

## **Annotated Bibliography: An Introduction to Feminist Readings of Crime Fiction.**

**The tradition of humour in crime fiction allows feminist writers and readers to explore serious issues while still having fun. In feminist readings of crime fiction, we reflect on refined women with inquiring minds and tough women ‘talking trash and kicking butt’—and how they manage to save the day again and again...**

**This annotated bibliography introduces twelve titles to fuel your feminist readings of crime fiction.**

1. *She's fantastical: the first anthology of Australian women's speculative fiction, magical realism and fantasy* edited by Lucy Sussex and Judith Raphael Buckrich. (Sybylla Feminist Press, 1995).

Within the broad category of literature known as ‘genre fiction’, crime and speculative fiction are both notable sub-genres. They both attract feminist authors, who utilise and subvert generic traditions to critique and challenge contemporary society, and question assumptions made about male and female roles by using genre and character twists for dramatic effect. The foreword here by that Goddess of fantasy writing, Ursula Le Guin, beautifully canvasses issues pertaining to the feminist reader—as applicable to crime fiction as to fantasy. For example, Le Guin observes that ‘...male writers...ignore...the regions where women relate principally to other women or children. Like Tolstoy, they flee in horror from the nursery’.

2. *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* by Susan Rowland. (Palgrave, 2001)  
Covering Britain’s ‘Four Queen’s’ (Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh) plus the newer forms of P. D. James and Ruth Rendell, Rowland posits the contemporary authors as ‘in dialogue’ with the Queens. She explores the pleasures of reading crime fiction while critically assessing women crime writers.

Rowland's feminist analysis includes 'gendering the genre' and that 'feminism is criminal', as well as looking at how issues of class and race informed women's crime stories.

3. *British Women Mystery Writers: Authors of Detective Fiction with Female Sleuths* by Mary Hadley. (McFarland, 2002).

Hadley investigates how women sleuth characters can subvert gender stereotypes in the context of 'both feminism and societal changes' so that women crime authors are 'putting women's issues at the front of the narrative'. Although not as sophisticated in its analysis as Rowland's comparable text above, Hadley does fill in some research gaps nicely, including lesser-known but pleasingly subversive authors, such as Susan Moody and her series about sleuth Penny Wannawake (*Penny Dreadful*, *Penny Wise...*).

4. *Women Authors of Detective Series: Twenty-One American and British Writers, 1900-2000* by Moira Davison Reynolds. (McFarland, 2001).

This accessible and comprehensive book gives biographical and publishing details of the big names in crime fiction by women, including Agatha Christie, Patricia Highsmith, Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and Patricia Cornwall. Reynolds, clearly a fan of the genre and thrilled to be in personal contact with some of the authors in this book, presents these authors' works in the context of developments in their lives, some of which read as the plot of a thriller themselves.

5. *Gothic Matilda: The Amazing Visions of Australian Crime Fiction* by Michel Polack and Margaret MacNabb. (Unity Press, 2002)

Living up to the promise of its wonderfully eerie title, *Gothic Matilda* examines a comprehensive range of Australian crime writers from European settlement to the present day, including Patricia Carlon and Gabrielle Lord. While not offering a feminist analysis *per se*, it offers an important critical overview of some Australian women writers' influential contributions to the genre.

6. *Killing Women: Rewriting Detective Fiction* edited by Delys Bird. (Angus and Robertson, 1993).

This book is a gem for Australian feminist readers of crime fiction. The delightfully named Delys Bird had a stroke of genius—inviting Australian women crime writers to ‘become the imaginative readers of their own genre’. Reading like a Who’s Who of Australian feminist crime fiction writers, we have Claire McNab, Jan McKemmish, Kerry Greenwood, Finola Moorhead, Susan Geason, and Marele Day writing about their own experiences as authors, sharing inspiring insights about their writing process as well as interesting details about their lives.

7. *Complex and Complicated Journeys: A Feminist Reading of Australian Crime Fiction* by Susannah Thompson. (Master’s Thesis for Monash University, 1994).

