



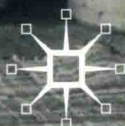
Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction

The Mothers of the
Mystery Genre

Lucy Sussex

**CRIME
FILES**

General Editor: Clive Bloom



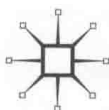
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1. The first part of the book	1
2. The second part of the book	2
3. The third part of the book	3
4. The fourth part of the book	4
5. The fifth part of the book	5
6. The sixth part of the book	6
7. The seventh part of the book	7
8. The eighth part of the book	8
9. The ninth part of the book	9
10. The tenth part of the book	10
11. The eleventh part of the book	11
12. The twelfth part of the book	12
13. The thirteenth part of the book	13
14. The fourteenth part of the book	14
15. The fifteenth part of the book	15
16. The sixteenth part of the book	16
17. The seventeenth part of the book	17
18. The eighteenth part of the book	18
19. The nineteenth part of the book	19
20. The twentieth part of the book	20
21. The twenty-first part of the book	21
22. The twenty-second part of the book	22
23. The twenty-third part of the book	23
24. The twenty-fourth part of the book	24
25. The twenty-fifth part of the book	25
26. The twenty-sixth part of the book	26
27. The twenty-seventh part of the book	27
28. The twenty-eighth part of the book	28
29. The twenty-ninth part of the book	29
30. The thirtieth part of the book	30
31. The thirty-first part of the book	31
32. The thirty-second part of the book	32
33. The thirty-third part of the book	33
34. The thirty-fourth part of the book	34
35. The thirty-fifth part of the book	35
36. The thirty-sixth part of the book	36
37. The thirty-seventh part of the book	37
38. The thirty-eighth part of the book	38
39. The thirty-ninth part of the book	39
40. The fortieth part of the book	40
41. The forty-first part of the book	41
42. The forty-second part of the book	42
43. The forty-third part of the book	43
44. The forty-fourth part of the book	44
45. The forty-fifth part of the book	45
46. The forty-sixth part of the book	46
47. The forty-seventh part of the book	47
48. The forty-eighth part of the book	48
49. The forty-ninth part of the book	49
50. The fiftieth part of the book	50

Foreword

Val McDermid

These days, everybody wants to know about their ancestors. There are TV programmes, magazines and websites all dedicated to teasing out the mysteries of our lineage. As with life, so it is with literature. As a writer, I've always believed we need to have a firm grasp of what our predecessors have achieved so we can better see the way forward; as a reader, I take pleasure in identifying how writers have internalized their influences and applied the lessons of the past to their own work.

But as is often the way with women's history, so much of the past has been a blank page for us crime writers. The significance of contemporary women crime writers is inescapable – we share equal prominence in the bestseller lists with our male counterparts and equal esteem from our readers. And of course, whenever the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction is mentioned, the names associated with it are female – Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh. But try going further back than that, try finding the founding mothers of the genre to set alongside the founding fathers and, pretty soon, you're running into a brick wall.

If pushed, and sufficiently well versed in the history of the genre, we might have come up with Mary Roberts Rinehart, queen of the 'Had I but known' school of foreshadowing, and possibly Anna Katharine Green, author of the runaway bestseller *The Leavenworth Case*. Australians might have added Ellen Davitt, but only because of the awards given in her name by the Sisters in Crime organization. But beyond those vague namechecks, nothing. Nobody could be blamed for thinking women had avoided the genre altogether.

For anyone with even the faintest knowledge of women's place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it wouldn't seem an unreasonable assumption. This was an era when the public sphere was almost exclusively male. Women were either entombed in domesticity, engaged in menial work or occupied in satisfying the less savoury appetites of men with money to pay for their pleasure. They certainly were neither lawyers nor members of the fledgling police forces. So if we are to write about what we know about, we women would seem to have been automatically disqualified from the early flowering of the genre.

But writers have never stuck to that narrow recipe. From the earliest exemplars of the novel, we've leapt chasms of ignorance to write about

places and subjects and occupations we have no direct knowledge of. It's called imagination, and the reason we get away with it is that human beings act in pretty much the same way whether they're merchant bankers or frontiersmen. Human relations are identical, whether you're a duchess or a dumpster diver.

That conviction now has solid evidence to back it up. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to Lucy Sussex for this fascinating excursion into crime fiction's female line of descent. She has exhumed the buried history of the distaff side of the genre for our pleasure. It's as good a tale as those early detective novels, and it has a cast of characters that wouldn't be out of place in one of my own novels. This is a book for writers and readers alike, a joy for anyone who loves a mystery.

