. 111.
12. Ibid., p. 266.
13. The 2002 murder of Laci Peterson served as one inspiration for Flynn; the body of Peterson, seven-and-a-half months pregnant at the time of her disappearance, washed up on the shore of San Francisco Bay in April of 2003. Her husband Scott was subsequently found guilty on two counts of

murder and sentenced to death. The conjunction of public fascination and extensive news coverage inspired Flynn to construct a fictional recreation of what she calls "the selection and the packaging of a tragedy […] what's going to make it believable that the media's going to descend on this? It's hard for anyone to claim that they don't know how these things work anymore because we're so immersed in it, on the internet and TV and movies. There are no really new stories anymore." (Stephan Lee, "'Gone Girl' Author Gillian Flynn talks Murder, Marriage, and Con Games", *Entertainment Weekly*, 26 June 2012). The degree to which media narratives are superimposed over these acts of violence and used as both a distancing tactic and a means of establishing cathartic proximity lends them an obscene glamour—the thrill of the familiar. Nick observes, at one point, that "society was utterly, ruinously derivative (although the word *derivative* as a criticism is itself derivative). We were the first human beings who would never see anything for the first time. We stare at the wonders of the world, dull-eyed, underwhelmed. *Mona Lisa*, the Pyramids, the Empire State Building […] the thing that makes me want to blow my brains out, is: the secondhand experience is always better. The image is crisper, the view is keener, the camera angle and the soundtrack manipulate my emotions in a way reality can't anymore." (Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 96.) Ironically, his own reality becomes sensational fodder for millions of strangers, a "secondhand experience" neatly packaged and disseminated via the well-worn wife-killer narrative. It is telling that Nick and Amy are skilled at "packaging reality", even outside of their fractured relationship—having both spent much of their adult lives working in magazine journalism, they (like *Sharp Objects*' Camille) are practised at editing and interpreting events to render them palatable.

14. Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 81.
15. The character of Abbott, whose rabble-rousing diatribes against Nick prove significantly influential in terms of public perception, is hugely reminiscent of American news commentator Nancy Grace, a controversial but popular figure who proclaims herself "a tireless advocate for victim's rights." (Nancy Grace, *About Nancy* (Atlanta: Nancy Grace Official Website, 2012)). Grace/Abbott's success is dependent, in large part, on popular narratives of female victimisation and the conservative paradigms therein, but her ability to exploit and explore these narratives may be read as an act of subversion in itself—Diane Negra describes these female-led news narratives as "a peculiar collision of victimized and apparently empowered female personalities […] such coverage sets a particularly/peculiarly postfeminist scene as these authoritative cable personalities symbolically 'lead' the search for the lost woman." (*What a Girl Wants? Fantasising the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge,

2009), p. 45.) In a sense, Grace/Abbott is embroiled in a struggle, not unlike that of Amy, to contextualise and demarcate the limits of female victimhood. The result is a reactive discourse which encourages a hegemonic understanding of victimisation and vulnerability. Thus the missing woman (in this case Amy) moves from complex individual to archetypal figure. The phenomenon of "Missing White Woman Syndrome" is a product of this reductive practice—many mainstream news outlets have been accused of insidious prejudice with regard to their obsessive focus on cases involving conventionally attractive, young Caucasian women, despite the fact that "the US population is roughly 50 per cent male and 35 per cent non-white […] there is a preponderance of reports regarding the abduction, murder and disappearance of white women and white female children. Most of the women are below the age of 40 or young girls or teenagers, and they are often blonde and attractive." (Regis A. DeSilva, "End of Life Legislation and the Semiotics of the Female Body", in *Death and Dying: A Reader* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), p. 28).

16. Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 34.
17. Ibid., pp. 221–222.
18. While Nick worries about the malign influence his father's sadism may have had on his psychological development, Amy bitterly contemplates the invisible wounds she bears as a result of her own cosseted but emotionally suffocating upbringing: "[my parents] made me this way and then deserted me […] they never, ever fully appreciated the fact that they were earning money from my existence […] then, after they siphoned off *my* money, my 'feminist' parents let Nick bundle me off to Missouri like I was some piece of chattel." (Ibid., p. 238).
19. Ibid., p. 300.
20. The barely-suppressed glee of these spectators is expressed most candidly by Greta, a young woman who attempts to befriend Amy while she hides away in a shabby rented cabin (under the pseudonym "Nancy"). Greta, a woman "with brown eyes and a split lip… [and] a perfectly round bruise the size of a plum near her left breast" (Ibid., pp. 259–261) is unmoved by the news coverage surrounding the disappearance of "Amazing Amy", noting that she "'sounds [like] a spoiled rich girl […] high-maintenance. Bitchy […] she sounds like a rich, bored bitch.'" (Ibid., p. 263).
21. Ibid., p. 265.
22. Ibid., p. 344.
23. Ibid., p. 347.
24. Ibid., p. 347.
25. Ibid., p. 264.
26. This dichotomy is invoked by Andie when she speaks publicly about the affair; Amy notes that she has traded her usual "fuckable" aesthetic for a

"tiny and harmless [look]… she looks like a babysitter, and not a sexy porn babysitter but the girl from down the road, the one who actually plays with the kids." (Ibid., p. 438).

27. These internal contradictions undercut any potentially empowering interpretations of Amy's invective on gender politics. While critics have wavered between reading her as "[a] misogynistic caricature" (Robert Palmer, "Gone Girl and the Specter of Feminism" *MT*, 20 August 2012) and a "feminist psychopath" (Eliana Dockterman, "Is Gone Girl Feminist or Misogynist?", *Time*, 6 October 2014), few have acknowledged that her paradoxical reasoning and self-serving appropriation of many of these gendered paradigms renders her arguments distorted and problematic, to say the least.
28. Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 299.
29. Ibid., p. 7.
30. Ibid., p. 245.
31. Ibid., p. 373.
32. Ibid., p. 275.
33. Amy's choreographed disappearance may be read as merely an extension of this treasure hunt—Nick describes the annual anniversary game as "Amy always going overboard, me never, ever worthy of the effort. Happy anniversary, asshole." (Ibid., p. 20.) The trajectory of her own unmaking is not dissimilar; Nick proves slow on the uptake and is ultimately condemned by his own psychological shortcomings.
34. Nick, Desi and Tommy O'Hara (an old boyfriend of Amy's) are all falsely accused, at various points in the novel, of having sexually victimised Amy. The ease with which she presents herself as a sexual assault survivor signifies a detached awareness of the cultural discourse around sexual violence and rape survivors. This is a type of victimhood which carries its own coded authority, tied as it is to a crime as pervasive as it is invisible. Flynn's tongue-in-cheek dismissal of the "brave rape victims" (Oliver Burkeman, "Gillian Flynn on her Bestseller Gone Girl and Accusations of Misogyny", *The Guardian*, 1 May 2013) populating contemporary crime fiction highlights the potentially destructive implications of the exploitation of this trope.
35. Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 325.
36. Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 553.
37. Ibid., p. 553.
38. Anne Helen Petersen, "The Problem With 'Gone Girl' Is That There's No 'Cool Girl'", *Buzzfeed*, 3 October 2014.
39. Robert Palmer, "Gone Girl and the Specter of Feminism", *MT*, 20 August 2012.
40. Gillian Flynn, "Hi reddit! I'm Gillian Flynn—Author of Sharp Objects, Dark Places and Gone Girl—AMA!", *Reddit*, 22 April 2014.

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PART III

Gendered, Sexual, and Intimate Violence in Domestic Noir

CHAPTER 6

"How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?": Domestic Noir and the Active Turn in Feminist Crime Fiction

Emma V. Miller

The fictional world of domestic noir may be largely confined to the homestead, bookended by embossed wallpaper, pebble dashing and stone cladding, upholstered with the intimacies of the marital bed, the secrets whispered behind drawn curtains and the evidence embedded in the carpet fibres, but there is nothing domestic, small or intimate about the commercial value of this subgenre of crime fiction. Domestic noir is big business. Nielsen BookScan's annual report on the bestselling fiction of the previous year placed various incarnations of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) at number one, four and six on the 2014 list. Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015) was at number three in the 2015 list and Liane Moriarty's *The Husband's Secret* also featured prominently on the 2015 list.[1] This particular brand of crime fiction has clearly hit a cultural nerve, but what exactly are we paying for? In defining the domestic noir, Julia Crouch has written that it "takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is [a] challenging and sometimes dangerous place for its inhabitants."[2] Crime statistics demonstrate that this is a reality, particularly for women, for, while men are more frequently attacked by strangers,

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women are much more likely to be subjected to violence by someone they know. Domestic noir acknowledges and then explores the reality of female experience, not that the specifics in each text are applicable to every woman, but rather that the treatment of the female characters, their experiences and the way they are responded to, echoes the social truth. Yet, very few of these fictions focus on what has grown to be an expectation of the crime genre: the female corpse.

The dead female has been identified as the ultimate in female passivity for a commercial culture that has fetishised and commodified the inanimate female body in everything from fashion photography, to advertising to film. However, the novels of, amongst others, Megan Abbott, Flynn and Hawkins, characterise what we might term the "active turn" in crime writing. The female protagonist in these texts is not restricted to a small number of roles: the inert body to be looked at, dissected and penetrated both criminally and then in the pursuit of justice; nor is her only participatory role as part of an established patriarchal culture, in the position of police officer or pathologist. In the domestic noir she is an individual, in her own space, whether that be her commute, her gym, her home or some other setting; it is the place of her choosing, and she plays a crucial role in shaping and directing the narrative.

Despite a history of female authors of crime fiction, female protagonists have been limited to certain roles. Even writers who have portrayed stronger female characters in crime writing, such as Patricia Cornwell, show women struggling for professional respect within a patriarchal judiciary system, whilst also being threatened by and subject to verbal and physical abuse. While this was, and perhaps still is, reflective of actual female experiences, even the apparently feminist sympathetic crime writers did not succeed—either because of market pressure or personal choice—in forging a narrative that could dynamically alter the predominant gendered discourses surrounding the circumstances of crime. Adrienne E. Gavin, writes that "[t]he central concern of feminist crime fiction remains violence against women. […] In emphasizing violence against women, feminist detective fiction makes a gendered protest. It also implies the question: if even the detective figure is violated and attacked, is justice possible?"[3] Cornwell's Dr Kay Scarpetta, the "chief medical examiner for the Commonwealth of Virginia" witnesses shocking misogyny within a few pages of the first novel in the series, *Postmortem* (1990), not only by the serial killer she is investigating, but from her peers. She says:

> The dead are defenceless, and the violation of this woman, like the others, had only begun. I knew it would not end until Lori Petersen was turned inside out, every inch of her photographed, and all of it on display for experts, the police, attorneys, judges and members of the jury to see. There would be thoughts, remarks about her physical attributes or lack of them. There would be sophomoric jokes and cynical asides as the victim, not the killer when on trial […].[4]

Her comments suggest that even professional investigators are susceptible to the sexualisation of the corpse, a view that is contrary to the general assumption that forensic scientists, including pathologists, view the body with what Foucault called the "clinical gaze"[5]: the detachment of a doctor to his patient's body. The clinical gaze may objectify the patient in that he or she becomes only a vehicle for disease, a mechanism to be worked on and fixed, and this in turn can lead to a dehumanising of the patient, but crucially the patient is also desexualised. The female corpse in crime fiction is rather more frequently fetishised as Cornwell suggests. She is put "on display", her body cut up visually—even where it is not in actuality—into sexualised parts that are judged. Unlike the living patient, the corpse is not entirely dehumanised; to fetishise the corpse is to impose an erotic fantasy on the corpse that relies on an awareness of a degree of humanity, even if it is not in any way reflective of reality.

Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on how the male gaze determines the cinematic presentation of women, sexualising them according to heterosexual male fantasies, is now over four decades old and both film and literary criticism have developed in many ways since this juncture, not least by making efforts to understand her argument in relation to the distinct gaze theories of Jacques Lacan, Jean Paul Sartre, Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. As Todd McGowan comments: "Early Lacanian film theory's conception of desire actually has more in common with Nietszche and Foucault than it does with Lacan […] for both Nietzsche and Foucault, power wholly informs our desire."[6] Yet, however Mulvey's approach might be flawed, evidence of the male gaze she outlined persists, particularly in crime fiction where the female corpse continues to be objectified and eroticised. The male gaze according to Mulvey is dominant, controlling, objectifying the female, who is presented on the screen for the sexual consumption of not just the heterosexual male, but all, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, who are bound by the male-defined "unconscious structured like a language […] caught within the language of the patriarchy".[7] For Lacan

and also for Sartre, the gaze is not one person or group of persons looking, but also about the possibility or actuality of *being looked at*. It is this awareness of the outside world, its judgements and its structure—albeit described and defined differently for each theorist—that completes and complicates the gaze. As McGowan writes with regard to Lacan: "The gaze thus involves the spectator in the image, disrupting her/his ability to remain all-perceiving and unperceived […]. [S]pectators never look at the picture from a safe distance; they are in the picture in the form of this stain."[8] Defined in these terms, the erotic gaze can never be entirely dominant, even if, as Mulvey asserts, the woman in her otherness incites "anxiety" because she suggests "a threat of castration" (a loss of power),[9] and the watcher consequently seeks to "escape from this castration anxiety" by either "demystifying her mystery" or through "devaluation" of the female.[10] Yet the watcher can never do this entirely free of the repercussions of the social order to which he or she belongs. Of course these repercussions may not necessarily be negative. Mulvey suggests that the devaluation of the female could be pursued through "punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star)".[11] Whilst punishment of the female is not overtly accepted by Western culture, the "saving" of a woman has been traditionally applauded and the influence of this approach can be seen even in Cornwell's *Postmortem*, where Scarpetta is first demeaned, then threatened, and then rescued by Sergeant Pete Marino.

The focus on the wounded or dismembered female corpse can be, as critics such as Ruth Penfold-Mounce and Daniel A. Cohen have described, a site of crossover with the pornographic,[12] referencing the fragmented, fetishised vision of erotica: the woman as sexual doll's shell, her body parts an array of sexual objects—breasts, mouth, buttocks, legs, vagina—perhaps more commercially valuable in bits than entire.[13] Indeed, as much as this might be an effort to confront a social norm by shocking the reader or viewer, even if this is the intention of the author it can still have the opposite effect. Although Peter Messent states that while the gratuitous depiction of the female corpse is "starting to lose a little of its ground", it remains a feature of many of the most popular examples of the genre. Messent writes that "[t]here are plenty of male corpses in the history of the genre, too, but it is rare to find the same type of emphasis on physical

mutilation, and especially of a sexual nature, as when the victim is a woman".[14] Evidence of the stain of the male gaze remains in scenes from fashionable Nordic and Scandi noir, too. Steven Peacock describes how "Swedish crime fiction is a showcase for murder's bloody allure. Corpses pile up, despatched in a huge variety of surreptitious, inventive and frenzied ways." While he allows that "texts are particularly concerned with the violation and enclosure of the female body", referencing Lisbeth Salander's violent rape by her guardian in Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy (2005–2007), he also states that "[t]he killing of another human being represents the crossing of a final set of boundaries", suggesting once again that murder is the ultimate offence.[15] But is the transgression the same for the killing of both male and female victims?

The BBC domestic noir drama, *The Fall*, provides an interesting example in relation to this, as it follows both the efforts of the police force to identify and bring to justice a serial killer who goes to great lengths to pose the corpses of the women he murders, and the apparently normal family life of the killer, Paul Spector. The bodies are washed, dressed and even made-up before being carefully presented, and then Spector is shown to return to his wife and two small children and to behave almost as if nothing out of the ordinary has occurred. The first series particularly focusses on his preparation of the bodies after death, displaying the nude females for the viewers' admiration as much as for Spector's. The bodies are often miraculously unmarked and always of young, attractive women who initially look as if they are live women adopting the kind of passive, sexualised attitude frequently depicted in advertising and fashion photography. Indeed, it is not just that models are passive in advertising in the twenty-first century, but that, as Kira Cochrane reported in a recent piece in the *Guardian*: "[b]eautiful women posed as dead bodies" have become "an advertising campaign staple".[16] Cochrane highlights a 2014 Marc Jacobs advertisement featuring Miley Cyrus seated next to an inert woman's body, her red hair pooled like blood beneath her head, but another stand-out example would be Sophie Dahl's infamous shoot advertising Yves Saint Laurent's Opium perfume, which displays Dahl's entirely naked body, her pallor, deathly white, apparently exhausted in the midst of an orgasm. Dahl's pose is disturbingly reminiscent of the hard-core pornographic phenomenon of "snuff", that profits from images of a woman being killed.[17]

Reactions to *The Fall* have been mixed, with critics describing it as a "sexy, unbearably tense thriller",[18] "[t]he most repulsive drama ever broadcast on British TV"[19] and "[t]he [f]eminist [c]rime [s]how [w]e've

[b]een [w]anting".[20] Much of the praise has been for the characterisation of DSI Stella Gibson who leads the investigation into Spector's murders, but the violence in the drama has also been defended, as the *Telegraph's* Michael Deacon writes: "TV dramas are full of raped and murdered women because our society is full of raped and murdered women."[21] While there is an argument for depicting violence against women on television because it reflects reality, it does not account for the numerous lingering shots of the naked bodies of his victims, many of which do not add to the development of the plot. We see the first woman he murders on-screen, Sarah Kay, carried nude and inert over his shoulder, buttocks and legs upturned to the camera, before he lowers her into the bath where he washes her, dries her and then paints her nails, before arranging her on the bed on her front, her head turned as if is sleeping, her buttocks now coyly obscured by a sheet. That the bathing scene is juxtaposed with one of Spector bathing his own little girl at home complicates the imagery, as does the nature of the discovery of Sarah's body, by her unsuspecting sister who places her own baby girl on the bed as she tries to wake her. These details serve to undermine the sexualisation of the young woman, reminding us that Sarah is more than a body; that she was a child once, and when we also learn that she is pregnant, that she could also have become a mother. In terms of the Sartrean theory of the gaze, these details serve a similar purpose to the footsteps heard by the voyeur peering through the keyhole[22]; they are a reminder of the complex reality we exist within, which challenges the attempt to simplify through fantasy.

The drama has in its third season demonstrated the influence of the active turn, with the emphasis on women in motion: the recovery of Spector's only surviving female victim, Rose Stagg, the difficulties experienced by Spector's wife and children, and the running-away of his teenage accomplice, Katie Bernadetto. Spector does not murder again until the end of the season and this time his victims are men. Indeed, Spector is captive throughout the final season, first in hospital and then in a secure psychiatric unit where he eventually commits suicide. Interestingly though, while there is dramatic action, albeit less violent and more associated with female agency than previously, media responses to the series have lamented the lack of it, with Adam Miller saying that "[s]hock death" in the final "brings flailing series back to life"[23] and Ben Travers writing that "[a] violent finale packed all the show's punches into one episode" and going on to say that "the whole season leading up to Episode 6" was "dialogue-heavy" and "action light".[24] Yet, Sally Ann, Spector's long-suffering wife, dramatically

miscarries in a police interview room and later drives her car into the sea with her two children sleeping in the back seat. Katie skips bail and attacks another girl with acid, narrowly avoiding blinding her, and Gibson is at her most dynamic, hunting down evidence of other previously unknown victims to ensure Spector pays for his behaviour. Does female action then count as less dramatic somehow compared with male action? Or is it less interesting to viewers for some reason? *The Fall* never featured the kind of high-octane drama of something like the Bourne[25] films; it always operated at a moderate pace, demonstrating just how ordinary murder was to Spector and how cool Gibson could be under pressure. Yet the *Irish News* reported that viewing figures fell from 2.5 million for episode one of series three, to 1.8 million for episode two, and furthermore there were "many" complaints about the amount of blood shown in trying to save Spector's life,[26] possibly by the same people who had turned on to watch Spector dispassionately display the female corpses in the first two seasons and then torture Rose Stagg.

Criminologist Ruth Penfold-Mounce has described the normalising of what she terms, "the macabre space", the fascination with death and the corpse in popular culture. She compares the presentation of the corpse in television shows to that of pornography: "The corpse is passive and beautiful and waiting to be dissected."[27] Similarly, Lindsay Steenberg has drawn comparisons between the depiction of the corpse in fashion stories and the popularisation of forensic science, citing *America's Next Top Model's* decision to ask the models to "pose as murder victims".[28] Yet, this example, while extreme, is not exceptional. The fragmentation of the female body is a mainstream phenomenon. There are a proliferation of magazines and television shows dedicated to botched plastic surgery, getting the perfect stomach, bottom or legs, make-up to accentuate facial features and even body contouring, bikini waxes and intimate piercings, all of which scatter our attention, rendering the different parts of the female body grotesque or beautiful, but never beyond comment. Jo Nesbø's international bestseller *The Snowman* (2010) also portrays a serial killer with an interest in the posing of bodies, with the third victim found "arranged" with what appears to be "loving attention" "on top of two large balls of snow" and supported by a steel wire hung "in a rigid noose around her neck".[29] However, what is particularly interesting is that the body has been dismembered and then "reassembled", with "one welt of stitches […] just under her breasts. The other around her neck".[30] Unlike an earlier find, a body that "had been cut into so many pieces […] it was only thanks to a naked breast that they had

been able to determine the gender",[31] this corpse is one that the Crime Scene officers appear to want to "display", reminding them of "abstract art".[32] Distinct from the victims in Stieg Larsson's work, where the violence and the posing is associated very overtly with stereotypical references to the victim's sex (a sanitary towel thrust down one woman's throat, a bird up the vagina of another, one tied to a laundry stand), here, the sexual symbolism is considerably more sophisticated. The sight of the scene actually impresses Nesbø's detective, Harry Hole, with its attention to detail, the "[i]mmaculate workmanship", the stitches at first not visible on "the naked, pale skin".[33] This is a woman dehumanised not just through the violence done to her in the act of murder, but through the same mechanisms used to dehumanise women in life. That Harry can hardly see the stitches reflects uneasily on the uncanny representation of the female aesthetic in a mainstream media which is just as obsessed with the broken female body as the pornographer and the pathologist.[34] While many of the "lad mags" which rose to prominence in the 1990s have ceased to be produced and there has been a cultural shift leading to soft-pornographic material being placed out of the sight of children in newsagents shops in the UK,[35] "art" remains largely uncensored, and so viewing the naked body through this medium remains permissible. As Mulvey argues, "[F]etishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself."[36] Harry is there to investigate the story of this woman's demise, to see her as a subject in her own narrative; but he too is caught up in the voyeurism intended by the killer, admiring the body as if it really had been created by the Snowman, rather than that of a real woman with her own personality, her thoughts, fears, desires, hopes and loved ones. Reader, viewer, pathologist, policeman, murderer, victim: we all become voyeurs at the point the body is exposed, waiting for the details, a horrific striptease, wondering what he has done with her breasts, her lips, her feet, her genitals, and in many ways we are primed to do so.

Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, from which the title of this chapter is taken, is a particularly notable example. The quote is from Amy's first-person narrative, after we have discovered that she has faked her death in order to frame her husband for murder, and she is explaining how she had at first pretended to be somebody else in order to please him, somebody that she believes men want:

> That's what men do: They try to make it sound like you are the cool girl so you will bow to their wishes. Like a car salesman saying, How much do you want to pay for this beauty? When you didn't agree to buy it yet. That awful

> phrase men use: "I mean, I know you wouldn't mind if I […]" Yes, I do mind. Just say it. Don't lose you dumb little twat.
>
> So it had to stop.
>
> […] [T]here was a real Amy in there, and she was so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging than Cool Amy. Nick wanted Cool Amy anyway. […] So that's how the hating began.[37]

Flynn maintains a persistent and self-conscious system of referencing to the crime genre and the commercial environment that reduces women to an inert corpse, a series of body parts, while determinedly undermining it. The "beauty" of a car that she refers to here is a particularly challenging conceit. It does not refer to the body of the woman as an assemblage of factory made identikit parts, which is the meaning of the common comparison made between women and boats and cars (things that traditionally men drive and penetrate to do so) but to the mask a real woman wears, the one, according to Amy, that men *think* is the reality, a gender performance either cynical or hopeful but always a lie. Amy adopts misogynistic language only when a woman has, in her opinion, accepted that she *is no more than the lie*. If she gives her body and mind over to male mastery, then she is reduced to her biology and then Amy calls her a "dumb little twat".[38] *Gone Girl* may not be the first example of the active turn but it is probably the earliest one to reach international acclaim. It marks a change in crime writing, where the *girl*, that patronising and infantilising term often applied to women, is gone. Amy is not a girl, she is a 39-year-old woman constantly identified with the heroine of a children's book penned by her parents, Amazing Amy. This fictional Amy (one of many) shares her name, but little else; in fact she excels wherever the real Amy fails. Interestingly, her "literary alter ego, my paper-bound better half, the me I was supposed to be",[39] serves to fetishise Amy Elliott Dunne, reducing her to a simplistic construct, a nostalgic staple of US childhoods, rendering her, in Mulvey's words, "reassuring rather than dangerous".[40] People, we are told, frequently confuse her with the character but: "No one wanted Amazing Amy to grow up, least of all me. Leave her in kneesocks and let me grow-up".[41] The real Amy wants to be liberated from the popular narrative, the one where she, like her namesake, only gets to grow up when she gets married and lives happily ever after with her very own Able Andy; instead she wants to write her own narrative. And once again this is not an occurrence particular to the world of the novel, but an example of a social problem, after all the media also commercialise both extremes of the life journey for women, glamorising both the childlike as well as the corpse, as Maggie

Wykes writes: "it touches us all, we buy products eroticized by young bodies or emulate the waiflike women who inhabit celebrity, or the men who desire them".[42]

Amy adopts the guises of both in various incarnations, sometimes simultaneously. As Desi's prisoner she is both passive child and erotic corpse, a sort of grateful sex doll, eating only what she's given, not protesting when she realises she can't escape, that he's put her on a diet, saying what he wants to hear, pretending to be inexperienced in bed and crying when he climaxes, only to use his response—"giddy, triumphant. His cock slick with conquest"—to blind him to her plans to murder him and come back to life herself.[43] *Gone Girl* is a novel that condemns a culture that celebrates passivity but it does not accept that it must campaign for change from within the dominant discourse. The story Amy leaves for the police is one they are all too ready to accept: the heiress who fears the loss of her value, both in terms of her trust fund and also, as a result of her age and her pregnant body, her aesthetic. This would make her the passive victim of a crime, but this is not a novel about docility but about action, the girl is already gone, the move made. Amy is a woman who "gets shit done",[44] who "always take[s] the extra step that other's don't",[45] yet we never see her doing anything physical apart from sex until she is "dead. Technically, missing".[46] There are some sites of crossover with the dominant discourse despite Amy's resistance. Even though she claims the diary is a work of fiction, she admits it has its elements of truth, and as her post-escape narrative emerges and the two can be compared it becomes clear that her sociopathic tendencies—changing personalities "[t]he way some women change fashion regularly"—are not so unusual.[47]

She is an extreme version of a culture that Natasha Walter describes as selling "independence and self-expression […] back to young women as the narrowest kind of consumerism and self-objectificaton",[48] and that Laurie Penny explains thus: "Femininity itself has become a brand, a narrow and shrinking formula of commoditised identity which can be sold back to women who have become alienated from their own power as living, loving, labouring beings".[49] Amy alludes to this when she says: "I'd never felt like a person, because I was always a product."[50] The product she refers to is Amazing Amy, the girl who does everything a girl is supposed to, docile to the narrative imposed on her by a commercial culture: if there is no demand for her stories, they are amended accordingly. Her escape is as much about fleeing an aesthetic as it is about exiting a place. "My body was beautiful, perfect economy", she writes, adopting the terminology of

both art and of commerce. "I don't miss it. I don't miss men looking at me. It's a relief to walk into a convenience store and walk right back out without […] some muttered bit of misogyny".[51] And the language and images of the media continue to inform her reinvention, as she describes cutting herself to add blood to the crime scene "like a bomb technician in an action movie"[52]; not the description of a person who identifies as a victim, but not one who is entirely liberated from the symbolic order either. Later, accompanying Jeff (an inhabitant of the cabin complex she hides in) on a mission to catch stolen fish, she makes a distinction between the Amy she has been and the Amy she is: "I have absolutely no intention of being part of this illicit piscine economy, but 'I' am fairly interested. […] 'I' am game. I have become game again since I died."[53] She accepts the hard, dirty, manual work and then afterwards rather than floating in the water as she has done previously she swims "far and fast", returning to the shore "fast as a porpoise".[54]

As Amy does not choose to assume the role of an athletic woman, despite there being allusions to her sporting capabilities at school (Nick notices a photograph of her and Desi dressed "in tennis whites"[55] when he interviews him), so it is reasonable to conclude she does not consider this sporty version of herself one that would be found attractive during the timespan of the novel. Unlike the "Cool Girl", athleticism is not "in style".[56] Indeed, as Carla Rice argues: "Because being physically active is associated culturally with masculinity, female athletes often have to work hard to emphasize their feminine appearance".[57] However, although Amy fears the possibility of a confrontation with Jeff and Greta because she doesn't "know how to fight", saying "they will grab me by the wrists while I pat and fuss at them like a child",[58] she soon learns the benefits of remaining in motion. Unable to actually disappear and having lost the desire to commit suicide, Amy approaches her affluent and manipulative high-school boyfriend Desi for help, abandoning her car and agreeing to remain hidden in his lake house. However, she soon realises she is trapped in the "ultimate white-knight fantasy: He steals the abused princess […] and places her under his gilded protection in a castle that no one can breach but him."[59] Amy is safer on the move. In this way she resembles Paula Hawkins's heroine Rachel, "the girl on the train".[60] Not quite as dynamic as Amy (she has not disappeared entirely before the novel begins), she is nevertheless on the move on the first page and she remains at her strongest and most comfortable when in flight, something she recognises herself when she says: "It's a relief to be back on the 8.04. […] I'd rather be

here, looking out at the houses beside the track, than almost anywhere else."[61] Her static moments are the most dangerous for her, when she is ensnared in her marital home, being manipulated by her abusive husband, Tom, or when she wakes in her "tiny bedroom" in the flat she shares with her "half-friend", Cathy, and where she "always feel[s] like a guest at the very outer limit of their welcome".[62] One home she has been forced to leave because her husband has moved in another younger and more fertile woman, the other she feels so uncomfortable in we generally only see her there at the point of waking, hung-over and trying to recall what really happened to her the night before. Every day she leaves and takes the train to the place she used to work until she was fired for being drunk, and she "walk[s]", goes to the park, "to the library", "[s]ometimes" "to the pub", but crucially she cannot linger at these place for too long, she keeps moving.[63]

The woman that Rachel sees from the train window, Megan, she at first classifies through the male gaze, describing her as "the perfect blonde",[64] and imagining her married life as a patriarchal fantasy: "He is […] well-built, strong protective, kind […]. She is one of those tiny bird-women, a beauty".[65] Here we can see that Rachel is in the picture she has created, her own opinions creating "the screen" through which she sees Megan and Scott, just as Lacan describes the gaze in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973): "If I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain".[66] However, as Lacan and Sartre have both theorised, the object—or here, rather, the objectified—looks back. As Rachel is not visible or not noticed to the couple the train passes every day, it is not possible at this point to experience the mutual acknowledgement of seeing each other that Sartre describes,[67] but rather the returned look is more as Lacan describes it in relation to an inanimate object, as Dylan Evans explains: "the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it".[68] Rachel becomes gradually aware of the returned gaze as she becomes acquainted with more details about Megan and Scott and is obliged to reassess what it is she thinks she has seen. Megan is also in an unhappy marriage, but, whereas Rachel longs for a misremembered idyll in the past, Megan fantasises about escape: "Sitting here in the morning, eyes closed and the hot sun orange on my eyelids, I could be anywhere. I could be in the south of Spain, at the beach; I could be in Italy, the Cinque Terre […] I can dream of: of more exotic adventures at the end of the line and beyond."[69] Like Amy, Megan considers herself "a mistress of self-reinvention […] Runaway,

lover, wife, waitress, gallery manager, nanny, and a few more in between",[70] but Megan never progresses from imagining another life to actually making it happen, her actions are all about trying to make her existence in Witney more exciting: her attempts to seduce her therapist, her affair with Tom, her efforts at appeasing her husband. Interestingly, also, many of these other guises are designated as traditional feminine roles, showing her as someone who is as aware of the requirement for female masks in a patriarchal economy as Amy is, but unlike Amy, she does not want to face her essential self. Joan Riviere has described "[w]omanliness" as something that "could be assumed and worn as a mask" and that womanliness is "the same thing" as "the "masquerade".[71] For Riviere the mask can be liberating, a means to embrace and safeguard the power of masculinity she may possess without being censured for it, yet as Mary Ann Doane has commented, "In this description, femininity is in actuality non-existent—it serves only as a disguise."[72] It is worth noting here that Riviere's paper was published in 1929 when power was largely equatable with masculinity, at least in terms of the symbolic, yet she raises an interesting point for the contemporary age. Amy has an essential persona aside from her masks, dead Amy or as she refers to herself at this juncture "'I'": a being not obviously or stereotypically gendered. But beneath the masks, Megan is even more traditionally feminine than her external persona allows. Her hidden past is one where she embraces the extremes of "the madonna/whore duality"[73]: she attempts to be a prostitute, adopts the role of a housewife of sorts and eventually becomes a grieving mother. Megan is not hiding attributes of masculinity or socially recognised power; instead she attempts to secrete her womanliness behind other masks of femininity. For Megan the mask is not about liberation. Megan professes to desire escape, to desire action, but she recognises the futility of her efforts even as she describes them:

> All those plans I had—photography courses and cookery classes—when it comes down to it they feel a bit pointless, as if I'm playing at real life instead of actually living it. I need to find something that I *must* do, something undeniable. I can't do this, I can't just be a wife […] there is literally nothing to do but wait. Wait for a man to come home and love you. Either that, or look around for something to distract you.[74]

Her plea for something she "*must* do" shows that unlike Amy, she does not have the strength or motivation to choose something for herself, and her "distractions" further bind her to her situation. She fears that she will "get caught" by Scott for having an affair, but she knows he reads her

emails and her browsing history, that he doesn't trust her. Ultimately she expects to be caught, she exposes herself to risks that render it almost inevitable, tying her irrevocably at first to a living death always waiting for a husband she doesn't love, and then to an actual death when she is murdered by Tom and is buried in Witney. It is Rachel rather than Megan who succeeds in regaining control of her narrative after she realises that Tom has deliberately lied to her about her behaviour when inebriated and she is finally able to disentangle truth from fiction. Her regain of control is not as complete as Amy's, but then nor is it so calculated. Amy entirely dominates the narrative of *Gone Girl*, and, to make this explicit, Flynn does not just give us access to her stream of conscious, but she makes Amy a writer, one who pens her own diary of events that she leaves as evidence to incriminate Nick, boasting, "and Nick said I wasn't really a writer, and why did I ever listen to him?"[75]

There is a new site of bodily concern in contemporary crime fiction. Whereas the sexual appeal of the woman has long been understood as that which is most threatening to the male gaze and therefore worthy of mutilation and objectifying, there has recently been a distinct interest in the head and the brain. Indeed, *Gone Girl* begins with Nick's meditation on Amy's skull and brain:

> When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. The shape of it to begin with. The very first time I saw her, it was the back of the head I saw, and there was something lovely about it, the angles of it […] You could imagine the skull quite easily.
>
> […]
>
> Like a child, I picture opening her skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it, trying to catch and pin down her thoughts.[76]

It is Amy's extraordinary brain that Nick here attempts to fetishise and that Amy forces him to appreciate and respect when she masterminds her disappearance. The description here by Nick is interesting because it renders the cerebral physical. Nick tries to ensnare her intelligence in the language of romance and sexual attraction, using the same methods already discussed, to divide and conquer the body and to reduce her intellect to something fragile and vulnerable to violence. Something similar but not quite so subtly sophisticated is at work in Jo Nesbø's *The Snowman*, where during the scene described above, in which the woman has been dismembered and reassembled, the stitches are plainly visible across her

neck and under her breasts, targeting an area associated with female sexuality and one connected to sentience. *The Leopard*, another of Nesbø's Harry Hole thrillers, opens with a scene depicting a woman tortured by an implement which expands in her mouth sending pincers into her brain, before the same sadist decapitates a female MP. Spector strangles his victims or asphyxiates them with a plastic bag, but by the final scenes of season three, when he has exhausted all attempts to maintain control over the narrative of life and death, this latter method is the one he uses on himself. George Butte has described the gaze as the locale, not necessarily of dominance, but of "struggle",[77] and while both characteristics are arguably in evidence in crime fiction, the struggle is the more forcible image in the domestic noir. The war between Nick and Amy is one of intellect, that between Rachel and Tom is one of memory, but both represent a battle over narrative and, consequently, also visual control. Demonstrating a reversal of the male attacks on women depicted above, when Amy seeks to undermine her husband, she targets his intellect, staging a treasure hunt with challenging riddles as clues, flattering him by saying he is "brilliant"[78] and "witty",[79] but promising "this time I'll teach you a thing or two".[80] When she murders Desi she cuts his throat, and while she may not murder Nick, she effectively doles out the same punishment: he is silenced, forced to accept her version of events, his own written account destroyed. In *The Girl on the Train*, Tom murders Megan by hitting her over the head and he tries to kill Rachel by using strangulation. However, in another inversion of the traditionally gendered roles of crime writing, it is Rachel and Anna who kill Tom, "[t]wisting the corkscrew in, further and further, ripping into his throat",[81] in an act of violent penetration that mimics that of rape.

Domestic noir is not an out and out triumph for the female gaze but it is an important battlefield during the war for narrative control. The active turn in domestic noir fiction is a very recent phenomenon, dating from the second decade of the twenty-first century and demonstrating a shift away from the passive, eroticised female corpse, or the female detective trying to operate within a male-dominated police force, towards female protagonists who strive for control of their own story, in their own settings and on their own terms. These fictions are proving just as commercially viable as their patriarchal predecessors, and continue to dominate bestseller lists. Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* is particularly important because it marks a turning point, not just in terms of narrative content but also in terms of its relationship with the reader. *Gone Girl* demands a dynamic interaction

with the reader as well as presenting an active female agent who competes for narrative dominance, agency and plot space. It is no longer reasonable to assume that the reader is unknowingly directed by the discourses of a patriarchy that objectifies women. In a world where gender equality is frequently discussed across a plethora of mainstream media outlets, readers cannot be the unthinking participants in the male gaze that Mulvey described during the Second Wave of Feminism. These novels are not comfortable reads; *Gone Girl* in particular is literary work designed to surprise, to challenge, to encourage the reader to reconsider what he or she has come to expect of the genre. As Wolfgang Iser puts it: "Literary texts initiate 'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meaning themselves."[82] The crime genre text, then, when refined and placed under the lens of the domestic noir is much more than a commercial endeavour that meets certain criteria, murder by numbers if you will; it is instead a dynamic space for political, personal and artistic re-evaluation. The girl is gone, by car, by train or by some other means, and if you gaze at her retreating form under the mistaken belief that she is still the blank page upon which meaning can be imposed, be prepared. As Nietzsche has it "if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee".[83] Or in the words of Amy Elliot Dunne, "I am penniless and on the run. How fucking noir."[84]

Notes

1. Statistics reproduced courtesy of Nielsen BookScan as follows: Clare Swanson, "Bookselling Books of 2014", *Publisher's Weekly*, 2 January 2015, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/65171-the-fault-in-our-stars-tops-print-and-digital.html [accessed 20 December 2016]; "Bestselling Books of 2015", *Publisher's Weekly*, 1 January 2016, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/69054-bestselling-books-of-2015.html [accessed 20 December 2016]; John Maher, "The Bestselling Books of 2016", *Publisher's Weekly*, 8 July 2016, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/70875-the-bestselling-books-of-2016-so-far.html [accessed 18 December 2016].
2. Julia Crouch, "Genre Bender", 25 August 2013, http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender.
3. Adrienne E. Gavin, "Feminist Crime Fiction and Female Sleuths" in *A Companion to Crime Fiction,* ed. Rzepka and Horsley, p. 268.

4. Patricia Cornwell *Postmortem* (London: Hachette Digital, 2008), pp. 7–8.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* [1963], trans. Tavistock Publications Ltd. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).
6. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 8.
7. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1989), p. 15.
8. Todd McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes", *Cinema Journal*, 42.3 (2003), p. 29, www.jstor.org/stable/1225903 [accessed 20 November 2016].
9. This may once again also include all genders and sexual persuasions because the woman is according to Mulvey only "implying a threat of castration" (p. 21). She can therefore be interpreted as a threat to the patriarchal order which defines and determines the very structure of knowledge and the ways in which it is understood. Her threat, then, in this approach, arguably represents not just a loss of specific instances of male power but also of the very manner in which the world the viewer knows is organised.
10. Mulvey, p. 21.
11. Mulvey, p. 21.
12. Ruth Penfold-Mounce, "Corpses, Popular Culture and Forensic Science: Public Obsession with Death", *Mortality* 21.1 (Online: 22 April 2015; In print: 2016), pp. 19–35, http://www.tandfonline.com [accessed 10 November 2016]; Daniel A. Cohen, "The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590–1850", *Journal of Social History* 31.2 (1997), pp. 277–306, www.jstor.org/stable/3789940 [accessed 19 November 2016]. Also see: Berit Åström, "Over Her Dismembered Body: The Crime Fiction of Mo Hayder and Jo Nesbø", in *Rape in Stieg Larsson's* Millenium *Trilogy and Beyond: Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction*, ed. Åström, Katarina Gregersdotter and Tanya Horeck (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 97–114.
13. For more on the doll and the female corpse in mainstream media see: Lindsey Steenberg, *Forensic Science in Contemporary Popular Culture: Gender, Crime and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 164–165.
14. Peter Messant, *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (Chichester: Wiley, 2013), p. 75.
15. Steven Peacock, *Swedish Crime Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 132.
16. Kira Cochrane, "How Female Corpses Became a Fashion Trend", *Guardian*, 9 January 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2014/jan/09/female-corpses-fashion-trend-marc-jacobs-miley-cyrus [accessed 7 September 2016].

