



Contemporary American and Canadian Writers

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SARA PARETSKY

Detective fiction as trauma literature

Sara Paretsky

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Cynthia S. Hamilton

Manchester University Press

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Sara Paretsky

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Contemporary American and Canadian Writers

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Nahem Yousaf and Sharon Monteith

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Series editors' foreword

This innovative series reflects the breadth and diversity of writing over the last thirty years, and provides critical evaluations of established, emerging and critically neglected writers – mixing the canonical with the unexpected. It explores notions of the contemporary and analyses current and developing modes of representation with a focus on individual writers and their work. The series seeks to reflect both the growing body of academic research in the field, and the increasing prevalence of contemporary American and Canadian fiction on programmes of study in institutions of higher education around the world. Central to the series is a concern that each book should argue a stimulating thesis, rather than provide an introductory survey, and that each contemporary writer will be examined across the trajectory of their literary production. A variety of critical tools and literary and interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged to illuminate the ways in which a particular writer contributes to, and helps readers rethink, the North American literary and cultural landscape in a global context.

Central to debates about the field of contemporary fiction is its role in interrogating ideas of national exceptionalism and transnationalism. This series matches the multivocality of contemporary writing with wide-ranging and detailed analysis. Contributors examine the drama of the nation from the perspectives of writers who are members of established and new immigrant groups, writers who consider themselves on the nation's margins as well as those who chronicle middle America. National labels are the subject of vociferous debate and including American and Canadian writers in the same series is not to flatten the differences between them but to acknowledge that literary traditions and tensions are cross-cultural and that North American writers often explore and expose precisely these

tensions. The series recognises that situating a writer in a cultural context involves a multiplicity of influences, social and geo-political, artistic and theoretical, and that contemporary fiction defies easy categorisation. For example, it examines writers who invigorate the genres in which they have made their mark alongside writers whose aesthetic goal is to subvert the idea of genre altogether. The challenge of defining the roles of writers and assessing their reception by reading communities is central to the aims of the series.

Overall, *Contemporary American and Canadian Writers* aims to begin to represent something of the diversity of contemporary writing and seeks to engage students and scholars in stimulating debates about the contemporary and about fiction.

Nahem Yousaf
Sharon Monteith

Acknowledgements

I am a slow reader and a slow learner, so this book has been under development for some time. As a result, I owe a great deal to a great many people. A Senior Visiting Fellowship at the Rothermere American Institute of Oxford University gave me the time to research this book and to produce a first draft of the manuscript. Paul Giles, the director when I was there, and the staff at the institute gave me those most precious of resources, time and space to think. It was through the RAI that I was able to meet Sara Paretsky and conduct two interviews.

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My colleagues in the Department of English at Liverpool Hope University have been unfailingly supportive, helping to create the space for me to explore my ideas, both in my teaching and through informal discussions. Within the department, I owe a special debt to Alice Bennett who, when asked for an initial reading list on trauma, suggested in passing that it might be possible to see detective fiction as trauma literature. Initially, I had focused on the depiction of trauma solely in *Total Recall*. Like all good teachers, Alice's question pushed me into new territory that has culminated in the line of argument taken in this book. Though the development of this idea and any mistakes are my own, I owe her an enormous debt for starting me on the critical path that I have taken.

As always, my husband David has been there all the way. It is to him, with love and gratitude, that this book is dedicated.

Novels by Sara Paretsky in order of publication date

- 1982 *Indemnity Only*
- 1984 *Deadlock*
- 1985 *Killing Orders*
- 1987 *Bitter Medicine*
- 1988 *Toxic Shock* (published in the USA as *Blood Shot*)
- 1990 *Burn Marks*
- 1992 *Guardian Angel*
- 1994 *Tunnel Vision*
- 1998 *Ghost Country* (non-Warshawski novel)
- 1999 *Hard Time*
- 2001 *Total Recall*
- 2003 *Blacklist*
- 2005 *Fire Sale*
- 2008 *Bleeding Kansas* (non-Warshawski novel)
- 2009 *Hardball*
- 2010 *Body Work*

