

Italian P.I.s: A Survey of Female Detective Fiction (1892-2002)

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1. MY FASCINATION WITH DETECTIVE FICTION

Even though my fascination with detective fiction dates back to my university years, I must confess that Italian detective fiction and *female* Italian detective fiction have entered my sphere of interest much later. One reason is that I had to fight a sort of personal prejudice against the so-called Italian “giallo” and against Italian lady writers. As a matter of fact, my first loves were Dupin, Holmes, Maigret, Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, so I felt any radical change of gender and topography might undermine the core of detective fiction.

Little by little, however, I was tempted to read some of the novels and stories I saw in the bookstores and whose authors were completely unknown to me until a very few years – and in some cases, months – ago. My curiosity was further enhanced by my meeting with some exceptional women who, during the last ten years, have given an extraordinary boost to the production and circulation of female detective fiction in Italy. One is Tecla Dozio, with her bookshop called “Sherlockiana” in Milan, which is much more than a simple store, having developed into a meeting point for readers, authors, and young writers. Tecla is a powerful and energetic woman and many destinies are marked by her judgement. Another lady is Elvira Sellerio in Palermo, who has contributed among other things to the diffusion of the stories of Margaret Doody, a professor of comparative literature and a very erudite crime fiction writer¹. And then there is Luciana

¹ Margaret Doody is both the author of the renowned essay *The True Story of the Novel*

Tufani from Ferrara, who is the director of both the feminist magazine *Leggere Donna*, and a publishing house entirely devoted to women's literature which has published, among other works, a collection of English female detective stories provocatively entitled *Un mestiere da donna*².

In spite of the fact that the stories I have chosen for the present essay are very recent, female detective writing is not a phenomenon linked to the beginnings of the III millennium nor to the 1990s, when Italian women writers of detective fiction were actually protagonists of the literary scene. On the contrary, there exists a long tradition of women writers of detective stories, women who have had to fight a double struggle for literary dignity – firstly, like their male colleagues, in order to affirm the value of detective fiction as a literary genre *tout court* and to keep it alive despite fascist censorship (in the 1930s and 1940s); secondly, in order to gradually assert their own right as women to appropriate that “unsuitable job for a woman” (P. D. James 1972) which certainly did not just mean being a detective but also being a narrator and a writer.

The history of the Italian detective story began in 1929, with the opening of the Gialli Mondadori series, followed by the outburst of a polemic which would last until the end of the 1930s, starring such personalities as Alberto Savinio and Augusto de Angelis. The former wrote: “Il giallo italiano è assurdo per ipotesi. [...] Le nostre città tutt'altro che tentacolari e rinettate dal sole non ‘fanno quadro’ al giallo né può “fargli ambiente la nostra brava borghesia”. De Angelis, on the contrary, remarked: “Dicono che da noi mancano i detectives, mancano i policemen e mancano i gangsters. Sarà, a ogni modo a me pare che non manchino i delitti. Non si dimentichi che questa è la terra dei Borgia, di Ezzelino da Romano, dei Papi e della Regina Giovanna” (Crovi 2002:9-10).

The history of Italian detective fiction showed that De Angelis was right. Our writers have widely proved and are still proving that Italian detective fiction can exist and have experimented in many directions, ranging from the feuilleton, noir, thriller, spy story, pulp, hard-boiled, literary detective story, historical detective story (Pieri 2000:55-66) to pastiches and genre contaminations. The small town and the countryside setting have worked out well, even though in recent years such big cities as Milan have often-

(Harper Collins 2000) and a series of novels, among which *Aristotle Detective*, *Aristotle and the Poetic Justice*, *Aristotle and the Secrets of Life*, *Aristotle and the Mystery of Life*, all translated in Italian and published by Sellerio).