17. For more on the crossover between advertising and pornography, including "snuff", see: Jane Caputi, "The Pornography of Everyday Life" in *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA; London; Far East Square; New Delhi: Sage, 2011), pp. 316–318.
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CHAPTER 7

Teenage Kicks: Performance and Postfeminism in Domestic Noir

Leigh Redhead

Although Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) and Megan Abbott's *Dare Me* (2012) were released six years apart, they received strikingly similar reviews in the press:

> Flynn brilliantly depicts the lurking malice and secrets of a small community as well as reminding us how scary teenage girls can be.[1]
>
> By the end, the novel—already an intense combination of high school story and hard-boiled thriller—has become almost like a Jacobean tragedy. Even so, the scariest thing about it remains its unsparing portrait of how dangerous teenage girls can be.[2]

Both novels feature adolescent girls—not as murder victims, but as protagonist and antagonist (Addy and Beth in *Dare Me*) and as killers (Amma and her girl gang in *Sharp Objects*). They also feature adult women who are complex, desiring and deeply flawed, and the books explore what Grossman, writing about the femme fatale, has called '[…] the vexed relationship between vital female agency and the limits placed on female desire'.[3] After years of arse-kicking feminist detectives and plucky teenage action heroes, it seems that female characters are finally allowed to be morally complex.

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However, not everyone is happy about this new development. Flynn has been accused of misogyny in her depiction of female characters, and critiques of both authors' books have mentioned that they write "unlikeable" protagonists. Reader reviews on Amazon are particularly indignant:

> Beth is mean, spiteful, and so completely unlikeable that I wanted to light the book (er, Kindle) on fire just to eliminate her from this world.[4]
>
> Awful. Horrible people doing ugly and disturbing things to each other. I couldn't finish this one.[5]

These reproaches seem to miss the point of noir, particularly that written by Abbott and Flynn whose work is thematically more similar to the classic noir exemplified by Jim Thompson and Patricia Highsmith than many other domestic noir texts. Like most crime novels, domestic noir explores dark themes; in particular, crime within romantic relationships and the family home. However, most tend to end optimistically, with order restored: wayward husband punished; abuser exposed and defeated; lost memory restored; alcoholism overcome. These narrative trajectories are essentially hopeful, and differ from classic noir, which is filled with characters whom Penzler describes as being "driven by greed, lust, jealousy or alienation, a path that inevitably sucks them into a downward spiral from which they cannot escape".[6] Breu offers a similar definition, calling noir texts "negative deformations" of several different genres which "rework their positive or utopian content into self-cancelling allegories of failure and futility".[7] Other scholars, such as Horsley, Faison, Conard and Porfirio, view noir as a kind of US existentialism, in which the characters, beset by the meaninglessness and absurdity of life, as well as an unjust and hostile society, go willingly into the abyss.[8] Author Hilary Davidson agrees, writing that "noir is what you are left with when you can no longer turn your gaze away from that abyss".[9]

Abbott and Flynn have embraced this noir sensibility, appropriating the genre conventions of classic noir fiction and ultimately subverting them. In the classic noir of the 1940s and 1950s, female characters were often cast in a binary relationship as either the "good girl" or the femme fatale—catalyst for the doomed hero's downfall. By transgressing gender norms, the femme fatale inevitably risked imprisonment or death. *Out of the Past* (1947) juxtaposes the wholesome sweetheart Anne with the murderous Kathie, and the same strategy is employed in *Double Indemnity* (1944) comparing innocent Lola and "spider woman" Phyllis. Both Kathie and

Phyllis cause the deaths of the male protagonists, and are eventually killed too. In the neo-noir of the 1980s and 1990s orthodox notions of masculine and feminine shifted, the homme fatale emerged and a new version of the femme fatale appeared in films such as *Body Heat* (1981), *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *The Last Seduction* (1994). This modern femme fatale was calculating and sexually aggressive and remained unpunished at the films' conclusions, keeping the money and/or getting away with murder.

Female characters in these earlier generic iterations have been interpreted as embodiments of the male anxiety of their times: the classic noir women rejecting traditional roles in the post-war period, and the neo-noir women dangerously empowered by second wave feminism. However, in contemporary noir there is a new paradigm at work. Female gender anxieties are being explored, and female characters are more likely to be released from the prescriptive madonna/whore dichotomy and presented as just as flawed and morally ambivalent as the males. This representation allows the authors to express realities of present-day female experience such as institutionalised sexism, gender-based double standards, physical and emotional violence and the difficulties women face as they attempt to navigate the complicated intersections between feminism, ambition, family, sex and desire.

Noir, with its sense of alienation, entrapment and paranoia, and its facility for critiquing social and economic ideology, is an ideal genre in which to explore and evaluate current cultural discourses. Hilfer suggests that these crime novels are "radical in the sense of questioning some aspect of law, justice or the way society is run."[10] This is also my position and I will argue that Flynn's and Abbott's novels are far from misogynist or anti-feminist. Rather, *Sharp Objects* and *Dare Me* critique a postfeminist, neoliberal cultural landscape. By postfeminist I am referring not to a movement, but a cultural sensibility where the work of feminism is assumed to have been done.[11] This discourse is particularly apparent in film, television and advertising that privilege consumer culture, choice and empowerment, sexually liberated women, girl power, youth culture, personal transformation and individualism. Postfeminism has been variously described as both empowering and objectifying, as a backlash against feminism, and as being closely aligned with neoliberalism, Gill and Scharff maintaining that "the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neo-liberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of post feminism".[12] The neoliberal and postfeminist subject also bears a strong resemblance to the adolescent female char-

acters in Flynn's and Abbott's novels, and I will contend that by juxtaposing these updated teenage femmes fatales with adult women characters, the authors provide a feminist critique of contemporary Western society.

Dare Me

Lee Horsley posits that current examples of the female-authored noir play with the notion of "gender performance" whereby female characters act out an ironic "hyper-femininity". She also asserts that female writers "rework the tropes of earlier noir […] imagining female performances from the inside and removing them from the male-centred narrative structures of traditional noir".[13] Horsley expands on this in *The Noir Thriller*, stating that Megan Abbott, in many of her novels, explores "the theme of instructive performance […] a doubling of the femme fatale and a struggle for power between two women […]".[14] This is certainly the case in *Dare Me*, which centres around the triangular relationship between two teenage cheerleaders, Addy and Beth, and their new coach, Colette French.

At first Addy, the protagonist, seems to be a classic noir innocent bystander, watching Horsley's power struggle play out between her best friend Beth and Coach—who both want to control the cheerleading squad. By the conclusion of the novel, however, Addy has been revealed as an unreliable narrator who has hidden her ambition all along. She triumphs and becomes captain of the squad while the other women succumb to the inevitable noir downfall—Beth nearly dying in a suicide attempt, and Coach losing everything after her husband is arrested for the murder of her lover. Although not a true sociopath in the mould of Thompson's Lou Ford or Highsmith's Ripley, nor scheming and murderous like the neo-noir femmes fatales in films such as *Bodyheat* (1981) and *The Last Seduction* (1994), Addy is a fille fatale for the postfeminist age, adept at disguising her true nature and becoming what other people expect her to be.

Abbott has commented that society is uncomfortable exploring "aggression, desire and rage" in teenage girls and prefers to continue to stereotype them as either "innocent and pure, or shallow and silly and capricious".[15] Addy seems aware of this as she ceaselessly performs the hyper-feminine and iconic role of high-school cheerleader, adjusting her enactments to suit specific audiences. When performing for squad captain Beth, she is the loyal lieutenant, a swaggering, militaristic second-in-command. To Coach, whom Addy initially reveres and wants to emulate, she is a cross between devoted acolyte and star-crossed lover. Her teachers

consider her an eye-rolling, texting, gum-snapping nuisance and to other high-school students she's a "cheerlebrity" to be admired from afar. While at a party with older men she dances erotically with another girl, referencing the cheerleader trope, which has been a staple of pornography from the 1970s to the present day.[16,17] In fact, all the teenage cheerleaders in *Dare Me* are wholly aware of their sexual power and how to use it to aggravate women and arouse men. Addy describes a fellow squad member's signature move thus: "Pixie-eyed, apple-breasted Emily lifts her arms languorously above her head in an epic yawn. Oh, we knew this routine, this routine which so provokes Mrs Dieterle and makes Mr Callahan turn red and cross his legs."[18]

When Addy is interviewed by police officers who want to question her in relation to the death of Coach's lover, Will, she performs another version of the character.

> Walking past all the cops, all the detectives, I raise my runner's shirt a few inches, like I'm shaking it loose from my sweated skin. I let them all see my stomach, its tautness. I let everybody see I'm not afraid, and that I'm not anything but a silly cheerleader, a feather-bodied sixteen-year-old with no more sense than a marshmallow peep. I let them see I'm not anything. Least of all what I am.[19]

Addy acts the role of the erotic yet vacuous teenager to protect herself from suspicion and fool the detectives into underestimating her, using descriptors that reference softness to highlight the deceptiveness of her display. The reader already knows she is not soft but "tight and rock-hard",[20] both physically and emotionally because of the cheer squad's tough training regime. The last two sentences of the paragraph also provide a clue that, like Amy in Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), Addy is an unreliable narrator, fooling not just the police, but the reader as well.

As a first-person protagonist, Addy is able to explicitly state that her personality is an enactment, and no one can see who she really is, therefore the performance is, as Horsley theorizes, represented from the inside out, destabilizing the traditional femme fatale figure. By presenting this female performance subjectively, through the first-person point of view of the narrator, and by focusing on the power struggles between women, rather than between a woman and a man, Abbott reimagines the traditional noir narrative trajectory. She also subverts the traditional noir femme fatale by having three main characters who all contain elements of the femme fatale, yet who each disrupt this figure in different ways.

Beth functions as antagonist to both Addy and Coach, and is in some ways the fatal female villain of the piece. However, if Addy, within the noir taxonomy, is the criminal/femme fatale protagonist as discussed above, then Beth, it could be argued, is the noir everyman who falls for the femme fatale. Betz maintains that the motivation for most noir protagonists is desire, which "references a range of meanings based on the focal point of an individual's attention".[21] Beth's focal point of attention is Addy and the power struggle between Beth and Coach is not just about control of the cheer squad, but also for Addy's affections. Throughout the novel, it is gradually revealed that Beth's fondness for Addy is romantic as well as friendship-based and her jealousy drives the plot of *Dare Me*, motivating Beth to reveal Coach's affair to her husband, and leading to the death of Coach's lover, Will. Beth's unrequited desire for Addy also provides motivation for her literal noir downfall. Throughout the novel, Beth references the existential noir abyss, and at the climax she literally throws herself into it, swan diving from the cheerleader pyramid onto the wooden floor below. "She never really wanted anything but this. *The Abyss, Addy, it gazes back into you.*"[22]

Beth experiences sexual desire, not for the boys and men she occasionally has sex with, but for Addy. However, Addy's wants are not sexual. While she spends time with Coach and Will, covering for them while they have sex, protecting them from Beth, and accompanying them drinking, and although she appears to experience vicarious longing for them, feeling "loose and wondrous inside. I want to be part of their kiss, and maybe even they want it too",[23] her desire is emotional rather than sexual. She basks in the glow of their forbidden love, fascinated by the chance to participate in a mysterious adult world of high emotion that has hitherto been denied her, yet without experiencing actual physical desire for Coach and Will or anyone else. Addy "makes out" with a boy from school, but only to impress Coach, who has mentioned he is attractive. Afterwards she feels nothing. "His wanting, so easily won—well it bores me."[24] Instead, Addy's apparent desire is to obtain Coach's approval. She wants to emulate the older woman and learn how to become the epitome of ideal, confident womanhood she initially perceives Coach to be.

An ex-cheerleader herself, Coach at first appears poised, perfect and in charge of her body and her emotions as she seeks to gain control of the cheer squad. As she trains and disciplines them, instructing them to lose

weight and become physically fit, and assisting them to improve their stunts, she personifies the postfeminist discourse of self-surveillance, self-improvement, and what McRobbie has labelled the "makeover paradigm" in which women's lives can be improved if they transform and become more successful versions of themselves.[25] Coach is a role model for Addy, because she exemplifies the "top girl"[26] with the added power and knowledge of womanhood, which Addy is initially desperate to absorb. When Addy first sees her, Coach appears:

> […] body drum-tight, a golden collarbone popping […] The sharp edges of her sleek bob […] the way she holds her chin so high […] And most of all her striking prettiness, clear and singing, like a bell. It hits us hard. But we will not be shaken by it.[27]

Coach is an example of Horsley's updated femme fatale, displaying "flawless performance […] inscrutability and lack of visible emotion",[28] and she is also an example of a post-feminist ideal: beautiful, in control of her taut, healthy body, skilled, professional, with a perfect, doll-like 4-year-old daughter and a handsome husband who works long hours in finance to provide her with all the expensive furnishings she could ask for. However, her perfect life is a façade, revealed when Coach explains to Addy that she never wanted these trappings of consumer culture. "He wanted to give her things. He let her have whatever she wanted. She didn't know what to want, but she cut out pictures from magazines."[29] The most revealing line here is "she didn't know what to want". The ideal postfeminist society comprises empowered women who know exactly what they want, and who go out and get it—whether "it" is a husband, career promotion or an expensive designer handbag. Coach divulges that she had to turn to glossy women's magazines in order to discern which possessions she should aspire to, thus exposing her postfeminist exterior as a lie. Addy begins to realise this when she visits Coach's house and is invited to lie in her bed and imagine herself as Coach. Addy soon intuits what is rotten at the heart of this fantasy:

> And here I am, my tight perfect body, my pretty, perfect face, and nothing could ever be wrong with me, or my life, *not even the sorrow that is plainly right there in the center of it. Oh, Colette, it's right there in the center of you, and some kind of despair too.*[30]

Addy empathises, because she feels this despair herself:

> It's something you feel constantly, the thing you fight off all the time. The knot of hot boredom lodged behind your eyes, so thick and grievous you want to bang your head into the wall, knock it loose.[31]

Betz asserts that in noir "female characters, feeling trapped by society's requirements for certain kinds of behaviours, both social and sexual, can only assert their innate longing for personal agency by following the one line of action they have open to them: they must become 'bad' to become fully realised persons".[32] Coach is indeed trapped, yearning for agency and seething with desire for transcendent experience, something beyond her socially required perfect house and family. However, as Horsley notes, "Female empowerment can only be assured by avoiding any entrapment in a close sexual relationship",[33] and this is what brings about Coach's undoing.

She directs her desire towards Will, an army sergeant who has been recruiting at the high school, and she becomes "bad" by starting a passionate affair with him. The affair so consumes her that she neglects her daughter, starts drinking, crashes her car, and loses any semblance of "empowerment". By having an affair and becoming "bad", Coach is refusing her life of consumerism, perfection and physical and emotional control, and is rejecting the neoliberal, postfeminist, patriarchal status quo. Her life instantly becomes difficult and emotionally painful; however, it is also authentic and wondrous and real. "'I never thought it would happen,' Coach says, and I think she means cheating on her husband. But then she says. 'I never thought I'd feel like this.'"[34] Like many of the heroes of classic noir, for example Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944), Coach seems to have chosen her fate, rushing headlong into the abyss, although she is aware it will destroy her.

Coach's downward spiral begins when Addy and Beth walk in on Coach and Will making love in the teachers' staff room after school, and Coach's desire and lack of control are exposed:

> Her thighs are shuddering whitely and his hand curls around the back of her head, buried in her dark hair, sweat-stuck and triumphant. Her face though, that's what you can't take your eyes off of. The dreamy look on her pinkening cheeks, all elation and mischief and wonder, like I never saw in her, like she's never been with us, so strict and exacting and distant, like a cool machine.
>
> It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.[35]

"Mischief and wonder" seems the ultimate repudiation of cool, calculated heterosexual performance; however, in the noir universe of "negative deformation" this playful state disempowers Coach. By giving in to her uncontrollable, noirish desire, Coach loses her self-control, and at the same time yields authority to Beth, who now has blackmail material. Although Addy is at first fascinated by Coach's desire, and considers the possibility of such desire as a remedy against her existential "despair" and "hot boredom", she reconsiders after witnessing the consequences of Coach's longing: the death of Will, the ruination of Coach and the incarceration of her husband. Addy ultimately decides to reject this out-of-control desire, in favour of ambition and the chance to be a leader. She chooses to observe the tenets of postfeminism and neoliberalism: performance, self-surveillance, personal transformation, self-discipline and individualism. And by doing so she becomes a sociopath. At the end of the novel Addy has "outperformed" both Coach and Beth and is ultimately successful while the other women are not.

Beth's performance fails because she acts out masculinity, ambition and toughness without concealing them behind a soft, unthreatening, feminine exterior. Coach's performance fails because she gives in to passionate emotion and can't sustain the façade. Addy's performance is successful—she remains feminine, in control, and acts out the stereotypical girlish behaviour expected of her. She hides her true nature from the other characters as well as the reader, performing the role of the idealised US teenage girl, and is ultimately rewarded for her "flawless performance".

Sharp Objects

Abbott suggests that in contemporary, female-authored noir, "gender alienation [is] another version of the economic and social alienation of the noir male heroes of the past".[36] *Sharp Objects* addresses this gender alienation, and, as in *Dare Me*, explores femininity as performance, and power struggles between women. In this case the struggle is between protagonist Camille, a journalist sent to her hometown of Wind Gap to cover the murders of two pre-teen girls, Adora, her wealthy, controlling mother, and Camille's half-sister Amma, Queen Bee of a gang of 13-year-old girls. Camille's desire is for acceptance by her family, Adora's desire is to infantilise and control her daughters, and Amma's desire is for power and control in a society which denies female autonomy.

Just as Addy performs the role of cheerleader in *Dare Me*, Amma, the antagonist of *Sharp Objects*, is an accomplished performer of girlish stereotypes, most notably the Lolita and the baby doll. When Camille returns to her hometown of Wind Gap she first encounters the Lolita version:

> What are you doing here?" asked the prettiest. Her flushed face had the roundness of a girl barely in her teens and her hair was parted in ribbons, but her breasts, which she aimed proudly outward, were those of a grown woman. A lucky grown woman.[37]

The Lolita motif is repeated whenever Amma is out in public. She flirts with Camille's initial love-interest, homicide detective Richard, calling him "Dick" while licking a large red lollipop[38] and also with Camille's second sexual partner, a teenage boy named John who is falsely suspected of killing the young girls, one of whom was his sister:

> Amma stayed up, staring down John, rubbing suntan oil on her shoulders, her chest, breasts, slipping her hands under her bikini top, watching John watching her […] One triangle of her top had fallen off to reveal the plump breast beneath. Thirteen years old, I thought to myself, but I felt a spear of admiration for the girl. When I'd been sad I hurt myself. Amma hurt other people. When I'd wanted attention, I'd submitted myself to boys: *Do what you want; just like me*. Amma's sexual offerings seemed a form of aggression.[39]

Amma is knowingly channelling the Lolita figure who has been appropriated from the pages of Nabokov's novel to become an icon of popular culture, never more ubiquitous than in the postfeminist era where girlishness and youth are the most highly prized commodities, seemingly available to all through an increasingly mainstream cosmetic surgery industry. It is interesting to consider that actual sexual desire in this context is pure performance also. The successful adolescent female characters in *Dare Me* and *Sharp Objects*, Addy and Amma, do not actually desire sex, but control over the self and others. Camille begins to realise that the Lolita act is just one part of Amma's routine when she observes the girl at home, performing a different role for their mother:

> Outside on the porch I saw a changeling. A little girl with her face aimed intently at a huge, four-foot doll-house […] Long blonde hair drifted in disciplined rivulets down her back […] the girl was in a childish sundress,

> matching straw hat by her side. She looked entirely her age—thirteen—for the first time since I'd seen her. Actually, no. She looked younger now. Those clothes were more appropriate for a ten-year-old. […] "I wear this for Adora. When I'm home, I'm her little doll."[40]

By performing both the Lolita and the baby doll, Amma is reproducing certain socially prescribed modes of femininity, particularly youthfulness, beauty and passivity, and as a result succeeds in her desire for power and agency by, as Lindop explains, "deflecting patriarchal reproach".[41] When Camille marvels at Amma's sexual precocity, using approving language such as "lucky woman" and "spear of admiration", and reiterating her extreme youth, the reader might be reminded of the problematic fact that "a twelve-year-old rape victim named Dolores became a dominant archetype for seductive female sexuality in contemporary America".[42]

Amma's version of "girl power" is wholly negative, however, and she uses her authority to control her friends, pimp out other teenage girls, taunt Camille, and murder two pre-adolescent girls who challenged the status quo by acting like tomboys, and whom she perceived as rivals for her mother's affection.

The fille fatale is not a new character. Lindop classifies Veda in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) as an early prototype, and discusses the proliferation of fatal teenage girls who appeared in neo-noir films of the 1990s such as *Wild Things* (1998), *The Babysitter* (1995) and *Poison Ivy* (1992).[43] However, Amma differs from these characters because she does not seduce and manipulate older men; instead she directs her rage against other women and girls. As with Addy in *Dare Me*, Amma's performance is seen from the inside out and her pathology explained. While not a point-of-view character, Amma's motivations can be understood through Camille's observations of her misogynist hometown. Wind Gap is a place where high-school girls are categorised as either sluts or lesbians, teen jocks are never punished for rape, and the best women can hope for is to marry well and play the role of ideal wife and mother. Amma, like Camille, has absorbed the town's misogyny and become a logical extension of the society in which she lives. However, while Camille has internalised the misogyny and uses it to punish herself, Amma directs her hatred outwards. "What if you hurt because it feels so good? Like you have a tingling, like someone left a switch on in your body. And nothing can turn the switch off except hurting?"[44]

Flynn critiques postfeminist notions of "girl power" and "female empowerment" by presenting the character with the most agency, Amma,

as a psychopathic murderer. Flynn also explicitly points out one of the contradictions of postfeminism in a scene where Camille visits her old high-school friends, who are now wives and mothers. One of the women laments going back to work:

> "With Tyler in preschool I thought I wanted to. I thought I need a purpose."
>
> "Oh honey, you have a purpose. Don't let society tell you how to raise your family, don't let feminists—" here she looked at me "—make you feel guilty for having what they can't have."
>
> "She's right Tish," offered Becca, "feminism means allowing women to make whatever kind of choices they want."
>
> The women were looking dubiously at Becca. […]
>
> Katie said, "I didn't really become a woman until I felt Mackenzie inside me. I mean, there's all this talk these days of God versus science, but it seems like, with babies, both sides agree. The bible says be fruitful and multiply, and science, well, when it all boils down, that's what women were made for, right? To bear children."
>
> "Girl Power," Becca muttered under her breath.[45]

As well as highlighting the dearth of lived experiences available for women in Wind Gap, the scene also plays out one of postfeminism's classic "double entanglements" whereby neoconservative values co-exist within a discourse of empowerment and choice. Lindop describes the ideal postfeminist, neoliberal subject as a "can-do girl" whose markers of success "include having a well-paid glamorous career and a luxurious consumer based lifestyle that embraces the aesthetic markers of commercialised girl power".[46] Camille Preaker is no such character. She works for a fourth-rate paper, lives alone in a drab, sparsely furnished flat, and has not had a relationship in over ten years, or desired one, because her body is covered in thick, raised scars. From the ages of 13 to 27 she has cut negative and feminised words such as *Wicked, Cupcake,* and *Spiteful*, all over her body, only stopping when she ran out of unmarked flesh and was subsequently hospitalised. Camille won't let anyone see her naked, and hides her scarred skin underneath long-sleeved shirts and pants.

Camille is not an "empowered" career woman, and is traumatised as a result of growing up with an unloving mother, her younger sister Marian's death 20 years earlier and her own gang rape at the age of 13. Unlike her half-sister Amma, Camille cannot perform the role of the cool, self-possessed femme fatale and this is in part due to her lack of control, expressed through

her desires. Camille desires acceptance: from her mother, Amma and Richard the detective. She is also a desiring sexual subject, and while there is repeated reference made to her enthusiastically masturbating as a teenage girl, she does not embody the *Sex and the City* or "Cosmo girl" ideal of skilled performance and "confident sexual agency".[47] Desire for Camille is interwoven with sexual violence, misogyny and shame:

> When I was still in grammar school, maybe twelve, I wandered into a neighbour boy's hunting shed, a wood planked shack where the animals were stripped and split. Ribbons of moist, pink flesh dangled from strings, waiting to be dried for jerky. The dirt floor was rusted with blood. The walls were covered with photographs of naked women. Some of the girls were spreading themselves wide, others were being held down and penetrated. One woman was tied up, her eyes glazed, breasts stretched and veined like grapes, as a man took her from behind. I could smell them all in the thick, gory air. At home that night, I slipped a finger under my panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick.[48]

As an adult woman, Camille still harbours conflicting positions toward sexual desire, which appear to mirror the arguments of "sex positive" feminists as well as those who claim that heterosexual sex and pornography are akin to rape. Camille has two sexual partners during the novel. The first, Richard, is a homicide detective from Kansas City, sent to investigate the murders. Richard is both a literal and metaphorical dick, as he quips to Camille after introducing himself: "'You can make your Dick joke now. It works on several levels.'"[49]

When Camille has sex with him she must disguise her real nature (emotional and physical), fearing that if she reveals herself he will be disgusted and reject her. She lies to Richard about how she lost her virginity and when she recounts a story about a 13-year-old girl who became drunk at a party and was passed around between four older boys, she does not reveal that she was that girl. When Richard becomes outraged and calls the incident rape, Camille disagrees:

> You're sexist. I'm so sick of liberal lefty men practicing sexual discrimination under the guise of protecting women against sexual discrimination […] sometimes drunk women aren't raped; they just make stupid choices—and to say we deserve special treatment when we're drunk because we're women, to say we need to be looked after, I find offensive.[50]

Many readers and reviewers find this scene confronting, arguing that a protagonist expressing these views exposes the book and author as misogynist. Flynn received similar criticism for *Gone Girl*; however, this argument presumes, obtusely, that for a novel to be feminist, the main character is required to be a positive female role model. Grossman, in a study of film noir femmes fatales, argues for "a more detailed and nuanced reading not only of female characters but of the narrative contexts (reflecting social realities) that inform and in some cases, determine their choices". She goes on to say that many people will assume a text is a failed "feminist narrative […] if the characters don't optimistically role model for viewers".[51] I concur with Grossman and with Flynn herself, who discussed the expectation of positive female characters in an interview:

> To me, that puts a very, very small window on what feminism is […] Is it really only girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself, and be the best you can be? For me, it's also the ability to have women who are bad characters […] the one thing that really frustrates me is this idea that women are innately good, innately nurturing.[52]

The feminist ethos resides in the author's freedom to be able to construct the characters they want, including characters embodying non-feminist views and "bad" character traits. Women have to fight to be able to represent themselves in ways other than normatively approved home-makers, career-girls and sex-pots; however, if they stray into areas that might serve as grist for the misogynist mill they are attacked for playing for the other side. As a result, Flynn is pilloried in some quarters for "letting the team down" or for creating bad role models; the implication being that unlike adult men who require no role models as they are in control of their lives, women and children are continually in need of inspirational and uplifting figures in popular culture to remind them of the required and acceptable modes of behaviour. Thus, women are captured in a system of internal surveillance and censorship in order to reproduce an orthodox range of gender identities. Ironically, self-surveillance and insistence on "empowered" women characters are exactly the sort of postfeminist notions Abbott and Flynn are critiquing in their novels.

When Camille has sex with Richard, she refuses to undress and won't allow him to touch her body lest he feels the raised scars underneath her clothes. As well as hiding her past, and her interior life, Camille blocks access to most of her physical exterior, essentially becoming just a mouth and a vagina. This is the only way that Camille feels she will be accepted by him.

Camille's second sexual partner is John Keene, the 18-year-old brother of one of the murdered girls. Like Camille, John is an outsider in the town, a nonconformist who doesn't fit prescriptive gender roles. He's androgynous looking, almost pretty, kind and gentle, and he behaves in ways that people read as feminine and therefore suspicious. When he is upset in public about the murder of his sister the townsfolk read this show of emotion as such transgressive behaviour for a male that John becomes a suspect in the killings and a pariah in the town. It is their shared alienation, and John's feminisation, that attracts Camille to him. When she encounters him, drunk and upset in a bar, she takes him to a motel room where she lets him undress her and see her scars. John is fascinated rather than repulsed and the encounter has a therapeutic quality for Camille. "He read me. His hands ran all over me, tasting myself on him. The words stayed quiet. I felt exorcised."[53] She is not performing sex this time, but is an active engaged participant, unapologetic for her imperfect body and mind and the scene is similar to the one in *Dare Me* where Coach seems suffused with "mischief and wonder". However, the euphoria does not last long. Camille is soon punished and shamed for her genuine desire, when the town sheriff and Richard come knocking on the motel door the morning after and find her and John half-dressed. "'You of age, son?' Vickery asked."[54]

Female desire is literally and metaphorically policed. Camille is shamed not only because she is "cheating" on Richard and has now lost his approval, but also because John is a much younger man as well as a murder suspect. The shame is compounded because in a town the size of Wind Gap, everybody soon learns of her aberrant behaviour, and she is considered an adulterer, near-paedophile, drunk and a slut, complicit in the killings of two little girls.

Camille's desires, intertwined with notions of shame and violence, reference the contradictory positions on desire, sex and pornography adopted by different feminist theorists, many of whom find it difficult to reconcile certain pleasures and practices with feminist principles. By portraying Camille as a damaged and flawed loser rather than a "can-do girl", Flynn critiques postfeminist empowerment and suggests that the only way for women to operate effectively in a neoliberal milieu that values success above all else is to conform and play the game.

At the conclusion of the novel, none of the women triumphs. Due to Camille's investigative work, her mother Adora is exposed as the killer of her daughter Marian, poisoner of Amma and Camille, and revealed as suffering

from Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy.[55] Adora is also (falsely) charged with the murder of the two girls, and with her mother in jail, Camille takes Amma back to Chicago to live with her. Still performing a role that hides her true nature from Camille, Amma murders another girl and is eventually put in a prison hospital. Guilt-ridden Camille has a breakdown and attempts to cut her last remaining sections of unmarked flesh: a circle on her back, and then her face. At the end of the book she is released from a psychiatric unit and taken in by her newspaper editor boss and his wife:

> Curry and Eileen packed my things and took me to their home, where I have a bed and some space in what was once a basement rec room. All sharp objects have been locked up, but I haven't tried too hard to get at them.[56]

Camille ends up figuratively incarcerated and infantilised, with Eileen tucking her in at night and serving her no beverage stronger than "grape cordial". Unlike many domestic noir protagonists, she does not succeed as a feminist role model, but ends up the classic noir loser.

Horsley suggests that "the narrative of noir […] can be reimagined to express the anxieties of successive decades".[57] In noir novels *Dare Me* and *Sharp Objects*, anxieties of white, middle-class US women at the start of the new millennium are gender-based, and stem from a neoliberal, post-feminist culture in which individualism, consumerism and the performance of a very narrow and prescribed femininity are encouraged and rewarded. While some readers and reviewers criticise the novels as misogynist and populated with unlikeable characters who make terrible female role models, both books effectively critique a culture in which structural inequality is denied to exist and feminism is said to be no longer relevant. The novels expose the high levels of performance and self-surveillance necessary to operate effectively as a woman within contemporary US culture, by juxtaposing successful and unsuccessful female performance within this setting. Both Abbott and Flynn were born in 1971, right in the middle of second-wave feminism, and it is easy to imagine their adult women characters as representative of the daughters of second-wave feminists, bewildered at how feminism has been colonised and co-opted by conservative and corporate interests. In comparison, the teenage characters appear as though they have grown up in a modern media culture and thus instinctively intuit its performative requirements. These adolescent girls are adept at avoiding "patriarchal reproach" and accept that if they are to gain any agency, they will need to look out for number one, eschew

any political action or female solidarity, and forgo the chance of experiencing "mischief and wonder". While the characters who embrace postfeminism and performance are successful in gaining power, and those who repudiate it end up as classic noir "losers", this does not mean the books are anti-feminist. Rather, by presenting female characters who are unable to push back against a neoliberal, postfeminist discourse which denies that structural inequalities exist, patriarchal ideology is exposed and critiqued. By representing noir "winners" as sociopathic, the novels demonstrate the price that must be paid in order to conform with, and succeed in, such an inequitable culture. Pessimistic critique such as this constitutes the dark heart of noir.

Notes

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3. Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir—Ready for her Close-up* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 135.
4. Melissa, "Just didn't get it", Amazon Review, August 13 2012. https://www.amazon.com/review/RM3717XRXRQU5
5. ebooklover, "*Dare Me*—Fraser Valley Regional Library," *BiblioCommons*, 2013 https://fvrl.bibliocommons.com/item/show/11680835062.
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8. Stephen E. Faison, *Existentialism, Film Noir, and Hard-Boiled Fiction* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008); Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Mark T. Conard and Robert Porfirio, *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 2008).
9. Chuck Wendig, "Hilary Davidson: The Terribleminds Interview", *Terribleminds: Chuck Wendig*, 2012 http://terribleminds.com/ramble/2012/02/23/hilary-davidson-the-terribleminds-interview/.

10. Tony Hilfer, *The Crime Novel:—A Deviant Genre* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990), p. 2.
11. Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility", http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2449/1/Postfeminist_media_culture_(LSERO).pdf, p. 4.
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13. "Raiding the Ivory Tower, Part II", *The Rap Sheet*, March 2009, http://therapsheet.blogspot.com.au/2009/10/raiding-ivory-tower-part-ii.html.
14. Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 266.
15. Jessa Crispin, "Mean Girls: Megan Abbott's *Dare Me", Kirkus Reviews*, 2012 https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/mean-girls-megan-abbotts-dare-me/.
16. Jane asserts that "[…] cheerleaders are a staple of Anglophone pornography and are frequently framed as objects of universal heterosexual desire." She identifies the prevalence of the cheerleader fantasy in adult films from the 1970s to the present day, from the ubiquitous remakes of *Debbie Does Dallas* to a plethora of cheerleader themed pornographic sites currently available on the Internet.
17. Emma A Jane, "Is *Debbie Does Dallas* Dangerous?: Representations of Cheerleading in Pornography and Some Possible Effects", *Feminist Media Studies*, 17 (2017), 264–280. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1187641, p. 264.
18. Megan Abbott, *Dare Me* (London: Picador, 2013), p. 12.
19. *Dare Me*, p. 237.
20. *Dare Me,* p. 179.
21. Phyllis M. Betz, "'I'm Your Girl': Queering Gender Affiliation in Megan Abbott's *Queenpin*", *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 30 (2012), 76–87, https://doi.org/10.3172/clu.30.1.76, p. 78.
22. *Dare Me*, p. 309.
23. *Dare Me,* pp. 99–100
24. *Dare Me,* p. 33.
25. Rosalind Gill, p. 16.
26. Angela McRobbie, "Top Girls?" *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2007), 718–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380701279044, p. 1.
27. *Dare Me*, p. 6.
28. Horsley, p. 268.
29. *Dare Me*, p. 64.
30. *Dare Me*, p. 67.
31. *Dare Me*, p. 79.
32. Phyllis M. Betz, p. 77.

33. Horsley, p. 268.
34. *Dare Me,* p. 85.
35. *Dare Me*, pp. 82–83.
36. "Raiding the Ivory Tower, Part II."
37. Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (London: Phoenix, 2010), p. 14.
38. *Sharp Objects*, p. 145.
39. *Sharp Objects*, p. 194.
40. *Sharp Objects,* p. 54.
41. Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 96.
42. Ira Wells, "Forgetting Lolita: How Nabokov's Victim Became an American Fantasy", *New Republic*, 2015, https://newrepublic.com/article/121908/lolita-cultural-icon.
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51. *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*, p. 7.
52. Oliver Burkeman, "Gillian Flynn on her Bestseller *Gone Girl* and Accusations of Misogyny", *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/01/gillian-flynn-bestseller-gone-girl-misogyny.
53. *Sharp Objects*, p. 269.
54. *Sharp Objects*, p. 271.
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CHAPTER 8

The Violent Mother in Fact and Fiction

Nicoletta Di Ciolla and Anna Pasolini

Representations in popular culture have a tendency to configure women as gentler by nature, as caring nurturers, whose physiological predisposition to take care of others is antecedent to any external intervention of cultural norms and practices that mould them into that shape. The imagined constant of the female constitution is believed to find its highest possible level of expression in motherhood, a state of being to which a set of regulatory traits is attributed that includes unconditional love, abnegation, selflessness and self-sacrifice, in the name of children and family. This view, challenged from many quarters because it is considered limiting, and reflective of the oppression and control exercised on women by the patriarchal order, continues however to chime with the most prevalent popular discourses on gender.[1]

The mere observation of reality however reveals a more complex picture of femalehood and motherhood, and evidence of deviation from this reassuring (stereo)type. The association between women and violence appears in an increasing variety of permutations in media reports. Here, in addition to the "traditional" scenarios, where women are placed at the receiving end of episodes of aggression (familial abuses, harassments, sexual crimes,

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and even murders), occurrences of a less customary figure are claiming a space: that of the female—often a mother—who is herself responsible for inflicting harm.[2] A similar articulation of this aspect of female experience is found in literary fiction and TV narratives. Stories featuring characters of "mothers who damage"—through forms of abuse or neglect that go from minor to severe—reflect a growing public concern for behavioural dynamics which are universally considered as uncharacteristic, hence dysfunctional and profoundly disconcerting, but simultaneously enable readers and viewers to exorcise those concerns, and the disturbance they encode, by situating them in a textual or televisual *elsewhere*.

This chapter analyses the representation of three "atypical" mother figures in several contemporary, European, female-authored novels, published between 2001 and 2014. We take "atypical" as an operative definition to signify mothers whose behaviour does not seem to conform with the socially constructed, culturally transmitted, and collectively understood models, and commit—or are considered to have committed—acts that can be generically defined as violent, usually affecting and causing damage to children. To clarify the terms of these behavioural models, we will refer to some indicative criminological and philosophical positions that have addressed and problematised the question of gender(ed) violence. It is our contention that narrative fiction, with its mass reach, can contribute to the deconstruction of the fixed paradigms that continue to be in place in the categorisation and evaluation of female behaviour and, through its contribution, can support positive cultural and social changes. Crime fiction is an especially effective tool for this purpose: its popular appeal makes it one of the primary sources through which the general public get their ideas about crime in society[3]; and, its facility for interpreting and giving a voice to social and cultural discomfort renders it capable of expressing dissent and triggering in its audiences an appetite for change.[4] It is a fact that authors of fiction find inspiration for stories, situations, and characters in real-life events, and that they are attuned to the debates that take place amongst practitioners—of law, criminal justice, or criminology—to which they refer in the name of factual accuracy and authenticity. We want to argue that this should not be considered as one-way traffic, and that the potential of fiction to support practitioners, as well as the general public, in their understanding of offenders and their crimes, should not be underestimated or underexploited.[5] Fiction can help us understand actual experience, bringing to the fore a range of factors that go beyond the criminal act itself, enabling a greater appreciation of what shapes crime

and criminal justice, and a better understanding of perpetrators. Popular representations of crime, and discourses about crime that can be found in novels—or on TV, or in new media—raise a number of relevant ethical and philosophical issues that have wider resonance, because of their bigger audience, than academic criminology. Because of this, they are useful to society at large.[6]

Fictional representations of women's problematic relations to motherhood arising from and/or triggering forms of domestic violence can induce a reflection on established cultural expectations of "proper" maternal behaviours, on the assumption that women have chief responsibility for child rearing and well-being, and they alone are to blame if anything goes wrong. Observing how the problematic relation to motherhood is expressed in narrative fiction offers a wider span of examples of women's agency in situations of violence within the family (specifically against children), which go beyond entrenched stereotypes of the violent mother as "mad" or solely as reacting to victimisation. This underlines the suitability of narrative fiction as a reliable partner for all those disciplines in the social sciences that are concerned with understanding the dynamics of social relations, and with removing inequalities that develop from the unequal distribution of power and influence. In the specific context of motherhood, this synergy facilitates a repositioning of the question of what a mother is (or should be), away from outdated gender-essentialist positions, and into a space where individual experiences can be interpreted free from prejudicial premises and clichés.