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Introduction

Paretsky is best known as one of a group of writers in the early 1980s, including Marcia Muller and Sue Grafton, who transformed the hard-boiled detective novel by employing a female private eye and using the formula as a vehicle for feminist values. This is seen as her greatest achievement. But Paretsky has moved on, and she has gone on to experiment with a number of different aspects of the formula. This has taken her into new territory. She continually tests her detective, exposing her to increasingly extreme situations that test her character's autonomy and agency, and in the process offering a sophisticated analysis of the dynamics and impact of coercive power. She has used press reports exposing corporate malfeasance and political corruption to add bite to her indictment of the indifference, inadequacy, and betrayals of institutions charged with promoting the public good. And she has used the narrative structure of the detective story to condemn those totalising narratives of history that would exclude and silence the marginalised and the victimised. Paretsky has explored the generic territory she inhabits with a strong commitment to social justice, and with an acute curiosity and an actively creative imagination. Paretsky has certainly been recognised as an important figure in the development of the hard-boiled tradition, but not, as this indicates, for all the right reasons.

In *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (2005), Lee Horsley explores Paretsky's work in a chapter on 'Regendering the Genre'.¹ In the *Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* (2010), Paretsky is presented in this context as well.² Peter Messent also locates her work in relation to gender politics in *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (2013).³ Notwithstanding such recognition, the exact extent and nature of Paretsky's feminism continues to be debated. Where Sally Munt sees a revisionist rather than a radical perspective, Gill Plain

sees a fairy tale that ultimately re-inscribes the patriarchal order rather than undermining it.⁴ Paretsky's engagement with wider social issues has also been recognised, but the extent of her critique of the status quo continues to be debated. Charles Rzepka notes that Paretsky 'focuses on institutionalised forms of oppression and corruption'.⁵ Sally Munt comments on the extent to which Paretsky 'takes on corrupt institutionalised crime – insurance frauds, the Vatican Bank, medical malpractice, industrial poisoning, Lloyd's of London, pension frauds', but sees her attack on white-collar crime as indicting the state for intervening in the private sphere.⁶ Peter Messent's influential introduction to *Criminal Proceedings* (1997) notes that Paretsky's detective 'directly interrogates the existing social order but cannot finally affect it'.⁷ Andrew Pepper also notes Paretsky's engagement with social issues, but sees her fiction as 'underwritten by a soggy liberalism where equality rather than difference is foregrounded'.⁸ Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones discuss the ways in which Paretsky extends the definition of a crime to implicate social attitudes and institutional practices.⁹

Assessments of Paretsky's limitations as both a feminist and a social critic are bound up with assumptions about whether the formula she employs has the capacity to articulate a radical or subversive message. This is a debate with a long history. Writing in 1981, Dennis Porter found it difficult to conceive of the possibility of a female private eye given the anti-feminist ethos, bordering at times on misogyny, and the masculine gaze and voice that characterised the formula. 'To be hard-boiled and to have retained a heroic integrity was to be a man,' he wrote, simply. 'The culture had generated no precedent for a tough-talking, worldly-wise woman, capable of defending herself in the roughest company, who also possessed the indispensable heroic qualities of physical attractiveness and virtue.'¹⁰ Porter also saw the hard-boiled detective formula as inherently conservative.

Tzvetan Todorov's seminal essay on 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' (1966) stated the artistic limits of the genre categorically: 'Detective fiction has its norms; to "develop" them is also to disappoint them: to "improve upon" detective fiction is to write "literature," not detective fiction.'¹¹ Franco Moretti's highly influential essay 'Clues' also fixed the artistic and political parameters of the formula. For Moretti, 'detective fiction links a continuous novelty of content to a perennial fixity of the syntax'.¹² He denies the relevance

