

Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction: The Mothers of the Mystery Genre.

Lucy Sussex. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 224pp.
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Crime fiction has been awarded a “paternal genealogy” which rests on the idea that the genre (dominated by the “detective novel”) has three famous “founding fathers,” Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, and Arthur Conan Doyle, who dominated the development of crime fiction during the nineteenth century. The prevailing explanation of crime fiction’s development is that after the end of the nineteenth century, crime fiction enjoyed a rebirth during its “Golden Age,” which was dominated by female writers such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. Lucy Sussex’s study shows that this common belief is greatly mistaken. *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction: The Mothers of the Mystery Genre* enacts a remarkable literary retrieval as Sussex’s admirable scholarship reveals that there was an extensive range of writers working within various forms of crime fiction throughout the nineteenth century - short stories, casebooks, police procedurals, dime novels, novellas, and novels - and that a large proportion of these early crime writers were women. Sussex argues that despite the strong influences of Poe, Collins, and Conan Doyle, it was actually a handful of women who dominated crime fiction commercially and who instigated many of the innovative elements within the genre and many of its still recognizable plot constructions.

Sussex notes that “the corpus of early crime fiction is vast” (3); her study is correspondingly wide-ranging, discussing the lives and plots of a large array of crime writers: British, American, and Australian. Sussex generally organizes each chapter around the work of one highly influential female author, but surrounds these examinations with discussions of other writers from the same country or time period whose works were either influenced by or in competition with the writing of the dominant author.

Using information drawn from the admissions of the novelists themselves, or deduced through knowledge of the genre, Sussex also locates the early influences upon the work of the crime writers who dominated the genre in the later nineteenth century. Rejecting the “monogenetic” view that all crime fiction has its origin in the mind of Poe, Sussex argues instead that crime fiction has “a multitude of creators” (6), citing, for instance, James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and several “true-crime” stories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, followed by William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794). The heroines of the late eighteenth-century Gothic were, Sussex explains, the precursors of the “heroine-sleuth” figure that was to become highly popular in the 1850s and 1860s; these Gothic influences were soon joined by Newgate fiction and the appearance of “casebooks” and detectives’ non-fictional memoirs. Nor does Sussex omit mention of the European writers who influenced the English crime novel: a number of the crime writers on whom she concentrates were familiar with fiction by Émile Gaboriau and E.T.A. Hoffmann, and the memoirs of François Vidocq and Joseph Fouché.

Sussex’s study corrects various long-standing errors relating to literary precedence. For example, for years, the American novelist Anna Katherine Green was commonly regarded as the first woman to venture into the detective genre; Green’s *The*

Leavenworth Case (1878) is often cited as the first detective novel written by a woman. However, Seeley Regester's novel *The Dead Letter* (1866) preceded it by several years. While *The Dead Letter* was a major bestseller, it was never to reach the colossal heights of popularity enjoyed by Green's novel. This disparity has endured: while Green's novel has been rediscovered by critics, Regester's has continued to be critically neglected.

The women Sussex writes about are extraordinary. Despite having no personal access to the legal or policing professions, these female authors wrote in detail about forensics, ballistics, legal procedures, rules of evidence, and even the daily lives of Australian bushrangers: as Sussex explains, even if female writers could not enter these professions, they often made the most of being married to lawyers or to policemen, or of being the daughters of such.

The chapter on Mary Fortune is especially welcome, due both to the sheer interest of Fortune's life and her important achievements as a crime novelist. Fortune holds many challenges for the biographer: she changed countries in her early twenties, contracted two mysterious marriages, had a child who is barely mentioned in official records, and wrote under a pseudonym. Sussex is the first researcher to discover the real (fiercely protected) identity behind Fortune's pseudonym. Particularly distressing, though revealing in its portrayal of the mid-Victorian Australian writing trade, is the detailed discussion of how Fortune experienced years of poverty and how, despite being "the most published author" Australia had produced, she became an alcoholic and was forced to live in immigrant lodgings (139–40).

Meanwhile, Sussex demonstrates that some novelists whom we have come to think of as overwhelmingly conservative, such as Frances Trollope and Ellen Wood, could be regarded as "proto-crime" novelists – each published several works containing a high proportion of mystery, murder, and crime (38–9). Other writers who merit their own chapters include Anne Radcliffe, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Anna Katherine Green, and Catherine Crowe, writer of *Adventures of Susan Hopley* (1841) – "perhaps the first substantial crime novel by a woman" (49) – while considerable mention is made of Harriet Prescott Spofford, and of the male writers Dickens, Collins, and Bulwer-Lytton.

Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction is fascinating on numerous levels: for retrieving women writers' buried history; for providing synopses of plots that reveal consistencies across the genre; for showing how class affects the activities of the detective; and for explaining the allure of the female detective, a figure that offered "a heroine not defined solely by the romance plot, but by work" (34). While Sussex's "focus is on writers who had influence or who were significant innovators" (3), *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction* nevertheless covers an impressively wide range of crime writers, thoroughly situating each within the context of crime fiction's development. This book is likely to thrill anyone interested in detective fiction or who is seeking to read exciting, "new," or relatively unknown Victorian texts.

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Heidi Logan completed her PhD. in English at the University of Auckland in 2013, having completed a thesis on the representation of physical and mental disability in Victorian sensation fiction. She is currently working on various publication projects, mostly related to the doctoral thesis, involving Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and other non-canonical writers of the period. Her research interests include Victorian sensation fiction, disability studies, detective fiction, novels by Charles Dickens, Victorian Gothic, the history of medicine, and Victorian psychology.