Can Women and Mothers Really Be Bad? From Positivist Criminology and Intersectionality to Narrative Fiction

The dominant and widely shared assumptions on gender and motherhood that set the parameters within which female and motherly behaviour could be expressed—with the endorsement of various theoretical frameworks—have for a long time prevented an understanding of the phenomenon of maternal violence beyond a summary moral judgement, condemnation, denial, or the unleashing of social panic. The idea that women are not capable of being inherently violent was curiously shared by the traditional criminologists of the early twentieth century and later by some feminist scholars, albeit the premises leading to that conclusion were radically

different. The idea of the positivist (and male) criminologists in the late 1800s and early 1900s that crime was gender specific, almost an epiphenomenon of maleness, contributed to the creation of a taxonomy of criminal ability in which women occupied the lower rungs. The works of Lombroso and Thomas affirmed the view that the capacity for criminal acts was physiologically irreconcilable with females, for reasons that included the fact that their brain, being smaller, was prone to psychological disturbances and dysfunctions, but not to wilful acts of violence. In combination with genetic predisposition, they argued, cultural conditioning contributed to rendering the female accustomed to behaving in a tame, gentle manner, hence less likely to offend.[7] The view from the social sciences chimed with Freud's psychodynamic theory of female delinquency, which was also being developed at that time.[8] Female offending was limited to crimes of the "hidden" kind, and either went undetected, or was dealt with more leniently by a justice system blinded by preconceptions about women's intrinsic incapacity to commit crimes.[9]

Feminist criminology from the 1970s has shifted the debate away from the axioms of genetic determinism, problematising these assumptions. Radical feminist scholars acknowledge that women can be violent, but ascribe this to a reaction to the systemic oppression that they suffer at the hand of patriarchal structures: in a context where they have little or no power, women find in violence an instrument of defence, and a survival strategy.[10] The fact that their violence can be directed towards their children, it is argued, demonstrates that motherhood too is experienced by women as a colony of patriarchal power, as an institution, whose potential for empowering is reduced or suppressed.[11]

The challenge to the axiom of the innateness of the maternal instinct, and the belief that it is subject to societal pressures and expectations of role allocation, has demanded a reconceptualisation of the notion of the "natural" aspect of maternal behaviour. This is what the works of authors such as Nancy Chodorow and Elisabeth Badinter have done, problematising the concept of motherhood, focussing on the spectrum of its nuances, and developing the propositions that Simone de Beauvoir had expressed, with devastating poignancy, in her essays and in her novels 30 years earlier.[12] The assumption that the interests of a mother should always and automatically coincide with those of her children also comes under scrutiny, urging a consideration that a mother's feelings towards her children could be affected by some degree of ambivalence.[13] Work carried out from the early 2000s advocates an interdisciplinary approach that would include consid-

eration of social pressures as well as the psychological and subjective factors that influence choices and behaviours.[14] Such an "intersectional"[15] approach reconciles different, hitherto neglected, and seemingly contradictory "points of intersection"[16] in women's—and mothers'—experience of violence, admitting the possibility that they can be, in the same context, both victims and willing perpetrators. It can account for the mobility of role positions and agency of women in the domestic environment; and it can explain why, forced to play the rules of the game, women may be victims in one situation (for example, in relation to their partners or to the broader social structures), but turn into victimiser in relation to weaker elements, *in primis* their children.[17] In our context the intersectional analysis of female violence highlights three key theoretical issues that merit scrutiny: first, the differences within the categories of "women" and "mothers", which posit that there is no universal womanhood or natural way of mothering; second, the multiplicity of female identity, which subsumes different, and often contradictory, elements such as being a victim, a survivor, and a victimiser; and finally, the question of power, and the need to conceptualise it not only in terms of gender relations, but also in its mobilisation through other channels, which produce complex systems of oppression activated even within the category of "woman" itself.[18]

Similar issues emerge from the contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives, which seek to emphasise the interaction between psychological factors, cultural representations, and the social management of motherhood, and focus on understanding maternal development ("maternal individuation") instead of looking at the relationship between mother and child from the standpoint of the latter, as traditional psychoanalysis has tended to do.[19] This framework offers a way out of the "impossible maternal ideals",[20] which can generate in mothers resentment towards children, violence and abuse, and redefines maternal ambivalence so that a mother can discover "ways of mothering which are congruent with her particular capacities and desires, rather than measuring herself against maternal mythologies".[21]

Whilst these debates animate discussion, and lead to paradigm-shifting discoveries in academic circles, however, they have had limited impact on societal attitudes with regard to what motherhood is, or should be. It is possible to argue that traditional gender stereotypes remain pervasive in public opinion, and continue to influence the way in which much popular culture represents women: still, in their essence, partners, mothers, and nurturers. Against this background of traditional wisdom, women in

general—and mothers in particular—who do not conform to the iconic model, who transgress from the norm by displaying behaviour which reveals signs of aggression or violence, are still considered an aberrant ontological and social anomaly. Their actions become the subject of extensive coverage and in-depth analysis in old and new media, generating attention that amplifies the natural shock that reasonably follows an act of violence with the extra ignominy of the gender factor. But attempts to explain behaviour that is irreconcilable with expectations, and with the canonical gender stereotypes, usually results in the creation of yet more stereotypes. Violent female behaviour continues to be understood mostly as an effect of persistent victimisation, and non-standard violent mothers continue to be framed in legal and public discourses into two additional dominant categories besides that of victim: "mad" or "bad".[22] This is a reductionist view that effectively diminishes women's responsibility and culpability as individuals, whilst at the same time limiting their agency, and their level of control over their own lives.

Current data from the UK and the EU confirms that women are statistically less likely to commit crime than men, and that they constitute a very small proportion of the prison population.[23] Their crimes tend to be less serious, "victimless" (such as fraud, theft, drug-related), and receive more lenient sentences, normally alternative to custody in prison.[24] While data confirms the accuracy of the findings of earlier scholars, from Lombroso to Pollak, reported above, it is women who are statistically more likely to harm their children, through cruelty or neglect.[25] Often the harm remains hidden, and it is discovered only when external bodies detect its signs.[26] Where arrests and convictions occur, gender bias in sentencing continues to be detected.[27] But maternal violence carries hefty social and personal costs: it is extensive, and has a significant social impact, including financial costs and cumulative developmental consequences for the victims.[28]

In considering a body of fictional works in which the experiences of atypical mothers are represented, we have identified and selected a number of instances worth investigating which, in terms of genre, fall under the subgenre of "psychological thriller" and, more specifically, "domestic noir".[29] The novels come from three different European cultures, and were published between the end of the twentieth century and the present. In our first example, maternal violence is inspired by a sense of justice: the mother acts against her own child to protect society from the danger the child is considered to pose. This is what happens in Laura Grimaldi's *Suspicion* (2003 [1996]), a novella in which the protagonist kills her son,

whom she believes to be a serial killer, ostensibly to stop him causing further harm to society.[30] In our second text, Véronique Olmi's *Beside the Sea* (2010 [2003]), the protagonist is a mother defeated by life, who kills her children as an act of mercy aimed at protecting them from the even worse harm that life itself would inflict on them.[31] Our final instance, Clare Mackintosh's *I Let you Go* (2014), presents a perceptive study of gender violence, maternal guilt and grief, through a case of motherhood denied.[32] All three stories foreground a dysfunctional familial dimension, in particular the relationship of the female protagonist to her (male) children, paying attention to the introspective element, and to the psychological investigation, which claims a privileged place in the architecture of the narrative. All three authors engage in a radical act of exposure (in *I Let You Go*) or subversion (in *Suspicion* and *Beside the Sea*) of culturally and socially accepted givens—especially those concerned with the enactment of maternal love, the representation of the mother–child bond, and woman's agency and responsibility towards her children in violent households—exploding myths and exposing wounds in the process.

Saving the World from the Child, or the Child from the World—Laura Grimaldi's *Suspicion* (1996) and Véronique Olmi's *Beside the Sea* (2003)

Both *Suspicion* and *Beside the Sea* portray mothers who are isolated, and who, relying only on themselves as trustworthy interlocutors, design a route to conflict resolution that requires the murder of their own offspring. Both appear to be variants of the model of mother labelled in psychoanalysis as "fusional", and identified by the inability to accept the natural evolution in her relationship with her child, including acceptance of the child's right to its own individual existence.[33] Grimaldi's protagonist Matilde Monterispoli, a woman whose sense of self-worth has always been a function of the men in her life (her late father and husband, and her son Enea), fits the model of the over-indulgent fusional mother. She is herself constructed as a signifier of passivity, lack, and absence, dispensing affection sparingly, and only as a way of compensating for her own need to be mothered. The unnamed mother in Olmi's novel, conversely, appears to reify the phallic mother model—ostensibly empowered beyond what her natural role and function would allow, until the paroxysmal climax in which she claims the right to decide that her children should not continue

to live. No space for father figures is allowed in either of the narratives other than a conjectural, and minimal, extra-diegetic one: this means that no rational counterpoint to the irrational and destructive agency of the mothers enacted in the stories is provided in the texts, which therefore appear to posit the latter, rather unequivocally, as a site of negativity and destruction. It is our contention, however, that whilst appearing to "toe the line of patriarchy", the texts problematise a set of long-established cultural givens, exposing the inadequacies of the conventional psychodynamic paradigm—whose uncontested application they indeed resist—and introducing subversive elements that erode the foundations of primary socio-cultural axioms.

Laura Grimaldi's *Suspicion* was inspired by one of the most disconcerting criminal cases in recent Italian history: the case of the "Monster of Florence", the serial killer (or gang) who terrorised Florence and its environs for a period of 17 years, between 1968 and 1985. As a journalist, Grimaldi had written extensively on the case; and, as a crime-fiction expert, she had co-operated with the police in their efforts to build a criminal profile of the perpetrator(s), who remained at large.[34] *Suspicion* sets the events against a clearly recognizable spatial, temporal, and cultural background, but narrates them from an alternative perspective, replacing the official police or media narratives, to which audiences had become accustomed, with the intimate, private point of view from inside a family. This, together with the core theme of the novel, which is the protagonist's suspicion that the Florence serial killer could be her own son, and the plan she designs to stop his murderous streak, creates a powerful effect of estrangement and generates expectations in readers acquainted with the original events, who could reasonably hope for some exceptional reveal from an author known to be reliably informed. Except that the power and appeal of the novel is not so much in the prospect of a disclosure of the identity of the monster, nor in the confirmation that Matilde's own investigative skills—inspired by that infallible gift that is maternal intuition—are more resource-efficient and effective than those deployed in police operations. It resides instead in the suggestion that the act of destroying her only son is the protagonist's first ever chance to assert her own agency—a chance that is cynically demeaned in the narrative through two essential developments. First, the killing happens by stealth: having decided that her son must die, Matilde does not commit the murder herself, but only makes a minimal move that facilitates it. She tampers with his daily insulin injection, so that his death is effectively a suicide. As a result,

her agency is defused by its reliance on an additional actor to realise its goal. Second, her dignity and value as the dispenser of justice is destroyed by the realisation that she had misread the signs of her son's culpability, and that his death was in vain, as he had no part in the Florence murders.

Contrary to the temporal, spatial, and cultural anchoring provided in *Suspicion, Beside the Sea* denies the reader any connection with a recognisable backdrop, refraining even from naming the protagonist. The mother retrospectively narrates the story of a trip to a seaside resort with her two boys, aged 9 and 5. A holiday out of season and out of character ("We'd never been away for a holiday, never left the city, and suddenly life felt new, my stomach was in knots, […] but I did my best, yes really my best, *so the kids didn't notice anything. I wanted us to set off totally believing in it*", p. 10, our emphasis) which, despite the narrator's best efforts (or perhaps precisely because of them), raises the suspicion both of the children and of the readers from the outset. The journey begins in the night-time ("so no one would see us", p. 9) on an old, noisy and unheated bus, on its last run of the day. Their destination is a coastal town plagued by constant rain, where the hostility of the wet and cold weather is mirrored by the inhospitable dinginess of their hotel accommodation, by the unfriendliness of the people with whom they get in contact, and by the ominous paucity of their means of support. Their entire resources consist of loose change, which the mother keeps in a tin, and which is enough to buy the children hot chocolate and chips for dinner, and to pay for a few rides at the funfair. After the money has run out, the reader gets the sense that time also is running out for the family, a sensation heightened by the protagonist's inability to conceptualise it. She struggles with the idea of time as a shared system of reference ("Hard to believe it's exactly the same time for everyone at the same moment", p. 77), she cannot account for her past, nor does she demonstrate a systematic understanding of the present. The narrative offers no memories of the mother's life before the events she narrates ("I am not used to memories", she says; and "memories don't always help", p. 99), with the exception of vague recollections of her father singing to her when she was a child, of social workers appointed to look after her case, and of the doctor's surgeries where she got her prescriptions. The absence of a defined background, and the availability of such sparse and random glimpses into the narrator's past, prevent the reader from making definite assumptions about her character and her fractured state of mind, and from anticipating the possible course of her actions. A similar effect is

achieved by the protagonist's understanding of the present, which is entirely subjective and unreliable: she seeks imaginary spaces where she can retreat, subtracting herself from the real world and its rhythms ("I waited in all that bustle, that turmoil, that rushing, trying to find a quiet corner to lay my eyes […] and eventually I found it: up in the sky there was a big wheel full of whoops and screams, I settled on that and didn't let go", p. 82). She repeatedly wonders what time it is, offering only the rain, the cold, darkness, and mud as potential points of reference, confounding the readers, and rendering their efforts to give the events narrated some order, a place along an objective chronological scale, entirely futile. In jarring contrast to her indeterminacy, the pragmatism of the children, who worry about the repercussion of this unauthorised absence from school, and about souvenirs to take back to the teachers, provides a tenuous link with normality, with common sense, and safety, which tragically snaps in the final pages of the novel. After preparing them for the night ("because at night there's a special preparation, like before a journey", p. 91) and tucking them into bed, the protagonist smothers them with a pillow, one after the other. She hopes that in death they will be together, but observing their dead bodies, facing away from each other, she realises that "[t]hey weren't joined together in death, they had lost each other there" (p. 105). And her scream at this realisation concludes the novel.

The "Dysfunctional Mother" as a Useful Scapegoat: Psychosocial Myths, Responsibility, and Guilt in Clare Mackintosh's *I Let You Go* (2014)

Clare Mackintosh's *I Let You Go* provides a complex reflection on guilt with relation to the (impossible) "myth of motherhood". Deeply ingrained in Western public discourse, this model has engendered dangerous expectations towards mothers as well as perverse blaming mechanisms, which easily turn into self-blame, feelings of inadequacy, and pain.[35] The weight of responsibility however is rarely accompanied by an increase in power within the family, but is generally paired with public scrutiny and hasty judgement.[36]

This complex interplay is fictionalised by Mackintosh's novel, which explores the psychosocial pressures on an abused woman's identity and agency when her motherly function becomes erroneously over-emphasised and the burden of responsibility becomes unbearable. The story is told by different, alternating voices offering fragments of facts presented from dif-

ferent perspectives that, taken together, enable the reader to reconstruct the full set of events. A short extra-diegetic prologue introduces the case of a terrible hit-and-run, from which the narrative unfolds. The victim, a 4-year-old boy, is left to die in his mother's arms. The investigation into the accident is carried out by a team led by DI Ray Stevens, who is the main character through whom sections relating to the police enquiry are focussed. Interestingly, and in line with the typical traits of domestic noir, besides following the investigation, the procedural sections linger on the details of DI Stevens's personal and family life: his midlife crisis, a difficult relationship with his teenage son—whom Stevens realises he does not know at all—and with his wife, a frustrated stay-at-home mum who resents her husband's total absorption in his job. Most of the novel is focussed on the auto-diegetic narrative of the female protagonist, Jenna, who, following a traumatic personal experience decides to escape to an isolated cottage in Wales to start over, reinventing herself with a new job and a very private life. Readers link Jenna to the hit-and-run of the incipit, and assume her narrative to be that of the grief-stricken single mother of the dead boy. This assumption lasts until the police pay a visit to her hideout in Wales, when Jenna's relation to the accident is revealed: she is not Jacob's mother, but the driver of the car that killed him. At this climactic point, a third, auto-diegetic narrator is introduced who, through long analeptic segments interspersed in the text, fills the gaps in Jenna's past that the narrative had left out, and adds a further perspective on the events. The perspective is that of Ian, Jenna's abusive estranged husband, who, in a narrative directly addressed at his wife, reveals the physical and psychological violence he inflicted on her, which culminated in a ferocious beating that caused the death of their unborn son. Progressively, the character of Jenna transitions from that of a woman who killed someone's child, to a victim who has herself suffered the death of her own child.

In this novel the analysis of motherhood—or, rather, its violent impairment—and the way in which issues of blame and guilt related to mothering are dealt with, is significant. Jenna recognises the blame and guilt for what has happened to Jacob right from the start. Readers are induced to accept such feelings of guilt, and to understand the public vilification to which Jenna is subjected, apparently for not taking enough care of her son, for not preventing his death. This perception is in line with Western myths of motherhood, built on the belief that it is natural for mothers to love their children, to take care of them and, most poignantly, feel responsible for what happens to them. Linked to these

cultural assumptions is a socially constructed set of prescriptions on how women ought to behave.[37] And when a mother does not conform to this ideal, society feels free to criticise and reproach her, adding to her own tangled feelings of guilt and self-blame. On her bus journey to her refuge in Wales, Jenna is troubled by the image of the young boy whose death she could not prevent: "A woman sits next to me. She opens her newspaper and suddenly it feels as though someone is pressing on my chest. Jacob's face stares at me; bruised eyes rebuking me for not protecting him, for letting him die" (p. 15). Readers are made to feel what Jenna is feeling, and to share the view expressed by the woman on the bus, who apportions the blame for the accident equally between the reckless driver and the careless mother: "Terrible, isn't it […] Driving off like that without stopping […] Mind you, […] five years old. What kind of mother allows a child that age to cross a road on his own?" (p. 16).

The novel also introduces a series of additional issues that become closely intertwined: beyond the presumed maternal negligence, we see the aggravating factors of single motherhood, and of "foreignness". The readiness to blame the dead boy's mother for letting go of her son's hand at the point of crossing the road—which Jenna's legal team try to use as a factor to mitigate against Jenna's guilt as a presumed killer by dangerous driving—is reported in the novel as coming from all quarters. This is intensified when the identity and personal circumstances of the dead boy's real mother are fully revealed: a single parent, whose child was the result of a casual relationship, and a Polish immigrant. The reproach that comes from the public is shared by the young Polish mother herself, who considers herself deserving of the tragedy that has befallen her. In an intensely focalised segment, readers are told that "[w]hen Jacob was killed she felt it was her punishment for not telling [her parents]. [S]he's carrying around a lot of guilt over the whole thing" (p. 187).

When Jenna's own personal circumstances emerge, blame and guilt thicken and stratify, and she too has to face adverse reactions from multiple quarters: the angry protesters waiting for her outside court; the people in the small Welsh village; and the police, stunned by her lack of emotion and trying to provoke her out of her apparent impassiveness ("It must have been tough for you […] living with what you'd done", p. 178). Except that Jenna's confession after her arrest does not convince them, and further investigation uncovers the real dynamics of the events, and the real identity of the driver, exonerating Jenna from the crime.

The narrative suggests that punishment for a crime she had not committed was for Jenna a preferable option to being free, but placed again at the mercy of a dangerously violent husband. However, a close reading of the novel reveals the complexity of Jenna's guilt, suggesting that her confession is, more poignantly, a form of self-punishment for the loss of her child. In an entirely familiar psychological process blurring the boundaries between the statuses of victim and perpetrator, Jenna convinces herself that in the death of her son she is guilty by joint enterprise: had she not provoked Ian he would not have kicked her in the stomach, killing their unborn child: "all I could think of was that if I hadn't burnt that shirt, Ben would still be alive" (p. 338). Jenna gives birth to a stillborn child, her body bears the marks of motherhood, even if she is denied the actual possibility of mothering. Motherhood becomes a strong part of Jenna's identification: "I think of my son; […]; of the ache in my womb that has never left. I think there should be a word for a mother with no children; for a woman bereft of the baby that would have made her whole" (p. 314). Not having the strength to leave her abusive husband adds to the unbearable sense of guilt and self-blame—all the more disabling as it is endorsed by society.

At the end of the novel, the question of female agency appears further problematised. On the one hand, the protagonist realises that she has found the strength to fight back against domestic violence: "I have spent most of my adult life hiding; running; being afraid, and now, as I'm feeling safe, he has come back to take it away from me. I will not let him. […] And I don't run. I have run enough from him" (p. 358). In the concluding pages of the novel, their final fight ends with Ian falling off a cliff, presumably to his death, which marks the end of Jenna's oppression. On the other hand, society again denies her agency, thus also showing that institutional and private justice do not necessarily coincide: to protect her, and spare her further suffering, the police decide to file Ian's death as an accident. Merciful as this act may seem, honourable as far as our instinctive idea of justice is concerned, and in line with the observed practices of institutional leniency towards women, it annuls Jenna's active role in killing the man, her autonomous decision to fight back, and thus public acknowledgement of her free and empowering choice.

What Makes a Mother a "Bad Mother"?

The novels analysed in this chapter leave the reader to ponder on a wide range of issues beyond the crime they place at the core of their plots. Foremost of these is the nexus between justice sought or obtained, for

different reasons, by the protagonists, which would appear to validate the destructive power of human obsessions and well-established social myths and expectations; and justice in the statutory sense, which would call for exemplary retribution in all their cases. The novels stage different articulations of problematised motherhood, showing mothers who have abdicated appropriate parental responsibilities and have withdrawn into a microcosm of their creation. The resultant distortion between external and internal realities offers a painful insight into the human condition and into the life of these female protagonists, who are profoundly lonely, deserted by those around them, and by society.

In *Suspicion* and *Beside the Sea* it is not the murders that are the most tragic event, rather the *mise en scène* of the tragic dynamics at work within the reputedly "safe" microcosm of the family, and the victims left in their trail.[38] The two mothers ostensibly act like the insidious Mother Goddess, the reification of the tragic archetype of Medea: they kill their children so that they can reclaim the control that they deem to have lost. Rather than a form of empowerment, however, murder is an act of desperation, performed to rescue themselves and their children from the inevitable suffering they consider that the world is going to inflict on them all. These mothers ultimately fall out of the "mad" or "victim" stereotypes, providing interesting case studies for the analysis of motherly behaviours which escape deeply entrenched—but limited and limiting—social assumptions, and myths of tame motherly love. *I Let You Go* shows yet another facet of the complex performance of motherhood, which is linked with a different kind of crime. Isolated like Olmi's unnamed mother and Grimaldi's Matilde, and withdrawn into the comfortable lies of a narration built to escape a reality that has become unbearable, Jenna's story too calls for a reflection on the issue of victimhood and victimisation, without reducing it to a blanket justification for female violence and "unmotherly behaviour".

By presenting the reader with different, complicated expressions of feelings of blame, guilt, and responsibility linked with motherhood, the novels succeed in problematising the socio-cultural status quo, exploring the overwhelming pressure of social expectations on mothers, and the social dysfunctions that can prevent a serene experience of motherhood. And by representing women who, in the end, reclaim ownership of their own narratives, the three novels make the reader stare at the kind of devastation that can occur when women attempt to resolve the tension between female agency, motherhood, and victimhood without an open and equitable cultural context to support them in this process.

Notes

1. Susan E. Chase and Mary Frances Rogers, *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1970); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976).
2. Arguably the most sensationalised case in the UK is that of Myra Hindley, who was convicted in 1965 for the abduction and murder of five children, and who died in jail in 2002. Hindley was considered as the epitome of female monstrosity, that had to be excised from society: although she engaged with psychiatric rehabilitation programmes while in jail, she was always denied parole. More recently, public shock was caused by the cases of Karen Matthews, who in 2008 kidnapped her own daughter to claim ransom money; and Vanessa George, a nursery nurse convicted for taking indecent images of young children in her care, which she passed to a known paedophile. Although in all three cases there was strong evidence that the women were under some form of coercion from male accomplices, the full force of social contempt and condemnation fell on them, ultimately guilty of not complying with the normative definition of femalehood and motherhood.

   A summary overview of the most sensationalised cases of filicide in Italy seems to suggest that women act on their own accord. The case that has possibly generated the strongest public outcry is the so-called Cogne murder in 2002, where a mother was convicted for bludgeoning her toddler son to death. The initial life sentence was commuted to house arrest after six years in prison.

   In the majority of reported cases of filicide, the press attribute to the mothers' mental health issues—normally depression or psychotic conditions—the root cause of the violence. The cases of sexual abuse or child neglect, conversely, are statistically more likely to involve men: mothers become complicit by not denouncing the crimes, for shame or for fear of being abandoned by the offender, usually their partner.
3. Nicole Rafter, 'Crime, Film and Criminology: Recent Sex-Crime Movies', *Theoretical Criminology,* 11 (2007).
4. Derek Raymond, *The Hidden Files* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992); Caroline Reitz, *Detecting the Nation: Fictions of Detection and the Imperial Venture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004); Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

5. This is the thesis supported by Dorothy Roberts in 'Motherhood and Crime', *Social Text* (1995). A case of a fictional work which has become a reference for criminology scholars is the series *The Wire* (2002–2008). See David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers and Michael Woolcock, 'The Fiction of Development: Literary Representation as a Source of Authoritative Knowledge', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 44.2 (2008), 198–216.
6. Rafter, p. 415.
7. Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *The Female Offender*, Introduction by W. Douglas Morrison (New York: Appleton, 1899 [1893]); William Isaac Thomas, *Sex and Society: Studies in the Social Psychology of Sex* (Chicago: University Press; London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907).
8. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Walter John Herbert Sprott (London: L. and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1933).
9. Otto Pollak, *The Criminality of Women* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950).
10. Chantal Lavergne, Marie Jacob, and Claire Chamberland, 'Contributions Féministes À La Compréhension Des Mauvais Traitements Envers Les Enfants [Feminist Contributions to the Understanding of Child Maltreatment]', *Violence envers les femmes et les enfants en contexte familial: Théories explicatives et données empirique, 69e Congrès de l'ACFAS, University of Sherbrooke* (2001). There are a number of other studies that investigate the complex dynamics of female violence, all pointing away from the simplistic notion of the impossibility for women to offend, but falling outside the scope of our discussion. Of particular interest are the studies of Steven Box and Steve Hale, 'Liberation and Female Criminality in England and Wales', *The British Journal of Criminology,* 23 (1983) and Sandra Walklate, *Gender and Crime: An Introduction* (Belfast: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf 1995), who put to the test the proposition that women's emancipation and liberation could be contributing factors that led to the increase in female offending. These studies found no evidence of causal connections and disputed the contention as an argument aimed at minimising the achievements of the women's liberation movement. Michele Burman, 'Girls Behaving Violently?', *Criminal Justice Matters*, 53.1 (2003), and Amy Reckdenwald and Karen F. Parker, 'The Influence of Gender Inequality and Marginalization on Types of Female Offending', *Homicide Studies*, 12 (2008) investigated the links between violent female offenders and the role of sex in socialisation processes, as well as the impact of socio-economic marginalisation on the type of female offending. Following the principles of control theory (which proposes the idea that our tendency to deviate depends on the strength of our two con-

trol systems—inner controls and outer controls—and their ability to regulate our desire to obtain personal gains through deviation from social norms), Pat Carlen (*Women, Crime and Poverty*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988) has demonstrated that for some women crime can be 'liberating', a route to a more satisfying (albeit atypical) lifestyle than that afforded by the conventional labour and marriage markets, or by welfare payments. This view echoes earlier findings that showed that weak social bonds, and a weakened sense of commitment, attachment, involvement and belief, mean that engaging in criminal activity, against gender expectations, offers better rewards to women than fulfilling a caring role at home. See Travis Hirschi, *Causes of Delinquency* (Piscataway: Transaction publishers, 2002).

11. See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1970); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976). See also Chase and Rogers (2001).
12. See Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1978), and Elisabeth Badinter and Roger DeGaris, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct, A Condor Book* (London: Souvenir Press (E&A), 1981). For De Beauvoir, see for example the novels *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* ([*Memories of a Dutiful Daughter*] Paris: Gallimard, 1958), *Une mort très douce* ([*A Very Easy Death*] Paris: Gallimard, 1964), and the chapter on motherhood in *Le deuxième sexe* ([The Second Sex] Paris: Gallimard, 1949).
13. Brid Featherstone, 'Taking Mothering Seriously: The Implications for Child Protection', *Child and Family Social Work,* 4 (1999); Rozsika Parker, 'The Production and Purposes of Maternal Ambivalence', in *Mothering and Ambivalence*, ed. by Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone (London; New York: Routledge,1997), 17–36; Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone, *Mothering and Ambivalence* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).
14. Dominique Damant et al., 'Taking Child Abuse and Mothering Into Account: Intersectional Feminism as an Alternative for the Study of Domestic Violence', *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 23.2 (2008); Leslie McCall, 'The Complexity of Intersectionality', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30.3 (2005); Kerry Carrington, 'Girls and Violence: The Case for a Feminist Theory of Female Violence', *International Journal of Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 2.2 (2013).
15. For the first definition of intersectionality as a concept that brings into focus the nuances of all systems of oppression, see Kimberlé Crenshaw's 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist

Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139–167, p. 140.

16. McCall, p. 1780.
17. Brid Featherstone, 'Victims or Villains? Women Who Physically Abuse Their Children', *in Violence and Gender Relations: Theories and Interventions*, ed. by Barbara Fawcett, Brid Featherstone, Jeff R. Hearn and Cristine Toft (London: Sage, 1996), 178–189, p. 183.
18. Damant et al., p. 127.
19. Parker, p. 18.
20. Parker, p. 25.
21. Parker, p. 25.
22. Belinda Morrissey, 'Crises of Representation, or Why Don't Feminists Talk About Myra?', *Australian Feminist Law Journal,* 16 (2002); Tracey Peter, 'Mad, Bad, or Victim? Making Sense of Mother–Daughter Sexual Abuse', *Feminist Criminology,* 1 (2006); Hilary Allen, 'Rendering Them Harmless: The Professional Portrayal of Women Charged with Serious Violent Crimes', in *Gender Crime and Justice*, ed. by Pat Carlen and Anne Worrall (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1987).
23. A report published by the Ministry of Justice in 2014, presenting data for England and Wales shows that, in the year 2013, women represented 18% of all arrests made, and 25% of convictions (Ministry of Justice, *Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2013*, November 2014. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380090/women-cjs-2013.pdf [accessed 10 November 2016]). In 2015, women represented around 5% of the overall prison population in the UK. See also http://www.womeninprison.org.uk/research/key-facts.php [accessed 11 November 2016].The data is in line with historical trends. See also Mike Hough, Jessica Jacobson, and Andrew Millie, *The Decision to Imprison: Sentencing and the Prison Population* (London: Prison Reform Trust, 2003).
24. Ibid. See also data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics, which compares Italian data with data from the other countries of the European Union http://www.istat.it/it/files/2015/03/detenuti-2015-1.pdf?title=Detenuti+nelle+carceri+italiane+-+19%2Fmar%2F2015+-+Testo+integrale.pdf. [accessed 11 November 2016].
25. The data is available for the UK. See the graph in the Ministry of Justice report, p. 65, which shows that cruelty or neglect of children accounts for roughly 13% of the crimes of 'violence against the person' committed by women, and 1% ca of the same category of crimes committed by men.
26. This is the situation described by the Italian National Observatory on the Health of children and adolescents (Paidòss) in a 2014 report. Data from 300 paediatricians who had observed signs of ill treatment in their young

patients shows that 80% of the cases of unreported child abuse in Italy are perpetrated by mothers. Whilst we acknowledge the limitation of this report (because of the small number of respondents and the limitation of the sample to children who were taken to be seen by a paediatrician), its findings invite some reflection on the role of mothers in children's wellbeing. Curiously, the first systematic report on child abuse in Italy, produced by the National Observatory on Childhood and Adolescence does not provide significant information on the (gender of the) perpetrator of the abuses. See http://www.garanteinfanzia.org/sites/default/files/documenti/Indagine_maltrattamento_TDH_Cismai_Garante_mag15.pdf [Accessed 14 November 2016].

27. The Ministry of Justice report observes that '[t]he type of sentence outcome given at court differs between male and female offenders'. More specifically, '[t]he most common disposal given to male offenders [for offences including cruelty to or neglect of children] is an *immediate custodial sentence*', whereas, by contrast, 'the most common disposal given for the offenc[e] of […] cruelty to or neglect of children was a *community sentence*'. *Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2013*, pp. 65–66. Our emphasis. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380090/women-cjs-2013.pdf [accessed 11 November 2016].
28. See Judi Pears and Patricia Noller, 'Youth Homelessness: Abuse, Gender and the Process of Adjustment to Life on the Streets', *The Australian Journal of Social Issues,* 30 (1995). This study cites maternal violence as one of the prime causes of youth homelessness. Kimberly A. Tyler and Ana Mari Cauce finds mothers responsible for one third of the first acts of physical violence against children in 'Perpetrators of Early Physical and Sexual Abuse among Homeless and Runaway Adolescents', *Child Abuse & Neglect,* 26 (2002).
29. Julia Crouch, 'Genre Bender' (2013), http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender [accessed 18 November 2016].
30. Laura Grimaldi and Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Suspicion* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, Terrace Books, 2003) [1996].
31. Véronique Olmi, *Beside the Sea* (London: Peirene, 2010).
32. Clare Mackintosh, *I Let You Go* (New York: Berkley Books, 2016).
33. See E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 47. In Freudian psychoanalysis, and in its subsequent developments, the relationship between the child and the mother is divided into two phases: the pre-Oedipal, in which the child perceives no separation with the mother's body, experiencing a sense of fusion with her, and the post-Oedipal, when a separate sense of self develops, and separation occurs. Fusional mother-

hood is a psychopathological condition characterised by the mother's attempts to lock the child in a pre-Oedipal stage, preventing separation and individuation. The main types of fusional motherhood, widely represented in culture, are the self-sacrificing 'angel of the house', the overindulgent and the phallic. See also Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

34. Although an arrest was made for the murders, the doubt whether the man convicted was in fact the Monster of Florence remained (and possibly still does), generating a number of conspiracy theories and alternative hypotheses.
35. See Parker: 'Despite the power of unconscious processes, our society continues to have grandiose expectations of mothers. And mothers, with their profound desire to be good mothers, both reproduce and resist these expectations. Wanting to control the uncontrollable, a mother feels painfully culpable when things go wrong' (p. 34).
36. Parker says 'Yet, even while mothers are accorded overwhelming responsibility for their children's development, their authority is all the time circumscribed, subjected as they are to the critical gaze of a network of social structure' (p. 34).
37. Peter, p. 283.
38. See Elvio Guagnini, 'Alcuni esemplari recenti di giallo italiano dentro e fuori gli spazi istituzionali', *Problemi*, 86 (1989), 257–288, p. 281.

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PART IV

Home as a Site of Violence

CHAPTER 9

"[T]he People that Should Have Lived Here": Haunting, the Economy, and Home in Tana French's *Broken Harbour*

Shelley Ingram and Willow G. Mullins

It is something of a truism that crime fiction is full of ghosts—of victims, of the past, of justice itself. Because ghosts and their hauntings, according to sociologist Avery Gordon, are above all about the connections between intimate spaces and larger systems of belief, it is perhaps inevitable that they populate stories about individuals navigating a world of crime.[1] To represent such hauntings in crime fiction is to reveal the inextricable lines between the past and the present, between domestic home life and organizing systems of social power. This chapter investigates the 'ghosts and gaps, seething absences and muted presences' haunting Tana French's 2012 novel *Broken Harbour*, a tale of a domestic and not-quite-suburban crime set against the backdrop of economic collapse that ended Ireland's prosperous Celtic Tiger era.[2]

Broken Harbour is the fourth novel in French's Dublin Murder Squad anthology. A sprawling psychodrama, it takes as its protagonist Detective Mick "Scorcher" Kennedy and follows him and his new partner, rookie

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Richie Curran, as they unravel the murder of the Spain family. The Spains live in a remote development outside of Dublin—once a holiday camp called Broken Harbour, now a suburban enclave renamed Brianstown. The Spain children have been suffocated in their beds; the parents, Patrick and Jenny, stabbed in a bloody fight in the kitchen. Only Jenny survives. The Spains had seemed to be the picture of a perfect middle-class family, but as the investigation digs deep into their lives, we come to see that Pat's redundancy had pushed the family slowly to the brink of collapse, both economically and psychologically, making the reveal of Jenny Spain as the murderer almost incidental. While the crime tests Kennedy and Curran's investigative skills and leads them to compromise their ethical and moral standards, it is the place itself that most haunts both detectives and victims: the half-built ghost estate, now standing in the place where years before Kennedy's mother walked into the sea to her death.

We begin this chapter by looking at the intangible force of economic collapse that haunts the people and the places of *Broken Harbour*, particularly the ways in which the crime is interwoven with the ghosts of the now abandoned houses in Brianstown, itself lying over the ground of Broken Harbour. We then explore how the language of haunting disturbs notions of home and gender through the triad of Pat, Jenny, and Kennedy, their disparate hauntings representing what Gordon might call "not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present".[3] Pat is haunted by the presence of an animal that no one else sees, the embodiment of the challenge that his redundancy has wrought on his masculinity. Jenny does middle-class motherhood "right", and in the process subverts and shatters herself, her home and family, and the prevailing cultural narratives of economic and womanly well-being. The final haunting, however, belongs to Kennedy, the detective who leads the investigation, as he reckons with the ghosts of his childhood. In *Broken Harbour,* French deliberately engages discourses of haunting to manifest the almost mystical ways in which unseen hegemonic forces invade even the most sacrosanct of domestic spaces. Because ghosts can lead us "to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life", they reveal weak points in the forces of neoliberal capitalism and introduce the possibility, however fleeting, of redemption.[4] Such revelations are, we argue, a crucial component of French's domestic noir.

Crime and detective fiction has a long history of plots centered around criminals "murderously determined on achieving upward mobility".[5] It is a cliché to say that greed and jealousy are prime motivators of crime, both

in life and in literature, but the history of the genre shows a deep investment in exposing the ways in which a desire for material wealth drives physical violence. The same holds true in *Broken Harbour,* but here the crime is brought about not by the search for or even the loss of wealth, as the Spains have never quite climbed far enough up the economic ladder to amass any substantial fortune. Instead, it is the loss of the *potentiality* of wealth and the kind of life they should have had that haunts them. It would thus be impossible to read *Broken Harbour* outside of the context of the Celtic Tiger era of economic prosperity and the bust which followed.

Ireland saw rapid economic growth during the late 1990s and early 2000s, due to low business tax rates that attracted international corporations. This economic growth signaled Ireland's first real economic success to be experienced by the majority of the population since becoming an independent nation. Prosperity, in turn, spurred widespread real-estate development. Unlike earlier construction, however, which remained close to urban centers, the Celtic Tiger developers cited new infrastructure to justify building in historically rural areas.[6] Government incentives and economic mobility twined to powerful effect with a cultural privileging of land ownership in a country haunted by colonial policies that had sharply limited land rights. The Celtic Tiger created a narrative of middle-class ascension in which families were getting on the property ladder, buying new clothes and cars, landing good jobs—acquiring the material symbols of the suburban idyll, what Jenny's sister Fiona refers to as "all that my-credit-card-is-bigger-than-your-credit-card stuff".[7] For the generation that came of age during the Celtic Tiger, this particular narrative, and the materialism that came with it, became a moral imperative.

However, the Celtic Tiger fell in 2008, as banking crises originating in the USA pushed a global recession. In Ireland, this recession, as the prosperity which preceded it had been, was writ on the land itself[8]: French herself has stated that she found the ghost estates "haunting and terrible", emblems of "people trying to do the right thing, the thing that everyone was telling you to", and still failing.[9] The banking and real-estate crises took away the middle-class path, and there was no way for many, including the Spains, to extricate themselves without going both economically and morally bankrupt.

Riven with this history of hope and loss, the ghost estate becomes a site rich with gothic possibilities. Emily Johansen locates the gothic in *Broken Harbour* in its "bleak sense of failed, even destroyed, community".[10] While

the brochure for Brianstown "cooed breathlessly about the beach, the childcare facility, the leisure center", promising a life of upper-middle-class domestic luxury, in reality it is marked by increasingly derelict homes, an absence of meaningful shared space, and unrealized promises of community and communal services.[11] At first glance Detective Kennedy thinks the community looks "pretty tasty", with big houses and charming street decorations, but a closer look reveals unfinished properties and "gaps in the footpaths". As he and Curran drive around the neighborhood searching for the crime scene, Kennedy is struck by its incompleteness and its absences, by the fact that "you could look straight through three out of four houses, to bare rear windows and gray patches of sky".[12] French thus creates a future-gothic space out of the ruins of economic collapse.

Just behind this vision of a failed development lurks Broken Harbour, once a modest holiday destination, consisting of long-standing businesses run by families with ancient local lineages. As a child, Kennedy and his family would travel there for equally modest but profoundly middle-class vacations; his father, mother, and two sisters, Geri and Dina, all staying in a caravan for two weeks each summer. It was a bucolic time and place, where every morning Kennedy would wake to see the "white lines of sea foam and leggy birds dashing along the sand, all of it glinting in the early light".[13] But now, Brianstown is bleak, and by the end of the novel the community is both actively decaying and dangerous—as Dina describes it, a poison. As Curran and Kennedy look around the neighborhood, Curran says to Kennedy "They'll say it's haunted now." Kennedy replies:

> I didn't tell him: the ghosts I believe in weren't trapped in the Spains' bloodstains. They thronged the whole estate, whirling like great moths in and out of the empty doorways and over the expanses of cracked earth, battering against the sparse lighted windows, mouths stretched wide in silent howls: all the people who should have lived here […] The ones that slice like razors are the ghosts of things that never got the chance to happen.[14]

Brianstown is haunted by the past, but also by a present and a future that should have been, the type of haunting that reckons "with that which we have lost, but never had".[15] What haunts Brianstown and Broken Harbour is not only the communities that never coalesce but the houses that never became homes and the individuals who never inhabited them.