of the content of individual texts, and focuses entirely on the function of the criminal, the detective, and the narrator within the structural syntax of the detective novel, explaining the function of these elements within the larger ideological structure that supports and generates them. His dismissal of content is absolute and beyond interrogation: 'The irrelevancy of the content is not an "assumption" but a problematic datum, a fact which calls for explanation.'¹³ In this view it is the structures themselves that generate meanings 'independent of the consciousness and the will of its producers'; meaning is lodged in the structures themselves.¹⁴ When Moretti talks about detective fiction as constructing a world rather than reflecting society, maintaining perfect self-referentiality that deflects validation beyond the borders of the constructed world, the contention is even more applicable to the reconstructed texts he creates and interprets within his totalising theoretical framework.¹⁵ His critique can usefully be applied to his own interpretative structure, for his interpretation may be seen as an act of authorship in itself, constructing a text that privileges certain aspects of the original while ignoring others, endowing the reconstructed text with significance derived from the theoretical framework employed and the ideological position that underwrites it. Both Moretti and Todorov discuss detective fiction in structuralist terms. Where Moretti identifies the criminal's deceptions with the *sjuzet*, it is the story of the investigation that fulfils that role in Todorov's framework. This definitional shift produces significant differences. Where Moretti's definition supports his view of the plot as superfluous, Todorov's treatment implicitly recognises the possibility of a more complex self-reflexivity within the formula itself. It is this self-consciousness, recognised in an undeveloped way by Todorov, that is most dangerous for Moretti's model, despite Todorov's dismissal of the seriousness of its use.

Todorov, Moretti, and Porter remain influential, but more recent assessments of the hard-boiled formula have been less willing to condemn it on the basis of theoretical limitations. Pepper has argued that 'the idea that genre is something so fixed and unyielding as to imprison subversive ideas surely needs to be revised, particularly if form as well as content is determined by not just aesthetic but also political considerations'.¹⁶ Scott McCracken recognises the issues and pitfalls of the theoretical landscape when he admits that 'genre criticism is a provisional art, as genre boundaries are never absolutely fixed'. As he notes, the production of new, boundary-breaking

texts continually alters our ideas about the nature of the genre.¹⁷ In *Detective Agency*, Walton and Jones used the concept of collective authorship to argue for texts as 'a space of negotiation in which communities of readers and writers, far from being passive reproducers or consumers of pre-existent forms and values, can exercise a kind of collective agency'.¹⁸

Western and Hard-boiled Detective Fiction in America (1987) was my first intervention in this debate.¹⁹ In that book, I sought to demonstrate the extent to which the hard-boiled detective formula and the American adventure formula, on which it was based and within which it can be considered a subgenre, contained sufficient flexibility to enable authors to explore their own areas of interest and pre-occupations. I suggested that one of the key dynamics enabling such variation was a layering of contexts, a generic intertextuality resulting from the incorporation, within particular texts, of conventional elements from different subgenres. I argued that such borrowings retained a recognisable affiliation with the subgenre from which they came, bringing with them resonances that could add depth, but also tensions. When published, my book was unusual not only in this respect, but also because it concentrated on a few writers within a fairly narrow time frame. This allowed a snapshot to be taken of the conventional elements of the formula at a particular moment in its evolution. In relation to the particular historical moment that I was examining, the period 1890–1940, I saw competitive individualism as a central component of the formula. But as I wrote, the formula was undergoing significant transformations, both in relation to its thematic content and in relation to the techniques used to effect those transformations. I set out to make an argument for the flexibility of the hard-boiled detective formula. To my chagrin, the formula has proved more flexible than I had suggested and has achieved this in ways that I barely hinted at.

This book shares some of the same ambitions as my first – to learn as much as possible about the dynamics that give genre literature its coherence and identity on the one hand, and its protean capability on the other. This book also exhibits my continuing conviction that the study of genre literature has more to gain from inductive than from deductive reasoning, that it is important to study the formula at particular moments and to carry out extended analysis of the practices of individual authors. In this current study, an examination of Paretsky's work has led me to explore different

thematic concerns, different issues, and different kinds of theoretical models.