² Cfr. P. D. James, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972).

taken over (Vallorani). Moreover, the writers of detective fiction and especially the women writers of detective fiction have developed an interest almost comparable to scientific research in Italian history, from ancient Rome (Comastri Montanari's saga – *Cave canem, Morituri te salutant, Parce sepulto, Cui prodest?, Spes ultima dea, In corpore sano, Mors tua, Scelera, Gallia est*) to the so-called “anni di piombo” – lead years – (Rossella Martina, *Facoltà di silenzio*, 2003).

In fact, for Danila Comastri Montanari “Le città italiane si prestano a fungere da scenario per il delitto molto meglio di quelle anglosassoni” and “L'omicidio di paese è ancor più gustoso di quello metropolitano; meno gente, meno sospetti, meno armi, più rancori, più segreti, più chiacchiere ...”. To set a detective story in ancient Rome, as Comastri does, seems particularly reassuring, since, as she says, “i morti da millenni non possono sporgere querela” (Comastri Montanari 2000:30-1).

Matilde Serao is considered the first Italian lady writer of detective fiction, with *Il delitto di via Chiatamone* (1892) – see also *La mano tagliata* (1912) – followed by *Il cappello del morto* by Erminia Bazzocchi (1899). However, two years before another Italian lady writer, Carolina Invernizio, had published *Il delitto della contessa*: it was the year 1887, the same year when in England Arthur Conan Doyle was serializing his first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, in the *Beeton's*, and in Italy Emilio de Marchi was publishing *Il cappello del prete* in the *Corriere di Napoli*. In 1909 Invernizio published *Nina la poliziotta dilettante*, where the first woman detective appears. These Italian writers reveal a strong interest in crime news, further enhanced in those very years by the translation of the adventures of Nick Carter, Nat Pinkerton and above all Joe Petrosino.

Some years later Magda Cochia Adami experimented with the thriller – *L'assassinio di Mistress Hernandez* and *Il mistero della cassaforte* (1934) – while in 1936 Gianna Anguissola published her *La polizia indaga*. In the same years the famous magazine *Il Cerchio Verde* was born, which collected a number of women writers – Eugenia Consolo, Luciana Peverelli, Elisa Trapani, etc.

The production of detective fiction in Italy suffered greatly the consequences of fascist censorship. In 1937 the Ministry of Popular Culture declared that in novels “l'assassino non deve assolutamente essere italiano e non può sfuggire in alcun modo alla giustizia”. Foreign books were wrapped in bands that read: “Gli usi e i costumi della polizia descritti in quest'opera non sono italiani. In Italia, Giustizia e Pubblica Sicurezza sono cose serie” (Comastri Montanari 2000:52).

In 1941 Mussolini himself ordered that the Mondadori series should stop publication, following a burglary which in his opinion might have been

inspired by crime fiction. He also ordered the confiscation by July 31 of “tutti i romanzi gialli in qualunque tempo stampati e ovunque esistenti in vendita” (Comastri Montanari 2000:60). This situation lasted until 1947, when the Gialli Mondadori reappeared with Perry Mason (even though in 1946 Carlo Emilio Gadda had started to serialize the first version of *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* in the magazine *Letteratura*).

We must wait until 1959 to see the renaissance of Italian female detective fiction, thanks to Laura Grimaldi's thrillers: *La femmina di Joe*, *Preparate il sudario*, and many others. Grimaldi is a translator, an editor, the author of a few satirical pastiches contained in the anthology *Elementare, signor presidente* (1977, edited by L. Grimaldi and M. Tropea) where important political leaders ask famous investigators for advice. This book was followed ten years later by *Elementare, signor presidente dieci anni dopo*. Starting from 1988 Grimaldi shifted to the noir with *Il sospetto*, inspired by the so-called monster of Florence, a sort of Italian Jack the Ripper. Grimaldi's style is dry and direct, her pages are pervaded by a sense of nightmare and reflect the dark side of our consciousness. One year later Grimaldi published *La colpa* (1989), centered on the psychology of evil and cruelty, and in 1996 she wrote a handbook entitled *Il giallo e il nero: scrivere suspense*.