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Foreword by Val McDermid</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction: Look for the Women	1
1 'Origins are Multifarious and Unclean!': The Beginnings of Crime Fiction	6
2 Mrs Radcliffe as Conan Doyle?	26
3 'A Most Preposterous Organ of Wonder': Catherine Crowe	45
4 'I'm a Thief-Taker, Young Lady'	64
5 Getting Away with Murder: Mary Braddon	81
6 'Dead! And ... Never Called Me Mother': Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood	101
7 The (Feminine) Eye of the Law: Mary Helena Fortune	120
8 A Jill-of-All-Writing-Trades: Metta Victoria Fuller Victor ('Seeley Regester')	142
9 The Art of Murder: Anna Katharine Green	164
Conclusion: 'She Has Got a Murderess in Manuscript in her Bedroom'	183
<i>A Timeline of Early True Crime and its Fictions</i>	186
<i>Bibliography</i>	191
<i>Index</i>	206

List of Illustrations

1.1	<i>Newgate Calendar</i> (1780) depicting its female readership as the ideal, genteel, admonitory mother	9
1.2	The murder of Maria Marten caused a multimedia frenzy	16
2.1	Anna Dorothea Therbusch's 1777 self-portrait	27
2.2	Fanny Trollope, depicted as demure and feminine by Auguste Hervieu	38
3.1	The sensational murder scene from Catherine Crowe's <i>Lilly Dawson</i>	58
4.1	Harriet Prescott Spofford, the first American woman to write detective fiction	69
4.2	The titlepage of <i>Revelations of a Lady Detective</i>	73
5.1	Caricature of Mary Braddon from <i>Punch</i>	84
6.1	Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood	104
7.1	The extensive police record of George Fortune	133
8.1	Metta Victor in 1857	143
9.1	Anna Katharine Green	172

Introduction: Look for the Women

Cherchons la femme. (Let us look for the woman)

Alexandre Dumas (père), *Les Mohicans de Paris*,
vol. 2, chapter 2

'Cherchez la femme' is an oft-repeated phrase in mystery and detective fiction. It first appeared in Alexandre Dumas' 1854–7 novel *Les Mohicans de Paris* as 'Cherchons la femme', words spoken by M. Jackal, a police detective. The subsequent popular listings could fill a book: they range from James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia* to Churchy La Femme in the comic *Pogo*. Typically the phrase has a function. It signals the entry of a female character – into a narrative previously masculine in content. The (male) detective has not solved a mystery, and the answer lies with a woman. 'Cherchez la femme', the search for her, re-genders the text.

The text under consideration in this book, to which the phrase 'cherchez la femme' will be applied, is the corpus of early crime and detective fiction. Today there is no need to search for women in today's crime fiction, and any reader can list examples: 'P. D. James, Sara Paretsky, Patricia Cornwell, etc. etc.' For the early twentieth century, the so-called Golden Age, Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers are famous. Yet for the nineteenth century, the period where crime fiction originated, readers will generally look blank. 'Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Conan Doyle ... but were there any women writers of crime, so far back?'

Generally, American Anna Katharine Green, author of the bestselling novel *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), has been cited as the first woman to venture into the detective genre. Yet bibliographies such as Allen J. Hubin's definitive *Crime Fiction* (1980 and subsequent updated editions) show Green was not isolated, and had female predecessors. To cite just one example, 'Seeley Regester's 1866 *The Dead Letter* is the first

American detective novel – irrespective of auctorial gender. Behind the pseudonym was New York writer and mother of nine Metta Victor.

If Green was not *the* founding mother of detective fiction, she is more properly regarded as an important founding femme, amongst various nineteenth-century and even eighteenth-century (m)others. The purpose of this book is to find them, and in so doing show that early detective writing was as much a feminine as it was a masculine domain, one that women helped significantly to create.

To do so is to revise both popular and critical accounts of crime fiction's origins. The popular view cites Poe in the 1840s, as the 'first' detective writer, of classic short stories. He was followed by Wilkie Collins with *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), a mystery and a detective novel respectively. In the late 1880s appeared Conan Doyle and his first Sherlock Holmes tales – just at the time when detective fiction became identifiable as a popular and wide-spread publishing category. By 1900 it had evolved into a literary genre, with its own set of conventions and codes.

This popular history of crime fiction's origins, with its 20-year intervals between the three canonical, founding fathers, is a progression that resembles three generations, a genealogy with no apparent maternal input. More specialist works, for the critics and the crime buffs, such as Ian Ousby's 1976 *Bloodhounds of Heaven: the Detective in English Fiction from Godwin to Doyle*, also tend to present a progressive model of origin, though they are inclusive of other, less famous names. The crime buff history usually begins with *Caleb Williams* (1794) by William Godwin, husband of Mary Wollstonecroft and father of Mary Shelley. His novel was at its publication and for decades afterwards variously categorized as a political or Gothic novel. Only retrospectively was it noticed that the title character was an amateur detective, perhaps the first in an English novel, a servant who suspects his master of murder. Godwin is followed by other less familiar names, not strictly Anglophone: Émile Gaboriau (1832–73), the most important French detective writer of the nineteenth century, who wrote the first *romans policiers* (police novels), from the 1860s. The genealogy is also not confined to the Northern hemisphere, with inclusion of the international bestseller *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886) by the antipodean Fergus Hume – which immediately preceded the publication of the first Sherlock Holmes stories. Yet the focus is similarly masculinist, with women authors being mentioned but not as a major focus of interest, incidental to this history.