In many ways *Broken Harbour* is the most intimate of French's novels, the investigation an invasion into the smallest recesses of the home, a tres-

pass into the details of life that the Spains would have considered either too mundane or, conversely, too intimately horrific for public consumption. Until moments before the book opens, the Spains' house is the only homely space in all of Brianstown, the only space that seemed to bear out the middle-class family life depicted by the brochures and promised by the economy. Jenny and Pat seem to be doing it right, and their house stood out as tidy and lovingly well kept. And yet it is immediately marked as not quite right; the first sound Curran and Kennedy hear as they approach the house is "a short, raw, ripped-open shriek, repeating over and over", like the wail of a *ban síde* signalling death with her keening.[16] When they go inside, the house simply "feels" wrong:

> It should have felt welcoming, but damp had buckled the flooring and blotched a wall, and the low ceiling and the just-wrong proportions were stubborn. They outweighed all that loving care and turned the room cramped and dim, a place where no one could feel comfortable for long.[17]

The Spain house, like Brianstown, is a quintessentially haunted space. French draws from classic tropes of haunting in describing the house: there are cold spots and frigid gusts of wind, ghostly after-images made by the crime-scene camera that superimpose scenes of violence onto empty spaces, and a stuffed animal whose "thin, sweet, inhuman chant" follows the detectives as they walk down the hall.[18] Furthermore, the investigation reveals that in the weeks leading up to the murders Jenny had been unsettled by a series of mysterious disturbances involving domestic items, like missing sandwich meat, rearranged curtains, and a disappearing pen—the kinds of traces one might expect a ghost to leave.

If, as Gordon argues, a ghost is "not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure", then one of the ghosts that haunts the Spains house is Conor.[19] Conor is an old friend of the Spains and godfather to their daughter Emma. But they have a falling-out over the Spains' move to Brianstown, and Jenny and Pat no longer speak to him. Conor, himself unemployed and without family, feels their absence keenly. He moves into one of the half-finished houses nearby, a liminal space, and begins watching the family through binoculars, spying on what he believes is their perfect happiness. He is, in fact, the Spains' ghostly intruder, invading and interacting with their domestic space the only way he can—by sneaking in to eat their food, steal inconsequential tokens, and rearrange their furnishings. He is haunting them the way his longing for their shared past haunts

him. The presence of Conor in the text would seem to offer a rational explanation for the disturbances, at least for the reader, which denies the supernatural. For Jenny and Pat, though, his presence remains outside of notice because he is no longer embedded within their constructed domestic present, a casualty of the impact of economic forces on personal relationships. All they can see are his traces. Jenny and Pat's continued refusal to engage with Irish economic history, with their own pasts, with their animated house, or with "the complexities" of the "social relations that the ghostly figures" means that they also open themselves up to other hauntings—not just by Conor, but by the economy and the promise of domestic perfection.[20]

For Patrick Spain, these hauntings crystallize with the belief that there is an animal in the attic. On the surface, Pat's difficulties are clear. He is the stereotypical suburban male breadwinner, now out of a job through no fault of his own, wondering how he will provide for his family. The Spains are broke, and, as Kennedy remarks, "[b]roke can lead people to places they would never have imagined".[21] The early part of the novel sets us up to favor Pat as the killer, his motive a thwarted masculinity redirected into murder. Curran continues to press for Pat as the perpetrator even after he discovers that Jenny is the real killer, in part because of the believability of the narrative of male violence and its role in family annihilation. But aside from Pat's financial difficulties, the reader really only knows one thing about him: his obsession with the animal. The animal is marked by absences, as the first hint we have of its presence is a hole in the wall that sets quivering Kennedy's sense of "evil".[22] The holes, they soon find, are everywhere. There is also an odd abundance of baby monitors stashed throughout the house near the holes—an eerie juxtaposition of the domestic and grotesque. Finally, in the attic, they discover an animal trap. The detectives can find no physical traces of the animal the trap is meant for, only material evidence of Pat's hunt for it.

The animal itself does not take shape until the Internet history on Pat's computer is recovered, revealing a written record of his quest to capture and kill it. Under the username "Patthelad", which marks an especially masculine enactment of gender, Pat actively displays his masculinity as he seeks first to simply rid himself of the animal and later to take revenge upon it, all in the name of protecting his family: "I've spent long enough taking shit from this thing", he writes on a message board for homeowners, "now its my turn to give it some shit for a change".[23] His rhetoric escalates over the course of several months, revealing the pressure his obsession is putting

on his marriage as he writes: "I need to show her this animal…Otherwise shes goign to leave me and take the kids with her. NO WAY AM I LETTING THAT AHPPEN. Her + those kids are everything Ive got [sic]." The house, he says, is not big enough for the both of them.[24]

Through Pat's epistolary-like ramblings on various message boards, we see a man on the brink of a collapse, barely hanging on to civilization and civilized manners as he battles an animal at once a symbol of a desirable but terrifyingly wild Ireland and of the alien economic forces that have wrought his downfall. There is much in the book about the negotiation of boundaries between nature and domesticated civilization. The animal stands as part of the palimpsest of Brianstown, its ghostly traces the result of the development's deliberate building over and rewriting of the land.[25] As French's Ireland is overtaken by development, the animal poses a question of ecological balance, revealing a tension between wilderness and domestication. We could thus read this animal as a manifestation of Pat's primal nature, and his search for it an attempt to recover the power taken from him first with his redundancy and then with his subsequent confinement to the home. He even reworks a tool of the highest order of domestic labor, the baby monitors, for the sole purpose of surveilling the intruder. Pat destroys the home, both literally in the rending of the walls and figuratively in the damage inflicted on the Spain family unit as he ceases to participate in their daily life. Pat makes the domestic space primal, turning his house into his hunting ground.[26]

Additionally, however, we can also read the animal as a personification of the larger economic forces to which Pat has fallen victim and against which he is powerless, forces that silently destroy his livelihood and lifestyle. The animal gives Pat a locus for his problems and something concrete that he can fight. In transferring blame for his redundancy from the economy, which is remote, abstract, and unwieldy, to the animal, which is immediate, manifest, and singular, he continues to imperil his family, moving the source of their troubles from outside to inside the home. There can be no domestic bliss for the Spains as long as the animal exists, as long as it remains unseen and, most pointedly, unreckoned with. During the investigation, Kennedy finds a box containing the Spains' financial records in a closet. "You could almost catch the stench of fear, dank as rotting seaweed", he says in gothic fashion, "coming up from the space at the back of the closet where the Spains had kept their monsters locked down".[27] Pat's monster is the animal, conjured by the realities of his life in a new economy.

While Pat would seem to be able to point to a specific origin of his haunting, his redundancy, and that haunting coalesces in a single manifestation, the animal, what drives Jenny to eventual murder lies in the accumulation of small wrongnesses that seem to batter the inside of her house as incessantly as the sea and wind do the outside. Jenny's difficulties are not as concrete as Pat's, but rather indications that the world is failing to live up to her belief in its promises. Jenny is haunted not only by what is occurring in her own house but also by much larger forces beyond her control and by how those communal, national, and global forces create absences and manifestations kaleidoscopically within her walls, turning what should be her home unhomely.

Brianstown should have been a haven of middle-class prosperity, and Jenny should have been its maternal ideal. Fiona says of her sister, "You don't get it. Jenny—when she does something, she does it *properly*".[28] Middle-class normalcy is Jenny's hallmark, and she is remarkable for her very unremarkableness. As Kennedy describes her in her hospital bed, "it wasn't a remarkable face in any way, but it had a clean-lined sweetness that brought up summer barbecues, […] I have always been caught by the pull of the unremarkable, by the easily missed, infinitely nourishing beauty of the mundane".[29] In her middle-class perfection, Jenny becomes the perfect victim of what Johansen calls the "neoliberal gothic", wherein the system itself assures that even those who follow the rules will fail.[30] As Pat becomes more concerned with the animal and the finances dwindle, Jenny focusses her attention on the trappings of suburban middle-class normality: "So I just went, *Right. OK. I'm going to make everything lovely for him. I'm going to show him we're fine*", as though wild flowers in vases, a clean kitchen, and well-dressed kids would bring both Pat's growing instability and Ireland's economy into line, as if what was needed was closer adherence to the rules.[31]

Kennedy makes clear, however, that Jenny's deadly commitment to this middle-class dream is not wholly her fault. The origin of Jenny's inability to deal with class failure lies partly in her generation. The newness of Celtic Tiger prosperity is laid bare in the contrast between Kennedy and the Spains. At 42 years old, Kennedy remembers the high unemployment of the 1980s. In their late 20s when their lives fall apart, presumably around 2012, the Spains do not: "That's your generation. Pat and Jenny's generation. Never been broke, never seen this country broke, so you couldn't imagine it, even when it started happening in front of your eyes".[32] As a result, blinded by the promises of a rising economy and a

belief that it would continue to rise, Jenny had no past to reference. As Shirley Peterson has said about French's work in general, "without access to memory, the past simply defines what the present is not without any indication of what the future could be".[33] For Jenny, the reckoning of a past in the present causes a crisis of faith. She cannot confront the ghosts that haunt her: the animal and Pat's subsequent insanity, her past and her unrealized future, her husband's unemployment, all of which wreak havoc on her own chosen identity of housewife and mother.

For Jenny, these problems are figured through their materiality. Moira Casey has said, "The Spains are unable to view their lives in terms other than the crass materialism of the Celtic Tiger, and this rigidity damages them irreparably", but that materialism is both literal and symbolic.[34] The first inkling that Fiona has that something is wrong comes with Jenny's recounting of the things missing from the house, the things we later learn that Conor has taken. The Spains' financial strain is similarly constructed through material lack. They have to return their SUV, and Jenny claims that she could not entertain with only "tea and Aldi biscuits".[35] But while absence marks the start of her troubles, it is the physical manifestation of those problems in the picture of Pat's animal that Emma draws, an embodiment of the absence, which pushes her over the edge.

As her hospital room confession reveals, it is when the lack becomes embodied, when the invisible becomes hypervisible, that Jenny commits murder. The JoJo's pin, a commemorative token left by Conor in the Spains' house in an effort to remind Jenny of happier times, instead convinces Jenny that she has gone insane.[36] Pat's holes in the walls force her to face the unhomeliness of Brianstown and their house. Confronted with daughter Emma's school-drawn picture of the animal, signaling public exposure of the Spains' problems, Jenny finally becomes convinced that their haunting is real—Emma "was scared of the animal. That it would hear her and come after her".[37] As long as the animal and their financial strain were contained within the house and the appearance of normalcy was intact, then Jenny and her family were safe. The manifestation of Jenny's fears in the drawing and, more particularly, the fear that the manifestation has exposed Pat's obsession and the family's dwindling resources, are more than Jenny can bear.

French leads us to believe that even then, Jenny might have saved her family had there been a way to leave the unhomely house. Johansen notes that the neoliberal gothic describes both a space and moment in society that cannot be escaped without changes to the entire social and economic

system.[38] Jenny voices that anxiety: "[The animal] had escaped; it had got outside the house, too. There wasn't anywhere left that was safe".[39] The manifestations of loss that haunt Jenny, however, pervade both Brianstown and Irish society. There is nowhere safe to go. The promises of Brianstown as a community remain unfulfilled. In its place, a darker community has emerged, with squatters and teenagers using the half-built houses. Nor could the Spains simply leave Brianstown for another part of Dublin or Ireland—the ghost estates and the failed promises they symbolized haunted the nation. Similarly, the friendships Jenny and Pat once had that were predicated on shared experiences, such as Pat's closeness with Conor, have been replaced by relationships figured in material terms. In her confession, Jenny comments that she could not turn to friends, because she and Pat "don't have those kind of friends, not any more",[40] an isolation that comes in part from living in a society that often denies women "recognition as equal subjects".[41] Though Jenny's issues are, and should be, read as superficial, French also makes clear that her superficialities are symptoms not of an individual, personal failing, but of national, hegemonic forces. No longer is it just the Spain house that is unhomely. Ireland itself has become haunted by the specters of poverty and the failed promises of prosperity.

Katharine and Lee Horsley have claimed that "in contrast to masculine noir, the dominant element" in female noir "is not *agency* but *community*", with the "key cause of anxiety" being a "loss of connection".[42] The character of Jenny, however, suggests that community and agency are not so easily cleaved apart, as her crimes are a desperate attempt to take control of what she feels is an untenable situation. Jenny murders her family and tries to commit suicide so that all that had gone wrong with their suburban life could be erased and her family could be reconstituted and redeemed. Horsley and Horsley center their argument on texts with "representations of the murdering mother, which handle the nurturing/destructive duality in more complex ways".[43] Jenny, though, is a new kind of *mère fatale*. French is not offering a rationale for an unbalanced binary, in which a mother is either too nurturing or too destructive. Instead, Jenny's mothering, until the very moment of the murders, is presented as acutely balanced, normal for this particular set of conditions and this particular kind of family. It is not her actions that French presents in a more complex way. It is a situational complexity that makes her actions seem inevitable, stemming from a loss of both community *and* agency.

While Horsley and Horsley address this inevitability as part of the brutal, naturalistic world of noir, in which the crimes of the mother have "their own kind of legitimacy",[44] the world French creates at first does not seem all that brutal. Its brutality is what French reveals, and she does so through the language of haunting. Gordon claims, "In haunting, organized forces and systemic structures that appear removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life in a way that confounds our analytic separations and confounds the social separations themselves."[45] For Jenny, the larger forces of the economy and its associated failure of community and agency work in concert with the more intimate hauntings acting from within her home, like Conor and the animal, to put middle-class mundanity out of reach. The only happy ending for Jenny is one which restores either the potential for the middle-class dream, which also requires the restoration of Ireland's economic prospects, or the wholeness of her family, only achievable through the death of them all. If the first option is out of reach because neoliberal forces make it impossible, the second is out of reach because Kennedy keeps it from her by preventing her suicide.

It is Kennedy who is tasked with unraveling the various truths behind the Spain murders. Kennedy in some ways presents as a typical detective of the genre. He is divorced, as his professional life prevents him from making his marriage work. He is difficult to get along with and often works alone, forgoing any kind of easy companionship with his fellow detectives, and he follows a rigid code of moral absolutes. His confidence, furthermore, asks readers to believe him and believe *in* him, and he positions himself as the "powerful weapon of reassurance" against social dissolution so often represented in novels with police detectives as protagonists.[46] But French also resists such generic classification for her detective. He is not, in fact, a lawman of the hard-boiled tradition, and he builds his life around institutionally sanctioned rules. Readers of French's previous novels enter this book with an image of Kennedy as brash and arrogant and not as good at his job as he believes himself to be. There is not much in *Broken Harbour* to challenge this characterization. He constantly reminds the reader of his professional successes, his position in his supervisor O'Kelly's trust, and his high solve rate, despite only ranking as a sergeant.[47] We see his beliefs—about life, about police work—convincingly challenged at every turn, by the Spains and Curran and his sister Dina. And while Kennedy would have the reader believe that his investment in pinning the murders on Conor lies high-mindedly in uncovering the truth, we suspect it also to be less idealistically driven by a desire to protect his record.

Kennedy's fallibility is obvious early on in the novel, and it is tellingly rooted in an inability to read or understand the domestic. When he looks around the Spains house, he can intuit that something is wrong. That is the nature of the haunted house. What he cannot grasp are the small clues whose interpretations rest on a knowledge of day-to-day family living. Kennedy lacks a certain domestic capital. Curran, his partner, is better at reading what the home has to say, like identifying the excessive number of baby monitors and knowing the high cost of a child's birthday party. Kennedy keeps telling anyone who will listen that cops should not have children because it "makes you soft", yet certain elements of the crime remain hidden from him because of an inability to comprehend the physical and economic demands of child-rearing, especially in an aspirational community like Brianstown.

Because of his lack of domestic capital, he latches on to a narrative he can understand, one that fits his view of the world as he knows it. He overidentifies with Pat Spain and empathizes with Pat's erratic behavior; though Kennedy is disturbed by the death of the two children, his ultimate goal is "to be the one who gets the man who killed Pat Spain".[48] He clings to the hope that Pat's animal is real, and when Curran wants to let Pat take the fall to spare Jenny, Kennedy refuses, because Pat "had done every single fucking thing he was supposed to do".[49] He would rather Conor, the pathetic voyeur, be convicted, because Conor was *wrong* for "want[ing] Pat's life instead of getting [his] own".[50] This is Kennedy's ideology, that doing "everything right" leads, except in the most extreme of circumstances, to a prosperous and stable middle-class existence: "what you get out of life", he says, "is mostly what you planted".[51]

It is this philosophy that keeps him from reckoning with his own ghosts, most notably the death of his mother and the illness of his sister. Kennedy's mother died of suicide when he was 15 years old, walking out into the sea at Broken Harbour on the last night of their holiday. After her death, it fell to him and his older sister Geri to take care of Dina, the youngest of the Kennedy children. Dina suffers from bouts of paranoia, hyperesthesia, and mania. According to Kennedy, she is simply "crazy as a bag of cats" and "no good at life".[52] Kennedy believes that their mother's suicide is to blame for Dina's undiagnosed mental illness, a clear cause and effect that he uses to make order out of Dina's disordered life. For Dina was also supposed to die that day—their mother took Dina with her and left a note saying that "Dina is too little to do without her mum."[53] We never discover how Dina escapes death at the hands of her mother, but that

unsolved mystery matters less than the revelation that Dina was having hallucinations even before the night at Broken Harbour. "'There isn't any *why*'", Dina says, "'That's what I mean, trying to organize me. I'm not crazy *because* anything. I just am.'".[54]

It is Dina who most clearly understands and articulates the impact Broken Harbour is having on Kennedy. The name alone sends her into an episode of instability, and she tells her brother that the "location is *bad* for you. I could tell the second I saw you the other night, you were all wrong."[55] Kennedy, of course, believes that he can mitigate the impact of Broken Harbour by sheer force of will. He is a "champion of neoliberal values",[56] a supporter of "property developers and their tame bankers and politicians" whose "thinking big" pulled them out of the last recession.[57] Theoretically, then, the building of Brianstown should not invoke a rural, backwards-looking nostalgia in Kennedy. He would rather see a property full of people and their energy than the empty seashore. Even at the end of the novel, when he imagines what Broken Harbour should have been, it is with "lawn mowers buzzing and the radios blasting sweet fast beats while men washed their cars in the drives", a middle-class suburban ideal.[58] And yet, the traces of his past life rise to the surface in spite of his rigid psychological control and his belief in the restorative order of cause and effect, forcing him to reckon with the repression of his past in the present.

This reckoning focuses primarily on Jenny. Jenny is a mother who had done everything she was supposed to do, and she murders her children and her husband because of, rather than in spite of, her desire to do things right. This is a dissonance with which both Kennedy and the novel as a whole struggle. When Curran hides evidence that proves Jenny's guilt, we are led to believe that it is because he wants Jenny to be free to kill herself and join her family in the afterlife. Kennedy, however, will not let that happen, telling Curran to "just stick to the fucking rules, hand in the fucking evidence and let the fucking system do its job".[59] But then Kennedy plants evidence against Jenny and acts as her unofficial confessor, giving her "a place to put her story", breaking these rules and sacrificing Jenny, and his job, in the process.[60] He wants Jenny to live, to serve her time and have a second chance at life. More than that, though, he wants his own mother back. In insisting that Jenny live, in denying her the chance to join her family through suicide, Kennedy strips Jenny of her agency so that *his* family can be made whole, with Jenny the living ghost of the mother he lost.

Kennedy hands in his badge and leaves his job, unable to cope with his professional misdeeds but, more importantly, recognizing the truth of Dina's claim that he is driven by this case to "make up for what happened to Mum".[61] There is no recourse for his return to the police force until he can reckon with his ghosts, and this can only happen through a return to the site of his trauma. Dina slips into his apartment, wet from rain this time instead of the sea, and enters Kennedy's bedroom with a sigh like "a child after a long day of playing". As she curls up next to him, he believes that finally she will answer questions about her escape from their mother, if only he will ask: "*did you pull away, at the edge of the water … did she open her hand and let you go?*" But instead of interrogating, instead of acting as a detective searching for the truth, he simply sits with her. Dina's coat soaks through his pyjamas in a repetition of the soggy morning of their mother's death, and his silence signals his willingness to exist in ambiguity, an acceptance of the impossibility of knowing, and a reckoning, finally, with the past that haunts him.

Catherine Ross Nickerson argues that at the turn of the twentieth century, women writing crime fiction in the USA "drew on the moral force of the domestic novel and the symbolic language of the gothic mode to critique the gender and class politics of maturing capitalism".[62] In the decade after the turn of the twenty-first century, Tana French also draws upon the moral force of the domestic and the language of the gothic to critique a local manifestation of global capitalism, Ireland's Celtic Tiger. Emily Johansen claims that French does this largely through the construction of a "neoliberal gothic". Johansen argues that writers of traditional gothic fiction were able to reinforce, however uneasily, prevailing ideologies through a rejection of alternative ways of being. In Johansen's formulation, the subjects of a neoliberal gothic however are so fully immersed within all-encompassing systems of oppression that they cannot imagine even the possibility of an alternative way of being. Here there can be no full resolution of the crime or restitution of society because of the "impossibility of escaping the internalized gothic so long as social arrangements remain the same".[63]

However, we argue that French's engagement with the symbolic language of haunting points toward a weakness in neoliberal forces. If, as Gordon argues, ghosts are social figures who manifest their repression in the present, then social arrangements can, in fact, be changed. The first step in challenging oppressive systems, whether they be historical or economic or patriarchal, is to reckon with ghosts. The characters of *Broken*

Harbour have varying degrees of success doing so; it is not an easy task, to face what haunts you. Intersectional identities dependent upon gender, class, caste, generation, and family history make navigating the neogothic landscape of Broken Harbour a unique experience for each of the characters, estranging them from each other and from their community. Pat, for instance, is haunted by his lost masculinity and the return of the natural world in the face of its erasure by the forces of capitalism, yet his desire to protect Jenny combined with the realities of life in a post-boom economy means that his reckoning leaves the home in ruins, as he punches holes in its interior and wreaks havoc on the domestic space. Through such representations of hauntings, both psychological and material, French reveals the numerous ideologies jockeying for position in contemporary Ireland.

The idea that French is critiquing the Celtic Tiger era's suppression of the past in the name of a bright, new present is well documented, in both her own words and those of critics.[64] But French's critique also stretches further back than the neoliberal heyday of the Celtic Tiger. Kennedy's lyric ode to the suburban ideal closely resembles Eamonn De Valera's 1943 speech where he describes the ideal Ireland as "the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living […] a land whose countryside would be bright with cozy homesteads; whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens". But Kennedy, who keeps himself aside from family and community, is blinded by his belief in the neoliberal promise, and like De Valera he fails initially to see the inextricability of the global, the national, and the personal. Jenny becomes a synecdoche for Ireland itself, a locus of family and nation and their crimes. Her guilt as a mother can be read as symbolic of the guilt of the motherland. Both mothers, despite their best efforts, destroy their own children, suffocating them either literally or economically—and they must both, finally, face their crimes.

Kennedy learns in the end that the restoration of order is impossible until the original trauma is revealed, suggesting that if Jenny must live to pay for her crime, then Ireland too must reconcile with how its failure to reckon with its past has left it incapable of dealing with its ghosts in the present. Perhaps the domestic noir, then, is about revelation rather than resolution, which is why it draws so naturally from gothic discourse. We see none of the characters exorcise their ghosts. But we are left with the hope that Kennedy will one day make peace with them through an acknowledgment of their true nature. He reconfigures his relationship

with Dina by accepting that her illness, and by extension their mother's, is not the result of any one individual moral failing but instead a condition brought about by forces he did not even realize he could not control. This revelation destabilizes his neoliberal worldview in which good things always come to those who "do things right". But instead of signaling despair, it suggests a way forward, because now he can reckon with the ghosts that actually haunt him, ghosts not of a single actant but of a system of interlocking forces. Early in the novel, Kennedy suggests that evil comes from one of two places: either the inside or the out. The revelation of *Broken Harbour* is that there is no such easy dichotomy. Ghosts are of the domestic *and* the global, the past *and* the present, the inside *and* the out. Recognizing them for who and what they are is perhaps the first step toward redemption.

Notes

1. Cf. Nickerson, *The Web of Iniquity: Early Detective Fiction by American Women* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), Skenazy, "Behind the Territory Ahead", in *Los Angeles in Fiction*, ed. David Fine, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), pp. 85–107, and Ascari, *A Counter-history of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
2. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 21.
3. Gordon, p. 183.
4. Gordon, p. 8.
5. Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 113.
6. Peter Collier, "Ireland's Rurban Horizon: New Identities from Home Development Markets in Rural Ireland", *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 13.1 (2004), p. 96.
7. Tana French, *Broken Harbour* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 259.
8. "As of October 2011 there were 2876 unfinished estates in Ireland…containing 212,048 housing units (36,510 of which are vacant or under construction). Of these estates, 2066 have either unfinished units or incomplete roads, paths, lighting or sewage works, and of these 1822 are inactive (no development work is taking place). …At the end of 2011 …house prices had fallen on average between 43 and 58 percent across the country; between one third and one half of all mortgages were in negative equity, and over 8 per cent of mortgages were more than 3 months in arrears" (Rob Kitchin, Justin Gleeson, and Martin Dodge. "Unfolding mapping

practices: a new epistemology for cartography", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 38. 3 (2013), pp. 485–6).

9. Alison Flood, "Tana French: I'm Haunted by Ireland's Ghost Estates", *The Guardian*, 27 July 2012, n.p.
10. Emily Johansen, "The Neoliberal Gothic: *Gone Girl*, *Broken Harbour*, and the Terror of Everyday Life", *Contemporary Literature*, 57.1 (2016), p. 30.
11. French, p. 64.
12. Ibid., p. 13.
13. Ibid., p. 12.
14. Ibid., pp. 156–7.
15. Gordon, p. 183.
16. French, p. 14.
17. Ibid., pp. 19–20.
18. Ibid., p. 102.
19. Gordon, p. 8.
20. Gordon, p. 179.
21. French, p. 81.
22. Ibid., p. 19.
23. French, p. 300.
24. French, pp. 304, 275.
25. This ecological theme carries through several of French's novels, in particular *In the Woods*, in which development of once wild land requires an accounting of old crimes.
26. Through this ecological reading, the animal highlights French's pairing of Pat and Conor. Conor uses his wildcraft, his ability to set up and maintain a wilderness style campsite, to turn the remnants of the building site into a domestic home.
27. Ibid., p. 81.
28. French, p. 257.
29. Ibid., p. 307.
30. Johansen, p. 33.
31. French, p. 393.
32. French, p. 51.
33. Shirley Peterson, "Homicide and Home-icide: Exhuming Ireland's Past in the Dectective Novels of Tana French", *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 30.2 (2012), p. 100.
34. Moira E. Casey, "'Built on Nothing but Bullshit and Good PR': Crime, Class Mobility, and the Irish Economy in the Novels of Tana French", *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 32.1 (2014), p. 101.
35. French, p. 392.
36. French, p. 409.

37. Ibid., p. 411.
38. Johansen, p. 31.
39. French, p. 412.
40. Ibid., p. 402
41. Horsley and Horsley (1999), p. 377.
42. Ibid., p. 377.
43. Ibid., p. 386
44. Ibid., p. 383
45. Gordon, p. 19.
46. John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 98.
47. Bill Philips, "Irish Noir", *Estudios Irlandeses,* 9 (2014), p. 173.
48. French, p. 58.
49. Ibid., p. 83.
50. Ibid., p. 357.
51. Ibid., p. 150.
52. French, p. 105.
53. Ibid., p. 292.
54. Ibid., p. 287.
55. French, p. 288.
56. Johansen, p. 49.
57. French, p. 11.
58. Ibid., p. 434.
59. Ibid., p. 381.
60. Ibid., p. 390.
61. French, p. 291.
62. Nickerson, p. 197.
63. Johansen, p. 54.
64. Cf. Denell Downum, "Learning to Live: Memory and the Celtic Tiger in Novels by Roddy Dowell, Ann Enright, and Tana French", *New Hibernia Review*, 19.3 (2015), pp. 76–92.

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CHAPTER 10

The Subversion of the Male Tradition in Crime Fiction: Liane Moriarty's *Little Lies*

Elena Avanzas Álvarez

Crime fiction has traditionally been considered a masculine literary genre due to the centrality of the male detective or "man in the mac" as a representative of: "[T]he dominant hegemonic Christian/patriarchal order, the assertion of values very traditional, and our identification with the hero places him firmly back in the centre, 'our' values elevated and restored to common sense status".[1] This insistence on the male figure has historically left little space for female characters, who have been assigned marginal roles as femme fatales or victims who, by opposition to the male detective, have represented moral disorder and chaos.[2] Such distribution led to the separation of public and private spheres according to gender: "Women were associated primarily with domestic, family spaces and men with the more dangerous areas of the public sphere."[3] However, the creation of the home as a safe space responds to a patriarchal construction of femininity in which domestic bliss is a woman's ultimate desire, and men come home to find dinner on the table, well-behaved children, and a happy housewife. But, "What if locking the door won't keep the bad things away?"[4]

Crime narratives from the 2010s have shown a trend for domestic noir, also known as domestic suspense, a crime fiction subgenre that questions

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and subverts patriarchal gender roles in crime fiction by making the traditionally female lived experience[5] central to the narration. By giving voice to housewives, mothers, and the domestic life, these stories "turn ordinary household chores into potential for terror, and transform fears about motherhood into horrifying reality [...] They are about ordinary, everyday life, and that's what makes these novels of domestic suspense so frightening."[6] Domestic noir then, subverts traditional gendered roles and destabilises heteronormative institutions and relationships such as marriage, child rearing, and domestic tasks. One of the most successful of these novels is *Little Lies* (2014) by Liane Moriarty,[7] a story about three white, middle-class Australian women, housewives and mothers, whose little lies fuel a criminal investigation. The novel is not as much a whodunit as a polysemic work that weaves together three female lived experiences to offer a more complex take on domesticity, motherhood, sexuality, and marriage.

Celeste and Madeleine are two good friends whose children attend the same kindergarten public school in the fictional Pirriwee peninsula. During orientation day, Madeleine meets Jane, a young mother who has just moved to the area with her son, Ziggy, who will join Madeleine's younger daughter, Chloe, at school. Trouble begins when Renata's daughter, Amabella, accuses Ziggy of strangling her during class. From that moment on, violence against women will connect the lives of the three main characters, each of whom is constructing her own little lies: Celeste is being secretly abused by her husband, Perry; Madeleine searches for her identity as a mother, a wife, an ex-wife, and a working woman; and Jane struggles to come to terms with the sexual assault that resulted in the birth of her son.

The characters' little lies will be uncovered during Trivia Night's dress-up party, where "little lies" refers to the narratives that Madeleine, Celeste, and Jane have elaborated to fit into the stable and fixed patriarchal roles for women in society and in crime fiction. However, their lived experiences are complex and fluid, and their public and private selves clash. Trivia Night, as a Bakhtinian carnival, allows for the reveal of their true identities and desires. Jane uncovers Perry as her rapist, Perry himself assaults Celeste publicly, and Madeleine finally comes to terms with her own identity. Part of this process is the acceptance of her ex-husband's partner, Bonnie, who, after being abused as a child, pushes Perry off the balcony when he assaults Celeste. After this incident, the three main characters make a pact of silence to protect Bonnie, hence positioning Detective

Sergeant Adrian Quinlan, a traditionally male detective, as a dangerous character.

The novel has been adapted as an HBO series starring Reese Witherspoon as Madeleine, Shailene Woodley as Jane, and Nicole Kidman as Celeste. It premiered in February 2017 under the alternative title of the novel for its publication in the USA, *Big Little Lies*.

Celeste White is described by Madeleine's narrative voice as an ethereal woman. Married to the equally stunning Perry, and mother of two mischievous yet charming identical twins, Celeste always appears to be perfectly dressed and styled, and Madeleine doesn't know where her flustered looks come from as she embodies contemporary beauty standards by being "tall, blonde, and beautiful".[8] However, Celeste's beauty and supposedly perfect marriage hide a story of domestic violence, as Perry has been systematically abusing her since their children were born. Celeste's little lie is centred around her inability to accept her identity as a victim and escape her marriage once she understands "The Cycle of Violence",[9] a revolutionary theory that states domestic abuse is articulated in three phases of escalating violence.

The first phase is the tension building phase in which any small domestic inconvenience disturbs the abuser, although not in an explosive way, and the victim tries to ignore or placate him.[10] The occasional success of this strategy makes the victim believe she can control the abuse, and results in pathological self-control. For Celeste, this has meant the internalisation of her abuser's discourse, which has resulted in an extreme form of self-surveillance[11]:

> Marriage to Perry meant that she was always ready to justify her actions, constantly monitoring what she'd just said or done while simultaneously feeling defensive about the defensiveness, her thoughts and feelings twisting into impenetrable knots, so that sometimes, like right now, sitting in a room with normal people, all the things she couldn't say rose in her throat and for a moment she couldn't breathe.[12]

The second phase is an acute battering episode "characterized by the uncontrollable discharge of the tensions that have built up during phase one".[13] It is often common for victims of domestic violence to foresee this phase,[14] so that after years of abuse, Celeste can see the transformation in Perry before one of his outbursts: "But then she'd seen the lightning-quick flash of rage when she'd made her comment about leaving him if he

signed the petition to have Ziggy suspended. She'd meant it to sound like a joke but she knew it hadn't come across that way, and that would have embarrassed him in front of Madeleine and Ed, who he liked and admired".[15] Right after this realisation Perry goes home with Celeste and assaults her, with the whole incident—the most violent in the novel—being described in detail:

> [H]e grabbed her by the hair, twisting it behind her head and pulling so hard, so astonishingly hard, that pain radiated through her scalp and her eyes filled with instant, involuntary tears. He stepped forward slowly and took her face in his hand the way he did when he was about to tenderly kiss her. "Not good enough," he said and he slammed her head against the wall.[16]

The third and last phase is known as "the honeymoon phase" and it presents the abuser dutifully taking care of his victim, usually under the pretence of sickness. After the most violent battering episode, Perry tends to Celeste and takes care of the twins to let her rest: "It was a lunacy really. The way he could behave like this. As if she was in bed with a bad migraine. As if this was nothing to do with him."[17] This behaviour also acts as a positive reinforcement for the victim to stay in the relationship by giving her the false impression of power. Celeste explains to the counsellor how the pain is almost worth it because: "First one person has the power, then the other. Each time Perry and I have a fight, especially if it gets physical, if I get hurt, then I get the power back. I'm on top […] The more he hurts me, the higher I go and the longer I get to stay there'.[18] However, as Celeste herself realises, the higher the victim goes during the honeymoon phase, the more violent the following attack will be, which may eventually result in the victim's death.

It is necessary to consider Celeste's role in the narrative to destigmatise women subject to domestic violence as objects, rather than subjects in the construction of female identity in domestic violence. Even though victims in these contexts are usually diagnosed with learned helplessness, a response to abuse based on "the belief that the person's natural way of fighting such abuse will not succeed in stopping it",[19] it is wrong to believe they are deployed through agency. Celeste embodies the complex relationship established between the victim and the abuser by feeling unable to imagine a possible self without Perry: "But the thought of being with other men besides Perry filled her with a heavy, listless sensation. She'd be

so bored. She was not interested in other men. Perry made her feel alive. If she left him she'd be single and celibate and bored forever. It wasn't fair. He'd ruined her."[20] However, this behaviour does not deprive her of agency or define her as a weak woman. Her doubts about leaving Perry are deeply rooted in her own strength and her learned resilience, which she directly links to her "Aussie tomboy mentality: if a boy hits you, you hit him right back!"[21] Hence, Celeste's lived experience is manifested in fighting Perry back, in an effort to assert her own strength and agency inside the relationship.[22]

Her decision to stay in her marriage is also deeply rooted in society's perception of her marriage, as the Whites are incarnations of the ideal white, heterosexual, WASP, upper-middle class and beautiful couple: "They were a fine-looking couple. People had been telling them that for years. They were admired and envied. They had all the privileges in the world. Overseas travel. A beautiful home".[23] Moreover, Perry is aware of this perception and takes advantage of it by crafting a façade of happiness and marital bliss on social media, where he actively plays the good husband, father, and friend to his wife's friends: "Perry would post pictures of them all frolicking in the snow on Facebook. He'd write something like: 'The boys have their first white Christmas!' He loved Facebook […] The Facebook photos wouldn't lie. So much joy. Her life had so much joy. That was an actual verifiable fact."[24] This masquerade puts social class prejudices at play, so that neither Celeste nor her close friend Madeleine can see or recognise the violence behind the Whites' superficial, heteronormative, and capitalist success.

This tension between social representations of victimhood and Celeste's lived experience leads to Celeste's inability to identify herself as a victim of domestic abuse, so she works on distancing herself from the "passive, weak, fearful, helpless battered woman".[25] When Celeste finally seeks help she arrives to her date with the counsellor dressed in a beautiful dress Perry bought for her in Paris, wearing make-up, though she never does, and faking a public-school posh voice. By putting up this performance, verging on drag,[26] Celeste is demonstrating her awareness of social and gender stereotypes, and she is choosing to perform her identity in a way that does not fit society's stereotype of a "battered" woman. This strategy is focussed on reaffirming her identity as a normal woman in a "special" relationship by trying to make the counsellor believe her little lie. However, Susi, the counsellor, can see beyond Celeste's façade and slowly deconstructs the victim's rhetoric to lay out the reality behind the Whites' marriage.

But Celeste's situated experience is one of advantage as a beautiful, white, upper-middle-class, English-speaking woman. First she realises that: "She was an educated woman with choices, places to go, family and friends who would rather gather around, lawyers who would represent her".[27] As her story develops, she finally sees the circular pattern of the abuse, a turning point in the escape from abusive relationships[28]: "It was amazing how fast the healing and forgetting process began again. The cycle was endless".[29] From this moment on she identifies herself as a victim, and Perry as an abuser, especially as she incorporates other people's narratives into her own life: "Violent relationships tend to become more violent over time. Had she read it in some of that folder of paperwork, or was it something Susi had said in that cool, non-judgmental voice of hers?"[30] On Susi's suggestion, Celeste works out an escape plan for Perry's next attack, and she rents an apartment in North Sydney in which she is finally able to express herself by decorating it with the girly antique look that she likes and Perry has dismissed as cheap and tacky. However, Perry dies before Celeste leaves the marriage, and the novel ends when she moves to the apartment with the twins to a fresh new start.

Madeleine's little lies refer to the masquerade she constructs to fit into a stable and fixed definition of a middle-aged woman, wife, and mother that is not representative of her lived experience, but comes imposed as a dominant discourse. *Little Lies* begins with Madeleine's internal monologue on her fortieth birthday, a meta-literary reflection on her unsuitability to be a proper victim: "It was probably perfectly natural to feel sadder over the death of a twenty-year old than a forty-year old. The forty-year old had enjoyed twenty years more of life".[31] Her refusal to fit into a traditional and binary distribution of roles in crime fiction is clear when, later that same day, she falls on the road and Jane helps her get to school. There, Madeleine will present Jane to a friend as "my knight in shinning armour. My knight-ess."[32] However, her role in the crime narrative is not fixed, as it is also explained that Madeleine met Celeste when she saved one of the White twins from drowning.

Madeleine's constant struggle comes from the tension to pin down her identity to society's expectations for her. She is especially tormented by the reconciliation between her maternal and professional duties because Madeleine refuses to perform her identity solely as a mother, openly criticising a group that she labels the "fundamentalist mothers" or "Mum Perfects", who are over-involved in their children's lives.[33] During a chat with Jane's mother she feels compelled to describe the living arrangement

between her and her husband, who gave up a better job at a bigger newspaper to work from home so that Madeleine could work three days a week as a manager at the Pirriwee Peninsula Theatre.[34] By making this decision, both can share parenting duties, and establish a more egalitarian relationship. However, she does not define herself as a working mother either, as she confesses her resentment over her "cute little part-time marketing job"[35] and negatively compares herself to "career women", like Amabella's mother Renata.

Contrary to her beliefs, Madeleine inhabits a privileged state of in-between-ness and ambiguity that allows her to escape traditional gender roles. Her fluidity is openly portrayed in her feminine aesthetics and her refusal to also perform the roles associated with that femininity. The first time Ziggy comes to play with Chloe, Madeleine opens the door dressed as a 1950s housewife, with a big skirt and red sparkling flats, while it is Jane—dressed in a plain white t-shirt and jeans—who brings home-cooked banana muffins. When Madeleine admires them and Jane offers her the recipe, she explains that baking is an exotic task for her, and she just wants the muffins, not the recipe: "I love the idea of baking but then I can't seem to make it a reality. I never seem to have all the ingredients. How do you manage to have all that flour and sugar and, I don't know, vanilla essence?"[36] Together, Madeleine and Jane challenge the idea that a woman alone needs to perfectly perform all tasks of traditional femininity, and establish a relationship of mutual support where each of them performs a different task.