When *Western and Hard-boiled Detective Fiction* was published, the serious study of the structural dynamics of genre fiction in general and detective fiction in particular was just escaping from fandom and moving into the academic arena. John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976) had appeared; so too had Dennis Porter's *The Pursuit of Crime* (1981) and Stephen Knight's *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980).²⁰ Subsequently, a host of talented critics have made that work look like what it was – tentative first steps towards a more sophisticated understanding of the way genre works. Since that time – and largely through a more detailed examination of particular aspects of the field or particular cohorts within the field – critics have asked more sophisticated questions and developed more nuanced approaches. This book is not meant to counter their work, but to supplement it. The ideas developed at length in this book, using Sara Paretsky's work as a suggestive case study, are designed to move the debate along in relation to discussions of the political content implicit in the form, in relation to the degree of agency enabled by the form, and in relation to the relational dynamics of author, reader, and text.

The range of possibilities at Paretsky's disposal when she began developing her own approach to detective fiction is reflected in the rich array of critical views on the hero's significance.²¹ William Ruehlmann first drew attention to the important frontier inheritance of the private eye.²² Leonard Cassuto argues for a very different inheritance for the hard-boiled detective, that of nineteenth-century domestic sentimentality.²³ For Ralph Willets, the detective 'typifies the alienated urban individual'.²⁴ For Erin Smith, the hard-boiled detective is an 'honest proletarian' and a 'workaholic' who, like the autonomous craftsman, values 'functional autonomy, a mutualist ethic, and a manly bearing toward supervisors and colleagues'.²⁵ Christopher Breu emphasises the extent to which the detective is constructed in relation to a conception of masculinity that itself represented 'an aggressive reformulation of male hegemony as much as a defensive reaction to what might have been perceived as a set of economic and social threats to this hegemony'.²⁶ Gill Plain emphasises the detective's vulnerability: 'he tended to detect through provocation rather than deduction, identifying the criminals through the mark of their violence – which was frequently left on his no

longer inviolable body'.²⁷ Charles Rzepka emphasises the continuing importance of inductive reasoning to the private eye's understanding of the world he lives in and the crimes he investigates.²⁸

As this suggests, the hero transformed by Paretsky had already exhibited a considerable variability. Chandler depicted him as a 'man of honor' who is 'neither tarnished nor afraid'.²⁹ For Hammett, he was 'a little man going forward day after day' who was 'as callous and brutal and cynical as necessary'.³⁰ It is clear that Paretsky learned from both Hammett and Chandler, as she admits and as her parodies, 'The Maltese Cat' and 'Dealer's Choice', indicate.³¹ These are certainly not the only male authors who shaped her thinking about detective fiction and its possibilities. Paretsky has spoken of the influence of Ross Macdonald, noting that 'he, much more than Chandler, really has this sense of the dislocations that people with a lot of power can perform on people without it'. It is this image of the impact of coercive power that Paretsky calls 'sort of central to how I think about narrative'.³² She has cited Michael Lewin's Bertie Samson books as helping her to think 'about the softer boiled private eye'. She has also acknowledged the importance of books such as Nicholas Blake's *The Smiler with the Knife* (1939), which featured an 'incredibly resourceful' woman, Georgia Strangeways. Carolyn Heilbrun's Amanda Cross books were, according to Paretsky, 'an important door opener', but she did not read Marcia Muller's *Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (1977) until after she had finished *Indemnity Only* (1982).³³

I note such influences in passing, but it is not my intention in this book to trace the lines of influence or to write a literary biography charting Paretsky's development as a writer through the fascinating developments and dead-ends that one finds in the versions of her novels evident in discarded, partial manuscripts. Nor do I wish to place Paretsky in detailed relation to either the developing tradition of feminist detective fiction or in relation to the shifting patterns of detective fiction more generally. The former has been the subject of many studies, from Kathleen Klein's *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, first published in 1988, through to the more recent work already cited.³⁴ The latter, as already indicated, is examined in a voluminous body of writing, including my own essay on 'U.S. Detective Fiction' in the *Companion to Twentieth Century United States Fiction* (2010).³⁵ This book does not examine Paretsky's work in relation to other media productions such as film, television, or radio, nor does it examine the text in relation to the economics of the production and