Attempts at redressing this neglect have been made. Some early women writers of crime are included in feminist surveys such as Dilys

Winn's *Murderess Ink* (1979), Kathleen Gregory Klein's *Great Women Mystery Writers* (1994) and Jessica Mann's *Deadlier than the Male* (1981). These studies, however, list only the well-known figures, such as Green, and even then the discussion is brief. It is the early women fictional detectives, rather than the writers, who have received more attention, with works such as Klein's *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (1995) and Joseph Kestner's *Sherlock's Sisters: the British Female Detective, 1864–1983* (2003).

Thus the female line of crime writing has never been traced back to its origins. An extensive examination of its founding mothers, their lives and literary crimes is long overdue. Without such a study, as presented here, our understanding of early crime writing is incomplete. In other areas of literature, such as the novel, and science fiction, the role of its early women has been known for decades. That something similar has not been done for crime is puzzling, given the genre's popularity and substantial female fan base.

A major problem with research is that the corpus of early crime fiction is vast. Hubin lists approximately 6000 titles published between 1800 and 1900. This figure refers only to novels published in English, although even in its early years crime writing was multinational. French writers were particularly active – and were read by their English-speaking counterparts. Moreover, the nineteenth century was a golden era for fiction journals, in which crime figured strongly, either in short story form or as serializations. Much of the crime writing found in journals of the period remains unexamined, although Poe, Collins and Conan Doyle all began their crime-writing careers with short magazine stories. Their periodical writings were reprinted in book form; but numerous other crime writers were not so lucky. Consider, for instance, the Canadian-Australian Mary Fortune (c. 1833–1909). She was the author of one published book but over 500 detective stories in magazines. Most were part of 'The Detective's Album', the longest-running early detective series worldwide, which she wrote for 40 years, from 1868 to 1908.

This study cannot claim to be utterly comprehensive, as in the course of research many early women crime authors were discovered, far more than there was space to discuss. Limits had to be imposed – thus the focus is on writers who had influence or who were significant innovators. Their many female followers deserve further attention. Also during research it became clear that the figure of the woman detective was far older and more varied than has been previously recognized. The female sleuth was a trope that expressed anxieties about women's

changing roles, and parallels could be drawn with the lives of the authors themselves. Both writer woman and woman written were intertwined.

There are pitfalls in studying the early history of a genre. Notable is the problem of definition – when does a crime story become generic crime fiction? Locating early examples of a genre can be a process of hair-splitting definitions, in which the final product is compared to its possibly dubious antecedents, in search of resemblances. Agatha Christie and Sara Paretsky can be categorically described as women detective writers; but can this also be said as easily of the nineteenth century's Ellen Wood or Caroline Clive? Other questions to bedevil the researcher into the genre's history include: When is a mystery not a mystery? Is a detective story without a detective a detective story?

Second is the problem of retrospective evaluation, of assessing early crime texts when informed by the more sophisticated works produced subsequently. A narrative may have been much admired in its time, but we will find its mystery 'obvious'. Therefore, early crime fiction will be discussed less in terms of literary merit (which is not necessarily an absolute) but in terms of its context, historical, social and political. It is not the intent to judge the pioneering writers as belonging to either good or bad literature, but by the effect they had. An influential text may now seem unmitigated pulp; or a writer dismissed as a hack in their lifetime can unexpectedly delight the modern reader. Such is the nature of literary reputations, which in crime fiction runs the gamut from pulp to works indistinguishable from 'high' literature. Part of the intent of the book is to show it was ever the case.

Yet, in talking about women writers of the preceding centuries, the lives they led are also important. The mothers of crime were constrained by their gender, in ways that in modern Western society seem unimaginable. They had limited access to education, and divorce, no contraception, and were denied access to most employment outside the menial and the seedy. Moreover, the professions most informative about crime matter, the law and the police, were closed to them. Nonetheless, the women in this book became successful writers. They were not scared of the racy or 'indelicate' subject matter of crime; with most, their knowledge of crime arose from personal experience. Some had lawyers for husbands or fathers; in some cases a close male relation skirting or on the wrong side of the law. Only one writer was, as far as is known, ever wanted by the police; yet in all cases their subject matter of criminal transgression echoed to some degree a personal revolt against Victorian notions of correct female behaviour. It may seem something of a miracle

that they wrote at all; but they also made important contributions to an emerging genre.

Whodunnit? Whose work helped shape and define the genre of crime fiction during the crucial years of its formation and codification? The usual suspects are Messrs Poe, Collins and Conan Doyle, with Anna Katharine Green as a belated founding foremother. But this book does not begin with Green, instead she ends it, behind a parade of unusual suspects in bonnets and crinolines. They include a Gothic novelist, a spiritualist, the wife of a policeman, a hunchback, an actress – and other women quite unexceptional except for their vivid imaginations. There are rather a lot of them.

'Cherchons la femme?'

No, *'Cherchons les femmes!'*