Madeleine's characteristic "girly girl" looks identify her as a Third Wave feminist, defined by the re-appropriation of traditional feminine aesthetics, less political activism, and a heavy reliance on popular culture: "Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels".[37] Creams, fashion and shoes are not articulated as a third shift that decreases her power,[38] but as commodities for a woman, who "should be whatever she wants to be without labelling that view as feminist or even recognizing the term *third-wave*".[39] Madeleine escapes mindless consumerism and subjection by using her marketing degree to see behind the strategies of the commodities she consumes. Despite the pleasure that she takes in the use of cosmetics, Madeleine acknowledges that she is using "an eye-wateringly expensive dab of eye cream […] a jar of hope".[40] Hence, her performance comes from an informed situated experience that allows her to actively choose to consume those goods and make better choices in the inevitable capitalist society she lives in.

Beauty routines and products take a central role in the narration as Madeleine's eldest daughter, Abigail, disowns her mother's values and moves in with her father and his new partner, Bonnie, who leads an alternative lifestyle. Abigail's story focuses on her new choice of clothes, diet, and interests in an effort to distance herself from her mother. The mother–daughter relationship is destabilised when she devaluates her close links with Madeleine, who had constructed their relationship as a feminine story of struggle and survival after Nathan walked out on them when Madeleine was only 26. "The MacKenzie Girls" became well-known in the neighbourhood as feminist role models, and Madeleine takes pride in their shared lived experience: "I supported myself too when Abigail was little […] It was hard, but it was also sort of satisfying, in a fuck-you kind of way".[41] This part of Madeleine's past inscribes single motherhood in popular culture, connecting Madeleine's story to Jane's, and highlighting, once more, the shared "breasted experience" that connects the women in the story.[42]

Moreover, when Abigail becomes interested in Amnesty International through Bonnie's influence, and she tells her mother she is reading about child marriage and sexual slavery, Madeleine's first reaction is to discourage her daughter from taking those issues too seriously. She tries to lure Abigail back to their trusting and loving relationship with traditional feminine routines and products. This is also an attempt to allow her sensitive daughter some peace of mind, so that stereotypically feminine interests, such as lipstick, are constructed as safer interests for teenage girls. Madeleine's love for fashion and make-up makes her feel like a "privileged, frivolous white Western woman […] who took far too much genuine pleasure in a new pair of shoes or a bottle of perfume".[43] But, by trying to establish a relationship with Abigail through these products, she is redefining make-up as a haven for her daughter, proving that female agency can change the way in which traditional goods and discourses can be interpreted. By the end of the novel, Madeleine's reappropriation of traditional femininity will have proven stronger and more useful to her daughter than Bonnie's alternative lifestyle. The hidden moral of the story here being that mother, after all, always knows best.

Jane's little lies derive directly from the sexual assault she was victim to five years earlier, which resulted in the birth of her son Ziggy. An important narrative device to Jane's story is her desire to keep her lived experience private, not allowing other voices to enter her interpretation of the past. She frequently revisits the traumatic event, and like Celeste, she is unable

to see herself as a proper victim, downplaying the attack, and reframing it as one bad sexual experience that she herself had initiated.[44] As a strategy to gain control over the traumatic narrative, she places the blame on herself and considers her agency that night as something negative:

> If Jane hadn't gone out that night, if she hadn't drunk that third tequila slammer, if she'd said "no thank you" when he slid on to the seat next to hers, if she'd stayed home and finished her Art Law degree and got a job and a husband and a mortgage and done it all the proper way, then maybe one day she would have lived in a family house and been a proper person living a proper life.[45]

From that moment on, Jane loses all confidence, and reframes her life as inappropriate, playing special attention to Perry's devaluation of her body during the attack by saying she was fat, disgusting, and wore trashy clothes. There is little left of Jane's past curvy body by the time the novel takes place, as she has erased it in favour of a more angular and androgynous body that she dresses in plain t-shirts and jeans. This response is common, as victims of sexual assault develop eating disorders and they "often struggle with a sense of body shame and loathing that can be experienced physically, rather than cognitively".[46] Perry's damage to Jane's perception of her body will only be healed by the incorporation of other voices to her lived experience, so that Jane can rewrite her role in the narrative and recognise herself as a victim of sexual assault.

The attack is still present in Jane's everyday life, and it is brought back to life when Ziggy is accused of strangling classmate Amabella on orientation day. Jane, caught up in the nature versus nurture debate, takes Ziggy to a child's psychologist in case he has inherited any of his father's traits: "Whenever Ziggy behaves in a way that seems out of character, I worry. Like on orientation day, when Amabella said he choked her. Of all the things to happen. *Choking*. I couldn't believe it."[47] Jane's relationship with Ziggy is complicated because of her relation to his rapist father. At first she chooses to hide her rape and her son's origins, as society is still unusually cruel to victims of rape,[48] but she privately believes that her relationship with her son is lacking. Even though she behaves like a good mother to Ziggy, she considers herself inadequate, and secretly feels everyday life is a lie because she does not conform to the heteronormative idea of family: "The rituals weren't real like they were in other families where there was a mum and a dad and at least one sibling".[49]

However, when Ziggy finally confesses it was Max White who had been hurting Amabella, Jane stops defining her son by his origins, and realises that her status as a single mother plays a more important role in the parents' perception of the Chapman family. In contemporary society, she reflects, the consequences of bullying are not the same for the White twin: "She didn't want to hand her 'bad mother' title over to poor Celeste but people would react differently when they knew it was Celeste's child who was the bully […] Rich, beautiful people weren't asked to leave anywhere".[50] The parents at Pirriwee School also contribute to this perception, with some mothers quickly suggesting during the criminal investigation that Jane had been having an affair with a stay-at-home father. However, Jane's parents and her friends act as an alternative construction of the traditional heteronormative and patriarchal family, helping Jane to reconstruct her lived experience as a victim of a sexual assault, but also celebrating her single motherhood. On the other hand, Max White's attack on Amabella deconstructs the idea of parental bliss, and situates Jane's lived experience as a single mother as a valid way of life, healthier for the children than many heterosexual marriages.

The tensions between Celeste's, Madeleine's, and Jane's private narratives, and their little public lies are solved during Trivia Night, a carnivalesque event for the Pirriwee Public School parents to meet socially, where they are asked to attend dressed up as figures such as Audrey Hepburn and Elvis Presley. Traditionally, carnivals meant a break with everyday life that allowed people to eat, drink, and spend their money before the restrictions of Lent.[51,52] In modern society, events like Trivia Night offer the parents a similar opportunity to drink, eat, and socialise so that "[p]eople who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchal barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square".[53] Despite this effort to turn the school environment into a melting pot, one traditional voice in the narrative suggests during the crime investigation that diversity has had negative consequences for the children by mixing different social classes and backgrounds: "So, at school events you've got a plumber, a banker, and a crystal healer standing around trying to make conversation. It's hilarious! No wonder we had a riot".[54] However, the assertion of said conservative values is denied by the triumph of the three main characters' alternative moral code.

Trivia Night is a performance of "acts of disguise and self transfiguration [which] include an element of wish-fulfilment".[55] For the mothers and fathers at Pirriwee Public School this fulfilment comes from putting

on a performance of traditional gendered aesthetics by dressing up as two icons of femininity and masculinity in the twentieth century: Audrey Hepburn and Elvis Presley. Most women choose Hepburn's iconic look from *Breakfast at Tiffany*'s (1961) with a black dress, a pearl choker, and a beehive. The men's looks as Elvis Presley represent Western masculinity, rebellion, and sexual power. However, there is a second articulation to this masquerade, as carnival costumes allow "the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves".[56] The first demonstration of this power comes from Celeste, who finally feels able to stand up to Perry: "Never a word. Not like that. She'd broken an unbreakable rule. Was it because he looked like Elvis Presley and none of this was real, or was it because he knew about the apartment now and everything was now more real than ever before?'[57] From this moment on, everyone's identities will come to light: Perry and Celeste's marriage will be revealed as an abusive relationship; Jane will identify Perry as her rapist; and Madeleine will confront her family about her roles as Abigail's mother and a working woman. Hence, the environment of Trivia Night is "a bacterium, in danger of corrupting the living body of the social hierarchy",[58] and polysemous, allowing marginal and silenced voices the opportunity to join the construction of the dominant discourse[59] and subvert public narratives. That is, private lived experiences that have been hidden under a façade of domestic bliss are let out to allow other voices to enter the story. This incorporation of marginal voices responds to the necessity of inscribing social changes in popular and contemporary literature.[60] However, said inscriptions can represent a power struggle that benefits from the positive environment of the carnival, as they are a "safety-valve […] a controlled escape of steam"[61] by which the main characters stop what they thought were little lies, and use their voices to assert their agency. When Bonnie recognises Perry's abuse of Celeste has been going on for some time, she pushes him and he falls off the balcony. By symbolically killing Elvis, the masculine figure, the mythic hero, Bonnie is subverting crime fiction's traditional gender role assignment and restoring all the female characters' identities. Immediately after the incident, Renata denies having seen what has happened, quickly followed by Jane, Madeleine, and Celeste who each protect Bonnie. When all these marginal voices come together, new narratives and new moral codes emerge, as carnivals "may even be characterised as a dramatic expression of community solidarity".[62] This community of women challenges the idea of the lonely mythic hero by standing together and deciding to protect one of the members of the group by challenging traditional moral

codes. Only Madeleine's husband, an outsider to this group of friends, has doubts about this arrangement and, had not Bonnie confessed, Madeleine is sure he would have done so. "[S]ometimes doing the wrong thing was also right" the novel concludes.[63]

The silent pact among the four women is a subversion of the patriarchal moral code of traditional crime fiction[64] embodied by the traditional masculine hero, which makes a less than remarkable appearance in the form of Detective Sergeant Adrian Quinlan in the novel. His interventions and questioning of the parents feel intrusive, and as the plot thickens, he emerges as a secondary character who threatens the women's stability and well-being. His suspicions of Celeste, based on traditionally assigned gender roles in crime narratives, also create him as a threat: "I thought it was the wife, to be honest. All my instincts were telling me it was the wife. I would have put money on it. Goes to show you can't always trust your instincts".[65] His lack of intervention during the criminal acts committed during the novel previous to Perry's manslaughter also signals the traditional detective's inability to positively intervene in certain contexts. Furthermore, the fact that the female main characters have actively helped each other during the novel, and will remain silent on Bonnie's manslaughter of Perry, shows that the restoration of order is no longer in the detective's hands, but in this new set of marginal voices. From this new distribution of roles emerges a new moral code, which is typical of domestic noir as a crime fiction subgenre that allows for "transgression in the private and public spheres by interrogating the gender-political dimensions of crime and justice".[66] These new values are self-contained in the text, and the commitment of the crime during a carnivalesque scene allows readers "to be socially deviant themselves for the duration of the reading".[67] Hence, domestic noir offers a safe space in which an alternative view of the world can be considered due to crime novels functioning as "both tools for oppression and as vehicles for subversive expression".[68] The final confirmation of an alternative moral code comes from the judge in charge of Bonnie's accusation. The final sentencing is "involuntary manslaughter by an unlawful and dangerous act […] the defendant's moral culpability was at the lower end of the scale for this type of offence".[69] He took into account the fact that Bonnie did not have a criminal record, was clearly remorseful, and that although it was possibly foreseeable that the victim would fall, it was not her intent to kill Perry.

Domestic noir has emerged as one of the most successful crime fiction subgenres in the 2010s. *Little Lies* questions traditional gender roles and

offers marginal characters the opportunity to tell their stories from a different point of view. Through this agency, mothers, wives, daughters, and cheated-on girlfriends, among many others, are constructed as multi-dimensional characters, sometimes aware of their role in the crime story in meta-literary terms, and not happy with it. *Little Lies* offers readers the opportunity to go beyond the closed doors of middle-class domesticity and motherhood by exposing the reality behind everyday life, tasks, and relationships. The home is no longer a safe space *a priori*, the institution of the heteronormative marriage is deconstructed as a potential risk, and motherhood may be far from its idyllic representation in television adverts. Instead of adhering to a discourse of domestic bliss, domestic noir analyses personal lived experiences. Women's emotions and stories—such as sexual desire, doubt about their life choices, ambition, and disappointment at their domestic identity—have previously been silenced in both literature and, historically, in real life. Now, however, they have been inscribed in popular culture, opening a conversation about what it means to be a woman in contemporary society and in crime fiction.

By including narratives of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and the struggle to be a working mother, *Little Lies* is opening a dialogue with readers to discuss typically female lived experiences that are not visible in contemporary society. Also, by giving voice to Jane, Celeste, and Madeleine, this novel inscribes female stories narrated from a female point of view into widely consumed cultural products. Finally, the three main characters' doubts about their suitability to inhabit their own lives are a questioning of modes of representation, and calls for a better understanding of women's experiences both inside and outside the home.

Only by starting this conversation can expectations and stereotypes about women and the female lived experience be challenged to offer destabilised representations of families, femininity, motherhood, victimhood, and beauty in a new polysemic and fluid discourse. This new paradigm offers readers temporary alternative paths and ways of thinking about the world they live in, and the gender prejudices that rule contemporary society. Consequently, definitions become fluid, and values are no longer understood as fixed and inevitably true, but as an imposed social construction that needs to be challenged to be more inclusive. In crime fiction, domestic noir has meant a break from very restrictive gender roles that forced women into restrictive one-dimensional categories, but also from traditional moral codes that included gender and social prejudices.

Notes

1. Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.
2. Munt 1994.
3. Linden Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 63.
4. Eva Holland, "'What if locking the door won't keep the bad things away?'—Eva Holland on Domestic Thrillers", *One Book Lane* (2014).
5. Simone de Beauvoir introduced the female lived experience in the phenomenological tradition with *The Second Sex* ([1949] 2011), and insisted on the importance of inscribing the specificity of women's lives in contemporary theory and the arts.
6. Sarah Weinman, ed., *Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives: Stories from the Trailblazers of Domestic Suspense* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).
7. Liane Moriarty, *Little Lies* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).
8. Moriarty 2014: 19.
9. Lenore E.A. Walker, *The Battered Woman Syndrome* (New York: Springer, [1979] 2009), p. 91.
10. Walker [1979] 2009: 91.
11. Even though Foucault's panopticism refers to the control of population by invisible forces, the strategies are similar, though in smaller scale, to the ones used in domestic-violence power relationships. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, [14] 1995).
12. Moriarty 2014: 260.
13. Walker [1979] 2009: 94
14. E.M. Lewis, "The effects of intensity and probability on the preference for immediate versus delayed aversive stimuli in women with various levels of interspousal conflict". Unpublished manuscript, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle.
15. Moriarty 2014: 309.
16. Moriarty 2014: 310.
17. Moriarty 2014: 354.
18. Moriarty 2014: 204.
19. Walker [1979] 2009: 84.
20. Moriarty 2014: 107.
21. Morairty 2014: 160.
22. Carisa R. Showden. *Choices Women Make: Agency in Domestic Violence, Assisted Reproduction, and Sex Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 38.
23. Moriarty 2014: 74.

24. Moriarty 2014: 57.
25. Walker 2009: 279.
26. Judith Butler theorises in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that traditional performances of femininity are "drag", since they try to imitate an original that does not exist. When Celeste decides to dress for her date with the counsellor, she performs those elements of traditional femininity that she thinks normative in order to normalise her abusive marriage. However, her appearance is clearly a façade trying to imitate an image (constructed by her situated experience as white, Australian, economically successful) that, like original femininity, does not exist.
27. Moriarty 2014: 134.
28. Walker 2009: 85.
29. Moriarty 2014: 360.
30. Moriarty 2014: 318.
31. Moriarty 2014: 10.
32. Moriarty 2014: 20.
33. Moriarty 2014: 33.
34. Moriarty 2014: 35.
35. Moriarty 2014: 193.
36. Moriarty 2014: 83.
37. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, 2000), p. 136.
38. In *The Beauty Myth* (1992) Naomi Wolf criticises the emergence of the fashion and cosmetic industries as a patriarchal construction to deprive women of the money they earn, and the power derived from said work. She coined beauty routines and the so-called "self-care" culture a third shift for women, who upon arriving home still had to undertake domestic duties, and work on their appearance to remain beautiful and desirable.
39. Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young, *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 59.
40. Moriarty 2014: 93.
41. Moriarty 2014: 27.
42. Iris Young proposes a phenomenological approach to feminism that creates all lived experience by women as similar due to owning of a female body in society. She coined the expression "breasted experience" for this in 2004. However, this could be considered exclusionary to those women without breasts.
43. Moriarty 2014: 230.
44. Moriarty 2014: 191.
45. Moriarty 2014: 83.
46. Petrak and Hedge, *The Trauma of Sexual Assault: Treatment, Prevention and Practice* (New Zealand: Wiley, 2002), p. 177.

47. Moriarty 2014: 195.
48. Andrew Solomon, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity* (New York: Scribner, 2012), p. 477.
49. Moriarty 2014: 61.
50. Moriarty 2014: 356.
51. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture of Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1994).
52. Tymothy Hyman, "A Carnival Sense of the World", in *Carnivalesque*, eds. T. Hyman and R. Malbert (California: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 8–73.
53. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. E. Caryl) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 123.
54. Moriarty 2014: 159.
55. Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilisation: the Carnivalesque in 18th Century English Fiction and Culture* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 73.
56. Christiana Gregoriou, *Deviance in Contemporary Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 96.
57. Moriarty 2014: 383.
58. Gregoriou 2007: 96–97.
59. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: The Will to Knowledge* (UK: Penguin, [1976] 2013).
60. Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
61. Burke 1994: 202.
62. Gregoriou 2007: 97.
63. Moriarty 2014: 424.
64. Munt 1994.
65. Moriarty 2014: 444.
66. Charlotte Beyer, "She Decided to Kill her Husband: Housewives in Contemporary American Fictions of Crime" in *Violence in American Popular Culture* [2 volumes], vol. 1 (USA: Praeger, 2015), p. 71.
67. Gregoriou 2007: 101.
68. Gregoriou 2007: 102.
69. Moriarty 2014: 449.

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CHAPTER 11

Domestic Noir and the US Cozy as Responses to the Threatened Home

Diane Waters and Heather Worthington

While in recent years much crime fiction has focused on the violent acts of a serial killer or killers, often hunted by a serial detective across a number of novels, two other seemingly diametrically opposed subgenres have gained popular and commercial success. Thus far, these two subgenres have received little critical attention: one, the so-called "cozy", has perhaps been considered too lightweight to warrant exploration; the other, "domestic noir", is a relative newcomer to crime fiction and, superficially at least, seems to follow some of the narrative patterns and structures found in the psycho-thriller and so is perceived to be deserving of further analysis. However, we contend that the cozy and domestic noir have more in common than their seemingly very disparate formats suggest: both have their roots firmly in Golden Age crime fiction, and both are strongly focused on the significance of home and of the community. Further, as in all crime fiction, these subgenres articulate, explore and offer a response to contemporary anxieties, specifically: the role of the individual in an increasingly fragmented and alienating society; the impact of global and national

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economics and finance on the individual and the community; and the particular effect of these anxieties on women. In the cozy and in domestic noir, issues of class and gender intersect in complex ways and are further complicated by differences between the US and UK, but the two subgenres share a broad concern with the middle-class home.

The cozy is described by Stephen Knight as the commercially successful, predominantly US development of the Golden Age clue-puzzle.[1] Cozies are murder mysteries that have moved their emphasis away from the multiple suspects and detailed investigation found in Golden Age crime narrative; the space focused on the investigation in the clue-puzzle shifts, in the cozy, to the details and routines of the small business run by the (usually) female protagonist. This business is most often based around food or a handicraft/hobby, and the recipes or other instructions included in the book invoke a high degree of reader engagement. The cozy's response to social anxieties, as its name suggests, is the creation of a safe place, where readers can literally "feel at home", sharing recognisable spaces that are populated by characters with whom they can identify and who have found solutions to financial and social strains similar to those the readers may themselves face. While in the cozy murder intrudes into the community, by contrast, domestic noir brings the threat from the "mean streets" exemplified in hard-boiled detective fiction into the "mean rooms" (Julie Smith cited in Horsley[2]) of the isolated individual forced into "mean", often claustrophobic, circumstances consequent on the harsh new economic realities that, for some, have resulted in new ways of living. Just as Agatha Christie examined the impact of the social changes of her times on the bourgeois individual and community, so the writers of these new forms interrogate not only the impact of social, but also economic, change on the modern middle classes.

The contiguity between the cozy and domestic noir is most clearly evident in the spaces they share and explore, and in the strong narrative pattern of disruption and resolution—although in the cozy the resolution will be comforting and in domestic noir more often unsettling. Our discussion sequentially considers Golden Age fiction, the cozy, and domestic noir, highlighting the key elements of each subgenre and noting similarities and differences. Subsequently, we consider how these subgenres represent the concept of "home" and how they engage with issues of disruption and offer—or do not offer—resolution. We suggest that domestic noir and the cozy are making significant, if differing, contributions to crime fiction's articulation of how we live in the twenty-first century. In a response to

modern anxieties about the self in society, domestic noir and the cozy change or complicate the source of the threat to the individual: in place of the threat from within the community that gave Golden Age crime narrative its tensions and power, these new forms consider the threat posed by pressures from outside the community, focalised through an individual and directed against a female member of that community. In domestic noir, the community is more usually a fragmented family, while in the cozy, family structures are replaced or replicated by social relationships.

Golden Age

The period *c.*1918–1945 has become known as the Golden Age of crime fiction, when novelists such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh produced a particular type of crime narrative whose key elements can be tracked in the cozy and in domestic noir. As Knight argues, this genre was:

> [e]scapist but also displacing real anxieties; enclosed in setting but suggesting that the enclosure in itself contains deep personal threats […] the "golden age" clue-puzzle is a highly complex form combining both consolation and anxiety.[3]

There is a plethora of critical material on Golden Age crime fiction: most relevant here is the work of Stephen Knight (1989, 2010, and in Priestman ed. 2003, pp. 77–94); Gill Plain (2001), and Alison Light (1991), specifically their analyses of Christie and the ideologies and socio-historical contexts that underlie her texts. One of the key aspects of the genre, as Knight suggests, is the enclosed setting that combines the reassurance of being securely together with one's social peers, but which equally locates that community in the confines of a limited setting that can function as a trap (Knight 1989, 2010). It is this aspect of Golden Age fiction that writers of both the cozy and domestic noir draw upon in different ways. The concept of domestic space as trap is explored in domestic noir, while the cozy considers the potential disruption of the social group and the communal values that are at its centre.

Key to all three of these subgenres is their focus on the domestic. An important element of Golden Age that is also a feature of domestic noir and the cozy is female agency: with reference to Christie, Plain observes that "the assumption underlying her interwar fiction is one of female

agency. Women can, and they do."[4] There are new models of agency in domestic noir and the cozy, models that are more suited to their moment. Cozy protagonists have little in common with Christie's elderly spinster-detective Miss Marple or with her other female characters, as their energies are focused on their business and friendships as much as on amateur detecting. In the case of domestic noir, the author Anna Snoekstra considers her own and other contemporary novels to be in the Bluebeard tradition, and notes that "ordinary wives and homemakers becom[e] pre-emptive detectives, investigating their own potential victimhood" (2016). Knight's description of the Golden Age format as the "clue-puzzle"[5] makes clear that its central feature is the puzzle element, which signals faith in rational thought as the mechanism for discovering solutions. This is not a feature of either domestic noir or the cozy, albeit for very different reasons: the flawed characters of domestic noir pursue desires and act in ways that not even they may understand and would not be open to rational detection. Character is secondary to plot in Golden Age crime narrative, whereas in both the cozy and domestic noir the individual and, in the case of the latter, her psychology, are pre-eminent.

While there is a popular belief that the isolated country house is the traditional setting for murder in Golden Age crime fiction, this has been severally challenged: Knight points out that Christie's stories are more likely to take place in small communities, whether villages or a district within a city[6]; Light demonstrates that the family home in Christie is showing signs of being under stress as country mansions are modernised and used as hospitals, care homes and so on (pp. 80–1). We suggest, however, that the defamiliarised houses of domestic noir resonate with those in Christie, certainly as Light sees them. Speaking of Christie's *Nemesis* (1971), Light states that:

> In fact the only "beautifully proportioned" house in the novel is the home of the mentally askew, and this crumbling Queen Anne house, covered with vines and ivies, is far from being the object of authorial drooling […] It is a pathological place, an image of repressed desires and unhealthy loves.[7]

Similarly, in Erin Kelly's domestic noir *The Poison Tree* (2010), the house is described as being a site of decay, alienated and alone:

> Tall and thin and tatty, it stood like a sulky, scruffy teenager not wanting to associate with the other houses […] I wondered if it had been their family home and, if so, whether death had shattered or dissolved that family.[8]

This negative representation of the house in domestic noir can also be seen in the work of Julia Crouch, who based the property central to *The Long Fall* (2014) on an actual house she had seen while on a journalism assignment and which she said appeared to her to be a "gilded cage" rather than a desirable place to live (email correspondence with author). Where the small towns and shops central to the cozy have a fantasy feel (and appeal), place in domestic noir is more often realistic, described in terms of economic cost and as having emotional resonance. However, in both the cozy and in domestic noir the setting of the narrative, whether a small community or a house, must resonate with the reader and be recognisable to her; as in Golden Age crime fiction, the world of the text replicates the social and economic world or superficially presents it as the longed-for ideal of its readers, and so makes the threats and tensions realistic, thus enhancing the cathartic release that resolution offers.

In Golden Age fiction, a single violent death is used to reveal the underlying fault lines of the apparently ordered community within which the narrative is set; in the course of the murder investigation, family secrets are laid bare and people are shown not to be what they seem. The threat is from within, and the implication is that no one can be trusted (Light p. 97, Knight 1980 p. 115). As Knight states, Christie shows "a sense of personal unease and possible danger that emerges even in—especially in—a world secluded from social and international disorder".[9]

Disruption takes the form of murder, usually of an unlikeable individual, which triggers the investigation and which is likely to occur early in the story. Protagonists are written to be sympathetic; victims and killers generally not so, although in the later cozy, the murderer will frequently initially be deceptively charming. However, as in Golden Age narratives, in the cozy there is little, if any, exploration of the psychology of victim, killer, or protagonist. By contrast, psychology is central to domestic noir and while the disruption of the world in the text is again violent death, the murder or murders are often positioned relatively late in the narrative in order to give space for character development, while simultaneously establishing a superficially idealised environment. A key element in domestic noir is the acknowledgement that the world of the text, like reality itself, is chaotic, and that the ideal is fantasy and so unobtainable. This is most clearly apparent in *The Girl on the Train,* in which:

> the protagonist observing the seemingly ideal (yet in reality chaotic) lives beyond the train window, mirrors the domestic noir reader's experience of discovering the dysfunction lying beyond an initially ideal façade.[10]

In Golden Age crime fiction the emphasis is on solving the mystery by rational means, such as analysing physical evidence and exploring suspects' behaviour. Characters whose minor, often social wrongdoings have brought them under suspicion are gradually cleared and the murderer revealed and rapidly removed, leaving the way clear for, often, a young couple: as Light observes, "Murder cheerfully rids the individual or the family once and for all of the burden of its past."[11] Property is dispensed in line with what is not just legally but also morally correct; readers are reassured that right is rewarded and, having shared the process of investigation, that their own powers of observation and logical thought may be sufficient to control disorder that threatens their community.

The cozy offers a similar reassurance to its readers but the threats to the cozy community and implicitly its readers are different. Issues around inheritance and the erosion of social structures epitomised in the large country house and its village environment are no longer relevant, and the cozy looks instead at the effect of the loss of home on the middle-class small-town community in the wake of global financial crisis.

The Cozy

> [M]ajor examples of crime fiction not only create an idea (or a hope, or a dream) about controlling crime, but both realise and validate a whole view of the world, one shared by the people who become the central audience to buy, read, and find comfort in a particular variety of crime fiction.[12]

The concept of controlling crime is not central to the cozy; rather, it is the worldview that these narratives offer the reader and the comfort of their consoling conclusions. The content of the cozy is often evident in the title and the cover. For example, Jennifer McAndrews's *Ill-Gotten Panes* (2014) is described as a "Stained-Glass Mystery", with the punning tagline "Small-town life isn't all it's cracked up to be." The jacket has an illustration of a desk cluttered with craft paraphernalia on which a kitten is rubbing against a glass-shaded lamp, but the kitten has one paw on a brick that has apparently been thrown through the window behind the desk, and shards of broken glass hang from the window frame. This mix of domesticated workplace, cartoon cuteness, and implicit threat of an intruder exemplifies the US cozy.

Where Golden Age crime narratives were commonly linked through their serial detectives, such as Christie's Hercule Poirot, the cozy format is usually a series of narratives set in one place (although some offer the plea-

sures of armchair travel) and featuring a recurring protagonist as well as other characters. These murder mysteries have moved their emphasis away from the multiple suspects and detailed investigation found in the Golden Age to focus on the daily life and work of the protagonist. In many series, the protagonist is single, often divorced, and lives alone in a small property close to her workplace; she has a cat (companion animals are portrayed with varying degrees of verisimilitude), which provides company, and the cozy offers what for some might be seen as a positive model of women living on their own. This protagonist will already be in her hometown, or will have moved back there from the city in the wake of some crisis, either to start a business or take over one she has inherited. Subsequently, using her particular skill, which is also often an inherited family trait, and through hard work, she supports herself and others. Whole sections of the narrative will be devoted to detailed instructions on a craft project, a hobby, or to recipes. A key to the cozy's popularity is the reader involvement that comes from what is in essence a craft class or a cookery lesson: readers are drawn in, in a similar way to the audience of the clue-puzzle, the former sharing the process of creation and the latter that of investigation. Evidence of reader involvement with the cozy can be seen in online reviews, where readers post comments about the recipes or craft project they have tried, or offer personal anecdotes about how the novels have helped with their own experiences of divorce or bereavement. The popularity of the recipes has led to the publication of series tie-in recipe books, some credited to the series character rather than the author. Clearly the comfort afforded by the cozy exceeds the satisfaction of seeing crime punished and is more about the perception of shared experience.

Cozies have retained some elements of Golden Age narrative plots: cozy characters frequently remind readers that they are in a fictional world, which enhances the sense of safety the texts confer. Where used, punning titles also implicitly inform the reader that the content is light and that graphic violence, explicit sex, or bad language will be absent.[13] The words *soothing*, *comfort*, and *cozy* itself are frequently reiterated. By contrast to the clue-puzzle, where the investigating figure is often an outsider (Christie's Miss Marple is an exception to this rule, at least in her earlier appearances), and so must rely on others to provide local knowledge, the protagonist of the cozy is ideally placed, like Miss Marple, to solve local mysteries. The cozy protagonist's investigation is supported by her own local knowledge, her (implicitly feminine) intuition, but by contrast to Miss Marple's essentially rational detective skills, is sometimes assisted by an animal or supernatural agent such as a benevolent spirit.

A significant difference between the cozy and its predecessors is that where in Golden Age fiction the threat comes from within the community, in the cozy it often seems to come from outside (in the form of a planned property development, for example). The world of the cozy is enclosed and gives the appearance of being self-sufficient; the emphasis is on the physical comforts of good food (of local provenance), simple furnishings, companionship, and rituals based in community. This world is represented as a place of security and comfort, unlike the isolated country house or unsettled village of the Golden Age narratives, and is in direct contrast to the Gothicised home that is central to domestic noir. Two texts that articulate the cozy's exploration of recent social anxieties are McAndrews's *Ill-Gotten Panes* (2014) and Laura Childs's *Eggs in Purgatory* (2008).

Home is central to *Ill-Gotten Panes*, whose protagonist Georgia Kelly is a New York city banker who loses her job and boyfriend in the wake of a banking scandal. She subsequently returns to her grandfather's house in "the old-fashioned, brick-making Hudson River hamlet of Wenwood" (jacket "blurb"). The recurring trope of the return to a small-town home in the cozy resonates with and speaks back to the Golden Age nostalgia for an imagined, innocent past which Light suggests is "that safe and unchanged home, from which we are all exiled by adulthood and culture".[14] In *Ill-Gotten Panes*, Georgia needs emotional and financial support, which her grandfather and the town's community provide, while also showing her the rewards for individual enterprise and hard work. The murder mystery centres on the death of an opponent to a planned marina development that has been promoted as a way to bring new jobs to the town following the closure of the brickworks. In place of the multiple suspects with personal motives seen in Golden Age fiction, the story keeps its focus on local businesses and finally the murderer is revealed as a businessman who stood to profit from the development.

Georgia's understanding of the community develops as she sets up a stained-glass workshop in her grandmother's basement room and applies herself to skilled, practical work; this shift to authenticity away from her past work in banking binds her into the network of mutually supporting small businesses that now sustain the town. Georgia's move back, metaphorically, to her grandparents' time, where shop doors open with a welcoming bell instead of the beep of an electronic security device, typifies the cozy's model of the restorative place. The world is one of "Cobbled road[s], faded awnings, trees so heavy with summer leaves their branches ought to have

brushed the sidewalk. Wenwood was nothing like the city I had left behind" (p. 291). Georgia initially spends her time there "sleeping like a drugged princess" (p. 60). The reference to a princess emphasises the fairy-tale aspects of the cozy; not only is the setting from a long-gone past, but there is a Disneyfied feeling to the descriptions of place and sometimes of people. The first sign of disruption comes as Georgia walks up the street, matching the people she meets with the various "battered" and "faded" vehicles parked by the kerb, but she is unable to imagine who might own the Jaguar (p. 10). This luxury imported car can be seen as a potentially troubling symbol of globalisation and of the foreign inserting itself into the local, and this is where the more recent cozies depart from their origins in the 1960s.

In the final confrontation of *Ill-Gotten Panes,* the killer, local store-owner Bill Harper, confronts Georgia and says she will not be able to stop his plans for the town's development as she is an "outsider", but she is able to fight him off as she has in fact become part of the community. A trope of the cozy is to show the protagonist overcoming the killer using a tool or symbol of her business, for example a chef using a heavy pan, or (improbably) a florist using a long-stemmed rose as a weapon. Here, Georgia throws hard walnuts at Bill, successfully keeping him at bay until the police arrive. These walnuts have been mentioned several times in the narrative: they are not indigenous to the area but have successfully established themselves. Just as non-native plants become deeply rooted, so can people, as this text sets out in plain terms: by the close of the narrative, Georgia is thinking she might "[p]ut down roots" in the place that "always welcomed me home" (p. 291).

Childs's *Eggs in Purgatory* is set in the same kind of hometown depicted in *Ill-Gotten Panes*, although in the Midwest rather than upstate New York. The protagonist, recently widowed Suzanne, is confronted by the unsympathetic district manager of the oil and gas supply company, who has raised his prices, with the result that the filling station owned by Suzanne's husband and left to her in his will has run dry. They are in the heart of America, near the small town of Kindred, but the sense of community that the cozy represents as essential to the well-being of the individual and the town itself has been lost from this heartland. Suzanne reopens the gas station as The Cackleberry Club, a place that appeals to different social groups as it combines a breakfast diner with afternoon tea shop and offers space for book clubs and knitting groups. Cozy protagonists often start or take over businesses in those areas that have been most hit by market and technological changes, for example the food and drink industry, where goods and services are now increasingly sold via franchises run to tight parameters.

A trope of the cozy is for the murder to undermine or directly threaten the protagonist's business: victims may be poisoned by foodstuffs, suspicion may drive customers away and so on. In *Eggs in Purgatory*, Suzanne finds her lawyer murdered, his blood mingled with the tomato sauce on his takeaway food. The lawyer had been helping Suzanne with "red tape" generated by her recent bereavement, and the text's negative view of outside influences contrasts with that in *Ill-Gotten Panes*. *Ill-Gotten Panes*' model is that of the rising economic tide that lifts all boats and brings benefits to all, while acknowledging the anxieties that change brings; in *Eggs in Purgatory,* development means increased property taxes and strains on people and resources that result in rising crime and dislocation. The murder plot centres around a multi-million dollar "kickback" given to Vern, a property developer who has recently moved to Kindred from Chicago. The bribe is to ensure the building of a for-profit prison that has been a controversial job-creation measure. It is Vern who has killed Suzanne's lawyer, who was investigating the deal, and Vern then diverts suspicion onto Suzanne's late husband. She subsequently faces potentially ruinous legal costs as she battles on several fronts to maintain the business and support her community, beleaguered by a faceless corporation buying land, and even alien invaders of the conspiracy-theory kind. The wider world has come to Kindred in part through the town's need to repair its finances with the prison scheme, but local people have lost control and the project has brought massive profits only to a few, leaving the majority of the community bewildered and angry. A farmer is shown wishing he could move away from the town he no longer recognises as his own, and women at the cafe joke about a religious group having a website and "outsourcing their prayers to India!" (p. 115). In the cozy, the setting may be a small town or a neighbourhood in a city, but wherever the location, it cannot be impervious to outside forces.

A key feature of the clue-puzzle is rational detection, and the cozy shows a difference in its use of highly convenient intuition. Suzanne finds the vital evidence against the developer, Vern, when studying a photograph at the house of the murdered lawyer: "Then, for some reason unbeknownst to her, she lifted it off the wall" (p. 257). Behind the photograph is a photocopy of a cheque from the development company for "millions", made out to Vern. When her discovery results in a confrontation with Vern, Suzanne manages to escape his attack until the police arrive and shoot him. Cozies generally end shortly after the murderer has been arrested.

Both these texts feature a female protagonist running a successful business, standing up to people more powerful than her, and triumphing over the perils and setbacks. The relative scale of the threats and the fantastic nature of some solutions, however, suggest a certain lack of reality and stray into an idealised world where conundrums are simply elided from the text: if there is a large enough market for a coffee shop in *Eggs in Purgatory*, for example, then why hasn't one of the major coffeehouse chains moved in? Nonetheless, there is comfort to be had from the cozy model of a woman making herself a home and livelihood that is seemingly capable of withstanding the forces of global markets.

In the final scene of *Eggs in Purgatory*, Suzanne has survived a shooting and is back at the cafe with her friends; both the community and the physical place Suzanne has made for herself have supported her. The narrative suggests that individuals, fortified by their values, can act with others to bring economic, social, and spiritual life back to their community. The hard edge of this cozy comes when the sheriff shoots and kills Vern. The armed response can be seen as a symptom of the community's underlying insecurity: fear of the intruder who may take the precious little that has been worked for (cozy protagonists tend to live modestly). Nonetheless, violence plays a minor role in the cozy by contrast to its centrality in domestic noir.

Domestic Noir

The domestic noir novel takes the concept of the isolated house as the setting for the crime, as in Golden Age fiction, to an extreme. Indeed, the house itself plays a role in the gradual disintegration of the female protagonist or victim. In both the use of the house and the dominance of the female protagonist, domestic noir owes something to the Gothic, not least the Gothic trope of the house as metaphor for the individual. By contrast to the cozy, there is no sense of community in domestic noir; the focus is entirely on the individual and his, or more usually her, psychological passage through the narrative. The house, which in the cozy is a support both domestically and financially, is here as alienating as its occupants are alienated, as seen in Julia Crouch's *The Long Fall* (2014) and Erin Kelly's *The Poison Tree* (2010).

Domestic noirs are stand-alone texts which focus on the psychology of the characters, and which deal with serious issues such as domestic violence, divorce and new families, insecurities and issues of taking responsi-

bility for our own lives and for those of children. Often representing female protagonists alone and motivated by personal desires, they have elements in common with Patricia Highsmith's fiction as described by Horsley: they are a form of "literary noir, a non-investigative psychological crime novel".[15] Typically, a domestic noir either lacks an official or police investigation or it is flawed and results in some form of injustice. The often muddled personal motive makes the crime unsolvable by the application of rational thought: seeking motives or asking who benefits is not helpful here. There can be no restoration of order, as the world of domestic noir is only superficially ordered in the first place: the trajectory is from one unstable state to another, by way of a violent disruption.

Domestic noirs may begin with a prologue that foreshadows the violence to come, as early chapters give space to setting up the ideal home and family that will be subsequently torn apart. Wanting to reveal the far from perfect interiors of both the apparently ideal homes and the model families who live in them, domestic noirs initially devote space to descriptions of desirable property and the couples who seem to have it all. The space and the relationship will then be disturbed by whatever cannot be kept out. The home is shown to already be a place of tensions and potential violence; the tipping point is triggered by external factors, most frequently in the form of economic or market forces that threaten ownership of the house. The form speaks to a generation priced out of the housing market: these characters are not the small-business owners of the cozy, but are perhaps closer to those educated professionals who are usually depicted as the winners in a globalised world.

In terms of its relationship to Golden Age narratives, domestic noir takes the enclosed setting to claustrophobic extremes. The key difference is that while female characters may spend much time in the house, they are not at home there. However, what the subgenre shares with Golden Age and with the cozy is a model of female agency. Anna Snoekstra, discussing the history of domestic noir, declares herself:

> proud to be part of this genealogy of writers who are repositioning women in crime narratives. Focusing on them as subjective in the story of their victimisation rather than being the ultimate objectification: a dead body.

Although she is active, the female protagonist of domestic noir may use her agency in destructive or self-destructive ways, in pursuit of and to protect her notions of love, family, and home. Also in contrast with the

cozy is the protagonist's isolation. Both Karen in *The Poison Tree* and Kate in *The Long Fall* have left their parents' homes and their home towns; their friendships are few and end in disaster, and they are both cut off from associations with work colleagues and from local communities, spending much time alone. Domestic noirs offer a study in alienation, and suggest that alienation is a consequence of modern life and the disintegration of community. In this sense, they offer a realistic, if stark and uncomfortable, representation of the modern world.