Other lady writers of these years are the journalist Nicoletta Bellotti, who mostly depicts Milan middle class in her novels (*Centro città*, 1976), Luciana Attoli, who describes the passage from suburban society to mass-mediated society (*Argia morirà*, 1979), and Gloria Zoff (*Moscacieca con delitto*, 1977). But it is especially from the 1980s that the golden age of Italian lady writers begins. Between 1982 and 1999 no fewer than eight women won the Alberto Tedeschi prize³. Detective fiction developed in many directions: the mystery story with Renée Reggiani (*Il triangolo rovesciato*, 1982), the medieval gothic with Laura Mancinelli (*Il fantasma di Mozart*, 1984), the reconstruction of real-life crimes with Martina Vergani (*In fondo al lago*, 1985), lesbian crime with Fiorella Cagnone (*Questione di tempo*, 1985), the mafia with Silvana La Spina (*Morte a Palermo*, 1987), the obsession with physical beauty with Domizia Drinna (the pseudonym of Linda di Martino, *Troppo bella per vivere*, 1987), and the ecological thriller with Nicoletta Sipos (*Favola in nero*, 1989).

³ Carla Fioravanti Bosi (*Contrabbando i diamanti e torno*, 1982); Francesca Clama (*La valle delle croci spezzate*, 1983); Maria Alberti Scuderi (*Assassino al Garibaldi*, 1984); Domizia Drinna (*Troppo bella per vivere*, 1985); Claudia Salvatori (*Più tardi da Amelia*, 1987); Danila Comastri Montanari (*Mors tua*, 1990); Diana Lama (*Rossi come lei*, con Vincenzo De Falco, 1995); Linda Di Martino (alias Domizia Drinna, *L'incidente di via Metastasio*, 1996); Anna Maria Fassio (*Tesi di laurea*, 1999).

In the 1990s we find a number of more noir-pulp oriented writers – often called “pulpiste” or “giovani cannibali” (Crovi 2002:221) – such as Bianca and Elena Stancanelli, respectively the authors of *Cruderie* (1996) and *Benzina* (1999); Nicoletta Vallorani (*Le sorelle Sciacallo*, 1999), Barbara Garlaschelli (*Nemiche*, 1998), Alda Teodorani (*Labbra di sangue*), and Raffaella Krishmer (*Il signore della carne*). All of these women tell bloody stories – this is explicit even in their titles – where noir and horror are mixed together. They are stories soaked in sex and violence, and are strongly angled from a female perspective. They portrait serial killers, invent situations “on the road”, and experiment with contaminations with science fiction by playing especially on the female body – a typical example is the synthetic detective Penelope De Rossi in *Il cuore finto di DR* (N. Vallorani, 1992). In the same years, however, we can also find more traditional settings ranging from England to Italy ⁴.

2. HARD-BOILED STORIES?

In the title of my essay I have used the expression “P.I.,” hinting at a particular genre, the so-called *hard-boiled* stories, whose hero was a private investigator or “Private Eye”. In the literary and filmic production – *The Maltese Falcon* by Huston, *Out of the Past* by Tourneur, *Cross Fire* by Dmytryk, *Cry of the City* by Siodmak, *The Lady from Shanghai* by Welles, etc. – the detective was invariably a man, and a very tough guy, while woman was usually represented as either the typical *femme fatale* who “veniva associata al mistero come ‘uno dei simboli da interpretare’ ” (Kirschenbaum 2000:67) or a *dark lady* “manipolatrice delle azioni maschili” (Proto 2000:98). In the *hard-boiled* genre even more than in the traditional detective story women and men were portrayed as stereotypes and represented through violent and misogyn-