Thompson shrewdly premises her analyses of crime fiction on the assertion that ‘crime... fiction has shown itself capable of great surface differentiation while adhering to its main brief—that of maintaining the ideology of patriarchy’. One of the strengths of Thompson’s work is the clarity and wit of her sophisticated explorations of feminist philosophy.

Thompson examines Australia’s master of crime Peter Corris as well as Garry Disher (who enjoys more success in Europe, especially Germany, than his homeland), and finds that their crime stories, while following generic conventions, include women characters who are ‘freed from patriarchal constraints’. Thompson also examines Australian women crime writers Marele Day and Kerry Greenwood, finding that some of their works are very subversive of the genre itself, as they provide interesting explorations of what she terms ‘the paradoxical position of women’ in contemporary Australian society.

8. *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* by Stephen Knight. (Palgrave, 2004).

Crime stories challenge and comfort the reader against a background of social realism, where current social, economic, and cultural trends and events inform the story—this

provides good fuel for feminist authors. Knight, a leading expert on crime fiction, provides a detailed overview of the development of the genre, including the chapter ‘Women on the Case’ where Knight puts forward a succinct argument for the influence of women writers in subverting the male paradigm of crime fiction, heralding a new movement in the genre in the early 1900s.

9. *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* by Gill Plain. (Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

Like fairy tales, crime fiction both challenges and comforts the reader, by presenting the worst of human nature—as revealed in the crimes—being resolved by the best of human nature—reason, courage, justice, and sometimes, luck. This seriously theoretical text is leavened by the post-modernist *penchant* for tongue-in-cheek humour. Thus we have ‘The Corporeal Anxieties of Agatha Christie’ (can you think of an Aggie without a Body?) and ‘Sara Paretsky’s Feminist Fairy Tales’. The latter is a psychological treatment of the character development of protagonist V.I. Warshawsky, one of the strongest feminist figures in crime fiction in the past few decades. While Plain occasionally misses the point by delving a little *too* deeply, she introduces some novel concepts to create a fascinating prism through which to conduct feminist readings of crime fiction.

10. *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel* by Sally R. Munt. (Routledge, 1994).

Munt analyses the many feminist crime fiction stories which were published in the 1980s, critically reviewing mainstream feminist literary strategies and foreshadowing contemporary literary, film and television pre-occupations with ‘the criminal mind [and] violent insanity’, which ‘lends itself to the female form of the genre’, since psychology and deduction are more useful than a rational approach to the ‘clue-puzzle’. This text also includes an insightful and comprehensive essay on ‘...why the dyke detective is striding forth as the new superhero for today’ in her chapter ‘The *Inverstigators*: Lesbian Crime Fiction’.

11. *Women Times Three: Writers, Detectives, Readers* edited by Kathleen Gregory Klein. (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1995).

Containing eleven essays about ‘women readers reading women writers writing women characters righting wrongs’, this academic and often playful text introduces some excellent concepts for feminist readings of crime fiction. Klein, foreshadowing Knight (above), asserts that ‘gender/genre wars’ occurred during the Golden Age of crime fiction (in the 1920s and 1930s), when the established crime fiction hierarchy sought to resist women writers’ challenge to the accepted traditions of the genre. Margaret Kinsman, writing on Paretsky and Chicago, celebrates the literary ‘mapping’ of contemporary women characters onto her beloved home state. Priscilla L. Walton, in her ‘E is for En/Gendering Readings’, finds that Sue Grafton’s Alphabet series ‘generates double readings’ due to ‘gender operating as a component in interpretive strategies...by readers’.

12. *Feminism in Women’s Detective Fiction* edited by Glenwood Irons. (University of Toronto Press, 1995).

This text is unusual in that it has male academics alongside female ones making excellent contributions to feminist readings of crime fiction. Perhaps that is why it raises some controversial issues, such as questioning whether the female sleuth can ever really be a positive role model for feminists, given the constraints of the genre. It also benefits from the inclusion of an essay about Nancy Drew, ‘the most independent of the girl sleuths’. But the stand-out essay is Scott Christianson’s ‘Talkin’ Trash and Kickin’ Butt: Sue Grafton’s Hard-boiled Feminism’, which is a definitive piece on feminist crime writers’ use of generic and character twists to present strong contemporary role models for women.