> List 1
> **What you'll be leaving behind:**
> A small town in the north of England.
> The whole north of England, in fact.
> Clammy attentions suffered as only child of ageing parents.
> Crouch, *The Long Fall*.[16]

The Long Fall is set in England and Greece and is much concerned with journeys and with home, or escape from a home that is felt to be repressive and confining. If, as Light suggests, the journey out signals desire,[17] domestic noir heroines are driven by their desires. The two strands of *The Long Fall* show women leaving home: in 1980, Emma leaves the "clammy attentions" of her parents to travel alone to Greece before taking her place at university. In 2013, Kate's teenaged daughter plans a similar trip alone, and by the book's end, Kate has also left her house and husband. Domestic noir reverses the trajectory of the cozy: it tracks the journey out, not the return home. Choosing to leave her home town and any support from family, a domestic noir protagonist may find herself adrift, and *The Long Fall* uses language and imagery of leaving the nest, flight, and the fall when there is nobody to catch you.

At the end of the cozy *Eggs in Purgatory*, Suzanne leans against the door of the cafe, literally supported by it, just as she is supported financially by the business and emotionally by her colleagues, friends, and neighbours. In an analogous scene in *The Long Fall,* "Kate put both her hands out, searching for walls to support herself. The circular room had none, and the windows were too far away and obstructed by sharp cacti."[18] The house does not provide her with the physical support and comfort she needs; neither, crucially, does it provide financial support. When faced with blackmail and in desperate need of money, Kate finds that what she had thought was joint property with her husband is in fact his alone. As the blackmailer's demands increase and their daughter is threatened, Kate cannot tell her husband

what is happening as it would mean revealing her past and her actual identity: she balks at telling him that their whole marriage was built on a lie. Neither the marriage nor the finances behind the house are sound, and the underlying weaknesses in both combine to threaten everything, as Kate needs to draw on those financial resources she shares with her husband in order to protect her past, just as a business crisis pushes him to reveal he considers their financial reserves to be his sole property.

In the dark reverse of the cozy, the noir protagonist does not find a place where she feels at home. Instead, she moves away from her childhood home, then lives in a house where she has no real security and is usually no longer in that house by the close of the narrative, but is facing an unclear future elsewhere. Images of freedom, insecurity, safety, and traps recur throughout the narrative in gendered terms, and young women learn they are at risk if they explore too freely: Kate lives as "a rich man's wife", "rattling around" in a large house in an area of London where crime is seen as a problem and so restricts her freedom to walk there. Money is shown to provide safety—taking taxis is shown to be safer than walking, hotels offer more security and privacy than hostels—and is a means to keep away from public spaces. The house itself shows this shift: "the towering white walls of a room that had once been the assembly hall for three hundred primary school children".[19] Conversion of a school to a family home shows the move from communal and public to private. There are trends in the USA and UK for those who can afford to opt out of public services (transport, schools, healthcare, parks) to do so, and *The Long Fall* shows how money offers protection. This is a new version of the socially enclosed world of Golden Age fiction, where victim, killer, and likely suspects are all drawn from within the same social group; in domestic noir, money isolates the individual or family from the community.

Further, intimacy is lacking between Kate and Mark themselves, who at one point are not talking, but only communicating via their sleeping habits and bedding: as her stress builds, Kate requires sleeping pills and so does not hear her husband get in at night or see him leave for work the next day:

> She had the consolation of knowing that he had been home, though. As was his nightly habit, he had thrown two of his three pillows onto the floor when he went to sleep. Following her own morning routine, she replaced them when she made the bed in her classic five-star hotel turndown style.[20]

At heart, this is an incident to which many readers might relate: shift work, a second job, pressures of childcare may mean that couples spend little time together.

The Poison Tree follows Karen, a talented linguist who leaves her parents and home town for university and travel, remaining an outsider at home (in a shared student house, where class barriers divide her from others) and abroad. She seems to find a home after meeting Biba, an aspiring actress, and moving into the house in Highgate where Biba lives with her brother Rex and several others. This house is the focus of one of the narrative strands, and the motive for two killings: following Biba and Rex's mother's suicide, the house passed to their father, who now lives in a gated home with his new wife and children. Biba and Rex stay rent-free, which means they don't have tenants' rights, and in hopes their father will make the house over to them. The unstable situation worsens after Biba's boyfriend, Guy, also moves in. The other story strand, ten years later, begins with Rex's release from prison and his move-in with Karen and 10-year-old Alice.

While there are three violent deaths in the novel, the most significant intrusions into the house prove to be those of Guy moving in with Biba and, later, Rex moving in with Karen and Alice. This latter strand shows Karen working from home as a freelance translator and so deals with tensions that can arise from changing work patterns. Compromise and conflict may be features of contemporary homes, as discussed by domestic noir authors on the breakdown of the woman at home/man out at work binary.[21] Here, Karen says:

> Our cottage is called an artisan's dwelling, which is estate agent-speak for tiny and shabby. Its size reflects the kind of mortgage that freelance translators, even good ones, can get. […] I didn't realise how small it was until now. It went from cosy to poky the minute Rex stepped inside.[22]

The Poison Tree puts into physical terms the way in which even a loved one can crowd out another person or household, as also shown when Biba's boyfriend moves in: "For someone who spent almost all his time in Biba's bedroom, Guy managed to fill every room in the house with his possessions." Reversing the image of Kate adrift in her large house in *The Long Fall,* Kelly shows people too large to be contained in small spaces, as when Biba is in a car, her feet and arms protrude from the windows. The narrative's references to Lewis Carroll's Alice books (the daughter is named for

that character) reinforce the metaphorical and psychological growing and shrinking that people undergo as they compromise and make adjustments to living with others.

Domestic noir shows characters in extreme situations, but this representation of domestic reality is one to which many readers will relate. Karen and Rex are far from typical parents, but their behaviour demonstrates the strains of negotiating childcare when both parents are at home. Karen also makes a reluctant and stress-filled return home to her own parents: this is not the return home seen in the cozy, where the protagonist settles back and reconnects with her innate skills and values. Karen's series of home moves are analogous to those made by many young people: initially away from the parental home, a period spent in rental or shared accommodation, a move in with a partner, then an enforced move back to the parental home as finances and relationships collapse.

The exploration of the psychology of the protagonists and other characters, who present an untroubled exterior to the world, is paralleled by the representation of the stylish exteriors of the apparently ideal homes and the discord that exists within them: the mismatch between the perfect proportions of the property and its "mentally askew" residents, as Light noted of Christie.[23] Kelly shows the large and valuable London house, home to an unhappy marriage and suicide even before present-day violence erupts from skewed forms of love. The murders are the product of an insecurity about the house as a symbol of betrayed family love, as they come from Biba's rage and despair at realising she has lost the house and her father's love, the two being inextricably linked in her mind.

In domestic noir there is no hero detective, and there is minimal official or effective investigation. The interest here lies in the psyches of the individuals and they themselves reveal their motivations and desires. Equally, by contrast to the cozy or indeed Golden Age fiction, there is no comforting closure. Characters and readers alike might seek the truth of events, but it is most likely that domestic noir will end with deaths unsolved and no justice for victims. The readers may be left with the uneasy feeling that this cannot be the end of the story when they reach the final page. *The Poison Tree*'s closing paragraphs might in a way suggest the new family order that can arise at the end of a Golden Age mystery: Karen is carrying Rex's child. However, this new family suggests that it will prove to be even less stable than the original, as Rex will surely discover he is not Alice's father, leading to the realisation that Alice is actually his sister Biba's daughter. Domestic noir does not begin with order, then introduce disor-

der and conclude with restoration; in fact it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint what exactly triggers subsequent events. In *The Poison Tree*, it might be the chance meeting of Karen and Biba, but there are indications that tragedy was already looming.

As it is hard to apportion blame, so it follows that justice is not meted out as in the cozy or Golden Age fiction, where the virtuous are rewarded, often with property, money, or love. Kate's unsupportive husband in *The Long Fall* is bailed out of his financial problems and may even come out ahead; Rex and Biba's father in *The Poison Tree* does well financially out of the family home that has been the site and cause of tragedy for others. Julia Crouch identified the shift from the model of the ordered world disrupted by crime and then put back: there is no redemption, even in etiolated form, in domestic noir as readers realise the modern world is a "much messier place" than fiction more usually suggests.[24]

Conclusion

Golden Age crime fiction responded to social changes and offered reassurance to readers, with Christie in particular able to show the "unease and possible danger that emerges even in—especially in—a world secluded from social and international disorder".[25]

In the twenty-first century, it is harder to believe in this secluded world. The Great Recession of the late 2000s brought insecurity to the middle classes, who may feel under threat from social and market forces beyond their control. Some may feel anger as whole sectors of employment disappear and are replaced by insecure jobs on freelance or contract bases—sometimes working from home, sometimes spending so long at work that work and home spaces are blurred. The family home may feel under threat or an unrecognizable place.

The cozy shows tensions as the outside world intrudes. Economic and social changes have changed US communities, and Childs's *Eggs in Purgatory* gives explicit voice to those who no longer feel at home. Global forces are cut down to size (the effects of lost industries and communities are shrunk to a lone, corrupt property dealer from out of state) and the cozy shows their defeat by a combination of hard work and values. The series structure is key, as comfort and reassurance are given at the end of each book as the intruder is defeated, resetting the protagonist and her business, showing her efforts rewarded financially and personally. A sense of community is created through the "shared" activities included with the

mystery, and online sites where readers engage with the books and each other: these online groups are symptomatic of the shift from actual communal spaces to the virtual networks that people inhabit via social media.

There is little comfort or reassurance of any kind given by domestic noir, which shows the dangers clearly, with explorations of marriages and families under stress. Erin Kelly and Julia Crouch contribute to the genre that is taking crime fiction into an examination of the claustrophobia, anxieties, and rages experienced by ordinary people coping with pressures of employment and unemployment. Domestic noir takes those everyday, domestic incidents of Golden Age crime fiction—such as family meals, marriage, and the routines of sharing a home—and raises the stakes and the danger, generating its powerful effect on readers by showing the eruption of violence as uncontrollable forces burst into the confined spaces of the home.

Notes

1. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 147–8; 221.
2. Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 253.
3. Martin Priestman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 91.
4. Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001; repr. 2011), p. 47.
5. Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980, 2010), p. 107.
6. Martin Priestman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 77–78.
7. Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001; repr. 2011), p. 63.
8. Erin Kelly, *The Poison Tree* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010; 2011), p. 35.
9. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1980, 2010), p. 91.
10. Sarah Moore, crime scholar, UEA.
11. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991; 2013), p. 102.
12. Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), p. 2.

13. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 147.
14. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991; 2013).
15. Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 254.
16. Julia Crouch, *The Long Fall* (London: Headline, 2014), p. 7.
17. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991; 2013), p. 91.
18. Julia Crouch, *The Long Fall* (London: Headline, 2014), p. 374
19. Julia Crouch, *The Long Fall* (London: Headline, 2014), p. 252.
20. Julia Crouch, *The Long Fall* (London: Headline, 2014), p. 292.
21. Domestic Suspense panel authors Julia Crouch, Sarah Hilary, and Christobel Kent at Noirwich Festival 2016 discussed how there is much more "to-ing and fro-ing" now as people divide work in and outside of the home.
22. Erin Kelly, *The Poison Tree* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010; 2011), p. 49.
23. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991; 2013), p. 63.
24. Julia Crouch on Noirwich 2016 panel.
25. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity second edition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 91.

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PART V

Geographies of Domestic Noir

CHAPTER 12

The House and the Hallucination in Tana French's New Irish Gothic

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A game's a game, but what's a hallucination? You begin by laughing, then it gets in you and you can't laugh it off.
— Elizabeth Bowen

The texture of [Uncle Silas] is never entirely distinguishable from its material, the world in which it takes place.
— W. J. McCormack

Stepping back from the absorbing crime plots of her individual novels, we might perceive Tana French's oeuvre as taking readers on a noir tour of Dublin-area housing. Following the rotating first-person narrators, all detectives from the fictional Dublin Murder Squad, readers move from the established suburban housing developments of *In the Woods* (2007) through the historically infused Anglo-Irish Big House of *The Likeness* (2008), working-class, urban, row houses of *Faithful Place* (2010), and post-Celtic Tiger "ghost estate" of *Broken Harbour* (2012) to the boarding-school faux-domesticity of *The Secret Place* (2014) and the Victorian terrace cottage row of *The Trespasser* (2016). While several of these locations qualify directly as candidates for what Bernice Murphy

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identifies as the subgenre of suburban gothic,[1] all of the novels have notably gothic elements in their police-procedural frames, and the emphasis on their domestic features places them squarely in the realm of domestic noir.

In a recent *Times Literary Supplement* (*TLS*) review, Ian Sansom identifies several central features of women's crime novels from the 1940s and 1950s: these works address "not just the threat but also the impossibility of self-destruction; the violence inherent not just in marital but in all family relationships; an appreciation not just of the underworld but of the everyday uncanny, too; and the possibilities of social as well as sexual transgression".[2] Without invoking the label *domestic noir*, Sansom goes on to note that "much of the most interesting popular fiction of the past couple of decades […] explores exactly this territory and has often depicted scenes and scenarios that envisage a violent return to life with women as both victims *and* perpetrators". Tana French is among the authors Sansom names as producers of this work, and his catalogue serves as a useful working definition of domestic noir. Analysing French's deployment of these motifs illuminates her contributions to the developing subgenre; adding the specifically Irish frame and forebears important to her novels enriches the analysis.

In domestic noir, women are in danger; they are also dangerous. They are victims; they are also perpetrators. They are acted upon; they are also actors. Samson's precise formulation of this duality as "a violent return to life with women as both victims *and* perpetrators" has particular resonance for three of French's novels where a female character is central: *The Likeness, Broken Harbour*, and *The Trespasser*. The violent return to life is particularly evident in *The Likeness* and *Broken Harbour*, but a shared emphasis on acting—creating and re-creating a role—and a concomitant blurring of fantasy and reality, is found in all three. Emphasis on specifically Irish housing conditions overlaps with the doubling and mirroring of traditional gothic, and the domestic nature of the violence makes these three novels central to this chapter. The particular focus here is the relation of domestic spaces in French's novels to earlier constructions of Irish gothic by Sheridan Le Fanu and Elizabeth Bowen. My central argument is that French flips several of the conventional attributes of Irish gothic, and she does so in ways that signal the upending of Irish literary history into the contemporary; in her novels, recognizable tropes of the Irish gothic are transformed into the violence of contemporary domestic noir.

French in Context: The Irish Gothic

Sansom's description above signals plainly the tendency towards genre overlap, combination, and re(combination) that marks the domestic noir. Indeed, Sansom's repeated "not just […] but also" could serve as the newly emerging genre's catchphrase. The territory of domestic noir is fed by many sources, the gothic being one of the more important tributaries. For Tana French's noir housing tour, some context on specifically Irish gothic forebears is pertinent. David Punter suggests that with the distinctive Scots-Irish strand of gothic fiction, it is helpful to "use different terms, principally the monument and the ruin" which are particularly relevant for Scotland and Ireland where "national aspirations are thwarted by conquest or by settlement."[3] History, in such a context, is "constantly under threat of erasure" (p. 105). This relation to history pertains to apprehension of time; the history itself makes land- and home-ownership especially freighted with meaning. In the Irish context, Punter explains, the myth concerning the fallen grandeur of past civilizations "undermines the entire sense of memory and interpretation on which history is based" (p. 120). While these insights contribute to better understanding of this branch of the gothic, Punter's formulation about Scots and Irish gothic elides an interesting historical difference in relation to nineteenth-century Scottish and Irish authors. When Punter discusses the Irish gothic from Maturin forward through the nineteenth century, these writers are Anglo-Irish. However complex their attitudes and relation to Ireland may be, it is as Anglo-Irish that they record the tremors as power—and land—transitions in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland, not as part of the older Catholic majority. One of the striking features of Tana French's Ireland is the relative lack of historical awareness—on social and individual levels—and the absence of formal religious ties and practices.[4] Characters in several books describe rampant consumerism as the nearest thing to religion the society has, and while Catholicism has long provided fodder for gothic tropes, it carries so little weight here it barely even features.[5] "Dublin is modern to the point of hysteria",[6] Cassie Maddox observes, and French makes clear some of the consequences of this relative rootlessness.

The gothic works of Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–1873) and Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973) are of particular interest as Irish literary predecessors for French, with their treatment of house and self, and house and time, tropes that French flips into contemporary domestic noir. Guillermo Del

Toro emphasizes Le Fanu's individuality as gothic author, connecting that distinctiveness specifically to his Irishness:

> The tenuous but precise ways in which Le Fanu builds up the supernatural elements is akin to the pervasive effects of mildew on a solid wall. It is not by force but by accumulation that he demolishes disbelief and tears down the barrier that separates us from fear. The relentless but delicate construction of atmosphere and dread that Le Fanu creates comes partly from a calculated and precise style of writing and partly from the lifelong relationship he has with the darkest folktales of his native Ireland.[7]

Del Toro's diagnosis of Le Fanu's methods is noteworthy, and chimes with those offered by noted Irish scholar W.J. McCormack and Elizabeth Bowen herself. I want to insist on not overlooking the specifically Irish gothic forebears of French's fiction, as too often their Irishness is elided. Del Toro offers the remarks quoted above on Le Fanu as editor for the Penguin Horror series, for example, but in the same volume, Laura Miller's introduction to Shirley Jackson's *Haunting of Hill House* casually dismisses any connection that Le Fanu might have to Jackson's novel about "a lonely, imaginative young woman in a big isolated house", on the basis that Le Fanu wrote "traditional English ghost stories".[8] (Among other things, Miller has evidently not read *Uncle Silas*.) Another illustration of this tendency to minimize the Irish is how, in a useful resource like the Palgrave *Teaching the Gothic* volume, among a dozen chapters, nine of which focus on specific topics, Ireland does not merit a chapter.[9] There is American gothic, and both Imperial and Postcolonial, but the index makes clear how little Ireland fits into the scheme. Neither Elizabeth Bowen nor William Carleton are to be found, and page references to Robert Charles Maturin and Sheridan Le Fanu direct readers to chapters focusing on Romantic gothic, Victorian gothic, and American gothic, while Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* is placed in the theory chapter and the sexuality chapter. Certainly these Irish writers contribute to broad understandings of period, theory, and sexuality, but foregrounding their common literary and historical heritage brings into focus not just Punter's monuments and ruins, but precursors of the main foci of this chapter.

Elizabeth Bowen's 1946 introduction to *Uncle Silas* pays tribute to Le Fanu as an author both rooted in his Anglo-Irish inheritance and ahead of his time. "For the psychological background of *Uncle Silas* it was necessary for him to invent nothing", she writes; "rather, he was at once exploit-

ing in art and exploring for its more terrible implications what would have been the norm of his heredity".[10] She also observes correctly that "the status of the psychological thriller is, to-day, high. *Uncle Silas* was in advance of, not behind, its time: it is not the last, belated Gothic romance but the first (or among the first) of the psychological thrillers" (p. 6). The post-war valuation of the psychological thriller to which Bowen refers is resurgent, and it is particularly successful in the hands of women writers.

The stories Bowen published as *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, written as she worked on the larger project of *The Heat of the Day*, are inextricably connected to their wartime London setting but, just as Bowen says of Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* that it is "an Irish story transposed to an English setting" (p. 4), we may consider Bowen's own Anglo-Irishness as informing her relation to the gothic. Her work also reflects an important shift in time, not simply in the sense of moving forward a hundred years closer to our time, but also in a present-time orientation for haunting. As W.J. McCormack argues, "Le Fanu's characters were usually haunted by the past, but some at least of Bowen's will be haunted in the present tense—and by it."[11] McCormack identifies a significant change in the Irish gothic, and French's work is the beneficiary of it. The contrast from constant awareness of the past—whether focused as a haunting or, just as likely, as a deliberate glorification of past ideologies and events—to a rootless present and frightening future contributes to the fears exposed by French's domestic noir. In *The Likeness*, the character of John Naylor represents one view, what we might call the traditional view in the gothic and in Irish literature: his obsession with the historical wrongs of the family in the Big House leads to a campaign of theft and vandalism and culminates in a historical throwback to the War of Independence, the complete destruction of the house through arson. The contemporary inhabitants of Whitethorn House offer a second, opposing viewpoint. They are interested in the house's history, but narrowly focused on it as a house and disconnected in vital ways from its larger history.[12] We see this, for example, when Daniel says of the old photograph album Lexie found, "'This house has enough history for a whole village; it shouldn't be lost. Look at this one: the cherry trees, just planted'" (p. 225). The group around Daniel March has constituted themselves as a family (fatally flawed), and "no pasts" is one of their most powerful credos. What Whitethorn House demonstrates clearly, however, is that when both symbolic and material value become too associated with the past you have one kind of trouble—Naylor's old-fashioned threat—but when the present becomes unmoored

you invite a different kind of trouble, such as the materialist future vision of cousin Ned. If Naylor's attitude prioritizes the past, and the Whitethorn family emphasizes the present, Ned represents the dread hand of the future. Ned wants to see Whitethorn House turned into "a golf club or a spa hotel" because "that's where the serious long-term profit is, specially if I can get a helipad put in. Otherwise, we're talking major luxury apartments" (p. 469). *Broken Harbour*'s narrator, Mick Kennedy, asserts that he is "a big believer in development […]. I'd rather see an apartment block any day, all charged up with people who go out to work every morning and keep this country buzzing."[13] The consequences of this view of history and real estate is also explored by French; tellingly, however, Kennedy makes one exception, names one place that should never change, and that is because of his personal childhood experience of Broken Harbour. His attitude is fairly typical of one found in most of French's books, where readers find characters not committed to complete denial of the past but who define the past as their personal pasts, setting a limit on the time frame that can be included in the past (e.g. one's own lifetime) and minimizing larger socio-political forces to zero in on personal impact.

McCormack links history to fictional character in Bowen's work in terms that also resonate significantly in French's novels. In the introduction to *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats and Bowen*, McCormack argues that:

> nineteenth-century Ireland went through a series of traumatic processes of modernization which have been denied and repressed in their aftermath. In Bowen's work a political transformation, by which the land of her birth changes from a metropolitan colony to semi-independent nation-state, is acutely apprehended in the operations of fictional character. Notions of character, generally based on assumptions of male bourgeois rectitude and power, inevitably implicate notions of participatory citizenship which in turn raise questions about the ideological nature of the state and the operations of civil society. (p. ix)

The "traumatic processes of modernization" in the nineteenth century are processed in Le Fanu's gothic tales, whether these are set in Ireland or, at the request of his publisher, transported to England. Bowen's work during the war years reflects her engagement with the "modernization" of Ireland and also, perhaps, of blitzed London. Both authors use the house—the complicated and unpredictably dangerous domestic space—and the self as

focal points for, to borrow Bowen's own verbs, "exploiting and exploring" the gothic during periods of upheaval and reassessment. In French's fictional world, I would argue, Ireland's abrupt rush forward into the twenty-first century via the Celtic Tiger boom and subsequent bust provide a similar forcing ground for a contemporary engagement with Irish houses and selves under pressure.

The House

The house, loosely defined, is the nexus for gothic plots and people. In French's real-estate tour, everything flows through it, both literally and metaphorically. Acting is a major concept in French's exploration of character psychology, and it also has relevance here as the houses become stages. The murder scenes, including actors, settings, and props, scream domesticity, and the role-playing female characters at the centre of the violence are—paradoxically—dangerous victims. The descriptions of the central crimes in *The Likeness*, *Broken Harbour*, and *The Trespasser* emphasize the homely and quotidian, the confusion of the participants, and the shocking contrast between scene and action. In the carefully maintained modern kitchen of the Spain family, "Pat was still on the kitchen floor. The knife was right there beside him. I picked it up and he turned around and I stuck it into his chest. He stood up and he went, 'What …?' He was staring at his chest and he looked so amazed, like he couldn't work out what had happened" (p. 494). A kitchen knife also features in the attack in *The Likeness*, and French offers another less-than-efficient stabber: the entire group is crossing paths in the kitchen after dinner as part of the group is doing the washing-up. There is a sudden confrontation and then, "'the next thing I remember,' Justin said, very quietly, 'is the back door slamming and this knife lying in the middle of the kitchen floor. With *blood* on it. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe this was actually happening'" (p. 593). The knife was "'just one of those manky old steak knives with the wooden handles'" (p. 612). In *The Trespasser*, domestic scene and homey weapon are even more intimate: a fist and a hearthstone. A punch strong enough to fracture Aislinn's jawbone and break teeth; the injury that killed her was on the back of her skull, "a sharp right-angled edge, consistent with the fireplace surround on which the victim was found".[14] There are two scenarios suggested by the medical evidence, either a punch that sends her crashing onto the hearth, or a push followed by a punch of her head after it has hit the fireplace surround. In all of these crime scenes, the

woman at the centre of the violence is abruptly revealed to be not whom she seemed to be; at home, literally, but no longer playing the correct role.

These domestic scenes take place in houses with very different exteriors. French weaves these houses together skilfully, however, into a net of domestic noir. Whitethorn House, built in 1734, is presented from the dream prologue (reminiscent of the opening of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*) in terms that capture the gothic duality. During her first day alone in it, Cassie says "that house had the effortlessly off-kilter feel of a something out of a storybook—I kept expecting to fall down a secret staircase, or come out of a room into a completely new corridor that only existed on alternate Mondays" (p. 190). These images of the house recur throughout the novel: "The first thing I thought when I stepped into Whitethorn House: *I've been here before*" (p. 162); Daniel "watched Lexie die, sooner than allow a siege on his spellbound castle" (p. 658). Aislinn Murray's place in Viking Gardens, "a scruffy cul-de-sac [of] Victorian terraced cottages fronting straight onto patched-up pavements" (p. 12) would seem at first glance to have no connection to either the Wicklow remnant Big House of the Daniel March "family" or the northern new suburban McMansion of the Spain family. Murray's house decor "looks like it was bought through some Decorate Your Home app where you plug in your budget and your favorite colors and the whole thing arrives in a van the next day" (p. 14). It is a smaller-scale version of the Spain family's magazine-ready house, where not just the public spaces but the private ones are conventionally, generically perfect. The Spain children's bedrooms—Man U football for the son, pink frills for the daughter—are carefully staged, and the parents' room, "picture perfect […] done up in flowery pink and cream and gold to look olde-fashionede [sic]" (p. 30), suggest nothing so much as an aping of the Whitethorn House style staged with an artificial polish the original would never achieve.

That the danger is *in* the house is nothing new, either in the tradition of the Big House novel or to the gothic-becoming-domestic-noir genre. But the importance of the house here is more than a valuable asset—though it is that—or a dangerous space filled with secrets that haunt its residents. Daniel March lays out these realities for Cassie, in terms that link Whitethorn House back to the historical situation of the Anglo-Irish Big House but also suggest how young couples like the Spains in *Broken Harbour* end up sacrificing too much to get on the "property ladder". Daniel offers as a foundational principle that "once you own your home, free and clear, what is there left for anyone—landlords, employers, banks—

to threaten you with? What hold does anyone have over you?" (p. 503). He bases this belief primarily on his characterization of contemporary Irish society: "'Have you ever considered,' he inquired, 'the sheer level of fear in this country? […] We have one of the highest debt-to-income ratios in the world'" (p. 501). When Cassie is slightly sceptical, he gives her a lesson in Irish history in which he argues that the English turning the Irish into mere tenantry made "everything else" an inevitable consequence. He does not remind her of the famine cottage in which Lexie's body is found, though readers will not have forgotten it.

It *is* about land, in other words, as rooted in the Irish historical context, but the characters inhabit a new relation to it. This is also why it matters that the narrators' relation to the central housing scene, both literally and metaphorically, emphasizes the gothic tendencies towards doubling, mirroring, fracturing. At the novel's end, Whitethorn House is burned to the ground. Ocean View, Brianstown, is a dead development (the actual ones that exist in Ireland, marooned by economic fluctuations, are suggestively called "ghost estates"). Kennedy, towards the end of *Broken Harbour*, says Ocean View "looked like Pompeii, like some archaeological discovery preserved to let tourists wander through it […] until it collapsed to dust, until anthills grew up in the middle of kitchen floors and ivy twined around light fixtures" (p. 517). Is there a direct line between Ocean View and the famine cottages evoked in *The Likeness*? Is the Spains' house a famine cottage of the future? If so, French has flipped the historical vision of both Big House and peasant cottage into something with distinctively twenty-first-century sinister qualities. Rather than focusing on the ivy or the house walls, readers are invited to see personal, family violence in kitchens and sitting rooms.

The Hallucination: Self

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik's examination of the female gothic has relevance for discussions of domestic noir. Particularly helpful is their formulation, drawing on the example of Barbara Comyns, that works of female gothic "portray a woman's ability to hold on to economic independence, her own space, and her own identity as in constant tension with the need to love and be loved […] Perhaps this threat of obliteration of the female self—whether through psychological abuse, physical incarceration, or actual murder—is something which informs all works we might describe as female gothic."[15] To these means of obliteration, French adds a couple

more through her novels' presentation of self-directed effacement of the female self and/or a manufactured replacement of the authentic self with a new role. In "Authority and Irish Cultural Memory in *Faithful Place* and *Broken Harbour*", Maureen Reddy points out that both the detective and the perpetrator/victim in *Broken Harbour* are "deeply committed to the notion that both the material and psychological realities of life are within one's own control".[16] This is shown to be a dangerous notion, leading Jenny Spain to self-destruction. Significantly, however, self-destruction turns out to be harder than anticipated. Having murdered both of her children and her husband, Jenny falls back on a stereotypically feminine excuse, here used in the dark context of her failure to kill herself: "'I sat down beside him and I stuck the knife in my chest and then in my stomach, but it didn't *work* […] I wasn't *strong* enough!'" (p. 495).

French's depiction of her narrator-detectives always invokes the deliberate assumption of a role; not only are they playing detective for their audiences, they are aware of their performances. All of her detectives discuss the rationale for choices in clothes, cars, and demeanours; their interactions with colleagues, suspects, and victims' families are all presented as deliberately planned. Christine Jackson demonstrates how "French projects an acting perspective onto the page, using a technique that visualizes a character from an actor's point of view. The perspective establishes three contexts: the actor's experience of being watched, the actor watching others, and the person who acts by watching the self."[17] This dynamic is particularly evident in French's portrayals of the detectives, but theatrical constructions feature in many aspects of her novels, including making a notable contribution to the characterization of the women at the centre of her domestic noir. Acting is important but, as in the theatre, it is only one part of the project. As the domestic murder scenes alluded to earlier suggest, when using theatrical concepts to analyse the selve(s) under pressure, French includes script, scene, props, and audience. So, for example, in *The Trespasser*, Aislinn Murray's friend Lucy Riordan is the technical manager at a theatre. Riordan describes her friend's plan in theatrical terms when she says "'all of a sudden, without knowing how I got there, I was in the middle of some play she was putting on'" (p. 347). Antoinette Conway, not a theatre professional like Riordan but one of French's acting-savvy detectives, knows that "McCann—same as every Murder D; same as me—he's the one who writes the scripts. He wouldn't have liked opening his eyes one day and finding himself in the middle of someone else's play"

(p. 347). Scripts, acting, stage management; these have applications outside the theatre, and potentially dangerous consequences.

Broken Harbour's Jenny Spain is eventually revealed to have been playing a role. The danger arises when she takes her role as leading lady too seriously, well beyond the colloquial sense of "playing a role". When the family's circumstances change, she is unwilling to give up the props and staging of affluence; fatally, she also assumes everyone else prioritizes the show rather than the actors/people enacting/living it. Keeping in character through job loss, social constriction, even her husband's psychosis, leads to a murder-suicide solution. How can you leave the role? Only by dying. As she describes all of this drama to Kennedy from her hospital bed, he offers this curious characterization of her:

> Probably Richie would have seen a spoilt middle-class princess whose sense of herself was too shallow to survive without pesto salad and designer shoes. I saw a frail, doomed gallantry that broke my heart. I saw a girl who thought she had built a fortress against the wild sea, braced at the door with all her pathetic weapons, fighting her heart out while the water seeped past her. (p. 467)

These clichéd roles, essentially contrasting extremes of "good princess" and "bad princess", reflect Kennedy's own over-investment in the values and desires he shares with Jenny Spain. There are other roles available, but Jenny refuses them; Kennedy's devaluing of the other options perhaps suggests why she did not consider them.

Role-playing young women get a slightly different turn in *The Trespasser*. Here, Aislinn Murray is not stuck in a role from which she cannot perceive an escape; rather, she has fabricated a role specifically designed to ensnare her victim. Upon first sighting, she looks to Antoinette Conway "like Dead Barbie", and a "few books about crime in Ireland—missing persons, gangland crime, murder" strike Conway as ironic (p. 19), one of the few odd notes in the cottage's prefabricated confection. The true-crime books, however, turn out to be research for Murray's current role (p. 345). The contempt Conway felt for Murray's made-to-order Barbie-ness (a model similar to Jenny Spain's) becomes respect when she learns that the apparent unreality of the woman and her domestic setting was tied to a crime role she created with all the dedication of a method actor. Murray's preparations for the role included body change—weight loss and sculpting—plus professional consultation for clothes, hair, and makeup. Even though

her friend Lucy says she "came out looking like she'd been cloned in some creepy factory off the M50", Conway begins "growing some respect […] She was training, taking her time and doing whatever it took" (p. 343). Murray's theatrical project, on the verge of success, instead abruptly turns fatal. The would-be femme fatale is herself killed, with scene, motive, and lead actors all suitable for domestic noir. That the femme fatale is a generic thin blonde with a spray-on tan, rather than the exotic beauty of the mid-twentieth century noir, is perhaps another comment on contemporary society.

Not only does Conway respect Murray for her dedication to her chosen role, the similarities between the two characters emphasize the confusions of self that are characteristic of domestic noir. The two women share certain similarities in situation—the lost fathers—and they even live in the same neighbourhood. Conway recognizes their psychological similarities as well: "I was doing exactly the same thing as Aislinn: getting lost so deep inside the story in my head, I couldn't see past its walls to the outside world. I feel those walls shift and start to waver, with a rumble that shakes my bones from the inside out" (p. 426). It is not a coincidence, in my view, that the two French novels with female narrators feature a heightened level of identification between victim and detective, and place great emphasis on roles, acting, and multiplicity of selves. It is in those books that the detectives can come "as close to recognition as the hidden mirrors of the novel admit", as McCormack says of Bowen's wartime novel *The Heat of the Day*.[18]

Cassie Maddox in *The Likeness* is a professional. Not just a detective, but one with experience in undercover. Her status as professional player of roles shows how far we have come from Maud Ruthyn in Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*. When Cassie goes undercover at Whitethorn House, she struggles to resist the lure of the role. She re-enacts psychological struggles familiar from older texts, but the professionalism is new. *The Likeness* takes the theatrical metaphors to new levels. The novel's central premise invites readers to a suspension of disbelief concerning identity, and what follows from that premise is first-rate domestic noir. In contrast to texts like *Gone Girl*, readers are invited into the mystery from the beginning, and we know the status and motivations of the components of the central female character: Cassie Maddox, Cassie as Lexie Madison, and the dead girl Grace Corrigan as Lexie Madison. On the one hand, Cassie refers to her current inhabitance of the role—Cassie playing Lexie in Grace's interpre-

tation—as something mechanical, "Lexie Madison 3.0" (p. 120). As Cassie-as-Lexie pursues her investigation, however, the novel is filled with language that suggests Lexie is real. She is a Frankenstein-like creation:

> Frank and I had done this. We made Lexie Madison bone by bone and fibre by fibre, we baptised her and for a few months we gave her a face and a body, and when we threw her away she wanted more. She spent four years spinning herself back, out of dark earth and night winds, and then she called us here to see what we had done.[19]

For Cassie to make statements such as "she had let me make her into what I was longing to see" (p. 472) reflects a deep confusion about reality and identity, about self.

Elizabeth Bowen, introducing the collection of her wartime stories *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* to a US audience, introduces the other keyword of my title when she notes that the stories reveal "a rising tide of hallucination". However, she explains, "the hallucinations in the stories are not a peril; nor are the stories studies of mental peril. The hallucinations are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of the characters: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in some other way."[20] In French's fiction, we see that process at work, but now there is mental peril in the twenty-first-century process of completion. "It was me" is Cassie's shocked recognition when she sees the dead woman, but "she was impossible: a high-fever hallucination, a screaming crack straight across all the laws of nature" (p. 26). Yet following out her doppelganger, going undercover as an already-murdered victim, Cassie is a professional. There is peril now, yes, but there are also new tools for women to cope with it, and it is not coincidental that the two women detective-narrators have comparatively happy endings after the cases are resolved. "The past, in all these cases, discharges its load of feeling into the anesthetized and bewildered present. It is the 'I' that is sought—and retrieved, at the cost of no little pain", Elizabeth Bowen wrote in 1945 (p. 51). French's psychologically fractured women detectives achieve their "I" with some pain, indeed, but they move past the boundaries of earlier Irish literary selves. Cassie upends the psychologically fragile damsel role when she thinks about how the other woman playing the same role "*may have lived here for longer, but I'm getting paid for it*" (p. 194).

Conclusion

Like the Irish true-crime books that sound an alarm bell in Aislinn Murray's conventional domestic interior, the Tuam babies scandal engulfing Irish news as this volume goes to print suggests the queasy reality of the gothic-infused fictional genre and the pertinence of Tana French's exploration of a specifically Irish domestic noir. We can see the parallels in the language needed to address the belated recognition that during the mid-twentieth century nearly 800 babies and toddlers died, their bodies simply discarded, in the mother and baby home in Tuam, County Galway, run by the *Bon Secours* nuns.[21] The Irish President, Michael Higgins, said the work of independent historian Catherine Corless was "blowing open the blocked doors of a hidden Ireland", and the Taoiseach Enda Kenny referred to it as not just a physical gravesite but also "a social and cultural sepulchre". University College Dublin's Lindsay Earner-Byrne noted the story is not "hidden history" but rather "just the history we haven't been willing to acknowledge". Earner-Byrne also pointed out that while the story was initially broken by Corless, a local historian, the 2017 media furore came several years later and, significantly, only after it was "relayed back to us from international media". The *Irish Times* editorial on the Tuam babies, with a suitably gothic title of "Past and present: a dark pattern we must not repeat", bundles the Tuam case with a pair of current events involving children, mothers, and domestic violence. The editorial asserts that these three cases together "strip away a layer of illusion" that allows Irish people to say such things belong to the past: "we can no longer assure ourselves that all the horror is in the past and that we live in an entirely new Ireland". If this isn't Tana French territory, I don't know what is.

While the news focuses, quite properly, on the mothers and babies at the heart of the Tuam Home tragedy, in the context of domestic noir it is worth noting the history of the property itself. The buildings that formed the Home were originally built in 1841 as a workhouse under the auspices of the Irish Poor Laws. The buildings were commandeered by troops in response to the 1916 Easter Rising and subsequently used as military barracks through the War of Independence and subsequent Civil War. In 1925, the nuns of *Bon Secours* took over the site and began running the Home. After its closure in the early 1960s, the buildings were torn down and in the 1970s housing was built on the property. Such property would seem ripe for gothic haunting. The narrative of its occupation captures something of each of the high-pressure Irish historical periods Le Fanu,

Bowen, and French respond to in their work, and each re-purposing of the property represents a quasi-domestic space with high potential for danger. One would like to believe the contemporary houses on that land are safe, but French's high-tension exploration of Irish domestic spaces and selves under pressure may cause her readers to worry. The linchpin of the working definition of domestic noir I built on Ian Samson's *TLS* review, the "violent return to life with women as both victims *and* perpetrators", is encapsulated by the Tuam babies scandal with its nuns, mothers, and babies violently re-emerging into public consciousness. Tana French's new Irish gothic, building on the legacy left her by Sheridan Le Fanu and Elizabeth Bowen, embodies a specifically Irish domestic noir with considerable explanatory power. It is not merely the suspenseful plots that keep her readers awake.

Notes

1. Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Some discussion of this territory is also found in Charles L. Crow's *American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009).
2. Sansom, Ian, "Only death is consistent: The nuanced world of post-war female suspense fiction", review of *Women Crime Writers: Eight Suspense Novels of the 1940s and 50s*, ed. Sarah Weinman, *TLS*, 11 November 2016 (no. 5928), pp. 14–15. It also worth pointing out that the book under review uses two classifying terms for its contents: "crime" and "suspense". The domestic noir draws on many different modes and genres.
3. "Scottish and Irish Gothic", in *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 105–23 (p. 105).
4. For twentieth and twenty-first-century Irish historical context directly pertinent to French's work, see Rosemary Erickson Johnsen, "Twenty-First-Century Mothers in Tana French's Crime Fiction", *Clues* 32.1 (2014), 61–70 and Maureen T. Reddy, "Authority and Irish Cultural Memory in *Faithful Place* and *Broken Harbor*", *Clues* 32.1 (2014), 92–102.
5. There is a curious moment in *Broken Harbour*, however, in which religious practice re-emerges in an upside-down way: after killing her two children and her husband, Jenny Spain finds it is not as easy to kill herself as she had anticipated. On the floor, afraid the police and an ambulance will arrive to save her, in her terror at not dying she turns, unexpectedly, to prayer: "'I prayed. I knew I didn't have any right to, but I did anyway. I thought maybe God would strike me dead for it, but that was what I was praying

for anyway. I prayed to the Virgin Mary; I thought maybe she might understand. I said the Hail Mary—I couldn't remember half the words, it was so long since I'd said it, but I said the bits I could remember'" (pp. 495–96). This may not be the traditional gothic approach to Catholicism, but its inversion of doctrine is striking nonetheless: Spain prays for death at her own hand and expects the Virgin Mary to understand her slaughtering her family. This is the kind of "perversity" that old-school gothic writers like Matthew Lewis and Ann Radcliffe would make much of.