⁴ For example, Gianna Baltaro’s saga of chief inspector Andrea Martini, set in Turin; the literary/historical *I Pascoli del mistero*, set in Messina (Maria Santini, 1995); *L’assassinio di via Malcanton*, set in Trieste (Giuliana Ischi, 1996); *Biscotti e sospetti*, set in England (Manuela Labardi, 1998); *Gli arcipelaghi*, set in Sardinia (Maria Giacobbi, 1995), as well as the novels of Eleonora Heger Vita set during the Napoleonic age (1995-99), Elena Ferrante’s domestic thriller (*L’amore molesto*, Elena 1992, film by Mario Martone), Carmen Iarrera’s thrillers and spy stories (*Uno sguardo indiscreto*, 1999), Federica Fantozzi’s ecological thriller (*Caccia a Emy*, 2000), Francesca Zucchiati Schaal’s aristocratic thriller (*Una dolce fine in Costa Azzurra*, 2000), and Angela Capobianchi’s legal thriller (*Le ragioni del Lupo*, 1998).

nistic language (Humm 2000:109-19). Moreover, the male investigator (Sam Spade created by Dashiell Hammett, or Philip Marlowe created by Raymond Chandler) was “un individuo duro, freddo, capace di controllare le emozioni” who “tratta tutte le donne come se fossero sessualmente devianti” (Humm 2000:112-14).

To talk about female private eyes may therefore seem a contradiction in terms. The women writers who have met this challenge starting from the '70s – especially feminist writers, such as Gillian Slovo, Barbara Wilson, Mary Wings, Sara Paretsky, and Rebecca O'Rourke – have had to make a radical change in the character of the detective even though “attraverso lo spazio pubblico e il tempo patriarcale” by resorting much less, as Maggie Humm remarks, to the “pistola fallica”, by refusing the “erotismo della violenza fisica”, and above all by establishing a “relazione [...] fra indagine e conoscenza di sé”. The central role belongs of course to a heroine, although to speak of centrality is problematic since the female *hard-boiled* story tends to choose marginalization and alterity as the main lines for action (Humm 2000:110-17).

Things have changed a lot with respect to 1929, when Dorothy L. Sayers defined women detectives “so irritatingly intuitive” (Pykett 1990:48). According to Lyn Pykett, the female detective in the feminist and post-feminist versions has, in fact, assumed many aspects of the male *hard-boiled* detective, “appropriating various of the conventions and stylistic devices of the masculine hard-boiled novel” – see Barbara Wilson, Rebecca O'Rourke – , “developing the theme of ‘big city loneliness’ that Ross Macdonald discerned in the hard-boiled novels of the 1930s and 1940s”, sharing the “deep inner loneliness” of the modern sleuth, engaging in strong dialogue with male authority, taking on personal and political responsibility, and adopting moral integrity *vs* corrupt society (cf. Pykett 1990:52-5).

On the other hand, female investigators show a number of original elements, such as emotional involvement with the victim and a very strong awareness of the conflict between the private and the public. From the '90s onward, as Donatella Izzo observes, women detective writers “share an unprecedented emphasis on issues of gender and ethnicity” and in their stories rewrite the autonomous, isolated, self-reliant male detective of the hard-boiled school in relational terms” – see Valerie Wilson Wesley, Barbara Neely, Gloria White who “play on gender and ethnic categories as well as literary stereotypes” resulting in a “deconstruction both of the white male bias of hard-boiled detective fiction [...] and of the assumptions of white bourgeois feminism” (Izzo 2000:226-7).

Priscilla I. Walton and Maria Jones also observe that female P.I.s “fanno sfoggio di qualità che risultano autorevoli e liberatorie per le donne, come per esempio l'autodeterminazione e l'indipendenza e sanno farsi valere, parlare duro ed essere ostinate esattamente come gli uomini: non hanno nessun bisogno di risultare simpatiche. Allo stesso tempo però possono rifiutare quell'atteggiamento tipicamente maschile di cercare il pericolo estremo e la violenza” (Kirschenbaum 2000:76).