6. Tana French, *The Likeness* (London: Hodder, 2013), p. 251. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in the text.
7. "Haunted Castles, Dark Mirrors: On the Penguin Horror Series", in *The Haunting of Hill House*, by Shirley Jackson (NY: Penguin, 2013), pp. xi–xxxii (p. xx).
8. "Introduction", in *The Haunting of Hill House*, by Shirley Jackson (NY: Penguin, 2013), pp. xxxiii–l. (p. xxxiv).
9. Anna Powell and Andrew Smith, eds., *Teaching the Gothic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
10. "Prefaces: *Uncle Silas*", in *Collected Impressions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), pp. 3–17 (p. 4).
11. *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats and Bowen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 209.
12. As Lucie Armitt notes, "the Gothic may take as its focus one family, but its consequences always apply to society at large". This is true whether or not Daniel March perceives himself as a contemporary updating of a gothic villain and his inherited house as a gothic trope. *Twentieth-Century Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 80.
13. Tana French, *Broken Harbour* (Dublin: Hachette Books Ireland, 2013), p. 13. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in the text.
14. Tana French, *The Trespasser* (New York: Viking, 2016), p. 183. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in the text.
15. "Female Gothic", in *Teaching the Gothic*, ed. Anna Powell and Andrew Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 107–20 (p. 114).
16. See Endnote 3 (p. 86).
17. "Vision and Blind Spots: Characterization in Tana French's *Broken Harbour*", *Clues* 32.1 (2014), 40–50 (pp. 40–41).
18. *Dissolute Characters*, p. 226.
19. p. 28. This has its counterpart in a natural (if rather creepy) image of regeneration: when she is at the famine cottage, meeting Ned, Cassie observes that "there were things growing beside me out of the earth where she had bled, a pale clump of bluebells, a tiny sapling that looked like a hawthorn: things made of her" (p. 471).

20. "Prefaces: *The Demon Lover*" [The American Edition], in *Collected Impressions* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1950), pp. 47–52 (p. 49).
21. My sources for the citations on the Tuam scandal are "President Pays Tribute to Work of Historian in Tuam Babies Case", 8 March 2017, www.irishtimes.com; Shane Harrison, "Tuam Mother and Baby Home 'Chamber of Horrors'—Irish PM", 7 March 2017, www.bbc.com; Fred Barbash, "The 'Mother and Baby Home' at Tuam, Ireland, Where Friends Just 'Disappeared, One After the Other'", 13 March 2017, www.washingtonpost.com; "Tuam Babies", 11 March 2017, www.rte.ie/radio1/marian-finucane/programmes; and "Past and Present: A Dark Pattern We Must Not Repeat", 11 March 2017, www.irishtimes.com. These sources are listed here in the order in which they are quoted in the conclusion.

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CHAPTER 13

Crime, the Domestic, and Social Commentary in Pierre Lemaitre's Thrillers

Andrea Hynynen

Introduction

This chapter examines the connections between crime, the domestic, and the political in Pierre Lemaitre's highly acclaimed noir thrillers. These socio-critical French novels belong to a different crime-fiction tradition than most domestic noir writing but they display many features commonly associated with domestic noir, such as central female characters, harmful personal relationships and a growing sense of suspense leading up to sudden plot twists and surprise endings. Lemaitre's (1951–) crime fiction and other novels have received an impressive number of national and international awards ever since his literary debut in 2006 with a gory thriller called *Travail soigné* (English translation *Irène*, 2014), in which the main character, commandant Camille Verhœven, chases a serial killer whose murders are inspired by existing crime fiction.[1] The novel was an immediate success as it won that year's first-novel *prix Cognac*, a much respected crime-fiction award in France. Lemaitre has since published two other novels and a short story about

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commandant Verhœven, and three stand-alone crime novels. After completing the Verhœven series in 2012 with *Sacrifices* (translated into English as *Camille* in 2015), he published the Goncourt-winning general novel *Au revoir là-haut* (2013; *The Great Swindle,* 2015) and then returned to the thriller format with *Trois jours et une vie* (2016; English translation *Three Days and a Life,* 2017).[2] It is interesting to note that while Lemaitre's original Goncourt-novel is not classified as crime fiction in France, its translation won the Crime Writers' Association's International Dagger Award in 2016.[3] Lemaitre had already won the 2015 International Dagger for *Camille*, and *Irène* was shortlisted for the award in 2014. Lemaitre hence remains one of the most interesting and appreciated contemporary crime writers.

Domestic noir is not a label commonly associated with this author. His crime novels are usually categorised as noir thrillers, as they rely on suspense, anxiety, and other emotions while critically engaging with contemporary society. Some critics or scholars such as Andrew Pepper see him as a proponent of political or radical crime fiction which critiques the ills and injustices of contemporary society, an assessment with which I agree.[4] Furthermore, the fact that Lemaitre and his serial detective figure are both male is contrary to the widespread idea that domestic noir is a predominantly "female" category, written by women about women for women. Julia Crouch, who first defined the term in 2013, speaks of the genre's preoccupation with "the female experience".[5] Ruth Dugdall and Sue Turnbull both assert that men who write this type of novels tend to hide their gender behind initials.[6] For instance, Steve John Watson explains that the decision to use initials instead of his full name was an explicit attempt on his part to avoid readers and critics judging his debut novel *Before I Go to Sleep* (2011) on the sole ground of it being written by a man about a female narrator telling her own story from the first-person perspective; he felt that this knowledge might distract them from the actual book.[7] Indeed, Pierre Lemaitre neither identifies as a writer of domestic noir nor claims to be particularly attuned to domestic matters, although he acknowledges that provoking emotions is his central aim.[8] To my knowledge, his work had not been associated with domestic noir by readers, critics, or scholars before the autumn of 2016 when his English publisher, MacLehose Press of Quercus Books, began to market a forthcoming 2017 paperback edition of *Blood Wedding* in the following words: "For fans of *Gone Girl* and Lemaitre's own internationally bestselling *Alex*, *Blood Wedding* is a compelling psychological thriller with a formidable

female protagonist".[9] No such comments were made in connection with the original 2009 novel *Robe de mariée*, or the first English translation released in July 2016.

Lemaitre's novels nonetheless often deal with crime that pervades the domestic sphere, for instance through the actions of a criminal who explicitly targets the main character's partner or family. Sometimes a dysfunctional family or marriage is the starting point of criminal behaviour. Several novels have strong female characters and a woman's point of view is often present, although her perspective usually alternates with other viewpoints or voices to create an effect of uncertainty or suspicion. Given that discussions of domestic noir have largely been restricted to English-speaking writers, I wish to expand the perspective by bringing attention to a French author who engages with similar issues as some of those writers most often associated with the label: Gillian Flynn, Paula Hawkins, S.J. Watson, Julia Crouch, Elizabeth Haynes, Erin Kelly to name a few. I take my cue from Stewart King, who challenges what he sees as the prevalent tendency within crime-fiction studies, namely to focus on national or regional traditions and evolutions, and suggests in its stead a world-literature approach centring crime fiction analyses on how different subgenres have developed across different countries and languages, or in what forms and under which circumstances new tropes have appeared and manifested themselves in the genre.[10] While Lemaitre's novels may not be epitomes of domestic noir, I suggest that their topics and narrative strategies relate to a growing interest in crime in the domestic sphere and an emphasis on psychological elements on an international scale.

The domestic is omnipresent in Lemaitre's Verhœven series, as family and close personal relationships occupy a prominent position in all three novels and the novella *Rosy & John* (2013, translated into English 2017). Verhœven's main characteristic is his small size: he measures 145 cm because of a medical condition caused by his mother's incessant smoking during her pregnancy. This repeatedly mentioned fact gives occasion to numerous musings concerning the complex emotions and thoughts that the commandant entertains towards his deceased mother, a flamboyant and skilful painter whom he both hates and loves. The lingering influence of this exceptional figure becomes even more pressing following the death of Verhœven's father in the second novel *Alex*, since the commandant then inherits his mother's former apartment with her atelier and some of her paintings. The situation forces him to confront his own conflictual feelings and memories.[11] A form of reconciliation is offered at the end of

the trilogy, when the commandant returns to his late mother's atelier, after having solved the case, against all expectations, and written a letter of resignation to his superiors. As Verhœven enters the empty apartment, he realises how much he loves the place and misses his mother. This final scene ends with him pulling out the last pictures ever taken of his brutally murdered wife to feed them into the peaceful flames burning in the fireplace in a gesture of final resolution.[12] Lemaitre's stand-alone novels are equally preoccupied with domestic matters: in *Blood Wedding*, a young woman's marriage is shattered and her life threatened by an insidious stalker, whereas the untranslated *Cadres noirs* (2010), whose title refers to "dark managers" and their unsavoury activities, demonstrates the disastrous effects of neoliberal corporate businesses on families and interpersonal relations.

Domestic noir is a UK and US phenomenon that has no equivalent in France. Its striking popularity in the anglophone world has, nonetheless, recently been recognized by the established literary magazine *Lire* in its annual special issue on crime fiction: the 2017 *Spécial polar* comments upon the dominant trend of domestic noir (*le thriller domestique*) by referring to well-known UK and US titles and writers.[13] It is perhaps because of differences in literary traditions and editorial practices that Lemaitre's novels are perceived slightly differently in their original context compared to their reception abroad. The English translations emphasise that a personal dimension prevails in the Verhœven series by way of their titles, which all consist of a single personal name: *Irène*, *Alex*, and *Camille*. Each novel carries the given name of a central character with considerable impact on the commandant's life. Irène is Verhœven's wife, who gets killed at the end of the first novel by the serial killer he hunts. Alex is both a victim of kidnapping and a serial killer, whom Verhœven tries to free and then to catch in the second novel. This young woman is a stranger to Verhœven, whom he never meets before she dies, but he gradually gets to know bits and pieces about this mysterious character while tracking her. The investigation also forces him back into the kind of police work he has been avoiding since Irène's murder and his subsequent breakdown; it revives his professional competence and makes him confront reality. Alex's destiny thereby greatly affects his own existence. As suggested by the title, which is the same as that of the French original, the third-person narrator focalises on Alex in large portions of the novel. The translation of the third and last novel is named after Commander Verhœven's own first name.

Compared to the French originals—*Travail soigné* and *Sacrifices*, which literally mean "careful work" and "sacrifices"—the English titles convey a sense of familiarity and give the impression of unity, as if the three novels form a coherent narrative arc, when they are, in fact, quite different from one another in spite of their reappearing central characters. *Irène* follows the pattern of a thriller-like crime novel about a police investigation of serial murders, which turns into a personal cat-and-mouse game between the main character and the killer. Different stages of the investigation and the investigating team's collaborative efforts to identify and apprehend the serial murderer are in focus, alongside descriptions of Verhœven's personal life. This particular Lemaitre novel perhaps bears less resemblance than the others to prime specimens of domestic noir because of the importance attached to the professional investigator's duel with his male opponent. In *Alex*, the commandant is pushed partly to the background as the mystery surrounding Alex and her actions take centre stage. The *Camille* novel has an even higher tempo than the others and conveys, from the outset, a sense of urgency with time indications, rapidly alternating points of view—including that of the main perpetrator speaking in the first person—police raids bordering on illegality, a set of rivalling professional criminals, and violent conflicts between Verhœven, his colleagues, and his superiors. It is worth noting that Lemaitre published two stand-alones between the first and second part of the Verhœven series, which seems to suggest that he did not set out to create a serial detective.

In what follows, I will first look more closely at the novels where family and the domestic sphere are threatened and come under attack from the outside: *Irène*, *Camille*, and *Cadres noirs.* This happens either when an outside criminal targets expressly the main investigator's domestic life or when collateral damage is inflicted on a family by one of its own members or an outsider. Next, I will discuss depictions of family as both the source and the ultimate target of criminal behaviour in *Alex*, *Blood Wedding,* and *Rosy & John*. Female perspectives and unexpected plot twists that radically change the image of a central character in the eyes of the reader, which are generally seen as typical features of domestic noir, will then come into focus. An illustrative example of such plot twists is found in Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep*, where the amnesiac first-person narrator suddenly realises that the man who claims to be her husband is in fact somebody else, somebody dangerous.[14] In the final part, I will examine the role of politics and social critique in these novels and discuss to what extent they fit within the category of domestic noir.

Family and the Domestic Targeted by Criminals or as Collateral Damage

As already mentioned, in the first Verhœven novel the commandant's pregnant wife is abducted and murdered. A serial killer inspired by crime fiction re-enacts murders taken from a range of novels, in the tiniest detail, by picking out victims who resemble the fictional characters and re-creating the murder scenes. The sources of inspiration are a mixture of notorious bestsellers, long-forgotten masterpieces and lesser-known, obscure novels. A well-versed reader of crime fiction is likely to recognise at least some of them before the titles are disclosed. Irène's death is the re-enactment of a murder in the killer's own failed novel.[15] In *Camille*, the final book of the Verhœven trilogy, the commandant's current girlfriend Anne gets severely injured in an assault. Whereas Irène's murder constitutes the novel's ending, this incident is the starting point of a tortuous investigation where neither victim nor perpetrator is who they at first seem to be. In both cases, however, it turns out that the commandant is the criminal's real target.

These thrillers resemble the familiar kind of crime fiction where the relationship between the main investigator and the killer becomes personal and the latter attacks his opponent's family, but the novels add specific emphasis on the domestic since the main character continuously ponders on his personal relationships. On the one hand, Verhœven admires the wonders of the two women who entered his life at different moments in time, as he praises their beauty, intelligence, professional competence, and interpersonal skills. On the other, he is amazed by his own good fortune and overcome by the fact that Irène and then Anne have chosen to share his existence.

The novels question whether it is possible to bridge the gap between two people involved in a close relationship, or to ever truly know one's partner. Irène's pregnancy opens up a gulf between her and Verhœven, despite the fact that they love one another dearly; the commandant does not notice the changes that his wife goes through over the course of her pregnancy and so their lives are no longer as synchronised as before: "Et c'était ça que Camille avait manqué, ce virage. Il avait continué de travailler comme avant, de rentrer tard, sans se rendre compte que leurs vies n'étaient plus aussi synchronées".[16] After the attack on Anne, his subsequent girlfriend, Verhœven is equally surprised to discover how ignorant he is about her and her background, and he asks himself what they truly

know about each other: "Que savent-ils l'un de l'autre, Anne et lui?"[17] Both novels suggest that an unsurmountable distance, "une distance infranchissable", separates people even within marriage and love, as becomes evident from the following quotation:

> Son visage aussi avait changé et son cœur se serra brusquement parce qu'il lui semblait qu'une distance infranchissable les séparait. […] Son inquiétude se calma néanmoins parce qu'il savait que cette distance entre elle [Irène] et lui [Camille] n'était pas une question d'amour […]. L'infranchissable était là, mais, somme, toute, ni plus ni moins qu'hier. C'était même grâce à cette distance qu'ils s'étaient rencontrés.[18]

The hiatus separating Verhœven from his wife is no obstacle to love, nor does it appear dangerous or ill-boding. It is, rather, a plain fact characterising human relationships.[19] On the contrary, Anne's suddenly uncovered unfamiliarity is of a different nature, as Verhœven gradually finds out that her name is false, that she does not work where she claimed to, that their first accidental meeting was in fact a carefully organised scene intended to bring them together, and that the assaults on Anne were a set-up aimed to manipulate him into predetermined action. We can see a similarity between Verhœven's discovery and that of S.J. Watson's abovementioned female narrator finding out that her alleged husband is a stranger, albeit it that Anne's motives are much less sinister than those of the wannabe husband in *Before I Go to Sleep*. As stated on the Crime Fiction Lover blog, central themes in domestic noir revolve around trust, close relationships, and secrets in ways which often raise the question of how well we know our close ones: our partner, parents, or children.[20] In Lemaitre's fiction these questions and doubts are not only implied but explicitly spelled out by the main protagonist on several occasions.

In *Camille*, the narrative hints at Anne's deceptive appearance very early on, as the talented sketcher Verhœven notes that he has never been able to capture his elusive girlfriend with his pen: "Anne récèle quelque chose d'irreductible, d'insaisissable, qui échappe à son regard, à son experience, à son observation."[21] The narrator gives insight into Anne's shock and deadly fear at the near fatal assault she has endured, and later depicts her discussing the matter with her assaulter in such a way that it becomes clear she had agreed to a staged attack—albeit not one as violent and hurtful as it turned out—so that the reader discovers her untruthfulness but still obtains no explanation for her behaviour until Verhœven clarifies the

situation and unveils her motives. Lemaitre's *Irène* novel builds up towards the tragic end with numerous mentions of Irène, but the primary function of these references seems at first to be the implicit characterisation of Verhœven, since they are irrelevant to the main plot and the ongoing investigation up until the last plot twist when Irène disappears. In *Irène* and *Camille*, Lemaitre employs the same method of inserting foreboding clues in early portrayals of characters whose destiny or appearance will change radically as the story unfolds. A similar device is used in the *Alex* novel, which begins with a scene where the eponymous character tries on different wigs and exposes her talent for disguises and self-transformation.[22] It is later shown that Alex uses this seemingly innocent and playful skill to commit murders and avoid detection.

The 2010 stand-alone novel *Cadres noirs* presents another variety on the topic of crime invading the domestic sphere. Here, 57-year-old unemployed Alain Delambre destroys his family in a desperate effort to secure a well-paid job, which requires him to engage in dubious criminal behaviour. The head-hunting firm which is in charge of the recruitment asks the candidates to stage an armed hostage situation. It is revealed to the reader, through the company director's correspondence, that the real aim of this exercise is to monitor the reactions of the company executives taken hostage, so that their ability to handle the stress of closing factories and dealing ruthlessly with sacked employees and syndicate representatives can be evaluated.

Against his wife's explicit wish and his promises to her, the main character and first-person narrator Delambre enters the game in secret and then tricks one of his daughters into lending him a huge sum of money, which he needs to prepare for the task and outmanoeuvre the other candidates. When Delambre's staged hostage situation turns into a disaster and he gets imprisoned, his other daughter, a lawyer, accepts the task of representing him even though it means putting her own career in jeopardy. It later turns out that this seeming failure had been carefully planned by Delambre, who uses the chaotic situation to steal money from the company's bank accounts, but this knowledge is kept from his family members and the reader until the end. At all stages, the main character and narrator lies to his wife and exploits his children's loyalty to get what he wants. His intention is not to harm his family members—their fate is collateral damage—but he knowingly sacrifices their well-being while justifying this behaviour to the reader and himself with their inability to understand his

predicament and with dishonest reassurances that everything will be fine as soon as he achieves his goals.

The first-person perspective invites the reader to sympathise with Delambre and to share in his self-deception, especially as the narrative initially explicates his growing despair through a few situations where he falls victim to unmerited abuse and unfair treatment. Delambre's stated regrets at being obliged to deceive his wife and children, and his remorseful descriptions of heart-breaking confrontations with them sound sincere, but these are contradicted by the actions to which he resorts. Soon, Delambre's ruthlessness equals or surpasses that of his opponents, as his main adversary's remark that they ought to have hired him suggests.[23] At the same time, he gets entangled in a web of lies and chain of events from which he can no longer break free even if he wanted to. When, in the end, his wife leaves him and one daughter rejects him, the millions he managed to get away with offer no solace: looking like a fool, he sits alone in his tailor-made costumes in their old run-down apartment, because life without his wife is meaningless: "sans Nicole, rien n'a vraiment de sens".[24]

Family as the Source and Target of Criminal Behaviour

In other novels, a conflictual family history is instead the source of the perpetrator's current criminal behaviour. This means that past incidents in the murderer's intimate life are the reasons for an urgent desire to crush his or her own family members, or alternatively, somebody else's family or partner. In *Alex,* the eponymous female serial killer has suffered grave sexual and physical abuse by her half-brother Thomas Vasseur. Her present killing spree is an act of vengeance, which aims to eliminate those who once took part in the abuse: business associates or friends of her brother, with whom he used to force her to have sex to advance his own personal agenda. The ultimate revenge amounts to framing the brother for murdering her, which nevertheless entails her own death.

The truth unfolds only after Alex's carefully orchestrated suicide, which has been masked as a murder with various clues pointing to her brother, when the police find her affairs and diaries. These allow Verhœven to uncover the horrible acts inflicted on Alex when she was little. They also reveal that Alex's and Thomas's mother was aware of the abuse but did nothing to prevent it; instead, she covered it up and continues to protect

and support her son when the police confront her in the present. These revelations shed new light on Alex's actions, which are partly condoned by the police investigators once they have discovered the gruesome details surrounding the trail of dead bodies that she has left behind. Although Verhœven and the magistrate who is in charge of the affair realize that Thomas Vasseur is not guilty of killing his sister, that he has been framed by her, they allow the evidence to be used to convict him in a gesture of retaliation on Alex's behalf. The magistrate adamantly declares that truth is not as important as justice: "Pour nous, l'essentiel, ce n'est pas la vérité, c'est la justice, non?", to which Verhœven nods in agreement.[25]

The stand-alone novel *Blood Wedding* describes a persistent stalker who slowly but surely invades and destroys his victim's marriage, causes her to miscarry and breaks down her mental health, because she is the daughter of his late mother's psychiatrist. The dead mother's insanity, her tyrannical treatment of the son, and her ultimate suicide are the root cause of Frantz's stalking. However he blames the doctors for her death, and hence feels justified in taking revenge on Sophie, the daughter of the psychiatrist once responsible for his mother's care, because he cannot punish Sophie's mother who is already dead.

Frantz's methods include poisoning Sophie to give her moments of amnesia, and killing people around her while she is passed out, so that she and everybody else believe her to be guilty. Of all Lemaitre's books, *Blood Wedding* fits most clearly into the category of domestic noir; it shares many features with notorious novels labelled as such. Like Rachel, the protagonist in Hawkins's novel *The Girl on the Train*, Sophie is manipulated into believing that she is guilty of despicable acts of violence, even murder, since her recollections of past incidents are non-existent or twisted. She appears untrustworthy and dangerous in both her own eyes and the eyes of the reader. One of the victims is Sophie's paralysed husband, whose predicament was caused by a car accident most likely arranged by Frantz. Frantz's plan is to kill Sophie, but when she decides to remarry in order to obtain a new name and obliterate her past, he seizes the opportunity to get even closer. Sophie thus unknowingly marries her tormentor, who pretends to take care of her but intends to push her to commit suicide in their shared home. In this respect, the novel resembles *Before I Go to Sleep*: a stalker takes full control over the female protagonist's life and reinforces her predicament (memory loss, hallucinations, and mental instability) by cutting her off from the rest of world, all the while pretending to be her saviour and protector. When Sophie learns the

truth, she breaks free and the roles are reversed as she then subjects him to the same insidious treatment he had inflicted on her: poisoned pills causing nightmares and hallucinations, suggestive whispers and noises in his ear when he tries to sleep or rest, confinement disguised as solicitude, falsified documents that make him question his own judgement, and so on. This is one toxic marriage, if ever there was one. Sophie's and Frantz's battle in *Blood Wedding* also brings Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* to mind: husband and wife inflict pain and suffering on one another (and others) while pretending to be the innocent, injured party, and the bewildered reader is uncertain of whose version of the events to trust. However, the novels present very different endings. Where Flynn's equally dubious protagonists Amy and Nick Dunne end up trapped in their twisted but somehow oddly functional marriage from which none of them can break free, Lemaitre's Sophie assumes a triumphant heroic role as she rids herself of her tormentor. In the end, Frantz jumps out of the window wearing Sophie's wedding dress, thus repeating the suicidal act of his mother, who had died in exactly the same manner, dressed in her wedding dress, 15 years earlier.[26] Where Frantz's criminal behaviour stems from a dysfunctional family and his mental instability, Sophie's actions are self-defence and revenge on the person who has robbed her of everything.

The novella *Rosy & John* (2013) presents yet another variation on distorted family relationships resulting in criminal acts. Here, Verhœven is confronted with a criminal who threatens to set off bombs in Parisian schools unless the police release his imprisoned mother, pay them a ransom and secure safe passage abroad. During the investigation, the police discover that the mother–son relationship is fraught with conflicts, and the question arises as to why John would want this suffocating and querulous mother, who has killed his girlfriend, released, but the authorities are forced to yield to avoid casualties. As son and mother reunite, they perform a peculiar dance with the mother gazing enamoured at her son before he blows up the pair of them.[27] John's elaborate scheme was thus aimed to create a permanent exit from an inescapable, traumatising family relationship and bring his mother along; he never intended to escape with her nor to harm anybody with his bombs. This comes as a surprise, since the novel's third-person narrator has revealed little of John's true intentions or thoughts.

Settings are an efficient way of bringing attention to central themes. In these works, as in domestic noir novels like *Before I Go to Sleep* and *The Girl on the Train*, the home is far from a secure and protected place.

Instead, many crimes or parts of crimes take place in domestic spaces. In *Irène*, Verhœven's wife is abducted from their shared home and then killed in the apartment that used to belong to the commandant's mother. Two books later, his girlfriend Anne gets shot at in that same place by the assaulter who first attacked her in public. Alex, who was molested at home as a child, kills most of her male victims in places associated with personal space: in their bedroom, hotel room, or a private truck's sleeping cabin. In *Blood Wedding*, Sophie's stalker frequently enters her home, where he moves around objects or hides them, so that she becomes disoriented and mentally unstable. Many of the murders that this stalker commits in order to frame Sophie take place in the home: little Léo, whom Sophie babysits, is strangled in his own bed with her shoelaces, and a young woman who invites Sophie home for lunch is knifed to death in her apartment, where Sophie then wakes up beside the corpse.[28] Later on, after she has married her stalker, Frantz locks her in their mutual home to continue his elaborate murderous scheme. This is also where he finally kills himself following his mother's example. *Cadres noirs* is the only novel where all violent crimes take place outside of the home, although Delambre invites crime into his home as he starts rehearsing hostage taking and practising shooting guns there while his wife Nicole is at work.

The importance attached to family and the domestic realm is further reinforced by the language used in these narratives, which resorts repeatedly to family metaphors in descriptions of behaviours and attitudes between non-related people. Verhœven compares an unco-operative witness to a child who pouts, and feels uncomfortable about the unwanted patriarchal role ("rôle de patriarche") that he has come to occupy at work due to his seniority.[29] In *Camille*, a hospital nurse reacts to Verhœven's protective attitude towards Anne, who is officially no more than an assault victim to him, by thinking that he is a police officer but behaves like a husband.[30] Verhœven analyses his relationship to his two closest colleagues in terms of a paternal relationship. He explains that he has shaped two sons: the irreproachable Louis is the perfect son and a studious disciple as opposed to the generous, but violent and obscure Maleval, who betrayed Verhœven and cost him his wife.[31] On another occasion, the commandant talks about his long relationship with a former colleague and present superior by the name of Le Guén in marital terms, as he likens their quarrel to that of an old couple ("un vieux couple").[32] If we add Verhoeven's complex relationship to his mother to the mix, it becomes evident that family and family relationships are a dominant leitmotiv in Lemaitre's novels

even as these deal with police investigations. In particular, mother–son relations are presented as crucial factors for a person's well-being and, if problematic, may result in criminality.

Plot Twist and Alternating Points of View Promoting Women

Plot twists and surprise endings are necessary features of domestic noir. In addition to the above-mentioned revelation about the fake husband in Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep* one could think of Rachel's sudden understanding in *The Girl on the Train* that her ex-husband is the violent and abusive party in their relationship, not her as she has been led to believe by him.[33] In *Gone Girl*, Amy's truly devious nature only surfaces towards the end of what she later claims to be an abduction by her hopelessly devoted ex-lover Desi, whom she ruthlessly murders in alleged self-defence.[34] All of Lemaitre's texts employ plot twists and unexpected revelations which change the image of characters and the course of events. This usually happens more than once in a single novel and is one of the author's trademarks, his "own personal music", as he puts it.[35] On numerous occasions, the narrative cleverly induces the reader to establish a certain impression of a character before suddenly shifting focus to shed new light on this figure, thereby forcing the reader to change his assessment. The use of first-person narration, internal focalisation, and alternating points of view play an important role in this process. Contrary to many domestic noir writers, such as Louise Doughty (*Apple Tree Yard*, 2013), Gillian Flynn (*Gone Girl*), and Paula Hawkins (*The Girl on the Train*), Lemaitre only occasionally uses first-person narrators; however, this skilful writer aptly controls the reader's access to characters' thoughts, feelings, and experiences to achieve whatever sensation of familiarity, closeness, and sympathy or, on the contrary, distance, dislike, or fear he wishes to induce. To this end, he also switches between first and third-person narrations. Alex is, for instance, presented in the role of a victim during one third of the novel. She gets abducted by a male stranger in the first chapter and the reader is invited to share her fears, panic, and other feelings during her experience as captive, until the police who are trying to rescue her from her kidnapper find the first of her murder victims. Suddenly, this woman is no longer a simple victim, but also a killer, whose brutal murders are soon demonstrated without any explanation as to why she kills. A second twist occurs after Alex's suicide, when her tragic past is uncovered and both Verhœven

and the reader are encouraged to once again re-evaluate the character. Alex thus moves back and forth between the positions of victim and culprit in the reader's mind. As mentioned, *Blood Wedding* operates in a somewhat similar fashion, as it introduces an amnesiac and unstable Sophie who repeatedly finds herself in the presence of dead people whom she seems to have killed, even though she cannot remember what has happened. The first part of the book is told from Sophie's perspective and recounts her experiences, uncontrollable mood swings, and memory losses, thus leading the reader to believe that she is a deranged killer until the second part switches over to the stalker Frantz and reveals his murderous scheme. The plot twists in *Camille* involve the revelation that Anne is not the person she claims to be and that the man she identifies as her attacker in fact had nothing to do with it. Instead, Verhœven's former colleague Maleval suddenly reappears, from behind an anonymous "I", as the criminal mastermind behind a plan intended to make Verhœven force a retired criminal by the name of Hafner out of hiding. Maleval has a score to settle with Hafner but cannot find him, so he uses Anne to manipulate Verhœven into doing this in his stead. Likewise, the bomber's blackmail, in *Rosy & John*, is actually for the purpose of killing his mother, not saving her, as it first seemed, and in *Cadres noirs* Delambre's failed hostage act is intentionally unsuccessful to serve as a front for his theft.

Frequent shifts in point of view, which serve to string the reader along and carefully control what information and clues are divulged, also support the representation of female agency and female perspectives, yet another essential characteristic of domestic noir (cf. above). Even though Lemaitre's serial detective is male, the novels present several strong female characters; with the exception of *Cadres noirs*, which depicts an almost exclusively male universe of corporate business. Even here, Delambre's wife and daughter have moral authority over him, which he realizes in the end. The portraits of Verhœven's wife and lover are highly admiring of their qualities though Irène and Anne both play second fiddle to the commandant. Still, Anne demonstrates determination and resourcefulness in the passages focalised on her. Alex and Sophie are particularly clever, active, and resourceful as they manage to escape from the police and their respective captors against all odds; both of them kill, at least once, to retaliate against abuse and mistreatment, and they occupy the centre for considerable parts of the narratives. Their shrewdness allows them to triumph over the authorities: Verhœven can neither rescue nor apprehend Alex, who executes her plan successfully to the very

end, whereas the police never catch up with Sophie; instead she gets rid of her tormentor, inherits his name and fortune, and thereby gains a new identity.

Domestic Noir and the Political

As mentioned, Lemaitre's crime novels are classified as noir thrillers. In France, the noir label is associated with critical social commentary, political commitment, and realist writing.[36] The 1970s saw the development of a specific type of noir that was more aggressive and entropic than earlier noir novels, the leftist *néo-polar* subgenre which was highly political.[37] The leading figure of the *néo-polar*, Jean-Patrick Manchette, considered it a means of radical social transformation: "un roman d'intervention sociale très violente".[38]

Contrary to the *néo-polar*, today's noir fiction does not necessarily manifest an outspoken political agenda, but according to Pepper, "Lemaitre is, very definitely, a political crime novelist, with leftist sympathies".[39] He defines Lemaitre's crime novels as "capitalist noir" and argues that these novels "use the genre to project, in grotesque and deliberately excessive ways, the exploitative, destructive impulses of contemporary capitalism". What separates Lemaitre's novels from the most radical forms of political crime fiction is the fact that they still offer a "good cop" who is capable of addressing some of the problems.[40] This is certainly true of *Alex*, in which Verhœven ensures that the abusive brother gets convicted of Alex's murder—of which he is not guilty—to compensate for his crimes against her, but Verhœven is not always as successful in his endeavours: he cannot save his wife, he never catches up with Alex, and he is equally incapable of preventing the bomber John from freeing his mother only to kill her. These partial failures can be read as a critique directed against the inadequacies of the authorities and the social order. The absence of a neat closure that re-establishes order through the capture of the criminal is a common feature of noir fiction as opposed to the classical whodunit. Verhœven's frequent irregular behaviour and his violent disposition serve as a reminder that the line between criminals and ordinary citizens is very thin. Lemaitre's fiction hence aligns with the idea that we are all potential criminals in a corrupt society, which is a recurring trope in French noir.[41]

I agree with Pepper's assessment of Lemaitre's political stance and the critique of capitalism that can be found in his novels, but I find that his reading of the *Alex* novel overstates slightly the capitalist aspects of the

abusive relationship to which the eponymous character Alex is subjected by her half-brother. Although an element of capitalist commercialism is undeniably present in the affair, *Cadres noirs* offers, in my opinion, a harsher and more apparent critique of contemporary capitalist society than *Alex*, which is first and foremost a story about personal revenge. *Cadres noirs* is a stark critical statement against neoliberal capitalism characterised by lethal competition, layers upon layers of deceit and corruption, and a total lack of human solidarity or decency; the novel demonstrates how companies' hunt for ever increasing profit ruins the lives of ordinary people and pits them against each other. Still, *Alex* offers a poignant critique of society and its systemic failure to protect its subordinated members like young Alex, who was let down not only by her mother and brother, but also by a schoolteacher who refused to listen to her, because children are notoriously untrustworthy. When a long-lost friend of Alex explains that she did nothing to help since she was then a powerless young girl, she points to persistent inequalities and hierarchies pertaining to gender and age.[42] The Verhœven series also brings attention to how poorly and disrespectfully people with some sort of physical and mental disability are treated.

So how does Lemaitre's social criticism and anti-capitalist agenda fit with the novels' affinities with domestic noir? Can crime fiction with a manifest political stance count as domestic noir or are these categories mutually exclusive? Pepper seems to abide by an idea of the domestic as being less political than the public domain, since he writes that crime stories "resolutely focused on disruptions to the ordered surfaces of the domestic realm" are less prominent in studies of radical crime fiction than "those which trace and interrogate the complex workings of power in the public and private domains".[43] Pepper's statement is hardly surprising; much crime-fiction scholarship makes similar arguments. He does, however, recognise that "individual action is always socially and economically situated", which means that the private and the public are necessarily intertwined, although he argues that the "systemic" is always privileged over the "subjective" in analyses of crime fiction's political stance.[44] In fact, hardly any study of political commitment or social critique in French noir pays attention to domestic or individual issues. However, from a perspective which embraces the axiomatic feminist slogan that the personal is political, a focus on the domestic does not necessarily mean lack of politics. Maureen Reddy rightly points out, in her seminal study *Sisters in Crime*, that private relationships as well as the institutions of marriage and

the family are essential factors with regard to legislation and politics.[45] A focus on private relationships in crime narratives can raise important questions about justice and whether the legal system is capable of ensuring that all members of society are treated equally and get the justice they deserve, which is exactly what Lemaitre's *Alex* novel does. Alex's distrust of the legal system is such that she prefers to kill herself and frame her brother than to try to go to court. Many other crime novels centred on personal relationships and the domestic, such as *The Girl on the Train* or *Apple Tree Yard,* make similar suggestions concerning the failure of legal procedures to protect and deliver justice to women and subordinated groups.[46]

Conclusion

To conclude, it has been shown that all of Lemaitre's novels are closely concerned with the domestic, regardless of whether the crimes actually take place in a domestic setting or not. They resonate with the growing fascination for domestic noir, and display in various forms and combinations some of its primary features as defined by, for instance, Julia Crouch and Rebecca Whitney: toxic marriages and family relations, female perpetrators, stalkers, a female perspective, and recurrent plot twists.[47] *Alex* and *Blood Wedding* are the most evident examples of domestic noir with their deployment of female protagonists, stalking, and lethal marriages. Still, this prominent role given to the domestic does not foreclose social and political commentary. Even though these novels do not display a political stance similar to what has traditionally counted as French engaged *noir* and (*néo-*)*polar*, Lemaitre's thrillers bring attention to many crucial social matters including gender issues such as rape, sexual violence, and prostitution, as well as to the devastating forces of global capitalism on human relations.

Notes

1. Since only some of Lemaitre's novels exist in English translation, this study is based on the original French novels but I will use English titles, when available, in the running text for the sake of readability. Nonetheless, all direct references are made to French editions, not least for the sake of originality.
2. Pierre Lemaitre, *Trois jours et une vie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2016).
3. It is unusual for France's most prestigious literary prize to be awarded to a crime novel.

4. Andrew Pepper, *Unwilling Executioner: Crime Fiction and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 228. Oxford scholarship online.
5. Julia Crouch, "Genre bender", http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender [accessed 23 November 2016].
6. Ruth Dugdall, "Ten Things You Didn't Know About Domestic Noir", *Female First,* 31 October 2015, http://www.femalefirst.co.uk/books/nowhere-girl-ruth-dugdall-889157.html [accessed 23 November 2016]. Sue Turnbull, "Domestic noir review: Home has never been more dangerous", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 May 2016, http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/domestic-noir-review-home-has-never-been-more-dangerous-20160429-gohwiw.html [accessed 23 November 2016].
7. Declan Burke, "SJ Watson I presume? Shining a light on a star of domestic noir", *Irish Examiner*, 23 May 2015, http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsfilmtv/books/sj-watson-i-presume-shining-a-light-on-a-star-of-domestic-noir-332139.html [accessed 24 November 2016].
8. Valerie Trierweiler, "Pierre Lemaitre, remords aux trousses", *Paris Match*, 10 March 2016, http://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Livres/Pierre-Lemaitre-remords-aux-trousses-926991 [accessed 28 November 2016].
9. https://www.quercusbooks.co.uk/books/detail.page?isbn=9781848666009. When I started writing this chapter, in the spring of 2016, Pierre Lemaitre's work had never been associated with such authors and novels. It seems likely that the publishing house has caught on to the current popularity of the domestic noir trend and sees an opportunity to enhance sales figures by linking Lemaitre's work to it.
10. Stewart King, "Crime Fiction as World Literature", *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 32.2 (2014), 8–19 (p. 13).
11. Pierre Lemaitre, *Alex*, pocket edition (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2012), pp. 178–181.
12. Pierre Lemaitre, *Sacrifices*, pocket edition (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2014), pp. 351–353.
13. See "Comment le thriller domestique s'est imposé", *Lire* 454 (April 2017).
14. S.J. Watson, *Before I Go to Sleep* (London: Black Swan, 2012), pp. 339–340.
15. Pierre Lemaitre, *Travail Soigné*, pocket edition (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2015), pp. 347–357.
16. *Travail soigné*, p. 99.
17. *Sacrifices*, p. 239.
18. *Travail soigné*, pp. 106–107.
19. Verhœven ascribes much of their difference to their sex: he is a man, Irène is a woman.
20. Crime Fiction Lover, "Domestic noir on Brum Radio …", 4 July 2016, http://www.crimefictionlover.com/2016/07/domestic-noir-on-brum-radio/ [accessed 25 November 2016].
21. *Sacrifices*, p. 49.

22. *Alex*, p. 11–13.
23. Pierre Lemaitre, *Cadres noirs*, pocket edition (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2011), p. 415.
24. *Cadres noirs*, p. 441.
25. *Alex*, p. 397.
26. Pierre Lemaitre, *Robe de mariée*, pocket edition (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2010), p. 310.
27. Pierre Lemaitre, *Rosy & John* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2013), p. 141.
28. *Robe de mariée*, pp. 22–23, 59–60.
29. *Travail soigné*, pp. 18, 25.
30. *Sacrifices*, p. 105.
31. *Sacrifices*, p. 326.
32. *Alex*, p. 68.
33. Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train* (London: Doubleday, 2015), pp. 265–267.
34. Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (London: Phoenix, 2013), p. 417.
35. Trierweiler, "Pierre Lemaitre, remords aux trousses".
36. Véronique Desnain, "Style et idéologie dans le roman noir", *Itinéraires* 1 (2015), https://itineraires.revues.org/2685 [accessed 27 November 2016]. See also Véronique Desnain, "Le polar, du fait divers au fait d'histoire", *Itinéraires* 3 (2014), https://itineraires.revues.org/2557 [accessed 25 November 2016].
37. Lee Horsley, "May 1968, Radical Politics and the *Néo-Polar*", in *French Crime Fiction*, ed. Claire Gorrara (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 71–85 (p. 71). See also David Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime: Reading Modern French Crime Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 93–108.
38. Jean-Patrick Manchette, *Chroniques* (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 1996), p. 12.
39. Pepper, p. 228.
40. Pepper, p. 210.
41. Desnain, "Style et idéologie".
42. *Alex*, pp. 335, 338.
43. Pepper, p. 3
44. Pepper, p. 12.
45. Maureen Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Continuum, 1988), p. 108.
46. Yvonne Carmichael, the main character in *Apple Tree Yard*, neatly sums up how expectations on proper female behaviour subject women to prejudicial and unfair treatment in legal procedures: "Three decades of being the most respectable science professional or suburban mother count for nothing against one fuck in a doorway". Louise Doughty, *Apple Tree Yard* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), p. 322.

47. Julia Crouch, "Genre bender"; Rebecca Whitney, "Domestic Noir is bigger than ever; top ten releases for 2015", *The Independent*, 13 January 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/domestic-noir-is-bigger-than-ever-top-ten-releases-for-2015-9975488.html [accessed 25 November 2016].

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CHAPTER 14

Carmen's Final Problem: Contesting Crime Fiction and Gender Roles in Marcela Serrano's *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad*

Patricia Catoira

The tales of Sherlock Holmes became so popular at the time of their release that it became impossible for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to consider ending the series of the English sleuth. The writer had tried in *The Final Problem* (1893), which ends with Holmes falling to his death after a fight with his nemesis Dr Moriarty. The multifaceted Doyle wanted to pursue other interests and leave behind (at least temporarily) the formulaic conventions of detective tales. The readers' uproar and the pressure from editors forced the creator to revive the beloved Sherlock Holmes and subsequently produce more installments in the series. In Chilean Marcela Serrano's *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad/Our Lady of Solitude* (1999), her character Carmen Lewis Ávila (C.L. Ávila as pen name) suffers the same bondage to her literary private investigator Pamela Hawthorne. The crime-fiction writer confesses to a friend that she hates her detective but does not know how to "get rid of her" and is not willing to "suffer the humiliation [like Doyle's] of having to resurrect her" (69).[1]

In a recent 2016 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine Terrence Rafferty wrote: "The most psychologically acute and exciting crime fiction these

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days is being written by women, who know all the new (and old) places to look for the darkest mysteries". The huge success of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), about the twisted relationship of a married couple who deceive each other as much as the reader, brought attention to and placed the marriage thriller and the domestic noir at the epicenter of today's mystery fiction, especially in the USA and Europe. Female writers like Flynn, Megan Abbott, Alison Gaylin, and Laura Lippman from the USA, or Alex Marwood, Paula Hawkins, and Sophie Hannah from the UK, just to name a few, have revitalized the genre by doing away with the lone-wolf hero and street violence, favoring instead emotional and psychological aggression among people who know each other. First-person female narrators create an intimate and often unreliable account of the mystery at hand, presenting death as chillingly casual and unnervingly familiar (Rafferty 2016: 104). Women have been writing crime stories since the 1920s and 1930s, the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction. Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers stand out as the two big names from that period characterized by intricate mysteries with multiple suspects. Later in the second half of the twentieth century, Patricia Highsmith infused her novels with a psychological and existential dimension as personified in Ripley, the amoral sociopath who is the protagonist of several of her works. But it was after the late 1970s that a group of female writers, mainly from the USA, carried out a literary phenomenon, in terms of production and readership, similar to today's bestselling domestic noir. Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, and others revitalized the male hard-boiled formula by placing women in detective and private-eye roles. Assessing the state of crime fiction, *Publishers Weekly* magazine declared in 1990 that: "the woman as tough professional investigator has been the most striking development in the detective novel in the past decade".[2] What is unique about today's domestic noir, including Chilean Marcela Serrano's *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad*, is that these female authors continue renovating the genre by placing the crime and mystery in spaces (marriage, relationships, daily life, suburbia, etc.) that are too familiar—and thus unsettling—to readers.

When the popular C.L. Ávila suddenly disappears in 1998 at age 43, her husband hires investigator Rosa Alvallay. The hypotheses about the novelist's disappearance range from Carmen being dead, to having been kidnapped by the Colombian FARC guerrillas due to a past romantic relationship with a member of the group when both lived in Mexico, or to disappearing of her own will. Like many literary detectives, Rosa loves crime fiction but has not read any of the works of the disappeared writer.

The investigator realizes the public dimension of her case. C.L. Ávila is a public figure about whom society had built expectations, "as if C.L. Ávila belonged to them".[3] Just as Conan Doyle's fans took for granted that he would be releasing Sherlock Holmes tales for the rest of his life, Carmen's readers and editors expected the same, and it was up to Rosa to deliver the famous C.L. Ávila back to them.

Serrano's novel presents a familiar trope in detective texts, the metafictional narrative that draws attention to the conventions of the genre. Rosa's first-person narration provides an intimate window into the mind of the sleuth during her investigation. She engages the readers by speaking to them directly and sharing information about her methods and analyses inaccessible to characters in the novel. The act of reading becomes one of production, imagining, interpreting, and decoding in which reader and writer share the process of fiction making.[4] Such a reciprocal relationship also helps readers assimilate stylistic and ideological changes to the genre.[5] *Nuestra Señora* dialogues with the formulas of detective fiction by evoking and contesting them at the same time. Rosa's double discourse allows the novel to effectively challenge patriarchal values in general, and in Chilean society in particular. These dynamics also function as an example of Michel Foucault's (1990) reverse discourse,[6] which means that Serrano's novel repeats recognizable conventions with strategic differences that invert the dominant discourse in order to empower those suppressed by it. Rosa's monologues become indictments of existing gender inequities. The investigator may not be able to voice her thoughts aloud in the reality within the text, but she is aware of the power she holds in the narrative of the novel because she has the readers' attention.

When female writers began to write detective fiction there was an inevitable gender-genre question. Could a genre so distinctively male (in terms of writers, characters, and ideology) and so heavily reliant on form conventions engage in feminist agency? For some critics (e.g. Kathleen Gregory Klein), the impositions of the genre limit the reformulation of detective narratives from a female-centric lens. Other critics (e.g. Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones) have found such enterprise possible by noting that female writers have succeeded in using an easily recognizable literary pattern to renegotiate existing formulations of the genre and highlight them as social constructions. In the process, they offer new reconfigurations of the detective: female investigators who navigate public and domestic spaces, and who work within a patriarchal system while contesting it through their actions.

Critic Judith Butler has proposed to look at gender as a repeated performance, a social construction that challenges its original depiction. The acts themselves constitute the gendered subject: "Such acts, gestures, enactment, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means."[7] Life experience becomes a source for political engagement.[8] It is in this context of agency through performance, repetition, and negotiation—in which the personal is political—that female authors can reformulate the detective novel. They provide gender agency through easily identifiable (accessible) narratives familiar to readers of detective fiction rather than imposing an explicitly feminist discourse.

The detective novel remained relatively dormant in Latin America until the emergence of the so-called *neopolicial*. Borrowing heavily from the gumshoe hard-boiled tradition of the USA, (male) writers across the region unleashed a wave of detective novels that not only revived the genre but led to a literary phenomenon comparable to the so called "Boom" of the 1960s that put Gabriel García Márquez and his generation on the international map. Although the *neopolicial* can be tracked back to Mexican writer Paco Ignacio Taibo's works in the 1970s, it is in the 1990s that Latin American detective fiction takes off in terms of production and readership around the world in an upswing trajectory that continues until today. The term *neopolicial* was coined by Taibo to refer to detective fiction that serves as a mechanism of denunciation and reflection about social and political problems.[9] Latin American detectives take on cases that force them to face institutions and entities which expose a pervasive system of corruption and injustice in their societies well beyond the criticism effected in the US hard-boiled novel. The amateur or professional detective encounters the legacy of Latin America's authoritarian regimes, civil wars, and conflicts that afflicted the region for most of the twentieth century and that came to an end in the 1980s and 1990s—coincidently the time writers turned to detective fiction. The historical context further seeps through the novel as most sleuths had participated in—and thus are reminders of—the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s that sought to create a more equal and just society. Their activism had often led to taking up arms against such oppressive regimes, which symbolized extreme versions of the establishment they are now facing.

In Chile, Augusto Pinochet's coup in 1973 against the democratically elected Salvador Allende established an authoritarian regime that resulted

in about 30,000 disappeared, 3000 dead, and thousands tortured, imprisoned, and forced into exile as in the case of Serrano. Backed by the USA in their mission to suppress the spread of communism and leftist movements in Latin America—which Allende's socialism symbolized—Pinochet's government also implemented neoliberal economic policies that helped modernize the country fast but left a large sector of society in poverty. After elections in 1989, Chile re-established its democratic rule a year later but with numerous bumps. The sequels of the dictatorship were still painfully present for a large portion of the society as members of the former regime continued to function in the new democratic society without any consequences for their actions. Pinochet himself held the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and later became a senator for life in the upper legislative chamber.[10] Chilean writers Luis Sepúlveda and Ramón Díaz Eterovic addressed these issues in their popular *neopolicial* novels about detectives George Washington Caucumán and Heredia, respectively. *Nuestra Señora* is Serrano's first detective novel. It continues the writer's focus on gender issues and the disillusionment with Chile's transition to a democratic equal society that characterize her other works.

When the case starts, Serrano's private detective deems C.L. Ávila to be very different from herself. But Rosa's investigation into Carmen's life becomes a journey of female empathy and solidarity. Both female characters stand out as symbols of the modern independent woman at the same time as the novel highlights that such independence comes at a personal and social price. Carmen is perceived by her husband's circle as a carefree woman, who is socially unfit for the Chilean upper class. Carmen was born to an "errant" American father who one day wandered in the rural remote area of General Cruz where Carmen's mother worked in the local store. The couple stayed there for a few years working on the mother's family land area but eventually left for India on a spiritual journey, leaving their young daughter in the care of the maternal grandmother. Carmen's best friend Jill thinks the parental abandonment at such an early age marked Carmen's lifelong feeling of uprooting (*desarraigo*). After witnessing the murder of her grandmother, Carmen moved to the care of her American Aunt Jane in San Francisco.

Abandoned by her parents, uprooted from her mother's culture, and trying to conform to Aunt Jane's guidance provided ample circumstances for Carmen to rebel and embrace the hippie lifestyle of the 1960s American counterculture. Just as her errant father did, Carmen and her friend Jill wandered the USA leading a bohemian life that led her to settle in Key

West where she sang in bars. From there, Carmen continued to travel and ended up in Mexico where she would spend "ten magical years": "So many important things happened there: my first and only son, my first novel, my first love."[11] Jill told Rosa that there was a magical spell that tied both friends to Mexico and that kept them there. Mexico like the USA appears as a malleable social space in stark contrast to a rigid, socially conservative Chile.

The prototype of the 1960s hippie female captures for the characters in the novel the same anxieties that the femme fatale did in the traditional hard-boiled fiction. On the surface, Carmen's marriage to Tomás is viewed as a break from the writer's bohemian life in Mexico and the USA. Marriage appears in this patriarchal context as a condition that rescues women from uncertainty and spaces that threaten the social patriarchal order. After meeting Carmen in Mexico, Tomás divorced his first wife and then Carmen moved with him to Chile. The college provost believes he saved Carmen from her "carefree" (*desordenada*) life. Carmen is perceived as inherently unfit for her new social position in Chile's upper-middle class. Tomás's only daughter, Ana María, is Carmen's harshest critic. She blames all of her stepmother's faults on the writer's "primitive" nature and social upbringing. Tomás echoes this association by referring to Carmen's sleeping habits as those of a "savage brute".[12] Ana María calls her dad's wife a "gypsy" and a "peasant" whose class origins were not a good match for her father's: "It seemed as if she had no sense or consideration for what was important to us. She was no match for my father's world […] her upbringing always betrayed her".[13]

Ana María portrays Carmen as difficult and unruly, having undeserved childlike outbursts with her father. The stepdaughter judges Carmen unfit to run the house, or for anything practical for that matter. She believes that Carmen married her father as a calculated move to "save herself"[14] from her chaotic life, that she used Tomás to provide financial and emotional stability for her son born out of wedlock, and that she is a bad mother for leaving her son Vicente in the care of Tomás when the writer goes on tours. Carmen's financial self-sufficiency is ignored, derided, or chastised. Georgina, the maid, sees Carmen as selfish for not wanting to be in charge of "anything",[15] "anything" being, of course, all things domestic. Georgina laughs at the notion of writing as a real job, one that would consume time and energy. Carmen's "distractions" or failings from her prescribed household duties similarly symbolize, in the eyes of the maid, the writer's failure as a wife as well. Tomás "never did anything wrong".[16]

Georgina and Ana María disparage Carmen's fame and profession as part of their portrayal of the writer as an eccentric and unfit woman. Tomás's employee tells Rosa that writing is not a job, while running the house as Ms Alicia did *was*. Georgina cannot believe somebody would be tired from writing and traveling as Carmen would often be.[17] Ana María views Carmen's profession as one more of her stepmother's eccentricities and egocentric choices. She criticizes Carmen's use of the pen name C.L. Ávila as a pompous gesture: "In this house, she is simply Carmen Lewis. That is her real name. None of her writer's eccentricities belongs here with us".[18]

Carmen's attempts at meeting Chileans' expectations of her class and gender draw the reader's attention to her performance as a repeated social construction. Carmen's struggles to conform are viewed as failings rather than her efforts to negotiate or resist such expectations. Carmen's friend Martín believes the epigraph of her first novel, "For Tomás, finally", may indicate her conscious effort to put her life in Tomás's hands. Carmen adapted her chaotic meal schedule to his, though at the end she was "clumsy in the little things, the domestic ones".[19] Tomás built a dressing room where Carmen could organize all her clothes. She divided her social gowns on one side and the comfortable ones she liked on the other side. As soon as she came home she would quickly change into the latter. According to Georgina, Tomás asked her to cut her "hippie" hair, but she did so only a couple times and she never wore make-up. Tomás condescendingly emphasizes his wife's disregard for money and inability to manage it. Similarly, he highlights Carmen's unmaterialistic lifestyle as symbolic of her carefree, childlike personality. He notes Carmen moved to Chile with only one suitcase. Carmen herself expressed in an interview that her joy of walking barefoot is part of feeling free and disconnected from material possessions. Ana María mentions Carmen did not appreciate all the material comforts that her father provided. She calls her stepmom "useless" for not knowing how to drive a car. Georgina concurs and says Carmen resented the formality of the house in Santiago and even more the beach house for its only purpose was to socialize with Tomás's acquaintances.

Chile worked hard to shed the stigma of economic underdevelopment and social "backwardness" afflicting some its neighbors in the region. The overarching narrative that sustained Pinochet's dictatorship for almost 20 years was the so-called economic miracle. Pinochet's regime hired US economists—the Chicago Boys—who implemented neoliberal policies focused on foreign investment and free markets. Despite the human rights

abuses, many in the middle and upper classes tacitly consented to the military regime as it brought a perceived economic stability and development to the country—although in reality it never trickled down to the lower classes. Eventually, it was the economic crisis that Chile suffered in the last years of the dictatorship that made Chileans consider a change of regime in the referendum of 1988, although the neoliberal policies continued. In this mindset, affluence is not only indicative of individual material success but also of progress and civilization.[20] Outward signs of wealth as well as consumer behaviors mark one's belonging to the imagined community comprised of Western, cosmopolitan, capitalist societies of first-world countries. It also effectively depoliticizes the nation under the guise of economic progress.

Carmen's marriage and new life become associated with Chile. Carmen had realized these changes and told Jill: "I have lost my American side these past years, Jill, and the Chilean side that is dominating my being is a bit rigid".[21] The USA, like Mexico, emerges as a liberating space where one can choose one's own destiny. Tomás also recognized this pull in Carmen: "She viewed American society as an enormous unformed body, in which everything fits, open to any type of diversity. That attracted her. In Chile everybody knows everybody, and that is why she decided not to be Chilean".[22] Carmen's estrangement in Chile was also rooted in the political developments taking place. She had decided to return to her mother's country just as Pinochet's authoritarian rule seemed to be coming to an end. In the midst of increasing outcry over human-rights violations, an economic crisis, and high-profile assassinations and scandals, the dictator had agreed to a referendum in 1988 in which his countrymen would decide if they wanted him to continue in power. If the "No" side won, elections would be called and democracy would be restored. Carmen absorbed the victory of the "No" side with great hope, as the preamble of wide-ranging changes in Chilean society. But like many on the Left, she soon became disillusioned by the transition to democracy. Carmen concluded with regret that "the Left had handed over normalcy to this country with nothing in return".[23] The disenchantment with how things turned out translated into apathy and withdrawal. Tomás said his wife "no longer hated or loved Chile, she was just bored with it".[24] As a result, she stopped writing about it.

Carmen's study became the physical refuge away from all she wished to avoid. There she could escape the formality and stuffiness of the family residence and social conventions. As in many domestic noir works, the

house had become Carmen's prison. She subverted that subjugation by creating her own private space within the oppressive walls of the couple's home. The room is more than a physical shelter from the outside; its decoration stands out in sharp contrast with the rest of the house. Rosa notices the incongruity: "[The study is] the only place in the house that seems to belong to Carmen. It is hard to picture this mansion in connection with the image of the writer."[25] The study has a bohemian feel with pillows, rugs, incense, candles, old leather chairs. "All the objects are alive", assesses Rosa.[26] Carmen's ability to carve a space of her own evokes Virginia Woolf's famous essay "A Room of One's Own" (1929): "A woman must have money and a room of her own to write fiction." Woolf discusses the marginalization that women writers, including herself, have traditionally experienced. Writing gave Carmen financial security as well as self-worth. It had become a medium in which to negotiate her life and ultimately escape from it. Carmen's friend Martín had told Rosa: "Little by little, the only world she became interested in living in was an imaginary one. As time went by, she read more and more. […] She was always writing or reading. Everything else she could do without, she lived in permanent fiction."[27] Even Ana María recognizes that Carmen was at her best when writing because she poured all her vitality in it.[28] According to Jill, only words could save her friend Carmen from the uprootedness she had suffered all her life. Writing had given Carmen the anchor and sense of belonging that no place or person had. Even though Carmen's study represents her success at claiming "her" space, the contempt that those in Tomás's circle display towards the room—what it symbolizes—highlights that Carmen's passion and profession are at odds with the expectations imposed by society. The study remains a marginal space.

Everything Rosa learns about Carmen in her interviews leads the investigator to believe that if she had been in the writer's place she would have wanted to disappear too. When the investigator first meets Tomás, she perceives him as aware of his importance. Tomás reminds her of an equestrian statue,[29] probably referring to an authoritarian figure: "I concluded Tomás Rojas was a dominant man."[30] Tomás's residence also personally repels the investigator. Looking at the formality of the décor, Rosa thinks, "if I had been C.L. Ávila, I would have dragged myself out of this house".[31] As mentioned earlier, only in Carmen's study does Rosa feel at ease. In the dressing room Tomás had built for his wife, Rosa also reflects on the constraints on women's appearance to conform to a standard: "the discipline of the outfit […] The disguise […] quickly, her free body restrains, and

once following the norm and oppressed, stifled, she becomes the provost's wife."[32] Rosa thus identifies with the writer and her dislike for social conformity.

Rosa finds instances of Carmen's own dissatisfaction in an interview she gave to the press. The writer felt as a "princess in her minaret", trapped like the young goddess Kumari she had met in her youth. In one of the trips with her parents, a young Carmen became obsessed by Kumari, the only living goddess in the world who at the time was as young as her. The community would choose the goddess when very young and extricate her from her family to live in isolation in a palace in Katmandu, where she would receive the proper training for her position. Kumari could not have any scars on her body, which meant that her image, her appearance, was as important as her spiritual aptitude. The girl's divinity would come to a sharp end at the time of her first menstruation. Despite the fascination at the time, older Carmen could not help but see Kumari's fate as an example of women's oppression.

The investigator can only conclude that under such circumstances it was only a matter of time before Carmen snapped: "Those who were around C.L. Ávila overlooked a very important element. If they thought that she had submitted, they didn't read in time the different and diverse expressions of rage. Because one needs a good dose of it to take action."[33] There are two possible catalysts prompting Carmen to act on that rage and leave her unfulfilled life behind. One was cheating death, after a plane that Carmen was supposed to be on crashed, killing everyone on board. After that event, only four months before her disappearance, Carmen seemed edgy, telling others that all the material stuff was irrelevant and that one had to find paradise on earth. The second development had to do with her writing. Carmen had confided to her friend Martín that she "hated" Pamela Hawthorne and felt "exhausted" by her heroine. The popularity of the series had bound Carmen to live up to the expectations of writers and editors, thus stifling her creativity and subjugating the popular writer to the will of others once again.

Serrano's portrayal of her female detective evokes her male counterparts in the traditional hard-boiled novel and the Latin American *neopolicial*, while at the same time re-negotiating that characterization through Rosa's enactments. The single mother loves her city, the cosmopolitan Santiago, but feels alienated from it and the ordinary people who inhabit it: "I watched the horrific traffic in the city of Santiago, feeling completely alien, easily excluding me from the puzzling streams coming and going

without stopping for its inhabitants, like victims of the swinging of a carousel from hell."[34] The familiar trope of the gumshoe detective's love-and-hate relationship with his/her urban locus extends in *Nuestra Señora*, as in most *neopolicial* fiction, to the nation as well. Rosa's performance is framed in this way within Chile's historical events and allows Serrano, through Rosa's voice, to comment on the state of affairs of her country.

Rosa had been exiled to Mexico during Pinochet's dictatorship. She had returned to Chile full of hope right before democratic rule was set to begin but soon became disillusioned about the political reconfiguration in the spheres of power. Rosa had believed in Allende's socialism as well as in the social transformation of Chilean society in the return to democracy. In another instance of identification with Carmen, Rosa succumbed to a fatalist malaise: "I am a sinner in many ways, the worst sin being discouragement, a true Chilean emotion. I am tormented by any aspirations to true happiness as I sense we will never achieve them."[35] Although Rosa did not consider herself an activist per se, she embarked, like many sleuths, on a quixotic quest to save those in need from the hands of evil. Upon her return to Chile, she had joined human rights organizations to help families find their loved ones who had disappeared during the almost 20 years of military rule. The institutional obstacles in the investigations and the ubiquitous rhetoric of moving forward, which implicitly sent the message of turning a blind eye to the crimes of the past, fed that discouragement: "el desaliento".

The portrayal of the 54-year-old detective in an unglamorous way follows the line of other *neopolicial* male detectives as well as the heroines in US female crime fiction from the 1970s onward. She is overweight and showing signs of aging, like wrinkles and grey hair. The investigator emerges as ordinary at best and marginal at worst, allowing the reader to identify with him or her. Rosa in fact describes herself as an "ordinary woman" who looks like any other woman in Chile and Latin America: "I am an ordinary woman […] Nothing in me is radically distinctive."[36] Rosa also feels invisible in a more existential way: "I have never been important to anybody, as it must be the case to a high percentage of the world population."[37] The characterization of Rosa as "ordinary" is contraposed with her status as a single mother. While she may look like many other women in Chile and in Latin America in terms of appearance, her marital and employment status sharply separate Rosa from the majority of women around her. Chile has traditionally been socially conservative. In 2004, it was the last country in the region to legalize divorce, after a long and bit-

ter struggle with the Catholic Church and its powerful allies on the political scene. The action of the novel is set in 1998, years before the milestone legislation was passed by Chile's Congress, which means that Rosa's divorce most likely happened in Mexico.

Male *neopolicial* and gumshoe detectives have usually been single or divorced, but always childless. They are sexually active and may have a love interest, but one that remains tangential to their existence and is usually doomed to failure. Male detectives do not bring attention to the domestic space; in fact, they barely spend time in their homes, and their bachelor life in an unkept pad is often romanticized. In contrast, female investigators run households by themselves and have untidy houses, but neither is romanticized. Rosa feels the weight of making ends meet and having to keep up with daily household chores. She loves hotels because "only in them can one attain the desired time without interruptions, only there can one escape from daily minutiae and domesticity, only there can one enjoy meals that were prepared by others, only there can one be equal to men".[38] The role of the traditional mother is also disrupted in the novel as Rosa notices her increasing disconnection from her children, with whom she barely interacts. Rosa implicitly feels the burden of being their sole provider while their father pursues his political activism without worrying about his children: "I was careful not to throw at him curses over the phone […] I did not judge him for this time only."[39] The investigator notices how easy it is to fall into traditional roles when she and her ex-husband are together: "When Hugo left, I washed the dishes from breakfast, put away the sweet bread we did not touch, the pastries, the donuts and palmiers that always tempted me so much, and I was shocked at how easily one assumes roles from the old days, as if one had never stopped doing them".[40] Serrano thus includes domesticity as part of the daily life of the investigator in a way easily relatable to the reader. Above all, Rosa is presented as a working woman who is financially independent, albeit not rolling in money, and uses her experience as a woman to enhance her investigative skills in a traditionally male profession.

Rosa's background in working for human rights organizations helped her get a job as a private investigator in a modest company in Santiago. Rosa believes her boss assigned her the case of C.L. Ávila's disappearance because of her gender and her time in Mexico. Rosa confides that being a woman will help her solve the case. Carmen agreed through her alter ego: "Pamela Hawthorne held—without explicitly saying it—that women were sharper than men in the field of criminal investigation. She wasn't one of

those feminists who believes women do everything better, no. She simply alluded to a certain *non-objective perspective* that we women possess with respect to any truth. I sense what she means."[41] She classifies her strategy to focus on Carmen's writings as distinctively female. If her male colleague was in charge of the case, Rosa argues, "he would go to bed, or take a shower to go out with his girlfriend of the day and never lay in bed to go over a novel from the disappeared writer since he wouldn't expect to find clues there. Maybe, by not putting himself constantly in her shoes, fewer suppositions would open to him than me right now".[42] Although Rosa understands how class, age, and beauty set her apart from Carmen and her literary detective, the experience of being a woman in a still sexist society establishes an implicit bond:

> Then, from this woman that I am, and in possession of the few certainties that I hold, I must imagine another woman—so different from me—a woman in that one percent I had referred to. I need to be able to put myself in her place and, to that end, since there's so much that separates us, I can only count on one personal element, that for a man may seem abstract: C.L. Ávila is also a woman, tied to the same laws, forced to submit to them or succumb.[43]

C.L. Ávila had written five installments of the Pamela Hawthorne series in 12 years. Her first novel germinated as a way to cope with the traumatic events of her grandmother's death: "When I felt it was time to write, I knew that if I did not exorcize that story, I wouldn't be able to let my imagination go. That's how I invented Pamela Hawthorne, she is the baby girl who was in her mother's arms".[44] Rosa pays close attention to the last novel, *Un Mundo Raro*, because Carmen had told her friend Martín that novels anticipate the future rather than retell the past. The novel takes place in Thailand and includes the story of the mysterious disappearance of Jim Thompson, which is irrelevant to Pamela Hawthorne's case but which catches Rosa's attention. The English entrepreneur had disappeared one day without leaving a trace, something that Pamela—like Rosa—cannot understand because, "There's always a trail".[45] Rosa further notes the significance of the novel's epigraph, which refers to Mexico and ends with the verse "We will have to disappear, no one should remain." Rosa also recalls Carmen agreeing with Rigoberta Menchú when the Guatemalan activist said that Mexico had become a sanctuary for those who do not have a place in the world.

Rosa travels to Mexico City and there she goes into "action", hitting the streets as the traditional crime fiction gumshoe but without the violence. She meets with the Mexican writer Santiago Blanco under false pretenses. She introduces herself as a journalist in search of an interview for a Chilean literary magazine. Jill and Carmen had rented from him when they lived in Mexico, and Rosa had realized that he had been the great love Carmen had talked about, not the Colombian guerrilla fighter Tomás was worried about. Santiago had to be the father of her son. His marital status makes Rosa recall Carmen's statement in an interview: "The problem with Mexican men is that they never stop being married."[46] Rosa adds love to the list of catalysts: "then I think about C.L. Ávila, the boredom she felt towards her own life, the untenable landscape before her and the apparent docility she displayed to handle it. If the love for this man amounted to the greatness that I give it, Why didn't it act as a regenerative substance?"[47] Rosa follows Santiago to Oaxaca and disguises herself to be in the same plane. Rosa acknowledges that the ordinary nature of her appearance, which she points out to the reader as "irrelevant to this story", is useful for her job, since she can be unnoticeable.[48] There Rosa sees him having an affair with a Colombian blonde which she resents as "an act of female solidarity". Rosa cannot understand how easily he can take on another mistress when the death—his take on the disappearance—of his former lover is so recent.

At the end, it is information from fiction—that source that maybe only female PIs would think of—that fills in the gaps of her male-centric street work and allows Rosa to solve her case. The investigator reads Santiago's novel *La loba*, about a woman's journey through her feelings of abandonment, and she realizes it is based on Carmen. One of the ultimate goals of the heroine in Santiago's novel is "to have a house somewhere in the world. Painted blue."[49] When Rosa discovers that the Colombian mistress, Lucía Reyes, lives in a house painted blue, Rosa finally realizes she has found C.L. Ávila. Santiago unveils all the story for Rosa. Carmen's hatred for Pamela Hawthorne went beyond the written pages. The novelist had hired her cousin Gloria, the baby who had inspired her heroine, as her assistant. Gloria and Tomás had had an affair in the beach house that the writer so much despised. After Gloria had been fired, Tomás continued cheating with much younger women. Avoiding death in Guatemala had given Carmen the final push to find that paradise, not through fiction, but in the world. She had rekindled the love affair with Santiago and both began meeting furtively during her international tours. He eventually was

unable to join her completely in her "adventure" for he did not have the courage to leave his wife and start anew with Carmen. She had plastic surgery to change her appearance and a new identity, thanks to her old flame the Colombian guerrilla fighter.

In the novel's Epilogue, Rosa's first-person narration surfaces with force, claiming a space where the investigator seeks the readers' ultimate complicity. Her voice becomes personal and intimate, but also political. As Hutcheon contends, "If self-reflective texts can actually lure the reader into participating in the creation of a novelistic universe, perhaps he can also be seduced into action—direct political action."[50] The discovery of Carmen's whereabouts poses a dilemma for Rosa. On the one hand, she can close the case and succeed at her job. She can be famous for returning the famous author to her family and fans. Rosa recaps how her intuition and open mind led her to find C.L. Ávila. She also credits fiction for it: "Writers always leave a trail behind!"[51] On the other hand, Rosa sympathizes with the novelist's actions because Rosa herself experiences the same subjugation: "And one of my lessons, learned with its good quota of uncertainty and sadness, is that it is hard for a woman to be independent, even at the turn of the [twentieth] century as we are. That those who seek self-determination almost always pay dearly for it. That the word freedom applied to a woman is almost always a lie."[52] Living in oblivion cost Carmen her career: "She turned her back to any claim of glory and chose *silence* …"[53] (my emphasis). Still, Rosa notes that Carmen's privileged financial and professional situation allows her to carry out a plan not possible to most women. Carmen could live off the sizable earnings she had accumulated. And to Rosa's envy, she could continue writing: "Maybe the noir novel is dead, Pamela Hawthorne is dead, C.L. Ávila is dead, but not the will to invent stories and tell them. […] The privilege of the writer is that her job can continue completely disregarding the outside world and its inhabitants".[54] Rosa acknowledges the power she holds over Carmen's fate: "Who am I to interrupt her steps? […] I wouldn't want another woman to give me away just as hope was beginning to take a hold of me".[55] Inspired by Carmen's life-changing actions, the investigator rips up all the papers of her case, allowing Carmen to enjoy the freedom she has fought for. In doing so, the novel evokes the subjugation of women in a larger social context and Rosa vindicates her "victim" as well as herself. While the patriarchal system remains unscathed in the novel, Rosa and the reader have been empowered to lead change.

In *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad*, writing appears as a site of negotiation and contestation of genre conventions and social impositions. The Pamela Hawthorne detective series had provided Carmen with the emotional attachment she had lacked during most of her life. At the same time, the pressures from readers and editors to produce more of the same, to submit to someone else's desires, subjugated her creativity. Despite Rosa's initial worry that the fate of the writer would depend on her, once the investigator found out that Carmen was still fully engaged in reading and writing under her new identity, she realized that C.L. Ávila's creativity would continue, but without the glory. Carmen's efforts to liberate herself from her stifling life were mirrored in her writing. She had built a space of her own on her own terms. Inspired by the writer's actions, Rosa decides at the end of the novel to take steps to change her life. And "it will be her [Rosa] this time" who writes a detective novel "and later. After that, whatever happens happens."[56] Ultimately, it is Serrano herself who frees herself from the male-centric formula-driven crime-fiction genre. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* becomes the unconventional detective novel that C.L. Ávila had not been able to write yet.

Notes

1. All my translations from Spanish.
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3. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 36.
4. Hutcheon, Linda. 1989. "Incredulity Toward Metanarrative: Negotiating Postmodernism and Feminism", *Tessera*, 7: 39–44, p. 86.
5. Cawelti, John. 1976. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 35–36.
6. Foucault refers to a reverse discourse as one that repeats and inverts the ideological imperatives of the dominant discourse in order to authorize those marginalized by it. Its efficacy in this case depends on the reader's recognition of such power relations.
7. Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge), p. 173.
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9. Scantlebory, Marcia. 2000 "Paco Ignacio Taibo II: La novela negra es la gran novela social de fin de milenio", in *Caras* http://www.caras.cl/ediciones/paco.htm [accessed 16 September 2005], p. 2.

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11. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 118.
12. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 108.
13. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 82.
14. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 78.
15. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 32.
16. Avelar, Idelber. 2000. *Alegorías de la derrota: La ficción postdictatorial y el trabajo del duelo* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio), p. 32.
17. Avelar, Idelber. 2000. *Alegorías de la derrota: La ficción postdictatorial y el trabajo del duelo* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio), pp. 27–28.
18. Avelar, Idelber. 2000. *Alegorías de la derrota: La ficción postdictatorial y el trabajo del duelo* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio), p. 83.
19. Avelar, Idelber. 2000. *Alegorías de la derrota: La ficción postdictatorial y el trabajo del duelo* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio), p. 105.
20. Avelar, Idelber. 2000. *Alegorías de la derrota: La ficción postdictatorial y el trabajo del duelo* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio), p. 66.
21. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 97.
22. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 106.
23. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 105.
24. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), pp. 106–107.
25. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 25.
26. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 25.
27. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 48.
28. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 84.
29. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 20.
30. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 78.
31. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 78.

32. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), pp. 64–65.
33. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 225.
34. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 14.
35. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 127.
36. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), pp. 125–126.
37. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 125.
38. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 132.
39. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 70.
40. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 141.
41. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 71.
42. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 71.
43. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 128.
44. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), pp. 113–114.
45. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 93.
46. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 151.
47. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), pp. 171–172.
48. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 127.
49. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 150.
50. Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press), p. 155.
51. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 243.
52. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 128.

53. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 225.
54. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), pp. 222–223.
55. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 245.
56. Serrano, Marcela. 1999. *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mexico: Alfaguara), p. 247.

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Afterword: The Woman Through the Window

Megan Abbott

Over and over again, in Wilkie Collins's wildly popular sensation novel *The Woman in White* (1859), the titular female character emerges from nowhere to place her hand on the male hero's shoulder. This, the literary critic D.A. Miller calls "the primal scene" of the novel, the one it "obsessively repeats and remembers". Each time, the gesture sends chills up characters' spines and thus our own. We the readers are infected too. Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*, crime fiction's breakout success of 2015, offers up a similarly potent primal moment: the recurring image of a woman outside looking in, or a woman inside looking out, through train windows, through patio doors, down into the dank mouth of an underpass. And she is always looking at another woman. Both the voyeur and the surveilled leave the encounter feeling watched, scrutinised, judged. The image repeats itself so many times, across all three of the book's female narrators, that it begins to have a contagious effect on the reader, evoking the feeling of someone looking over one's shoulder as one turns the pages. Watching, judging.

Miller argues that these moments—the surge of fear and paranoia and dread the characters experience in them—replicate themselves in our own reading experience, binding us to the novel in ways we can't explain. We identify with the main characters because we're experiencing the same physical sensations. It takes on the quality of a dream from which we can't let go when daylight comes.

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The Girl on the Train was widely and excessively trumpeted as "the next *Gone Girl*", a phrase now overused to the point of irrelevancy. The two novels, however, share little more than the "girl" in the title. Most conspicuously, there is a difference in tone. Alongside Gillian Flynn's mordant tale of marital torment, Hawkins's novel is very earnest. But on a deeper level, the two novels have very different relationships with the reader. If Flynn dances with us, seeking to provoke, to shock, to unsettle and upturn, Hawkins is after something more interior, more intimate.

Like those sensation novels of the nineteenth century, *The Girl on the Train* plays on us like a cold hand on our shoulder as we read. With all its repetitions, its gaps and blackouts, it takes on the quality of a private dream or nightmare. At certain points, one can easily forget which of its female characters is narrating, as all three often read like split-off pieces of the same person. Meanwhile, the more circumscribed male characters don't even necessarily feel real but like strange projections from the narrating women's subconscious.

The commercial juggernaut of both "Girl" books comes as little surprise among crime and mystery readers. Women, who comprise the majority of the genre's readership, have long had a strong appetite for dark stories of domestic discord. One need only open up Library of America's two-volume *Women Crime Writers: Eight Suspense Novels of the 1940s and 1950s* (2015), edited by Sarah Weinman, to find similarly complicated heroines in mid-century tales of the dark side of marriage and motherhood, the fallout from gender wars at home and in the culture at large.

But the fact that both "Girl" books have reached a readership well beyond the genre is noteworthy. While some readers may have purchased the books simply to be part of the conversation about a zeitgeisty novel, the back-to-back blockbuster successes point to something larger going on: a desire among readers for stories that speak to their experiences—experiences they may not see reflected elsewhere, at least not as keenly. They respond to books heavy with the emotional violence of many marriages, of domestic life, of the weight of family judgement, and the complicated gifts of motherhood.

It seems to me no accident, either, that contemporary female crime writers, including Flynn, Laura Lippman, Alison Gaylin and Alex Marwood, draw heavily on true crime in their fiction. In their most recent novels, they explore the media-sanctioned ways women are supposed to behave in the face of crime and what happens when they don't. There is a rich "meta" experience for readers, then, who can follow a case such as the Madeleine McCann disappearance or the Casey Anthony murder trial only

to find these cases dissected and deconstructed in the novels that follow, eliciting further uncomfortable truths about gender and the media, and gender and the justice system.

Does this mean we will see only variations on *The Girl on the Train* now? The vast tonal differences between Flynn's and Hawkins's novels seem instead to have demonstrated to publishers that readers are not looking for only one kind of story or one way of telling it. In fact, when one looks at the crime fiction of the last few years, you see tributaries opening up in all directions, reflecting greater diversity in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, class, and a new boldness not just in subject matter but in style. One need only place the work of Lippman and Attica Locke, who operate more in the tradition of the social novel, next to Celeste Ng's delicate family pathology (*Everything I Never Told You*) or the highly stylised, voice-driven fiction of Elizabeth Little (*Dear Daughter*) and Lisa Lutz (*The Passenger* and *How to Start a Fire*), to see the genre's range.

Yet oddly, for all their insight into contemporary life, not to mention their reader-by-reader cultural impact, novels like Hawkins's are generally not accorded much gravitas. The literary press still regards them as simple potboilers, gimmicks dependent on twists, escapist formula fiction. Sometimes, of course, the culprit is simply gender bias. One is less likely to hear such brush-offs in the case of other big recent crossover crime novels, such as Richard Price's *The Whites*, Dennis Lehane's *World Gone By* or Don Winslow's *The Cartel*. But then, marginalisation was certainly the case with the sensation novel, shoved to the boundary of the literary canon for more than a century until critics like Miller pulled it back to centre stage. The same fate faced many of the domestic suspense novels of the mid-century, perhaps a reason so many of them remained out of print until the Library of America's recent effort appeared.

Such dismissals, to my mind, reflect a larger cultural anxiety. To their critics, these books' popularity might point to a subversive energy among their readers. After all, these novels are explicitly uncomfortable with the standard roles accorded to women. They refuse to be satisfied, to play the victim. Classic sensation novels are safer propositions, because in them order is restored at the end, errant women are contained, no horrors are left gaping. Meanwhile, our contemporary "Girl" novels, bearing the influence of the noir tradition, and the messier landscape of true crime, aren't much for tidy endings. They even bear a kind of threat: their readers, at least in fantasy, may not remain passive spectators to trauma and violence but may take action, by (metaphoric) box cutter or corkscrew.

As such, it's strange to call these books "escapist". Their settings, so close to home, are places most readers find more familiar than the world of the mob, or spycraft or the high-stakes drug trade. The domestic sphere is a world where knowledge is always only partial, where power in any relationship is fleeting, and where marriage—at least most of them—is always a bit of a masquerade. And this is a world that readers understand intimately and struggle with daily.

Perhaps that explains why, sometimes, it feels like these books are reading us. We may think we're sitting alone, absorbed in the narrative, but then suddenly there's that cool hand on our shoulder. Our eyes lift and we see her: the woman out there, through the window. Do you see her, too? Right there, trespassing. Watching. Look at her expression. Is she angry? Or is she forlorn? Is she dangerous? Or is she me?

Index[1]

[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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