When the “private eye” happens to be a woman who acts in the public space of detection it is easy to understand how the conflict between the private and the public is immediately realized in fiction in the ambivalence of what, in my title, I have called “public look”, an expression by which I intended to suggest a double meaning of female “exteriority” – beauty, fitness, charm, public performance – and consumeristic observation, in other words the way the private fact of murder becomes an object of community interest and mass consumption.

Italian lady writers have been making very *hard-boiled* choices in the last few years. Nicoletta Vallorani's urban settings have in particular inherited and reinterpreted all the characteristics of Hammett's and Chandler's cities – “incubo tentacolare, organismo vivente e mostruoso” (Rigosi 2000:91) – and their ladies are really *dark* in the most radical sense, becoming more and more credible “nel momento in cui si allontana[no] dallo stereotipo maschile” (Proto 2000:102). They actually become even “tougher” than their male predecessors, who on many occasions handled huge revolvers without using them, let themselves be drugged without opposing any resistance, fell into traps set by women brighter than themselves, and suffered from basic insecurity which resulted in the visual fragmentation of the body – both on the written page and on the screen – and the labyrinthic, even oneiric structure of the plots (Calanchi 1982, 1987).

3. A SELECTION OF SHORT STORIES

From the vast quantity of stories and novels, I have decided to make a selection of three short stories, all published in 2002. The first one is entitled “Il ghetto d'Irene” (Linda di Martino 2002). The author was born in Florence and has won the Alberto Tedeschi Prize twice. The story is set in Florence, in the Jewish quarter, in 1871. It is narrated in the first person. The narrator is Irene, an orphan girl who has moved from the countryside to the ancient house belonging to a couple of distant cousins. Irene is young but has some

physical anomalies: she is “malcomposta dalla cintola in giù, come risultassi da due pezzi diversi, le gambe sconnesse e lussate all'anca, i piedi volti in dentro e incapaci di poggiare interamente al suolo” (pp. 119-20). Her elder cousin Elisabetta is an invalid, must use a wheelchair and is therefore confined to within the house. She also has poor eyesight, to the extent that she tells Irene on the first day of her stay: “Potresti prestarmi i tuoi occhi: sai leggere e scrivere?” (p. 123).

Irene cannot read or write, but she starts looking around and telling the old lady all she sees (pp. 124-5). Thanks to her good capacity of observation and description, Irene tells Elisabetta all that happens inside the house and in the outer world, without omitting any detail: “da questo terrazzo la vita entra in casa, senza coinvolgermi, senza forzarmi” (p. 131). Irene is fascinated by a picture where three women are portrayed and seem to invite her in their pictorial “harmony” (pp. 131, 136) and discovers, on the living room floor, a peephole through which it is possible to look underneath, inside the shop where Elisabetta’s husband works. Irene goes on to discover little by little that there are secret passages everywhere, and that the whole life of the post-Jewish Ghetto is controlled by a secret organization whose members gather at night in that very shop. Although she is told that these are “facende da uomini” (p. 141). Irene continues to investigate and discovers a complicated story of poisoning between wife and husband. In the end it becomes clear that the true leader of all the Ghetto activities is Elisabetta herself, who in turn is planning to name Irene as her successor: “La nostra intesa correrà liscia come si addice al nostro sesso: nascosto, complesso e potente” (p. 154).

In this story where murders and victims are mixed and overlapping, the *private eye* is of course Irene, even though she is a P.I. without any real crime to detect. She is an “eye” in the most literal and symbolic sense, since she is the one who sees, records, and remembers. From the “private” of the house to the “public” of the outer world it is Irene’s eye that takes on the responsibility of a community which is corrupt yet ordered, unfair yet rational, where private interests trespass on public ones, and where women are those who are in charge.

3.1. “L’anello del renaiolo” is a story by Rossella Martina (2002), who was born in Viareggio, has a degree in Philosophy, and is a journalist for *Il Giorno*, *La Nazione* and *Il Resto del Carlino*. She also published two novels: *Rosa Prova – La donna che rammenda il destino* and, just a couple of months ago, *Facoltà di silenzio*, set in the academic world and inspired by Professor Biagi’s

murder.⁵ “L’anello del renaiolo” begins in a totally different way from the previous story. The body of a man stabbed to death is found on the way to Lucca. The year is 1900. The story is told in the third person and is set among poor people. The person in charge of the investigation is carabinieri Del Longo, who gradually has to face a world of abused women, a world of suffering and violence which, once explored, is destined to reverse completely his own assumptions.

Little by little two female characters emerge from the background. The first is Rosa, an orphan girl who was raped when still a child and compelled to have sex with the murdered man. She is now the mother of a young girl and a dumb boy. The second female character is old Beppa, the only person who has taken care of Rosa since her birth. She is an abnormal, diabetic invalid whose legs are gradually amputated and who progressively becomes blind. She is an extraordinary and monstrous woman who will turn out to be the mandatory of the man’s murder, carried out by Rosa’s young son: “Lei cieca e senza gambe, lui muto, avevano non si sa come trovato il modo di comunicare” (p. 80).

Although Del Longo has understood everything, the crime is dismissed and the case is closed. The brutality of the abuses inflicted on both women – blows, rape, abortion, etc. – is even stronger than the brutality of the murder itself, so that the victim is no longer perceived as such. What Rossella Martina is interested in is to frame the crime within a story which is capable of turning the perspectives upside down, of inscribing femininity in a story of gendered abuse and violence where the body is the protagonist, the eyes become blind in order not to see and the mouth becomes mute in order not to speak. The metaphors of sight and speech linked to the woman’s body give non-verbal communication a new meaning and offer the opportunity to understand the reality of women – who are the true victims of the story – in the light of the forementioned anomalies of the body, that is, signs of suffering written on the flesh.

3.2. “Sputo e il Giustiziere” is a short story by Nicoletta Vallorani (2002), who lives in Milan where she is a University professor, and has published several Sci Fi novels (the most recent of which is *Eva*). This is the only story among those I have chosen that is set not in the past but in a near future, in

⁵ Professor Marco Biagi, Chair of Comparative Labor Law at the University of Modena, was murdered by political assassins in Bologna, Italy, where he lived, on March 19, 2002. He was the author of several books including *Toward a European Model of Industrial Relations*, and a senior advisor to the Italian government on labor law reform.

an almost contemporary reality, a Milan inhabited by tramps and outsiders of various kinds. The narrator is a character of the story who has the task of relating the “noble achievements” of Sputo and “il Giustiziere”, two eccentric heroes who are methodically accomplishing a bloody revenge linked to a friend’s not so accidental death. Sputo’s life is narrated from the day of his birth up to his symbolic investiture as a squire by the Giustiziere. The narrator is a lady journalist who wants to grasp the opportunity for a scoop but who in the end is “executed” in turn because she has chosen Sputo and not Giustiziere as the hero of the scoop: “L’eroe era il Giustiziere, e io la sua bocca parlante [...] Poi tutto si sciolse. E arrivarono le parole. Il pezzo migliore della mia vita. L’affresco che avevo sognato di dipingere da sempre. L’epica immortale di un eroe dei poveri. Al centro del disegno, Sputo” (p. 76).

In a few highly intense pages, Vallorani rewrites the story of Don Quixote as a *noir*, substituting the characters with the marginalized inhabitants of the slums: Mel “il ciccione”, Angela Riparo, Scodella, “il Prete”... As the arena of a class struggle so degenerated that even tramps hate blacks and communists, this is a capsized and perverse world where Santa Claus is the greedy and selfish burglar of TV commercials and the children who play in the city gardens are wicked murderers. It becomes more and more difficult to distinguish between victims and culprits - “Alla fine, non si capiva se fosse più colpevole la vittima o il carnefice: questa mi sembrò arte” (p. 73). Art, or literature, takes over reality, and it is significant that the story ends with the murder of the narrator.

4. PRIVATE EYES, PUBLIC LOOKS

In all of these stories the dynamics of events, the typology of detection, and the personality of the victims and investigators/narrators hint at a deep unresolved conflict between the private and the public, between private eyes and public looks. Femininity – whether the victim’s, the narrator’s, or other – becomes a meaningful variable in a number of interrelated discourses. All the murderers are women and children, the crime weapons are knives and poison, the motives are interest and revenge.

The narrative construction itself owes a lot to a strongly female perception of the body and body metaphor for writing: “Una volta, alla fiera, ho guardato un burattinaio riparare un suo fantoccio: incastrava gambe e braccia nei perni, ne ungeva di grasso orli e giunture, vi adattava fili e molle

perchè ogni movimento fosse possibile e agevole” (di Martino p. 119). This is Irene speaking about her physical handicap, but behind the scenes it is the author Linda di Martino explaining how to write a detective story. And Nicoletta Vallorani – who is both the author, the narrator and a character of her own story – makes a confession: “non è che mi dispiaccia di morire. Mi dispiace di più non poter scrivere ancora” (p. 76).

Vallorani's story in particular, and all the stories under examination in a more general sense, contain a sort of revisitation of the *Arabian Nights* – writing against dying. And this also implies a bitter political reflection: writing might only mean making a scoop. Vallorani's *Giustiziere* embodies all the prejudices and conditioning of a post-contemporary regime which has morally subjugated everybody, down to the lowest members of society (p. 76).

The body thus ceases to be a private fact and becomes the object of public gaze. In these stories the female gaze is always observing, detecting, and describing. These women are natural born detectives, absolutely amateurish, “private” in the most literal sense, and also emotionally involved in the investigation.⁶ Yet, theirs is a “politicized” way of looking at things. In an interview, Vallorani speaks about the way the Balkan war and Ground Zero have changed “la comune percezione della morte e trasversalmente la percezione del corpo [...] il corpo della vittima diventa manipolabile, viene messo in scena [...] quello che si fa vedere è sempre più cruento” (Pace 2002:35). It is just this very vision of the world that we find in these stories, a way of looking at things that is capable of competing with death, capable of detecting abuse on a political level beyond the mere fact of private death, and, of course, capable of capturing the reader's attention all the time.

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⁶ This is also true as regards novels. See for example *La collega tatuata* by Margherita Oggero (2002), where the detective is a male chief inspector but the real investigator is a female colleague of the victim's, or Rossella Martina's *Facoltà di silenzio* (2003), where it is the victim's daughter who investigates his father's mysterious suicide.

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Despite the traditional strength of women as writers of detective fiction, detective heroines have until recently been remarkably rare. At one time, the only clear category for women in the genre was the "little old lady" best exemplified by Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple. Young or middle-aged heroines - characters for whom questions of sexuality, romance, or marriage might be expected to arise - were very rare. Detective story, type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed. Detective stories frequently operate on the principle that superficially convincing evidence is ultimately irrelevant. Learn more about detective stories in this article. Encyclopaedia Britannica's editors oversee subject areas in which they have extensive knowledge, whether from years of experience gained by working on that content or via study for an advanced degree. See Article History. Detective story, type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed. Detective Fiction lesson plans include elements of detective fiction, detective code, characters, & more. Teach this sub-genre of crime fiction & mystery in the classroom today! Many students may already be familiar with the traditional format of detective fiction stories before they begin reading one. Popular TV shows make use of this format all the time, from the lead detectives with a strict moral code, to a brilliant solution that wraps up the case. Many enthusiasts of the genre trace its beginnings back to Edgar Allan Poe, and its true flourishing to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his Sherlock Holmes series. The detective fiction genre is characterized by specific characters and themes, and follows a traditional format. Detective Fiction's Rise in Popularity.